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Intimacy, control, and toxicity: A social penetration analysis of cohabiting students' relationships in Yogyakarta

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Abstract

This study is motivated by the phenomenon of cohabitation among students in Yogyakarta, which reflects shifting social and moral values amid modernisation. Students who choose to live together without marriage often face complex interpersonal communication dynamics, which in many cases develop into toxic relationships. This condition is interesting to study because it shows the contradiction between modern freedom and local cultural values. This study uses Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor) to analyse the stages of self-disclosure and the depth of interpersonal relationships that occur. The research method uses a descriptive qualitative approach. Data was collected through in-depth interviews with five student informants who were cohabiting in Yogyakarta. Data analysis focused on four aspects: (1) stages of self-disclosure, (2) reciprocal balance of self-disclosure, (3) dimensions of depth and breadth of self-disclosure as tools of manipulation, and (4) perceptions of cost and reward in toxic relationships. The results show that the process of self-disclosure develops rapidly due to physical closeness but is not balanced by emotional readiness and healthy privacy boundaries. This imbalance in communication gives rise to domination, emotional control, and manipulation, which are hallmarks of toxic relationships. These findings confirm that physical closeness does not guarantee stable emotional intimacy. The implications of this research emphasise the importance of understanding healthy interpersonal communication, which focuses on emotional balance and respect for individual privacy. Practically, the results of this study can be used as a reference for higher education institutions and student counsellors in designing education and guidance related to healthy communication in student romantic relationships.

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Keywords

Interpersonal communication, Living together, Toxic relationship, Social penetration theory, Yogyakarta student

Introduction

Toxic relationships have increasingly attracted attention due to rising reports of emotional manipulation and psychological violence among young adults. Interpersonal relationships, which ideally serve as a source of emotional support, often become sources of stress and instability [1]. University students are particularly vulnerable to toxic relationship dynamics because they are in a transitional developmental phase marked by identity exploration, emotional experimentation, and increasing relational autonomy. This focus is especially relevant in Yogyakarta, a major education hub in Indonesia that hosts more than 400,000 university students across numerous higher education institutions. The high concentration of students living away from their families creates conditions that may normalize independent living arrangements, including cohabitation practices. Therefore, toxic relationships among university students constitute an important issue in interpersonal communication studies.

Cohabitation among university students, especially in Yogyakarta, increases the frequency of interaction and physical closeness, accelerating the development of emotional intimacy. However, this intensity also creates opportunities for intimacy misuse, as emotional adaptation processes are shortened and privacy boundaries become fragile. Self-disclosure, which is meant to build trust, can become a tool for manipulation when personal information is used to pressure a partner [12]. For cohabiting students, disclosure often occurs rapidly and spontaneously, increasing the risk of misuse.

Social Penetration Theory (SPT) by Altman and Taylor explains that interpersonal relationships develop through gradual layers of personal information disclosure [4]. Ideally, this process requires emotional safety and balanced reciprocity, but cohabitation can accelerate emotional penetration, bypassing psychological readiness and increasing vulnerability to manipulation. Imbalanced reciprocity in disclosure creates emotional pressure and unhealthy dependency [2], which is reinforced by practical dependencies such as shared routines and living spaces [9].

Continuous physical proximity in cohabiting relationships intensifies emotional control, as partners have direct access to each other's routines, personal spaces, and private activities. Such conditions expand opportunities for monitoring, boundary intrusion, and coercive interpersonal regulation [3]. Disproportionate self-disclosure fosters emotional dependency, reinforcing cycles of manipulation [5]. Negative verbal behaviors and possessiveness are intensified in cohabitation contexts [1][6]. This study addresses a gap by examining intimacy misuse through the lens of SPT among students in Yogyakarta, integrating SPT stages, reciprocity dynamics, and cost–reward evaluations to understand how emotional closeness transforms into mechanisms of control. Continuous physical proximity in cohabiting relationships intensifies emotional control, as partners have direct access to each other's routines, personal spaces, and private activities. Such conditions expand opportunities for monitoring, boundary intrusion, and coercive interpersonal regulation. Understanding this dynamic is

important because the normalization of cohabitation among university students may obscure early warning signs of relational toxicity, potentially exposing young adults to prolonged psychological risk. This study therefore provides critical insight into how accelerated intimacy in cohabiting contexts can transform into mechanisms of control, contributing to the development of preventive communication strategies for emerging adults.

Method

This research employs a qualitative phenomenological design to explore interpersonal communication experiences within toxic relationships among cohabiting students in Yogyakarta, allowing an in-depth understanding of subjective meanings from intimate interactions and intimacy misuse, with a focus on stages of self-disclosure based on Social Penetration Theory [4]. Participants are university students who have cohabited with their partners for at least six months and exhibit dynamics such as imbalanced self-disclosure [5], possessive behavior, excessive control [6], or emotional manipulation, selected through purposive sampling, while Yogyakarta provides a diverse student social context [10]. Data were collected via semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting 45–60 minutes, supplemented with field notes to capture nonverbal expressions, and audio-recorded with consent [9], using an interview guide based on SPT concepts including depth, breadth, reciprocity, and disclosure stages [4][2], alongside an observation sheet for nonverbal cues. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis [10], including transcription, familiarization, coding, theme generation, and interpretation, examining each dataset through SPT to identify how disclosure evolves into control mechanisms, with cross-case comparisons highlighting recurring patterns and variations, providing a comprehensive understanding of intimacy misuse dynamics among cohabiting students.

Result and discussion

The study involved five participants, selected through purposive sampling for their direct experience in cohabiting relationships and relevance to the research focus, all aged 20–22, representing late-stage university students navigating early adulthood, a developmental phase marked by identity exploration and the formation of intimate relationships. The duration of cohabitation ranged from six to twelve months, providing substantial experiential depth to observe interpersonal communication processes, including toxic relational patterns. Participants, coded as MJ, AE, RK, IS, and OT, were all female students aged 19–23 years to protect their identities. They reported experiences such as control patterns, conflict escalation, verbal manipulation, social isolation, silent treatment, excessive demands for disclosure, possessiveness, and psychological pressure. Reporting participants' gender and age provides important analytical context, particularly given evidence that young women in emerging adulthood may experience distinct vulnerabilities in intimate relationships. Using initials

ensures ethical standards are upheld while maintaining analytical consistency when referencing quotes in the Results section.

Stages of students'self-disclosure

The stages of students' self-disclosure refer to the gradual process through which individuals reveal personal information, emotions, and experiences to romantic partners, particularly within cohabiting relationships. Based on Social Penetration Theory, disclosure typically starts with superficial exchanges and progresses to deeper layers involving personal beliefs, vulnerabilities, and private experiences [1]. In cohabitation settings, constant daily interaction accelerates this process, prompting students to share sensitive information earlier and more frequently than in non-cohabiting relationships [2]. While rapid disclosure can strengthen relational closeness, it also increases vulnerability to manipulation, emotional control, and conflict when relationships become unhealthy [3][4].

Among the five participants, early-stage self-disclosure progressed quickly due to physical proximity and frequent interaction during the first months of cohabitation. Most participants reported that intimate sharing began within the first one to three months of living together, indicating an accelerated penetration process. MJ explained that living together "made us closer… so we could get to know each other more deeply" (Interview MJ, 2025), while AE described initial disclosure as natural and comforting (Interview AE, 2025). Social Penetration Theory suggests that intensified interaction can rapidly move individuals from superficial to deeper communication layers.

Emotional consequences emerged between the fourth and sixth month of cohabitation. MJ noted that personal stories she shared "became a weapon used against me" (Interview MJ, 2025), and RK reported conflicts triggered by personal openness (Interview RK, 2025). IS described a one-sided dynamic, feeling "interrogated, but she wouldn't open up" (Interview IS, 2025), indicating weakened reciprocity over time. Signs of de-penetration appeared after approximately six to twelve months of cohabitation, when most participants began limiting disclosure as self-protection. AE "started holding back" (Interview AE, 2025), and MJ established stricter privacy boundaries (Interview MJ, 2025). The findings demonstrate a compressed but fragile trajectory of self-disclosure, showing that physical proximity alone does not ensure stable emotional intimacy.

Changes in depth of information and control

The subsection *Changes in Depth of Information and Control* explores how self-disclosure in cohabiting student relationships can shift from mutual intimacy to a mechanism of control. According to Social Penetration Theory, sharing deeper layers of personal information ideally fosters closeness when handled reciprocally [1]. However, once private information is disclosed, boundaries may be violated if a partner uses it to monitor, regulate, or emotionally pressure the other [2]. In cohabitation, accelerated

interaction can intensify this shift, turning voluntary disclosure into a tool for dominance or manipulation [3]. This subsection examines how these dynamics appear in the lived experiences of participants.

Participants reported that early-stage disclosure felt safe and natural, but over time, the depth of information became a source of tension and control. RK shared personal stories about family and academics because he felt "accepted" (Interview RK, 2025), yet these disclosures eventually triggered conflict. MJ described that each disclosure "turned into a weapon during arguments" (Interview MJ, 2025), showing how sensitive information can be exploited for dominance. AE experienced criticism and mockery stemming from personal disclosures (Interview AE, 2025), illustrating that premature depth without reciprocity increases vulnerability. These experiences indicate that the intended intimacy of disclosure can be distorted into relational leverage.

One-sided disclosure patterns were also evident among participants. IS felt pressured to reveal deeply while receiving little openness in return, stating, "He often forced me to tell things that felt too personal" (Interview IS, 2025). OT described excessive intrusion and surveillance, reporting that her partner "always wanted to know my messages or why I met certain friends" (Interview OT, 2025). As conflicts escalated, participants began limiting disclosures to protect themselves; AE "started holding back" (Interview AE, 2025), and RK avoided sharing "things that are too deep" (Interview RK, 2025). Overall, these findings demonstrate that changes in disclosure depth among cohabiting students often shift from fostering intimacy to enabling control, highlighting the dual nature of self-disclosure in toxic relationships.

Toxic communication patterns in living together

The subsection *Toxic Communication Patterns in Living Together* explores how continuous cohabitation intensifies destructive interaction styles that undermine relational stability. According to Gottman, toxic patterns such as criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling predict relational breakdown and emotional distress [11]. In cohabiting student relationships, the lack of physical and emotional boundaries exacerbates these behaviors, making conflicts more immediate and difficult to resolve. Proximity increases emotional reactivity, facilitating verbal aggression, passive withdrawal, and monitoring-driven questioning [12]. This subsection examines how these dynamics manifest in participants' daily interactions.

Participants reported that toxic communication emerged early as interaction intensity increased and dominance shaped conversations. MJ described a partner who "often raised their voice over small things" (Interview MJ, 2025), reflecting a shift from supportive communication to verbal aggression. AE noted frequent blame shifting, where her partner "always looked for something to blame me for" (Interview AE, 2025), showing how repeated manipulation prevents conflict resolution and creates emotional imbalance. RK highlighted the use of silent treatment, explaining that her partner "could go silent for days without clear reason" (Interview RK, 2025), generating

uncertainty and psychological dominance. These experiences demonstrate how early cohabitation can escalate minor disagreements into toxic interactions.

Other patterns reported included interrogation, jealousy-driven monitoring, and belittling remarks. IS explained that his partner "always wanted long explanations about unimportant things" (Interview IS, 2025), while OT described persistent questions about whom he met and why (Interview OT, 2025), signaling controlling communication. AE reported being mocked about sensitive matters (Interview AE, 2025), and MJ noted repeated mentions of past mistakes (Interview MJ, 2025), both reinforcing emotional domination. RK emphasized negative generalizations, such as "you're always wrong" (Interview RK, 2025), which damage self-worth and relational respect. Nonverbal aggression, such as OT's report that her partner "gave looks that scared me" (Interview OT, 2025), further intensified relational toxicity, showing that living together amplifies destructive communication patterns and fosters emotional dependency.

Possessiveness and surveilance dynamics

The subsection Possessiveness and Surveillance Dynamics examine how relational insecurity and power imbalances in cohabiting relationships manifest through monitoring behaviors, excessive demands, and restrictions on personal autonomy. Scholars argue that possessiveness often stems from fear of abandonment and a desire for control, escalating into surveillance behaviors such as checking messages, demanding constant updates, or limiting social interactions [13][14]. Cohabitation intensifies these behaviors by reducing privacy and normalizing intrusion, shifting relationships from mutual trust to coercive regulation and psychological strain [3][6]. Participants reported that possessiveness emerged from intense physical and emotional closeness. MJ shared that his partner "always wanted to know where I was and with whom" (Interview MJ, 2025), while AE experienced digital monitoring, with his partner frequently asking to see private chats (Interview AE, 2025).

Physical and nonverbal surveillance also appeared prominently. OT explained that his partner "liked to look over my shoulder when I was on the phone" (Interview OT, 2025), reflecting direct intrusion into personal boundaries. Emotional insecurity and fear of abandonment further fueled possessiveness; MJ recalled his partner saying, "I'm scared you'll leave me for someone else" (Interview MJ, 2025), while IS reported guilt-based manipulation through statements like, "If you love me, you should tell me everything" (Interview IS, 2025). IS's experience highlights how such behaviors coerce disclosure and legitimize surveillance under the guise of emotional concern. Overall, possessiveness and surveillance dynamics in cohabiting student relationships combine physical monitoring, digital access, social restriction, and emotional manipulation, creating imbalanced relational structures, compromising emotional safety, and fostering emotional dependency.

Emotional impact and dependency

The subsection Emotional Impact and Dependency examines how prolonged exposure to toxic dynamics in cohabiting student relationships affects emotional well-being and fosters maladaptive dependency. Emotionally destructive relationships generate chronic stress, diminished self-worth, and heightened anxiety, particularly in living arrangements with minimal physical distance [15]. Dependency emerges when a partner becomes both the source of distress and the primary provider of emotional reassurance, creating a paradoxical attachment reinforced by alternating affection and control [13][16].

Participants consistently reported psychological strain linked to constant proximity and recurring conflict. MJ felt "mentally exhausted" (Interview MJ, 2025), AE felt "wrong even when I hadn't done anything wrong" (Interview AE, 2025), IS reported declining self-confidence, RK expressed fear of speaking, and OT described persistent monitoring that prevented relaxation. These accounts indicate sustained emotional pressure that undermines personal stability.

Defensive coping patterns also appeared. AE began "pulling away emotionally" (Interview AE, 2025), while MJ and IS reported self-blame and fear of being alone. RK described growing daily reliance on her partner, and OT felt unable to refuse requests, reflecting reduced autonomy. The findings show that toxic cohabiting relationships produce a reinforcing cycle of psychological strain and emotional dependency, highlighting the importance of recognizing relational risks among young adults in shared living contexts.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that cohabiting students experience accelerated self-disclosure processes that heighten relational vulnerability and intensify toxic communication patterns. The findings show that shifts in disclosure depth, possessiveness, and surveillance behaviors shape an unhealthy cycle of emotional dependency, aligning with yet extending current theoretical frameworks such as Social Penetration Theory and Communication Privacy Management Theory. The discussion indicates that constant proximity amplifies conflict, reduces boundary regulation, and escalates psychological distress, particularly among emerging adults with developing emotional regulation skills. These insights contribute to the broader field by highlighting how cohabitation uniquely transforms interpersonal dynamics in young adult relationships, challenging assumptions that physical closeness inherently fosters intimacy. The study also underscores the importance of integrating developmental factors into future analyses of relational toxicity. Finally, future research should investigate preventive strategies and relational education models that can support young adults in navigating early cohabiting relationships more safely and sustainably.

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