

Growing From Trauma: A Post-Traumatic Growth Analysis of Makoto Shinkai's Suzume No Tojimari

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the psychological transformation of the protagonist in the animated film *Suzume no Tojimari* (2022) directed by Makoto Shinkai through the application of the Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) framework. This study explores how the film's narrative responds to the collective trauma caused by the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method with a clinical psychology approach. Data were collected through structured cinematic observation and analyzed by systematically aligning visual and textual evidence with the five dimensions of PTG proposed by Tedeschi and Calhoun, without involving human participants. The findings indicate that the protagonist's direct confrontation with her repressed childhood memories symbolized by the blackened diary clearly represents the process of post-traumatic recovery. Her physical and emotional journey demonstrates the strengthening of personal capacities, the restoration of interpersonal relationships through acts of self-sacrifice, the emergence of new life possibilities, an increased appreciation of beauty, and ultimately the achievement of profound existential acceptance. In conclusion, the film successfully reinterprets the impact of the disaster by transforming the narrative from a state of psychological stagnation to a dynamic process of active empowerment. Overall, this study makes a significant contribution to the discourse on disaster psychology by demonstrating that contemporary animation serves as a constructive cultural blueprint for visualizing psychological healing and cultivating mental resilience in processing collective grief.

Keywords: *Suzume no Tojimari, Makoto Shinkai, Collective Trauma, Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG), Psychological Resilience*

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary literature and animation have transcended their traditional role as mere sources of entertainment and have evolved into cultural platforms reflecting collective memory and social trauma. In the context of Japanese popular culture, anime often serves as a narrative medium that symbolically conveys psychological experiences and national disasters. One prominent example is *Suzume no Tojimari*, directed by Makoto Shinkai. The film centers on a teenage girl named Suzume, who embarks on a journey across Japan to close mysterious "disaster doors." These doors can be interpreted as a metaphor for unresolved trauma, particularly that associated with the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. This tragic event caused not only widespread physical damage but also long-term psychological impacts on survivors. As Thelen (2026) argues,

the film's hyper-realistic representation of landscapes and abandoned spaces symbolizes collective grief, positioning the narrative as a space for confronting and processing trauma.

Previous research has examined psychological themes in anime, particularly those related to trauma, identity formation, and the search for meaning. Research conducted by Laylatul Mukharohmah and Anas Ahmadi (2026) showed that traumatic experiences in fictional characters often trigger existential struggles and a search for meaning when analyzed through an existential psychology approach. Furthermore, findings by Emory S. Daniel Jr. et al. (2024) revealed that characters in *Persona 5: The Royal* exhibit post-traumatic growth (PTG) through interpersonal relationships and adaptive coping strategies. Other studies, such as that by Ludin and Febrianty (2025), emphasize identity reconstruction, while Fida et al. (2023) focus on trauma and emotional recovery in *Suzume no Tojimari*. However, most of this research focuses primarily on trauma, PTSD, or identity crises, and is limited in its discussion of how trauma can foster positive psychological transformation.

In response to this gap, this study aims to analyze *Suzume's* psychological development as a representation of post-traumatic growth using the theoretical framework proposed by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun (1996). Specifically, this study seeks to identify how the protagonist's experiences reflect five dimensions of post-traumatic growth: connection with others, new possibilities, personal strength, appreciation for life, and spiritual change. With this approach, this study contributes to existing research by shifting attention from trauma as mere suffering to trauma as a basis for psychological development.

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative approach based on the scheme proposed by John W. Creswell (2014, as cited in Ishāq, 2019), which highlights the understanding of meanings emerging from text and image data. The primary data consisted of scenes, conversations, and monologues taken from the film, and were analyzed using thematic methods. The analytical steps included identifying narrative elements related to trauma and development, grouping them within the PTG framework, and interpreting their meaning within the broader context of post-disaster narratives. This study did not involve individual participants, but utilized triangulation between visual evidence, narrative structure, and relevant psychological theories to ensure analytical validity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) has long been practiced in many Indonesian communities as a foundation for environmental conservation and sustainable economic development. As'ad et al. (2021) identified the success of a local conservation model in Lubuk Beringin Village, Jambi, where the community integrated *Seloko Adat*—traditional Islamic-based moral expressions—into village regulations to protect forest and river ecosystems. The management of community forests and forbidden pools (restricted fishing zones) illustrates how customary law and state law can work together to maintain biodiversity and local livelihoods.

Similarly, Nuraeni (2022) studied the Baduy community in Banten, known as the “land of a thousand prohibitions,” where ecological ethics are embedded in ritual prohibitions and oral traditions. These restrictions protect forests and water sources while strengthening community discipline. Another model in Bendrong Hamlet, Malang integrates green conservation and energy, combining agroforestry with biogas technology from livestock waste (Muspita & Sudiasmo, 2020). These practices demonstrate that community participation and legal legitimacy are key drivers of local conservation success.

On a broader scale, Law No. 5/1990 concerning Conservation of Natural Resources in Indonesia underlines public participation as a fundamental element of environmental management. Local wisdom acts as a moral-ecological framework that supports national conservation goals (Maridi, 2015). Globally, similar practices are found across cultures: bamboo forest management based on Daoist ecology in China (Yan et al., 2017); sacred forest conservation through ritual prohibitions in India (Lama, 1998); the Maasai rotational grazing system in East Africa (Homewood et al., 2001); indigenous wetland protection in Canada (Berkes, 2012); and forest payment schemes linked to traditional verification systems in Mexico (Alix-Garcia et al., 2005).

In the Maluku region, the sasi system is one of the most established forms of local environmental governance. Wenno et al. (2021) highlighted the ecological and economic functions of sasi on small islands, while Tobing et al. (2018) describe it as a seasonal prohibition mechanism that regulates marine and terrestrial resources. In Southwest Maluku Regency, oral traditions such as Lielyar Papr (Salenussa, 2020), Wakra Meke (Unwaru et al., 2022), and Yorwoy (Lewier et al., 2023) also have ecological and educational functions, transmitting social ethics and environmental values across generations. Linguistically, these oral forms often use the language of the land (the sacred language of ancestors), embodying cosmological and ecological principles. Dwiningsih and Agustini (2021) warn that the decline of regional languages in Southwest Maluku not only endangers cultural identity but also the ecological ethics embedded within them.

Lewier's (2016) dissertation on Tyarka, a singing tradition in the Babar Islands, further reveals how oral performances communicate messages of harmony and human-nature relationships. These findings suggest that traditional oral expressions similar to sasi and Tyarka in Masela play an important role in maintaining ecological balance and social harmony.

Therefore, integrating local oral traditions into contemporary conservation policies provides a culturally grounded model for sustainable ecological and economic management in Indonesia's remote islands, particularly in Masela, where cosmology and ecology form an integrated worldview. While numerous studies have demonstrated the ecological and economic roles of local wisdom across Indonesia, few have articulated how maritime cosmologies serve as a structural basis for policy design. Therefore, this study extends existing knowledge by framing local cosmologies—not only as cultural heritage but as governance systems relevant to policy for the sustainability of small islands.

Literature Review

Anime and the Representation of Collective Trauma

Japanese animation, also known as anime, has evolved into a media form that is not only entertaining but also serves as a means of exploring collective trauma, particularly related to natural disasters. Following the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, a new trend in anime stories emerged that highlighted post-disaster themes. This subgenre focuses on examining the psychological impact felt by communities following the tragedy. Previous research has shown a shift in the way modern anime represents situations, from simply depicting destruction to emphasizing narratives of recovery and the reshaping of memories through space and landscape (Chen, 2017).

Makoto Shinkai's works consistently incorporate supernatural elements as symbols for addressing real-world social tensions. In *Suzume no Tojimari*, the idea of the "door of disaster" serves not only as a narrative device but also as a symbolic depiction of unresolved emotional wounds. From a cultural psychology perspective, embedding collective memory within abandoned places helps individuals cope with traumatic experiences with greater emotional distance (Dell'Osso et al., 2022). In this context, trauma should be understood as an underlying condition that often manifests as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), characterized by intrusive memories, avoidant behavior, and feelings of emotional isolation.

The Concept Of Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG)

Unlike traditional psychological approaches that primarily focus on the negative impact of trauma, such as PTSD, this study adopts the Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) framework as its analytical foundation. This concept was first introduced by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun in 1996, who defined PTG as positive psychological changes that emerge from an individual's struggles in coping with a highly challenging or traumatic life experience. Within this framework, individuals do not simply return to their pre-traumatic state but can experience significant transformations that enhance their adaptive capacity and psychological resilience. PTG is categorized into five main dimensions:

1. **Personal Strengths:** Increased awareness of one's ability to overcome adversity.
2. **New Possibilities:** The emergence of new life paths or opportunities after trauma.

3. Connecting with Others: The development of deeper and more meaningful interpersonal relationships.
4. Appreciation of Life: A heightened awareness of the value of everyday life.
5. Spiritual or Existential Change: A deeper understanding of life from a philosophical or spiritual perspective.

Operationalization of PTG in the Analysis of "Suzume no Tojimari"

In examining *Suzume no Tojimari*, this study utilizes five aspects of PTG as analytical tools to uncover the main character's psychological changes. These aspects are viewed not only as coping mechanisms but also as signs of changing identity and sense of existence (Jayawickreme et al., 2022). Regarding Personal Strength, this analysis highlights Suzume's transformation from a helpless figure due to past traumatic experiences to a proactive individual who averts disaster. This transformation is evident in her courage in the face of supernatural threats, demonstrating increased resilience and emotional understanding.

A new dimension of potential is reflected in Suzume's travel experiences across Japan. This journey, involving both physical and symbolic aspects, signifies her attempt to find new meaning after loss. Her desire to leave her comfort zone demonstrates her cognitive ability to adapt to a new reality. In the context of interacting with others, Suzume's portrayal of characters like Chika, Rumi, and Souta reflects the rebuilding of trust within society. The absence caused by trauma slowly transforms into openness and the creation of valuable relationships.

Furthermore, Respect for Life is explored through Makoto Shinkai's distinctive visual perspective. The contrast between the captivating landscape and the post-disaster debris emphasizes how proximity to loss and death can heighten understanding of the instability and significance of life. Finally, the Spiritual or Existential Transformation aspect reaches its climax in the moment where Suzume confronts her younger self in Tokyo. This moment reflects a profound introspection about the meaning of life, ultimately leading to self-acceptance and mental peace. Overall, these five dimensions of PTG form the primary analytical basis for this study. By grouping narrative and visual elements into these categories, this study reveals that "*Suzume no Tojimari*" serves not only as a film but also as a cultural depiction of complex and multidimensional post-traumatic growth.

METHODOLOGY

This study applies a qualitative descriptive approach combined with a psychological perspective in media and literary analysis. This approach was chosen based on its ability to explore phenomena that cannot be measured quantitatively in depth, including feelings, behavioral interactions, and symbols found in visual media. A qualitative descriptive approach is considered most appropriate because it provides an analytical way to systematically interpret complex visual metaphors, dialogue, and character development related to traumatic experiences or aspects that are difficult to express well through quantitative measurements.

The primary data source for this study comes from the animated film *Suzume no Tojimari*. Directed by Makoto Shinkai and produced by CoMix Wave Films, it was officially released on November 11, 2022. This work was chosen because it represents a contemporary cultural artifact. It explicitly addresses the shared trauma experienced by the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. It also provides a clear depiction of the characters' psychological transformation from a traumatic state to a stronger and more empowered state. Secondary data sources. This indicates that, despite this, there are numerous peer-reviewed journal articles, psychological literature, and cultural studies published between 1996 and 2026. These references include the foundational theory of Posttraumatic Growth proposed by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun in 1996, as well as contemporary studies on media and trauma. The selection of these sources aims to ground the analytical framework in established psychological theory while remaining relevant to current academic discussions.

Data collection was conducted through intensive observation accompanied by narrative note-taking. This process involved repeated, structured viewings of the film to accurately identify, transcribe, and categorize scenes, dialogue, and character interactions that reflected the protagonist's psychological state. During the analysis phase, the collected data was systematically examined based on the five core dimensions of Post-

Traumatic Growth. Without involving human participants, this study ensured analytical validity by aligning visual and textual data with theoretically established indicators of Post-Traumatic Growth. Through this systematic qualitative approach, the study objectively depicts the protagonist's developmental trajectory from post-traumatic stress to a more mature and resilient psychological state.

DISCUSSION

The Baseline: Spatial Trauma and the Blacked-Out Diary

Before examining the development of the main character, it is essential to first understand the underlying trauma she experiences. Suzume's psychological condition at the beginning of the narrative is heavily influenced by repressed memories of the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, which resulted in her mother's death. Severe symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are explicitly depicted in the film, as illustrated in "Figure 1" (precisely at minute 1:38:51) through the visualization of her childhood diary.



Figure 1. The blacked-out diary representing repressed trauma, adopted from Suzume (Shinkai, 2022)

Psychologically, the chaotic black scribbling reflects avoidance of distressing thoughts and emotional numbness, both of which are primary clinical symptoms of PTSD (Jayawickreme et al., 2022). These blacked-out pages function as tangible voids within memory, symbolizing the inexpressible nature of childhood trauma, where profound pain is buried deep within the subconscious as a protective mechanism. The findings of this study indicate that by physically uncovering this "time capsule" and confronting the darkened diary at the end of the narrative, Suzume breaks through the barrier of repressed memory, taking the first fundamental step toward initiating her post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

Manifestation of Post-Traumatic Growth in Suzume

As Suzume embarks on her journey across Japan to close the disaster doors, the findings reveal a significant shift in her psychological trajectory from active avoidance to direct confrontation. By validating the collected textual and visual evidence against the psychological framework proposed by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun (1996), the analysis demonstrates that Suzume's journey encompasses the five core dimensions of Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG):

1. Personal Strength

The findings indicate that Suzume's transformation from a passive victim into an empowered savior represents the most prominent dimension of PTG in the film. As shown in "Figure 2", the ultimate validation of this strength occurs during the climax in Tokoyo (a liminal space/the Ever After), precisely at minute 01:53:02.

Rather than succumbing to despair upon seeing her younger, traumatized self-crying out for her mother, the older Suzume steps forward as a protector. By offering the three-legged chair symbolizing her mother's love and her constrained yet resilient life she acknowledges her past vulnerability while affirming her newly

Figure 1 Suzume confronting and comforting her younger self in the Ever After, adopted from Suzume (Shinkai, 2022).

developed inner strength. This reflects a heightened level of emotional intelligence often identified in resilience models within Japanese animation (Rosyidha & Rohmah, 2025).



Figure 2. Suzume confronting and comforting her younger self in the Ever After, adopted from Suzume (Shinkai, 2022)

2.Relating to Others

Trauma often leads individuals to experience social isolation. however, PTG theory asserts that overcoming adversity can result in deeper interpersonal connections (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). The findings of this study indicate that, prior to reaching emotional maturity, Suzume first reconstructs her capacity for empathy through interactions with strangers. As illustrated in “Figure 3” (minute 0:34:12) and “Figure 4” (minute 0:54:10), Suzume forms a genuine bond with Chika in Ehime and assists Rumi in caring for her twin children in Kobe.



Figure 3. Suzume reconnecting with maternal and social responsibilities through Rumi's children, adopted from Suzume (Shinkai, 2022)



Figure 4. Suzume building a supportive friendship with Chika, adopted from Suzume (Shinkai, 2022)

Suzume's willingness to help others and to accept assistance from strangers marks the end of her trauma-induced “emotional numbness.” However, the most radical manifestation of this dimension is evident in her

relationship with Souta. As illustrated in “Figure 5”, the emotional climax occurs at minute 01:34:26. Although removing the keystone could trigger a catastrophic disaster, Suzume’s decision to save Souta and her willingness to replace him as the keystone signify a transition from self-isolation to heroic self-sacrifice. These findings demonstrate that her capacity for interpersonal connection has been fully restored, to the extent that she is willing to bear a divine burden for the sake of others (Jayawickreme et al., 2022).



Figure 5. Suzume’s ultimate act of self-sacrifice and deep emotional connection to Souta, adopted from Suzume (Shinkai, 2022)

3. New Possibilities

Severe trauma often confines individuals within memories of the past, preventing them from envisioning the future. However, the process of post-traumatic recovery provides survivors with cognitive flexibility to discover new pathways and embrace futures that were previously unimaginable (Jayawickreme et al., 2022). This concept is vividly illustrated in the final scene of the film, as shown in “Figure 6” (minute 1:56:39). The findings explicitly reveal Suzume returning to her daily routine, wearing her school uniform and riding her bicycle enthusiastically along a bright seaside road, where she is ultimately reunited with Souta.



Figure 6. Suzume riding her bicycle on a sunny seaside road to embrace a new future, adopted from Suzume (Shinkai, 2022)

This vibrant scene stands in stark contrast to the emotional stagnation she experiences at the beginning of the narrative. In animation studies, it has been established that animated landscapes should not be viewed merely as passive backgrounds, rather they function within a broader philosophical context (Chen, 2017). In this specific finding, the open road and the shimmering sea serve as cinematic symbols of a future filled with potential. This dynamic environmental representation confirms that Suzume is no longer bound by historical grief. Instead, she actively engages with the present and enthusiastically embraces the new possibilities that have emerged in her life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

4. Appreciation of Life

Psychological growth following traumatic events is typically marked by a renewed appreciation for existence and a positive shift in an individual's worldview (Jayawickreme et al., 2022). At the beginning of the film, Suzume exhibits a pessimistic and indifferent attitude toward life and death, casually suggesting that survival is merely a matter of luck. However, the findings of this study demonstrate that her traumatic experiences radically transform this perspective. As illustrated in "Figure 7", this transformation is most effectively visualized during the climax in her hometown between minutes 01:49:02 and 01:49:10.



Figure 7. The fiery wasteland miraculously transforming into a lush green landscape, adopted from "Suzume" (Shinkai, 2022).

The film explicitly employs environmental storytelling to reflect her psychological transformation. Immediately after Suzume and Souta successfully suppress the disaster triggered by the *mimizu* worm, the fiery wasteland representing the devastation of the 2011 disaster and her deep-seated trauma miraculously transforms into a lush green field beneath a clear sky. Studies on modern anime indicate that Makoto Shinkai frequently utilizes such hyper-realistic mythological transitions to symbolize a recalibration of human appreciation for fragile beauty (Thelen, 2026). By witnessing this cinematic shift from a landscape of death to one of life, the findings confirm that Suzume liberates herself from apathy, perceiving the world not as a place defined by tragic loss, but as one imbued with profound intrinsic value (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

5. Spiritual Change

The final dimension of Post-Traumatic Growth involves the development of deeper spiritual or existential beliefs, often manifested as a profound sense of inner peace and acceptance of one's circumstances (Mukharohmah & Ahmadi, 2026). In *Suzume no Tojimari*, the findings indicate that this existential resolution is executed remarkably at minute 1:53:39. As illustrated in "Figure 8" after rescuing Souta and confronting her younger self, Suzume stands before a mystical door that connects the Ever After (*Tokoyo*) with the ruins of her hometown in the real world.



Figure 2. Suzume gently closing the door to the Ever After, adopted from "Suzume" (Shinkai, 2022)

As she gently closes the door, she gazes at the scenery and softly whispers, "*Ittekimasu*" ("I'm leaving"/ "I'm going"). This simple yet deeply resonant statement signifies her complete acceptance of her past trauma. Within Japanese cultural discourse, this phrase functions as a profound declaration of leaving a place of safety to face the uncertainties of the world (Thelen, 2026). By directing these words toward her devastated hometown, the findings explicitly conclude that Suzume acknowledges the tragedy, reconciles with her

existential loss, and consciously steps forward into the world of the living with a fully healed and resilient psychological state (Jayawickreme et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The film *Suzume no Tojimari*, directed by Makoto Shinkai, not only presents a conventional post-disaster narrative but also functions as a complex cinematic metaphor representing the process of cognitive recovery from the collective trauma of the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. The protagonist's active confrontation with her previously repressed memories clearly reflect the core dimensions of Post-Traumatic Growth, manifested through her physical and emotional journey in strengthening personal capacity, restoring interpersonal relationships, uncovering new life possibilities, enhancing appreciation for fragile beauty, and ultimately achieving profound existential acceptance. Through this narrative construction, the film successfully reinterprets the impact of disaster from a state of psychological stagnation into a dynamic process emphasizing individual empowerment, thereby establishing it as a significant cultural representation of human resilience. Based on these findings, future research is encouraged to expand the application of the Post-Traumatic Growth framework to various contemporary media and narratives in order to deepen understanding of how popular culture visualizes psychological healing and provides constructive narrative models for processing collective grief, while also enriching academic discourse on the role of animation in fostering mental resilience in the face of tragedy.

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