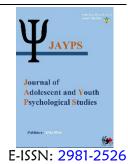


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Emotional Abuse and Social Isolation as Predictors of Trust in Relationships in Undergraduate Students

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to investigate emotional abuse and social isolation as predictors of trust in interpersonal relationships among undergraduate students.

Methods and Materials: The present study employed a descriptive correlational design. The sample consisted of 400 undergraduate students (216 females and 184 males) selected through convenience sampling from various universities in Turkey, with the sample size determined according to Morgan and Krejcie's table. Participants completed the Rempel Trust Scale (1985) to assess trust in relationships, the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ; Jacobson & Gottman, 1998) to measure emotional abuse, and the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3; Russell, 1996) to assess social isolation. Pearson correlation coefficients and linear regression analyses were conducted using SPSS-27 software to analyze relationships between variables and examine their predictive power on relational trust

Findings: Descriptive statistics indicated moderate levels of emotional abuse (M = 3.12, SD = 0.87), social isolation (M = 2.88, SD = 0.91), and trust in relationships (M = 4.75, SD = 1.05). Pearson correlation analysis showed significant negative correlations between trust and emotional abuse (r = -0.56, p < 0.01), and trust and social isolation (r = -0.44, p < 0.01). Regression analysis revealed emotional abuse and social isolation significantly predicted trust (F(2, 397) = 55.34, p < 0.01), explaining 22% of variance (Adjusted R² = 0.21). Emotional abuse emerged as a stronger negative predictor (β = -0.39, p < 0.01) compared to social isolation (β = -0.30, p < 0.01).

Conclusion: These results underscore the importance of addressing emotional maltreatment and social isolation through targeted psychological interventions and support programs aimed at improving relationship quality among university students.

Keywords: Emotional Abuse, Social Isolation, Trust in Relationships, Undergraduate Students, Predictors.



1. Introduction

nterpersonal trust is recognized as a fundamental aspect influencing relationship dynamics among undergraduate students, significantly affecting their psychological wellbeing and the quality of their interpersonal relationships (Fatima, 2025; Ju et al., 2023). Trust, defined as the willingness to become vulnerable based on positive expectations of another person's intentions or behavior, serves as a foundational component of healthy relationships, providing a sense of security, intimacy, and emotional stability among young adults (Ju et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2023). Conversely, when trust is undermined, it not only disrupts relational harmony but can also lead to lasting emotional damage, impairing an individual's capacity to form meaningful relationships later in life (Finzi-Dottan & Abadi, 2024; Petersson & Plantin, 2023). Given the critical role that trust plays during the developmental transition of adulthood, particularly among undergraduate young students navigating complex social interactions, understanding predictors of relational trust is both timely and

Among various threats to trust in interpersonal relationships, emotional abuse emerges prominently due to its pervasive yet often hidden nature. Emotional abuse refers to repetitive patterns of behavior involving humiliation, manipulation, rejection, verbal aggression, and controlling tactics designed to diminish an individual's sense of selfworth and autonomy (Guo, 2022; Nazir et al., 2023). This form of maltreatment significantly erodes the victim's emotional stability, creating long-lasting psychological consequences including anxiety, depression, emotional dysregulation, and difficulty forming secure attachments (Ali & Yousaf, 2022; Amirmohammadi et al., 2022). Research indicates that individuals subjected to emotional abuse tend to exhibit heightened sensitivity to rejection, diminished self-esteem, and persistent difficulties in developing intimacy and trust toward others (Finzi-Dottan & Abadi, 2024; Rofifah & Widyastuti, 2022). Moreover, emotionally abusive experiences during critical developmental stages, such as adolescence and early adulthood, are known to shape maladaptive relational patterns extending into adulthood, reflecting in increased vulnerability to relational distress and mental health disorders (Benzi et al., 2023; Chen & Duan, 2023).

The impact of emotional abuse on interpersonal trust extends across diverse relationship contexts, including family, romantic relationships, and even professional interactions. Within romantic relationships university students, emotional abuse often manifests through behaviors such as gaslighting, isolation, and psychological manipulation, which systematically undermine the victim's confidence in their perceptions and judgments (AkİŞ & Öztürk, 2021; Huey et al., 2021). These abusive dynamics frequently result in heightened emotional dysregulation, leading victims to experience difficulties in managing emotions and maintaining stable emotional bonds with peers and romantic partners (Ali & Yousaf, 2022; Liu et al., 2024). Furthermore, emotional abuse has been associated with increased risks of internalizing behaviors and maladaptive coping strategies, including social withdrawal, substance abuse, and self-harm, further complicating victims' capacity for trust and healthy relational engagement (Manurung, 2024; Morgado et al., 2021).

Alongside emotional abuse, social isolation stands as a critical, yet relatively under-explored predictor of diminished trust in relationships among undergraduate populations. Social isolation encompasses subjective feelings of loneliness, a sense of exclusion, and limited social connectedness, significantly affecting mental health, emotional well-being, and overall life satisfaction (Baúto et al., 2021; Canoy, 2025). Particularly during the university years, perceived isolation can exacerbate emotional vulnerabilities, increasing susceptibility to relational dysfunction, mistrust, and mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression (Sy et al., 2024; Yang & Lee, 2024). Individuals experiencing sustained isolation tend to develop expectations toward negative social interactions, subsequently reinforcing avoidance behaviors and hindering their ability to build trusting interpersonal relationships (Balcı et al., 2023; Hong et al., 2024). In this sense, social isolation becomes both a consequence and perpetuator of emotional distress, creating cyclical patterns of relational withdrawal and mistrust that persist into adulthood.

Recent empirical evidence highlights the interconnected nature of emotional abuse and social isolation, suggesting that these factors frequently co-occur within relational dynamics. Victims of emotional abuse commonly report experiences of deliberate isolation imposed by abusers, a tactic intended to reduce victims' external social support, heightening their dependency and vulnerability to ongoing abuse (Alade & Oziofu, 2022; Fiolet et al., 2023). This forced isolation not only restricts access to external support systems but significantly impacts victims' psychological resilience, reducing their capacity to recognize abusive patterns or seek help proactively (Baig & Riaz, 2021;



Kuruppu et al., 2022). As such, social isolation exacerbates the harmful consequences of emotional abuse, magnifying the detrimental impacts on trust formation and relational stability.

Moreover, studies have also established a clear relationship between emotional abuse and impaired emotional regulation, further complicating trust-building processes. Poor emotional regulation, a frequent consequence of emotional abuse, impairs individuals' ability to handle relational stressors effectively, increasing their likelihood of relational conflict, mistrust, and isolation (Liu et al., 2024; Nazir et al., 2023). Individuals with emotional dysregulation are less likely to engage positively in conflict resolution and exhibit diminished trust toward others, often interpreting neutral interactions negatively, perpetuating mistrustful relational dynamics (Rofifah & Widyastuti, 2022; Sy et al., 2024). Therefore, exploring the combined predictive roles of emotional abuse and social isolation is particularly relevant in clarifying the pathways through which trust in relationships is compromised among undergraduate students.

Despite growing awareness of emotional abuse and social isolation as crucial factors affecting trust in interpersonal relationships, research focusing explicitly on undergraduate population in Turkey remains relatively limited. Existing studies predominantly originate from Western contexts, creating potential gaps in understanding culturally specific manifestations and consequences of emotional abuse and isolation within Turkish social norms and relational dynamics (AkİŞ & Öztürk, 2021; Balcı et al., 2023). Given cultural variations in emotional expression, relational expectations, and coping strategies, it is essential to examine these factors within culturally specific contexts to provide accurate insights and culturally relevant interventions (Baúto et al., 2021; Hong et al., 2024). Consequently, investigating emotional abuse and social isolation among Turkish undergraduate students not only contributes to global knowledge but addresses critical gaps in culturally informed perspectives on relational trust.

Considering the significant implications of trust in relationships for emotional well-being and relational health among young adults, there is an urgent need to better understand the specific roles emotional abuse and social isolation play as predictors of relational trust within the Turkish undergraduate population. Addressing these variables can inform targeted intervention programs aimed at enhancing emotional resilience, improving relational skills, and ultimately fostering healthier and more trusting

relationships among university students. This study aims to examine emotional abuse and social isolation as predictors of trust in interpersonal relationships among Turkish undergraduate students, thereby contributing valuable insights for psychological interventions and relational counseling strategies.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

The present research employed a correlational descriptive design to investigate the predictive role of emotional abuse and social isolation on trust in relationships among undergraduate students in Turkey. Participants consisted of 400 undergraduate students (216 females, 184 males) from various universities across Turkey, selected through convenience sampling. The sample size was determined based on the Morgan and Krejcie sampling table, ensuring representativeness for accurate generalization. Participation criteria included being currently enrolled as an undergraduate student, aged between 18 to 25 years, and having experienced at least one intimate or close interpersonal relationship within the last year. Data collection procedures were carried out online via a secure survey platform, and informed consent was obtained digitally from all participants before completing the questionnaires. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of their participation, confidentiality of their responses, and the right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. Ethical approval was granted by the ethics committee prior to data collection.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Trust

To assess trust in relationships, the Rempel Trust Scale developed by Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna (1985) was utilized. This scale is widely used in research examining interpersonal trust, particularly in romantic and close relationships. It consists of 17 items divided into three subscales: Predictability, Dependability, and Faith. Respondents rate each item on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Higher scores indicate greater levels of trust in the relationship. The scale has demonstrated strong internal consistency across diverse populations, and its construct validity and reliability have been confirmed in numerous studies focusing on close and intimate relationships (Yılmaz et al., 2023).



2.2.2. Social Isolation

Social isolation was measured using the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3), created by Russell in 1996. This widely accepted instrument consists of 20 items designed to assess subjective feelings of loneliness and perceived social isolation. The scale is unidimensional but captures various aspects of social disconnection through both positively and negatively worded items. Responses are given on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "often," with higher scores reflecting greater loneliness and isolation. The UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) has been extensively validated and has shown excellent internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values typically above 0.90, and robust evidence of convergent and discriminant validity (Schoenmakers & ten Bruggencate, 2024; Zhou & Shen, 2024; Zhou, 2024).

2.2.3. Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse was measured using the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ) developed by Jacobson and Gottman in 1998. This instrument captures psychological aspects of abuse and includes 66 items covering four key subscales: Isolation, Degradation, Sexual Abuse, and Property Damage. For the purpose of this study, only the items relevant to emotional and psychological abuse were analyzed. Participants respond using a Likert scale ranging from "never" to "very often," with higher scores indicating more frequent experiences of emotional abuse. The EAQ has been validated in both clinical and non-clinical populations, showing high reliability coefficients and solid factorial validity in previous research (Finzi-Dottan & Abadi, 2024; Liu et al., 2024; Nazir et al., 2023).

 Table 1

 Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Variable Mean Standard Deviation Trust in Relationships 4.75 1.05 Emotional Abuse 3.12 0.87 Social Isolation 2.88 0.91

The descriptive statistics for the study variables are presented in Table 1. The dependent variable, Trust in Relationships, showed a mean score of 4.75 (SD = 1.05). Among independent variables, Emotional Abuse had a mean

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS-27). Initially, descriptive statistics including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were calculated to summarize demographic characteristics and study variables. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to explore the relationships between the dependent variable (trust in relationships) and each independent variable separately (emotional abuse and social isolation). Subsequently, linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive role of emotional abuse and social isolation on trust in relationships. Prior to regression analysis, data were screened for assumptions such linearity, normality, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity, and no substantial violations were detected. Statistical significance was set at p < .05, and standardized beta coefficients were reported to demonstrate the strength and direction of predictions.

3. Findings and Results

The sample consisted of 400 undergraduate students from various universities across Turkey. Among the participants, 216 (54.0%) were female, and 184 (46.0%) were male. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 25 years, with the majority falling within the 21–23 age category (n = 174; 43.5%), followed by the 18–20 age group (n = 136; 34.0%), and those aged 24–25 years (n = 90; 22.5%). Regarding relationship status, 248 students (62.0%) reported currently being in a romantic relationship, while 152 (38.0%) indicated being single but reported at least one significant intimate relationship in the past year. Academic year distribution showed that 88 students (22.0%) were first-year students, 106 (26.5%) were second-year students, 124 (31.0%) were third-year students, and 82 (20.5%) were in their fourth year of study.

of 3.12 (SD = 0.87), and Social Isolation had a mean of 2.88 (SD = 0.91). These scores indicate moderate levels of perceived emotional abuse and social isolation among the participating undergraduate students, with trust levels in





relationships positioned slightly above the midpoint of the scale.

Before performing linear regression analysis, assumptions were assessed and confirmed. Linearity was evaluated through scatterplots of standardized residuals against standardized predicted values, indicating no deviations from linearity. Normality was confirmed by examining skewness (range = -0.65 to 0.72) and kurtosis (range = -0.84 to 0.95) values, all of which fell within the acceptable range of ± 2 . Additionally, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for the dependent variable was non-significant

(p = .082), further supporting normal distribution. Multicollinearity diagnostics yielded tolerance values ranging from 0.67 to 0.89, well above the threshold of 0.10, and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values ranged from 1.12 to 1.49, below the threshold of 10, confirming the absence of multicollinearity issues. Lastly, homoscedasticity was verified by observing the residual plots, which displayed no discernible pattern, thus indicating equal variance of residuals. These results collectively indicated that the regression analysis assumptions were satisfactorily met.

 Table 2

 Correlation Between Trust in Relationships and Independent Variables

Variable	Pearson r	p-value
Emotional Abuse	-0.56	<0.01
Social Isolation	-0.44	< 0.01

The correlation analysis results between trust in relationships and independent variables are provided in Table 2. Emotional Abuse demonstrated a strong, negative correlation with Trust in Relationships (r = -0.56, p < 0.01), indicating that higher emotional abuse significantly

correlates with lower trust. Similarly, Social Isolation showed a moderate negative correlation (r = -0.44, p < 0.01), suggesting that as social isolation increases, trust in interpersonal relationships notably decreases.

Table 3
Summary of Regression Analysis Predicting Trust in Relationships

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	R	\mathbb{R}^2	Adjusted R ²	F	p-value
Regression	87.45	2	43.72	0.47	0.22	0.21	55.34	< 0.01
Residual	312.55	397	0.79					
Total	400.00	399						

Table 3 summarizes the regression analysis results predicting trust in relationships based on emotional abuse and social isolation. The regression model was significant (F(2, 397) = 55.34, p < 0.01), explaining approximately 22%

 $(R^2 = 0.22, Adjusted R^2 = 0.21)$ of the variance in trust. These results suggest that emotional abuse and social isolation together substantially predict undergraduate students' trust levels in interpersonal relationships.

Table 4Results of Multivariate Regression Analysis Predicting Trust

Constant 7.85 0.31 25.32 <0.01	Predictors	В	Standard Error	β	t	p-value
	Constant	7.85	0.31			< 0.01
Social Isolation -0.35 0.06 -0.30 -6.01 <0.01	Emotional Abuse	-0.47	0.05	-0.39	-9.40	< 0.01
	Social Isolation	-0.35	0.06	-0.30	-6.01	< 0.01

The multivariate regression analysis results are presented in Table 4. Both predictors were statistically significant. Emotional Abuse significantly negatively predicted trust (B = -0.47, β = -0.39, t = -9.40, p < 0.01), demonstrating that higher levels of emotional abuse strongly reduce trust. Social

Isolation was also a significant negative predictor of trust (B = -0.35, β = -0.30, t = -6.01, p < 0.01), indicating that increased feelings of isolation significantly diminish trust among undergraduate students.





4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to examine emotional abuse and social isolation as predictors of trust in relationships among undergraduate students. Findings revealed significant negative correlations between emotional abuse and trust, as well as between social isolation and trust in interpersonal relationships. Regression analysis further confirmed that both emotional abuse and social isolation significantly predicted lower levels of trust among Turkish undergraduate students. Specifically, emotional abuse emerged as a stronger predictor, indicating its profound detrimental impact on students' capacity to trust others within their interpersonal interactions.

These findings align with previous studies emphasizing emotional abuse as a critical factor undermining trust. Consistent with the present study's findings, emotional abuse has been repeatedly associated with adverse relational outcomes, including heightened insecurity, reduced intimacy, and diminished trustworthiness perceptions in interpersonal relationships (Alade & Oziofu, 2022; Finzi-Dottan & Abadi, 2024). Emotional abuse commonly manifests through manipulation, humiliation, degradation, impairing individuals' emotional stability and self-worth, resulting in long-term difficulties in trusting others (Ali & Yousaf, 2022; Nazir et al., 2023). This psychological manipulation often leads victims to internalize negative beliefs about themselves and others, causing persistent relational anxieties and fear of intimacy, thereby significantly obstructing trust formation (AkİŞ & Öztürk, 2021; Huey et al., 2021). In particular, the observed stronger predictive role of emotional abuse on trust aligns with findings by Finzi-Dottan and Abadi (Finzi-Dottan & Abadi, 2024), who reported that emotional abuse is closely tied to attachment insecurity and rejection sensitivity, both factors directly undermining trust.

Moreover, the present study indicated social isolation as another significant predictor negatively impacting trust in relationships. Undergraduate students experiencing high levels of social isolation reported lower trust levels, reflecting the detrimental role loneliness and perceived isolation play in relational development. This result concurs with prior studies which consistently highlight social isolation's association with relational mistrust, impaired social competence, and psychological distress (Canoy, 2025; Hong et al., 2024). Undergraduate students experiencing isolation tend to form negative social expectations and heightened sensitivity to rejection, which in turn reinforces

their reluctance to engage in meaningful relationships, creating cycles of social withdrawal and distrust (Sy et al., 2024; Yang & Lee, 2024). Social isolation further exacerbates emotional vulnerabilities, often leading individuals to interpret ambiguous social interactions negatively, perpetuating distrustful attitudes toward relationships (Balcı et al., 2023; Baúto et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the current findings support existing literature demonstrating a complex interplay between emotional abuse and social isolation in undermining relational trust. Emotional abuse frequently involves tactics of isolation designed to sever external social connections, reduce available emotional support, and increase the victim's psychological dependence on the abuser (Alade & Oziofu, 2022; Fiolet et al., 2023). Thus, experiencing emotional abuse and social isolation simultaneously significantly magnifies emotional distress, exacerbating relational difficulties and further impairing trust development. Previous studies provide ample evidence supporting this assertion, highlighting emotional abuse as directly associated with increased emotional dysregulation, isolation behaviors, and difficulties in establishing stable interpersonal relationships (Liu et al., 2024; Nazir et al., 2023). Therefore, the current results underscore the critical need for addressing both emotional abuse and social isolation simultaneously in interventions aimed at enhancing trust and relational well-being among undergraduate students.

Additionally, the finding that emotional abuse was more strongly predictive of reduced trust compared to social isolation contributes meaningfully to the literature, particularly emphasizing the severity of emotional maltreatment. Emotional abuse involves deeply intrusive psychological harm, directly attacking the individual's core beliefs about their self-worth and trustworthiness of others, thus exerting a profound long-term impact on relational capabilities (Benzi et al., 2023; Chen & Duan, 2023). Studies consistently show emotional abuse victims developing heightened emotional dysregulation, increased susceptibility to anxiety, depression, and maladaptive interpersonal patterns, factors all critically linked to reduced trust (Ali & Yousaf, 2022; Nazir et al., 2023). Hence, the robust predictive power of emotional abuse identified here further reinforces the argument that emotional maltreatment must be prioritized as a significant target in psychological and relational interventions within university populations.

Taken together, these findings extend existing empirical research by confirming the critical roles emotional abuse and



social isolation play in relational trust development among Turkish undergraduate students. They highlight the necessity for culturally sensitive interventions addressing emotional maltreatment and isolation as central relational difficulties significantly influencing trust within young adult populations. Recognizing emotional abuse and isolation as central threats to relational health provides valuable insights for university counseling centers and mental health services, enabling the development of targeted preventive and therapeutic interventions.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

The present study included several limitations worth noting. First, the correlational descriptive design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions about the relationships between emotional abuse, social isolation, and trust in relationships. As such, the identified associations cannot definitively establish causation or directionality. Second, reliance on self-reported data may introduce response biases, including social desirability, memory distortions, or selfpresentation effects, potentially influencing participants' accuracy in reporting experiences of emotional abuse, isolation, and trust. Third, the use of convenience sampling limits the generalizability of the findings to all Turkish undergraduate populations. While the sample size was robust, the lack of randomization reduces representativeness and generalizability across diverse regions, socioeconomic backgrounds, and universities in Turkey. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of data collection does not allow exploration of developmental trajectories or longitudinal effects of emotional abuse and social isolation on relational

Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs to explore temporal changes in trust related to emotional abuse and social isolation. Longitudinal studies can provide deeper insights into the causal relationships and potential long-term impacts of these variables on relational trust. Additionally, future studies should incorporate qualitative or mixed-method approaches, offering deeper contextualization of emotional abuse and isolation experiences within the Turkish cultural context. Such qualitative insights can enrich understanding of culturally specific forms of emotional abuse and isolation, further informing culturally tailored interventions. Expanding sample diversity, including random sampling across multiple universities and regions, can enhance the generalizability of future findings. Furthermore, future

research should examine potential moderating or mediating variables, such as emotional regulation strategies, attachment styles, and resilience factors, which may influence the relationships between emotional abuse, social isolation, and trust.

In practical terms, these findings emphasize the importance of proactive university-based interventions addressing emotional abuse and social isolation to foster healthier interpersonal relationships and enhanced trust among undergraduate students. Universities should implement awareness and educational programs aimed at identifying signs of emotional abuse and promoting supportive social networks among students. Additionally, counseling services should prioritize targeted intervention strategies to help emotionally abused and socially isolated students develop effective emotional regulation, enhance interpersonal competencies, and rebuild trust. Workshops or peer-support initiatives encouraging open dialogue about emotional maltreatment and isolation can facilitate safer campus environments and stronger social connections, ultimately enhancing students' relational well-being and trust-building capabilities.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions





All authors equally contributed to this article.

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