



# Traumatic Experiences of Female Victims of Sexual Harassment: A Case Study at Higher Education in South Sulawesi, Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

This research employed a qualitative case study design involving four female students and alums who experienced sexual harassment in higher education settings. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation over six months. Thematic analysis was conducted using systematic coding to identify patterns across emotional, cognitive, behavioral, social, and academic dimensions. The findings reveal that sexual harassment generates persistent and interconnected psychological changes. Participants experienced intense emotional distress, including fear, shame, anxiety, and prolonged sadness. Cognitive distortions such as self-blame, negative self-perception, and lowered self-esteem were prominent. Behavioral responses included social withdrawal, avoidance of specific places or individuals, sleep disturbances, and self-harm tendencies. Social relationships deteriorated, particularly in interactions with male peers. Academic functioning was also disrupted, marked by decreased participation, difficulty concentrating, and delayed completion of academic tasks. Sexual harassment constitutes a complex and enduring traumatic experience that affects victims across multiple life domains. Trauma should be understood not only as an individual psychological response but also as a socially shaped experience. From a theoretical perspective, trauma theory explains that traumatic experiences are influenced not only by internal psychological processes but also by social contexts, including cultural norms, social support, and societal responses toward victims. Higher education institutions must adopt comprehensive, trauma-informed policies and support systems to ensure victim protection and recovery.

## INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of sexual harassment in higher education is a significant problem that impacts the mental health of victims. Several studies have shown that sexual harassment and violence remain structural problems in higher education. This is often linked to power relations, organizational culture, and the normalization of discriminatory behavior (Pantelmann & Wälty, 2022; Triyono, 2023). Sexual harassment is considered not only an individual act within a hierarchical organization, but also a practice associated with power dynamics and silencing (Abraham & Ph, 2025; Duffy et al., 2023). This phenomenon becomes more complex when facilitated by digital technology. Online sexual harassment and image-based harassment can have a profound psychological impact on victims (Hellevik & Haugen, 2022). Victims experience reputational damage, difficulties interacting with others, and loss of sexual autonomy as a result of social responses that blame victims for their sexual harassment, according to research on image-based sexual harassment (Gauthier, 2023; Hellevik & Haugen, 2022).

Mental health impacts from sexual harassment have been widely documented in the literature. Psychological distress, decreased self-esteem, self-criticism, and insecure attachment patterns are all correlated with experiences of sexual harassment (Schnittker, 2022). Furthermore, a comprehensive study of sexual trauma found that harassment is associated with depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and long-term psychosocial functioning problems (Obradovic et al., 2025). Similar findings were found in women who experienced sexual trauma. Victims experienced more emotional distress and PTSD than the general population (Sujadi et al., 2023). Sexual harassment of college students not only disrupts victims' academic performance but also their sense of security and interpersonal relationships (Molstad et al., 2023).

Theoretically, Sigmund Freud's idea of traumatic neurosis can be linked to an individual's understanding of trauma. Freud explained that traumatic experiences are often not consciously processed by individuals. Instead, they are stored in the subconscious and later resurface in the form of symptoms, anxiety, or intense emotional reactions. Thus, traumatic experiences can continue to influence an individual's psychological condition even after the event has passed, because trauma stored in the subconscious may reemerge in various forms of emotional and behavioral responses. According to this perspective, trauma is not simply a past event. It is an experience that continues to operate in the individual's brain through the mechanisms of compulsion, repetition, and deferred action. Contemporary trauma approaches further reinforce this framework through the concept of PTSD, which defines symptoms of intrusion, avoidance, cognitive-emotional changes, and hypervigilance as responses to traumatic experiences. However, clinical approaches are insufficient. Victims often face cultural challenges in disclosing their experiences. This is examined from a social and feminist perspective (Mao et al., 2023). This is especially true in societies that continue to enforce conservative norms and stigmatize victims. Therefore, trauma resulting from sexual abuse must be understood as a phenomenon that is not only intrapsychic but also social.

International research has extensively addressed the relationship between sexual harassment and psychological disorders. Most studies focus on quantitative approaches and measurement instruments, such as the Sexual Harassment Scale (SEQ), to determine incidence rates and correlations with psychological variables (Soler-Sánchez & López-Pina, 2025). However, this literature is very limited. First, victims are often not positioned as subjects who possess personal narratives and meanings regarding their traumatic experiences. Instead, research participants are frequently treated merely as objects of clinical diagnosis, focusing primarily on symptoms rather than the subjective experiences of the victims themselves. This perspective tends to overlook the deeper psychological meanings individuals attach to their traumatic experiences. Second, there remains limited in-depth research examining how victims interpret and experience psychological changes in their everyday lives. From a theoretical perspective, trauma is not only a

clinical condition but also a subjective psychological experience that shapes how individuals understand themselves and their social world. Therefore, further exploration is needed to understand better victims' lived experiences and the complex psychological processes that emerge following traumatic events. In addition, contextual research on this issue remains limited in Indonesian universities, particularly studies that employ qualitative case study approaches.

This study aims to examine the multidimensional psychological changes experienced by victims of sexual harassment and to explore how these changes are interpreted and experienced in their daily lives. Using a qualitative case study approach, this study collects data through in-depth interviews with victims to capture their lived experiences and understand the psychological meanings attached to those experiences. This provides theoretical benefits for the development of contextual trauma research and practical benefits for strengthening victim protection policies in higher education settings.

## **METHODS**

### **Unit of Analysis**

This research focuses on female students who were victims of sexual harassment in a university environment in South Sulawesi. The study focuses on the victims' psychological experiences after the sexual harassment incident, the types of psychological changes caused by the incident, and how these changes are perceived and addressed in daily life. The research aims to position trauma as a subjective, personal, and multidimensional experience.

The results indicate that harassment produces profound and multidimensional psychological impacts on female students. Victims experience intense emotional responses, including fear, shame, anxiety, and prolonged sadness. These experiences also lead to cognitive changes such as self-blame, negative self-perception, and reduced self-esteem. Behaviorally, victims tend to withdraw from social environments, avoid certain places or individuals, and experience sleep disturbances. The trauma also affects social relationships, particularly in interactions with male peers, and disrupts academic functioning, including decreased participation, difficulty concentrating, and delays in completing academic tasks. Consequently, the analysis focuses on the dynamics of individual experiences in depth and context.

### **Research Design**

This study used a qualitative case study instead, the goal was to comprehensively understand how victims experience sexual abuse and its resulting psychological impact. The case study design allows research to be conducted within a real-life context. This method can be used to answer research questions that focus on "how" psychological experiences are shaped and "what" changes occur and their impact on victims' daily lives (Akhmad, SE. et al., 2023).

### **Data and Information Sources**

Primary and secondary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with four subjects purposively selected based on the relevance of their experiences to the research topic. The four participants were students and alumni who had experienced sexual harassment at university and were willing to share their experiences voluntarily. Secondary data were obtained from literature, scientific journals, and theoretical references on psychological trauma and sexual harassment. This data was used to strengthen the conceptual foundation and help researchers interpret empirical findings systematically and theoretically.

### **Method of collecting data**

Data collection was primarily conducted through in-depth interviews conducted in a semi-structured format. The three research objectives were to examine the victims' psychological

experiences after the abuse, identify the types of psychological changes that emerged, and understand how these impacted their daily lives. The interviews, conducted in a flexible yet directed manner, allowed participants to share their experiences and think critically freely.

This method enabled researchers to capture the dominant emotions that emerged after the incident, such as fear, anxiety, sadness, shame, and panic, as well as sleep disturbances and emotional responses that emerged when victims were in situations reminiscent of the incident. To understand the social context of the interviewees, researchers also conducted non-participatory observation. This observation allowed researchers to record the emotional dynamics that occurred during the interviews. To supplement the data and increase the accuracy of the findings, field notes were used. Data were collected over approximately six months, ensuring the confidentiality and psychological safety of participants.

### **Data analysis**

Data analysis was conducted qualitatively throughout the data collection process. The initial process began with interview transcription and repeated reading to identify meaningful units related to the research subjects. Next, the data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach through a coding process. The initial stage of analysis involved reading and thoroughly understanding the interview transcripts obtained from the participants. The researcher then assigned codes to segments of the data that were relevant to the focus of the study. These codes were subsequently grouped based on similarities in meaning to form several categories.

The resulting categories were then organized into main themes representing the psychological experiences of victims after experiencing sexual violence. In the final stage, the themes were reviewed to ensure their consistency with the data, and were then defined and interpreted. The results of the analysis indicated that changes in emotional, cognitive, behavioral, social, and academic aspects emerged as the main themes identified in this study. This study utilized Atlas. TI software to support the coding and theme mapping process, allowing for a systematic and well-documented analysis (Michalovich, 2022). To gain a better understanding of how the victims' psychological changes occurred and how they affected their daily lives, the empirical findings were linked to the trauma theory framework used in the study.

### **Validity (Data Validity)**

Data validity consists of four main components: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These are used to ensure the quality of the research. To maintain credibility, thorough interviews, repeated readings of transcripts, and clarification of meanings throughout the interview process were conducted. Furthermore, the consistency of themes across participants was checked to ensure that the categories formed represented actual patterns of experience. By providing in-depth contextual descriptions of participant attributes and the research situation, transferability was strengthened. This allowed readers to assess the relevance of the results in different contexts. The use of Atlas. ti, which produces a traceable audit trail, and thorough documentation of the entire research process ensured dependability. Confirmability was achieved through researcher self-reflection (reflexivity), which was employed to reduce interpretation bias. Furthermore, the analysis was based on direct narrative quotations from participants. Furthermore, this study considered ethics through providing informed consent, anonymizing participants, and conducting safe and comfortable interviews to prevent re-traumatization.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Results**

#### **Condition of Informant 1**

The results of interviews with informant Rw regarding psychological experiences, forms, and the impact of psychological changes experienced after experiencing sexual harassment can be seen in Figure 1 below.

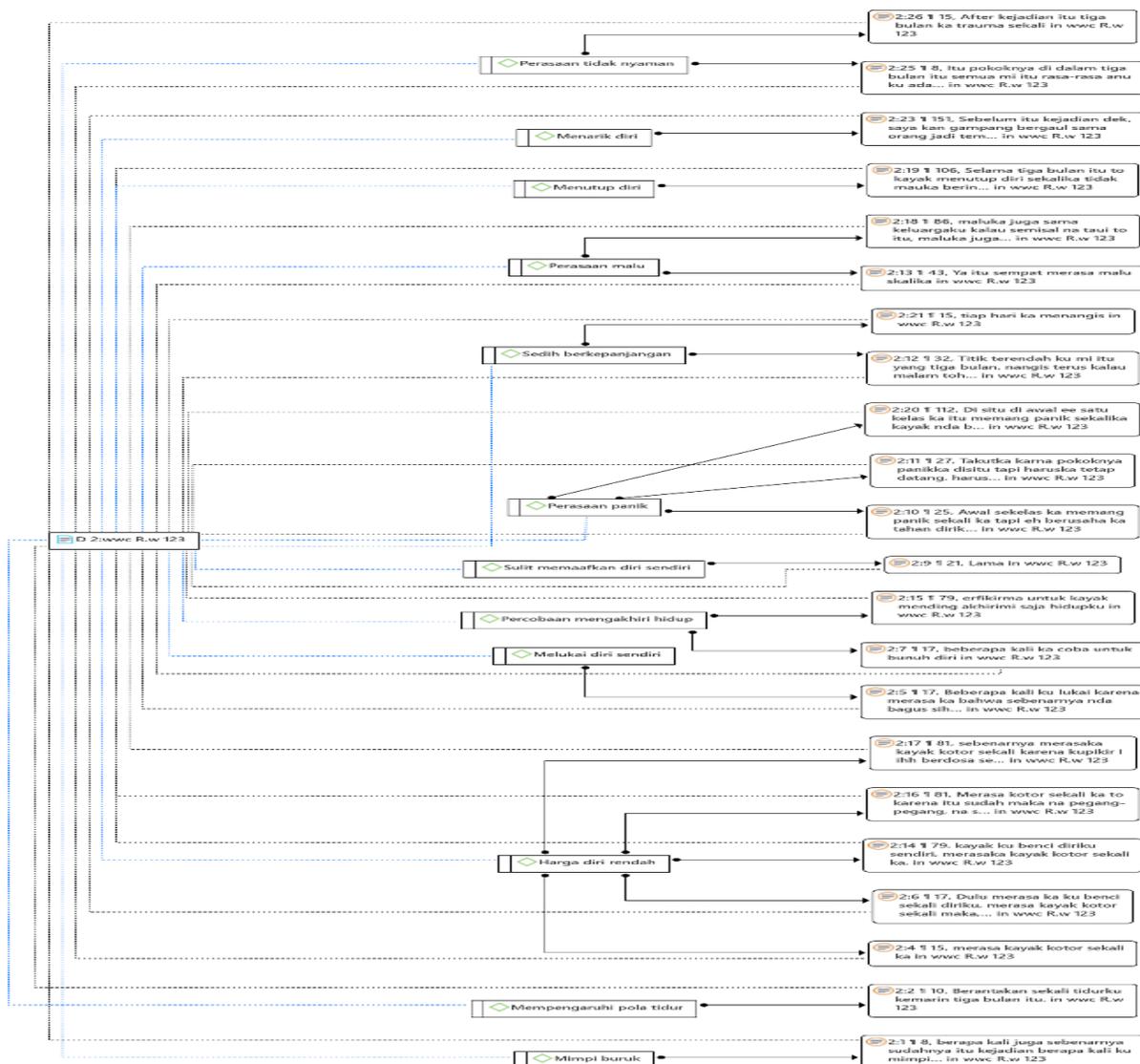


Figure 1. Atlas.ti Coding Results of Informant 1

Figure 1 displays *the coding network results* from the analysis of interviews with informant 1 using Atlas. ti, which illustrates the interrelationships between the informant's psychological experiences. The figure shows that the experience of sexual harassment elicits dominant emotional responses such as discomfort, shame, prolonged sadness, and panic. These emotional responses are linked to cognitive changes such as self-blame, feelings of dirt, and low self-esteem. Furthermore, the coding network reveals behavioral impacts such as withdrawal, avoidance of certain places or individuals, self-harm, and even suicide attempts. Sleep disturbances and nightmares also indicate recurrent traumatic memories. Overall, this figure confirms that the impact of sexual harassment is multidimensional and interconnected among emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects.

After visualizing the images, the next step is to create a table of the analysis results. The table of research results can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Comparison of Psychological Conditions of Informant 1

	EXPERIENCE 1	EXPERIENCE 2	EXPERIENCE 3	EXPERIENCE 4	EXPERIENCE 5
	Emotional Dimension	Cognitive Dimensions	Behavioral Dimensions	Social Dimension	Academic Dimension
<b>Before</b>	Stable emotional condition	Positive thinking patterns	Able to control oneself	Positive social interactions	Be diligent in following the learning
<b>After</b>	-Feeling of discomfort -Feel embarrassed -Feeling sad -Feeling panic	-Low self-esteem -It's hard to forgive yourself	-Introvert -Attempted suicide -Self-harm -Affects sleep patterns/nightmares	Withdrawing from the circle of friends	
<b>Impact</b>	The victim reported frequently crying at night and experiencing persistent sadness for three months. She also experienced feelings of shame, discomfort, and panic after the incident.	Victims develop a negative self-perception, viewing themselves as dirty and sinful, accompanied by feelings of self-loathing. This condition triggers the victim's long-term need to forgive themselves.	The victim stated that she had experienced several nightmares related to the perpetrator and the incident, and had experienced sleep disturbances that lasted for approximately three months. Furthermore, the victim also exhibited self-harming behavior and refused to interact with those around her.	The victim withdraws from friends who they perceive as having a negative influence on them. Furthermore, the victim also shows a reluctance to trust the opposite sex or their friends again.	

Table 1 presents a summary of the results of the thematic analysis of informant 1's psychological experiences before and after experiencing sexual harassment, classified into five main dimensions: emotional, cognitive, behavioral, social, and academic. Initially, the participant demonstrated a stable emotional state, positive mindset, self-control, good social interactions, and optimal academic engagement. However, after the incident, significant changes emerged in the form of negative emotions (fear, shame, sadness, panic), cognitive distortions such as self-blame and low self-esteem, withdrawal and self-harm behavior, limited social interactions, especially with the opposite sex, and decreased academic participation.

## Condition of Informant 2

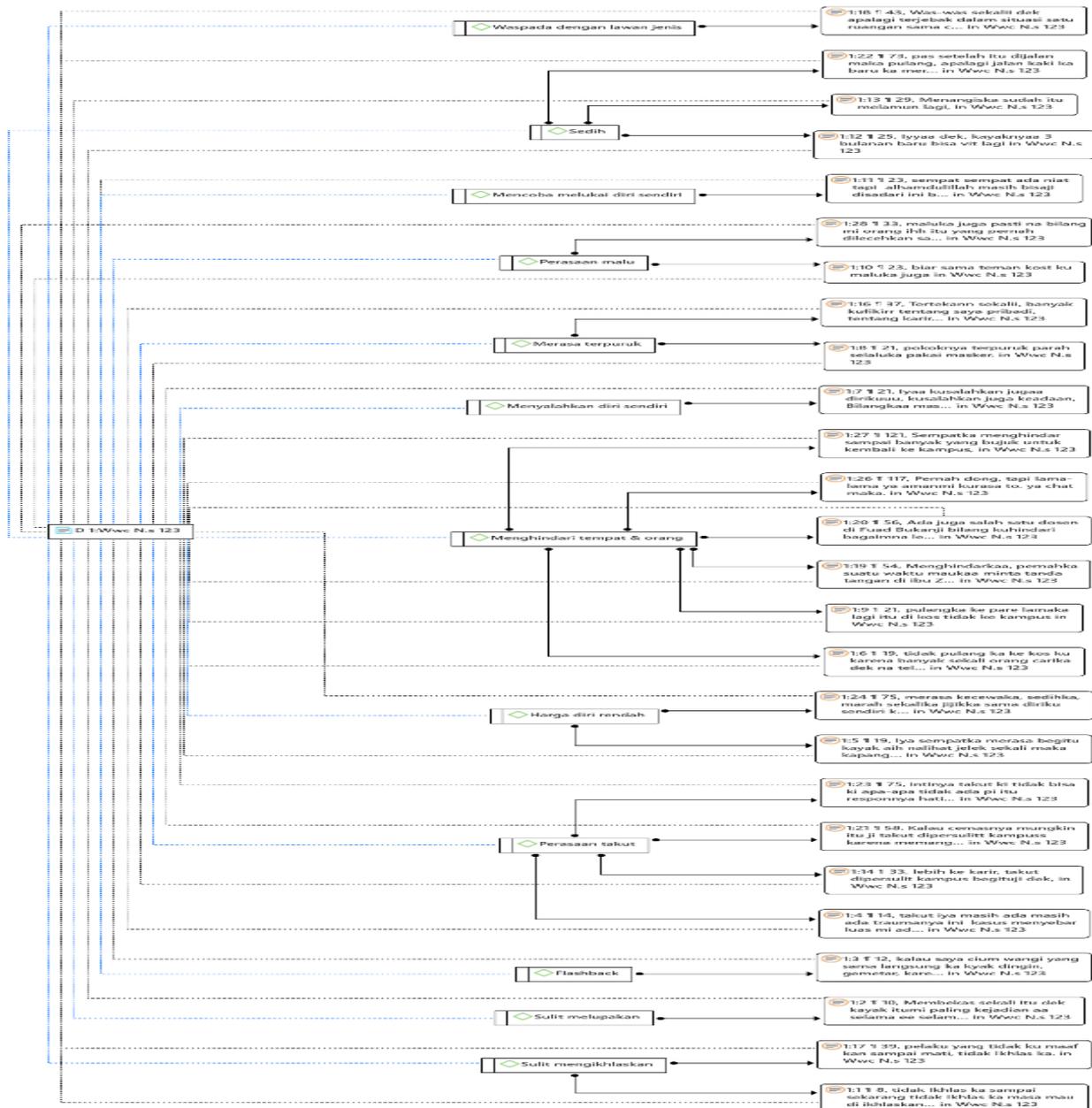


Figure 2. Atlas.ti Coding Results of Informant 2

Figure 2 displays a network view of the thematic analysis results using Atlas. ti, depicting the interrelationships between codes based on interviews with informant 2. The visualization shows that the experience of sexual harassment elicits interconnected multidimensional responses, encompassing emotional (feelings of fear, shame, sadness, anxiety), cognitive (self-blame, low self-esteem, feeling dirty), and behavioral (withdrawal, avoidance of certain people or places, self-harm). Furthermore, codes such as flashbacks, difficulty forgetting, and wariness of the opposite sex indicate recurring traumatic memories and increased social sensitivity. The interrelationships between codes in the network confirm that the psychological impacts experienced by informant 2 are not isolated, but rather form a complex pattern of trauma that influences one another.

After visualizing the images, the next step is to create a table of the analysis results. The table of research results can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Comparison of Psychological Conditions of Informant 2

	EXPERIENCE 1	EXPERIENCE 2	EXPERIENCE 3	EXPERIENCE 4	EXPERIENCE 5
	Emotional Dimension	Cognitive Dimensions	Behavioral Dimensions	Social Dimension	Academic Dimension
<b>Before</b>	Stable emotional condition	Positive thinking patterns	Able to control oneself	Positive social interactions	Be diligent in following the learning
<b>After</b>	- Afraid -Feeling panic -Feel embarrassed -Feeling sad -Feeling depressed -Feeling of not being accepted	-Blaming yourself -It's hard to forget and let go -Low self-esteem	-Closing oneself/avoiding -Avoid certain places and people -Trying to hurt yourself	-Withdraw from the lecture environment -Be careful with the opposite sex	Avoid the campus environment
<b>Impact</b>	The victim experiences emotional stress characterized by feelings of fear, shame, sadness, anxiety, depression and feelings of not accepting the consequences of the sexual violence.	Victims perceive themselves as contaminated individuals, and they tend to blame themselves for what happened to them. They also experience intrusive memories, where memories of the traumatic event resurface when exposed to certain stimuli, such as a scent that resembles the perpetrator's.	The victim avoided certain places and people, such as being reluctant to go to campus, reluctant to meet boarding house friends and classmates, apart from that, the subject also often wore a mask when leaving the boarding room.	Victims are reluctant to be in the same room as the opposite sex and avoid places such as boarding houses due to social pressure.	The victim avoided the campus environment.

Table 2 shows significant changes in five key dimensions after experiencing sexual harassment. Before the incident, the informant was emotionally stable, had a positive mindset, was self-controlled, interacted well socially, and actively participated in learning activities. However, after the incident, strong emotional distress emerged in the form of fear, panic, shame, sadness, depression, and feelings of rejection. In the cognitive dimension, the informant showed a tendency to blame himself, feel contaminated, have low self-esteem, and experience intrusive memories that resurface when exposed to certain stimuli. Behaviorally and socially, the informant withdrew, avoided certain places and individuals, including the campus environment, and showed wariness of the opposite sex. These impacts also had implications for academic aspects, where the informant tended to avoid the lecture environment, thus confirming that the experience of sexual harassment affects psychological, social, and academic functioning comprehensively.

### Condition of Informant 3

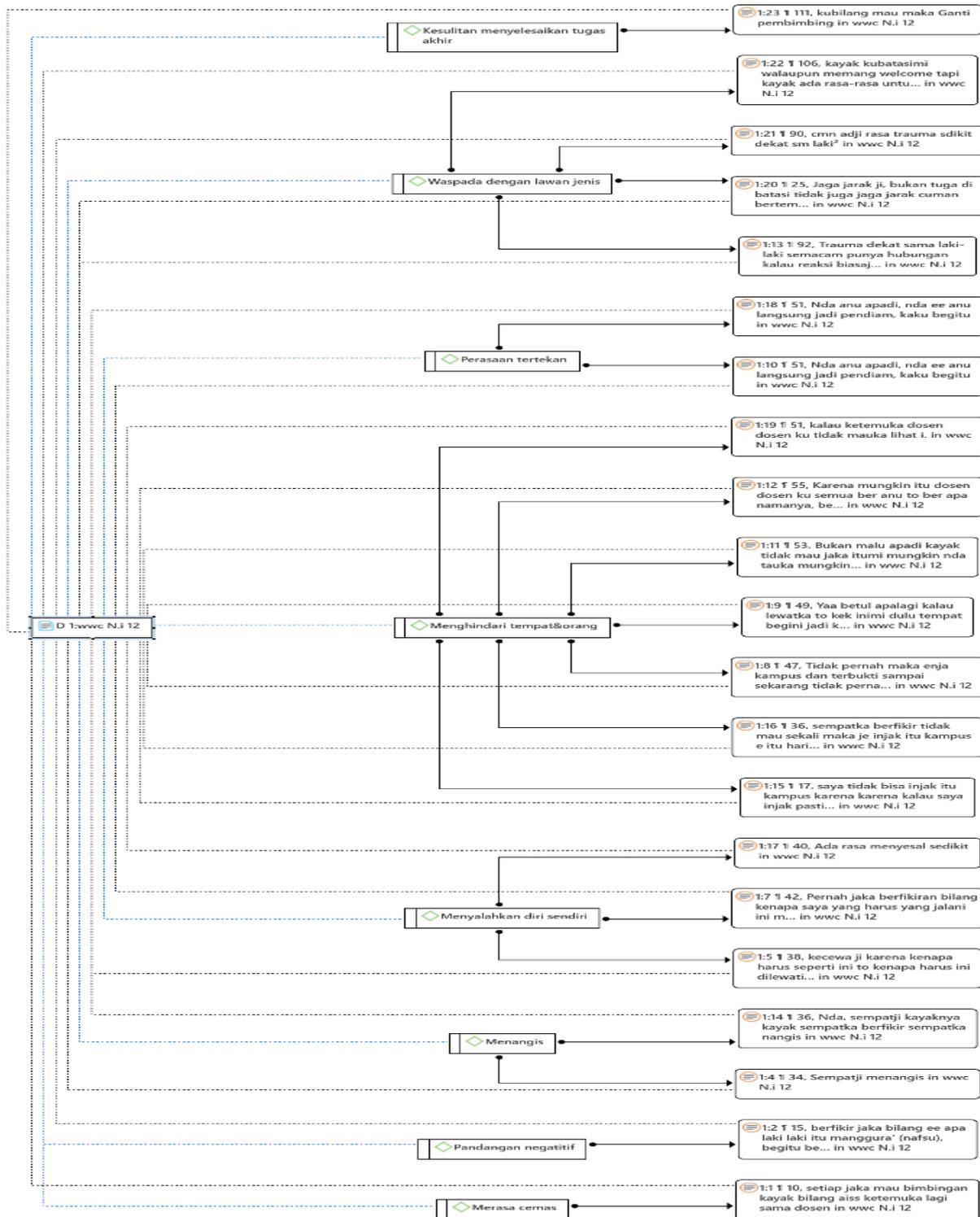


Figure 3. Atlas.ti Coding Results of Informant 3

Figure 3 displays the results of an Atlas.ti *network analysis* showing the relationships between themes based on informant interviews, particularly across the academic, social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. It appears that difficulty completing a final assignment is associated with increased vigilance toward the opposite sex, feelings of stress, and avoidance of the campus environment. Furthermore, codes such as self-blame, shame, negative outlook, and crying are interconnected, indicating cognitive distortions that exacerbate emotional distress. This network also demonstrates that avoidance behavior is not merely a social response, but rather a continuing effect of unresolved psychological trauma.

After visualizing the images, the next step is to create a table of the analysis results. The table of research results can be seen in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Comparison of Psychological Conditions of Informant 3

	EXPERIENCE 1	EXPERIENCE 2	EXPERIENCE 3	EXPERIENCE 4	EXPERIENCE 5
	Emotional Dimension	Cognitive Dimensions	Behavioral Dimensions	Social Dimension	Academic Dimension
<b>Before</b>	Stable emotional condition	Positive thinking patterns	Able to control oneself	Positive social interactions	Diligently follow the guidance process
<b>After</b>	-Feeling depressed -Cry -Feeling anxious	-Blaming yourself -Negative views towards the opposite sex	-Avoid certain places and people	Keep the distance be wary of the opposite sex	Difficulty completing final assignment
<b>Impact</b>	After experiencing sexual violence, victims show emotional responses in the form of feelings of depression, anxiety, and frequent crying.	Victims show a tendency to blame themselves by questioning why they had to experience sexual violence, thus giving rise to feelings of disappointment, regret, and personal failure, accompanied by negative beliefs about men.	The victim revealed that since completing his studies until now, he has tended to avoid the campus environment and limited interaction with several lecturers who were involved in the problem and were considered not to be on his side.	Victims reported a tendency to keep their distance or be wary of male individuals.	The victim revealed that she had wanted to change her academic supervisor due to the involvement of the supervisor in the sexual violence she experienced.

Table 3 shows changes in the informant's condition across five key dimensions before and after experiencing sexual violence. Initially, the informant was emotionally stable, had a positive mindset, was self-controlled, maintained good social interactions, and actively participated in academic guidance. However, after the incident, significant changes emerged, including emotional distress, such as feeling depressed, anxious, and frequently crying. Cognitive changes included a tendency to blame oneself and the development of negative views of the opposite sex. Avoidance behavior toward certain places and individuals. Maintaining distance and increased vigilance in social relationships. Academic challenges, such as difficulty completing final assignments and a desire to change supervisors, were also observed.

Condition of Informant 4

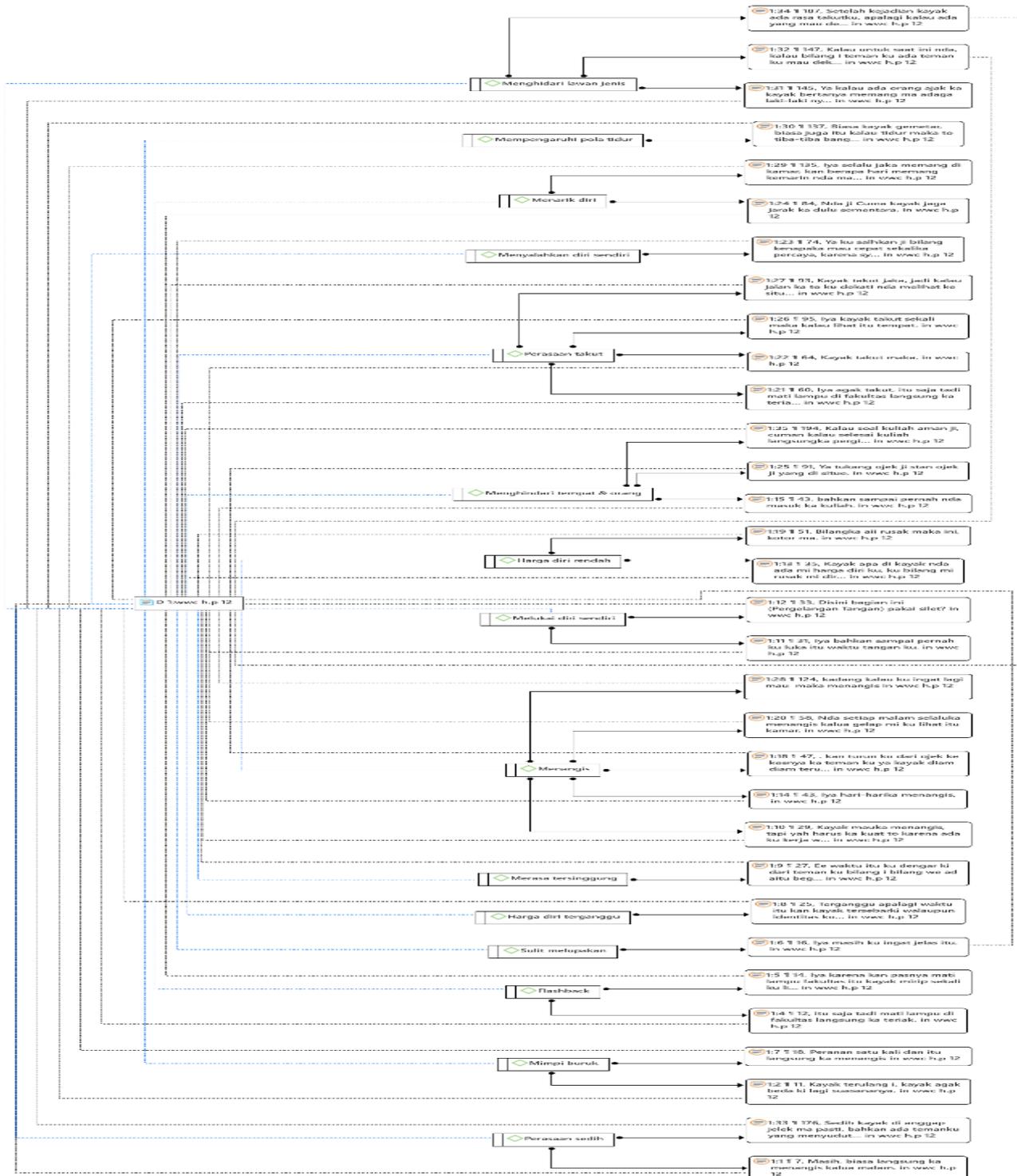


Figure 4. Atlas.ti Coding Results of Informant 4

Figure 4 displays a network view of the results of the thematic analysis, illustrating the interconnectedness of various psychological responses from informants after experiencing sexual harassment. The visualization shows that traumatic experiences lead to changes in the social dimension, such as avoiding the opposite sex and maintaining distance, which are linked to feelings of shame and self-blame. The cognitive dimension shows negative self-evaluation, feelings of worthlessness, and difficulty accepting oneself, which are closely related to low self-esteem. Meanwhile, the emotional and behavioral dimensions show responses such as crying, feelings of

depression, withdrawal from the environment, difficulty forgetting the incident, and flashbacks and nightmares.

After visualizing the images, the next step is to create a table of the analysis results. The table of research results can be seen in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Comparison of Psychological Conditions of Informant 4

	<b>EXPERIENCE 1</b>	<b>EXPERIENCE 2</b>	<b>EXPERIENCE 3</b>	<b>EXPERIENCE 4</b>	<b>EXPERIENCE 5</b>
	<b>Emotional Dimension</b>	<b>Cognitive Dimensions</b>	<b>Behavioral Dimensions</b>	<b>Social Dimension</b>	<b>Academic Dimension</b>
<b>Before</b>	Stable emotional condition	Positive thinking patterns	Able to control oneself	Positive social interactions	Always present in class
<b>After</b>	-Feeling scared -Cry -Feeling offended -Feeling sad	-Blaming yourself -Low & disturbed self-esteem -Difficult to forget/flashbacks	-Avoid certain places/people -Self-harm -Affects sleep patterns/nightmares	-Avoid the opposite sex -Withdrawing from social circles	Not attending the lecture process
<b>Impact</b>	After experiencing sexual violence, victims show emotional responses in the form of feelings of depression, anxiety, and frequent crying.	Victims often experience flashbacks and difficulty forgetting the traumatic events they experienced, which impacts the cognitive dimension, characterized by a tendency to blame themselves and the formation of negative self-assessments, such as the belief that they are "dirty".	The victim had experienced suddenly waking up in the middle of the night and nightmares that reflected the traumatic events he had experienced. In addition, the subject had engaged in self-harming behavior and showed avoidance behavior towards certain locations and individuals, such as hotels, motorcycle taxi bases, and motorcycle taxi drivers.	Victims exhibit avoidant behavior toward social interactions, particularly in peer situations involving members of the opposite sex. Furthermore, victims also exhibit a tendency to withdraw from social settings, isolating themselves in their rooms and reducing social activities.	The subject did not attend the lecture process.

Table 4 shows significant changes in the informants' psychological condition across five dimensions after experiencing sexual harassment. Prior to the incident, the informants were emotionally stable, had a positive mindset, were self-controlled, interacted well socially, and consistently attended lectures. However, post-incident, emotional responses emerged in the form of fear, sadness, offense, and frequent crying. In the cognitive dimension, participants experienced difficulty forgetting the traumatic event (flashbacks), self-blame, and decreased self-esteem with negative self-assessments. Behaviorally, there was avoidance of certain places and individuals, sleep disturbances accompanied by nightmares, and self-harm. In the social aspect, participants tended to avoid the opposite sex and withdraw from social environments, while in the academic dimension, there was a decrease in participation, characterized by not attending lectures.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that the sexual harassment experienced by the four informants resulted in multidimensional and ongoing psychological impacts, encompassing emotional, cognitive, behavioral, social, and academic aspects. All informants exhibited intense emotional distress in the form of fear, anxiety, shame, sadness, panic, and feelings of depression that persisted for a considerable period of time. These symptoms were often accompanied by sleep disturbances, nightmares, and the sudden recurrence of memories when the victim was exposed to certain stimuli reminiscent of the traumatic event. This pattern is consistent with the characteristics of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), particularly the intrusion and hyperactivation symptom clusters. The literature indicates that sexual harassment has a very significant psychological impact, even more complex than non-sexual forms of harassment, because it touches on the dimensions of the victim's self-identity and personal integrity (Schnittker, 2022).

Furthermore, research (Wang et al., 2022) shows that experiences of sexual harassment may increase the risk of various mental health problems among victims, including anxiety, depression, fear, and reduced self-confidence. These psychological effects are not limited to the short term but may persist over time, influencing victims' psychological well-being and diminishing their overall quality of life. However, because this study is based on a small number of participants in a case study context, the findings should be interpreted with caution and are not intended to be generalized to a broader population.

In the cognitive dimension, this study found a strong tendency to blame oneself (self-blaming), the emergence of feelings of dirt, damage, and worthlessness, and the formation of persistent negative self-evaluations. These cognitive distortions are part of a cluster of negative changes in cognition and mood within the PTSD framework. Schnittker (2022) showed that victims of sexual abuse experienced significantly decreased self-esteem and increased self-criticism compared to victims of non-sexual abuse. This suggests that sexual abuse has profound implications for self-concept. These findings also align with studies on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which show that the accumulation of traumatic experiences increases vulnerability to mental disorders and amplifies the psychological burden on victims (Hanlin et al., 2024). From a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective, this condition can be understood as an intrapsychic conflict between the id, ego, and superego. The id represents spontaneous emotional impulses such as anger and fear. The superego presents moral pressure in the form of guilt and shame internalized from social norms. Meanwhile, the ego is in a position of pressure to mediate this conflict. When the superego becomes dominant, victims tend to punish themselves through guilt and regret, thus reinforcing cognitive distortions and prolonging psychological suffering.

In the behavioral and social dimensions, participants showed a tendency to avoid places, individuals, and situations associated with the traumatic event, including the campus environment. Some participants even withdrew from social interactions and limited interactions with the opposite sex. This avoidance pattern is a key symptom of PTSD and serves as a self-protective mechanism to reduce exposure to anxiety-provoking stimuli. However, in the long term, avoidance can become dysfunctional by narrowing the victim's social space and reinforcing isolation. A study by Xu and Zhang (2022) showed that the experience of sexual harassment impacted the quality of women's interpersonal relationships and personal well-being, including decreased relationship satisfaction and increased vigilance toward others. This indicates that sexual trauma has broad implications for victims' ability to build safe and healthy relationships. In a broader social context, the normalization of sexual harassment on campus, as found in the study by Berenguer-Simon et al. (2024), exacerbates victims' experiences. This is due to a permissive culture that can hinder the validation and social support they should receive.

The impact of sexual harassment in this study was also clearly evident on the participants' academic functioning. Difficulty concentrating, decreased motivation to learn, absence from

lectures, and obstacles in the guidance process and completion of studies were tangible consequences of the trauma experienced. These findings are consistent with research showing that experiences of harassment correlate with decreased work performance and increased intention to leave the institution (Dellarocco et al., 2025). In the context of college students, decreased academic functioning can be understood as a manifestation of impaired concentration and emotional dysregulation, which are part of the trauma response. Psychodynamically, the victim's psychic energy is absorbed in managing anxiety and internal conflict, thus reducing the ego's capacity to carry out adaptive functions such as learning and achievement. Thus, sexual trauma not only impacts emotional well-being but also disrupts the victim's socio-academic role as a student.

Interpretatively, these findings suggest that trauma resulting from sexual harassment is not only an individual phenomenon but also bound to social and cultural contexts. The self-blaming tendencies emerging among participants reflect the internalization of patriarchal gender norms that place a moral burden on women as victims. The literature shows that victims of sexual harassment often face skepticism and secondary victimization, further exacerbating their psychological well-being (Schnittker, 2022). In conservative cultures, as described by Xu and Zhang (2022), women's honor and morality are often associated with control over their bodies and sexuality. Therefore, the experience of sexual harassment can be interpreted as identity damage. Within Freud's framework, these social norms are internalized as a repressive superego and reinforce feelings of shame and guilt in victims. Therefore, the trauma experienced by victims is not solely the result of the violent incident but also the result of social constructs that fail to provide adequate protection and support.

The implications of these findings underscore the importance of a trauma-informed approach in higher education settings. Educational interventions that raise students' awareness of sexual harassment have been shown to change attitudes, improve their ability to identify harassing behaviors, and empower individuals to become agents of social change (Berenguer-Simon et al., 2024). Therefore, higher education institutions need to integrate PTSD-based counseling services, safe and victim-friendly reporting systems, and ongoing gender equality education programs. This approach aims not only to heal victims but also to prevent the reproduction of a culture that normalizes harassment. By combining a PTSD perspective that explains the clinical dynamics of trauma with a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective that highlights intrapsychic conflict and the internalization of social norms, this research provides a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of sexual harassment. It offers a strong theoretical basis for policy development and interventions in higher education settings.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that sexual harassment in higher education has multidimensional and lasting psychological effects on victims, including emotional distress, cognitive distortions, behavioral withdrawal, social isolation, and academic disruption. The findings highlight that trauma is a complex phenomenon shaped by both psychological processes and social contexts. Understanding these experiences is essential for developing effective, trauma-informed policies and support systems in higher education. Future research should continue to explore victim experiences to inform evidence-based interventions.

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