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# Elementary school students' conceptualizations of bullying, role-based emotions, and coping strategies: a thematic analysis

**Ade Nursanti*), Entin Nurhayati**
Universitas YARSI, Jakarta, Indonesia

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**ABSTRACT**

Bullying is a form of violence that has significant impacts. This study investigates primary school students' conceptualizations of bullying, based on role-based emotions and coping strategies. Previous research has shown that bullying also occurs in elementary schools, but few have tried to explore the emotions and coping strategies that may be used by elementary school students. This study employed a qualitative descriptive design using written interviews. In this study, 88 male elementary school students participated. The data were analyzed manually using thematic analysis, guided by the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist. The results show that four main themes and 15 subthemes were identified as perceived by students: Definition of bullying, Types of bullying, Participants' perceived emotions by role, and Participants' perceived coping strategies employed. The findings indicate that bullying occurs in various forms and has negative impacts on perpetrators, victims, and bystanders. The uniqueness in this study was one of the effects of the perpetrator, namely the feeling of pleasure and satisfaction as a perpetrator. Meanwhile, students perceived strategies for addressing bullying include reporting incidents to teachers or other adults, avoiding perpetrators, assisting victims, and, in some cases, expressing a desire for retaliation. The implications of this study highlight that preventing bullying can start from the school environment by building a positive relationship between teachers and students, creating a supportive classroom climate and providing a safe and comfortable environment for students, and teaching students to strengthen emotional regulation and empathy.

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**Corresponding Author:**

Ade Nursanti
Universitas YARSI
Email: ade.nursanti@yarsi.ac.id

## Introduction

UNESCO has reported that almost one in three students (32%) has been bullied by their peers at school at least once in the last month. In all regions except Europe and North America, physical bullying is the most common, and sexual bullying is the second most common type of bullying. In Europe and North America, psychological bullying is the most common type of bullying. Cyberbullying affects as many as one in ten children. More than one in three students (36%) has been involved in a physical fight with another student, and almost one in three (32.4%) has been physically attacked at least once in the past year (UNESCO, 2019). Similarly, the Indonesian Education Monitoring Network (JPPI) reported an increase in cases of violence in school settings, from 573 in 2024 to 614 in 2025 (JPPI, 2024; Jaringan Pemantau Pendidikan Indonesia, 2025). The Indonesian Child Protection Commission (Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia/KPAI), which also recorded an increase in such

cases. Notably, KPAI reported even higher figures and highlighted an escalation in the intensity or severity of these incidents. Throughout 2025, several cases of suicide and student fatalities were reported as a result of violence and bullying. This situation indicates that bullying in Indonesia requires serious attention.

Bullying is a form of violent behavior that frequently occurs in school settings in various forms. It may manifest as verbal or physical abuse, or a combination of both. Some incidents of bullying remain unreported, as perpetrators, victims, and bystanders often do not report these occurrences to the relevant authorities. In some cases, both students and teachers perceive such behaviors as normal or commonplace among peers (Ghofur et al., 2022). Bullying can be defined as a social process in which a child in a less powerful position is repeatedly harassed or excluded by others (Salmivalli, 2010). Thornberg (2015) also emphasizes that bullying is not an individual behavior, but rather a collective phenomenon formed through daily social interactions among members of a peer group, specifically the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim.

Bullying has significant effects on students' development, including physical, psychological, emotional, and social aspects. Other research by Ghofur et al. (2022) indicates that bullying causes victims to experience stress and psychological or symptomatic distress. Victims reported feelings of depression and difficulties in social interaction. Hoover and Olson (2000) further noted that bullying also affects the broader school environment and community. Students who attend schools where bullying occurs tend to feel unsafe and lack self-confidence. KPAI also emphasized that violence in schools not only impacts students physically and psychologically but may also lead victims to take their own lives. This is illustrated by a case involving an elementary school student in Subang, West Java (Kompas, December 2, 2024). Such cases demonstrate the severe consequences of bullying.

A growing body of research shows that bullying occurs even at the most basic level of education. Numerous studies at the elementary school level have examined both the causes and impacts of bullying behavior. For example, Jan & Husain (2015) found that victims of bullying experience difficulties concentrating in class and struggle to focus during learning activities. Nurhalimah et al. (2025) reported that victims of verbal bullying experience mild anxiety due to peer rejection, regardless of gender and age. also found that victims experience stress and symptomatic distress, feel inferior and ashamed among peers, and tend to avoid attending classes. These effects are not limited to the short term. Eriksen et al. (2012) found that the impact of bullying persists over the long term in victims' lives. Furthermore, they reported that these long-term effects are experienced not only by victims but also by perpetrators.

Given the increasing prevalence of bullying among elementary school students, this study aims to obtain a comprehensive understanding of bullying behavior from the perspectives of elementary school students. The development in the elementary school stages of grades 4, 5, and 6 is that students can think logically about real situations and understand the relationship of cause and effect in simple terms. A characteristic of this developmental stage is that children understand mental operations, as shown in their ability to convert (Setiana & Eliasa, 2024). Meanwhile, as their social-emotional development progresses, children begin to recognize, understand, and manage emotions that will have a significant impact on their psychological and social well-being. The incidence of bullying that occurred during this period made researchers want to know how to understand bullying for elementary school students, especially in understanding the various roles that occur when bullying occurs. The researcher is also interested in exploring the basic role of emotion and the coping strategies chosen by elementary school students when facing bullying. By capturing insights from this group, prevention and intervention programs addressing bullying and its impacts can be refined more effectively. Accordingly, the objective of this study is to explore elementary school students' perspectives on bullying directly. Specifically, this study examines how students perceive bullying. This research aims to examine Elementary School Students' Conceptualizations of Bullying, Role-Based Emotions, and Coping Strategies. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the literature by enriching the understanding of bullying behavior from the direct perspectives of elementary school students.

## Method

This study employed a qualitative, descriptive design to explore elementary school students' perceptions of bullying and the roles involved in bullying incidents, including perpetrators, victims, and bystanders. A descriptive qualitative design seeks to obtain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon through the collection of qualitative data, such as interviews, observations, and document analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In this study, the phenomenon of bullying was understood from the perspectives of elementary school students.

The participants in this study were students from an elementary school located in Central Jakarta. The participants were students in Grades 4 to 6. All participants were male. This research is based on male students only because it is based on research conducted by (Borualogo & Gumilang, 2019), which states that boys are

more likely to be physically bullied by being beaten by siblings and beaten by other children at school. Data collection was conducted only after the school authorities stated that the research procedures were safe and could be implemented with the students. Before data collection, informed consent was obtained from the students' guardians, namely the school and parents. Meanwhile, student consent was obtained during implementation in class by explaining the procedure and offering the option to decline to continue if they did not wish to.

The data were collected through written interviews, in which the researcher delivered the questions orally, and the participants provided their answers in written form. The questions were administered one by one, meaning that one question was read aloud, the participants wrote their responses, and only then was the next question presented. Participants were students in grades 4-6 (approximately 9-12 years old), who had already developed sufficient reading and writing skills according to the Indonesian elementary school curriculum. The researcher realized that this made students use two cognitive functions, namely listening and writing. Although actually for education in Indonesia, grades 4, 5, and 6 already have stages that can write and read well. Written responses were selected because they reduced direct interaction between participants and the researcher, thereby decreasing interviewer effects and allowing participants to express their experiences more privately. We acknowledge that written interviews conducted in a school setting may involve social desirability bias. To reduce this risk, the answer sheets were not marked with names or codes, allowing the participants to respond anonymously. Through this anonymity, it was expected that the students would feel more comfortable expressing their feelings, thoughts, and concerns. Students were informed that there were no right or wrong answers, participation was voluntary, teachers were not involved in data collection, responses would remain anonymous, and their answers would not affect their academic evaluation.

This study was reported in accordance with the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist, which guides the transparent reporting of qualitative studies(Tong et al., 2007). During data collection, the researcher introduced themselves as an independent researcher to encourage students to express their experiences openly. Recognizing that qualitative researchers inevitably bring prior knowledge and assumptions into the research process, reflexivity was maintained throughout the study. The researcher documented analytic decisions through reflexive memo writing, continuously compared emerging codes with the original written responses, and revisited interpretations during theme development to ensure that findings remained grounded in participants' accounts. An audit trail documenting coding decisions and theme refinement was maintained throughout the analysis. During written interviews, the researcher limited interactions with participants to procedural instructions and clarification of question wording when necessary. No feedback, prompting, or evaluative comments were provided while participants completed the written responses, thereby minimizing researcher influence on participants' narratives. Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis was adopted for data analysis to ensure that patterns of meaning in the participants' narratives were identified systematically(2006). In line with the descriptive design, thematic analysis allowed the researchers to interpret students' experiences of bullying, their perceptions, and their coping processes in a flexible and in-depth manner. The stages of thematic analysis were as follows: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing potential themes, (5) refining, defining, and naming themes, and (6) writing up the findings. In the first stage, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts. Second, the participants' statements were coded and then grouped according to the types represented by each code. Subsequently, broader patterns with similar meanings were grouped, and themes and subthemes were identified. The researchers then evaluated the thematic consistency of the themes, combining or removing several themes when necessary. In the next stage, each researcher conducted the analysis independently, after which they discussed the results to reach agreement, and finally proceeded to write up the findings. Two researchers were involved in the analysis process by conducting repeated readings of the transcript and discussing the development of the code and themes reflectively. The discussion was not aimed at reaching statistical agreement, but rather at sharpening interpretations, exploring alternative perspectives, and strengthening the depth of analysis. The entire process of discussion, code changes, and theme development is documented in analytical memos and audit trails as an effort to maintain transparency and rigor of the research.

## Results and Discussions

In this section, the data obtained from written interviews with 88 elementary school students were analyzed using thematic analysis. The participants were students in Grades 4 to 6, and all participants were male. This analysis focuses on the perceptions of elementary school students' roles of emotion and coping strategies. From this analysis obtained that, four main themes and 15 subthemes were identified. The themes identified in this study include: (1) Elementary school students' understanding of bullying, (2) Types of bullying as perceived by the participants, (3) Participants' perceived feelings by role, and (4) Coping strategies employed. Four main

topics were explored with the participants. The first topic concerned the definition of bullying; the second addressed the types of bullying understood by the participants; the third focused on who is involved in bullying and the emotions experienced by perpetrators, victims, and bystanders; and the final topic examined how participants perceived responses to bullying and the coping strategies they employ. The questions were administered to the participants sequentially based on these topics. The responses were then analyzed in stages by grouping them into categories that shared similar themes. Table 1 presents the thematic structure along with representative quotes that support the identified themes. The code "P" refers to participants, and the accompanying number indicates the coding sequence of each participant (e.g., P-1 refers to the transcript of Participant 1).

Table 1 <Elementary School Students' Perceptions of Bullying Behaviors>

| Theme | Subtheme | Representative Quotations |
|---|---|---|
| Definition of Bullying | 1. Behavioral intention/Purpose of behavior | Bullying is hitting an innocent friend (P-69) |
| | 2. Object of bullying (targeting weaker individual) | "Mocking someone with a weaker physical condition" (P-35)<br>"Bullying is hurting those who are weaker" (P-38) |
| | 3. Duration (repetitive behavior) | "It is teasing or hitting an innocent friend repeatedly" (P-46) |
| | 4. Age appropriateness | "Bullying is violence that is inappropriate for children" (P-42) |
| | 5. Impact on victims | "Bullying can cause trauma" (P-60) |
| Types of Bullying | 1. Based on Form | |
| | Physical | "Hitting" (P-1) |
| | Verbal | "Mocking peers" (P-35) |
| | Social | "Excluding others" (P-33) |
| | Physical and verbal | "Hitting and mocking" (P-88) |
| | 2. Combined Form based on verbal actions and victim condition | "Body shaming" (P-81) |
| | 3. Taking others'property | "Demanding something that does not belong to them" (P-82),<br>"Extorting others accompanied by threats." (P-26) |
| Participants' Perceived Feelings by Role | 1. Perpetrators | "Fear of being expelled from school" (P-1) |
| | Perpetrators – fear of consequences | |
| | Perpetrators – negative feelings | "Feeling regretful" (P-39) |
| | Perpetrators – positive feelings | "Feeling happy" (P-76); "Feeling satisfied" (P-74) |
| | 2. Victims – emotional impact | "Feeling sad (P-36)"; "Feeling hurt"(P-28) |
| | 3. Bystanders – empathy | Feeling pity (P-40) |
| Participants' perceived Coping Strategies employed | 1. Reporting | "I would report it to the principal" (P-85) |
| | 2. Avoidance | "I do not want to be bullied again and will avoid those who bully me" (P-83)<br>"Leaving and not staying with them anymore" (P-37)<br>"Avoiding them" (P-31)<br>"Feeling sad and not wanting to go to school" (P-11) |
| | 3. Helping the victim | "Helping the victim and reporting to the teacher." |
| | 4. Revenge intention | "If I am bullied, I would take revenge" (P-86) |

**Theme 1: Definition of Bullying**

This theme reflects elementary school students' perceptions of bullying. It consists of five subthemes: the purpose of the behavior, the target of the behavior/victim, duration, age boundaries, negative impacts on the victim, and the object of the bullying.

(1) Behavioral intention/Purpose of behavior: In this subtheme, participants perceived bullying through various actions carried out by perpetrators toward victims, including teasing, oppressing, punching, kicking, threatening, hitting, harassing, and engaging in inappropriate behavior. (2) Object of bullying: Bullying was also described as a form of violence directed toward victims based on their characteristics or condition, such as being physically weak, belonging to a different racial group, or being an innocent individual. Victims of bullying were described as individuals who differ from their peers, which makes them targets of bullying. (3) Duration: Participants described bullying as a continuous and repeated occurrence, emphasizing that it involves actions carried out repeatedly over time. (4) Age appropriateness: Some participants indicated that bullying is inappropriate at the elementary school level, noting that children at this level are still underage. (5) Impacts on

victims: In this subtheme, bullying was defined in terms of its consequences, including reduced self-esteem and feelings of frustration as a result of being mocked.

Based on the findings, it was found that, first, participants understood bullying behavior as a form of aggression. Participants described bullying as involving various actions carried out by perpetrators, ranging from verbal abuse, such as teasing, to physical violence, as well as harassment and behaviors intended to humiliate the victim. Participants also described bullying as involving a combination of different forms, such as a perpetrator threatening or physically assaulting the victim and subsequently taking the victim's belongings.

Bullying behavior was perceived as being triggered by the characteristics or conditions of the victim. For example, perpetrators may perceive victims as weak; victims may belong to a different ethnic or racial group; and perpetrators may view victims as suitable targets for ridicule, even when the victims have done nothing wrong. According to Olweus (2018), typical victims tend to be anxious and feel insecure, which makes them more sensitive and withdrawn. Based on these characteristics, perpetrators may feel secure in engaging in bullying behavior because victims often have low self-esteem and negative self-perceptions. As a result, bullying tends to occur repeatedly rather than as a one-time incident. This is consistent with participants' perceptions that bullying occurs continuously and repeatedly. This finding is in line with the study conducted by (Ayuningbudi & Hanami, 2023), which reported that bullying occurs repeatedly in the classroom and school environments.

Based on these findings, bullying in elementary schools, from students' perspectives, involves the presence of perpetrators and victims and may occur repeatedly. These findings are also consistent with the definition proposed by Olweus (2018), which states that bullying occurs when negative actions are repeated over time. Negative actions refer to intentional behaviors that cause discomfort to the recipient. Furthermore, bullying involves an imbalance of power (asymmetric power relationship), making it difficult for victims to defend themselves due to their lack of power. This is consistent with findings by (Ruslan & Rezkiani, 2023), which indicate that victims often have a smaller physical stature compared to perpetrators. Participants in this study also mentioned that perpetrators target individuals from different racial or ethnic backgrounds.

When participants in this study were able to identify roles in bullying, it can be concluded that they understood bullying as involving multiple roles, namely perpetrators, victims, and bystanders. This finding is consistent with Salmivalli et al. (1996), who conceptualize bullying as a group process, in which not only perpetrators and victims are involved, but also other roles that contribute to bullying behavior, such as assistants, reinforcers, defenders, and outsiders (bystanders). In this study, however, the researchers focused only on perpetrators, victims, and bystanders when posing questions to participants. Students' perceptions of bullying in this study describe bullying in general. The unique thing in this study is that students describe in detail the various behaviors carried out by the perpetrators in Indonesian words that are limited to be translated into English, such as "meledek, ejek-ejekan, tonjok-tonjokan, tabok, tendang-tendangan, palak,". Bullying in student perception in this study appears to have a broad meaning with a variety of words, forms of oppression or bullying perceived by students. Some students also perceive that bullying should not occur at the elementary school level because bullying is normally only done by adults.

**Theme 2: Types of Bullying**

Bullying behaviors described by participants can be categorized into subthemes based on their form and the nature of the target. Based on form, bullying may occur as physical, verbal, social, or combined forms. Based on the target, it may involve harming, degrading, or taking from others. (1) Based on form: Physical bullying, participants described perpetrators engaging in physical aggression, such as punching, hitting, slapping, kicking, oppressing, throwing paper, and slapping. Verbal bullying, as described by participants, includes name-calling, insulting, and mocking. Social bullying: Participants described bullying through social distancing behaviors, such as avoiding and excluding victims. Combined physical and verbal bullying: In this study, a subtheme emerged in which perpetrators engage in both physical and verbal violence, such as extorting others through threats and taking others' belongings while simultaneously insulting the victim. This reflects common patterns of bullying behavior.

Participants perceived that various types of bullying can occur among elementary school students. The findings indicate that students' perceptions of bullying are diverse, encompassing both the forms of bullying and the nature of the target. Forms of bullying: Physical bullying involves various forms of physical aggression, such as slapping, kicking, and hitting. Physical bullying is the most recognizable form of bullying because it leaves tangible physical evidence. However, research shows that while the physical impact is obvious, the long-term psychological impact is often no less serious than other forms of bullying(Shetgiri, 2013). Bullying that occurs physically is easy to recognize because the impact looks like bruises, cuts, and so on. Research conducted by Ruslan & Rezkiani, (2023) stated that the victim only admitted that he was bullied after the doctor stated that the injuries were caused by the blows.

Bullying also perceived can occurs in verbal forms, where perpetrators use abusive language, insult victims with harsh words, or call victims by their parents' names in a derogatory manner. Previous research has similarly shown that verbal bullying is highly prevalent and occurs at the highest rate, with children often being given offensive nicknames by their peers at school (Borualogo & Gumilang, 2019). Victims may experience various forms of bullying; however, verbal bullying is reported to occur more frequently than indirect or physical forms of violence (Mohan & Bakar, 2021). (Tutik & Nararya, 2024) further reported that verbal bullying, involving mockery and humiliation, significantly contributes to a decline in victims' self-confidence, leading to anxiety, insecurity, and hesitation in social and academic activities. Verbal bullying has a psychological impact on the victim; basically, verbal bullying is not realized by the perpetrator or the authorities because it is considered a joke and something normal. For victims, verbal bullying is a behavior that eventually becomes social alienation, especially if verbal ridicule is carried out not only by individuals but by a group of students.

In addition, students perceived that bullying may occur as a combination of physical and verbal forms. In such cases, participants described perpetrators engaging in extortion by forcibly demanding money from other students, often accompanied by threats. Participants also perceived that perpetrators may take others' belongings while simultaneously mocking or verbally abusing the victims. (Jan & Husain, 2015) similarly reported that some students bully victims by damaging their belongings and demanding money from them. According to (Shetgiri, 2013), there is direct bullying and indirect bullying. Direct bullying occurs when the perpetrator commits physical or verbal bullying. The perpetrator intimidates the victim psychologically through hurtful words.

Furthermore, social exclusion was identified as another form of bullying, in which victims are isolated or deliberately excluded from peer interactions. This includes behaviors such as not inviting victims to play, distancing oneself from them, denying them opportunities, and preventing them from participating in group activities. This finding is consistent with Jan & Husain (2015), who reported that perpetrators socially exclude victims in similar ways. Victims of social exclusion may initially be unaware that they are being bullied by their peers. This finding is also in line with (Ünal Çelik et al., 2026), who found that perpetrators, particularly among secondary school students, engage in psychological bullying through exclusion, mockery, gossip, and being ignored, all of which contribute to emotional distress in victims.

Types of bullying can be (2) combined forms based on verbal actions and victim condition: Another subtheme identified involves bullying that combines verbal abuse with the victim's personal condition or status. For example, participants described mocking orphaned children or engaging in body shaming toward peers perceived as too thin or overweight. Another form of bullying identified in this study relates to the content of the target, particularly verbal bullying directed at the victim's personal or physical condition. Perpetrators engage in bullying based on characteristics possessed by the victim, such as being an orphan (a child who has lost a father). Victims may be labeled with derogatory terms, such as being called "fat" due to their body shape, reflecting body-shaming practices. What is different from this study from the results of previous research is how students' perception of participants related to bullying victims, namely perpetrators who tease or bully orphans or children who do not have fathers.

(3) Taking others' property: Participants also perceived that bullying occurs when perpetrators take others' belongings or forcibly demand food or other items. Another form of bullying identified based on participants' perceptions is the taking of others' property (extortion), where perpetrators forcibly demand items such as food or pocket money from victims. This is consistent with (Gaine, 2005), who defined extortion as the deliberate taking of money, property, or lunch vouchers accompanied by threats. Victims of extortion may also be coerced into engaging in antisocial behaviors, such as theft or property vandalism. Thus, elementary school students demonstrate an understanding that bullying is not limited to physical acts but also includes the repeated deprivation or taking of others' property.

**Theme 3: Participants' Perceived Feelings by Role**

This study also explored perceptions of emotional experiences. In this theme, the researchers categorized participants' emotional perceptions by role in bullying: perpetrators, victims, and bystanders. For perpetrators, three subthemes were identified: (1) Fear of consequences: Perpetrators were perceived as experiencing concern about the consequences of their actions. Participants indicated that perpetrators may fear being scolded, receiving punishment, or being expelled from school. (2) Negative emotions: Participants perceived that perpetrators experience feelings of regret, guilt, and annoyance toward themselves and their actions. (3) Positive self-perceptions: Conversely, in this subtheme, participants perceived that perpetrators may evaluate themselves positively, feeling satisfied, happy, and perceiving themselves as stronger than others.

Participants perceived that perpetrators experience anxiety regarding the consequences of their actions, such as fear of being reprimanded or even expelled from school. In this regard, participants demonstrated an

understanding that bullying behavior entails consequences, indicating a conscious awareness that bullying is a negative behavior that may result in sanctions if identified by school authorities. This finding is consistent with studies by Rigby & Griffiths (2011) and Mohan & Bakar (2021),which indicate that perpetrators may experience psychological fear in relation to their peers, resulting in difficulties in forming close friendships and establishing interpersonal relationships. This condition is associated with antisocial tendencies within peer groups. Perpetrators also experience social and emotional difficulties; once they engage in bullying behavior, it becomes challenging for them to build and maintain friendships (Mohan & Bakar, 2021). Similarly, Ünal Çelik et al. 2026) reported that perpetrators experience impairments in social interaction. Although perpetrators may have a desire to interact with peers, fear of rejection may lead them to withdraw and isolate themselves.

On the other hand, this study also found that some participants perceived perpetrators as experiencing positive emotions toward themselves as a result of their actions. Participants perceived positive affective responses such as "feeling happy" and "feeling satisfied." This finding is consistent with Ünal Çelik et al. (2026), which suggests that perpetrators may gain social recognition and perceive themselves as powerful when they successfully bully others. Similarly, Putri Felita Listiani et al. (2024) reported that elementary school perpetrators tend to exhibit aggressive behaviour, a sense of superiority, and a desire to dominate. However, if analyzed further, the perpetrator who feels happy after bullying the victim may not have guilt and may have less empathy. This can be explained by moral disengagement. Jia et al. (2025) describe moral disengagement as how a rational individual can behave unethically without feeling guilty or self-blame. It refers to specific cognitive tendencies that include redefining one's actions to minimize perceived harm and minimizing responsibility for consequences. In addition, the feeling of happiness felt by the perpetrator can be caused by increasing the social status of the perpetrator and the victim's sense of control. This is in accordance with the characteristics of bullying, which cause a difference in strength between the perpetrator and the victim; here, the perpetrator feels strong compared to the victim, so that he manages to gain control of the situation. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that respondents perceived perpetrators may experience a sense of pride when they successfully intimidate or harm their peers.

For victims, two subthemes were identified: (1) Negative emotions experienced by victims: Participants perceived that victims experience sadness, emotional pain, frustration, disappointment, shame, and trauma. (2) Behavioral effects on victims: Participants also perceived behavioral consequences experienced by victims, such as reluctance to attend school, social withdrawal, withdrawal from their social environment, avoidance of future bullying, lack of confidence in taking action, unwillingness to form friendships with perpetrators, and avoidance of social interactions. In addition, participants described the emotional experiences of victims, which were predominantly negative. Research conducted by Skrzypiec (2008)on elementary school students in Australia found that victims of bullying experience difficulties in concentration and attention in class due to fear. Victims of bullying also face learning difficulties. Furthermore, bullying has emotional and psychological impacts, as victims may feel isolated, rejected by their peers, withdrawn, and angry (Mohan & Abu Bakar, 2021). Research conducted by Li et al. (2024) also states that victims of bullying, whether in traditional bullying or cyberbullying, experience psychological and mental health problems such as depression, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempts. Meanwhile, research conducted by Liu et al. (2026), based on the results of Hierarchical Linear Model analysis (HLM), shows that there are differences in the effects of bullying based on gender and type of bullying. Female students have a higher average baseline rate of depressive symptoms than male students. Symptoms of depression increase over time among male students, but decrease among female students. Male students are more likely to experience depressive symptoms in physical bullying, while female students have higher depressive symptoms in relational bullying. Regardless of the severity of the problem, bullying consistently results in negative impacts on victims across physical, psychological, and social domains. In this context, elementary school students demonstrate an understanding that bullying may have long-term effects and can lead to trauma for victims.

Meanwhile, for bystanders, participants perceived emotional responses that bystanders experience, including feelings of shock, sympathy toward victims, and guilt when they are unable to help. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that bystanders may develop negative feelings toward the school environment and experience nightmares (Development Services Group, 2013), as well as emotional distress (Ünal Çelik et al., 2026). When witnesses witness bullying, of course, it causes feelings of psychological distress such as anxiety, insecurity at school, and fear of becoming the next victim, especially if the victim is a person known and close to the witness. Guilt also arises because the bystander knows the victim needs his help, but the passive bystander does not act out of peer pressure or is worried about accepting the consequences and the perpetrator. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that participants perceived that bullying has impacts not only on perpetrators and victims but also on bystanders.

**Theme 4: Participants' Perceived Coping Strategies Employed**

This theme consists of four subthemes: making a report, avoiding perpetrators, helping victims, and revenge intention. (1) Making a report: In this subtheme, participants perceived responded, such as "reporting to the teacher," "the victim reports the bullying to the teacher," and "the victim feels sad and reports the incident." (2) Avoiding perpetrators: Participants indicated that "the victim does not want to be accompanied," which reflects avoidance behavior toward the perpetrator. (3) Helping the victim: Participants stated that "bystanders help the victim and feel sympathy," indicating supportive actions taken by bystanders. (4) Revenge's intention: Some students expressed retaliatory responses, such as "if I were bullied, I would take revenge," "the bystander reports and retaliates," and "fight back."

Within this theme, participants perceived various coping strategies that can be employed in response to bullying behavior. Participants perceived that victims can take action by reporting incidents to teachers or school principals. In addition, when bullying occurs, victims may choose to leave the situation or run away from the scene. Consistent with Ghofur et al. (2022), victims often experience difficulties in reporting incidents to teachers or parents due to fear of becoming targets of further victimization. They may also be concerned about not having close friends and may wish to avoid becoming the focus of teachers' attention.

Meanwhile, participants perceived that victims of bullying could be proactive by retaliating against the perpetrator's behavior. This is certainly the right of the victim to retaliate. However, the victim must also have a strategy in retaliating, considering that the characteristic of bullying is power, where the perpetrator has more power than the victim. For example, the perpetrator's physique is taller than the victim's, and the perpetrator is more famous, so that many have followers compared to the victim, who is usually considered strange and a minority. In this study, participants perceived that victims have different characteristics from general students. Then, if the victim has the desire to retaliate against this, it is feared that it can worsen the victim's condition if he replies physically.

Concerning bystanders, participants perceived that they can also report incidents to school authorities, choose not to associate with perpetrators, and provide assistance to victims. Participants' perceptions suggest that bystanders may attempt to deter perpetrators by refusing to befriend them. noted that prosocial bystanders support victims by reporting incidents to teachers and by removing or protecting victims from harmful situations. Bystanders play a crucial role, as they may either mitigate or exacerbate bullying behavior. As suggested by Nst et al. (2023), Active defending behavior can help prevent bullying. Indicators of active defending behavior among bystanders include helping the victim, reporting bullying incidents, opposing bullying behavior, and providing support to victims (Nst et al., 2023). In this study, the participants' perceptions are also diverse regarding witnesses; if you dig deeper, it may be found that each individual has a different perception of a situation. Similarly, with bullying witnessed by witnesses, witnesses who feel the need to help will help; Witnesses who have high empathy will also help. Meanwhile, if the witness perceives that it is just an ordinary incident, joking among friends, then the witness does not feel the need to intervene or help the victim.

Salmivalli et al. (1996) identified two types of bystanders: defenders and reinforcers. Defender bystanders act as protectors of victims or attempt to stop bullying behavior. In contrast, reinforcer bystanders are those who participate in or support bullying behavior, for example, by cheering for the perpetrator. In another study, Smokowski & Evans (2019) further categorized bystanders into negative bystanders, who support perpetrators through verbal encouragement or active involvement; passive bystanders, who do not take action or wait until the incident has passed before offering help; and prosocial bystanders, who actively assist victims. These findings suggest that bystanders may exhibit a range of responses when witnessing bullying behavior. Active bystander behavior, as identified by Nst et al. (2023), has the potential to reduce bullying. Therefore, when a greater number of bystanders engage in defending behaviors, bullying incidents are likely to decrease, making such responses an effective coping strategy.

The results of this study, if associated with research conducted by (Thornberg, 2015), are very relevant because bullying is a group process or peer group process. Participants perceived bullying not only as caused by the perpetrator, but also by the culture of their peers. Second, the perception of the victim is actually not because the victim is different, but because the group makes a label for the victim so that the victim is considered different. In this study, participants answered that a child whose father has passed away he/she become a victim of bullying. Someone is mocking her/him. Actually, there is nothing wrong if a child does not have a father because his father died and he became an orphan. However, if referring to Thornberg (2015), the group of children interprets it differently so that they become objects in bullying behavior (victims).

The last coping strategies that perceived by students is taking revenge. Participants perceive that the victim can take revenge. This indicates that the participant feels that the victim has the right to defend himself, to retaliate for what he has received, or that the victim believes that by retaliating, he avoids the risk of becoming

a victim again. However, in some bullying studies, some participants were identified as perpetrators, as victims, or as perpetrators as well as victims. So it can be concluded that revenge behavior can be carried out with the provision that it is only to retaliate as a form of coping mechanism against trauma and not then participate in bullying other innocent friends.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, all participants were male students from a single elementary school. Consequently, the findings primarily reflect the perspectives of boys within one specific educational context and should not be assumed to represent the experiences of all elementary school students. Gender differences in bullying experiences and coping strategies have been reported in previous research, suggesting that the themes identified in this study may not be transferable to female students. Furthermore, because the study was conducted in only one school, school culture, institutional policies, peer norms, and community characteristics may have shaped participants' experiences. Therefore, the transferability of these findings to other schools or regions should be approached with caution. Future research should recruit participants from multiple schools, include both boys and girls, and involve more diverse educational and sociocultural contexts to examine the consistency and variation of the identified themes.

The limitation of this study is also that this research is specifically conducted in Central Jakarta, which may have good resources and children have a good quality education, with supporting facilities and infrastructure. This research may not be generalized to all elementary school children in other provinces or areas in Indonesia.

## Conclusions

This study found that one of the most striking findings was that revenge emerged as a primary strategy underlying bullying behavior among boys. Rather than functioning solely as an impulsive act of aggression, bullying was often described as a deliberate means of retaliating against previous victimization, restoring self-esteem, and regaining social power. This finding highlights the cyclical nature of bullying, in which experiences of victimization may contribute to subsequent perpetration if unresolved.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, all participants were male elementary school students from a single cultural context, which limits the transferability of the findings to female students or to broader educational settings. Future studies should include more diverse participant groups, including girls and students from different school contexts, to examine whether the motives and experiences associated with bullying differ across gender and sociocultural backgrounds.

Based on these findings, two practical recommendations are proposed. First, schools should implement conflict resolution and socio-emotional learning programs that explicitly challenge beliefs that revenge represents strength or an effective coping strategy. Such programs should promote constructive conflict management, emotional regulation, empathy, and prosocial alternatives to retaliation. Second, teachers and school staff should receive specialized training to recognize expressions of satisfaction, pride, or enjoyment following bullying incidents as potential warning signs of unresolved victimization and emerging cycles of bullying. Early identification of these indicators would enable timely intervention, preventing victims from transitioning into perpetrators and fostering a safer and more supportive school environment

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