

Emotional Distress and Psychological Entrapment in Toxic Relationships: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 2026-08-13

Revised 2026-08-28

Accepted 2026-09-05

Keywords:

Interpretative
Phenomenological Analysis
Psychological Dynamics
Toxic Relationships
Young Adults

ABSTRACT

This study explored emotional distress and psychological entrapment among individuals who had experienced a toxic romantic relationship, using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach. Two young adults who met the inclusion criteria of having experienced and exited a toxic relationship, and of reporting ongoing emotional distress, served as the primary participants; they were selected through purposive sampling and their accounts were further contextualized through corroborating interviews with two close informants, who were not analyzed as primary IPA cases. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation, and analyzed using IPA. Findings indicate that toxic relationships developed through a gradual escalation of harmful behavior, produced an erosion of both participants' self-concept that extended beyond momentary distress, and centered on a mechanism of psychological entrapment in which awareness of harm did not translate into the capacity to leave; for one participant this awareness only crystallized after the relationship ended, while for the other it coexisted with continued entrapment. These patterns tentatively suggest, based on these two idiographic cases, that toxic relationships may be more usefully understood as a dynamic, multi-stage psychological process—spanning escalation, self-erosion, entrapment, and post-relationship identity reconstruction—rather than as a static condition. This study contributes an in-depth, culturally situated account of how psychological entrapment and post-breakup identity reconstruction are subjectively experienced, offering a foundation for more contextually grounded prevention and counseling approaches for young adults in Indonesia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ideally, a romantic relationship provides a sense of security, support, and psychological comfort for both partners. In reality, however, a considerable number of relationships instead become a source of harmful stress, a pattern commonly termed a toxic

relationship: an unhealthy, undesirable pattern of interaction that fails to provide partners with a sense of comfort and instead erodes their psychological well-being [1], [2], [3]. Fitriani et al. [4] emphasize that a toxic relationship is a complex form of interaction that frequently arises in human life and carries a significant impact on the psychological well-being of those involved.

Several constructs central to this study are defined here at the outset. Emotional distress refers to a state of psychological suffering—encompassing anxiety, sadness, anger, or a diminished sense of self-worth—that arises in response to a perceived threat or harm within a relationship [5]. Psychological entrapment describes a condition in which a person recognizes that a relationship is harmful yet feels unable to leave it, a state that this study interprets partly through attachment theory [6] and through the concept of trauma bonding, a complex emotional bond that can form between victim and perpetrator through a cycle of fear, intermittent affection, and coercive control [7], [8]. A toxic relationship, for the purposes of this study, is an intimate relationship characterized by escalating patterns of emotional, verbal, sexual, physical, or economic abuse that undermine a partner's autonomy and well-being [1], [9], [10]. Attachment is understood, following Ainsworth and Bowlby, as the strong and enduring emotional bond that forms between two individuals and functions as a source of felt security, one that can paradoxically bind a person to a partner who is also a source of harm [11]. Finally, maladaptive coping refers to cognitive and behavioral strategies—such as avoidance, self-blame, or continued accommodation of a harmful partner—that manage distress in the short term but prolong exposure to it over time [12].

Generally, the dynamics of violence within a toxic relationship unfold gradually. Fitriani et al. [4] and Lortkipanidze et al. [13] classify the escalation of verbal abuse into three stages: first, verbal harassment in the form of accusations or inappropriate remarks; second, sexually charged pressure, ranging from coercive persuasion to acts of coercion; and third, physical violence such as hitting, kicking, or shoving. Alongside these forms, emotional abuse—manifested through verbal threats or intimidating expressions—and economic abuse—evident in one-sided financial demands—are also hallmarks of toxic relationships [14]. This pattern aligns with the broader framework of intimate partner violence (IPV), which identifies emotional, psychological, social, and economic abuse as forms of non-physical violence often overlooked relative to physical violence [9]; economic abuse in particular is frequently described as a form of “invisible abuse” because neither the public nor victims themselves always recognize financial control as part of a pattern of abuse [10].

The urgency of this issue is underscored by empirical data. In Indonesia, the National Commission on Violence Against Women's annual report recorded 632 cases of violence by a former partner and 407 cases of dating violence in 2024, amid a 9.77% increase in reported violence against women compared with the previous year [15]. Beyond Indonesia, dating violence—whether verbal, emotional, psychological, digital, sexual, or physical—affects adolescents and young adults across diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts [16], [17], and psychological aggression in particular is thought to be the most prevalent form of intimate partner violence among young adults, often preceding more severe abuse [18].

When left unaddressed, this distress may gradually develop into chronic stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, post-traumatic stress, and, in severe cases, suicidal ideation [19], [20]. Longitudinal evidence suggests that repeated exposure to psychological abuse is associated with disrupted emotional regulation and persistent depressive symptoms, particularly among young adults whose emotional and interpersonal competencies are still developing, and that intimate partner violence experienced in adolescence can continue into young adulthood [19], [21], and may extend to physical health through prolonged activation of the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis, manifesting as cortisol dysregulation, systemic inflammation, sleep disturbance, and cardiovascular strain [22]. Over time, such experiences can interfere with cognitive functioning, interpersonal trust, and attachment patterns even after the relationship has ended [23], [19].

Previous studies on toxic relationships have tended to focus on distinct, separate strands. Mahmudah et al. [12], in a phenomenological study of young adults, documented a range of coping strategies used in toxic relationships but did not explicitly examine how attachment styles shape the selection of these strategies. Knox et al. [11], through a large-scale meta-analysis, demonstrated an association between insecure attachment, stress, and partner-maltreatment behavior in a quantitative, cross-study manner, but this aggregate approach cannot capture how emotional stress is personally experienced, interpreted, and responded to by victims in daily life. Speranza et al. [24] found that attachment patterns rooted in childhood trauma contribute to vulnerability to intimate partner violence in adulthood, but emphasized the historical origins of attachment rather than the dynamics of emotional distress as it unfolds during the toxic relationship itself.

Taken together, these studies suggest that coping, attachment, and emotional distress in toxic relationships are typically examined separately, both in the variables considered and in methodological approach (quantitative-aggregate versus qualitative-partial). To date, no Indonesian study appears to have explicitly examined these three dimensions—forms of relational abuse, attachment patterns, and maladaptive coping—together within a single qualitative, idiographic framework; this is offered as a tentative observation given the limits of any single literature review, but if accurate it points to a meaningful gap, particularly for understanding why emotional distress among victims of toxic relationships tends to be persistent and difficult to address through intervention.

This study offers an exploratory contribution by considering attachment theory [6] and Lazarus and Folkman's stress-and-coping framework [25] alongside each other to help make sense of why some individuals remain in toxic relationships. Rather than proposing a fixed chain of cause and effect, this study treats attachment and coping as interrelated processes that may plausibly reinforce one another in participants' accounts: a strong attachment bond may be associated with the use of maladaptive coping strategies, which in turn may prolong exposure to emotional stressors. Where relevant, participants' accounts are also considered in relation to Sternberg's triangular theory of love, which conceptualizes love as a balance of intimacy, passion, and commitment [26], and to the concept of trauma bonding introduced above [7], [8]; both concepts are applied interpretively in the Discussion. An exploratory approach grounded in participants' subjective experiences within the Indonesian cultural context also offers value, since comparable studies [24], [11] have so far

been dominated by Western samples, leaving the relational dynamics and sociocultural norms that also shape victims' emotional experiences in Eastern contexts comparatively unexplored.

The urgency of this research also lies in the risk of long-term consequences from unaddressed toxic relationships, ranging from psychological distress to, in severe cases, suicidal ideation, as well as physical effects such as cardiovascular strain resulting from prolonged stress. Limited public understanding of the characteristics of healthy relationships increases the risk that individuals remain unaware they are in a harmful relationship pattern; a deeper understanding of the psychological processes underlying emotional distress in toxic relationships is therefore needed, both as a foundation for preventive education and as a basis for more targeted psychological interventions.

Based on this discussion, this study aims to develop an in-depth understanding of emotional distress and psychological entrapment among young adults who have experienced a toxic relationship, focusing on their subjective experiences and how they make sense of, and respond to, these experiences emotionally and psychologically. Specifically, this study addresses the following research question: How do young adults make sense of emotional distress and psychological entrapment during and after a toxic romantic relationship? Through this study, it is hoped that theoretical and practical contributions can be made toward a more comprehensive psychological understanding of emotional distress in toxic relationships, and toward the development of more contextually appropriate educational programs and psychological interventions.

2. METHOD

Research Design

To thoroughly uncover and analyze the phenomenon of toxic relationships by understanding how young adults experience, interpret, and make sense of them, this study employs a qualitative research method. According to Creswell [27], qualitative research is a type of inquiry that explores and seeks to understand the meanings individuals or groups attribute to social issues. This study uses an interpretive phenomenological approach because the experience of being in a toxic relationship is subjective, personal, and rich in meaning from participants' own perspectives, and can therefore only be fully understood through the perspective of those who lived it. According to Eddles-Hirsch [28], phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that aims to uncover the shared meanings constituting the essence of a concept or experience.

Data analysis in this study specifically employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), an approach designed to examine how individuals make sense of major life events; IPA is a qualitative approach committed to examining how a person makes sense of significant experiences in their life [29]. IPA was considered appropriate for this study for three main reasons. First, IPA is grounded in three theoretical pillars—phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography—which together enable researchers to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences and thereby deepen understanding of a particular phenomenon [30]; this aligns with the objective of this study, which is to understand how

participants make sense of toxic experiences in their romantic relationships rather than merely describe them. Second, the idiographic principle in IPA treats a small sample size not as a limitation but as a methodological strength: because IPA prioritizes the depth, richness, and case-level detail of the data over its quantity, a small number of information-rich cases allows the kind of close, line-by-line interpretive engagement that IPA requires, and the appropriate number of participants varies with a study's aims, scope, and the depth of engagement possible with each case [31]. With two participants, this study was able to sustain the in-depth engagement with each individual case that IPA's idiographic commitment requires, while still allowing a limited cross-case comparison. Third, IPA has been widely used in recent studies of intimate partner violence, both to examine the experiences of victims and of perpetrators [32], giving this method a strong empirical precedent for phenomena similar to those examined here.

Research Subject

Purposive sampling was used to select participants meeting explicit inclusion criteria: (a) young adulthood (approximately 18–25 years of age); (b) having been in a romantic relationship that the individual themselves identified, during a preliminary screening conversation, as a toxic relationship—operationalized as a relationship marked by at least two recurring forms of verbal, emotional, sexual, physical, or economic abuse as described in the interview guide; (c) self-reported, ongoing emotional distress attributable to that relationship, screened through an initial open-ended conversation prior to formal data collection; and (d) willingness to discuss the relationship in a recorded interview. Individuals were excluded if they were unable to discuss the relationship without acute distress that raised clinical safety concerns, or if the relationship in question was still active with no completed period of reflection on it. Participants were recruited through the researcher's personal and campus networks within the same urban area, using a snowball approach following initial purposive identification; prospective participants were approached individually, informed about the study's purpose and procedures, and enrolled only after providing informed consent. Both participants had already ended the relationship in question at the time of data collection, allowing them to reflect on the experience with some temporal and emotional distance while it remained recent enough to be recalled in vivid detail.

There were two participants (the primary subjects of the IPA analysis) in this study. The first, identified as KIJ (20 years old), is an administrative employee; the second, identified as RID (21 years old), is a college student. Consistent with IPA's idiographic commitment to depth over breadth, a small, homogeneous sample of two cases was considered appropriate: it allowed sustained, case-by-case interpretive engagement with each participant's transcript, supported meaningful within-case richness before any cross-case comparison was attempted, and is consistent with published IPA guidance recommending small samples for focused, single-study IPA projects [31]. To support triangulation of the participants' accounts, two informants were additionally interviewed to provide corroborating, contextual perspectives based on their close relationship with the participants and their familiarity with the participants' romantic histories: ZA (20 years old), a college student who has been friends with KIJ for eight years, and ZS (22 years old), a college

student who is a close friend of RID. The informants interviews were not themselves subjected to the full IPA procedure applied to the participants' transcripts; rather, they were analyzed thematically as supplementary, corroborating material used to contextualize and cross-check the participants' own accounts, consistent with IPA's emphasis on centering participants' first-person meaning-making rather than substituting third-party report for it.

Research Instrument

In accordance with the characteristics of phenomenological qualitative research, the primary instrument in this study is the researcher herself (the human instrument), who was responsible for formulating questions, conducting interviews, observing, and interpreting the data obtained from participants and informants. Because the researcher's own interpretive lens is central to IPA, reflexivity was treated as part of the instrument: the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis to document assumptions, reactions, and interpretive decisions; engaged in peer debriefing with the research team to test emerging interpretations against alternative readings of the data; and kept an audit trail of coding decisions to support the transparency and traceability of the analysis, in line with recommended strategies for managing subjectivity in qualitative health research [33]. To support this role, the researcher used the following auxiliary instruments. First, a semi-structured interview guide containing open-ended grand-tour questions, developed from a theoretical review of the forms of abuse present in toxic relationships (verbal, sexual, physical, emotional, and economic). Second, a non-participant observation guide and field notes used to document nonverbal aspects during interviews facial expressions, tone of voice, pauses, and body language when participants recounted emotional experiences as supplementary data to enrich interpretation. Third, documentation of supporting material such as screenshots of conversations, photographs, or participants' personal notes relevant to the toxic relationship experienced, used to triangulate participants' accounts [31].

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation (written and unwritten). Each participant took part in one primary in-depth interview lasting approximately 60–90 minutes, conducted face-to-face in a private, quiet location chosen by the participant, followed by a brief follow-up conversation to clarify or expand on specific points and, for member-checking purposes, to confirm the researcher's emerging interpretation of key themes. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim in Bahasa Indonesia, the language in which all interviews were conducted; excerpts presented in this article were subsequently translated into English by the researcher for reporting purposes, with attention to preserving participants' original meaning and register. Informants ZA and ZS were each interviewed once, for approximately 30–45 minutes, following the same recording and transcription procedure. The use of multiple data collection methods enabled methodological triangulation and helped corroborate information obtained from participants, thereby strengthening the credibility and rigor of the findings.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), following the idiographic, case-by-case analytic procedure described by Larkin and Thompson [31]. Analysis proceeded through several iterative stages. First, each transcript was read and reread closely to promote immersion in the participant's own account. Second, exploratory noting was carried out line by line, capturing descriptive observations about the content of what the participant said, linguistic features of how it was said, and more conceptual, interpretive observations about its possible meaning. Third, these exploratory notes were distilled into emergent, experiential statements that stayed close to the participant's own words while beginning to capture their significance. Fourth, these statements were clustered according to conceptual similarity and abstracted into personal experiential themes (PETs) for that individual case, each supported by direct excerpts from the transcript. Fifth, this entire process was repeated independently for the second participant's transcript, bracketing insights from the first case as far as possible so that each case was first understood on its own terms. Sixth, once both cases had been analyzed idiographically, the personal experiential themes were compared across cases to identify patterns of convergence and divergence, from which group experiential themes (GETs) reported here as superordinate themes were developed. Findings from the informants' interviews and the documentation collected were used at this stage as corroborating, contextual evidence to support or nuance the interpretation of the participants' own accounts, rather than as an independent source of themes.

Data Validity

To support the trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed data source triangulation (comparing participants' statements with those of informants) and methodological triangulation (comparing interview, observation, and documentation data). These strategies address the qualitative trustworthiness criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability [34], pursued through prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, member checking, and an audit trail. Member checking was additionally conducted by reconfirming the results of thematic interpretation with participants, to help ensure that the meanings developed by the researcher corresponded to participants' actual experiences rather than reflecting the researcher's interpretation alone.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

Analysis of participants' transcripts, corroborated by informants' accounts and supporting documentation, yielded four superordinate themes describing the shared structure of participants' experiences, each expressed through distinct subordinate themes and idiographic particulars in KIJ's and RID's individual cases. Table 1 summarizes these superordinate and subordinate themes together with illustrative evidence from each case; the case narratives and cross-case synthesis are then presented in full below, with description of participants' accounts kept distinct from the researcher's interpretive commentary.

Table 1. Superordinate and Subordinate Themes with Illustrative Evidence

Superordinate Theme	Subordinate Theme – KIJ	Subordinate Theme – RID	Illustrative Evidence – KIJ	Illustrative Evidence – RID
1. Escalation of problematic partner behavior	Gradual shift from calm to harsh, controlling communication	Escalating possessiveness following an ordinary relationship start	“...things started to get heated... it had already started to get abusive” (KIJ 1.1. 20250531: 10–12)	“Honestly, it’s uncomfortable because of his..possessive behavior” (RID 2.1. 20250519: 15–16)
2. Self-erosion of self-concept	Emotional reticence; distress more visible to an informant than in KIJ’s own account	Performative compliance; loss of authentic self-expression	“...she’d often cry by herself... feels like he’s still single even though he has a partner” (ZA 1.1. 20250531: 19–27)	“The change in me is that I can’t really be myself anymore... I always want to look... perfect in front of him” (RID 2.1. 20250519: 22–25)
3. Psychological entrapment	Awareness emerging only in retrospect; a psychological “blind spot” while still in the relationship	Concurrent awareness of harm coexisting with an inability to leave	“Maybe it wasn’t until after the breakup that I finally realized it.” (KIJ 1.1. 20250531: 65–66)	“At that time, honestly, I felt pressured but couldn’t let go either” (RID 2.1. 20250519: 18–19)
4. Post-breakup awareness and self-reconstruction	Retrospective critical insight; healing through nature	Relief following separation; return to a previously sidelined hobby	“Maybe if everything is communicated properly, you won’t get angry right away.” (KIJ 1.1. 20250531)	“The first step was finding new hobbies—one of them was fangirling.” (RID 2.1. 20250519: 34–35)

3.1. KIJ’s Profile (20 years old)

The Essence of the Experience

KIJ’s experience of being in a toxic relationship was marked by a gradual shift in the couple’s communication patterns, leading to emotional withdrawal and a retrospective awareness that only emerged after the relationship ended. Unlike RID, who recognized her discomfort while the relationship was still ongoing, KIJ exhibited a pattern of delayed insight; she only truly came to understand her relationship as toxic after leaving it.

Narrative Flow

In the early stages, KIJ described a subtle yet consistent shift in the way her partner communicated with her. She attributed the root of the problem not to a single dramatic event, but to a series of small, gradually accumulating issues that eventually became overwhelming:

“Well, from the very beginning, our communication might have been different, and then when we talked, things started to get heated. But... maybe what was worse was that it had already started to get abusive” (KIJ 1.1. 20250531: 10–12)

The repeated use of the word “started” in KIJ’s account is important to examine interpretatively: she constructs her experience as a gradual process, not a single event, which aligns with the pattern of escalating verbal violence described by Fitriani et al. (4) in their

theoretical study. The partner's rising tone of voice further intensified the discomfort experienced by KIJ:

"From the start of the relationship, the way he spoke was already getting louder; his tone was already getting higher" (KIJ 1.1. 20250531: 14–15).

What is interesting from an idiographic perspective is that KIJ herself rarely elaborated on the emotional impact she felt directly during the interview; her account tended to be descriptive and detached. This narrative gap was instead filled by the perspective of informant ZA, who revealed aspects of KIJ's emotional state that she herself did not often verbalize:

"As for her emotional changes, she'd often cry by herself maybe... when he's alone, he mostly thinks about this: 'How is this going to work out? What's the solution?' And... she must also be thinking about whether to continue this toxic relationship or... or walk away, but then we'd be the ones getting hurt" (ZA 1.1. 20250531: 29–33)

The discrepancy between KIJ's relatively flat self-report and ZA's more emotionally vivid description is a notable pattern in the data. One plausible interpretation is that it reflects a degree of emotional suppression or reticence on KIJ's part, consistent with ZA's observation that KIJ "feels like he's still single even though he has a partner" (ZA 1.1. 20250531: 19–27); however, this interpretation should be held tentatively, since the same discrepancy could equally reflect KIJ's own choice not to disclose certain feelings to the researcher, differences in how KIJ and ZA make meaning of the same events, or ordinary differences in recall and framing between a first-person and a third-party account. The gap between the two accounts is therefore treated here as an observation to be interpreted with caution rather than as direct evidence that suppression occurred.

KIJ's turning point in awareness only came after the breakup:

"Maybe it wasn't until after the breakup that I finally realized it." (KIJ 1.1. 20250531: 65–66)

This brief statement carries significant interpretive weight: it suggests that while in the relationship, KIJ was in a sort of psychological "blind spot" that may have hindered critical awareness of her own situation. After leaving the relationship, KIJ formulated forward-looking lessons, with an emphasis on healthier communication patterns:

"Maybe if everything is communicated properly, you won't get angry right away." (KIJ 1.1. 20250531)

She also began exploring simple yet meaningful self-recovery activities, such as a desire to seek healing in nature (KIJ 1.1. 20250531: 42–43), a small step toward reconstructing her personal space, which had previously "narrowed" as a result of the relationship she was in.

KIJ's Idiographic Signature

What appears to distinguish KIJ's experience is a pattern tentatively interpreted here as emotional suppression or reticence (her distress is more visible through others' eyes than through her own direct account), alongside delayed awareness, in which insight emerges only after the relationship ends rather than while it is ongoing. This differs from RID's pattern, in which awareness of discomfort was present in real time, even though it did not translate into the ability to leave.

3.2. RID's Profile (21 years old)

The Essence of the Experience

RID's experience is marked by an awareness that runs parallel to her suffering, she was aware of the discomfort and pressure she experienced even while the relationship was ongoing, yet this awareness did not automatically enable her to break free. RID's experience is more richly elaborated from cognitive and performative perspectives: the demand to appear perfect, distortions in thinking, and an explicit process of self-reflection after the relationship ended.

Narrative Flow

RID describes the beginning of her relationship as something normal that developed naturally from a friendship:

"At first, we were just regular classmates, then we started feeling attracted to each other, and after that, well... he started making a move on me first through chat, and from there the relationship became more intense until we finally started dating" (RID 2.1. 20250519: 10–13)

This positive opening narrative is important from an interpretive perspective because it emphasizes that toxic relationships do not always begin with clear warning signs dysfunctional patterns develop after the relationship has formed, rather than being present from the start. The partner's possessive behavior emerged as the primary issue explicitly identified by her:

"Honestly, it's uncomfortable because of his..possessive behavior" (RID 2.1. 20250519: 15–16)

Unlike KIJ, who tends to be emotionally distant in her narration, RID is able to articulate more clearly how this pressure affects her sense of self. She describes the loss of freedom to be herself, replaced by the performative demand to appear perfect in her partner's eyes:

"the change in me is that I can't really be myself anymore, and I always want to look... well, look perfect in front of him. And at that time, I wasn't doing it because I felt forced it was like I actually wanted to but deep down, I was also feeling pressured" (RID 2.1. 20250519: 22–25)

This statement reflects the ambivalence characteristic of toxic relationships: RID realizes that her behavior presenting a "perfect" version of herself is not entirely the result of external pressure, yet she herself acknowledges the internal pressure behind it a kind of self-imposed compliance stemming from the need to maintain her partner's acceptance. Informant ZS's observations reinforce this picture from an external perspective:

"At the very beginning of the relationship, it seemed like she looked anxious and felt she had to appear perfect" (ZS 2.1. 20250519: 7–8)

The height of RID's ambivalence is clearly evident in her admission regarding her powerlessness to leave the relationship despite being aware of the pressure she was experiencing:

"At that time, honestly, I felt pressured but couldn't let go either" (RID 2.1. 20250519: 18–19)

This statement is at the core of RID's experience a state of entrapment in which cognitive awareness (knowing she was under pressure) does not correlate with the capacity to act (breaking free). After the relationship finally ended, RID described a non-linear emotional transition from pain to relief:

"At first, it really hurt, but over time I started to feel so relieved, like all the weight on my shoulders had disappeared." (RID 2.1. 20250519: 30–32).

RID's recovery process was further realized through rediscovering personal interests that had been "lost" while in the relationship:

"The first step was finding new hobbies one of them was fangirling." (RID 2.1. 20250519: 34–35).

This simple act symbolically represents a process of self-reclamation RID actively reclaims personal space and interests that had previously been sidelined by the demands to constantly conform to her partner's expectations.

RID's Idiographic Signature

The uniqueness of RID's experience lies in her awareness coexisting with a sense of powerlessness she knows she is under pressure, is able to articulate it clearly, yet this awareness is not enough to prompt her to leave the relationship while it is still ongoing. This pattern contrasts with KIJ, whose awareness only "clicked" after the relationship ended.

Cross-Case Synthesis

Although KIJ and RID exhibit different patterns of awareness (KIJ: delayed insight; RID: concurrent insight without the power to act), both converge on the same experiential common thread: the inability to act in accordance with what they actually feel, whether because that awareness itself is not yet present (KIJ) or because it is present but hindered by emotional attachment and investment in the relationship (RID). Another significant point of convergence is that the post-breakup recovery process for both subjects was realized through small, concrete steps not grand declarations of "healing," but rather simple, everyday actions (KIJ: healing through nature; RID: returning to her fangirling hobby) that gradually restored their sense of ownership over themselves.

DISCUSSION

Gradual Escalation as a Common Pattern in Toxic Relationships

The pattern captured in Superordinate Theme 1 (escalation of problematic partner behavior) is consistent with, and may be interpreted through, the theoretical framework outlined in the Introduction. Both KIJ and RID described violence entering the relationship gradually rather than as a single, sudden event, a pattern broadly consistent with the classification of verbal-abuse escalation proposed by Fitriani et al. [4] and Lortkipanidze et al. [13] and with Walker's cycle-of-violence theory [35], which describes how tension in intimate relationships tends to build gradually before developing into more destructive patterns. The repeated use of the word "started" in KIJ's narrative ("communication used to be different... had already started to become intense... started to get abusive") can be read as a linguistic marker of how she constructs her experience as an unfolding process rather than a discrete event. This is consistent with, though it does not on its own establish, the

gradual-escalation pattern described in prior quantitative and review literature; with only two cases, this finding is best understood as illustrating how that pattern may be subjectively experienced, rather than as independent confirmation of the model itself.

Self-Erosion: From the Perspective of Self-Discrepancy and the Psychological Impact of Toxic Relationships

Superordinate Theme 2 suggests that, for these two participants, the impact of a toxic relationship was not confined to the behavioral level but appeared to extend into their sense of self. RID's account of feeling "unable to be herself" and needing to appear perfect for her partner is consistent with a pattern of performative compliance, in which a person may suppress authentic self-expression to maintain a partner's approval. This pattern is broadly consistent with prior findings linking toxic relationships to reduced self-confidence and psychological distress [36], [37], and with a recent systematic review associating exposure to toxic relationships with mental health difficulties and reduced self-esteem in early adulthood (14).

The narrative gap observed in KIJ's case, in which emotional impact was more visible through informant ZA's account than through KIJ's own, is of particular interest but warrants a cautious reading. One plausible interpretation is that it reflects a coping pattern resembling emotional suppression, sometimes observed among individuals in dysfunctional relationships who have not yet developed a cognitive framework for labeling their experience as "toxic." However, alternative explanations remain equally plausible: KIJ may have chosen not to disclose certain feelings in an interview setting, she and ZA may attach different meanings to the same events, or the two accounts may simply reflect the ordinary differences between first-person and third-party recollection. Read cautiously, this pattern may help explain why KIJ's insight only emerged after the relationship ended (Superordinate Theme 4), in contrast with RID, who was able to articulate her distress more directly while still in the relationship though this remains an interpretation drawn from a single case rather than an established explanatory mechanism.

Entrapment as a Core Mechanism: Explaining "Why Stay"

RID's statement, "I honestly feel pressured but I can't let go either," is among the most theoretically significant findings of this study, as it speaks directly to a question frequently raised in public discourse about toxic relationships: why victims do not leave immediately even when they recognize they are being hurt. One interpretive lens that may help make sense of this pattern is the concept of trauma bonding a complex psychological bond that can form between victim and perpetrator through a cycle of fear, intermittent kindness, and coercive control [7]. Although trauma bonding was not directly measured in this study and RID's experience cannot be diagnosed as such from interview data alone, it offers a plausible interpretive framework suggesting that RID's continued attachment need not reflect a personal failure to be "firm enough" to leave, but may instead be understood as one possible psychological consequence of the relational pattern she described.

The theoretical roots of trauma bonding in the intimate-partner-violence literature are often traced to two frameworks: attachment theory and learned helplessness, both of which

served as early conceptual accounts of trauma bonding before more complex models were developed in subsequent research [8]; more recent work similarly links need for closure to traumatic bonding among victims of intimate partner violence [38] and highlights how attachment and perpetrator perception can shape repeat victimization [39]. Read through this lens, RID's pattern—persisting not because she was unaware of the pressure she experienced, but in a context where the emotional bond with her partner appeared to intensify through repeated cycles of conflict and reconciliation is consistent with, rather than confirmed by, these frameworks. Viewed through attachment theory specifically [6], RID's difficulty disengaging may also be interpreted as reflecting the same underlying need for felt security described in the Introduction, in which a partner who is also a source of distress can nonetheless remain a primary attachment figure; and viewed through Lazarus and Folkman's stress-and-coping framework [25], her continued accommodation of the relationship may be interpreted as an emotion-focused coping response to an appraised threat she did not feel able to resolve through direct action. These readings are offered as interpretive possibilities consistent with RID's account, not as claims that either mechanism was directly measured.

The Erosion of Triangular Love: Interpreting Possessiveness Through Sternberg's Framework

The possessive and overprotective behavior RID described can also be considered, as one interpretive lens among several, through Sternberg's triangular theory of love, which conceptualizes love as a balance of intimacy, passion, and commitment [26]. When one partner exercises excessive control, the intimacy component which should encompass warmth and emotional openness may instead be crowded out by fear and vigilance. A recent review of Sternberg's framework in romantic relationships suggests that imbalance among these three components is associated with conflict and relational dysfunction [26]. Applying this framework interpretively to RID's and KIJ's accounts, the partners' possessive behavior and verbal aggression might be read as expressions of commitment and passion pursued destructively a controlling sense of ownership rather than healthy intimacy leaving a relationship that is structurally imbalanced because one component dominates the others. This reading is offered as one plausible theoretical lens for making sense of the pattern described, not as a diagnostic classification of either relationship.

A Moment of Self-Awareness and Self-Reconstruction After a Breakup

Findings under Superordinate Theme 4 suggest that, for these two participants, leaving a toxic relationship marked the beginning of a process of critical self-awareness rather than an instant resolution. KIJ's statement that she only really understood the relationship after the breakup suggests that, while still in the relationship, psychological processes that may have included emotional suppression and rationalization of the partner's behavior appeared to limit critical evaluation of the situation; only after leaving did space for reflection seem to open up. This pattern is broadly consistent with the recovery process described by Chi and Dariyo [40] regarding opportunities for young adults who have been in toxic relationships to recover and grow. The small, concrete steps both participants took—KIJ's interest in healing through nature and RID's return to fangirling—can be read as a process

of self-reclamation: an effort to recover personal space and identity that had previously been narrowed by the demands of an unhealthy relationship.

Situating the Findings within Indonesian Sociocultural Context

Although the Introduction framed part of this study's novelty around the Indonesian and broader Eastern sociocultural context in which these experiences occurred, the discussion above has drawn primarily on general psychological theories developed largely in Western settings. It is worth making this sociocultural dimension more explicit. Collectivist sociocultural norms—which can emphasize family harmony, relational obligation, and reluctance to disclose relationship difficulties outside the family—have been associated, across a large cross-national analysis, with patterns of intimate partner violence and with women's mental health outcomes in ways that differ from more individualist contexts [41]. Read against this backdrop, KIJ's relative reticence in directly verbalizing distress, and both participants' delay in recognizing or acting on the toxicity of their relationships, may plausibly be shaped not only by individual psychological processes but also by broader cultural expectations around relational endurance and emotional restraint that are more pronounced in collectivist settings such as Indonesia. This interpretation remains tentative, since sociocultural factors were not directly assessed in this study, but it points to a dimension worth foregrounding in future research.

Synthesis: Toxic Relationships as a Process, Not a Static Condition

Taken together, the findings of this study are consistent with understanding toxic relationships at least as experienced by these two participants—as unfolding through a dynamic, multi-stage process: the escalation of problematic behavior, erosion of self-concept, entrapment (interpretable, tentatively, through the lens of trauma bonding), and a turning point of awareness that becomes most fully articulated after the relationship ends. This proposed sequence is offered as an interpretive conceptual model emerging from these two idiographic cases, not as an empirically established or universal developmental pathway, and its transferability to other individuals or contexts remains an open question for future research. What this study adds beyond prior literature—which has largely relied on quantitative or cross-sectional designs—is a close, idiographic account of how escalation, self-erosion, entrapment, and post-relationship awareness may be subjectively lived and made sense of, including the observation that the path toward distress can differ meaningfully between individuals (KIJ, through apparent emotional suppression and delayed awareness; RID, through concurrent awareness constrained by continued attachment) even as both experiences converge on a similar core of psychological entrapment. This depth of meaning, grounded in participants' own accounts, complements the quantitative and aggregate literature that has so far dominated research on toxic relationships.

4. CONCLUSION

This study found that KIJ's and RID's experiences of a toxic relationship followed a broadly similar underlying pattern: a gradual escalation of harmful partner behavior, an

erosion of self-concept that extended beyond momentary distress, a mechanism of psychological entrapment in which awareness of harm did not straightforwardly translate into the ability to leave, and a process of critical awareness and self-reconstruction that became most fully articulated after the relationship ended. Within this shared pattern, the two participants' paths differed: KIJ's distress was expressed more through an informant's observations than through her own direct account, and her critical awareness emerged only in retrospect, whereas RID was able to articulate her distress more directly while still in the relationship, even though this awareness did not translate into an immediate ability to leave.

These findings suggest that psychological entrapment in toxic relationships may be usefully understood through the interpretive lenses of attachment theory, stress-and-coping theory, trauma bonding, and Sternberg's triangular theory of love, and that emotional expression and awareness within such relationships can plausibly be shaped by Indonesia's collectivist sociocultural context. Practically, the findings suggest that psychologists, counselors, and relationship-support programs working with young adults may benefit from attending not only to whether a client recognizes a relationship as harmful, but also to the entrapment processes that can keep recognition from translating into action, and from creating space for clients particularly those, like KIJ, whose distress may be under-expressed to voice difficult emotions without judgment. For educators and prevention programs, the findings point to the value of building young adults' capacity to recognize early, non-physical signs of a toxic relationship, such as gradual shifts in communication and possessiveness, before these patterns become entrenched.

As an idiographic study of two cases, these findings describe how these two participants made sense of their own experiences in depth and are not intended to be statistically generalized to all individuals in toxic relationships; their transferability to other people, relationships, or cultural contexts should be assessed by the reader in relation to the particulars of this study rather than assumed. Future research could extend this work by including a more diverse range of participants (for example, varying in gender, age, and relationship type), examining toxic relationships in different relational contexts such as non-heterosexual or long-distance relationships, adopting longitudinal designs to track how awareness and entrapment develop and change over time, and conducting comparative cross-cultural studies to test whether the sociocultural patterns suggested here also appear elsewhere.

In sum, this study contributes an in-depth, idiographic account of how awareness, psychological entrapment, and post-breakup identity reconstruction are subjectively experienced by young adults recovering from toxic relationships, offering a foundation for more contextually grounded prevention and counseling approaches within Indonesian settings.

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