

The phenomenon of toxic masculinity on violence in a romantic relationship status

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ABSTRACT

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Intimate partner violence, particularly when fueled by toxic masculinity, remains a significant issue in Indonesia, where patriarchal social norms dominate societal structures. Toxic masculinity, characterized by traits such as dominance, control, and emotional repression, serves as the foundation for violence in intimate relationships, often justified as an expression of love and care. This study aims to explore the impact of toxic masculinity on relationship violence from the perspective of victims. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed to understand the subjective experiences of five female informants, aged 20-21, who have experienced various forms of violence—verbal, emotional, psychological, and physical—within their romantic relationships. The findings indicate that toxic masculinity is expressed through behaviors such as possessiveness, jealousy, verbal abuse, physical violence, and emotional manipulation. These behaviors are often driven by power imbalances within relationships, shaped by deeply entrenched gender norms. Hegemonic masculinity, which reinforces male dominance over women, was identified as a key factor in justifying such violence. The study emphasizes the critical need for education that challenges toxic masculinity norms and promotes gender equality to reduce the prevalence of relationship violence. The findings provide valuable insights for policy development and intervention strategies, offering recommendations for addressing gender-based violence in Indonesia and promoting a more equitable society.

Keywords: gender-based violence, intimate partner violence (IPV), male dominance, toxic masculinity

INTRODUCTION

Violence against women remains a pervasive issue in Indonesian society, rooted in deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. Men are often viewed as the dominant figures in both public and private spheres, which normalizes male authority and positions women as subordinate. This patriarchal view assigns men leadership roles, reinforcing their power and control over women. In this context, masculinity is linked with dominance, strength, and authority, while women are often seen as passive and dependent. Such social constructs perpetuate behaviors that enable male-perpetrated violence, as men use their power to control and subjugate women. This dynamic is not only socially accepted but also ingrained in cultural norms, making violence against women a tool.

For maintaining male dominance. Studies indicate that these power imbalances contribute to a cycle of abuse, where men justify violent behaviors as a means of asserting their superiority and control over women (Khaninah and Widjanarko, 2016).

Recent reports from the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan, 2022) highlight the alarming increase in cases of gender-based violence. In 2021, there were 459,094 reported cases of violence against women, a sharp rise from 226,062 in 2020. These incidents predominantly occurred in personal relationships, with the most common forms of violence being physical (29.8%), psychological (29.4%), and sexual (28.8%) violence (Komnas Perempuan, 2022). The prevalence of such violence is attributed to deeply entrenched gender norms, where men often feel entitled to assert dominance over women. Such violence leaves victims with profound physical, psychological, and social impacts, including trauma, depression, and social isolation (Fitry & Hayati, 2022; Wessells & Kostelny, 2022).

Existing literature emphasizes the connection between gender roles, masculinity, and relationship violence. Masculine norms, especially those associated with hegemonic masculinity, contribute to an environment where men feel pressure to exert control through violence. Research shows that men who adhere to toxic masculinity often justify violence as a means of asserting their dominance and protecting their perceived masculinity (Dewi & Dewi, 2021; Saleh et al., 2022). This toxic masculinity, characterized by aggression, emotional suppression, and dominance, fosters an environment where violence becomes an acceptable expression of male power (Novalina et al., 2021; Farike et al., 2022). Raewyn Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity further explains how such gender norms are institutionalized, perpetuating male superiority and contributing to violence against women (Zeha, 2022).

Despite the growing body of research on the relationship between masculinity and gender-based violence, a notable gap exists in understanding the victim's perspective on the phenomenon of toxic masculinity in intimate relationships. While much of the literature has focused on the psychological and social impacts of toxic masculinity on men, fewer studies explore how women, especially victims of violence, perceive and respond to this issue. There is also limited exploration of how toxic masculinity specifically influences different forms of intimate partner violence, such as domestic violence, dating violence, and violence perpetrated by ex-partners. This study fills this gap by focusing on the victim's perspective and examining how toxic masculinity affects their experiences and perceptions of violence in relationships.

This study aims to explore the impact of toxic masculinity on relationship violence, focusing on the victim's perspective. The assumption underlying this research is that the perpetuation of rigid gender norms influences men's violent behavior and that toxic masculinity plays a crucial role in justifying such violence. Additionally, it is assumed that women, as victims, perceive and respond to these acts of violence in ways that are shaped by their social and cultural understanding of gender roles.

The findings of this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of how toxic masculinity shapes violence in intimate relationships, offering insights into the psychological, emotional, and social implications for women victims. By focusing on the victim's perspective, this research will provide valuable information for policymakers, practitioners, and advocates working to address gender-based violence in Indonesia. It will also help challenge harmful gender norms and contribute to the development of more effective interventions and preventive measures against relationship violence.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach, which is deemed appropriate for exploring the lived experiences of individuals affected by toxic masculinity within dating violence. The phenomenological method emphasizes understanding the subjective meanings and personal interpretations that individuals assign to their experiences, thus enabling the researcher to capture the emotional and social complexities of interpersonal relationships. A purposive sampling technique was applied to recruit informants who met specific criteria: individuals of any gender, aged 18 years or older, who have been or are currently in a romantic relationship, and who have experienced or are currently experiencing violence within that relationship, whether verbal, emotional, psychological, or physical.

Based on these criteria, five female informants were selected: NJ (21 years old), AP (21 years old), AG (20 years old), RB (21 years old), and RR (21 years old). Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews and document review. Interviews, lasting between 10 to 30 minutes, served as the primary source of data and allowed participants to openly share their personal experiences. Document review was conducted on materials voluntarily provided by the informants, such as personal notes or digital communication records, to support and enrich the interview data.

To ensure the validity of the data, both source triangulation and theoretical triangulation were employed. Source triangulation involved comparing information across informants and data types (interviews and documents). Theoretical triangulation utilized three key theoretical frameworks: hegemonic masculinity theory, feminist standpoint theory, and gender theory. Hegemonic masculinity theory (Jewkes et al., 2015) conceptualizes masculinity as a social instrument that legitimizes male dominance, power, and gender inequality. Feminist standpoint theory argues that reality is inseparable from the subject's perspective, and that knowledge is influenced by the values and social positions of those who experience it (Zachra Lukietta & Samatan, 2022). Gender theory, as discussed by Su, Iswary, and Kuswarini (2023), differentiates between nature (biological determinants of gender roles) and nurture (environmental and social constructs), acknowledging that gender is shaped through both ideology and material conditions.

Data analysis was conducted using the Colaizzi method, which involves several key steps: reading the entire descriptions, extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, organizing the meanings into thematic clusters, providing comprehensive descriptions of the phenomenon, identifying the essential structure of the experience, and validating the findings with the informants. Although the method is presented in sequential steps, it allows flexibility to adapt the order according to the analytical process (Fauziah & Atmaja, 2022). Through this rigorous methodological framework, the study seeks to reveal the nuanced and deeply rooted manifestations of toxic masculinity as experienced in intimate partner relationships.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Phenomenon of Toxic Masculinity in Dating Relationships

This study explored manifestations of toxic masculinity in romantic relationships through interviews with five young informants. Thematic analysis revealed five dominant patterns: possessiveness, jealousy, verbal abuse, physical violence, and emotional manipulation. These behaviors are rooted in unequal power dynamics, often justified by traditional gender roles that normalize male dominance and female subordination in intimate contexts. The findings reveal that toxic masculinity is not merely expressed through physical aggression, but more subtly through

controlling behavior, emotional blackmail, and restrictions on social interactions. Such patterns align with broader cultural norms of hegemonic masculinity, in which control, authority, and emotional repression are valorized traits of male identity.

Table 1. Manifestations of toxic masculinity reported by informants in romantic relationships

Informant	Possessiveness	Jealousy	Verbal Abuse	Physical Violence	Emotional Manipulation
NJ	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
AP	Targeted	Yes	Yes	No	Yes (Mild verbal control)
AG	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes (suicidal threats)
RB	Yes	Targeted	Targeted	Yes (Hitting)	No
RR	Self-driven	Yes	No	No	No

Source: Research data

These findings align with contemporary research on adolescent romantic relationships, where cultural scripts often romanticize control and jealousy. Aragón and Lozano (2024) highlight how possessiveness and manipulation are frequently mistaken for expressions of passion and commitment, thus obscuring their harmful and toxic nature. In a systematic review, Treves-Kagan et al. (2020) emphasize that jealousy and perceived infidelity are major catalysts of intimate partner violence (IPV), which is often normalized as an expression of love and care. The experiences shared by AG and AP, who reported verbal degradation and emotional blackmail, illustrate how these toxic behaviors are embedded within hegemonic masculinity. This theory suggests that masculinity, when defined by dominance and control, leads to relational inequalities where both overt and covert abuse become normalized. These personal accounts reflect broader societal issues, showing how patriarchal ideologies and gender norms perpetuate structural violence. At the micro level, these dynamics foster unhealthy relationships, while at the macro level, they reinforce societal acceptance of male dominance and control over women.

Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity provides a comprehensive framework to understand how male dominance over women becomes a central element of male identity. This dominance is often reinforced through tactics such as emotional surveillance, social restriction, and explicit threats. In this context, men assert control by dictating the behavior, emotions, and social interactions of their female partners. This study echoes the work of Cleghorn, Cummings, and County (2024), who discovered that both same-gender and heterosexual relationships can internalize patriarchal norms that perpetuate male power and control. Furthermore, Fontanesi et al. (2024) highlight how certain dark personality traits, such as narcissism and Machiavellianism, predict emotional manipulation and possessiveness in relationships, particularly among young people. These traits are often present in individuals who use emotional manipulation as a means of maintaining dominance. In this regard, toxic masculinity should not be viewed as a collection of isolated behaviors but rather as a culturally sanctioned system that promotes gender-based control. This system normalizes coercion and emotional dependency, ensuring the perpetuation of male superiority and the subjugation of women in intimate relationships.

Relationship Violence

The research findings reveal that all interviewed informants had experienced relationship violence, either in their current or past relationships. The most frequently reported type was verbal violence, followed by physical violence. These violent behaviors were commonly driven by possessive attitudes, jealousy, and poor communication, particularly from male partners who often exercised dominance. Informants indicated that their partners perceived control and possessiveness as a form of affection, though it manifested in harmful behaviors. The presence of toxic masculinity—a cultural belief in aggressive male dominance—was consistently highlighted by informants as a major contributing factor to these violent dynamics. This pattern suggests that relationship violence is not only situational but deeply rooted in unhealthy gender norms and imbalanced relationship power structures. The chart below illustrates the number of informants who experienced different types of relationship violence.

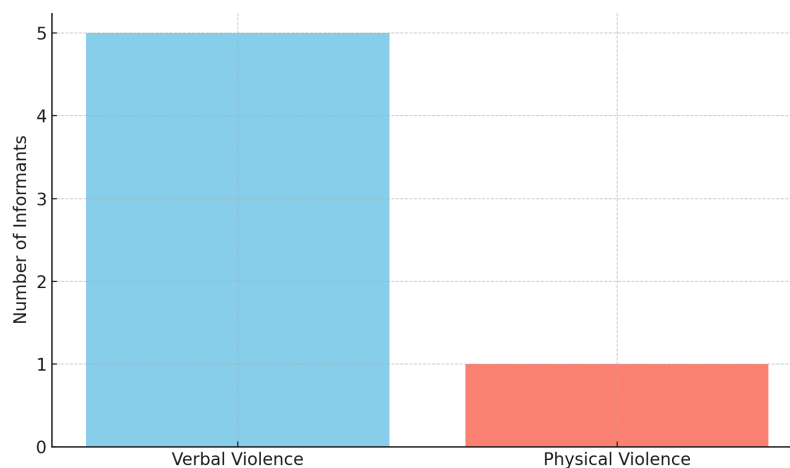


Figure 1. Type of relationship violence experienced by informants

These findings closely align with recent literature on intimate partner violence (IPV). Messerschmidt (2020) emphasizes that toxic masculinity plays a crucial role in reinforcing patriarchal control, which normalizes violence within intimate relationships. In relationships where male dominance prevails and emotional communication is absent, patterns of verbal and physical abuse are more likely to emerge. This study supports previous research that indicates a strong correlation between possessiveness and verbal aggression, particularly in young adult relationships, showing that these abusive dynamics are not confined to specific cultural or geographical contexts. Moreover, hegemonic masculinity provides a framework to understand why men may justify violent behavior as a way to assert control, especially in situations where their authority or security in the relationship is threatened. This need for dominance often stems from deep-rooted insecurities and the pressure to adhere to traditional gender roles. Such behaviors become ingrained, with men often viewing violence as an acceptable method of resolving relational conflicts or maintaining power. Consequently, these findings underline the importance of addressing toxic masculinity as a root cause of IPV across diverse contexts.

The frequent occurrence of intimate partner violence can be attributed to the social conditioning of male dominance and the romanticization of control as a form of love. Jewkes et al. (2022) argue that when power dynamics in relationships are unbalanced, particularly with male partners exerting authority over female counterparts, it creates an environment conducive to

ongoing violence. This power imbalance, often reinforced by patriarchal norms, allows for the normalization of controlling behaviors, which escalate into more severe forms of abuse. Ineffective communication plays a pivotal role in escalating minor disagreements into verbal abuse, as participants frequently reported being threatened or yelled at, often in response to jealousy. These behaviors are routinely accepted as normal in many relationships, reflecting a broader societal failure to provide education on emotional health, conflict resolution, and respectful partnerships. Furthermore, the cultural endorsement of toxic masculinity contributes to a cycle of abuse, as control is perceived as a demonstration of love or commitment. Breaking this cycle requires challenging these harmful dynamics through awareness, education, and the promotion of gender equality. Only by addressing these issues can society hope to reduce the prevalence of intimate partner violence and foster healthier, more equitable relationships..

Relationship Violence Fueled by Toxic Masculinity

This study reveals a consistent and concerning pattern: all informants reported experiencing violence in their romantic relationships caused by toxic masculinity. Toxic masculinity, embedded in cultural norms, manifests through behaviors such as possessiveness, dominance, aggression, and manipulation. These actions stem from societal beliefs that equate masculinity with control, emotional suppression, and power. In romantic relationships, this leads to verbal and physical abuse as men, influenced by these norms, seek to impose control. Informants described these behaviors not as isolated incidents but as continuous patterns intended to maintain male dominance. As a result, victims suffer psychological impacts, including stress, anxiety, and trauma that persist long after the abusive relationship ends. The findings underscore the severe psychological consequences and highlight the urgent need for systemic change.

The study's results are supported by Connell's hegemonic masculinity theory, which explains how societies institutionalize male dominance through cultural expectations (Jewkes et al., 2015). Within this framework, toxic masculinity becomes a dominant script promoting traits like toughness, authority, and emotional detachment. Gomez-López et al. (2019) describe relationship violence as cyclical abuse marked by emotional manipulation, where perpetrators seek to dominate emotionally and psychologically. These behaviors are normalized in many societies, reinforcing patterns of abuse. Rakovec-Felser (2014) found that victims of such violence often suffer from long-term psychological issues, such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which frequently outlast physical injuries and continue to affect victims' well-being and future relationships.

In Indonesia, research by Astutik and Payontri (2022) confirms that cultural norms reinforce male supremacy, fostering an environment where intimate partner violence is not only possible but prevalent. These norms act as a catalyst for toxic masculinity, allowing harmful behavior to continue unchecked. Gender construction theory further explains these patterns. Gurung (2020) argues that gender roles are shaped by society rather than biology. Boys are socialized to exhibit strength and dominance while avoiding emotional expression. When they feel they do not meet these standards, some men exert power in their relationships to compensate, often through control and aggression. Kusuma et al. (2023) emphasize that such behaviors are reinforced by patriarchal values, with toxic masculinity often resulting in threats, manipulation, and violence against partners.

Verbal violence, frequently reported by informants, has severe emotional consequences. Cahyani and Hendriani (2023) found that verbal abuse can cause emotional distress, lower self-

esteem, and reduce mental productivity. Victims may internalize this abuse, leading to prolonged psychological harm and self-blame. These findings illustrate that both verbal and physical abuse stem from the same toxic root—social constructs of masculinity that promote dominance and discourage vulnerability.

To counteract these issues, a comprehensive approach is needed. Preventative efforts must include education that promotes gender equality and challenges traditional views of masculinity. Campaigns in schools, media, and communities should raise awareness about dating violence and the warning signs of toxic behavior. Rusyidi et al. (2020) advocate for creating safe spaces for open dialogue, access to counseling services, and initiatives that promote empathy and respectful communication in relationships. Programs targeting both victims and perpetrators can help change the narrative and reduce the incidence of violence.

This study highlights the real and harmful impact of toxic masculinity in romantic relationships. Supported by global and local research, the findings illustrate that toxic masculinity is not just a cultural ideology but a lived experience that causes enduring psychological harm. To address it effectively, society must reevaluate and transform the norms and values that sustain male dominance. Through collective action, education, and policy reform, it is possible to build a culture that values equality, emotional intelligence, and healthy relationship dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This study provides important insights into the phenomenon of toxic masculinity in romantic relationships among young people. Through thematic analysis of interviews with five informants, five recurring behaviors were identified: possessiveness, jealousy, verbal abuse, physical violence, and emotional manipulation. These behaviors stem from unequal power dynamics shaped by patriarchal ideologies. Traditional masculinity—valuing control, stoicism, and authority—supports a cultural script where dominance is mistaken for affection and manipulation for care. Toxic masculinity goes beyond physical aggression, manifesting subtly through emotional blackmail and social restriction. These reflect internalized hegemonic masculinity, where male dominance is reproduced through interpersonal control.

The study supports existing literature by showing how emotional manipulation, especially among youth, is rooted in social norms equating masculinity with entitlement and emotional detachment. The research has several implications. It highlights how cultural norms and relationship dynamics normalize violence, particularly among adolescents. There is a pressing need for educational efforts that challenge patriarchal values and promote gender equality. Additionally, the psychological toll on victims, often long-lasting, emphasizes the need for policy responses addressing emotional abuse, not just physical harm. Toxic masculinity thus emerges as a public health concern impacting mental health and relationship quality.

This study offers a novel perspective by focusing on dating relationships, a stage often overlooked in prior research that has emphasized marital settings. It demonstrates how gendered power imbalances appear early in romantic engagement. By integrating local and global perspectives, the study presents a grounded yet theoretically informed analysis. However, limitations remain. The small sample size, though appropriate for qualitative work, may not reflect broader experiences across sociocultural contexts. Reliance on self-reported data may also invite bias. Future research should broaden the demographic scope and adopt longitudinal designs to examine how these toxic patterns develop over time. Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed. Schools should include relationship and gender education focused

on emotional intelligence, communication, and awareness of coercive behavior. Media and community initiatives should challenge harmful masculinity norms. Strengthening support systems—counseling, helplines, and peer networks—is also essential for prevention and recovery. In conclusion, toxic masculinity in dating relationships is a deeply embedded social issue that sustains cycles of harm and inequality. Tackling it requires systemic change, cultural transformation, and collective action. This study contributes to the growing call for a more empathetic, respectful, and equitable framework for young people's relationships.

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