



# Experiences Of Female University Student Victims Of Abusive Relationships (A Phenomenological Study on Female University Students in Malang City)

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## Abstract

This research aims to analyze the subjective experiences of female university students who have been victims of abusive relationships in the context of dating in Malang City. The research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a phenomenological method to explore the meaning and essence of the victims' experiences in-depth. The main theory used is Lenore Walker's Cycle of Violence Theory, which outlines the recurring pattern of violence in three phases: tension building, acute battering incident, and honeymoon phase. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation of three female student informants (RAD, SA, and IAH) selected using purposive sampling technique. Data analysis follows the Miles and Huberman model (data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing) with source triangulation to ensure data validity. The results show that all three victims experienced various complex and overlapping forms of violence, including physical violence (hitting, slapping, kicking), verbal and psychological violence (cursing, humiliation, emotional control), sexual violence (forced intercourse), digital violence (social media surveillance, privacy violations), and financial violence (economic exploitation, forced taking of money). The relationship dynamics followed Walker's cycle of violence, where accumulated tension exploded into explicit violence, followed by a pseudo-reconciliation phase by the perpetrator. This research concludes that abusive relationships among female university students are a multidimensional phenomenon that traps victims in a manipulative cycle. Efforts to increase awareness, education about healthy relationships, and systematic support from campuses and the environment are needed to prevent and address dating violence.

**Keyword:** experience, female university student, dating violence, abusive relationship, cycle of violence, phenomenology

## 1. Introduction

Abusive relationships have become a worrying social phenomenon, not only within household bonds but also in dating relationships. Dating violence encompasses various forms, ranging from physical, verbal, psychological, sexual, to digital and financial violence. National data shows a significant increase, with the 2024 Annual Record (CATAHU) of the National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) recording 445,502 cases of violence against women. More specifically, data from the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection's (KemenPPPA) Online Information System for the Protection of Women and Children (SIMFONIPPA) as of April 2025 shows that 86.01% of 6,918 reported violence cases had women as victims. The local context in Malang City as an educational city also shows this vulnerability, with the Malang City LPSPDM recording 23 reports of dating violence involving female students in 2023.

### 1.1 Literature Review and State of the Art

Several previous studies have discussed similar topics and serve as a foundation and comparison for this research.

1. Sonia Grasella (2021), "Phenomenology of Abusive Relationship in Pekanbaru City." Grasella's research focused on the reasons informants stayed in the relationship but did not explicitly use a specific theoretical framework like the Cycle of Violence Theory.
2. Intan Permata Sari (2018), "Violence in Dating Relationships Among University Students: A Study of Female Experience Reflection." Examined dating violence among university students using a qualitative approach and explored the experiences of women.
3. Ramadhani Ayu (2022), "Toxic Relationship Recovery in Dating Among Adolescents." Used a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of victims in unhealthy (toxic/abusive) relationships.

4. Nadhila Safitri & Marsilia Arianti (2023), "Forms of Self-Defense and Coping Strategies of University Students Victimized by Dating Violence." Researched university student victims of dating violence and used a qualitative approach.
5. Resty Wulandari (2021), "The Phenomenon of Toxic Relationship in Dating Among Students of Sriwijaya University." Examined the phenomenon of unhealthy (toxic/abusive) relationships in the context of university student dating.

Previous research has provided insights into various aspects of dating violence. However, this research offers novelty by integrating Lenore Walker's Cycle of Violence Theory as the main analytical framework to read the relationship dynamics.

## 1.2 Research Originality

This research comes to fill that gap with three original contributions. First, the research applies Lenore Walker's Cycle of Violence Theory as the main analytical framework to map the dynamic patterns of violence in female university students' dating relationships. Second, the research expands the scope of violence forms by including an in-depth analysis of digital and financial violence relevant to the context of contemporary female student life. Third, through a phenomenological approach, this research holistically explores the essence of the victims' subjective experiences, specifically in understanding the psychological complexity behind the decision to stay in a detrimental relationship.

## 1.3 Research Objectives

Based on the background and research gap above, the main objective of this research is to analyze the experiences of female university student victims of abusive relationships in Malang City through a phenomenological approach with the Cycle of Violence Theory framework. Specifically, the research aims to: (1) identify the forms of violence experienced; (2) analyze relationship dynamics through the three phases of the violence cycle; (3) understand the reasons victims stay; and (4) examine the impact of violence on the victims.

## 2. The Art of Research

This process began with formulating clear and focused research questions: "What are the experiences of female university students who are victims of abusive relationships in Malang City?" This question served as a compass maintaining the focus and direction of the entire research process.

Creativity and critical thinking were then directed to explore existing research. A review of five previous studies allowed the researcher to understand the scholarly context and identify gaps and opportunities for novelty. This analysis revealed that although similar topics had been researched, none had specifically combined the phenomenological approach with Lenore Walker's Cycle of Violence Theory framework to dissect the three-phase dynamics (tension, explosion, honeymoon) in the context of female students in an educational city like Malang. Furthermore, digital and financial violence as contemporary phenomena had also not been extensively explored in-depth in similar research.

Based on the identification of this gap, the novelty of this research was formulated in three aspects: (1) Strong theoretical integration between phenomenology and the Cycle of Violence Theory for dynamic analysis; (2) Conceptual expansion by including an in-depth analysis of digital and financial violence; and (3) Psychological depth in revealing the paradox of the "reasons for staying" of victims trapped in the cycle. This novelty distinguishes this research from previous studies.

The research question and gap findings then informed the chosen methodology. A qualitative approach with phenomenological research type was deemed most appropriate to explore the meaning of the victims' subjective experiences. Data collection techniques through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation were designed to comprehensively answer the research question. Thus, the entire process from formulating questions, analyzing literature, identifying novelty, to selecting methods is an implementation of the art of research that is systematic, critical, and creative to fill the identified knowledge gap.

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Research Approach and Design

This research uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological research type. This approach was chosen because it is suitable for delving into, describing, and interpreting individuals' lived experiences related to a specific phenomenon (abusive



relationship), as the focus of this research. The design is descriptive-analytic to describe the phenomenon in depth based on data obtained from informants.

### 3.2 Research Subjects (Informants)

The research subjects were three female university students who are currently or have previously been in abusive dating relationships in Malang City. Criteria for selecting informants (purposive sampling) were: (1) female, (2) actively enrolled as a student at a higher education institution in Malang City, (3) have experience being a victim in a dating relationship involving elements of violence (physical, psychological, sexual, digital, or financial), and (4) willing to share their experiences openly. To maintain confidentiality, the three informants were given anonymized codes: RAD, SA, and IAH. A brief profile of each informant is explained in the research results section.

### 3.3 Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through three main techniques to strengthen data validity (triangulation). The primary technique for data exploration. Interviews were conducted semi-structured using an interview guide containing open-ended questions regarding experiences, forms of violence, reasons for staying/leaving, and impacts experienced. Second, Observation conducted during the interview process to note non-verbal attitudes, emotional expressions, and atmosphere that might enrich the understanding of the narratives shared by informants. Third, document study. Used to collect supporting data, such as photographic evidence of physical injuries (Figures 4.1 & 4.2), screenshots of digital conversations (Figure 4.3), and other relevant documents approved by the informants.

### 3.4 Data Analysis Technique

The collected data were analyzed following Miles and Huberman's interactive model, which includes three stages:

1. Data Reduction: Selecting, focusing, and simplifying raw data (interview transcripts, observation notes) to facilitate conclusion drawing.
2. Data Display: Organizing the reduced data into a systematic form, such as narrative descriptions and matrices, to enable conclusion drawing.
3. Conclusion Drawing/Verification: Interpreting the displayed data to find meaning, patterns, and relationships, then continuously verifying their truthfulness throughout the analysis process.

### 3.5 Analytical Framework

To analyze the data findings, this research uses Lenore Walker's Cycle of Violence Theory as the main analytical framework. This theory functions as a "scalpel" to dissect and understand the dynamics of abusive relationships experienced by informants into three recurring phases: (1) Tension Building Phase, (2) Acute Battering Incident Phase, and (3) Honeymoon Phase. This theory was chosen for its relevance and strength in explaining the complex psychological patterns that trap victims in detrimental relationships.

### 3.6 Data Validity Check

To ensure the validity of data and findings, source triangulation technique was used. This was done by comparing and checking the consistency of information obtained from the three different informants. Thus, the research findings are not based on a single perspective but are supported by consistent patterns of experience from several subjects.

#### 4. Result

This section presents the main research findings that have undergone the analysis process. Data is presented systematically to describe the experiences of female university student victims of abusive relationships in Malang City.

##### 4.1. Forms of Violence Experienced

All three informants experienced various overlapping forms of violence within a single relationship. Comprehensively, these forms can be mapped as follows:

Table 1. Mapping of Forms of Violence Experienced by Informants

Form of Violence	Manifestations of Behavior	RAD	SA	IAH
Physical	Slapping, punching, kicking, pushing, hair-pulling, throwing objects.	✓	✓	✓
Verbal & Psychological	Cursing (e.g., "dog", "whore"), insults, physical/slander threats, control, gaslighting, psychological harassment.	✓	✓	✓
Sexual	Forcing sexual intercourse with threats or violence.	✓	-	-
Digital	Full control over social media (passwords, posts), forced location sharing, threats to spread private content, phone tapping.	✓	✓	✓
Financial	Forcing to give money/transfer, unauthorized use of ATM/borrowing money, control over expenses.	-	✓	✓

##### 4.2. Analysis Based on Lenore Walker's Cycle of Violence Theory

The dynamics of abusive relationships in all three informants showed patterns consistent with the three phases in the Cycle of Violence Theory, although the intensity and duration of each phase varied.

1. Phase 1: Tension Building. Characterized by increased possessive attitudes, suspicion, outbursts, and verbal violence. Example: EP (RAD's partner) started yelling and cheating; RDP (SA's ex) fully controlled social media and social interactions.
2. Phase 2: Acute Battering Incident. Tension peaks and explodes into explicit violence. Example: EP hit RAD until bruised; RDP slapped and choked SA; EL (IAH's partner) hit IAH until she collided with a table.
3. Phase 3: Honeymoon Phase. After the violence, the perpetrator shows remorse, apologizes excessively, acts very attentive, and promises to change. Example: EP gave a gold ring to RAD; RDP came to SA's house bringing flowers to apologize. This phase often traps victims into hoping again and staying.

##### 4.3. Reasons for Staying and Impacts Experienced

Table 2. Reasons for Staying and Impacts on Each Informant

Informant	Main Reasons for Staying in Abusive Relationship	Main Impacts Experienced
RAD	Feelings of affection and pity because partner is an orphan; long-term relationship (~5 years); families know and care for the partner; symbolic bond (ring).	Became an introverted person, withdrew from social interaction, experienced mental pressure.
SA	(Before breaking up) Family closeness; partner's stable job status; remaining affection.	Severe trauma, difficulty trusting men, became closed-off and no longer oversharing, decline in academic performance (GPA dropped).
IAH	Long-established relationship (since high school); families know each other; still affectionate and hoping partner will change.	Lack of self-confidence (insecure), easily anxious, always feeling inadequate, and



		experiencing pressure.	ongoing	psychological
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#### 4.4. Turning Point: Reasons for Leaving the Relationship

Only one informant (SA) managed to permanently exit the cycle. Her turning point was acute physical and emotional exhaustion, supported by family support after they learned about the violence. SA's threat to report RDP's behavior to his workplace institution also became a pressure factor. After breaking up, SA cut off all communication access (blocking number and social media) as a form of boundary for recovery.

### 5. Discussion

The research results reveal that the experiences of the three female university student victims of abusive relationships in Malang City consistently support and concretize the main proposition in Lenore Walker's Cycle of Violence Theory. These findings also provide a strong argument against the general assumption that victims of violence can easily leave detrimental relationships.

#### 5.1. Confirmation and Enrichment of the Cycle of Violence Theory

First, the research data clearly proves the existence of the recurring three-phase cycle (tension-explosion-honeymoon) in all three cases. This pattern not only occurs in physical violence but also serves as an effective framework for understanding the escalation of psychological, digital, and financial violence. For example, the tension-building phase in informants SA and IAH was manifested through control and criticism on social media, before eventually culminating in physical violence or more brutal emotional outbursts. This expands the applicability of Walker's Theory, which was initially largely applied to domestic physical violence, into the realm of dating violence with more contemporary and diverse modes of violence.

Second, this research strengthens the argument about the complexity of the "honeymoon phase." This phase is not merely pseudo-reconciliation but a highly effective binding mechanism (trauma bonding). The giving of a gold ring by EP to RAD or RDP's dramatic apology to SA functions as intermittent reinforcement—a psychological pattern known to be very strong in creating dependence. This argument answers the fundamental question of why victims like RAD and IAH stayed: they were not only trapped by fear (explosion phase) but also conditioned to hope for the "good" and "remorseful" version of the partner that only appears momentarily after the violence.

#### 5.2. Argument Regarding "Reasons for Staying": Beyond External Factors

Findings about reasons for staying (pity, long relationship, family ties) are often simplified as the victim's weakness or ignorance. However, through the lens of the Cycle of Violence Theory, this research proposes a different argument: these reasons are an integral part of the psychological trap created by the cycle itself. RAD's pity for EP, an orphan, for example, cannot be separated from the narrative built by EP during the honeymoon phase and manipulated during the tension phase. Similarly, established family ties (for RAD and IAH) create systemic pressure that makes it harder for victims to leave, because the decision to break up not only affects them but also inter-family relationships. Thus, this research argues that the decision to stay is an understandable (though unhealthy) response from individuals trapped in a layered system of pressure: psychological (violence cycle), social (stigma, family ties), and emotional (trauma bond).

#### 5.3. Comprehensive Impact: Evidence Inconsistent with the Myth of "Mild Violence"

The research results firmly reject the myth that dating violence is "normal" or has mild impacts. The impacts experienced by all three informants from personality changes to introversion (RAD), severe trauma and decline in academic performance (SA), to shattered self-esteem (IAH) show uniformity in the seriousness of the consequences. These findings are consistent with the research's implicit hypothesis that abusive relationships cause multidimensional damage. Furthermore, the impact is not proportional to the "visible" form of physical violence. IAH, who experienced more psychological and financial violence, for example, suffered from self-confidence and anxiety impacts just as severe as SA, who experienced more explicit physical violence. This is a strong argument for dismissing a hierarchy of violence and affirming that all forms of violence in relationships, both physical and non-physical, have the potential to cause severe and long-term psychological impacts.

#### 5.4. Implications of Findings: Validation of Experience and Direction for Intervention

On a practical level, the consistency of findings with Walker's Theory provides a clear roadmap for intervention. Breaking the cycle must target each phase. Education about signs of the tension phase (such as excessive control on social media) can serve as an early warning. Crisis support should be focused when victims are in the explosion phase. Most critically, victims need to be empowered to recognize the honeymoon phase as part of a manipulation pattern, not a sign of genuine change. Therefore, this research is not only consistent with the underlying theory but also converts that theory into operational insights for prevention and support in the campus environment.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1. Conclusion

This research concludes that the experiences of female university student victims of abusive relationships in Malang City follow a pattern of violence consistent with Lenore Walker's theory. All three informants experienced various interrelated forms of violence within three recurring phases: tension building, acute battering incident, and honeymoon phase. The honeymoon phase is a critical psychological mechanism that creates false hope for change, thereby reinforcing trauma bonds and trapping victims in detrimental relationships. Reasons for staying such as pity, length of relationship, and family ties are direct consequences of this manipulative cycle, not merely individual rational choices. The impacts experienced include multidimensional damage to mental health, self-confidence, and social-academic life of the victims, regardless of the visible form of physical violence.

### 6.2. Suggestions for Further Research

This research opens opportunities for further study, such as exploring the perspectives of perpetrators of violence in dating relationships to understand relational dynamics more comprehensively. Similar research with a broader and more diverse range of informants from various cultural backgrounds is also needed to test the generalizability of the findings. Intervention research based on these findings, such as developing healthy relationship education modules that integrate an understanding of the cycle of violence and trauma bond mechanisms, could be a further practical contribution.

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