



Love Bombing and Emotional Abuse among College Students

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Abstract

Love bombing is an abuse tactic used to lure or keep someone in a relationship. It often involves intense displays of affection, admiration, and grand gestures. Love bombing can happen at any relationship stage but is more common when two people first meet. While all this attention may seem flattering, it can be dangerously manipulative. Emotional abuse is generally considered any harmful abusive behavior that is not physical. A relationship becomes emotionally abusive when the pattern occurs repeatedly over time. While there are no physical scars or broken bones, emotional abuse is a form of domestic violence. Emotionally abusive relationships do not always include physical violence, but psychological abuse can be a precursor to physical harm in a relationship. Other names for emotional abuse include mental abuse and psychological abuse. A sample of 45 college students who were dating for a period of 6 months was collected. Standardized scales were used to measure love bombing and emotional abuse among people in a relationship or situationship. Results found out that none of the results were significantly correlated. However, there was a positive correlation between love bombing and emotional abuse. It's not always possible to avoid an emotionally manipulative or abusive situation, and abuse is never a victim or survivor's fault. However, understanding common signs of love bombing and what to do if a new relationship feels off may help one spot potentially problematic behavior before one gets too emotionally invested. Setting clear boundaries, seeking support from trusted individuals or professionals, and prioritizing self-care are crucial. Open communication about feelings and concerns is essential, as is evaluating whether the relationship is healthy in the long

term. If the abuse persists and the partner is unwilling to change, seeking therapy or considering ending the relationship may be necessary for one's own well-being.

Keywords: *Love Bombing, Emotional Abuse, College Students.*

INTRODUCTION

Love bombing is a manipulative tactic often used by individuals with narcissistic personality disorder to gain control in a relationship. Friends, family, or romantic partners can love-bomb by showering one with gifts, being overly complimentary, or constantly giving the other partner attention. These actions may make the partner feel loved and dependent, which they may use against the person to isolate and control them. Love bombing can happen quickly in a relationship and slowly progress into an unhealthy and abusive relationship. “Love bombing is characterized by excessive attention, admiration, and affection with the goal to make the recipient feel dependent and obligated to that person,” explains licensed therapist Sasha Jackson, LCSW.

The chilling tactic is often used by narcissists, abusers, and even cult leaders. What makes love bombing so confusing (and difficult to untangle oneself from) is that at first, it actually feels really good thanks to all the dopamine and endorphin boosts you get from the bomber’s lavish gifts and attention. “*You feel special, needed, loved, valuable, and worthy, which are all the components that contribute to and increase a person’s self-esteem,*” Jackson says. “Daters guilty of love bombing feel the need to fill an emotional void with the love of another person, but once they have that person and feel secure in the relationship, their true feelings can come to the surface, and the instability unravels from there,” Simone adds, “*You may feel like you owe a love bomber the same amount of adoration and loyalty in return for all of the extra gifts and attention you have received, but true acts of love do not need reciprocation and are inspired from within.*”

Emotional abuse can include verbal assault, dominance, control, isolation, ridicule, or the use of intimate knowledge for degradation (Follingstad, Coyne, & Gambone, 2005). It targets the emotional and psychological well-being of the victim, and it is often a precursor to physical abuse. There is a high correlation between physical abuse and emotional abuse in batterer populations (Gondolf, Heckert, & Kimmel, 2002), and verbal abuse early in a relationship predicts subsequent physical spousal abuse (Schumacher & Leonard, 2005). Emotional abuse often involves

disregarding another person's emotional needs and can occur in various relationships, including romantic relationships, friendships, families, and the workplace.

One of the challenges of identifying emotional abuse is that it can be subtle and covert, making it difficult to recognize. Individuals may not realize they are being emotionally abused, particularly if the abuse has been happening for a while. However, emotional abuse typically involves a pattern of behavior that occurs over time, rather than a one-time event. The abuser may isolate the victim, withhold affection, or use threatening language. Victims might experience low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and feel constantly on guard, walking on "eggshells" around the abuser. Recognizing these signs is crucial for intervention and seeking help.

Situationships can be defined as "romantic relationships with no clarity or label." They might include affection, sexual behaviors, and spending time together but also involve low levels of commitment. Put simply, a situationship is essentially a relationship without any commitment, says Dr. Romanoff. She adds that this type of arrangement allows individuals to experience the benefits of being in a relationship and being single simultaneously. But a situationship can also leave you unsure what to say when someone asks whether you're seeing someone. "It's complicated" may be the only response that seems appropriate. The ambiguity of situationships can take a toll on your mental health. "Our brains really like clarity," Dr. Albers notes. "They gravitate to black and white, so this gray area can be very hard to process and may even create anxiety." The other pitfall of a situationship: It's difficult to maintain, emotionally. Dr. Albers explains, "It's very hard to stay unattached. It can feel like you're skimming the surface of a relationship. And the ambiguity can consume a lot of energy." That difficulty is a byproduct of how our brains work. "We're human. And when we're intimate with someone, our brains release a hormone called oxytocin," she adds. Oxytocin is powerful stuff. It stimulates sexual arousal, ejaculation, contractions during pregnancy, parent-infant recognition and bonding — even lactation! Oxytocin also facilitates behaviors you might not expect, like trust. "It's hard to override hormones like oxytocin with the logic that we're not attached to someone," Dr. Albers notes.

In the context of couples, the phrase "in a relationship" usually means being in a committed, long-term romantic relationship. A committed relationship is one where two or more people agree to continue being in a relationship for the foreseeable future. There's an understanding that the two will continue to spend time together, work on growing their relationship with each other, and continue nurturing their connection. People in committed relationships may choose to use

identifiers like boyfriend, girlfriend, or partner to signify their relationship to others. In traditional monogamous relationships, being in a relationship also means that a couple will be romantically and sexually exclusive—that is, they won't have any other romantic or sexual partners other than each other. In non-monogamous relationships, exclusivity isn't required. Love bombing is a behavior sometimes exhibited in the early stages of a relationship where one partner excessively showers the other with affection, compliments, and attention. While it may initially feel good and flattering, it can become concerning if it's used to manipulate or control the other person. In a relationship that's been ongoing for six months, love bombing might not be as common or as noticeable as in the very early stages, as the intensity of infatuation usually starts to stabilize over time. However, if one partner continues to excessively shower the other with affection or attention while neglecting their own needs or boundaries, it could still be considered a form of love bombing. Healthy relationships involve mutual respect, communication, and consideration for each other's needs and boundaries.

Review of Literature

Love Bombing

Love bombing is defined as the continuous “bombing” of a person with flattery, compliments, and affection.¹ It comes in various forms—gift-giving, long-winded messages, social media interactions, and passionate declarations of love—and is often used by those with narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). Typically, a person being loved bombed will be flooded early in a relationship with their partner's desire to discuss their future together. The love bomber may be overly communicative about their feelings for the person. The partner may even claim they love the person, or the person is their “soul mate.” However, this behavior is rarely altruistic as the partner seeks to make gains for their hopelessly romantic expressions, whether control, success, or unwavering admiration.

The literature review by Silva et al. (2023) described the main characteristics of psychopaths including their sexual habits in their ritual of charming, dominating, and abandoning their victims, as well as explain the chaos and devastation they cause in them. Finally, suggested treatment approaches for victims in the damage recovery process. Interviews were conducted with victims of psychopaths who lived with them for more than a decade. Information concerning

sexual habits was carefully categorized and explained. As support, online searches for the construction of this article were carried out in the databases of Google Scholar, PUBMED Central, Web of Science, BVS / BIREME, Science Direct, Scielo, The Cochrane Library, and also by PROSPERO. The identities of victims and psychopaths were kept confidential. Results showed that the sexual habits of psychopaths include 3 stages, a) initial love bombing, b) humiliation, and c) domination of the victim, and d) finally abandonment after sexual, emotional, and financial exploitation. The main consequences in the lives of partners include chaos, sleep and eating disorders, anger, despair, and depression, and in some cases lead to death. The authors add that psychopathy has no treatment, and due to the devastation, it causes in people due to the feeling of betrayal, exploitation, and lack of love, it causes victims to have all aspects of their lives destroyed. The only way to fight it is through knowing the psychopath's mind and what they can do.

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse, also known as psychological maltreatment, is a significant health problem. Long-term outcomes of emotional abuse are quite negative and include physical and mental health disorders. Vidourek (2017) examined emotional abuse and correlates to such abuse among college students. The American College Health Association–National College Health Assessment II was completed by study participants at one urban, Midwestern university. A total of 777 students participated in the survey. Greater than one in 10 (10.7%) students reported being emotionally abused in the past year. The final logistic regression model found being female, being an older student, recent marijuana use, and being so depressed it was difficult to function were significant predictors of emotional abuse. Study findings suggest it may be important to screen high-risk students for emotional abuse as part of mental health treatment or other medical screenings. Given that one in 10 students experienced past year emotional abuse, it may also be crucial to raise awareness of emotional abuse on college campuses.

The study by Karakurt and Silver (2013) aimed to investigate the moderating roles of gender and age on emotional abuse within intimate relationships. This study included 250 participants with an average age of 27 years. Participants completed the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ; Jacobson and Gottman, 1998), whose four subscales are isolation, degradation, sexual abuse, and property damage. Multigroup analysis with two groups, female ($n = 141$) and male ($n = 109$), was used to test the moderation effect. Younger men reported

experiencing higher levels of emotional abuse, which declined with age. Older females reported experiencing less emotional abuse than older males. Overall, emotional abuse was more common in younger participants. Younger women experienced higher rates of isolation, and women's overall experience of property damage was higher than that of men and increased with age. Results are interpreted through the Social Exchange and Conflict frameworks.

Methodology

Purpose

The aim is to study love bombing and emotional abuse among college students who are dating.

Method

Sample

A total sample of 45 young adults in the age group of 18-25 years was collected from the city Ludhiana.

Measures

The following standardized tools were used to measure love bombing and emotional abuse among college students.

Love Bombing Scale: The scale was developed based on previous literature regarding tendencies of narcissists in romantic relationships (Campbell, 1999; Campbell et al., 2002; Campbell & Foster, 2002; Foster et al., 2006; Oltmans et al., 2004) as well as assertions made by anecdotal accounts published to internet blogs. The scale was used to measure love bombing among young adults. The scale had a total of 8 items. The items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Emotional Abuse: The scale as developed by Jacobson and Gottman (1998). The scale consisted of 28 items which assesses the level of emotional abuse of a person. The items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often).

Procedures

The participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the questionnaires were filled through Google forms; each participant was thanked for their cooperation. Standardized psychological tests were administered to the participants.

Analysis of Data

Results

Table 1

N, Mean and Standard Deviation

		Love bombing		Emotional Abuse	
Love bombing		—			
Emotional Abuse		0.078		—	
<i>Note.</i> * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$					

Discussion of Results

The study aimed to investigate the relationship between love bombing and emotional abuse among people in situationships and those who have been in a relationship for the past 6 months. The results found out that there is a positive relationship between Emotional abuse and Love bombing ($r=0.078$). However, the relationship was found to be insignificant.

In abusive contexts, love bombing is often seen as the first step in a pattern of establishing coercive control over another person (Fox, 2013). In this sense, a period of pure love bombing lasts until it has served its purpose. Once the emotional attachment has been formed, an abuser can shift toward using other behaviors to control the target of the love bombing. However, they may resort again to these manipulative displays of affection and attention if they sense the target is

losing their dependency on the abuser. Coercive or manipulative love bombing serves a particular function (Vaknin, 2020). First, it sends a very clear message: “I care about you so much. I can’t stop thinking about you. I just want to make you happy.” Second, it creates an image of the love bomber as deeply caring, generous, and full of good intentions. Third, it immerses the love bomber and the recipient in an alternative reality where their truly special, unique love unites them—and, just as importantly, separates them from others. Finally, it teaches the recipient of the love bombing to expect these powerful displays of love: They have been conditioned to await these gestures and to respond to them positively. The stage is thus set for the love bomber to exercise control over the target of their manipulation.

Research by Iwaniec, Larkin, & Higgins (2006) examined risk and resilience in relation to emotional abuse. Research has identified numerous child and family factors that may increase the risk of emotional abuse occurring and has also identified numerous ways in which an experience of emotional abuse can enhance vulnerability to negative outcomes. However, relatively little is known about the factors that determine the extent to which an experience of emotional abuse predicts later psychosocial functioning. Factors that may determine risk and resilience in children who experience emotional abuse are discussed. These include predisposing factors such as early caregiving experiences; precipitating factors such as the frequency, intensity and duration of the abuse; factors intrinsic to the child such as working models of the self and others, internal or external attributions, behavioral and coping strategies, self-esteem, and disposition; and external factors such as school and availability of supportive relationships. The need to pay attention to the vulnerabilities and protective factors pertaining to each emotionally abused child in order to most effectively enhance resilience is highlighted.

Conclusion

The research aimed to study love bombing and emotional abuse of people in a relationship and situation among college students. A sample of 45 college students in the age group of 18-25 years were taken. Standardized scales were used to measure love bombing and emotional abuse. Results found out that none of the results were significantly correlated. However, there was a positive correlation between love bombing and emotional abuse.

Suggestions

Love bombing often makes individuals initially question their true feelings, and the relationship may feel uncomfortable or overwhelming. Partners, family members, and friends should respect one's boundaries when asked. Confronting them about their behaviors and discussing setting boundaries when being love-bombed. Working through love-bombing behaviors and sticking to healthy boundaries may take some time, but it can heal a relationship. Keeping communication channels open to address any concerns calmly and directly. Seeking support from trusted friends, family, or professionals if needed. Education regarding healthy relationship dynamics is important. Seeking assistance from a mental health professional can provide valuable support in managing emotional turmoil arising from abuse or terminating relationships. Remember, healthy relationships are built on trust and mutual respect.

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