BEHIND THE WALLS OF *PESANTREN*: A REVIEW OF THE HIDDEN PSYCHOLOGICAL AND ACADEMIC IMPACTS OF BULLYING IN INDONESIA

Umi Muzayanah[1*], Wasino Wasino[2**], Sandy Arief[3],Agus Wahyudin[4], Aji Sofanudin[5],
Moch. Lukluil Maknun[6], Scientia Inu Kirana[7]
First Author *, Corresponding Author**
[1] Doctoral Programme in Education Management, Postgraduate School, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia
[2,3,4] Postgraduate School, Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia
[1,5,6] National Research and Innovation Agency, Jakarta, Indonesia
[6] Doctoral Programme in Humanities, Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia
[7] RSJ Menur, Surabaya, Indonesia
(umimuza78@students.unnes.ac.id, wasino@mail.unnes.ac.id,
sandy.arief@mail.unnes.ac.id, aguswahyudin@mail.unnes.ac.id, ajis004@brin.go,id,
mochlukluilmaknun1984@mail.ugm.ac.id, scienkirana@gmail.com)
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Abstract

Bullying is still a significant problem in Indonesia, especially in *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), in which hierarchical structures and cultural norms contribute to its prevalence. This study aims to systematically review the psychological and academic impacts of bullying and identify its contributing factors. Using a thematic review approach, this study synthesised findings from 48 scholarly articles across academic databases such as Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Lens, applying rigorous selection criteria and thematic analysis. The findings discover that peer influence, seniority-junior hierarchy, family instability, and cultural acceptance of aggression exacerbate bullying behaviour in *pesantren*. Additionally, consequences for victims include increased anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and academic decline, highlighting the need for more effective anti-bullying policies. Despite existing interventions, law enforcement remains inadequate; thus, it requires a more comprehensive, community-inclusive approach that integrates parental involvement, mental health support, and cultural transformation in *pesantren*. This study also provides critical insights into the underlying mechanisms of bullying in *pesantren*, emphasising the urgency of developing appropriate policy frameworks and interventions to mitigate bullying.

Keywords: *bullying, intimidation, pesantren, psychological impact, academic impact*

INTRODUCTION

Bullying remains a serious concern in Indonesia's education system, affecting students across various levels, from elementary to higher education. Interactions that should ideally foster positive relationships and social development in schools, madrasahs, and *pesantren* often turn into experiences marked by psychological harm. A historical study shows that physical punishment as a form of discipline in Indonesian schools has long legitimised violence (Nasution et al., 2025), contributing to the normalisation of bullying. UNICEF (2020) reports that three out of four Indonesian children and adolescents who have experienced bullying were victimised by their peers. The extent of the problem is also reflected in official statistics. Between January and mid-2024, Indonesia recorded 1,096 bullying cases in educational institutions (Kementerian Pemberdayaan Perempuan dan Perlindungan Anak RI, 2024). In addition, the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI, 2024) revealed that 35% of 114 reported cases of bullying took place in schools and similar educational units. KPAI also recorded that Indonesia ranks highest in school bullying cases among ASEAN countries, with a prevalence rate of 84%, surpassing Nepal, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Pakistan (Safaat, 2023).

Among the educational institutions affected, *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) present a particularly complex challenge due to their hierarchical structure, seniority-based social dynamics, and communal living environment. Although widely perceived as a space of moral and religious education, several *pesantren* have been linked to serious bullying incidents. These include the death of a student in Jombang in 2016 (Sujarwoko, 2016), a fatal incident in Gontor in 2022 (Putra & Susanti, 2022), and more recent cases in Banyuwangi and Sukoharjo in 2024 (Abrori, 2024; Amaranggana & Dzulfaroh, 2024). These events highlight the contradiction between the moral ideals promoted by *pesantren* and the troubling behaviours that persist within them.

Despite growing concern, scholarly understanding of bullying in *pesantren* remains underdeveloped due to limited theoretical engagement and a lack of systematic empirical research. Much of the existing knowledge is derived from individual case narratives or media reporting, which frequently lack analytical rigour and contextual grounding. Although stakeholders have increasingly acknowledged the problem, comprehensive academic analyses remain scarce. In particular, there is a lack of studies that integrate conceptual frameworks with empirical synthesis to examine the structural causes, psychological consequences, and appropriate responses to bullying in *pesantren*.

To address this gap, the present study conducts a thematic literature review that systematically identifies, categorises, and interprets scholarly findings on

bullying in *pesantren*. This approach is necessary given the unique institutional and cultural characteristics of pesantren, such as embedded seniority and close communal life. To strengthen the conceptual foundation and provide a more comprehensive understanding of bullying in *pesantren*, this study employs a dual-theoretical approach, drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Lazarus and Folkman's stress and coping theory. Together, these frameworks enable a multi-layered understanding of how environmental structures and individual psychological responses interact within the *pesantren* context, thereby facilitating the development of more contextually appropriate, evidence-based intervention strategies. Specifically, this study aims to identify the social and cultural factors influencing bullying, examine its psychological and academic impacts on students, and evaluate the effectiveness of existing anti-bullying programs within *pesantren*.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Bullying is broadly defined as repeated, intentional aggression marked by power imbalance (Shetgiri, 2013; Sullivan, 2011; UNESCO, 2019), manifesting in verbal, physical, relational, and cyber forms (Coyle et al., 2021; Peng et al., 2020; Xiu et al., 2021), with verbal bullying most common in classroom (Xiu et al., 2021). International surveys such as the Global School-based Health Survey (GSHS) and Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) expand these categories to include psychological and sexual bullying (UNESCO, 2019). However, such typologies are rarely contextualised within religious educational settings.

In Indonesia, bullying is often normalised within rigid hierarchies, especially in schools and *pesantren*, where institutional cultures may implicitly legitimise dominance and conformity (National Academies of Sciencies Engineering and Medicine, 2016). Rigid discipline and competitive academic environments contribute to its prevalence (Wang & Chen, 2023), while biased representations in curricula reinforce exclusionary behaviours (Mekhirunsiri & Sathian, 2024). Peer relations and sense of belonging are also strong predictors of victimisation (Sánchez et al., 2018). In *pesantren*, bullying emerges from structural, cultural, and interpersonal dynamics. Interpersonal conflict with instructors (Netrasari, 2015), peer pressure, lack of supervision, and entrenched senior-junior hierarchies (Effendi et al., 2024; I. N. Rahman et al., 2023) are key enabling factors. Seniors with poor emotional regulation and empathy further exacerbate this behaviour (Ananda et al., 2023), resulting in verbal threats, social exclusion, and physical violence (Hafidzi et al., 2024). Motivations range from power assertion to personal gratification (Retnowuni & Yani, 2022).

Psychologically, victims often experience anxiety, depression, and low self-worth (Halliday et al., 2021; Kowalski & Limber, 2013), which in turn hinder social engagement and learning (Esquivel et al., 2023). Academically, bullying correlates with reduced performance in core competencies, particularly among early-age victims (Murphy et al., 2022), often leading to avoidance behaviours. In urban *pesantren*, the challenges can be more complex due to the diverse backgrounds of the students and external cultural influences, whereas in rural area, limited supervision and scarce resources constitute the main obstacles (I. K. Rahman et al., 2023; Saragih et al., 2023).

Ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) has been widely used to analyse these dynamics. The microsystem, comprising peers, caregivers, and school staff, plays a direct role in shaping behaviour (Delany & Cheung, 2020; Hayes et al., 2017), and in *pesantren*, this system is intensified through constant communal living. Peer-based hierarchies, norms, and expectations are internalised, often sustaining bullying patterns. Boarder systems such as the exosystem and macrosystem also influence these dynamics, while the chronosystem, e.g., the intergenerational transmission of norms, adds temporal depth (Bakar & Subramaniam, 2025). Within this ecosystemic framework, Lazarus's cognitive theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) offers further insight by explaining how students cognitively appraise and respond to bullying. The interaction between ecological systems and stress appraisal processes explains why certain individuals experience bullying as a chronic psychological burden, particularly in environments where emotional support is scarce and authority figures are perceived as complicit or unresponsive.

Despite increasing studies on school bullying, few focus exclusively on *pesantren*, and even fewer engage with theoretical frameworks that explain its structural persistence. This study addresses that gap by systematically synthesising existing research and applying a thematic lens to understand how bullying in *pesantren* is produced and maintained. By integrating empirical findings with context-specific theory, this article contributes to both academic discourse and the development of culturally attuned interventions to foster safer learning environments in *pesantren* and similar institutions.

METHODOLOGY

This article used a thematic review approach, which is a comprehensive and structured method for synthesising existing research on a particular topic (García-Peñalvo, 2022; Sun & Aziz, 2024). The steps taken in this study began with formulating research questions, then determining eligibility criteria, conducting a comprehensive literature search, assessing the quality of studies, and finally

synthesising findings (Brignardello-Petersen et al., 2024). To ensure the rigour and transparency of the review process, the PRISMA framework was applied to assess eligibility and exclusion criteria, encompassing the processes of identification, screening, eligibility evaluation, data abstraction, and analysis of the included articles (Rosni & Zainol, 2020). These steps are taken to answer the following research questions:

(1) What are the social and cultural factors in *pesantren* environment that contribute to bullying among students?

(2) What are the psychological and academic impacts of bullying on students who are victims in *pesantren*?

(3) How effective are the anti-bullying programs or policies implemented in *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) to reduce the frequency of bullying behaviour?

To answer the three questions above, literature search used several keywords or Query Strings, namely ("boarding school*" OR "*pesantren*" OR "Islamic boarding school*") AND ("bullying" OR "intimidasi" OR "intimidation" OR "oppression" OR "*aggressive behaviour*"). The decision to exclude Scopus and instead utilise Google Scholar, Web of Science (WoS), and Lens was based on the recognition that Scopus-indexed publications provide limited coverege of studies specifically addressing bullying in Indonesian *pesantren*. While Scopus offers rigorous and high-impact sources, it may underrepresent region-specific or non-mainstream research, particularly those published in Indonesian-language journals or local academic outlets. Therefore, the inclusion of Google Scholar, WoS, and Lens was intended to broaden the scope and capture a more comprehensive and contexctually relevant body of literature.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined to ensure that the selected literature was directly relevant to the study's objectives. Articles were included if they were published between 2020 and 2024, written in either English or Bahasa Indonesia, and focused on bullying or aggressive behaviour within the context of *pesantren*, particularly in Indonesia. Studies with a broader regional scope were considered only if they offered specific insights applicable to *pesantren* settings. Meanwhile, articles were excluded if they focused on non-*pesantren* schools, were non-empirical publications such as opinion pieces or editorials, were not fully accessible due to paywall restrictions, or were not relevant to the topic focus based on the predefined search criteria.

Articles on bullying in *pesantren* obtained from Google Scholar, WoS, and Lens were then saved and imported into the Covidence application. After the article data was entered, filtering was carried out based on the title and abstract, followed by filtering through the full article. The results of the filtering of 226

articles into 48 articles that were most relevant to the study can be presented in Figure 1.
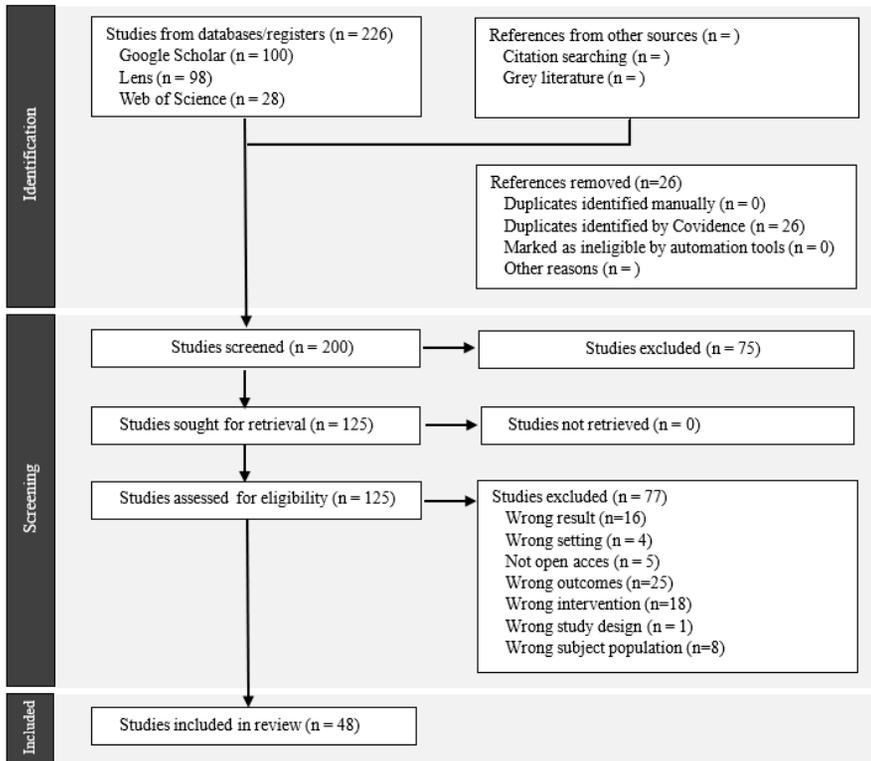
Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram
(Source: Covidence.)

This literature review began with the identification of 226 studies from Google Scholar, WoS, and Lens, which were narrowed down to 200 after the removal of duplicates. An initial screening excluded 75 studies, leaving 125 for eligibility assessment. Following a thorough evaluation, 77 studies were excluded due to issues related to outcomes, population, intervention, or study design, resulting in 48 studies that met the inclusion criteria.

The analytical approach in this study employed a thematic synthesis method consisting of three stages: open coding, theme categorisation, and thematic narrative construction. Theme development was conducted through iterative reading and pattern tracking within the reviewed texts, while verification was carried out through researcher triangulation and theoretical validation. To enhance the credibility of the coding process, inter-coder reliability was tested by involving two researchers who independently coded a subset of the data and compared their interpretations to ensure consistency. Theme validation was

further strengthened through peer debriefing and theoretical alignment with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework and Lazarus and Folkman's stress and coping theory. Digital tools such as Scispace and Mendeley were utilised in the initial stages for reference management and literature identification. However, the synthesis and analysis processes were conducted manually to maintain interpretative depth.

This study employed a thematic literature review and did not involve the collection of primary data or direct interaction with human participants. The data analysed were entirely sourced from publicly available publications. Therefore, this study did not require ethical approval as it did not involve direct research subjects.

RESULTS

Bullying remains a pervasive and systemic issue in Indonesian schools, with alarming prevalence rates among adolescents. According to the 2018 PISA study, 41% of 15-year-old students reported experiencing bullying at least several times a month, positioning Indonesia among countries with high bullying rates globally (UNICEF, 2020). As detailed in Table 1, these patterns underscore how bullying manifests through interpersonal violence, material damage, and social manipulation, necessitating comprehensive intervention that addresses power imbalances, gender norms, and school climate reforms.

Table 1: Prevalence of bullying in Indonesia

Type of bullying	Boys	Girls	Total
I got hit or pushed around by other students	12.8%	23.1%	18%
Other students took away or destroyed things that belonged to me	18.7%	25.2%	22%
I was threatened by other students	10%	18.2%	14%
Other students made fun of me	19.4%	25.6%	22%
Other students left me out of things on purpose	16.7%	21.4%	19%
Other students spread nasty rumours about me	16.4%	24.2%	20%

Source: UNICEF (2020).

The data in Table 1 show that various forms of bullying, ranging from physical violence to social exclusion and rumour spreading, affect both boys and girls at significant rates, with girls generally experiencing higher levels of victimisation than boys. These findings are particularly relevant in the context of *pesantren*, where unique social dynamics may influence the patterns and impacts

of bullying, highlighting the need for prevention and intervention strategies tailored to the values and environment of *pesantren*.

Sociocultural Dynamics and the Normalisation of Bullying in *Pesantren*

The increasing number of bullying cases in *pesantren* has become a bad image of the boarding school educational institution that teaches moral, ethical, and religious values to its students. Ideally, an institution that fosters an Islamic generation with noble morals, with the figure of a kyai as a patron, is a safe place because it upholds norms and religiosity in all its activities. However, bullying cases still occur, involving students, peers, teachers, and *kyai*. This phenomenon has attracted many researchers to uncover the secrets behind bullying cases in *pesantren* by identifying the bullying factors that occur.

Table 2: Bullying factors in *pesantren*

Aspects	Factors	Description	Sources
Peer Influence and Social Dynamics	Peer Pressure	Peer pressure influences *bullying* behaviour, encouraging students to conform to aggressive or intimidating actions to fit in with their peers.	(Azhari & Rahmawati, 2024; Nugroho et al., 2020; Ramli et al., 2023)
	Senior-Junior Hierarchies	Seniority within the school creates a power imbalance, often leading to intimidation, especially in schools where traditions emphasise respect based on seniority.	(Astriani et al., 2023; Barus et al., 2023; Hesfi & Sofia, 2022)
Family Background and Parenting Styles	Parental Supervision	Lack of parental supervision is associated with increased bullying behaviour, likely due to insufficient guidance or support from home.	(Azhari & Rahmawati, 2024; Mubarok et al., 2023)
	Family Conflicts	Unstable or problematic family backgrounds contribute to aggressive behaviour in children, as they may mirror conflicts, they observe at home	(Fauzi & Horna, 2024; Syah, 2020)
Cultural and Societal Norms	Normalisation of Aggression	Cultural acceptance of aggression, often seen in verbal forms, can normalise bullying among peers,	(Alwi et al., 2023; Barus et al., 2023; Hesfi & Sofia, 2022;

		reinforcing aggressive behaviours as socially acceptable.	Retnowuni & Yani, 2022)
	Economic Disparities and Social Status	Economic inequality creates social tension among students, leading to bullying based on perceived social or economic status differences.	(Barus et al., 2023; Prasetyo et al., 2023)
Media Influence	Exposure to Aggressive Media Content	Media exposure, especially to violent or aggressive content, correlates with increased bullying behaviour as students imitate what they see.	(Arif et al., 2024; Ulum, 2021)
School Environment and Institutional Factors	Insufficient Supervision	Areas without adult supervision (e.g., certain school zones) often see more bullying incidents, as students feel emboldened in the absence of authority figures.	(Nugroho et al., 2020; Ramli et al., 2023)
	Rigid School Policies	Strict and inflexible school policies can provoke rebellious behaviour among students, leading to bullying as a form of resistance.	(Emilda, 2022; Mukowim et al., 2024)
Emotional and Psychological Factors	Emotional Immaturity	Adolescents with lower emotional regulation skills or a lack of empathy are more prone to engage in bullying behaviour.	(Astriani et al., 2023; Prasetyo et al., 2023)
	Past Victimisation	Previous victims of bullying may resort to bullying others as a form of retaliation or to regain a sense of control.	(Badruzzaman et al., 2024; Sumitro et al., 2023)

The normalisation of bullying in *pesantren* is rooted in their sociocultural environment. Retnowuni and Yani (2022), through interviews with perpetrators, found four recurring themes: verbal humiliation, physical abuse, power assertion, and emotional gratification. Victims were demeaned, "Where are you from? Your face looks so backwards…come here and fetch my sandals," and subjected to violence, "He defied a senior, so that we choked and beat him up with four others." These acts reinforced power, "Who dares to fight me?…everyone stayed silent."

Such findings reveal how hierarchical culture and peer dynamics contribute to the internalisation of bullying as a legitimate social mechanism.

Bullying in *pesantren* arises from the interaction of multiple factors: social, familial, cultural, media, and institutional, though existing studies vary in emphasis. Azhari & Rahmawati (2024) and Nugroho et al. (2020) highlight the role of peer pressure in normalising aggressive behaviour as a means of gaining social acceptance. In contrast, Astriani et al. (2023) and Barus et al. (2023) emphasise structural dimensions such as seniority, which perpetuate power imbalances and legitimise violence. In the familial domain, Azhari & Rahmawati (2024) and Mubarok et al. (2023) point to insufficient parental supervision as a key risk factor. In contrast, Fauzi & Horna (2024) expand this by noting that exposure to familial conflict can foster imitation of aggressive behaviours.

Cultural perspectives also diverge: while Alwi et al. (2023) consider verbal aggression to be culturally normalised in social interaction, Barus et al. (2023) and Prasetyo et al. (2023) emphasise how socioeconomic disparities fuel stigma and marginalisation among students. Regarding the influence of media, Arif et al. (2024) and Ulum (2021) agree that exposure to violent content reinforces perceptions of aggression as a means of asserting dominance. However, consensus remains limited as to whether media merely reflect or actively shape students' social norms. Institutionally, Nugroho et al. (2020) identify weak supervision as a key enabler of bullying, while Emilda (2022) and Mukowim et al. (2024)focus on student resistance to rigid institutional policies, with bullying emerging as a form of protest.

Psychological Distress and Academic Disengagement Among Victims of Bullying in *Pesantren*

Emotional and psychological factors play an important role in bullying behaviour, especially related to emotional immaturity and previous victimisation experiences. Adolescents with low emotional regulation skills or a lack of empathy tend to be more vulnerable to engaging in bullying behaviour because they have difficulty managing their emotions or understanding the feelings of others (Astriani et al., 2023; Prasetyo et al., 2023). On the other hand, students who have been victims of bullying before often take revenge or try to regain a sense of control by bullying others (Badruzzaman et al., 2024; Sumitro et al., 2023). These negative experiences can create a cycle of violence in which victims turn into perpetrators, repeatedly exacerbating the social and psychological impacts on them.

Table 3: Bullying impacts on students' psychological and academic conditions

Aspects	Factors	Description	Sources

Psychological Impacts	Anxiety	Victims often experience increased anxiety due to bullying.	(Azhari & Rahmawati, 2024; Nugroho et al., 2020; Prasetyo et al., 2023; Ramli et al., 2023; Yunita & Isnawati, 2024)
	Depression	Bullying leads to depressive symptoms, with victims frequently feeling sadness or despair.	(Alwi et al., 2023; Azhari & Rahmawati, 2024; Ramli et al., 2023; Waliyanti & Swesty, 2021; Yunita & Isnawati, 2024)
	Social Withdrawal and Loneliness	Victims may isolate themselves from social interactions and feel lonely.	(Alwi et al., 2023; Azhari & Rahmawati, 2024; Barus et al., 2023; Mayasari & Rambe, 2023)
	Low Self-Esteem	Bullying erodes victims' self-confidence and self-worth.	(Alwi et al., 2023; Hastri et al., 2022; Mayasari & Rambe, 2023; Prasetyo et al., 2023)
	Trauma and Long-Term Psychological Effects	Long-Lasting trauma and psychological issues often persist into adulthood for victims.	(Mayasari & Rambe, 2023; Munifah et al., 2024; Ramli et al., 2023; Sumitro et al., 2023)
	Fear of School	Victims develop a fear of school and may avoid attending due to bullying experiences.	(Abdurrohim, Fitriani, et al., 2024; Alwi et al., 2023; Emilda, 2022; Yunita & Isnawati, 2024)
	Suicidal Thoughts	Severe bullying can lead victims to develop suicidal thoughts.	(Alwi et al., 2023; Fauzi & Horna, 2024; Ruslan & Lubis, 2024; Waliyanti & Swesty, 2021)
	Physical Symptoms	Victims may experience headaches, stomach aches, and other physical symptoms due to stress.	(Azhari & Rahmawati, 2024; I. K. Rahman et al., 2023; I. N. Rahman et al., 2023; Retnowuni & Yani, 2022; Sumitro et al., 2023)
Academic Impacts	Decline in Academic Performance	Bullying affects victims' academic performance, leading to lower grades and reduced motivation.	(Nugroho et al., 2020; Ramli et al., 2023; Retnowuni & Yani, 2022; Yunita & Isnawati, 2024)
	Decreased Motivation to Learn	Victims lose interest in academic activities and struggle to stay motivated.	(Azhari & Rahmawati, 2024; Hasanuddin & Amirullah, 2022; Hastri et al., 2022; Prasetyo et al., 2023)
	Difficulty Concentrating	Anxiety and stress from bullying interfere with	(Fauzi & Horna, 2024; I. K. Rahman et al., 2023;

		victims' ability to concentrate on their studies.	Ulum, 2021; Waliyanti & Swesty, 2021)
School Absenteeism		Victims may avoid school altogether, resulting in frequent absences.	(Barus et al., 2023; Emilda, 2022; Yunita & Isnawati, 2024)
Long-Term Disinterest in Schooling		Bullying can result in a lasting disinterest in education, affecting victims' future educational goals and achievements.	(Hastri et al., 2022; Mukowim et al., 2024; Ulum, 2021)

Bullying is consistently associated with serious psychological consequences, particularly anxiety and depression. Azhari & Rahmawati (2024) highlight how peer dynamics within *pesantren* create a persistent sense of threat, while Nugroho et al. (2020) view anxiety as a more general emotional response. Similarly, both Alwi et al. (2023) and Waliyanti and Swesty (2021) report symptoms of depression, yet their emphases differ. Alwi et al. link it to culturally normalised verbal aggression, whereas Waliyanti and Swesty underscore its long-term impact on emotional well-being. These psychological disturbances may even persist into adulthood (Mayasari & Rambe, 2023; Munifah et al., 2024), suggesting that the effects of bullying are both immediate and enduring.

Victims also tend to withdraw socially, experiencing feelings of rejection and a lack of support (Alwi et al., 2023; Azhari & Rahmawati, 2024). Alwi et al. attribute this to a cultural climate lacking empathy, whereas Azhari and Rahmawati focus on interpersonal exclusion. A decline in self-esteem is another common impact, attributed either to repeated verbal degradation (Alwi et al., 2023) or to institutional neglect (Hastri et al., 2022). These differing interpretations reflect the complexity of psychological vulnerability within *pesantren* environments.

Academically, victims often exhibit diminished performance. Declines in motivation and achievement are widely reported (Nugroho et al., 2020; Yunita & Isnawati, 2024); while Yunita and Isnawati highlight institutional inaction, Nugroho et al. attribute these outcomes to psychological strain. Stress and anxiety further impair concentration (Fauzi & Horna, 2024; Waliyanti & Swesty, 2021), potentially leading to long-term disinterest in education (Hastri et al., 2022; Ulum, 2021). Absenteeism exacerbates these challenges. Victims often avoid school to escape distressing experiences (Barus et al., 2023; Emilda, 2022).

Institutional Responses to Bullying: Effectiveness and Limitations of Current Strategies in *Pesantren*

This section presents the findings of the review related to institutional responses to bullying in *pesantren*, focusing on the effectiveness and limitations of current strategies. The following synthesis examines how *pesantren* have addressed bullying, what has been effective, and where gaps remain in ensuring a safe and inclusive educational environment.

Table 4: Effectiveness of anti-bullying programs in *pesantren*

Programs	Description	Sources
Community and Parental Involvement for Policy Effectiveness	Policies emphasise the need for community and parental involvement to enhance effectiveness in reducing bullying incidents.	(Alwi et al., 2023; Lingga & Nurjannah, 2023; Mubarok et al., 2023; Nasution & Adi, 2023; Prasetyo et al., 2023; Waliyanti & Swesty, 2021; Wibowo & Nurmalasari, 2023)
Focus on Continuous Monitoring and Adaptation	Studies highlight the importance of continuous monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation to improve the effectiveness of anti-bullying policies.	(Arif et al., 2024; Badruzzaman et al., 2024; Emilda, 2022; Prasetyo et al., 2023; I. K. Rahman et al., 2023; Wibowo & Nurmalasari, 2023)
Integration of Islamic and Cultural Values	Policies incorporate Islamic values, cultural norms, and religious activities as preventive measures against bullying.	(Abdurrohim, Fitriani, et al., 2024; Arif et al., 2024; Mayasari & Rambe, 2023; Mubarok et al., 2023; Saragih et al., 2023; Wibowo & Nurmalasari, 2023)
Emphasis on Punitive Measuring and Rules	Policies involve punitive measures and clear rules to deter bullying behaviour, although effectiveness varies.	(Alwi et al., 2023; Mayasari & Rambe, 2023; Nasution & Adi, 2023; I. K. Rahman et al., 2023; Waliyanti & Swesty, 2021)
Students Safety and Mental Health Support	Policies focus on improving student safety and providing mental health support as key components of effective anti-bullying measures.	(Abdurrohim, Fitriani et al., 2024; Badruzzaman et al., 2024; Prasetyo et al., 2023)
Preventive and Responsive Counselling	Policies include preventive and responsive counselling, with emphasis on effective communication and conflict resolution.	(Mayasari & Rambe, 2023; Syaifuddin & Ahwan, 2024)
Need for Comprehensive and	Studies recommend comprehensive strategies that involve collaboration with	(Abdurrohim, Fitriani et al., 2024; Abdurrohim, Rusdiyah et al., 2024; Ardian et al., 2024; Saragih

Collaborative Strategies	stakeholders, including local authorities.	et al., 2023; Wibowo & Nurmalasari, 2023)

To make anti-bullying policies effective requires the various parties' participation, both from the community and parents. Research shows that involving parents and the community in the planning and implementation of policies can increase the effectiveness of reducing bullying incidents (Alwi et al., 2023; Lingga & Nurjannah, 2023). This involvement also provides broader emotional support for students and helps create a more supportive environment outside the Islamic boarding school. This indicates that efforts to reduce bullying must be collective and involve all elements of society.

In addition, continuous monitoring and policy adaptation are important highlights to make anti-bullying policies more effective. Various studies show that evaluation and adjustment of anti-bullying policies must be carried out continuously so that the policy remains relevant to the dynamics that develop in the field (Arif et al., 2024; Badruzzaman et al., 2024). Without regular monitoring, the policies implemented can lose their positive impact over time, and the problem of bullying can increase again.

Importantly, integrating cultural and religious values is also a key component to prevent bullying. Several studies have shown that anti-bullying policies that integrate Islamic values and local cultural norms can help reduce the incidence of bullying in *Pesantren* (Abdurrohim, Fitriani et al., 2024; Mayasari & Rambe, 2023). These values not only provide a strong moral perspective but also create closer social bonds among students, until violence or bullying is prevented.

Although an approach involving punishment and clear rules is often applied in anti-bullying policies, the effectiveness of its implementation can vary. Several studies have stated that although punishment can have a deterrent effect, if it is not balanced with a more holistic approach such as mental health support and counseling, the results can be less optimal (Alwi et al., 2023; I. N. Rahman et al., 2023). Therefore, an effective anti-bullying policy depends not only on the application of sanctions, but also on comprehensive support to students.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the causes and persistence of bullying in *pesantren* through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. By adopting a multi-layered analytical framework, this study highlights how interrelated ecological systems shape and sustain bullying behaviour. This ecological perspective fills a critical gap in the

literature by situating bullying not merely as an individual issue but as a systemic outcome of dynamic interactions across social contexts within the *pesantren* setting.

At the most immediate level, the microsystem, including family dynamics, peer relationships, and the culture of seniority, emerges as a critical determinant. Students exposed to domestic violence or authoritarian parenting are more likely to replicate aggressive behaviours within the *pesantren* context. These behaviours are further reinforced by peer dynamics and the entrenched culture of seniority, which often legitimises dominance and hierarchical violence. Recent studies (Azhari & Rahmawati, 2024; Mubarok et al., 2023) support this observation, indicating that aggression becomes normalised when embedded within everyday interpersonal relationships.

The mesosystem, which refers to the interaction between different microsystems such as family, *pesantren*, and peer networks, further contextualises how bullying behaviour is either reinforced or mitigated. When negative experiences at home, such as neglect or exposure to aggression, are not met with responsive and empathetic intervention from *pesantren* authorities, students are more likely to externalise these behaviours within the institutional setting. Conversely, effective communication and collaborative monitoring between parents and *pesantren* serve as protective factors that reduce bullying incidents. This aligns with findings of Alwi et al. (2023) and Barus et al. (2023), who emphasise the importance of a cohesive support system across different environments to prevent bullying. However, a critical challenge lies in the dominant reliance on punitive approaches within *pesantren*, which often overlook the emotional drivers of aggression. Incorporating empathy-based strategies, such as restorative dialogue and trauma-informed care, can lead to more sustainable outcomes; however, these approaches require cultural shifts and capacity building among educators and caregivers.

At the exosystem, external environments in which students are not directly involved, such as mass media and broader community influences, also shape behaviour. The study finds that students' exposure to violent media content contributes to the internalisation of aggression, particularly within the relatively insulated *pesantren* environment. Media representations that depict dominance, retribution, and violence as effective means of asserting control may contribute to the normalisation of bullying by offering implicit behavioural templates, although the extent of this influence remains context-dependent and subject to individual interpretation. These findings echo prior research (Arif et al., 2024; Ulum, 2021) that associates media influence with increased tendencies toward aggression, especially in environments already characterised by rigid hierarchy and limited external oversight.

Moving further outward, the macrosystem reflects the influence of dominant cultural values and institutional ideologies that legitimise power asymmetries and coercive discipline. The hierarchical structure of many *pesantren* institutions, reinforced by traditional understanding of respect, seniority, and obedience, often creates an implicit tolerance for violence enacted under the guise of discipline or character-building. Such cultural legitimisation is difficult to dismantle, as it aligns with broader societal norms that equate seniority with authority and entitlement. Supporting evidence from Astriani et al. (2023) and Barus et al. (2023) illustrates how these macro-level ideologies contribute to the institutionalisation of bullying as a taken-for-granted practice within *pesantren* culture.

The study also applies Lazarus and Folkman's stress theory to analyse how bullying affects students in *pesantren*, both psychologically and academically. This theory explains stress as a result of how individuals perceive and respond to their environment, especially when they see it as threatening or beyond their capacity to handle (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). By using this perspective, the study shifts the focus from seeing bullying as just an external act to understanding how it creates internal psychological pressure. In *pesantren*, students who are bullied often experience this pressure as overwhelming, leading to anxiety, depression, and in severe cases, suicidal thoughts. These findings are consistent with previous studies (Azhari & Rahmawati, 2024; Ramli et al., 2023; Yunita & Isnawati, 2024), which show how serious the emotional impacts of bullying can be, especially when students lack proper support from the institution.

The study also explores how ongoing stress from bullying negatively affects students' academic performance. Prolonged emotional distress can disrupt concentration, reduce motivation, and weaken cognitive abilities, factors that are crucial for learning. Rather than treating this as a simple cause-and-effect issue, the study highlights how these effects build up over time, especially when schools fail to respond adequately. Evidence from (Nugroho et al., 2020) and (Ramli et al., 2023) shows that bullying is linked to declining academic achievement and a growing sense of disconnection from school. This suggests that bullying is not just an individual problem, but a systemic issue that needs to be addressed at the institutional level.

Given these consequences, the role of *pesantren* as both a place of risk and a potential source of support becomes important. According to the stress-buffering view in the theory, a supportive school environment can reduce the negative effects of stress and help students cope better. However, this study questions the assumption that moral or religious teaching alone is enough. Instead, it calls for more concrete actions, such as clear anti-bullying rules, psychological support

systems, and teacher training, to create a safer and more respectful environment. One of the key insights from this study is the proposal to make better use of *pesantren*'s cultural and religious values in shaping anti-bullying programs. Promoting values like empathy, kindness, and mutual respect can help prevent violence if they are implemented consistently. This is supported by studies such as Munifah et al. (2024) and Sumitro et al. (2023), which show that culturally informed approaches are often more effective and sustainable.

This study contributes to the scientific understanding of bullying by integrating ecological systems theory and stress theory, offering a holistic framework for understanding the causes and effects of bullying in *pesantren* for society. This study provides practical recommendations for creating a safer and more supportive educational environment, particularly in religious institutions. By addressing the root causes of bullying and its psychological impacts, this study has the potential to improve the mental health and academic outcomes of students, ultimately contributing to a more just and equitable society.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on a comprehensive review of literature and the analysis of the three research questions, this study concludes that bullying in *pesantren* is influenced by a combination of social and cultural factors, including hierarchical seniority norms, rigid discipline, and the normalisation of verbal and physical aggression as forms of socialisation or character building. These cultural dynamics often create an environment where bullying is tolerated or overlooked. Psychologically, victims experience chronic stress, anxiety, and depression, which significantly impair their academic performance and engagement. The institutional response to bullying remains largely inadequate, with many anti-bullying programs or policies being either absent, poorly implemented, or lacking in cultural relevance. While some *pesantren* have begun to adopt preventive measures, their effectiveness is limited when such efforts are not accompanied by broader changes in institutional culture, teacher capacity, and student support systems.

The integration of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Lazarus and Folkman's stress theory offer a comprehensive lens to interpret the multi-layered dynamics of bullying in *pesantren*. While stress theory explains how students internally process bullying as a source of psychological strain, ecological system theory situates this experience within broader structures that shape and sustain bullying behaviours. These findings underscore the need for systemic, multilevel interventions. For policymakers, this study recommends the development of national anti-bullying guidelines that account for the unique cultural-religious context of *pesantren*, supported by monitoring mechanisms to

ensure implementation fidelity. For *pesantren*, the findings highlight the importance of creating psychologically safe learning environments by strengthening teacher training in trauma-informed pedagogy, establishing peer mentoring systems, and embedding anti-bullying principles into religious instruction. This theoretically informed and evidence-based strategy ensures that anti-bullying efforts are not only reactive but also transformative and sustainable.

This study acknowledges several limitations. First, the scope was limited to specific *pesantren* contexts, which may not represent the diverse social and cultural dynamics of other Islamic boarding schools across Indonesia. Second, the study relied exclusively on peer-reviewed secondary sources, which, while academically rigorous, may have excluded valuable insights from non-peer-reviewed sources or unpublished local narratives. This reliance also raises the possibility of publication bias. Moreover, the absence of primary data, particularly the voices of *pesantren* leaders, students, or other key stakeholders, limits a deeper understanding of the lived experiences and institutional responses to bullying. Future research could address these gaps by employing ethnographic case studies, participatory action research within *pesantren* communities, or comparative analyses across different *pesantren* models. Such approaches would offer richer, contextually grounded perspectives that enhance both theoretical and practical understanding of bullying in Islamic boarding schools.

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