

## Forms of Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication in Toxic Relationships in Teenage Dating Relationships

Aria Ramadina Putri Dirantau<sup>1</sup>, Sri Wahyuningsih<sup>2</sup>, Rafi Joan Pratama<sup>3</sup>,  
Give Thanks Keren Hapukh Manalu<sup>4</sup>, Hisyam Nasrullah<sup>5</sup>, Mahela Widya  
Astutik<sup>6</sup>, Aminatus Zehroh Fitriani<sup>7</sup>, Yula Wulandari<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8</sup> Universitas Trunodjoyo Madura, Jawa Timur, Surabaya, Indonesia

Corresponding author: [dina.ramadina9@gmail.com](mailto:dina.ramadina9@gmail.com)

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.56480/jln.v6i1.1601>

Received: October 09, 2025

Revised: October 29, 2025

Accepted: November 20, 2025

### Abstract

*This study examines verbal and non-verbal communication patterns in toxic adolescent romantic relationships, identifying the factors that compel teenagers to remain in such dynamics and assessing the resulting emotional and social impacts. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the researchers conducted in-depth interviews, non-participant observations, and documentation with eight informants (aged 18–23) in East Java who have experienced toxic dating environments. The findings categorize toxic communication into two spheres. Characterized by manipulation, blaming, demeaning language, and implicit threats. Non-Verbal: Marked by high-pitched intonation, aggressive expressions, "silent treatment," and restricted social interactions. Despite these harms, participants often remained in these relationships due to emotional dependency, fear of abandonment, and the dangerous normalization of toxic behavior, misinterpreting control as a form of affection. Toxic communication patterns profoundly damage adolescent well-being, leading to diminished self-esteem, heightened anxiety, and social withdrawal. The study highlights that interpersonal communication is the primary vehicle through which toxic dynamics are both constructed and sustained, emphasizing the need for healthier relationship literacy among youth.*

**Keywords–** *Interpersonal Communication, Verbal Communication, Nonverbal Communication, Toxic Relationship, Adolescent Dating.*



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## **1. Introduction**

Adolescence is a pivotal developmental phase characterized by the search for identity, the strengthening of self-concept, and an increasing need for intimate interpersonal relationships. During this period, teenagers begin to build romantic connections as a natural part of their emotional and social exploration. Ideally, dating serves as a healthy learning environment for developing communication skills, empathy, and an understanding of personal boundaries. However, not all romantic trajectories follow a constructive path; many relationships devolve into "toxic" dynamics characterized by imbalanced interactions and patterns that actively harm the individuals involved rather than fostering mutual growth.

The phenomenon of toxic relationships among youth has become increasingly critical to examine, especially as interpersonal interactions intensify through both face-to-face meetings and digital platforms. A toxic relationship is generally defined by an imbalance of power, the dominance of one party, excessive control, and repeated manipulative behaviors. According to Qonitah et al. (2024), these unhealthy dynamics often trigger significant harm, including chronic anxiety, depression, and emotional stress. While dating is theoretically meant to provide a support system where both partners feel valued and secure, the reality for many contemporary adolescents is far removed from this ideal, often failing to reach a healthy maturity or long-term stability (Tamu et al., 2023).

Interpersonal communication occupies a central position in determining the quality and sustainability of these romantic bonds. Through communication, individuals do not merely exchange information; they construct meaning, negotiate roles, and establish the boundaries of the relationship. In adolescent dating, verbal and nonverbal cues are the primary media for expressing affection, managing conflict, and building power structures. When communication is weaponized—through demeaning remarks, implicit threats, high-pitched tones, or the "silent treatment"—it

functions as an instrument of control that systematically weakens the partner's psychological state. Due to limited emotional maturity, many teenagers struggle to recognize these toxic communication patterns as a form of abuse.

Previous research indicates that individuals trapped in toxic relationships experience profound negative psychological impacts, such as diminished self-esteem and disrupted social lives. Despite recognizing these harms, many choose to stay due to strong emotional bonds, psychological dependency, and the fear of abandonment. In the modern era, this is complicated by social media, where dating is no longer just a direct interaction but is heavily influenced by digital representations of "ideal" relationships (Ariyanti et al., 2025). This digital landscape often blurs the line between healthy passion and emotional violence, leading adolescents to misinterpret possessiveness and extreme control as genuine signs of care or affection.

Preliminary findings from interviews with students suggest a relatively uniform pattern of communication within toxic dynamics. These patterns include the use of derogatory language, the restriction of social circles, and the implementation of emotional punishments like the silent treatment. Interestingly, even when informants expressed discomfort, they remained in the relationship citing emotional attachment and a misplaced sense of responsibility toward their partner. This indicates that communication serves a dual role: it is the vehicle for conflict, but it is also the mechanism through which toxic behavior is normalized. As social beings, communication is a fundamental necessity to fulfill our goals and intentions (Tamu et al., 2023), yet in these cases, it is used to trap individuals in a cycle of dysfunction.

While there is an abundance of literature on toxic relationships, most studies focus primarily on the psychological trauma of the victim or frame the issue within the broad context of physical dating violence. Research specifically analyzing the nuanced roles of verbal and nonverbal communication as the primary engines of toxic sustainability remains relatively scarce. Furthermore, there is a lack of focus on university students—

the "late adolescent" group—who are in a critical transition toward adulthood. Their relationship dynamics are often more complex than younger teens, yet they face similar pressures in a hyper-connected environment that demands constant accessibility.

This study offers a fresh perspective by positioning verbal and nonverbal communication as the primary lens through which toxic dating dynamics are understood. Rather than viewing communication as a mere symptom of a failing relationship, this research treats it as the central mechanism used to build power structures, foster emotional dependency, and normalize toxic behavior. By doing so, this study aims to explore the specific forms of communication in toxic adolescent relationships, identify the factors that compel youth to stay, and analyze the resulting emotional and social implications. Ultimately, these findings are expected to contribute to the field of interpersonal communication and provide a basis for preventive educational programs that promote healthy relationship literacy.

## **2. Method**

This study employs a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to explore the deep-seated subjective experiences of adolescents navigating toxic romantic relationships. The primary objective is to uncover the lived reality of these individuals, specifically focusing on the verbal and non-verbal communication patterns that define their interactions. A qualitative framework is utilized because the research prioritizes the understanding of meaning, personal experience, and individual interpretation of social phenomena encountered directly, rather than focusing on quantitative measurements or hypothesis testing. The study is grounded in a post-positivist paradigm, which views social reality as something that truly exists but can only be understood partially through the researcher's interpretation, taking into account the specific context and the complex dynamics of social interaction.

The research subjects consist of eight adolescents aged 18–23 who are currently active students at various universities in East Java. These participants were selected because they have firsthand experience of being in or having previously endured a toxic dating relationship. Informants were chosen using a purposive sampling technique based on specific criteria: they must have direct experience related to the phenomenon under study and a willingness to disclose their personal experiences openly. This age range was strategically selected to represent the transition from late adolescence to early adulthood, a stage where romantic dynamics become increasingly complex yet are often still susceptible to emotional immaturity.

Data collection was conducted through a combination of semi-structured in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation as supporting evidence. The interviews were carried out either in person or through digital platforms, depending on the informant's availability, and were subsequently transcribed verbatim to maintain the integrity of the narratives. Non-participant observation allowed the researcher to enrich the understanding of the informants' behavior and expressions within their social contexts. Furthermore, documentation—such as screenshots of digital conversations or social media posts—was utilized in a limited capacity and only with the explicit consent of the informants to complement the primary interview data.

The data analysis follows an interactive model consisting of three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. This process was carried out continuously from the start of data collection until a comprehensive meaning of the phenomenon was achieved. Data reduction involved sifting through raw data to identify key themes related to toxic communication, while data display organized the information to facilitate the drawing of grounded conclusions. To ensure the validity and rigor of the findings, the study employed triangulation of sources and techniques, member checking with the informants, and systematic recording of the research process to guarantee the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the results.

### **3. Result and Discussion**

The findings of this research indicate that toxic relationships among adolescents are not spontaneous phenomena or mere results of temporary conflicts. Instead, these harmful dynamics are constructed through continuous and repetitive communication processes, both verbal and non-verbal. These interactions gradually build an imbalanced power dynamic where one individual occupies a dominant position while the other is relegated to a subordinate role. In this context, communication transcends its function as a mere exchange of messages; it acts as an active mechanism that defines the meaning of the relationship, regulates the partner's behavior, and sustains an emotional dependency that traps the individual within the dysfunctional bond.

Data from the field reveal a high degree of uniformity in the communication patterns experienced by informants, regardless of their varied backgrounds, relationship durations, or partner personalities. This consistency suggests that adolescent toxic relationships possess a systematic and recurring communicative structure. These patterns evolve through daily interactions that eventually become normalized within the dating culture. Consequently, behaviors that are objectively damaging—emotionally and psychologically—are no longer viewed as deviations. Instead, they are interpreted as a "natural" part of romantic dynamics, causing adolescents to overlook the early warning signs of an unhealthy relationship.

This normalization process leads teenagers to accept demeaning remarks, excessive control, and emotional restrictions without resistance, as these behaviors have integrated into their perceived "standard" of communication. This situation highlights that toxic relationships are not solely the result of individual personality traits but are reinforced by social practices and repeated communication habits. As noted by Lestari et al. (2024), adolescents often find themselves reproducing these patterns to avoid immediate conflict, even when such communication creates a profound sense of insecurity.

Verbal communication serves as a primary tool for establishing power, manifested through systematic patterns of belittling, blaming, and manipulation.

Demeaning speech is not always overt; it often appears as subtle comments regarding a partner's intellectual capacity, life choices, or physical appearance, frequently disguised as "joking" or "caring." Because these messages are packaged as affection, victims often fail to recognize them as emotional abuse. Lestari et al. (2024) emphasize that such dynamics lead to internal conflict, anxiety, and depression, making it difficult for adolescents to rebuild self-confidence or interact healthily with their wider social environment.

Manipulative verbal patterns are further identified through the reversal of responsibility during conflicts. Dominant partners often shift the blame onto the informant, making them feel responsible for issues triggered by the partner's own actions. Prasetyo (2024) explains that possessive partners often use this tactic to curb their significant other's autonomy. Over time, this distorts the informant's perception, leading them to doubt their own judgment and view every conflict as a personal failure. This recurring guilt becomes a control mechanism, as the subordinate partner constantly adjusts their behavior just to avoid the next confrontation.

Implicit threats also play a strategic role in maintaining this power imbalance. These threats—such as the warning of emotional withdrawal, ending the relationship, or withholding affection—are highly effective because romantic relationships are often the primary source of self-validation for adolescents. Khairunnisa et al. (2024) suggest that interpersonal communication is the most effective tool for altering beliefs and behaviors. For teenagers, the fear of losing their emotional safety net compels them to concede to irrational demands. Thus, language becomes a symbolic tool that constructs and reifies the dominant-subordinate reality within the relationship.

Non-verbal communication proves equally significant in exerting covert emotional control. Beyond reinforcing verbal messages, non-verbal cues like high-pitched intonations, angry facial expressions, intimidating stares, and superior body language create a persistent atmosphere of tension. While healthy relationships are built on openness and mutual understanding (Ardiany & Putri, 2024), toxic ones rely on "silent treatment" as a strategic emotional punishment.

This prolonged silence creates intense uncertainty, forcing the informant into a state of anxiety where they feel compelled to apologize for unknown offenses just to restore peace.

Non-verbal communication is used to restrict the informant's social interactions. Partners may signal their disapproval of the informant's friends through jealous expressions or withdrawal when the informant interacts with others. This non-physical violence (Qonitah et al., 2024) gradually narrows the informant's social space, cutting off external support systems and deepening their dependency on the toxic partner. For adolescents still forming their identities, this constant non-verbal pressure erodes psychological security, making it increasingly difficult to break the cycle of emotional control that is misinterpreted as passion.

The psychological and social implications of these relationships are profound and long-lasting. Exposure to toxic communication leads to a gradual decline in self-esteem and a significant increase in anxiety. As Maulana et al. (2024) point out, manipulative language strips individuals of the confidence to speak or act for themselves. This emotional isolation often persists even after the relationship ends, affecting the individual's ability to trust or engage in future healthy social relations. Given that adolescence is a critical window for identity formation, the presence of toxic relationships can leave lasting scars on an individual's developmental trajectory and future relational quality.

The findings of this research clearly demonstrate that verbal and non-verbal communication in toxic adolescent relationships function not merely as expressions of conflict but as a systematic apparatus for psychological pressure. Verbal patterns, including demeaning remarks, manipulation, and the reversal of blame, serve as a persistent mechanism that erodes an informant's self-esteem and fosters a deep-seated sense of guilt and emotional dependency. Simultaneously, non-verbal cues—such as aggressive intonations, intimidating stares, and the strategic use of the "silent treatment"—create an atmospheric uncertainty that triggers chronic anxiety and insecurity. Because non-verbal messages operate directly on the affective domain, they are often more difficult



to challenge and easier to normalize within the daily rhythm of the relationship, effectively trapping the victim in a cycle of emotional vulnerability.

Beyond immediate interactions, relational control manifested through social restrictions and possessiveness highlights communication as a behavioral regulation mechanism. By systematically limiting the informant's social sphere and weakening external support from friends and family, the dominant partner effectively reinforces the informant's emotional isolation. This isolation deepens the informant's dependency on the dysfunctional relationship, as their external "stock of knowledge" and social validation are severed. Consequently, verbal and non-verbal patterns operate simultaneously and synergistically; they are not isolated incidents but a mutually reinforcing loop that sustains an imbalanced power dynamic, making it exceptionally difficult for adolescents—who are still in a critical stage of identity formation—to break the cycle of toxicity.

From a theoretical perspective in Communication Studies, these romantic dynamics are understood as a social construction built through continuous symbolic interaction. According to Aswaruddin et al. (2025), communication is the fundamental element that allows for the exchange of ideas and feelings, without which social interaction cannot persist. Viewed through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism, the meanings within adolescent dating are born from the individual's interpretation of everyday symbols. Thus, demeaning language or angry expressions are interpreted by the informant not just as temporary emotions, but as reflections of their own self-worth and relational standing. This repetitive process of meaning-making contributes to a distorted self-concept, where the individual internalizes their subordinate position as a normalized reality of romantic life (Pendidikan & Vol, 2025).

The study aligns with the concept of power relations in communication, where dominance is exercised through symbolic and discursive practices rather than physical force. Human life is inherently complex, and when faced with limitations or frustration, individuals may lean toward aggressive or controlling communicative patterns to manage their environment (Wahyuningsih, 2017). In these toxic dyads, manipulation and emotional threats function as strategies to

regulate a partner's behavior and maintain a dominant hierarchy. Because these practices are integrated into the mundane "lifeworld" of the couple, the power imbalance often remains invisible to the victim. Ultimately, because adolescence is a foundational period for relational patterns, exposure to such unhealthy communication serves as a negative blueprint that can persist into adulthood, underscoring the urgent need for communication-based literacy and intervention.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study concludes that toxic adolescent dating relationships are not formed instantly or as a result of momentary conflicts, but rather develop through repetitive verbal and nonverbal communication practices and normalized in daily interactions. Verbal communication characterized by derogatory speech, manipulation, and implicit threats, along with nonverbal communication such as the use of exalted voice intonation, intimidating expressions, restrictions on social interaction, and prolonged silent practices, serve as a psychological control mechanism that gradually establishes and maintains unequal power relations between partners. The sustainability of toxic dating relationships in adolescents is also influenced by psychosocial factors, especially emotional dependence on partners, fear of losing romantic relationships, and limited understanding of the concept and practice of healthy relationships. In these conditions, adolescents tend to tolerate harmful behaviors in order to maintain the continuity of the relationship. This unhealthy communication pattern causes various emotional and social consequences, such as decreased self-esteem, increased anxiety, social isolation, and disruption of the individual's ability to build and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships in the future. This study emphasizes the importance of efforts to improve interpersonal communication literacy and education about healthy relationships as a preventive measure. These efforts are expected to help adolescents recognize the early signs of unhealthy relationships, develop more equal communication patterns, and support adolescents' emotional and social development optimally and sustainably.

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