

THE NORMALIZATION OF VERBAL ABUSE IN STUDENT DATING RELATIONSHIPS: A SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION STUDY AT THE STATE ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY OF NORTH SUMATRA

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines how verbal abuse becomes normalized in student dating relationships at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra and how students interpret such experiences within an Islamic academic environment. The study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to explore students' lived experiences of verbal abuse in romantic relationships. Data were collected from nine active students aged 19–24 who had experienced verbal abuse in current or previous dating relationships. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: active student status, experience in dating relationships, and willingness to share personal experiences related to verbal abuse. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings show that verbal abuse is normalized through the repeated interpretation of jealousy, excessive control, insulting language, emotional threats, possessive behavior, demands for location sharing, and social media surveillance as expressions of affection, care, or protection. The study also reveals that unequal power relations and certain gendered cultural assumptions shape how students justify controlling behavior in dating relationships. In some cases, particular social interpretations of religious values are used to legitimize obedience, restriction, and protection, although these interpretations contradict the ethical principles of compassion, mutual respect, and emotional self-control promoted in Islamic teachings. The study concludes that verbal abuse in student dating relationships is not merely an interpersonal conflict but a social and religiously interpreted phenomenon that requires healthy relationship education, gender-sensitive religious literacy, and campus-based counseling support.

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1. Introduction

Dating relationships among university students are commonly understood as emotional spaces built upon affection, intimacy, care, and mutual support. In practice, romantic relationships among students may also become spaces where harmful communication patterns emerge and persist. One form of harm that frequently appears in dating relationships is verbal abuse, which includes yelling, insulting, humiliating, blaming, threatening, degrading, and using harsh expressions toward a partner. Although verbal abuse does not leave visible physical injuries, it may produce serious psychological consequences, including

emotional distress, fear, decreased self-esteem, anxiety, and dependency within unhealthy relationships (Cahyani & Hendriani, 2023).

The problem of verbal abuse in dating relationships becomes more complex because it is often not immediately recognized as violence. Students may perceive harsh words, excessive jealousy, possessive behavior, and emotional threats as ordinary expressions of conflict in romantic relationships. In some cases, repeated yelling, restrictions, and degrading remarks are interpreted as signs of concern, protection, or affection. This process indicates the normalization of verbal abuse, namely a social condition in which harmful verbal behavior is repeatedly tolerated, justified, and accepted as a common part of dating relationships.

The normalization of verbal abuse among university students is not only an individual psychological issue but also a social phenomenon shaped by relational meanings and everyday interactions. In student dating relationships, possessive behavior may be framed as loyalty, excessive jealousy may be understood as proof of love, and controlling actions may be interpreted as care. Such meanings are constructed through repeated interactions between partners and reinforced by peer conversations, digital communication practices, and broader social assumptions about romantic relationships. As a result, victims may find it difficult to distinguish between healthy concern and abusive control.

National data also show that violence in dating relationships remains a serious issue. Komnas Perempuan, through its 2024 Annual Report on violence against women, documented thousands of cases of dating violence within the personal sphere in 2023. These data indicate that romantic relationships do not always function as safe relational spaces, especially when violence is minimized, hidden, or understood merely as ordinary interpersonal conflict. Within academic environments, this issue requires deeper attention because students are in a transitional stage toward adulthood, where emotional maturity, identity formation, and relational patterns are still being developed.

From a sociological perspective, verbal abuse in dating relationships is shaped by unequal power relations and cultural assumptions that regulate how men and women are expected to behave in romantic relationships. Patriarchal cultural patterns may position men as more entitled to control, direct, or regulate their partners, while women are often expected to be patient, understanding, and responsible for maintaining the relationship. Such assumptions may create relational imbalance and make controlling behavior appear legitimate. Wahyuni et al. (2020) argue that dating violence among university students is closely related to unequal power dynamics and cultural structures that normalize domination within romantic relationships.

The influence of digital media further expands the form and intensity of verbal abuse in student dating relationships. Control may appear not only in face-to-face interaction but also through digital practices such as demanding immediate replies, requesting location sharing, checking social media activity, monitoring online interactions, and questioning communication with friends of the opposite sex. When these demands are not fulfilled, partners may respond with anger, accusations, insults, or threats to end the relationship. Digital communication therefore becomes an important space where verbal abuse can be intensified, repeated, and normalized in everyday student relationships.

The issue becomes particularly significant in Islamic higher education institutions, where students live within an academic environment that formally upholds religious values, moral discipline, ethical communication, and social responsibility. Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara represents a context in which religious identity is an important part of institutional life and student self-understanding. Ideally, religious values encourage compassion, respect, self-control, dignity, and responsible communication in interpersonal relationships. In reality, some students may still tolerate verbal abuse or interpret controlling behavior as protection, especially when such behavior is connected to ideas of obedience, modesty, gender roles, or moral supervision.

The sociology of religion perspective is used in this study to analyze religion not as a cause of verbal abuse, but as a moral and social framework through which students interpret romantic relationships. Religion is examined as a moral system that provides ethical ideals about respect, compassion, and self-control; as a form of social control that shapes acceptable and unacceptable behavior; as a source through which gender norms may be socially interpreted; and as an interpretive framework used by students to define care, protection, obedience, and relational boundaries. This perspective is important because verbal abuse in dating relationships does not only involve harmful words, but also the meanings students attach to love, morality, gender, and authority.

Previous studies have widely examined dating violence, toxic relationships, verbal abuse, psychological impacts, and gendered power relations among young people and university students. Studies by Wahyuni et al. (2020), Kirana et al. (2024), Widyananda and Ashfaq (2023), and Ramadhatsani et al. (2024) show that dating violence is influenced by power imbalance, emotional dependency, patriarchal culture, and the tendency to justify harmful behavior as part of romantic attachment. These studies provide important contributions to understanding violence in dating relationships, particularly in relation to its forms, causes, and consequences.

Research that specifically examines the normalization of verbal abuse in student dating relationships within Islamic higher education institutions from a sociology of religion perspective remains limited. Existing studies tend to focus on dating violence as a psychological, legal, gender, or interpersonal communication issue, while the interaction between religious identity, moral norms, gendered interpretations, and the normalization of verbal abuse has not been sufficiently explored. This study addresses that limitation by examining how students at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra interpret verbal abuse, how such abuse becomes normalized in dating relationships, and how religious values are understood, negotiated, or misinterpreted within those relationships.

This study therefore aims to analyze the normalization of verbal abuse in student dating relationships at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra through a sociology of religion perspective. The study focuses on the forms of verbal abuse experienced by students, the social process through which such abuse becomes normalized, and the role of religious identity, cultural assumptions, and gendered power relations in shaping students' interpretations of abusive behavior. Through this analysis, the study is expected to contribute to the development of sociological and religious understanding of healthy relationships,

while also offering practical relevance for campus-based education on emotional self-regulation, respectful communication, and gender-sensitive religious literacy.

Theory

Symbolic Interactionism Theory

In dating relationships, communication plays a crucial role in shaping meaning between partners. Expressions such as jealousy, attention, restrictions, or advice are often perceived as forms of affection. However, in certain situations, these behaviors may transform into controlling actions and verbal violence, such as yelling, insults, threats, or degrading remarks toward a partner.

Herbert Mead's (1934) *theory of Symbolic Interactionism* is used as the foundation for analysis. This theory explains that individual behavior is formed through social interaction and the meanings that emerge from symbols in everyday life, such as language, speech, and actions. In other words, individuals act based on the meanings they derive from their interactions with others. Through the concept of the self, Mead explains that a person's self-perception is influenced by the responses of others. Therefore, victims of verbal violence may experience decreased self-confidence, feelings of being unappreciated, and even emotional dependency on their partners due to repeated exposure to negative remarks.

Based on this theory, verbal violence in students' dating relationships can be understood as the result of social interactions that construct the perception that possessiveness, domination, and harsh words are normal behaviors. Thus, symbolic interactionism is relevant in analyzing how students interpret verbal violence and why unhealthy relationships may persist.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. This design was selected because the study aimed to explore students' lived experiences and subjective interpretations of verbal abuse in dating relationships. Phenomenology enables the researcher to understand how participants experience, interpret, and give meaning to verbal abuse, particularly when harmful expressions such as yelling, insults, threats, excessive jealousy, and controlling behavior are perceived as normal parts of romantic relationships. The research was conducted at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra from April to May 2026.

The participants consisted of nine active students aged 19–24 who had experienced verbal abuse in current or previous dating relationships. Participants were selected using purposive sampling because the study required informants who had direct experience relevant to the research focus. The inclusion criteria were active student status at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra, having been or currently being involved in a dating relationship, having experienced verbal abuse such as yelling, insulting language, emotional threats, possessive behavior, excessive control, or social media surveillance, and being willing to participate voluntarily in the research. Participants who were unwilling to discuss personal experiences or who felt psychologically uncomfortable during the recruitment process were not included in the study.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. In-depth interviews were conducted individually to allow participants to

narrate their experiences in a safe and private setting. Each interview lasted approximately 45–75 minutes and focused on participants' experiences of verbal abuse, their interpretation of abusive behavior, the process through which such behavior became normalized, and the influence of social, cultural, digital, and religious meanings in their dating relationships. Participant observation was conducted by observing relevant social contexts surrounding students' relational practices, including patterns of peer discussion, everyday interaction, and digital communication norms related to dating relationships. Documentation was used to support the primary data through field notes, interview transcripts, and relevant academic documents related to dating violence, verbal abuse, and the sociology of religion.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis was conducted through several stages. The first stage was data familiarization, in which the researcher repeatedly read interview transcripts and field notes to understand the overall meaning of participants' experiences. The second stage was initial coding, in which significant statements related to verbal abuse, emotional threats, possessive behavior, religious justification, power imbalance, and normalization were identified. The third stage was theme development, in which similar codes were grouped into broader thematic categories. The fourth stage was theme review, in which the emerging themes were compared with the raw data to ensure consistency and relevance. The fifth stage was theme naming, in which the main themes were formulated, including forms of verbal abuse, normalization of abusive behavior as affection, social media-based control, unequal power relations, patriarchal cultural assumptions, and religiously interpreted meanings in dating relationships. The final stage was interpretation, in which the themes were analyzed using the sociology of religion perspective and symbolic interactionism to understand how students construct meaning around verbal abuse.

Ethical considerations were emphasized because the study involved personal and potentially traumatic experiences. Before the interviews were conducted, all participants received an explanation of the research objectives, data collection procedures, possible emotional risks, and their right to refuse or withdraw from the study at any time. Informed consent was obtained from each participant. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by using participant codes rather than real names. All interview transcripts, field notes, and documentation were stored securely and used only for research purposes. During the interviews, participants were not forced to answer questions that made them uncomfortable, and the researcher provided space for participants to pause or stop the interview whenever needed to protect their psychological safety.

The credibility of the data was strengthened through source triangulation, technique triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and audit trails. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information from participants with different backgrounds and dating experiences. Technique triangulation was applied by comparing data obtained through interviews, observation, and documentation. Member checking was conducted by confirming the accuracy of participants' statements and the researcher's interpretation with selected informants. Peer debriefing was carried out by discussing the coding process and thematic interpretation with academic peers to reduce researcher bias. Audit trails were maintained by documenting the research process, including participant selection, interview procedures, coding decisions, theme development, and analytical reflections.

3. Result and Discussion

Forms of Verbal Violence in Dating Relationships

Based on in-depth interviews with students of Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, it was found that several informants aged 19–24 continue to experience verbal violence in their dating relationships. This phenomenon remains relatively frequent and manifests in various forms. The types of verbal violence identified include yelling at a partner, using harsh language, insulting, emotionally threatening, displaying possessive behavior, and excessively controlling a partner's activities. Most informants admitted that initially they did not recognize such behaviors as violence, as they were perceived as common occurrences within dating relationships.

The Influence of Social Media on Verbal Violence

The findings indicate that the most common forms of verbal violence include yelling during arguments, the use of harsh words when angry, and prohibiting partners from socializing with members of the opposite sex. Social media also emerged as a significant factor reinforcing verbal violence in students' dating relationships. Several informants reported being frequently required to provide constant updates, share their location, and respond promptly to messages. When these expectations were not met, partners would become angry, use harsh language, assign blame, or threaten to end the relationship.

One informant stated:

"At first, I thought he was just being caring, always asking where I was and who I was with. But over time, if I replied late to his messages, he would yell at me, speak harshly, say I didn't respect him, and even threaten to break up..." "He often asked me to send my location and screenshots of my chats. If I replied late, he would immediately accuse me of various things, which led to arguments." (IS, female, 22 years old)

Another informant explained that her partner excessively monitored her social media activities:

"If I uploaded a story and a male friend replied, he would get very angry and say I couldn't maintain the relationship, even calling me cheap." (RN, female, 20 years old)

Power Relations and Patriarchal Culture

The interviews revealed that verbal violence in dating relationships generally does not emerge suddenly but develops gradually through unhealthy relational patterns. At the beginning of the relationship, possessive behavior is often interpreted as a form of care and affection. However, over time, such behavior evolves into attitudes that make the partner feel restricted, fearful, and deprived of social freedom.

One informant stated:

"He often forbade me from getting close to male friends because he said he was afraid I would fall into bad company, even though it was only for group assignments. When he was angry, he would speak harshly and belittle me, but afterward he would apologize. Because I loved him, I kept forgiving him." (NA, female, 22 years old)

The Perspective of Sociology of Religion in Students' Dating Relationships

From the perspective of Sociology of Religion, the findings indicate that an Islamic-based campus environment such as Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara is known for

upholding strong religious values and norms in students' social lives. Religion fundamentally teaches compassion, mutual respect, careful speech, and emotional control in interactions with others. In dating relationships, these values should ideally be reflected in mutual respect, safeguarding a partner's dignity, and using appropriate language in communication. However, in practice, some students interpret religious values narrowly. Several informants considered controlling their partner, restricting social interactions, or demanding obedience as reasonable behaviors, perceiving them as forms of care and protection. Some even used religious arguments to justify possessive and controlling behavior.

LM, a sixth-semester female student (21), stated:

"He said I shouldn't be too close to other men because women must guard themselves, and he said I should obey him because men are leaders".... "He said he only wanted to protect me so I wouldn't fall into bad company, so at first I thought it was normal." (Interview, May 6, 2026)

LM initially perceived her partner's behavior as care and protection. The prohibition against interacting closely with other men was understood as a way to preserve moral conduct and demonstrate obedience. Her partner justified his actions by asserting that men are leaders and that women should therefore comply. Consequently, controlling and restrictive behavior was normalized within the relationship. However, this condition reflects an unequal power relation. The religious justification employed by LM's partner rendered possessive and excessive control seemingly acceptable, even though such actions constitute verbal violence and restrict the partner's autonomy.

Verbal Violence from the Perspective of Symbolic Interactionism

These findings demonstrate that religious understanding in dating relationships is often influenced by patriarchal culture, which positions men as the dominant party. This aligns with Widyananda and Ashfaq (2023), who explain that power relations in student dating relationships are frequently interpreted as expressions of protection and care. From Mead's Symbolic Interactionist perspective, controlling behavior toward a partner is socially interpreted as affection, making verbal violence difficult to recognize as problematic.

In contrast to LM's experience, the study also found that some victims of verbal violence chose to remain in their relationships, believing that endurance and patience are part of relational sacrifice. This indicates that interpretations of religious values in dating relationships remain influenced by patriarchal culture and unequal power relations. Informants admitted to staying despite experiencing hurtful verbal treatment due to strong emotional attachment, fear of separation, and hope that their partner would change.

DS stated:

"Even though he often yelled at me, I stayed because I loved him too much and was afraid of losing him." (DS, female, 22 years old)

Another informant expressed:

"We've been together for a long time, so I feel it would be a waste to end it just because of that issue." (FA, female, 21 years old)

The findings also reveal that verbal violence in dating relationships is not experienced exclusively by women; men may also become victims. Several male informants reported remaining in their relationships for similar reasons. AF (23), male, stated:

“I thought she would change if I stayed patient and tried to understand her.”
(RA, male, 21 years old)..

Another informant, MR, said: *“I’m afraid that if this relationship ends, it will be difficult to start everything over again.”* (MR, male, 23 years old)

Additionally, the interviews indicate that peer environments contribute to the normalization of verbal violence in dating relationships. Several informants reported that possessive behavior, excessive jealousy, and restrictions imposed on partners were often regarded by their friends as signs of love and care. As a result, many students failed to recognize that such behaviors constitute verbal violence within romantic relationships.

This study confirms that verbal violence in students’ dating relationships has undergone a process of normalization in everyday life. Possessive behavior, controlling actions toward partners, and hurtful verbal expressions are often interpreted as forms of attention and affection, making them difficult to recognize as acts of violence. This condition indicates that students’ dating relationships are still influenced by unequal dynamics and power relations within interpersonal interactions.

These findings are consistent with Wahyuni et al. (2020), who explain that students’ dating relationships are frequently shaped by imbalanced power relations, resulting in dominant behavior toward partners. In addition, patriarchal culture continues to influence students’ romantic relationships. Some men perceive themselves as having greater authority to regulate their partners, while women are more often expected to understand and preserve the relationship, even when subjected to verbally hurtful treatment.

From the perspective of Sociology of Religion, this study identifies a discrepancy between the religious values taught and the actual practices within students’ dating relationships. As an Islamic-based institution, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara upholds religious norms and social ethics within its academic environment. Religion emphasizes the importance of maintaining respectful speech, honoring others, and controlling emotions in social interactions. These values should ideally serve as the foundation for building healthy and mutually respectful relationships.

However, the findings also reveal a gap between students’ understanding of religious values and the way they practice dating relationships. Some students still perceive yelling, prohibitions, and controlling behavior as expressions of care and affection. The results indicate that verbal violence in students’ dating relationships is not solely a matter of communication issues but is also influenced by how students interpret religion, love, and power dynamics within romantic relationships.

This condition reflects an inconsistency between religious identity and relational behavior. On one hand, students exist within an environment that promotes religious and moral values; on the other hand, behaviors that contradict these values persist. This suggests that some students understand religious teachings primarily at the level of knowledge, without deeply internalizing and applying them in daily life.

In certain cases, religious reasoning is used to justify controlling behavior, such as prohibiting friendships with members of the opposite sex or restricting a partner's social activities under the pretext of protection. When religion is used to suppress or limit a partner, its values shift from teachings of compassion to justifications for domination within the relationship. Thus, verbal violence in students' dating relationships is not only related to communication problems but is also shaped by how students interpret love, religion, gender roles, and power relations. Behaviors that are inherently harmful are frequently perceived as acts of care and protection, leading verbal violence to gradually become normalized within student dating relationships.

The development of social media has also expanded the forms of verbal violence in dating relationships. Control is no longer exercised solely through direct interaction but also through digital platforms, such as demanding location sharing, monitoring online activity, and requiring immediate responses to messages. This continuous surveillance intensifies psychological pressure on victims, as monitoring occurs persistently across both digital and offline spaces.

The findings of this study are analyzed using George Herbert Mead's Symbolic Interactionism Theory. According to Mead, meaning is constructed through ongoing social interaction. In this study, yelling, prohibitions, and possessive behavior are interpreted by some students as expressions of attention and affection because such behaviors have become normalized within dating relationships. Through the concept of the self, Mead explains that an individual's self-perception is shaped by responses from others. Victims who repeatedly receive negative remarks and controlling treatment from their partners tend to experience decreased self-esteem and increased emotional dependency. This condition makes it difficult for victims to leave unhealthy relationships, as endurance is often perceived as a form of loyalty and sacrifice.

This study demonstrates that the normalization of verbal violence among students in an Islamic-based campus environment is influenced not only by power relations and patriarchal culture but also by how students interpret religious values within dating relationships. In certain contexts, religious understanding is used to justify possessive and controlling behavior. The novelty of this research lies in its demonstration that religious values may be interpreted differently by students and can contribute to the normalization of verbal violence in interpersonal relationships.

In conclusion, based on the interview findings, verbal violence in students' dating relationships is influenced not only by individual factors but also by the social environment, patriarchal culture, social media, power relations, and students' interpretations of religious values in interpersonal relationships. Therefore, there is a need for a deeper understanding of healthy relationships and educational efforts regarding the forms of verbal violence, so that students are better equipped to build respectful, equitable, and violence-free relationships.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that verbal abuse in student dating relationships at the State Islamic University of North Sumatra is normalized through repeated relational patterns in which yelling, insulting language, emotional threats, excessive jealousy, possessive behavior,

social restrictions, and digital surveillance are interpreted as expressions of affection, protection, or relational commitment. The findings directly show that verbal abuse is not merely an interpersonal conflict between dating partners, but a social phenomenon shaped by cultural norms, gendered power relations, peer environments, digital communication practices, and certain social interpretations of religious values.

From the perspective of sociology of religion, this study demonstrates that religious identity and moral norms interact dynamically with students' intimate relationship practices. Religion is not positioned as the cause of verbal abuse. Rather, the findings indicate that particular social interpretations of religious teachings may be used to justify obedience, control, protection, and gendered authority in dating relationships. This condition reveals a gap between religious values that emphasize compassion, dignity, self-control, and respectful communication and relational practices that continue to tolerate verbal harm. Theoretically, this study contributes to the sociology of religion by showing how religious meanings are negotiated in everyday romantic relationships and how moral norms may be interpreted differently within unequal relational structures.

Practically, the findings emphasize the need for preventive and educational efforts within Islamic higher education institutions. Campus-based healthy relationship education is needed to help students distinguish between affection and control, care and coercion, conflict and verbal abuse. Counseling services should also be strengthened to provide safe, confidential, and accessible support for students who experience verbal or emotional abuse in dating relationships. Gender-sensitive religious literacy is equally important so that religious values are understood through the principles of justice, mutual respect, emotional self-regulation, and the protection of human dignity rather than as justification for domination or restriction.

This study has several limitations. The number of participants was limited, the research was conducted within a specific institutional context, and the qualitative phenomenological design does not aim to generalize findings to all Islamic higher education institutions. Future research may examine similar issues through comparative studies across different Islamic universities, quantitative approaches involving larger samples, or mixed-method designs that combine statistical patterns with deeper qualitative narratives. Further studies may also explore gender differences, digital surveillance, emotional dependency, and campus-based intervention models for preventing verbal abuse in student dating relationships.

Based on the research findings, the researcher proposes the following recommendations:

- a. For students, it is essential to develop a deeper understanding of the forms of verbal violence in dating relationships in order to distinguish between healthy expressions of care and behaviors that constitute control and emotional abuse. Students are also encouraged to cultivate relationships that are healthier, more equitable, and mutually respectful.
- b. For students within Islamic-based campus environments, a more comprehensive understanding of religious values is needed, beyond purely textual or normative interpretations. Religious values should be applied through attitudes of mutual respect, careful speech, emotional self-control, and the avoidance of using religious justifications to legitimize controlling or degrading behavior toward partners.

- c. For future researchers, it is recommended to expand the scope of research on violence in dating relationships by examining broader aspects, such as psychological abuse, the influence of social media on toxic relationships, or comparative analyses of verbal violence experiences based on gender and students' social backgrounds.

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