

Effects of Trauma Bonding, Emotional Dependence, and Self-Esteem on Marital Persistence

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Abstract

Purpose: This study analyzes the influence of trauma bonding, emotional dependence, and self-esteem on relationship persistence in unhealthy marital relationships.

Research Methodology: This research employed a quantitative explanatory design with a longitudinal time-lagged approach. Data were collected via online questionnaires distributed through Google Forms to individuals who had experienced unhealthy marital relationships. A purposive sampling technique was applied, resulting in 200 respondents. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (SEM-PLS) with SmartPLS 4.

Results: The findings show that trauma bonding and emotional dependence positively affect relationship persistence in unhealthy relationships. Conversely, self-esteem negatively affects relationship persistence. Individuals with stronger emotional attachment and dependence are more likely to remain in unhealthy relationships, while higher self-esteem reduces this tendency.

Conclusions: Psychological factors significantly explain why individuals persist in unhealthy relationships. Trauma bonding and emotional dependence increase persistence, whereas self-esteem reduces it.

Limitations: The study is based on self-reported data and focuses only on unhealthy marital relationships, limiting generalizability.

Contributions: This study contributes to relationship psychology and mental health literature by proposing an integrative model of relationship persistence. The findings provide insights for psychologists, counselors, and practitioners in understanding abusive relationship dynamics.

Keywords: *Emotional Dependence, Relationship Persistence, Self-Esteem, Trauma Bonding, Unhealthy Relationships*

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of individuals remaining in unhealthy relationships despite experiencing emotional abuse has become a global issue receiving increasing attention within relationship psychology and mental health studies (Fonseca & Oliveira, 2021). Intimate partner violence is recognized as a global public health problem that significantly affects individuals' psychological well-being and the quality of interpersonal relationships (Ayesoro, Ojo, & Peter, 2025; Molina, & Matud, 2024). In many cases, victims do not immediately leave the relationship; instead, they return after experiencing repeated cycles of conflict, reconciliation, and abuse (Kaiser, 2025). This pattern reflects a relational dynamic

characterized by strong emotional attachment that makes separation difficult ([Isaiah, Effiong, Udokang, Ogwuche, Udoukok, & Iorfa, 2024](#); [Reid, 2024](#)).

This phenomenon is closely related to trauma bonding, which refers to intense emotional attachment between victims and perpetrators formed through repeated abusive and reconciliatory experiences ([Zhao, Liu, Liu, Liu, Zhang, & Hu, 2022](#)). Such attachment develops through inconsistent reinforcement patterns involving alternating negative and positive behaviors, making the emotional bond difficult to break ([Effiong, Ibeagha, & Iorfa, 2022](#)). In addition, emotional dependence is identified as another factor contributing to the persistence of harmful relationships ([Güler, Bankston, & Smith, 2022](#)). Emotional dependence reflects an excessive need for emotional support from a partner, leading individuals to remain in relationships despite negative treatment ([Blom, Obolenskaya, Phoenix, & Pullerits, 2024](#); [Fischer, 2022](#)). Self-esteem also plays a crucial role, as individuals with low self-esteem tend to tolerate unhealthy treatment and struggle to disengage from harmful relationships ([Effiong et al., 2022](#); [Olave, Iruarizaga, Herrero, Macía, Momeñe, Macía, & Estevez, 2024](#)). Previous studies further show that self-esteem is associated with attitudes toward relationship violence and influences individuals' behavioral responses within relationships ([Edhammer, Petersson, & Strand, 2024](#); [El-Etreby, Hamed, Abdelhay, & Kamel, 2024](#); [Purwanti, Agustriyani, Ardinata, Palupi, & Mukhlis, 2023](#)).

More specifically, this phenomenon is frequently observed among women in marital relationships who experience psychological abuse yet continue to maintain the relationship ([Wiel, 2022](#); [Yang, & Yip, 2021](#)). Emotional abuse in intimate relationships often occurs repeatedly and creates psychological distress that reduces individuals' ability to make rational decisions to leave the relationship ([Bautista, & Regalado, 2023](#); [Imasaka, Onzuka, Nomura, Fukuda, Hirata, Morita, & Shiose, 2022](#); [McLindon, Brown, McKenzie, Tarzia, & Hegarty, 2026](#)). This situation is further complicated by the tendency of individuals to return to their partners after conflicts occur ([Feng, Liang, Luo, & Chen, 2022](#); [Qian, Hadi, Silvestro, Ma, Rivera, Bajpai, & Tellaoui, 2022](#)). As a result, there is a clear discrepancy between the harmful nature of the relationship and the decision to remain within it ([Gao, Chen, Guo, & Sun, 2025](#); [Isaiah et al., 2024](#); [WHO, 2021](#)).

This inconsistency indicates that relationship persistence is not solely driven by rational decision-making, but also by psychological and emotional factors ([Starke, Zius, & Barbee, 2022](#); [Zhu, Zhou, Zhu, Cheng, Pan, Zhou, & Xu, 2022](#)). Trauma bonding may impair individuals' ability to objectively evaluate their relationship conditions, leading them to remain despite harmful experiences ([Effiong et al., 2022](#)). Emotional dependence further strengthens this condition, as individuals may fear losing emotional support and perceive the relationship as their primary source of security ([Young, Karnilowicz, Mauss, Hastings, Guyer, & Robins, 2022](#)). Consequently, repeated return behavior often occurs despite persistent negative experiences ([Isaiah et al., 2024](#)). Low self-esteem intensifies this situation by reinforcing feelings of unworthiness and increasing tolerance toward negative treatment ([El-Etreby et al., 2024](#)).

The grand theories underlying this phenomenon include attachment theory and reinforcement theory within trauma bonding ([Mowder, Widerstrom, & Sandall, 1989](#)). Trauma bonding develops through repeated cycles of abuse and reconciliation that strengthen emotional attachment and make disengagement difficult ([Isaiah et al., 2024](#)). Dependency theory in interpersonal relationships explains that emotional dependence leads individuals to maintain relationships despite their harmful nature ([Cecen & Ündar, 2026](#)). Emotional dependence reflects excessive emotional reliance on a partner ([Dorey, 2022](#); [Putri, & Huwae, 2025](#)). Self-esteem theory further explains that individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to accept negative treatment in relationships ([Navarro & Carhualla, 2025](#)). Self-esteem influences self-evaluation and perceptions of deservingness in relationships ([El-Etreby et al., 2024](#); [Setianingrum, & Kelly, 2023](#)).

Several previous studies have examined trauma bonding in relation to intimate partner violence ([Simonič, & Osewska, 2019](#); [Tabib, Guermazi, Mnif, Cherif, Feki, Baati, & Masmoudi, 2024](#)). Research indicates that trauma bonding is an emotional attachment formed through repeated abusive

cycles that contributes to victims remaining in abusive relationships ([Effiong et al., 2022](#); [Navarro and Carhualla, 2025](#)). Other studies show that emotional dependence is associated with the maintenance of unhealthy relationships and tolerance of abusive partners ([Bonet, & Pavón, 2021](#); [Yılmaz, Gunay, Lee, Whiting, Silver, Koyuturk, & Karakurt, 2023](#)). Individuals with high emotional dependence are more likely to engage with partners exhibiting manipulative behaviors ([Shyu, Lin, Fang, & Cheng, 2020](#); [Zeigler-Hill, Besser, Gabay, & Young, 2021](#)). Furthermore, self-esteem has been found to influence attitudes toward relationship violence and decision-making in relational conflicts ([Castillo-González, Mendo-Lázaro, León-del-Barco, Terán-Andrade, & López-Ramos, 2024](#); [Macía, Estevez, Iruarrizaga, Olave, Chávez, & Momeñe, 2022](#)). Individuals with low self-esteem are more vulnerable to accepting violence in relationships ([Ceballos, & Haensch, 2025](#); [El-Etreby et al., 2024](#)). Emotional abuse has also been shown to contribute to psychological distress, which affects victims' ability to leave unhealthy relationships ([Molina and Matud, 2024](#); [Wang, Chen, Liu, Bullock, Li, Chen, & French, 2020](#)).

However, existing literature remains fragmented, as most studies have examined trauma bonding, emotional dependence, and self-esteem separately, rather than integrating them into a unified explanatory model ([Effiong et al., 2022](#)). Prior research has primarily focused on the association between these variables and intimate partner violence or psychological outcomes, rather than explaining relationship persistence as a behavioral decision. In addition, limited attention has been given to understanding how these psychological factors jointly influence individuals' decisions to remain in unhealthy relationships. This indicates a clear gap in the literature regarding an integrative model that simultaneously examines trauma bonding, emotional dependence, and self-esteem in explaining relationship persistence in unhealthy relationships ([Molina & Matud, 2024](#)).

Therefore, the novelty of this study lies in its integrative approach that simultaneously examines the effects of trauma bonding, emotional dependence, and self-esteem on relationship persistence within a single conceptual framework. Unlike previous studies that investigated these variables separately, this study focuses on their combined influence on the persistence of unhealthy marital relationships. This provides a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying individuals' decisions to remain in abusive relationships.

This study is important because the phenomenon of individuals remaining in unhealthy relationships has serious implications for mental health and quality of life. Intimate partner violence significantly affects individuals' psychological well-being ([Molina & Matud, 2024](#)). Without adequate investigation, understanding of the psychological factors causing individuals to remain in unhealthy relationships will remain limited. Such limitations may hinder psychological interventions and preventive efforts aimed at reducing abusive relationships ([Isaiah et al., 2024](#)). The findings of this study are expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of relationship psychology models concerning relationship persistence in unhealthy relationships. In addition, the study is expected to offer practical contributions for counselors, psychologists, and relationship practitioners in understanding the dynamics of victims who repeatedly return to abusive relationships. Based on the foregoing discussion, this study aims to analyze the influence of trauma bonding, emotional dependence, and self-esteem on relationship persistence in unhealthy relationships.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

2.1 Trauma Bonding and Relationship Persistence

Trauma bonding refers to an emotional attachment formed between victims and perpetrators through repeated cycles of violence, emotional manipulation, and reconciliation within interpersonal relationships. This concept explains why individuals in abusive relationships often maintain strong emotional ties despite persistent negative treatment. Reinforcement theory suggests that inconsistent patterns of affection following abusive episodes create psychological dependency that reinforces continued attachment ([Isaiah, Effiong, Udokang, Ogwuche, Udoukok, & Iorfa, 2024](#)).

In unhealthy relationships, trauma bonding contributes to distorted cognitive evaluations of the relationship, where individuals rationalize abuse and maintain emotional attachment despite

recognizing its harmful nature. This dynamic leads individuals to repeatedly return to their partners after conflict, driven by expectations of change and emotional reinforcement. Prior research indicates that trauma bonding is closely linked to victims' persistence in abusive intimate partner relationships due to cyclical patterns of abuse and reconciliation ([Isaiah et al., 2024](#); [Sergeyevna, 2025](#)).

Furthermore, trauma bonding is associated with victims' inability to terminate abusive relationships. Overall, trauma bonding strengthens emotional entrapment by combining intermittent affection, apology, and reconciliation phases that reinforce attachment to the partner. This mechanism reduces the likelihood of relationship termination, as the relationship itself becomes a source of emotional validation despite its harmful consequences. Accordingly, individuals experiencing trauma bonding are more likely to persist in unhealthy relationships. Based on the foregoing discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₁: Trauma bonding positively influences relationship persistence

2.2 Emotional Dependence and Relationship Persistence

Emotional dependence refers to a psychological condition characterized by excessive affective reliance on a partner, where the relationship becomes the primary source of emotional support and self-validation. Individuals with high emotional dependence tend to experience anxiety when separated from their partners and fear losing emotional connection, which reduces their ability to end relationships despite harmful conditions ([Santos & Diniz, 2024](#)). Dependency theory explains that such individuals maintain relationships because they perceive their emotional needs as being fulfillable only through their partner ([Santos & Diniz, 2024](#)).

In unhealthy relationships, emotional dependence creates fear of loneliness and perceived inability to function independently, which reinforces continued attachment. This condition leads individuals to tolerate manipulative or controlling behaviors in order to preserve emotional closeness within the relationship. Empirical evidence also shows that emotional dependence contributes to difficulties in leaving abusive relationships, as individuals perceive the relationship as essential for emotional stability ([Blom, Obolenskaya, Phoenix, & Pullerits, 2024](#)). Thus, emotional dependence functions as a psychological mechanism that increases persistence in unhealthy relationships by strengthening emotional reliance and reducing perceived alternatives. Therefore, higher emotional dependence is expected to increase relationship persistence. Based on this explanation, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₂: Emotional dependence positively influences relationship persistence

2.3 Self-Esteem and Relationship Persistence

Self-esteem refers to individuals' evaluation of their own worth, competence, and value in interpersonal relationships ([Daralita, Agustriyani, Damayanti, Probo, & Mukhlis, 2023](#)). Individuals with high self-esteem tend to establish healthier relational boundaries, whereas those with low self-esteem are more likely to accept negative treatment and remain in harmful relationships ([Majidovna, 2025](#); [Taccini, & Mannarini, 2024](#)). In the context of unhealthy relationships, low self-esteem increases vulnerability by fostering feelings of unworthiness and dependence on external validation. This condition reduces individuals' perceived ability to leave harmful relationships and increases tolerance toward emotional abuse. Self-esteem theory explains that individuals with low self-worth are more likely to internalize negative treatment and normalize unhealthy relational dynamics ([Taccini & Mannarini, 2024](#)).

Overall, self-esteem plays a protective role in preventing relationship persistence in unhealthy contexts. Individuals with higher self-esteem are more capable of recognizing harmful patterns and making decisions to leave abusive relationships, whereas those with lower self-esteem are more likely to remain due to fear of rejection and perceived lack of alternatives. Therefore, self-esteem is expected to reduce relationship persistence in unhealthy relationships. Based on this explanation, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H₃: Self-esteem negatively influences relationship persistence

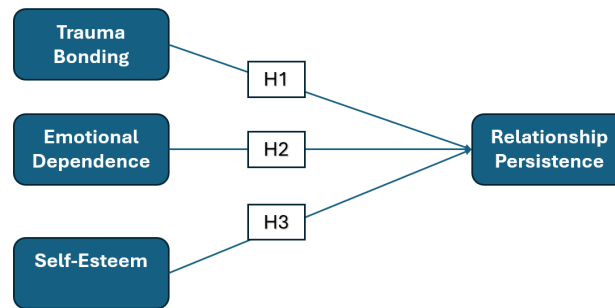


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of this study, which explains the relationship between trauma bonding, emotional dependence, self-esteem, and relationship persistence in unhealthy marital relationships. The framework proposes that trauma bonding and emotional dependence act as psychological factors that increase individuals' tendency to remain in unhealthy relationships. Trauma bonding reflects strong emotional attachment developed through repeated cycles of conflict, abuse, and reconciliation, while emotional dependence represents excessive reliance on partners for emotional support and validation. Conversely, self-esteem is positioned as a protective factor that is expected to reduce relationship persistence by strengthening individuals' self-worth and ability to make independent decisions. Therefore, this model examines how these psychological mechanisms simultaneously contribute to individuals' decisions to maintain unhealthy marital relationships.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed a quantitative approach with an explanatory research design to analyze the influence of trauma bonding, emotional dependence, and self-esteem on relationship persistence among individuals involved in unhealthy marital relationships. The study adopted a longitudinal design using a time-lagged approach, in which data collection was conducted at two different time periods to minimize common method bias and enhance the accuracy of causal relationship explanations among variables. A longitudinal approach is considered appropriate in relationship psychology because the development of trauma bonding, emotional dependence, and persistence in unhealthy relationships occurs gradually over time and cannot be fully captured through a single cross-sectional measurement (Podsakoff, Podsakoff, Williams, Huang, & Yang, 2024).

The population of this study consisted of individuals who had experienced or were currently involved in unhealthy marital relationships characterized by emotional abuse, psychological manipulation, excessive control, or other forms of abusive relational patterns. The study employed purposive sampling with specific inclusion criteria: at least 18 years old, having experienced or currently involved in an unhealthy marital relationship for a minimum of six months, and experiencing repeated emotional conflicts within the relationship. Purposive sampling was applied because the study required respondents who had direct and relevant lived experience with the phenomenon under investigation, particularly relationship persistence in abusive relational contexts. This approach ensures data relevance rather than representativeness, which is commonly applied in psychological studies focusing on specific behavioral experiences. The minimum sample size followed the SEM-PLS recommendation of 5–10 times the number of indicators; therefore, this study targeted at least 200 respondents to ensure stable and reliable model estimation (Podsakoff et al., 2024).

Data collection was conducted in two waves. In the first stage (Time 1), respondents completed instruments measuring trauma bonding, emotional dependence, and self-esteem. In the second stage (Time 2), conducted after an interval of 4–6 weeks, respondents completed the relationship persistence instrument. The selection of a 4–6 week time lag was based on methodological considerations in behavioral research, where this interval is considered sufficient to reduce immediate response consistency effects while still maintaining temporal relevance between psychological states

and behavioral persistence. A shorter interval may not adequately reduce common method bias, whereas a much longer interval may introduce external life changes that distort causal inference ([Isaiah, Effiong, Udokang, Ogwuche, Udoukok, & Iorfa, 2024](#)). The time-lagged approach was therefore designed to balance temporal separation and response stability ([Santos & Diniz, 2024](#)).

To further ensure measurement validity, all constructs were operationalized using established and validated measurement scales adapted from previous studies. Each instrument underwent content validity assessment through expert review and was evaluated for construct validity using convergent and discriminant validity tests in SEM-PLS. Reliability was ensured through Cronbach alpha and composite reliability thresholds. These procedures were applied to confirm that the measurement model accurately represented the theoretical constructs before hypothesis testing ([Isaiah et al., 2024](#)). Online questionnaires were distributed via Google Forms. This method was considered appropriate for sensitive topics such as unhealthy relationships because it increases respondent anonymity and reduces social desirability bias. All measurement items were assessed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree ([Santos & Diniz, 2024](#)).

The trauma bonding variable was measured using indicators related to emotional attachment resulting from cycles of abuse and reconciliation, the need to maintain relationships despite negative treatment, and difficulties in ending relationships with abusive partners. The measurement was based on the trauma bonding concept developed by Patrick Carnes and supported by studies on abusive relational attachment and intimate partner violence ([Isaiah et al., 2024](#)). The emotional dependence variable was measured through indicators including excessive affective needs toward partners, fear of losing partners, self-sacrificing tendencies to maintain relationships, and emotional dependency in relational decision-making, based on prior research on emotional dependency in interpersonal relationships. The self-esteem variable was measured using indicators related to self-evaluation, self-worth, feelings of personal value, and confidence in interpersonal relationships. The measurement was based on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, widely validated in psychological and relationship studies. The relationship persistence variable was measured using indicators reflecting the tendency to remain in unhealthy relationships, returning to partners after conflict, tolerance toward negative partner behavior, and persistence despite emotional distress, based on prior research on persistence in abusive relationships ([Isaiah et al., 2024](#)).

Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares-Structural Equation Modeling (SEM-PLS) with SmartPLS version 4. SEM-PLS was selected due to its suitability for predictive models with complex relationships and non-normal data distributions. The analysis included outer model and inner model evaluation. The outer model assessed convergent validity, discriminant validity, Cronbach alpha, composite reliability, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). The inner model assessed R-square, f-square, Q-square, and hypothesis testing using bootstrapping. Hypotheses were accepted when t-statistics exceeded 1.96 and p-values were below 0.05 ([Hair & Alamer, 2022](#)). Ethical considerations were strictly applied by ensuring confidentiality, voluntary participation, and informed consent. Given the sensitivity of the topic, respondents were also given the option to withdraw at any stage without consequences.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Outer Model

The outer model evaluation was conducted to assess the validity and reliability of the research constructs. Convergent validity was measured using outer loading values, while construct reliability was evaluated through Cronbach alpha, composite reliability, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE).

4.1.1 Outer Loading

Convergent validity was evaluated using outer loading values. Indicators with outer loading values above 0.70 were considered valid and able to represent their constructs adequately. The results of the outer loading test are presented in Figure 2.

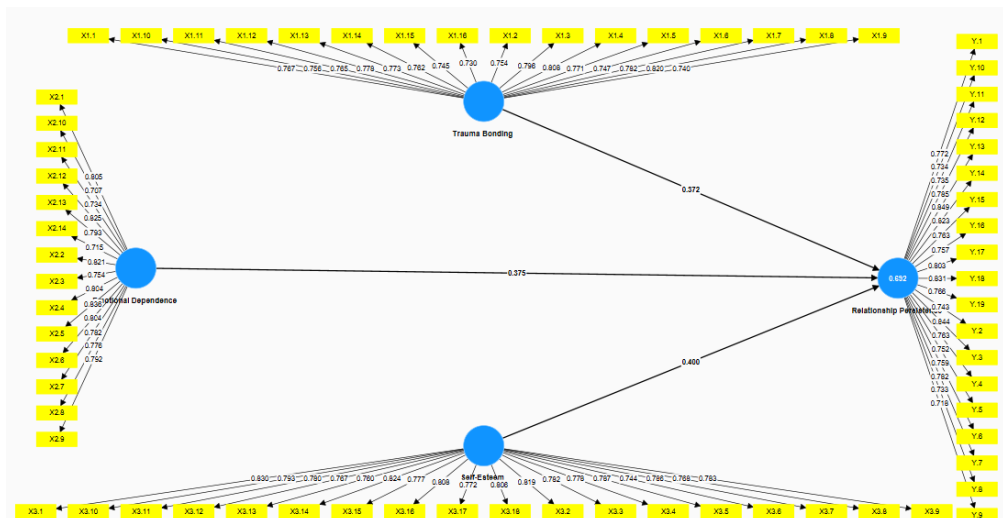


Figure 2. Outer Loading Diagrams

Figure 2 indicates that all indicators meet the recommended threshold for outer loading, confirming that each indicator adequately represents its respective construct. This suggests that the measurement model demonstrates satisfactory convergent validity across trauma bonding, emotional dependence, self-esteem, and relationship persistence. From a structural perspective, the results indicate distinct directional relationships among the variables. Trauma bonding and emotional dependence exhibit positive associations with relationship persistence, whereas self-esteem shows a negative association. These patterns imply that psychological attachment and emotional reliance contribute to stronger persistence in unhealthy relationships, while higher self-esteem functions as a protective factor that reduces the likelihood of remaining in such relationships.

4.1.2 Reliability and Convergent Validity Results

The reliability and convergent validity of the constructs were evaluated using Cronbach alpha, composite reliability, and Average Variance Extracted (AVE). A construct is considered reliable if Cronbach alpha and composite reliability values exceed 0.70, while AVE values should be above 0.50. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Reliability and convergent validity results

Variables	Cronbach Alpha	Composite Reliability (rho_a)	Composite Reliability (rho_c)	AVE
Emotional Dependence	0.951	0.954	0.957	0.613
Relationship Persistence	0.963	0.964	0.966	0.601
Self-Esteem	0.964	0.965	0.967	0.620
Trauma Bonding	0.954	0.956	0.959	0.591

The Table 1 indicate that all constructs demonstrate satisfactory internal consistency, as reflected in Cronbach alpha and composite reliability values exceeding the recommended threshold. This suggests that the indicators consistently measure their respective latent constructs across the model. Furthermore, the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values surpass the minimum requirement, indicating that each construct has adequate convergent validity. Overall, these results confirm that the measurement model is both reliable and valid, providing a sound basis for examining the relationships among trauma bonding, emotional dependence, self-esteem, and relationship persistence in unhealthy relationships.

4.1.3 Discriminant Validity (Fornell–Larcker Criterion)

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion, where the square root of the AVE for each construct should be greater than the correlations with other constructs. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Discriminant validity (Fornell–Larcker Criterion)

Variables	Emotional Dependence	Relationship Persistence	Self-Esteem	Trauma Bonding
Emotional Dependence	0.783	-	-	-
Relationship Persistence	0.604	0.775	-	-
Self-Esteem	0.339	0.628	0.787	-
Trauma Bonding	0.252	0.575	0.272	0.769

The Table 2 indicate that the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for each construct is greater than its correlations with other constructs. This finding confirms that each construct demonstrates adequate discriminant validity, indicating that the measurement model is able to clearly distinguish between trauma bonding, emotional dependence, self-esteem, and relationship persistence. Consequently, each construct represents a distinct conceptual domain within the research model.

4.1.4 Model Fit Results

Model fit was evaluated using several goodness-of-fit indices, including SRMR, d_ ULS, d_ G, Chi-square, and NFI. The results of the model fit evaluation are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Model fit results

Criteria	Saturated Model	Estimated Model
SRMR	0.051	0.051
d_ ULS	5.993	5.993
d_ G	3.326	3.326
Chi-square	3274.672	3274.672
NFI	0.752	0.752

The Table 3 indicate that the structural model demonstrates an acceptable level of model fit. The SRMR value falls below the recommended threshold, suggesting that the model adequately reproduces the observed data. In addition, the NFI value indicates a reasonable level of overall model fit within the SEM-PLS framework. Overall, these findings confirm that the proposed structural model is appropriate for explaining the relationships among trauma bonding, emotional dependence, self-esteem, and relationship persistence.

4.2 Inner Model

4.2.1 R-Square Results

The coefficient of determination (R-square) was evaluated to assess the predictive power of the structural model. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. R-Square Results

Variables	R-square	R-square Adjusted
Relationship Persistence	0.692	0.687

The Table 4 indicate that the proposed model has substantial explanatory power in accounting for relationship persistence in unhealthy relationships. The combined influence of trauma bonding, emotional dependence, and self-esteem explains a considerable proportion of variance, indicating that psychological factors play a dominant role in shaping individuals' persistence in such relationships.

However, a portion of the variance remains unexplained, suggesting the presence of other contextual, relational, or environmental factors beyond the scope of the current model.

4.2.2 Effect Size (f-square) Results

Effect size (f-square) analysis was conducted to evaluate the contribution of each exogenous variable to relationship persistence. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Effect size (f-square) results

Variables	Emotional Dependence	Relationship Persistence	Self-Esteem	Trauma Bonding
Emotional Dependence	-	0.390	-	-
Relationship Persistence	-	-	-	-
Self-Esteem	-	0.439	-	-
Trauma Bonding	-	0.404	-	-

The Table 5 indicate that all predictor variables demonstrate substantial effects on relationship persistence, as reflected by f-square values exceeding the recommended threshold. This suggests that trauma bonding, emotional dependence, and self-esteem each play meaningful roles in explaining variations in individuals' persistence in unhealthy relationships. Among the predictors, self-esteem exhibits the strongest relative effect, followed closely by trauma bonding and emotional dependence. This pattern indicates that although all variables contribute significantly, self-esteem functions as the most influential factor in shaping individuals' decisions to remain in unhealthy relationships.

4.3 Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis testing was conducted using the bootstrapping procedure in SEM-PLS to evaluate the significance of the relationships among variables. A hypothesis is accepted if the t-statistics value exceeds 1.96 and the p-value is below 0.05. The results of hypothesis testing are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Hypothesis testing results

Relationship	Original Sample (O)	STDEV	T Statistics	P Values	Results
Emotional Dependence and Relationship Persistence	0.375	0.039	9.615	0.000	Supported
Self-Esteem and Relationship Persistence	0.400	0.038	10.551	0.000	Supported
Trauma Bonding and Relationship Persistence	0.372	0.042	8.919	0.000	Supported

The Table 6 indicate that emotional dependence has a positive and significant effect on relationship persistence ($\beta = 0.375$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that higher emotional reliance increases individuals' likelihood of remaining in unhealthy relationships. Similarly, trauma bonding shows a positive and significant effect ($\beta = 0.372$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that emotional attachment formed through abusive relational cycles contributes to continued persistence in such relationships. Self-esteem also demonstrates a significant relationship with persistence ($\beta = 0.400$, $p < 0.05$), highlighting its important role in shaping individuals' decisions to remain in unhealthy relationships. Overall, the findings confirm that all three psychological factors are significant predictors of relationship persistence, with self-esteem showing the strongest relative influence among the variables.

4.4 Discussion

The results of this study indicate that trauma bonding significantly influences relationship persistence in unhealthy relationships. These findings reflect the phenomenon in which individuals remain in abusive relationships despite repeatedly experiencing emotional violence, manipulation, and psychological distress. Victims often develop strong emotional attachment toward their partners

because cycles of abuse are followed by reconciliation, affection, and emotional attention. This condition makes individuals believe that the relationship can improve, causing them to repeatedly return to the relationship even after experiencing harmful treatment. This finding is consistent with reinforcement theory and attachment theory, which explain that repeated cycles of abuse and affection strengthen emotional attachment and make it difficult for victims to detach from abusive partners. The findings also support previous studies by [Effiong, Ibeagha, and Iorfa \(2022\)](#); [Isaiah, Effiong, Udokang, Ogwuche, Udoukok, and Iorfa \(2024\)](#), which found that trauma bonding increases victims' tendencies to remain in abusive intimate relationships. These findings imply that trauma bonding can weaken victims' ability to objectively evaluate unhealthy relationships, thereby increasing vulnerability to prolonged emotional abuse.

The findings further reveal that emotional dependence significantly affects relationship persistence. This result supports the phenomenon that individuals with excessive emotional dependence tend to perceive their partners as their primary source of emotional security, validation, and support. Consequently, victims often fear loneliness, rejection, or emotional loss if the relationship ends, even when the relationship is psychologically harmful. In unhealthy relationships, emotional dependence causes individuals to tolerate manipulative and controlling behaviors in order to maintain emotional closeness with their partners. These findings are in line with dependency theory, which explains that individuals with high emotional dependency are more likely to maintain harmful relationships because their emotional needs are strongly tied to their partners. The findings also support previous studies by [Blom, Obolenskaya, Phoenix, and Pullerits \(2024\)](#); [Santos and Diniz \(2024\)](#), which reported that emotional dependence contributes to individuals' inability to leave abusive relationships. This condition may increase emotional vulnerability and prevent victims from developing healthy and independent interpersonal relationships.

In addition, the findings demonstrate that self-esteem significantly influences relationship persistence. Individuals with low self-esteem tend to perceive themselves as unworthy of healthier relationships and become more tolerant of abusive treatment from their partners. This phenomenon explains why many victims remain in emotionally harmful relationships because they lack confidence in their self-worth and ability to establish better relationships. Self-esteem theory explains that individuals with low self-evaluation are more likely to accept negative interpersonal treatment and depend on external validation from their partners. The findings are consistent with previous studies by [El-Etreby, Hamed, Abdelhay, and Kamel \(2024\)](#) and [Taccini and Mannarini \(2024\)](#), which found that low self-esteem is associated with greater acceptance of relationship violence and difficulties leaving abusive relationships. The impact of this condition is that victims may experience prolonged psychological distress, reduced emotional well-being, and greater susceptibility to repeated abusive relationship patterns.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the influence of trauma bonding, emotional dependence, and self-esteem on relationship persistence in unhealthy relationships. The findings confirm that all three psychological factors significantly influence individuals' persistence in such relationships. Overall, the results highlight that relationship persistence is strongly shaped by emotional and cognitive psychological mechanisms, particularly attachment-based and self-evaluative processes. This supports the integration of trauma bonding, emotional dependence, and self-esteem within a unified explanatory framework of relationship persistence. The study contributes to relationship psychology literature by offering an integrated model that explains persistence in unhealthy relationships from multiple psychological perspectives. Practically, the findings provide insights for psychologists and counselors in understanding the underlying mechanisms that influence individuals' decisions to remain in abusive relationships.

5.2 Research Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the study relied on self-reported questionnaires, which may increase the possibility of response bias and subjectivity in respondents' answers. Second, the research

focused only on individuals involved in unhealthy marital relationships, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other forms of interpersonal relationships such as dating relationships. Third, although the study applied a time-lagged design, the observation period remained relatively limited and may not fully capture long-term psychological changes in abusive relationships.

5.3 Suggestions and Directions for Future Research

Future studies are recommended to expand the research sample by involving respondents from different demographic backgrounds and relationship contexts to improve the generalizability of findings. Further research may also apply longer longitudinal designs to better understand the development of trauma bonding, emotional dependence, and self-esteem over time. In addition, future researchers are encouraged to explore other psychological variables such as attachment style, resilience, coping strategies, social support, or psychological distress that may influence relationship persistence in unhealthy relationships. The use of mixed-method approaches combining quantitative and qualitative methods is also recommended to obtain deeper insights into victims' experiences in abusive relationships.

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Author Contributions

DS conceptualized the study, designed the research framework, conducted data collection and analysis, and prepared the original manuscript draft. BA contributed to the research design, methodology development, and critical review of the manuscript. IS assisted in data collection, literature review, and manuscript editing. MA contributed to data interpretation, validation of findings, and manuscript revision. AY supervised the overall research process, provided academic guidance, and reviewed the final version of the manuscript. All authors discussed the results, contributed to the improvement of the manuscript, and approved the final version for publication.

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