



Psychosocial Impacts and Coping Strategies of Commercial Sex Workers in Response to Social Stigma: Implications for Trauma Informed Guidance and Counseling Services

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: May 25, 2026; **Revised:** June 30, 2026; **Accepted:** July 5, 2026

KEYWORDS

Avoidance coping;
Commercial sex workers;
Learned helplessness;
Psychosocial impac;
Social stigma5 trauma bonding

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the psychosocial impacts experienced by commercial sex workers (CSWs) and the coping strategies they developed in response to social stigma. A qualitative approach using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design was employed. Data were collected through semistructured in depth interviews with a purposively selected 28-year-old woman residing in Palangkaraya City. The findings indicate that the participant's involvement in commercial sex work was influenced not only by economic factors but also by exploitative family relationships and prolonged traumatic experiences. The psychosocial impacts emerged from the interaction of exploitation, social stigma, and interpersonal relationships, which shaped the participant's survival strategies. These findings highlight the importance of trauma sensitive guidance and counseling services that emphasize comprehensive psychosocial assessment, trauma recovery, self efficacy enhancement, positive identity reconstruction, the development of adaptive coping strategies, and survivors' social reintegration.

KATA KUNCI

Dampak psikososial;
Koping penghindaran;
Learned helplessness;
Pekerja seks komersial;
Stigma social;
Trauma bonding;

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi dampak psikososial yang dialami pekerja seks komersial (PSK) serta strategi koping yang dikembangkan dalam menghadapi stigma masyarakat. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (IPA). Data diperoleh melalui wawancara mendalam semi terstruktur terhadap seorang perempuan berusia 28 tahun di Kota Palangkaraya yang dipilih secara purposive. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa keterlibatan partisipan dalam seks komersial dipengaruhi tidak hanya oleh faktor ekonomi, tetapi juga oleh relasi keluarga yang eksploitatif dan pengalaman trauma yang berkepanjangan. Dampak psikososial yang dialami merupakan hasil interaksi antara eksploitasi, stigma sosial, dan relasi interpersonal yang membentuk strategi bertahan hidup partisipan. Temuan ini menegaskan pentingnya layanan bimbingan dan konseling yang sensitif terhadap trauma dengan berfokus pada asesmen psikososial, pemulihan trauma, penguatan efikasi diri, rekonstruksi identitas positif, pengembangan strategi koping adaptif, dan reintegrasi sosial penyintas.

1. INTRODUCTION

Commercial sex refers to activities involving the exchange of sexual services for money, goods, or other forms of compensation. This practice is generally carried out by commercial sex workers (CSWs), namely individuals who

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22460/quanta.v10i2.7349>



provide sexual services to obtain economic benefits, either by personal choice or as a consequence of situational pressures (Musu & Apriani, 2024). In practice, the commercial sex industry often extends beyond a purely economic activity and intersects with various forms of exploitation, including recruitment, transportation, sheltering, and the control of individuals through threats, manipulation, and the abuse of vulnerable conditions. Therefore, narratives that portray sex workers' involvement as entirely voluntary often fail to explain the complexity of the realities faced by survivors. Instead, numerous studies indicate that many sex workers exist within systems that exploit their economic, social, and psychological vulnerabilities (Rakhmah & Putra, 2024).

This phenomenon demonstrates that commercial sex is not merely an economic issue but also a human rights concern. In many cases, commercial sexual exploitation shares characteristics with human trafficking, particularly the commodification of the human body for the benefit of third parties such as pimps or other exploitative networks. Such conditions deprive individuals of autonomy over their bodies and undermine human dignity (Lase et al., 2025). This situation is reflected in various cases in Indonesia, including that of a junior high school student in Blitar who concealed her work as a sex worker from her family by claiming to work at a small food stall. The case illustrates the significant psychological pressure and social burden individuals endure to maintain their identity amid societal stigma (Purwati, 2026).

From a sociological perspective, commercial sex is often viewed as a form of social pathology because it contradicts prevailing social norms and values and generates broad social consequences. The practice is not only associated with sexual transactions but also contributes to increased risks of human trafficking, the spread of sexually transmitted infections, and disruptions in the social functioning of families and communities (Saputro, 2022). Nevertheless, behind these social issues, survivors of sexual exploitation also face complex psychological pressures, including social stigma, discrimination, marginalization, social exclusion, and the continuous loss of social support (Khairunnisa & Apsari, 2020). These conditions may affect psychological well-being, self-efficacy, and individuals' ability to function adaptively in their daily lives.

The various psychosocial impacts experienced by survivors of sexual exploitation indicate that they require not only legal protection and economic assistance but also guidance and counseling services that can facilitate psychological recovery, identity reconstruction, self-efficacy enhancement, and the development of more adaptive coping strategies. Within the field of guidance and counseling, counselors play an important role in facilitating recovery through therapeutic relationships that are safe, empathetic, non-stigmatizing, and empowerment-oriented. Trauma-informed counseling has become increasingly relevant because it places traumatic experiences at the center of understanding individuals' behavior, emotions, and decision-making processes. Through this approach, counseling services focus not only on problem resolution but also on helping survivors rebuild a sense of safety, hope, resilience, and psychosocial functioning.

Persistent social pressure encourages sex workers to develop various coping strategies to sustain their lives. One commonly identified strategy is identity concealment through a clear separation between personal life and work, ensuring that their identity as sex workers remains unknown to their broader social environment. In addition, they tend to withdraw from wider social relationships as a form of protection against stigma and negative labeling. This condition often leads to the formation of exclusive communities that function as safe spaces where fellow survivors can obtain social acceptance without fear of discrimination (Adipu et al., 2025).

Although these strategies may provide temporary protection from social pressure, numerous studies indicate that the psychological impacts experienced by sex workers persist and may even become more deeply entrenched. One frequently identified consequence is trauma bonding, a paradoxical emotional attachment between victims and exploiters that develops through patterns of manipulation and inconsistent reinforcement (Sanchez et al., 2019). Repeated exposure to pressure may also lead to learned helplessness, a condition in which individuals lose confidence in their ability to change their circumstances because of continual experiences of failure and powerlessness (Nur & Mukramin, 2023). Under such conditions, coping strategies often take the form of avoidance coping, including avoiding conflict, withdrawing from social environments, and denying traumatic experiences (Adipu et al., 2025). The interaction among trauma bonding, learned helplessness, and coping strategies demonstrates that the psychosocial impacts on sex workers are far more complex than mere economic consequences or social stigma alone.

Previous studies have examined social stigma, marginalization, and coping strategies among commercial sex workers. Community-based approaches, as advocated by Wahyuni et al. (2023), have proven more effective in maintaining survivor engagement than interventions that are solely individual and clinical in nature. Poerwandari (2021) further emphasizes that trauma insensitive approaches, such as demanding full transparency before trust

has been established or using language that reinforces stigma, may worsen survivors' psychological conditions rather than help them.

However, most existing research still adopts a macro-level perspective that positions sex workers as objects of social phenomena or focuses primarily on legal, public health, and clinical psychological aspects. Studies that specifically explore the subjective lived experiences of sex workers in interpreting the psychosocial impacts they face and the processes through which coping strategies are formed remain relatively limited, particularly in the Indonesian context. Furthermore, the relationships among trauma bonding, learned helplessness, and avoidance coping as interconnected psychological experiences have not been extensively examined through an interpretative phenomenological approach. Research linking these psychological dynamics to the need for guidance and counseling services as a foundation for trauma-sensitive interventions is also still scarce. Consequently, the empirical basis for developing counseling services oriented toward psychological recovery, self-efficacy enhancement, and social reintegration for survivors of sexual exploitation remains inadequate.

Based on these gaps, this study aims to explore in depth the lived experiences of commercial sex workers in confronting societal stigma, with a particular focus on the dynamics of psychosocial impacts, trauma bonding, learned helplessness, and the coping strategies they develop. Through an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, this research is expected not only to enrich understanding of the psychological experiences of survivors of commercial sexual exploitation but also to provide an empirical foundation for the development of guidance and counseling services oriented toward trauma-informed counseling, self-efficacy enhancement, identity reconstruction, and survivor empowerment in the processes of recovery and social reintegration.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design to explore in depth the lived experiences of commercial sex workers in confronting societal stigma. This approach was selected because it enables researchers to understand participants' subjective meaning making processes regarding experiences of exploitation, trauma, and coping strategies through the process of double hermeneutic. In addition to providing an in depth understanding of participants' psychological dynamics, the IPA approach offers an empirical foundation for developing guidance and counseling services oriented toward psychological recovery and survivor empowerment.

2.2 Research Setting and Participant

The study was conducted in Palangkaraya City in 2026. The participant was selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: having previously engaged in or currently engaging in commercial sex work, having experienced social stigma, being willing to voluntarily share her lived experiences, and providing informed consent. The study involved one 28-year-old female participant who was selected because she represented an information rich case, which is consistent with the characteristics of IPA research.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through semistructured in depth interviews using an interview guide that covered experiences of sexual exploitation, psychosocial impacts, trauma bonding, learned helplessness, coping strategies, psychological support needs, and expectations regarding the recovery process. The interviews were conducted face to face at a mutually agreed location while ensuring the participant's comfort, psychological safety, and privacy. With the participant's consent, all interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the IPA approach, which involved the stages of reading and rereading, initial noting, identifying emergent themes, clustering themes into superordinate themes, and developing the final interpretation. The analysis was intended to understand the participant's psychological dynamics while identifying the need for guidance and counseling services as a basis for developing trauma sensitive interventions that support self efficacy enhancement and adaptive coping strategies.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

Data analysis using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach identified four major themes that describe the participant's psychological experiences in confronting societal stigma: (1) existential crisis resulting from stigma and social rejection; (2) trauma bonding with the pimp and family members; (3) manifestations of learned helplessness; and (4) avoidance coping through the reconstruction of social space. These four themes were interconnected and formed a sequence of experiences illustrating how exploitation, stigma, and interpersonal relationships influenced the participant's self perception, ability to endure her circumstances, and development of adaptive coping strategies. The findings also provide insight into the participant's psychological support needs, which may serve as a foundation for developing trauma sensitive guidance and counseling services.

3.1.1 Participant Profile

The participant was a 28-year-old woman (hereafter referred to as F) who was residing in Palangkaraya City at the time of the study. F had been involved in commercial sex work for several years and had experienced complex forms of exploitation, social stigma, and various efforts to maintain her survival. According to the interview findings, F's involvement in commercial sex work was not the result of a voluntary decision but originated from pressure within her family environment.

3.1.2 Existential Crisis Resulting from Stigma and Social Rejection

The IPA analysis identified the first theme as an existential crisis resulting from stigma and social rejection. F explained that after her identity as a sex worker became known within the community, she experienced various forms of social rejection, including ridicule, social exclusion, and judgmental treatment from those around her. These experiences caused her to lose her sense of self worth and question the meaning of life as well as the fairness of her circumstances.

In addition to societal stigma, F experienced limited social support. She felt that she had no one she could trust to share her experiences or receive emotional support. This situation was further intensified by failed romantic relationships, which made it increasingly difficult for her to trust others and led her to view herself as undeserving of a healthy relationship. The accumulation of these experiences resulted in persistent feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, and emotional isolation in her daily life.

These findings indicate that the experience of stigma affected not only the participant's emotional condition but also disrupted her self acceptance, self esteem, and sense of safety. This situation highlights the need for guidance and counseling services that facilitate psychological recovery, self acceptance, and the strengthening of a positive identity. The effects of social rejection extended beyond the participant's relationship with society and also influenced the way she established and maintained interpersonal relationships.

3.1.3 Trauma Bonding with the Pimp and Family

The second theme identified was trauma bonding, which developed not only with the participant's pimp but also with members of her own family. According to F's narrative, her involvement in commercial sex work began when her mother pressured her to help repay the family's debt to a pimp. This experience marked the beginning of a relationship characterized by exploitation.

F described her relationship with the pimp as alternating between threats and expressions of care. On one hand, she experienced fear because of ongoing economic pressure and intimidation, while on the other hand, she occasionally received attention that made her feel cared for. This inconsistent pattern of treatment created feelings of ambivalence, making it difficult for her to leave the relationship.

After the family debt had been repaid, the emotional attachment shifted toward her family. F explained that her family continued to demand financial support without showing concern for her psychological condition or physical health. One of the most painful experiences she recalled was being hospitalized without the presence or support of any family member, an event she interpreted as a profound form of neglect.

These findings demonstrate that prolonged exploitative relationships created a need for counseling services that help survivors rebuild a sense of safety, restore trust in others, and regain autonomy in decision making. Such long lasting exploitative relationships also influenced the participant's perception of her own ability to change her circumstances.

3.1.4 Manifestations of Learned Helplessness

The next theme revealed manifestations of learned helplessness in F's life. Although several of the barriers that had previously constrained her no longer existed, she continued to believe that she was incapable of leaving commercial sex work. She repeatedly expressed that she saw no opportunity to begin a different life.

In addition to economic dependence, F described a psychological dependence on the life she had lived for years. The attention she received from clients provided her with a sense of acceptance and appreciation, even though she recognized that these relationships were purely transactional. As a result, she found it difficult to imagine a life outside the environment she had always known. This condition was accompanied by persistent anxiety and recurring frustration in her daily life. To manage her psychological condition, F reported attending regular consultations with a psychiatrist so that she could continue functioning in her everyday activities.

These findings indicate that the participant's sense of helplessness was related not only to economic circumstances but also to her belief in her own ability to change. This suggests the need for guidance and counseling services focused on strengthening self efficacy, fostering hope, and promoting independent decision making. The participant's feelings of helplessness subsequently shaped various strategies that enabled her to survive under continuing social pressure.

3.1.5 Avoidance Coping Through the Reconstruction of Social Space

The final theme identified was avoidance coping through the reconstruction of social space. As a form of self protection against societal stigma, F deliberately severed communication with friends and members of her former community who were aware of her identity as a sex worker. This decision was made consciously to reduce the likelihood of experiencing further rejection and social judgment.

F also chose to relocate to a new neighborhood so that she could begin a new life without her past identity being known by those around her. In her new environment, she primarily established relationships with fellow sex workers, members of the gay community, and individuals employed in the nightlife industry. According to F, this environment provided her with a sense of safety, acceptance, and the freedom to be herself without having to conceal her identity or fear the stigma directed toward her.

These findings suggest that avoidance coping provided short term psychological protection by creating a safer and more supportive environment. However, they also indicate the need for guidance and counseling services that assist survivors in developing more adaptive coping strategies, expanding their social support networks, and facilitating gradual psychological recovery and social reintegration.

3.2. Discussion

Through the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, this study identified four major themes: existential crisis resulting from social stigma, trauma bonding, learned helplessness, and avoidance coping. These themes did not emerge as isolated experiences but were interconnected, forming a sequence of psychological processes that influenced how the participant perceived herself, others, and the possibility of escaping exploitation. Accordingly, the discussion focuses on interpreting the relationships among these themes by relating the findings to previous studies without intending to generalize beyond the participant's lived experience. In addition to enriching the understanding of the psychological dynamics of survivors of sexual exploitation, these findings provide relevant insights for the development of guidance and counseling services, particularly in the areas of needs assessment, psychological recovery, and survivor empowerment through trauma sensitive approaches.

3.2.1 Commercial Sex as a Manifestation of Exploitation Within Family Relationships

The findings indicate that F's involvement in commercial sex work did not originate from an entirely individual decision but was shaped by exploitative family relationships. This finding broadens the prevailing perspective that commercial sex is primarily understood as a form of social pathology at the individual or societal level. Saputro (2022) argued that commercial sex represents a form of social deviance with widespread consequences for society. However, F's experience demonstrates that exploitation may begin within the family environment, which should ordinarily function as a source of protection, before individuals encounter stigma from the broader community.

This finding is consistent with Lase et al. (2025), who explained that sexual exploitation involving coercion, control, and economic gain shares characteristics with human trafficking. In F's case, exploitation was perpetrated not by strangers but by members of her own family, suggesting that family relationships can increase an individual's vulnerability to commercial sexual exploitation.

Unlike most previous studies that have emphasized poverty, economic hardship, or human trafficking networks as primary pathways into prostitution, the present study highlights family dynamics as another important pathway leading individuals into commercial sex work. Although this finding is not intended to generalize the experiences of all sex workers, it suggests that family factors should be considered during psychosocial assessments and intervention planning for survivors of sexual exploitation. From the perspective of guidance and counseling, these findings underscore the importance of conducting comprehensive assessments that explore not only individual conditions but also family relationships as potential sources of both risk and support. Consequently, counseling services should adopt a holistic perspective by considering the family context that shapes survivors' traumatic experiences and decision-making processes.

3.2.2 Trauma Bonding as a Mechanism That Sustains Exploitative Relationships

The second theme demonstrates that F's relationships with both her pimp and her family developed into trauma bonding, making it difficult for her to escape exploitation. These findings support those of Sanchez et al. (2019), who reported that survivors of sexual exploitation often develop emotional attachments to perpetrators despite experiencing violence and manipulation.

In F's experience, trauma bonding developed through a combination of economic threats, psychological pressure, and inconsistent expressions of care. This pattern is consistent with the concept of intermittent reinforcement described by Selian et al. (2025), in which unpredictable positive reinforcement strengthens victims' emotional attachment to perpetrators. The findings further indicate that this attachment persisted even after the economic conditions that initially created dependence had diminished.

A significant contribution of this study is the identification of trauma bonding not only with the pimp but also within family relationships. This finding suggests that emotional attachment to family members is more complex because it is influenced by biological ties, moral obligations, and cultural expectations regarding filial responsibility. Therefore, recovery from sexual exploitation involves not only ending relationships with perpetrators but also reconstructing survivors' understanding of family relationships that have served as sources of exploitation. From a guidance and counseling perspective, these findings emphasize the importance of trauma informed counseling, which prioritizes safety, empathy, and respect for survivors' experiences as the foundation of the therapeutic relationship. Such an approach enables counselors to recognize that survivors' difficulty in leaving exploitative relationships is not simply a matter of insufficient motivation but rather the consequence of complex psychological processes.

3.2.3 Learned Helplessness as the Accumulation of Trauma and Stigma

This study identified that prolonged exploitation, combined with social stigma and repeated interpersonal failures, contributed to the development of learned helplessness. Even after her family's financial debt had been resolved, F continued to believe that she lacked the ability to leave commercial sex work. This condition is consistent with the concept of learned helplessness described by Nur and Mukramin (2023), in which individuals gradually lose confidence in their ability to change adverse circumstances.

The findings also indicate that F's barriers evolved from economic constraints into psychological barriers. The attention she received from clients provided her with a sense of acceptance that had previously been absent within her family and social environment. This observation supports the explanation of Fauziah et al. (2021), who suggested that individuals experiencing learned helplessness tend to develop negative self attributions, making it increasingly difficult to perceive change as achievable.

Furthermore, F's need for regular psychiatric consultations indicates that the psychological distress she experienced had significantly affected her daily functioning. This finding supports the view of Sari and Wulandari (2022), who emphasized the importance of professional interventions addressing cognitive, emotional, and relational dimensions to restore self efficacy and hope for the future. Accordingly, the present findings suggest that recovery from sexual exploitation requires interventions that extend beyond improving economic conditions to include gradual psychological recovery. Within guidance and counseling practice, these findings highlight the importance of services focused on strengthening self efficacy, restructuring negative self perceptions, and empowering survivors to recognize realistic opportunities for change. Such interventions are essential for fostering hope and increasing survivors' readiness to pursue more adaptive lives.

3.2.4 Avoidance Coping as an Adaptive Response to Stigma

The final theme indicates that F developed avoidance coping by severing ties with her previous social environment, relocating to a new place of residence, and establishing new social networks that provided a sense of safety. These strategies emerged as responses to repeated experiences of rejection and social judgment.

These findings are consistent with Adipu et al. (2025), who reported that survivors of sexual exploitation often establish communities that provide social acceptance as a form of psychological protection. In this study, relationships with fellow sex workers, members of the gay community, and individuals employed in the nightlife industry created a social environment in which F could experience acceptance without concealing her identity.

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal the limitations of avoidance coping. Although these strategies reduced the psychological burden associated with stigma in the short term, they did not address the underlying factors that maintained the participant's involvement in exploitation. This observation is consistent with Prasetyo and Hartini (2022), who argued that strong attachment to homogeneous communities may limit opportunities to expand social networks and facilitate reintegration into the broader community. From the perspective of guidance and counseling, coping strategies that initially helped survivors endure adverse circumstances should gradually be strengthened into more adaptive forms through resilience building, expansion of social support networks, and enhancement of skills for managing social pressures. Such an approach enables survivors not only to experience safety but also to rebuild healthy relationships with the broader social environment over time.

This study demonstrates that the psychosocial impacts experienced by commercial sex workers result from the interaction of family exploitation, societal stigma, trauma bonding, and learned helplessness, which collectively contribute to the development of avoidance coping as a survival mechanism. These findings suggest that recovery from sexual exploitation requires comprehensive interventions that include trauma recovery, self efficacy enhancement, identity reconstruction, and the development of sustainable social support systems. Within the context of guidance and counseling, the findings emphasize that effective services should integrate psychosocial assessment, trauma sensitive counseling, individual empowerment, and the strengthening of family and community support as essential components of the recovery process. Although these findings are derived from a single case using the IPA approach and are not intended to be generalized, they provide an empirical contribution to understanding the psychological dynamics of survivors of commercial sexual exploitation, particularly those rooted in family relationships, while offering a conceptual foundation for the development of guidance and counseling practices for vulnerable populations.

4. RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study suggest that the recovery of survivors of sexual exploitation should not focus solely on economic assistance or legal protection but also requires comprehensive, continuous, and trauma sensitive guidance and counseling services. The psychological dynamics characterized by social stigma, trauma bonding, learned helplessness, and avoidance coping highlight the importance of conducting comprehensive psychosocial assessments as the foundation for designing counseling interventions that are responsive to individual needs. Therefore, counselors are expected to adopt approaches that promote trauma recovery, strengthen self efficacy, reconstruct positive identity, and foster more adaptive coping strategies through therapeutic relationships that are safe, empathetic, and free from stigma. In addition to contributing to guidance and counseling practice, these findings may also serve as a foundation for developing psychosocial rehabilitation programs that involve families. This study demonstrates that the experiences of commercial sex workers in confronting sexual exploitation and societal stigma involve complex and interconnected psychological processes. Using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, the study identified four major themes: existential crisis resulting from social stigma, trauma bonding, learned helplessness, and avoidance coping. The findings indicate that the participant's involvement in commercial sex work was influenced not only by economic factors but also by exploitative family relationships, which subsequently contributed to experiences of trauma, helplessness, and the development of survival strategies under persistent social pressure. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological dynamics experienced by survivors of sexual exploitation, particularly in the context of family relationships as a source of exploitation, an area that remains relatively underexplored.

From the perspective of guidance and counseling, the findings emphasize the importance of services that prioritize trauma recovery, self efficacy enhancement, positive identity reconstruction, and the development of more adaptive coping strategies through trauma sensitive approaches. Accordingly, this study contributes not only to the psychological literature on survivors of sexual exploitation but also provides an empirical foundation for the

development of assessment procedures, intervention strategies, and guidance and counseling services that support psychosocial recovery and the social reintegration of vulnerable populations. As this study employed an IPA design with a single participant, the findings are not intended to be generalized. Instead, they are expected to provide a reference for future research involving more diverse participants and contexts in order to broaden the understanding of guidance and counseling needs among survivors of sexual exploitation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to all individuals who supported this research, especially the participant who generously shared her lived experiences, making this study possible. The authors also extend their appreciation to the institution that provided academic support and to all those who offered valuable feedback throughout the preparation of this manuscript. Their contributions and support were invaluable to the successful completion of this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

The authors declare that each made substantial contributions to this study. Neng Lisma contributed to the conceptualization of the research, methodology development, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and preparation of the original manuscript draft. Nor Fatmah contributed to research supervision, validation of the findings, methodological refinement, manuscript review and editing, and research administration. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript and accept full responsibility for the content of the published article.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this study.

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Quanta Journal (Kajian Bimbingan dan Konseling dalam Pendidikan)

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