SOCIAL DEPRIVATION AS A FORM OF ABUSE IN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS: PERCEPTIONS OF INDIVIDUALS IN LATE ADOLESCENCE AND ADULTHOOD

Vjosa ABAZI

[1*]*Department of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy*
[*]*Corresponding author's email: v.abazi220461@unite.edu.mk*

Abstract

Social deprivation in couple relationships is a form of psychological violence that is experienced in different ways by individuals. In intimate relationships, social deprivation constitutes a complex phenomenon, often invisible and silent, that affects the relationship between partners and the overall family climate. The aim of this study was to explore perceptions regarding social deprivation as a form of violence in couple relationships. The study was conducted using a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews with individuals in late adolescence and adulthood. The sample consisted of 19 participants selected through the snowball sampling technique. Data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The results identified several main themes, including the understanding and interpretation of social deprivation and the reported forms of social deprivation. Participants' experiences and perceptions were diverse and varied, yet they shared common elements. Furthermore, the findings indicate that this phenomenon cannot be understood solely through individual factors, but that social and cultural factors must also be taken into consideration.

The development of interdisciplinary studies that combine psychological, sociological, and educational perspectives would contribute to a better understanding of the mechanisms of social deprivation and, at the same time, help build effective strategies for prevention and intervention.

Keywords: social deprivation, violence, adolescents, adults.

1. Introduction

Social deprivation refers to the control or restriction of contacts with friends, family, colleagues, or the community. (Khan & Akram, 2025) Social deprivation manifests through restrictions on communication, control of contacts, and interference with personal autonomy. In the social context, these behaviors are often normalized as forms of care or protection, which makes their identification as forms of deprivation more difficult.

In married life, it is often the case that one intimate partner or both become victims of social deprivation by the partner of the opposite sex, and very often this goes unnoticed by them, as such behaviors are interpreted as protection, love, and myths of love. Controlling behaviors in couple relationships in the digital era, specifically communication technology (social networks, messages, applications), are often used as tools for exercising psychological control, where young people normalize jealousy and the restriction of contacts as expressions of love (Hernández, Enríquez & Expósito, 2020).

One of the consequences that arise from poor social relationships, or their absence, may lead to other, more severe consequences that can be directly related to human health. According to a review of articles conducted by Cacioppo & Cacioppo (2014), it is analyzed how loneliness, as a consequence of isolation, which is perceived by the individual as negative, can lead to impairment of mental and physical health, as well as problems with sleep and executive functions. These effects then combine, contributing to higher rates of illness and affecting the individual's longevity (John, Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014).

A review article by Thoits (2011) emphasizes that social support is not merely an additional element of life, but a powerful protective mechanism for mental and physical health. She argues that individuals who have extensive social networks experience less stress and possess greater coping abilities, whereas isolation from these networks leads to increased depression, anxiety, and weakening of the immune system.

https://doi.org/10.62792/ut.icfra.y2026.i2.pp156

Gómez-López et al. (2019) emphasize that romantic relationships have a dual impact: on the one hand, they contribute to well-being and emotional development, while on the other hand, they may bring risks such as conflicts, jealousy, and social control. The authors highlight that the perception of a partner's behaviors often varies according to age and developmental stage, suggesting that young people tend to normalize control as an expression of care, whereas adults are more likely to view it as a restriction of personal autonomy.

The aim of this study is to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of adolescents and adults towards social deprivation as a form of violence.

2. Research methodology

This study is designed as a qualitative study with a phenomenological approach and aims to explore and understand the lived experiences and subjective perceptions of adolescents, young people, and adults regarding social deprivation as a form of violence.

Participants were recruited using the 'snowball sampling' technique. The process began with one individual who had experienced social restrictions, who then suggested other people with similar experiences. Recruitment continued until the collected data provided sufficient descriptions and no fundamentally new themes emerged. A total of 19 individuals, aged 18 to 55, participated in this research. The study included participants of various genders, individuals currently in relationships as well as those who had ended relationships in which they had experienced social deprivation and people with varying levels of education. This diversity in participant characteristics allowed the exploration of social deprivation from different perspectives.

The data collection process took place during the period from April to June 2026. The duration of the interviews ranged from 10 to 21 minutes. The interviews contained direct and focused descriptions of the participants experiences regarding social deprivation. In two cases, additional clarifying online meetings were held, which contributed to enriching and deepening the data.

The settings in which the interviews were conducted were quiet and secure, ensuring that participants felt as comfortable as possible. These locations included the participants' workplaces, home courtyards, a psychology laboratory, parks, and so on. During the interview process in these settings, it was requested that no one else be present in the room, in order to maintain complete privacy.

The interviews were conducted in person. Each subject was informed in advance about the purpose of the interview and was given the option to stop responding if they did not wish to continue. The interviews were audio-recorded with the informed consent of the participants. Following the interview process, each interview was transcribed, preserving the participants' original expressions. The transcripts were coded to ensure the anonymity of the participants. Once the transcription process was complete, the audio recordings were deleted to fully protect the participants' identities.

2.1 Research Instrument

The type of instrument used for this study is the semi-structured interview. To develop the semi-structured interview guide—aimed at exploring the experiences and perceptions of adolescents, young people, and adults regarding social deprivation within intimate relationships, the researcher examined existing theories and prior studies, such as coercive control theory, research on romantic relationships and social support that address the phenomenon of social deprivation (Gómez-López, Viejo, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2019; Haggerty,

Bradbury, & Karney, 2021; Sánchez Hernández et al., 2020; Muise, Schimmack, & Impett, 2021

The analysis of these sources provided a clearer understanding of the nature and dimensions of social deprivation, which served as an initial guide for exploring how this phenomenon might be experienced and understood within intimate relationships.

Subsequently, following an inductive approach, exploratory conversations were conducted with colleagues and individuals from different age groups, through which general guiding themes were identified. These themes served as an initial guide for the development of the semi-structured interview guide, which allows space for conversation with participants and for free accounts of their experiences.

The interview guide consists of 13 open-ended questions designed to encourage narratives about the participants' personal experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of social deprivation and how this phenomenon is manifested and understood within their intimate relationships.

Data analysis was conducted thematically, while the interpretation of each theme was guided by three aspects of the participants' experience: the cognitive aspect, relating to the meanings and interpretations participants attribute to social deprivation; the affective aspect, encompassing the emotional experiences associated with this phenomenon; and the aspect of direct experience, which reflects the concrete situations recounted by the participants.

3. Findings

1. What do adolescents, young people, and adults understand by the term "social deprivation" in the context of intimate relationships, and which behaviors do they consider to fall under this category?

Theme 1: *Understanding social deprivation as a form of violence in intimate relationships* – Data gathered from interviews indicate that participants perceive deprivation in various ways: some view it as a means of expressing care and love toward their partner; others see it as a phenomenon that emerges when there is a lack of trust between partners; and some interpret these restrictions as an expression of unhealthy jealousy and insecurity on the part of the partner.

Subtheme 1 : Social Deprivation as an Expression of Perceived Care and Love –Acceptance of a Partner's Restrictions and Interference as a Way of Expressing Love and Care for them. Subjects tell that accepting some of the restrictions and interferences from their partners, tells them that they care for them, and its a way of showing love.

*Partricipant 1.V. A- "*For example, as I told you, there are people who, you know, don't want you to go here and there, and you simply, in one way or another, do it more or less for that person's sake, you know? And maybe you put certain things in your routine on hold, not exactly your routine, but perhaps certain things, you stop doing them for that person so that they can feel good, you know? More or less, in a way, you show that you care about their feelings, you know? Not that you have to lock yourself inside the house, not in that sense, not that you should stay locked up to show that you love them, but rather that there are certain little things that you notice they really care about, you know? *"*

Participant 4.V.A: "What he values, I would have done. If he values the fact that I don't keep boys on Instagram, then I would do that. But if he doesn't value it, then there's no point in deleting them, because he wouldn't care about it and it wouldn't make any impression on him."

Participant 6.D.A: Regarding time restrictions, states: "It is not that bad, because it shows care rather than deprivation."

Subtheme 2: Social Deprivation as a Consequence of a Lack of Trust Between Partners- The idea that when one partner becomes suspicious of the other, they begin to restrict the other

person's social freedom. Based on the participants' accounts, it can be indirectly understood that they associate social deprivation with a lack of trust in their partner. The participants' narratives are presented below:

Participant 1.V.A: "But it's not that I would be suspicious. I think it all comes down to trust and how you choose to monitor that person. It's also about how you look at it, because naturally, you might want to look through their phone, you know? For example, you're this person, but let me see what kind of person you are through your phone (aha, in the virtual world). Yes, and for example, checking their phone or knowing what kind of people they associate with. For instance, if his friends are really bad people, you know, naturally, you wouldn't believe that he would turn out to be any different. Or if his friends behave in certain ways, and he goes out with them, naturally, you would wonder how they can all behave like that, and yet you still go out with them, you know?"

Participant 7.D.A- "I would understand it if, for example, I don't know exactly how I would feel about it, but I would understand if he were at the house of a female friend whom I also know. In that case, yes. But, for example, I don't really understand the other situations. I think the main reason why you would stop someone from doing something is when you don't trust that person. For instance, if you know that when he stays out later than 12 o'clock, he might do something, cheat on you, or something like that. If that's what you think, then you don't trust him, and you would constantly be sitting there, unable to feel at ease yourself."

Subtheme *3:* Social Deprivation as a Consequence of Insecurity and Jealousy- Restrictions and interference arising from one Partner's insecurities and jealousy. The majority of participants' narratives suggest that social deprivation occurs as a result of insecurity and jealousy, which they describe as something abnormal and concerning. Some of the participants' narratives are presented below:

Participant 9.D.A- "I can give an example of a specific situation that happened to me, involving my female friends from high school, whom I still have as colleagues now. She knows them too because we have mutual friends. She thought that I had feelings for one of those girls, that I liked one of them. And because of that, she would get upset and didn't want me to go out with those girls. So, in this social aspect, she would restrict me from going out with them because she thought I still had some feelings for that girl. Even though I made it clear that I don't have any feelings for her, she would not get it. She didn't understand, and she would say: " I don't want you to go out with her anymore. If you're going out with that female friend, then I'll be there too, because I think you liked one of those girls.' Which was quite extravagant, but yeah..."

Participant 8.D.A- "Pathological jealousy. Ummm, I consider it a lack of respect, a lack of self-confidence, and an inability to read the person in front of you, to understand their feelings towards you, to understand them. I mean, it's not their problem; it's your problem."

Participant 11.G.R- "That's not right. It depends, because some people have male friends they went to school with, grew up with, and so on. It's not right for someone to tell them that. But there are also people who say things like, 'Delete the boys, you can have only girls there.' Some say that, while others don't. It depends, it all about the jealousy."

Subtheme 3: Social deprivation as conflict avoidance.- Respecting agreements within the couple and denying (not acknowledging) that one is being deprived, as a way of preventing conflicts from arising. Some of the participants' narratives are presented below:

Participant 7.D.A: “Yes, but, for example, it has happened to me a few times, not when it comes to going out at night or things like that, but at school. I wouldn't go outside because she was upset, and I would stay in the classroom so as not to make her angry,to let her know that i was there with her.”

Participant 6.D.A:“Care is shown by refraining from doing certain things without the other person having to tell you to stop doing them, in order to avoid conflict and not upset them.”

Theme 2 – Experienced Forms of Social Deprivation-The participants narratives reveal that there are several different forms of social deprivation experienced either by the participants themselves or by people they know. Restrictions range from the most extreme forms, in which participants are completely isolated from their social circles and social contacts, to restrictions affecting all aspects of socialization and development, such as: restrictions on employment and education, socializing, accessing public spaces, using social media, as well as deprivation of personal autonomy and individual expression (interference with eating habits, clothing, and freedom of expression).

Subtheme 1: Complete Restriction of Social Contacts – Participants report that they themselves, or people they know, are currently experiencing or have previously experienced a complete restriction of social contacts. Some of the participants' narratives are presented below:
Participant 11.G.R- I spent 11 years serving my husband's family and attending to their needs. After that he only allowed me to go into the city with my father-in-law, and only to the bazaar. I wasn't allowed to go to cafes. It was only recently that I started going out again."
Participant 15.B.R-"There are many cases, for example, in families where the husband doesn't allow his wife to visit her family, go out with friends, or even go to the shops, etc."
Participant 3.V.A- "For this part, I have examples from my social circle. It hasn't happened to me personally, but I have seen cases among my female friends where, once a girl gets involved with a boy, she loses the entire social circle she used to have with other girls. She only spends time with her partner. Her partner becomes... he is her partner, her friend, someone who fills the role of a colleague, I could say, uhhh, even a father figure. He takes on all these roles, so instead of having all these figures separately, you have them all in one person, your partner..."

Subtheme 2: Deprivation of Education and Employment – This category includes cases in which one partner does not allow the other partner to pursue employment or education. The participants' narratives indicate that there are cases in which a partner prevents their significant other from continuing their education. Furthermore, participants report cases in which one partner prevents the other from becoming employed. The participants' narratives are presented below:
Participant 4.V.A- " Nowadays, I think things have changed a little, although not for everyone. It depends on the individual. Some stand their ground, while others don't want to, and some simply let things happen as their partner says. I think you need to stand up for yourself a little. You shouldn't immediately... the more freedom you give a person, the more..."
Participant 13.G.R- "There are, there are cases I have heard about, although I don't personally know these people, where women are not allowed to visit their family members or attend family gatherings, such as a wedding or a celebration. And the reasons are, for example, pointless ones, like 'there is no need,' 'it's not necessary,' and so on. They are trivial reasons, not reasons based on any serious justification."

Subtheme 4: Deprivation of access to social media and the virtual World – Participants report that they themselves, or people whose situations they are familiar with, are restricted in their use of social media. Some of the participants' narratives are presented below:
Partcipant 6.D.A- "Don't like or follow them," he would tell me, questioning why I had liked other girls' posts. This situation led to conflicts on many occasions."
Participant 10.D.A: "Another example is a girl whose boyfriend told her that she was not allowed to use social media anymore, meaning that she had to delete her account and everything, because he didn't want her to follow anyone other than him. And she, naturally, because she was in love with him while they were in a relationship, deleted her social media accounts."

Subtheme 5:Deprivation of personal autonomy and individual expression: Participants report cases in which one partner exercises control over everyday decisions, such as eating

habits, clothing, manner of speaking, and the expression of personal opinions. Participants describe cases in which one partner interferes with the aforementioned decisions.

Participant 8.D.A- "... Look, I have been present in these situations; I have witnessed relationships, and I have personally experienced them. I have been present when one person restricted the other person's food intake, uhh, through judgment and prejudice, comments about obesity, this and that, all kinds of judgment. The person is also controlled in the way they dress, as well as in the way they express themselves and their freedom of speech. For example, you don't feel comfortable expressing everything in the presence of that person. In a way, that person is controlling..."

Participant 1.V.A-"For example, when it comes to clothing, I think they might say, 'Don't dress too... how should I put it, don't dress too revealingly, you know, or too tightly, or too openly.' That's one thing. Another thing, uhh, they might also set limits on your time. For example, you want to come back at 3 a.m., you know? But he might say, 'No, you have to be back by 12.' For example, you've gone out, and they might restrict how much time you can spend out. Uhh, what else, what else..."

Participant 3.V.A- "Another form of social deprivation, uhh, occurs when people are in toxic relationships, and it all comes down to control, because... I don't know, it's all about control. For example, controlling the way a girl dresses, because I think this happens more often when the boy does it to the girl, you understand? But there are also some girls who do it. I can't think of another example right now; I shared this one based on my own experience."

4. Conclusions

This qualitative study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of adolescents, and adults regarding social deprivation. The data analysis revealed several key themes that reflect how individuals experience and understand this phenomenon.

The main themes identified through the analysis are: Understanding and Interpretation of Social Deprivation and Reported Forms of Social Deprivation.

Regarding how participants understand the phenomenon of social deprivation and which behaviours they consider to constitute forms of deprivation, the collected data revealed that interpretations vary. Some participants understand social deprivation as a way of expressing care and love towards one's partner, while others associate it with a lack of trust between partners. Some participants consider restrictions to be an expression of unhealthy jealousy and emotional insecurities on the part of the partner.

The restrictive behaviours that participants reported experiencing themselves, or that someone close to them had experienced, took various forms. These ranged from the most extreme forms, in which individuals were completely isolated from their social circles and contacts, to restrictions affecting all aspects of socialisation and development, such as prohibitions on employment and education, socialising, visiting public spaces, using social media, and limitations on personal autonomy and individual expression (including interference with eating habits, clothing choices, and freedom of expression). These findings are also consistent with those of Khan and Akram (2025), who describe social deprivation as the control or restriction of contact with friends, family, colleagues, or the wider community, noting that such control often also involves prohibiting employment or participation in public activities.

An important part of this study's findings also concerns the restrictions imposed through social media. Most participants report experiencing various forms of restriction on social media. The participants' narratives reveal that partners use social media to restrict the other person's personal autonomy by interfering with what they post, how they use social media, and with whom they communicate on these platforms. Such interference is more pronounced when it comes to the partner's interactions with members of the opposite sex. These findings are

consistent with the study on psychological control in intimate relationships in the digital age, conducted by Sánchez-Hernández et al. (2020).

The findings of this study further contribute to the existing literature by providing more detailed information about the various ways in which individuals experience different forms of social deprivation. Furthermore, since this qualitative research is based on direct communication with participants, it allows for closer engagement with their experiences and provides a deeper understanding of the phenomenon itself.

4.1 Kufizime dhe rekomandime

Although the study provided valuable data on the experiences of individuals affected by social deprivation, its findings are limited by the small sample size, the purposive selection of participants, the fact that some interviews were conducted in settings that may have affected participants' freedom of expression and concentration, such as the workplace, as well as the difficulty of including individuals experiencing more severe forms of social isolation.

Furthermore, the interpretative nature of phenomenological analysis and the interviewer's prior acquaintance with some of the participants may have influenced the nuances of the findings. Considering these limitations, further studies are recommended, particularly those employing quantitative and interdisciplinary approaches, in order to measure the prevalence of the phenomenon and gain a deeper understanding of the psychological, social, educational, and gender-related factors that influence it.

At the same time, educational institutions, non-governmental organisations, the media, and public institutions should promote awareness-raising activities, educational programmes, and intersectoral cooperation, with the aim of preventing social deprivation, strengthening support networks, and fostering a more inclusive society that is more sensitive to this phenomenon.

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