Toxic Relationships and Attachment Styles Among Young Adults: A Qualitative Research

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ABSTRACT

Toxic relationships, characterized by patterns of domination, manipulation, and recurrent conflict, can significantly damage individuals' emotional well-being and shape unhealthy attachment styles. However, research gaps remain regarding how young adults who have experienced toxic romantic relationships reflect on their attachment patterns and how these patterns evolve in subsequent relationships. This research aims to explore the experiences of young adults who have survived toxic relationships and to understand how these experiences influenced their attachment styles and interpersonal communication patterns. Using a qualitative approach with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), data were collected through semi-structured interviews with three informants aged 24–32 years who had ended toxic relationships at least one year prior. The results reveal that all informants initially experienced positive communication and affection with their partners, but later faced controlling, aggressive, or manipulative behaviors that led to insecure attachment styles characterized by fear, dependence, and lack of autonomy. The research concludes that toxic relationships leave a strong impact on attachment styles and negatively affect the victims' mental well-being. However, further analysis of interview data reveals that individuals can develop healthier patterns when they gain awareness and engage in more constructive communication in future relationships. These findings have both theoretical and practical implications to enrich understanding of Attachment Theory in the context of toxic romantic relationships among young adults and offer valuable insights for counselors, therapists, and educators to support survivors in rebuilding secure, healthy interpersonal relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal relationships refer to relationships between two or more individuals established through consistent social interaction. This term can be defined as interpersonal relations between two individuals who are interdependent and engage in patterns of intensive communication (Badawi & Rahadi, 2021). In interpersonal relationships, communication unfolds in a reciprocal and harmonious manner, which is followed by feedback, either in direct interaction or through media (Singgih et al., 2024). Effective interpersonal relationships are characterized by mutual support, trust, openness, and a balanced distribution of roles among the individuals involved (DeVito, 2022).

Through interpersonal communication, individuals can fulfill social needs, share emotions, and establish meaningful bonds with others (Rinne, 2024). In addition, three aspects are required to establish good interpersonal relationships: (1) trust, (2) a supportive attitude, and (3) openness (Nurfadliyah & Maryam, 2024). Hence, the quality of communication within interpersonal relationships greatly influences how healthy and harmonious these relationships are (Kanter et al., 2022). Moreover, interpersonal communication can alter the mindset and behavior of those involved when compared to other communication models (Agustin et al., 2023), making it essential to maintain a high-quality relationship.

However, in reality, not all interpersonal relationships develop positively. In practice, such relationships may become distorted when communication is no longer based on equality, trust, and mutual support but is instead dominated by patterns of domination, manipulation, and recurring conflict. Such circumstances and interpersonal conflicts often serve as the initial trigger for the emergence of unhealthy interpersonal dynamics, commonly referred to as toxic relationships (Praptiningsih et al., 2024). Such phenomena highlight that their quality is not solely determined by their presence, but also by the communicative dynamics and patterns of interaction that unfold within them (Kanter et al., 2022).

A toxic relationship is an unhealthy interpersonal bond marked by the absence of mutual support and the presence of disrespectful, undermining behaviors from one partner (Josephine & Asha, 2023). Toxic relationships often inflict negative impacts, both physically and mentally, on those involved. These relationships are usually marked by repetitive negative behaviors, such as prolonged conflict, emotional manipulation, excessive control, denial of feelings, and even neglect (Solferino & Tessitore, 2021). Ironically, individuals involved in toxic relationships may develop emotional dependence, which in turn enables the abusive partner to maintain exploitative control over the relationship (Solferino & Tessitore, 2021).

Experiencing a toxic relationship does not only cause temporary emotional wounds but also has the potential to shape unhealthy emotional attachment patterns in individuals, known as attachment styles. These styles refer to patterns of emotional bonds formed since childhood and developed through interpersonal experiences, including within romantic relationships (Schrodt et al., 2022). This research will specifically focus on individuals in early adulthood, approximately in their 20s to 30s. According to Santrock (2021), early adulthood is a transitional stage from adolescence to full adulthood, typically covering ages 20s to 30s. During this transitional period, individuals experience significant changes and exploration as they gain greater independence and adult responsibilities (Santrock, 2021). Therefore, this research

focused on young adults because at this age, the human brain has developed sufficiently to enable individuals to better regulate emotions, manage stress, and make decisions (Barkin, 2021).

This research employs a qualitative methodology, specifically Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to deeply explore individuals' lived experiences in toxic relationships and their perceptions of attachment patterns. IPA allows researchers to explore the subjective meaning of personal experiences and how individuals reflect on and interpret these experiences within their own narratives (Smith et al., 2022). The theoretical framework for this research is Attachment Theory, developed by John Bowlby and further refined by Mary Ainsworth as well as Bartholomew & Horowitz, which will be used to analyze attachment patterns emerging in the narratives of toxic relationship survivors. Through this approach, the research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of how damaging relationships leave traces in the form of attachment styles and how these experiences affect the ways individuals build future relationships.

Attachment theory, used as the basis of this research, was originally developed by John Bowlby (Schrodt et al., 2022). Bowlby viewed Attachment Theory as a way to understand how relationships and interactions formed between children and their caregivers can influence their communication and emotional health (Schrodt et al., 2022). This theory then evolved to be applicable in explaining romantic relationships in adulthood or young adults. According to Bartholomew and Horowitz, there are four attachment styles in adults: (1) positive attachment, (2) dismissive attachment, (3) preoccupied attachment, and (4) fearful attachment (Schrodt et al., 2022).

Each attachment style reflects different patterns of communication and relational approaches. According to Schrodt et al. (2022), positive attachment is classified as a secure style, while dismissive, preoccupied, and fearful attachments are considered insecure styles. Individuals with a secure style tend to experience five characteristics: (1) seeking balance and closeness in their relationships, (2) using communication as a tool to build and maintain positive relationships, (3) demonstrating romantic behaviors, engaging in shared activities, and committing to their partners, (4) viewing conflict constructively as an opportunity for growth and problem-solving, also (5) expressing a wide range of emotions in a healthy way (Schrodt et al., 2022). In contrast, individuals with insecure styles often show characteristics such as (1) intense fear of dependency on others, (2) engaging in antisocial behaviors—such as spying, creating destructive conflict, or exerting control—to maintain relationships, (3) perceiving conflict as a threat and becoming defensive, (4) concealing secrets or emotional feelings from their partners, also (5) testing their partner's feelings (Schrodt et al., 2022).

Schrodt et al. (2022) further explain that an individual's attachment style is based on their self-model and model of others. Moreover, even though a person may have a particular attachment style, their patterns of communication with a partner can influence the development or change of that attachment style over time (Schrodt et al., 2022). Therefore, this research will observe how attachment models develop within toxic relationships

experienced by each informant, as well as whether the same attachment patterns persist in subsequent relationships.

This research carries both theoretical and practical significance in the field of communication studies, particularly in the domain of interpersonal communication. Theoretically, this research enriches our understanding of how the experience of a toxic relationship not only causes short-term harm but also influences the formation of emotional attachment style in relationships, and how past relationship communication patterns shape perceptions, expectations, and communication behaviors in later relationships. This research also emphasizes the relevance of attachment theory in the context of young adult relationships. Practically, the findings of this research may serve as a reference for counselors, therapists, and communication practitioners in understanding the communication patterns of toxic relationship survivors. Additionally, this research can help educate the public—especially individuals in young adults—on how to identify the characteristics of toxic relationships, understand their impact on emotional health and future relationships, and build awareness of the importance of healthy communication and secure emotional attachment. In this way, it is hoped that this research will not only make a scientific contribution but also have a social impact by supporting healthier and more empowered interpersonal relationships.

RESEARCH METHOD

To describe the phenomena of toxic relationships experienced by young adults, this research uses a qualitative research method. This method is used because of its ability to represent the views and perspectives of the research informants (Lim, 2025). In this way, all events and thoughts are explained through the real meanings held by the individuals who experience them, rather than through values or interpretations imposed by the researcher (Lim, 2025). Furthermore, this research uses the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, which seeks to understand how individuals perceive certain experiences and the meanings these experiences hold for them (Ruslin et al., 2022).

Data collection in the IPA method was conducted through semi-structured interviews, allowing informants to recall and share their experiences in depth (Ruslin et al., 2022). IPA researchers usually select informants with similar experiences so that these experiences can be explored more thoroughly (Love et al., 2020). Therefore, informants are not chosen randomly but are instead selected based on experience relevant to the research topic.

According to John W. Creswell, qualitative research typically involves between three and ten informants (Haryanto et al., 2022). In this study, three informants were interviewed: Informant 1, a 26-year-old female; Informant 2, a 24-year-old male; and Informant 3, a 32-year-old female. The interviews were conducted periodically from March to June 2025 via online platforms to ensure both the confidentiality and comfort of the informants. During the interviews, the researcher obtained consent from each informant to record their responses, which were then transcribed as data for analysis. The data were subsequently processed using three stages of coding—open coding, axial coding, and selective coding—following qualitative

research methods proposed by Anselm L. Strauss (Alnsour, 2022), in order to identify the attachment styles that emerged based on Attachment Theory.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section describes the results of data coding based on information obtained from the informants. As background, all three informants had previously been in toxic relationships and had ended those relationships for more than one year prior to participating in this research. This time frame was chosen because research by Subramaniam et al. (2024) indicates that individuals who have experienced toxic relationships typically need at least one year to recover, move on, and regain stability.

During the interview, Informant 1 revealed that at the beginning of the relationship, she was able to feel happiness, love, and affection from her partner. According to Informant 1, the communication between them was also very positive, as they frequently exchanged messages, spoke directly, and met in person. In addition, Informant 1 often spent time with her partner going to malls and watching movies. Observing her partner's nonverbal behaviors and verbal expressions, Informant 1 felt that her partner was extremely romantic and perfect. Informant 1 stated:

> *"I could really feel it, and it felt like he was just so perfect. For example, at that time, I had never been seriously ill to the point of being hospitalized before, but when I was in Jakarta I had to be admitted to the hospital. He was so caring—he took me to the hospital, waited there with me, and looked after me. I could really feel it."*

In contrast, Informant 1 was also able to express her love toward her partner, though she was more comfortable doing so verbally rather than nonverbally. This was because Informant 1 felt shy about showing affection through actions if they could be seen or noticed by other people.

However, within the nearly three-year relationship, around the seventh or eighth month, Informant 1's partner began to show toxic behaviors. These ranged from small acts to more severe ones. Whenever the partner felt or saw something that did not meet his expectations, he would become immediately emotional and speak in a raised tone. One example occurred when Informant 1 and her partner were at a mall. The partner discovered that Informant 1 had not added him to the close friends list of her second Instagram account. Informant 1 had actually done this because she often shared happy stories and positive remarks about her partner there and felt embarrassed if he saw such praise. At that moment, Informant 1's partner spontaneously became mad and raised his voice, drawing attention from people around them who witnessed the commotion. Informant 1 even shared:

> *"I was so embarrassed so much that I walked with my back turned to him. We were walking in the same direction, but I turned my body away. I was extremely embarrassed."*

Another toxic behavior carried out by Informant 1's partner involved pulling Informant 1's hair and hitting her head against the car dashboard while in a fit of anger. This sudden act took Informant 1 by surprise, leaving her unable to avoid it. As a result, whenever her partner

was mad, Informant 1 always felt afraid because she would experience both psychological pressure and physical violence. Moreover, these toxic behaviors occurred on a daily basis. Her partner also attempted to exert control by isolating Informant 1 from her friends, driven by intense jealousy. Consequently, Informant 1 ended up having no friends and developed a dependency on her partner, believing that only he was willing to accompany her and always be there for her.

Due to these recurring toxic behaviors, Informant 1 tried to communicate about these issues with her partner. When expressing her discomfort, complaints, or jealousy in the relationship, Informant 1 would speak calmly and reasonably. Her partner was able to listen and respond appropriately. However, when similar discomfort, complaints, or jealousy came from her partner, he usually expressed them aggressively and harshly. According to Informant 1, the conflicts in their relationship did not function constructively, but instead made things even more complicated. Informant 1 explained:

> *"In my opinion, conflicts didn't actually fix the relationship, but just made things worse because he was basically looking for a fight. Things that shouldn't have led to arguments were turned into problems by him, so there was constant conflict."*

Based on the information gathered from Informant 1 and analyzed through the characteristics of the secure style in Attachment Theory, it can be seen that (1) Informant 1 and her partner communicated regularly, also (2) they were able to demonstrate romantic gestures and engage in shared activities. Although Informant 1 was able to express a range of emotions, her partner mostly displayed negative emotions. Moreover, the conflicts that arose were not constructive for the relationship but instead made it increasingly uncomfortable.

Viewed from the characteristics of the insecure style, (1) Informant 1 was highly dependent on her partner due to the control he exercised, which resulted in her lack of friends; (2) her partner initiated many conflicts that were damaging to the relationship; and (3) Informant 1 perceived conflicts as a threat. Informant 1's emotional dependency and fear of losing her partner reflect characteristics of an insecure attachment style, where individuals seek excessive closeness and approval while doubting their own self-worth (Schrodt et al., 2022). The constant need for reassurance, combined with tolerance of abusive control, illustrates how toxic relationship dynamics. Therefore, it can be concluded that the attachment style formed between Informant 1 and her partner can be categorized as an insecure style.

For Informant 2, communication with his partner at the time was also generally positive. While both Informant 2 and his partner were working, they would still update each other via text messages. After work, they would meet simply to have dinner together, and once back home, they would continue to communicate through video calls. According to Informant 2, meeting after work and going on vacations together were routine activities chosen to spend quality time as a couple. Informant 2 also expressed that he could show affection toward his partner, and his partner did the same. When Informant 2 felt exhausted or sick, his partner would provide him with vitamins or medicine. On one occasion, his partner even made a doctor's appointment for Informant 2 without his knowledge because he was unwell but reluctant to seek medical care. This allowed Informant 2 to feel genuine care and concern from

his partner. The attention given by his partner made Informant 2 feel happy and comfortable in the relationship.

However, the relationship between Informant 2 and his partner began to feel toxic when Informant 2 discovered that his partner had been cheating. Informant 2 reported that his partner was caught going out alone with an ex. Initially, Informant 2 forgave this, assuming it was just a casual meeting, especially since his partner had previously flirted with one of her male friends. However, Informant 2 later learned that his partner had returned to cheating with the same ex on six separate occasions. As a result, what began as trust turned into distrust and with Informant 2's partner becoming increasingly defensive. Informant 2 explained:

"At first, we were open and trusted each other. After I found out for the first time she cheated on me, I still trusted her. But she repeated the same behavior again and again, up to six times. When I found out the third and fourth times, I still forgave her, but my feelings were already gone. So from there, there was suspicion, and it turned into her asking for my location and so on, even though she was the one who cheated. Somehow she turned it around, like attacking back to defend herself."

According to Informant 2, he worked in shifts, which sometimes required coming home late at night or early in the morning. This made his partner anxious, then they decided to use the Find My app so his partner could know when Informant 2 had returned home. However, the original purpose of this location tracking shifted into spying every single movement of Informant 2. Consequently, whenever Informant 2 left home or returned, there would be notifications on his partner's phone. Beyond that, Informant 2's partner also had access to his Instagram account on their phone and would become mad if the password was changed or if Informant 2's Find My app was turned off. Yet Informant 2 did not have access to his partner's Instagram, and the partner often deactivated her own Find My app without explanation.

Regarding these behaviors, Informant 2 had repeatedly complained about his partner turning off Find My app and being unfaithful. However, when confronted with these complaints, his partner would become mad, cut off all communication if the discussion was via text or phone, and leave without notice when the topic was discussed directly. As a result, Informant 2 felt that the conflicts only worsened the relationship rather than resolving anything. Moreover, the way his partner responded to conflicts contributed to ongoing and unresolved disputes.

After realizing the toxic pattern in the relationship, Informant 2 attempted to end it, but his partner tried to keep the relationship by threatening self-harm and revenge porn. As a result, Informant 2 was unable to leave the relationship and developed a fear of abandonment. The repeated threats and controlling behavior from Informant 2's partner created emotional strain, leading to increased stress and reduced performance at work.

Eventually, however, his partner did follow through with the revenge porn which damaged Informant 2's relationships with others around him. Given the situation he faced, Informant 2 decided to end the relationship and came to recognize his position as a victim within a toxic relational dynamic. From this series of events, Informant 2 described three phases

in the relationship: a happy phase, an anxious phase, and a threatened phase. Informant 2 stated:

> *"At first I was happy but there were phases. A happy phase, an anxious phase, and then a threatened phase. The happy phase was at the beginning, there were no issues, and we were open with each other. The anxious phase came after catching her cheating several times. The threatened phase was when I couldn't leave but constantly felt threatened."*

When observing the relationship between Informant 2 and his partner based on the characteristics of secure style in Attachment Theory, it is clear that similar to Informant 1, Informant 2 was able to communicate with his partner, demonstrate romantic behaviors, and engage in shared activities. However, based on the characteristics of insecure style, Informant 2's partner (1) monitored and controlled the relationship through the use of the Find My app and Instagram, including threats against Informant 2; (2) perceived conflict as a threat, becoming avoidant and defensive whenever Informant 2 tried to resolve issues; (3) kept secrets from Informant 2 by repeatedly engaging in unfaithful behavior; and (4) tested Informant 2's feelings through flirting with others and multiple cheating.

Informant 2's experience of being monitored, manipulated, and threatened by his partner aligns with an insecure attachment style. This style is characterized by a desire for closeness with one's partner coupled with fear of emotional pressure (Schrodt et al., 2022). His partner's defensive reactions and avoidance of open communication indicate fear of vulnerability, while Informant 2's reluctance to leave the relationship despite experiencing distress reflects emotional dependency and trauma bonding, consistent with insecure attachment style. Therefore, it can be concluded that the attachment style formed between Informant 2 and his partner was an insecure style.

Informant 3 reported having generally good daily communication with her partner, as they engaged in video calls every night. Informant 3 and her partner were also able to express affection toward each other, both verbally and nonverbally. One nonverbal way Informant 3 showed affection was by picking up her partner at the airport whenever needed, even when Informant 3 was spending time with friends, as their relationship was long-distance. Meanwhile, Informant 3's partner demonstrated affection by providing financial support when Informant 3's finances were unstable due to a career transition.

This relationship, which lasted approximately seven years, from the outset lacked any formal status. Informant 3 and her partner never officially defined themselves as a couple, had no anniversary date, and never publicly announced their relationship. Only a few of Informant 3's close friends were aware of it, while none of the partner's friends knew. Informant 3 explained:

> *"If I think about it, we never actually stated that we were dating. We just said we liked each other, but never declared we were in a relationship. So during those seven years, we had no anniversary date. We just kept chatting, helping each other, and went along with it."*

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Although communication between Informant 3 and her partner occurred daily, it was one-sided and controlled. Only the partner was allowed to initiate calls, and Informant 3 admitted never having the guts to call first. Communication could also be cut off for days whenever the partner was busy or mad. This showed that the communication was unequal and placed Informant 3 in a passive and waiting position.

Additionally, throughout the romantic relationship, Informant 3 realized early on that the relationship was toxic because it was extremely private and the partner consistently avoided discussions about marriage. However, Informant 3 remained in denial about the toxic nature of the relationship. In contrast, Informant 3 stayed in the relationship because of feelings of affection and emotional dependence on the partner. This dependence developed because the partner was always present in difficult times and offered financial help, making Informant 3 believe the relationship was worth holding on to.

Whenever Informant 3 tried to express opinions, desires, or discomforts within the relationship, it was difficult because of fear of the partner's reactions, which were often angry, avoidant, or emotionally intimidating and defensive. As a result, Informant 3 suppressed self-expression and became a passive individual in order to avoid conflict. Informant 3 even felt that she could not be herself within the relationship. They explained:

"I even had to gather courage for a month just to bring up marriage because I was so scared. Once, when I asked about it, he just got mad."

Informant 3 also experienced emotional manipulation, such as explosive anger. Although there was no direct physical violence, Informant 3 witnessed the partner's outbursts directed at surrounding objects. This made Informant 3 fearful of the partner's emotional reactions. Informant 3 shared:

"Just because I posted about picking him up at the airport, he got so mad that he hit the car dashboard. We were supposed to go for dinner, but instead we went straight home. I felt so guilty."

Moreover, Informant 3's partner tended to be secretive and avoided transparency. The partner forbade Informant 3 from accessing his phone and did not allow posting about their relationship on social media. Throughout the relationship, Informant 3's partner also refused to introduce Informant 3 to his family or social circle, while Informant 3 had already introduced him to her own parents and relatives. As a result of this relationship, Informant 3 developed emotional dependency, a lack of autonomy, and fear of expressing feelings or conflicts.

Observing the relationship between Informant 3 and her partner reveals several characteristics of an insecure attachment style, including: (1) suppressed emotional expression due to fear of rejection or anger; (2) closed and unequal communication; (3) control over privacy and social relationships; and (4) strong emotional dependence. Even when Informant 3 began to realize that the relationship was unhealthy, she still found it difficult to end things, due to a loss of self-confidence and doubts about whether anyone else could accept her or whether she could form a new relationship. It can be said that the actions of Informant 3's partner caused Informant 3 to lose self-confidence, become overly dependent on the partner,

frequently suppress emotions and refrain from expressing feelings, also ultimately leading to psychological distress.

Therefore, based on Attachment Theory, all three informants showed an insecure attachment style within the toxic relationships they experienced. As previously stated by Schrodt et al. (2022), attachment style is formed through a combination of one's self-model and the model of others. Thus, even if an individual has a positive self-model, if the other individual involved in the relationship holds a negative self-model, the resulting attachment style may become insecure and vice versa.

Beyond the immediate relationship dynamics, all informants experienced enduring emotional and psychological consequences that shaped their interpersonal perceptions. Feelings of fear, guilt, and self-blame persisted even after the relationships ended. For instance, informants reported hypervigilance in new relationships, difficulty trusting partners, and occasional emotional withdrawal—symptoms commonly associated with relational trauma (Carvalho et al., 2022). These emotional residues indicate that toxic relationships may produce long-term effects similar to post-traumatic stress, influencing how individuals regulate emotions and approach intimacy in the future.

Thus, the informants learned from their experiences to better understand and love themselves before finding a new partner. Through this process, in their subsequent relationships, the informants were no longer involved in toxic relationships because they had become aware of various toxic behaviors that should not exist in a healthy relationship. By staying alert to such patterns and taking steps to address or end them when they arise, the informants are now in relationships defined by secure attachment.

Therefore, according to the informants, it is important to leave such relationships and also no longer tolerate the same harmful and toxic behaviors in future relationships by engaging in more active and open communication. As a result, the informants' self-models shifted from previously negative to positive, and they were able to find current partners who also possessed positive self-models, leading to the development of secure attachment. This aligns with Schrodt's et al. (2022) view that attachment styles formed within a relationship can change and develop over time, depending on the self-models of the individuals involved.

CONCLUSION

From this research, it can be concluded that the experience of being in a toxic relationship has a significant impact on the establishment of emotional attachment styles among young adults in dating relationships. All three informants demonstrated that unhealthy patterns of communication, imbalanced expressions of affection, domination and control by their partners, as well as the inability to voice personal feelings and needs were the main characteristics of the unhealthy relationships they experienced. The findings also indicate that toxic relationships do not only shape insecure attachment patterns—such as preoccupied, fearful, or dismissive attachment—but also affect the psychological well-being of the individuals involved. Prolonged exposure to emotional manipulation, coercive control,

jealousy, and threats created emotional strain that led to heightened anxiety, stress, and self-doubt during the relationship

Nevertheless, these experiences did not entirely result in lasting negative consequences for future relationships. All three informants were able to end their toxic relationships, engage in deep reflection, and build new awareness of their personal boundaries and self-worth. This allowed them to develop the potential for forming healthier attachment styles in subsequent relationships. This finding supports previous research with revealed that attachment style is dynamic and can change over time through interpersonal experiences, especially when individuals encounter partners with positive self-models and positive models of others. Therefore, this research not only illustrates how emotional wounds can be formed through toxic relationships, but also highlights the human capacity to grow, recover, and develop more secure attachment styles through reflective communication processes and supportive relationships.

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