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# Experiences of emotional dependency in lesbian couples

## *Experiências de dependência emocional em casais de lésbicas*

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### Abstract

#### Objective

This study seeks to analyze the experiences of emotional dependency in lesbian couples from  
a private university in Metropolitan Lima.

#### Method

The study is qualitative with a phenomenological design. A semi-structured in-depth interview  
was applied to 6 lesbian couples and a hybrid thematic content analysis was conducted.

#### Results

They prioritized their partners, which led to the modification of their activities to give them  
more space, and hunger for affection based on the demand for contact with their partner. There  
was also a need to please, seeking approval and taking the blame for problems; and they felt  
fear of rejection, especially in the face of a possible breakup.

#### Conclusão

In conclusion, the experiences of dependency in these couples hindered the fulfillment of  
activities of their choice and the need for attention, with the constant desire to be included  
and the fear of not being loved, inhibiting the normal development of the relationship.

**Keywords:** Dependency, psychological; Lesbian; Life change events; Spouse abuse;  
Phenomenology.

### Resumo

#### Objetivo

Este estudo procura analisar as experiências de dependência emocional em casais de lésbicas numa  
universidade privada em Lima Metropolitana.

#### Método

O estudo é qualitativo com um desenho fenomenológico. Foi aplicada uma entrevista aprofundada  
semi-estruturada a 6 casais de lésbicas e foi realizada uma análise do conteúdo temático híbrido.

#### Resultados

Os participantes experimentaram uma priorização do parceiro que implicava a modificação das  
suas actividades para lhe dar mais espaço, e uma voracidade afectiva baseada na procura de

contacto com o parceiro. Havia também a necessidade de agradar, procurando a aprovação e assumindo a culpa pelos problemas; e sentiram um medo de rejeição, particularmente face a uma possível ruptura.

### **Conclusão**

Em conclusão, as experiências de dependência em casais de lésbicas dificultaram-lhes a realização de actividades da sua escolha e a necessidade de atenção, com um desejo constante de serem incluídas e um medo de não serem amadas, inibindo assim o desenvolvimento normal da relação.

**Palavras-chave:** Dependência psicológica; Lésbica; Experiência de vida; Maus-tratos à companheira; Fenomenologia.

Several members of the Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Bisexual, and Intersex (LGBTI) community suffer from the effects of sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2015; Gutiérrez, 2021). Nonetheless, it is known that today, 26 countries belonging to the United Nations (UN) allow same-sex marriages, including some Latin American nations (Mendos, 2019). However, this is not the case in Peru, where only 27% of the population support it (Institut de Publique Sondage d'Opinion Secteur, 2022), thereby affecting the experiences of LGBTI couples, who cannot fully be themselves, which possibly weakens their relationships with their partners (Janicka, 2021).

The Peruvian Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática (INEI, National Statistics and Informatics Institute) conducted an online survey with 12,026 LGBTI people, of which 72% were between 18 and 29 years old. When asked if they suffered any health issues over the last 12 months, 47% replied affirmatively, and the rest highlighted mental health issues (depression and anxiety) (Saldaña & Vásquez, 2020). From the above sample, 48.7% were single, 46.8% had a partner, and 2.3% reported being involved in more than one relationship (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 2018).

Overall, studies regarding emotional dependency within the LGBTI community are quantitative, and their main objective is to prove its existence (Gómez & Montenegro, 2015; Rodríguez et al., 2019) or to find a connection with other variables (Ascurra & Mozo, 2021; Pérez Linares & Peralta Eugenio, 2019). According to Rodríguez et al. (2019), some of these studies indicate that emotional dependency in homosexual couples is even higher than in heterosexual and bisexual ones, although information in this regard is scarce.

Emotional dependency is the extreme need for affection that an individual feels toward a partner throughout different relationships (Castelló, 2005), making them feel incapable of neither ending their relationship nor imagining their lives without the other person (Skvortsova & Shumskiy, 2014). Their behaviors have a psychopathological basis that, to date, has not been categorized as a mental or personality disorder (Santamaría et al., 2015), even though therapists have addressed this issue with increasing frequency (Anguita, 2017; Salcedo & Serra, 2013).

Moral and Sirvent (2008) argue that emotionally dependent individuals tend to take a subordinate role, usually accepting humiliation and contempt from their partners as they ignore their faults or attempt to prevent their relationship from ending (Gómez & Montenegro, 2015; Pradas & Perles, 2012). Moreover, their romantic relationships are characterized by possessiveness and energy burnout, the inability to break ties, a desperate need for love, and unpleasant feelings such as guilt, fear of abandonment, and emptiness (Alvarado & Plasencia, 2019). In the same vein, Castelló (2012) claims that emotionally independent individuals are involved in intense romantic relationships, in which the most crucial aspect is to have someone by their side, and thus direct all their attention to their partners. They feel nothing is more important than their significant other, also experiencing the feeling of being unable to live without them (Rodríguez et al., 2019).

Regarding the above, Castelló (2012) indicates that the dimensions that make up emotional dependency include prioritizing the partner, where the affected individuals gradually stop doing activities that they used to do (Escobar & Sanchez, 2019), moving away from their closest circle so that nothing meddles in their relationship. However, affective greed makes the emotionally dependent individuals keep in constant contact with their partners, physically or through various means of communication (Castelló, 2012). In turn, the excessive tendency of exclusivity is the intense desire to have one's partner to oneself, avoiding events that involve others (Castelló, 2005).

Romantic idealization explains how dependent individuals usually overestimate and admire their partners, as they consider them superior. If a romantic breakup occurs, they feel devastated (Castelló, 2012). Furthermore, their need to please their partner arises because they seek to satisfy their loved ones, which is regarded as vital in their lives (Aiquipa, 2015; Gómez & Montenegro, 2015). As for low self-esteem, this absence leads to a greater desire to seek support from a partner (Urbiola et al., 2017). Therefore, the fear of loneliness manifests itself by constantly seeking to interact or hang out with different people (Alvarado & Plasencia, 2019; Castelló, 2005, 2012). Finally, in the case of fear of rejection, one of the two individuals accepts everything about the other, seeking full acceptance (Castelló, 2012).

Conversely, it is widely known that emotional dependency may trigger a type of anxious-depressive symptomatology (Ng & Bornstein, 2005; Shahar, 2008; Urbiola et al., 2014), as well as physical diseases (Bornstein, 2012; Porcerelli et al., 2009) caused by somatization (Bornstein & Gold, 2008). Likewise, emotionally dependent individuals score higher in different psychopathological symptoms, such as obsession-compulsion, hostility, and paranoid ideation (Albuín & Rivera, 2015; Santamaría et al., 2015), and are more likely to be involved in cases of violence (Aiquipa, 2015; Alvarado & Plasencia, 2019; Bornstein, 2006; Rodríguez et al., 2019) and legal matters (Germán, 2010).

As described above, it is evident that emotional dependency is relevant to mental health as it causes significant discomfort in the sufferers and their immediate environment (Bornstein, 2012). However, although it is a widely studied variable in the heterosexual population, the literature states that its study in homosexual couples is scarce (Rodríguez et al., 2019). In this regard, Pérez Linares and Peralta Eugenio (2019) suggest that emotional dependency in this population is directly and significantly related to high-risk sexual behavior. Additionally, as they show less interpersonal power, it is more difficult for them to ask their partners to use condoms (Bragard et al., 2021).

It is worth highlighting that as Peru is a country with high levels of discrimination toward the LGTBI community (Gutiérrez, 2021), only a handful of studies include this population, thereby ignoring the various problems they may experience in their relationships. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the experiences of emotional dependency in lesbian couples attending a private university from Metropolitan Lima.

## Method

### Study Design

The methodology adopted for this study was qualitative with a phenomenological design as it will allow for reflecting the participants' experiences and perceptions of this phenomenon. Specifically, hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 2015) will be adopted as the objective is to study the lived experience, as well as the explanation of phenomena as participants become aware of them.

## Participants

The participants, which included six couples (12 women) who were in a same-sex relationship (Table 1), were recruited using purposive, convenience sampling. The inclusion criteria were being a woman, being a university student aged 20–30 years, identifying as lesbians, attending a private university in Metropolitan Lima, and being in a relationship for at least three months exclusively with a person of the same sex at the time of the interview. Additionally, minors were excluded from the study. Choosing the number of participants was based on practical criteria of convenience, considering the difficulty of accessing this type of population in Peru. Participants were reached out to after key informants published a call for this study through a university social network (Robinson, 2014).

The participants were 20–27 years old ( $M = 23$ ). 67% participants stated that they had been in a relationship for a year or longer. Further, 83% reported having had a romantic relationship before the current one, whereas the rest were experiencing their first relationship.

**Table 1**

*Characteristics of participating couples*

Couples	Pseudonym	Age	Couple history	Time in relationship
Couple No. 1	Norma	23	4	1 year, 4 months
	Margarita	24	6	
Couple No. 2	Camila	20	1	10 months
	Lucia	21	2	
Couple No. 3	Ximena	20	2	3 months
	Nina	21	1	
Couple No. 4	Marta	24	4	1 year, 10 months
	Bárbara	22	5	
Couple No. 5	Mercedes	22	0	4 years, 4 months
	Cassandra	27	1	
Couple No. 6	Amelia	27	3	3 years
	Susana	24	0	

## Data Collection Tools

A semi-structured interview was conducted as it allowed for delving into the phenomenon under study (Brinkmann, 2013). The interview guide was developed based on a categorization matrix according to the research objectives (Elo et al., 2014) and the theoretical model proposed by Castelló (2012) and subsequently reviewed by three expert judges. A pilot interview was conducted with a couple who met the inclusion criteria, after which it was concluded that the questions in the instrument were clear, coherent, and representative (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Semi-structured interview guide*

Themes	Interview questions
Partner prioritization	How have your daily activities changed now that you are in a relationship? Has your partner ever asked you to cancel a social activity? What do you think of that? How do you feel about the time your partner spends with you?
Hunger for affection	How do you feel when your partner does not respond? What do you think? How do you feel if your partner does not want to do recreational activities with you?
Partner idealization	To what extent is your relationship affected when you don't do what your partner wants? How important is your partner's opinion? Why?
Low self-esteem	How do you feel when your partner tells you something you don't like? What changes do you think you should make for your partner to like you?
Need to please	Has your partner ever planned something without taking your opinion into account? What do you think of that? Why do you generally argue with your partner?
Fear of rejection	What is your opinion about a possible breakup with your partner?

## Procedures

The administrators of the social networks of LGBTI groups formed within a private university were contacted, and they were informed of the research objective. Later, the study team communicated with the individuals who met the study criteria and wished to contribute to this research. Once contacted, the study team, objectives, and interests were introduced. Next, online synchronic interviews were scheduled, which were to be attended by participants at their homes. The informed consent was read to them before conducting each interview, verbally accepted by those who wished to participate in the study. For ethical purposes, the identity of all participants was protected using pseudonyms. Moreover, they were informed that the interview would be recorded, also mentioning the confidential nature of the collected data. The interviews were held in April 2020, included both members of the couple, and lasted 40 minutes on average; the interviews were conducted by the first and last research authors (degree in clinical psychology and PhD/professor in psychology, respectively). None of the individuals refused to participate or dropped out of the study, and repeat interviews were not required. Furthermore, interviewers used a field journal to record the primary insights from the interviews.

As for the quality criteria (Mertens, 2015), dependency was considered, through the development of an analysis protocol detailing each step of the process; *credibility*, which involved checking the accuracy of the transcriptions, reviewed and commented on by the participants; and *confirmability*, from which the results are based on a logical chain of evidence present in the data analysis (Yin, 2018).

## Data Analysis

A hybrid thematic content analysis was carried out (Swain, 2018) based on the proposal by Braun and Clarke (2013). This modality was deemed relevant in terms of design as it allows for theoretically and empirically delving into the understanding of the phenomenon under study. The analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti 9 software, taking into account the following steps: (1) a preliminary deductive *codebook* was constructed, followed by (2) *data familiarization*, where interviews were literally transcribed (first author), and preliminary quotations were generated after reading. Next, inductive codes were created based on the empirical data analysis conducted. The coding process was carried out by the main researcher, and checked by the research team. This was followed by (3) the *theme search and review*, where categories of meaning were created from the data obtained. A semantic map and coding matrices were developed. The fourth step entailed (4) the *theme definition and naming*, for which the constant comparative method was used and the categories generated were verified. This process was carried out until data saturation was achieved, applying the criterion of representativeness, frequency, and density of categories (Miles et al., 2014). Finally, (5) *results were prepared*. At the end of the results preparation process, they were returned to the participants for their comments, after which the findings could be refined.

## Ethical Considerations

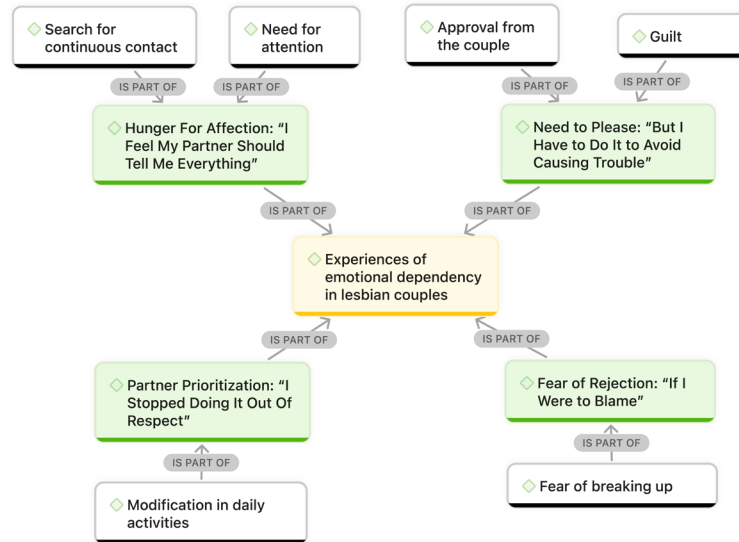
The research followed the standards set forth in the Helsinki declaration, as well as the ethical criteria indicated by the Colegio de Psicólogos del Perú (College of Psychologists of Peru) (Consejo Directivo Nacional, 2017).

## Results

Four categories were obtained regarding the experiences of emotional dependency in lesbian couples: partner prioritization; hunger for affection; need to please; and fear of rejection. Each of these was put into context by their corresponding sub-categories (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Semantic network of identified codes and categories*



### Partner Prioritization: "I Stopped Doing It Out of Respect"

This priority is experienced as an excessive desire not to allow anything to hinder the development of the bond with the partner. This leads to a modification in daily activities, where one of the members of the couple becomes the focus of attention of the other. Therefore, individual central plans begin taking a back seat to spending more time with their partners.

I used to hang out with my friends more often, sometimes going to the movies, other times to the park. Once I got into the relationship, I stopped doing all that out of respect, because I'm with her. I have to leave all that behind, although I don't stop talking to people, but I have to respect her [...] then, apart from all that, I think that's the only thing that has changed. As for the rest, I make the same plans as usual and keep doing what I used to do. (Lucia, 21 years old)

In line with the above, it is extremely important to point out that this is experienced as an everyday part of the relationship, as a way of paying respect to the partner and, finally, they downplay or normalize the dependent nature of the relationship.

### Hunger For Affection: "I Feel My Partner Should Tell Me Everything"

Hunger for affection is experienced as an excessive need of the dependent individuals to remain close to their partners, either in person, virtually (through social networks), or symbolically, to avoid dealing with the absence of that person, the subject of dependency. This category is experienced through a constant search for contact and the need for attention, with the utmost

desire to be in their partner's company and to have continuous communication to be aware of what may be happening in their lives.

Throughout the day, she can take a minute to text me, send me a voice message, or call me to let me know, for example: "my friends are coming over" or "I'm going to meet someone" [...] or "I'll call someone on the phone," etc. It's not a big deal [...] I feel she should tell me those things at some point. (Casandra, 27 years old)

As with the previous category, this hunger for affection is hidden behind discourses of care and concern for their partners. Moreover, the participants conclude that their partners fail to give them enough time, thereby demonstrating their need for attention and reinforcing their dependency.

### **Need to Please: "But I Have to Do It to Avoid Causing Trouble"**

This need arises in dependent individuals as a search for satisfaction from their partner in various contexts, waiting for their approval to perform a given activity. In this sense, participants experience guilt as they feel the responsibility of bearing the burden of the relationship problems. This illustrates the value that the interviewees place on the position of their partners, with a tendency to change their opinions or attitudes to satisfy them and maintain the illusion of harmony in the relationship.

When I came back from work, she started saying that I've been in the house all day, that I've not worked for a month, just doing nothing, and I can't even make the bed. So, to avoid that, I just make the bed or take out the garbage, you know what I mean? Or [...] I don't know, I tidy the house and do the laundry. I mean, if I was too lazy to wash my own clothes, imagine washing hers and mine, but I have to do it. I feel like I have to do things to avoid causing trouble. (Mercedes, 22 years old)

As can be seen, the participants sacrifice their own interests to avoid problems. It is inferred that the blame for this stems from the feeling of not having duly complied with their self-demands.

### **Fear of Rejection: "If I Were to Blame"**

In the couple, one partner experiences fear that the other may stop being affectionate and thinks that dealing with the possibility of not being in a relationship may be an unpleasant event. This is expressed as the fear of breaking up, which gives rise to the need to please the other. They experience sadness, guilt, and the desire to reverse the situation, no matter what must be done.

I'd be sad, probably crying if it's for something that no longer has a solution. I would try to restrain the desire to look for her, but I would of course be super sad or depressed. If it were something that might have a solution, I'd be depressed, but I would try to look for her if I were to blame [...] I'd call her, write to her, or something like that. (Amelia, 27 years old)

The results allow us to introduce the phenomenon of emotional dependency, exposing its dynamics through interrelated categories and subcategories. It is important to note that these categories are made explicit in the everyday environment, which normalizes this situation and even makes it desirable, as a model of a relationship in which the partner stops doing or does things for the benefit of the other. Consequently, the relationship is built upon a feeling of fear of rejection.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This research aimed to assess the experiences of emotional dependency in lesbian couples attending a private university from Metropolitan Lima. The four main categories found are consistent

with Castelló's findings (2012). Thus, regarding *Prioritizing the partner*, dependent individuals consider their partners as people who give meaning to their life (Gómez & Montenegro, 2015) and perceive that their world revolves around their significant other (Rodríguez et al., 2019), who gives them support (Urbiola et al., 2017), setting aside their family and/or friendship ties (Aiquipa, 2015). This leads to energy burnout with one or both individuals (Moral & Sirvent, 2008), thereby degrading the relationship as an imbalance in interpersonal power is seen (Bragard et al., 2021; Moral & Sirvent, 2008).

In line with the above, the hunger for affection experienced characterizes emotionally dependent relationships (Moral & Sirvent, 2008). In this type of relationship, one of the members, or both, actively seek to become part of their partners' daily activities (Gómez & Montenegro, 2015).

However, as for the need to please, what is described above is related to the need for acceptance as one of the individuals shows passive or submissive behaviors with the purpose of avoiding conflicts (Alvarado & Plasencia, 2019). The above may lead to a high-risk sexual behavior (Pérez Linares & Peralta Eugenio, 2019), resulting from partner idealization as they believe they are the most important thing in their lives and deserve everything (Aiquipa, 2015).

Finally, regarding fear of rejection, it is clear that dependent individuals are negatively affected by the idea of losing their partner (Gómez & Montenegro, 2015) and adopt subordinate behaviors, reaching the point of tolerating disdain or humiliation to retain or make the relationship last (Moral & Sirvent, 2008; Pradas & Perles, 2012).

Despite the results, it cannot be confirmed whether the participants are emotionally dependent. Conversely, we can assert that lesbian relationships, just like heterosexual ones, experience similar feelings in terms of the emotional dependency phenomenon (Alvarado & Plasencia, 2019; Escobar & Sanchez, 2019; Gómez & Montenegro, 2015). This preliminarily allows us to state that such experiences depend more on the dynamics of the interpersonal relationship than on sexual preference. Based on these findings, an intersectional view that considers the different limitations for lesbians to fully live their identity should be adopted (Janicka, 2021).

It can be concluded that dependency in lesbian couples is experienced through four categories as participants stated that they prioritize their partner, giving up activities they liked or other responsibilities to spend more time with them or to avoid conflicts. Moreover, as for hunger for affection, participants describe the desire for their partners to always include them in their plans and to keep them up to date with their partners' activities. Conversely, in the case of *Need to please*, their desire to satisfy their partners prevents them from developing naturally, showing significant changes in their environment, as they are seeking approval from their partners and feel guilty. Finally, as for the fear of rejection by their partners, participants expressed the concern about losing their current relationship, which confirms they are afraid they may break up.

Finally, it is worth highlighting that there are limited sources of information related to emotional dependency in lesbian couples. Further, participant recruitment was also limited as this population is still stigmatized in Peru, which affects our outreach. Similarly, non face-to-face interviews made it impossible to see the non-verbal behavior of the interviewees. However, it allowed them to express themselves more freely as they were protected by the anonymous nature of the study.

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