

Does power predict emotional abuse in adolescent romantic relationships?

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Abstract

The aim of the current study is to explore the association between power perception and emotional abuse, with power satisfaction as a mediating factor, and to determine the prevalence of reciprocal emotional abuse within adolescent romantic relationships. The sample consisted of 184 (15-18 years) in romantic relationships for at least six months and were students at SMAS A, SMKN B, and SMAN C, selected using a purposive sampling technique. Data were collected using the Multidimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse Scale and Power Perception and Power Satisfaction Scale. The scale reliability indicates good results, $\alpha \geq 0.8$ for MMEA dimensions and $\alpha > 0.66$ for Power scale. Data were analyzed using the causal step method. The analysis results show that power perception, mediated by power satisfaction, does not significantly affect emotional abuse in adolescents ($p > 0.05$). In adolescents, the power perception tends to be the same, and they generally experience high power satisfaction. The research also shows that emotional abuse between adolescents with romantic relationships occurs reciprocally ($p < 0.01$; $r > 0.194$). The research results are expected to contribute to future studies and the design or development of interventions aimed at preventing emotional abuse in adolescent relationships.

Keywords

Adolescents, emotional abuse, power perception, power satisfaction

Introduction

Emotional abuse is the most prevalent form of violence encountered in adolescent romantic relationships. In Panama, 61.6% of female adolescents and 73.4% of male adolescents have experienced emotional abuse within their dating relationships (Gabster et al., 2023). Similarly, studies in the United States indicate that more than half of adolescents are involved in emotionally abusive romantic relationships, either as victims (65%) or perpetrators (61%) (Taylor & Mumford, 2016). In Indonesia, emotional abuse is present among all respondents who reported experiencing violence in romantic relationships ($n=281$) (Wulandaru et al., 2019). Emotional abuse is often normalized within relationships, and it can be reciprocal, with both partners engaging in abusive behavior (Giordano et al., 2010; Murray & Azzinaro, 2019; Swahn et al., 2010).

The terms emotional abuse, psychological abuse, and verbal abuse are frequently used interchangeably, all referring to non-physical aggressive interactions within a relationship (Karakurt et al., 2009; Outlaw, 2009). Emotional abuse encompasses actions of coercion or hostility intended to inflict emotional harm or threats of harm (Murphy & Cascardi, 1999). Emotional abuse categorized into four dimensions based on behavioral forms and emotional consequences: restriction, humiliation, aggressive withdrawal, and domination/intimidation (Bonechi & Tani, 2011). Emotional abuse is reported to be common among adolescents of both genders, with findings suggesting that adolescents experience higher rates of emotional abuse compared to adult

men and women (Hildebrand et al., 2019; Karakurt & Silver, 2013; Sousa et al., 2010).

Romantic relationships play a crucial role in adolescents' social and sexual development, becoming central to their lives during this period (Papalia et al., 2013; Putri et al., 2021). Theoretically, as individuals enter adolescence, they begin to separate from their parents and increasingly spend more time with romantic partners as they age (Branje et al., 2021). These romantic relationships are a form of close interpersonal bond where partners are interdependent, meaning that one's thoughts, feelings, and actions can significantly affect the other (Kim et al., 2019). The ability to influence one's romantic partner is referred to as power (Anderson et al., 2012). Power can also be defined as the capacity to make decisions or exert social control within the relationship (Zaaiman, 2020). In adolescent dating relationships, the partner who is less committed and derives less satisfaction from the relationship is often perceived to hold greater power and control over decisions and resources. Conversely, the partner who is more dependent and in need tends to have lower power (Lennon et al., 2012; Van Lange & Balliet, 2015). The more dependent partner is likely to bear the brunt of the relationship dynamics, often making sacrifices,

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accommodating the other, and being more vulnerable to neglect, threats, or coercion (Van Lange & Balliet, 2015).

An imbalance of power is linked to the occurrence of violence within a relationship (Giordano et al., 2010; Gracia-Leiva et al., 2022; Hawkesworth, 2011; Martín-Lanas et al., 2021). This power imbalance can be viewed through one's perception of power within the relationship (Körner & Schütz, 2021). Perceived power imbalance is not uncommon in romantic relationships, with males typically holding more power than females (A. Handley et al., 2019).

Perceived power imbalance offers insights into the role of power in emotional abuse within relationships; however, the dynamics are more complex. An individual might experience a power imbalance and perceive themselves as having lower power, yet if they are satisfied with their level of power, violence may not occur (Rogers et al., 2005). Thus, satisfaction with power in a relationship plays a more significant role as a predictor of violence than merely the perception of power (Toplu-Demirtaş & Fincham, 2022). Power satisfaction refers to an individual's contentment with the amount of power they hold in a relationship (Ronfeldt et al., 1998).

Previous research has explored power satisfaction as a mediator between perceived power and various forms of violence—physical, sexual, and psychological—among college students. Findings indicate that students with lower perceived power and dissatisfaction with their power were more likely to engage in physical, sexual, and psychological violence against their partners (Toplu-Demirtaş & Fincham, 2022). However, the exploration of power perception and emotional abuse, mediated by power satisfaction, in adolescent populations remains under-researched. Given the high prevalence of emotional abuse among adolescents, its detrimental impacts, and the scarcity of studies on this topic, understanding the predictors of emotional abuse is crucial for enhancing prevention efforts. Emotional abuse is a significant predictor of future physical violence and can indicate patterns of abuse in future adolescent romantic relationships (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013; Gómez, 2011; Stark, 2015; Temple et al., 2016).

This study aims to investigate the mediating role of power satisfaction in the relationship between power perception and emotional abuse and to examine the reciprocal nature of emotional abuse in adolescent romantic relationships in Indonesia. The research hypotheses are: (1) there is a relationship between power perception and the level of emotional abuse mediated by power satisfaction among adolescents in romantic relationships, and (2) emotional abuse in adolescents occurs reciprocally.

Method

Participants

The study actively involved 184 adolescents aged 15-18 years, comprising 65 males ($M = 16.86$, $SD = 0.827$) and 119 females ($M = 16.82$, $SD = 0.823$). Participants were recruited using a purposive sampling technique with criteria that included being in a romantic relationship for at least six months and being students from SMAS A, SMKN B, and SMAN C. The sample size accounted for a 20% attrition rate (Fritz & MacKinnon, 2007). Statistical power was calculated

using G*Power, yielding a power of 1.0 with an effect size of 0.35 and a significance level (α) of 0.05. Data were collected through an online survey administered via JotForm from May 26 to June 23, 2023

Research Instruments

Emotional abuse was measured using the Multidimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse (MMEA), which consists of 28 items (Murphy & Hoover, 1999). The MMEA assesses both the victim's and the perpetrator's roles within the same respondent, thus capturing the reciprocal nature of emotional abuse in romantic relationships. The scale comprises four dimensions: Restriction ($\alpha = 0.82$); Humiliation ($\alpha = 0.851$); Aggressive Withdrawal ($\alpha = 0.867$); Dominance/Intimidation ($\alpha = 0.800$) Each dimension was analyzed separately due to the scale's multidimensional nature. Responses were recorded on a 7-point frequency scale: 0 = never; 1 = once; 2 = twice; 3 = 3-5 times; 4 = 6-10 times; 5 = 11-20 times; 6 = more than 20 times higher MMEA scores indicated higher levels of emotional abuse.

Power perception and satisfaction were assessed using the Power Perception and Power Satisfaction scales, which consist of 10 items in total (Ronfeldt et al., 1998). These scales are multidimensional, enabling separate evaluations of power perception and power satisfaction, each comprising five items. Reliability analysis for these dimensions showed acceptable results, with Cronbach's alpha (α) values of 0.689 for Power Perception and 0.669 for Power Satisfaction. For the Power Perception subscale, the response options varied. The first three questions allowed participants to respond on a scale from 1 ("My partner has more say") to 4 ("I have more say"). The last two questions provided responses ranging from 1 ("My partner") to 4 ("I"). A higher total score on this subscale indicated a greater perceived power in the romantic relationship, according to the respondent. In the Power Satisfaction subscale, participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with their power in the relationship on a scale from 1 ("Very dissatisfied") to 4 ("Very satisfied"). Higher total scores on this subscale reflected greater satisfaction with their level of power within the relationship. Both scales were originally developed in English and were translated into Indonesian using a backward translation design.

Data Analysis Technique

The data analysis employed simple regression analysis incorporating a mediation variable using the causal step technique as proposed by Baron & Kenny (1986). According to this approach, a variable can be considered a mediator under specific conditions: (1) The total effect of X on Y (path c) must be significant. (2) The effect of X on the mediator M (path a) must also be significant. (3) The effect of M on Y, controlling for X (path b), must be significant. (4) The direct effect of X on Y adjusted for M (path c') should not be significant. A mediation is considered perfect if all these conditions are met. If these conditions are not fully met or if the direct effect of X on Y remains significant after adjustment for M, it is considered partial mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Suliyanto, 2011).

Before conducting regression analysis, the assumptions of the causal step method were tested across two models:

the relationship between Power Perception (X) and Power Satisfaction (M), and the relationship between Power Perception (X) and Power Satisfaction (M) on Emotional Abuse (Y). In the first model, the assumptions of normality ($p = 0.06$, $p > 0.05$), linearity ($p = 0.95$, $p > 0.05$), and heteroskedasticity ($p = 0.97$, $p > 0.05$) were met. However, in the second model, residuals for the Humiliation and Dominance/Intimidation dimensions of MMEA were found to be non-normally distributed ($p < 0.05$). Conversely, residuals for the total MMEA score ($p = 0.74$), Restriction dimension ($p = 0.58$), and Aggressive Withdrawal dimension ($p = 0.53$) were normally distributed ($p > 0.05$). Heteroskedasticity was observed in the Humiliation, Aggressive Withdrawal, and Dominance/Intimidation dimensions of MMEA (sig. < 0.05) in the second model. No multicollinearity was detected in the second model. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Medicine, UNS, and was granted on Thursday, April 6, 2023.

Result

Participants consisted of 119 (64.7%) females and 65 (35.3%) males, aged between 15-18 years (mean=16.83). The majority of participants were 16 years old (37.0%, $n=68$); 36.4% were 17 years old ($n=67$); 24.5% were 18 years old ($n=45$); and approximately 2.2% were 15 years old ($n=4$). Further categorization based on standard deviation with three divisions revealed that out of 184 participants, the majority experienced emotional abuse at low-frequency levels (Total MMEA $n=166$, 90.2%; Restriction MMEA $n=94$, 51.1%; Humiliation MMEA $n=183$, 99.5%; Aggressive Withdrawal MMEA $n=117$, 63.6%; Dominance/Intimidation MMEA $n=169$, 91.8%). Regarding power perception, 5 participants had moderate power perception (2.7%), while 179 participants had high power perception (97.3%), with no participants reporting low power perception. Most participants reported high levels of power satisfaction ($n=182$, 98.9%), while 1.1% of participants reported moderate power satisfaction ($n=2$). Descriptive statistics for males and females are presented in Table ???. Specifically, there were no significant differences in the average frequency of emotional abuse between females and males, with the highest average in the Restriction dimension: females = 14.49 and males = 11.86. Power perception and power satisfaction did not significantly differ between males and females.

In Table 1, it is found that there is a statistically non-significant relationship ($p > 0.05$) throughout the mediation model paths in the first dimension and across all b-paths. Due to these four equations not being fulfilled, it can be understood that power satisfaction (M) cannot be recognized as a mediating variable in the relationship between power perception (X) and emotional abuse (Y).

Based on Table ??, it was found that among the subscales of the Multidimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse, both the perception of being the perpetrator of emotional abuse and the perception of being the victim who receives emotional abuse from the partner have a significant relationship with each other ($p < 0.01$), with a calculated correlation coefficient (r) greater than the critical value (r critical = 0.194). Therefore, it can be understood that there is a positive relationship

between them, indicating that as the level of emotional abuse received by someone increases, the level of emotional abuse they perpetrate also increases.

Discussion

The results of the first hypothesis testing using causal step regression analysis found that the mediating variable did not show a statistically significant relationship along the mediation model's path b. This indicates that the initial hypothesis was rejected. In other words, power satisfaction cannot serve as a mediating variable between power perception and the level of emotional abuse perpetration among adolescents in romantic relationships in this study.

These findings contradict previous research results indicating that power satisfaction mediates the relationship between power perception and emotional abuse in romantic relationships (Toplu-Demirtaş & Fincham, 2022). It has been suggested that dissatisfaction with power predicts emotional abuse toward a partner (Ronfeldt et al., 1998). Additionally, individuals with low perceived power and dissatisfaction with their power are considered more likely to engage in emotional abuse (Toplu-Demirtaş & Fincham, 2022). These differences may be attributed to various factors, one of which is participant characteristics. Differing participant characteristics could influence research outcomes; previous research involved young adults aged 18-35 who have entered adulthood (Toplu-Demirtaş & Fincham, 2022), whereas this study focuses on adolescents aged 15-18 who are in adolescence. Adulthood and adolescence are distinct phases with different characteristics, which can lead to differences in the characteristics of romantic relationships as well.

One characteristic that can explain differences in romantic relationships between adolescents and adults is the purpose of these relationships. Adolescence is a period of self-exploration to discover one's identity. Romantic relationships among adolescents may aim to understand their preferences in romantic relationships and to enhance their social hierarchy among peers (Brown, 1999; Collins et al., 2009). In contrast, adults tend to consider romantic relationships with goals for the future, emphasizing commitment and intimacy needs (Arnett, 2000; Giordano et al., 2010).

In the context of patriarchal culture, where men are traditionally associated with greater power in romantic relationships compared to women, no gender roles were found in adolescent romantic relationships (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). Power dynamics in adolescent romantic relationships tend to be egalitarian (Cucci et al., 2020; Zaaiman, 2020; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999), with no significant differences in power perception and satisfaction between males and females. Consequently, emotional abuse in adolescent relationships may stem from other factors such as family background, habits, and past experiences of violence. Family dynamics play a crucial role, where witnessing violent conflicts within the family significantly increases the risk of perpetrating or experiencing emotional abuse in adolescent romantic relationships (Karlsson et al., 2016; Wolfe et al., 2004). Moreover, the normalization of violence among adolescents increases the likelihood of engaging in emotional abuse (Temple et al., 2016). Furthermore, in terms of past violence experiences, adolescents with a history of bullying are found

Table 1. Causal Step Regression Analysis Result

| Path | Model | β | Sig. | R Square |
|------|--|---------|------|----------|
| c | Perceived Power → Total MMEA | 0.242 | 0.00 | 0.059 |
| c | Perceived Power → Restriction MMEA | 0.133 | 0.07 | 0.018 |
| c | Perceived Power → Humiliation MMEA | 0.258 | 0.00 | 0.067 |
| c | Perceived Power → Aggressive withdrawal MMEA | 0.190 | 0.01 | 0.036 |
| c | Perceived Power → Dominance/intimidation MMEA | 0.205 | 0.00 | 0.042 |
| a | Perceived Power → Power Satisfaction | 0.204 | 0.00 | 0.042 |
| b. | Power Satisfaction controlled by Perceived power → Total MMEA | -0.011 | 0.88 | 0.059 |
| b. | Power Satisfaction controlled by Perceived Power → Restriction MMEA | -0.032 | 0.67 | 0.019 |
| b. | Power Satisfaction controlled by Perceived Power → Humiliation MMEA | -0.035 | 0.63 | 0.068 |
| b. | Power Satisfaction controlled by Perceived Power → Aggressive withdrawal MMEA | 0.000 | 0.99 | 0.036 |
| b. | Power Satisfaction controlled by Perceived Power → dominance/intimidation MMEA | 0.028 | 0.70 | 0.043 |
| c' | Perceived Power controlled by Power Satisfaction → Total MMEA | 0.244 | 0.00 | 0.059 |
| c' | Perceived Power controlled by Power Satisfaction → Restriction MMEA | 0.139 | 0.06 | 0.019 |
| c' | Perceived Power controlled by Power Satisfaction → Humiliation MMEA | 0.265 | 0.00 | 0.068 |
| c' | Perceived Power controlled by Power Satisfaction → aggressive withdrawal MMEA | 0.190 | 0.01 | 0.036 |
| c' | Perceived Power controlled by Power Satisfaction → Dominance/intimidation MMEA | 0.199 | 0.00 | 0.043 |

Notes: The total effect of X on Y (path c). The effect of X on the mediator M (path a). The effect of M on Y, controlling for X (path b). The direct effect of X on Y adjusted for M (path c').

Table 2. The Result of Pearson Product Moment, Mean, Std Deviation Analysis

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
|---------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Restriction P | 1 | 0.322** | 0.436** | 0.342** | 0.713** | 0.269** | 0.457** | 0.270** |
| Humiliation P | 0.322** | 1 | 0.363** | 0.603** | 0.206** | 0.504** | 0.247** | 0.363** |
| Aggressive Withdrawal P | 0.436** | 0.363** | 1 | 0.430** | 0.469** | 0.293** | 0.517** | 0.368** |
| Dominance/ Intimidation P | 0.342** | 0.603** | 0.430** | 1 | 0.320** | 0.357** | 0.232** | 0.670** |
| Restriction K | 0.713** | 0.206** | 0.469** | 0.320** | 1 | 0.328** | 0.429** | 0.272** |
| Humiliation K | 0.269** | 0.504** | 0.293** | 0.357** | 0.328** | 1 | 0.460** | 0.469** |
| Aggressive Withdrawal K | 0.457** | 0.247** | 0.517** | 0.232** | 0.429** | 0.460** | 1 | 0.378** |
| Dominance/ Intimidation K | 0.270** | 0.363** | 0.368** | 0.670** | 0.272** | 0.469** | 0.378** | 1 |
| M | 13.56 | 2.16 | 11.21 | 4.61 | 13.43 | 1.91 | 11.78 | 4.87 |
| Std. Deviation | 9.245 | 3.490 | 8.289 | 6.489 | 9.170 | 3.047 | 9.425 | 6.640 |

P : Perceived as Perpetrator, K = Perceived as Victim; ** = $p < 0.01$

to engage more in emotional abuse (Hamstra & Fitzgerald, 2022). Additionally, adolescents who were victims of bullying tend to be victims of emotional abuse compared to those who were not involved (Espelage & Holt, 2007).

Adolescents who perceive their power as equal to their partners may do so because they are not entirely dependent on their partners. Power itself is obtained through one's control over resources, including economic (money), affective, social, and other types of resources (Körner & Schütz, 2021). Individual status can also influence the power they possess (Anderson et al., 2006). Therefore, power imbalances can occur when one partner is more dependent on the other in terms of resources or when partners have different statuses. In the context of socioeconomic resources, adolescents are not financially dependent on their partners because they are still under parental care. Moreover, adolescent romantic relationships often occur between peers of equal status, both being students.

Hypothesis testing using Pearson product-moment correlation showed a positive relationship between perpetrating and experiencing emotional abuse. This indicates that as

the perpetration of emotional abuse increases, so does the likelihood of experiencing emotional abuse. Therefore, the second hypothesis suggesting that emotional abuse can occur reciprocally among adolescents is supported. This aligns with previous research findings that emotional abuse often occurs reciprocally between partners (Cuenca Montesino et al., 2015; Follingstad & Edmundson, 2010; Giordano et al., 2010; Swahn et al., 2010).

Emotional violence occurring reciprocally is unsurprising, considering that individuals can learn and mimic behaviors they have experienced. This phenomenon may occur when one partner starts using psychological tactics to emotionally harm or control the other, and the recipient partner may perceive these acts as permissible in their relationship, subsequently mimicking and engaging in similar behaviors. Unintentionally, both partners may tacitly agree that behaviors they unconsciously consider as emotional abuse are acceptable in their relationship. Alternatively, both partners may recognize these actions as emotional abuse but believe that emotional harm does not carry the same impact

as physical or sexual violence, thus continuing such behaviors to punish their disliked actions of their partners.

Furthermore, gender analysis revealed that there is no significant difference between males and females in the dimensions of emotional violence, whether as recipients or perpetrators. In terms of emotional violence dimensions, the highest frequency among both male and female adolescents is in the restriction dimension, which involves actions such as isolation, surveillance, limitation, and control over activities and social contacts (Murphy & Hoover, 1999; Toplu-Demirtaş & Hatipoğlu-Sümer, 2023). Conversely, the lowest frequency of engaging in emotional violence is found in the humiliation dimension, which includes verbal attacks on the body, appearance, and identity of the partner (Toplu-Demirtaş & Hatipoğlu-Sümer, 2023).

The high frequency of the restriction dimension among adolescents in romantic relationships indicates that they perceive excessive monitoring, control over social activities, and isolation as acceptable forms of emotional violence in a relationship. This situation may arise because participants do not recognize monitoring and restrictions on their partner as forms of emotional abuse. On the other hand, the humiliation dimension, which has the lowest frequency of emotional violence, may occur because verbal attacks on a partner's body or appearance are considered excessive and morally wrong behaviors. These findings are supported by other research where insults directed at a partner's body or appearance are perceived as the least acceptable behavior and are more likely to elicit assertive responses that could escalate into more heated arguments (Francis & Pearson, 2021). Therefore, it is not surprising that the humiliation dimension exhibits the lowest frequency of emotional violence.

This study has several limitations. Firstly, it did not collect reports from both partners regarding emotional victimization, perpetration, as well as perceptions and satisfaction of power. Therefore, it cannot provide detailed insights into the experiences of emotional violence that occur within relationships. Secondly, the study is vulnerable to biases. Thirdly, there is an unequal distribution of participants with a majority being females. Fourthly, participants were limited to one region, suggesting future research should consider sampling from various regions in Indonesia to depict the phenomena on more broadly. Fifthly, the study focused on adolescents who tend to rely more on their parents than their partners, explaining why adolescent couples may have equal power dynamics. Despite these limitations, this research aims to contribute to the literature and interventions related to emotional violence in adolescent relationships in Indonesia.

Conclusion and Implications

The study's findings reject the first hypothesis that there is a relationship between emotional abuse and power perception mediated by power satisfaction in adolescent romantic relationships. This may be due to adolescents typically having balanced power dynamics and high satisfaction with their power, suggesting other factors outside the study contribute to emotional violence among adolescents. From testing the second hypothesis, it was found that there is a positive relationship between perpetrating and experiencing emotional violence in adolescent relationships, supporting the second

hypothesis that emotional violence among adolescents occurs reciprocally. Both parties were found to be perpetrators and victims of emotional violence. Furthermore, the research indicates that emotional violence among adolescents in Surakarta is low, and there is no significant difference in violence between males and females. Both genders exhibit higher averages in emotional violence in the dimension of restriction. There was no statistically significant difference between males and females in power perception and satisfaction with power.

Based on the findings, this study suggests that future researchers interested in power perception among adolescents should collect data on emotional violence from both partners in romantic relationships. Data collection can utilize multi-method approaches, including self-report and observation methods. Additionally, researchers could broaden their studies by sampling from various regions in Indonesia to capture a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon. Furthermore, researchers could expand on this study by investigating the same variables across different developmental stages. For instance, studying married couples where one partner does not work could provide insights, as married individuals often rely on their partners for socio-economic resources.

Declaration

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Author contributions

All authors contributed to this study.

Conflict of interest

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