

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CYBERBULLYING, PEER SUPPORT, AND ANXIETY LEVELS AMONG UNIVERSITY

Udizca Nurvithasary¹, Moesarofah^{2*}¹Guidance and Counseling Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas PGRI Adi Buana Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia²Guidance and Counseling Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas PGRI Adi Buana Surabaya, Surabaya, Indonesia

Corresponding Author:

Moesarofah,

Guidance and Counseling Study Program, PGRI Adi Buana University, Surabaya, Indonesia

Email: moesarofah@unipasby.ac.id^{2*}**Article Info**

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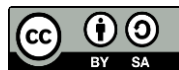
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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the relationship between cyberbullying, peer support, and university students' anxiety levels. A quantitative approach with a correlational research design was employed. The study involved 112 university students who were active social media users, selected via purposive sampling. Data were collected using scales measuring cyberbullying, peer support, and anxiety levels. Data analysis was conducted using Pearson Product Moment correlation and multiple correlation tests. The results indicated that cyberbullying did not have a significant relationship with students' anxiety levels (correlation coefficient = -0.147; significance value = 0.121; $p > 0.05$). Conversely, peer support showed a significant negative relationship with students' anxiety levels (correlation coefficient = -0.192; significance value = 0.043; $p < 0.05$), albeit with a weak strength of association. When analyzed simultaneously, cyberbullying and peer support demonstrated a significant relationship with students' anxiety levels ($R = 0.347$; $R^2 = 0.121$; $p = 0.001$). These findings reveal that while peer support is negatively associated with anxiety levels, cyberbullying does not show a significant relationship on an individual basis; however, when analyzed together, both factors significantly relate to anxiety levels, contributing 12.1% to the variance. These findings highlight the importance of strengthening peer support and developing comprehensive guidance and counseling services to support students' psychological well-being.

Keywords: cyberbullying, peer support, anxiety levels, university students, social media.



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INTRODUCTION

The advancement of digital technology has fundamentally transformed patterns of communication and social interaction, particularly among university students, who are active users of social media. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, X (Twitter), WhatsApp, and Facebook have evolved beyond mere communication tools into spaces for constructing personal identities, gaining social support, and building both academic and personal relationships (Kuss & Griffiths, 2021). Ideally, social media should serve as a means for self-development, expanding social networks, enhancing academic collaboration, and supporting students' psychological well-being through positive communication. Higher education institutions also aim for a safe digital environment where students can learn, interact, and express themselves without facing psychological distress. Thus, the evolution of digital technology should ideally act as an instrument that bolsters students' mental health and academic success.

However, empirical evidence reveals a different reality. The rising intensity of social media usage has been accompanied by an increase in various forms of digital violence, notably cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is defined as aggressive behavior—carried out intentionally and repeatedly via electronic media—aimed at harming, humiliating, or intimidating another individual (Hinduja & Patchin, 2020). Unlike conventional bullying, cyberbullying is characterized by rapid dissemination and anonymity, and it can occur around the clock, thereby imposing greater psychological pressure on victims. UNICEF has reported that nearly half of adolescents and young adults in Indonesia have experienced cyberbullying while using social media. International studies further indicate that victims of cyberbullying face a higher risk of psychological stress, depression, social isolation, and anxiety disorders (John et al., 2018; Kowalski et al., 2019).

Anxiety levels is among the most common psychological consequences of negative experiences on social media. For university students, anxiety levels stems not only from academic activities but also from social pressures, the need for peer acceptance, concerns regarding others' judgments, and experiences of being a victim of digital violence. The American Psychiatric Association (2022) defines anxiety levels as an emotional response to a threat, characterized by excessive worry, physiological tension, difficulty concentrating, and avoidance behavior. Among university students who use social media, this condition is further exacerbated by the phenomenon of the "Fear of Missing Out" (FoMO), social comparison, and continuous exposure to negative comments. Consequently, students become more vulnerable to mental health issues, which can ultimately diminish their academic performance, psychological well-being, and quality of social life.

On the other hand, peer support is viewed as a protective factor capable of mitigating the negative impacts of various psychological stressors. According to the Stress-Buffering Model, social support acts as a buffer against the effects of stress, thereby enhancing an individual's ability to adapt when facing stressful events (Putranto, 2022). For university students, peers serve as a primary source of support because they share the same developmental stage and similar academic experiences, and they are often more accessible than family members for providing both emotional and informational support. Such support—which may take the form of empathy, validation, instrumental assistance, or the provision of information—helps students cope with various psychological pressures. Therefore, peer support plays a crucial role in explaining the variations in anxiety levels among university students who use social media.

Nevertheless, research findings regarding the relationship between peer support and anxiety levels remain inconsistent. Some studies conclude that peer support is negatively correlated with anxiety levels, meaning that higher levels of received support correspond to lower levels of individual anxiety levels (Acoba, 2024; Worley et al., 2023). Conversely, other studies have found that university students with high levels of social interaction on digital media do not necessarily experience reduced anxiety levels; this is because such interactions are influenced by the quality of support received, peer pressure, and social media communication culture. These findings indicate that the relationship between

peer support and anxiety levels warrants further in-depth study, particularly within the context of Indonesian university students.

Previous research also shows that studies on cyberbullying generally focus solely on the link between cyberbullying and depression or anxiety levels. Gusdiansyah and Welly (2024) found a significant association between cyberbullying experiences and increased anxiety levels among university students. A study by Aisy and Akbar (2025) involving Generation Z in Bandung demonstrated that cyberbullying contributes significantly to the emergence of social anxiety levels. A meta-analysis by Kowalski et al. (2019) similarly concluded that cyberbullying is consistently associated with various mental health issues, including anxiety levels and depression. Meanwhile, research on peer support has largely examined it as a predictor of psychological well-being without integrating it with experiences of cyberbullying. Consequently, most research continues to view these three variables in isolation.

Based on a review of prior research, several research gaps provide the rationale for the current study. First, most studies examine the relationship between cyberbullying and anxiety levels without incorporating peer support as a factor within a single research model. Second, research on peer support has predominantly focused on secondary school students, whereas studies involving university students remain relatively limited. Third, previous studies generally examine the influence of only a single independent variable on anxiety levels, failing to explain the simultaneous contributions of cyberbullying and peer support to the psychological state of university students. Fourth, there is limited research on this topic involving students from Guidance and Counseling study programs, even though this group possesses distinct academic and psychosocial characteristics compared to students in other disciplines. This situation indicates a scholarly gap that offers the opportunity to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the determinants of anxiety levels among university students who use social media.

The novelty of this study lies in its simultaneous examination of the relationships between cyberbullying, peer support, and anxiety levels among social media-using students within the context of Indonesian higher education. Unlike previous studies that largely examined these variables in isolation, this research presents a more comprehensive relational model by integrating risk factors (cyberbullying) and protective factors (peer support) to explain student anxiety levels. Furthermore, the study focuses on students from Guidance and Counseling programs—a demographic that has rarely been the subject of research regarding cyberbullying and mental health to date.

This topic is particularly significant given the rising prevalence of mental health issues among university students in recent years. Students are in the early adulthood developmental stage, characterized by various academic, social, and career demands, which renders them highly vulnerable to psychological distress. If experiences of cyberbullying are not addressed promptly, the consequences extend beyond diminished mental health to impact learning motivation, academic engagement, interpersonal relationships, and overall academic success. Consequently, the findings of this study are expected to serve as a foundation for developing guidance and counseling services in higher education institutions—specifically in formulating cyberbullying prevention programs, enhancing digital literacy, strengthening peer support systems, and providing mental health-oriented counseling services for students.

Based on the preceding explanation, the objectives of this study are to: (1) analyze the relationship between cyberbullying and anxiety levels among university students who use social media; (2) analyze the relationship between peer support and anxiety levels among university students who use social media; and (3) analyze the simultaneous relationship of cyberbullying and peer support with anxiety levels among university students who use social media. The study's findings are expected to contribute to the fields of Guidance and Counseling and Educational Psychology, as well as serve as a basis for developing preventive and curative interventions to improve university students' mental health in the digital era.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative approach with a correlational design aimed at examining the relationship between cyberbullying, peer support, and the anxiety levels of university students who use social media. A correlational design was selected because the study does not administer a treatment to the research variables; instead, it identifies the strength and direction of the relationships between variables as they occur naturally (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The study also utilizes an **ex post facto** design, as the independent variables had already occurred prior to the study, and the researcher did not manipulate the respondents' conditions (Fraenkel et al., 2019). Furthermore, the study adopts a cross-sectional approach, wherein data collection takes place at a single point in time, thereby providing a snapshot of the relationships between variables based on the respondents' actual conditions (Setia, 2016). The independent variables in this study consist of cyberbullying (X_1) and peer support (X_2), while the dependent variable is the students' anxiety level (Y). The relationships between the variables are analyzed both partially and simultaneously to obtain a comprehensive understanding of each variable's contribution to the anxiety levels of university students who use social media.

Research Target

The population of this study comprised all active students of the Guidance and Counseling Study Program at Universitas PGRI Adi Buana Surabaya, cohorts 2022–2025, who actively used social media, with a total population of 161 students. The target population was selected because these students were active social media users, with an average daily social media use of 8 hours per day, indicating a relatively high intensity of social media use. This level of social media exposure may increase students' opportunities to encounter various online interactions, including potential experiences of cyberbullying, while social media may also serve as a medium through which students obtain peer support. The sample was selected using simple random sampling, resulting in 112 respondents ($N = 112$).

Research Procedure

This study was conducted in several stages, ranging from the development and testing of research instruments to field data collection. The first stage involved creating an instrument blueprint based on indicators for each research variable: cyberbullying, peer support, and anxiety levels. Each indicator was then developed into a series of statement items tailored to respondent characteristics and measurement objectives (DeVellis, 2016). Subsequently, the instrument underwent pilot testing to assess the suitability of each item as a research measurement tool. This testing process included assessments of both validity and reliability; validity testing determined the ability of each item to measure the intended construct, while reliability testing assessed the instrument's consistency in producing measurements. Based on the test results, items meeting the validity and reliability criteria were retained, whereas those failing to meet the criteria were evaluated and either discarded or revised. The finalized measurement scale was then distributed to respondents online (Terwee et al., 2018).

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was conducted using research instruments comprising a cyberbullying scale, a peer support scale, and an anxiety levels level scale. The cyberbullying scale was developed based on the framework of Hinduja and Patchin (2020) regarding university students' experiences as victims of cyberbullying, covering the dimensions of: (1) flaming, (2) harassment, (3) denigration, (4) impersonation, (5) outing and trickery, and (6) exclusion. The peer support scale was developed based on (Acoba, 2024) concepts regarding perceived peer support, encompassing the dimensions of: (1) emotional support, (2) appraisal support, (3) instrumental support, (4) informational support, and (5) social-network support. Meanwhile, the anxiety levels scale was developed based on (Davis & Arënliu, 2024) regarding anxiety levels symptoms experienced by students, covering the dimensions of: (1) cognitive, (2) somatic, and (3) behavioral aspects. Prior to field implementation, all instruments

underwent validity testing using Pearson Product-Moment correlation and reliability testing using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, thereby meeting the requirements for use as research measurement tools. The scales were distributed online via Google Forms, with links shared with students through their respective class representatives to facilitate coordination during data collection.

Data Analysis Technique

Data analysis involved assumption testing—comprising the One-Sample Kolmogorov–Smirnov test for normality, the Deviation from Linearity test for linearity, and checks for multicollinearity using Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and Tolerance values—to ensure the model met statistical assumptions prior to hypothesis testing. Subsequently, descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to characterize the data by examining means, standard deviations, minimum and maximum values, and the categorical distributions of each variable. Hypothesis testing utilized Pearson Product Moment correlation to determine the partial relationships between cyberbullying and anxiety levels, as well as between peer support and anxiety levels. Meanwhile, the simultaneous relationship of the two independent variables with anxiety levels was analyzed using multiple correlation analysis. All statistical tests were conducted at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$. The analysis results were interpreted based on correlation coefficients, coefficients of determination, and significance values to explain the strength of the relationships between the research variables (Field, 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Results of Pearson Product Moment Correlation Test of Cyberbullying (X_1) and Anxiety Levels (Y)

Correlations			
		Cyberbullying (X_1)	Anxiety Levels (Y)
Cyberbullying (X_1)	Pearson Correlation	1	-,147
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,121
	N	112	112
Anxiety Levels (Y)	Pearson Correlation	-,147	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,121	
	N	112	112

Based on Table 1, the Product Moment correlation test results indicate that the relationship between cyberbullying and students' anxiety levels yielded a correlation coefficient with a significance value of $p = .121$, based on a sample of 112 students. This significance value exceeds 0.05 ($p > .05$), indicating the absence of a significant relationship between cyberbullying and students' anxiety levels. Although the negative correlation coefficient suggests an inverse relationship, the lack of statistical significance means this directionality cannot serve as a basis for concluding the existence of an empirical relationship between the two variables (Navarro & Foxcroft, 2018). Consequently, the hypothesis positing a relationship between cyberbullying and students' anxiety levels is not supported.

Table 2. Results of the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Test between Peer Support (X2) and Anxiety levels (Y)

Correlations		Peer Support (X ₂)	Anxiety Levels (Y)
Peer Support (X ₂)	<i>Pearson Correlation</i>	1	-,192*
	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>		,043
	<i>N</i>	112	112
Anxiety Levels (Y)	<i>Pearson Correlation</i>	-,192*	1
	<i>Sig. (2-tailed)</i>	,043	
	<i>N</i>	112	112

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Based on Table 2., the Pearson Product Moment correlation test results indicate that the relationship between peer support and students' anxiety levels has a correlation coefficient of -0.192, with a significance value of 0.043 and a sample size of 112 students. Since the significance value of 0.043 is less than 0.05, it can be concluded that there is a significant relationship between peer support and students' anxiety levels. The negative correlation coefficient indicates an inverse relationship between the two variables; this means that higher levels of peer support tend to be associated with lower levels of student anxiety levels, and conversely, lower levels of peer support tend to be associated with higher levels of student anxiety levels. Meanwhile, the correlation coefficient of -0.192 indicates that the strength of the relationship between peer support and anxiety levels falls into the low or weak category. Thus, the hypothesis stating that there is a relationship between peer support and students' anxiety levels is supported.

Table 3 Multiple Correlation Test Results

Model Summary									
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df 1	df 2	Sig. F Change
1	,347 ^a	,121	,104	3,26181	,121	7,473	2	109	,001

a. Predictors: (Constant), Peer Support, Cyberbullying

Based on Table 3, the multiple correlation analysis results show values of $R = .347$ and $R^2 = .121$, with an F-change significance value of $p = .001$. As the significance value is less than .05 ($p < .05$), this indicates that cyberbullying and peer support have a significant simultaneous relationship with students' anxiety levels. The R value of .347 indicates a positive relationship between the two independent variables combined and anxiety levels. Furthermore, the R^2 value of .121 indicates that the combination of cyberbullying and peer support accounts for 12.1% of the variation in students' anxiety levels, while the remaining 87.9% of the variation is attributable to factors outside the research model (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Thus, the hypothesis stating that there is a simultaneous relationship between cyberbullying, peer support, and students' anxiety levels is supported by the research findings.

DISCUSSION

The study results indicate that there is no significant relationship between cyberbullying and university students' anxiety levels. This finding is evidenced by a correlation coefficient of -0.147 and a significance value of 0.121 ($p > 0.05$). Although the correlation indicates a negative relationship, the value is not statistically significant; therefore, it cannot be interpreted as an empirical link between cyberbullying and anxiety levels. These findings suggest that the cyberbullying experiences encountered by the students in this study were not a factor directly associated with variations in their anxiety levels. This result differs from the findings of (Arif et al., 2024) based on a systematic review of university students—which showed that cyber-victimization was significantly associated with anxiety levels in the majority of the studies examined. Such discrepancies suggest that psychological responses to cyberbullying vary among students and may be influenced by accompanying psychological or social conditions.

Theoretically, cyberbullying is a form of aggressive behavior carried out via electronic media that can inflict psychological distress on victims (Hinduja & Patchin, 2020). Characteristics such as the potential for persistence, wide reach, and anonymity theoretically create conditions where victims might experience emotional distress linked to anxiety levels. However, the results of this study indicate that this mechanism did not manifest significantly among the respondents. This outcome is understandable, given that student anxiety levels is a multidimensional psychological condition not solely linked to negative experiences on social media. The American Psychiatric Association (2022) explains that anxiety levels involves cognitive, somatic, and behavioral aspects; consequently, an individual's anxiety levels level can be influenced by a wide range of personal and environmental factors.

The lack of a significant relationship between cyberbullying and anxiety levels may also point to the role of other factors in the psychological processes students undergo when facing negative social media experiences. Coping skills, emotional regulation, resilience, and social support can help individuals manage stress, preventing cyberbullying experiences from necessarily escalating into heightened anxiety levels. Thus, the experience of cyberbullying cannot be viewed as the sole determinant of students' anxiety levels. These results also highlight the importance of considering individual characteristics and social contexts when explaining the relationship between cyberbullying experiences and student mental health. Furthermore, the study results indicate a significant relationship between peer support and students' anxiety levels. A correlation coefficient of -0.192, with a significance value of 0.043, reveals a significant negative relationship of low strength. This means that the higher the peer support perceived by students, the lower their tendency toward anxiety levels; conversely, students who perceive lower levels of peer support tend to exhibit higher levels of anxiety levels. These findings demonstrate that peer support is linked to students' psychological well-being, even though the strength of the relationship is relatively low.

These findings align with the Stress-Buffering Model, which posits that social support serves as a resource helping individuals cope with stressful conditions (Casal et al., 2023; Cohen & Wills, 1985). For university students, peers represent a crucial source of social support, given their shared developmental and academic environments. Such support can manifest as emotional backing, validation, instrumental assistance, information sharing, or simply the presence of a social network. When students encounter academic, social, or personal pressures, the presence of friends who offer acceptance and assistance can help mitigate their perception of stress, thereby making anxiety levels more manageable.

These results are consistent with Acoba (2024), whose systematic review demonstrated the vital role of social support in student mental health. Social support acts as a psychological resource that aids students in navigating the various pressures inherent in higher education. (Worley et al., 2023) similarly showed that peer support is linked to students' psychological well-being and can influence psychological states through mechanisms of resilience. These findings reinforce the conclusion that the quality of support from one's peer environment is relevant to students' psychological well-being.

However, the weak correlation observed in this study suggests that peer support is not the sole factor associated with students' anxiety levels. This aligns with the systematic review by Pointon-Haas et al. (2024), which found mixed evidence regarding the effectiveness of peer support for student mental health. Factors such as the type of support, nature of interactions, student characteristics, and relationship quality can all influence the benefits derived from peer support. Consequently, the mere presence of peers is not necessarily sufficient to explain anxiety levels; the quality and form of the support received must also be considered.

The negative relationship between peer support and anxiety levels observed in this study indicates that students with supportive peer environments tend to experience lower levels of anxiety levels. Emotional support fosters a sense of acceptance and understanding, while informational and instrumental support can assist students in identifying alternative solutions to problems. Such support can alleviate feelings of inadequacy regarding the demands of academic and social life. Thus, peer support can be viewed as a protective factor that helps university students cope with psychological stress.

Simultaneous analysis revealed that cyberbullying and peer support collectively share a significant relationship with students' anxiety levels. An R-value of 0.347 and an R^2 of 0.121 indicate that these two variables together account for 12.1% of the variation in anxiety levels, while the remaining 87.9% is attributable to factors outside the research model. These findings suggest that student anxiety levels should be understood as a multi-determined phenomenon, not merely linked to a single psychological or social factor.

Conceptually, cyberbullying can be categorized as a risk factor stemming from the digital environment, whereas peer support serves as a social resource that aids students in managing stress. When these two aspects are considered together, their relationship with anxiety levels proves significant. This indicates that students' psychological states are shaped by the interplay between negative experiences and the social resources available to them. However, given the study's correlational and cross-sectional design, the results demonstrate associations between variables but cannot be used to establish a causal relationship.

The contribution rate of 12.1% indicates that there are other, broader factors associated with students' anxiety levels. These factors may include academic pressure, self-efficacy, emotional regulation, resilience, family circumstances, personality traits, and the quality of interpersonal relationships. Consequently, these results support the understanding that student anxiety levels is a complex condition requiring a multifaceted perspective. These findings also explain why cyberbullying alone did not show a significant relationship, yet when analyzed alongside peer support, both variables demonstrated a significant association with anxiety levels.

In the context of guidance and counseling, these results imply that efforts to maintain student mental health should not focus solely on preventing cyberbullying. Higher education institutions also need to strengthen peer support systems through activities such as peer support groups, peer mentoring, and group counseling services. This is particularly relevant given that research on peer support in higher education indicates that peer mentoring and peer learning yield more consistent results in reducing anxiety levels and stress compared to other forms of peer support (Pointon-haas et al., 2024).

Overall, the study reveals that while cyberbullying alone does not have a significant relationship with student anxiety levels, peer support shows a significant negative relationship—albeit a weak one—with anxiety levels. When analyzed simultaneously, both cyberbullying and peer support exhibit a significant relationship with student anxiety levels. These findings underscore the need to consider both digital experiences and social support when understanding the psychological state of students who use social media. Therefore, university guidance and counseling services should develop approaches that go beyond addressing cyberbullying experiences to also strengthen social support and enhance students' ability to cope with various sources of pressure.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that cyberbullying does not have a significant relationship with university students' anxiety levels. Conversely, peer support shows a significant negative relationship with students' anxiety levels, although the strength of this relationship is classified as low. When considered simultaneously, cyberbullying and peer support are significantly related to students' anxiety levels. Together, these two variables contribute 12.1% to the variance in students' anxiety levels, while the remaining 87.9% is attributable to factors outside the scope of this study. These findings indicate that peer support is a social aspect linked to students' anxiety levels, whereas a relationship between cyberbullying and anxiety levels was not individually established in this study. Therefore, efforts to assist students in managing anxiety levels should consider strengthening peer support while also addressing other factors that may influence students' psychological well-being.

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