

The Lived Experiences of Adolescents Born in the 2000s Engaged in Opposite-Sex Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore and interpret the lived experiences of adolescents born in the 2000s who are engaged in opposite-sex relationships, focusing on the psychosocial, emotional, and cultural dynamics that shape these relationships.

Methods and Materials: This qualitative study was conducted using a grounded theory design to capture the subjective experiences of adolescents. The study population consisted of high school, pre-university, and undergraduate students in Shiraz, Iran, who were born in the 2000s and had been involved in opposite-sex relationships. Participants were selected through purposive sampling until theoretical saturation was achieved, resulting in a final sample of ten adolescents (five females and five males). Data were collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed according to Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin's three-stage coding approach (open, axial, and selective coding). Trustworthiness was enhanced through member checking, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and maintaining a detailed audit trail. Ethical approval was obtained from the Islamic Azad University Ethics Committee, and informed consent was secured from all participants.

Findings: The analysis revealed eleven axial categories capturing the core dynamics of these adolescents' experiences: identity and future concerns, generational conflict and family pressure, factors of attraction and relationship maintenance, psychological and emotional effects of relationships, influence of family role models, socio-cultural changes, relationship dynamics and attraction patterns, coping mechanisms against pressure, psychological consequences of relationships, normative and cultural shifts, and the impact of future concerns on relationships. The emerging core category reflected adolescents' negotiation of autonomy and identity within relationships while managing socio-cultural contradictions, emotional vulnerabilities, and aspirations for personal growth.

Conclusion: Adolescent opposite-sex relationships constitute complex psychosocial phenomena shaped by intersecting personal, familial, and cultural forces. These relationships serve as arenas for identity exploration and emotional development, yet also expose adolescents to psychological risks, highlighting the need for supportive educational and counseling interventions.

Keywords: Adolescence; Opposite-sex relationships; Lived experience; Grounded theory; Identity development; Emotional well-being

1. Introduction

Adolescence represents a critical stage of psychosocial development characterized by rapid cognitive, emotional, and relational transformations. It is during this period that individuals begin to explore intimate relationships, which can profoundly shape their sense of identity, self-worth, and social connectedness. The experience of opposite-sex romantic relationships among adolescents, especially in socio-cultural contexts undergoing value transitions, has become an increasingly salient area of inquiry. Contemporary studies have emphasized that romantic relationships during adolescence are closely intertwined with identity formation processes, autonomy development, and emotional regulation capacities. Research has shown that supportive and secure romantic ties can bolster adolescents' psychological well-being, foster resilience, and enhance their social competencies (Ratelle et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2022). Conversely, tumultuous or conflict-laden relationships can contribute to emotional dysregulation, depressive symptoms, and lowered academic performance (Ritter et al., 2023; Simon et al., 2019). The emotional salience of romantic bonds often intensifies adolescents' sensitivity to rejection, perceived failure, or breakup experiences, leading to states of distress or rumination that may adversely affect their mental health (Loan et al., 2023; Rajabi VandeChali et al., 2022). Such outcomes highlight the dual nature of romantic involvement in adolescence—simultaneously a domain of growth and a source of vulnerability.

A growing body of literature has also examined the role of attachment dynamics in shaping adolescents' romantic relationship behaviors. Attachment styles—formed through early interactions with caregivers—strongly influence expectations, emotional responses, and coping strategies within intimate relationships (Santona et al., 2019; Simon et al., 2019). Securely attached adolescents are more likely to experience satisfaction and stability in romantic relationships, whereas those with anxious or avoidant attachment patterns may display heightened jealousy, fear of abandonment, or emotional withdrawal (Kaur, 2024; Pourmohseni-Koluri, 2016). These findings indicate that the internal working models developed in early life continue to guide relational perceptions and behaviors, affecting both the quality and outcomes of adolescent romantic experiences. Moreover, attachment insecurity has been associated with increased susceptibility to depressive symptoms following relationship difficulties, suggesting its

role as a psychological vulnerability factor (Eken & Çankaya, 2022; Körük & Kurt, 2019).

Cultural and contextual factors also critically shape how adolescents approach and interpret romantic relationships. In societies undergoing rapid socio-cultural changes, adolescents may encounter conflicting messages about the acceptability and meaning of opposite-sex interactions. Studies have shown that shifting gender norms, digital media exposure, and globalized cultural values have altered adolescents' expectations regarding intimacy, autonomy, and emotional expression (Saqqezi & YazdaniEsfidvajani, 2020; Yaridhenavi & Ebrahimi Shahabadi, 2023). In more traditional or collectivist contexts, romantic relationships among adolescents may be perceived as taboo or morally questionable, creating tensions between personal desires and familial or societal expectations (Akbarzadeh & Hashemianfar, 2022; Khorasaniyan, 2022). Such tensions can contribute to secrecy, guilt, or identity confusion, while also motivating adolescents to seek emotional validation and autonomy through their relationships (Amanelahi et al., 2015; Ebrahim et al., 2016).

The digitalization of social interactions has further transformed the landscape of adolescent romantic relationships. Social media platforms now serve as primary venues for initiating, maintaining, and terminating romantic ties, reshaping norms around emotional disclosure, commitment, and conflict resolution. These platforms often accelerate relationship dynamics, amplifying both positive and negative experiences, and can heighten exposure to peer judgment or cyber aggression (Hadzigeorgiou & Schulz, 2019; Huey et al., 2021). At the same time, digital environments allow adolescents to experiment with self-presentation, emotional intimacy, and boundary negotiation, which may support identity exploration but also foster superficial connections or emotional dependency (Lazzaro et al., 2022; Özabacı & Eryılmaz, 2015). This digital mediation of relationships has made the line between public and private spheres increasingly blurred, intensifying the psychological stakes of adolescent romantic involvement.

Psychological responses to romantic relationship challenges—particularly breakups—have also emerged as a major concern in adolescent populations. Romantic breakups are frequently experienced as profound personal losses, triggering emotional turmoil and even identity crises. Research indicates that adolescents who struggle to cope with romantic dissolution often report declines in self-esteem, motivation, and perceived social support (Rahimi et al., 2022; Rajabi VandeChali et al., 2022). Persistent

rumination following breakups has been identified as a mediating factor between relationship distress and subsequent sleep disturbances or depressive symptoms (Loan et al., 2023). Gender differences have been noted in these responses, with some evidence suggesting that girls may exhibit greater emotional investment and vulnerability to post-breakup distress (Ebrahim et al., 2016; Pourmohseni-Koluri, 2016). These findings underscore the psychological intensity of romantic relationships during adolescence, which often occur amidst limited emotional regulation resources and underdeveloped coping skills.

Despite these vulnerabilities, romantic relationships also present crucial opportunities for adolescents to develop socio-emotional competencies. Engaging in romantic interactions allows adolescents to practice empathy, communication, conflict resolution, and trust-building skills that are foundational to adult intimate relationships (Hadzigeorgiou & Schulz, 2019; Ratelle et al., 2013). Romantic relationships can serve as training grounds for negotiating autonomy and closeness, balancing individual needs with relational responsibilities. They can also provide affirming experiences that enhance self-efficacy, body image, and overall life satisfaction (Kaur, 2024; Lazzaro et al., 2022). When embedded within supportive social networks, these relationships can contribute to adolescents' subjective well-being and buffer the stress associated with academic or family pressures (Huey et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022). In this way, romantic experiences are not merely potential sources of harm but are also central to normative developmental trajectories.

Nonetheless, research in this field has often overlooked the nuanced, context-specific lived experiences of adolescents who navigate opposite-sex relationships within restrictive or rapidly changing cultural milieus. Much of the existing literature relies on quantitative designs that capture general trends but fail to illuminate the subjective meanings adolescents attach to their relational experiences (Akbarzadeh & Hashemianfar, 2022; Yaridhenavi & Ebrahimi Shahabadi, 2023). Qualitative approaches, particularly those grounded in lived experience, are essential to reveal the complex emotional landscapes, identity negotiations, and cultural tensions that shape adolescents' romantic lives (Eken & Çankaya, 2022; Körük & Kurt, 2019). Investigating these experiences can offer valuable insights for designing culturally sensitive educational, counseling, and preventive interventions that address both the developmental needs and psychosocial risks associated

with adolescent romantic involvement (Rahimi et al., 2022; Saqquezi & YazdaniEsfidvajani, 2020).

Accordingly, this study aims to explore and interpret the lived experiences of adolescents born in the 2000s who are engaged in opposite-sex relationships

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative design using the grounded theory approach to explore and understand the core structure of the lived emotional experiences of adolescents who have been involved in opposite-sex relationships. The research aimed to interpret the participants' subjective experiences from their own perspectives through a systematic and iterative analysis of their narratives. Grounded theory, as introduced by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss and further developed by Juliet Corbin, is a powerful methodology in qualitative inquiry that enables the development of theories rooted in empirical data. It is especially valuable in the fields of social sciences, psychology, and education, where it allows researchers to generate a deep conceptual understanding of human phenomena.

The study population consisted of adolescents born in the 2000s who were high school students, pre-university students, or undergraduate students residing in Shiraz, Iran. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, aiming to select individuals who could provide rich and diverse perspectives on the phenomenon under investigation. The recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved, meaning no new themes or insights emerged from subsequent interviews. Based on previous methodological guidance and saturation criteria, twelve eligible participants were initially recruited, and after accounting for attrition, ten participants remained in the final sample. The participants included both males and females aged between 16 and 21, and they varied in birth order and educational levels. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Islamic Azad University, Shiraz Branch. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected using in-depth, semi-structured interviews, complemented by preliminary literature reviews to build the theoretical background. This interview format, often referred to as phenomenological interviewing, allowed for a collaborative, dialogical process between the researcher and the participant. The interview guide was developed based on the research objectives and prior theoretical and empirical studies. The questions were open-ended and designed to elicit detailed narratives of personal experiences related to opposite-sex relationships.

The interview questions underwent content validation by three faculty experts in psychology who reviewed them for clarity, logical consistency, and alignment with the study's objectives. A pilot interview was conducted with one eligible participant, after which the transcript was examined multiple times, coded, and analyzed to refine the subsequent interviews. This iterative process continued after each interview to ensure progressive focusing of the data collection. The interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and then reviewed multiple times for accuracy.

Several strategies were used to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the collected data. Prolonged engagement with participants and the topic helped the researcher gain a deep understanding of the context and avoid superficial interpretations. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary codes and interpretations with several participants to confirm that the findings accurately reflected their lived experiences. Peer debriefing was also performed with experienced qualitative researchers to review the coding process, categories, and emerging relationships. Negative case analysis was undertaken to identify and scrutinize data that contradicted emerging patterns, thus enhancing the robustness of the findings. Rapport-building was prioritized to establish trust and encourage openness during interviews.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the grounded theory methodology proposed by Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1998), which involves three main stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The analysis began concurrently with data collection and progressed in a cyclical and iterative manner.

In the open coding stage, all raw data, including interview transcripts and analytic memos, were carefully examined to break down the data into smaller meaning units and to assign

conceptual labels or initial codes. These codes were often derived from the participants' own words to preserve the authenticity of their perspectives. Constant comparison was used to identify similarities and differences among codes, which were then grouped into higher-order categories based on semantic relatedness.

During axial coding, relationships among the categories generated in the open coding phase were explored. Using the Strauss and Corbin coding paradigm, each category was examined in terms of causal conditions, contextual and intervening conditions, central phenomena, strategies/actions, and consequences. This helped to build a more integrated structure of the data and clarify how different elements interacted within the participants' experiences.

Finally, in the selective coding phase, all categories were integrated around a central core category that captured the essence of the phenomenon. A theoretical narrative was developed to explain how the categories and their relationships formed a coherent and explanatory grounded theory of the lived experiences of adolescents in opposite-sex relationships. Throughout all coding stages, analytic memo-writing was used to document the researcher's reflections, emerging hypotheses, and conceptual linkages. This process enhanced reflexivity and ensured that the evolving theory was firmly grounded in the data.

Trustworthiness of the analysis was further supported through audit trailing, which involved detailed documentation of all methodological and analytical decisions, and through maintaining coding consistency by re-reading and re-coding data where necessary. The combination of constant comparison, negative case analysis, member checks, and peer review strengthened the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study's findings.

3. Findings and Results

The first stage of data analysis involved open coding, which focused on breaking down the raw interview data into smaller meaning units and labeling them with conceptual codes. This stage aimed to show how initial concepts were derived directly from participants' narratives. Through meticulous reading and line-by-line analysis of each transcript, the researcher identified recurring words, phrases, and ideas that reflected the lived experiences of adolescents born in the 2000s who are engaged in opposite-sex

relationships. Each open code represents an initial conceptualization grounded in direct participant quotations.

Table 1

Open Codes and Supporting Quotations from Participants

| Open Code | Supporting Textual Evidence (Direct Quote) | Participant Code |
|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Worry about future and migration | "My concern is whether I can and if I have the strength to start studying in a foreign country away from my family." | 1 |
| Anxiety about future in a foreign country | "I'm worried if I can and if I have the strength to start studying in a foreign country where I have no family or friends." | 2 |
| Goal of migration | "My goal is to migrate." | 1 |
| Desire for financial and personal independence | "Most people my age just want to be independent, have their own money, and not have to answer to anyone." | 9 |
| Family's defensive stance and lack of understanding | "My family personally are very defensive about this and keep telling me I'm too young and why I don't tell them everything I do." | 2 |
| Poor relationship with father | "Because of the not-so-good relationship I had with my father, I always thought I could never enter an emotional relationship with any boy." | 2 |
| Low family empathy | "Families don't empathize; they can't put themselves in the shoes of an Iranian youth living in this era." | 1 |
| Imposition of unreasonable parental expectations | "They have expectations that are really illogical and unreasonable." | 3 |
| Prioritizing appearance in choosing a partner | "Physical attractiveness only... I think looks are really important." | 3 |
| Upbringing focused on dependence on family | "They did everything to make me dependent on them and rely on them." | 2 |
| Interest in sports and going to the gym | "I really love sports and go to the gym under any circumstances." | 7 |
| Normalization of open relationships | "Boundaries have disappeared; for example, a girl holds her boyfriend's hand and brings him home, and they talk about sexual issues in front of parents." | 7 |
| Effort to maintain a relationship | "It's seeing effort from the other side... I think that keeps the relationship alive." | 4 |
| Attraction to emotionally unavailable people | "I get attracted to someone who actually ignores me and doesn't pay attention to me." | 8 |
| Importance of future social status | "I think a lot about having a good social position in the future." | 8 |
| Feeling of safety and happiness in a relationship | "A sense of safety and happiness." | 4 |
| Negative emotions (worry, anxiety, sadness) | "Negative emotions like worry, anxiety, and sadness." | 10 |
| Positive emotions (sense of power, value, capability) | "It gives me a sense of power, value, and capability." | 8 |
| Prioritizing love over logic | "If I love someone, I won't easily get discouraged, and my love outweighs the problems that come up." | 3 |
| Existence of shared goals in a relationship | "Honesty and being straightforward / respect and giving space / having shared goals." | 1 |
| Willingness to solve problems in relationships | "This generation enters relationships with deep thinking and perspective." | 6 |

The open coding process revealed a diverse set of themes that reflect the participants' inner worlds and relational experiences. Many adolescents expressed concerns about their future, especially regarding migration and studying abroad, often intertwined with aspirations for independence and achieving higher social status. Others highlighted tensions within their families, such as defensive parental attitudes, low empathy, and unreasonable expectations, which shaped their approach to relationships. Several participants described emotional influences, including both negative feelings (worry, anxiety, sadness) and positive

feelings (power, value, happiness) experienced within their relationships. Additionally, they emphasized personal criteria in choosing partners, such as physical attractiveness, shared goals, and the ability to solve conflicts, while also revealing contradictory tendencies like being drawn to emotionally distant individuals. Some adolescents depicted a shift in social norms, mentioning the normalization of open romantic interactions, while others underlined the effort required to maintain relationships despite familial opposition. Collectively, these open codes provide an initial conceptual framework that illustrates how these adolescents

navigate the complex emotional, social, and familial dynamics surrounding their opposite-sex relationships.

Table 2

Axial Categories, Related Open Codes, and Descriptions

| Axial Category | Related Open Codes | Description |
|------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Identity and Future Concerns | Desire for financial and personal independence; Importance of future social status; Anxiety about future in a foreign country; Goal of migration | This category encompasses adolescents' concerns and aspirations regarding identity formation, personal and financial autonomy, and their fears and hopes about their educational and occupational futures, especially with respect to migration. |
| Generational Conflict and Family Pressure | Low family empathy; Family's defensive stance and lack of understanding; Imposition of unreasonable parental expectations; Upbringing focused on dependence on family | This category captures the communication challenges between adolescents and their parents, including differences in perspectives, psychological pressures, and feelings of being misunderstood, which often manifest as control and restrictions. |
| Factors of Attraction and Relationship Maintenance | Prioritizing appearance in choosing a partner; Attraction to emotionally unavailable people; Effort to maintain a relationship; Existence of shared goals; Prioritizing love over logic | This category highlights the elements involved in initiating and sustaining opposite-sex relationships, ranging from unconscious attraction patterns and physical appearance to conscious efforts to preserve and nurture the relationship. |
| Psychological and Emotional Effects of Relationships | Negative emotions (worry, anxiety, sadness); Feeling of safety and happiness in a relationship; Positive emotions (sense of power, value, capability); Anger and emotional instability | This category addresses the emotional and psychological outcomes of relationships, showing how they can evoke a wide range of positive and negative feelings—from security and self-worth to anxiety and distress. |
| Influence of Family Role Models | Poor relationship with father; Parental influence on forming emotional relationships | This category shows how early family experiences and role models (especially the father-child relationship) serve as a contextual background that shapes how adolescents build and experience future emotional relationships. |
| Socio-Cultural Changes | Normalization of open relationships; Parental awareness via social media; Erosion of traditional boundaries | This category reflects broader societal shifts that act as intervening factors influencing adolescents' and their families' attitudes toward opposite-sex relationships. |
| Relationship Dynamics and Attraction Patterns | Attraction to emotionally unavailable people; Attraction to specific personalities; Effort to maintain a relationship; Honesty and straightforwardness | This category refers to behavioral and psychological patterns within relationships, from being drawn to inaccessible individuals to consciously sustaining the relationship through honesty and commitment. |
| Normative and Cultural Shifts | Normalization of open relationships; Erosion of traditional boundaries; Parental awareness via social media | This category points to evolving social and cultural norms in Iran that affect how adolescents and families perceive and navigate opposite-sex relationships, with social media playing a key mediating role. |
| Coping Mechanisms Against Pressure | Hiding from family; Lying; Efforts to gain independence | This category explains the strategies adolescents employ to cope with familial and societal pressures, from concealment and deception to active pursuit of autonomy and self-sufficiency. |
| Psychological Consequences of Relationships | Feeling of safety and happiness; Positive emotions (sense of power, value, capability); Negative emotions (worry, anxiety, sadness) | This category highlights the profound psychological consequences of relationships, showing how they can be sources of joy and empowerment or, conversely, stress and emotional turmoil. |
| Impact of Future Concerns on Relationships | Worry about future and migration; Prioritizing the future and career; Choosing a partner based on shared goals | This category illustrates how concerns about the future and migration directly influence the type and nature of relationships adolescents engage in, with relationships often being seen as strategic steps toward future goals rather than purely emotional experiences. |

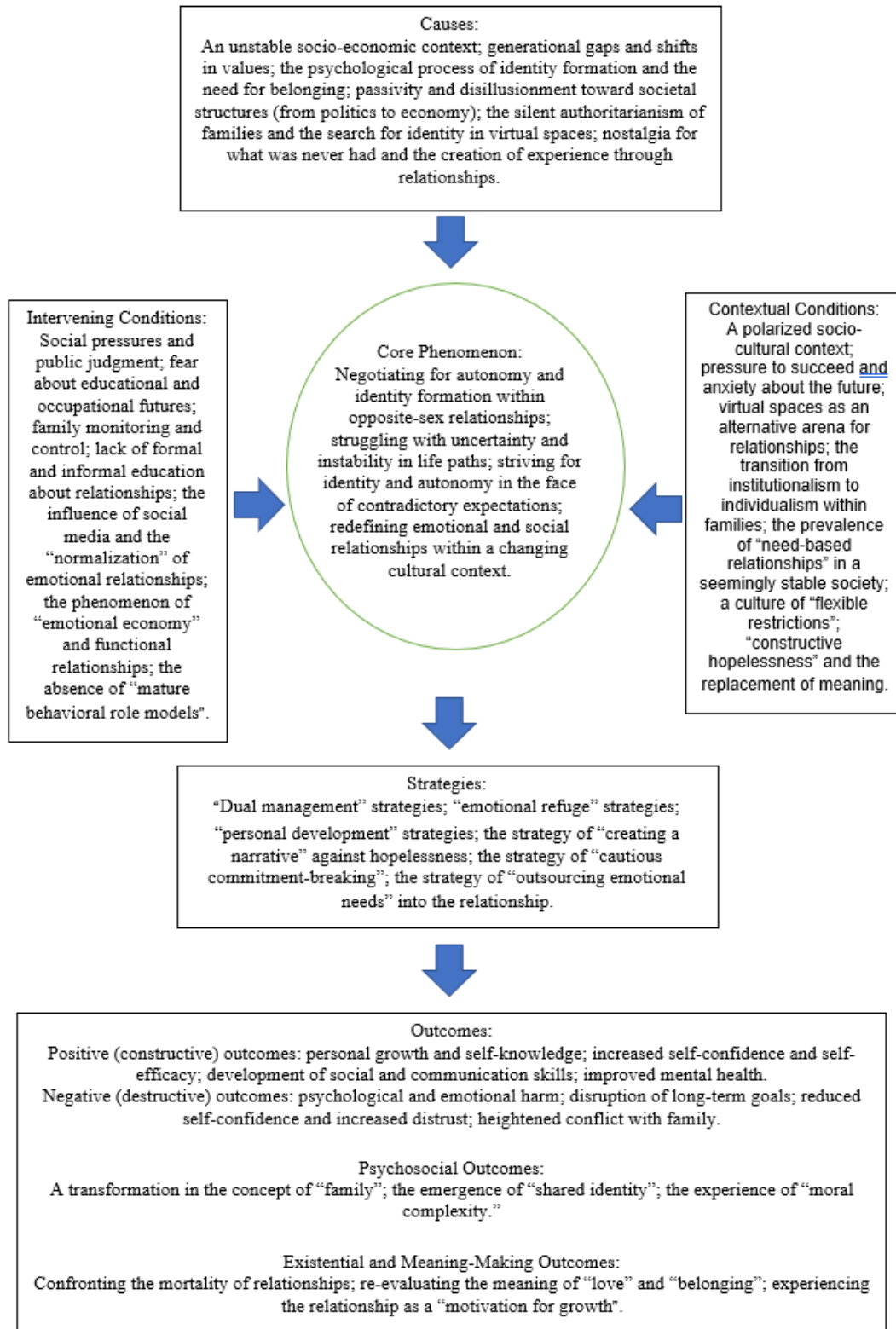
The axial coding stage organized the previously identified open codes into broader, conceptually meaningful categories that reveal the structural dimensions of adolescents' lived experiences in opposite-sex relationships. These categories illustrate how personal identity development and future-oriented anxieties intertwine with family pressures, socio-cultural shifts, and psychological dynamics to shape the way adolescents perceive and conduct their relationships. Many participants described their romantic involvement not merely as emotional or impulsive but as embedded within a larger framework of life planning, autonomy-seeking, and negotiating generational gaps. Family dynamics—especially

lack of empathy, defensive parenting, and controlling expectations—were reported as major contextual pressures that both hindered and shaped these relationships. Simultaneously, adolescents expressed diverse attraction patterns and emotional responses, ranging from love-driven commitment to anxiety and insecurity, revealing the ambivalent psychological impact of such relationships. Societal change and the erosion of traditional norms also emerged as powerful intervening factors, pushing adolescents toward secrecy, rebellion, or independence as coping mechanisms. Altogether, these axial categories show that these relationships are complex psychosocial

phenomena, deeply rooted in cultural change, emotional needs, and strategic aspirations for the future.

Figure 1

Final Model



4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to explore the lived experiences of adolescents born in the 2000s who are engaged in opposite-sex relationships, aiming to uncover the psychosocial, emotional, and cultural dynamics that shape these relationships. Through a grounded theory analysis of semi-structured interviews, several core categories emerged, including identity and future concerns, generational conflict and family pressure, factors of attraction and relationship maintenance, psychological and emotional effects of relationships, influence of family role models, socio-cultural changes, coping mechanisms against pressure, and the impact of future concerns on relationships. These findings illuminate the multifaceted nature of adolescent romantic relationships, demonstrating how they are simultaneously sites of identity negotiation, emotional fulfillment, and psychosocial strain.

One of the central findings was that adolescents view their romantic relationships as intertwined with their personal identity development and future aspirations. Participants described desires for independence, concerns about migration, and aspirations for social mobility as deeply connected to their relational choices. This aligns with prior studies indicating that adolescent romantic relationships serve as key contexts for the exploration of autonomy and self-concept (Kaur, 2024; Ratelle et al., 2013). Adolescents often use romantic partnerships as spaces to rehearse adult-like responsibilities and to envision potential life trajectories, which suggests that such relationships are not purely emotional but also instrumental in constructing future-oriented identities (Wang et al., 2022). These findings also echo the notion that romantic involvement in adolescence can foster personal agency and goal setting, particularly in cultural contexts where independence is emerging as a salient developmental task (Saqezi & YazdaniEsfidvajani, 2020; Yaridhenavi & Ebrahimi Shahabadi, 2023).

However, this forward-looking orientation often coexisted with feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and instability. Many adolescents expressed ambivalence about their capacity to sustain relationships alongside educational or migration plans, reflecting a tension between intimacy and self-development. This tension has been observed in previous research, where romantic involvement has been shown to sometimes conflict with academic and career

pursuits, generating psychological strain (Loan et al., 2023; Ritter et al., 2023). The current findings suggest that such conflicts are intensified in contexts marked by economic volatility and rapid socio-cultural change, where the future appears especially unpredictable. This underscores the need to view adolescent romantic experiences within the broader socio-economic and cultural landscapes that shape young people's sense of temporal stability and possibility (Akbarzadeh & Hashemianfar, 2022; Hadzigeorgiou & Schulz, 2019).

Another major theme was the perception of generational conflict and family pressure. Participants frequently described their families as unsympathetic, controlling, or dismissive of their emotional experiences, often perceiving parental attitudes as rooted in outdated norms. This finding is consistent with evidence that adolescents in transitional societies often encounter intergenerational clashes over values surrounding intimacy, sexuality, and autonomy (Ebrahim et al., 2016; Yaridhenavi & Ebrahimi Shahabadi, 2023). Such clashes can produce feelings of secrecy, guilt, and rebellion, as adolescents attempt to assert their emotional autonomy while preserving family relationships. Prior studies have shown that lack of parental empathy and overcontrol are associated with higher relational conflict, lower self-efficacy, and increased psychological distress in adolescents (Santona et al., 2019; Simon et al., 2019). These patterns suggest that intergenerational misunderstandings may act as a chronic stressor that shapes the emotional climate of adolescent romantic relationships.

Closely linked to this generational tension was the finding that adolescents often resort to covert strategies—such as secrecy, deception, or selective disclosure—to protect their relationships from parental interference. This aligns with research indicating that adolescents frequently conceal their romantic involvement when they anticipate disapproval or punitive reactions from their families (Ebrahim et al., 2016; Rahimi et al., 2022). Such concealment, while protective in the short term, may also exacerbate psychological stress and reduce access to supportive guidance. At the same time, it may foster adolescents' sense of agency and problem-solving skills as they navigate competing demands from different relational domains (Ratelle et al., 2013; Saqzezi & YazdaniEsfidvajani, 2020). This dual role of secrecy—as both a burden and a developmental strategy—underscores the complexity of adolescents' adaptive mechanisms in managing romantic involvement under restrictive conditions.

The analysis also revealed that adolescents' attraction patterns and relationship maintenance behaviors were shaped by both emotional and pragmatic considerations. Some participants prioritized physical appearance or felt drawn to emotionally unavailable partners, while others emphasized shared goals, mutual effort, and honesty. This duality resonates with evidence that adolescent romantic choices are guided by both affective impulses and cognitive appraisals, often reflecting an ongoing negotiation between passion and pragmatism (Kaur, 2024; Pourmohseni-Koluri, 2016). Studies have shown that early romantic relationships frequently involve idealized expectations and emotional intensity, yet those that persist tend to incorporate more mature qualities such as commitment, communication, and compatibility (Körük & Kurt, 2019; Özabacı & Eryılmaz, 2015). The coexistence of impulsive attraction and strategic partner evaluation in this study suggests that adolescents are actively transitioning from emotionally driven to more goal-directed relational models.

Moreover, the study found that adolescents experienced a wide spectrum of psychological and emotional effects from their relationships, ranging from positive emotions like happiness, security, and empowerment to negative feelings such as anxiety, sadness, and emotional instability. This supports existing evidence that adolescent romantic relationships are emotionally intense experiences that can simultaneously enhance well-being and increase vulnerability to distress (Huey et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022). Participants who described their relationships as supportive often reported boosts in self-esteem and confidence, which aligns with findings that positive romantic experiences contribute to adolescents' social competence and emotional regulation skills (Lazzaro et al., 2022; Ratelle et al., 2013). Conversely, participants who experienced relational conflict or instability reported emotional exhaustion and diminished motivation, consistent with research linking romantic stress to depressive symptoms and academic disengagement (Ritter et al., 2023; Simon et al., 2019). These results underscore the dual role of adolescent romantic relationships as both developmental assets and potential stressors.

The influence of early family role models, particularly paternal relationships, emerged as another salient theme. Participants who reported distant or conflictual relationships with their fathers often described difficulties trusting or emotionally engaging with partners. This mirrors findings that early attachment experiences significantly shape adolescents' relational schemas and expectations in later

romantic contexts (Eken & Çankaya, 2022; Santona et al., 2019). Studies have shown that insecure attachment patterns stemming from inconsistent caregiving are associated with greater jealousy, fear of abandonment, and lower relationship satisfaction (Pourmohseni-Koluri, 2016; Simon et al., 2019). The current findings reinforce the idea that family dynamics serve as a foundational context for adolescents' emotional development, influencing how they approach intimacy, vulnerability, and conflict in romantic relationships.

Participants also highlighted the perceived normalization of opposite-sex relationships within their peer culture, alongside what they described as an erosion of traditional boundaries. They noted that behaviors once considered taboo—such as public displays of affection or discussing sexual topics openly—had become more accepted among their peers. This perception reflects broader socio-cultural shifts documented in recent research, which has shown that globalization, social media exposure, and shifting gender norms are reshaping young people's expectations about intimacy and gender roles (Hadzigeorgiou & Schulz, 2019; Yaridhenavi & Ebrahimi Shahabadi, 2023). While such changes can reduce stigma and create more open communication about relationships, they may also provoke intergenerational conflict and moral ambivalence, especially in societies where traditional norms remain influential (Akbarzadeh & Hashemianfar, 2022; Khorasaniyan, 2022). These findings suggest that adolescents are navigating a cultural liminality where contrasting value systems coexist and collide.

Interestingly, some participants framed their romantic relationships as sources of motivation for personal growth, describing how these relationships encouraged them to develop social skills, emotional resilience, and future-oriented planning. This aligns with research highlighting the constructive potential of adolescent romantic experiences in fostering self-knowledge, self-efficacy, and psychological well-being (Lazzaro et al., 2022; Ratelle et al., 2013). Positive romantic relationships can function as emotional training grounds that enhance empathy, conflict resolution skills, and the capacity to balance autonomy with closeness (Hadzigeorgiou & Schulz, 2019; Özabacı & Eryılmaz, 2015). Such findings challenge deficit-based narratives that view adolescent romantic involvement primarily as a risk factor, instead emphasizing its potential as a developmental resource when embedded in supportive contexts.

At the same time, several participants reported that relationship challenges—especially breakups—led to

emotional distress, rumination, and declines in self-esteem. This is consistent with evidence that romantic dissolution during adolescence can trigger grief-like responses, identity disruptions, and symptoms of depression or anxiety (Loan et al., 2023; Rajabi Vandechali et al., 2022). Prior studies have shown that adolescents often lack effective coping strategies for handling romantic loss, making them particularly vulnerable to its psychological impact (Amanelahi et al., 2015; Rahimi et al., 2022). Gender differences noted in earlier research suggest that girls may experience greater emotional investment and therefore greater distress after breakups, while boys may be more prone to emotional suppression (Ebrahim et al., 2016; Pourmohseni-Koluri, 2016). These patterns were reflected in the current study, where several female participants described profound feelings of sadness and self-doubt following relationship failures.

Collectively, these findings portray adolescents' opposite-sex relationships as complex psychosocial phenomena shaped by intersecting personal, familial, cultural, and developmental forces. They are not merely emotional experiences but serve as arenas where adolescents negotiate autonomy, rehearse adult roles, seek validation, and confront societal contradictions. The results corroborate prior evidence that romantic relationships in adolescence are double-edged—capable of fostering growth and well-being while also posing risks for emotional dysregulation and psychosocial difficulties (Ritter et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022). This underscores the importance of adopting a balanced perspective that recognizes both the developmental benefits and potential hazards of adolescent romantic involvement.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

While this study offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of adolescents engaged in opposite-sex relationships, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small and drawn from a single urban context, which may limit the transferability of the findings to adolescents from different regions or socio-economic backgrounds. The use of purposive sampling, though appropriate for qualitative research, may have introduced selection bias by favoring participants who were more willing to discuss their personal relationships. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported interview data raises the possibility of social desirability bias, as participants may have underreported behaviors perceived as

socially unacceptable or exaggerated positive aspects of their relationships. The cross-sectional nature of the study also precludes any inferences about how adolescents' romantic experiences and their psychological impacts evolve over time.

Future studies should aim to address these limitations by incorporating larger and more diverse samples, including adolescents from various cultural, socio-economic, and geographical backgrounds. Longitudinal qualitative designs could provide valuable insights into how romantic experiences shape and are shaped by adolescents' developmental trajectories over time. Comparative studies across different cultural contexts could illuminate how societal norms and value systems influence adolescents' approaches to and interpretations of romantic relationships. Additionally, mixed-methods research integrating qualitative interviews with quantitative measures of psychological well-being, attachment patterns, and relationship satisfaction could deepen our understanding of the complex interplay between individual, relational, and cultural factors. Future research could also explore the role of digital media in shaping adolescents' romantic expectations, communication patterns, and coping strategies following relationship challenges.

Practitioners working with adolescents—such as educators, counselors, and mental health professionals—should adopt developmentally informed and culturally sensitive approaches to addressing romantic relationships. Educational programs can be designed to promote emotional literacy, communication skills, and conflict resolution strategies, helping adolescents navigate relationships more effectively. Schools and counseling centers should create safe spaces where adolescents can openly discuss their relational experiences and receive guidance without fear of stigma or judgment. Parental education initiatives could also be implemented to help families understand adolescents' emotional needs and reduce intergenerational conflicts regarding romantic involvement. By fostering supportive environments at both family and institutional levels, practitioners can help adolescents build healthy, fulfilling relationships that contribute to their psychological well-being and personal growth.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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