

Emotional Bond Reflected In Donny's Character In *Baby Reindeer* Movie

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Abstract :

This study analyzes the representation of *emotional bond* in *Baby Reindeer* movie, focusing on Donny's emotional attachment to his abuser. *Emotional bond* refers to a strong psychological connection that develops between individuals through repeated emotional interaction, vulnerability, and dependency. Using a qualitative descriptive method, this research examines selected dialogues and scenes to identify patterns of emotional dependency, empathy toward the abuser, cognitive conflict, and self-blame. The findings show that Donny's attachment is not rooted in genuine affection, but in fear, vulnerability, and the need for validation. The series portrays emotional bonding as a complex psychological condition that keeps individuals connected to harmful relationships even without physical captivity. This study highlights how contemporary media represents emotional entanglement and the psychological impact of abusive dynamics.

Keywords : Baby Reindeer, Donny, Emotional Bond

INTRODUCTION

Abusive relationships are often difficult to understand from a rational perspective. Many victims remain emotionally attached to those who hurt them, even when they experience ongoing psychological harm. This attachment can be understood as an *emotional bond*, a psychological connection formed through repeated emotional interaction, vulnerability, and dependency. Emotional attachment is considered a fundamental human need that involves feelings of closeness and connection with others (Aggarwal & Singh, 2024). When this need develops within unhealthy relational patterns, it may create a strong bond that is difficult to break. In contemporary media, abusive dynamics are no longer portrayed only through physical confinement, but also through digitally mediated relationships. The Netflix limited series *Baby Reindeer* (2024) presents this complexity through the character of Donny, who develops an emotional attachment to his stalker despite experiencing continuous psychological distress.

The main issue addressed in this study is how an *emotional bond* can develop within an abusive relationship that does not involve physical captivity. Emotional bonds are often strengthened by repeated interaction, emotional reinforcement, and the desire for validation (Al-Janaby & AlHusseini, 2024). In some cases, victims may rationalize harmful behavior as a coping strategy in order to maintain emotional stability. Similarly, Mengo et al. (2022) argue that unstable relational patterns, especially those involving alternating attention and withdrawal, can intensify emotional dependency. This dynamic can lead individuals to remain emotionally connected even when the relationship causes harm.

Previous studies have explored emotional attachment in abusive contexts. As (Dorey, 2022) explains that repeated cycles of emotional reinforcement and distress can create a strong attachment that makes separation psychologically challenging. According to (Sidiropoulou, 2024) highlights that emotional attachment may become stronger during periods of distance or silence, as individuals begin to question their own reactions and long for previous interaction. According to (Wahyuningrat et al., 2025) further emphasize that repeated emotional communication in media narratives can reinforce psychological closeness between characters, shaping audience understanding of relational dynamics.

Although these studies provide valuable insights, most focus on real-life abusive relationships or general toxic dynamics. Research that specifically examines the representation of *emotional bond* in digitally mediated stalking narratives such as *Baby Reindeer* remains limited. Existing discussions of the series tend to focus on masculinity, conflict, or narrative structure rather than the psychological mechanism of emotional attachment. This gap indicates the need for a focused analysis of how emotional bonding is portrayed in modern abusive relationships without physical confinement but through persistent emotional interaction and manipulation.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the representation of *emotional bond* in *Baby Reindeer* (2024), particularly through Donny's emotional dependency, empathy toward the abuser, cognitive conflict, and self-blame. This research is expected to provide a clearer understanding of how contemporary media portrays emotional attachment within harmful relationships and to contribute to discussions on psychological abuse in modern society.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to examine the representation of *trauma bond* in the Netflix limited series *Baby Reindeer* (2024). A qualitative approach is chosen because the research focuses on interpreting psychological meanings, emotional expressions, and relational dynamics rather than numerical measurement. The primary data source is the series itself, particularly dialogues, monologues, and selected scenes involving Donny that reflect emotional attachment, dependency,

empathy toward the abuser, cognitive conflict, and self-blame. Secondary data are obtained from relevant books and recent scholarly articles related to *trauma bond*, psychological abuse, and emotional attachment. The data were collected by repeatedly watching the series, identifying and transcribing significant dialogues, and selecting scenes that indicate patterns of abusive emotional dynamics. The data were then categorized based on psychological indicators and analyzed using a psychological approach to explain how emotional attachment is formed and maintained within an abusive relationship, ultimately revealing how *trauma bond* is represented through Donny's character in the series.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The analysis shows that Donny's emotional attachment to Martha develops through patterns of dependency, fear, internal conflict, and psychological influence, which indicate the presence of an *emotional bond*. Based on the analysis of selected dialogues and scenes, several indicators of emotional bonding are identified. These findings are presented and discussed through the following data:

Data 1

Donny V.O: "I couldn't sleep that night for fear of Martha finding out about Teri." (Richard Gadd, Eps II, 06:50)

The quotation occurs when Donny is unable to sleep after starting a relationship with Teri while Martha is still actively stalking him. At this moment, he expresses fear that Martha might discover his new relationship, which shows that her psychological presence continues to dominate his thoughts. The phrase "fear of Martha" reflects his deep anxiety and emotional entanglement, indicating that he has not fully detached from her influence. Meanwhile, the expression "finding out about Teri" highlights his concern that his personal life could be disrupted, suggesting that his new relationship exists under the shadow of Martha's control. Although he is physically separate from her, his emotional state remains shaped by her actions, demonstrating that his sense of safety is fragile and easily destabilized.

This reaction reveals that Donny continues to live in a state of psychological fear, where Martha's influence affects his thoughts, emotional responses, and ability to feel secure in forming a healthy relationship. His fear overrides his independence, showing that he is still emotionally connected to the source of distress. In line with (Aggarwal and Singh, 2024), emotional attachment is a fundamental human need involving feelings of connection and closeness that significantly influence psychological responses. In this case, Donny's anxiety demonstrates that Martha still holds emotional control over him, as his behavior is driven more by fear and anticipation of her reaction than by confidence or emotional freedom.

Data 2

Donny: "Everywhere I turned, she just seemed to be there, popping up at the most inopportune moments to talk about our future together." (Richard Gadd, Eps II, 12:17)

The quotation occurs when Donny is carrying out his daily activities, such as going to work and moving through public spaces, yet Martha repeatedly appears without invitation and speaks about "our future together" as if their relationship is already established. This situation creates emotional pressure, as Martha assumes a level of commitment that Donny has never agreed to. The phrase "our future together" suggests emotional closeness and certainty, transforming what should be casual interaction into something intense and possessive. Donny's reaction reflects confusion and discomfort, as he feels increasingly trapped in an assumed intimacy that he does not fully accept but also struggles to firmly reject.

This response demonstrates emotional entanglement, as Martha's constant presence and imagined future impose a sense of closeness that places psychological pressure on Donny. Instead of clearly setting boundaries, he remains hesitant, which indicates that he is already emotionally affected by the dynamic. According to (Aggarwal and Singh, 2024), emotional attachment develops through feelings of connection and closeness between individuals. In this case, the assumed shared future constructs a forced emotional proximity that influences Donny's emotional state. Although he does not openly reciprocate Martha's expectations, her persistent behavior creates a bond that leaves him feeling pressured and psychologically confined.

Data 3

Donny V.O: "It all just seemed too simple, too easy." (Richard Gadd, Eps III, 12:02)

The quotation occurs when Donny is sitting on a bus and reflecting on his early interactions with Martha, which initially felt harmless and uncomplicated. At that time, he describes the situation as "too simple, too easy," suggesting that he felt comfortable and emotionally relaxed in her presence. This sense of ease made him lower his guard and allow the interaction to continue without caution. The phrase reflects how emotional closeness can develop subtly, as Donny did not perceive any immediate threat and therefore did not establish boundaries. His comfort becomes the starting point of an emotional connection that grows gradually without his full awareness.

This moment demonstrates the early formation of emotional attachment, as Donny's feeling of safety and simplicity encourages him to accept Martha's presence without resistance. According to (Aggarwal and Singh, 2024), emotional attachment naturally develops when individuals experience closeness and emotional comfort with others. In this case, Donny's description of the interaction as "too simple, too easy" indicates how emotional comfort can create openness, allowing attachment to form before its consequences are fully realized. His reflection shows that what once felt harmless later became the foundation of a deeper emotional entanglement.

Data 4

Donny : "It all just came back to those same feelings of empathy which got me here." (Richard Gadd, Eps III, 15:22)

The quotation occurs when Donny sees Martha standing outside his house as he is about to leave, prompting him to reflect on why he remains involved with her despite the growing discomfort. In this moment, he realizes that his feelings of

empathy repeatedly draw him back into the situation. The phrase suggesting that these feelings “came back” indicates that his emotional response is not temporary but recurring. Rather than responding with anger or firm boundaries, Donny feels sorry for Martha and worries about hurting her feelings. This pattern shows that his empathy becomes a powerful emotional link that continues to influence his behavior, even when the relationship is clearly harmful.

This reaction demonstrates a sustained emotional attachment, as Donny’s compassion overrides his need for self-protection. His empathy does not weaken over time; instead, it resurfaces and keeps him emotionally connected. According to (Aggarwal and Singh, 2024), emotional attachment naturally develops through feelings of closeness and emotional comfort between individuals. In this case, Donny’s recurring empathy functions as the foundation of his attachment, repeatedly pulling him back into the same harmful dynamic. Although the situation becomes increasingly damaging, his emotional bond prevents him from fully detaching, reinforcing the psychological entanglement between them.

Data 5

Donny: “I spent all night panicking, thinking of the things Martha could do now she knew where I lived.”
(Richard Gadd, Eps III, 11:21)

The quotation occurs when Martha discovers where Donny lives, causing her stalking behavior to intensify. As a result, Donny stays awake throughout the night, overwhelmed by panic and imagining what she might do. His reaction shows that Martha’s presence extends beyond physical proximity and continues to occupy his thoughts. The expression of “panicking” reflects the intensity of his emotional response, while his fear of “the things Martha could do” indicates that she still holds psychological power over him. Even in the absence of direct confrontation, her actions dominate his mental state and disrupt his sense of security within his own home.

This moment demonstrates that Donny remains emotionally affected by Martha, as fear becomes the dominant force shaping his reactions. Her influence controls his thoughts, sleep, and perception of safety, suggesting a persistent emotional attachment. According to (Aggarwal and Singh, 2024), emotional attachment creates a strong psychological connection in which one person’s presence significantly affects another’s emotional state. In this case, Donny’s inability to rest and his heightened anxiety show that Martha continues to exert emotional control over him, reinforcing the ongoing emotional bond between them despite the harm it causes.

Data 6

Donny: “Martha saw me the way I wanted to be seen.” (Richard Gadd, Eps IV, 41:40)

The quotation occurs when Donny reflects on why he finds it difficult to report Martha to the authorities. In this moment, he realizes that despite her harmful behavior, she once made him feel emotionally validated during a time when he felt insecure and unnoticed. The phrases “saw me,” “the way I wanted,” and “to be seen” reveal his deep need for emotional recognition and acceptance. These expressions indicate that Martha’s attention fulfilled a personal vulnerability, making him feel understood in a way that he desired. This sense of being acknowledged becomes a significant emotional factor that complicates his decision to detach from her.

This reaction demonstrates the formation of an emotional bond rooted in validation rather than safety. Donny’s hesitation to report Martha shows that his attachment is connected to the emotional comfort he once received, even though the relationship later became damaging. According to (Aggarwal and Singh, 2024), emotional attachment is a fundamental human need involving feelings of connection and closeness with others. In this case, Donny’s desire “to be seen” explains why he remains emotionally conflicted, as the validation he experienced strengthens his attachment and makes separation psychologically difficult.

Data 7

Donny: “When Martha turned up, all that confusion faded.” (Richard Gadd, Eps IV, 41:21)

The dialogue “When Martha turned up, all that confusion faded” occurs as Donny reflects on a period of emotional chaos and loneliness in his life. The phrase “all that confusion faded” suggests that Martha’s presence temporarily brings him a sense of clarity and emotional relief. Despite the harm she causes, her arrival provides a form of psychological comfort that stabilizes his unstable feelings. This reaction indicates that Donny associates Martha with emotional calmness, even though the relationship itself is unhealthy. Her presence becomes a source of reassurance during moments when he feels lost or uncertain.

This response demonstrates the presence of an emotional bond, as Donny begins to rely on Martha for emotional stability. Instead of resolving his confusion independently, he experiences relief only when she appears, showing a dependency rooted in emotional need. According to Aggarwal and Singh (2024), emotional attachment is a fundamental human need involving feelings of connection and closeness with others. In this case, Donny’s sense of relief highlights how Martha fulfills his need for connection, reinforcing an attachment that persists despite the negative consequences of their relationship.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of selected dialogues and scenes in *Baby Reindeer* (2024), it can be concluded that Donny’s character clearly reflects the formation and development of an *emotional bond* within an abusive relational dynamic. The findings show that this bond is not built on genuine affection or romantic attraction, but rather on repeated emotional interaction, vulnerability, fear, empathy, and the need for validation. Throughout the series, Donny demonstrates various indicators of emotional attachment, including lowering his guard during early interactions, feeling comforted by Martha’s presence,

experiencing anxiety during her absence, struggling with internal conflict, showing recurring empathy, and remaining psychologically affected by her actions even when physically separated.

The study also reveals that emotional bonding can develop gradually through subtle emotional reinforcement. Moments that initially feel simple, harmless, or comforting later become the foundation of deeper psychological entanglement. Donny's inability to sleep, his panic when Martha intensifies her stalking, his fear of her discovering Teri, and his hesitation to report her all indicate that Martha continues to exert emotional influence over him. In several instances, he feels seen, understood, and emotionally validated by her, which strengthens the attachment despite the harm he experiences. This shows that emotional bonds can persist even when the relationship creates fear and instability.

Furthermore, the findings highlight that emotional attachment does not require physical confinement to be powerful. In this case, digital communication, repeated encounters, and persistent emotional presence are enough to create psychological dependency. Martha's constant appearance, her assumptions about "their future," and her alternating emotional behavior contribute to a sense of closeness that pressures Donny and blurs his emotional boundaries. As a result, he becomes emotionally entangled, confused between discomfort and connection, fear and familiarity.

Overall, *Baby Reindeer* portrays emotional bond as a complex psychological condition shaped by unmet emotional needs, insecurity, and repeated emotional exposure. The series illustrates how emotional closeness, validation, empathy, and fear can coexist within a harmful relationship, making detachment difficult. This study contributes to the understanding of how contemporary media represents emotional attachment in abusive contexts and shows that psychological influence can be as powerful as physical control. Through Donny's character, the series emphasizes that emotional bonds in toxic relationships are often rooted in vulnerability and the human need to feel seen and connected, even when that connection becomes damaging.

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