

## Exploring the Impact of Maternal Rejection on Emerging Adult Women

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### Abstract

An insecure mother-daughter relationship resulting from maternal rejection can have long-term effects on the psychological development of emerging adult women. However, in-depth understanding based on subjective experiences remains limited. This study aims to explore the impact of maternal rejection through the lens of IPARTTheory, focusing on how experiences of perceived rejection are interpreted, internalized, and carried into adulthood in this context. A qualitative phenomenological study was conducted with five women aged 20–30 years through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Maternal rejection was interpreted as an insecure relational experience that affects relational conflict, ongoing internal conflict, physical condition, and parenting patterns, accompanied by the development of adaptive strategies by the participants. These findings underscore the significance of maternal rejection as a relational factor with enduring effects and highlight its importance in the context of psychological development and intervention.

**Keywords :** Maternal rejection, emerging adult women, mother.

### Abstrak

*Hubungan ibu-anak perempuan yang tidak aman akibat penolakan maternal dapat memiliki dampak jangka panjang pada perkembangan psikologis wanita dewasa muda. Namun, pemahaman mendalam berdasarkan pengalaman subjektif masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi dampak penolakan maternal melalui lensa Teori IPAR, dengan fokus pada bagaimana pengalaman penolakan yang dirasakan diinterpretasikan, diinternalisasi, dan dibawa hingga dewasa dalam konteks ini. Penelitian fenomenologis kualitatif dilakukan dengan lima wanita berusia 20–30 tahun melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dan dianalisis menggunakan Analisis Fenomenologis Interpretatif (IPA). Penolakan maternal diinterpretasikan sebagai pengalaman relasional yang tidak aman yang memengaruhi konflik relasional, konflik internal yang berkelanjutan, kondisi fisik, dan pola pengasuhan, disertai dengan perkembangan strategi adaptif oleh para peserta. Temuan ini menekankan pentingnya penolakan dari ibu sebagai faktor hubungan yang memiliki efek jangka panjang dan menyoroti pentingnya hal ini dalam konteks perkembangan psikologis dan intervensi.*

**Kata kunci:** Penolakan ibu, perempuan dewasa muda, ibu.

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The developmental dynamics of women in emerging adulthood are often unique and cannot be fully explained by Erikson's classical model, which is oriented toward male experiences, because women tend to experience the development of identity and intimacy simultaneously rather than sequentially as described by Erikson (Butterbaugh & Wood, 2020). This occurs because the primary mechanism of women's identity development lies in connectedness with others rather than separation from others (Josselson, 1987, 1998, 2017; Butterbaugh & Wood, 2020).

This relationally oriented development helps explain why women, particularly within the family context, are more actively involved in building and maintaining emotional closeness with their parents, which is subsequently manifested in higher levels of social support provided to them (Fingerman et al., 2020; Silverstein et al., 1997, in Hwang et al., 2023). This indicates that gender-based differences in roles and closeness also influence parent-child relationships. Studies that differentiate parent-child gender combinations are therefore relevant, as intergenerational bonds have been found to be strongest in mother-daughter relationships, followed by mother-son, father-daughter, and lastly father-son relationships (Nauck & Streinbach, 2010, in Hwang et al., 2023). Daughters demonstrate stronger normative responsibilities toward their parents than sons, which appears to be related to the socialization of daughters into caregiving roles within the family (Gans & Silverstein, 2006, in Hwang et al., 2023). This tendency further explains the closer relational patterns between daughters and mothers, in which mothers play a greater role in various aspects of children's lives compared to fathers, thereby reinforcing that mother-daughter relationships are closer than father-son relationships across multiple dimensions of contact and support (Fingerman et al., 2020; Silverstein et al., 1997, in Hwang et al., 2023).

Mother-daughter relationships play an important lifelong role in development throughout adulthood (Carboneau et al., 2020). Women's roles within the family develop gradually with age, beginning with daughters learning to understand responsibilities and self-expectations through observation and experiences with their mothers, until ultimately these role understandings are formed through everyday social interactions (Alford & Harrigan, 2019, in Nerviadi & Nurwianti, 2024). Nevertheless, daughters may still experience difficulties in understanding the complexity of the roles and demands they carry and in communicating the obstacles they face; thus, despite the significance of these roles, they continue to encounter various limitations and challenges in daily life (Nerviadi & Nurwianti, 2024). These conditions contribute to increased psychological distress among daughters who have entered adulthood, particularly when they experience confusion related to changes in social roles, responsibilities toward family financial conditions, and less harmonious family backgrounds, such as poor relationships with their mothers since childhood (Matud et al., 2020; Wang & Bartholomae, 2022; Losada-Baltar et al., 2021, in Nerviadi & Nurwianti, 2024).

Disharmonious mother-child relationships are consistent with experiences of parental rejection during childhood, which are crucial in shaping maladaptive adjustment patterns and may sustain acceptance-rejection syndrome into adulthood (Rohner et al., 2020). Individuals'

experiences of parental rejection include cold and unaffectionate behavior, hostility and aggression, indifference and neglect, and undifferentiated rejection (Rohner, 2021).

Experiences of maternal rejection since childhood are particularly relevant because early child-caregiver relationships play an important role in the formation of trust and attachment. Children who experience trauma during the basic trust versus mistrust stage tend to be unable to trust caregivers, especially when the source of trauma is the caregiver themselves (Clark, 2021). Attachment relationships under conditions of neglect or abusive treatment may be disrupted because children do not receive the comfort, affection, and stability they need (Clark, 2021). Non-protective family environments resulting from violence and neglect also contribute to the development of mistrust and insecurity in children (Kaiser, 2020). Erikson emphasized that failure to meet psychosocial needs at early developmental stages can negatively affect personality formation across subsequent stages of development (Kaiser, 2020).

Based on preliminary interview results conducted with two emerging adult women, a general picture emerged indicating that both had experienced maternal rejection. One emerging adult woman, identified as CK, stated that she had experienced verbally aggressive rejection and undifferentiated rejection from her mother, particularly when her parents decided to divorce while CK was still a child. CK explained that she frequently experienced poor communication with her mother, which often escalated into intense arguments. CK described that her mother consistently engaged in one-way communication accompanied by hurtful verbal insults, resulting in CK feeling that she had no opportunity to fully express her emotions and did not receive validation or affection as a daughter should from her mother. These negative feelings were further reinforced when CK became aware that her mother had received psychiatric treatment due to psychosomatic conditions. CK's experiences with her mother became one of the factors contributing to anxiety symptoms, leading CK to seek psychiatric treatment.

Children's perceptions of parental acceptance-rejection have been shown to have a significant impact on psychological well-being, particularly through increased internalizing and externalizing behaviors across development (Rothenberg et al., 2021, in Liu et al., 2024). According to acceptance-rejection syndrome, individuals who experience high levels of parental rejection tend to develop maladaptive personality dispositions, including hostility and aggression, dependency, negative self-esteem, negative self-adequacy, emotional unresponsiveness, emotional instability, a negative worldview, anxiety, insecurity, and cognitive distortions (Rohner, 2004, in Kayha & Akbas, 2025). These dispositions may be associated with maternal rejection experienced during childhood and individuals' adjustment in adulthood (Kayha & Akbas, 2025). In the context of mother-child relationships, the term maternal rejection, meaning "rejection by the mother," is conceptually aligned with emotional abuse, as parental rejection can be equated with emotional maltreatment of children, including hurtful words, cold behavior, and indifference (Rohner & Rohner, 1980, in Son et al., 2020).

Maternal rejection tends to act as a trigger for anxiety, which can lead to low self-worth, a characteristic commonly associated with attachment anxiety (Kayha & Akbas, 2025). Adults with high levels of attachment anxiety tend to have a greater fear of rejection and rely excessively on attachment figures to obtain validation and a sense of worth (Kayha & Akbas, 2025).

In this regard, individuals' relational experiences with their mothers play an important role in the psychological condition of emerging adult women. However, research on maternal rejection has been predominantly dominated by quantitative approaches that tend to generalize experiences, resulting in limited in-depth understanding of its impact within the broader life context of emerging adult women. Therefore, this study is important to explore the impact of maternal rejection as experienced and interpreted by emerging adult women in their lives.

## Method

This study employs a qualitative approach, as qualitative research aims to explore and understand the subjective meanings experienced by individuals or groups in relation to social or human phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). A qualitative approach is also used when researchers seek to examine psychological realities formed through relational experiences rather than to test hypotheses or measure variables statistically (Sahir, 2021). In accordance with the objective of this study, which focuses on exploring the experiences of emerging adult women who have experienced maternal rejection since childhood, a phenomenological design was employed.

Phenomenological research is used because this approach originates from philosophy and psychology, in which researchers explore participants' lived experiences of a phenomenon to identify the essence of shared meanings, typically through in-depth interviews (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994, in Creswell & Creswell, 2023). In phenomenology, researchers engage in epoché or bracketing, which involves suspending judgments about natural attitudes until a foundational understanding is reached (Naamy, 2019). This design was chosen because it is relevant to the characteristics of the study, which seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of the impact of maternal rejection within the context of emerging adulthood.

### Participant

Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling based on several criteria. The criteria for research subjects included: (1) Women between 20-30 years of age; (2) Unmarried; (3) Having experienced maternal rejection since childhood, and (4) has previously received psychological or psychiatric treatment. Based on these criteria, five participants were recruited.

### Data Collection Techniques

Data collection in this study was conducted through in-depth interviews. According to Esterberg, an interview is a process of exchanging information and ideas through question-and-answer interactions involving two or more individuals, which allows for the construction of meaning regarding a particular topic being discussed (Sugiyono, 2023).

This study employed semi-structured interviews as the data collection technique, as this type of interview provides flexibility for participants to narrate their experiences in depth while also enabling researchers to identify issues more openly (Sugiyono, 2023). Semi-structured interviews are considered part of the in-depth interview category because they allow researchers to explore information more deeply, openly, and contextually by encouraging participants to freely express their views and thoughts (Sugiyono, 2023). Semi-structured interviews were selected because they are consistent with the phenomenological approach, which emphasizes the exploration of participants' subjective perceptions of the research issue, allowing interview questions to vary across participants (Sahir, 2021). The interview guide in this study was developed based on the dimensions of IPARTheory.

### Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) through six systematic stages: (1) *reading and re-reading* to immerse the researcher in participants' narratives, (2) *initial noting* to generate detailed descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments, (3) *developing emergent themes* to identify core meanings from the data, (4) *searching for connections across themes* to organize themes into a coherent conceptual structure, (5) *moving to the next case* by repeating the analytic process for each participant while

maintaining bracketing, and (6) *looking for patterns across cases* to identify shared meanings across participants (Smith et al., 2009).

## Results

The findings from the interviews with participants indicate that two emergent themes were identified among individuals who experienced maternal rejection. The first theme concerns the impacts of maternal rejection experiences, which include a decline in physical condition, relational conflict, ongoing internal conflict, and the redefinition of parenting patterns. The second theme relates to strategies for coping with experiences of maternal rejection, encompassing contrasting physical distance, coping mechanisms, self-acceptance and adaptation, and hopes toward the mother.

**Tabel 1. Interviews**

	Theme	Subtheme
The impact of Maternal Rejection	Impact of Maternal Rejection	Decline in Physical Condition Relational Conflict Ongoing Internal Conflict Redefinition of Parenting Patterns
	Coping Strategies	Contrasting Physical Distance Coping Mechanism Self-Acceptance and Adaptation Hope toward the mother

### **Theme 1: Impact of Maternal Rejection**

#### a. Decline in Physical Condition

This emergent theme describes participants' experiences in which the complexity of the mother–daughter relationship manifested in a decline in physical well-being. In this study, one out of five participants experienced a deterioration in physical condition associated with emotional distress. Participant HN reported that a tendency to suppress emotions without receiving validation or support adversely affected her physical health, ultimately requiring medical treatment in the form of surgery.

*“Pokoknya aku sendiri aja aku pendem, akhirnya aku masuk rumah sakit aku masuk rumah sakit karena aku usus buntu, jadi jatuhnya larinya ke sakit fisik ya gitu. kan. Karena aku tuh terlalu banyak terlalu banyak menahan semuanya tanpa validasi orang-orang di sekitarku yang peduli sama aku dan disitu aku jalanin... aku jalanin masuk ke 2023 setelah operasi.”*

This finding suggests that maternal rejection may impact not only psychological functioning but also manifest in physical health complaints, particularly when emotional distress is unexpressed and individuals lack a safe space for emotional validation.

#### b. Relational Conflict

In this study, all participants experienced relational conflict associated with maternal rejection. This emergent theme describes participants' experiences of tension and difficulty in forming and maintaining interpersonal relationships, both with their

mothers and with others outside the family. In this study, all five participants experienced relational conflict associated with maternal rejection.

Relational conflict related to romantic relationship dynamics was experienced by SN. SN reflected on patterns of negative treatment that mirrored those she had received from her mother. She described this pattern as a contributing factor to the dissolution of her romantic relationship at a stage when it was approaching marriage.

*“Baru aja kejadian saya ini... tahun ini tuh ngerencanain buat nikah, pengen banget melangsungkan pernikahan tapi malah banyak berkonflik sama pasangan saya.”*

*“Pasangan saya tuh bilang kalau lama-lama saya itu jadi keliatan kayak mamah sifatnya, tuh. Jadi kayak mamah contohnya suka menghindari masalah, menghindari konflik, lalu saya takut buat ngehadepin kemarahan pasangan.”*

c. On-Going Internal Conflict

In this study, all participants experienced ongoing internal conflict that was shaped and intensified by experiences of maternal rejection. HH reported that the various demands she experienced triggered anxiety about making mistakes, which subsequently developed into irrational thought patterns, such as the belief that the world would condemn her for any error.

*“Maksudnya kalau aku ngelakuin kesalahan itu... seakan-akan tuh... dunia tuh seketika mengecam aku juga gitu, loh.”*

*“Jadi kayak aku gak boleh ngelakuin kesalahan. Aku gak boleh ngelakuin kebodohan. Terus aku dituntut jadi anak yang harus tumbuh.... dengan seenggaknya harus bisa sempurna. Karena aku kan anak terakhir juga. Jadi aku harus bisa melakukan berbagai macam hal.”*

As a result of these persistent demands, HH developed a pattern of dissatisfaction with her achievements.

d. Redefinition of Parenting Patterns

In this study, all participants experienced a redefinition of parenting patterns, in which they came to recognize that the parenting they received from their mothers was maladaptive. HN reported difficulty recalling when her mother began treating her children poorly, as her memories primarily consisted of her mother's perceived mistakes during her school years. Over time, HN came to realize that her emerging sister had also experienced similar maternal rejection.

*“Saya tuh sempet bingung kapan di saat momen kecil saya... itu saya ngerasa ibu saya itu salah... itu saya kemudian nggak ngerasa sama sekali, karena saya cuma ngeliat yang salah saat itu adalah mama saya.”*

*“Aku nggak tahu mungkin itu kesepian atau apa., dulu kan nggak ngerti aku ngerasain apa.”*

Subsequently, HN engaged in journaling, which facilitated reflection on her relationship with her mother and increased awareness of how maternal parenting patterns had influenced her psychological condition.

*“Makanya aku journaling, aku menulis, terus juga aku refleksi diri kayak apa sih yang gue lakuin ketika gue kecil gitu.”*

### **Theme 2: Coping Strategies**

#### **a. Contrasting Physical Distance**

In this study, three out of five participants reported improvements in their relationships with their mothers, which were influenced by increased physical distance and reduced interaction intensity. Based on HN's account, she began to create physical distance as a form of self-protection and emotional regulation, while simultaneously restructuring her relationship with her parents in a more controlled manner.

*“Aku memutuskan untuk keluar dari rumah karena rasanya gak belong to home aja kayak ada sesuatu yang terputus disana. Kayak aku udah bener-bener kehilangan diri aku aja aku memutuskan untuk ngekos pulang juga seperlunya.”*

*“Dari hubungan ini jadi aku kabur. Aku coba cari pindah kerja gitu, dan mungkin dari jalannya kali ya, aku jadinya pindah ke luar negeri, ke tempat dimana dia gak bisa ngejar dan menjangkau aku, ya. Dan aku juga jadi jauh dari orang tuaku gitu kan, bener-bener terus saat itu aku mikirnya kayak gue cuma mau lari dari stressor ini semuanya, dari orangtua, dari omongan orang lain.”*

HN's decision to maintain distance evolved from an initial physical separation within the same region to a transnational physical distance.

#### **b. Coping Mechanism**

In this study, all participants employed their own coping mechanisms. One of them was CK who employed a coping mechanism by intentionally attempting to forget distressing childhood memories, which resulted in limited recall of her early life experiences.

*“Saya tuh sejurnya saya kurang bisa mengingat masa kecil saya. Karena mungkin kalau ada orang bilang, dulu tuh saya ada omongan kayak misalnya kalau memori kecil pas jelek tuh harus dilupain aja.”*

CK also accepted her mother's invitation to attend psychiatric consultations together. Although the sessions were initially situational, CK acknowledged feeling better after engaging in self-reflection techniques introduced during the psychiatric sessions, despite not having fully recovered.

*“[...] Yang saya mencoba tuh kayak yaudah ayo gitu. Sekalian juga kan... Pada saat itu bareng-bareng ke psikiaternya kan juga sama mama. Jadi kayak... Ya sekalian aja daripada saya cuma nunggu gitu.”*

#### **c. Self-Acceptance and Adaptation**

In this study, four out of five participants demonstrated processes of self-acceptance and adaptation in response to their experiences of maternal rejection. One example is CK, who engaged in acceptance and adaptation through efforts to communicate with her mother, although not frequently.

*“Tapi overall karena saya sekarang juga udah gede ya, jadi saya bisa memahami dan bisa berdiskusi sekarang sedikit-sedikit, walaupun nggak banyak ya, bisa memahami kenapa beliau melakukan itu dulu pas saya kecil.”*

In addition, CK attempted to consider her mother's wishes rather than responding with direct rejection or expressing negative emotions during interactions. She was able to identify positive aspects of her mother's intentions by understanding her mother's perspective and engaging in more reflective and limited communication.

*“Jujur kadang kurang setuju dengan pendapat Mama dan pikiran Mama. Tapi ada kalanya saya nekat itu ada yang berhasil, ada yang nggak. Jadi saya nanti ujung-ujungnya balik lagi ke Mama saya, ngadu lagi kayak, oh iya ya harusnya kalau nurutin apa kata Mama kayak gini ya.”*

*“Kalau misalnya mau ngomong sesuatu atau segala macem, saya harus mempersiapkan dulu mental saya. Terus kayak biar, ya jangan kesel deh, cuma mau ngomong biasa aja.”*

d. Hope toward the mother

In this study, all participants expressed hopes toward their mothers. SN articulated hopes focused on her mother's emotional healing and the establishment of a relationship that no longer involved mutual emotional harm, even in the absence of close emotional intimacy.

*“Saya berharapnya mama saya suatu hari bisa berdamai dengan lukanya. Bisa sembuh dengan sakit hatinya yang dia dapetin dalam pernikahan.”*

## Discussion

The results indicate that maternal rejection continues to shape emotional, relational, and self-related processes into emerging adulthood, rather than remaining a past experience. These impacts appear in interconnected forms, including physical health decline, recurring relational conflict, ongoing internal conflict, and the redefinition of perceived parenting patterns.

One notable finding is the emergence of physical health deterioration as an impact of prolonged emotional suppression without validation or support, suggesting that maternal rejection may be embodied when emotional distress remains unexpressed. Beyond physical consequences, all participants experienced relational conflict across mother-daughter, interpersonal, and romantic relationships, marked by emotional tension, jealousy, fear of conflict, and the repetition of maladaptive relational patterns learned in childhood. These dynamics support findings that maternal rejection contributes to relational patterns such as conflict avoidance (Alford, 2021).

All participants also demonstrated ongoing internal conflict characterized by anxiety, negative self-evaluation, emotional dysregulation, and persistent self-doubt. These findings are consistent with evidence linking maternal rejection to low self-esteem and negative worldviews (Turkdogan, 2021), as well as attachment anxiety and mood-related symptoms (Kayha & Akbaş, 2025). Frequent anger expression and difficulties in sustaining romantic relationships further support the notion that unresolved psychosocial crises may develop into hostility (Nooradia, 2016, in Rizki, 2024).

Alongside these impacts, participants redefined their understanding of parenting in adulthood through reflective processes, recognizing the maladaptive nature of the parenting they received. Overall, these findings align with Erikson's stage of intimacy versus isolation, which posits that isolation may develop when individuals fail to establish secure emotional bonds (Rizki, 2022). Furthermore, the findings support the intergenerational transmission of maladaptive parenting patterns, indicating that parental rejection may be passed down through parenting practices shaped by mothers' own childhood experiences (Guzel & Osmanoglu, 2023).

The findings show that emerging adult women employ multiple coping strategies in responding to maternal rejection, including increased physical distance, diverse coping mechanisms, self-acceptance, and adjusted expectations toward their mothers. Three participants reported improved mother-child relationships following increased physical distance, which created emotionally safer interactions and reduced conflict.

All participants developed individualized coping mechanisms based on their emotional needs, including confrontation, avoidance, reliance on supportive figures, professional help, journaling, and social connection. The use of friendships and broader social engagement supports the view that individuals who successfully navigate crises tend to channel love through friendships and community (Rizki, 2024).

Over time, most participants demonstrated acceptance and adaptation by reframing their relationships with their mothers more realistically and shifting from idealized expectations toward manageable relational boundaries. Although all participants retained hope toward their mothers, these hopes became simpler and more attainable, reflecting psychological adaptation and self-protection. Overall, participants increasingly invested emotional energy in relationships beyond the mother-child bond while maintaining their personal identity, a process consistent with Erikson's concept of intimacy (Erikson, 1950, in Nuurmahsa & Maghfiroh, 2025).

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that experiences of maternal rejection among emerging adult women originate in childhood and are reflectively interpreted in adulthood. Although mother-daughter relationship dynamics varied across participants, similar meaning-making patterns emerged, particularly maternal emotional unavailability and limited affective warmth. Maternal rejection developed from mothers' life dynamics, such as insecure marriages, compensation for lived experiences, and histories of maladaptive parenting, which contributed to relational conflict, ongoing internal conflict, physical health decline in one participant, and the redefinition of parenting patterns. Despite these impacts, participants exhibited adaptive efforts through regulating relational distance, employing coping mechanisms, engaging in self-acceptance, and forming more realistic expectations toward their mothers to maintain psychological functioning.

## Recommendations

Future research is encouraged to further explore maternal rejection by involving more diverse participants in terms of cultural background, marital status, and broader age ranges, as well as by applying alternative qualitative approaches or mixed methods to complement phenomenological findings.

Emerging adult women who experience maternal rejection are encouraged to reflect on their relational experiences without excessive self-blame, seek professional support, build safe support systems, and develop adaptive coping strategies, while recognizing that maternal rejection reflects complex relational dynamics rather than personal inadequacy.

Mothers of daughters are encouraged to increase awareness of the importance of emotional presence, warmth, and affective validation, balance material provision with consistent emotional involvement, and engage in self-reflection or professional support to prevent the repetition of maladaptive parenting patterns.

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