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# ROMANTIC EXPERIENCES IN EMERGING ADULTS: HOW THEY RELATE TO THE IMPORTANCE OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS AND THE QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS

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This study examined the link between perceived romantic relationship (RR) importance (relationship desire and dismissal) and emerging adults' romantic experiences, including relationship status, number of partnerships, and relationship durations. It also explored how individuation from parents contributes to the prediction of these experiences. Participants ( $N = 464$ , 64.4% female,  $M_{\text{age}} = 22.59$ ) reported on their romantic relationship importance, relationship experiences, and perceived connectedness and intrusiveness from parents. Hierarchical regression analyses revealed that perceived RR importance significantly contributed to the prediction of romantic experiences beyond demographic factors. Additionally, paternal intrusiveness negatively predicted the duration of current and longest relationships. The findings suggest that RR importance and individuation, especially in relation to the father, play an important role in emerging adults' romantic experiences.

Keywords: romantic experiences, emerging adulthood, importance of romantic relationships, connectedness, intrusiveness



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## INTRODUCTION

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### **Romantic Experiences and Importance of Romantic Relationships in Emerging Adulthood**

Growing interest in and engaging in romantic/intimate relationships is a normative rite of passage for young people (Moore et al., 2012). Romantic experiences and sexual experimentation in adolescence and emerging adulthood provide an important foundation for the formation of personal preferences for emotional and physical intimacy that later lead to more mature romantic relationships and sexual behaviours (van de Bongardt et al., 2015). Interest in romantic relationships begins to develop in early adolescence when romantic relationships are casual and short-lived. In mid-adolescence, interactions with romantic partners and sexual activity increase, whereas in late adolescence, the focus is on developing intimacy and emotional support in the relationship (Seiffge-Krenke & Stemmler, 2003). As young people enter the stage of emerging adulthood, they develop more exclusive and dyadic romantic relationships. These are characterised by deeper intimacy, a stronger sense of love and commitment, and a stronger tendency to care in a relationship than at earlier ages (Ponti et al., 2010).

In his theory of emerging adulthood, Arnett (2004) emphasised that emerging adulthood is a time to explore possibilities related to romance and love, to determine what kind of person one wants to commit to, and to gain experience in romantic relationships before settling down with a steady partner. As a result, young people today may have many different romantic relationships that tend to be short-term or noncommittal (Beckmeyer & Jamison, 2021; James-Kangal et al., 2018; Norona et al., 2017). Shulman and Connolly (2013) relate the transience of relationships and noncommittal partnerships to the unpredictable modern world and unstable economic conditions. In this way, young people should increase their flexibility, choices, and various opportunities. Nevertheless, attitudes towards committed, long-term relationships are positive and young people want to live this way in their future (Braithwaite et al., 2010; Gonzalez Avilés et al., 2021).

In reviewing the literature on romantic relationships in emerging adulthood, we found that authors focus primarily on the quality of the romantic relationship or relationship style, its psychosocial antecedents, and mental health outcomes (Beckmeyer & Jamison, 2021; Mirsu-Paun & Oliver, 2017; Ponti et al., 2010). Other characteristics of romantic experiences in emerging adulthood, such as relationship status, length of romantic relationship, and number of lifetime partnerships, have been reported primarily as descriptive characteristics of study samples. However, empirical evidence shows that romantically involved emerging adults have higher life satisfaction and pos-

itive self-esteem (Beckmeyer & Cromwell, 2019; Gonzalez Avilés et al., 2021), fewer feelings of loneliness (Beckmeyer & Cromwell, 2019), more positive sexual well-being (Kaestle & Evans, 2018), and fewer mental health problems (Braithwaite et al., 2010) than emerging adults with casual romantic relationships or singles. Another interesting question is how much romantic experience is sufficient to enter a stable long-term relationship. Madsen & Collins (2011) examined the relationship between the involvement and quality of dating experiences of adolescents in mid-adolescence and the quality of their romantic relationships in their early 20s. They found that adolescents who had fewer dating partners in middle adolescence and maintained higher quality relationships at age 16 had smoother romantic partner interactions in emerging adulthood. Conversely, adolescents who had more dating partners in mid-adolescence tended to experience more negative emotions in romantic partner relationships in emerging adulthood.

One of the explanatory psychological variables for more or less engagement in romantic experiences among young people could be the degree of subjective importance of romantic relationships and their value in the context of other life priorities. The subjective importance and value of romantic relationships are an important source of motivation for individuals to enter into and maintain an intimate relationship (Chan, 2017; Watkins & Beckmeyer, 2020). A stronger desire for a romantic relationship implies a stronger belief in the value of a lasting partnership and binding romantic commitments. Relationship dismissal, on the other hand, represents a belief in the lesser importance of a romantic relationship in one's life, often seen as an obstacle to an individual's life plans, and the prioritisation of personal goals over romantic commitments (Watkins & Beckmeyer, 2020). A recent study of a sample of Polish adults found that single individuals reported lower relationship desire and higher relationship dismissal than coupled individuals (Adamczyk et al., 2022). In addition, emerging adults who placed greater importance on romantic relationships in their lives were more satisfied with their romantic experiences, whereas emerging adults with higher relationship dismissal reported a lower number of romantic relationships in their lives and higher cycling in their current relationship (Watkins & Beckmeyer, 2020).

## **Relationships with Parents in Emerging Adulthood and Romantic Involvement**

The relationships that children have with their parents can affect their later relationships with others inside and outside the family (Bretherton, 1985). There is empirical evidence showing that positive parent-child relationships are related to healthy romantic relationships in adulthood (Conger et al., 2000; Don-

nellan et al., 2005; Feldman Barrett & Russell, 1998; Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2001), whereas conflict, hostility, and emotional dysregulation in parent-child relationships have been shown to be negatively related to the quality of romantic relationships (Fite et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2009). Specifically, strong, and reliable attachment to parents at ages 15 and 17 has been shown to predict connectedness and attraction in romantic relationships at age 20 (Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2001), and adolescent reports of family cohesion and adaptability have been associated with romantic happiness in young adulthood (Feldman Barrett et al., 1998).

The theory of the second individuation process (Blos, 1967; Josselson, 1998; Youniss & Smollar, 1985) provides a background that explains the intrapsychic process of developing individuality while maintaining connectedness with parents, which in modern societies begins in adolescence and continues into the individual's third decade of life (Lamborn & Groh, 2009). Connectedness with parents, which is composed of the individual's experiences of mutual understanding, respect, and trust in the relationship and the perception of parents as good, sincere companions, appears to have an important influence on the socio-emotional life and psychological well-being of emerging adults (Komidar et al., 2016). Accordingly, the dimensions of parental warmth and consistency have been found to be significantly associated with young adults' feelings of comfort with intimacy, less difficulty relying on others, and less fear of being abandoned or unloved (Hagerty et al., 2002). On the other hand, intrusive parenting, in which the boundaries of the parent-child relationship are disrupted, has been linked to unhealthy individuation and poor adjustment in children (Barber, 2002; Kerig, 2005). While there has been growing interest in the effects of intrusive parenting on young adult psychosocial functioning and in factors that may influence couple functioning (Gagliardi et al., 2013; Gasbarrini et al., 2015; Parise et al., 2017), surprisingly little attention has been paid to the effects of intrusive parenting on the characteristics of adult children's romantic experiences. One example is a recent longitudinal study by Parise et al. (2017), who found that perceived intrusive parenting was a negative predictor of relationship quality for both men and women.

## The Present Study

In the present study, we examined how the perceived importance of romantic relationships was related to aspects of romantic experiences, such as whether one was in a relationship or single, how many romantic relationships one had, how long the longest romantic relationship lasted, and how long the current romantic relationship lasted (only participants in

a relationship). In addition, we were interested in whether experiencing connectedness and intrusiveness in relation to mother and father significantly contributed to predicting emerging adults' romantic experiences beyond the perceived importance of romantic relationships and demographics. In predicting romantic experiences, we controlled for relevant demographic variables, i.e., participants' age, gender, and living arrangement. Based on the theoretical background presented, we hypothesised that relationship desire would be positively related to current romantic relationship duration, number of romantic relationships, and longest romantic relationship duration, while higher levels of relationship dismissal would be inversely related to the three indicators of romantic experiences. We also hypothesised that perceived parental intrusiveness would be negatively related to romantic relationship experiences, while higher levels of connectedness with parents were expected to be positively related to romantic relationship experiences. Due to the lack of literature on the different effects of paternal and maternal parenting on later romantic relationship dynamics, we did not propose specific hypotheses in relation to mothers and fathers.

## METHOD

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### Participants

The sample consisted of 464 emerging adults, of whom 63.4% were women, 35.6% were men, and 1.0% identified as other. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 29 years ( $M_{\text{age}} = 22.57$ ,  $SD = 2.63$ ). Most participants were students (84.7%), 12.7% were employed, and 2.6% were unemployed. 34.5% of participants lived with their parents ( $M_{\text{age}} = 22.04$ ), 50.6% lived partly with their parents and partly alone (i.e., semi-independent,  $M_{\text{age}} = 22.10$ ), and 14.9% lived independently ( $M_{\text{age}} = 25.35$ ).

### Measures

*The Brief Measure of Relationship Importance* (BMRI; Watkins & Beckmeyer, 2020) is a six-item self-report instrument that captures emerging adult's beliefs about the value and cost of a romantic relationship. The measure consists of two subscales. Relationship Desire measures enthusiasm and desire to be in a romantic relationship (two items, an item example: "A romantic relationship is one of the most satisfying things a young adult can have") and Relationship Dismissal measures devaluation of the importance of romantic relationships in one's life (four items, an item example: "I prefer not being involved in a committed romantic relationship"). Participants rate each item on a four-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strong-

ly agree). The Cronbach's alphas for Relationship Desire and Relationship Dismissal in our study were 0.78 and 0.79, respectively. Because the BMRI had not been previously validated in a Slovenian sample, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to examine the construct validity of the measure. The fit indices were as follows: Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 0.981, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 0.964; RMSEA = 0.069, SRMR = 0.031. The factor loadings of the items ranged from 0.65 to 0.88. Thus, the two-dimensional structure of the BMRI showed good construct validity in a Slovenian sample.

*The Individuation Test for Emerging Adults - Short Form (ITEA-SF; Komidar et al., 2016)* is a 21-item self-report measure. Participants respond on a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1 (completely untrue) to 5 (completely true). The ITEA-SF measures five dimensions of individuation in relation to mother and father: Support Seeking, Connectedness, Intrusiveness, Self-Reliance, and Fear of Disappointing the Parent. The construct validity and concurrent validity of both mother and father forms proved to be satisfactory (Komidar et al., 2016). In this study, we only used the subscales Connectedness and Intrusiveness, which were completed independently for mother and father immediately after each other. The order of presentation of the two forms was automatically rotated. Connectedness consists of 4 items and refers to the experience of mutual understanding, trust, and respect between the emerging adult and the parent (e.g., "He/she respects my wishes") ( $\alpha = 0.87/0.88$ , respectively for the father and mother form). Intrusiveness consists of 5 items and refers to the perception of parental intrusion into individual's privacy (i.e., "I think he/she wants to know too much about me") ( $\alpha = 0.86/0.90$ , respectively for the father and mother form).

*Romantic relationship experiences.* Relationship status was measured by asking participants: "Are you currently in a relationship with a romantic partner?". Below the question was a description of the term romantic partner: "A romantic partner is someone you are physically attracted to and have an intimate relationship with (holding hands, kissing, etc.)." Participants answered yes or no, and those who were currently in a relationship indicated the duration of their current romantic relationship in months. All participants then answered the question: "How many romantic partners have you had in your lifetime?" The response options were 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, and more than 4. Finally, participants indicated the duration of their longest romantic relationship (in months).

*Demographics.* Participants were asked about their age, gender ("male," "female," "other"), employment status ("student," "employed," "unemployed"), and living arrangement ("with parents," "semi-independent (partly with parents, partly alone)," "independent").

## Procedure

The study was conducted between October and December 2021. The majority of participants were students from various study programmes at the University of Ljubljana, the University of Maribor, and the University of Primorska. A subset of the sample included students attending a course in educational psychology taught by one of the researchers. We also advertised the study on various social networks and invited all individuals between the ages of 19 and 29 to participate. The measures were presented in the following order: demographic variables, relationship importance, and individuation in relation to mother and father. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and anonymous and that the data would only be used for the purpose of this study. After participants agreed to the consent form, they were asked to begin completing the survey. Completing the questionnaire took about 10 minutes on average. Data were analysed using the SPSS 25 statistical package. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed in R version 4.1.2 (R, 2021). The study was approved by the Ethics Commission of the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana.

## RESULTS

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We first calculated the average scores of the relationship desire and relationship dismissal scales, and connectedness and intrusiveness in relation to mother and father and then assessed distribution of the measures. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov coefficients were statistically significant, as was the Shapiro-Wilk test ( $p < 0.01$ ), indicating a non-normal distribution of the scores on measured variables. However, since these tests are sensitive to sample size, we decided to investigate additional indicators of normality by examining kurtosis and skewness values. All subscales had moderate values for skewness and kurtosis that were within the range of  $\pm 1.5$ , which is considered acceptable for the use of parametric tests (George & Mallery, 2016). As can be seen in Table 1, participants in the sample scored above the mean for relationship desire, below the mean for relationship dismissal as well as above the mean for connectedness in relation to both mother and father, and below the mean for perceived intrusiveness of both mother and father. Slightly more than half of the sample was in a relationship at the time of the study (51.3%). 25.9% of participants had never been in a relationship, 25.4% reported having had one romantic partner, 23.5% reported having two partners, 14.9% reported having three partners, 5.4% reported having four partners, and 5% reported having four or more partners ( $M = 1.63$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ). Among those currently in a romantic relationship,

the average duration of the relationship was 35.45 months. The average duration of the longest romantic relationship that participants had was 33.77 months. The majority of participants who had never been in a relationship were between 19 and 23 years old (90.1%).

Table 1 shows additional descriptive statistics for the included variables, split by gender, relationship status and living arrangement, as well as the respective effect sizes (Cohen's  $d$  or partial eta squared ( $\eta^2$ )) in each comparison. Participants with partnered status scored higher on relationship desire, number of lifetime romantic relationships, and duration of longest romantic relationship than single participants, while the latter scored higher on relationship dismissal and perceived intrusiveness of mothers and fathers. Men reported a stronger relationship desire and a stronger intrusiveness of both parents than women, while women reported a stronger connectedness to both parents, a higher number of romantic relationships in life, a longer duration of the longest romantic relationship and a longer duration of the current romantic relationship than men. Living arrangement was only significantly associated with romantic experiences. Pairwise comparisons (Tukey's) showed that participants who lived independently were significantly more likely to report a higher number of lifetime romantic relationships ( $ps < 0.001$ ) and a longer duration of current romantic relationship ( $ps < 0.001$ ) than participants who lived with their parents or semi-independently. Because living arrangement was related to age ( $r = 0.38$ ,  $ps = < 0.001$ ), we conducted additional ANCOVA analyses to control for the potentially confounding effect of age. After controlling for age, a significant main effect of living arrangement remained in explaining the number of lifetime romantic relationships ( $ps = 0.002$ ) and the duration of the current romantic relationship ( $ps = 0.015$ ).

Table 2 shows the correlations between the included measures. Relationship dismissal was moderately and negatively associated with relationship desire. In addition, those participants who expressed higher relationship dismissal, reported lower connectedness in relation to mother and father and higher perceived intrusiveness of both parents (correlations were significant but negligible or small). Participants with higher relationship dismissal had fewer romantic experiences (i.e., fewer lifetime romantic relationships, shorter duration of longest romantic relationship, and shorter duration of current romantic relationship) than participants with lower relationship dismissal. In contrast, participants with higher relationship desire reported a longer duration of their romantic relationships (current and longest romantic relationship) than their peers with lower relationship desire.



TABLE 1  
Descriptive statistics  
for the total sample  
and comparisons  
according to  
relationship status,  
gender and living  
arrangement

Variables	Total sample M (SD)	Partnered emerging adults M (SD)	Single emerging adults M (SD)	Effect size Cohen's <i>d</i>	Females M (SD)	Males M (SD)	Effect size Cohen's <i>d</i>	Living with parents M (SD)	Living semi-inde- pendently M (SD)	Living inde- pendently M (SD)	$\eta^2$
Relationship dismissal	1.62 (0.65)	1.35 (0.48)	1.91 (0.68)	0.95**	1.60 (0.67)	1.64 (0.59)	0.07	1.63 (0.69)	1.65 (0.62)	1.47 (0.65)	0.009
Relationship desire	2.73 (0.92)	3.95 (0.83)	2.49 (0.95)	-0.52**	2.67 (0.93)	2.85 (0.87)	0.21*	2.72 (0.93)	2.67 (0.93)	2.95 (0.90)	0.011
Connectedness M	3.80 (0.98)	3.88 (0.97)	3.74 (1.00)	-0.14	3.90 (0.98)	3.64 (0.95)	-0.27*	3.79 (1.05)	3.83 (0.91)	3.77 (1.09)	0.001
Intrusiveness M	2.21 (1.07)	2.01 (1.04)	2.39 (1.07)	0.32*	2.08 (1.04)	2.48 (1.07)	0.38**	2.29 (1.03)	2.24 (1.09)	1.95 (1.07)	0.012
Connectedness F	3.40 (1.03)	3.47 (1.07)	3.33 (0.99)	-0.13	3.46 (1.04)	3.32 (1.00)	-0.13	3.46 (1.07)	3.37 (0.98)	3.38 (1.12)	0.001
Intrusiveness F	1.69 (0.82)	1.56 (0.75)	1.83 (0.88)	0.32*	1.61 (0.81)	1.84 (0.81)	0.28*	1.72 (0.84)	1.70 (0.81)	1.60 (0.85)	0.002
Lifetime number of RRs	1.63 (1.40)	2.10 (1.34)	1.15 (1.31)	-0.71**	1.74 (1.39)	1.38 (1.34)	-0.27*	1.46 (1.37)	1.51 (1.32)	2.46 (1.48)	0.062**
Duration of longest RR	33.77 (27.73)	41.90 (28.27)	20.54 (21.00)	-0.83**	37.00 (28.22)	25.60 (23.70)	-0.44**	28.38 (24.67)	31.00 (26.61)	50.45 (29.68)	0.085**
Duration of current RR+	/	35.45 (29.90)	/	/	37.00 (26.64)	27.27 (26.51)	-0.35*	28.38 (24.67)	32.06 (28.49)	51.72 (32.58)	0.088**

Note. RR = romantic relationship, M = mother, F = father, + only participants in a relationship. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Age	-								
2 Relationship dismissal	-0.096*	-							
3 Relationship desire	0.099	-0.522**	-						
4 Connectedness M	-0.022	-0.101*	0.031	-					
5 Intrusiveness M	-0.061	0.117*	-0.027	-0.591**	-				
6 Connectedness F	-0.011	-0.184**	0.112*	0.356**	-0.206**	-			
7 Intrusiveness F	0.044	0.107*	0.016	-0.267**	0.449**	-0.254**	-		
8 Lifetime number of romantic relationships	0.264**	-0.150**	0.077	-0.059	-0.018	-0.016	-0.001	-	
9 Duration of longest romantic relationship	0.352**	-0.289**	0.174**	0.031	-0.184**	-0.095	-0.227**	0.062	-
10 Duration of current romantic relationship +	0.367**	-0.191**	0.170**	0.070	-0.209**	0.189**	-0.227**	-0.137*	0.761**

**TABLE 2**  
Zero-order correlations for study variables

*Note.* RR = romantic relationship, M = mother, F = father, + only participants in a relationship. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

Only connectedness in relation to the father (and not in relation to the mother) was associated with the romantic experiences of emerging adults in the sample. Those emerging adults who felt more connected in relation to the father reported longer durations of the current romantic relationship and the longest romantic relationship. Lastly, emerging adults in the sample who reported more intrusiveness from their parents had fewer lasting romantic relationships.

Before we ran regression analyses, we examined the assumptions for all hierarchical linear regressions. The Cook's distances were all below 1, suggesting the absence of outliers. There were no signs of multicollinearity (any correlation was above 0.70). VIF scores were predominantly in the 1-2 range. Collinearity tolerances were consistently above 0.1 in all the iterations of the hierarchical linear regressions.

To examine the effects of demographic variables (gender, age, and living arrangement), perceived importance of the relationship, and the two dimensions of individuation (connectedness and intrusiveness in relation to each parent) on aspects of romantic experience (number of lifetime romantic relationships, duration of current relationship, and duration of longest relationship), we ran multiple hierarchical linear regressions. The three demographic variables were inserted into a separate block in the first step, relationship dismissal and desire were inserted into the second block, and the two individuation dimensions related to each parent were inserted separately in the last step, using the default Enter method.

The results of the multiple regression analysis (Table 3) show that demographic data, perceived importance of the relationship, and connectedness and intrusiveness in relation to the mother (father) explain 13.4% (12.2%) of the variance in

emerging adults' lifetime number of romantic relationships. The first block, which includes demographic data, shows that women, older emerging adults, and those who lived independently or semi-independently were more likely to have a greater number of romantic relationships in their lives. Adding the importance of the relationship in the second block of the regression model significantly increased the explained variance in the lifetime number of romantic relationships ( $R^2\Delta = 0.012$ ). Relationship dismissal (but not desire) proved to be a significant and negative predictor of the lifetime number of romantic relationships. The addition of the two dimensions of individuation related to mother and father in the third block of the regression model did not significantly contribute to the prediction of lifetime number of romantic relationships.

TABLE 3  
Summary of  
hierarchical multiple  
regression analysis  
predicting the number  
of lifetime romantic  
relationships

	Predictor	Number of romantic relationships		
		B	$\beta$	95% CI B
Step 1	Female	0.339	0.118**	[-2,669, -0.146]
	Age	0.105	0.200**	[0.054, 0.156]
	Living arrangement d1	-0.610	-0.160**	[-1.021, -0.199]
	Living arrangement d2	-0.603	-0.158**	[-0.997, -0.208]
Step 2	Female	0.318	0.111*	[0.062, 0.574]
	Age	0.100	0.191**	[0.049, 0.151]
	Living arrangement d1	-0.592	-0.205**	[-1.003, -0.182]
	Living arrangement d2	-0.576	-0.209**	[-0.970, -0.182]
	Relationship dismissal	-0.259	-0.121*	[-0.484, -0.035]
	Relationship desire	-0.019	-0.013	[-0.178, 0.140]
Step 3a (mother)	Female	0.384	0.133**	[0.120, 0.647]
	Age	0.093	0.181**	[0.042, 0.145]
	Living arrangement d1	-0.607	-0.211**	[-1.017, -0.197]
	Living arrangement d2	-0.570	-0.208**	[-0.963, -0.177]
	Relationship dismissal	-0.307	-0.142*	[-0.542, -0.071]
	Relationship desire	-0.002	-0.001	[-0.166, 0.163]
	Connectedness	-0.115	-0.082	[-0.270, 0.039]
	Intrusiveness	0.003	0.002	[-0.140, 0.146]
Step 3b (father)	Female	0.370	0.128**	[0.096, 0.645]
	Age	0.097	0.186**	[0.044, 0.151]
	Living arrangement d1	-0.573	-0.197**	[-1.00, -0.139]
	Living arrangement d2	-0.585	-0.212**	[0.999, -0.171]
	Relationship dismissal	-0.292	-0.131*	[-0.542, -0.041]
	Relationship desire	-0.008	-0.005	[-0.179, 0.164]
	Connectedness	0.048	-0.036	[-0.177, 0.081]
	Intrusiveness	0.052	0.031	[-0.109, 0.213]
R <sup>2</sup> Step 1		0.108**		
R <sup>2</sup> Step 2		0.120*		
R <sup>2</sup> Step 3a		0.134		
R <sup>2</sup> Step 3b		0.122		

Note. Living arrangement (reference = living independently, d1 = living with parents, d2 = living semi-independently). \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

Predictor	Duration of current RR			Duration of longest RR		
	B	$\beta$	95% CI B	B	$\beta$	95% CI B
<b>Step 1</b>						
Female	12.104	0.179*	[4.091, 20.118]	11.625	0.206**	[6.122, 17.127]
Age	3.190	0.312**	[1.811, 4.570]	2.769	0.291**	[1.720, 3.818]
Living arrangement d1	-12.523	-0.201*	[-22.743, -2.303]	-11.944	-0.214**	[-20.036, -3.851]
Living arrangement d2	-10.764	-0.192*	[-20.134, -1.395]	-9.868	-0.188*	[-17.647, -2.088]
<b>Step 2</b>						
Female	12.296	0.182*	[4.359, 20.233]	11.858	0.210**	[6.538, 17.177]
Age	3.030	0.296**	[1.663, 4.397]	2.777	0.292**	[1.771, 3.782]
Living arrangement d1	-12.388	-0.199*	[-22.478, -2.298]	-10.706	-0.192**	[-18.474, -2.937]
Living arrangement d2	-9.596	-0.171*	[-18.891, -0.302]	-7.639	-0.146*	[-15.154, -0.123]
Relationship dismissal	-7.226	-0.124	[-14.628, 0.176]	-10.786	-0.256**	[15.376, -6.196]
Relationship desire	2.518	0.074	[-1.864, 6.899]	0.635	0.022	[-2.517, 3.787]
<b>Step 3a (mother)</b>						
Female	9.895	0.144*	[1.570, 18.219]	12.337	0.217**	[6.803, 17.870]
Age	3.060	0.300**	[1.678, 4.441]	2.899	0.308**	[1.902, 3.895]
Living arrangement d1	-9.309	-0.148*	[-19.804, 1.187]	-9.424	-0.169*	[-17.209, -1.638]
Living arrangement d2	-7.354	-0.131*	[-16.964, 2.256]	-6.345	-0.121	[-13.837, 1.148]
Relationship dismissal	-6.706	-0.115	[-14.191, 0.778]	-10.073	-0.232**	[-14.970, -5.176]
Relationship desire	2.662	0.077	[-1.862, 7.187]	1.152	0.040	[-2.139, 4.443]
Connectedness	-1.314	-0.045	[-5.748, 3.119]	-2.020	-0.075	[-5.155, 1.114]
Intrusiveness	-3.881	-0.143	[-8.157, 0.395]	-2.766	-0.111	[-5.753, 0.222]
<b>Step 3b (father)</b>						
Female	11.937	0.174*	[3.522, 20.352]	12.279	0.217**	[6.631, 17.926]
Age	2.891	0.283**	[1.477, 4.306]	2.752	0.291**	[1.707, 3.797]
Living arrangement d1	-10.333	-0.164	[-5.019, 10.964]	-8.904	-0.160*	[-17.109, -0.699]
Living arrangement d2	-7.360	-0.132	[-2.91, 20.957]	-5.825	-0.111	[-13.671, 2.021]
Relationship dismissal	-5.736	-0.097	[-13.473, 2.000]	-8.141	-0.184**	[-13.392, -2.890]
Relationship desire	2.493	0.073	[-2.043, 7.029]	2.201	0.076	[-1.218, 5.620]
Connectedness	3.380	0.129*	[.141, 6.620]	0.513	-0.020	[-2.105, 3.131]
Intrusiveness	-5.484	-0.147*	[-10.121, -0.847]	-4.559	-0.140**	[-7.872, -1.246]
R <sup>2</sup> Step 1	0.196**			0.195**		
R <sup>2</sup> Step 2	0.224*			0.266**		
R <sup>2</sup> Step 3a	0.232			0.291		
R <sup>2</sup> Step 3b	0.249**			0.277*		

**TABLE 4**  
Summary of hierarchical multiple regression analyses predicting the duration of current romantic relationship and the duration of the longest romantic relationship

*Note.*  $n = 229$  (predicting duration of current romantic relationship, RR),  $n = 329$  (predicting the longest romantic relationship, RR). Living arrangement (reference = living independently, d1 = living with parents, d2 = living semi-independently). \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ .

Demographic characteristics, perceived importance of the relationship, and connectedness and intrusiveness in relation to the mother (father) explained 23.2% (24.9%) of the variance in the duration of the current romantic relationship (see Table 4). The first block of demographic characteristics shows that women and older emerging adults were more likely to have

a longer current romantic relationship, while those emerging adults who lived with their parents or semi-independently reported a shorter length of current romantic relationship than their peers who lived independently. The addition of relationship importance in the second block of the regression model significantly increased the explained variance in the duration of the current romantic relationship ( $R^2\Delta = 0.028$ ). However, the independent contributions of relationship dismissal and desire in explaining the duration of the current romantic relationship were not confirmed. Moreover, adding connectedness and intrusiveness in relation to the mother in the third block of a regression model did not significantly contribute to predicting the duration of current romantic relationship. On the other hand, connectedness and intrusiveness in relation to the father made a significant contribution to predicting the duration of the current romantic relationship over and above demographics and perceived importance of the relationship ( $R^2\Delta = 0.025$ ). Specifically, higher paternal connectedness contributed positively, and higher paternal intrusiveness contributed negatively to the duration of the current romantic relationship. Table 4 also shows the results of a regression model predicting emerging adults' duration of the longest romantic relationship. Demographics, perceived importance of the relationship, and connectedness and intrusiveness in relation to the mother (father) explained 29% (28%) of the variance in the duration of the longest romantic relationship. The first block of demographic data shows that being female, older, and living away from parents mean having longer duration of the longest romantic relationship. The addition of relationship importance in the second block of the regression model significantly increased the reported duration of the longest romantic relationship ( $R^2\Delta = 0.071$ ). Those emerging adults who were more dismissing of romantic relationships had a shorter duration of their longest relationship, whereas relationship desire did not significantly contribute to explaining the duration of the longest romantic relationship. Of the measures assessing the two aspects of individuation, only paternal intrusiveness significantly and negatively predicted the duration of the longest romantic relationship.

## DISCUSSION

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One of the most important relational developmental tasks during emerging adulthood is the ability to form and maintain long-term romantic relationships. In this study, we examined how beliefs about the importance of romantic relationships and the two aspects of individuation related to parents (perceived connectedness with parents and parental intrusiveness) are related to emerging adults' relationship status and the

frequency and duration of their romantic experiences, while controlling for emerging adults' age, gender, and living arrangements.

First, we found that single emerging adults showed lower relationship desire and higher relationship dismissal than coupled emerging adults. In addition, single emerging adults showed a lower number of lifetime romantic relationships and an overall shorter duration of the longest romantic relationship. These findings support our first hypothesis and add to the results of previous studies that have examined the association between emerging adults' relationship beliefs and the characteristics of their romantic experiences. Young participants who currently have a partner reported more positive romantic beliefs and more satisfying romantic experiences than their single counterparts (Adamczyk et al., 2022; Beckmeyer & Cromwell, 2019; Watkins & Beckmeyer, 2020). In terms of relationships with parents, single emerging adults reported higher levels of paternal and maternal intrusiveness than partnered emerging adults. These findings could be interpreted in light of research emphasising the importance of parent-child dynamics in the formation and maintenance of relationships (Conger et al., 2000; Donnellan et al., 2005; Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2001). Overly intrusive parents who are unable to interact with their children in a warm, loving way may disrupt children's attachment styles and consequently impact their ability to form and maintain romantic relationships later in life (Parise et al., 2017). However, the lack of relationship experiences is not necessarily due to problems in psychosocial functioning, as today's emerging adults generally have fewer romantic relationship experiences than previous generations. These changes in relationship experiences could therefore be related to broader societal factors – a finding that has been observed in both Generation Z and Millennials compared to previous generations (Demarinis, 2020; Twenge et al., 2017; Wagner et al., 2015).

The second aim of our study was to determine how gender, age, and living arrangement relate to the frequency of emerging adults' romantic relationships and the duration of current and longest romantic relationships, and whether beliefs about the importance of romantic relationships and the two aspects of individuation in relation to parents (connectedness and intrusiveness) predict aspects of romantic experiences over and above demographic characteristics. We found that gender, age, and living arrangement explained the largest proportion of variance in all three regression models. Gender appears to be an important predictor of romantic experiences, as confirmed in previous studies. Demographic data from the United States show large gender differences in relationship status: 51% of young men (under 30) report being

single compared to 32% of young women (Brown, 2020). This finding is consistent with a general pattern showing that men marry later in life than women (Allendorf et al., 2017). Age is an important predictor of relationship experience, as older emerging adults are more likely to be in a relationship and have more relationship experience than younger individuals (Beckmeyer & Cromwell, 2019; Watkins & Beckmeyer, 2020). Similarly, older emerging adults are more likely to be in more stable, long-term relationships (Ponti et al., 2010). Finally, all three regression models show that emerging adults who lived independently had more romantic experiences in their lives than those who lived with their parents or semi-independently. These results may suggest that independent living is an important criterion for reaching adulthood (even after controlling for age), which in turn is associated with other criteria such as having a stable romantic relationship and a job (Zupančič et al., 2014). Another explanation is that emerging adults who live independently are under less parental supervision and have more freedom to explore romantic and sexual relationships (Tillman et al., 2019).

In predicting the lifetime number of romantic relationships, the importance of romantic relationships contributed significantly to the second step of the regression, but only relationship dismissal (and not relationship desire) was a significant independent predictor. The authors of the BMRI questionnaire (Watkins & Beckmeyer, 2019) reported similar results, with relationship dismissal being a significant predictor of the number of romantic relationships in one's life, whereas relationship desire was not. We can assume that emerging adults who place less importance on a romantic relationship in their lives are less likely to engage in behaviours that could lead to the formation of a romantic relationship. However, as this is a correlational study, an alternative explanation could also be that self-reported relationship dismissal could be the function of defense mechanisms (Cramer, 2015; Freud, 1929) or cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), as individuals who have difficulty entering into a relationship may tend to invoke rationalisations for their romantic relationship status. Two aspects of individuation related to parents did not contribute to the prediction of the number of lifetime romantic relationships in the third step of the regression model, which does not support our hypothesis about the association between the two aspects of individuation and the frequency of emerging adults' romantic experiences.

After controlling for demographic characteristics, beliefs about the importance of romantic relationships explained a significant amount of the variance in the duration of current and longest romantic relationships. Only relationship dismissal,

but not relationship desire, predicted the duration of the longest romantic relationship (negatively). Individuals who are dismissive of their romantic relationships may invest less in their relationship and put less effort into maintaining and improving their romantic commitment. However, the reverse is also possible: Individuals who have had shorter relationships may be more dismissing of their future romantic relationships due to the dissatisfaction they experienced in their short-lived previous relationship. Indeed, negative past relationship experiences have been shown to influence beliefs and expectations about future relationships (Baker et al., 2017; Carnelley & Janoff-Bulman, 1992). In addition, connectedness with mother and maternal intrusiveness did not significantly contribute to the prediction of the duration of the current and longest romantic relationship. However, connectedness with father significantly predicted the duration of the current romantic relationship, whereas paternal intrusiveness negatively predicted the duration of the current and longest relationship. Thus, our hypothesis about the relationship between the two individuation dimensions and the duration of emerging adults' romantic relationships was only partially supported. There are few studies that have examined the differential effects of the father-child relationship and the mother-child relationship on the romantic experiences of their adult children, likely due to the traditional view that mothers are the primary caregivers of children (Arendell, 2000). However, the few studies that do exist in this area have reached similar conclusions to ours. For example, Dalton et al (2006) found that parenting quality of the father (but not the mother) was related to the quality of emerging adults' current romantic relationships. In their longitudinal study, Flouri & Buchanan (2002) followed participants from age 7 to age 33 and found that participants who had good relationships with their fathers at age 16 had better marital satisfaction at age 33, while no relationship was found between mother-child relationships at age 16 and participants' later marital adjustment.

It should be noted that most of the emerging adults in our sample did not experience high levels of parental intrusiveness and most of them reported high levels of connectedness with their parents. In future studies, it would therefore be interesting to focus on those emerging adults who reported high levels of parental intrusiveness and low levels of connectedness with their parents. For example, could the psychological effects of dysfunctional relationships with parents be observed at different stages of an existing partnership? Indeed, studies have found that people often use deceptive



self-presentation when trying to achieve their strategic goals (Leary, 1995), which also applies to partnership contexts (Guadagno et al., 2012). The potential negative effects associated with high parental intrusiveness and low connectedness with parents can be hidden from the partner, especially in the early stages of a romantic relationship, whereas they are more difficult to conceal in later stages of a relationship and may consequently lead to the termination of the relationship.

It remains partially unexplained why the dynamics between father and adult child play a more important role in the emerging adult's experience of romantic relationships than the dynamics between mother and adult child. In a study of the differential effects of mother-child and father-child relationship quality (Riggio, 2004), it was found that only father-adult child relationship quality was significantly and negatively related to feelings of anxiety in the adult child's romantic relationships. The authors surmised that this could be due to the fact that relationships with fathers are seen as more voluntary than relationships with mothers and therefore high relationship quality with the father is seen as a sign of the individual's competence and desirability in relationships. Accordingly, Karataş et al. (2019) found that low connectedness with fathers, but not with mothers, was a significant predictor of emerging adults' anxious attachment in a relationship with a romantic partner.

### **Strengths, Limitations and Future Research**

One advantage of our study is that we used objective measures of emerging adults' romantic experiences, i.e. their frequency and duration. However, this could also be seen as a disadvantage, as we did not use a more sensitive measure of the quality of romantic relationships to get a more comprehensive view of the potential relationship dynamics. This was partly because we wanted to include both single and partnered emerging adults in our sample, so a measure of current romantic relationship quality would not apply to the substantial proportion of emerging adults who are single. However, by measuring only the frequency and duration of romantic experiences, we were able to partially support the hypothesis that certain aspects of romantic experiences in emerging adulthood are related to individuals' relationships with their parents, as measured by two important dimensions of individuation (connectedness and intrusiveness). Another notable limitation of this study was its cross-sectional design, which does not allow for causal inferences about the direction of the relationship between the included variables, but only allows for

a discussion of the results at the correlational level. The sample was not gender balanced, as almost two-thirds of the sample consisted of women. Another important factor is that the present study was conducted while the coronavirus pandemic was still ongoing. The restrictions put in place to contain the spread of the virus may have influenced various societal dynamics that could also be related to romantic relationship factors. For example, emerging adults have had less romantic relationship experience because they were unable to socialise due to Covid-19 restrictions (Puklek Levpušček & Poredoš, 2023), and the additional stressors associated with the pandemic may have influenced the nature, duration and initiation of potential romantic relationships. An important starting point for future research would be to examine how specific characteristics of emerging adults' relationships with their mothers and fathers are related to the quality of romantic relationships. While a few studies have already examined the differential effects of mothers and fathers (Dalton et al., 2006; Seiffge-Krenke et al., 2010), more extensive research is needed to shed light on this complex dynamic.

## CONCLUSION

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In this study, we found important differences between emerging adults currently in a relationship and single emerging adults in terms of their relationship beliefs and perceived parental intrusiveness. We also found important effects of age, gender, and living arrangement on the frequency and duration of romantic experiences. After controlling for demographic variables, emerging adults' beliefs about the importance of romantic relationships explained a substantial amount of the variance in objective measures of relationship stability, i.e., the duration of current and longest romantic relationships. We also found that individuation in relation to parents plays a role in certain aspects of romantic experiences, but we only confirmed the significant contribution of perceived paternal intrusiveness in explaining the duration of emerging adults' partnerships. The dynamics underlying the differential role of fathers and mothers in explaining characteristics of children's romantic relationships are not yet fully understood and require further research.

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## Romantična iskustva mladih na prijelazu u odraslost: odnos s važnosti romantičnih veza i kvalitetom odnosa s roditeljima

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Cilj studije bio je istražiti vezu između percipirane važnosti romantičnih veza (želja za vezom i odbacivanje veze) i romantičnih iskustava, uključujući status veze, broj dosadašnjih partnerskih veza i trajanje veza. Također, zanimalo nas je kako individuacija u odnosu sa svakim roditeljem pridonosi predikciji tih iskustava. Sudionici ( $N = 464$ , 64,4% žene, prosjek dobi = 22,59 godina) pružili su informacije o važnosti romantičnih veza, iskustvima u vezama te percipiranoj povezanosti s roditeljima i pretjeranom nadzoru roditelja. Hijerarhijska regresijska analiza pokazala je da je percipirana važnost romantičnih veza značajno objasnila varijancu u iskustvima s romantičnom vezom nakon kontrole demografskih varijabli, dok je očinski pretjerani nadzor značajno (negativno) pridonio trajanju trenutnih i najdužih veza. Rezultati sugeriraju da važnost romantičnih veza kao i određeni aspekti individuacije, posebno u odnosu s ocem, značajno utječu na romantična iskustva mladih na prijelazu u odraslost.

Ključne riječi: romantična iskustva, mladi na prijelazu u odraslost, važnost romantičnih veza, povezanost s roditeljima, pretjeran nadzor



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