



Research Paper: Emotional Relationships with Opposite Sex: Two Studies on the Mental Health of Adolescent Girls



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Abstract

Objective: This research was conducted in two studies with the aim of investigating the mental health of adolescent girls who have relationships with opposite sex.

Methods: The first study used a qualitative approach and a phenomenological method, and the second study used a quantitative approach and a causal-comparative method. In the first study, 12 adolescent girls aged 12 to 18 years old from Amlash city in 2025 who had a regular, daily, and at least one-year emotional relationship with the opposite sex were selected through purposive sampling and subjected to semi-structured interviews. In the second study, 30 adolescent girls who were in a romantic relationship with the opposite sex were selected and compared with 30 girls who were not in such a relationship. The research instruments in the second study were the Ryff Scale Psychological Wellbeing-Short Form (RSPWB-SF) and the Mental Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12).

Finding: The coding of the interviews in the first study revealed 3 main themes and 27 sub-themes. In the second study, the findings showed that girls who have an emotional relationship with a opposite sex partner experience a significantly lower level of mental health and psychological well-being than girls who do not have such a relationship ($P < 0.05$).

Conclusion: According to the findings, it can be concluded that adolescent girls have their own concerns, fantasies, and worries about emotional relationships with an opposite sex partner, which requires the attention of families, schools, and culture-building in society to prevent psychological harm and reduce their mental health.

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is a period of transition and profound transformation in various biological, psychological, and social dimensions of the individual. This period, which usually begins in early puberty and continues until the end of adolescence, is accompanied by rapid hormonal and physical changes that in turn affect the individual's psychological and behavioral state. At this critical juncture, identity formation, which is considered one of the most important developmental tasks of adolescence, takes place by exploring various roles, values, and beliefs (Luyckx et al., 2025). Romantic relationships with the opposite sex, as one of the most prominent manifestations of these explorations, play an important role in this process. In fact, these are the first steps on the path to knowing oneself and others in an emotional format that can form the foundations of the individual's future relationships (Shabani Shahreza et al., 2024). Research and social studies indicate the significant prevalence of these relationships among adolescents. For example, statistics indicate that about 60 to 70 percent of 18-year-old girls have experienced a romantic relationship (Jing et al., 2023; Navaneetham et al., 2025). In Iran, Naghizadeh et al. (2024), by surveying 700 girls born in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, showed that same-sex relationships were common among young girls, and only about one-third (35.2 percent) of single girls considered maintaining virginity as an important issue for girls before marriage in the current era. About 27 percent were not sure, and about 38 percent believed that this issue was

unimportant. Mehrolhassani et al. (2020) also concluded, based on their findings, that Iranian adolescents are at risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases. This initial experience often begins with romantic dates, which usually begins around the ages of 14 to 15. These ages, coinciding with the onset of sexual maturation and emotional development, are considered an appropriate time to explore romantic relationships, although the level of psychological and social readiness to manage these relationships is not the same among all adolescents (Emami et al., 2024). The impact of these relationships on the mental health of adolescents is a dual and complex phenomenon. On the one hand, healthy and supportive romantic relationships can have positive effects on individuals' mental health, and a sense of security in establishing an emotional connection with another person can lead to enhanced self-confidence and a sense of empowerment in facing social challenges (Berli et al., 2021; Trimble et al., 2025; McIntyre et al., 2023). However, on the other hand, romantic relationships during adolescence, due to emotional immaturity and insufficient experience, also have the potential to cause numerous psychological disorders and problems, and when these relationships are accompanied by conflict, insecurity, uncertainty, or even an unfortunate ending, they can impose a heavy cost on the adolescent's mental health (Emami et al., 2024).

Statistical evidence in this area is worrying and shows that adolescents who are in conflicted and tense relationships are more likely to show clinical symptoms of

depression and anxiety (Bajoghli et al., 2014; Kansky & Allen, 2018). This means that unpleasant experience in this emotional area significantly increases the risk of developing mood and anxiety disorders. In this context, Fathi et al. (2019) showed in a qualitative study on 30 girls aged 18 to 31 that, in addition to gaining experience and increasing knowledge about the opposite sex, having a relationship with the opposite sex has brought about pessimism towards the opposite sex, fear of establishing a relationship, and physical and mental problems for girls. Worse still, the consequences of deep problems in teenage romantic relationships can progress to the point of serious crises; so much so that many teenage girls who attempt suicide have experienced a serious crisis in their emotional relationships before this horrific act (Fallahi-Khoshknab et al., 2023; Vergara et al., 2023). These statistics clearly show the depth of the impact of teenage romantic relationships on the most vital aspects of mental health. In addition to mental health, other aspects of adolescent well-being are also affected by these relationships. Psychological well-being, which includes a sense of life satisfaction, purpose, personal growth, positive relationships with others, self-acceptance, and autonomy (Ryff et al., 1995), can be altered by the quality of adolescents' romantic relationships. In this regard, Gómez-López et al. (2019) studied 747 Spanish adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 and showed that romantic relationships can predict psychological well-being, and although they are positively related to the dimensions of positive

relationships with others and personal growth, they are negatively related to autonomy and self-acceptance. Camirand and Poulin (2022) also showed that the presence of conflict in romantic relationships is associated with a lower level of well-being. Sometimes, focusing an adolescent's emotional and intellectual energy on a romantic relationship, even at the beginning of its formation, leads to a decrease in purpose in life and a decrease in attention to other aspects of personal development such as education, personal interests, or family and friendship relationships. This exclusive focus can lead to an unhealthy emotional dependency that ultimately undermines the individual's psychological well-being (Trimble et al., 2025).

Finally, it can be concluded that romantic relationships among adolescent girls are a multifaceted and complex phenomenon that is influenced by several factors, including puberty and family relationships. The impact of these relationships on the mental health and psychological well-being of adolescents can be both positive and negative, and in many cases, there is a delicate balance between these two aspects. Given the sensitivity of this period and the potential consequences of early relationships, local and culturally appropriate research is essential to better understand this phenomenon and provide supportive and preventive solutions. Therefore, the present study was conducted to investigate the mental health of adolescent girls who have an emotional relationship with a person of the opposite sex.

2. Methods

2.1. Statistical Population, Sample, and Sampling Method

This research was conducted in the form of two studies. The first study was qualitative and phenomenological, and the second study was quantitative and causal-comparative. In the first study, 12 teenage girls aged 12 to 18 years old from Amlash city who had a regular, daily, and in-person emotional relationship with a heterosexual partner for at least one year were selected through purposive sampling and were subjected to semi-structured interviews until theoretical data saturation. The duration of the interviews was between 45 and 83 minutes. The text of the interviews was analyzed manually using the seven-step Colaizzi's method. The initial interview questions were: 1) How long have you been in an emotional relationship? 2) How many times have you had a continuous emotional relationship with a boy? 3) How long has your emotional relationship or relationships lasted? 4) What is it like to be in an emotional relationship with a heterosexual partner? 5) What feelings

does an emotional relationship with a boy bring? 6) What are the reasons for forming a romantic relationship with a person of the opposite sex? 7) Is a romantic relationship with a person of the opposite sex beneficial? 8) What are the benefits of a romantic relationship with a person of the opposite sex? 9) What harm has a romantic relationship with a person of the opposite sex caused to you? 10) Is a romantic relationship with a person of the opposite sex harmful? 11) What effects has a romantic relationship with a person of the opposite sex had on you? 12) What are the strategies for improving a romantic relationship with a person of the opposite sex? 13) How can girls protect themselves from unhealthy romantic relationships with a person of the opposite sex? 14) How can girls have healthy romantic relationships with a person of the opposite sex?

Demographic information of the participants in the first study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic information of the research participants

Rank	Age	Educational level	Duration of relationship with opposite sex
1	14	8th grade	2 years
2	18	12th grade	3 years
3	13	7th grade	1 years
4	16	10th grade	1 years
5	18	11th grade	2 years
6	15	9th grade	2 years
7	17	11th grade	3 years
8	15	10th grade	2 years
9	18	12th grade	2 years
10	18	12th grade	2 years
11	17	11th grade	2 years
12	18	12th grade	3 years

In the second study, 30 teenage girls who had a regular, daily, and at least one-year emotional relationship with a opposite sex were selected and compared using purposive sampling. Data analysis was performed using multivariate analysis of variance and SPSS-26 software.

2.2. Instrument

General Health Questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12); This questionnaire was developed by [Goldberg and Williams \(1988\)](#) and consists of 12 items and consists of two subscales: positive mental health symptoms (items 2, 3, 4, 6, 10, 12) and symptoms of mental problems (items 1, 5, 7, 8, 9, 12). This questionnaire is scored on a 4-point Likert scale from not at all (0) to much more than usual (3), with higher scores indicating higher mental health. [Goldberg and Williams \(1988\)](#) reported sensitivity, specificity, and overall classification error as 6.80, 3.93, and 9.10, respectively. In the study by [Yaghoubi et al. \(2012\)](#), the sensitivity, specificity, and overall classification error for the best cutoff point of the questionnaire, which was 9, were 81.5 percent, 77.1 percent, and 17.8 percent, respectively. The cutoff point was also obtained by considering the maximum sensitivity (95.5 percent) of a score of 5 and the maximum specificity (95.8 percent) of a score of 15. The construct validity of the questionnaire was calculated by examining the correlation between the subscales with each other and with the total score, all of

which had a significant correlation with strong intensity. Also, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the questionnaire was 0.92 and the reliability coefficient of the scale and the Spearman-Brown was 0.91.

Ryff Scale Psychological Wellbeing–Short Form (RSPWB-SF):

This scale was developed by [Ryff \(1995\)](#) and has 18 items and is scored on a 6-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). The total score of the questionnaire is obtained from the sum of the items, and a higher score indicates higher psychological well-being. This scale has 6 subscales: mastery of the environment (items 1, 4, 6), self-acceptance (items 2, 8, 10), positive relationships with others (items 3, 11, 13), having a purpose in life (items 5, 14, 16), personal growth (items 7, 15, 17), and autonomy (items 9, 12, 18). The internal consistency of the total score and subscales has been reported to be between 0.75 and 0.88, and its convergent validity has been confirmed through the correlation of this scale with the Life Satisfaction Scale ($R = 0.47$), the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire ($R = 0.58$), and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale ($R = 0.46$) ([Bayani et al., 2008](#)).

3. Results

Findings from the coding of interviews in the first study indicated 3 main themes and 27 subthemes ([Table 2](#)).

Table 2.

Main and sub-themes extracted from interviews with participants

Main themes		Sub-themes										
Daydreaming	Curiosity	Experience of love	Desire to be understood	Sense of care	Fantasizing	Emotional attraction	Sense of purpose	Idealization	Physical attractiveness	Hope	Sense of motherhood	Gaining independence
Worry	betrayal	fear of loneliness	Worry about the future	Economic instability	Relationship conflicts	Worry about the durability of the relationship	Love failure	Social stigma	Rumination	Unsuccessful marriage		
Support	Family support	Education	Counseling	Culture building	Consulting with friends							

It is observed that the lived experience of adolescent girls of relationships with the opposite sex, in addition to including fantasizing and motivational and emotional conflicts, also includes some concerns, obsessions, and ruminations, and obtaining support from the family and other areas that promote values can act as a psychological refuge and be their support for a healthy passage through this period.

In the second study, the mean and standard deviation of the age of girls in a heterosexual relationship were 17.24 and 2.65, and girls without a heterosexual relationship were 17.76 and 3.60. The mean and standard deviation of the research variables are presented in [Table 3](#).

Table 3

Mean and standard deviation of meaning of the research variable

Variable	Girls in a heterosexual relationship	Girls without a heterosexual relationship
	Mean± Standard deviation	Mean± Standard deviation
Mental health	17.60±0.81	47.25±0.93
Psychological well-being	78.58±1.42	103.08±72.1

As can be seen in [Table 3](#), the mean mental health and psychological well-being of girls in a heterosexual relationship are lower than that of girls without a heterosexual relationship. The significance level of the

Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for all indicators was greater than 0.05, and as a result, the data distribution was normal. The Levene's test statistic was not significant to examine the homogeneity of error variances of mental

health ($F = 0.49$, $P = 0.15$) and psychological well-being ($F = 0.67$, $P = 0.09$) in the study groups, and as a result, the error variances of these variables in the groups were homogeneous. Multivariate analysis of variance was used to examine the difference in mental health and psychological well-

being between the two groups. The value of the Wilks lambda statistic ($F = 0.38$, $P = 0.00$, eta squared = 0.69) showed that there was a significant difference between the groups in at least one of the variables. A summary of the results of the multivariate analysis of variance is reported in [Table 4](#).

Table 4

Summary of the results of the multivariate analysis of variance test

Component	Sum of squares	d.f	Mean of squares	F	P	Effect size
Mental health	938.20	1	938.20	2.41	0.00	0.21
Psychological well-being	1264.08	1	1264.08		0.00	0.32

As shown in [Table 4](#), the significance level of the test is significant for mental health and psychological well-being. Therefore, it can be said that the level of mental health and psychological well-being in girls who have an emotional relationship with a heterosexual is significantly lower than that of girls who do not have such a relationship.

4. Discussion

This research was conducted in two studies with the aim of investigating the mental health of adolescent girls who have heterosexual relationships. In the first study, which was conducted with a qualitative approach and phenomenological method, the findings indicated 3 main themes and 27 sub-themes. The main theme of daydreaming included 12 sub-themes: curiosity, experiencing love, desire to be understood, sense of care, fantasizing, emotional attraction, sense of purpose, idealization, physical attractiveness, hope, sense of motherhood, and gaining independence. The main theme of worry included 10 sub-

themes: betrayal, fear of loneliness, worry about the future, economic instability, communication conflicts, worry about the durability of the relationship, love failure, social stigma, rumination, and unsuccessful marriage. The main theme of support included 5 sub-themes: family support, education, counseling, culture building, and consulting with friends. In the second study, it was also observed that girls in romantic relationships with opposite-sex partners experienced significantly lower levels of mental health and psychological well-being than girls who did not have such relationships. These findings are in line with the research of [Khalajabadi-Farahani \(2025\)](#), [Naghizadeh et al. \(2024\)](#), [Shabani Shahreza et al. \(2024\)](#), [Atefifar et al. \(2023\)](#), [Emami et al. \(2024\)](#), [Fathi et al. \(2019\)](#), [Amiri et al. \(2021\)](#), [Alimoradi et al. \(2019\)](#), [Bahrami et al. \(2018\)](#), and [Motamedi et al. \(2016\)](#). The results of this bimodal study (qualitative and quantitative) provide an in-depth picture of the lived experience of adolescent girls involved in romantic relationships and shed

light on the main reason for the significant decrease in mental health and psychological well-being in this group. In fact, these relationships are a double-edged sword, on the one hand responding to developmental and idealistic needs (the main theme of daydreaming) and on the other hand, due to their unstable nature and social contexts, they are a source of chronic stress (worry). The qualitative study identified three main themes in the lived experience of adolescent girls that indicate the ongoing tension between positive motivations and negative risks at this developmental stage. The main theme of daydreaming, which includes idealism and the fulfillment of developmental needs, with 12 subthemes, explains the core of girls' motivation and emotional attraction towards these relationships. These themes indicate that emotional relationships in adolescence are often not a purely emotional goal, but a means to fulfill important developmental tasks. Themes such as "gaining independence," "desire to be understood," "a sense of purpose," and "experiencing love" show that through this relationship, the teenage girl tries to define her identity outside the family framework, feel valuable, and fill the emotional void caused by the changes of puberty. Themes such as "fantasizing" and "idealization" indicate the introduction of the element of imagination into the emotional relationship. The teenager sees her emotional partner beyond reality and, relying on "hope" and "emotional attraction," seeks a perfect and eternal bond. This idealism, although beautiful, creates a deep distance from the reality of human relationships that lays the groundwork for future failures. The themes

of "feeling of care" and "feeling of motherhood" also indicate the emergence of feminine and instinctive dimensions in the behavior of the teenager, which find an opportunity to express themselves in the emotional bond. In this context, [Amiri et al. \(2021\)](#) conducted a qualitative study on 18 students to investigate the reasons for the tendency to have relationships with the opposite sex, and found eight main themes: emotional-educational vacuum, inevitable socio-cultural changes, mass media, atheism, response to internal needs, personality traits, environmental pressures and friends, and an ineffective educational system. [Bahrami et al. \(2018\)](#) found in a qualitative study on 20 teenage girls that a poor understanding of the risks and processes of identity formation can be a prerequisite for entering into a relationship with the opposite sex. [Mousavi et al. \(2012\)](#) showed in a qualitative study and by interviewing 19 female students that various factors such as the individual's attitude, feelings of loneliness, and the social atmosphere, including the university environment, family, friends, religious beliefs, and media that promote Western culture, can be effective in emotional relationships with the opposite sex before marriage. [Motamedi et al. \(2016\)](#) also showed that being male, younger, single, and less religious or secular are important determinants of a positive attitude towards premarital sex.

The main theme of worry, with 10 subthemes, directly refers to a decline in mental health. These worries are factors that cause anxiety and rumination, which are divided into two main categories. 1)

Relationship-related pressures: Themes such as “betrayal,” “communication conflicts,” “love failure,” and “worry about the durability of the relationship” reflect instability, lack of communication skills, and uncertainty in adolescent relationships. For an adolescent who has defined a large part of his or her value in the relationship, the threat of failure or betrayal is equivalent to an identity catastrophe. 2) Future-oriented and social pressures: Themes such as “worry about the future,” “failed marriage,” and “economic instability” indicate that adolescent anxiety is not limited to the present, but also encompasses an uncertain future and future responsibilities. In addition, “social stigma” indicates a conflict between individual behavior and social or cultural norms, leading to “rumination” and concealment, and thus weakening social supports.

The main theme of support, with 5 sub-themes, refers to factors that can play a moderating role against stress caused by emotional relationships. “Family support” is the most important protective factor; in the presence of safe support, an adolescent girl can manage the risks of an emotional relationship. “Counseling” and “education” are also tools that provide adolescents with coping and conflict resolution skills and reduce the severity of psychological trauma. In this regard, [Khalajabadi-Farahani \(2025\)](#) showed, by studying 1,055 female students in Tehran, that factors such as higher social perspectives on marriage, new marital attitudes, low respect for parental values, and liberal sexual norms of peers are significant predictors of premarital sexual behaviors.

[Shabani Shahreza et al. \(2024\)](#) systematically reviewed 17 articles and showed that the lack of sexual knowledge among parents and teachers, as well as the lack of comprehensive sexual programs for girls in this age group and the lack of appropriate sexual awareness are among the main causes of sexual problems in adolescent girls, and examining and focusing on sexual issues in this crucial stage of girls' lives can help achieve a healthy sexual life and prevent serious problems. [Atefifar et al. \(2023\)](#) showed in a study on junior high school girls that with increasing assertiveness in the family, relationships with the opposite sex also decrease. [Alimoradi et al. \(2019\)](#) also showed in another qualitative study on 18 adolescent girls aged 13 to 19 that the existence of conflict arising from families, schools, and peers makes it necessary to establish and strengthen communication between parents and adolescents on sexual issues.

The finding of the second study that girls in romantic relationships experience significantly lower levels of mental health and psychological well-being is fully explained by the qualitative findings and the main theme of “worry.” Adolescent romantic relationships lack the structural stability and long-term commitment of adults. This instability, along with social and future-oriented fears (the theme of worry), causes chronic psychological stress. Psychological well-being also includes dimensions such as autonomy, mastery of the environment, personal growth, and purpose in life. However, when a major part of the adolescent's mental energy is spent “ruminating” about infidelity or the

continuation of the relationship, his sense of mastery over his life and environment decreases. Anxiety caused by social anxiety and fear of judgment prevents the adolescent from living openly and is forced to hide, which in turn harms his mental health. Furthermore, from the perspective of attachment theory, adolescent relationships often reflect a form of insecure attachment (anxious or avoidant). The need to be “understood” and “experience love” is very strong, but repeated experiences of “love failure” or “betrayal” reinforce negative cognitive schemas (I am not lovable or the world is unsafe) that directly lead to reduced self-esteem and increased symptoms of depression and anxiety. In this regard, Emami et al. (2024) found that many adolescents enter into unhealthy relationships due to their tendency to have relationships with the opposite sex. However, due to their strong attachment, they do not accept the problems and do not accept that this relationship is harmful to them. These researchers believe that the family plays a key role in many aspects of life, especially in the way adolescents relate to the opposite sex.

Overall, it is observed that teenage girls have their own concerns and reasons for having relationships with the opposite sex, and the presence of support resources from family, schools, friends, and, on a more general level, the culture that governs society can protect them from establishing unhealthy relationships and, as a result, reducing their mental health and psychological well-being.

5. Conclusion

According to the findings, it can be concluded that adolescent girls have their own concerns, fantasies, and worries about emotional relationships with an opposite sex partner, which requires the attention of families, schools, and culture-building in society to prevent psychological harm and reduce their mental health

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Conflicts of Interest

No conflict of interest has been reported.

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