



## Interpersonal Communication Strategies in Facing Toxic Dating Relationships: A Study among Communication Science Students at Dehasen University

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### Abstract.

Toxic relationships within romantic contexts are increasingly prevalent among university students, often leading to negative mental health outcomes and distorted interpersonal dynamics. This study investigates how interpersonal communication unfolds in the context of toxic dating relationships among students of the Communication Science Department at Dehasen University. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected via in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation from three informants who had experienced excessive control, emotional manipulation, and verbal abuse in their relationships. Findings indicate a breakdown in key interpersonal communication traits—openness was suppressed due to manipulative reactions, empathy was absent as partners lacked mutual understanding, supportiveness took the form of control rather than care, positive attitudes eroded into emotional fatigue, and equality was replaced with domination. The study highlights the need for increased awareness of healthy communication, early recognition of relational toxicity, and institutional support for students at risk. These insights contribute to the broader discourse on student mental health, character education, and interpersonal relationship management in higher education settings.

**Keywords:** *Interpersonal Communication, Toxic Relationship, University Students, Dating, Partner Domination.*

### INTRODUCTION

Romantic relationships during the college years are often seen as a formative phase in young adults' emotional and psychological development. Within these relationships, interpersonal communication plays a crucial role in shaping the dynamics between partners. According to DeVito's theory of interpersonal communication, key aspects such as openness, empathy, supportiveness, positive attitude, and equality are foundational to healthy and meaningful interactions. When these elements are compromised, the relationship may become toxic—a condition marked by control, manipulation, and emotional abuse.

The phenomenon of toxic relationships has gained attention due to its detrimental impact on individuals' mental health, especially among university students who are in a critical stage of self-discovery and identity formation. Studies suggest that toxic relationships among students often manifest in the form of excessive jealousy, emotional dependence, verbal aggression, and psychological manipulation. These behaviors not only hinder effective communication but also lead to anxiety, stress, depression, and in extreme cases, suicidal ideation. A tragic case reported by *Antara News* highlighted the suicide of a female student in Bengkulu, allegedly due to unresolved romantic conflicts, underlining the urgency of addressing toxic relational dynamics in academic environments.

At Dehasen University, preliminary interviews revealed that several students had experienced toxic romantic relationships characterized by emotional instability, possessiveness, and verbal violence. Despite being communication science students, many lacked the awareness or tools to navigate these situations effectively, leading to communication breakdowns and emotional exhaustion. This contradiction—between academic knowledge and personal experience—serves as the main impetus for this study.

Therefore, this research aims to explore how interpersonal communication is practiced in toxic dating relationships among communication science students at Dehasen University. Using DeVito's communication framework and social exchange theory, the study seeks to analyze the communication patterns and relational consequences faced by students entangled in toxic partnerships. Ultimately, the study contributes to the development of preventive communication strategies and mental health support systems in higher education institutions.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Interpersonal Communication Theory**

Interpersonal communication is defined as a face-to-face interaction between individuals that involves both verbal and nonverbal message exchange, enabling immediate feedback and mutual influence (Mulyana, 2003; DeVito, 2011). Joseph A. DeVito outlines five essential characteristics of effective interpersonal communication: openness, empathy, supportiveness, positive attitude, and equality. Openness involves honest expression of thoughts and feelings; empathy refers to understanding others from their perspective; supportiveness encourages emotional backing; a positive attitude helps manage conflict constructively; and equality ensures balanced communication between partners. DeVito also identifies five stages in interpersonal relationships—contact, involvement, intimacy, deterioration, and dissolution—which describe the progression or breakdown of relationships based on communication quality.

### **Social Exchange Theory**

Social Exchange Theory, introduced by George C. Homans and further developed by Blau and Thibaut & Kelley, explains human relationships through a cost-reward framework. In this context, individuals maintain relationships when perceived benefits outweigh the costs. In toxic relationships, this theory helps explain why individuals may remain despite emotional harm—they might perceive the "rewards" such as emotional security or social validation as outweighing the "costs" like stress or loss of autonomy. Homans' propositions—such as success, stimulus, value, deprivation-satiation, aggression-approval, and rationality—are applied to understand decision-making patterns in interpersonal conflict and emotional dependency.

### **Toxic Relationship Dynamics**

The term "toxic relationship" was popularized by Dr. Lillian Glass in 1995, referring to relationships characterized by conflict, control, lack of respect, and emotional abuse. Toxic behaviors may include possessiveness, jealousy, gaslighting, manipulation, and verbal aggression. Fincham & Linfield (in Sumarjo, 2023) describe five dimensions of toxic relationships: negative interaction quality, dissatisfaction with sacrifice, resentment toward partner, hostile conflict behavior, and intolerance toward differences. In romantic relationships, especially among students, toxic dynamics are often normalized under the guise of love, resulting in emotional dependency and difficulty exiting the relationship. These patterns can severely impact mental health, academic focus, and social interaction, making early recognition and communication education critical.

## **METHODS**

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore interpersonal communication patterns within toxic dating relationships. The aim was to understand subjective experiences and meanings constructed by the participants through direct engagement and contextual interpretation. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on students from the Communication Science Program at Dehasen University, Bengkulu. The criteria for inclusion were: (1) students aged 18 or above, (2) individuals who were currently or had previously been in a romantic relationship marked by toxic dynamics such as excessive control, emotional manipulation, or verbal abuse, and (3) willingness to share experiences openly and in detail. A total of three informants—two females and one male—met these criteria. Data collection was conducted using three techniques:

1. In-depth interviews, guided by a semi-structured interview protocol, to capture narratives of participants' relationship experiences.
2. Observation, including behavioral cues and expressions during interviews.
3. Documentation, including chat logs, field notes, and photographs relevant to the interpersonal communication dynamics under investigation.

Data analysis followed the interactive model by Miles and Huberman, involving three key stages:

1. Data reduction – identifying relevant patterns and themes related to the five interpersonal communication traits (openness, empathy, supportiveness, positive attitude, and equality).
2. Data display – organizing the information into matrices and descriptive summaries.
3. Conclusion drawing and verification – interpreting the data to form meaningful insights while cross-checking for consistency and credibility.

To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied triangulation of sources, prolonged engagement, and member checking with participants.

## **RESULTS**

This study examined how interpersonal communication functions within the context of toxic dating relationships among Communication Science students at Dehasen University. The analysis focused on five key characteristics of interpersonal communication proposed by DeVito: openness, empathy, supportiveness, positive attitude, and equality. Through in-depth interviews and observations, it became evident that these communication elements were significantly disrupted, leading to an unhealthy and emotionally draining relationship dynamic for the participants.

The first dimension, openness, was largely absent in all participants' accounts. Informant SKR described how any attempt at honest expression was met with anger or psychological manipulation by her partner. For instance, when she tried to express concerns about financial autonomy, her partner would react aggressively, making her feel guilty and emotionally threatened. As a result, SKR resorted to silence, prioritizing emotional survival over transparency. A WhatsApp conversation presented during observation supported her statement, showing her partner using harsh language and accusatory tones that intimidated her and discouraged further dialogue.

Informant SPP, a male student, also struggled with openness in his relationship. His partner frequently overreacted when he attempted to express thoughts or emotions, particularly when the topic involved his personal freedom or social activities. This caused SPP to suppress his feelings and avoid initiating meaningful conversations. Despite being a communication

student, he admitted that the fear of conflict outweighed his need for emotional honesty. This pattern highlights the paradox of being educated in communication theory while simultaneously experiencing communication breakdown in personal life.

Empathy, the second element, was likewise diminished in these relationships. Informants expressed that their partners consistently failed to understand or acknowledge their emotions and viewpoints. MRL described how her partner, DN, became increasingly possessive after she began university, perceiving her growing independence as a threat. Instead of offering support, DN accused her of changing and neglecting the relationship, which led MRL to feel emotionally isolated. Her experiences reflect how lack of empathy transforms minor misunderstandings into persistent emotional conflicts, where one party feels misunderstood and unsupported.

SPP reported a similar lack of emotional reciprocity. His partner frequently demanded attention and emotional validation while showing little regard for his own emotional needs. The imbalance led him to feel drained and emotionally undervalued, which further discouraged open communication. In toxic relationships, the absence of empathy results in a communicative environment dominated by emotional neglect or even punishment for vulnerability, rather than mutual understanding.

Moving to supportiveness, the third dimension, all informants indicated that the "support" provided by their partners was often conditional and manipulative. SKR recounted how her partner demanded control over her financial decisions, which was initially framed as assistance but later revealed to be a tactic for dominance. Such "support" blurred the lines between care and control, making it difficult for her to distinguish genuine concern from coercive behavior. This aligns with prior research showing how toxic partners weaponize emotional support to achieve control and compliance.

MRL's relationship illustrated another form of pseudo-support. Her partner required constant updates on her activities, framed as concern for her safety. However, this behavior escalated into surveillance and possessiveness. Rather than feeling supported, MRL experienced emotional suffocation and began to lose trust in her partner's intentions. This pseudo-support eroded her autonomy and led to further withdrawal, weakening the foundation of mutual respect and communication in the relationship.

Positive attitude, often reflected in kindness, patience, and constructive dialogue, gradually gave way to emotional exhaustion in all cases. Informants initially attempted to maintain optimism and understanding toward their partners' behavior, hoping that conflicts were temporary. However, the repeated cycles of misunderstanding, manipulation, and verbal hostility eroded their emotional resilience. SKR shared that despite multiple efforts to de-escalate arguments and communicate calmly, her partner's repeated aggression left her mentally drained and hopeless about change. This chronic emotional fatigue eventually led her to end the relationship.

For SPP, the lack of positivity translated into constant tension. He was caught between wanting to maintain peace and being emotionally burdened by his partner's constant suspicion and demands. Over time, his demeanor shifted from cooperative to avoidant, not out of indifference, but as a coping mechanism to protect his mental health. In these cases, communication became a source of stress rather than a tool for connection and problem-solving.

Lastly, equality was almost entirely absent from the dynamics of each relationship. Each participant described an imbalance of power wherein one partner dominated the relationship and made unilateral decisions. SKR's autonomy was compromised by her partner's financial control, a situation that left her feeling subordinate and emotionally dependent. She described how disagreements were always resolved on her partner's terms, reinforcing a one-sided dynamic that invalidated her voice and concerns.

Similarly, MRL recounted that her partner's expectations required her to be constantly available and submissive. Attempts to assert independence—such as focusing on studies or spending time with friends—were met with accusations of disloyalty or disrespect. Over time, this imbalance conditioned her to prioritize her partner's needs at the expense of her own well-being. The absence of equality turned communication into a mechanism for control rather than collaboration.

In summary, the findings of this study clearly demonstrate that interpersonal communication in toxic relationships among students is characterized by fear, manipulation, imbalance, and emotional exhaustion. The five communication traits outlined by DeVito—intended to foster healthy and empathetic exchanges—were either suppressed or distorted by toxic behaviors. These results suggest a significant gap between theoretical understanding of communication and its practical application in emotionally volatile romantic contexts. The need for awareness, counseling, and interpersonal skill-building programs within academic settings is more urgent than ever to protect students' mental health and personal growth.

## **DISCUSSION**

The results of this study reinforce existing theoretical frameworks on interpersonal communication while highlighting the complexities of applying such models in the context of toxic romantic relationships. While DeVito's five communication traits—openness, empathy, supportiveness, positive attitude, and equality—are intended to foster mutual understanding and emotional intimacy, the findings show that toxic dynamics distort or entirely negate these principles. Students, despite being trained in communication theory, often find themselves trapped in emotionally manipulative relationships where communication functions more as a weapon than a bridge.

Openness, which ideally encourages honesty and transparency, was notably absent. Participants consistently reported withholding their thoughts and emotions due to fear of backlash. This supports DeVito's assertion that communication is inherently reciprocal—when responses to openness are negative or manipulative, individuals naturally retreat into silence. This phenomenon is also aligned with Fincham & Linfield's view that negative interaction quality is a core dimension of toxic relationships. Emotional suppression becomes a defense mechanism, ironically reinforcing the toxicity and reducing chances for resolution.

Empathy, the ability to see from another's perspective, was rarely reciprocated in the relationships studied. Instead, participants described emotional invalidation and blame-shifting from their partners. This suggests that emotional disconnection in toxic relationships is not a mere misunderstanding, but a systematic refusal to recognize the partner's humanity. In interpersonal terms, the absence of empathy turns interaction into emotional labor for one party and emotional dominance for the other—an imbalance that leads to alienation and self-doubt.

Supportiveness, which is foundational to psychological safety in relationships, was often weaponized. Rather than offering encouragement or comfort, support was conditional and disguised as control. This reflects what Glass (1995) describes as the deceptive nature of toxic partners, who often present controlling behavior as protective care. The illusion of support not only confuses the victim but also creates a false sense of obligation, causing the victim to rationalize the abuse as love or concern.

The deterioration of a positive attitude over time was another consistent theme. Participants described starting the relationship with optimism, only to experience emotional fatigue and cynicism as conflicts remained unresolved. This mirrors the cycle described by Walker's model of toxic relationships, where partners oscillate between affection and aggression in a repetitive cycle. The emotional inconsistency erodes trust and makes positive thinking seem futile, leaving the victims mentally exhausted and emotionally numb.

Equality was virtually nonexistent. All participants described power imbalances, whether in emotional expression, decision-making, or day-to-day interaction. According to Social Exchange Theory, individuals tend to stay in relationships where perceived rewards exceed costs. In these toxic dynamics, however, the “rewards” are often psychological illusions—such as the hope of change or fleeting moments of affection—that obscure the overwhelming emotional cost. This explains why many victims remain in abusive relationships despite clear signs of harm.

Moreover, the findings highlight a concerning contradiction: students majoring in communication were unable to apply theoretical knowledge to protect themselves from relational harm. This may point to a gap between cognitive understanding and emotional resilience. Knowing how communication should function is not the same as being able to implement it in high-stress, emotionally manipulative environments. This emphasizes the need for integrated emotional intelligence training alongside communication theory in academic settings.

Lastly, the study underscores the importance of institutional support. Toxic relationships among university students are not just private matters—they are public health concerns with academic, psychological, and social implications. The university environment must provide safe spaces, counseling services, and awareness programs to help students recognize and escape harmful relationship patterns. Communication education, therefore, should not stop at theory but extend into the realm of personal empowerment and mental well-being.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that toxic romantic relationships significantly disrupt the essential traits of effective interpersonal communication as proposed by DeVito. Among Communication Science students at Dehasen University who experienced toxic relationships, the communication patterns were marked by emotional suppression, lack of empathy, manipulative “support,” emotional exhaustion, and power imbalance. These findings underscore that toxic relationships are not merely emotional struggles but systemic breakdowns in mutual respect, understanding, and psychological safety.

Despite having academic knowledge of communication principles, the participants were unable to practice these principles effectively due to fear, control, and emotional dependency within their relationships. This highlights a crucial disjunction between theoretical comprehension and practical resilience in navigating intimate relationships.

The study reaffirms that healthy interpersonal communication—characterized by openness, empathy, supportiveness, positivity, and equality—is critical in maintaining emotional well-being in romantic contexts. When these traits are absent, communication becomes dysfunctional and often harmful. Therefore, it is imperative that educational institutions, especially those offering communication programs, integrate emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and relationship literacy into their curricula.

Finally, the research calls for increased awareness, prevention, and intervention strategies to support students trapped in toxic dynamics. Universities must ensure that character education and counseling services are not peripheral, but central to holistic student development. Empowering students to identify, resist, and exit toxic relationships is not only a matter of communication—but of survival, growth, and dignity.

## **LIMITATION**

This study is subject to several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the sample size was small, comprising only three participants, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Although the in-depth qualitative approach provided rich and detailed insights, the experiences of these individuals may not represent the broader population of university students or toxic relationship dynamics across different contexts.

Second, all participants were students of the Communication Science Program at a single institution—Dehasen University—creating a narrow academic and cultural context. Their understanding of communication may differ significantly from students in other disciplines or regions, potentially influencing how they interpret and engage in interpersonal relationships.

Third, the study relied heavily on self-reported data through interviews, which can be influenced by memory bias, emotional framing, or social desirability. Participants may have withheld certain information or unintentionally altered their narratives, especially given the sensitive nature of the topic.

Finally, the study did not incorporate perspectives from the participants' partners or external observers, which could have offered a more balanced or comprehensive view of the communication dynamics within these relationships. Future research should consider a larger, more diverse sample and adopt a multi-perspective approach, possibly combining qualitative and quantitative methods, to validate and expand upon these findings.

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