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Silent Bruises, Strong Voices: Lived Experiences and Coping Mechanisms of Filipino High School Students in Bullying Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Bullying in Philippine high schools presents significant challenges to students' emotional well-being, social relationships, and academic engagement. This study explored how Filipino adolescents in Grades 9–12 who experienced bullying understand and cope with these incidents. Using a transcendental phenomenological design, twelve students from urban and rural public and private schools participated in semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed following a modified Stevick–Colaizzi–Keen method, focusing on bracketing, horizontalization, clustering of meaning units, imaginative variation, and synthesis of textural and structural descriptions. Analysis revealed four major themes: living in fear, silenced voices, navigating coping strategies, and seeking safe spaces. Students described pervasive anxiety, reluctance to disclose victimization, engagement in both adaptive and maladaptive coping, and reliance on supportive peers, family, and teachers. Institutional support was perceived as inconsistent and insufficient. These findings suggest that Filipino students actively negotiate their emotional, social, and institutional realities in response to bullying. Implications include the need for culturally responsive interventions encompassing policy development, teacher training, peer support, and mental health services within schools.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a multifaceted social problem that undermines students' academic performance, social participation, and psychological well-being. In the Philippines, adolescents report experiences of verbal harassment, relational exclusion, and cyberbullying, often embedded within complex cultural and institutional contexts (Chiu & Vargo, 2022; Tadena, Kim, & Lee, 2021). Collectivist values such as pakikisama and hiya shape students' responses, sometimes discouraging disclosure and reinforcing a culture of silence (Batangas, Reyes, & Cruz, 2023).

Adolescents' coping strategies are diverse and context-dependent. Adaptive responses include seeking social support from peers or family, engaging in hobbies, and cognitive reframing, which facilitate resilience and emotional regulation. Recent studies highlight how Filipino adolescents' lived experiences are shaped by sociocultural and institutional factors (Alipasa *et al.*, 2021a; Gatdula *et al.*, 2021; Chiu & Vargo, 2022). Also, maladaptive strategies, such as avoidance, emotional suppression, and social withdrawal, may exacerbate distress (Nurhayati, 2024; Pakingan, 2015; Shannen, Kim, & Lee, 2021). The effectiveness and choice of these strategies are influenced by peer relationships, school climate, and broader cultural expectations.

Although quantitative research in the Philippines has documented bullying prevalence and psychological impacts, phenomenological studies centering the students' lived experiences remain scarce. Understanding these experiences is critical for designing interventions that are both culturally sensitive and practically effective. Consequently, this study asks: How do Filipino high

school students describe their experiences of being bullied, and what coping strategies do they employ within their cultural and institutional contexts?

Phenomenological Studies on Lived Experiences in Education and Social Contexts

Phenomenological research has been widely used to capture the depth and complexity of lived experiences within educational and social contexts. Alipasa *et al.* (2021) explored parents' experiences in supporting their children during online distance learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting emotional strain, adaptive coping, and resilience within Filipino families. This study demonstrates the strength of phenomenology in uncovering nuanced human responses to challenging educational environments.

Similarly, Gatdula *et al.* (2021) examined non-Catholic Lasallians' experiences in living out Lasallian values, emphasizing identity negotiation, inclusion, and meaning-making in institutional settings. Their findings reinforce the relevance of phenomenological approaches in understanding values, belongingness, and social interaction—key dimensions also present in bullying experiences.

Psychosocial Challenges, Coping, and Resilience

Reyes *et al.* (2022) investigated the processes Caviteña women undergo in situations of intimate partner violence, revealing patterns of endurance, resistance, and decision-making. Although focused on adult women, the study provides valuable insights into coping mechanisms and psychosocial responses to sustained harm, which conceptually parallel adolescents' responses to bullying.

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In the context of curriculum and educational structures, Alipasa (2016) discussed prevailing issues in the Philippine English curriculum, underscoring systemic pressures that influence learner experiences. Such structural factors may indirectly shape school climates where bullying behaviors emerge or persist.

Contemporary Issues in Education, Ethics, and Policy

Alipasa (2026) emphasized trust and ethics in the integration of artificial intelligence in authentic education, foregrounding learner welfare, agency, and ethical responsibility. While centered on AI, the study's ethical lens is relevant to bullying research, particularly in framing schools' moral obligations to protect student well-being.

Further, Alipasa's work on navigating policy shifts in Philippine grade school language education highlights ongoing challenges in educational reform and learner support. These policy-level dynamics provide contextual grounding for understanding institutional responses—or lack thereof—to bullying in schools.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A transcendental phenomenological approach was used to explore the essence of students' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Participants were twelve students (seven males, five females, Grades 9–12) who self-identified as having experienced bullying. Purposive sampling ensured inclusion of students from diverse urban and rural schools.

Semi-structured interviews lasting 45–60 minutes were conducted in private school settings. The interview guide, informed by previous research (Nurhayati, 2024; Pakingan, 2015; Shannen *et al.*, 2021), included questions about types of bullying experienced, emotional and physical responses, coping strategies, and sources of support. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis followed a modified Stevick–Colaizzi–Keen method (Moustakas, 1994), which included bracketing of researcher assumptions, identification of significant statements, clustering into themes, imaginative variation to examine multiple perspectives, and synthesis of textural and structural descriptions to identify the essence of the bullying experience. Ethical clearance was obtained, and parental consent and student assent were secured. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, and those experiencing distress were referred to guidance counselors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis revealed four major themes, each reflecting the complex interplay of emotional, social, and institutional factors in students' experiences.

Living in Fear

Students described chronic anxiety and vigilance in anticipation of bullying incidents, often accompanied by psychosomatic symptoms such as stomachaches, trembling, and sleep disturbances. One student remarked, “Every day, I would wonder what they would say or do to me next” (Juan, Grade 10), while another reported, “I felt drained and scared all the time; I couldn't focus in class” (Ella, Grade 11).

Silenced Voices

Silence was a pervasive strategy, influenced by fear of disbelief, shame, and social norms emphasizing endurance. Participants frequently refrained from reporting bullying due to anticipated stigma or previous ineffective interventions. One participant explained, “I didn't tell anyone because I thought they would laugh at me or think I'm too sensitive” (Mark, Grade 9). Cultural expectations reinforced this silence, with students internalizing the belief that suffering quietly preserved dignity.

Navigating Coping Strategies

Participants engaged in a spectrum of coping strategies, shifting between adaptive and maladaptive approaches depending on context and perceived support. Adaptive strategies included seeking support from friends or family, participating in hobbies, and reframing negative experiences cognitively. Maladaptive strategies, such as avoidance and emotional suppression, were also common. Students' coping strategies were dynamic, often evolving with changing social or institutional circumstances.

Seeking Safe Spaces

Supportive relationships with peers, family, or attentive teachers provided temporary relief from bullying-related distress. Participants valued teacher interventions that acknowledged their struggles. However, students consistently noted gaps in institutional support, including unclear reporting mechanisms and limited access to counseling services.

Table 1: Themes, Subthemes, and Representative Quotes

Theme	Subtheme	Representative Quote (Pseudonym, Grade)
Living in Fear	Anticipatory fear	“Every day, I would wonder what they would say or do to me next.” (Juan, Grade 10)
	Emotional exhaustion	“I felt drained and scared all the time; I couldn't focus in class.” (Ella, Grade 11)
	Academic disruption	“I couldn't concentrate on my lessons because I was always anxious.” (Leo, Grade 10)
Silenced Voices	Fear of disbelief	“I didn't tell anyone because I thought they would laugh at me or think I'm too sensitive.” (Mark, Grade 9)
	Cultural expectations	“It's better to endure quietly than make others think you're weak.” (Rosa, Grade 12)
	Reporting fatigue	“Even when I reported once, nothing happened, so I stopped telling anyone.” (Jake, Grade 11)

Navigating Coping Strategies	Adaptive coping	“Talking to my best friend made it bearable.” (Rosa, Grade 12)
	Maladaptive coping	“I pretended it didn’t hurt, but at home, I would cry.” (Leo, Grade 10)
	Dynamic coping	“Sometimes I avoided them; other times I tried to distract myself with drawing or music.” (Ella, Grade 11)
Seeking Safe Spaces	Peer and family support	“My sister and my best friend were the only ones I could talk to.” (Juan, Grade 10)
	Teacher support	“One teacher noticed and asked if I was okay, which really helped me feel safe.” (Mark, Grade 9)
	Institutional gaps	“The school doesn’t have a clear way to report bullying, and counselors are not always available.” (Rosa, Grade 12)

This study illuminates the complex emotional, social, and structural dimensions of bullying among Filipino high school students. Chronic fear and psychosomatic distress highlight the emotional burden, consistent with prior research in Southeast Asian contexts (Buguina & Buguina, 2023; Teodorico, 2019). Cultural norms emphasizing *hiya* and *pakikisama* contribute to silence, reinforcing vulnerability and shaping coping strategies. Coping strategies are multifaceted and dynamic. Adaptive strategies provide resilience and facilitate meaning-making, whereas maladaptive strategies may compound stress. These findings align with previous studies showing that peer support, cognitive reframing, and engagement in hobbies are protective factors, while avoidance and emotional suppression are risk factors (Nurhayati, 2024; Pakingan, 2015; Shannen et al., 2021). Institutional gaps were evident in participants’ narratives, reflecting limited access to counseling, unclear reporting procedures, and inconsistent teacher awareness (Jaranilla, 2023; Aunario & Garcia, 2018). Effective interventions require a holistic approach addressing emotional, social, and structural dimensions simultaneously. Schools should cultivate safe, culturally responsive environments, integrate peer support programs, and provide accessible mental health services. Teacher training in socio-emotional competencies is critical to enable early identification and intervention.

CONCLUSION

Filipino high school students’ experiences of bullying reveal a complex interplay between personal emotions, coping strategies, and institutional contexts. The pervasive fear and emotional distress reported highlight the significant psychological impact of bullying on adolescents, emphasizing the need for attentive, culturally informed support systems.

Students’ silence and hesitancy to disclose victimization are influenced by social norms and cultural expectations, which can exacerbate feelings of isolation. Coping strategies, both adaptive and maladaptive, reflect students’ resilience and their attempts to navigate challenging social environments, underscoring the importance of promoting positive coping mechanisms within educational settings. The study underscores the critical role of schools in providing safe spaces, accessible counseling, and supportive relationships with teachers and peers.

Comprehensive, culturally sensitive interventions that integrate policy enforcement, teacher training, peer support, and mental health resources are essential to foster student well-being and resilience.

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