

# Breakdowns to Breakthroughs: Growth After Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) of Filipino Women

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**Abstract:** *Many Filipino women experience trauma from their past romantic relationship and grow from that experience, however local literature about this phenomenon is still lagging. This study aimed to describe the experiences of Filipino women who experienced intimate partner violence and its psychological impact, understand the factors that influenced their psychological growth, and identify domains of posttraumatic growth. Fifteen participants were interviewed about their experience and themes were formed through thematic analysis. The themes that emerged in the dataset were divided into four categories: (1) intimate partner violence experienced; (2) psychological impact of the trauma, (3) trauma to recovery; and (4) domains of posttraumatic growth experienced. Results are interpreted using the framework of Posttraumatic Growth by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004). Clinical implications were discussed based on the results.*

**Keywords:** Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), post-traumatic growth, Filipino women, gender-based violence, resilience, psychological recovery, domestic abuse, empowerment

## INTRODUCTION

Intimate Partner Violence is a global social issue. After conducting a study across 10 countries in Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Pacific Islands, South America and Africa, the World Health Organization concluded that Intimate Partner Violence happens regardless of religion, socioeconomic status, and nationality (Violence Against Women, 2021). In 2011 alone, more than a million individuals reported experiencing incidents of violence from their former or current partners, girlfriend, boyfriend or spouse (Valdez, et al., 2014). Past research shows that people who experienced violence inflicted by close relationships predict more harmful outcomes than those experienced by non-close relationships or by environmental factors like war, near-death experience and life-threatening sickness (Kline et al., 2020). Literature says that Intimate Partner Violence elicits more shame, low self-esteem, and distress than non-personal trauma (Wamser-Nanney, et al., 2018; Platt, et al., 2015). It is also concluded that when trauma is received from a close relationship, it predicts higher personality disorder symptoms and suicidal behavior (Rickman, et al., 2021). With this information, it is important to study this phenomenon to prevent future cases and to develop intervention for the victims.

For this study, *Intimate Partner Violence* (IPV) is operationally defined as any intentional behavior of an individual that causes psychological, physical, sexual or financial harm to their intimate partner

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(World Health Organization, 2021). These behaviors include, but not limited to, physical aggression, sexual coercion, manipulation, humiliation, threats of harm, isolation from family and friends, and restriction or denial of access to healthcare or financial resources. Intimate Partner Violence may happen from adolescence to adulthood. Intimate Partner Violence happens in teenagers who marry young, married couples, cohabitating couples, and even in informal partnerships like dating, boyfriend-girlfriend and engaged relationships.

Throughout the literature, there had been many related concepts studied in relation to intimate partner violence. Intimate Partner Violence is often used interchangeably with Domestic Abuse. While there is a striking similarity with these two phenomena, domestic abuse also pertains to violence against children and parents, siblings, and other extended family members, therefore also sometimes called family violence (Flury et al., 2010). Intimate Partner Violence is specific with individuals who are romantically involved. Another concept related to Intimate Partner Violence is Interpersonal Trauma. Interpersonal Trauma is a category of traumatic experiences received from a perpetrator that is known to the victim (Hughesdon, et al., 2021). Although victims of IPV are traumatized by their interpersonal relationships, interpersonal trauma can also be used to describe any event that is unintentional but painful, like a death of a family member or discord of a group of friends. It can also pertain to any type of relationship, from acquaintances, friends, and family members. Intimate Partner Violence captures the type of relationship and the experiences of the participants more accurately than all of the other terms mentioned above.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A nationally representative sample study of more than 11,000 Filipino women and girls describes experiencing emotional, physical and sexual abuse from their romantic partners (Yoshioka, et al., 2020). The study showed that 23.9% of their samples identified experiencing violence from their current relationships, inability to refuse sexual advances, and acceptance that there are valid reasons for their partner's aggressive behavior. Most violent partners explain their behavior with alcoholism, jealousy, and the other partner as insinuating violence (Ansara, D. L., & Hindin, M. J., 2009). In addition to that, in a community-based study of Filipinos living in the United States, it is found that Filipinos experience more Intimate Partner Violence than their Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Indian and Vietnamese respondents (Leung, et al., 2008). In the Philippines, efforts to eliminate violence against women are observed. Despite this, one in four women aged fifteen to forty-nine is still affected by this phenomenon (Violence Against Women, 2022). This widely experienced phenomenon shows that Intimate Partner Violence is commonly experienced by Filipinos yet empirical studies regarding their experiences after IPV are still lacking.

### **Intimate Partner Violence and Posttraumatic Growth**

Posttraumatic growth (PTG) is defined as the positive psychological change that a person experiences following a traumatic event (Tedeschi et al., 2004). The most comprehensive theory about posttraumatic growth is that of Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004). Their model explains that when a person experiences a traumatic event, their assumptions about the world are challenged. They begin to question their beliefs about life and the world. When they are faced with the aftermath of trauma, they become unsure of their identity, security and relationships. As they go through this transformative process of understanding this new information about themselves and the world around them, they develop psychological strength as they attempt to psychologically survive and make sense of what happened to them. Although the event itself is still distressing, they psychologically grow when they reconstruct their beliefs and assumptions, and they also feel positive affect throughout the years, in relation to the aftermath of traumatic events. The most reported domains of posttraumatic growth are greater appreciation of life

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and a rearrangement of priorities, more meaningful relationships with other people, increased personal strength, increase in spirituality or existentialism and recognition of new possibilities in life. PTG is also different from resilience, optimism, psychological wellbeing and hardiness (Calhoun, et al., 2004). While all the mentioned constructs are related to how people handle the adversities they experience in life, PTG pertains to the positive result of the adversity rather than management of posttrauma symptoms. This model has been used to interpret the results of the study. The experiences of the participants during the IPV, their rumination afterwards, the ways that they coped from this experience and the factors that helped them develop PTG has been examined through the lens of this model, hence, applying a deductive approach.

Over the past decade, psychotrauma studies have been focused on Posttraumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD), primarily on veterans. However, growing research indicates that not all posttrauma is PTSD, especially if there is a close relationship between the victim and the perpetrator (Vandervoort et al., 2006). An individual who experienced interpersonal trauma from a close relationship like a family member, a lover or a friend shows a shattered assumption not only about themselves but also about the people around them and the world in general, which results in more harmful outcomes (Kaufman, et al., 2018). A study comparing the effects of trauma type to posttraumatic growth revealed that trauma experienced from romantic partners predicts higher PTG in terms of seeing new possibilities and opportunities in life, gaining personal strength, and spiritual change when compared to those whose worst life trauma is experienced from bereavement, physical assault, rape and illness of someone close to them (Lowe, et al., 2020).

Some Filipino women build tolerance to abuse due to fear of being blamed as the reason for the abuse they received, the negative association of the society ascribed to separated women, culture of silence because partner abuse is considered a private issue and should be dealt in private, normalization of violence, lack of resources, and limited community programs (Garcia, 2020). A phenomenological study done locally described the experiences of battered Filipino women who stayed in the relationship and those who left (Estrellado et al., 2016). The study described those who left the relationship as experiencing financial difficulties, and the dynamics of a family led by a single mother affected the children emotionally. On the other hand, women who left the relationship had many important gains as well. They regained their sense of identity, freedom, self-respect, peace and hope. Although terminating the abusive relationship results in many adjustments, studies showed that their psychological well-being after separation significantly increased over time (Anderson et al., 2003). The process of leaving an abusive relationship is perplexing, but when individuals are finally able to escape it, they experience growth in many domains of life. For instance, a study shows that women who experienced the lowest quality of marriages gained higher life satisfaction after separation (Bourassa, 2015) than those who experienced a good quality of marriage before separation, confirming the findings of other studies that posttraumatic growth is maximized at the resolution of the trauma.

Although the idea of growth from suffering is not new, as seen in many religious and philosophical thinking, it is only in the 1990s that researchers started to empirically conceptualize posttraumatic growth. Even though there is already a considerable amount of literature to understand its concept (Jayawickreme et al., 2014; Seery, 2011; Joseph, 2005; Updegraff, 2000; Maercker et al., 2004; Taylor, 1983), many research gaps are yet to be addressed especially in the local setting since posttraumatic growth studies are mostly based on other developing countries, their experiences and theoretical guidelines (Gultiano, et al., 2007). As seen in a PTG study done in Japan (Taku, et al., 2012), Western and Eastern cultures predict different results when comparing US and non-US samples. It is a well accepted fact in cross-cultural psychology that westerners are leaning on individualism mentality and easterners are leaning on the collectivism mentality (Cohen, et al., 2016). Having this in mind, the

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researcher focused on trauma experienced from intimate romantic relationships. Up to this point, there are very few, if any, studies done about the posttraumatic growth of Filipinos who experienced Intimate Partner Violence. The closest scholarly study done locally about PTG is with resilience, but all has been in relation with poverty (Ramalho, J., 2020), employment experiences (Isidro, M. & Calleja, M., 2021), and disaster response (Maquiling, K., et al., 2021).

### **The Current Study**

There is limited literature to understand the experiences of individuals who experienced intimate partner violence and how they grew psychologically afterwards. Although empirical studies about Intimate Partner Violence have increased over the decade, there is a considerable research gap on studies on how they develop PTG (Valdez, et al., 2014). Only one study focused on survivors of IPV, however, the study's objective is only to measure if survivors of IPV developed posttraumatic growth (Cobb, et al., 2006). A decade after, only two studies focused on the growth of IPV victims. One study focused on the schematic reconstruction process of the victims (Valdez, et al., 2014) and another literature studied the systems that victims used to achieve growth from their experience (Brosi, et al., 2019). While the risk factors, perpetrator-victim processes, and reverberations of the experience are widely documented, positive impact or growth is still largely unexplored.

This is a research gap that this study wished to address. This study aimed to describe the intimate partner violence experiences of Filipino women, describe the factors influencing their psychological growth from that experience, and identify domains of posttraumatic growth.

### **METHODOLOGY**

A total of 29 respondents were recruited online through Purposive sampling and snowball technique. Out of the 29 respondents, only 15 individuals were contacted to be the participants. Participants are those who identified as someone who experienced intimate partner violence and has been separated from their partner for more than two years. Posttraumatic Growth and time elapsed from the time of the event is positively correlated, as seen in a meta-analysis (Levi-Belz, et al., 2021). Therefore, the inclusion criteria for at least 2 years since the separation was done to increase the probability that the person already developed PTG and to prevent retraumatization of the participants. The participants in the meta-analysis who experienced relationship trauma showed the least increase in their posttraumatic growth when the testing happened 1-2 years after the event or especially if in less than one year. The most significant increase in posttraumatic growth was nine to ten years after the event.

Considering the change in the structure of union in the Philippines, those who were previously married and involved in cohabitation relationships were accepted to the study. Filipinos are now waiting longer before they get married, as influenced by their educational level and areas of residence. It results in the decreasing rate of legal marriages and the increasing rate of cohabitation in Filipino couples, especially in the younger age groups (Abalos, 2014). However, the third participant revealed in the interview that she did not live together with her previous relationship, but they were engaged. When she was about to get

married after a couple of years, she experienced psychological distress and realized that this triggered her unresolved trauma. Later on, she was diagnosed with anxiety disorder and is still currently undergoing therapy. Reflexivity required reassessment of the inclusion criteria. It has been realized that the status of the relationship (married, living together, engaged or just boyfriend-girlfriend relationship), does not predict a hierarchy of trauma. Therefore, it was decided that those who were previously engaged and were in boyfriend-girlfriend relationship status will be accepted to the study as well.

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Only female participants were accepted to participate in the study, but those who identified as lesbians or bisexuals are accepted in the study as well. Women are most often victims of abuse because they are less likely to be violent and even when they are, husbands and fathers still demonstrate greater intensity of violence (Mandal, M., & Hindin, M. J., 2015). The participants were 15 females, two of them identifying as an LGBTQIA+, with an average age of 30 years old. Their length of relationship varied from 1 month to 10 years and above, with an average of 39 months. A minimum of 2 years since the separation was required, and the average is 6 years since separation when the interview was conducted. Emotional abuse was the most common type of abuse experienced by the participants, followed by psychological abuse, then verbal abuse, physical abuse, then sexual abuse. 8 out of 15 of the participants experienced being abused several times, 4 out of 15 experienced being abused for years, and 3 out of 15 experienced being abused for only one time.

### **Distress Protocol**

Considering the sensitive subject of the research, participation was completely voluntary. Ethics approval within the university has been sought and approved. No conflicts of interest was observed. The risks and benefits of the study were discussed in the informed consent form and at the interview. Throughout the interview, this distress protocol was observed:

The interview was terminated if the participant felt uncomfortable to proceed or decided to continue at a later time. The researcher paused when the participant showed distress like sweating, irregular breathing or panic. The participant was asked if they wanted to continue with the interview or if they needed a break. The interview did not proceed unless the participant was calm and collected. The participant was also asked for a contact number of a family member who can be physically with them in case of emergency. The participant was asked if they wished to be referred to a mental health professional and they were given a list if they requested. The participant was asked if the researcher can contact them later in the day and the following day to ensure that they are no longer distressed. General references about the research topic were also given if they wished to learn more about the study. Lastly, the contact information of the researcher was also provided.

Participants who were emotional during the interview were asked how their experience of the interview was and if the researcher can help in any way. All of the participants indicated that it was a relief to talk about their experiences, and even though it was emotional, being able to talk about it made them realize that they are already far from that experience. Aside from that, the participants also expressed pride in knowing that their story will be a basis for a study that could potentially help other people going through the same experience. Lastly, participants were contacted a day after to check in on them, if they have any questions or if they feel distressed after the interview. The participants let the researcher know that there were no triggers and relapses after the interview.

### **Data Gathering Instruments**

#### ***Demographic Information Questionnaire (DIQ).***

DIQ is a questionnaire designed by the researcher to gather information about the demographic characteristics of the participants. Among these questions are age, sex (Male or Female), civil status (Single, Married, Separated/Annulled, or Widowed), educational background (did not complete high school, high school diploma, college degree, graduate studies) and occupation status (unemployed, employed, freelance). This included a section where they were asked about their previous traumatic relationships like length of relationship, length of abuse and the number of years or months that elapsed since separation.



***Posttraumatic Growth Inventory - Short Form (PTGI-SF).***

PTGI-SF is a standardized scale designed by Cann et al (2010) to measure the positive change that people experience in themselves following a traumatic event. It is the adaptation of the PTGI, but has reduced its items for efficiency in research. PTGI-SF captures the variance and internal consistency as the full form. Additionally, PTGI-SF has a coefficient alpha coefficient of .93. PTGI consisted of 10 items where the participants rated in a 6-point scale on how much they related to the situation described. The scale was based on the fivefactor model of Tedeschi et al. (1996) which are new possibilities, relating to other people, personal strength, spiritual change and appreciation of life. Sample items included "I changed my priorities about what is important in life", "I have a greater appreciation for the value of my own life" and "I am able to do better things with my life". Answers were summed then divided by 10. The average score ranged from 1-50. The average score were interpreted from low (0-10), below average (11-20), average (21-30), above average (31-40) and high (41-50) PTG. PTGI-SF was used as a cut-off score instrument in the study. Only those participants who scored above average and high posttraumatic growth were contacted for an interview. This was to ensure that participants will be able to give insight about posttraumatic growth.

**Procedure**

The data gathering was done online to protect all parties from the current COVID-19 pandemic. First, interested participants were given consent forms where the general objectives of the study were explained. They were informed that they can withdraw from the study at any time and asked that their data be removed from the data if they wish to do so. Should they decide to continue, confidentiality and anonymity were ensured. Once the participant understood the details of their participation, they were asked to answer the

Demographic Information Questionnaire and the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory Short - Form. These tools were used to select the participants. Only those who scored above average and high were accepted into the study. This was to increase the likelihood that the participants will provide insight on the topic of the study. The interview started with rapport-building and an introduction to the study. Then, the researcher read the informed consent form and asked the participants if they had any questions. The researcher proceeded with the semi-structured interview questions that were designed to draw out their experiences.

**Data Analysis**

The current study is phenomenological research, a type of study that describes the commonalities of a certain experience among several individuals (Creswell, 2018). Data from the study were analyzed through thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method of identifying and analyzing themes emerging from data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A theme is a pattern of response from the data that represents meaning in relation to the research question. It was considered the most appropriate approach to meet the objectives of this study. The first step of the analysis involved transcribing the interviews. Then, two trained and experienced coders were hired to code the interviews and identify themes with the main researcher. Since the coders were outsiders in the study, they were able to provide objectivity in the study. The codes had five categories: intimate partner violence experience, psychological experience of the trauma, immediate effects after the separation, factors that facilitated posttraumatic growth, and the domains of posttraumatic growth. After two weeks, the coders and the researcher compared their codes to check inter-coder reliability. Clarification about the codes were done and consensus was made and themes were formed by the researcher. Lastly, interpretations were drawn using the Posttraumatic Growth framework of Tedeshi and Calhoun (2004).

## **RESULTS**

The themes that emerged in the dataset were divided into four categories: (1) intimate partner violence experienced, which describes the type of abuse that the participants had; (2) psychological impact of the trauma; (3) trauma to recovery, which describes the events, people and factors that facilitated growth; and (4) domains of posttraumatic growth experienced in the present, which describes the different areas of growth the participants experienced which were not evident in their lives prior the trauma experienced.

### **Intimate Partner Violence Experience**

This theme describes the IPV that the participants experienced from their partners. It describes the nature of the abuse they received, as well the impact it had on them. Aside from that, this theme also describes the actions they took in response to the abuse.

### ***Psychological Aggression***

The most common experience among the participants is the infidelity of their partners. The discovery of the infidelity caused great psychological distress, often making the participants feel depressed, confused, insecure and afraid. Most of the participants decided to separate after finding out about the infidelity, but a number of them tried to stay in the relationship but eventually left after experiencing their partners cheating again. Most of the participants who have children with their ex-partners struggled with their decision partly due to their romantic feelings but also because of the benefits of having a two-parent household. Another common experience among the participants is the controlling behavior of their partners. Most of them were restricted on the clothes they can wear, the people they can talk to, the jobs they can take, and the decision they should make. This control creates a feeling of dependency to their ex-partner, insecurity of their own decision making, isolation from their friends and acquaintances, and regret of lost opportunities. Usually, the participants endured this controlling behavior during the course of their relationship, a number of them willingly allowed themselves to be dominated by their ex-partners and minimized it into normal jealousy or manly leadership. In hindsight, however, they realize the detrimental effects of such relationship dynamics.

### ***Physical Violence***

Participants experienced being slapped, grabbed, punched, pointed a gun at and stabbed in the hand. Participants had bruises, broken bones, and hospitalization due to these incidents. Some of the instances happened once, while most of them happened several times.

### ***Financial Abuse***

Participants experienced financial abuse by being denied financial support for their children and housing. This led to hardship in bringing their children to school, buying their needs and inability to pay their rent, water and electric bills. In the same regard, the participants felt abused financially by being extorted, causing them to lose resources to buy things for themselves and their family of origin. Lastly, participants were also restricted access to income-generating activities like work, freelance, or business activities.

### ***Sexual Abuse***

Participants experienced being coerced for sexual intercourse and performing sexual acts that they are uncomfortable with. A participant recounted only realizing the full extent of that impact of the trauma on her when she is already undergoing therapy.

### **Psychological Impact of the Trauma**

This theme describes the psychological impact of IPV to the participants. It describes the emotional, social, mental, financial and spiritual repercussions of the abuse they experienced. This theme also examines the psychological reactions of the participants immediately after their separation from their previous partners.

#### ***Shattered Assumptions***

The participants expressed changes in their beliefs about themselves and the people around them after being exposed to Intimate Partner Violence. Participants contrast their ideas of a loving relationship before and after their experience. Participants were hesitant to interact with the opposite gender following the relationship, with or without the intention of a romantic possibility. Most shared that they are now hesitant to enter a new romantic relationship thinking that the same thing might happen again.

*“Natrauma ako nun kasi syempre, baka yung sunod, gawain ulit yun. Kaya tumigil ako ng ilang taon. Baka gawin uli yung ginawa nya sakin, kaya sabi ko, ayoko muna. Kayanin ko muna maging ano... single.” (DS, 45)* [I was traumatized then because of course, what if the next person would do that again. That’s why I stopped for a few years. The next one might do what she did to me, so I said, I don’t want to try again yet. I want to be single first.]

#### ***Neglected Needs***

Most of the participants expressed feelings of neglect over the fact that they are suffering in the relationship or in other areas of their life and they find that their partners are uncaring, unsupportive or unreliable at that point in their life. They expected their partner to nurture them, protect them and take care of them. Instead, they were deprived of love.

*“Ang laking bagay na naging impact sakin na hindi sya naging open dun sa pagiging depressed ko. Kasi lubog ako eh. Kumbaga inaasahan ko sana na sya yung makakaintindi, na sya yung makikinig, pero hindi nya ginawa” (RI, 32)* [It was a big deal for me that he wasn’t open about me being depressed. I was at my rock bottom. I was expecting that he would be the one to understand me, the one to listen to me, but he did not do that.]

#### ***Diminished Self Worth***

Participants expressed that their abusive partners restricted them from expressing themselves by silencing or ignoring their emotions and opinions. Most of the participants felt that their real identities were taken away from them either at the start of the relationship, or when the relationship turned abusive, because they were forced to act in the ways that would please their ex-partner rather than what they really want to do.

#### ***Sense of Betrayal.***

The respondents were vocal about the sense of betrayal that they felt. Most of the women believed that they gave their maximum contribution to the relationship but not only was it not reciprocated, their partner chose to hurt them instead. This sense of betrayal tends to be more extreme for the married couples or those living together, as well as those who became engaged. However, the experience of aspiring for a future with their partners and being betrayed is common to all participants.

*“Sa una... parang hindi pa sya nagsisink in sa utak ko kasi naisip ko pa na parang totoo ba to.. parang... possible ba na ganun? Tas hindi ko, even sa panaginip hindi ko nanisip na mangyayari yun...Parang iisipin ko na, “di ka kamahal mahal” yung parang ganun. Yung*



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*tipong ano bang kulang, ano bang wala saakin, yung parang ganun. Bakit, hindi ako yung pinili. May ganun akong thinking nun... So parang super new saakin yung ganung klaseng pain...” (NC, 30) [At first... it hasn't sunk in my mind yet because I was thinking, is this real... is it possible? And I didn't think it would happen even in my wildest dreams. I was thinking “I am not worthy of love” like that. I was thinking, what were my shortcomings, what did I lack. Why was I not the one he chose? I was thinking about all those things before. The pain was super new to me.]*

Aside from this, participants also felt disoriented about what to do for their future, now that their relationship is over. Having set routines and plans for the future, they are left betrayed by the dissolution of the relationship.

*“Tapos eventually feeling ko after nung relationship I don't know what to do kasi parang I didn't know my purpose anymore tapos parang in my head, ano na sya, parang dapat ikasal kami, ganun dapat, parang may track na that he set out for me. Kasi parang after we get married the plan ay move to the province. So ganun yung track namin. So after parang I was feeling so empty na wala nakong purpose.” (AY, 32) [And then eventually after my relationship I was feeling that I don't know what to do because it's like I didn't know my purpose anymore and it's like in my head, we were supposed to get married, it should be like that, it's like there's already a track that he set out for me. Because it's like after we get married, the plan was to move to the province. So that was the track we were supposed to go. So after, I was feeling so empty that I have no purpose anymore.]*

**Psychological Distress.**

Participants experienced mental health problems following their separation from their partners. Some described experiencing panic attacks, having suicidal ideation, and being diagnosed by a psychologist or a psychiatrist with a mental health disorder.

*“Grabe yung mental health ko nagdeteriorate din talaga. Dumating pa sa point na tinotorture ko yung sarili ko physically. So nagkasuicide thoughts narin kasi ako nun, Tas dumating pa sa point na, nagmamasters kasi ako nun sa university, paikot ikot na pala ako sa jeep for 2 hours tapos wala ako sa wisyo, tas wala akong kain at that time... tas ibang language na yung naririnig ko. Sabi ko nun “nasa Thailand ba ako? tapos feeling ko that time, “shucks, God, mababaliw na ba ako?” (TL, 27) [My mental health really deteriorated. It came to a point that I was torturing myself physically. I also had suicide thoughts at that time... It also came to a point when I was having my masters in a university, I was inside a jeepney and I was on a loop for 2 hours without realizing it... and I was hearing a different language. I said “am I in Thailand?” and I felt that time “shucks, God, am I getting crazy?]*

*“May times na mga isang week.. Hindi na ako kumakain. Tapos hindi ako makatulog, iyak ako ng iyak magdamag. Ganun. Sabi ko ano ba to bat ganto nangyayari sa buhay ko... Kasi nung time kasi nun maam mga ilang weeks talaga akong empty yung nararamdaman ko talaga, na wala akong maramdaman na parang laging pagod yung katawan ko ganun parang may physical symptoms talaga na nararanasan nung time na yun... Yung time kasi na yun parang sasabog ka na, and di mo na maintindihan ano bang nangyayari, ang tamlay ko, di nakakausap, parang mababaliw na ata ako dito, parang ganun na yung nangayayari saakin. Ang pangit na ng posture ko, di na ako minsan naliligo, grabe.” (DC, 22) [There were times that around a week, I wasn't eating. And I can't sleep as well, I just cried and cried all night. I was saying,*

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what is this happening in my life... It's because at that time, it's been several weeks that I really feel empty, i don't feel anything, my body is always tired, there are really physical symptoms that I experienced at that time... I felt like I was about to burst, I didn't understand what's happening, I was sluggish, I couldn't talk much, I thought I was going crazy, it looks like that's what's happening to me. My posture was bad, I sometimes don't take a bath anymore, it's too much.]

### **From Trauma to Recovery**

This theme describes the factors, behaviors, events, and people that helped develop posttraumatic growth. It describes the process that the participants went through to make sense of what happened to them and the actions they took to heal from their experiences. Aside from their personal contribution to their healing, this theme also discusses the events and resources that the participants needed from the people around them and their environment in order to progress in their recovery. The Posttraumatic Growth Model of

Tedeschi and Calhoun was utilized to interpret the themes that emerged from the dataset.

### ***Mental Resolve.***

Mental resolve is the conscious decision of the participants to end the relationship, refuse reconciliation, and grow from what they experienced.

*“When I came to know Jesus, yun talaga yung nakapag decide nako, I had a different courage to stay away from that relationship. Because I knew that it was ungodly. It will not glorify God”* (LO, 27) [When I came to know Jesus, that's really when I was able to decide. I had a different kind of courage to stay away from that relationship. Because I knew that it was ungodly. It will not glorify God.]

### ***Meaning Making and Cognitive Reconstruction.***

Participants try to make sense of what happened to them, hypothesizing why it happened to them, their shortcomings, their efforts to make the relationship work, their future plans, and what they possibly gained after the relationship. They create meaning from their experiences based on their new faith, insight from conversations, or by reading books. When participants gain insight from their experience, it helps with the acceptance of what happened and the courage to move forward.

*“Sobrang tinanong ko na yung sarili ko kung ano bang meron, ano bang nangyayari, bat ganto... tinanong ko ano bang mali... Tapos yun nagmumuni muni ako minsan. Pero kung icocompare ko yung sarili ko dati sa ngayon, syempre laki ko nang nabago... Kaya ngayon narerealize ko na thankful din ako na naranasan ko yun kasi at least maaga naparanas sakin yun, alam ko na gagawin next time... So yun thankful din ako na naranasan ko yun kasi marami din akong natutunan na lessons. And ang masasabi ko talagang nag grow ako as a person kung ano ako ngayon...”* (DC, 22) [I really asked myself, what happened, why is it like this? I was asking what was wrong... And then I am reflecting sometimes... So now I realize that I am thankful that I experienced that because at least I experienced that early in life, and I know what to do next time... I am also thankful that I experienced that because I learned a lot of lessons. And what I can really say is that I grew as a person to who I am today.]

### ***Industry.***

Activities that required the participants to be productive are important factors that facilitated growth. These are activities where they spend time with other people. **Work.** Working has many benefits to the participants. Primarily, it served as a distraction to not think about what happened to them. Unlike being in the house daily, where the place triggers memories of their relationship, working provides an activity

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that the participant should focus on. It provided a sense of accomplishment and purpose, making the participants realize that they are capable of doing something. It also served as a way to connect to other people who supported the participants by listening to them, giving advice and insight, and doing other activities with them. Lastly, work was very important for the single mother participants, because it was the means to provide for their child or children, in the absence of financial support from their partners.

*“Tama nga yung sinasabi nila na magtrabaho ka, kasi kung nandyan ka lang sa bahay, iisipin mo ng iisipin, maloloka ka. First 3 yrs ko ng pagtrabaho sya pa rin ang nasa isip ko. Pero dahil sa advise ng mga kasamahan, tapos lagi akong may nakakausap, nakakangiti ako, may mga iba ibang bagay na napaguusapan... Kung may sarili akong kita... may pambili ng mineral na tubig, diaper, pagkain. Kasi kung iaasa ko sakanya, Php500 lang ibibigay sakin kada kinsenas nun, anong mangyayari? Sa bahay... binubusy mo yung sarili mo, pagod ka paglalaba, paglilinis. Pero pag nakaupo ka, ayan na naman iisip na naman. Kasi makikita mo bawat kanto. (RF, 43) [Other people’s advise to work is really right, because if you are just staying in the house, you will get crazy for thinking about it over and over. For the first three years that I was working, he was still on my mind. But because of the advise of my workmates, and I always have someone to talk to, I was able to smile. There are different topics that we’re talking about... and if I have my own income... I can buy mineral water, diapers, and food. Because if I hope for him, he will only give 500 pesos every 15th of the month, what will happen to us? At home... I try to make myself busy, I’m exhausted because of the laundry, tidying up. But when I sit down, I start thinking about him again. Because I see him in every corner of the house.]*

**Hobbies or Recreational Activities.** These are activities that the participants do without the intention of earning. However, like work, these activities provided distraction from ruminating about what happened. It also provided insight and an opportunity to connect with other people. Examples of this category are reading books, joining socio-civic organizations, committing in church activities, recording vlogs, etc.

***Psychological Help.***

Consulting with a psychologist or a psychiatrist helped the participants deal with the trauma that they experienced. Most of them are not even aware that their experience was traumatic but because of its detrimental effects, they sought professional help. They started to process what happened to them, accept it, recognize their emotions, and manage the ramifications felt in their lives. Some were given medications while others are still undergoing psychotherapy.

*“I’m someone who’s not good at processing emotions. Palagi akong may delayed response sa mga bagay bagay, kaya ngayon I’m also seeing a psychologist every month, once a month. Tas nakita ko lang how this trauma, actually di ko nga alam yung mga terms terms, recently ko lang naintindihan na this is traumatic pala for me, for my emotions, for my mental health. ” (LO, 27) [I’m someone who’s not good at processing emotions. I always have delayed responses to things, that’s why I’m now seeing a psychologist every month, once a month. I also only saw this trauma.*

*Actually I didn’t even know the terms, it’s only recently that I understood that this was traumatic for me, for my emotions, for my mental health.]*

Several of the participants, though did not consult a professional, still benefited from Psychology. They are either students majoring in Psychology, attended an event with a resource speaker discussing Psychology, or they have friends who work in the field of Psychology.

*“Tapos nakakatuwa din naman kasi yung mga nakakausap ay mas parang imbis na malabuan ako dun sa sitwasyon, mas nalilinawan ako. Kasi may mga input sila, tsaka may mga assessment sila, kasi sina friend kasi is psychologist... So nung nakakausap ko sya, parang ano naiidentify ko na, nakikita ko, yung mga hindi maganda sa relationship na blinded ako nung nasa in a relationship pa kami.” (SP, 31) [I am glad that my conversations with people bring clarity instead of confusion about my situation. It’s because they have input and assessment, because my friends are psychologists... So when I talk with them, I was able to identify, or see, the ugly things in our relationship that I was blinded by when we were still together.]*

### **Meeting After the Relationship.**

There are different positive effects when participants are able to meet with their partners after the relationship, whether intentionally or unplanned. First, having a conversation after the relationship provided an opportunity for an apology and to talk about what happened to them. They are also able to talk about their arrangement for their children, if they have one. Having an opportunity to talk after the relationship brings a sense of finality that the relationship is really over.

*“Alam mo yung mga typical na closure daw. Tapos nung nagmeet kami... Yung dati sya, yung gentle magspeak nun, sya ulit yun. So as vulnerable as I was, I was trying to build a wall na no, not again. That’s not gonna happen again for the second time around. Ayoko na talaga, I’ve had enough of this relationship. But she was trying to pursue me. And I told her na ayoko na talaga, na this will be the last time that we’re gonna meet. I’m cutting you off in my life, we will not be friends anymore... Parang too much na yung mga nangyari for us to stay as friends, sabi ko. And I think it’s not gonna be healthy on my end too. So after nung nagusap kami for the last time, wala na kaming communication afterwards.” (GL, 24) [She told me about, you know, the typical closure... so we met. The old her, the one that speaks gently, it was her again. So as vulnerable as I was, I was trying to build a wall that no, not again. That’s not gonna happen again for the second time around. I really don’t want to come back, I’ve had enough of this relationship. But she was trying to pursue me. And I told her that I really don’t want to anymore, that this will be the last time that we’re gonna meet. I’m cutting you off in my life, we will not be friends anymore... It’s like what happened between us is already too much for us to stay friends. And I think it’s not gonna be healthy on my end too. So after that meeting for the last time, we didn’t communicate anymore afterwards.]*

It can also be observed that for some participants, this opportunity brings a sense of relief that they are already free from that person and that relationship. They recognize their growth especially when they see their partner after some time. It also reinforces the idea that they are already healed from that traumatic experience because they are no longer emotionally affected when they see their partner.

*“Tapos alam mo yung tinitingnan ko yung guy tas narealize ko, ibang tao na sya, ibang tao na ako. Nakakatuwa na nakakatingin ako directly sa eyes nya, parang ang gaan lang... Ayun sobrang thankful din ako kay God sa opportunity na yun na makapag meet kami face to face kasi nga nakapagself check din ako na God, healed na pala talaga ako.” (TL, 27) [And then when I was looking at the guy, I realized, he’s already a different person, and I’m already a different person. I was happy that I was able to look him directly in the eyes, it was very light... So I was so thankful to God for the opportunity to meet him face to face because I was able to check myself and say that God, I am really already healed.]*

*“Actually nung namatay yung daddy ko pumunta pa sila dito, ng nanay nya. Ang ano ko pa is, parang lalong lumakas yung loob ko nung time na yun kasi siya yung hindi makatingin sakin*

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*sa mata. Parang nafeel ko na, alam nyang sya yung may kasalanan, parang ganun...*“ (SP, 31) [Actually when my daddy died, they went here, with his mother. And the thing is, I felt courage at that time because he was not able to look me directly in the eyes. I just felt that he knows he did me wrong.]

However, one participant does not see the need to meet after the relationship. Some think it is unnecessary because they already healed on their own and they are content with their current relationship and they want to show respect to their current partner.

*“Sinabi lang sakín ng bestfriend ko na gusto daw makipagmeet. Sabi nya gusto nya daw sana makipagkita ng personal kasi gusto daw nya mag apologize sa lahat ng sinabi nya, sa lahat lahat ng ginawa nya. Closure nya! Eh closed na sakín yun eh, okay na ako eh, ikakasal na nga ako! Sinabi ko yun sa husband ko. Hindi na worth it na magkita pa kami kasi nandyan na husband ko eh.”* (RI, 32) [My bestfriend just told me that he wanted to meet with me. She said that he hoped to meet in person because he wanted to apologize about everything he said, and everything he did. It was his closure! It's already a closed chapter for me, I'm already okay, I'm even about to get married! I told my husband about that. It's not worth meeting up with him because I'm already with my husband.]

### **Social Support.**

Participants highlighted the importance of social support after the separation. As most of them became isolated during the relationship, reconnecting with other people was refreshing for them. It was also an opportunity to express themselves and be vulnerable about their trauma. Most of them gained insight from other people that helped them see their situation from a different perspective. It usually takes a while before participants are comfortable to disclose their experiences with other people, but when they do, it often has a great impact on their healing process. Some felt the most significant social support from their family, friends, church community, elders, or even the social media.

*“Kinausap ako ng mama ko nun. Sabi sakín ng mama ko, “Anak.. ano bang nangyayari sayo?”... Tapos don ko lang narealize na... oo nga no, ano bang nangyari sakín? Yun nung nilat out ko lahat yun, dun ko na sinimulan na ibangon yung sarili ko. Nun kasing nakausap ko yung mama ko, sobrang naging comforting yun sakín, na nung na let out ko lahat, alam mo yun parang, yung para kang may bato sa likod na natanggal... Yung support, dun ko naramdaman yun. Family support. Kahit ganun yung situation, nakaalalay lang sila.”* (RI, 32) [My mom talked to me at that time. My mom told me, “My daughter... what is happening to you?” that's when I realized... that's right, what happened to me? When I was able to let it out, that's only when I started standing up again. Because when my mom talked to me, it was very comforting for me, when I was able to let it all out, you know, it's like a boulder was lifted off my back. The support, that's when I felt it. Family support. Even if the situation was like that, they were guiding me.]

### **Domains of Posttraumatic Growth Experienced in the Present**

#### **Interpersonal Relationships.**

##### **Wisdom about Future Romantic Relationships.**

Most of the participants, whether in a current romantic relationship or not, claim to learn a lot of lessons from their past relationship that can be applied to future ones. Participants learned to identify what they want and don't want in a relationship, to practice good communication, to express when they are uncomfortable, and to handle and resolve conflicts.



*“There was this one time na I realize na pag nagkaroon ulit ako ng relationship, I want it to be healthy as much as possible. I don’t want that to happen again. Yun yung mga naisip ko after everything that happened. Right now, I’m happy with my new partner... We’re turning 2 years and all of the things that I mentioned, it’s very much practiced because she had her own share of an abusive relationship as well. So parang sabay natuto... i’m very very much happy right now”* (GL, 24) [There was this one time that I realized that when I have another relationship, I want it to be healthy as much as possible. I don’t want that to happen again. That’s what I was thinking after everything that happened. Right now, I’m happy with my new partner.... We’re turning 2 years and all of the things that I mentioned, it’s very much practiced because she had her own share of an abusive relationship as well. It’s like we learned at the same time... I’m very much happy right now.]

**Reconnecting with Other People.** Because their previous partners were of the jealous-type, controlling and managing their relationships, they did not have the freedom to talk and connect with anyone they pleased. When the relationship was gone, they were liberated of the senseless burden to isolate themselves and make their romantic relationship the only relationship they have. Participants started reconnecting with their family and friends whom they stopped meeting regularly during the relationship. Though there is a sense of guilt, it is often a relief to be with their relationships to make up for the lost time. Most of the participants also received social support from reconnecting with their friends.

*“Nakikipagmeet din ako sa friends ko, may iba’t iba kasi akong mga circle of friends so yun... di ko nagagawa nung kami pa kasi parang kasi ako ay, yun bang... inisolate ko yung sarili ko sa iba, tapos nakafocus lang ako dun sa ex ko... kaya wala akong masyadong friends nun nung kami pa. So ayun lang, ginawa ko is bumawi nalang ako sa mga friends ko, yun. This time ako naman yung nanlibre sa kanila para, alam mo yun para makabawi man lang sa mga nagawa ko sakanila”* (SM, 23) [I am meeting with my friends too, I have many different circles of friends... I am not able to do that during our relationship because I, you know... I isolated myself from others, I just focused on my ex... that’s why I didn’t have that many friends when we were still together. So that’s why I made it up with my friends. This time I treated them so that, you know, I can make up for what I did to them.]

**Helping Others Through What They Experienced.** Another theme that emerged under this category is the desire to help or inspire other people through what has happened to them. Participants felt greater compassion to other people who are going through a traumatic relationship after their experience. A majority of participants also agreed to participate because they are thinking that whoever will be able to read this study will benefit from their life story.

*“Actually nung nakita ko yung post about sa study, gusto ko talaga to ishare, kasi ang daming taong gustong malaman yung tungkol saakin, kasi they see me ano, worse before... Then now, gusto kong ishare sakanila na sobrang ganda ng napuntahan ko ngayon kahit tingin nila ay worst, gusto ko ishare na kung galing ka sa worse, wag ka magalala, pupunta ka din sa better, na hindi mo kailangan ipilit, dadating din...”* (AA, 21) [Actually when I saw the post about your study, I really wanted to share, because there’s a lot of people who would like to know what happened to me, because they see me in my worse state before, then now I want to share with them that I am in a very great place now, even when they saw the worst, I wanted to share that if you came from a worse situation, don’t worry, you will arrive in a better place, that you don’t have to force, but it will come...]

### ***Appreciation of life***

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Participants recounted appreciating their life, work, relationships, and abilities more after their experience. Most of the participants expressed a sense that time, effort and resources will be wasted if they continue spending it in their traumatic relationship or in the memory of them. Afterwards, they started to allocate their energy and life into something more meaningful and rewarding.

*“Mas okay na ako ngayon kaysa dati. Kasi dati, after nun, balewala lang ako sa buhay ko. Yung dati kasi, lahat nandun - sugal, alak, sigarilyo. Yan. ngayon, wala na. Basta di ko na binabalikan yung dati, wala na yung dating ganun... Kasi ako nun, nung sakanya, naisip ko yun na magpakamatay. Kaso may bumulong saakin na hindi yan ang paraan.. Hindi lang sya ang tao sa mundo, wag ka manghinayang sa tao na minahal ka pero niloko ka naman. Wag mo tapusin ang buhay mo dahil lang sakanya.”* (DS, 45) [I am better now compared to before, after that. Because you know after that, I didn't care about my life. Before, everything was there - gambling, drinking, smoking. But now, it's gone. I don't want that again... I don't think about the past anymore; it has changed already... Because you know, about her, I thought about committing suicide. But there was a whisper in my head saying it's not the right way... that she's not the only person in the world, do not feel regret for someone that loved you but cheated on you. do not end your life just because of that person.]

***New Possibilities in Life.***

Since most of the participants felt regulated in many ways by their previous partners, being out of the relationship made the world a bigger place. It opened up a lot of opportunities for the participants. They are now able to pursue the hobbies they avoided in the past, express themselves, start a new job or a new career path, socialize, enroll in a school, travel, and many more.

*“Nagka new job ako and then I was really enjoying my work. It's something that I've wanted to do for a long time. Kasi I'm a writer eh, na ayaw nung... kasi super controlling.. When I think about it! Na ayaw nung ex-fiancee ko. Kasi he thought that it is very impractical so, ako, parang nagfollow lang ako. Tapos yun. I moved to my new work in 2014. Tapos I was enjoying it then, as in kasi yung perks ng job was parties, we're covering events, tapos writing, getting my work published. Tapos ano pa ba? As in lahat ng mga gusto kong maachieve in life feeling ko, naachieve ko na then.”* (AY, 32) [I found a new job and then I was really enjoying my work. It's something that I've wanted to do for a long time. Because I am a writer, that he didn't want... because he's very controlling... when I think about it! It's because he thought it was very impractical, I just followed him. And then that was it. I moved to my new job in 2014. I was enjoying it then, because the perks of the job were parties, we're covering events, and then writing, getting my work published. What else? All those things that I want to achieve in my life, I felt like I was able to achieve at that time.]

*“Pagdating sa relationship, sa career, sa pagiisip kung ano bang gusto ko in the future, kasi before parang wala eh, parang hindi ko sya naiisip or hindi namin napaguusapan yung pagdating sa ganun, na kahit yung future namin di din namin napaguusapan kasi ayaw nya... Meron talaga akong priorities kahit nun actually, kaso hindi kasi ako talaga nakakapagfocus don, so ngayon single ako is okay eto na talaga yung gagawin ko, eto pala dapat yung gawin ko. Kasi dati hindi eh... Yun nga naginvest din kasi ako ng pera, saming dalawa. Hindi naman sa niyayabang ko, pero more on ako talaga yung naglalabas ng pera samin. So imbis na mailalagay ko sya sa savings is hindi sya napupunta don, napupunta sa kanya ganun.”* (SM, 23) [When it comes to relationships, in career, in thinking about what I want for the future... Before there's nothing like that. I wasn't thinking about those things or we're not talking about those things, even our future together, we didn't talk about that because he didn't want to.... I

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really had priorities even before, but I wasn't able to focus on them, so now that I am single it's set that this is what I should do. It wasn't like that before. I also invested money in our relationship. I'm not bragging about it, but I really gave more money in our relationship. Instead of putting that on my savings, it went to him instead.]

**Personal Strength.**

At the onset of the separation, participants felt great emotional distress. However, as time passes by, their emotions become transformed into strength. Participants recognize the experience as the cause of their maturity, compassion, wisdom and boldness to face difficulties in life. They also started to feel confident and secure in their personal life. Lastly, participants are now better able to take care of themselves through self-care activities.

*“Pagkatapos naming maghiwalay, parang nagkaroon ako ng peace of mind. Pangalawa, financially sobrang naging stable. Ang mga bata naging maayos. Nagkaroon na ako ng kumbaga, tiwala sa sarili ko. Nafeel ko ulit na maganda ako (laughs). Nafeel ko yung kahit nandito lang kami, tatlo lang kami sa bahay, nafeel ko yung secured ako. Nafeel ko na kaya kong matulog ng mahimbing, ng wala akong iniisip. Yun yung pagkakaiba. Wala akong kailangang iplease na tao. Kumbaga, ako na ulit ‘to. Bumalik ulit ako sa dati ko.” (AE, 30)* [After we separated, it's like I had peace of mind. Second, financially it really became stable. My children became better. I finally had trust in myself. I felt that I am beautiful again (laughs). I felt like even though we're only here in our house, I felt that I am secured. I feel that I am able to sleep deeply, without thinking about anything. That's the difference. There's no one I need to please anymore. It's like, this is me again. I came back to my old self.]

**Spiritual Strength.**

Most of the participants expressed having a richer spiritual experience after their traumatic relationship. Majority of the participants engaged in spiritual activities like going to church, reading the bible, spending time with the church community, having clear convictions of what is right or wrong, and a general sense of being closer to God. Participants find comfort in the idea that God sees their suffering and responds to their needs at that time.

*“And nakita ko na though hindi man tinugon ng Panginoon na makabalik sya.. Nakita ko na ang tinugon ng Panginoon is yung.. Yung ako na mismo. Yung pag heal ko... Kasi kung ikaw lang yung magdedeal dun sa situation, di talaga kaya. Dati, though I know na there is God, wala kaming connection ng Lord yung relationship as Father in Heaven, tapos ako as his daughter, wala akong ganun. So yun nakita ko na naggrow talaga sakin yung faith, yung relationship ko sa father God, kasi yun talaga yung wala sakin noon.” (NC, 30)* [I saw that even though the Lord did not grant him to be back... I saw that what the Lord answered was... me. My healing... Because if you were going to deal with the situation by yourself, you can't do it. Even though I know that there is a God before, I don't have any relationship to him as a father in heaven, as his daughter, I don't have that. So I really saw that my faith was really growing, my relationship with the father God, because that's what I didn't have then.]

Remarkably, one participant shared that from atheism, she became more active in going to church and praying after her experience.

*“Kasi nung time na yun nung naging kami. Wala syang religion eh. Atheist daw sya. So nainfluence din ako na maging ganun. Tapos nung after nung separation namin, nun lang ulit ako nagpray. Nun lang ulit ako pumasok ng simbahan. Nun lang ulit ako nagdasal.” (RI, 32)*

[During that time when we became together, he had no religion, he didn't believe in religion, he didn't pray. He said he is an atheist. I was influenced to be like that too. Then after our separation, that was the only time I prayed again.]

## DISCUSSION

The study aimed to understand the experiences of Filipino women who experienced Intimate Partner Violence. It also aimed to identify the factors that helped them develop posttraumatic growth. Lastly, the study aimed to identify the areas of life where the participants grew as a result of their experience.

### **Intimate Partner Violence Experience**

One of the goals of this paper was to describe the Intimate Partner Violence experiences of Filipino women. According to the theory of Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), on which the findings of this paper is explained, trauma constitutes any event powerful enough to shatter a person's assumption about other people and themselves. This event is also impactful enough to challenge a person's psychological resources and psychological survival. The need for studies about posttraumatic experiences related to interpersonal relationships is well recognized in the academic community (Rokach, 2015; Orzeck, et al., 2011).

### **Psychological Aggression**

People are social beings that have a deep need to belong in an intimate relationship. This relationship is characterized by care, knowledge of the other person, interdependence, trust, commitment, and intimacy. The socially accepted norm in an intimate relationship is exclusivity. Infidelity is the betrayal of the expected exclusivity of the relationship through deception and pursuing a relationship with a different person (Rokach, et al., 2015). Couple therapists say that their most prevalent clients are infidelity cases. They describe that problems related to affairs are among the most complicated relationship problems to treat (Snyder, et al, 2004). One reason found across the literature for the more adverse outcome is the sense of intentionality of the perpetrator to hurt the victim, thus shattering the assumptions of trust and care pretrauma (Reich, et al., 2021). Many clinicians agree that infidelity results in symptoms characteristic of posttraumatic stress disorder.

Aside from this, the participants had an experience of having a controlling partner. It is found in the literature that one of the hallmarks of abuse is control (Hester, 2013). Coercive control is the repetitive attitude or behavior of a person in a relationship that seeks to control, restrict and dictate the other person in order to maintain power or benefits (Cattaneo, 2008). It is the way in which a person keeps their partner under their influence, taking away their liberty. This loss of autonomy creates an unhealthy dependency of the victim to their partner. Most of the participants mourned the loss of their relationship, even if it turned out to be traumatic later on. There is a sense of longing, especially when the separation was recent, which made the participants think about reconciliation, but later decided not to. This is not an uncommon experience, because separation from a controlling partner whom a person already developed dependency on creates feelings of instability (Platt, et al., 2009).

*“Parang sakanya lang umikot yung mundo ko nung time na yun. So napaka dependent ko sakanya. Everything na sabihin nya, kahit nung hindi pa kami kasal, talagang nakikinig ako. Even sa parents ko hindi na ako nakikinig (laughs)... tas parang wala akong social life, so ngayon ko lang ulit nakasama yung mga kaibigan ko dati yung mga 10 years ko nang kaibigan ngayon ko lang nakasama.” (NC, 30) [It's like my world revolved around him at that time. I was so dependent on him. Everything he said, even before we were married, I really listened to. I don't even listen to my parents (laughs)... And it's like I don't have social life, so it's only now that I reconnected with my friends for ten years, it's only now that I get to be with them]*

### ***Physical, Sexual and Financial Abuse***

Physical violence has harmful consequences to the individual, the children, and the society. Aside from the obvious physical health risks, physical, sexual and financial abuse has serious mental health implications as well. In a study that examined the difference of the effects of abuse by current partners and ex-partners (Theran, et al., 2006), it was found that physical violence has a greater effect when the abuser is a current partner than an ex-partner. Due to the nature of the abuse, a victim is able to seek help and healing once the relationship is already over.

Financial abuse, also sometimes called economic abuse, is a behavior or attitude that creates a barrier for another person to access proper financial resources therefore threatening a person's self-sufficiency (Adams, et al., 2018). Participants of this study experienced being pressured to not take a job they wanted, withholding or being stringent with financial support given to them which is insufficient for their everyday needs, and being forced to buy material items for their partners. Individuals who experienced Intimate Partner Violence or domestic abuse experience financial abuse 99% of the time, but do not recognize it. Victims of financial abuse cite embarrassment as the most common hindrance for not seeking legal action or help from the people around them, or the fear of having no source of financial support (Conner, D., 2014). Once the victim is able to acquire resources through government programs or by being employed, they become empowered. It is one of the most common experiences among the participants, being employed gave them new purpose, meaning, and strength. It is concluded in a study about the survivors of financial abuse that practical help like improving government policies, deliberate campaign in the workforce for recruitment and employment, as well as legal protection for wives and children are needed to mitigate the effects of financial abuse (Pastmus, et al., 2011). However, psychological studies for evidence-based interventions for victims are still lacking in the literature. Aside from the understanding that financial abuse does affect an individual's dependence on their abuser, no other claims or studies are done for this specific experience.

Lastly, sexual abuse is any act of coercion or violence related to sex and sexuality. It may include forcing their partner to have a sexual intercourse, or perform sexual acts that they are uncomfortable with. Sexual abuse may also include sexual taunts and insults, threats, and manipulation (Levy, ND). Usually, sexual abuse co-occurs with other types of abuse in relationships. Experiencing sexual abuse affects one's physical and emotional health (Oram, S., 2019). It is found that sexual abuse has a greater effect when the abuser is already an ex-partner, rather than a current partner, alluding to the delayed response of the participants to the sexual abuse they experienced (Theran, et al., 2006). This implies that the effects of the abuse may continue and exacerbate even if the relationship has already ended, thus understanding the process of posttraumatic growth from this population is important.

### **Psychological Impact of the Experience**

#### ***Shattered Assumptions***

Several theories have been formulated to explain the relationship between trauma exposure, specifically interpersonal trauma, and shattered assumptions (Unthank, K., 2019). After experiencing trauma from abusive relationships, individuals develop dysfunctional posttraumatic conditions. It is also found out in the literature that these negative cognitive effects of trauma are correlated with higher symptoms of depression and PTSD. (Dunmore, et al., 2001). Without cognitive reconstruction, posttraumatic growth cannot occur.

#### ***Neglected Needs***

Across the literature, studies about emotional neglect are mostly about parents and children. While it is understandable since children are a vulnerable population and they bring this experience to adulthood



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(Barlow, et al., 2009). However, it is also evident that this emotional abuse happens in Intimate Partner Violence too. Neglect is the feeling of isolation and abandonment. It is the intentional disregard to a person's physical, sexual, and psychological needs in order to maintain power in the relationship. Neglect is the ironic feeling of loneliness while in a romantic relationship. It creates beliefs of helplessness thus making it hard for the victims to seek help. Interestingly, literature says that neglect and isolation happens more commonly with males than with females (Karakurt, 2013). Having scarce studies of IPV in the male population, it is difficult to infer the difference of their experiences.

***Diminished Self Worth***

No matter the type of abuse received during the relationship, (physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, verbal and financial), all participants expressed a sense of loss of identity during their traumatic relationship. As seen with the findings of other researchers with battered Filipino women (Estrellado, et al., 2016), being abused by their romantic partners decreases the self-esteem and self-respect of women to the point that they feel like they do not know themselves anymore. Participants mentioned losing their dreams, priorities, self-respect, and even their hobbies. In addition to this, because most of the participants experienced their partners cheating, it caused self-doubt and questions about their worth. A sense of betrayal, which is felt in trauma from intimate relationships (Birrell, 2006), was also expressed by the participants. As a boyfriend, fiancé, or a husband, the participants planned to spend their lives with their ex, but not only did it not happen, the relationship also often ended very badly. Aside from this, most of the participants considered their partners as their best friend, someone whom they are most vulnerable to. They also expected their partner to protect them, nurture them, and support them, which did not happen, and they received abuse in return. All of these contributed to the sense of betrayal they felt. This betrayal may also explain the participant's fear associated with the opposite gender, even if the relationship is platonic. Due to the sense of betrayal from their ex partner, it negatively affected their perception of other people (Deprince, et al., 2009).

***Psychological Distress***

At the onset of the separation, participants felt a great deal of psychological and emotional distress. While liberating, the end of a traumatic relationship is not an easy experience. Individuals do not automatically grow psychologically. After the separation, all of the participants felt a great deal of distress, to the point of being diagnosed with a psychological disorder, experiencing psychosis, and having suicidal ideations. There is much literature available that concludes the correlation of experiencing relationship trauma and depression, anxiety, and even personality disorders (Dye, et al., 2020). Most participants expressed feeling depressed, anxious, guilty, confused, and irritable. Physical reactions are also evident as some experienced gastric problems, fatigue, loss of appetite and difficulty sleeping.

***Trauma to Recovery***

Another goal of this paper was to identify the factors that help a Filipino woman grow from their traumatic experiences, a construct known as posttraumatic growth. Analysis of the themes of the study is consistent with the model of Posttraumatic Growth Theory by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004). At the onset of the event, individuals tend to ruminate about what happened, with usually automatic and intrusive thoughts. Eventually, when individuals choose to disclose their experience to other people and have a good experience with it, thus gaining social support, they will be able to be more intentional and reflexive in interpreting what happened to them. They will be able to adapt to this new insight and integrate it into their life, resulting in greater wisdom.

### ***Mental Resolve***

It is found across the dataset that the participant's mental resolve to end the relationship and to grow from the experience is an important factor that led to their growth. Participants decided that the relationship is over, deliberately took steps to disconnect from their ex-partners, and firmly decided that they will come out as a better person after this experience. A lot of the participants grieved the loss of their relationship at first, but after cementing their decision, they went uphill from there. A number of them had thoughts about going back to their ex-partners, but ultimately decided not to pursue that anymore. It is important to understand that the loss of the relationship caused instability and a feeling of loss of control (Snyder, 2004). Having a mental resolve is regaining control in their lives. Because posttraumatic growth is a long process (Frazie, et al., 2002), having mental resolve prevents victims of IPV from relapsing or going back to the abusive relationship.

### ***Meaning Making and Cognitive Reconstruction***

Understanding that one of the most devastating effect of trauma is shattered assumptions, meaning making and cognitive reconstruction is a pre-requisite for growth (Uhnthank, et al., 2019). Without processing their experience, victims of intimate partner violence will not be able to achieve posttraumatic growth, highlighting the importance of mental health professionals to aid in this process. This is where the difference between interpersonal and non-personal trauma lies. Rumination, or the negative persistent thinking about the event that happened, its consequences, and the victim's role in the event, is often linked to higher symptoms of PTSD (Arditte Hall, et al., 2019). However, a certain type of cognitive style is found to be helpful among the participants, confirming the framework of Tedeshi and Calhoun (2004). It is evident that finding meaning and purpose about what happened to the participants also contributed to their growth. Seeing their experience from a different perspective also helps them reconstruct their shattered assumptions about trust, love, care, boundaries, self-worth, and relationships (Kouvelis, 2021). Punitive and condemning thinking is associated with rumination, but schema reconstruction is found to be helpful. When participants start to think about what they learn from their experiences and what they can do better in the future, posttraumatic growth starts to develop. The theme of their thoughts start to change, from being trapped to freedom, from being dependent to autonomy, from being insecure to being secure, from being helpless to being empowered. This shift started to happen to the participants through gaining insight from their conversations with other people and reading articles, or by having closure with their ex-partners, an opportunity to settle their misunderstandings. However, there are participants who cite that psychotherapy has been helpful for them in understanding, processing, and growing from their experience of Intimate Partner Violence, highlighting the importance of professional help for the victims.

Persistence in cognitive reconstruction plays an important role in facilitating growth. This is consistent with previous studies (Jirek, S., 2011), which shows that there are different types of cognitive functioning at the onset of the trauma and at the later years, which are both contributing in the development of growth. When the trauma is recent, the cognitive focus is more on understanding what happened to them. Later on, the cognitive focus is more on seeing the benefits of what happened and positively reinterpreting the event. People develop a trauma narrative, that is, seeing their life from before and after the trauma, with the event as the turning point. Meeting or seeing their exes also further reinforces the new narrative, thus strengthening their psychological resources. This is consistent with the participants looking back to what happened to them and seeing it in a new perspective, how the experience gave way to strength, depth, and better life.

Participants experienced cognitive reconstruction after their traumatic relationships. They are cognitively challenged to reconcile what they believe and what they experience in reality (Wade, et al., 2017). For example, participants shared that before the experience, they firmly believe that all people

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deserve a second chance, to be forgiven, understood and trusted again. However, when they experienced being cheated on repeatedly, they realized that not all people deserve a second chance, because they choose to hurt intentionally. As past literature explains (Ramos, et al., 2013), growth is not an automatic result of experiencing a traumatic event but a result of cognitively processing what happened to them. This struggle with the new reality appears to be crucial in developing posttraumatic growth. It can be likened to a house built in the Pacific, sturdy and able to provide shelter. However, when a storm came, it collapsed and was devastated. The owner would have to rebuild the house, but now with the storm in mind, he or she will be able to incorporate that experience into the design of the new house. They will be able to choose storm-proof materials that will be able to withstand other storms to come. Similarly, dealing with the participant's breakdowns resulted in their breakthroughs in life.

Self-disclosure is also found to be particularly helpful in this process of building psychological growth because another person's insight can provide new information or strengthen ideas that will be incorporated to the person's new schema (Jordan, et al., 2016; Farber et al., 2009). However, as seen in the study of Marriott (2015), people who experienced trauma from a close relationship tend to disclose later compared to those whose trauma is environmental, or from non-close relationship. Although difficult at first, a study (Birrel, et al., 2006) shows that healing from trauma should not only be focused on reducing symptoms experienced but by increasing positive interpersonal experiences. Social support provides a sense of warmth, comfort, trust, and guidance which somewhat undo what they experienced in their traumatic relationships. Across the literature (Xie, et al., 2022), evidence of the healing power of helpful others are very evident. This is observed to be true in all of the participants. They recalled their experiences of talking with family members, friends, coworkers, mentors, or a therapist as one of the points detrimental to their healing process. They felt understood and cared for when other people empathize with them. They also develop insight from their conversations that leads to reflection and meaning-making.

### **Domains of Posttraumatic Growth**

Posttraumatic Growth is experienced in five major domains, namely: interpersonal relationships, appreciation of life, new possibilities, personal power and spiritual change. Themes of domains of PTG identified in this study can be categorized in all five of Tedeshi and Calhoun's categories; no new category was identified. Another observation is that there is growth that could be categorized to more than one domain of growth. For example, the most evident and the most common among all participants is their growth in interpersonal relationships. While many experienced fear associated with the opposite gender at the onset of separation, all of the participants learned to manage this reaction and transform their learning into healthy boundaries and a basis for standard for their next relationship. Reclaiming their self-esteem and self-worth enabled them to refuse the treatment they think they do not deserve from other people. This reflects a growth in their interpersonal relationship and also their personal power.

As mentioned previously, many participants disclosed experiencing depression and suicidal ideation. Growth in the domain of appreciation of life shows that individuals who evaluated their life as meaningless in the past, now have a renewed sense of passion and purpose. The experience of being at the rock bottom and slowly rising to recovery also inspires most of the participants to help other people move on from this experience. This is a display of growth in the domains of appreciation of life, personal power, and interpersonal relationships. For other participants, a closed door gives way to a new open door. When their restrictive and toxic relationship ends, they are able to identify what other things they want to pursue in life, which they haven't seen before.

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Personal power is a domain of growth that is very empowering to hear from the participants. They tell their story of recovery with so much pride and joy, especially when they describe how they chose and continued to choose to heal and grow from their experience. The mood at the start of the interview where they tell what happened in their relationship is usually very depressing, with some participants crying because they still feel the pain. As the interview progresses and especially towards the end where they share the things they think improved from themselves after their experience, the mood becomes victorious. They are proud to have experienced a traumatic relationship and fight their way to recovery. Most of them reclaimed their sense of self, they learned how to take care of themselves again, they felt beautiful again, they feel that they are making better choices now, and overall, they think that they are a better, stronger, and wiser person compared to who they were before. Lastly, spiritual change is very evident in the lives of the participants as well. Engaging in religious activities and practices gave participants a sense of hope that things will get better soon. It also gave them comfort to believe that Someone higher than them is orchestrating events to bring justice to the pain they felt.

Lastly, religiosity is also found to be a consistent domain of PTG among trauma survivors (Schultz, et al., 2010). One important factor of religion is that it aids in the cognitive reconstruction of the victims and it also connects to the victims emotionally (Ronneberg, et al., 2014). It offers an explanation or purpose to what happened, offers a promise of vindication and forgiveness, and it also alludes to the emotions of love, care, protection, strength, and comfort. Due to this, it is no doubt a protective factor for the participants.

### **LGBTQIA+ RESPONDENTS**

The literature about the IPV experiences and posttraumatic growth is still very young, if not non-existent. One study states that gender-based violence is commonly experienced in the LGBTQIA+ community, and this has been the most studied phenomenon in this gender minority. However, their experiences after this phenomenon and how they develop posttraumatic growth is still largely unexplored (Sullivan, et al., 2017). This study included individuals identifying as an LGBTQIA+ and during their data analysis, it is found out that there are no significantly different theme on the IPV experiences and its psychological impact specific for this group. With this finding, we can conclude that the framework of posttraumatic growth transcends gender and sexuality boundaries.

### **Clinical Implications of the Study**

A past traumatic relationship is highly transformative because it is a very emotional experience (Rokach, et al., 2007). Whatever the participants learned from that is not just an intellectual learning, but something that is highly personal (Vandervoort, et al., 2006). We can see that most of the participant's mental health was greatly affected because of their experience. A lot of them expressed suicidal ideation, confusion with their identity and life, difficulty forming new relationships, physical discomfort, and loss of motivation. One of the participants also disclosed experiencing psychosis at the onset of their break up. Several of the participants have been diagnosed with major depressive disorder as well. There is no doubt that mental health is greatly affected by this experience. Seeking psychological help is seen to be effective among the participants who had access to assessment, consultation, and psychotherapy.

Therefore, it is important for clinicians to understand the nature of traumatic relationships here in the Philippines, so that they will be better equipped to help their patients develop posttraumatic growth through therapy. Psychoeducation is very important because several participants expressed that at first, they did not understand what was happening to them, and only heard about the proper terms and understood their emotional and physical responses to trauma after consulting a psychologist. Psychoeducation provides clarity and is the first step to recovery. Next, psychologists should assess if

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client is experiencing depressive symptoms, especially suicidal ideation. It is important for patients to be taught about self-care as well, since a lot of the participants struggled to take care of themselves during the relationship and also after their separation. Clinicians should also promote meaning-making strategies, self-disclosure practices and activities that will make the patient feel industrious as these are found to promote posttraumatic growth to participants.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

While the study achieved its goals, it is not without limitations. First and foremost, all of the participants were female. Although according to the Violence Against Women (2017) report, one in four Filipino women are being abused, it is still important to understand if the same process happens with males. Next, the duration it took for the participants to say they recovered from the experience varies from participant to participant, some lasted for only a few months, while others took years to recover. It will be important for future researchers to explore the factors related to this observation.

Lastly, another important limitation of the study is that the majority of the participants identified as a born again Christian. The Philippines as a religious country probably contributes to why the participant's relationship with a higher Being is so central to their healing process, so it is recommended for future researchers to study this domain with a nonChristian sample or an equally representative sample of the religion of the population. It is also worth investigating if religiousness predicts posttraumatic growth. If posttraumatic growth is evident in religious people, it begs the question if spirituality is a domain of growth or a predictor of posttraumatic growth.

### **CONCLUSION**

Intimate Partner Violence is a complex experience. It impacts the person's selfconcept, interpersonal relationships, finances, future plans, emotions and mental health. Going through this experience is not foreign to Filipinos. As then-Vice President Leni Robredo described in her speech (Rappler, 2021), Filipino women often find it very difficult to leave an abusive relationship, especially for the sake of their children, but once they find that strength to walk out the door, it is because they realize that this is not the life they want to continue on living. This is not the kind of life that they want their children to inherit. Even when the relationship is severed, the fight is far from over. The victims have to go through the long and tedious work of rebuilding themselves, their idea of a good relationship, their living situation, and their parenting. Although healing from this experience is individualized, this study gave a clearer understanding of this phenomenon which hopes to help individuals, communities, and clinicians.

Posttraumatic Growth is fostered primarily through reflecting on the event that happened to reconstruct schema, self-disclosure, and social support. After some time, although the experience remains to be distressing, growth in the areas of personal strength, interpersonal relationships, spirituality, new possibilities in life and greater appreciation of life are evident. While it is true that a traumatic relationship is a devastating experience, this paper is a testimony that human beings have extraordinary psychological strength to not just survive, but to transform their breakdowns into breakthroughs.

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## Appendix

### Informed Consent Form

This consent form will give you details about the study and which will help you decide whether you would like to participate. Your participation in this study is purely voluntary. You may opt to withdraw at any time you feel uncomfortable and unwilling to continue, and will not incur any penalty whatsoever. This form aims for your consent in your participation in this study about traumatic experiences and psychological growth. Participants of this study will be answering questions about their traumatic romantic relationship experiences and the changes they noticed in themselves. Participation in this study will take approximately 10 minutes for the first phase. For the second phase, the researchers will select participants from the survey for an interview to gather more information which will take place in a virtual meeting. The interview will be focused about the experiences of the participants after the separation from the previous traumatic relationship.



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Please be assured that all information gathered will be treated with confidentiality and your identity will not be disclosed in the study or in any discussion that will take place after the study. If in the duration of the study, participants feel uncomfortable answering the questions, he or she may withdraw from participating and the study involving the participant will end. The participant may also request to be endorsed to a local mental health facility if needed. When the study is completed, the participant may ask about the results. If you have any questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact the researcher at [ainah\\_salcedo@dlsu.edu.ph](mailto:ainah_salcedo@dlsu.edu.ph). Affixing your name and signature below signifies that you read this informed consent form and agree to be a participant of the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature over printed name  
*Participant*

\_\_\_\_\_  
Ainah O. Salcedo, Rpm  
*Researcher*

**Posttraumatic Growth Inventory - Short Form (PTGI-SF)**

*Instructions:* Listed below are 10 areas that are sometimes reported to have changed after traumatic events. Please mark (✓) the appropriate box beside each description indicating how much you feel you have experienced change in the area described. The 0 to 5 scale is as follows:

- 0 = I did not experience this change as a result of my crisis
- 1 = I experienced this change to a very small degree
- 2 = a small degree
- 3 = a moderate degree
- 4 = a great degree
- 5 = a very great degree as a result of my crisis

**Interview Guide Questions.**

The interviews lasted for approximately one hour, with the following questions asked:

1. Describe your past relationship experiences and your separation.
2. What are the factors that helped you cope with this experience?
3. What are the changes you experienced as a result of your experience?