

# THE EXPERIENCES OF MALE ADOLESCENTS WHO HAVE BEEN IN A TOXIC RELATIONSHIP

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## **PENGALAMAN REMAJA LELAKI YANG PERNAH MENJADI KORBAN DALAM TOXIC RELATIONSHIP**

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### **Abstrak**

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman remaja laki-laki dalam hubungan pacaran yang tidak sehat (toxic) dan pertimbangan mereka untuk meninggalkan hubungan tersebut. Tidak seperti persepsi pada umumnya, perempuan juga dapat menjadi pelaku kekerasan dalam relasi, yang berdampak signifikan pada korban laki-laki. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi kualitatif, peneliti menganalisis data dari lima remaja laki-laki di Bali yang mengalami relasi pacaran tidak sehat selama masa SMA. Data diolah menggunakan Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), yang mengungkap lima tema utama: 1) perjalanan hubungan; 2) peran keluarga; 3) bentuk perilaku tidak sehat (toxic) pasangan; 4) hal yang memengaruhi keputusan untuk bertahan atau meninggalkan pasangan; dan 5) respons psikologis. Temuan-temuan ini menyoroti dinamika kompleks dari relasi pacaran tidak sehat yang melibatkan remaja laki-laki.

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the experiences of male adolescents in toxic relationships and their considerations for leaving such relationships. Contrary to common perceptions, females can also exhibit toxic behaviors, significantly affecting male victims. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, researchers analyzed data from five male adolescents in Bali who experienced toxic relationships during high school. The data were processed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), revealing five main themes: 1) the journey of the relationship; 2) the role of family; 3) forms of toxic partner behavior; 4) factors influencing decisions to stay or leave; and 5) psychological responses. These findings highlight the complex dynamics of toxic relationships involving male adolescents.

**Keywords:** adolescent, dating experience, male adolescent, toxic relationship

### **Impacts and Implication in the Indigenous Context**

From an indigenous standpoint, relationships are often viewed as interconnected with broader familial and societal contexts. In many indigenous cultures, the emphasis lies not only on the individual but also on communal well-being. In this cultural framework, male victims may encounter unique challenges due to prevailing expectations pertaining masculinity and emotional resilience. Moreover, indigenous perspectives challenge gender stereotypes and acknowledge the complexities of power dynamics in relationships. By acknowledging that both males and females can exhibit toxic behaviors, indigenous approaches encourage a more nuanced understanding of interpersonal dynamics.

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## INTRODUCTION

Healthy dating relationships have many benefits for adolescents, such as providing motivation and emotional support so that they can thrive in life. In contrast to a healthy dating relationship, a toxic relationship is a destructive attachment that can cause damage not only to the individuals involved but also their relationships with others (Nabila et al., 2021). Toxic relationships can occur when there is violence or dominance committed by one side in the relationship, causing their partner to feel pressured and uncomfortable (Zaka, 2022). The common perception that only males exhibit toxic traits in relationships has become a norm, as with the “*he’s a red flag, but red is my favorite color*” trend on social media that is constantly used by adolescents (Goda, 2021; Ortiz, 2022). These beliefs could also originate from gender stereotypes, where males are taught to be dominant and view toxic behavior as a means of having more power over women (Isaacs, 2022). The issue of man with this perspective is that it can put women in harm’s way, as aggressive behavior can be frightening and may escalate into violence if the man gets carried away.

However, it is also possible that a male in a toxic relationship is a victim of his partner's toxic behavior. Out of nine studies set in Indonesia and abroad on toxic relationships, researchers found seven studies focused on female participants, and only two studies included both male and female participants (Amanda & Mansoer, 2021; Dosil et al., 2020; Fajrina, 2017; Korkmaz & Överlien, 2020; Kuo et al., 2021; Marita & Rahmasari, 2021; Natasya & Susilawati, 2020; Praptiningsih & Putra., 2021; Rahayu & Qodariah, 2019). It is an evidence that research on toxic relationships appears to predominantly involve female adolescent participants. This can be explained by Ratnasari and Suleeman (2017) in their study results, which suggest that there are differences in expressive suppression between male and female adolescents. Males tend to bottle up emotion and inhibit excessive emotional responses, even though doing so does not actually help reduce those emotions.

According to the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey in the US (Basile et al., 2022), more than 26% of females and over 15% of males first experienced toxic relationships (including sexual or physical violence and/or stalking) before the age of 18. In light of these findings, researchers conducted a preliminary research study on male adolescents in Bali who had experienced dating while in high school. The results of the preliminary study showed that nine out of 51 respondents (17.65%) had experienced sexual violence in dating, 29 out of 51 respondents (56.86%) had experienced physical violence in dating, 46 out of 51 respondents (90.20%) had experienced psychological aggression, and 20 out of 51 respondents (39.22%) had been victims of stalking. These

data indicate that the phenomenon of dating violence that triggers toxic relationships is still common in Bali.

Based on previous research, toxic relationships are primarily examined from the perspective of female adolescent victims. However, this does not exclude the possibility that male adolescents may also experience toxic relationships, a topic that remains understudied, particularly in the Indonesian context. In patriarchal cultures like Indonesia, men's experiences in romantic relationships tend to be overlooked, as they are often perceived as the dominant party (Himawan, 2022). This contributes to the lack of academic discourse on how young men navigate relational challenges, including toxic dynamics. Therefore, this study aims to explore how male adolescents experience toxic relationships and their considerations when deciding to leave them.

The distinction of this study lies in its focus on Balinese male adolescents who have experienced toxic relationships while in high school. Previous research on romantic relationships has often framed them within dyadic interactions (Oriña et al., 2011; Stoeber, 2012; Verger & Duymedjian, 2020), whereas this study situates toxic relationships within a broader interconnected network, including family, parents, and peers. Recognizing the importance of cultural sensitivity, this research aligns with the call for alternative approaches in understanding Indonesian men's romantic experiences (Himawan, 2022). This study also contributes to educating adolescents on identifying toxic behaviors and guiding parents in establishing healthy dating boundaries for their children.

## **METHODS**

### ***Design***

This research uses qualitative research methods with a phenomenological approach. The purpose of qualitative research is to explore a complex series of factors surrounding the main concept or phenomenon and explore or reveal the various perspectives or meanings respondents hold regarding the concept or phenomenon in question (Supratiknya, 2015). Herdiansyah (2014) argues that the essence of qualitative research, which distinguishes it from other research methods, is its focus on understanding what other people feel, grasping the mindset and point of view of others, and comprehending a central phenomenon based on the point of view of a group of people or a specific community in a natural setting. Phenomenology emphasizes the need for researchers to *epoche* or confine all assumptions, prejudices, and theories to obtain objective research results (Kahija, 2017). In this study, researchers chose to use the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach with individual units of analysis.

## ***Participants***

The inclusion criteria for participants in this study were: 1) male adolescents, 2) have had a toxic relationship while in high school (by experiencing one/or more of the following: physical violence, sexual violence, psychological aggression, or stalking), 3) have terminated the toxic relationship, and 4) have been in a relationship for at least six months.

This study involved five male adolescents between the ages of 17 and 20 who had experienced toxic relationships when they were in high school. The first respondent is DA, a 19-year-old male teenager who was in his third semester at a public university in Bali by the time the study was conducted. DA started dating when he was 16 years old, while in grade X of high school. His last dating relationship was his second dating relationship, and he had been in it for two years before finally breaking up with his partner. DA began to realize that he was in a toxic relationship in the last six months of the relationship.

The second respondent is JV, a 17-year-old male who was in grade XII at a public high school in Denpasar, Bali, by the time of interview. JV was in his tenth relationship. JV has never encountered toxic behavior from partners in previous dating relationships. JV started his last dating relationship when he was 17 years old, in grade XI of high school. The relationship lasted more than seven months until JV finally decided to leave that toxic relationship.

The third respondent is NR, an 18-year-old male and a first-semester freshman at a public university in Bali. NR had a toxic relationship in his third dating relationship. NR started dating when he was 17 years old, in the XI grade of high school. The relationship lasted for 1 year until NR decided to break up. NR encountered many problems during his last dating relationship, both with his partner and his partner's ex.

The fourth respondent is AW, a 20-year-old male who is an alumnus of one of the public high schools in Denpasar, Bali. AW is in his fifth semester of an undergraduate program at a well-known university. AW dated when he was 17 years old in grade XI of high school. His last dating relationship was his second one, and he had been in it for 2 years before finally deciding to leave. During the 2 years of dating, AW underwent a discreet relationship due to family factors from the couple.

The fifth respondent is BM, a 19-year-old male and a first-semester freshman at a public university in Bali. BM first dated when he was 18 years old, in grade XII of high school. BM had a toxic relationship in his first dating relationship. BM had a long-distance relationship with his partner until he finally decided to break up in the sixth month of dating. Table 1 shows the participants' demographics and dating timeline overview.

Table 1.

*Participant Demographic Profiles*

Identity	Respondent I	Respondent II	Respondent III	Respondent IV	Respondent V
Respondent Code	DA	JV	NR	AW	BM
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Male	Male
Region of Origin	Denpasar, Bali	Denpasar, Bali	Denpasar, Bali	Gianyar, Bali	Denpasar, Bali
Current age	19	17	18	20	19
Current education	Third Semester Undergrad	Grade XII High school students	First Semester Undergrad	Fifth Semester Undergrad	First Semester Undergrad
Early dating age	16	17	17	17	18
Early dating education	Grade X High school students	Grade XI High school students	Grade XI High school students	Grade XI High school students	Grade XII High school students
Length of dating time	2 years	7,5 months	1 year	2 years	6 months

***Procedure***

We first screened the five respondents through the spreadsheets of preliminary study Google Forms data results that were distributed on social media from May until November 2022. This was intended to find respondents who fit the research criteria. Before initiating the interview, we provided an informed consent sheet that required signing by the respondent to take part in the interview process. The study also included a statement informing respondents that if they experienced any signs of trauma during the interview process, they could access mental health support and resources using the contact details provided in the information sheet. Furthermore, we explained the purpose of the study, rights and involvement of respondents, and the responsibility of researchers regarding the research data obtained. We built rapport with the respondents to create a comfortable atmosphere for the respondents during the interview process, which can be in the form of questions related to the respondents' recent circumstances and activities. Interview was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, was recorded, and respondents were asked for their consent to record the interview.

We conducted each interview using a set of predetermined questions, accompanied by probing techniques to further explore respondents' answers. Once sufficient information was obtained, we concluded the session by thanking the respondent and confirming their willingness to participate in potential follow-up interviews. Immediately after each interview, we wrote detailed field notes to document observations and reflections. The duration of the interviews varied, typically ranging from approximately 40 minutes to more than one hour. Data collection was conducted over a three-month period from September to December 2022.

***Interview Schedule***

The data collection technique commonly used in phenomenological research is interviews, and the most common form of interview used is semi-structured (Kahija, 2017). The data collection

process in this study was carried out through interviews. Before conducting the data collection process, we first compiled an interview guideline according to the research focus and supporting information needed to answer research questions. The questions used in the interviews were open-ended questions, which gave the respondents flexibility in answering the questions asked. Examples of the interview questions included “*When and how were you realized that you were in a toxic relationship?*”, “*What did you feel when you were in such a relationship?*”, “*At that time what made you stay in the relationship?*”, “*What drove you to leave the relationship?*”, “*How did you feel after the relationship ended?*”.

### ***Analysis Strategies***

This study used a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. The data analysis process used the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) technique. IPA emphasizes understanding the meaning given by respondents to their life experiences. In IPA, there is a double-hermeneutic or double interpretation, such as the researcher’s interpretation of the respondents’ interpretation of the experiences (Kahija, 2017). The five stages of analysis were: 1) reading and re-reading, 2) adding comments to the transcript (initial noting), 3) eliciting emergent themes, 4) generating superordinate themes for each respondent, and 5) uncovering superordinate themes between respondents.

*Reading and re-reading.* The first stage of analysis begins with reading and re-reading the transcripts that have been made. The first reading is a skimming read, we look for the general or main ideas from the factual material. This is followed by the second reading, which is previewing while noting sentences that need to be reviewed, and the third reading is active reading. By reading the transcripts many times, we can go deeper into the original data obtained and view the respondents’ phenomenon holistically. We can see that each respondent's experience is unique and must be understood individually.

*Adding comments to the transcript (initial noting).* After reading and internalizing the content of the transcripts, we conducted initial noting by providing initial comments or notes on each respondent’s transcript file. Exploratory comments contain the gist of the transcript and our interpretation of what the respondent said in the transcript. The next process involved forming a three-column table consisting of original transcripts, exploratory comments, and emergent themes. All transcripts that had been given preliminary comments or notes were entered into the exploratory comments table that had been created. One exploratory comment corresponds to one original transcript.

*Eliciting emergent themes.* After adding the exploratory comments, we re-read the comments to come up with emergent themes. Emergent themes can take the form of phrases or words resulting from our reflection on the exploratory comments. The selection of word groups in emergent themes is subjective but still shows conformity with the exploratory comments rooted in the transcripts. The emergent themes obtained for each respondent were entered into a three-column table that had been made previously.

*Generating superordinate themes for each respondent.* The stage of formulating superordinate themes is done by collecting similar emergent themes. The superordinate theme is a theme whose position is above the emergent themes and accommodates several emergent themes. The formation of superordinate themes can be done in various ways. In this study, we first made a list of emergent themes for each respondent and printed it on A4 paper. After that, we marked the emergent themes that could be categorized into one superordinate theme. The emergent themes selected were themes that were relevant to the research questions. The formulation of superordinate themes was carried out and completed by one respondent first before moving on to the files of other respondents.

*Uncovering superordinate themes between respondents.* When all respondents' data has been analyzed, the researcher will look for patterns or intertwining themes obtained from all respondents. Each respondent's experience is individual and unique. However, the formulation of themes still needs to be continued to see how one respondent's experiences can relate to other respondents' experiences. This process will form superordinate themes between respondents.

### ***Authors Positionality***

We approach this research from complementary perspectives. As the first author, a psychology graduate with personal experience in a toxic relationship, I recognize how power dynamics and emotional abuse can significantly impact psychological well-being. This positionality enables me to critically engage with the narratives of male victims, identifying both the similarities and unique challenges they encounter compared to female victims. The co-author, a faculty member specializing in psychology, contributes from an academic standpoint, highlighting the necessity of including male victimization within psychological discourse. Her extensive background in psychological research and expertise in interpersonal relationships provides a structured framework for examining how societal norms shape the recognition and responses to male victims of toxic relationships.

## RESULTS

This research found that there are five main themes in the experiences of male adolescents during and after toxic relationships, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

*Main Theme and Superordinate Theme*

Main Theme	Superordinate Theme
The Journey of The Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Beginning of the Relationship</li> <li>- Appearance of Toxic Behavior During the Relationship</li> <li>- Post-relationship Experience</li> </ul>
The Role of Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Role of Family During Relationship</li> </ul>
Forms of Toxic Partner Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social Restraint</li> <li>- Psychological Aggression</li> <li>- Physical Violence</li> <li>- No Behavioral Change from Partner</li> <li>- Lying and Cheating Issues in the Relationship</li> </ul>
Things That Influence Respondent's Decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reasons to Start a Relationship</li> <li>- Reasons to Stay in a Toxic Relationship</li> <li>- Reasons for Breaking Up</li> </ul>
Psychological Responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Psychological Response During the Relationship</li> <li>- Post-breakup Psychological Response</li> </ul>

Participant responses were coded using the format 'VB\_AW\_01\_214-219,' where 'VB' stands for Verbatim, 'AW' is a pseudonym for the participant, '01' indicates the interview session number, and '214-219' represents the line numbers of the excerpt in the verbatim transcript. This coding system ensured respondent anonymity while allowing for accurate referencing of their responses.

### *The Journey of The Relationship*

The first main theme discusses the beginning of the respondents' relationship, followed by the emergence of toxic behavior from the partner during the relationship, and ends with the respondents' experience after breaking up.

### *The Beginning of the Relationship*

Five respondents in this study started the relationship when they were in high school, with an age range of 16 to 18 years old. Respondents JV, NR, and AW started their relationships in their second year in high school when they were 17 years old. Regarding the beginning of the relationship, we found that the five respondents had different dating relationship backgrounds. Respondents NR and AW stated that they were in a toxic relationship in their third dating relationship. Whereas DA was in his second dating relationship, JV was in his tenth, and BM was in his first relationship.



### *Appearance of Toxic Behavior During the Relationship*

After undergoing a dating relationship, the respondents felt they experienced a toxic relationship when they entered the third month of the first year of dating. We found that respondents began to get unpleasant behavior from their partners in the middle of the relationship, where respondents were in a relationship for 6 months to 2 years of dating. DA, AW, and BM explained that communication in the relationship worsened from the middle to the end of the relationship. In contrast to the previous three respondents, NR explained that his partner (female) was still in contact with her ex (male) during her relationship with the respondent. When confronted by the respondent, the partner engaged in gaslighting manipulation and brought up the false accusation that the respondent had cheated on her before. The accusation and manipulation by the partner made the respondent forgive the partner's behavior and maintain the relationship at that time. Furthermore, Respondent JV noted that by the third month of dating, his partner frequently requested a breakup over minor issues. In the fifth month, JV explained that his partner started to be demanding, asking to be picked up and dropped off at her house, getting angry if her demands were not met, and dared to physically abuse the respondent. After that, JV explained that in the sixth month of dating, his partner restricted the respondent from his environment, especially from his classmates. Finally, in the seventh month, the respondent felt fed up with his partner's toxic behavior and decided to leave the relationship.

*“After that, in the seventh month, it’s like—I started to feel exhausted with her constant controlling behavior over my life. I even began to think, comparing her to my mom, like—‘Even my mom isn’t as overprotective as she is.’ I mean, we’re just dating, still in high school, but she has the nerve to act like this... [...] She often pinches me, pulls my hair, or slaps me—it’s become normal for her” (VB\_JV\_01\_178-190).*

### *Post-Relationship Experience*

Respondent AW only realized that he had been in a toxic relationship after successfully leaving and breaking up with his partner. Furthermore, respondent DA was only able to fully move on from his partner one year after the breakup.

*“[...] so we had broken up, but it took about a year to really, fully move on. Because before that, I kept trying to remind myself of her. After the breakup... after we broke up, it’s like I still couldn’t let go of her in my mind. I still kept wanting to look for her. So, to really feel free, it probably took a full year.” (VB\_DA\_02\_154-160).*

### *The Role of Family*

During their relationships, all five respondents stated that their families supported and approved of their relationships. This makes the respondents feel comfortable sharing their story and seeking advice from their family members. However, respondent AW received a prohibition from his

partner's family to be in a dating relationship. This caused AW and his partner's relationship had to be kept secret and not made public.

*“Eh, my family does approve of the relationship. Well, but, her family... that's the problem. She- her family is the problem. The problem is that her family is quite strict, like tough, quite harsh, so like- the relationship between a girl and a boy is something that is somewhat forbidden.” (VB\_AW\_01\_214-219).*

### **Forms of Toxic Partner Behavior**

The following sections will explore various manifestations of toxic partner behavior, including social restraint, psychological aggression, and physical violence, no behavioral change from partner, and lying and cheating issues in the relationship.

#### *Social Restraint*

During the relationship, some of the toxic behaviors that emerged from the partners, based on the respondents' statements, included excessive jealousy, restrictions of interaction on social media, friendship limitations, and personal interference. JV, NR, and BM stated that their partners restricted them from making friends, either with friends of the opposite sex, classmates, or their seatmates. Their partners tend to be overly jealous and enforce social restraint on their peers. According to JV and NR, their partners blocked and unfollowed their friends from Instagram without their permission. Furthermore, JV explained that he was constantly required to post photos of their partners on social media to show the public that they were still dating.

*“At the end of 12th grade... there were a lot of issues with my classmates because of her... Like, I wasn't allowed to make friends... I was basically isolated by her... even the guys were treated the same way by her. That's why, back when we were in 12th grade, everyone started avoiding me. My classmates distanced themselves from me... At one point, even my desk mate wanted to switch seats with me because of my girlfriend.” (VB\_JV\_01\_588-594).*

#### *Psychological Aggression*

There was psychological aggression from the partner, both verbal and non-verbal aggression, perpetrated on the respondents. Verbal aggression included demanding, insinuating, and degrading the respondents. Meanwhile, the non-verbal aggression that was found was demands for respondents to be sensitive and know their partner's wishes without the need to say it, and the absence of their partner's efforts to maintain good communication in the relationship. JV, NR, AW, and BM explained that their partners demanded that they be sensitive and aware of their partner's wishes on their own. Partners tend to remain silent and wait for respondents to realize what they want. However, partners

will get angry when respondents fail to guess and realize their hidden desires. Respondents are always the individuals in the relationship who initiate to go out with their partners or take the initiative to ask how their partners are doing first. BM added that his partner would get angry when he did not initiate the chat, even though, according to BM, dating relationships should be reciprocal, and it is not always the male party who has to keep taking the initiative. “[...] *She gets sulky for no reason but wants to be understood, like, I was supposed to realize what the problem is by myself.*” (VB\_NR\_01\_726-728).

*“[...] For example, when she seems tired, I can tell from the way she talks. Maybe she just had a lot of assignments from college or something. So I ask her, ‘What’s wrong?’ She says, ‘Nothing, it’s fine.’ But then she’s like, ‘Why aren’t you asking me again?’ And I’m thinking, ‘I already asked, and you said it’s fine.’ and then she ends up getting mad at me.”* (VB\_BM\_01\_756-762).

*“There was a time when she asked me to buy her doll. We went out to a store, and there was this cow doll. I said to her, ‘Just take it and bring it to the cashier, I’ll pay for it later.’ So while we were at the store, I thought she didn’t want it, like- she didn’t like the doll because she didn’t bring it to the cashier. Then when we got home, she said, ‘Why didn’t you buy me that doll? I wanted it... You should have been more sensitive.’”* (VB\_JV\_01\_770-786).

### *Physical Violence*

Based on the explanations of JV and NR, their partners had committed physical violence, such as grabbing, slapping, pinching, and pushing the respondents during the relationship. “[...] *it was direct, grabbed slapped like that... in front of... often in school... yes more precisely in front of her friends... right because I often play in her class...*” (VB\_JV\_01\_347-352). “*No wounds, just redness ... on the cheek... and my hand, it was quite bad... like... it hurts...*” (VB\_JV\_01\_553-555).

*“She pushed me- that’s what happened at that time, after the fight, she was still - it looked like she was still cheering on her ex, then I thought, what’s wrong? I was pushed, so I felt like why is she siding on him that much...”* (VB\_NR\_01\_669-676).

### *No Behavioral Change from Partner*

Based on the explanations of AW, BM, and JV, after trying to talk about issues in the relationship and the partner's toxic behavior, the partner still did not change their behavior. BM and JV added that the partner only changed their behavior for a few days before finally repeating the same behavior again.

### *Lying and Cheating Issues in the Relationship*

NR stated that her partner (female) was still close to her ex (male) and lied when confronted with chat evidence obtained by the respondent. Furthermore, NR stated that the partner showed off her intimacy on social media with another man a few days after breaking up with the respondent. In relation to NR, respondents DA and BM also stated that their partner had a new boyfriend after a few days of breaking up with them.

### ***Things That Influence Respondents' Decisions***

This section discusses the various reasons individuals may choose to start a relationship, as well as the complex factors that influence their decisions to stay in a toxic relationship or to break up.

#### *Reasons to Start a Relationship*

Adolescents start dating relationships for various reasons; there are underlying factors such as external influences and internal desires. DA and NR stated that they initially started dating on a whim and because of peer pressure. Meanwhile, JV, AW, and BM started dating because they were attracted to and liked their partners. JV explained that he already had feelings of affection for his partner, so he finally dared to start a more serious dating relationship. Apart from that, JV also explained that the reason he started dating was so that his partner could provide encouragement and motivation to study harder. Respondent AW explained that he was dating because he liked his partner but had not thought of committing to the relationship. BM further explained that he was attracted to his partner's attentive nature before they started dating.

#### *Reasons to Stay in a Toxic Relationship*

During the toxic relationship, there were times when respondents made the decision to stay in the relationship despite knowing their partner's toxic behavior. DA stated that the reason he stayed was because he had introduced his partner to his family. JV stated that he stayed in the toxic relationship because of support and advice from peers. Respondent NR also received advice from his peers but decided to follow his heart and stay in the relationship because he still loved his partner. In addition, AW explained that he stayed in the relationship because he cared about his relationship that had been going on for two years.

#### *Reasons for Breaking Up*

The five respondents that we interviewed have successfully left the toxic relationship. Based on the explanations from JV, NR, and AW, the respondents decided to leave the relationship because they could not stand the toxic nature and behavior of their partners. JV explained that the reason she

broke up was because she was tired of responding to her partner's unchanging behavior. Meanwhile, DA explained that the reason for his breakup with his partner was because she already had a new partner and was seeing another man.

### ***Psychological Responses***

This section will explore the psychological responses that occur during the relationship and the effects that manifest after a breakup.

#### ***Psychological Response During the Relationship***

Being in a toxic relationship has different impacts on each individual. Based on the explanations from DA, JV, NR, and BM, we found that the respondents felt helpless and discouraged and tended to succumb when getting toxic treatment from their partners. JV added that he felt that he was not being himself because he always held back during his relationship with his partner. The psychological response felt by JV also had an impact on his physique, where JV felt physically weaker during the relationship because he often stayed up late and was prohibited from exercising by his partner. In addition, based on AW and BM's explanations, it is known that the respondents felt stressed and had a lot on their minds during the toxic relationship.

#### ***Post-breakup Psychological Response***

There are differences in the responses of respondents who initiated and decided to leave the relationship with respondents who were dumped by their partners. Based on DA and NR's explanations, we found that respondents who were dumped by their partners still remembered and could not forget their partners after the breakup.

*“In the beginning, obviously I was upset, like that. Like I've fought so hard to maintain the relationship, then all my friends, every time I hang out or something, they ask me about her. That's what made me feel like- I've broken up but I didn't dare to tell them at that time. Then it's like that, that's what was difficult at first, but as time goes on, I begin to understand that it's good to be separated from people like that.”*  
(VB\_NR\_01\_654-663).

In contrast to the two previous respondents, JV, AW, and BM expressed feeling relieved and free after the breakup. AW and BM also stated that they had no regret about their decision to leave the relationship.

*“It's finished... I'm relieved, I'm free -freed... [...] because it's ... really finished like ... I was thinking ... if it continues ... it will eventually hurt one of us... so”.*  
(VB\_JV\_01\_265-269).

## DISCUSSION

The results reveal five main themes related to experiences during and after toxic relationships. This section will examine the findings of these themes based on theory and previous research.

### *The Journey of The Relationship*

This study indicates that male adolescents who were victims of toxic relationships began dating during middle adolescent age category, ranging from 16 to 18 years old. Santrock (2003) explains that middle adolescence, which refers to the age after 15 years, is characterized by a greater interest in dating than early adolescence. Male adolescents who are victims of toxic relationships tend to experience changes in partner (female) behavior in the middle to late stages of the relationship, in the form of progressively worsening communication in the relationship and the behavior of psychological aggression as well as physical violence. Respondent JV, for instance, received unpleasant behavior from his partner during the third month of dating and received physical violence after five months. Furthermore, respondent DA sensed a change in behavior of her partner after being in a relationship for more than one year.

Haes (2017) suggests that not all victims and perpetrators of violence recognize that they have become victims or perpetrators in toxic relationships, as these acts of violence often interpreted as expressions of affection and love for their partners. This is consistent with the results of the study, which found that respondent AW only realized that he was in a toxic relationship after successfully leaving and breaking up with his partner. This study found that some male adolescents took up to a year to move on and escape from their toxic partners after breaking up. Male adolescents as victims were still remembering their partners after breaking up; their minds could not be separated from their partners, and they were often looking for their partners' whereabouts even though they knew they were in a toxic relationship and were aware of their partner's toxic behavior during dating.

### *The Role of Family*

This research found that families who support adolescent dating relationships and are positive about this phase of adolescents' lives make adolescents more open to sharing their experiences. Open communication between parents and adolescents about dating can directly influence adolescents' dating behavior (Gloria, 2019). Positive parental communication received by adolescents can be seen from how parents condition themselves to be more pleasant to communicate with and the frequency of parents communicating with adolescents about dating (Gloria, 2019).

This study also found that communication between parents and adolescents about dating relationships can significantly influence adolescents' decisions during the relationship. The family, especially parents, play a crucial role in providing advice related to adolescent dating relationships with partners. These results are in line with previous research by Wijaya (2019), which states that the family's role has a direct impact on adolescent dating violence prevention behaviors. Furthermore, the results of previous research by Mardiah et al., (2017) found that the role of the family is highly correlated with the tendency of adolescents to commit violent behavior in dating. Therefore, the study found that male adolescents who have positive communication with their families never retaliate against toxic behaviors committed by partners in relationships.

### ***Forms of Toxic Partner Behavior***

Dating relationships can be considered toxic if they are characterized by behaviors that make individuals feel unhappy during the relationship, such as belittling, lying, restraining, and being unsupportive of their partners (Lamothe & Raypole, 2022). These findings are in line with the results of this study, which found that male adolescents who were victims of toxic relationships received unpleasant treatment from their partners, such as verbal aggression (demanding, insinuating, and belittling), limiting friendships and interactions on social media, being unsupportive, and the absence of their partner's efforts to maintain good communication in the relationship. Puteri et al. (2022) explained that toxic relationships can be physical and emotional, and the results of this study also found that there were toxic partner behaviors in the form of physical violence and psychological aggression. Toxic behavior in the form of physical violence that was found included pulling hair, slapping, pinching, and pushing. In addition to physical violence, this study also found toxic partner behavior in the form of psychological aggression, which consists of verbal and non-verbal aggression.

Furthermore, the results of this study found that the partner used manipulation in the form of gaslighting when the male adolescent as victim confronted the evidence of his partner's closeness with her ex. Gaslighting is one of the manipulation techniques in acts of violence that aims to make the victim question his perceptions and make him insecure to justify the partner's actions (Muflihah & Naqiyah, 2022). This study found that the manipulation carried out by the couple made the male adolescent, as the victim, forgive the partner's behavior and maintain the relationship at that time. This study also found that respondents stayed in the relationship because they wanted to give their partner a chance to change their behavior, but in the end, the partner repeated the same toxic behavior.

In addition to manipulation in the form of gaslighting, this study also found that infidelity may also occur in toxic relationships, in which partners lie to victims and engage with other men.

Furthermore, the female partner remained close to her ex-partner and lied when confronted with chat evidence obtained by the respondents. Some respondents stated that their partners showed off their intimacy on social media with other men a few days after breaking up with them. Based on research by Haes (2017), it is known that infidelity committed by adolescents in the dating stage can be divided into two categories: physical and emotional infidelity. Physical infidelity is characterized by physical contact, such as hugs and kisses with the opposite sex who is not their partner, while emotional infidelity can be in the form of feelings that are owned but not to their partner (Haes, 2017). The results of this study found that respondents were victims of emotional infidelity from their partners, where the partner (female) routinely informed her ex (male) by giving caring messages and showing affection for each other.

### ***Factors That Influence Respondents' Decisions***

This study found that male adolescents started dating relationships for various reasons; there are underlying factors such as encouragement from peers and respondents' internal desires, such as doing it for fun, attraction to partners, feelings of affection, and to motivate and encourage them to study. These results are in line with some of the results from previous research by Santika and Permana (2021), which explains that the reasons individuals date are to get enthusiasm and mood boosts and to be accepted due to environmental influences. The reasons male adolescents are dating related to the exploration of sexuality, such as doing it for fun, can be attributed to Santrock's (2003) view that adolescence is a period of individual life in which psychological exploration occurs to find self-identity.

Male adolescents, as victims of toxic relationships, initially decided to stay in the relationship for various reasons. This research found that respondents endured the toxic relationship because they had introduced their partner to their family. In addition, there is support and advice from peers who suggest staying in the relationship. These results are in line with Khaninah and Widjanarko (2017), who found that adolescents stay in toxic relationships because they are embarrassed when the relationship is known by many people, including friends and family, both from the victim's family and the partner's family. However, in addition to external factors such as family and peers, there are also internal reasons for male adolescents who decide to stay in a toxic relationship, namely because they still love their partner and pity the already long-standing relationship.

Furthermore, the results of previous research by Khaninah and Widjanarko (2017) found that adolescents often persist in dating relationships despite experiencing violence because they believe their partners can change for the better and hope that the relationship can be repaired. This study



corroborates those findings, revealing that male adolescents who were victims of toxic relationships decided to stay in the relationship because they wanted to give their partners the opportunity to change their behavior. Additionally, respondents also expressed feelings of helplessness and discouragement, which made them more susceptible to accepting toxic treatment from their partners. After deciding to stay in a toxic relationship and finding that there was no change from their partner, respondents finally decided to terminate the relationship.

There are several reasons behind the respondents' decision to break up from a toxic relationship. The results of the study found that male adolescents decided to leave toxic relationships because they could not stand the toxic traits and behavior of their partners. There are considerations that have been well thought out by male adolescents before finally deciding to leave their partners. For instance, AW first considered his relationship before finally deciding to break up because he could not stand the impact he felt during the relationship with his partner. The results of this study are in line with the results of research by Sambhara and Cahyanti (2013), which explains that individuals who experience toxic relationships go through a series of stages before making the decision to leave the perpetrator. The internal process that leads each individual to this stage will affect their success in breaking away from the perpetrator (Sambhara & Cahyanti, 2013). However, there are also other reasons male adolescents could leave a toxic relationship, including the fact that their partner has a new lover and is close to another man.

### ***Psychological Responses***

There are various psychological impacts and responses experienced by male adolescents during toxic relationships. JV explained that he felt like he was not being himself because he always held himself back during the relationship with his partner. In addition, male adolescents also feel upset, hurt, uncomfortable, weak, stressed, and have a lot of thoughts while experiencing toxic relationships. Moreover, respondent NR shared that he could not stop crying in front of his partner when he found out that his partner was lying and still in contact with her ex. Maria and Sakti (2021) found that the psychological impact felt by male adolescents who are victims of toxic relationships is a loss of self-confidence, fear of being considered weak as men and loss of motivation to complete academic activities. This previous research is in line with the results of this study, which found that female partners mocked male adolescents when they felt pain after being pinched or slapped. This study also found that male adolescents who initially dated to find motivation to study became discouraged and felt afraid while in a toxic relationship.

Furthermore, this research found that male adolescents who were dumped by their partners still remembered and could not forget their partners after breaking up. Meanwhile, male adolescents who decided to leave the toxic relationship felt relieved and free after the breakup, and there were no regrets in their decision to leave the relationship. NR explained that, at first, it was hard to forget his partner, but over time, he felt lucky to have escaped from his toxic partner. This finding is consistent with research by Aska et al. (2022), who found that after going through the breakup phase, respondents no longer had the desire to get back into a relationship with their ex. On the other hand, there are respondents who stated that the breakup made them learn from every existing condition (Aska et al., 2022). In this regard, respondent BM made his first dating experience a learning experience for his next relationship. BM explained that he was able to find out that there are individuals who have traits like his partner, so that in the future he will be more prepared and not surprised anymore when he meets a partner with similar behavior.

### ***Limitations***

A limitation of this study is that respondents were restricted to heterosexual adolescents, thus not representing homosexual or bisexual populations. Additionally, since the research was conducted exclusively in Bali, future studies should explore other cultures and regions to better understand the phenomenon of toxic relationships among male adolescents.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECCOMENDATIONS**

This study revealed that toxic relationships harm male victims, causing stress and frequent overthinking during the relationship, which negatively impact their physical health. Respondents experienced toxic behaviors from their partners, including social restriction, psychological aggression, physical violence, lying, and cheating. These behaviors intensified the toxicity of the relationship, causing harm to at least one party involved. The decision-making process regarding whether to leave or remain in toxic relationships involves a complex interplay among cultural values, personal experiences, and external pressures. Indigenous perspectives emphasize the importance of communal support, highlighting the role of family, elders, and community networks in guiding individuals and facilitating healing. Respondents who managed to exit their toxic relationships reported feeling relieved, liberated, and grateful.

From a theoretical perspective, existing frameworks addressing toxic relationships could be expanded to include insights into male adolescents as victims. Developing theories that considers

gender-specific experiences, such as the normalization of emotional expression among young men, could deepen our understanding of adolescent relational dynamics and their mental health implications. Moreover, recognizing family, particularly parents, as crucial support systems during adolescent relationship navigation could enrich existing adolescent development theories. Future theoretical studies should explore how family dynamics influence adolescents' comfort in discussing relationship experiences and identifying toxic behaviors, particularly for male adolescents. Additionally, incorporating peer support into intervention models may offer substantial value, highlighting peers' roles in providing early support and guiding affected individuals toward professional help. This integration could significantly enhance theoretical models of adolescent relationship support systems and crisis intervention.

Practical recommendations include encouraging adolescents, particularly young men, to openly communicate their relationship experiences with family members. Schools and youth centers should implement programs to provide workshops on emotional expression and recognizing toxic behaviors. Family counseling initiatives could also strengthen supportive family environments. Further research is recommended to specifically focus on male adolescent victims, including those experiencing sexual violence, to fill gaps in the current understanding of toxic relationships. Additionally, diversifying studies to include different regions and sexual orientations would contribute to a more comprehensive perspective on toxic adolescent relationships.

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## **COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARD**

### ***Ethical Statement***

All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its amendments or with comparable ethical standards. The ethical aspect of this study has been institutionally reviewed. Informed consent has been obtained from all participants in this study.

### ***Conflict of Interest***

The authors declare no competing interests.

### ***Daya Availability***

The datasets used in this study are available from the corresponding author through email.

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