

When Love Leaves Wounds: A Portrait of Toxic Relationships in Phenomenological Studies

¹Pralayar Fanny Fadesti

Universitas Mulawarman

Email: fannydesti@fisip.unmul.ac.id

³Satriana

Universitas Mulawarman

Email: satrianazainddn123@gmail.com

²Agatha Graciela Pirade

Universitas Mulawarman

Email: agathagracielpirade@gmail.com

⁴Risma Sasmita Trisofika

Universitas Mulawarman

Email:
trisofika.rs@gmail.com

Correspondent author: Pralayar Fanny Fadesti

Mulawarman University

Email: fannydesti@fisip.unmul.ac.id

Abstract

Toxic relationship is a phenomenon of unhealthy relationships commonly experienced by Generation Z, characterized by excessive control, manipulation, verbal and physical abuse, and emotional dependency that undermines individual autonomy and mental health. This study aims to describe the emergence of toxic relationships, the dynamics of emotional dependency, relational patterns, exit barriers, as well as the impacts and post-traumatic growth. The method used is qualitative research with a phenomenological approach. Three participants aged 20 were selected through snowball sampling. Data was collected through non-participant observation and structured interviews, then analyzed using thematic analysis according to Braun & Clarke (2006) with triangulation to ensure credibility. The results indicate that toxic relationships arise due to changes in partner behavior, the loss of a supportive figure, and inconsistent commitment. Exit barriers emerge due to feelings of love, sacrifice, and manipulation. After breaking up, individuals experience trauma but also grow in the form of increased self-awareness and the ability to establish boundaries. This study emphasizes the importance of psychoeducation and institutional support.

Keywords: Toxic relationship, Emotional dependency, Generation Z, Post-traumatic growth

Abstract

Hubungan toksik merupakan fenomena hubungan yang tidak sehat yang sering dialami oleh Generasi Z, ditandai dengan kontrol berlebihan, manipulasi, kekerasan verbal dan fisik, serta ketergantungan emosional yang merusak otonomi dan kesehatan mental individu. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menggambarkan munculnya hubungan toksik, dinamika ketergantungan emosional, pola hubungan, hambatan untuk keluar, serta dampak dan pertumbuhan pasca-trauma. Metode yang digunakan adalah penelitian kualitatif dengan pendekatan fenomenologis. Tiga peserta berusia 20 tahun dipilih melalui teknik sampling bola salju. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi non-partisipan dan wawancara terstruktur, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik sesuai dengan Braun & Clarke (2006) dengan triangulasi untuk menjamin kredibilitas. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa hubungan toksik muncul akibat perubahan perilaku pasangan, hilangnya figur pendukung, dan ketidakkonsistenan dalam komitmen. Hambatan untuk keluar muncul akibat perasaan kasih sayang, pengorbanan, dan manipulasi. Setelah perpisahan, individu mengalami trauma tetapi juga tumbuh dalam bentuk peningkatan kesadaran diri dan kemampuan untuk membangun batas. Penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya pendidikan psikologis dan dukungan institusional.

Kata kunci: Hubungan toksik, Ketergantungan emosional, Generasi Z, Pertumbuhan pasca-trauma

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BACKGROUND

Humans are essentially social creatures who always need others in their lives. From birth to the end of life, humans have never truly lived alone. He needs the help, support, and presence of others to meet his physical, emotional, and social needs. Without social interaction, humans will have difficulty developing both individually and collectively. As social beings, humans tend to establish relationships with others (Qorib et al., 2024). This relationship can be in the form of communication, cooperation, and deep emotional bonds. Through continuous interaction, humans find identity, build trust, and obtain psychological support that strengthens them in facing life's challenges (Putri et al., 2024).

However, not all relationships develop in a healthy way. One example that often occurs is a *toxic relationship*, which is a relationship full of emotional manipulation, excessive control, and lack of emotional support. In these relationships, couples often feel depressed, unappreciated, or even threatened (Permana et al., 2023). The impact of this kind of relationship is not only on mental health, but it can also lead to physical trauma. For example, possessive spouses may be overly supervised and involve physical violence when prohibitions are violated (Nurrochman et al., 2023).

Dating is not only limited to relationship labels, but involves daily activities that strengthen closeness. This activity can be in the form of dating, sharing experiences, exchanging stories, and providing emotional support. Through these activities, couples are expected to get to know each other's characters, habits, and mindset better (Maciá et al., 2022). In a healthy dating relationship, there are common goals that you want to achieve. The main goal is to build relationships that are compassionate, mutually respectful, and mutually supportive. This kind of relationship encourages both parties to grow together and enrich each other's life experiences (Lestari et al., 2024).

Good communication, mutual trust, and deep understanding are important foundations in dating relationships. Without these three things, relationships are easily fragile, misunderstood, or even turn into unhealthy relationships (Lalompoh & Londo, 2024). But in reality, not all dating relationships go as expected. In the early phase, couples usually pay too much attention to each other to create a sense of comfort. However, initially sincere attention sometimes turns into excessive, controlling, and restraint attitudes (Kurniawan, 2023).

This phenomenon often gives rise to possessive behavior and unhealthy sense of ownership towards the partner. When feelings of love turn into obsessions, the relationship begins to enter a dangerous phase and potentially develops into Januarti et al. (2023) a *toxic relationship* (Healy et al., 2024). *Toxic relationship* is an unhealthy relationship condition that actually harms one or both parties involved. Its characteristics include emotional manipulation, possessive attitude, excessive criticism, and lack of emotional support. Relationships like this often

leave individuals feeling depressed, unappreciated, or even threatened (Hogan et al., 2021).

The impact of *toxic relationships* is not only limited to psychological, but also physical. For example, a partner who is too possessive can exercise excessive supervision, prohibit certain activities, and even involve physical violence when the prohibition is violated (Hasibuan & Jailani, 2023). This caused physical injuries as well as deep trauma to the victim. A relationship that was originally full of love slowly turns into a source of suffering. Victims of Hammonds (2015) *toxic relationships* often experience trauma that disrupts their lives in the long term. Unfortunately, many individuals persist in these kinds of relationships despite being hurt, either because of fear of loss or social pressure (Forth et al., 2021).

The results of the study show that students of the 2020–2021 BK USD Study Program experienced *toxic relationships* in the high category. However, there are 53.77% of students who only experience toxic treatment at a low level. Interestingly, 86.7% of students also showed a considerable effort to find solutions to the toxic behavior experienced (Firmansyah & Dede, 2022). The biggest impact of *toxic relationships* is on the mental health of the victim. Based on Effiong et al. (2022) many experience stress, anxiety disorders, and self-esteem crises. Individuals feel worthless and are constantly in inner conflict. This condition is often exacerbated by abusive treatment from a partner who leaves deep trauma (Firnando & Suhesty, 2024).

Data from Komnas Perempuan in 2023 recorded 457,895 cases of violence, with one of the causes being *toxic relationships* (Fávero et al., 2025). This data shows that *toxic relationships* are not just a personal phenomenon, but a social problem that has a wide impact. Another study conducted by By found that as many as 69% of students admitted to having experienced Effiong et al. (2022) a *toxic relationship*. This figure confirms that the phenomenon of *toxic relationships* occurs quite a lot among adolescents and young adults, who should be in the phase of exploration and identity formation.

The inability to get out of a *toxic relationship* is often explained through the learned helplessness theory put forward by (Davis & Weigel, 2019). Learned helplessness describes a psychological condition in which individuals feel powerless to fix the situation, even though there is actually an opportunity to change. This condition arises as a result of repeated experiences full of failure, rejection, and violence that do not yield positive results. (Davis & Weigel, 2019) (Crapolicchio et al., 2021)

When the individual continuously experiences failure in fighting his partner's toxic behavior, he or she will feel tired and give up (Chi & Dariyo, 2025). Ill-treatment that was initially rejected was eventually considered normal. This damages confidence, self-esteem, and even makes the victim believe that he or she does not deserve to be loved or treated well. Another factor that strengthens *toxic relationships* is the attachment theory of (Chi & Dariyo,

2025). Individuals with an anxious attachment pattern tend to be afraid of losing their partner so they are willing to survive even if they are hurt. Unhealthy emotional attachment keeps them trapped in a cycle of manipulation and violence (Bram et al., 2019).

The results of this study Boisvert et al. (2011) show that many women in West Bogor City experience toxic relationships characterized by prolonged conflict, emotional distress, and lack of support. In fact, many cases involve verbal violence, physical violence, possessive attitudes, social restrictions, and reduced comfort in relationships. This ultimately leads to depression, depression, and difficulty getting out of unhealthy emotional bonds (Barkah et al., 2020).

Although many previous studies have revealed various factors underlying toxic relationships, such as psychological factors, emotional attachment, and social influences (Arthawati & Mevlanillah, 2023). There is still a lack of research that thoroughly describes how individuals interpret and try to get out of toxic relationships. Many studies have not delved in depth into the personal experiences of victims and how they deal with them from a phenomenological perspective (Andriana & Astuti, 2024).

The research conducted by Ananda and Hamidah (2020) focused on young adult individuals in Bandung who claimed to have experienced Ananda and Hamidah (2020) *toxic relationships*. The results of the study revealed that there are five important themes, namely the reason for starting a relationship, the phase of awareness that "something is wrong", the negative outcomes experienced, strategies to end the relationship, and the expectations that arise after the relationship ends.

The purpose of this study is to describe the dynamics and factors that cause the emergence of toxic relationships among Generation Z, as well as to understand how individuals interpret and experience these relationships. This study also aims to explore strategies used by individuals in overcoming toxic relationships, both in trying to get out of the relationship and in the post-separation recovery process. With a phenomenological approach, this study is expected to provide in-depth insights into the life experiences of individuals trapped in toxic relationships, as well as provide an understanding of how they deal with the psychological and emotional impacts they cause.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research focuses on the subjective experiences of individuals who have been involved in *toxic relationships*, the meaning given to these experiences, and coping strategies used in self-recovery efforts. This focus is in line with the chosen phenomenological approach, as phenomenology acts as a bridge to understand life experiences from the perspective of the subject directly and deeply. In this context, researchers try to capture the

essence of *toxic relationship experiences* through interpretation of meaning, not just describing apparent behaviors.

The type of research used is qualitative research with a phenomenological approach. Qualitative research aims to understand social phenomena in depth by emphasizing the meaning of human experience (Qorib et al., 2024). This approach is rooted in constructivism that allows researchers to explore meaning through interviews, observations, and case studies (Putri et al., 2024). In this study, the phenomenological approach was chosen because it is in accordance with the goal of exploring the subjective experiences of individuals who have been in toxic relationships, understanding the narrative of love that ends in wounds, and discovering how individuals build meaning and grow after exiting the relationship (Permana et al., 2023).

The conceptual definitions in this study include several key concepts. First, *toxic relationships* are understood as unhealthy relationships where one of the parties harms their partner both emotionally and physically. Second, the concept of learned helplessness which Nurrochman et al. (2023) describes a state of resignation and loss of motivation due to repeated experiences of facing uncontrollable situations. Third, Maciá et al. (2022) cognitive dissonance which explains the tendency of individuals to seek psychological comfort even when in conflicting situations. In addition, the cycle of violence Lestari et al. (2024) theory emphasizes a pattern of violence that repeats and traps victims. Relationship theory is also used, which is attachment theory Kurniawan (2023) which explains the initial emotional bond as the basis for future relationship patterns. Finally, the concept of post-traumatic growth is Hogan et al. (2021) used to understand positive growth after trauma.

The research location was conducted offline and online in Samarinda City, East Kalimantan. The study subjects were selected using an effective snowball sampling technique to access populations with limited access, such as individuals who are in *toxic relationships*. Three resource persons from Generation Z became participants in this study, each with different experiences in living and coming out of toxic relationships. The demographic characteristics of the research subjects include several variables that provide an idea of the social background of the individuals involved. The study subjects numbered three people, consisting of two males and one female, with the ages of all subjects being 20 years. All subjects have unmarried status and come from two cities, namely Samarinda and Balikpapan. In terms of religious background, the research subjects have different religions, namely Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism. These demographic characteristics are important to provide an understanding of the variations in social context that may affect their experiences of dealing with toxic relationships.

This data also helps researchers to understand how demographic factors such as gender, age, marital status,

domicile, and religion can affect an individual's perception and experience related to the topic being studied.

Table 1 Research Subject

Research Subject	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Domicile
DM Subject	Man	20	Unmarried	Samarinda
ERM Subject	Woman	20	Unmarried	Balikpapan
PAW Subject	Man	20	Unmarried	Samarinda

The data collection methods used were observation and interviews. Observation is carried out on a non-participant basis, where the researcher is not directly involved in the subject's life but rather only as an observer (Hasibuan & Jailani, 2023). This observation allows the researcher to record the behavior of the subjects relevant to the research problem in real-time. Structured interviews were also conducted to dig deeper information about the subject's experiences, feelings, and coping strategies. Interview guidelines are prepared in advance to ensure the focus of the data collected, and the interview process is supported by recording and recording so that the data obtained is more comprehensive.

Data analysis is carried out systematically through several stages, starting from organizing the data, breaking the data into small parts, summarizing findings, to drawing meaningful conclusions (Kurniawan, 2023). To ensure the validity of the data, triangulation techniques are used in the form of re-checking and cross-checking between data sources (Januarti et al., 2023). This triangulation aims to ensure the credibility of the findings so that the research results can be trusted and reliable. With this structured approach, the research is expected to be able to provide an in-depth overview of the *toxic relationship phenomenon* and its implications for Generation Z.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Genealogy Toxic Relationship

Toxic relationships are triggered by the dynamics of changing partner behavior, the emergence of excessive control, inconsistencies in commitment, and the loss of support figures who previously acted as emotional supports. In the first case, the experience of ERM shows that limited time together due to the couple's strict parental rules triggers the breakdown of relationships and the development of unhealthy relationship patterns. In the second case, PAW's experience shows that the loss of the mother as the main figure of affection creates an emotional void, which is then filled by couples with increasingly repressive patterns of physical and verbal violence. Meanwhile, in the case of DM, it was found that after six months of being in a relationship, the couple began to show a strong attitude of social control, suppressed personal freedom, and demanded full obedience to his or her will. These findings as a whole confirm that toxic relationships do not appear suddenly, but rather develop through gradual processes influenced by situational changes,

psychological dynamics, and environmental interactions that erode the balance of relationships.

"He is gabisa, after that he is a strict parent... stricter than me" (W1 ERM, B179-184).

"When my mother died, she was completely different... And then there is the anger of the people" (W1 PAW).

"After six months, things have changed a little... I was told to go far to myself" (W1 DM, B32-36; B331-347)

Affective Dependence

Victims of *toxic relationships* build a strong dependence on their partner due to accumulated personal problems, social isolation, and the absence of other supporting figures outside the relationship. In the case of ERM, the experience of friendship problems and limited family support pushed her to make her partner the only place to be emotionally dependent. In the case of PAW, the loss of the mother as the main figure of affection and nurturing creates a deep emotional void, so that the couple is positioned as a "home" or a place of return that provides a sense of security, even though the relationship is full of stress. Meanwhile, in the case of DM, the dynamics are different, where initially the couple shows a very dependent attitude, but as the intensity of the interaction is high, the DM begins to imitate this pattern and eventually experiences similar emotional dependence. These findings confirm that emotional dependency in toxic relationships is formed not only from an individual's need for a sense of security, but also through repetitive relational processes, until the partner becomes the main source of irreplaceable emotional regulation.

"I feel like I'm very disappointed. so I ended up depending on him" (W1 ERM, B234-257).

What makes it survive is because they have lost a place to go home... That is the way it should be" (W1 PAW).

"He who depends on me... so I feel like something is missing" (W1 DM, B224-237).

Relational Patterns

The pattern of toxic relationships is formed through a combination of verbal and physical violence,

psychological manipulation, excessive control, and power imbalance in relationships. In the case of ERM, toxic patterns appear in the form of an inability to resist and a tendency to accept harsh treatment in the form of hurtful words that constantly undermine self-esteem. In the case of PAW, the relationship is characterized by physical violence, control of clothing and social circles, as well as efforts to isolate from the circle of friends so as to narrow social space. Meanwhile, the case of DM shows a pattern of control through coercion to follow the couple's wishes, including restrictions on friendships and daily activities, which gradually reduce personal autonomy. These findings confirm that toxic relationships take place in an unequal cycle of power, where one party dominates and controls, while the other party experiences a weakening of resistance, so that patterns of violence, manipulation, and control continue to repeat and take root.

"I can't fight... so he often spoke rudely to me" (W1 ERM, B460-474).

"He stabbed me... twisted"; "I came home at 11 o'clock and I was told that I was a wild girl" (W1 PAW).

"I was told to leave the community... you have to spend time with me" (W1 DM, B629-664).

Psychosocial Immobility

Participants' difficulties in ending the relationship are rooted in emotional dependence, deep affection, experiences of great sacrifice, and manipulation by the partner. In the case of ERM, the urge to persist arises because he still admires the maturity and abilities of the partner, even though the relationship is fraught with discomfort. In the case of PAW, the fear of losing the figure of a partner as the only place to depend after the death of the mother makes it even more difficult for him to break free from the painful bond. Meanwhile, in the case of DM, the emotional attachment is stronger because of the amount of sacrifice that has been made and the perception that the partner is the "world", so that the toxic relationship is maintained even though it is full of pressure. These findings confirm that the inability to get out of toxic relationships is not just a matter of rationality, but involves deep affective bonds, cognitive distortions due to manipulation, and subjective experiences that reinforce the perception that the relationship still has value to maintain.

"I kept him because I liked his mature nature" (W1 ERM, B347-358).

"I'm afraid I'll go crazy without him" (W1 PAW).

"I already feel like he's my world... many inputs are outputd" (W1 DM, B274-281; B705-714).

Self-Motivation

The decision to end a toxic relationship does not happen suddenly, but rather through a reflective process triggered by internal and external factors. In the case of ERM, a turning point came when she found the inscription "She will not come back," which made her realize that the suffering she experienced would not bring about positive change, so she was motivated to end the relationship full of wounds. In the case of PAW, strong motivation arises due to the spouse's disrespectful behavior towards the family as well as emotional manipulation involving the deceased parent, which is perceived as a form of emotional violence that can no longer be tolerated. Meanwhile, in the case of DM, although it was previously difficult to let go due to emotional bonds, the decision to keep distance was finally taken after the couple's parents threatened to cut off financial support, so the DM chose to end the relationship for the sake of the common good. These findings confirm that the process of exiting a toxic relationship is determined by the "last trigger" or *last straw* that makes the victim aware of the unworthiness of the relationship, where external support, self-awareness, and direct experience of the partner's behavior are the main catalysts in making the decision to separate.

"He will not come back... so therefore I want to be steady" (W1 ERM, B478-513).

"He said 'papa mama is crying on top of your behavior'... I can't stand it anymore" (W1 PAW).

"He was threatened... I cut off the relationship" (W1 DM, B731-780).

Post-Traumatic Growth

The experience of coming out of a toxic relationship produces multiple impacts, including relief as well as emotional wounds, but also opens up space for positive growth. In the case of ERM, feelings of plang and pleasure arise after the end of the relationship, but the traumatic experience makes her more introverted and fosters *trust issues* with men who try to get closer. In the case of PAW, freedom from toxic relationships presents an opportunity to return to being yourself, establish broader social relationships, and set a new standard for choosing a healthier and more respectful partner. Meanwhile, in the case of DM, the initial post-breakup phase is marked by emptiness and loss of identity, but as the process of reflection and recovery begins, DM begins to rebuild the network of friends and enforce clearer boundaries in the relationship. These findings confirm that although the initial impact of a toxic relationship can cause psychological injury, in the long term individuals have the potential to experience *post-traumatic growth* in the form of increased self-awareness, emotional resilience, and ability.

"Plong... Straight away... but I don't want to have anything to do with men anymore" (W1 ERM, B534-575).

"Legacy... I can go back to being myself... Don't be a weak girl" (W1 PAW).

"I feel like I've lost my identity... now I want to have a world of its own" (W1 DM, B885-948).

DISCUSSION

The phenomenon of relationships being kept secret from the social environment, as found in this study, reveals that choosing to hide relationship status is not only a practical decision, but also a factor that magnifies the risk of the emergence of toxic relationships relationship (Hogan et al., 2021). The absence of external validation spaces hinders individuals in managing internal conflicts. Social support, which is usually attended by family and friends, plays an important role in maintaining psychological stability. Without this support, couples are more susceptible to distortion of perception, which ultimately worsens the condition of the relationship to be more toxic (Healy et al., 2024). Social support has an important role in maintaining individual psychological stability, especially when relationships face challenges or conflicts. The absence of external validation space makes couples more susceptible to distortion of perception, so that internal conflicts in relationships are increasingly difficult to manage and tend to escalate in a toxic direction (Hasibuan & Jailani, 2023).

Research Hammonds (2015) shows that strict parenting, lack of open communication, and control-oriented, such as those found in this study, form relational patterns that tend to increase vulnerability to toxic relationships. This is in line with the Forth et al. (2021) finding that this parenting encourages individuals to view emotional control as something natural, thus influencing individuals as adults to survive toxic relationships full of manipulation. The internal working model formed since childhood influences the way a person interprets love and closeness, which then has an impact on tolerance for possessive behavior and jealousy in romantic relationships (Firmansyah & Dede, 2022).

The developmental psychology literature emphasizes the importance of family parenting as a foundation in the formation of relational scripts in adulthood. Strict parenting, minimal open communication, and control-oriented tended to produce individuals who lack interpersonal communication competence. This is as stated by Fávero et al. (2025) the fact that this kind of parenting increases vulnerability to being trapped in toxic relationships. Children raised in such a parenting often view control, restriction, and even emotional pressure as natural in a relationship.

The internal working model formed from childhood will have a significant effect on how a person interprets

love and closeness in adulthood. When love is perceived as something that must always be paid for by obedience or submission to authority, then the individual will bring the script into the romantic relationship dini (Effiong et al., 2022). As a result, possessive behavior, jealousy, and restriction of movement space are often tolerated and even interpreted as a form of attention. In the long run, this perpetuates a cycle of toxic relationships that are difficult to break because they have been internalized from an early age (Crapolicchio et al., 2021).

Based on Davis dan Weigel (2019) show the temporal dimension in relationships, especially the existence of *quality time*, cannot be ignored either. Time together is the main medium in building intimacy, understanding, and emotional attachment (Callow et al., 2021). Chi dan Dariyo (2025) confirming that couples who are able to allocate more time to positive interactions tend to report higher levels of relationship satisfaction. Conversely, the limitation of quality time contributes to feelings of neglect, unprioritized, and a decreased perception of relationship seriousness. In other words, the quality of daily interaction determines relational satisfaction more than just the intensity of the meeting.

The lack of positive interaction also has an impact on the mechanism of emotion co-regulation that should be characteristic of healthy relationships. Bram et al. (2019) in toxic relationships, interactions are more often dominated by conflict, criticism, and defensiveness, thus lowering the empathy capacity of both parties. Research shows that a negative spiral in couples' communication characterized by cycles of criticism, self-defense, and avoidance has a direct impact on the weakening of intimacy quality. Without social correction or reflective awareness, this communication pattern will further strengthen and worsen the condition of the relationship (Boisvert et al., 2011).

Traumatic experiences in social relationships, such as bullying, have major implications for the formation of attachment styles in adulthood. suggests that victims of bullying tend to develop Bram et al. (2019) *an anxious attachment style*, characterized by fear of abandonment, excessive jealousy, and a constant need for validation from their partner. The emotional wounds of the experience of bullying constitute an urgent need for a protective figure, which in romantic relationships is often interpreted as a partner capable of providing a sense of security (Arthawati & Mevlanillah, 2023).

The emotional dependence formed from this kind of trauma actually increases vulnerability to manipulative relationship dynamics. asserts that emotional dysregulation in bullying victims often makes it difficult for them to distinguish between healthy protection and excessive control (Andriana & Astuti, 2024). The couple who is present as a "savior" can easily shift into a controlling actor, because the asymmetrical position in the relationship has been formed from the beginning. This shows how early social experiences greatly determine a person's

susceptibility to toxic relationships (Ananda & Hamidah, 2020).

The loss of a key figure in the family, such as parents, is also a critical factor in shaping relationship patterns. The loss creates a great emotional void, which is often sought to be filled through romantic partners. Qorib et al. (2024) attachment replacement process initially provides a temporary sense of security, but in many cases it increases dependence. Individuals place the partner as a "substitute" of the primary caregiver figure, thus losing the boundary between childhood emotional needs and adult relational needs (Ananda & Hamidah, 2020).

In such a condition, even if the partner shows manipulative or even violent behavior, the individual persists because of the fear of loss that is greater than the pain experienced. This is in line with (Nurrochman et al., 2023) findings that show that victims often tolerate their partner's abusive behavior because of the already strong emotional bond factor. Emotional dependence is not just a matter of rational choice, but a psychological condition in which the fear of loneliness overrides the need for self-safety.

The concept of *preoccupied attachment* provides an important explanation of these dynamics. Permana et al. (2023) explains that individuals with this attachment style tend to display a pattern of love that is possessive, demanding, and demands total ownership of the partner. This pattern results in relationships characterized by high emotional intensity, but minimal stability. In the context of toxic relationships, Serendipity et al. (2023) *preoccupied attachment* leads the individual to tolerate unhealthy partner behavior because the fear of loss outweighs the urge to protect oneself (Permana et al., 2023).

Gradual changes from attentive behavior toward control are characteristic of *toxic relationships*. Couples start with small demands, such as wanting to be accompanied at all times or sharing stories at all times (Nurrochman et al., 2023). However, over time, these demands have evolved into social controls, such as banning friends with the opposite sex or limiting personal activities. The gradual changes make it difficult for victims to realize that they are losing their autonomy. This condition confirms that *toxic relationships* are often formed through an accumulative process, rather than a single event (Permana et al., 2023).

In the long run, victims of *toxic relationships* experience a significant decline in self-worth. Arifin & Nurchayati found that constant bullying makes individuals begin to instill the belief that they are never right (Nurrochman et al., 2023). The internal working model that is formed is the belief that personal identity is invalid, and that only by fully conforming to the partner can the relationship be maintained. As a result, the victim loses their identity as well as the ability to make decisions independently (Maciá et al., 2022).

The phenomenon of gaslighting plays an important role in the formation of this condition. Gaslighting, as a

form of psychological manipulation, forces the victim to doubt his own perception (Lestari et al., 2024). confirms that this form of manipulation is very effective in prolonging the duration of a toxic relationship because the victim loses confidence in his or her ability to assess reality. In the end, individuals believe more in the narrative that the perpetrator builds than in the evidence he or she actually experiences (Lalompoh & Londo, 2024).

Cognitive dissonance also contributes significantly to the dynamics of staying in toxic relationships. explains that humans have a tendency to maintain cognitive consistency (Kurniawan, 2023). In toxic relationships, victims often convince themselves that their partner's abusive behavior is just a form of attention. Januarti et al. (2023) When facts are not in line with beliefs, victims tend to change factual interpretations rather than abandon the relationship. This explains why many victims persist despite realizing patterns of violence.

The cycle of violence described by shows that toxic Hasibuan and Jailani (2023) *relationships* do not take place in a linear manner, but are cyclical: the tension phase, the violent incident, the reconciliation phase, and the honeymoon phase. The honeymoon phase gives false hope that the couple will change, so the victim feels that surviving is a rational decision. However, this pattern repeats and intensifies over time, strengthening the traumatic bond between the victim and the perpetrator (Healy et al., 2024).

Trauma bonding, according to Forth et al. (2021), is an emotional bond that develops through a combination of violence and intermittent affection. The brain's dopamine system responds to "momentary gifts" after periods of high-intensity violence, creating an addictive effect. Thus, the victim finds it increasingly difficult to leave the relationship because they are tied to positive moments that actually rarely happen. This traumatic bond makes *toxic relationships* feel valuable, even though in reality they are very detrimental (Firmansyah & Dede, 2022).

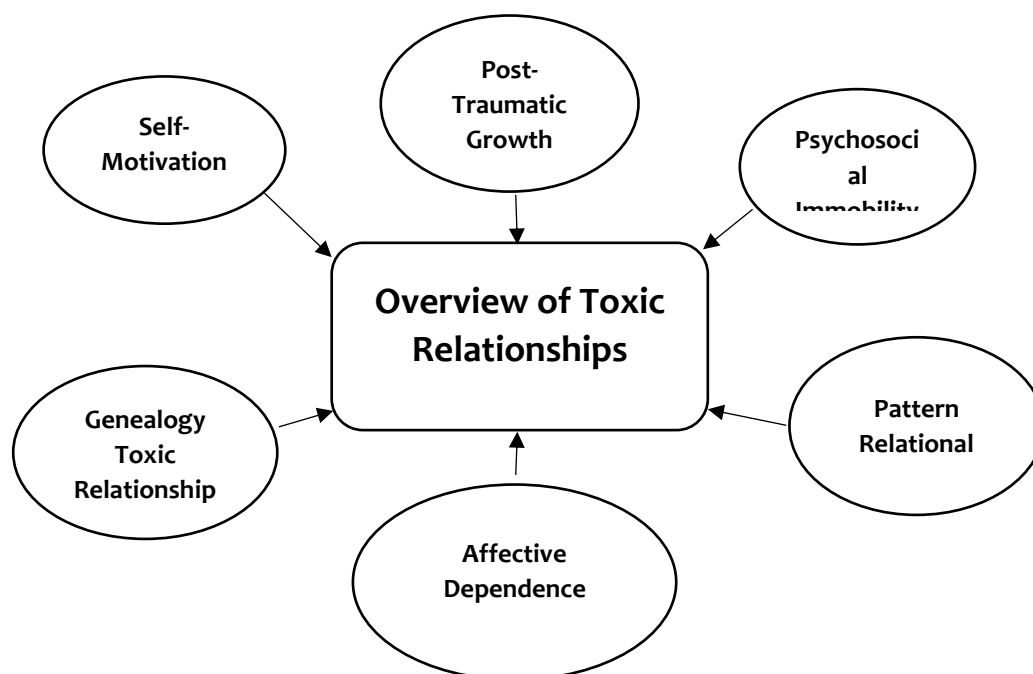
Stockholm syndrome is a relevant analogy in explaining this phenomenon. The victim begins to minimize the behavior of the perpetrator, normalize violence, and even defend the perpetrator in front of others lain (Fávero et al., 2025). This condition is formed because the victim believes that maintaining the relationship is the best way to maintain his emotional safety. In the long term, this syndrome deepens dependence and prolongs the duration of toxic relationships (Effiong et al., 2022).

The reason for staying is also often associated with the existence of "exchange value" in the relationship. Davis dan Weigel (2019) states that even though victims are aware of the emotional loss, they still persist because they still feel a benefit, such as financial support, social status, or a momentary sense of security. This rationalization makes the victim postpone the decision to leave because they still see the value that is maintained, even though it is not proportional to the injuries experienced (Crapolicchio et al., 2021).

Although this study provides in-depth insights into the factors that affect the formation of toxic relationships, there are some limitations that need to be considered. This study used a phenomenological approach with a limited sample, which included only individuals from a single

community or region. Therefore, generalization of the results of this study to the broader population may need to be considered with caution.

Figure 1. Overview of Toxic Relationships



Conclusion

Toxic relationships are influenced by intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural factors, such as strict parenting, traumatic experiences, limited social support, and anxious attachments, which make it difficult for victims to come out despite being aware of the negative impacts. This study highlights the importance of healthy relationship education in schools and communities to improve emotional literacy and awareness of the signs of toxic relationships. In addition, attachment psychology-based counseling and trauma healing can help victims break out of the cycle of injury and experience healthier post-traumatic growth. The theoretical implications point to the need for a holistic approach in dealing with and preventing toxic relationships.

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