

The Mediated Role of Aggressive Behavior in the Relationship Between Self-Esteem and School Refusal Among Adolescents

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Abstract

This study began with the emergence of indicators of school refusal behavior, namely truancy among adolescents. Self-esteem and aggressive behavior are factors in the emergence of school refusal. Therefore, this study aims to show the role of aggressive behavior as a mediator between self-esteem and school refusal. This study used a quantitative approach, a cross-sectional survey conducted on 226 students from 14 Junior High Schools in Surakarta. The instruments used were the School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised ($\alpha = 0.752-0.799$), the Self-Esteem Inventory scale ($\alpha = 0.650-0.722$), and the Buss and Perry Aggression Questionnaire scale ($\alpha = 0.650-0.720$). All scales used have met psychometric requirements and have been validated through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Data were analyzed using SEM-PLS software. The results of this study indicate that self-esteem has an indirect effect on school refusal through aggressive behavior, with a significance value of 4.7%. The F-square results for the relationships between self-esteem and school refusal were 0.681 (strong influence), between self-esteem and aggressive behavior 0.125 (moderate influence), and between aggressive behavior and school refusal 0.033 (low influence). The implication of this research is the need for programs by parents and teachers to increase students' self-esteem, thereby reducing aggressive behavior and school refusal.

Keywords: aggressive, school refusal, self-esteem

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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a transitional phase from childhood to adulthood that causes physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional changes (Santrock, 2020). Adolescent development occurs between ages 10 and 21 years. The majority of adolescents at this age attend junior or senior high school. The developmental tasks that adolescents should have include emotional independence, characterized by positive relationships with adults in their environment and the ability to solve problems independently (Havighurst, 1984). However, adolescents often face problems in the school environment, including fighting with friends, smoking at school, fighting with teachers, jumping fences, and truancy (Oktawati, 2017; Ahmad et al., 2019). In fact, the number of dropout cases among junior high school students across Indonesia in 2021 was 348,658 (Kemendikbudristek, 2021). From the problems described, adolescents have school-related problems related to deviant behavior that lead to indicators of school refusal (Kearney, 2001). The phenomenon of school refusal is often referred to as school refusal.

School refusal is a student's behavior of being absent from school or of experiencing difficulties and being unable to stay at school for long (Kearney & Silverman, 1993). School refusal behavior can be seen through signs such as being absent from school, attending school but not attending class or leaving school early, attending school but displaying withdrawn, aggressive, uncooperative behavior, throwing tantrums, and complaining of physical or other complaints to avoid going to school (Kearney, 2001; Naser et al., 2022). In addition, school refusal behavior is often characterized by negative experiences that make children afraid to attend school (Hartanti & Nursalim, 2022). This behavior usually occurs within 2 weeks to 1 year in the age range of 10-15 years (Farahat & Nursalim, 2022). This means that school refusal remains a problem today.

The prevalence of school refusal behavior in Japan increased from 81,591 to 133,683 students over the last 21 years, affecting elementary and junior high school students aged 6-15 years (Ochi et al., 2020). In New York, specifically in the East Coast metropolitan area, 70 adolescents aged 13-18 years reported missing school for at least 2 days, and 26 reported missing school for a whole month (Rohrig et al., 2023). Meanwhile, in Surabaya, specifically at State Junior High School 27, 55 students exhibited school refusal behavior, representing 13%, a high proportion (Dewi & Nursalim, 2022). Meanwhile, in State Junior High School 10 Surabaya, grade IX, there were 13 students in the high category (Farahat & Nursalim, 2022).

In addition to the data above, researchers have conducted a preliminary study on school refusal behavior among junior high school students in Surakarta City. The preliminary study was conducted in grades VII, VIII, and IX in 14 public junior high schools in Surakarta City. The study found that 242 students exhibited indicators of school refusal. There were even cases of students who recently dropped out due to school refusal behavior, including three students from two schools. Behaviors that emerged included frequent unexplained absences from school, truancy, pretending to be sick, refusing to do assigned homework, and sleeping in class. Based on the presentation of these data, this study is important to conduct in Indonesia to add to the references on school refusal in Indonesia.

Individual factors are one of the factors that influence the occurrence of school refusal behavior (Ingul et al., 2018; Lestari & Nursalim, 2020; Nathasyafitri & Wiryosutomo, 2022; Leduc et al., 2024; Ulaş & Seçer, 2024). One individual factor that plays a significant role in school refusal behavior is self-esteem (Filippello et al., 2020; Aqeel & Rehna, 2020). Self-esteem is often referred to as self-worth. Self-esteem is a



form of self-assessment reflected in an individual's belief that they are capable, successful, important, and valuable (Coopersmith, 1967). The higher an individual's self-esteem, the less likely they are to exhibit school refusal behavior (Filippello et al., 2020). This shows that individuals with high self-esteem have a positive impact on students, especially in the school environment.

The impact on students with high self-esteem includes good social skills, self-confidence, optimism, and high enthusiasm, enabling them to develop their potential (Rokhmatika & Muslikah, 2024). In addition, low self-esteem can be characterized by behavior that tends to avoid situations that give rise to feelings of anxiety/fear, lack of self-confidence, always blaming others when they have problems, feeling helpless, easily discouraged, and vulnerable (Damayanti & Nurjannah, 2017). The existence of student behavior that shows low self-esteem will lead to deviant behavior in adolescents (Oktafia & Rahayu, 2024).

The deviant behavior in question is the emergence of self-esteem-related aggression (Ifeanacho & Emmanuel, 2017). Lower self-esteem will lead to increased aggressive behavior (Khasanah et al., 2019; Oktafia & Rahayu, 2024). Low self-esteem is characterized by negative self-assessments, resulting in feelings of worthlessness and insignificance (Coopersmith, 1967). This is in line with the frustration and aggression theory, which explains that if someone feels worthless and unimportant, it will cause them to experience feelings of frustration and be unable to manage their emotions, which will result in the emergence of aggressive behavior (Dollard et al., 1939; Zulfa et al., 2024). When someone exhibits aggressive behavior, they will face social rejection, causing the perpetrator to withdraw from their environment (Amelia & Suhesty, 2025). Withdrawing from social situations that are unpleasantly evaluated at school is one indicator of school refusal (Kearney, 2002).

The impacts of aggressive behavior on students include being frequently labeled as individuals who are frequently called to the guidance counselor or are problematic, friends not wanting to play or help with school problems, lack of focus, declining academic performance, and frequent remedial classes (Pangarsa, 2018). High levels of aggressive behavior even encourage students to skip school (Malau et al., 2022; Dewi & Nursalim, 2022). This is supported by other findings that indicate a positive relationship between aggression and school refusal behavior (Vicent et al., 2018). Meanwhile, forms of aggression (physical, verbal, anger, and hostility) have a positive relationship with school refusal behavior (González et al., 2021). This means that aggression is closely related to school refusal behavior.

Aggressive behavior is assumed to mediate between self-esteem and school refusal. This is because adolescents with low self-esteem tend to have negative self-assessments, such as being easily discouraged and emotional. This is in accordance with the opinion of Febrina et al (2018) that someone with low self-esteem, when faced with failure and problems, will respond more emotionally. This emotional attitude will lead adolescents to engage in aggressive behavior, both physical and verbal (Papalia et al., 2008). The emergence of aggressive behavior in adolescents carried out towards peers will cause them to be shunned and hated by their environment (Arifin & Lukitaningsih, 2017). This causes perpetrators of aggressive behavior to face social rejection for their actions, leading them to withdraw from their environment (Amelia & Suhesty, 2025). Social rejection will cause adolescents to withdraw from the school environment and lead to school refusal behavior (Lestari & Nursalim, 2020).



The dynamics of the relationship described above serve as the basis for examining the role of aggressive behavior as a mediator between self-esteem and school refusal. This study used aggressive behavior as a mediator, focusing on physical and verbal factors, as in Indonesia, the majority of problems arise in these areas (Salma & Hatta, 2018; Hardoni et al., 2019; Yunalia & Etika, 2020). This study employs mediator variables, drawing on the theory of Baron and Kenny (1986). Furthermore, no literature in Indonesia, particularly on school refusal, has explored the use of mediating variables, making this study novel. Based on the findings of Aqeel & Rehna (2020) in Pakistan, one result indicated that physical and verbal aggression mediate the relationships between school refusal behavior and self-acceptance, self-competence, social, academic, and parental involvement in truant and non-truant students. This study provides novelty in its variables, location, and sample. Therefore, researchers will examine aggressive behavior as a mediator between self-esteem and school refusal among adolescents.

METHOD

This research is a non-experimental quantitative study with a cross-sectional survey design. Cross-sectional surveys were used because they were conducted at a single point in time. In cross-sectional surveys, researchers administer questionnaires to a sample population to gain insight into opinions, attitudes, and behaviors (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Prior to conducting the study, researchers conducted a preliminary study of 20 schools in the Surakarta area. However, only 14 schools responded and provided data related to the issue. Therefore, the population of this study comprised adolescents aged 12-15 years attending 14 public junior high schools in Surakarta. Data were collected offline and took 5-10 minutes to complete. This age range was chosen because it falls within the early adolescence category, which experiences many changes in psychological, biological, and social aspects (Santrock, 2020).

The research sample consisted of 226 students selected purposively. In sampling, this study used a purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling is a technique used to select samples based on criteria established by the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The criteria for sampling include adolescents aged 12-15 years who are studying at public junior high schools in the Surakarta City area, students with behavior of absence from school without explanation or pattern, and truancy. This sample was deemed to have met the requirements for multivariate statistical analysis using structural equation modeling (SEM) (Hair et al., 2014). According to Hair et al (2010), the ideal sample size in research is between 5 and 10 times the number of items used in the study. In this study, 37 questions were used, so the minimum sample size was 37 times 5, or 185 respondents. Based on the criteria established by the researcher, 226 students were selected as the sample for this study.

The measurement in this study used psychological scales: the School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised (adapted), Self-Esteem Inventory (modified), and Buss and Perry Aggression Questionnaire (modified). The instrument in this study was the School Refusal Assessment Scale-Revised (SRAS-R), which is based on Kearney's (2002) theory and was adapted by Widiatoro (2020). Adaptation of the measuring instrument was carried out by obtaining permission, conducting forward translation by two language experts, synthesis, back translation, expert review, try-out, and revalidation (validity & reliability). This scale contains 13 items with 4 aspects: Avoidance Negative Affectivity (ANA), Escape Social Evaluation (ESE), Pursuit Attention (PA), and Pursuit Tangible Reinforcement (PTR). This scale measures school refusal using 7 answer choices.



Content validation was carried out through expert judgment by two experts in educational and developmental psychology. After conducting a validity test using expert judgment, the researchers assessed each item using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The results showed that the school refusal scale had no items dropped (outer loadings > 0.5). The AVE values of the scale range from 0.576 to 0.802, the reliability of the scale is 0.752–0.799, and the CR is 0.844–0.890. This indicates that the school refusal scale is valid and reliable.

The instrument used was the Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI), based on Coopersmith's (1967) theory and modified by the researcher. Modifications are made by searching for original measuring instruments, translating them, and changing several words to suit the research. This scale is composed of 4 aspects: strength, significance, virtue, and ability, consisting of 27 items. This scale measures self-esteem using 5 answer choices. Content validation was carried out through expert judgment by two experts in educational and developmental psychology. After conducting a validity test using expert judgment, the researcher tested each item with Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The results showed that the Self-Esteem Inventory scale had 12 items dropped because their outer loadings were < 0.5. The AVE values of the scale ranged from 0.407 to 0.753, the reliability of the scale ranged from 0.650 to 0.722, and the CR ranged from 0.802 to 0.859. This indicates that the school refusal scale is valid and reliable.

The instrument used to measure aggressive behavior is the Buss & Perry (1992) theory, which has been modified by the researcher. Modifications are made by searching for original measuring instruments, translating them, and changing several words to suit the research. This scale uses two aspects, namely physical aggression and verbal aggression, consisting of 13 items. This scale measures aggressive behavior using 5 answer choices. Content validation was carried out through expert judgment by two experts in educational and developmental psychology. After conducting a validity test using expert judgment, the researcher tested each item with Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The results showed that the aggressive behavior scale had 4 items that were dropped because their outer loadings were < 0.5. The AVE values of the scale ranged from 0.418 to 0.588, the scale reliability ranged from 0.650 to 0.720, and the CR was 0.811. This indicates that the school refusal scale is valid and reliable.

The first validity test the researchers used was expert judgment. Expert judgment was conducted by selecting two experts, both lecturers in the Master of Psychology program at Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta (UNY). In general, the experts assessed the instrument as suitable for use, taking into account the recommendations provided. Therefore, the self-esteem, school refusal, and aggressive behavior instruments were deemed valid, reflecting the concepts they measure. After conducting validity tests using expert judgment, the researchers tested each item using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). The CFA results for the self-esteem variable revealed 12 items that were dropped due to outer loadings < 0.5: items 1, 2, 5, 6, 9, 10, 13, 14, 17, 18, 25, and 27. For the aggressive behavior variable, four items were dropped: items 4, 5, 9, and 10. Furthermore, the school refusal variable had no items dropped.

The data analysis employed Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) within the Partial Least Squares (PLS) framework using SMART-PLS 3.0 software. PLS-SEM analysis was chosen because it does not require a large sample size, the data do not have to be normally distributed, and it examines mediation effects (Zeng et al., 2021). Furthermore, PLS-SEM comprises two components for model evaluation: the outer



model and the inner model (Hair et al., 2011). PLS-SEM is a non-parametric method, so it does not require assumption testing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Descriptive Data and Evaluation of Measurement Models (Outer Model)

Based on descriptive variable analysis, self-esteem, school refusal, and aggressive behavior were grouped into five categories: very high, high, medium, low, and very low. The data are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1.
Descriptive Data

Variable	SR n (%)	R n (%)	S n (%)	T n (%)	ST n (%)	Mean	Standard Deviation
School Refusal	125 (55.4%)	68 (30%)	27 (12%)	5 (2.2%)	1 (0.4%)	13	39
Self-Esteem	2 (0.9%)	15 (6.6%)	44 (19.5%)	80 (35.4%)	85 (37.6%)	10	45
Aggressive Behavior	114 (50.5%)	71 (31.4%)	30 (13.3%)	8 (3.5%)	3 (1.3%)	6	27

Note: SR = Very Low, R = Low, S = Average, T = High, ST = Very High.

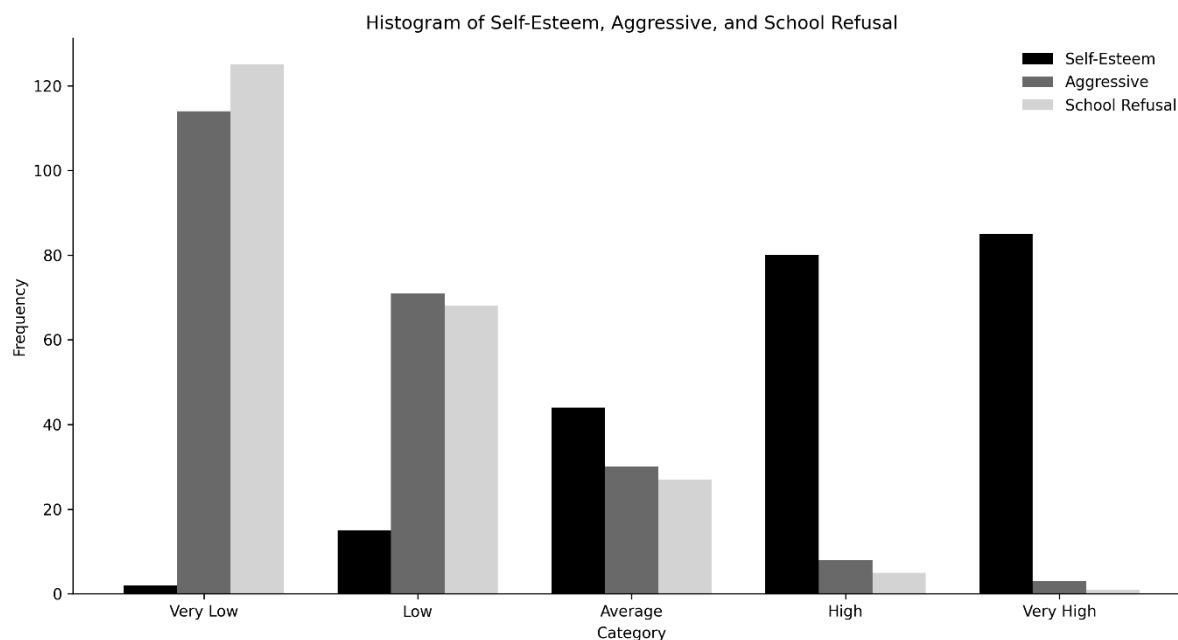


Figure 1. Histogram of Self-Esteem, Aggressive and School Refusal

Table 2 presents an evaluation of the measurement model, which includes four criteria: indicator reliability, composite reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2014). The measurement model, or outer model, is related to reliability and validity. Reliability is assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability as estimates of the construct's internal consistency. Validity, on the other hand, focuses on convergent and discriminant validity. Researchers can assess convergent validity by examining the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and outer loading values. A minimum AVE value of 0.4 is acceptable, provided the composite reliability value is



greater than 0.6, indicating good convergent validity (Huang et al., 2013). An outer loading value >0.5 is considered to meet the requirements for convergent validity (Chin, 1998).

Table 2.
 Outer Loading, Composite Reliability, AVE

Construct	Indicator	Item	Outer Loading	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)			
School Refusal	ANA	ANA1	0.637	0.844	0.576			
		ANA2	0.816					
		ANA3	0.779					
		ANA4	0.792					
	ESE	ESE5	0.787					
		ESE6	0.814					
		ESE7	0.851					
		ESE8	0.707					
	PA	PA9	0.881					
		PA10	0.910					
	PTR	PTR11	0.847					
		PTR12	0.820					
		PTR13	0.832					
Self-Esteem	Power	P3	0.634	0.802	0.407			
		P4	0.524					
		P7	0.596					
		P8	0.770					
		P11	0.668					
		P12	0.606					
	Significance	S15	0.838					
		S16	0.882					
	Virtue	V19	0.896					
		V20	0.838					
	Aggressive Behavior	Competence	C21			0.617	0.818	0.479
			C22			0.653		
			C23			0.812		
C24			0.790					
C26			0.553					
Physic		F1	0.665					
		F2	0.723					
		F3	0.634					
		F6	0.615					
		F7	0.657					
		F8	0.576					
Verbal		V11	0.800					
		V12	0.752					
		V13	0.748					



The first test was to assess reliability. The school refusal, self-esteem, and aggression variables had indicators with items that collectively showed values >0.524 . This was determined by examining the outer loading values. This indicates that the indicators were categorized as appropriate in forming the construct.

The second test was conducted to assess composite reliability and internal consistency. Composite reliability can be assessed by examining the composite reliability (CR) values. These values ranged from 0.802 to 0.890, indicating the construct is reliable (Hair et al., 2019).

The third test was conducted to assess convergent validity. Validity was assessed by examining the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values. The AVE values in Table 3 ranged from 0.407 to 0.802. An AVE value of at least 0.4 is acceptable, provided the composite reliability value is greater than 0.6, indicating good convergent validity (Huang et al., 2013).

The fourth test was conducted to assess discriminant validity. This study assessed discriminant validity using the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT). The Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) was chosen because it has higher sensitivity than the cross-loading and Fornell-Larcker criteria (Henseler et al., 2015). The threshold value for the HTMT method is one (Ab Hamid et al., 2017). If the HTMT value exceeds one, discriminant validity is not met. This is described in Table 3 below:

Table 3.

Nilai Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

	Aggressive	Self-Esteem	School Refusal
Aggressive			
Self-Esteem	0,369		
School Refusal	0,416	0,718	

Structural Evaluation Model (Inner Model)

A structural model is a measurement used to examine the influence of latent variables in research (Hair et al., 2011). Components of evaluating a structural model include conducting a multicollinearity test, assessing the significance of the research model's relationships using path coefficient analysis, observing the coefficient of determination (α^2), and evaluating the goodness-of-fit criteria (Hair et al., 2014).

The multicollinearity test is used to determine whether there is multicollinearity among the independent variables. A good model is one that has no relationships between independent variables. The multicollinearity test can be performed by examining the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) value. The VIF value must be below 5 to indicate that the variables do not experience multicollinearity (Hair et al., 2011). The VIF value in this study ranged from 1.000 to 1.125, indicating no collinearity between constructs (see Table 4).

Table 4.

Multicollinearity Test Results with VIF Value

Variable	Aggressive	Self-Esteem	School Refusal
School Refusal			
Self-Esteem	1,000		1,125
Aggressive			1,125



R square (R^2) or coefficient of determination is used to see the measure of predictive accuracy of the model that shows the influence of independent variables on the dependent variable. The R square value is categorized into 3 categories: 0.75 as strong, 0.50 as medium, and 0.25 as low (Hair et al., 2011). The coefficient of determination indicates that the aggressive behavior variable can be influenced by self-esteem, with a value of 0.111. This value falls within the weak category. This means that self-esteem can influence aggressive behavior by 11.1%, while 89.9% is influenced by other factors outside the study. In addition, the coefficient of determination for the school refusal variable was 0.478, indicating it is in the medium category. This means that self-esteem and aggressive behavior can simultaneously influence school refusal by 47.8%, while 52.2% is influenced by other factors. This can be explained in Table 5 below.

Table 5.

Results of the Coefficient of Determination (R Square)

Variable	Coefficient Determination
Aggressive	0,111
School Refusal	0,478

The F-square indicates the extent of exogenous variables' influence on endogenous variables (Wong, 2019). According to Hair et al. (2021), an F-square value of 0.02 indicates a low influence. A value of 0.15 indicates a moderate influence, and a value of 0.35 indicates a strong influence. The F-square results indicate that self-esteem influences school refusal with an F-square of 0.681, indicating a strong effect. The F-square value for the influence of self-esteem on aggressive behavior is 0.125, indicating a moderate influence. The F-square value for the influence of aggressive behavior on school refusal is 0.03, indicating a low influence. This can be seen in Table 6 below and Figure 2.

Table 6.

F-square test results

	School Refusal	Aggressive
Self-Esteem	0,681	0,125
Aggressive	0,03	



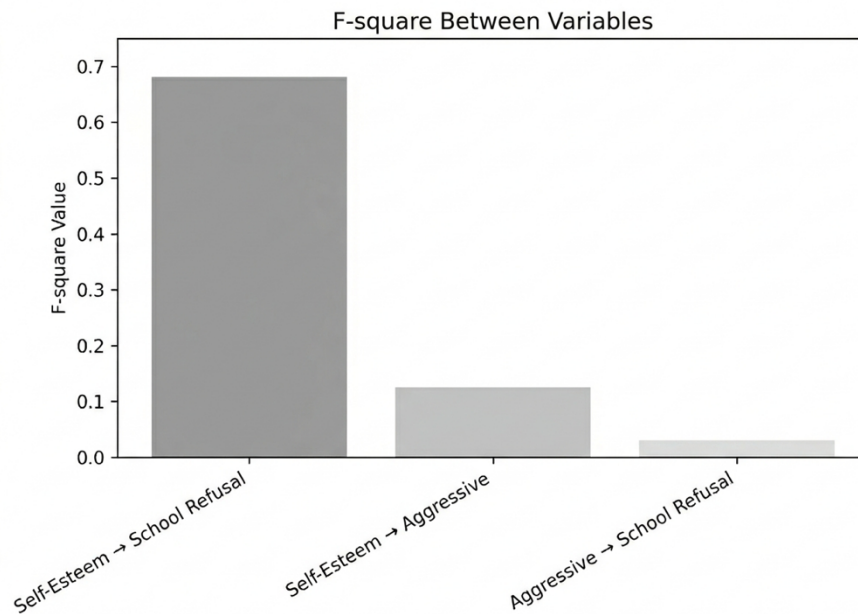


Figure 2. F-Square Values for Direct Relationships

To test model fit in this study, the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) value was used. If the SRMR value is below 0.10, it indicates a good model fit (Worthington & Whittaker, 2006). Model fit was assessed using the SRMR because it allows for an assessment of the level of model specification error in model measurements, samples, and measurement quality (Ximénez et al., 2022). Model fit, based on the SRMR value, is considered good if it is less than 0.10. The model fit test result in this study was 0.093 for the SRMR, indicating that the research model was categorized as fit.

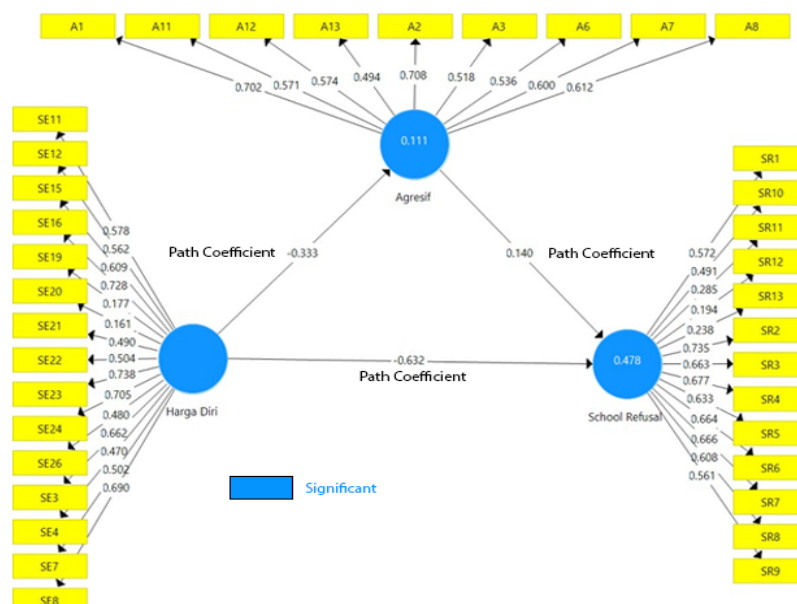


Figure 3. Results of SEM-PLS Model Measurement Analysis



Hypothesis testing

This study used the bootstrapping method (1000 samples) and PLS-SEM to test the hypothesis. SEM-PLS does not assume that the data are normally distributed, so researchers must use bootstrapping to assess the significance of direct and indirect effects (Sarstedt et al., 2021). The level of significance can be seen from the path coefficient, which can empirically indicate the direction of the hypothesis to support the causal relationship formulated from the hypothesis (Hair., 2011). Hypothesis testing with mediating variables can be assessed using the t-statistic and p-value. If using the t-statistic, the calculated t-value will be compared with the critical value from the t-table. The t-table value used in this study was 1.96 (significance level = 5%). If the p-value is less than 0.05, the hypothesis is accepted.

Hypothesis one yields an original sample value of -.632, a t-value of 14.080, and a p-value of 0.000. The original sample is used to determine whether the relationship is positive or negative. These results indicate that hypothesis one is accepted. Hypothesis two yields an original sample value of -0.333, a t-value of 5.585, and a p-value of 0.000. The original sample is used to determine whether the relationship is positive or negative. These results indicate that hypothesis two is accepted. Hypothesis three yields an original sample value of 0.140, a t-value of 2.546, and a p-value of 0.011. The original sample is used to determine whether the relationship is positive or negative. These results indicate hypothesis three is accepted. Hypothesis four yields an indirect effect, with an original sample value of -0.047, a t-value of 1.987, and a p-value of 0.047. The original sample is used to determine whether the relationship is positive or negative. These results indicate that the fourth hypothesis is accepted. These results demonstrate that aggressive behavior acts as a partial mediator because there is a significant direct effect between self-esteem and school refusal, consistent with the concept (Baron & Kenny, 1986). This is shown in Table 7 below.

Table 7.
 Original Sample Value, F-Square, T-Statistic, P-Value, Explanation

	Original Sample	F-Square	T-Statistic	P-Value	Explanation
Direct Effect					
Self-Esteem -> School Refusal	-0,632	0,681	14,080	0,000	Accepted
Direct Effect					
Self-Esteem -> Aggressive	-0,333	0,125	5,585	0,000	Accepted
Direct Effect					
Aggressive -> School Refusal	0,140	0.03	2,546	0,011	Accepted
Indirect Effect					
Self-Esteem -> Agresif -> School Refusal	-0,047		1,987	0,047	Accepted



Discussion

This study found that self-esteem negatively impacted school refusal among public junior high school students in Surakarta City. This means that lower self-esteem increases school refusal behavior in public junior high school students in Surakarta City. This is supported by the findings of Filippello et al. (2020), who stated that lower self-esteem in adolescents can lead to school avoidance and, in turn, school refusal behavior. This condition is supported by Andayani et al (2021), who explained that lower self-esteem in adolescents will increase juvenile delinquency. The study explained that one form of juvenile delinquency is truancy, an indicator of school refusal. However, other results conducted by Suryandari and Desiningrum (2024) found that self-esteem does not play a significant role in the relationship with juvenile delinquency, such as truancy, fighting with friends, lying, speeding on the road, and drinking alcohol. This can mean that there is an important role for self-esteem in juvenile delinquent behavior, one of the indicators of which is school refusal.

Good self-esteem is essential for every student to support their success in school (Rahmawati, 2020; Muarifah et al., 2024). Furthermore, strong self-esteem helps students develop decision-making skills and overcome academic difficulties (Yu et al., 2022). Students with low self-esteem are less likely to achieve at an optimal level. This occurs because students feel lazy and incompetent in their learning, leading to low motivation to learn (Yudiono & Sulisty, 2020). Low self-esteem can lead to disobedience, avoidance, and school-related stress, resulting in school refusal (Filippello et al., 2020). This is due to an immature self-concept, which affects adolescents' social interactions with their peers (Widianti et al., 2021).

This study found a negative influence of self-esteem on aggressive behavior among public junior high school students in Surakarta City. This study used physical and verbal aggression aspects because in Indonesia, the majority of aggressive cases occur in these two aspects. These results are supported by Jabbarov et al. (2023), who explained that higher self-esteem is associated with lower levels of aggressive behavior in students. Specifically, adolescents with low self-esteem are more likely to have high levels of aggressive behavior. This result is in line with research findings (Fitriani et al., 2021). In the results of research by Nurhasarah et al (2023), it was stated that lower self-esteem in an adolescent increases the risk of verbal aggressive behavior in the form of bullying. One impact of aggressive behavior in adolescents is that they find it difficult to socialize with their environment, which affects the learning process at school (Khaira, 2022). This difficulty causes an adolescent to withdraw from their environment to be alone and tends to be more easily hurt.

Low self-esteem often triggers feelings of frustration because individuals feel worthless or fail to meet their own expectations, making them vulnerable to envy of their friends, reducing self-control, which then becomes the main trigger for aggressive behavior as a mechanism for releasing uncontrolled emotions (Hu et al., 2023). This occurs because aggressive behavior emerges as a defensive response to protect a fragile ego stemming from low self-esteem (Ryanti, 2021). This is reinforced by the findings of Oktafia (2024), who found that lower self-esteem increases the risk of aggressive behavior, which aligns with Coopersmith's theory that low self-esteem encourages non-normative behavior, such as aggression, as a mechanism to maintain self-perception. Furthermore, recent findings reveal that low self-esteem in adolescents will increase aggressive behavior as a form of maladaptive coping for individuals (Wulandari et al., 2025).



This study found a positive influence of aggressive behavior on school refusal among public junior high school students in Surakarta City. These results are supported by Aparicio (2020), who explained that students with high levels of aggressive behavior towards peers will have significantly higher school refusal scores. Adolescents aged 13-17 years with high levels of aggressive behavior will increase school refusal. This is supported by González et al (2021), who explain that higher levels of physical and verbal aggression, anger, and hostility will increase school refusal behavior. These results are also supported by González et al. (2023), who found that groups in the school refusal behavior categories showed high scores for aggressive behavior. Aggressive behavior is often characterized by poor emotional control, leading to its emergence as a means of escape (Bucur et al., 2020). Emotionally vulnerable students may respond aggressively to cope with stressful school situations (Torregrosa et al., 2020). Self-concept is often defined as a student's ability to understand the consequences of their actions, understand the value and usefulness of an action, take responsibility for their actions, and reject anything that could harm others or themselves (Herawati & Irama, 2021).

According to Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, adolescents are in the identity versus role confusion stage. During this phase, adolescents are forming their identity, values, and life goals. Success leads to a strong sense of commitment; failure leads to low self-esteem due to uncertainty and social isolation (Erikson, 1968). This low self-esteem can trigger aggressive behavior as a defensive mechanism to mask feelings of insecurity (Inayah et al., 2021; Rusuli, 2022). Furthermore, adolescents with a blurred identity are vulnerable to school rejection due to low self-confidence and fear of facing environmental demands (Brault et al., 2022).

Social information processing theory explains six cognitive steps from signal encoding to behavioral emergence. Individuals with low self-esteem tend to exhibit deficiencies in the interpretation stage, resulting in a hostile attribution bias toward ambiguous peer behavior, which in turn triggers an aggressive response (Crick & Dodge, 1994). This is reinforced by the findings of Verhoef et al. (2022), who developed a social information processing model indicating that adolescents with low self-esteem tend to misjudge social situations, thereby triggering repeated aggression (hostility). The emergence of aggressive behavior will lead to social rejection, which ultimately increases the risk of school refusal. This is reinforced by the findings of González-Castro et al (2024) who found that school refusal is related to low self-esteem and aggression, mediated by negative reinforcement in social processing.

The results of this study indicated partial mediation by aggressive behavior in the relationship between self-esteem and school refusal among public junior high school students in Surakarta City. This result is supported by Filippello et al., (2020), who explained that individuals with low self-esteem will increase school refusal, with aggressive behavior being a mediator (Aqeel & Rehna, 2020). Specifically, the results of this study indicated that physical aggression fully mediated the relationship between school refusal and school refusal. Aggressive behavior mediated the influence of self-esteem on school refusal. This is because the component of aggressive behavior falls under the category of deviant behavior. Deviant behavior arises from a person's low self-esteem. The results of Rizki and Akbar's (2020) study explained that low self-esteem in students carries a risk of committing deviant acts, namely aggressive behavior. In the last 5 years of research, researchers have found that low self-esteem plays a role in increasing deviant behavior in the form of aggressive behavior (Amad, 2021; Fitriani et al., 2021; Jabbarov et al., 2023; Hu et al., 2023; Nurhasarah et al., 2023).



Implications of these findings include the need for school-based intervention programs that integrate self-esteem training through positive self-talk. Furthermore, aggression management through emotional regulation training is important to provide students with the knowledge to manage their emotions, thereby reducing the emergence of aggressive behavior and social rejection, which ultimately leads to school refusal. Intervention programs are also directed at teachers and parents through parenting programs to provide knowledge on how to improve children's self-esteem.

CONCLUSION

These findings demonstrate that self-esteem has a negative influence on school refusal, both directly and indirectly, through partial mediation of aggressive behavior in junior high school students in Surakarta. Theoretically, these findings can expand the theory of school refusal by integrating the mediating role of aggressive behavior, which is still rarely explored in Indonesia. Furthermore, these findings also strengthen the frustration-aggression theory and social information processing within the local cultural context. Practically, these findings indicate the need for school-based interventions such as group counseling to strengthen students' self-esteem, social skills training, and aggression management through emotion regulation, in collaboration with parents and guidance counselors to monitor student progress. These findings have several limitations: the cross-sectional design can hinder causal inference, the sample is limited to public junior high schools in Surakarta, thus limiting generalizability, and the self-report scale is susceptible to bias. For future research, it is recommended to use longitudinal studies to test causality, expand the sample to include private junior high schools and senior high schools, and explore other mediators/moderators, such as social support, emotion regulation, and parenting styles, to obtain new, more insightful findings.

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