

Research Paper

Examining Emotional Abuse in the context of Urban Indian Dating Relationships

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact that emotional abuse in dating relationships has on late adolescents and young adults. With the rising prevalence of dating relationships among the younger population, it is necessary to delve into the experience and impacts of emotional abuse. Additionally, there has been less research into the impact of emotional abuse than the impacts of physical and sexual abuse. The participants were between the ages of 16-30, having had at least one relationship experience for a minimum of three months. Based on previous studies, an operational definition of emotional abuse was created incorporating four dimensions, assessed through a survey. The dimensions were dominance/intimidation, restrictive engulfment, denigration, and hostile withdrawal. Restrictive engulfment was found to be the most common form of emotional abuse. The participants' experiences in an emotionally abusive relationship were studied in depth through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed negative impacts in the short term, such as perceived depression and anxiety, a decrease in self-mattering, along with harmful coping mechanisms and physical effects. Long term impacts, on the other hand included both positive and negative effects. In addition, interviews revealed common methods of ending an abusive relationship, and its perpetuating factors.

Keywords: *Emotional Abuse, Dating Relationships, Abusive Relationships, Negative Impact, Positive Impact, Adolescents and Young Adults*

The emergence of romantic relationships during adolescence is an essential aspect of social development. They contribute to the formation of the self and identity. Adolescents with positive experiences, for instance, might consider themselves attractive partners, while those with negative experiences might lose self-esteem or develop a dislike towards relationships in general (Varma & Mathur, 2015).

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Early adolescence is often the start of romantic relationships which grows in importance and stability over time. It is a newer experience marked by sexual and romantic attraction towards peers of the same or opposite gender (Brown et al., 1999). According to reports, more than 75% of emerging adults are involved in romantic relationships by the time they graduate from high school (Smetana et al., 2006).

Romantic relationships are often seen as a source of support, care, and love from a partner, but not everyone benefits in the same way from such relationships. Many young adults may encounter abuse, which has serious negative effects on their mental and physical health. Teenagers and young adults typically try to keep their romantic relationships as a secret, which may keep them trapped in a cycle of abuse. Also because of young age and immaturity in relationships, they may find it difficult to address it on their own.

The psychological development of adolescents may suffer significantly if they endure abuse in the setting of a romantic relationship. In addition to physical harm, teenage experiences of abuse from a romantic partner have also been connected to symptoms of anxiety, trauma, and depression (Eshelman & Levondsky, 2012; Hanson, 2002).

In the era of social media, unrealistic notions of love and romantic relationships are often publicized, altering the expectations young people have regarding romantic relationships. The idea that loyalty comes from sharing passwords exemplifies how invading someone's personal space has become normalized in contemporary relationships.

Various forms of dating abuse, especially subtler forms like sexist humor and unacceptable language are often glorified in the media. Such abusive behaviors subconsciously are fed into young minds as something that match the prevalent gender norms. Popular media downplays and makes issues of dating violence seem less important, contributing to its normalization (Kohlman et al., 2014). A similar study by Mathew et al (2021) revealed that most people do not perceive being patronizing, raising their voice against the partner, trolling or making inappropriate memes about their partner, etc. as dating violence. It indicated a lack of awareness in the Indian context about emotional abuse, hinting at the minimal exposure, discussions, and engagements young adults have had with topics like dating abuse (Jhala et al, 2021).

Various researchers recognize the importance of teaching the youth necessary life skills to curb dating violence, one of them being bystander skills (Noonan & Charles, 2009). It is important to recognize such necessary skills and tailor interventions around them to prevent dating violence.

According to the National Centre of Injury Prevention and Control (Canada, 2016), dating abuse involves using psychological, physical, emotional, and/or sexual behaviors to gain and maintain power and control over one's partner in a romantic relationship. (Hancock et al., 2017). It signifies how dating abuse is not just limited to physical or sexual abuse but involves emotional abuse as well.

The aim of this abuse is frequently to control the victimized partner. For instance, this can be achieved by restricting the victim's access to outside resources or communication, making them dependent on the abuser to meet their needs (Eshelman & Levondsky, 2012). Research findings indicate that emotional abuse is more prevalent and common in college dating relationships. (Holt & Espelage, 2005; Jackson et al., 2000; Wolfe et al.,

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2001). Physical abuse in relationships is a topic highly discussed and talked about as it is overt in nature and can be perceived through someone's behavior, but emotional abuse is not as easily perceived due to its subtle and covert nature as well as its pervasive pattern.

Understanding Emotional Abuse through Existing Literature

Murphy and Cascardi (in press) defined psychological abuse as "consisting of coercive or aversive acts intended to produce emotional harm or threat of harm."

A persistent series of acts that cause suffering and damage, which consequently impairs a person's psychological health, is referred to as emotional abuse. These actions of one individual tend to destroy the inner self of another. Its existence might not be perceived directly but diminishes the status of self gradually. It is only later when a great deal of damage has been done that the person recognizes its presence. Acceptance of such forms of emotional abuse is even more difficult as it leads to confusion and lack of clarity in the relationship.

Murphy and Hoover (1999) listed four different types of emotional abuse:

Restrictive engulfment which is when the partner might gradually try to lay down restrictions on the personal choices or start tracking and observing the other. These actions tend to keep the partner separate from others and limit their social interactions and activities, and include displays of strong jealousy and possessiveness, with the belief that the goal was to reduce perceived relationship threats by making the partner more dependable and available.

Dominance/Intimidation occurs when individuals in a relationship tend to start threatening or showing signs of extreme verbal aggression to incite fear or submission. This includes a continuum of behaviors, ranging from mildly coercive actions that occur occasionally in well-adjusted relationships to a comprehensive pattern of coercive domination and mind control found in the most extreme battering relationships (Graham, Rawlings, & Rimini, 1988; Romero, 1985).

DemEANING and humiliating actions such as slut shaming, and criticizing the partner's goals and dreams are grouped under the heading of denigration because it was assumed that their primary goal was to lower the partner's self-esteem by making direct attacks on it.

After some time when one starts avoiding their partner during a disagreement and withholds emotional support or communication in a callous or harsh manner are examples of the fourth dimension which is hostile withdrawal. These behaviors are meant to punish the partner and heighten their anxiety or insecurity about the relationship.

All types of dating violence exposure during emerging adulthood are linked to a host of detrimental effects, including low self-esteem (Katz et al., 2000). It could also be explained in terms of socio-location theory which states that an individual's self is based on their social standing in their relationships, whether romantic or other. (Burton et al., 2013). Humans being a social animal, most of us have a need for positive acceptance and validation, especially from the ones we are intimately connected to. This could be another possible reason explaining why negative experiences in a romantic relationship can have a direct impact on a person's self and identity.

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Substance abuse (Eshelman & Levendosky, 2012), dropping out of school (Kaukinen, 2014), and depressive and anxious feelings (Hanson, 2002) along with diminished relationship quality (Marcus, 2004) are some of the other impacts commonly seen. Dysregulation in emotions, as persistent jealous reactions, anger, and an inability to effectively resolve conflicts are common experiences for victims of abusive dating relationships (Korchmaros et al., 2013; Orpinas et al., 2013).

Emotional Abuse in the Indian Setup

Urban Indian societies have become more Westernized, and as a result, young people are more likely to date, be in romantic relationships, and think or talk about their ideal partner. Although this is a newer concept to Indian youth, it is not so easily approved by most parents or might appear as something that goes against cultural norms.

As observed so far, emotional abuse is not even considered abusive in Indian households and marriages. It has been normalized in the name of patriarchy, sexism, love, care, and mere disagreements that every couple encounters. These notions are further carried forward by youngsters. But its impacts are so adverse that they tend to destroy the psychological health of an individual as explored in the current study.

A review of existing literature revealed an extremely limited number of studies that explored the experiences and nature of emotional abuse in the Indian context of dating relationships. Shinde and Wagani (2022) in their study of Indian women in an emotionally abusive relationship found that women tend to be submissive and passive in nature to avoid conflicts or minimize them. After the termination of the abusive relationship, 66.6% of their sample used maladaptive coping mechanisms that led to detrimental effects on their mental health, and only a small portion of the sample used adaptive coping mechanisms such as reaching out for social support, going to therapy, and trying to rebuild their self-esteem. Women also reported that they would have liked if they were more aware and knowledgeable about emotional abuse.

The extent of dating abuse was assessed in educated women in Karnataka. They found the prevalence of violence to be 40.5% and that less educated women and their partners were found to report more violence (Kundapur et al, 2017). A similar study was conducted on young adults in Bangalore, Karnataka to understand how they perceive dating violence and several other related factors. The sample acknowledged the presence of dating violence but did not have a complete understanding of what it constitutes, its various types, and ways to seek help. Emotional abuse was perceived to be most prevalent among the different kinds of dating abuse (Mathew et al, 2021). These studies defined psychological abuse as a component of dating violence but merely reported its perceived prevalence.

Other studies have focused only on the physical and sexual aspects of dating violence. For example, Waldner et al (1999) studied the cultural differences between the USA and India in the prevalence of sexual coercion. Som's dissertation (2006) aimed to understand the attitudes, perceptions and experiences of college women in modern India about intimate partner violence, specifically dating violence.

The limited literature available on dating violence in India focuses majorly on physical and sexual abuse, giving little importance to emotional abuse. Only a few papers have been found that considered and studied emotional abuse as a component of dating violence. Most of these studies were also limited in that they only looked at the perceived prevalence rates,

and not the nature and experience of emotional abuse. The present research delved deeper into the first-hand experiences of victims of emotional abuse.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The 106 study participants were within the age group of 16-30 and were currently in dating relationships or had experienced a dating relationship in the past, where the relationship was of at least 3 months (Females = 86.8%, Males = 10.4%, Others = 2.8%). Their average age was 19.2 (SD = 2). No incentive was offered for participation in the study. All participants were of Indian origin. The mean length of the dating relationship was 19.9 months (median = 14, SD = 15.77).

43.4% of participants were referring to the current relationship whereas 56.6% of the participants were referring to the past relationship which has had the most negative impact 88.7% of the participants were in their bachelor's, 4.7% working, 3.8% pursuing master's, 1.9% senior secondary school, and 0.9% secondary school. 60.4% of the participants reported belonging to the economic middle class, 32.1% to the economic upper middle class, 4.7% to the economic lower middle class, and 2.8% reported that they belonged to the economic upper class. 93.4% of the participants referred to a heterosexual relationship, while the remaining 6.6% referred to a homosexual relationship.

The interview was conducted with 10 participants. All 10 interview participants were female with a mean age of 19.3 years (SD = 1.89). The mean length of dating relationships was 17.2 months (median = 16, SD = 10.09). All interviewees reported referring to the past relationship which had had the most negative impact on them. 8 interviewees were pursuing their bachelor's degree, 1 was working and 1 was pursuing secondary education. 6 participants reported belonging to the economic middle class, 3 to the economic upper middle class, and 1 to the economic lower middle class.

Procedure

The initial survey in the form of a Google Form was circulated throughout the various channels available. The demographic population was requested to fill out the questionnaire. The participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the right to confidentiality, and the right to withdraw freely, along with the potential risks associated with the study. Informed consent was taken and the participants were asked if they would be comfortable in giving an interview. The Google Form was kept open for about a month until the desired number of responses (100) was reached. Convenient and purposive sampling was thus used to obtain the required sample size.

The survey consisted of demographic items along with 25 items on a Likert scale that measured the degree and types of emotional abuse faced by participants in their dating relationships. The items consisted of identifiers of emotional abuse as reported by Murphy & Hoover, 1999 and Mouradian, 2000. They were grouped on the basis of dimensions of emotional abuse (Murphy and Hoover, 1999), namely: dominance/intimidation, restrictive engulfment, denigration, and hostile withdrawal. Participants were asked to rate the frequency of incidents given such as: "Were you ever told by your partner that your feelings or thoughts are irrational or invalid?" or "Has your partner ever attempted to put down your friends and family?" on a scale of 1 to 4 where 1 was never and 4 was always.

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The data collected was then analyzed and the 22 participants with the highest total scores on the survey measuring total perceived emotional abuse, who had given their consent, were contacted for the interview. The interviews were of a semi-structured format which included an average of 30 questions that inquired into the experiences of the interviewees with respect to their emotionally abusive relationships, the effects they faced, and other related topics. For example, “Do you think the relationship brought down how you view yourself?” and “How often did you find it difficult to pursue your daily activities?” A breathing exercise along with small talk was used for debriefing. A dropout rate of 54.54% shows that participants may have felt triggered by the thought of discussing their experience of emotional abuse with researchers, although they filled the survey and consented for a possible interview.

RESULTS

Analysis of the quantitative data collected through the survey was conducted through the use of SPSS (version 2023). Descriptive statistics were calculated for the total perceived emotional abuse, along with each dimension of emotional abuse.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Scores obtained in Survey

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Total Emotional Abuse	49.01	17.54
Dominance/Intimidation	15.42	6.46
Restrictive Engulfment	11.90	4.93
Denigration	9.83	4.12
Hostile Withdrawal	9.33	3.18

The percentage of participants whose score on total perceived emotional abuse and each dimension falls above its respective means was calculated:

Table 2: Percentage of Participants falling above the Mean Score in Survey Results

Dimension	Percentage of Participants falling above the Mean Score
Total Emotional Abuse	40.57%
Dominance/Intimidation	36.79%
Restrictive Engulfment	47.17%
Denigration	42.25%
Hostile Withdrawal	45.28%

Dependent samples ANOVA was used to assess the effect of the status of the relationship, length of relationship and economic status of the participant on the perceived level of emotional abuse faced.

Table 3: F Table

	Total Perceived EA		F (106)	p
	Mean	SD		
Status of Relationship				
Current (n = 46)	38.52	11.70	39.768	< .001
Past (n = 60)	57.05	17.07		
Length of Relationship				
12 months and below (n = 52)	49.17	16.80	.224	.800
13 months to 24 months (n = 27)	50.44	17.61		
25 months and above (n = 27)	47.26	19.32		
Economic Status				
Lower Class (n = 37)	47.38	19.76	.489	.486
Middle - Upper Class (n = 69)	49.88	17.78		

Table 4 Content and thematic analysis of the interviews taken revealed the following themes:

Theme	Subthemes
Short Term Impacts	Perceived Depression
	Self-Mattering
	Perceived Anxiety
	Coping Mechanisms
	Physical Effects
Long Term Impacts	Post Traumatic Growth
	Negative Post Traumatic Effects
Method of ending an abusive relationship	“Ghosting,” breaking up during fights, etc.
Perpetuating factors of an abusive relationship	Personality factors of abuser and victim, social norms

DISCUSSION

While studies on physical and sexual abuse abound even in the Indian psychological community, there is a lack of research on emotional abuse, specifically its impacts on victims and the dimensions of emotional abuse. Although some researchers have examined the prevalence of emotional abuse in Indian society (Waldner et al, 1999; Kundapur et al, 2017), there is not much awareness regarding it amongst the general public, as can be witnessed by the doubt amongst our interviewees regarding whether what they went through could count as a form of abuse. This study thus based its definitions of emotional abuse and its dimensions upon those provided by Euro-American researchers and adapted them to fit Indian norms. Rather than focusing upon perceived prevalence, this study conducted detailed, qualitative interviews to elicit responses from victims of emotional abuse and observe the trends emerging from these conversations.

Among various dimensions of perceived emotional abuse, restrictive engulfment emerged as the most reported dimension of emotional abuse. Hostile withdrawal was the second most reported dimension. Denigration was reported as the second least occurring dimension and dominance/intimidation was the least reported dimension (see Table 2).

It is important to note that the prevalence of participants falling above the mean scores in each dimension seem to follow a traditional, patriarchal trend that can be seen in Indian society. The first and most common dimension of emotional abuse is that of restrictive

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engulfment, a widespread practice in India which is justified through reasons such as protecting loved women from the evils of unknown men and society at large. Hostile withdrawal is also a common sight in Indian households where non-communication and a lack of display of affection are often used as forms of punishment. Degrading comments and belittlement are also often used by those perceived to be superior to keep others in check. Direct dominance is least used, since it is considered uncouth and uncivilized.

The prevalence of benevolent sexism in Indian society functions to control women and “keep them in their place” through incentives, failing which punishment is used. The higher presence of restrictive engulfment, defined as restrictions laid down by one partner for the other, along with tracking and observing them, is often justified as a means to protect the so-called weaker partner, most often the woman in a heterosexual relationship. The misogynistic nature of Indian culture at large is expressed through the idea that women are incapable of protecting themselves, and it is the responsibility of their male partner, father, or brother to save them from other people who wish to harm them. This benevolent sexism extols women’s traditional virtues, promising protection and provision to women who live up to the traditional feminine ideal and thereby enable men to enact their more powerful, traditional roles (Rudman and Glick, 2008).

The calculation of F for total perceived emotional abuse among the various demographic factors collected, such as the status of the relationship, the length of the relationship, and the economic status of the participants revealed certain significant differences. While the length of the relationship or the economic status of the participant did not seem to have an effect on the total perceived emotional abuse ($F = .224, p = .800$; $F = .489, p = .486$ respectively), the responses received from participants referring to a current relationship were significantly lesser than those referring to a past relationship ($F = 39.768, p < .001$).

This difference could be explained by a phenomenon mentioned by many interviewees, who stated that while in the abusive relationship, they tended to downplay the abuse and rationalize it with different reasons such as the love their partner held for them, their protectiveness, and even their mental health issues. According to them, they were only able to understand the extent of the emotional abuse experienced after a certain threshold or extreme act. Thus, those responding to the survey with respect to a current emotionally abusive relationship may deny the truth or severity of their experiences to reduce the dissonance of being in a harmful relationship.

The significant difference between the scores on total perceived emotional abuse obtained from those referring to a past relationship and those referring to a current relationship brought to light the difference in perception of emotional abuse faced in these two situations. A comparison of mean scores on total perceived emotional abuse as well as of each dimension showed that participants referring to a past relationship consistently scored higher than those referring to a current relationship. In the interviews conducted, participants often mentioned the denial of their experiences with emotional abuse, which may serve as the basis for this difference in scores.

Perpetuating Factors of an Abusive Relationship

Many thought processes and emotions were described by participants which played a part in their continued acceptance of emotional abuse and delayed their separation from the abusive partner.

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The factor most often described was that participants kept attempting to repair the relationship and improve the behavior of their abusive partner. They did not want to destroy the relationship by leaving, and said that they had high hopes from their partner and that the relationship would return to its earlier state. They also agreed to remain due to a fear of being alone and losing a long-term relationship. For example, “I just kind of felt that he is kind of immature, which I knew from the starting but I thought that I would be mature enough to handle things for both of our sides.”

Another factor often cited by participants was a lack of social support. This absence caused participants to deny the abuse in the relationship and defend it despite their awareness of its negative effects. This isolation was often the result of both the participants’ own actions as well as steps taken by their partner to isolate them.

Participants also felt compelled to stay in the relationship due to manipulation in the forms of apologies by their partner and assurances that they would change. The abusive partner used “love bombing” and the “us vs them” idea to keep the abusive relationship going. The abusive partners also often normalized abuse as the average experience of couples, and used long term commitments to keep their victims in the relationship. Due to a lack of positive social relationships, participants felt compelled to stay in their abusive relationships as it was the one place they received love and affection, even if it was inconsistent.

Multiple interviewees described that they felt afraid to leave the relationship in case their partner’s mental ill-health such as frequent panic attacks, low self-esteem, etc., led them to further issues. This was described by them in hindsight as the use of a “victim card” by the abuser to keep them in the relationship. One interviewee stated, “I thought, I don't know if he will go and do something with himself. I was scared, I didn't know this is normal for him.”

The interviews also revealed several themes touching upon the experiences of victims of emotional abuse.

Short Term Impacts

Multiple impacts of emotional abuse were reported by the interviewees, which occurring during the abusive relationship as well as up to 6 months after it.

Perceived Depression

When asked about their mood and other similar symptoms of depression, all interviewees responded that they had experienced or were currently experiencing them. The major symptoms that were reported by participants were low mood and energy, loss of interest in daily activities and hobbies, increased distractibility, excessive crying, and intense flashbacks and nightmares. Many participants experienced disturbances in their eating and sleeping habits. While some mentioned an increase, most reported a loss of appetite and reduced sleep.

These symptoms, typical of anhedonia, could be better understood by one of the statements given by a participant, “I want to start a new hobby. I also wanted to start gym, but I am not able to. I wanted to go on a walk, but I am not able to. I wanted to do assignments, I am unable to. It was like a dark room. And I was sitting alone in it. There was no one.”

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Half of the participants interviewed also admitted that they performed self-harm, in either a mental or physical manner. One participant justified it as “Physical harm is equal to pain to your own body. And I thought that mental pain will go. See, if I am doing something to my own body, the things in my mind will go away because I will be focusing on the pain.”

60% of the interviewees also mentioned experiencing suicidal ideation to different extents, ranging from passive ideation to active planning which stopped short of execution. For example, “*Life kuch nahi hai, nothing good about me toh aisa thought kabhi aata thi kaash koi accident ho jaye mera jese yeh to bahut common thi ki haan ho jaye koi gadi mar de ya mai kuch kar lun apne saath* (there is nothing in this life for me, there is nothing good about me so I used to wish that some accident would occur with me. It was very common that I thought about a car hitting me or doing something to myself.)”

Self-Mattering

90% of the interviews revealed that victims of emotional abuse faced some sort of negative effect on the way that they view themselves. Participants mentioned feeling insecure about their appearance and personality, disappointed, insufficient, and a decrease in their self-esteem.

Participants mentioned feeling dependent on others to approve their choices and decisions, and an increased need for external validation. They also began to question their self, beliefs, choices, etc. For example, “I started to question my beliefs for sure. My goals in life, my career, my destiny and everything. Even my existence.”

Of the interviews taken, 80% of the participants also reported experiences of social isolation, both imposed by the partner and by themselves. Participants mentioned feeling like they had to prioritize the relationship over everyone else, including family and close friends. They felt lonely due to an “us vs them” mentality that developed in the relationship, and cut off many friends as a result. For example, “He kind of made it happen like he was the only one and I could only talk to him.”

Perceived Anxiety

Out of the participants interviewed, 70% reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety such as extreme panic, feelings of anxiety, huge clusters of thoughts, difficulty in switching trains of thoughts, shortness of breath and hyperventilation, excessive sweating, trembling and tenseness.

A participant mentioned, “I overthink a lot. Yes, you can say panic. I start getting anxious. I start crying, hyperventilating. The tendency to think will be very difficult.”

Coping Mechanisms

Half of the participants reported the use of coping mechanisms to deal with the distress caused due to the experiences of emotional abuse, the main two of which were denial and attention seeking.

Participants described that they would deny the issues in the relationship to both themselves and others, justified abusive actions, and gave their abusive partner multiple chances due to their emotional attachment. One participant mentioned, “I just kept thinking that it's probably not this bad, it's just me in the heat of the moment I'm making a big deal out of it.”

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They described a need for attention from others, specifically from their abusive partner when they were ignored, and “wanted to be wanted.” For example, “I wanted him to bother my options. He should feel that I haven't talked to him since morning. But maybe he never felt that. He was busy doing everything else. Maybe I was left behind somewhere.”

Some participants also admitted to the use of self-harm as a method to gain attention from their partner, and wished to get hurt so they would be cared about by others. One interviewee said, “if an accident happens to me... Then maybe somebody will care about me.”

Physical Effects

All but one of the interviewees mentioned that they experienced physical effects during the abusive relationship or during its aftermath. They mentioned feeling exhausted both physically and mentally, restlessness, etc. Multiple participants also reported falling ill after the breakup, which they theorized could have been due to extreme emotions, stress, or excessive crying.

Long Term Effects

In addition to the short-term impacts observed during the interview, several long-term effects were also seen. These have been summarized into two categories.

Post Traumatic Growth

Of the interviews taken, 70% reported experiencing positive growth following the experience of negative effects. These positive experiences include a revived interest in old hobbies and developing new ones, focusing on their mental health through activities such as journaling and poetry, and an improvement in concentration. Participants mentioned that they were working on increasing their self-image, self-worth and felt like they were returning to their real selves. “I'm trying to bring back that version of me that was there [...] who didn't fear anything or anybody because she had her shit together. I really want to be that person right now. I'm trying to do that,” was stated by one of the participants.

Many interviewees said they feel more independent since their breakup, and that they do not feel as much of a need for external validation as they used to. They have found support systems in their peers, school counselors and families. Participants report a reduction in self-harm behaviors, and a return to healthy eating and sleeping habits. They have developed criteria and standards for any future partners in the hopes to avoid a similar experience. Interviewees said that they are happier after the breakup, and feel that they have grown stronger in the time after it. For example, “I've dealt with all these things and managed to learn more mature things.”

Post Traumatic Negative Effects

However, it must be kept in mind that all participants interviewed also reported certain long lasting negative effects from their experience with emotional abuse. Multiple participants mentioned that they feel uncomfortable with other people, especially men (it is important to note that all participants interviewed were women who had been in heterosexual relationships, i.e. with men). They feel that they have developed trust issues, and experience loneliness due to a fear of interacting with new people in case it leads to another negative experience. Participants have stopped talking to their old friends and feel unable to approach their family with mental health issues.

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Participants find it hard to think of the abusive partner negatively. Due to their sensitivity to situations similar to the abusive relationship, they feel unable to entertain any new romantic prospects. For example, “[I’ve] been overly sensitive to some situations, talking about loving someone, talking about getting in a relationship. It’s scary for me and like, I am not experiencing it. I thought that I’ll be able to meet new people. I’ll be able to meet new boys and I’ll experience something good, which I’ll be able to describe as love. But I think this thought is in my mind that I won’t be able to experience love because of my own trauma. I won’t be able to have a good relationship. I think that everyone will be the same person. Every relationship will have a traumatic experience.”

It was mentioned by participants that they experience huge clusters of thoughts which overwhelm them, in which they often question how they allowed the abuse to happen. They also regret not noticing the problems earlier, not sharing them with anyone, and not leaving the abusive relationship earlier. They have noticed an increase in symptoms of anxiety such as panicking, hyperventilating, trembling, chest pain, sweating, etc.

Interviewees reported a continuous presence of symptoms of depression such as constant sadness, lowness and discontent, feeling directionless, increased exhaustion, along with physiological symptoms such as disturbed eating and sleeping habits. Participants feel unable to carry out daily activities due to a decrease in concentration and thought clarity. They also report becoming undersensitive and find it hard to react to anything. This was stated by a participant as, “I have become emotionally numb actually, because like, I don’t respond to negative situations. That is a plus point. But uh, the minus point is that I don’t even get happy at things that I should.”

Participants report that their routine has been interrupted, and they feel like they are falling behind. They feel like they are unable to achieve their goals and worry about it. They feel burnt out and unable to carry out the activities they need to. They experience memory loss in daily life, and experience flashbacks and panic attacks when they are confronted with situations from their abusive relationship.

Methods of Ending an Abusive Relationship

Participants described the process of breaking up with an abusive partner as difficult and emotionally turbulent. Each interviewee reported being the person to initiate the final breakup, regardless of previous attempts by either person in the relationship which were unsuccessful.

Many different ways were described by participants: some of them broke up suddenly during a fight and did not accept reconciliation attempts by the abusive partner. Others were supported throughout the process by their family and did not have to take many active steps to carry out the separation, which was handled by their family members.

Another aspect of the separation mentioned by many participants was that they had become emotionally detached from their abusive partner and the relationship, and in this way found it easier to initiate the breakup. Another important aspect reported was the use of the method of “ghosting,” i.e. ignoring all communication attempts from the abusive partner, including blocking their phone number, social media accounts, etc.

Participants described the experience of feelings of guilt, sadness and nostalgia following the separation, despite the positive effects on their mental, physical, and social health.

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These emergent themes reveal the workings of emotionally abusive relationships from the perspective of the victim, and provide a deeper understanding of the experience. It has shown that emotional abuse is not as harmless as it has been believed to be, and it often leads to a similar severity of effects on the victim as physical or sexual abuse may inflict.

CONCLUSION

The study of emotional abuse in Indian romantic relationships is essential to initiate the process of creating an environment that encourages victims to speak out about their experiences and seek psychological and social support in the endeavor to recover. The normalization of the experience of emotional abuse has led both psychologists and the public to focus majorly on physical and sexual abuse, while minimizing the experiences of victims of other types of abuse.

This study was the first to delve into the experience from the point of view of victims of emotional abuse in dating relationships in India, making it a pivotal turn in the study of social psychology and interpersonal relationships in Indian society. It must serve as a springboard for further research, to enable mental health practitioners to develop frameworks of support for victims of emotional abuse.

Further studies must also focus on the study of the effects of emotional abuse amongst men, and the transgender and gender non-conforming communities. There is a need to analyze if there may be a difference between the experiences of emotional abuse amongst the urban and rural youth, along with those that are not undergraduate college students. The skewed sample obtained in this study leaves many such questions unanswered, which are nonetheless essential to gain a fuller picture of the experiences of victims belonging to a variety of demographics.

This study ought to serve as the foundation for building a comprehensive understanding of this oft-overlooked aspect of emotional abuse in Indian dating relationships. Its findings related to the effects faced by victims, along with surrounding facets such as the perpetuating factors of an emotionally abusive relationship and the ways that have most often been used to end such relationships must be studied in depth to allow a comprehensive understanding of emotional abuse.

The result that restrictive engulfment was the most reported dimension of emotional abuse reveals the effect of ingrained misogyny in Indian society, and its manifestation as benevolent sexism being accepted as love and protection by women. Studies may be conducted to investigate the line between benevolent and hostile sexism, and when and where the former begins to turn into the latter in the form of dominance and denigration.

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Conflict of Interest

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