

Vol. 4 No. 1 April 2023

ISSN: 2722-5461 (Online)  
ISSN: 2722-5453 (Print)

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Fakultas Ushuluddin dan Dakwah  
Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Mas Said Surakarta

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**Published by:**

Fakultas Ushuluddin dan Dakwah, Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Mas Said  
Surakarta, Central Java, Indonesia, in collaborate with Himpunan Psikologi Indonesia  
(HIMPSI) and Perkumpulan Ahli Bimbingan dan Konseling Islam (PABKI).

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Website: <https://ejournal.uinsaid.ac.id/index.php/ajpc/index>

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## Post-Traumatic Growth Experiences Of Bullying Victims

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**Keywords:**  
post-traumatic  
growth; university  
students; victims of  
bullying

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### **Abstract**

*The study of post-traumatic growth (PTG) in bullying victims is an effort to understand how individuals can grow and develop after experiencing trauma due to acts of bullying. This study aimed to understand the experience of PTG in victims of physical, verbal, and cyberbullying, and factors that influence an individual's ability to experience PTG after bullying. This study used a phenomenological approach and data collection techniques through in-depth interviews.*

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*Five informants were selected using the purposive sampling technique based on criteria relevant to the research including university students, who had experienced bullying and trauma, and had achieved post-traumatic growth. The results showed that bullying could trigger a process of reflection, meaning-making, and emotional growth that led to positive changes in the victim, such as developing a stronger, independent, and confident attitude. The study also revealed that a supportive social environment is very important in helping bullying victims achieve PTG.*

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**Kata kunci:**  
pertumbuhan  
pasca trauma;  
mahasiswa; korban  
perundungan

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### Abstrak

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Studi mengenai *post-traumatic growth* (PTG) pada korban perundungan merupakan upaya untuk memahami bagaimana individu dapat tumbuh dan berkembang setelah mengalami trauma akibat perundungan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui pengalaman PTG pada korban perundungan secara fisik, verbal, *cyber bullying*, dan faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi kemampuan individu untuk mengalami PTG setelah mengalami perundungan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi dan teknik pengumpulan data berupa wawancara mendalam. Lima informan dipilih setelah proses *purposive sampling* berdasarkan kriteria yang relevan dengan penelitian di antaranya: mahasiswa, pernah mengalami perundungan, pernah mengalami trauma, dan mencapai *post-traumatic growth*. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pengalaman traumatis seperti perundungan bisa memicu proses refleksi, pembuatan makna, dan pertumbuhan emosional yang berujung pada perubahan positif pada diri korban, seperti sikap yang lebih kuat, mandiri, dan percaya diri. Penelitian ini juga mengungkap bahwa lingkungan sosial yang mendukung sangat penting bagi korban perundungan untuk mencapai PTG.

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### How to cite this (APA 7th Edition):

Arifin, M. S., Zunia, E. T., Ni'mah, S. K., Wulandari, F. J., Maqfiroh, R. L., & Faruq, F. (2023). Post-Traumatic Growth Experiences Of Bullying Victims. *Academic Journal Of Psychology And Counseling*, 4(1). 97-126. <https://doi.org/10.22515/ajpc.v4i1.7435>

## INTRODUCTION

### *Background Of The Study*

Research on post traumatic growth (PTG) in victims of bullying is an effort to understand how a person can grow and develop after experiencing the trauma from bullying (Nasti, Intra, Palmiero, & Brighi, 2023). There is a lack of research on PTG in

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victims of bullying. Meanwhile, bullying is a very complex social problem that may have a serious negative impact on its victims. There has been a surge in bullying cases, yet simultaneously the government shows few efforts to overcome this problem. In 2022, the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (*Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia/KPAI*) reported 226 incidents of physical and psychological violence in the school environment, including 18 incidents in cyberspace (Setyowati, 2022).

One of the most recent school bullying cases took place in Cilacap, Central Java. The incident, which happened in September 2023, had a major impact on several parties involved, including the victim, the perpetrator, students who witnessed the incident, and the school. KPAI conducted an investigation in the school following the bullying case. The agency said it aims to ensure the optimal fulfillment of children's rights and protection (KPAI, 2023).

Bullying is a repeated act of aggression by individuals or groups toward weaker or vulnerable people, causing them a grievance (Mayasari, Hadi, & Kuswandi, 2019). This desire to hurt is manifested in various forms of actions, which can be physical or psychological. Bullies are often those who are stronger, more powerful, and feel entitled to exploit their power over others. Victims of bullying, on the other hand, often feel helpless and vulnerable and may experience a range of negative emotions, such as anxiety, depression and trauma, as a result of the aggression (Tumon, 2014).

According to UNICEF's 2020 data, 40% of 15-year-old students in Indonesia experienced bullying at least several times a month. Aggressive behaviors like bullying are associated with an increased risk of psychological disorders, poor social functioning, and disruption in education. Almost 40% of suicide incidents in Indonesia are linked to bullying (Beaton, Doherty, & Wenger, 2012).

Bullying victims, or those whom aggressors target, may experience various adverse consequences, such as social isolation, low self-esteem, and poor academic performance (Wardani, Mariyati, & Tamrin, 2019). Parties involved in bullying are often not only victims and perpetrators. At times, bully victims are also involved in bullying incidents. Bully-victims are individuals who conduct aggressive behavior toward others and are also victims of aggression themselves. While bullying others,



bully-victims may derive joy from their actions. Bully-victims have a higher tendency of verbal and physical aggression (Zakiyah, Humaedi, & Santoso, 2017).

There are several forms of bullying, including physical, verbal, relational, and cyberbullying. Physical bullying involves the use of physical force or violence to intimidate or hurt someone. Verbal bullying consists of the use of demeaning or insulting language to hurt others, while relational bullying involves using social exclusion or manipulation to damage one's relationships with others. Cyberbullying is a form of bullying where the perpetrator uses digital technology to harass or intimidate their targets (Sulisrudatin, 2014; Saifuddin, 2023).

The psychological impact of bullying includes low self-esteem and self-doubt. They can have difficulty building healthy relationships and may have lost trust in others (Oktaviany & Ramadan, 2023). The adverse effects of bullying also cause serious issues in the development of self-identity, especially in adolescents between 11 and 18 years old. Bullying victims can experience a range of mental and physical health problems, such as depression, anxiety, headaches and muscle tension. In some cases, bullying can even lead to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Idsoe et al., 2021).

Not only victims, but bullying perpetrators are also at risk of emotional disturbances, substance addiction, exhibiting violent behaviors, having difficulty building a career due to aggressive tendencies, becoming a perpetrator of domestic violence, and being involved in criminal activities. Bullying is a serious issue that can have long-term negative consequences for both victims and perpetrators. Therefore, understanding the types and impacts of bullying is important to develop effective prevention and intervention strategies to address this problem (Andarista & Religia, 2023).

Overall, bullying can be defined as the use of force to verbally, physically, and psychologically harm a person or a group, causing the victim to feel depressed, traumatized, and helpless. The adverse effects experienced by victims include the development of various mental problems such as sadness, tension and post-traumatic disorder (PTSD) (Abulof, 2017). However, not all bullying victims experience prolonged adverse effects. Some of them can grow and develop positively after the

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traumatic experience, known as post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Aldwin & Levenson, 2004).

### *Rationale Of The Study*

Post-traumatic growth (PTG) refers to a psychological phenomenon an individual grows and develops after experiencing a traumatic life event that threatens their safety or security (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2016). Individuals who undergo post-traumatic growth can see the world in a better way, improve social and emotional relationships, increase understanding of the meaning of life, strengthen spiritual or religious beliefs, improve coping skills, and find strength in themselves (Burke, 2016).

However, in some cases, bullying victims do not achieve post-traumatic growth (PTG) but instead seek revenge by bullying others. The experience of bullying can place significant emotional stress on the victim, who may feel angry, hurt and isolated. The pent-up anger and frustration resulting from the bullying experience can trigger the desire for revenge. Individuals may attempt to cope with their feelings by bullying others as a form of emotional release. This is an unhealthy response and can have a further negative impact on the psychological well-being of both the bully and the victim, as well as potentially continuing the cycle of bullying (Sari & Azwar, 2017).

PTG theory assumes that this psychological growth occurs because individuals confront and process their trauma adaptively and constructively, leading to positive changes in their views of themselves, others, and the world (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The theory also recognises that the process does not happen spontaneously or effortlessly, but involves individuals' efforts to process their experiences and change their outlook on life (Ratcliff, Tombari, Miller, Brand, & Witnauer, 2022). To say that an individual experiences growth after trauma, the person must undergo positive psychological changes due to efforts made in the face of adversity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). PTG does not mean the end of suffering in trauma victims because it is not a fixed outcome, but rather an ongoing process (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

In the context of bullying victims, PTG theory is used to understand how victims of bullying can grow and develop psychologically after being traumatized by the bullying experience. Empirical data show that stressful events can positively impact individuals (Lovrien, 1963). Through the PTG process, victims of bullying can develop

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the ability to understand and cope with their traumatic experiences, increase their understanding of themselves and others, and find new meaning in their lives (Andreou, Tsermentseli, Anastasiou, & Kouklari, 2021).

In this study, PTG is used as a theoretical framework to identify and explore factors and the understanding of positive growth experiences that influence the ability of bullying victims to experience post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The concept of PTG is expected to help understand the adaptation process of bullying victims after experiencing trauma and provide insight on how to help them grow and develop positively after that experience.

International researchers have widely discussed PTG and related topics, such as in the study of the relationship between rumination and PTG in mobile cabin hospital nurses. The study examined the significant mediating effect of psychological resilience. Distressed nurses can improve their psychological resilience through training, education, and interventions, encouraging deliberate rumination among nurses and improving situations or even PTG (Liu et al., 2023).

Another study explained that someone who has experienced bullying and negative situations has a high level of optimism (Burke, 2016). A different study discussed how past bullying experiences might be related to PTG in college students, and how motivation and coping strategies play a role in this relationship (Oktaviany & Ramadan, 2023). There is a study that addressed the relationship between workplace bullying and mental health, with an emphasis on the indirect effects of post-traumatic stress and moderation of perceptions of bullying in the workplace (Hong, Kim, Nam, Wong, & Lee, 2021). Meanwhile, in Indonesia, post-traumatic growth in bullying victims is still rarely discussed, with a past study debating the relationship between bullying incidents in adolescents and their ability to experience post-traumatic growth (Dewi & Valentina, 2020). The study aimed to explore the level of post-traumatic growth in adolescents who were victims of bullying and see what factors contributed to post-traumatic growth. A phenomenological study by Dewi & Susilawati (2022) examined the meaning of bullying and PTG attainment in bullying survivors. Another research examined post-traumatic stress due to COVID-19, which was found to expedite PTG attainment (Landi et al., 2022).

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### *Novelty Of The Study*

The present study is unique from previous research because it focused more on exploring the experience of PTG in bullying victims so that they can utilize the traumatic experience to grow and develop as an individual. The growth in an individual post-trauma is one of PTG's characteristics, encompassing various aspects, such as positive activities, personal strength, spiritual changes, and improved relationships with others. In addition, it emphasizes positive activities carried out by bullying victims to achieve PTG. Bullying victims can experience positive growth, and a supportive social environment (which can directly combat acts of bullying) is needed to assist victims in achieving that state.

### *Purpose Or Hypothesis Of The Study*

This study also sought to describe the individual's ability to grow and develop through the traumatic experience of bullying. Therefore, the researcher needed a deeper insight into the mental, emotional and psychological processes involved in coping with traumatic experiences and to find out whether the social environment influences the post-traumatic growth process. The researchers designed a *grand tour question* to answer some of the main questions in this study and develop an in-depth understanding of how PTG can occur in bullying victims and the factors that influence the process. The grand tour question of this research was how post-traumatic growth is experienced in bullying victims. Meanwhile, the sub-questions proposed to deepen the focus of the study include: 1) what types of bullying are experienced by victims; 2) how the victim overcame the bullying experience, and 3) how the victim's social environment affects the PTG they experience, what are the factors causing victims to experience PTG.

## **METHODS**

### *Research Design*

This study used a phenomenological approach, aiming at exploring the meaning of bullying experience in victims who had experienced post-traumatic growth. This study design allowed researchers to conduct an in-depth exploration of bullying victim

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experience related to potential post-traumatic growth, encompassing informants' feelings, perceptions, and reflections on their experiences.

### Research Informants

Informants were selected using purposive sampling techniques, based on criteria decided by the researchers. The criteria for informants were: 1) university students; 2) having experienced bullying in the past; 3) having experienced trauma due to the bullying experience; and 4) achieving post-traumatic growth.

The informant selection process involved distributing a questionnaire to potential research participants. The questionnaire contained a consent form regarding willingness to fill out the questionnaire and a statement that the data obtained would be used for research purposes and kept confidential. Questions included in the survey were related to aspects or dimensions of bullying, trauma, and post-traumatic growth. Respondents could choose between four options (Never, Rarely, Often, Very Often). An example of the content of this questionnaire is as follows: "I was hit, kicked, or pushed by others," "I feel afraid to meet people," "I feel threatened when I am in public places," "Others do not let me join my classmates," "Past experiences of bullying make me ready for the future," and "I believe I can make positive changes in life."

Five university students fulfilled the predetermined research criteria (Table 1). Before the interview, the informants received an explanation about the purpose of the interview and how the interview data would be used in the research. After the explanation, the informant gave explicit consent to continue the interview.

Table 1.

Informant Data

Initial	Sex	Age	Bullying Type	Time & Location
INF1	Male	21	Physical and verbal	During primary to junior high school, within the school environment
INF2	Male	23	Physical and verbal	During junior high school, within the school environment
INF3	Female	21	Physical, verbal, and cyberbullying	From high school to university, outside of the school environment
INF4	Female	21	Verbal	During primary school
INF5	Female	21	Verbal	During primary school and Qur'an tutoring

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### *Data Collection Technique*

The data collection strategy used was face-to-face interviews. The in-depth interviews were directed at the topic of the informants' bullying experience and how they responded to the event, as well as the impact on their lives.

### *Data Analysis Technique*

Data were analyzed using the interpretative phenomenological analysis technique, according to guidelines from Kahija (2017). There were four stages carried out by researchers, namely: 1) repeatedly reading the transcripts to understand the informants' experiences; 2) constructing exploratory comments; 3) identifying emergent themes; and 4) developing superordinate themes.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### *Bullying Experience*

Bullying is a harmful action directed at another individual or group. It can take many forms, ranging from verbal taunts to physical assaults. Bullying usually occurs during the school years, especially at the primary and secondary education levels, and can last for a considerable period. Bullies can be peers or other individuals who act as aggressors. Bullying can occur in a variety of settings, such as in schools, neighborhoods, or cyberspace. Some factors can cause bullying such as socioeconomic differences, physical weaknesses, or incompatibility in the social setting.

The first theme highlights how some informants had experienced bullying. This theme refers to informants' experiences of being victims of harassment or degrading treatment by other individuals or groups. Bullying can take many forms, including physical, verbal, psychological or cyberbullying.

The bullying incidents experienced by informant 1 almost always occurred when the classroom was empty and no teacher was supervising. The perpetrators were considered to have "power" in that classroom, so the victim was hesitant to fight back or show anger toward the bullies. One of the experiences that he still remembered was having his pants or sarong forcibly removed and then thrown and used as a toy by the

bullying perpetrators. Informant 1 reported experiencing trauma and fear. He was scared whenever the classroom was empty with no teacher in sight.

*"Once in a while, twice the Ustadz didn't come in, and when it happened I felt the trauma. The feeling was like, anxious, afraid that it would happen again. Those were two different experiences in my school that I think are still attached, still present in my memory."*

Informant 2 said he experienced bullying when he was in junior high school, causing fear that forced him to follow the bullies' whims to avoid threats and blows.

*"My bullying experience started when I entered junior high school. So, two people always called me during every break and told me to buy them food. Like what is pentol, noodles, or iced drinks. So [they did it] with yelling or threats. If I refused, I would be struck, which scared me. I dealt with it by obeying their orders because I was afraid. I was afraid to be abused, afraid to be beaten, [complying is better] than being hurt."*

Informant 3 said she experienced physical, verbal and also online bullying. The physical bullying was restraint, holding the victim's hand firmly to prevent her from going away. Then, the victim received verbal threats from the perpetrator. In addition, there was an effort to defame the victim on social media.

*"So I'd known [the bully] for three years, in the last year the person did the bully. Yes, at first they just made fun of me. They terrorized me, creating a social media account under my name. I didn't have Facebook, but they used photos I posted on my WhatsApp story in the Facebook profile, writing down the bio as "stay at the boarding house" as if I were a delinquent. Then they threatened me, saying they would come to my house. They posted a picture showing their weapon in front of my house. After that, they also came to my campus and dormitory. Then, my older brother told me to look for a crowded place; I was confused about what kind of crowded place to look for because at that [the bully] had caught my left hand."*

Informant 4 revealed that she was bullied in the first grade. She experienced physical and verbal from the children in her neighborhood. The informant was often bullied because she had curly hair while most other kids at school had straight hair. Sometimes the victim was taunted about her parents' names.

*"In the first grade of primary school, I was bullied because of my name, my hair, [and] my physique. [Getting teased] about the name is normal, [among] children, they always tease parents' names."*

Informant 5 revealed that she experienced bullying from the sixth grade of elementary school to the second grade of junior high school. The form of bullying she received was verbal, with perpetrators insulting her physical and economic conditions, among others.

*"[I was bullied] verbally. In the past, I was often told 'you are ugly,' then 'you are skinny', 'what a smarty-pants.'"*

Based on the data, it can be concluded that some informants experienced physical and verbal bullying. The bullying incidents took place within and outside the school environment. The bullying perpetrators were individuals and groups.

### ***Traumatic Impact Of Bullying***

The second theme is the trauma resulting from bullying. Trauma is a condition that arises as a result of extremely difficult or traumatic situations. These traumatic experiences cause fear, anxiety, loss of self-confidence, and other psychological symptoms that have a severe impact on an individual's well-being.

Trauma in this context refers to deep emotional discomfort and significant psychological impact caused by the bullying experience. Therefore, the term "trauma" is used to describe the severity and distress experienced by the informants after the bullying incident.

Informant 1 revealed that although some of the perpetrators were no longer in the same class, the trauma remained and lingered in his memory. This shows how strong the emotional impact of bullying can be, leaving long-lasting marks even after the event has ended.

*"When I was about to enter, when I was about to enter madrasa [school], I always get reminded by people or friends who did [the bullying]."*

Informant 2 said he initially felt anxious about every guy when he entered the vocational high school, fearing that his male friends would do the same thing as his junior high school peers.

*"I, what I felt was anxiety."*

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Informant 3 revealed that the traumatic experience had made her feel that he could not do anything by herself or that there must be someone accompanying her everywhere.

*"However, I can't do anything by myself. I want to be accompanied everywhere."*

Informant 4 revealed that the trauma caused her to lack confidence and prefer to stay at home, which hindered her development and knowledge of the outside world. She only interacted with the same friends, lacking interest in getting to know new people.

*"Because I don't feel confident going anywhere, I prefer staying home or playing with close friends. So I felt the lack of understanding about the outside world."*

Informant 5 revealed that the bullying caused fear and anxiety when speaking in public and being in the crowd. She also lost trust in others and herself. The informant said she often blamed herself.

*"I used to be afraid whenever I was in the middle of the crowd. [Large gathering] like class reunions."*

It can be concluded that the effects of trauma caused by bullying include loss of self-confidence, anxiety, and fear of meeting the bully.

### ***Post-Traumatic Growth Experience***

The third theme discusses the post-traumatic growth experience. Victims described the positive changes that occur after enduring the bullying trauma.

Informant 1 started taking steps to gain recognition from his peers. He began to be active in school activities, which allowed him to expand his social circles. His involvement in organizations and expanding social circles gave him confidence and earned him appreciation from his peers. He felt respected, even by most of the students in the school, because of his position in a school organization. Although there were still some disturbing verbal taunts, such as negative comments or criticism, the victim was more aware that he was not as weak as others thought he was.

*"But again, it was only in the early part of the grade 10, [then] grade 11, grade 12. Moreover, in grade 11 it can be said that I had power, over the entire school. [Even more] in grade 12 within the same cohort. So, I think I didn't experience any bullying in grade 12, but in grade 10 there were [small incidents]."*

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Informant 2 said he learned from the experience to ignore anyone who thinks of him as useless, instead trying to prove his capability through his achievements. He said it would make the bullies ashamed of their words and victims.

*"Show that we have achievements or talent to those who already consider us [or rather me], who underestimate [me]."*

Informant 3 said she did not seek professional counselling but tried to open up to her parents about her bullying experience.

*"At that age I didn't know how to judge people's [characters]. Now I understand them [better], I know what people are like."*

Informant 4 revealed a positive change in herself that happened without her awareness, saying that she became accustomed to negative words from people around her. She became used to ignoring them, to the point that the negativity no longer impacted her.

*"Positive changes, yes I think. But it [happened] unconsciously. Unconsciously, yes. It's more like, for example, people judge you no matter what, so just ignore them."*

Informant 5 said she became motivated to change and grow for the better when she participated in organizational activities at school.

*"The trigger was when I joined the GWN Ambalan Scout in the second grade of junior high school. Well, I was taught by my teacher there, that we have to be brave to speak out. Moreover, my position was, like an instructor. So, I had to teach the class. So it's like a teacher, the only difference was that the material we taught was scout-related. So I tried to be confident, like, practice first."*

Overall, each informant underwent unique paths to achieve post-traumatic growth, and that involved the role of their surrounding environment. Feeling valued, recognized, and confident about one's capability, is the starting point in achieving post-traumatic growth.

### ***Forms Of Post-Traumatic Growth***

The next theme delves into the dynamic of post-traumatic growth, which is the process of positive psychological, emotional, and social changes after experiencing trauma. Forms of post-traumatic growth can include increased confidence, the

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discovery of new meaning in life, changes in values and priorities, and increased quality of relationships and intimacy with others.

Informant 1 said he experienced improved social relationships. This improvement helped reduce the impact of his past bullying experience and provided a starting point for viewing himself more positively. He also said he became aware of the consequences of bullying, saying he is committed to helping bullying victims. Another form of positive growth is empathy and support for others. Then, post-traumatic growth also encompasses an individual's awareness of how important it is to maintain good relationships and not demean others.

*"I realize more [that] other people cannot feel what I feel. So that is one of the things that makes it like, an experience, also a warning that we cannot do the same thing to others."*

Informant 2 said his friends in high school were kind and did not differentiate people based on their personal attributes. The school community also took care of each other. Because of this, he felt better.

*"For positive changes after experiencing bullying, is after I got to know all my friends at the vocational school. They are very kind. And those friends don't judge people [based on whether they're] weak, strong, or handsome. So, all of us were friends. There is no classism. Friends at my high school always protected each other. And that's when I became strong and kind."*

Informant 3 said that after going through bullying, she put more trust in herself, believing that she was able to defeat the trauma to achieve growth.

*"In the friendship circle... I am more guarded when I am in the college environment, um, my college friends are also very helpful. They [helped me] to be more confident in myself and assured me that me [and the bullies] were far apart. So, [God willing] they would not return."*

Informant 4 revealed that after the bullying she became wiser and was able to accept her physical traits. She became grateful because to her, her curly hair was unique.

*"Then I just knew, like, [I'm] trying to accept and assure myself. God blesses you with curly hair, so just be grateful."*

Informant 5 revealed that she felt more confident and braver because the bullying incident had happened so long ago.

*"Thank God, [I felt] more confident. Maybe because the incident happened a while ago."*

Based on the data obtained, forms of post-traumatic growth experienced by informants include improved social relationships, awareness of the impact of negative actions, higher empathy for others, enhanced sensitivity to others, confidence and calmness, finding meaning in life and changing perspective toward the world.

### ***Factors That Support Post-Traumatic Growth***

This fifth theme discusses the factors that support post-traumatic growth, referring to elements that comprehensively influence the informants' ability to undergo positive change and growth after experiencing trauma. These factors include psychological, social and spiritual aspects that interact and contribute to developing strength, new meaning and emotional balance after a traumatic experience. A deep understanding of these factors can provide valuable insights into how informants overcame trauma, developed resilience and achieved positive growth in their lives.

Informant 1 revealed that social support, especially from family and friends, was a significant factor in his PTG process. In addition, he continued to explore his past experiences and his close friends. Social media was also quite influential in motivating him to keep growing.

*"A factor that influences [my growth] is my continuous exploration, I mean, exploring experience, knowledge in social media."*

Informant 2 said that when he entered high school he participated in an extracurricular activity related to his hobby. He participated in the selection process and became the school representative in competitions with other schools. He gained appreciation from his schoolmates. He was known to be reliable, and collected achievements. This was his turning point after the bullying experience in junior high school.

*"...Many of my classmates gave me recognition. That I had achievements and could be relied upon. And there was even [a student from] another class I didn't know, who knew me. When we passed each other, he always greeted me even though I didn't know him."*

Informant 3 revealed that something that supported her in achieving growth after bullying was the support of a circle of friends who always understood the trauma she had experienced, took good care of her, and assured her that she was safe.

*"In the friendship circle... I am more guarded when I am in the college environment, um, my college friends are also very helpful. They [helped me] to be more confident in myself and assured me that me [and the bullies] were far apart. So, [God willing] they would not return."*

Informant 4 revealed that she told her parents about her bullies. Her parents advised her to let it slide as long as she was not physically hurt. They told her she could retaliate if the bullying got physical or made her uncomfortable. Additionally, her parents offered to get her hair straightened because she was bullied for her curly hair. Her parents showed support by listening to her complaints, even though she talked about her bullying experience frequently.

*"[I think] when I was younger, I was told to tell my parents about anything. I always told my parents that my friends made fun of me, this and that, and they told me to ignore them. Then, if they got physical, such as hitting me, and making me uncomfortable I could retaliate."*

Informant 5 said her family and social media support drove her to change. She said they gave her a positive impression and encouraged her to improve.

*"The first is my own family. First of all, my family was aggrieved to hear my bullying stories. It was affecting [me]. I had already known Facebook by the second grade of junior high, when I met a female friend. She asked to get to know me, and then we got acquainted on Facebook, until we became best friends, because there used to be fan pages on Facebook, so we became the admins in a fan page, and then we exchanged words, sentences of encouragement. Being bullied was not pleasant."*

It can be concluded that there are internal and external factors that influence the post-traumatic growth process. It is emphasized that external factors, including social support from friends and family, are influential.

### **Factors Hindering Post-Traumatic Growth**

This theme discusses obstacles in the growth process following the bullying experience. Understanding these factors can provide knowledge about the proper response to these obstacles so bullying victims can thrive after the trauma.

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One of the risks that hindered informant 1 was seeing others experiencing what he experienced in the past (bullying). It could trigger flashbacks and cause him to be anxious.

*"Risks that hinder [are] when seeing other people experiencing the same thing [that I experienced], for me the problem [is] that nowadays it doesn't matter what age, whether they are men or women, bullying still happens, and nowadays I see bullying news in junior high school students or social media."*

Informant 2 told the interviewer that after graduating from junior high school and going to vocational school, he found it difficult to socialize with his new friends, he was afraid of being treated the same way as in the previous school.

*"Saying [that I am] traumatized, well, [I am] traumatized. When I graduated from junior high school, I started attending high school. So, I found it difficult to socialize and make friends."*

Informant 3 revealed she was reminded of her traumatic experience when witnessing things that the bullies did to her in her daily life.

*"In the daily life... I mean like the things [the bully] usually did [to me], when I saw the same thing happening, I was reminded of the trauma."*

Informant 4 revealed that her school environment did not support her in achieving PTG. She described the environment as "toxic," and made her feel uncomfortable. She also revealed that she told her teacher about the bullying incident but was dismissed. It deterred her from reporting future incidents to teachers.

*"Nothing. In fact, by chance, my classroom [environment] was toxic, making me uncomfortable."*

Informant 5 said the obstacles in her PTG process were others' worldviews and ineffective communication.

*"Oh, the obstacles? Well, the obstacles... Maybe the obstacles were not from myself, maybe from the surrounding environment. Like, there was a friend of mine who was quiet, like she couldn't communicate her feelings explicitly, so we took it slow. I felt like learning a lot more [about characters], like, 'oh, this friend is an extrovert,' 'oh, this one is an introvert.' [Some] people can be approached easily, while others should be approached slowly, to become really close [with them]. If the friend... [Making them] welcome me. That's it. And, yes, communication is challenging."*

Based on the data, it can be concluded that informants experienced different obstacles, namely communication difficulties, unsupportive environments, and flashbacks of past bullying experiences. Factors that hinder the post-traumatic growth process can vary among people.

### *Discussion*

Based on the data obtained from five informants, bullying victims underwent post-traumatic growth (PTG) after experiencing said traumatic event. Previous research showed that bullying can have a detrimental and painful impact on victims (Idsoe et al., 2021; Oktaviany & Ramadan, 2023). However, interestingly, some victims were able to see positive changes in themselves after experiencing this trauma. These changes include increased self-esteem and self-confidence, as well as the ability to be more empathetic toward people experiencing adversity or similar difficulties, and the discovery of new problem-solving skills. In addition, there are changes in thinking patterns and self-assessment. Bullying victims begin to see themselves as strong and capable (Indriani & Arbi, 2022). The data gathered by researchers revealed different aspects ranging from the experience of bullying, the impact of bullying, the process of PTG, the form of PTG, and factors that support or hinder the growth process.

Based on the data, the most common forms of bullying experienced by victims are physical and verbal. Physical bullying involves actions such as physically hurting, or forcing victims to do things they do not want to do. Meanwhile, verbal bullying occurs through taunting, insulting, or demeaning the victim verbally, through speech or writing. In addition, the data showed that the perpetrators could form groups or gangs, meaning that multiple people simultaneously committed acts of bullying against the victim (Polmear, 2015).

The psychological impact of bullying was also revealed in the data. Informants experienced trauma (Idsoe et al., 2021), anxiety (Pörhölä, Almonkari, & Kunttu, 2019), and significant changes in behavior. They feel anxious, have prolonged feelings of low self-esteem, and fear of experiencing similar situations in the future. This is in line with previous research which showed that bullying can lower well-being, with victims experiencing psychological turmoil, difficulties in social relationships, and problems in

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academics (e.g., passive behavior in the classroom, disliking subjects, academic failure) (Gomes et al., 2020; Haroon, 2018), and obstacles in self-development (e.g., fear of taking part in new activities and difficulty of expressing oneself) (Dewi & Susilawati, 2022).

The bullying experience can also affect the victim's mental well-being in the long term, even after it has ended. This is reflected in lingering feelings of trauma and fear in the school environment (Burke, 2016). Some informants also experienced regret and difficulty in trusting others. However, they also managed to recover from their traumatic experiences. Informants took steps to change their outlook, seek support from others, love and accept themselves, and consider the positive side of their experiences.

In the PTG process, an informant reported resisting their bullies, saying they did not like this behavior. The victim no longer responded to the taunting and proved that he was capable by participating in extracurricular activities and becoming a school representative. In their turning point and awakening process, informants increased their self-confidence and refused to be underestimated by others. Furthermore, some informants said they avoided problematic people, including their bullies.

Informants also took steps to get help and support. Social support can be obtained from the victim's family and friends (Febriana & Rahmasari, 2021). One of the steps they took was telling others, such as friends, about their experience. Friends who provided emotional and practical support helped informants feel accepted. Friends who provided advice to fight bullying also gave informants encouragement and confidence to overcome the traumatic experience. By sharing this experience, bullying victims feel calmer, which aids them when dealing with the trauma of bullying (Rahayu, Hamidah, & Hendriani, 2019).

An informant also reported the bullying incidents with her family. This is important because families can provide additional support and strength in post-traumatic recovery and growth. Family support comes in the form of understanding, empathy and encouragement to keep moving forward. Through these steps, informants can feel the presence of strong social support from friends and family. The



social support that victims of bullying get from those around them will strengthen self-acceptance.

The PTG process also includes the transformation of informants from victims to defenders. These informants did not only fight bullying by protecting themselves but also actively helped people who were bullied. These informants used their experiences to teach others about the dangers and negative impacts of bullying. They dared to reveal their past missteps and shared their experiences to inspire change and take the initiative to treat others well (Purwanto & Hendriyani, 2020).

PTG involves significant changes in attitude and mindset. Informants who experienced PTG tend to develop adaptive coping strategies and greater resilience. They can face challenges, manage stress, and cope with the negative impacts resulting from the bullying experience better (Purwanto & Hendriyani, 2020). Before that, informants who experienced PTG often sought meaning in their experiences. They reflected on the true meaning of the experience and tried to find the wisdom behind it, making connections to spiritual growth or deeper values (Tumon, 2014).

The form of PTG that emerged from this process also involved several important aspects. First, informants developed a deeper self-awareness of the effects of bullying and the importance of preventing it. They accepted the responsibility to create a safe environment for everyone. Then, informants also experienced self-development. Through achievements; such as joining organizations and becoming school representatives, they gained confidence in their own abilities and worth. They rejected undermining assumptions about themselves from others and valued their potential. These informants tried to love themselves by acknowledging their strengths and weaknesses and accepting parts of themselves. They learned to thank God for the growth they experienced, and to appreciate their new sense of self-worth.

Overall, the study describes an individual's journey from being a victim of bullying to a person who experiences personal growth involving self-awareness, self-confidence, self-acceptance, and respect for others. The process also requires attitude change, deep understanding, and the use of the traumatic experience as motivation to help others and create positive change in their environment. Some informants who experienced PTG reported healthier and more meaningful social relationships after

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overcoming their traumatic experiences (Purwanto & Hendriyani, 2020). Some informants said they experienced personal growth after going through a process of deep reflection and seeking meaning from their experiences. According to Calhoun and Tedeschi, an individual's experience in dealing with bullying can turn into a valuable life experience, in which the person is pushed to achieve positive psychological changes such as becoming a better, stronger, more successful, and happier person (Dewi & Valentina, 2020).

This study found similarities and differences with previous research related to the process and form of post-traumatic stress growth. The present study found signs of more profound transformation, with bullying survivors becoming more empathetic toward friends who shared similar experiences. In addition, informants in this study also responded to bullying by showing achievements at school, proving that they were capable and had grown from the trauma. This study amplifies our understanding of PTG and provides new insights into how individuals cope with bullying.

The study demonstrates the importance of supporting individuals who experience bullying so they can develop adaptive coping strategies. They can do so through an intervention approach that involves developing healthy coping strategies, providing information resources, and strengthening positive social networks. In addition, providing space and opportunities for individuals to reflect on their experiences and seek meaning in traumatic experiences can help encourage PTG (Dewi & Valentina, 2020). Previous research also showed a high correlation between social support and PTG (Raudatussalamah & Putri, 2020).

Data showed that bullying victims in this study underwent a successful recovery process. Several supporting factors contribute to the success, namely social support, self-development, and positive experiences in the social environment. Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004). found that social support has a very strong role in post-traumatic growth if it is provided to individuals consistently over time. In some cases, bullying victims can overcome their traumatic experiences by approaching friends, and teachers and even getting involved in school organizations (Anantasari, 2011). Through this involvement in the community, victims feel valued, gain recognition, and can slowly let go of the trauma. Motivation and self-exploration contribute to recovery. Social

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media can also have a positive influence, with victims finding inspiration and support from online communities.

In addition to external factors, internal factors play a role in post-traumatic growth in victims of bullying. Individual motivation to overcome traumatic experiences and exploration of past experiences can provide encouragement and inspiration for victims of bullying to cope with trauma and grow personally. These findings suggest that social support, whether from friends, family or through social media, as well as personal understanding and experience, can contribute to post-traumatic growth. Such research helps us understand the factors that play an important role in the recovery and growth of individuals who have experienced traumatic bullying incidents (Yuhbaba, Winarni, & Lestari, 2017).

However, some factors hinder the recovery process. Every informant had personal obstacles in the post-traumatic recovery and growth process after bullying, such as exposure to news about bullying cases. It can trigger trauma in victims of bullying (Saputri & Arifin, 2022). Continued exposure to such news can exacerbate the traumatic effects. The next barrier is difficulty in communication, where bullying victims often encounter difficulty in building new relationships because they are afraid of experiencing the same treatment as before. The negative perception of the community toward victims is also an inhibiting factor because it makes them feel unsupported and misunderstood. The last factor is decreasing self-confidence.

Social support from friends and family and a positive environment should be strengthened to prevent bullying. Education to prevent bullying must also be improved, encompassing the role of social media in influencing bullying. Schools, teachers, and parents must play an active role in dealing with the bullying problem. They should provide attention and support to victims, and teach empathy, tolerance and respect for differences to all individuals within the school environment. It is important to note that this study aligns with previous studies that identified similar forms of bullying and its profound impact on victims. These findings reinforce the conclusion that bullying is a serious problem and requires greater attention (Febriana & Rahmasari, 2021).

From this study, we can conclude that bullying victims often recognize their weaknesses and vulnerabilities following the aggression they endured in the past. This experience can trigger deep reflection on their identity, self-esteem (Dou et al., 2022), and social interactions. Bullying experiences create a crisis and uncertainty for victims. They may feel a sense of losing control, fear, and prolonged stress. However, in some cases, this crisis can also be a turning point for personal growth. The recovery process after bullying often involves strong social support. Victims who receive support from family, friends, teachers, or mental health professionals can feel understood and empowered to face and overcome their trauma.

The PTG process begins with the victim of bullying experiencing demeaning, hurtful, or insulting treatment from the bully. Bullying takes the form of verbal, physical and cyber assaults. The experience can have significant negative impacts on the victim, including psychological (depression, anxiety, and trauma), social, and physical. When victims of bullying begin to realize the impact of bullying, they feel the need for introspection and self-reflection. They can reflect on how the experience has affected their confidence and self-esteem. At this point, help from the victim's social environment is key. Friends, family, or even caring teachers can provide emotional and behavioral support. They can listen to the victim's story, provide encouragement, and help the victim overcome negative feelings. PTG begins when the victim of bullying starts taking positive steps to overcome the impact of the traumatic experience. The forms of PTG can vary according to how the bullying victim interprets it. One of the changes is a mindset shift for the better, which can break the cycle of bullying. This dynamic is explained in Figure 1.

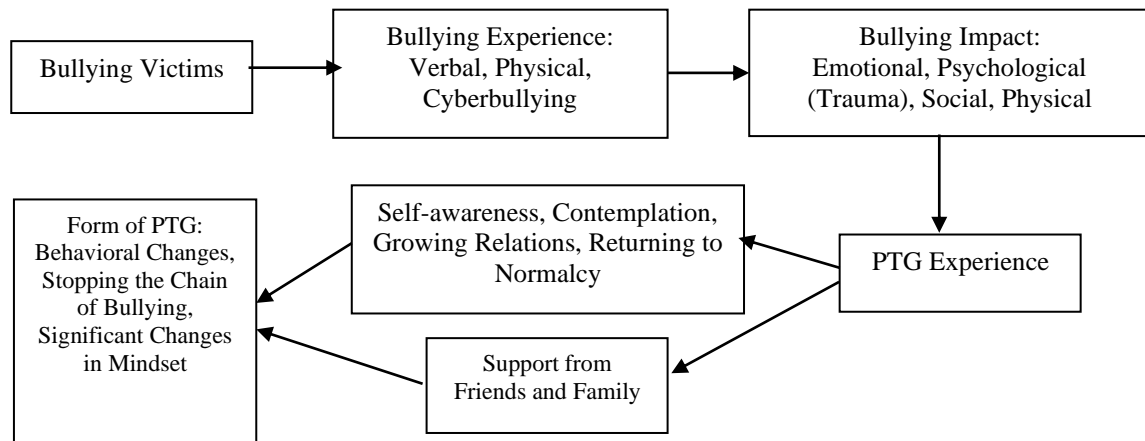


Figure 1. The Dynamic Of Post-Traumatic Growth In Bullying Victims

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

### *Conclusions*

The present study showed the experience of PTG in individuals who were bullied. PTG involves significant changes in attitudes and mindsets. Bullying victims who experience PTG tend to develop a more positive attitude towards themselves, strengthen self-confidence, and develop empathy and understanding towards others. They also develop adaptive coping strategies and greater resilience. Enabling factors such as social support, personal development, and positive experiences within the school environment play an important role in the post-traumatic recovery and growth process. Support from friends, family and a positive environment had a significant impact on overcoming the negativity of the bullying experience and promoting PTG. Overall, this study enriches the understanding of the PTG experience and the factors that influence it. It also emphasizes the importance of social support and self-development in facilitating post-traumatic growth and bullying prevention.

### *Suggestions*

For future research, it would be relevant to conduct studies that focus on bullying perpetrators to understand whether they previously fell victim to bullying and, if so, what factors influenced them to retaliate by bullying others. Such research would provide comprehensive insight into the dynamics and interactions between

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bullies and their personal experiences as victims of bullying, as well as the factors that may play a role in their drive to continue the violent cycle.

#### **AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT**

**Muhammad Samsul Arifin:** Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Funding Acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Project Administration; Resources; Validation; Visualization; Writing Original Draft; Writing, Review & Editing

**Elka Tiara Zunia:** Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Funding Acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Project Administration; Resources; Validation; Visualization; Writing Original Draft; Writing, Review & Editing

**Siti Khoirun Ni'mah:** Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Funding Acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Project Administration; Resources; Validation; Visualization; Writing Original Draft; Writing, Review & Editing

**Fuji Juliana Wulandari:** Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Funding Acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Project Administration; Resources; Validation; Visualization; Writing Original Draft; Writing, Review & Editing

**Reni Lailatul Maqfiroh:** Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Funding Acquisition; Investigation; Methodology; Project Administration; Resources; Validation; Visualization; Writing Original Draft; Writing, Review & Editing

**Faruq Faruq:** Conceptualization; Methodology; Writing, Review & Editing; Other Role

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First publication right:

[Academic Journal of Psychology and Counseling](https://doi.org/10.22515/ajpc.v4i1.7435)

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Academic Journal of Psychology and Counseling has been accredited by The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, Republic of Indonesia as an academic journal in Sinta Grade 4 (SK Direktur Jenderal Pendidikan Tinggi, Riset, dan Teknologi, Kemendikbudristek No. 225/E/KPT/2022) and is valid for 5 years from Volume 1 No. 2 2020 to Volume 6 No. 1 2025.

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