

Navigating Romantic Loss: A Phenomenological Study of Emotional Distress, Coping, and Recovery Following a Romantic Breakup

Rijal Abdillah*¹, Shazia Shahzadi²

¹Universitas Bhayangkara Jakarta Raya, Jakarta, Indonesia

²Institute of Allied Health Sciences Islamabad, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: rijal.abdillah@dsn.ubharajaya.ac.id*

	ABSTRACT
ARTICLE INFO: Received July 24, 2026 Revised Augusts 12, 2026 Accepted September 02, 2026 KEYWORDS: Emotional Impact, Navigating Heartbreak, Phenomenological, Recovery Process, Romantic Breakup, Rumination	Romantic relationship dissolution (heartbreak) is a common yet psychologically significant event in early adulthood. Prior research on its aftermath has been dominated by quantitative studies examining associations among emotion regulation, rumination, self-compassion, and psychological well-being, leaving the lived experience of recovery relatively underexplored, particularly within Indonesia's collectivist culture. This study explored the lived experience of emotional recovery following a romantic breakup among young adult women in Indonesia. A qualitative study using a descriptive phenomenological design and Colaizzi's seven-step method (Morrow et al., 2015) was conducted. Three participants (SIM, 19; HAN, 19; ZA, 20) who reported experiencing emotional recovery following a breakup, along with two key informants (RO, 21; BRI, 22), were recruited through purposive sampling. Data from in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological procedure; informant data were used for triangulation rather than as independently reported findings. Six interrelated themes emerged: the emotional impact of the breakup, rumination, emotional regulation and coping strategies, social support, the process of recovery, and emotional recovery. Recovery unfolded gradually through cumulative turning points rather than a single moment of closure. Peer support played a more central role than family support, while behavioral recovery did not always coincide with full emotional resolution, as illustrated by one participant's persistent resentment despite resuming normal daily functioning. Interventions following a breakup should therefore address emotional resolution and forgiveness rather than functional recovery alone. These findings highlight the value of phenomenological inquiry for understanding recovery processes that variable-centered quantitative research may not fully capture.

INTRODUCTION

Romantic relationship dissolution, commonly experienced as heartbreak, is a psychologically significant event during early adulthood. Romantic relationships at this stage are closely connected to identity formation and the transition to adulthood, consistent with Erikson's account of the intimacy-versus-isolation stage, in which the development of intimate and committed relationships contributes to psychological well-being (Graziano et al., 2024). Consequently, the end of a romantic relationship may be experienced not simply as the termination of an interpersonal bond but as a significant form of interpersonal loss. Individuals may experience sadness, anger, guilt, loneliness, loss of meaning, and disruptions in their sense of self, with some experiencing more severe psychological difficulties such as depression, anxiety, or adjustment problems (Gehl et al., 2024; Joel & Macdonald, 2021; Verhallen et al., 2019). The impact of heartbreak may also persist beyond the breakup itself when individuals struggle to adapt emotionally to the loss (Cherry, 2026; Fernandes et al., 2025). In this sense, romantic loss involves not only the loss of an attachment figure but also the

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disruption of a relational identity, requiring individuals to reconstruct their self-concept, goals, and expectations (Leite et al., 2025; Shulman et al., 2026).

The psychological consequences of romantic loss may be particularly salient during early adulthood, a period characterized by major developmental transitions such as completing education, entering the workforce, and preparing for longer-term relational and family commitments. A breakup during this period may therefore add to existing demands for psychological adaptation and has been associated with reduced well-being, depression, anxiety, loneliness, and lower self-esteem (Giombini, 2015; Sbarra, 2006). These responses indicate that romantic breakup is not merely a temporary emotional disturbance but may influence multiple aspects of psychological functioning. However, individuals do not respond to romantic loss in the same way. The course of adjustment may depend on how individuals regulate their emotions, interpret the loss, cope with distress, and mobilize available interpersonal resources.

Emotion regulation is one important process involved in psychological adjustment following a breakup. It refers to the processes through which individuals monitor, evaluate, and modify their emotional experiences and expressions (Gross, 2014). Adaptive strategies such as cognitive reappraisal and acceptance have been associated with more favorable psychological adjustment, whereas suppression, avoidance, and impulsive responses may contribute to greater emotional difficulties (Au, 2025; Mancone et al., 2025; Roos, 2018). Rumination is another process that may shape post-breakup adjustment. It involves repeatedly focusing on the causes, consequences, and meaning of a negative experience without reaching constructive resolution (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). Following a breakup, rumination may involve replaying conflicts, idealizing the former partner, or imagining alternative outcomes (Czarnecka & Trzebinski, 2025), and persistent rumination has been associated with depression, anxiety, sleep disturbance, and reduced well-being following interpersonal loss (Joormann & Stanton, 2016).

At the same time, recovery from romantic loss is influenced by broader psychological and relational resources. Self-compassion, defined as responding to personal suffering with kindness and recognizing suffering as part of the shared human experience, has been associated with greater acceptance, reduced self-criticism, and more adaptive coping (Neff, 2011, 2023). Other resources, including self-esteem, optimism, resilience, and social support, may also facilitate adjustment by helping individuals reinterpret the experience and regain a sense of stability. Social relationships are particularly relevant because family members and peers may provide emotional support, opportunities for disclosure, and alternative perspectives during periods of distress. Moreover, heartbreak does not necessarily result only in negative psychological consequences. Consistent with the post-traumatic growth literature, experiences of loss may also lead individuals to develop greater appreciation for life, more meaningful relationships, and revised life priorities when the experience is interpreted constructively (Tedeschi et al., 2026). Thus, recovery from romantic loss may involve both the reduction of distress and a broader process of emotional and personal reorganization.

Despite growing research on romantic relationship dissolution, much of the existing literature remains dominated by quantitative and variable-centered approaches. Previous studies, for example, have examined associations between emotion regulation and depression (Zhang & Chen, 2017), self-compassion and psychological well-being (Shahzadi & Musa, 2026), and rumination and emotional distress (Wrape et al., 2016). Acolin (2023) examined trajectories of post-breakup depressive symptoms and demonstrated substantial individual variation in their natural course. Although such studies are valuable for identifying associations and patterns across individuals, they provide limited insight into how people actually experience and interpret the process of recovery. Statistical relationships between variables cannot fully capture how individuals make sense of the loss, negotiate conflicting emotions, reconstruct their identity, or gradually regain emotional stability. Romantic breakup may therefore involve subjective processes that cannot be adequately

represented through variable scores alone, particularly when changes in relational identity are considered (Slotter et al., 2010).

A small but growing body of qualitative research has begun to address this limitation. Perez et al. (2025), for instance, demonstrated how socially prescribed rules of feeling shape the ways young people interpret and express sadness following a breakup. Dailey et al. (2024) further described recovery from romantic dissolution as a multidimensional and highly individual process involving acceptance of the loss, adaptation to everyday life, and the psychological relocation of the former partner. Similarly, Machia et al. (2023) noted that relationship dissolution research has historically focused more strongly on predictors and correlates of relationship outcomes than on the subjective experience of dissolution itself. Phenomenological research has begun to demonstrate that heartbreak may unfold through interconnected experiences of decision-making, emotional impact, self-blame, emotional re-engagement, and acceptance, potentially culminating in personal growth (Subramaniam et al., 2024). Research also suggests that self-concept clarity and resilience may support more positive adjustment following relationship loss (Yue & Cui, 2025). Nevertheless, the lived process through which individuals move from emotional distress toward recovery remains insufficiently understood.

This gap is particularly relevant in the Indonesian context. Existing research provides limited phenomenological understanding of how young Indonesian adults experience and make sense of emotional recovery following romantic breakup. This is important because recovery from relationship loss occurs within social and cultural contexts rather than in isolation. Family and peer relationships may shape how individuals express distress, seek support, interpret the meaning of the breakup, and reconstruct their sense of self. Moreover, previous studies have often examined individual factors such as rumination, emotion regulation, self-compassion, or social support separately. Less is known about how these experiences interact within the everyday lives of individuals as they gradually navigate romantic loss. A more holistic understanding is therefore needed to examine not only whether individuals recover, but also how recovery is experienced, interpreted, and constructed over time.

A descriptive phenomenological approach grounded in Husserlian phenomenology is well suited to addressing this gap because it focuses on individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to those experiences. Rather than treating emotional recovery as an outcome determined by separate psychological variables, phenomenological inquiry makes it possible to explore how individuals experience emotional distress, engage in rumination and coping, draw on or withdraw from social support, and gradually reinterpret the meaning of the breakup. Such an approach can illuminate the subjective and relational dimensions of recovery that may remain obscured in variable-centered research. Accordingly, this study aimed to explore how young Indonesian women experience and make sense of emotional recovery following a romantic breakup, with particular attention to emotional distress, rumination, emotion regulation and coping, social support, and the gradual process of recovery.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design grounded in Husserlian phenomenology. Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method was used to analyze the data (Morrow et al., 2015). A descriptive phenomenological approach was selected because the study sought to understand and describe the lived experiences of emotional recovery following romantic relationship dissolution. Rather than examining statistical relationships among predetermined variables, the study focused on how participants experienced, described, and made sense of emotional distress and recovery after a romantic breakup. The use of a Husserlian orientation was intended to maintain attention to participants' accounts and to identify the essential structure of the

phenomenon while minimizing interpretations imposed by the researchers (Creswell et al., 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Participants and Sampling

The study involved three primary participants: SIM (19), HAN (19), and ZA (20), all of whom were female university students enrolled at a private university in Jakarta, Indonesia. All participants had experienced the dissolution of a romantic relationship and reported having reached a degree of emotional recovery following the breakup. Two additional individuals, RO (21) and BRI (22), were recruited as key informants to provide corroborating and contextual information concerning the participants' experiences.

Participants and key informants were selected using purposive sampling based on criteria relevant to the research objectives. The inclusion criteria for the primary participants were: (a) female university students who had experienced the end of a romantic relationship; (b) individuals who reported having experienced emotional recovery following the breakup, indicated by the resumption of normal daily functioning and the absence of persistent preoccupation with the end of the relationship; and (c) individuals who were willing and able to communicate openly and reflectively about their experiences. These criteria were applied to ensure that participants could provide sufficiently detailed accounts of the phenomenon under investigation.

RO and BRI served specifically as key informants rather than primary phenomenological participants. They were individuals identified as close friends of the participants during their university studies and were included to provide additional perspectives relevant to the participants' recovery experiences. Their accounts were used to corroborate and contextualize information obtained from the primary participants rather than to constitute separate phenomenological cases.

Data Collection

Data were collected using three complementary techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. In-depth interviews constituted the primary source of data and were used to obtain detailed descriptions of participants' experiences of romantic loss, emotional distress, coping, and recovery (Creswell, 2009). The interviews encouraged participants to describe their experiences, emotional responses, interpretations of the breakup, and the ways in which they navigated the recovery process.

Participant observation was used as a supplementary data-collection technique. During the research process, the researchers observed participants' facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, and other observable emotional responses while they recounted their experiences. These observations were used to complement and contextualize the accounts obtained through interviews.

Document analysis was conducted as an additional source of information to support the interpretation of the primary data. Relevant research materials, including interview transcripts, audio recordings, field notes, and other documentation generated during the research process, were reviewed to complement the interview and observational data (Moleong, 2018).

The three primary participants constituted the central unit of phenomenological analysis. Data obtained from RO and BRI, together with observational and documentary materials, were used as supporting sources for data triangulation. Accordingly, the study did not treat the key informants as independent participants whose experiences were analyzed separately from those of the primary participants.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step descriptive phenomenological procedure (Morrow et al., 2015). First, the researchers read and reread the interview transcripts to develop an overall understanding of each participant's account. Second, significant statements directly related

to emotional recovery following romantic breakup were identified and extracted from the transcripts. Third, meanings were formulated from the significant statements while maintaining close reference to the participants' original accounts. Fourth, the formulated meanings were organized into thematic clusters, and the emerging clusters were compared with the original transcripts and across participants to ensure consistency with the data.

Fifth, the thematic clusters were integrated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon of emotional recovery. Sixth, the exhaustive description was condensed into a statement describing the fundamental structure of the participants' lived experiences. Seventh, where feasible, the fundamental structure was returned to participants for member checking and validation against their experiences. This process was intended to ensure that the resulting phenomenological description remained consistent with participants' accounts.

Observational data, documentary materials, and information obtained from the two key informants were considered during the thematic-clustering and validation processes as sources of data triangulation. These sources were used to corroborate and contextualize themes identified primarily from the interviews with the three primary participants. They were not treated as independent phenomenological findings. The analytical process therefore maintained the participants' lived experiences as the central basis for constructing the phenomenological description.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Participant Characteristics and Data Description

Table 1 presents the demographic and relational characteristics of the three primary participants and two key informants. The primary participants were female university students aged 19–20 years who had experienced the dissolution of a romantic relationship lasting between one and two years. At the time of data collection, approximately one year had elapsed since each participant's breakup. The reported contexts of dissolution included miscommunication, a joint decision to end the relationship, and a partner's mistake. The two key informants, RO (21) and BRI (22), were male university students and served as supporting informants for triangulation.

Table 1. Demographic and Relational Characteristics of Participants and Key Informants

Code	Role	Age	Sex	Education	Relationship Duration	Time Since Breakup	Breakup Context
SIM	Primary participant	19	Female	University student	2 years	1 year	Miscommunication
HAN	Primary participant	19	Female	University student	1 year	1 year	Joint decision
ZA	Primary participant	20	Female	University student	1 year	1 year	Partner's mistake
RO	Key informant	21	Male	University student	—	—	—
BRI	Key informant	22	Male	University student	—	—	—

Analysis of the interview data identified six interrelated themes describing the participants' experiences of emotional recovery following romantic breakup: (1) the emotional impact of the breakup, (2) rumination, (3) emotional regulation and coping strategies, (4) social support, (5) the process of recovery, and (6) emotional recovery. The themes describe a gradual process in which participants experienced emotional disruption, responded to recurring thoughts and distress through different coping strategies, drew on interpersonal resources to varying degrees, and gradually resumed everyday functioning. Accounts from the two key informants and supplementary

observational and documentary data were used to corroborate and contextualize these themes rather than to constitute independent phenomenological findings.

The Emotional Impact of a Breakup

The participants described the breakup as an emotionally disruptive experience that affected their sense of self, emotional stability, and everyday functioning. Although the nature and intensity of the responses differed across participants, their accounts indicated that romantic loss could involve frustration, loss of direction, difficulty accepting the end of the relationship, guilt, mood changes, and withdrawal from everyday activities.

For SIM, the breakup was associated with a strong sense of frustration and disruption of her sense of identity. She described feeling uncertain about who she was and losing the sense of direction that she previously associated with the relationship:

"...So it's like being frustrated, really, it just frustrated, like not knowing who I am. Yeah, basically that... not knowing who I am." "and feeling frustrated and isolated..."

(SIM.1.080626: 13–15)

The emotional disruption also affected SIM's daily functioning. She recalled feeling lost and having difficulty maintaining her usual academic activities:

"...I felt kind of... lost, more like completely lost, I didn't know what to do. That's why, back when I was in high school, I often skipped school because of that because of the relationship..."

(SIM.1.080626: 19)

The experience was further intensified by the fact that SIM and her former partner were in the same class. She described becoming less motivated to attend class, withdrawing socially, and avoiding usual activities:

"...Oh, so you feel unmotivated, yeah, you get quiet, you keep to yourself, you might even act like a weirdo, guys, because it's like, 'Who are you, anyway?' especially if you're dating and in the same class." "Yeah, same class. Oh, so I just don't feel like going to class. That's a bad habit, guys, don't copy that..."

(SIM.1.080626: 29–31)

HAN experienced the breakup differently. Her primary difficulty involved concentration during academic activities, with thoughts about the causes of the breakup repeatedly interfering with her attention:

"...Yeah, there was. We were in class, right? So whenever there was an assignment for any of my courses, I'd get distracted by thoughts about what caused the breakup, and I'd be confused about why it... why it could just end like that..."

(HAN.1.080626: 6)

For ZA, the breakup was initially experienced as a significant loss accompanied by difficulty accepting that the relationship had ended. She explicitly characterized her initial response as denial:

"...Mmm... what was the experience, exactly? Denial..."

(ZA.1.080626: 7)

She further explained:

"...Yeah, just denial—not accepting it..."

(ZA.1.080626: 11)

ZA also described feelings of guilt and self-blame, accompanied by mood changes and reduced motivation:

"...Mmm... how do I feel? Guilty." "I think it's my fault..."

"...Mmm... what, exactly? So, mood swings, or... yeah, how should I put it?

Yeah, something like that. It's like... I've lost my drive, I guess..."

(ZA.1.080626: 14–20)

Taken together, these accounts show that the initial impact of romantic loss extended beyond sadness. Participants described disruptions in identity, concentration, motivation, emotional stability, and daily behavior. The form of disruption differed across participants: SIM emphasized feeling lost and socially withdrawn, HAN described difficulty concentrating because of breakup-related thoughts, and ZA emphasized denial, guilt, and loss of motivation.

Rumination

The participants described recurring thoughts and memories concerning the former relationship and the circumstances surrounding its dissolution. However, the presence and persistence of these thoughts varied across participants. The accounts suggest that breakup-related thoughts could emerge spontaneously without necessarily developing into sustained rumination.

HAN described recurrent thoughts that appeared particularly when her mind was inactive or when there was an absence of competing stimulation:

"...Because, in my opinion, they say that the brain fills in the gaps, you know, in every moment of emptiness. So those thoughts just creep in! That's how it is; I keep thinking about it, picturing it, remembering it..."

(HAN.1.080626: 101)

In contrast, SIM described a more deliberate effort to prevent recurring thoughts from developing further. She acknowledged that memories of the relationship could still appear but chose not to dwell on them:

"...sometimes they pop into my head, but I'm like, 'Oh well, whatever..."

(SIM.1.080626: 51)

Her account also reflected an effort to cognitively distance herself from the former relationship:

"...Just move on, guys. I mean, it's not really that important, is it? You're already hurting from being treated that way all the time, if you went back, what's the point? It'd be like reading the same story twice..."

(SIM.1.080626: 35–37)

These accounts indicate that breakup-related thoughts remained part of the participants' experiences even after they had resumed everyday functioning. However, participants differed in how they responded to such thoughts. Rather than uniformly describing persistent rumination, the participants reported experiences ranging from spontaneous memories and mental images to conscious efforts to redirect attention and avoid prolonged engagement with the thoughts.

Emotional Regulation and Coping Strategy

The participants used different strategies to manage sadness, disappointment, and other emotional responses following the breakup. Their coping patterns ranged from withdrawal and avoidance to emotional expression, self-reflection, social engagement, and participation in positive

activities. SIM described coping primarily through withdrawal and sleep. She reported remaining silent, sleeping, and avoiding situations associated with emotional distress:

"...Stay quiet, sleep, that's it." "Sleep, yeah, I love sleeping. I'll just pretend to be sick so I don't have to go to school." "Sleep and pretend to be sick, so I can go home..."

(SIM.1.080626: 42–49)

HAN described music as an emotional outlet during the period following the breakup:

"...my escape back then was music, the kind of music that's really, like, pong, you know, like 'go ahead'... basically, my escape was music like that."

(HAN.1.080626: 16)

Her account also indicated that coping involved self-reflection, forgiveness, and gratitude. Rather than relying solely on distraction, she gradually incorporated cognitive and emotional processes that helped her reinterpret the experience.

ZA emphasized interpersonal and activity-based coping. She described talking with friends and engaging in hobbies as ways of managing the emotional consequences of the breakup:

"...Talk to friends..."

"...What, exactly? Such as... hobbies, hobbies..."

(ZA.1.080626: 22–35)

The participants therefore demonstrated different approaches to emotional regulation and coping. SIM tended to reduce distress through withdrawal and sleep, whereas HAN combined emotional distraction through music with self-reflection and processes of forgiveness and gratitude. ZA relied more strongly on social interaction and engagement in positive activities. These differences indicate that recovery was not characterized by a single coping pattern but by individually constructed responses to emotional distress.

Social Support

Social support emerged as an important relational resource during the participants' recovery. Across the three participants, peers were the primary source of support. However, the ways in which participants sought and used this support differed.

SIM identified several close friends as sources of support:

"...There's Nala and Hesty..."

"...Yeah, Dira, and my junior high friends, I hang out with them..."

(SIM.1.080626: 59–61)

She described sharing her experiences with these friends and receiving advice:

"...So yeah, I told them about it, we talked, and I took their advice but I'm just a quiet person, so whatever I do, it's the same as lying anyway..."

"...Their response was just like, 'Oh, thanks for the advice; just don't deny it, that's what matters..."

(SIM.1.080626: 63–65)

At the same time, SIM deliberately excluded her parents from the recovery process because she preferred to keep the experience private:

"...But my parents don't know, I kept it a secret; I didn't want to tell anyone.

Back then..."

"...It's not that I'm closed off, I just didn't want anyone to know..."

(SIM.1.080626: 69–73)

HAN similarly relied on close friends as a space for emotional disclosure and motivation. She described confiding in friends and receiving perspectives that shifted her attention beyond the romantic relationship:

“...and second, I confided in my friends, my closest friends, you know.” “There are a few friends who motivate me, you know, life isn’t just about love, but about ourselves...”

(HAN.1.080626: 16–18)

ZA also described receiving encouragement from peers. Their responses helped her view the breakup from a broader perspective:

“...What was it, exactly? They gave me support, encouragement, I guess, that kind of thing.” “Yeah. Like, ‘It’s okay... there are still plenty of other women out there,’ that sort of thing...”

(ZA.1.080626: 26–28)

Across the participants, peer support primarily took the form of emotional disclosure, advice, motivation, validation, and encouragement. Nevertheless, support was not used in the same way by all participants. SIM preferred privacy and limited family involvement, HAN used friendship as a space for reflection and motivation, while ZA experienced peer encouragement as a means of developing a more adaptive perspective on the breakup.

The Process of Recovery

Recovery emerged as a gradual process rather than an immediate transition from distress to emotional stability. Participants described different turning points through which they gradually changed their relationship with the breakup and resumed everyday activities.

For SIM, an important turning point occurred after she completed high school. She described this period as the point at which she began to distance herself psychologically from her former partner:

“...Moving on from the past... it was right after I graduated from high school...”

She subsequently described a shift in perspective after spending time with friends:

“...then after coming back from the villa with my friends, I immediately bounced back. Why should I even think about that person? Because they’re terrible, both in terms of character and looks...”

(SIM.1.080626: 78–80)

SIM also used cognitive reappraisal to reduce the perceived value of continuing the relationship:

“...Forget it, don’t continue it, don’t think about it anymore, what’s the point?...”

(SIM.1.080626: 82)

However, her recovery was accompanied by unresolved negative feelings toward her former partner:

“...I hate them, I hold a grudge, I’ll never forgive them because of that one thing...”

(SIM.1.080626: 88)

HAN described recovery through self-reflection and a future-oriented understanding of romantic relationships. She explained that reflection helped her regain motivation:

"...Oh, definitely self-reflection first. It's only through that reflection that I became motivated..."

She also developed a more future-oriented view of romantic relationships:

"...surely a soulmate will match and be on par with our readiness for the next relationship..."

(HAN.1.080626: 18)

For ZA, recovery was reflected initially through renewed engagement in activities she enjoyed:

"...Yeah, doing my hobbies, stuff like that..."

(SIM.1.080626: 37)

Over time, she began to interpret the breakup as a learning experience:

"...Mmm... Just a learning process..."

(SIM.1.080626: 41)

The participants' accounts therefore suggest that recovery involved different turning points, including temporal distance from the relationship, social experiences, self-reflection, cognitive reappraisal, renewed engagement in activities, and the development of new meanings. Importantly, recovery did not necessarily involve complete elimination of negative emotions.

Emotional Recovery

The final theme concerned how participants understood and experienced emotional resolution after the breakup. Although all three participants had resumed aspects of normal daily functioning, emotional recovery did not necessarily involve the same degree of psychological resolution.

SIM described an easygoing orientation toward the breakup and did not feel a strong need to construct a deeper meaning from the experience:

"...I can't really make sense of a breakup, though I'm just more easygoing about it, like, just let it flow..."

(SIM.1.080626: 90)

However, her account revealed that this apparent emotional distance coexisted with persistent resentment. She described an incident in which her former partner attempted to apologize again in 2025, but she rejected the apology:

"...No, it started two years ago, and I was still on good terms with this person in 2025. He wanted to apologize again, but I didn't want to. You keep apologizing like that, I'm tired of it. There's just... something. I don't know, I just couldn't accept it. What kind of person is this? It's just a simple 'sorry', I don't want that either. After that, I hated him, and after that, I held a grudge..."

(SIM.1.080626: 96)

In contrast, HAN described a more deliberate form of emotional resolution characterized by establishing boundaries with her former partner. She acknowledged the possibility of maintaining a relationship with an ex-partner but reframed it as a non-romantic friendship governed by clear interpersonal boundaries:

"...we can still have a relationship with an ex, but it's not a dating relationship, right? It's more about being friends and, um, just maintaining a relationship like that, and as much as possible, of course, the ex knows the rules... we have to make sure they don't try to get back into our personal connections or access again. And we also don't open up access for them either..."

(HAN.1.080626: 22)

ZA's account further indicated emotional recovery through renewed engagement in everyday interests and the reinterpretation of the breakup as a learning experience. Her ability to resume activities she enjoyed and to view the experience as part of her personal development represented a shift from experiencing the breakup primarily as a loss toward incorporating it into her broader life narrative.

Overall, the participants' accounts demonstrate that emotional recovery cannot be equated solely with the restoration of normal daily functioning. SIM, for example, had resumed everyday activities and described herself as able to "let it flow," yet continued to experience resentment toward her former partner. HAN demonstrated recovery through reflection and the establishment of interpersonal boundaries, while ZA described recovery through renewed activity and the construction of meaning from the experience. Thus, emotional recovery appeared as a multidimensional and individually experienced process involving changes in behavior, emotional responses, interpersonal boundaries, and personal meaning.

DISCUSSION

This study explored how young women experienced emotional recovery following romantic relationship dissolution. Three interconnected findings are particularly salient. First, the experience of breakup-related distress and subsequent coping differed substantially across participants, demonstrating that emotional recovery was not characterized by a uniform trajectory. Second, peer relationships emerged as the most consistently described source of interpersonal support, whereas family involvement was limited in at least one participant because of concerns about privacy. Third, and most importantly, the findings suggest a distinction between functional recovery and emotional resolution. Participants could resume everyday activities and develop a more stable routine while still experiencing unresolved emotions toward a former partner. These findings extend previous research by illustrating recovery as a gradual and individually constructed process rather than a discrete endpoint.

The Emotional Impact of a Breakup

The participants described romantic breakup as an experience that could disrupt several aspects of psychological functioning, although the form of disruption differed across individuals. SIM described frustration, loss of direction, social withdrawal, and disruption of everyday functioning. HAN emphasized difficulty concentrating on academic activities because of recurring thoughts about the breakup, whereas ZA initially experienced denial, guilt, mood changes, and reduced motivation. These differences suggest that the psychological meaning of romantic loss is not uniform even when participants share broadly similar developmental circumstances.

The findings are consistent with Erikson's conceptualization of early adulthood as a developmental period in which intimacy and the formation of meaningful relationships are particularly salient. The dissolution of such a relationship may therefore involve more than the loss of a partner; it may temporarily disrupt expectations about identity, daily routines, and future relationships. This interpretation is consistent with research indicating that romantic breakup can be accompanied by sadness, loss of motivation, withdrawal, and other forms of psychological distress (Armadani et al., 2026; Lembang & Gismin, 2025). However, the present findings add a

phenomenological dimension by showing how these consequences were experienced in everyday life. For SIM, for example, the breakup was experienced as a loss of direction and was associated with withdrawal from academic activities, while for HAN the disruption was more closely connected to difficulties maintaining concentration. Thus, the same life event may acquire different psychological meanings depending on the individual's circumstances and interpretation.

Rumination

The findings indicate that breakup-related thoughts remained present during the participants' recovery, but their experiences did not necessarily correspond to persistent or uncontrollable rumination. HAN described spontaneous thoughts, memories, and mental images that emerged particularly during periods of mental inactivity. SIM, in contrast, described consciously disengaging from such thoughts when they appeared. This distinction is important because the presence of recurring memories does not necessarily indicate that an individual remains psychologically trapped in the breakup.

This finding is broadly consistent with Bugay-Sökmez et al. (2023), who linked rumination and co-rumination with self-regulatory resources such as self-compassion and self-esteem. It is also compatible with Ashton et al. (2023), who demonstrated that deliberate strategies for managing unwanted memories can reduce the intensity of intrusive thoughts. However, the present study does not establish that self-compassion, self-esteem, or memory-control strategies caused differences in participants' experiences. Rather, the accounts suggest that individuals may differ in how they respond when relationship-related thoughts arise. Some may allow the thoughts to pass without prolonged engagement, whereas others may experience them more spontaneously and vividly. From a phenomenological perspective, this distinction highlights the importance of examining not only the presence of breakup-related thoughts but also how individuals experience and respond to them.

Emotional Regulation and Coping Strategies

The participants described markedly different ways of managing emotional distress following the breakup. SIM tended to withdraw, remain silent, sleep, and avoid situations associated with distress. HAN used music as an emotional outlet and described self-reflection, forgiveness, and gratitude as part of her adjustment. ZA emphasized talking with friends and engaging in hobbies and other positive activities. These accounts demonstrate that coping following romantic loss may involve different combinations of avoidance, distraction, reflection, social engagement, and behavioral activation.

SIM's reliance on withdrawal and sleep resembles avoidant coping, which previous research has associated with poorer adjustment following relationship dissolution. Gehl et al. (2024), for example, found that avoidance coping may contribute to the relationship between attachment insecurity and subsequent depressive and anxiety symptoms. At the same time, the present findings should not be interpreted as evidence that SIM's coping strategy directly caused either prolonged distress or incomplete emotional resolution. Her account illustrates that a strategy may provide short-term distance from distress while not necessarily resolving all of the emotions associated with the loss.

In contrast, HAN's self-reflection and ZA's engagement with friends and hobbies suggest other ways of responding to breakup-related distress. These experiences are consistent with research emphasizing emotion regulation and social support as important resources in post-breakup adjustment (Fernandes et al., 2025; Tiron & Ursu, 2023). Nevertheless, the findings suggest that coping is not simply a matter of classifying strategies as adaptive or maladaptive. Participants appeared to construct their own ways of managing the experience according to their circumstances and personal interpretations. This supports a more process-oriented understanding in which coping strategies may change as individuals move through different phases of recovery.

Social Support

Peer support emerged as the most consistently described interpersonal resource across the three participants. Participants described friends as people with whom they could disclose their experiences, receive advice, obtain encouragement, and develop alternative perspectives on the breakup. This finding is consistent with Sahi et al. (2023), who highlighted the role of peers in supporting emotional regulation during adolescence and emerging adulthood, and with Fernandes et al. (2025), who identified social support as an important protective resource following romantic relationship dissolution.

An important feature of the present findings, however, is that support was not simply determined by the availability of relationships. Participants actively decided whom to involve in their recovery. SIM, for example, sought support from close friends while deliberately withholding information from her parents because she preferred to maintain privacy. This suggests that perceived safety and trust may be as important as the mere presence of social relationships. The findings therefore provide a more nuanced interpretation of social support: recovery may be facilitated not simply by having people around an individual, but by having relationships in which the individual feels sufficiently safe to disclose vulnerability.

The prominence of peer support should nevertheless be interpreted cautiously. The study involved only three young women from one university context, and therefore the findings cannot establish that peer support is generally more important than family support among young adults. Rather, the participants' accounts indicate that peers were the most salient sources of support within their particular experiences. The limited role of family support, particularly for SIM, may also reflect individual preferences for privacy rather than a general absence of family resources.

The Process of Recovery

Recovery was experienced as a gradual process involving several turning points rather than as a single moment of closure. For SIM, completing high school and spending time with friends were described as important moments in distancing herself from the former relationship. HAN emphasized self-reflection and developing a more future-oriented understanding of romantic relationships. ZA described renewed engagement in hobbies and gradually reframed the breakup as a learning experience. These accounts suggest that recovery involved changes in attention, daily activity, self-understanding, and the meaning attributed to the breakup.

This pattern is consistent with Yue and Cui (2025), who emphasized the relationship between self-concept clarity, resilience, and positive adjustment following relationship loss. The present findings similarly suggest that recovery involved a gradual reconstruction of personal direction rather than simply the disappearance of negative emotions. However, the phenomenological accounts also demonstrate that recovery may remain incomplete in particular emotional domains. SIM's experience is especially illustrative: she described returning to ordinary activities and adopting an attitude of letting the experience pass, while continuing to experience hatred and resentment toward her former partner.

This discrepancy is consistent with evidence that adjustment following relationship dissolution may unfold at different rates depending on relational and contextual circumstances, including the nature of the previous relationship and continued contact with a former partner (Tran et al., 2024). More importantly, the present findings suggest that outward functioning and inner emotional resolution should not automatically be treated as equivalent indicators of recovery. A person may regain routine, social functioning, and daily productivity while still carrying unresolved emotional responses to the relationship.

Emotional Recovery

The final theme highlights differences in how participants incorporated the breakup into their broader life narratives. SIM adopted an easygoing stance and did not feel a strong need to derive a particular lesson from the experience. HAN described a more deliberate process of establishing boundaries with her former partner and using the experience to inform her understanding of future relationships. ZA interpreted the breakup as a learning process and re-engaged with activities that were meaningful to her.

These differences demonstrate that emotional recovery may involve different forms of meaning-making. Recovery does not necessarily require individuals to produce a coherent or transformative narrative about their breakup. For some, emotional recovery may involve accepting the experience without extensive reflection; for others, it may involve learning, redefining interpersonal boundaries, or incorporating the experience into a broader understanding of oneself. HAN's account is consistent with aspects of post-traumatic growth described by Subramaniam et al. (2024), particularly increased insight into oneself and future relationships. However, the present study does not establish post-traumatic growth as an outcome for all participants.

The experience of SIM is particularly important for understanding emotional resolution. Despite having resumed normal activities, she continued to describe strong resentment and an inability to accept her former partner's later apology. Her experience indicates that functional recovery does not necessarily imply forgiveness or complete emotional reconciliation. Rather than treating forgiveness as a universal endpoint of recovery, the findings suggest that emotional recovery may involve different degrees of acceptance, detachment, meaning-making, and unresolved emotion. This distinction provides an important contribution to understanding romantic loss as a multidimensional process.

Implications

The findings suggest that post-breakup adjustment may be better understood as a multidimensional process rather than a binary condition of being either recovered or not recovered. The three participants demonstrated different pathways involving emotional disruption, recurring thoughts, coping, interpersonal support, renewed engagement in everyday life, and changes in the meaning attributed to the breakup. In particular, the distinction between functional recovery and emotional resolution suggests that observable restoration of daily functioning may not fully represent an individual's emotional state.

This distinction has implications for psychological practice. Assessment following romantic breakup should consider not only whether individuals have resumed their academic, social, and daily activities but also whether unresolved emotional responses remain present. Interventions may therefore benefit from addressing emotional processing, cognitive reappraisal, self-compassion, and unresolved resentment rather than assuming that restored functioning represents complete recovery. The prominent role of peers also suggests the potential value of accessible peer-support structures for young adults, particularly when concerns about privacy make family disclosure difficult. In university settings, low-stigma support services may provide an additional avenue for students experiencing relationship-related distress, academic disruption, or difficulties with adjustment.

Limitation

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study involved only three female university students from a single private university in Jakarta, which limits the transferability of the findings to young adults with different demographic, educational, cultural, or relational backgrounds. Second, the participants were selected based on their reported experience of emotional recovery following a breakup; therefore, the findings primarily represent retrospective accounts of individuals who had reached a degree of functional

recovery and may not capture the experiences of individuals who were still experiencing acute post-breakup distress. Third, the data relied primarily on participants' retrospective self-reports, which may have been influenced by memory reconstruction and subsequent reinterpretation of the breakup experience. Although key informants, participant observation, and documentary materials were used for triangulation, these sources were supplementary rather than independent phenomenological accounts. Finally, the study focused specifically on young women, and the findings should therefore not be assumed to represent the experiences of young men or individuals with different gender identities. Future research could address these limitations through multi-site qualitative studies involving more diverse participants and, where feasible, longitudinal designs that follow the recovery process over time.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that recovery following romantic breakup is not experienced as a single, linear process of distress and resolution. Among the three young women, the emotional impact of breakup varied from disruption of identity and motivation to academic difficulties, guilt, and emotional instability. Rumination also differed across participants, with some experiencing recurring breakup-related thoughts while others described deliberate efforts to disengage from such memories. Coping strategies likewise varied, including withdrawal, self-reflection, emotion regulation, social interaction, and engagement in meaningful activities, suggesting that coping needs to be understood within the individual context of recovery rather than as a simple adaptive–maladaptive continuum. Peer support emerged as a consistently described source of emotional support, although the role and accessibility of family support varied across participants. Recovery unfolded gradually through cumulative turning points, including self-reflection, social connection, renewed activities, and changes in how participants understood the ended relationship. Importantly, the findings highlight a distinction between functional recovery and emotional resolution: returning to normal daily activities did not necessarily indicate that all negative emotions had been resolved, as illustrated by SIM's continued resentment toward her former partner. Thus, post-breakup recovery can be understood as a multidimensional and personally negotiated process involving changes in emotional experience, cognition, behavior, relationships, and meaning-making. These findings underscore the value of phenomenological inquiry for understanding the complexity of emotional recovery beyond observable behavioral adjustment alone.

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