

Romantic relationships quality and relational aspects of the self among Croatian youth

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Abstract

Romantic relationships in adolescence and early adulthood are normative. They determine the course of adolescents' psychosocial development and are involved in the formation of sexual identity and self-esteem. Self-esteem, as an evaluative component of the self, may influence the quality of intimate relationships. On the other hand, romantic events might influence perceptions of one's worth. However, research on constructs in this area is still underrepresented in Croatian professional and academic settings. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate whether the quality of romantic relationships and the perceived importance of intimate relationships predict the relational aspects of the self - relational esteem, relational preoccupation and relational depression. Results suggest that in adolescence and young adulthood, perceived importance of relationships is the only significant predictor of relational esteem, whereas conflict and participant age were found to be significant predictors of relational depression. These results were interpreted within the framework of the sociometer theory. The present data suggest that conflict in romantic relationships and perceived importance of intimate relationships predict relational aspects of self in adolescents and young adults.

Keywords: *romantic relationships; relationship quality; relational depression; relational preoccupation; relational esteem*

Introduction

Peer relationships in adolescence and early adulthood play an important role not only in social and emotional development, but also in overall well-being (Chiu et al., 2021; Collins, 2003; Gómez-López et al., 2019; Neemann et al., 1995; Pinquart & Pfeiffer, 2018; Ponti et al., 2010; Schwartz-Mette et al., 2020). In general, a growing body of literature suggests that romantic relationships have an impact on one's overall sense of competence, identity and self-esteem (Furman et al., 1999; Neemann et al., 1995).

Relationship quality may play a particularly important role as one of the key determinants of a romantic relationship in an individual's current functioning and further development (Collins, 2003). It is defined as a multidimensional construct characterized by several positive aspects such as closeness, intimacy, support, security and companionship, as well as various negative aspects, such as conflict and antagonism (Collins et al., 2009; Ponti et al., 2010). For example, relationships that are perceived as conflictual and 'unhealthy' may lead to the development of inappropriate romantic relationship behaviors, resulting in a gradual dete-

rioration of adolescents' psychosocial functioning (Connolly & Konarski, 1994). Moreover, perceptions of the inadequate quality of romantic relationships may be associated with depressive symptoms and internalizing behavior disorders (Davila et al., 2017, Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2007). On the other hand, high-quality romantic relationships are associated with a range of positive psychosocial outcomes, such as feelings of competence, a positive self-image and perceptions of social support (Masten et al., 1995). Such relationships may eventually lead to higher quality romantic relationships in adulthood (Seiffge-Krenke, 2003).

In terms of self-concept and identity formation, romantic experiences may play an important role in the development of the above factors (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Adolescents develop a different self-image in the romantic sphere, with relational aspects of the self-concept related to whether one has a romantic relationship and, more importantly, to the quality of that relationship (Connolly & Konarski, 1994; Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Thus, positive romantic experiences may lead adolescents and young adults to see themselves as attractive and competent romantic partners, whereas unfavorable romantic experiences may lead to lower relational esteem. For this reason, it is important to emphasize the relationship between the quality of romantic relationships and self-esteem. Self-esteem, as an evaluative component of the self-concept, is defined as a measure of self-acceptance (Baumeister, 2005), as well as a sense of one's competence in various domains (Mruk, 2006). It is also one of the crucial factors when it comes to monitoring other people's reactions to one's own behavior and maintaining interpersonal relationships. This is based on the sociometer theory, which states that "self-esteem is a sociometer, essentially an internal monitor of the degree to which one is valued or devalued as a relational partner" (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). In other words, the sociometer monitors the environment and interactions within it, with the goal of detecting signs that indicate possible negative self-evaluation caused by disapproval, avoidance and rejection by others in various interactions

that are backed by one of the universal psychological needs - the need for belonging and acceptance (Leary and Baumeister, 2000). Depending on the developmental stage, the sociometer is particularly responsive to perceptions of acceptance or rejection in different contexts. Given the importance of intimate relationships in late adolescence and early adulthood, it seems relevant to consider the quality of romantic relationships and the responsiveness of the sociometer in such interactions. According to the sociometer theory, poor relationships and dissatisfaction with intimate partners can significantly reduce self-esteem. In contrast, self-esteem increases when someone feels that their relationship is healthy and their partner is happy (Erol & Orth, 2017).

Harris and Orth's (2020) meta-analysis showed that self-esteem and social relationships reciprocally predict each other over time, with effects that are age- and gender-independent. Although some studies examined the relationship between self-concept or self-esteem and relationship quality (e.g., Kraljević, 2013; Mađarić, 2019; Marić, 2020; Ostović, 2022), the authors of this paper are aware of only one study examining the relational self-concept (Krnić et al., 2022) in the Croatian context. Snell and Finney (2002) distinguish three aspects of the relational self-concept: relational esteem (perception of one's capacity for romantic relationships), relational depression (focus on negative aspects of a romantic relationship) and relational preoccupation (importance of love and a romantic relationship in one's life). Based on the assumption derived from the sociometer theory that poor relationships can be detrimental to the self-concept, this pilot study aimed to examine whether the quality of romantic relationships and the perceived importance of romantic relationships predict relational aspects of the self.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We conducted the research in the spring of 2021. Participants were high-school and university

students who reported being in a romantic relationship. There was a total of 121 participants, 83% of whom were women, aged 17 to 28 years ($M = 19.87$, $SD = 2.436$). They completed an online survey using the Google Forms platform. We distributed the survey questionnaire via social media.

Measures

The questionnaire included demographic questions, the Romance Qualities Scale (Ponti et al., 2010), and the Relational Assessment Questionnaire (Snell & Finney, 2002).

The Romance Qualities Scale (Ponti et al., 2010) originally consisted of twenty-two items with a response scale of 1 (i.e., “not true at all”) to 5 (i.e., “completely true”); however, a modified version with twenty-three items across five subscales was used in this study. These five subscales measure: conflict (e.g., “Sometimes I quarrel even violently with my partner”), companionship (e.g., “My partner and I spend all our free time together”), help (e.g., “If other people were bothering me, my partner would help me”), security (e.g., “If I have a problem at school, at work or at home, I can talk to my partner about it), and closeness (e.g., “If my partner had to move away, I would miss him”).

The Relational Assessment Questionnaire (Snell & Finney, 2002) consists of thirty items, which are assessed using a response scale from 1 (i.e., “not at all characteristic of me”) to 5 (i.e., “very characteristic of me”). The questionnaire includes three subscales: relational esteem (e.g., “I am a good partner for an intimate relationship”), relational depression (e.g., “I am disappointed about the quality of my close relationships”) and relational preoccupation (e.g., “I think about intimate relationships all the time”).

For this study, we developed a six-item scale to measure the importance of romantic relationships. It included items focused on the perceived importance of romantic experiences and feelings related to romantic relationships, as well as items based on the self-assessment of the impact of intimate relationships on one’s mental health and self-esteem.

To investigate the psychometric properties of this scale, we performed an exploratory factor analysis. A KMO value of .698 and a statistically significant Bartlett’s test for sphericity ($\chi^2 = 238.846$, $df = 15$, $p < .001$) allowed us to perform factor extraction. First, we used the principal components method and extracted two factors: one with an eigenvalue of 2.510 and one with an eigenvalue of 1.086. Since only one item was saturated with the second factor, we decided to use the principal axis factoring method with the direct oblimin rotation method to further investigate the one-factor structure. This one factor explained 32% of the variance in the items, with communalities shown in Table 1. The item “I would rather be in any relationship than single” had a communality of less than .30, and was therefore excluded from further analysis. Thus, the importance of romantic relationships was measured with five items on a scale ranging from 1 (i.e., “not at all characteristic of me”) to 5 (i.e., “very characteristic of me”). After recoding the item “I feel better about myself when I’m single or in a casual relationship,” the total score was calculated as a sum of all items.

Table 1. Communalities for the one-factor solution for the Importance of Romantic Relationships Scale

Item	Communality
I find that romantic relationships affect my self-image and self-confidence	.749
I find that I have a better self-image when I’m in a relationship	.713
It’s important to me to be in a romantic relationship or at least to date someone	.618
I find that romantic relationships have an impact on my mental health	.554
I feel better about myself when I’m single or in a casual relationship	-.402
I would rather be in any relationship than single	.121

Results

Descriptive parameters

Table 2. shows descriptive parameters for all variables analyzed. As one can see, participants

perceive moderate conflict in their relationships (mean score 11.56 out of 25), but high companionship (mean score 12.50 out of 15), help (mean score 23.31 out of 25), security (mean score 21.47 out of 25) and closeness (mean score 23.68 out of 25). In addition, they exhibit low relational depression (mean score 17.60 out of 60), moderate relational preoccupation (mean score 25.33 out of 45) and high relational esteem (mean score 24.21 out of 30).

Table 2. Descriptive parameters for all analyzed variables ($N = 121$)

Scale	Min.	Max.	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	17	28	19.87	2.436
Importance of romantic relationships	7	25	14.45	3.490
Conflict	5	23	11.56	3.916
Companionship	7	15	12.50	2.038
Help	8	25	23.31	2.771
Security	12	25	21.47	2.714
Closeness	10	25	23.68	2.618
Relational esteem	11	30	24.21	4.076
Relational depression	10	40	17.60	5.984
Relational preoccupation	10	43	25.33	7.048

Note. *n* – number of participants, Min. – lowest result, Max. – highest result, *M* – mean, *SD* – standard deviation

Because a Cronbach's alpha below .50 indicates low reliability, an alpha between .50 and .75 indicates moderate reliability, and an alpha above .75 indicates high reliability (Hinton et al., 2014), the companionship subscale was excluded from further analysis due to low reliability. Although the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicates an asymmetric distribution of all variables except relational preoccupation, only help and closeness have skewness greater than 2, and kurtosis greater than 7 (Table 3.), indicating that their distribution is negatively asymmetric (Curran et al., 1996). Despite this fact, the residuals are normally distributed, and the assumption of homoscedasticity is satisfied.

Table 3. Indicators of normal distribution and reliability for all analyzed variables

Scale	K-S d	Skewness (S.E.)	Kurtosis (S.E.)	α
Age	.31*	.86 (.220)	-.59 (.437)	-
Importance of romantic relationships	.14*	-.79 (.220)	.31 (.437)	.67
Conflict	.13*	.83 (.220)	.62 (.437)	.73
Companionship	.20*	-.88 (.220)	.26 (.437)	.36
Help	.27*	-2.63 (.220)	8.67 (.437)	.79
Security	.16*	-1.06 (.220)	1.07 (.437)	.59
Closeness	.33*	-2.82 (.220)	8.51 (.437)	.85
Relational esteem	.13*	-.72 (.220)	.51 (.437)	.84
Relational depression	.13*	1.16 (.220)	1.73 (.437)	.81
Relational preoccupation	.05	.06 (.220)	-.46 (.437)	.84

Legend. K-S d – Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, α – Cronbach's Alpha, * $p < .001$

We found a positive relationship between the importance of romantic relationships and relational esteem (.26, $p < .05$) and relational preoccupation (.25, $p < .05$), that is, when romantic relationships are more important, adolescents report higher relational esteem and relational preoccupation. Higher relational depression is also related to more perceived conflict (.39, $p < .05$) in a relationship, and less help (-.49, $p < .05$), security (-.38, $p < .05$) and closeness (-.46, $p < .05$). Relational esteem and relational preoccupations are not significantly related to aspects of relationship quality, and age is not significantly related to any other variable. Although not all predictors were significantly associated with the outcome variables, we decided to include them in hierarchical models to see how they act when put together.

The role of relationship quality in explaining the relational aspects of the self

To answer our research questions, we conducted three hierarchical regression analyses with relational esteem, relational depression and relational preoccupation as criteria (Table 4.).

Table 4. Results of hierarchical regression analyses with demographic variables and relationship quality as predictors and relational esteem, relational depression, and relational preoccupation as criteria

	Relational esteem	Relational depression	Relational preoccupation
<i>Predictors</i>	β	β	β
Step 1			
Gender (1-male, 2-female)	.18 (.19*)	-.13 (-.11)	-.06 (-.09)
Age	.05 (.03)	-.15 (-.19*)	.05 (.01)
Rc ²	.02	.02	.01
Step 2			
Importance of relationships	.22*	-.10	.16**
Conflict	.14	.20*	-.04
Help	.15	-.20	.08
Security	.09	-.13	-.11
Closeness	-.01	-.14	.02
Rc ²	.08*	.30**	.02

Note. β – standardized regression coefficient, Rc² – the proportion of explained variance after introducing a new block of variables, () – values of the standardized regression coefficient in the last step of the hierarchical regression analysis, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

In the first step, we introduced demographic variables, i.e., gender and age, as control variables, and in the second step, we added all other predictors, i.e., the importance of romantic relationships, conflict, help, security and closeness. Although VIF values for help and closeness were greater than 2, values for Tolerance were greater than .10 in all three analyses, suggesting that multicollinearity is not present in our data. In the final step, 8% of the variance in relational esteem among adolescents who are in a romantic relationship was explained. Gender and the importance of the romantic rela-

tionship proved to be significant predictors of this aspect of relational self.

On the other hand, we were able to explain 30% of the variance in relational depression with age and perceived relationship conflict. Thus, girls and adolescents in a relationship who perceive romantic relationships as more important report higher relational esteem, whereas adolescents who are younger and perceive more conflict report higher relational depression.

Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether the quality of romantic relationships is related with the relational aspects of the self in adolescents and young adults involved in romantic relationships. The results suggest that age and conflict communication between romantic partners predict the relational depression, while the importance of romantic relationships predict the relational esteem in adolescents and young adults. It should be noted, however, that modest proportion of the variance is explained. Some other variables, such as attachment style, attributional style, general self-esteem or mental health problems, may also play an important role in explaining the relational self-concept.

The results of this study suggest that young people who perceive higher levels of conflict communication patterns in interactions with romantic partners, tend to evaluate their romantic relationships predominantly negatively and view their own romantic competencies as inadequate. Some of the basic assumptions of the sociometer theory may explain these findings. According to the sociometer theory, self-esteem increases when a person feels that he or she is of high value to the people in relationship with him or her, and it decreases when the person feels that he or she is not as important to the important people in his or her life (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). If a person's romantic relationship is characterized by antagonism and conflictual communication, one might conclude that the other person does not like them enough, which in turn could affect the relational aspects of the self - in this

case, relational depression. One could respond to this by ending the unsatisfactory relationship, but it is also possible that the person will internalize this negative self-image, which could have an impact on relationships developed later in life. Regarding the age of the participants, the younger participants perceived their relationships more negatively (relational depression) than older participants. It is possible that personal definitions of the quality of romantic relationships change with age, possibly resulting from the increasing cognitive and emotional maturity and the greater relationship experience.

The importance of romantic relationships proved to be a significant predictor of relational esteem, suggesting that young people who believe relationships are more important believe they have adequate skills to build them. One possible explanation according to the sociometer theory is that young people who perceive their relationships as highly valued, pay more attention to events in their relationship and have a stronger tendency to evaluate themselves. Another possible explanation could be the phenomenon of rejection sensitivity, which refers to the tendency of individuals to anxiously expect, perceive and overreact to rejection. This phenomenon is common among adolescents and young adults, and affects their perception of satisfaction with their relationships (Downey et al., 1999). In general, the results of the current study are consistent with previous findings that romantic relationships and perceptions of their importance are critical to understanding young people's self-concept and romantic competence (Knee et al., 2008).

Limitations of the study

Finally, the results obtained should be interpreted within the limitations of the present study. First, it was conducted at a single measurement point, and our sample was convenient, consisting of 121 high school and college students, mostly women, who were in romantic relationships. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to the entire population. The number of participants in future studies

should be increased, especially the number of young men and those who have completed formal education. It should also be noted that for this study, we used scales measuring the importance of romantic relationships, companionship, conflict and security, although moderate Cronbach's alpha coefficients suggest that we should more thoroughly question whether these are reliable and valid measures of the constructs of interest. Finally, it would be advisable that future studies on adolescent romantic experiences include the constructs of the contingent self, attachment theory, basic psychological needs and romantic competence.

Despite these limitations, the study conducted demonstrates the importance of the role that romantic experiences play in understanding the relational aspects of the self, especially relational esteem and relational depression. It provides the basis for further research in this sensitive area, which is crucial for the future psychosocial development of young people and their current psychological functioning. In addition, the findings of this study highlight the importance of assertive, yet supportive communication with romantic partners, which is an important practical implication for the development of prevention programs. Because relational depression is associated with more mental health problems (Krníć et al., 2022), building a positive relational self-image could help adolescents not only develop healthy relationships later in life, but also protect their mental well-being.

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