

EMOTIONAL DEPENDENCE AND THE ON-AND-OFF PHENOMENON: A CASE STUDY OF EARLY ADULT COLLEGE STUDENTS' DATING RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

This study aims to understand emotional dependency in dating relationships and its association with the on-and-off relationship phenomenon among students of Islamic Guidance and Counseling (Bimbingan dan Penyuluhan Islam), cohort 2022. This research employs a qualitative approach with a case study design involving students who have experienced and are currently in on-and-off relationships. Data were collected through interviews, observations, and documentation. The findings indicate that partners are perceived as the primary source of emotional support, security, and a place to share problems. Strong emotional attachment makes individuals feel comfortable with their partners, but also leads to anxiety when attention or communication decreases. This condition encourages individuals to maintain the relationship despite frequent conflicts, resulting in an on-and-off relationship pattern. The study shows that emotional dependency plays a role in sustaining unstable relationship dynamics among students.

Keywords: Emotional Dependency, On-And-Off Relationships, Romantic Relationships.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami ketergantungan emosional dalam hubungan pacaran serta kaitannya dengan fenomena hubungan putus-nyambung pada mahasiswa Bimbingan dan Penyuluhan Islam Stambuk 2022. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus terhadap mahasiswa yang memiliki pengalaman dan yang sedang menjalani hubungan putus-nyambung. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pasangan dipandang sebagai sumber utama dukungan emosional, rasa aman, dan tempat berbagi masalah. Keterikatan emosional yang kuat membuat individu merasa nyaman bersama pasangan, tetapi juga menimbulkan kecemasan ketika perhatian atau komunikasi berkurang. Kondisi ini membuat individu cenderung mempertahankan hubungan meskipun sering mengalami konflik, sehingga memunculkan pola hubungan putus-nyambung. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa ketergantungan emosional berperan dalam mempertahankan dinamika hubungan yang tidak stabil pada mahasiswa.

Kata Kunci: Ketergantungan Emosional, Hubungan Putus-Nyambung, Hubungan Romantis

INTRODUCTION

Early adulthood is a stage of development marked by forming an identity, increasing independence, setting educational and career goals, and developing close interpersonal relationships. Students in this phase face academic, social, and family demands, as well as job preparation, while also starting to explore romantic relationships (LeFebvre & Carmack, 2019). Dating relationships can be a way to learn communication, commitment, and emotional regulation, but they can also cause stress if they are unhealthy, full of conflict, and uncertain. In psychosocial theory, early adulthood is related to the task of intimacy versus isolation, which is the ability to build closeness without losing identity and self-autonomy (LeFebvre, et al., 2022).

One of the dating dynamics that often happens is an on-off relationship, which is a relationship that repeatedly ends and then gets back together with the same partner (Machia, Niehuis, & Joel, 2023). This pattern can be influenced by ineffective communication, differences in expectations, jealousy, distrust, social pressure, and difficulty accepting a breakup. On-and-off relationships tend to have higher conflicts, less healthy communication, and more uncertainty in commitment compared to stable relationships (Dailey, Zhong, Pett, Scott, & Krawietz, 2019). If the main issue isn't resolved, reconciliation can just repeat the same conflict and create a cycle of breaking up over and over.

The instability of that relationship can affect a student's emotional well-being, such as causing sadness, anxiety, a sense of loss, self-doubt, difficulty concentrating, and a drop in academic motivation. Romantic relationship transitions, including breaking up and getting back together, can impact young adults' psychological state (Uçar & Demir, 2022). One factor suspected of driving people to stick with on-and-off relationships is emotional dependence, which is when a partner becomes the main source of security, acceptance, validation, and self-worth. People who are emotionally dependent tend to fear being left, struggle to live without their partner, need excessive attention, and stay in the relationship even when it causes discomfort (Marganski, Melander, & DeKeseredy, 2021).

In on-and-off relationships, emotional dependence can create a cycle of conflict, breakups, loneliness, longing, and reconciliation. People may go back to their partners not because the issues have been resolved, but because they fear losing them, feel lonely, or are not yet emotionally independent. Students of the Islamic Guidance and Counseling Study Program, batch 2022 at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra, are relevant to study because they are in early adulthood and are learning guidance, counseling, interpersonal communication, and Islamic values. However, theoretical knowledge does not always guarantee the ability to manage personal emotional issues. Therefore, this research is important to understand the forms of emotional dependence, the reasons students return to their partners, conflict patterns, and the impact of on-and-off relationships on students' emotional, social, and academic life.

Research on dating in early adulthood has often discussed conflict, jealousy, attachment styles, loneliness, and mental health. Like studies (Busk, Vennum, McAllister, & Busk, 2020; Charvat, Rosner, Monk, & Colaner, 2023) Emotional dependence is still mostly dominated by a quantitative approach that focuses on relationships between variables, like loneliness, self-esteem, and coping strategies. This approach hasn't fully explained individuals' subjective experiences when they feel afraid of being abandoned, excessively need their partner's validation, struggle to accept breakups, and choose to return to relationships that previously caused conflict.

Research gap (Joel & MacDonald, 2021; Leckfor, Wood, Wood, & Hales, 2023) It can also be seen in the limited studies connecting emotional dependence with on-and-off relationships in dating. On-and-off relationships are usually studied as a form of unstable relationships related to conflict, poor communication, and uncertainty about commitment. However, this pattern can indicate emotional dependence, fear of being alone, difficulty setting personal boundaries, and the hope that the partner will change. Therefore, this study focuses on understanding the role of emotional dependence in the cycle of conflict, breakups, missing each other, and reconciliation in college dating relationships.

The novelty of this research lies in the use of a qualitative approach with a case study design on students of the Islamic Guidance and Counseling Study Program, Class of 2022, at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra. This study doesn't just measure the level of emotional dependence, but also explores students' experiences in maintaining on-and-off relationships, the reasons for returning to a partner, and the impacts on their emotional, social, and academic well-being. The results are expected to serve as a basis for developing student guidance and counseling services to strengthen emotional independence, emotion regulation, assertive communication, and the ability to make healthy decisions in interpersonal relationships.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to understand emotional dependency and the on-and-off phenomenon in early adult college dating relationships. A qualitative approach was chosen because the research focuses on subjective experiences, personal meanings, as well as the emotional and social processes college students go through during conflicts, breakups, and reconciliations with their partners (Creswell, 2024). Qualitative research allows researchers to understand the meaning that individuals give to social issues and their life experiences, while case studies are used to examine phenomena in depth within the real-life context of students (Yin, 2024).

The research was conducted on students of the Islamic Guidance and Counseling Study Program, class of 2022, at North Sumatra State Islamic University. The informants were selected using purposive sampling, meaning active students aged 18–25 who have experienced or are experiencing on-and-off relationships, marked by breaking up and getting back together with the same partner at least once. Informants were chosen based on their willingness to participate and their ability to openly explain their experiences.

The number of informants was estimated to be five to eight people, or until the data reached saturation, that is, when the information obtained had been repeated and no new themes were produced.

Data was collected through structured in-depth interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation. The interviews explored relationship history, forms of emotional dependence, conflicts, experiences of breaking up and getting back together, reasons for maintaining the relationship, and its impact on emotional condition, social relationships, and academic activities. Observations were done by paying attention to emotional expressions, body language, intonation, and the informants' responses during the interviews. Documentation included interview recordings, field notes, and supporting documents used with the informants' consent (Sugiyono, 2024).

Data analysis refers to an interactive model (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2024), which includes data condensation, data presentation, and drawing and verifying conclusions. The data from interviews, observations, and documentation were coded, grouped into categories, and then analyzed into themes, such as the need for partner attention, fear of being abandoned, difficulty accepting separation, recurring conflicts, reasons for reconciliation, and the impact of an on-and-off relationship. Data validity was maintained through source and technique triangulation, member checking, and audit trails to enhance the study's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The research applies ethical principles by explaining the purpose, procedures, benefits, data usage, and the rights of informants before conducting interviews. Participation consent is obtained through informed consent. Informants can refuse to answer questions, stop the interview, or withdraw at any time. The identities of informants and related parties are disguised using codes or pseudonyms, while all data is stored securely and used only for academic purposes (Arikunto, 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Emotional Dependence In Dating Relationships

Based on the observation results, the informants appeared to demonstrate strong emotional involvement when discussing their partners and dating experiences. This was reflected in changes in facial expressions, slower voice intonation, pauses before answering questions, and visible sadness or anxiety when discussing conflicts, breakups, or the possibility of losing their partners.

The observations also indicated that the informants' emotional states were strongly influenced by their partners' responses. The informants tended to describe their moods, daily activities, and sense of comfort in relation to their partners' presence, attention, or communication. When their partners did not provide updates or showed changes in attitude, several informants appeared more restless and found it difficult to shift the conversation away from the relationship problems they were experiencing.

In addition, the informants appeared to have developed a habit of engaging in various activities with their partners. This high intensity of togetherness caused some informants to feel a loss of comfort when their partners were absent or when the relationship was experiencing conflict. These observations suggest that partners occupied an important position in the informants' emotional lives; consequently, changes in the dating relationship could affect their emotional stability and daily activities. The observation findings were consistent with the interview results, which are presented below.

Based on interviews with the informants, most participants demonstrated emotional dependence on their partners. This dependence was reflected in a strong need for attention, security, emotional support, and difficulty carrying out daily activities without their partners. Partners were perceived as the primary persons with whom the informants shared stories, sought comfort, and derived happiness in their everyday lives.

Table 1. Forms of Emotional Dependence Among University Students

INFORMANT	INTERVIEW EXCERPT	MEANING
KH	"I am used to doing activities with my partner, so when they are not around, I simply do not feel motivated."	The informant demonstrated emotional attachment in daily activities.
AZ	"I feel that my world would fall apart if I broke up with them."	Emotional dependence caused the informant to experience an excessive fear of losing their partner.
MRA	"I always imagine what my life would be like if my partner were no longer there."	The informant felt that their life was highly dependent on the presence of their partner.
DA	"I feel anxious about being abandoned, lonely, and excessively worried."	The relationship affected the informant's emotional stability and generated emotional anxiety.
A	"When they do not contact me or behave differently, I feel anxious, overthink, and find it difficult to concentrate."	The partner's responses strongly influenced the informant's psychological condition.
NA	"Almost all of my daily activities are done with them."	Emotional attachment emerged due to the high intensity of togetherness.

Based on the observation and interview findings, it can be concluded that most informants experienced emotional dependence on their partners. This condition was characterized by a strong need for attention, security, and the partner's presence, as well as the emergence of anxiety, sadness, and difficulty concentrating when the partner became distant or failed to communicate. The high intensity of shared daily activities also caused the informants to experience a loss of comfort when the relationship encountered conflict or separation. Therefore, partners played a highly significant role in the informants' emotional stability and daily lives.

The On-And-Off Phenomenon In Romantic Relationships

Based on the observation findings, all informants appeared to have experienced dating relationships characterized by separation and reconciliation with the same partner. When describing the reasons for their breakups, several informants showed changes in facial expressions, spoke in a softer tone, and paused while explaining the conflicts they had experienced. The conflicts discussed included dishonesty, lack of communication, differences in perspectives, jealousy, possessive behavior, boredom, and the presence of a third party. These findings indicate that the informants’ on-and-off relationships did not result from a single issue but rather from recurring conflicts that had not been fully resolved.

The observations also showed that the informants continued to demonstrate emotional attachment when discussing their partners, even though their relationships had previously caused sadness, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion. Some informants appeared more emotional when discussing separation experiences; however, they continued to describe their partners as individuals who provided comfort, understood them, and were difficult to replace. This condition reflects ambivalence, in which informants recognized the conflicts within their relationships while simultaneously maintaining a strong desire to preserve or return to their partners.

Furthermore, the decision to resume the relationship appeared to be associated with fear of loss, habitual togetherness with the partner, and the expectation that the relationship could improve. The informants seemed to find it difficult to separate their emotional needs from problematic relationships because their partners had become an important part of their daily activities and emotional comfort. Therefore, the observation findings suggest that the on-and-off relationship phenomenon among the informants was influenced not only by interpersonal conflict but also by emotional attachment and dependence, which made it difficult for them to end the relationship permanently. The observation findings were consistent with the interview results, which are presented below.

The findings also indicated that all informants had experienced on-and-off relationships for various reasons, including their partners’ ego, lack of communication, dishonesty, jealousy, and the involvement of a third party. Although these relationships were frequently marked by conflict and had negative emotional consequences, most informants chose to resume their relationships with the same partners.

Table 2. The Phenomenon of On-and-Off Dating Relationships

INFORMANT	CAUSES OF ON-AND-OFF RELATIONSHIPS	REASONS FOR RESUMING THE RELATIONSHIP
KH	Dishonesty by one of the partners	They still loved and needed each other.
AZ	A third party and the partner’s possessive behavior	The informant found it difficult to let go of the partner and felt comfortable with them.

MRA	Ego-related conflicts between both partners	The informant felt that the partner understood them better than anyone else.
DA	Misunderstandings and differences in perspectives	The informant hoped that the partner would change for the better.
A	Lack of communication and the involvement of a third party	The informant still had feelings of affection and hoped that the relationship would improve.
NA	A third party, boredom, and poor communication	The informant felt that the partner was the most compatible person for them.

Based on the observation and interview findings, it can be concluded that all informants experienced on-and-off relationships due to recurring conflicts, such as dishonesty, poor communication, jealousy, ego-related issues, possessive behavior, and the involvement of a third party. Although these relationships produced negative emotional consequences, the informants continued to return to their partners because of affection, fear of loss, habitual togetherness, emotional comfort, and the belief that their partners were the individuals who understood them best. Therefore, on-and-off relationships were influenced not only by interpersonal conflicts but also by emotional attachment and dependence, which made it difficult for the informants to end the relationships permanently.

DISCUSSION

Emotional Dependence In Dating Relationships

The research results show that most of the informants experience emotional dependency on their partners. This is seen through a high need for attention, a sense of security, emotional support, and the presence of their partner in daily activities. Observations reinforce the interview findings because when talking about their partner, conflicts, or the possibility of separation, informants showed changes in facial expressions, slower voice intonation, pauses when answering, as well as sad and anxious responses. This indicates that dating relationships are not just understood as social connections, but have become a main source of comfort and emotional stability for the informants.

These findings align with research on emotional dependence, which explains that individuals with emotional dependence tend to make their partner their main source of validation, security, and psychological support. In this situation, the presence of a partner has a big impact on a person's mood. When the partner shows attention, the individual can feel calm and happy. On the other hand, when the partner doesn't check in, withdraws, or shows changes in attitude, the individual can experience anxiety, overthinking, and fear of loss. Studies (Farrokhi, Zohrabi, & Azarberis, 2023; Soloway, Gica, & Langlais, 2025) explains that anxiety in romantic attachment is related to a high sensitivity to threats in a relationship. Individuals may respond to relationship uncertainty with behaviors like seeking reassurance, excessive worry, and a strong need for closeness with their partner.

This condition is seen in informant A, who stated that when their partner doesn't give any updates or behaves differently, they feel anxious, overthink, and have trouble focusing. This statement shows that the partner's responses are the main trigger for changes in the informant's psychological state. A similar situation is seen in informant DA, who expressed fear of being abandoned, loneliness, and excessive worry. In this context, the anxiety that arises is not only related to ongoing conflicts but also to the possibility of losing their partner as a source of emotional comfort. Research (Dunn, 2022; Eastwick, Finkel, & Joel, 2023) In early adulthood in Indonesia, a positive relationship was found between anxious attachment and emotional dependence in romantic relationships. The findings show that worries about rejection or separation can be related to an individual's tendency to be more emotionally dependent on their partner.

AZ's statement that they felt “the world would end” if they broke up with their partner, and MRA's statement imagining life being difficult without a partner, show that the partner has been placed as a central point in the informants' sense of security and meaning in life. These expressions don't mean that affection in a dating relationship is always unhealthy. However, when emotional well-being, the ability to carry out activities, and self-assessment heavily rely on the presence of a partner, the relationship can become unbalanced. Studies (Hoffman, Ward, Rueda, & Beasley, 2024; Blackburn, LeFebvre, & Brody, 2024) showing that difficulties in regulating emotions play a role in the relationship between insecure attachment patterns and emotional dependence on a partner. In other words, when individuals find it hard to accept or manage negative emotions like loneliness, fear, and disappointment, their partner can end up being the only way to soothe those feelings.

Findings from KH and NA also show that spending a lot of time together can strengthen emotional attachment. KH mentioned that they are used to doing activities with their partner, so they feel unmotivated when the partner is not around, while NA said that almost all of their daily activities are done with their partner. Closeness and spending time together are basically normal parts of a romantic relationship. However, if activities, social support, and personal sources of happiness become concentrated on one person, individuals may be more vulnerable to feeling empty when the relationship faces conflict or distance. Research on dependency and frustration tolerance in teenage and young adult romantic relationships shows that dependency patterns are related to how individuals deal with discomfort and frustration in relationships.

Overall, the research results show that emotional dependence on the informants is formed through a combination of the need for security, fear of loss, emotional responses to changes in the partner's attitude, and the habit of engaging in activities intensely together with the partner. This dependence seems to make the informants' emotional state easily change according to the dynamics of communication and the partner's presence. These findings are also in line with studies that place emotional dependence and anxiety in attachment as factors related to the instability of romantic relationships in early adulthood.

In the context of students in the Islamic Guidance and Counseling Study Program, Class of 2022, at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra, this finding highlights the importance of strengthening emotional independence in student counseling services. These services can focus on recognizing personal emotional needs, managing anxiety, developing social support outside of romantic partners, practicing assertive communication, and the ability to set healthy boundaries in relationships. This approach is important so students can still build warm romantic relationships without making their partner their only source of safety, happiness, and emotional stability.

The On-and-Off Phenomenon in Romantic Relationships

The study results show that all the informants had experienced on-and-off relationships, meaning relationships that involved a breakup followed by getting back together with the same partner. Conflicts that triggered the breakups included dishonesty, ineffective communication, differences in thinking, partner ego, jealousy, possessiveness, boredom, and the presence of a third party. These findings show that on-and-off relationships aren't isolated events but rather a pattern that forms when the core issues in the relationship aren't fully resolved. Conflicts might calm down when the couple gets back together, but they can resurface if there's no change in communication patterns, clarity of commitment, and problem-solving methods.

The finding aligns with the research (Ben-Ze'ev, 2024; Eastwick & Joel, 2025) It explains that on-again/off-again relationships are different from stable ones because they tend to have relational uncertainty, higher conflict, and more negative interaction quality. In this study, that uncertainty shows up in the experiences of the participants who kept going back to their partners even though the reasons for previous breakups, like dishonesty, jealousy, poor communication, and involvement of a third party, weren't fully resolved. So, the reconciliations that happened with the participants don't always mean the relationship problems were solved, but rather can reflect the continuation of the relationship in a cycle of conflict, breaking up, and getting back together.

The observation results show that some informants displayed emotional responses when discussing conflicts and breakup experiences, such as changes in facial expressions, softer intonation, and pauses in answering questions. These responses can be understood as an indication that breakup experiences still hold strong emotional significance for the informants. Recent research by (Gaver & Gaver, 2023; Song, 2025) shows that relationships that break up and get back together repeatedly can act as a source of ongoing relational stress. The more cycles of breaking up and reconciling, the higher the potential for relational stress, especially if the relationship involves negative interaction patterns. These findings align with the experiences of the informants, who still felt sadness, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion even when choosing to continue the relationship.

The informant's decision to return to their partner shows ambivalence in the relationship. On one hand, the informant realizes that the relationship has conflicts and causes unpleasant emotional effects. On the other hand, the informant still sees their partner as

someone who provides comfort, understands them, and is hard to replace. This is evident in KH, who came back because they still care for and need each other; AZ, who finds it hard to let go of their partner because they feel comfortable; MRA, who thinks their partner understands them the best; and DA and A, who still hope their partner or relationship can improve. In qualitative analysis (Katz, Okpych, Charles, Wall, & Courtney, 2023; Furlong & Hinnant, 2024), The decision to rekindle a relationship can be influenced by continuing contact after a breakup, uncertainty about the relationship's status, and the belief that the old relationship still offers emotional benefits compared to other options. In other words, breaking up doesn't always sever the bond between partners, but it can change the form of the relationship temporarily before reconciliation happens.

Fear of loss, habitual engagement in shared activities, and the belief that the partner was the most compatible person were also important reasons for the informants to resume their relationships. These findings indicate that dating relationships had become part of the informants' routines, emotional support systems, and sense of security. When a relationship ended, individuals did not only lose their partners but also lost familiar routines, a person with whom to share experiences, and a source of daily comfort. Therefore, the decision to reconcile may emerge as a response to this sense of loss, even when there is a risk that previous conflicts will recur. Research on relationship cycling indicates that partners in cyclical relationships tend to report lower relationship quality, greater uncertainty, and more negative interaction patterns than partners in stable relationships.

Nevertheless, these findings do not imply that every on-and-off relationship has the same meaning or consequences. The literature suggests that some relationships may use periods of separation as opportunities for self-evaluation, clarification of personal needs, and the development of better communication. However, this possibility requires meaningful change, both partners' willingness to address the sources of conflict, clear relational boundaries, and a commitment not to repeat harmful patterns. Studies on the types and trajectories of on-again/off-again relationships also indicate that some relationships may develop constructively, whereas others are characterized by incompatibility, controlling behavior, or recurring conflict.

Overall, the phenomenon of on-and-off relationships among students in the 2022 cohort of the Islamic Guidance and Counseling Study Program at Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara demonstrates an association between interpersonal conflict and emotional dependence. Unresolved conflicts served as triggers for separation, whereas affection, fear of loss, emotional comfort, habitual togetherness, and expectations of change encouraged reconciliation. This pattern may make it difficult for informants to end their relationships permanently and may contribute to the continuation of the same cycle of conflict. Therefore, guidance and counseling services for university students may be directed toward strengthening assertive communication, conflict-resolution skills, relationship-boundary setting, emotion regulation, and decision-making that considers

personal well-being within dating relationships.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that emotional dependence plays a role in maintaining the on-and-off phenomenon in dating relationships among early adult students in the Islamic Guidance and Counseling Study Program, Class of 2022, at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra. The informants showed a high need for attention, security, and their partner's presence, so conflicts like dishonesty, poor communication, jealousy, ego, possessiveness, and the presence of a third party do not always lead to a permanent breakup. Feelings of love, fear of loss, shared habits, comfort, and hopes that the partner will change encourage informants to get back together even though they experience anxiety, sadness, and emotional fatigue. These findings imply the importance of counseling services that focus on emotional independence, emotion regulation, assertive communication, conflict resolution, and setting healthy relationship boundaries. However, this study was limited to informants from a single study program and mostly used the perspective of one side in the relationship. Therefore, future research could involve a more diverse group of subjects, informant pairs, and also examine other factors such as attachment patterns, family support, peers, social media, and religious values.

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