

Conflict Resolution Strategies among Adolescent Victims of Sexual Dating Violence: Emotional Dependence, Regulation, and Social Support

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Abstract

Sexual dating violence (SDV) is a global public health concern affecting a significant proportion of adolescents, with prevalence estimates ranging from 20% to 50% worldwide and disproportionately impacting young women. In Indonesia and other Southeast Asian contexts, disclosure remains limited due to stigma and cultural barriers, leaving many adolescents isolated in unsafe relationships. Against this backdrop, this study aimed to explore how adolescent victims of SDV navigate conflict resolution within their intimate relationships and identify the psychological, interpersonal, and social factors shaping their strategies. Using a qualitative instrumental narrative design, five adolescent females aged 15–22 who had experienced SDV and received at least one year of psychosocial support were recruited through purposive sampling. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and field observations and analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's framework. The findings revealed four key themes: (1) reliance on withdrawal as the most frequent conflict resolution strategy, (2) the entrapment of emotional dependence counterbalanced by gradual growth in regulation skills, (3) conflict involvement characterized by cycles of escalation and gaslighting, and (4) the pivotal role of social and emotional support in resilience and recovery. The study highlights that conflict resolution in SDV contexts is less about repairing relationships and more about survival, agency, and dignity, offering theoretical reframing and practical implications for trauma-informed interventions.

Keywords: Adolescents, conflict resolution, sexual dating violence, emotional regulation, social support

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage characterized by identity exploration, emotional maturation, and the establishment of social and romantic relationships. While romantic involvement during this stage can foster intimacy, emotional growth, and identity development, it also presents unique risks that may undermine adolescents' psychological well-being (Bundock et al., 2020). Romantic relationships among adolescents are often marked by intense emotional attachment, jealousy, possessiveness, and, in some cases, abuse. These relational dynamics create vulnerabilities that can escalate into dating violence, including sexual dating violence (SDV), which has become a growing concern globally and locally (Piolanti & Foran, 2022; Woolweaver et al., 2024). In Indonesia, studies also indicate that adolescents face increasing exposure to risky sexual

behaviors and relationship violence, often exacerbated by limited access to accurate sexual education and the persistence of cultural stigma surrounding disclosure (Prameswari & Nurchayati, 2021; Susanti & Widyoningsih, 2019).

Sexual dating violence (SDV) encompasses a wide spectrum of abusive behaviors within intimate adolescent relationships, including sexual coercion, unwanted sexual contact, attempted rape, reproductive coercion, and non-contact sexual harassment (Marcos et al., 2023). The consequences of SDV are severe and multidimensional, affecting adolescents' mental health, academic trajectories, and relational development. Victims often experience depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress symptoms, suicidal ideation, and diminished self-esteem (Fernet et al., 2019; Gilbert et al., 2023; Stermac et al., 2020). Beyond psychological consequences, SDV also disrupts educational attainment and social functioning, with survivors reporting concentration difficulties, absenteeism, and increased risk of school dropout (Espelage et al., 2020; Stermac et al., 2020). Such impacts are not only immediate but also long-term, shaping how survivors view intimacy, trust, and future relationships (Temple et al., 2013).

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Epidemiological studies highlight the alarming prevalence of SDV globally. Recent findings indicate that adolescent girls are disproportionately affected, with 87% reporting experiences of sexual victimization within dating contexts (Young & Huwae, 2022). In the United States, for example, the (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021) reported that one in eight high school students experienced sexual dating violence in the past year. Meanwhile, systematic reviews confirm that SDV is not confined to Western contexts but constitutes a global health issue, with prevalence rates ranging between 20% and 50% depending on cultural and methodological variations (Wincentak et al., 2017; Woolweaver et al., 2024). In Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, disclosure remains particularly low due to cultural stigma, victim-blaming, and familial expectations, which further silence adolescents and hinder help-seeking behaviors (Prameswari & Nurchayati, 2021; Susanti & Widyoningsih, 2019). This silence intensifies the cycle of victimization and underscores the urgency of exploring how young people negotiate conflict and relational trauma in such constrained environments.

Conflict resolution strategies have long been recognized as central to relational functioning and individual adjustment. Kurdek (1998) identified three primary strategies: positive problem-solving (e.g., negotiation and compromise), conflict engagement (e.g., verbal aggression, escalation), and withdrawal (e.g., avoidance, emotional disengagement). These strategies significantly influence whether conflicts are addressed constructively or exacerbate dysfunction (González-Méndez et al., 2018). More recent studies demonstrate that maladaptive strategies, such as withdrawal or hostile engagement, correlate with higher psychological distress and relationship dissatisfaction (Aguilera-Jiménez et al., 2021; Bonache et al., 2016). Yet, much of this literature is based on consensual, normative relationships where conflict assumes a reciprocal and negotiable nature. Less is known about how these strategies manifest under coercive and violent relational dynamics, such as SDV, where power asymmetry and safety concerns overshadow opportunities for constructive resolution.

Theoretical perspectives such as social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and the power and control framework (Pence & Paymar, 1993) help contextualize SDV as not merely interpersonal but structural and cultural phenomena. Social learning theory suggests that adolescents may internalize violent relational scripts from observing familial or societal models, while the power and control framework emphasizes the deliberate use of coercion and domination to sustain abusive relationships. These perspectives underscore that traditional conflict resolution models, which presuppose mutual willingness to negotiate, often fail to capture the survival-oriented strategies of SDV victims. For instance, what may be labeled as "withdrawal" in normative settings can function as a critical self-protective strategy for adolescents attempting to minimize risk of further harm (Hamby & Grych, 2013; Gilbert et al., 2023). Understanding such reframing is essential in acknowledging that adolescents' responses are often adaptive within unsafe relational ecosystems.

Empirical studies demonstrate that adolescents exposed to SDV often rely on maladaptive conflict strategies, which worsen emotional distress and entrap them in cycles of abuse. For example, Aguilera-Jiménez et al. (2021) found that emotional dependence and deficits in conflict management skills reduce adolescents' ability to exit abusive dynamics. Conversely, resilience and

protective factors such as emotional regulation, social support, and attachment to significant non-romantic figures can facilitate adaptive coping and empower victims to reassert autonomy (Gilbert et al., 2023; Woolweaver et al., 2024). Nevertheless, much of the existing literature either focuses on prevalence rates or intervention outcomes, leaving a research gap regarding the nuanced, lived experiences of adolescents in negotiating conflict amid SDV. Few studies investigate how survivors interpret, adapt, and transform conflict resolution strategies in the face of ongoing abuse and relational trauma, particularly within Southeast Asian contexts where cultural stigma, family dynamics, and limited service provision shape adolescent experiences.

This study addresses this gap by exploring how adolescent victims of SDV navigate conflict resolution within their romantic relationships. Specifically, it examines the psychological, interpersonal, and contextual factors that influence their choice of strategies, including emotional regulation, dependency, social support, and the presence of significant figures. This research is guided by the following question: How do adolescent victims of sexual dating violence navigate conflict resolution within their romantic relationships? By integrating Kurdek's (1998) conflict resolution framework with perspectives from social learning theory and power and control frameworks, the study seeks to critically reframe conflict resolution in contexts where safety, agency, and survival are paramount.

The contribution of this study is twofold. Theoretically, it enriches conflict resolution scholarship by highlighting how strategies such as withdrawal—often seen as maladaptive—can function as adaptive survival mechanisms in unsafe relationships. Practically, it offers insights for psychologists, counselors, educators, and policymakers to develop trauma-informed interventions that strengthen adolescents' emotional regulation, relationship literacy, and resilience. Moreover, this research contributes to preventive and educational programs aimed at reducing the prevalence of dating violence by fostering healthier relationship norms and equipping adolescents with tools to navigate conflict safely and constructively.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach with an instrumental narrative design, which was chosen to capture the nuanced, lived experiences of adolescent victims of sexual dating violence (SDV). The narrative design allows for in-depth exploration of participants' personal stories, with the aim of identifying patterns and meanings across cases while maintaining the uniqueness of each narrative (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 1995). This approach was particularly suited to the study's focus on conflict resolution, as it provides insight into how participants construct meaning around their experiences, interpret relational dynamics, and navigate strategies within unsafe relationships.

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, ensuring that those selected met the criteria

most relevant to the research objectives. Inclusion criteria were: (a) adolescents aged 15–22 years, (b) individuals who had directly experienced sexual dating violence, and (c) those who had received at least one year of psychosocial support or counseling, ensuring a degree of reflection on their experiences. Exclusion criteria included adolescents currently in immediate crisis situations or those without access to supportive services, to avoid retraumatization. A total of five female participants took part in the study. They represented diverse educational and social backgrounds, ranging from high school students to young adults engaged in higher education and employment. Recruitment was facilitated through referrals from psychosocial support organizations, community counselors, and survivor networks. This ensured both ethical sensitivity and access to individuals who could safely share their experiences.

Research Focus

The central focus of this study was to explore how adolescent victims of SDV engaged in conflict resolution within their intimate relationships. Specifically, the study examined the psychological, interpersonal, and contextual factors shaping their strategies, such as emotional regulation, dependence, social support, and the role of significant figures. By focusing on both intrapersonal and relational processes, the study aimed to uncover survival-oriented adaptations not adequately addressed in traditional models of conflict resolution.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection relied on semi-structured interviews and systematic observations. An interview guide was developed using Kurdek's (1998) conflict resolution framework, which identifies positive problem-solving, conflict engagement, and withdrawal as central strategies. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to reflect on how they navigated conflict, while probes were used to deepen exploration of emotional, relational, and contextual influences. The guide was reviewed by two experts in adolescent psychology to ensure content validity. Interviews were conducted in safe, private settings and lasted between 60–90 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. In addition, the researcher maintained field notes documenting non-verbal cues such as tone of voice, pauses, and emotional expressions, which were later triangulated with the transcripts. This multimodal data collection enhanced the richness and credibility of the findings.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: (1) familiarization with data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. NVivo 12 software supported the coding process, enabling systematic organization of data. Both semantic (explicit) and latent (underlying) meanings were identified. Coding was conducted independently by two researchers to enhance reliability, with discrepancies resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Reflexive memos were also maintained to ensure transparency and minimize researcher bias throughout the analytic process. Data saturation was considered achieved when no new themes emerged across cases.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity of the research, strict ethical protocols were followed. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional ethics committee at [University/Research Institute—replace with actual name]. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and parental consent was sought for those under 18 years of age. Confidentiality was ensured by assigning pseudonyms and removing identifiable details from transcripts. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. To mitigate emotional distress, a trained counselor was made available for immediate referral if participants experienced discomfort during or after the interviews. These measures adhered to international ethical standards for research on vulnerable populations (World Health Organization, 2016).

RESULTS OF STUDY

Description of Participant

Participant 1 is a 20-year-old female university student, experienced sexual dating violence in her late adolescence involving coercion, manipulation, and emotional blackmail. Despite her attempts to resolve conflict assertively, her partner consistently dismissed her boundaries, leading her to adopt emotional withdrawal as a protective response. During her lowest emotional point, she lacked immediate support, but later found validation from a friend, which helped her regain emotional stability. Through journaling and self-reflection, Participant 1 gradually developed emotional regulation skills and shifted from passive endurance to a more self-aware and resilient approach to managing conflict in intimate relationships.

Participant 2 is a 22-year-old female college student, experienced sexual dating violence in early adolescence involving coercion, emotional manipulation, and familial pressure to empathize with her abusive partner. Despite trying to assert boundaries, she often withdrew emotionally, leading to psychological distress and suicidal ideation. A key turning point came from her bond with her younger sibling, which kept her from engaging in self-harm. Over time, after ending the relationship and receiving emotional support, Participant 2 began to develop healthier conflict resolution strategies through improved emotional regulation and reflective communication.

Participant 3 is a 21-year-old university student, endured prolonged physical and sexual abuse in a dating relationship that led to two miscarriages and deep emotional isolation. Initially attempting to resolve conflict through compromise, she later resorted to emotional withdrawal as her partner's aggression escalated. Her strong emotional dependence and lack of support made it difficult to leave the relationship. However, sustained counseling and emotional validation from close friends became turning points in her recovery. Participant 3's journey reflects a shift from silence and self-blame to increased emotional regulation and empowered conflict resolution.

Participant 4 is a 22-year-old university student and preschool teacher, experienced a two-year abusive relationship involving verbal threats, emotional manipulation, and psychological control. Despite recognizing the harm, her emotional dependence and need for validation made it difficult to leave. Participant 4

initially coped by withdrawing and isolating herself, often internalizing guilt and self-blame. Her conflict resolution attempts were marked by emotional reactivity and avoidance. A turning point occurred when she chose to leave their shared residence, signifying a step toward reclaiming autonomy. Though lacking strong external support, participant 4 gradually developed emotional regulation through self-reflection and journaling, shifting toward more adaptive conflict resolution.

Participant 5 is a 19-year-old university student and online business owner, experienced sexual coercion and emotional manipulation in a romantic relationship. Despite her efforts to resolve conflict through gentle communication, her partner consistently invalidated her feelings, leading her to adopt emotional withdrawal as a protective response. Lacking external emotional support, participant 5 relied on journaling and self-reflection to process her emotions. A strong emotional bond with her younger sibling became a protective factor against suicidal thoughts, helping her maintain emotional resilience. Her experience reflects a quiet but persistent form of conflict resolution shaped by emotional fatigue and internal strength.

Overview of Themes

Analysis of the five participants' narratives revealed that adolescent victims of sexual dating violence (SDV) primarily relied on withdrawal strategies as a form of conflict resolution, though elements of positive problem-solving and conflict engagement also emerged. Four overarching themes were identified: (1) patterns of conflict resolution strategies, (2) emotional dependence and regulation, (3) conflict involvement and management, and (4) the role of social and emotional support. These themes provide insight into how adolescents negotiated relational trauma and attempted to protect themselves in coercive relationships.

Theme 1: Conflict Resolution Strategies

The findings show that adolescent victims of sexual dating violence (SDV) navigated conflicts through three main strategies: positive problem-solving, conflict engagement, and withdrawal. While these approaches mirrored normative conflict resolution patterns, their meaning and function in the SDV context were substantially different. For the participants, these strategies were less about sustaining relational harmony and more about negotiating safety, emotional survival, and attempts to assert agency within coercive dynamics.

Positive Problem-Solving

Some participants initially attempted constructive strategies, seeking open dialogue or negotiation to address ongoing issues. SP (P1), for example, consistently initiated conversations, believing that honest communication could prevent escalation: "*I've always been the type of person who, if there's a problem, I'll say, 'Let's talk about it.' I don't think there's any issue too overwhelming to discuss—as long as both people are willing to talk.*"

Similarly, GR (P3) described trying to integrate different strategies with her partner in pursuit of a balanced approach: "*We combined the different ways we tried... and agreed that we needed to fix the way we handle conflict.*" At first glance, these efforts reflected adaptive conflict management. However, within abusive contexts,

such attempts were rarely successful because partners consistently dismissed or manipulated these efforts. The repeated failure of constructive strategies often left participants feeling invalidated, reinforcing self-blame and weakening their confidence in communication. This suggests that while positive problem-solving was present, its function was not to sustain mutual understanding but rather to test whether partners were capable of respecting boundaries—a test that frequently confirmed the imbalance of power in the relationship.

Conflict Engagement

Conflict engagement, on the other hand, often escalated into destructive dynamics. For some participants, particularly AK (P4) and GR (P3), conflict spiraled into verbal aggression, threats, and even physical violence: "*There was definitely verbal abuse... I was threatened multiple times... he said he would kill me*" (AK, P4). "*We would end up fighting—sometimes even to the point of hitting and punching each other, and suddenly it would just feel like everything was fine again*" (GR, P3).

This paradox—violence followed by moments of reconciliation—illustrates how conflict engagement was entangled with cycles of fear, guilt, and intermittent relief. Rather than resolving disputes, engagement reinforced participants' entrapment in abusive dynamics. Some participants also described losing control of their own emotions during these conflicts, reflecting how coercive pressure undermined their ability to regulate responses. The escalation highlighted a core dilemma: attempts at assertion often backfired, leading to further victimization, yet passivity risked emotional suffocation. In this sense, conflict engagement was less a choice and more a byproduct of being cornered within unequal relationships.

Withdrawal

The most dominant strategy across narratives was withdrawal, used both as avoidance and as a protective mechanism. HD (P2) explained how silence could last for weeks as a way of de-escalating tensions: "*If he got angry, and I did too, we'd just stop talking—maybe for a week, maybe even a month—and eventually we'd go back to normal like nothing ever happened.*" AK (P4), however, connected her withdrawal to deep feelings of shame and fear of rejection: "*Rather than being judged... I'd rather just stay silent.*"

Withdrawal functioned as a double-edged strategy. On the one hand, it allowed participants to create temporary distance, regain composure, and avoid immediate harm. On the other, it left conflicts unresolved, often giving abusive partners implicit permission to continue harmful behaviors. For some, withdrawal was not passive disengagement but a calculated decision to minimize risk, conserve emotional energy, or prevent further escalation. This highlights the adaptive aspect of withdrawal: it was not resignation but a survival tactic in situations where asserting oneself could provoke retaliation.

Together, these findings reveal that the three conflict resolution strategies were reframed within the SDV context. Positive problem-solving, while initially attempted, was often invalidated, demonstrating how coercion neutralized traditional constructive approaches (table 1). Conflict engagement highlighted the dangerous cycles where assertion led to further violence, trapping participants between fear and the need for self-expression. Withdrawal, while often dismissed in normative settings as

maladaptive, emerged as the most functional survival-oriented strategy, reflecting adolescents' attempts to protect themselves in environments where safety and autonomy were compromised.

In essence, these strategies were not merely relational tools but emotional negotiations with survival. Adolescents

oscillated between speaking out, fighting back, and retreating, each strategy carrying costs and benefits depending on the immediate threat. This underscores that in contexts of sexual dating violence, conflict resolution is less about restoring relational equilibrium and more about reclaiming fragments of agency in the midst of coercion.

Table 1. Conflict Resolution Strategies among Adolescent Victims of Sexual Dating Violence

Strategy	Intended Function in Normative Relationships	Observed Outcome in SDV Context	Hidden Meaning / Interpretation
Positive Problem-Solving (e.g., negotiation, compromise, open communication)	To achieve mutual understanding, repair relational ruptures, and maintain intimacy	Often dismissed, manipulated, or invalidated by abusive partners; attempts rarely resolved conflict	Functioned as a "test" of partners' willingness to respect boundaries; repeated failures reinforced feelings of helplessness and highlighted imbalance of power
Conflict Engagement (e.g., verbal aggression, escalation, confrontation)	To assert personal needs, express emotions, and address perceived injustice	Frequently escalated into verbal abuse, threats, or physical violence; reconciliation often temporary	Less about genuine negotiation, more a byproduct of coercive entrapment; illustrated cycles of violence where assertion provoked retaliation, trapping victims between silence and risk
Withdrawal (e.g., silence, avoidance, disengagement)	To avoid escalation, cool down emotions, and temporarily reduce tension	Most commonly used strategy; created temporary safety but left conflicts unresolved	Served as a survival-oriented tactic; not passivity but a calculated effort to minimize risk, conserve emotional energy, and reclaim fragments of control in unsafe environments

Table 2. Emotional Dependence and Regulation among Adolescent Victims of Sexual Dating Violence

Dimension	Manifestations in Participants' Narratives	Immediate Effects on Conflict Resolution	Long-Term Impact / Interpretive Meaning
Emotional Dependence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Exclusive focus on partner, neglect of friendships or family (GR, P3) – Fear of abandonment despite manipulation (NS, P5) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Reduced autonomy and inability to leave relationship – Greater tolerance of abuse; reliance on silence or appeasement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Entrapment in cycles of conflict – Reinforced belief that relationship continuity equals personal worth
Emotional Regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Journaling, self-reflection, selective withdrawal (SP, P1; HD, P2) – Acknowledgment and labeling of emotions ("Now it's more about acknowledging... I am angry") 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Improved capacity to de-escalate conflict – Shift from impulsive reactions to intentional responses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Reconstruction of self-worth and agency – Enabled resilience and adaptation; provided foundation for safer conflict resolution strategies

Theme 2: Emotional Dependence and Regulation

The participants' accounts revealed that emotional dependence on abusive partners was one of the strongest forces keeping them entangled in harmful relationships, even when they were aware of ongoing manipulation or violence. GR (Participant 3) described her complete emotional investment, noting: *"At that time, when I was in a relationship with him, I didn't spend time with anyone else... My attention was entirely on him."*

This reflects how dependence restricted her autonomy and isolated her from external sources of support. Such attachment created a paradox: despite recognizing abuse, she felt unable to detach, as her sense of security and identity had become bound to her partner. Similarly, NS (Participant 5) admitted a persistent fear of losing her partner even while acknowledging the manipulation: *"Perhaps at the time, I still believed that every relationship had its ups and downs, and on the other hand, I was also afraid of losing him."*

Her narrative shows how dependence operates less as a rational calculation and more as an emotional tether,

where the cost of separation appeared more frightening than enduring continued harm. This fear of abandonment reflects a dynamic where adolescents equated relationship continuity with personal worth, which ultimately shaped their conflict resolution responses. At the same time, participants' stories illustrate that emotional regulation developed unevenly but progressively over time. SP (Participant 1) reflected on this growth: *"Now it's more about acknowledging—like, okay, I am angry... I need to do this or that."*

This acknowledgment highlights a shift from denial and uncontrolled emotional reactivity toward deliberate self-regulation. Initially, many participants described moments of emotional escalation, where anger, fear, or anxiety overwhelmed their ability to respond constructively. Over time, however, journaling, self-reflection, and selective withdrawal became strategies for regaining composure and redefining their emotional boundaries. Regulation here was not simply about suppressing emotion but about transforming raw reactions into intentional responses that allowed participants to reclaim fragments of agency.

Table 2 shows that dependence and regulation functioned as opposing yet interconnected forces. Dependence entrapped adolescents by making them prioritize the abusive relationship over their own safety, while regulation allowed them to gradually reclaim emotional control and agency. The push-and-pull between these dynamics shaped whether conflict resolution strategies perpetuated cycles of abuse or opened pathways toward recovery.

The interplay between dependence and regulation reveals a tension central to the participants' lived experiences. Dependence tethered them to abusive relationships, often pushing them toward silence, endurance, or appeasement. Yet regulation enabled small but meaningful shifts—from being consumed by manipulation to recognizing and managing their own emotions. This duality explains why participants often oscillated between despair and resilience: dependence anchored them in cycles of conflict, but regulation gave them the tools to gradually reconstruct self-worth and imagine the possibility of healthier conflict resolution.

In interpreting these findings, it becomes clear that conflict resolution strategies were not isolated choices but were embedded in this emotional landscape. Dependence

reduced the likelihood of decisive separation or assertive confrontation, while regulation provided the foundation for eventual adaptation, recovery, and growth. In essence, adolescents' journeys show that the path out of abusive dynamics is not linear but marked by this ongoing negotiation between attachment that entraps and emotional regulation that liberates.

Theme 3: Conflict Involvement and Management

The participants' experiences revealed that their involvement in conflict was not merely a spontaneous reaction, but rather the result of ongoing emotional pressure. HD (P2) described how conflicts frequently escalated into arguments followed by periods of silence: "*I did raise my voice at him... then we ended up fighting... and that's when the silent treatment started.*" This statement shows that conflict involvement did not produce resolution, but instead generated recurring cycles between emotional outbursts and withdrawal. It reflects how conflict in unhealthy relationships served more as a mechanism for maintaining control rather than as a space to seek solutions.

Table 3. Conflict Involvement and Management among Adolescent Victims of Sexual Dating Violence

Manifestations in Participants' Narratives	Immediate Effects on Conflict Resolution	Long-Term / Interpretive Meaning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Escalation into shouting, arguments, and silent treatment (HD, P2) Gaslighting experiences where communication was invalidated (NS, P5) Attempts at direct expression despite partner domination (SP, P1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conflicts remained unresolved and cyclical Victims experienced disorientation and self-doubt Assertion often triggered more violence or manipulation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conflict became an arena of power negotiation rather than a means of resolution Participants navigated between the need for expression and the fear of deeper entrapment Reinforced asymmetry and cycles of abuse

Table 4. Role of Social and Emotional Support among Adolescent Victims of Sexual Dating Violence

Manifestations in Participants' Narratives	Immediate Effects on Conflict Resolution	Long-Term / Interpretive Meaning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Validation and encouragement from peers improved clarity and emotional regulation (SP, P1) Sibling bonds provided protective anchors and prevented self-destructive acts (HD, P2) Lack of family support deepened isolation and helplessness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support reduced emotional burden and created alternative perspectives Absence of support prolonged helplessness and isolation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support served as a bridge to resilience and recovery - Enabled victims to reconstruct agency and self-worth Demonstrated that conflict resolution was shaped not only by the abusive relationship but also by the broader social ecosystem

NS (P5) explained her experience with gaslighting, where her communicative efforts were consistently turned against her: "Every time I tried to calmly talk about the issues I was feeling... it always got turned around on me." This demonstrates that conflict involvement among SDV victims often created psychological disorientation. Instead of solving problems, they lost confidence in their ability to evaluate reality. Thus, involvement in conflict reinforced the asymmetry of the relationship, consolidating the partner's dominance.

However, there were variations in experience. SP (P1) showed a tendency to keep speaking up despite the risks: "I told him clearly—I'm disappointed because of this, I don't like it when you do that... I made sure he knew how I felt." This highlights an active attempt to reclaim a

communicative space, even when her efforts were often ignored. Interpretively, conflict involvement for the participants became a tug-of-war between the need to express themselves and the risk of becoming more entangled in violence. In other words, conflict was not a pathway to resolution but an arena where they negotiated safety, dignity, and identity under the domination of their partners.

This theme demonstrates that conflict involvement did not serve as a path to resolution but instead reinforced the dominance of abusive partners (Table 3). Attempts at direct communication were often manipulated, while escalation fueled cycles of abuse. Conflict thus became less about solving problems and more about negotiating identity, safety, and control within unequal relationships.

Theme 4: Role of Social and Emotional Support

Social and emotional support proved to be a decisive factor in how participants navigated conflict and recovered from experiences of violence. SP (P1) emphasized that validation from friends was critical in reshaping her emotions: *"Emotional openness and validation from trusted individuals helped me regulate emotions and think more clearly."* This experience shows that the presence of supportive figures reduced feelings of isolation, helped victims regulate their emotions, and gave them new perspectives for understanding conflict. External support served as a counterbalance to the distorted communication they experienced in abusive relationships.

For HD (P2), her younger sibling became an important turning point that prevented self-destructive behavior: *"My bond with my younger sibling kept me from doing anything reckless."* This illustrates that family bonds, even when simple, could serve as emotional anchors preventing further harm. It demonstrates that support does not always need to be formal intervention; the presence of trusted significant figures was enough to restore a sense of belonging and self-worth.

Conversely, the absence of family support heightened victims' vulnerability. Some participants described how strained family relationships deprived them of a safe space to confide, prolonging cycles of isolation and helplessness. In this context, social support was not supplementary but vital—differentiating between remaining trapped in patterns of violence and finding opportunities to build resilience.

This theme highlights that external support systems were decisive in shaping how adolescents managed conflict. While the absence of support intensified isolation, the presence of validating peers or family anchors offered emotional grounding and pathways to resilience. Social support thus acted as a turning point, enabling victims to reclaim agency and reframe conflict resolution in more adaptive ways (table 4).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore that conflict resolution among adolescent victims of sexual dating violence (SDV) cannot be fully understood through conventional models that assume safety, reciprocity, and mutual willingness to compromise. Instead, adolescents' strategies—positive problem-solving, conflict engagement, and withdrawal—were reframed as survival-oriented adaptations in contexts characterized by coercion, emotional manipulation, and power asymmetry. This aligns with the theoretical proposition of Kurdek (1998) that conflict strategies shape relationship quality, but extends it by revealing that in abusive relationships, the function of these strategies is not relational repair but self-preservation.

The results show that withdrawal was the most prevalent strategy, not as passive disengagement but as an intentional tactic to de-escalate conflict and protect emotional or physical safety. While prior studies often categorize withdrawal as maladaptive (Aguilera-Jiménez et al., 2021; Bonache et al., 2016), in this study it emerged as a form of agency within constrained environments. This reframing is supported by the power and control framework (Pence & Paymar, 1993), which highlights how coercive dynamics limit victims' options. In contrast,

positive problem-solving, although attempted by several participants, was consistently dismissed or manipulated by abusive partners, reinforcing participants' sense of helplessness. Conflict engagement, meanwhile, often escalated to verbal threats and physical violence, suggesting that assertive strategies in unsafe relationships may inadvertently increase victim vulnerability.

These findings resonate with international studies showing that adolescents exposed to SDV often struggle to apply constructive conflict strategies due to power imbalances and fear of retaliation (Gilbert et al., 2023; Woolweaver et al., 2024). At the same time, they diverge from studies in normative adolescent relationships, where positive problem-solving is linked to improved satisfaction and stability (González-Méndez et al., 2018). This divergence highlights that SDV contexts require rethinking conflict resolution frameworks: strategies traditionally perceived as maladaptive (such as withdrawal) may in fact be adaptive when safety is threatened.

A second major theme was the role of emotional dependence and regulation. Emotional dependence tethered participants to their abusive partners, leading them to endure harm rather than risk abandonment. This echoes Aguilera-Jiménez et al. (2021), who observed that dependence diminishes assertiveness and prolongs abusive cycles. However, participants also demonstrated gradual growth in emotional regulation through journaling, self-reflection, and acknowledgment of emotions. Such practices enabled them to shift from impulsive reactions to more deliberate responses, marking the beginning of resilience and self-reconstruction. This suggests that regulation, even in small forms, can serve as an entry point for survivors to reclaim agency.

The theme of conflict involvement and management revealed that attempts at communication often led to cycles of escalation or gaslighting. Instead of achieving resolution, conflicts became spaces where power and control were negotiated, leaving victims disoriented and doubtful of their own perceptions. These findings align with social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), which posits that violent relational scripts can be normalized through repeated exposure. Participants' narratives suggest that involvement in conflict was less about solving disputes and more about negotiating dignity and survival within oppressive dynamics.

Finally, the role of social and emotional support emerged as a decisive protective factor. Validation from peers or siblings provided victims with emotional grounding, clarity, and pathways to resilience, while the absence of family support intensified isolation and entrapment. This finding supports Woolweaver et al. (2024), who emphasize the buffering effect of social support against the psychological consequences of SDV. Importantly, even small acts of support, such as a sibling bond, served as turning points in preventing destructive behaviors, underscoring that intervention need not always be formal to be impactful.

This study contributes to theory by reframing conflict resolution strategies in SDV contexts. It challenges the universal application of Kurdek's (1998) framework, showing that strategies such as withdrawal can hold adaptive value in unsafe relationships. By integrating social learning and power-control perspectives, the study demonstrates that conflict resolution is deeply embedded in structural and cultural dynamics, not merely interpersonal negotiations.

Practically, the findings highlight the need for trauma-informed interventions that validate adolescents' use of survival-oriented strategies while equipping them with

tools for safer conflict navigation. Counselors and educators should avoid pathologizing withdrawal and instead help adolescents reframe it as a protective response while gradually introducing healthier coping strategies. Schools and communities should foster safe disclosure spaces, while policymakers must ensure access to adolescent-friendly psychosocial services that address both individual resilience and social stigma.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited by its small, all-female sample, which restricts generalizability across genders and cultural contexts. Ethical constraints also prevented disclosure of detailed demographic information. Future research should include male and non-binary adolescents to broaden understanding of how gender shapes conflict resolution in SDV. Moreover, combining qualitative and quantitative methods could strengthen the analysis by linking lived experiences with measurable patterns of conflict strategies and psychological outcomes.

This study reveals that conflict resolution among adolescent victims of SDV is not primarily about repairing relationships but about negotiating safety, identity, and agency in environments of coercion. Conflict resolution strategies, emotional dependence and regulation, involvement in conflict, and the presence or absence of support all intersect to shape how adolescents cope with relational trauma. Recognizing these dynamics is critical for developing interventions and policies that meet adolescents where they are—acknowledging survival as the first step toward resilience.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study indicate that adolescents who experience sexual dating violence (SDV) navigate relationship conflicts that are deeply rooted in emotional and social complexities. The conflict resolution strategies they adopt—namely positive problem-solving, conflict engagement, and withdrawal—are shaped by the need to cope with environments characterized by emotional manipulation and psychological distress. These strategies are not random; rather, they reflect underlying influences such as emotional dependence, regulation capacity, interpersonal conflict skills, degree of involvement in the conflict, social support systems, and the role of significant others. As survivors gain insight into recurring patterns of abuse and are supported by trusted individuals, they become better equipped to form constructive and self-affirming approaches to conflict resolution. In this context, resolving conflict is not simply about addressing interpersonal disagreements, but also about rebuilding a sense of agency, dignity, and emotional safety within the self and within relationships.

While this study offers valuable insights, future research should consider including male adolescent survivors of sexual dating violence to broaden understanding across gender perspectives. It is also recommended that subsequent studies utilize theoretical frameworks that are more contextually relevant to adolescents' lived experiences and incorporate quantitative methods to assess conflict resolution capacities. Additionally, future research could explore how adolescents interpret the roles of family and romantic relationships in shaping their responses to conflict, particularly within specific cultural and social settings.

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DECLARATION

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Researchers have obtained research permits from the Salatiga City health office and have also obtained consent from the research participants prior to conducting in-depth research

Consent for publication

I fully agree that this research can be published for academic purposes and I am ready to provide support and additional information needed to facilitate the publication process.

Availability of data and materials

All of the data and materials used in this research have been collected well and are available for those who need them, both for academic purposes and further research.

Conflicts of interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Authors' contributions.

The author's contributions to this research include planning, data collection, analysis, and report writing. All of these contributions would not have been possible without the support of the parties who have assisted in the research process.

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