

All Is Well in Moderation: Perspectives of Young Adults on Positive and Negative Factors Influencing the Quality of Romantic Relationships

Nikola Kallová¹ , Lucia Hargašová¹ 

[1] *Institute for Research in Social Communication, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava, Slovakia.*

Interpersona, 2024, Vol. 18(1), 21–39, <https://doi.org/10.5964/ijpr.10389>

Received: 2022-10-02 • **Accepted:** 2023-09-22 • **Published (VoR):** 2024-06-28

Corresponding Author: Nikola Kallová, Dúbravská cesta 9, 841 04 Bratislava 4, Slovakia. E-mail: nikola.kallovova@savba.sk

Supplementary Materials: Materials [see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#)]



Abstract

Considerable research confirms that romantic relationships and their quality are one of the top priorities in the lives of individuals, especially as they enter the emerging adulthood stage. It is indisputably relevant to revisit relationship quality factors in research, even though there is generally plenty of interest in this topic across the research literature. The present study concerns the antecedents of relationship quality in a research-excluded region of Central Eastern Europe, namely Slovakia, where no similar research has been published to date, presuming the cultural specificities of Slovak youth. The study intends to approximate individuals' perceptions, not to fit them into predefined theories; thus, the research is inductive with an experiential orientation to the data. A reflexive thematic analysis of in-depth semi-structured interviews (37) or written self-moderated accounts (74) from 104 participants in a cohort of 18- to 35-year-olds resulted in the creation of four themes. These reflect the participants' accounts of the antecedents of relational quality, which are i) external circumstances, ii) partners' mutual attitudes and feelings, iii) the degree of sharing, and iv) individual contributions to relationship quality (personality, character traits, emotionality). Although the results can be formulated as a positive versus negative duality of oppositional influences, the degree phenomenon is strongly present. The idea that "everything in excess is bad" certainly applies.

Keywords

intimate relationships, quality of relationships, factors of relationship quality, sources influencing romantic relationships, young people



This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, CC BY 4.0](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction, provided the original work is properly cited.

Defining the Quality of Relationships

The quality of relationships is a broad concept used interchangeably and overlappingly with terms such as “relationship quality”, “satisfaction with romantic relationships”, and “relationship satisfaction” (Rogge et al., 2017) alongside a myriad of other conceptually related terms. When examining dating relationships, the concept of relationship flourishing (Fowers et al., 2016) is worth mentioning; within marital relationships, this takes shape in the form of concepts such as marital satisfaction (Negy & Snyder, 1997), marital quality (Norton, 1983), and marital happiness (Azrin et al., 1973).

Scientific assessments of the optimal qualities of romantic relationships have focused on intimacy, enjoyment, the ability to resolve conflicts smoothly, and a sense of security (Madsen & Collins, 2011). Furthermore, individuals in a serious partnership benefit in terms of mutual attraction and relationship satisfaction from similar communication values and cognitive similarities (Burleson et al., 1994), which are some of the concepts and variables associated with the quality of relationships that have been the subject of scholarly interest. Research has also focused on other indicators of relationship quality, such as self-control (Vohs et al., 2011), social comparison (Buunk et al., 2001), commitment (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993), and sacrifice (Impett et al., 2005).

Relationship Quality Factors

The focus on individual factors and the terms and concepts used can vary significantly in academic discourse. A lot depends on the scientists' assumptions about the nature of human interaction, mainly their ontological perception and noetic paradigm in close relationships research and whether romantic relationships are believed to be determined by factors such as a developmental curve, social experiences, interactions, and the use of language, or, for example, by psychoanalytic phenomena.

Mention can be made of several examined factors underpinning the quality of individuals' current romantic relationships. Interpersonal skills (Batoool & Khalid, 2012), attachment (Feeney & Noller, 1990), childhood experiences, and family processes (the family climate and parenting practices) have all been of interest to researchers in this field (Linder & Collins, 2005; Xia et al., 2018) as have earlier (adolescent) romantic relationships (Madsen & Collins, 2011; Shulman, 2003) and peer relationships (Linder & Collins, 2005). Relational quality factors include the interplay of each partner's psychological conditions and interpersonal events on relationship outcomes (Fitzpatrick & Sollie, 1999). Farooqi (2014) highlights a slightly different range of factors that can impact relationship quality. He mentions self-verification, self-enhancement, personality, emotional intelligence, interaction patterns, partner support, and economic factors. Yet another source of relational quality is described by Shulman (2003). According to him, the core qualities in a romantic relationship can be considered a balance between emotional closeness and individuality, or, in other words, between attachment and autonomy.

Why Examine the Quality of Relationships?

While social relationships in general have been extensively studied and linked to well-being (Diener & Seligman, 2002), romantic relationships may be uniquely and powerfully related to subjective well-being (Kansky, 2018). Kansky (2018), alongside the key developmental theorists (Arnett, 2014; Erikson, 1963), explains that romantic relationships are a major aspect of a young person's identity from late adolescence to emerging adulthood, young adulthood, and adulthood. Kansky (2018) states that numerous studies have shown that marriage is linked to lower psychological distress and higher levels of well-being and that romantic relationships are linked to an overall sense of subjective well-being. These studies share the common finding that while higher levels of well-being are connected to being in romantic relationships, the quality of these relationships is the primary determining factor (Diener & Seligman, 2002).

By contrast, recent research on singlehood has challenged previous findings on the strong link between romantic relationships and well-being (Adamczyk, 2017; Oh et al., 2022). Several studies have shown that well-being among single individuals does not differ much (if at all) compared to the well-being of married people and those in other romantic relationships. These findings illustrate the importance of several factors: the voluntariness or involuntariness of being single as opposed to being in a relationship, the social stigma that accompanies singlehood, the quality of life within a relationship as well as outside of it, and, most importantly, the quality of these relationships. These findings also assert that the quality of life as such is not as closely related to having any romantic relationship as much as it is to the quality of the relationship itself. This is one of the reasons why research on relationship quality factors, especially in the formative period of emerging adulthood and young adulthood, needs to be constantly reassessed for its relevance for changing generations, social conditions, and cultural contexts where constructions of relationship quality are shaped.

For more than a decade, there has been no shortage of Anglo-American researchers and scholars worldwide who have documented the factors of the quality of romantic relationships among youth. Although, since that point, relational quality is at the center of a lively discussion, there is a noticeable lack of similar studies in non-Western national contexts such as the Central Eastern European (CEE) countries, and there has been no such study published in the context of Slovakia. Studies of cultural patterns and societal values in CEE countries have found lower levels of equality and higher hierarchy and conservatism than in Western European countries. In Slovakia specifically, the effects of the second demographic transition began to manifest in romantic relationships later than in more Western European countries. This suggests that the hitherto unexplored antecedents of relationship quality in young adults may differ from those in Western partnering. Bearing the sociocultural differences in mind, studies that shed light on the romantic relationships among a sample from the research-excluded region of Central-Eastern Europe and non-western countries are of great importance.

Method

Present Study

We approach the topic from a reflexive research position that gives room and credibility to the subjectivity of the research participants, called for by authors such as Gough and Madill (2012). The authors urge psychological researchers to consider the benefits of a more reflexive scientific approach that would include an active approach to subjectivity in the research process, using strategies to incorporate (rather than avoid) the personal into the design and conduct of research, thereby yielding rich and valid findings. Rather than trying to fit people's accounts of their varied private lives into research assumptions, we draw on their experiences, stories, and concepts to better understand their perceptions of what influences the quality of their romantic relationships.

The present study aims to explore the factors influencing relationship quality as viewed and reported by Slovakian research participants in an age cohort of emerging and/or young adulthood. The aim herein is to find patterns in the statements—particularly in terms of semantics and being a “bottom-up” data-led inductive approach—with-out classifying them within predetermined theoretical frameworks. A second important established criterion for researching sources concerning relationship quality was their research's integrative nature (Fitzpatrick & Sollie, 1999). This is driven by a critique that the categories of romantic and sexual involvement tend to be explored independently of each other, leading the literature to remain disjointed in many ways, especially in terms of conceptualizing and operationalizing relational forms and experiences (Jamison & Sanner, 2021). Authors believe this leaves few opportunities to explore how different romantic and sexual experiences may perform overlapping or interrelated functions. According to the authors, this poses a challenge for synthesizing the existing literature. The aim of this study is, therefore, to explore different relational experiences holistically within a single research in which researchers seek to free themselves from pre-established pigeonholes, labels, definitions, or operationalisations. For this purpose, in-depth semi-structured interviews and inductive thematic analysis were selected as valuable tools to assess the subjectivity and natural language of the participants.

Participants

The final research sample numbered 104 people aged from eighteen to thirty-five years (with a mean age of 25.2 years), of whom 63 were female (60.6%) and 41 were male (39.4%); 80 research participants (78.4%) claimed to be religious. The sample included students (41.7%), working (49.52%), students who were also working (3.9%), and unemployed (4.9%). The most significant proportion lived in rural areas (49.5%), 40.8% lived in urban areas, and 9.6% lived in large cities. Completion of primary education was 5%, secondary education 45%, and university education 50% of the research participants. At the time of being interviewed, 63.5% of the sample were in an unmarried relationship,

23% were single, and 13.5% were married. The vast majority of participants (96.2%) were heterosexual, with only 3.8% of respondents having a same-sex orientation. To be included in the sample, participants had to meet two criteria—being between eighteen and thirty-five years of age (i.e. the age group of emerging adulthood and/or young adulthood) and having an experience of a romantic relationship maintained for at least half a year.

Data Collection

For the project's needs, two independent recruiters were contracted to reach out to about 30 participants to ensure that the sample included those who met the research criteria and had representation in eastern, central, and western Slovakia. The remaining participants were recruited through them using a snowball method. They were instructed to target a diverse sample of acquaintances (not all women, not all students, and not just living in large cities in western Slovakia) until reaching over a hundred people. The data was obtained by means of personal interviews with thirty-seven respondents; another sixty-seven respondents agreed to participate in the research through self-moderated written interviews. There were several reasons for collecting written data. Some potential respondents expressed interest in participating but declined the physical presence of an interviewer, and there were repeated requests for a written interview for a greater sense of privacy and time to reflect. In addition, data collection took place in late 2019/early 2020, when the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic prevented further face-to-face interviews.

Similarly to the procedure used by [Jamison and Sanner \(2021\)](#), along with the interview scenario on relationship histories, we used a co-created relationship history timeline to more efficiently guide the interviews and document the timing and length of romantic and sexual involvements. The authors point out that using graphical representations in relationship histories improves the data quality and reduces bias in terms of social desirability. The semi-structured interview scenario is described in Table 1 in [Supplementary Materials](#) File 1. The questions in the online written interviews corresponded to the topics discussed in the face-to-face interviews. The face-to-face interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Both the face-to-face interviews and the self-moderated written interviews were then coded and analysed using Atlas-ti software.

Data Analysis

The data was analysed following a six-phase process of reflexive thematic analysis ([Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019](#)), which is a flexible method of identifying, analysing, and creating formulas (themes) within data ([Braun & Clarke, 2006](#)). The method of reflexive thematic analysis is frequently used in qualitative research within psychology and other scientific disciplines and, if inductive, is broadly considered one of the methods enabling

participant subjectivity in research (Gough & Madill, 2012; for up-to-date guidelines on the method, see Braun & Clarke, 2022, or Byrne, 2022). The data was assessed through the prism of essentialist epistemology and experiential orientation, assuming that the nature of relational quality factors is intrinsic, cognizant, and most appropriately assessed through respondents' subjective statements. As a result, semantic coding was primarily employed to study the phenomenon, recording, in particular, the literal and explicit meanings credited by the participants, and latent codes were later used for further interpretation. The phases of the analysis are described in Table 2 in [Supplementary Materials File 2](#) and the characteristics of the themes are illustrated in Table 3 in [Supplementary Materials File 3](#).

Results

1. We Are Corroding, Becoming Stale, and Crystallizing

In the participants' statements, there were factors affecting the quality of the relationship for which neither partner may be directly responsible, or which represented behaviours and life circumstances that were only indirectly related to the relationship. Participants mentioned circumstances and events such as the over-involvement of one of the partners' parents in the relationship, the loss of employment for one of the partners, a change of residence, the working life of one of the partners (a change of environment, activities, or team), substance abuse, and relationships with third parties in general. In the collected statements, however, the most frequent external factors were related to time and the ways in which relationships are affected by the passage of time; herein there were two opposite poles—that which was considered novel and that which was considered ordinary.

... after all, every relationship is such that at the beginning it is beautiful ... I can see that something has changed over the years. I'm not just referring to gifts ... it's just that I'm already his. He doesn't have to try so hard. (FD15)

In the earlier stages of a relationship, feelings of excitement, new experiences, and space for exploration are commonplace. Partner behaviour in a newly formed relationship is characterized by expressions of affection, attention, and care: There are things such as staged surprises and gift-giving. These increased feelings of a positive nature are often described as being in love, infatuation, and attraction. One female participant freely assigned this period to the honeymoon phase or to perceiving things through rose-coloured glasses.

When it all starts, it's always so pretty and rosy. You don't notice the imperfections that stick out like a sore thumb for others. (FD108)

Niehuis et al. (2011) suggest that the early stages of relationship development often involve several phenomena that are experienced in a positive manner; these include attraction, thinking about one's (potential) partner, and spending time with them. In their view, positive attitudes and perceptions of one's partner (or relationship) can rise to levels that are unwarranted in independent assessments of the partner's characteristics. Such overevaluations of a partner or relationship used to be termed "idealization" and "positive illusions" (Niehuis et al., 2011), which were substantiated by the statements of another female respondent. As she describes, the transition from the "beginnings" to the "reality" can be characterized by a sudden reduction in the quality of a relationship as well as in the individual quality of life. The participant's statement aptly illustrates these transitions through three phases: the happy phase (blindness, idealization, an increased tolerance, and a decreased sensitivity), getting to know each other (cohabitation and taking off the rose-coloured glasses), and reality (increased sensitivity, authenticity, and conflict).

At the beginning of all of my relationships, it has been idyllic ...

After a while, some things come out into the open. It's not just in the behaviour, it's in the personality as well ... The beginnings are always nice, but then comes the reality and being aware of it. Then there comes some effort to come to terms with it. I can divide relationships into three phases or periods. That was when we weren't living together and not getting on each other's nerves. After that, it would get worse and worse ... when I've known someone for a longer time, I show more dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and so on. Also, my quirks may overwhelm that person... so at first there is happiness and complete contentment. I don't see a lot of things. Or I see them, but they don't bother me. I get over it. If the same thing would happen after two years, then it bothers me. And it could be a silly matter. (FD8)

On the other hand, the commitment and habits resulting from longer-term relationships create a sense of security, stability, and comfort for partners; however, there can also be a negative side to this in the form of perceived boredom, detachment, and a growing sense of stereotype. The easing of the intensity of the initial affect, which is characteristic of relationships in their more advanced phases (Graham, 2008) in a mutually desired sense of comfort, can sometimes lead to relationship boredom (Spielmann & Cantarella, 2020).

The first month—everything was great. Then it just got so boring and so stereotypical. And after three months, it was over in terms of sex. And in all other aspects too, I guess. So there's a lot that can be achieved in just three months. From awareness through to boredom. (FD28)

2. How We Feel Towards Each Other and How We Approach Each Other

According to the participants, interest and the expression of interest and feelings, admiration, holding each other in high regard, gratitude, attention, respect, recognition of one's worth or beauty, acceptance, and unconditional love were all characteristics of a partner's attitude that helped increase the quality of a relationship and kept it in good shape.

Sometimes it is even such a simple sentence; it makes me so happy, and I have a good day. It's maybe some compliment or saying thanks for doing something. That you're getting some kind of recognition from that person. Some kind of meaningfulness that when you do something for that person, it also pleases you. And that person gives this back to you in unexpected ways. (MD16)

The partner's behaviour moves between two poles that stimulate either a feeling of security and safety or a feeling of being under threat. In addition to the aforementioned approach, participants talked about other security-inducing attitudes and actions such as a partner's help, support, caring, tolerance, loyalty, and a partner's commitment to staying in a relationship and striving to maintain its quality (i.e. working on the relationship). These have all been understood as beneficial for the quality of the relationship in question. On the contrary, the participants noted that a partner's lack of interest in the other person (their work, interests, and hobbies), rejection, disapproval, criticism, and humiliation were all destructive for a relationship while triggering a sense of a threat. Similarly, a lack of support or encouragement, betrayal, infidelity, manipulation, controlling behaviour, restriction, jealousy, lying, and concealment were seen to lead to a decline in both the quality of life and the quality of the relationship.

Later it started to get worse. There were constant arguments and suspicions, and eventually that is how it ended. He was very jealous and was always hovering around, not letting me do things, controlling me all the time; it was unbearable, and eventually I ended it. (FD72)

In relation to the different expressions of feelings and behaviours of their partners, the participants importantly pointed out that too much of anything is harmful; this is true even in the case of tolerance and unconditional love. For ambitious individuals, unconditional acceptance from a partner brought on excessive levels of comfort and passivity, which negatively affected their individual quality of life as well as the quality of the relationship.

For me, it was like I suddenly had no motivation to try because he just accepted me the way I was. Even if I was the worst. I'm just not trying. I want to go to sleep, but he'll put on a TV series and we'll eat junk food. It's a moment when you just don't want to try. (FD7)

3. Are We One?

The constellation of what partners have in common and what they share covers a wide range of realities. These can include spending time together; shared holidays, hobbies, interests, worldviews, opinions, and habits; having common ideas about the future (e.g. parenting and housing); laughter and humour (shared ideas about jokes); living together; and having the same community (good relationships with loved ones, friends, acquaintances, and family). This area also includes communication in terms of common topics and areas of discussion (having something to say to each other and sharing needs), mutual understanding and openness, and the ability and willingness to listen to each other. In addition to communication, the topic of sharing included another issue of equally high priority for participants—namely, sharing in the sense of closeness and intimacy. For many, both physical and psychological closeness were essential for maintaining a quality relationship. Shared sexual preferences, having a good sex life, exploring sexuality, physical attraction, and physical compatibility (e.g. scent) were also mentioned in regard to physical closeness. Kansky (2018) states that sexual satisfaction is a relationship domain that is linked to relationship quality, satisfaction, well-being, and relationship stability. In relation to other components promoting relationship quality, a satisfying degree of shared sexuality formed a substantial component of such a mix in the sample.

I need her to be there when I need it, when I want advice, I want help, I want to confide in someone, I want to hug someone, or I want to have sex, I want to do something and share my life with that person ... For me, the thing is that she's the person I can talk to about anything. I can tell her everything, confide in her, hug her, love her, and make love to her. (MD17)

Again, however, it is worth pointing out that too much of anything is harmful and that closeness also needs to be moderated to a reasonable level.

It's still a little intense for me, even though I'm sort of getting used to it all and to him. We share everything, every second of our lives; we make all decisions together. You know, it's this type of relationship model. And this is where I struggle. (FD7)

According to participants, the quality of a relationship can be negatively affected by both too much and too little of an overlap in sharing things as well as too many differences.

Different habits, lifestyles, age differences, and contrasting ideas about the future are all mentioned as factors that threaten relationships.

... my current partner is ten years older than me, and he says that he probably won't have children. I don't know why, but he says it's because he's old. I'm still young enough to give birth... but he's afraid that if we have a child that he won't live to see their high-school leaving party. I said don't scare me, because I want kids —at least one. (FD12)

The mentioned differences between partners also included situations of imbalance, such as when one partner wants more than the other does from the relationship (noncommittal sex versus commitment and affection; marriage and settling down versus traveling, enjoying life, and non-commitment). There are also times when only one partner makes the decisions in the relationship and when there is an unequal division of labour, duties, and housework. There can also be poor relationships between one's partner and one's friends or parents, and even a disagreement on parenting with one's partner's parents. Furthermore, there can be differences of opinion, an inability to open up, and no or merely dysfunctional communication between partners. Differences negatively affecting the quality of a relationship can also be caused by one of the partners studying instead of working (i.e. being relatively carefree but not financially independent), a lack of sex or attraction, and the physical separation of partners and having a long-distance relationship.

There were a lot of things about him that annoyed me and things about me that he was bothered by e.g. outlooks on life, forms of communication, general views. This concerned all areas of life. It could concern, for example, food or planning a holiday. Everything that we did, we imagined differently. I used to get all kinds of depressing thoughts. I'd call work on many occasions, saying that I could not come in. This was because I'd been so upset the night before. It was bad—it was holding us both back. As much as I wanted to develop, there was always this obstacle—and it was him. He had a problem with everything. There was no time for anything. We'd always argue and yell at each other, and there was always some problem that had to be worked out. There was absolutely no interest in the kinds of things that I was into. Emotionally, that relationship just made my life stagnant. And maybe things even went backwards. (FD8)

This participant's comments accurately illustrate that an excessive level of contrasts prevented individual growth in addition to causing a significant decline in the quality of

the relationship. This is also why participants often considered a balance in contrasts, similarities, and sharing to be optimal in order to satisfy the need for space and freedom within the relationship. Academic literature examining the connection between well-being and romantic relationships has also identified this phenomenon. Perceptions of the negative aspects of being in a relationship commonly include factors such as general challenges associated with interdependence, such as an inability to liberally pursue one's own self-interests (Spielmann & Cantarella, 2020).

I found that I needed space—that I couldn't stand being with one person 24/7 or even five days a week. It made me realize that I still need my space and that I need to have some activities and friends of my own. (FD25)

4. I Come With Baggage

The participants' statements show that they considered the personality and character traits, as well as the emotional state of each partner, to be strong determinants of the quality of the relationship. In this case, these are attributes that are present in the partnership and can also be seen in a partner's approach to other people and to themselves. Characteristics such as kind-heartedness, composure, patience, purposefulness, selflessness, sensitivity, and empathy were evaluated by participants as assets in their partners and for the relationship. On the contrary, participants identified weaknesses in relationships in the form of partners' negative attributes such as unreliability, impatience, laziness, indecisiveness, hostility, aggression, tardiness, stubbornness, and selfishness.

He is bad-tempered and always finds faults in things. He complains about everything. When he's in the car, he's always mouthing off at other drivers on the road. It's a bit upsetting, but it's survivable. Over the years, I've become used to it: In one ear and out the other. (FD14)

The quality of relationships can also suffer from one's negative state of mind: e.g. if partners are dissatisfied, irritable, ignorant of their own needs, or suffering from low self-esteem.

It is not possible for both partners to be ideally balanced if one of them presents their own complexes and problems, or simply does not know how to function as an adult. (FD7)

The link between an individual's mental health, their relationship status, and the quality of their romantic partnerships was identified by Kansky (2018). Mental unpreparedness for a relationship in terms of focusing too much on the negatives of being single and having a fear of not being in a romantic relationship (a primed fear of being single)

increases a person's willingness to settle for less in a relationship in terms of prioritizing a prospective partner's availability over their suitability (Spielmann & Cantarella, 2020).

I have let a lot of people into my life, and some of them [now] I wouldn't touch with a bargepole. It was out of despair ... so wait ... where was the mistake? Well, I guess that's just me. (FD8)

A healthy mental state is crucial for the quality of relationships for many participants. According to them, desirable mental attributes for themselves and their partners included positive control over one's emotions, self-satisfaction, a good mental balance, and focusing on the here and now.

...I guess just how calm he is and how balanced he is. That's what attracts me to him the most. He can resolve issues in such a calm way. (FD35)

Discussion

According to some author's critical stances (Fitzpatrick & Sollie, 1999; Jamison & Sanner, 2021), research is needed on the topic of sources of relationship quality that takes an integrative approach because they observe the necessity to assess the relative importance of each type of factor in relationship quality. The present study's findings help to show the interplay of various influential factors documented separately in the relevant literature to date, stressing the subjectivity of the participants and the authenticity of their accounts.

The effects of the passage of time on relationship quality, which falls under one of the themes of this paper, have been discussed in many other studies. A comprehensive review study by Niehuis et al. (2011) found that romantic idealization predicts relationship and marital satisfaction (as well as relationship stability) and that it has a negative association with conflict. On the other hand, in the later stages of some relationships, there is a phase and process of disillusionment which rapidly reduces the quality of a relationship or marriage and often causes them to break down.

The idea behind the model of romantic idealization and disillusionment is that during courtship, romantic partners are motivated to see and present themselves to each other in the most positive light (Huston et al., 2001). Huston et al. also assert that once partners are more closely acquainted, or married, the reality of day-to-day life sets in; partners begin to see each other more realistically and become less motivated to engage in impression management. As a result, disillusionment can set in and cause great harm to relationships (Huston et al., 2001).

The present results are in line with these findings. As was illustrated in the previous section, participants stated that after an initial "happy" phase—characterized by infatuation, idealization, increased levels of tolerance, and decreased levels of sensitivity to neg-

ative relationship aspects and the negative characteristics of one's partner – there would come a getting-to-know-you phase and finally the third phase of "reality" (which can be accompanied by increased levels of sensitivity to negative elements, authenticity, and conflict). The presented findings show that the later phases of romantic relationships, in contrast to the first phase, may be subject to a loss of excitement and novelty and may even arrive at a state of relationship boredom. Relationship boredom in general, and sexual boredom in particular, reduces the quality of a relationship and may lead to its termination (Graham, 2008; Spielmann & Cantarella, 2020).

Another set of factors, broadly conceptualized in this study as partners' mutual attitudes and feelings, extends across several psychological theories. These theories have been dealt with in research literature within the broader concepts of interpersonal skills (Batool & Khalid, 2012) and relationship attachment (Feeney & Noller, 1990). These phenomena create a prerequisite for a specific type of partner behaviour, which is why they tend to be studied as associated phenomena (Egeci & Gencoz, 2011). This study asserts that expressions of interest, admiration, reverence, gratitude, attention, respect, recognition of worth, beauty, and acceptance or expressions of unconditional love are characteristics of a partner's approach that help to increase the quality of a relationship. Researchers seeking clarity within the term "respect" have found that closely related words, when taken as a group, characterize a partner as someone that attachment theorists refer to as a good (i.e. security-enhancing) attachment figure; this is a person on whom one can rely for protection, comfort, support, and encouragement (Frei & Shaver, 2002).

In addition to the above, the concept of respect includes other desirable types of attitude and feelings exhibited by a partner that were mentioned by the participants. These attitudes and feelings include helping, being there for one's partner, and offering support in a stressful situation; acts of caring, tolerance, reliability, and faithfulness; and a commitment to staying in the relationship and striving for its quality. According to the participants, all of these attitudes and feelings are beneficial to the quality of a relationship. By contrast, a partner's lack of interest in the other person, rejection, judgment, criticism, humiliation, lack of support, betrayal, infidelity, manipulation, controlling behaviour, restriction, jealousy, lying, and concealment all lead to a decline in the quality of a relationship. With such an approach, partners fail to meet the role of being romantic partner in providing social support when conflict, distress, and other negative events arise (Kansky, 2018).

The fact that traits of personality and character and the emotionality of individuals are linked to relationship quality has been made evident in hundreds of scholarly articles. The "relationship baggage" that is brought into present romantic involvements does not omit sex life (Kershaw et al., 2014). Researchers' attention has long focused on how the personalities and psychological states of individual partners underpin the quality of their current romantic relationships (Fitzpatrick & Sollie, 1999). A recent study also

found that character strengths were factors which positively correlated with marital satisfaction and intimacy (Boiman-Meshita & Littman-Ovadia, 2022). Boiman-Meshita & Littman-Ovadia explain that a partner characterized by strengths such as self-control and being capable of not doing or saying things that they may later regret would be able to avoid destructive responses, thus preventing damaging their relationship and therefore contributing to its quality.

Several personality traits and character strengths which partnerships benefit from in terms of relationship quality have been reported in the present study. Namely, these are kindness, composure, patience, purposefulness, dedication, sensitivity, and empathy. The personality and character traits of partners who were unreliable, impatient, lazy, indecisive, bad-tempered, aggressive, tardy, stubborn, or selfish had a negative impact on relationship quality in our sample. It was also found that the quality of a relationship suffered from the influence of an individual's state of mind, depending, for instance, on whether partners were dissatisfied, irritable, self-conscious, or even ignorant of their own needs. On the other hand, positive emotional tuning, self-satisfaction, composure, and concentration on the present were among the primary favourable emotional states for relationships in our study.

Many scholars view relational quality through the prism of the contrast between closeness and autonomy in a relationship. According to Shulman (2003), this balance between emotional closeness and individuality, or between relatedness and autonomy, can be seen as the core aspect of quality in a romantic relationship. Shulman asserts that a conflict or balance between these two indicators is closely related to conflict resolution. Indeed, the balance between attachment and autonomy was also considered important for relationship quality by the participants. This includes a moderate amount of sharing, that is, spending time together, mutual hobbies, opinions, and customs, sharing ideas about the future, having a shared community, communication, physical and psychological intimacy, and sexuality.

Having a balance and the right degree of factors in a relationship, however, is not something that is to be discussed exclusively within the topic of where partners have intersecting interests; there are other matters, such as the amount of novelty and routine, or attention and acceptance from a partner, that also need to be taken into consideration. Several participants admitted that excessive displays of unconditional acceptance from a partner brought about too much comfort and passivity, which can negatively affect their individual quality of life and the quality of their relationships by lowering their ambitions or standards. In this sense, the presented findings about the quality of relationships certainly overlap with the idea that anything in excess can be bad.

Considering the cultural context of Slovakia, the findings presented are consistent with those from more Western countries, and no differences in the workings of factors on relational quality stand out. However, a few facts can be pointed out that were not part of the research questions but help to create the complete picture of the findings

of this study. The specificities that may have been related to the region lay in the sample and in the fact that a large proportion of the participants had a high degree of conservative values and ideals, drawing on Catholic models (such as having sexual intercourse after marriage and starting families at a young age while studying). The sociological differences of the sample compared to Western countries were partly reflected in the reporting of homosexuality, to which the Slovak political and public sphere are frequently inhospitable. People who reported homosexuality in demographic questionnaires described heterosexual relationships in their interviews, which may indicate ignorance of the concept of homosexuality or the absence of both the first and later stages of coming-out.

Limitations and Future Directions

In spite of the fact that the qualitative design provided insight into the interplay between the different factors of relationship quality, this type of methodological choice causes several limitations. The way the findings were reported and the method of analysis prioritized the language of the participants at the expense of any rigid terminology or classification of relationship quality factors. Although this fulfills the aim of the study and we consider it a strength, the approach makes operationalization and quantification problematic when seeking to compare it to other studies.

The standard limitations of qualitative studies also include recall bias, sample bias, self-selection bias, social desirability bias, suggestiveness in the interview questions, and artificiality in the data. Furthermore, the fact that a significant group of participants engaged in a written self-moderated interview rather than in a face-to-face interview can be seen as another limitation. The participants were therefore motivated to be less emotionally engaged and generous in terms of the extensiveness of their narratives. Moreover, no additional questions from the interviewer could have been asked. On the other hand, this approach allowed participants a sense of privacy and a safe space to share intimate details about their lives without being confronted by the interviewer.

Besides the thought-provoking issues highlighted by the findings of this study, namely the idea of moderation, the attention of academics needs to be directed to discussing reasonable levels of idealization and illusion, which can have a two-fold effect. Even though it is known that these phenomena increase the quality of relationships (Niehuis et al., 2011), they may lead to reduced relationship quality when moving to the later stages (Huston et al., 2001). The idea of finding a reasonable degree between novelty and the routine within a relationship has not been comprehensively covered in the presented sample of texts and codes, and this matter deserves in-depth attention in future research. Also, sources of relationship quality resulting from the phase before entering into a relationship could inspire further research. Although research into singlehood is on the rise, specifically examining the effects of singlehood as preparation for a romantic

relationship and its role as a factor within a relationship could be beneficial to future scholarship.

Funding: This work was supported by the Slovak Research and Development Agency under Contract no. APVV-18-0303.

Acknowledgments: The authors have no additional (i.e., non-financial) support to report.

Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Ethics Statement: Our study was approved by Institute for Research in Social Communication Ethics Committee. All participants provided written informed consent prior to enrollment in the study.

Data Availability: The ethical clearance obtained by the research project leader in 2018 allowed for the inspection and use of the data only by members of the research team and the transcriber, who were bound by confidentiality and for analysis. In written informed consent, participants agreed to participate in the interviews on the condition that no third party would have access to their data and information. For that reason, the data corpus as a whole is not publicly available.

Supplementary Materials

For this article, the following Supplementary Materials are available (see Kallová & Hargašová, 2024):

- Supplementary file 1: Semi-structured interview scenario
- Supplementary file 2: Individual phases of the thematic analysis
- Supplementary file 3: Characteristics of the themes created in the analysis

Index of Supplementary Materials

Kallová, N., & Hargašová, L. (2024). *Supplementary materials to "All is well in moderation: Perspectives of young adults on positive and negative factors influencing the quality of romantic relationships"* [Study materials]. PsychOpen GOLD.

<https://doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.14482>

References

Adamczyk, K. (2017). Voluntary and involuntary singlehood and young adults' mental health: An investigation of mediating role of romantic loneliness. *Current Psychology*, 36(4), 888–904. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-016-9478-3>

Arnett, J. J. (2014). *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199929382.001.0001>

Azrin, N. H., Naster, B. J., & Jones, R. (1973). Reciprocity counseling: A rapid learning-based procedure for marital counseling. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 11(4), 365–382. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0005-7967\(73\)90095-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0005-7967(73)90095-8)

Batool, S. S., & Khalid, R. (2012). Emotional intelligence: A predictor of marital quality in Pakistani couples. *Pakistan Journal of Psychological Research*, 27(1), 65–88.

Boiman-Meshita, M., & Littman-Ovadia, H. (2022). Is it me or you? An actor-partner examination of the relationship between partners' character strengths and marital quality. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 23(1), 195–210. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-021-00394-1>

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE.

Burleson, B. R., Kunkel, A. W., & Birch, J. D. (1994). Thoughts about talk in romantic relationships: Similarity makes for attraction (and happiness, too). *Communication Quarterly*, 42(3), 259–273. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463379409369933>

Buunk, B. P., Oldersma, F. L., & De Dreu, C. K. (2001). Enhancing satisfaction through downward comparison: The role of relational discontent and individual differences in social comparison orientation. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 37(6), 452–467. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jesp.2000.1465>

Byrne, D. (2022). A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis. *Quality & Quantity*, 56, 1391–1412. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y>

Diener, E., & Seligman, M. E. (2002). Very happy people. *Psychological Science*, 13(1), 81–84. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9280.00415>

Egeci, I. S., & Gencoz, T. (2011). The effects of attachment styles, problem-solving skills, and communication skills on relationship satisfaction. *Procedia: Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 30, 2324–2329. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.10.453>

Erikson, E. H. (Ed.). (1963). *Youth: Change and challenge*. Basic Books.

Farooqi, S. R. (2014). The construct of relationship quality. *Journal of Relationships Research*, 5, Article e2. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jrr.2014.2>

Feeeney, J. A., & Noller, P. (1990). Attachment style as a predictor of adult romantic relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58(2), 281–291. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.58.2.281>

Fitzpatrick, J., & Sollie, D. L. (1999). Influence of individual and interpersonal factors on satisfaction and stability in romantic relationships. *Personal Relationships*, 6(3), 337–350. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.1999.tb00196.x>

Fowers, B. J., Laurenceau, J. P., Penfield, R. D., Cohen, L. M., Lang, S. F., Owenz, M. B., & Pasipanodya, E. (2016). Enhancing relationship quality measurement: The development of the Relationship Flourishing Scale. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 30(8), 997–1007. <https://doi.org/10.1037/fam0000263>

Frei, J. R., & Shaver, P. R. (2002). Respect in close relationships: Prototype definition, self-report assessment, and initial correlates. *Personal Relationships*, 9(2), 121–139. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6811.00008>

Gough, B., & Madill, A. (2012). Subjectivity in psychological science: From problem to prospect. *Psychological Methods*, 17(3), 374–384. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029313>

Graham, J. M. (2008). Self-expansion and flow in couples' momentary experiences: An experience sampling study. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95(3), 679–694. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.95.3.679>

Huston, T. L., Caughlin, J. P., Houts, R. M., Smith, S. E., & George, L. J. (2001). The connubial crucible: Newly wed years as predictors of marital delight, distress, and divorce. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80(2), 237–252. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.80.2.237>

Impett, E. A., Gable, S. L., & Peplau, L. A. (2005). Giving up and giving in: The costs and benefits of daily sacrifice in intimate relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 89(3), 327–344. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.89.3.327>

Jamison, T. B., & Sanner, C. M. (2021). Relationship form and function: Exploring meaning-making in young adults' romantic histories. *Personal Relationships*, 28(4), 840–859. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12400>

Kansky, J. (2018). What's love got to do with it? Romantic relationships and well-being. In E. Diener, S. Oishi, & L. Tay (Eds.), *Handbook of well-being* (pp. 1–24). DEF Publishers.

Kershaw, T., Gerber, R., Divney, A., Albritton, T., Sipsma, H., Magriples, U., & Gordon, D. (2014). Bringing your baggage to bed: Associations of previous relationship experiences with sexual risk. *AIDS and Behavior*, 18, 159–170. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10461-012-0349-0>

Linder, J. R., & Collins, W. A. (2005). Parent and peer predictors of physical aggression and conflict management in romantic relationships in early adulthood. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 19(2), 252–262. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.19.2.252>

Madsen, S. D., & Collins, W. A. (2011). The salience of adolescent romantic experiences for romantic relationship qualities in young adulthood. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 21(4), 789–801. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2011.00737.x>

Negy, C., & Snyder, D. K. (1997). Ethnicity and acculturation: Assessing Mexican American couples' relationships using the Marital Satisfaction Inventory—Revised. *Psychological Assessment*, 9(4), 414–421. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1040-3590.9.4.414>

Niehuis, S., Lee, K. H., Reifman, A., Swenson, A., & Hunsaker, S. (2011). Idealization and disillusionment in intimate relationships: A review of theory, method, and research. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 3(4), 273–302. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1756-2589.2011.00100.x>

Norton, R. (1983). Measuring marital quality: A critical look at the dependent variable. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 45(1), 141–151. <https://doi.org/10.2307/351302>

Oh, J., Chopik, W. J., & Lucas, R. E. (2022). Happiness singled out: Bidirectional associations between singlehood and life satisfaction. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 48(11), 1597–1613. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672211049049>

Rogge, R. D., Fincham, F. D., Crasta, D., & Maniaci, M. R. (2017). Positive and negative evaluation of relationships: Development and validation of the Positive-Negative Relationship Quality (PN-RQ) scale. *Psychological Assessment*, 29(8), 1028–1043. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pas0000392>

Rusbult, C. E., & Buunk, B. P. (1993). Commitment processes in close relationships: An interdependence analysis. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 10(2), 175–204. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026540759301000202>

Shulman, S. (2003). Conflict and negotiation in adolescent romantic relationships. In P. Florsheim (Ed.), *Adolescent romantic relations and sexual behavior: Theory, research, and practical implications* (pp. 5–27). Psychology Press.

Spielmann, S. S., & Cantarella, I. A. (2020). Fear of being single priming predicts maladaptive relationship pursuits. *Personal Relationships*, 27(4), 801–819. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12348>

Vohs, K. D., Finkenauer, C., & Baumeister, R. F. (2011). The sum of friends' and lovers' self-control scores predicts relationship quality. *Social Psychological & Personality Science*, 2(2), 138–145. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550610385710>

Xia, M., Fosco, G. M., Lippold, M. A., & Feinberg, M. E. (2018). A developmental perspective on young adult romantic relationships: Examining family and individual factors in adolescence. *Youth Adolescence*, 47, 1499–1516. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-018-0815-8>