



RESEARCH ARTICLE

How Romantic Relationships Shape Self-Worth: A Qualitative Exploration of Relationship Contingent Self-Esteem in Early Adulthood

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Abstract

Romantic relationships in early adulthood have been shown to have a significant impact on an individual's sense of self-worth, particularly when self-esteem becomes dependent on relational dynamics. This study explores the manifestation and impact of Relationship Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE) on psychological well-being among young adults in Padang, Indonesia. A qualitative survey approach was utilized to collect data from 200 participants (75 males and 125 females) through open-ended questionnaires designed to capture personal experiences and perceptions related to self-worth in romantic contexts. Thematic analysis was conducted using MAXQDA software in three stages: open coding to identify key concepts, axial coding to uncover patterns, and selective coding to synthesize overarching themes. The findings of the present study indicate that external validation from romantic partners plays a pivotal role in shaping self-evaluation and emotional states. Dependence on partner approval has been demonstrated to correspond with fluctuations in self-esteem, which in turn has been demonstrated to impact overall psychological well-being. The findings underscore the importance of addressing emotional vulnerabilities in romantic relationships. The necessity for targeted interventions, such as psychoeducational programs and emotional regulation training, is also suggested. The purpose of these interventions is to foster emotional resilience and promote healthy relational development during early adulthood.

Keywords: Relationship Contingent Self-Esteem; Early Adulthood; Romantic Relationships

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal relationships play a vital role in human life, profoundly influencing how individuals perceive and evaluate themselves (Gómez-López et al., 2019; Syafiyah & Primanita, 2024). Accurate self-evaluation is a critical factor in the establishment of self-worth, which in turn affects psychological well-being and interpersonal functioning (Crocker & Park, 2004; Kernis, 2005). Within this theoretical framework, social validation, particularly from close relationships, emerges as a central factor in shaping self-esteem (Crocker & Park, 2004; Kernis, 2005; Schwinger et al., 2017). While a stable and internalized sense of self-worth fosters emotional resilience and supports healthy relational patterns, some individuals develop self-esteem that is conditional upon success or approval in specific domains. This phenomenon is referred to as contingent self-esteem (Santic, 2019).

Early adulthood, defined as the period from ages 18 to 25, is a critical developmental phase. It is characterized by the transition from adolescence to independent adulthood, during which individuals begin to assume new roles and responsibilities in society (Hurlock, 1980; Santrock, 2012). One of the hallmark developmental tasks in this stage is the establishment of intimate and enduring romantic relationships, which function as a principal source of emotional support, identity construction, and validation (W. A. Collins et al., 2009; Miller, 2011). As individuals invest more emotionally in romantic relationships, the success or failure of these bonds can have a profound impact on their psychological well-being. Research has demonstrated a robust correlation between love and intimacy in early adulthood and key psychological well-being outcomes, including happiness, self-esteem, emotional security, and life satisfaction (Adamczyk & Segrin, 2015; Davila et al., 2017). Within this context, the concept of Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE) emerges, indicating that individuals may anchor their self-worth to the approval and affection of their romantic partners (Holden et al., 2018). Given the heightened emotional salience of romantic relationships in early adulthood, this period is particularly significant for understanding the development and impact of RCSE.

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As indicated by Zeigler-Hill (2013), one of the most emotionally salient domains in which contingent self-esteem manifests is within romantic relationships. In this context, an individual's self-worth becomes contingent upon the success or failure of romantic relationships (a phenomenon referred to as Relationship Contingent Self-Esteem) (Holden et al., 2018; Knee et al., 2008). Individuals with elevated levels of RCSE frequently anchor their sense of value to the approval, affection, or perceived success experienced within romantic partnerships. Consequently, fluctuations in relationship satisfaction, conflict, or perceived rejection may result in significant psychological distress (Knee et al., 2008). Such individuals may exhibit excessive emotional investment in their relationships (Santic, 2019), experience paradoxical feelings of intimacy and dissatisfaction (Knee et al., 2008), and display intense responses to perceived threats of relationship dissolution, including behaviors such as partner retention efforts or obsessive pursuit (Park et al., 2011).

The psychological consequences of Relationship Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE) are both severe and far-reaching, encompassing anxiety, depressive symptoms, emotional instability, and maladaptive coping behaviors such as rumination, self-harm, and substance use (DiBello et al., 2015; Gudonis-Miller et al., 2012; Kalina et al., 2023; Manouchehri et al., 2022; Tomaka et al., 2013). These outcomes stem from an excessive reliance on romantic partners for self-worth. Individuals with high RCSE exhibit heightened sensitivity to criticism, unstable self-perception, and defensive behaviors like overcommitment or control. These behaviors, in turn, erode relational trust and intimacy (Buduris, 2017; Callahan, 2018; Holden et al., 2018; Knee et al., 2008). In the digital age, these vulnerabilities are further exacerbated by social media platforms, which intensify the need for external validation through public metrics such as likes, comments, and partner interactions. For individuals with RCSE, such digital cues become volatile indicators of self-worth, increasing emotional reactivity and fueling behaviors like digital surveillance, online jealousy, and obsessive comparison with curated romantic ideals (Abbasi, 2019; Fox & Moreland, 2015; Rodríguez-de-Dios et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2021). Furthermore, phenomena such as the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) and algorithm-driven visibility distort perceptions of relationship norms, contributing to dissatisfaction, distress, and chronic insecurity (Bouffard et al., 2022; Karaman & Arslan, 2024; Satici et al., 2023). The convergence of these compounding pressures, both internal and digital, underscores the pressing need to comprehend RCSE not merely as a personal vulnerability but also as a construct inextricably intertwined with digital culture. This imperative necessitates the implementation of preventive strategies that are both clinically informed and contextually grounded.

Despite the mounting global academic interest in Relationship Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE), empirical research within the Indonesian context remains limited, despite its significant potential to shape relational and psychological experiences among young adults. Furthermore, there is a conspicuous absence of comprehension concerning the manner in which RCSE functions within the distinctive socio-cultural dynamics and relational norms that are characteristic of early adulthood in Indonesia. The present study endeavors to qualitatively explore the lived experiences, perceptions, and emotional dynamics of emerging adults in Padang who exhibit RCSE within romantic relationships. Padang, a prominent urban area in West Sumatra, offers a distinctive socio-cultural environment marked by strong collectivistic

values, entrenched traditional gender roles, and evolving youth romantic norms. This distinctive context furnishes a significant framework for the examination of the psychological ramifications of RCSE. The present study makes a significant contribution to the field of RCSE literature by offering a more comprehensive understanding of emotional development and relational functioning within Indonesia's cultural context. This topic has been historically underrepresented in global RCSE literature. The findings are expected to inform the development of targeted interventions aimed at enhancing emotional regulation, relational competence, and self-esteem among youth.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participant characteristics and research design

This study employed a qualitative survey approach, which refers to the use of open-ended questions to gather detailed narrative data from a larger number of participants than typically involved in other qualitative methods (Jansen, 2010). The present method was selected for the exploration and understanding of the phenomenon of relationship-contingent self-esteem (RCSE) among early adults in Padang, Indonesia. Participants completed open-ended written questionnaires designed to capture their subjective experiences, emotional responses, and interpersonal dynamics in romantic relationships where self-worth is contingent upon partner validation. This methodological framework enabled the aggregation of rich, descriptive data while concurrently affording participants the flexibility to articulate their perspectives in their own words. In contradistinction to the structured quantitative survey, this method prioritizes depth of insight over statistical generalizability.

The primary objective of this study was to capture the subjective experiences, perceptions, and relational dynamics of individuals whose self-worth is shaped by their romantic relationships. The primary data collection instrument employed was open-ended questionnaires, which enabled participants to articulate their thoughts, emotions, and experiences related to RCSE. This approach was intended to generate rich, nuanced insights into how romantic relationships influence self-perception and psychological well-being.

The study's participants comprised 200 individuals (75 males and 125 females) ranging in age from 18 to 25 years, all of whom reported being in, or having recently been in, a romantic relationship (see Table 1). Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research objectives (Memon et al., 2020). The ethical protocols were strictly adhered to, including the obtaining of informed consent and the maintenance of participant confidentiality. The collection of identifying information was not a component of the research process; consequently, anonymity was maintained throughout the research process.

Participants were considered eligible for the study if they met several inclusion criteria. Specifically, the subjects were required to be between the ages of 18 and 25, which corresponds to the developmental stage of emerging adulthood. Moreover, it is imperative that the subjects possess prior or current experience in a romantic relationship. All participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary, and each individual provided written consent before commencing the study.

The demographic data collected encompassed a range of variables, including gender, age, duration of the relationship, the current relationship status, and prior experience with romantic relationships.

Table 1
Demographic characteristics (N=200)

Demographic characteristics	n	Composition ratio %
Age		
18 Years	23	11.5
19 Years	47	23.5
20 Years	39	19.5
21 Years	34	17
22 Years	31	15.5
23 Years	13	6.5
24 Years	11	5.5
25 Years	2	1
Gender		
Male	75	37.5
Female	125	62.5
Relationship Status		
Dating	197	98.5
Married	3	1.5
Length of Relationship		
0 - <1 Years	95	47.5
1 - <3 Years	99	49.5
3 - <5 Years	3	1.5
5 - <10 Years	3	1.5

Sampling procedures

Participants in this study were selected using a purposive sampling method, with the objective of recruiting individuals aged 18–25 years with current or prior experience in romantic relationships. This approach was selected to guarantee that participants could offer pertinent insights into the phenomenon of Relationship Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE). The recruitment process was executed through online channels, leveraging social media platforms and university student networks. Participants voluntarily completed an anonymous online questionnaire hosted on a secure platform. No financial or material incentives were provided. The study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical standards, and electronic informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement. The principles of anonymity and confidentiality were strictly adhered to throughout the data collection process.

Sample size, power, and precision

The target sample size for this study was 200 participants, which was successfully attained, comprising 75 males and 125 females. Due to the qualitative nature of the research, the determination of the sample size was not based on statistical power calculations. Instead, the objective was to achieve data saturation, defined as the point at which no new themes or insights emerge from the data. During the thematic coding process, data saturation was observed when no new codes or categories emerged from approximately the final 30 responses, suggesting thematic redundancy. The coding process was conducted collaboratively by two researchers: the principal investigator and the academic supervisor, who also served as the expert validator for the open-ended questionnaire. To ensure the integrity of the data and prevent the

generation of novel information, regular discussions were held between the two coders. These discussions focused on cross-checking coding consistency, validating emerging themes, and ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the research. This procedural verification provided assurance that data saturation had been achieved, thereby affirming the adequacy of the sample size for in-depth thematic analysis (Memon et al., 2020).

Measures and covariates

The data for this study were collected using an open-ended questionnaire specifically designed to explore the experiences, perceptions, and relational dynamics of Relationship Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE) among individuals in early adulthood. The instrument under consideration was developed based on conceptual and empirical insights from Knee et al., (2008). The aforementioned researchers identified key psychological characteristics of individuals with RCSE, such as dependence on romantic relationships for self-worth, heightened emotional reactivity, and the need for external validation.

The questionnaire was meticulously structured into two primary sections to comprehensively capture the participants' experiences and perceptions regarding romantic relationships and relationship-contingent self-esteem (RCSE). The initial section of the study comprised preliminary inquiries designed to ascertain demographic and contextual information. Participants were asked to provide details about the duration of their current or most recent romantic relationship, their previous experiences with romantic relationships, the frequency of interaction with their partner (e.g., daily, weekly, or occasionally), their perceived level of satisfaction within the relationship, and a general description of their current or most recent romantic relationship.

The subsequent section centered on open-ended inquiries meticulously designed to delve into RCSE-related experiences with greater profundity. The aforementioned inquiries encompassed three fundamental themes. Initially, participants were queried about their perception of an increase in self-esteem when their romantic relationship was thriving. They were also invited to offer illustrative examples to elucidate the potential contingent nature of their self-worth on the quality of their relationship. Secondly, participants were prompted to describe their emotional responses when receiving criticism or facing dissatisfaction from their partner, with the aim of uncovering how conflict or relational tension could impact their self-esteem. Thirdly, participants were asked to reflect on the importance of receiving validation or recognition from their partner and how this external affirmation influenced their self-perception within the relationship. The purpose of this study was to elicit introspective responses from participants that would shed light on the dynamics of RCSE in emerging adults.

The items were meticulously crafted to promote introspection and detailed narrative responses, thereby aiming to capture the nuances of participants' subjective experiences. The questionnaire was disseminated via online channels, and responses were collected anonymously to promote honesty and openness. Prior to distribution, the instrument underwent content validation through expert judgment by two qualitative research experts. These experts evaluated the clarity, contextual appropriateness, and conceptual alignment of the items. In light of the received feedback, minor revisions were implemented with the objective of enhancing the

instrument's coherence and relevance. A formal pilot test was not conducted, as the emphasis was placed on the collection of rich, narrative data as opposed to the elicitation of standardized responses.

Data analysis

A three-level thematic analysis was conducted using MAXQDA software to explore the participants' experiences with relationship-contingent self-esteem (RCSE). The analysis commenced with open coding, a methodical, line-by-line examination of the dataset to identify key concepts and recurring patterns related to RCSE. During this stage, preliminary codes were assigned to meaningful phrases or expressions that reflected how participants' romantic relationships influenced their self-esteem. Subsequent to this, axial coding was implemented, whereby analogous codes were grouped into broader categories based on their conceptual relationships. This stage facilitated the identification of major thematic categories, including emotional dependency, conflict reactivity, and the need for external validation. The final phase, selective coding, focused on integrating these core categories into overarching themes that captured the essence of participants' lived experiences with RCSE. These themes were subsequently developed into a cohesive theoretical narrative to explain how romantic relationships shape self-worth during early adulthood.

In order to enhance the validity of the findings, two coders—consisting of the primary researcher and a faculty advisor—independently coded the data and engaged in regular reflexive discussions to review interpretations and code consistency. Any discrepancies in coding were resolved through iterative discussions, in which both coders justified their interpretations and collaboratively revised code definitions. In instances where disagreements persisted, the faculty advisor, who also served as a methodological expert and content validator, provided the

final judgment. Analytical memos were maintained throughout the process to document the rationale behind the coding, the development of the themes, and the decision-making process. This ensured transparency and trustworthiness in the analytical process.

RESULTS OF STUDY

The objective of this study was to examine the dynamics of Relationship Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE), with a particular emphasis on the extent to which individuals' self-worth is influenced by the quality of their romantic relationships. The analysis was guided by three core research questions: (1) How do interpersonal relationships impact an individual's self-esteem? (2) How do individuals respond to criticism or dissatisfaction from their partners? (3) To what extent does validation or recognition within the relationship shape one's level of RCSE?

How Interpersonal Relationships Influence Individual Self-Esteem

The analysis of responses to the question *"Do you feel your self-esteem improves when your relationship is going well? Can you provide an example?"* revealed several dominant themes that illustrate the significant role interpersonal relationships play in shaping self-perception and self-worth. The use of terms such as *"self-esteem improvement"*, *"confidence"*, and *"relationship appreciation"* was prevalent, underscoring the capacity of romantic interactions to augment an individual's positive self-evaluation. These responses were then subjected to further analysis at both the sentence and contextual levels, with the objective of gaining a more profound understanding of the underlying experiences.

Table 2
Frequency of Themes: How Interpersonal Relationships Influence Self-Esteem

Main Themes	Related Codes	F
Self-Esteem and Confidence Enhancement	Self-esteem improvement (69), Confidence (69), Positive self-perception (26), Pride (7), Amazing (1), Success (1), Worthy (1)	174
Positive Emotions and Psychological Well-Being	Happiness (9), Comfort (8), Positivity (9), Feeling lucky (1), Special (2), Acceptance (2), Gratefulness (1)	32
Harmonious Interpersonal Relationships	Harmonious relationships (15), Relationship appreciation (66), Support (9), Healthy relationship (9), Getting along (1), Communication (1), Loyalty (1), Smooth (14)	116
External Validation and Acceptance	External validation (6), Others' opinions (6), Feeling loved (2), Respect (3), Compliments (1)	18
Sociability and Openness	Sociability (3), Becoming more open (4), Attention (2), Curiosity (1)	10
Roles and Positive Actions in Relationships	Being present when needed (4), Making a positive impact (1), Encouragement (1), Discipline (1), Prioritizing (2), Being genuine (1)	10
Emotional Regulation and Personal Resilience	Emotional regulation (15), Strength (4), Challenges (1), Decision-making (3), Independence (1)	24
Difficulties or Barriers in Relationships	Difficulty providing examples (5), Shame/Insecurity (1)	6

For instance, one participant articulated the following: The subject reported that her partner's appreciation for her contributions led to an increase in her sense of self-esteem and confidence. This response was coded under *"self-*

esteem enhancement" and *"confidence"*, thereby underscoring the potent emotional impact of partner validation. A plethora of other themes were mentioned with high frequency, including *"happiness"*, *"harmonious*

relationships”, and *“support”*. These findings suggest that a healthy and supportive romantic environment is associated with positive psychological well-being. The application of thematic coding resulted in the identification of 61 distinct categories, which were subsequently grouped into eight core themes based on their shared meanings and contextual patterns. The aforementioned themes are summarized in Table 2.

A thorough examination of the data indicates that this surge in self-esteem is not a sporadic occurrence, but rather the consequence of a reinforcing cycle comprised of interconnected processes. This cycle appears to be rooted in the presence of harmonious interpersonal relationships, which engender a safe and supportive environment. This stable setting then serves as the foundation for consistent external validation and acceptance from one’s partner. The affirmations and appreciation received are subsequently internalized by the individual, directly leading to increased self-esteem and confidence. Consequently, this positive cycle fosters and sustains a state of positive emotions and psychological well-being, engendering feelings of happiness, security, and value within the relationship.

The data overwhelmingly indicate that positive interpersonal relationships are pivotal in fostering self-worth, with Self-Esteem and Confidence Enhancement emerging as the most dominant theme (174 instances). It has been reported by participants on frequent occasions that the provision of support, appreciation, and validation from a romantic partner has a direct impact on their self-perception. This connection is articulated with great conviction by a 19-year-old female participant, who perceives her partner’s support as a direct source of her own value.

“Yes, it has a significant impact. For example, when I accomplish something and my partner acknowledges it, I feel that I am valuable and worthy of love. My partner’s support makes me feel more confident in making decisions and facing challenges”. (9, 109, 159, Pos. 1)

This narrative elucidates a core mechanism of Relationship Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE), in which a partner’s acknowledgment is not merely praise but is internalized as profound validation. The participant’s statement illustrates how external acknowledgment is associated with a fundamental belief of being “valuable and worthy of love.” This association has the potential to enhance confidence and resilience in the face of adversity.

The second most prevalent theme was “Harmonious Interpersonal Relationships,” which appeared in 116 instances. This finding underscores the notion that a stable and secure relational environment is foundational to self-esteem. The participants highlighted the significance of peaceful communication and emotional security, noting that these factors contributed to a sense of acceptance and emotional stability. A 22-year-old male participant provided the following explanation:

“When the relationship is going well, I feel more at ease and self-assured. For example, when we can communicate well without conflict, I feel fully accepted. This sense of acceptance makes me value myself more and worry less about other people’s judgments”. (51, Pos. 1-2)

This account demonstrates that relational stability fosters a sense of psychological safety. For individuals whose self-esteem is relationship-contingent, the feeling of being “fully accepted” functions as an emotional anchor, thereby fostering a more stable self-worth and insulating them from the need for broader social approval. This secure base fosters the capacity for self-esteem that is not contingent upon the validation of others.

Collectively, these positive relational experiences foster positive emotions and psychological well-being (32 instances), including feelings of happiness, comfort, and emotional fulfillment. The mechanisms of external validation and emotional support have been identified as pivotal in fostering a sense of self-security. It is noteworthy that Difficulties or Barriers in Relationships were mentioned only six times, indicating that for the majority of the participants in this dataset, the positive aspects of their relationships, which contribute to self-esteem, were more prominent and easier to articulate than the negative ones. In summary, the results of the present study provide substantial evidence that romantic relationships characterized by support and validation play a pivotal role in the development of self-esteem, confidence, and overall psychological resilience.

How Individuals Respond to Criticism or Dissatisfaction from Their Partner

In response to the inquiry regarding the emotional response to expressions of dissatisfaction or criticism from one’s partner, the following findings were documented. Can you describe your experience in such a situation?” The participants reported a wide range of emotional and behavioral reactions. The use of words such as *“silent”*, *“sad”*, *“annoyed”*, *“devastated”*, and *“disappointed”* was frequently observed, indicating that experiences of criticism from a romantic partner often evoke strong negative emotional responses. Furthermore, expressions such as *“feeling like a failure”* *“lacking self-confidence”*, and *“low self-worth”* underscore the immediate impact of such interactions on an individual’s self-esteem.

A comprehensive analysis encompassing both sentence-level and contextual elements was conducted, yielding a multifaceted array of coping strategies. A number of participants reported opting to refrain from speaking or acquiescing as a means of avoiding further conflict. In contrast, others responded with acceptance, introspection, or efforts to improve the relationship. Conversely, maladaptive responses were also observed, including avoidance behaviors, feelings of being attacked, and even non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI). These findings suggest that a subset of individuals experienced significant emotional distress.

Participants frequently described emotional states such as worry, exhaustion, anger, and frustration, which indicated disruptions in emotional security within the relationship. These responses were systematically coded and grouped into thematic categories to capture the emotional and behavioral dynamics involved in coping with criticism from a partner. A synopsis of the aforementioned categories is provided in Table 3.

A thorough examination of the data indicates that participants’ responses to partner criticism are driven by a complex psychological process that is interconnected. The initial reception of criticism often functions as a catalyst, prompting a pronounced negative emotional response, characterized by sentiments of distress and disillusionment. This emotional impact does not occur in a vacuum; rather, it is inherently linked to the impact on self-esteem, where external criticism is rapidly internalized, manifesting as profound self-doubt or a sense of personal failure.

Confronted with this profound psychological pressure, subjects are compelled to adopt a coping strategy, thereby establishing a discernible correlation between emotion and behavior. For many, this profound emotional distress often serves as a catalyst for maladaptive responses. Behaviors

such as social withdrawal, verbal aggression, or even self-harm emerge as desperate attempts to manage the unbearable emotional turmoil. Consequently, maladaptive behaviors are not arbitrary reactions; rather, they are a rational outcome of the inability to regulate initial emotional distress, which undermines self-esteem.

A comprehensive review of the extant data suggests that expressions of criticism or dissatisfaction from a romantic partner can serve as a significant catalyst for a

range of adverse emotional and behavioral responses. These responses have the potential to compromise an individual's sense of self-esteem and emotional well-being, thereby jeopardizing their emotional stability. The findings indicate a range of reactions, predominantly characterized by negative emotional patterns and maladaptive coping mechanisms. However, a significant counter-narrative of resilience also emerged, highlighting adaptive strategies for navigating relational conflict.

Table 3

Frequency of Themes: How Individuals Respond to Criticism or Dissatisfaction from Their Partner

Main Themes	Related Codes	F
Negative Emotional Responses	Sad, Annoyed, Devastated, Disappointed, Hurt, Frustrated, Angry, Anxious.	94
Impact on Self-Esteem	Feeling like a failure, Lack of confidence, Feeling unappreciated, Self-doubt, Low self-worth.	53
Maladaptive Responses	Silence, Disappearing, Avoidance, Self-harm (NSSI), Retaliation, Breaking things, Breaking up.	83
Adaptive or Constructive Responses	Introspection, Acceptance, Effort to change, Listening, Calming, Communication, Clarification, Empathy.	81
Emotional Security Disruption	Loss of emotional safety, Feeling attacked, Sensitivity, Burdened, Not good enough, Lack of focus.	45
Situational Management Actions	Asking questions, Self-defense, Sticking to principles, Openness.	6
Acceptance of Criticism	Understanding, Feeling neutral.	10
Physiological or Behavioral Disruption	Loss of appetite, Fatigue, Apathy.	7

The most prevalent theme identified was the disruption of self-worth, wherein partner criticism was internalized as a reflection of personal failure. The participants reported a combination of emotions, including sadness and disappointment, as well as a profound crisis of self-identity, as evidenced by their responses.

"I started to question whether I was truly worthy of being loved by them" (56, Pos. 2).

"When my partner criticizes me, I feel extremely pressured and begin to doubt my abilities" (42, Pos. 3).

"I was upset with myself for disappointing them" (104, Pos. 2).

"I felt so stressed that I ended up pulling my own hair" (195, Pos. 2).

These statements elucidate the vulnerability inherent in Relationship Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE), wherein external relational events directly compromise an individual's core sense of self. This process often commences with an existential threat, prompting self-reflection regarding one's capacity for love. It rapidly evolves into feelings of inadequacy and reduced capability. The subsequent internalization of blame—becoming upset with oneself for a partner's disappointment—can then escalate into an overwhelming somatic toll, where psychological distress manifests in alarming physical actions like pulling one's own hair. Collectively, these quotations portray a destructive cycle in which criticism incites a progression from self-doubt to self-punishment.

For many, this intense emotional distress manifested as maladaptive coping strategies, including various forms of self-harm. It is evident that these actions were not devoid of intention; rather, they appeared to be desperate attempts to manage psychological distress.

"I once came close to engaging in non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI)" (198, Pos. 2).

"Feeling attacked, I intentionally hurt myself by scratching my skin" (197, Pos. 2).

"I have hit walls or other objects to release my emotions" (191, Pos. 2).

"I deliberately skipped meals all day because I felt disappointed" (192, Pos. 2)

These behaviors illustrate how relational conflict can be internalized and manifest as self-directed violence. Direct self-injury, defined as the act of deliberately causing harm to oneself, serves a dual function. Firstly, it transforms abstract emotional pain into a tangible, manageable physical sensation. Secondly, it serves as a form of self-punishment for perceived failure. Other actions, such as striking a wall, serve as external manifestations of this self-directed anger, thereby facilitating a forceful physical release of overwhelming internal pressure. Even passive behaviors, such as deliberately skipping meals, can be considered a form of self-neglect rooted in worthlessness. This is a silent declaration that one does not deserve basic care or sustenance. The body becomes the medium through which psychological distress is expressed, when no other means of expression are available.

However, this narrative of distress was not universally observed. Notwithstanding the prevalence of adverse patterns, a salient theme of resilience emerged, with numerous participants exhibiting adaptive responses to conflict. They proactively transformed criticism into an opportunity for personal and professional growth, facilitating self-reflection and open communication.

"At first, I definitely felt sad and disappointed. But once I calmed down, I would try to ask what made my partner dissatisfied and what I could improve. For me, criticism is important so that we can understand each other and make the relationship more mature." (8, Pos. 2)

"When my partner shows dissatisfaction or criticizes me, I first introspect. If I am at fault, I will apologize, but if the criticism does not align with who I am, I will defend myself."(9, Pos. 3–4)

These excerpts underscore the significance of emotional intelligence and relational resilience. The process they present begins with acknowledging emotional pain and progresses rapidly towards regulation, accountability, and assertive communication. The capacity to discern between legitimate criticism that necessitates an apology and unwarranted criticism that demands self-defense is a pivotal skill. It is indicative of a sound sense of self that is not entirely contingent on external validation from others. This mindset, which strikes a balance between accountability and firm personal boundaries, functions as an aspirational model for healthy conflict resolution, offering a powerful contrast to the more damaging patterns observed elsewhere in the data.

While many individuals demonstrated resilience through adaptive responses, several noteworthy nuances emerged when viewed through a gendered lens. The female participants demonstrated a tendency to articulate their emotional wounds with greater expressiveness, employing terms such as "broken" or "unworthy of love." In contrast, male participants—though also experiencing emotional pain—more frequently reported responses characterized by verbal withdrawal, such as "choosing to remain silent," or noted a direct impact on their self-confidence.

The Importance of Validation in Romantic Relationships

In response to the inquiry regarding the significance attributed to the receipt of recognition or validation from one's partner within a relationship, the following responses were documented. How does it affect the way you perceive yourself?" The data indicated a strong

emphasis on the significance of validation within romantic relationships. A subsequent analysis of the word cloud revealed the most frequently occurring phrases to be "important" "partner validation", and "feeling appreciated". These keywords reflect a consensus among participants that validation from a partner is perceived as a crucial component of relational satisfaction. The terms "confidence", "happiness", and "sense of security" further underscore the notion that validation positively contributes to self-perception and emotional well-being. It has been frequently documented that participants have described the experience of validation, as indicated by acts of attentive listening, verbal expressions of appreciation, and gestures of affection, as having the effect of enhancing their sense of being valued and emotionally connected.

At the sentence level, qualitative responses such as "I feel appreciated when my partner gives me attention" and "My partner's validation helps me feel more confident in this relationship" were coded under the category Positive Responses to Validation. Conversely, statements such as "I feel insignificant when my partner doesn't express appreciation" and "An imbalance in the relationship makes me doubt myself" were classified under the Negative Impacts of Lack of Validation category. These findings imply that validation plays a pivotal role in shaping an individual's self-worth and emotional stability, with its presence or absence exerting a direct influence on the overall dynamics of the relationship. A synopsis of the aforementioned findings is provided in Table 4.

A thorough examination of the data indicates that validation from one's partner serves as a predominant psychological mirror for individuals, particularly those exhibiting a propensity for Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE). The presence or absence of this validation subsequently elicits two distinctly disparate experiential pathways.

Table 4

Frequency of Themes: The Importance of Validation in Romantic Relationships

Main Themes	Related Codes	F
Significance of Validation	Important	111
Positive Impacts of Validation	Feeling appreciated, Loved, Valued, Happy, Accepted, Relationship efforts recognized, Strengthened, Emotionally balanced, Conflict reduction	58
Negative Impacts of Lack of Validation	Feeling unappreciated, Inadequate, Self-doubt, Not good enough	30
Role of Appreciation in Relationships	Appreciation for efforts, Feeling heard, Understood, Expecting gratitude	15
Desire for Social Media Recognition	Social media validation, Desire for romantic expression online	6
Feeling of Failure Without Partner Response	Efforts feel in vain, Withdrawing effort due to lack of partner response	5
Communication in Validation	Communication, Openness, Human limitations in understanding unspoken needs	13

On the one hand, when validation and appreciation are consistently provided, they generate more than momentary positive feelings; they act as ongoing affirmations of one's worth and self-value. Affirmation from a partner is known to become internalized as self-assurance, ultimately reinforcing a sense of emotional safety and confidence. Conversely, the absence of validation prompts a divergent trajectory. This absence is seldom perceived as neutral; rather, it is frequently interpreted as a manifestation of neglect or rejection. Such

interpretations have been demonstrated to result in adverse outcomes, including self-doubt and feelings of worthlessness, which have been shown to erode emotional stability. In this sense, validation is not merely a "bonus" in a relationship; rather, it is a central mechanism that actively constructs or undermines one's sense of security and self-esteem over time.

The most prevalent theme, The Significance of Validation (111 instances), reveals a consensus among participants that validation is a fundamental need in

romantic relationships. For many, it is not merely a beneficial addition but an indispensable condition for feeling loved and valued, underscoring a deep reliance on partner affirmation for personal well-being. The sentiment was articulated clearly by the participants.

"I feel more appreciated and more valuable when my partner acknowledges the things I do" (38, Pos. 3).

"It's very important. I feel valued and loved only when my partner recognizes my efforts in the relationship" (51, Pos. 4).

These statements illustrate how external validation from a partner functions as a primary source of self-worth. The initial quotation illustrates a straightforward cause-and-effect relationship, demonstrating that recognition fosters feelings of value. The second quote further elaborates on this condition, emphasizing the pivotal phrase "only when," which encapsulates the fundamental principle of Relationship Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE). This suggests that for this individual, love and value are not merely enhanced by recognition but are entirely contingent upon it, rendering the feeling of being loved inaccessible in its absence. Collectively, these narratives illustrate the romantic relationship as a predominant milieu in which self-worth is perpetually formed, measured, and validated.

Conversely, the theme of Negative Impact of the Absence of Validation (30 instances) elucidates the deleterious consequences of this dependency. The withholding of validation has been demonstrated to elicit profound emotional and behavioral repercussions, manifesting in feelings of insignificance, anxiety, and the adoption of dysfunctional coping strategies.

"Whenever my partner doesn't give me attention, I feel unappreciated and anxious about the relationship" (33, Pos. 3–4)

"I force my partner to treat me well in front of his friends, even though behind the scenes he often doesn't care" (54, Pos. 3–4)

"To me, it's extremely important. Without appreciation from my partner, I feel like my efforts are in vain and our relationship becomes less meaningful" (120, Pos. 3–4).

This compilation of quotations elucidates the progressively deleterious ramifications of absent validation. The onset of the condition is marked by a disruption in self-perception, which manifests as acute emotional distress, characterized by feelings of "unappreciated and anxious" emotional distress, which poses a threat to the individual's sense of security. This anxiety then deepens into an existential crisis, where efforts feel "in vain" and the relationship itself loses meaning, revealing that validation is the primary source of significance. The most extreme manifestation of this phenomenon is behavioral, characterized by an individual's deliberate attempt to elicit public validation through performance. This dysfunctional strategy underscores an urgent necessity for a socially validated image of the relationship, placing a higher priority on this image than on the establishment of authentic private connections and the provision of care.

In summary, the findings demonstrate that for individuals with high RCSE, validation functions as a fundamental emotional "currency." The presence of validation has been demonstrated to affirm self-worth and relational meaning. Conversely, its absence engenders an emotional void that can precipitate maladaptive behaviors, such as coercive attempts to secure public validation. This, in turn, can paradoxically erode intimacy and trust. This

underscores the notion that an excessive reliance on external validation can perpetuate a cycle of psychological distress, underscoring the importance of cultivating a more internal and stable sense of self-worth.

DISCUSSION

This study explores the dynamics of relationship-contingent self-esteem (RCSE) among emerging adults in Padang, with a particular focus on how individuals perceive and evaluate their self-worth within the context of romantic relationships. The findings indicate that the majority of participants establish a strong correlation between their self-esteem and the quality of their romantic relationships, as well as the validation they receive from their partners. Romantic relationships are conceptualized as a pivotal catalyst for self-worth development, wherein positive experiences foster self-confidence, while criticism or rejection can precipitate emotional volatility. The study's findings reveal a direct impact of both harmonious and conflictual relational experiences on fluctuations in participants' self-esteem. Thematic analysis yielded three core themes: (1) elevated self-esteem as a result of healthy and supportive relationships; (2) emotional vulnerability to negative evaluations or criticism from one's partner; and (3) a pronounced need for validation and acknowledgment from one's partner as a foundation for identity formation and perceived self-worth. These findings underscore the significant role of RCSE in shaping self-worth during early adulthood and highlight the urgency of interventions that foster autonomous self-esteem that is not wholly dependent on romantic partners.

Initial findings indicate that harmonious romantic relationships have the capacity to significantly enhance self-confidence, positive emotions, and healthier self-perceptions among emerging adults. The validation received from partners, manifesting in the form of praise, emotional support, or acknowledgment of effort, engendered momentary feelings of happiness and was internalized as an affirmation of self-worth. As expressed by many participants, they reported an increase in confidence in decision-making, resilience in the face of challenges, and a sense of deservingness when their partners offered positive reinforcement. These findings align with the theory of Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE), which posits that individuals with high RCSE base their self-esteem heavily on the dynamics of their romantic relationships (Holden et al., 2018; Knee et al., 2008). When relationships are functioning well, individuals tend to exhibit more positive self-perceptions. Conversely, relational conflict or instability often results in a significant decline in self-worth. In addressing the initial research question, a total of 174 excerpts indicated that interpersonal relationships can be a double-edged sword with regard to self-esteem, in the sense that they can function as a significant source of affirmation or a substantial source of vulnerability. The dominant theme, "Harmonious Interpersonal Relationships," emerged in 116 participant statements, underscoring the critical role of supportive romantic connections in fostering a secure psychological foundation. Illustrative quotes such as "I feel worthy and lovable when my partner appreciates me" reflect how external validation becomes internalized into positive self-evaluations, consistent with the core tenets of RCSE.

These findings are further substantiated by an expanding corpus of literature emphasizing the pivotal role

of positive relational dynamics in nurturing self-esteem and psychological well-being. For instance, positive illusions in romantic relationships—where partners view each other through an idealized lens—have been shown to enhance self-esteem and contribute to long-term relationship quality (Swami & Furnham, 2008), while self-compassion has been associated with healthier relational behaviors (Neff & Beretvas, 2013). Mutual support in secure relationships has also been shown to increase positive affect and life satisfaction (Orth et al., 2018). Additional factors, such as self-concept clarity (McIntyre et al., 2018), emotion regulation within couples (Lemay et al., 2024), and experiences of self-expansion (Stanton et al., 2020) further contribute to the development of a stable and positive self-perception. Research has demonstrated a correlation between relationship satisfaction and enhanced mental health outcomes, with the potential to mitigate feelings of loneliness and internalized stigma (White et al., 2023). The present study, when considered as a whole, serves to reinforce the theoretical framework of Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE) and to affirm the critical role of a healthy relational environment in shaping positive self-experiences.

Conversely, the fragile nature of relationship-contingent self-esteem (RCSE) becomes particularly evident when individuals are faced with criticism or conflict within their romantic relationships. This vulnerability is substantiated by 53 participant excerpts that explicitly describe the direct impact of criticism on their declining self-esteem. Narratives frequently conveyed feelings of "failure," being "unlovable," and "losing direction," illustrating how self-worth tied to relational dynamics becomes highly susceptible to negative interactions. When confronted with expressions of dissatisfaction from a partner, individuals with high RCSE do not perceive such feedback as mere input regarding the quality of the relationship. Instead, they perceive it as a personal rejection, an invalidation of their very existence. The processing of criticism is not accomplished through the lens of objective relational feedback; rather, it is perceived as a threat to one's identity. This perception serves to reinforce the belief that one is, in essence, inadequate. This pattern aligns with the findings of previous studies. Individuals with high RCSE are significantly more affected by criticism within romantic relationships, as their self-worth is deeply intertwined with their partner's perception and the overall state of the relationship (Holden et al., 2018; Knee et al., 2008). In the context of conflict, individuals encounter significant fluctuations in self-esteem, with positive events eliciting an immediate surge and negative events, such as criticism, leading to a precipitous decline (Knee et al., 2008). These findings suggest a correlation between RCSE and instability in self-esteem, as well as heightened emotional reactivity to minor shifts in relationship dynamics.

Furthermore, in the context of technology-mediated communication—such as text messaging or social media—these negative reactions tend to be even more pronounced. Research indicates that individuals with high RCSE are more prone to negative bias when conflicts occur outside of face-to-face interactions, thereby amplifying the emotional impact of criticism (Scissors & Gergle, 2016). This effect is exacerbated by their tendencies toward attachment anxiety and excessive self-criticism, which increase the likelihood of interpreting a partner's missteps as threats to the stability of the relationship (N. L. Collins et al., 2006; Lassri et al., 2016). Consequently, RCSE may instigate a maladaptive psychological cycle, whereby minor criticisms or conflicts are perceived as

disproportionately threatening, eliciting intense emotional distress that, in turn, significantly undermines self-esteem.

The second research question explored how individuals with relationship-contingent self-esteem (RCSE) respond to criticism from their romantic partners, revealing a remarkably wide spectrum of reactions ranging from extreme emotional vulnerability to impressive resilience. The findings indicate that, for the majority of participants, criticism is not perceived as neutral relational feedback but rather as a personal threat to their sense of self-worth and identity. At the more vulnerable end of the spectrum, 94 excerpts reflected intense negative emotional responses, including profound sadness, shame, feelings of abandonment, anger, and even hopelessness. These emotional reactions frequently extended beyond the affective level and manifested in maladaptive coping strategies. A total of 83 cases illustrated behaviors such as social withdrawal, non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI), or the destruction of objects as outlets for emotional release. These behaviors were not merely impulsive acts but rather deliberate emotional strategies aimed at redirecting or regulating psychological pain that felt overwhelming and abstract. The manifestation of criticism from a significant other has been observed to precipitate an existential crisis, characterized by feelings of inadequacy, incompetence, and a perceived unworthiness of love. For individuals with high RCSE, this emotional pain becomes intricately intertwined with their core self, leading to the perception that destructive responses serve as a expeditious means of alleviating profound internal distress.

The present study is consistent with previous research that has identified these dynamics. Individuals with high RCSE have been shown to experience more intense negative emotions—such as sadness, feelings of failure, and existential anxiety—when their relationships are disrupted or when they feel invalidated (Arikewuyo et al., 2022; Holden et al., 2018; Marigold et al., 2010). Furthermore, they often perceive their partners as less responsive to positive moments following conflict, which exacerbates their emotional distress (Smith & Reis, 2012). Consequently, many resort to maladaptive coping strategies, including self-injury, withdrawal, or extreme emotional reactions (Arikewuyo et al., 2022; Holden et al., 2018; Marigold et al., 2010). With the passage of time, these patterns may evolve into protective or destructive relational behaviors, including partner-blaming, manipulation, or emotional disengagement (Marigold et al., 2010). Furthermore, the propensity to ascribe negative attributes to a partner's behavior during conflict—for instance, interpreting criticism as personal rejection—exerts a significant exacerbating effect on emotional distress and the escalation of conflict (Adamo et al., 2021; N. L. Collins et al., 2006). This sequence ultimately contributes to a decline in relationship quality, as emotional tension and maladaptive coping foster a cyclical pattern of dissatisfaction and recurring conflict (Arikewuyo et al., 2022; Marigold et al., 2010; Szachter et al., 2025).

However, at the opposite end of the spectrum, noteworthy psychological resilience was also demonstrated in some responses. While these adaptive responses were less prevalent than maladaptive ones, a total of 81 participant excerpts revealed constructive and adaptive coping mechanisms employed in response to criticism from a romantic partner. It was observed that a subset of the participants exhibited an aptitude for recognizing criticism as an inherent component of relational dynamics. This ability did not immediately translate into the interpretation of criticism as a personal rejection. The subjects demonstrated more mature

emotional regulation capacities, including introspection, open communication, and a more balanced reinterpretation of criticism. Statements such as "I calm myself first, then we talk it out" or "I'm learning to distinguish between constructive criticism and personal attacks" illustrate the ability to regulate emotions and engage in self-evaluation in a healthy manner. These findings imply that even individuals with high RCSE are not inherently helpless or destined to engage in destructive responses. Conversely, there are protective factors that may moderate the adverse effects of RCSE on self-esteem and emotional regulation.

These findings also suggest that RCSE is not the sole determinant of individuals' psychological responses to conflict within romantic relationships. The presence of more stable, internal sources of self-esteem—such as self-awareness, moral principles, personal achievements, or self-acceptance—plays a critical role in fostering psychological resilience. This finding aligns with the theoretical framework proposed by Crocker & Knight (2005), which posits that individuals who derive their self-worth from internal sources are better equipped to withstand relational stress without experiencing a breakdown in self-value. Indeed, some participants reported that conflict or criticism served as reflective moments for improving the relationship, clarifying personal boundaries, and reinforcing their sense of identity. In this context, RCSE should not be viewed as inherently pathological; rather, its potential negative effects may be mitigated by the presence of specific psychological skills, such as emotional regulation, assertiveness, and boundary awareness.

Consequently, these findings serve to reinforce the dynamic nature of Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE) and to expand our understanding of how individuals' emotional regulation capacities, the personal meaning ascribed to the relationship, and their coping mechanisms influence the psychological trajectories that follow criticism or conflict. Consequently, the RCSE should not be regarded as a static or universally pathological condition. Rather, it should be conceptualized as a flexible and context-dependent system of self-esteem regulation. This system is significantly influenced by an individual's ability to interpret, evaluate, and respond to interpersonal experiences in constructive ways. This flexibility in response is further influenced by entrenched gender norms within the cultural context of Padang. For instance, social expectations for women to maintain relational harmony may help explain why the absence of validation or exposure to criticism is experienced as a deeply personal threat. Conversely, societal pressures on men to appear strong and dependable may contribute to their tendency to withdraw or remain silent. These strategies are employed to manage perceived failure without overtly displaying emotional vulnerability.

In response to the third research question, the findings emphasize that validation is not merely an emotional supplement within romantic relationships; rather, it functions as a vital psychological currency, particularly for individuals with high levels of Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE). The prevalence of the theme "Significance of Validation" in 111 cases indicates a pervasive and profound need for validation among the participants. The presence of validation has been shown to reinforce positive self-perceptions, enhance relational security, and provide a significant sense of existential meaning. Conversely, the theme "Negative Impact of Validation Absence," reflected in 30 cases, illustrates that the lack of validation can result in serious emotional

deficits—ranging from anxiety and feelings of worthlessness to dysfunctional compensatory behaviors. A number of participants articulated their engagement in endeavors aimed at compelling their partners to manifest affection in a public setting, such as on social media platforms, as a substitute for the absence of emotional validation in private contexts. For instance, statements such as "I asked him to treat me well in front of his friends so I would feel appreciated" suggest that the need to appear loved may, at times, surpass the need to feel authentically loved, particularly when self-esteem is heavily dependent on external perception.

These findings lend support to the theoretical framework proposed by Crocker & Park (2004) and further developed Park et al. (2011). This framework posits that individuals with high levels of Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE) are particularly vulnerable to fluctuations in self-worth triggered by dynamics within romantic relationships. External validation serves as a critical anchor for psychological equilibrium (Holden et al., 2018; Knee et al., 2008). Research has demonstrated that consistent validation has the potential to reduce relational anxiety and reinforce situational self-esteem. Conversely, the absence of validation can result in dysfunctional compensatory strategies, including excessive displays of affection on social media, heightened relationship anxiety, and depressive symptoms (Lakey et al., 2014; Sági, 2016). Furthermore, individuals with high but unmet RCSE tend to adopt manipulative tactics to project an idealized image of their relationship in order to preserve social approval, even at the expense of relational authenticity (Øverup et al., 2015).

Consequently, the findings of this study contribute to the expansion of our understanding of Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE) as a form of self-worth that is not merely intrapersonal but also profoundly contextual and intersubjective in nature. The RCSE does not exclusively reflect how individuals evaluate themselves; rather, this evaluation is significantly influenced by recognition and acceptance from significant others, most notably, romantic partners. Within this theoretical framework, validation is not merely a form of praise or positive reinforcement. Rather, it functions as a psychological affirmation, a source of relational meaning, and a foundation of perceived self-worth. In circumstances where such validation becomes scarce or inconsistent, individuals with high RCSE are susceptible to developing what can be termed "alternative emotional economy strategies." These are compensatory efforts to fill the validation void, including demanding public displays of affection, comparing their relationship to others, or even sabotaging the relationship to elicit attention. However, these strategies frequently prove to be maladaptive, leading to exacerbated instability in self-esteem and relational tension.

The findings of this study underscore the imperative for interventions that extend beyond the mere alleviation of symptoms to address the psychological underpinnings of RCSE. These interventions should encompass the cultivation of intrinsic self-worth, the enhancement of emotional awareness, and the reinterpretation of validation within the paradigm of healthy relationships. In collectivistic cultures, such as Indonesia, the need for validation is not merely personal but also serves as an indicator of social success. The failure to obtain validation from a romantic partner is frequently perceived as a failure to fulfill expected social roles. This perception exerts a profound psychological impact on individuals with high RCSE. This study contributes to the advancement of

understanding of RCSE as a phenomenon that is not only intrapersonal but also deeply embedded in socio-cultural contexts. The necessity for validation is indicative of cultural pressures to "perform" romantically, thereby positioning romantic relationships as a socially sanctioned source of self-worth. Therefore, validation should not be regarded as a vulnerability, but rather as an adaptive response to prevailing social norms. This underscores the necessity for intervention strategies that encompass both the individual and the broader socio-cultural frameworks underpinning the formation and perpetuation of RCSE.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study underscores the substantial impact of Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE) on emerging adults in Padang's perception of their self-worth within the context of romantic relationships. The core findings indicate that participants' self-esteem is predominantly influenced by the quality of their relationships, with validation from romantic partners playing a pivotal role in the formation of self-value. This reliance underscores the emotional vulnerability intrinsic to RCSE, wherein relational dynamics directly contribute to fluctuations in self-perception. However, the study also demonstrates that resilience can be cultivated through the development of internal sources of self-esteem and effective communication, emphasizing the importance of balancing relational support with personal growth.

The distinctive contribution of this study is its assertion that Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE) is not a universally experienced psychological phenomenon; rather, it is a construct profoundly influenced by sociocultural context. This study focuses on emerging adults in Indonesia, a country characterized by strong collectivistic values. The study demonstrates that the need for validation from romantic partners becomes particularly intensified among this demographic. In this context, validation serves not only as personal affirmation but also as a proxy for social acceptance and a marker of success in fulfilling culturally prescribed relational roles. These findings contribute to the existing RCSE literature, which has predominantly emerged from individualistic Western settings, by illustrating how collectivist norms and traditional gender roles can heighten the dependency of self-esteem on romantic relationships.

The findings of this study carry clear practical implications for the development of support programs targeting emerging adults. The development of more effective interventions may be facilitated through the implementation of structured group psychoeducation. Such programs could commence with a module that introduces the concept of Relationship-Contingent Self-Esteem (RCSE) and its cultural underpinnings. This module is designed to normalize participants' experiences and reduce self-blame. Subsequent workshops might center on the cultivation of internal sources of self-worth. These might include the identification of personal values, the establishment of non-relational goals, and the practice of self-compassion. In order to complement the aforementioned elements, the program should also incorporate assertive communication skills training through role-playing exercises. This will enable individuals to express their emotional needs and establish healthy boundaries with their partners without escalating into destructive conflict.

It is imperative to acknowledge the limitations of this study in the interest of transparency. Firstly, as a qualitative investigation, the findings are intended to offer in-depth insights rather than statistical generalizability to a broader population. Secondly, the online recruitment of participants may have introduced selection bias, as those who chose to participate were likely to be more digitally active or from particular socioeconomic backgrounds. Thirdly, the sample was predominantly female (125 out of 200), which limits the ability to draw robust conclusions about the experiences of RCSE among male participants.

Consequently, future research endeavors are advised to adopt mixed-methods or quantitative designs to test the hypotheses derived from this study in larger and more representative samples. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable for tracing how RCSE and its impacts evolve over time. Furthermore, it is imperative to examine how relationship duration (e.g., short-term vs. long-term) may influence the dynamics of RCSE and emotional responses to partners, a subject that extends beyond the scope of the present study. In light of the heightened vulnerability of emerging adults in seeking validation through social media, future research should also explore the potential role of digital literacy as a protective factor or mediator in RCSE experiences within online contexts. Finally, cross-cultural comparative studies within Southeast Asia could offer deeper insight into how variations in collectivist values and gender norms shape the manifestation of RCSE across diverse cultural settings.

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Declarations

Ethic approval and consent to participate

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study, as it did not involve any interventions, the collection of sensitive data, or engagement with vulnerable populations that would require formal ethics committee oversight. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Consent for publication

The authors affirm that consent for publication was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Availability of data and material (ADM)

The data and materials generated during this study are not available online. However, they can be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Artificial Intelligence-Assisted Technology

The authors declare the use of AI-assisted technologies in the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, ChatGPT (OpenAI) and DeepL Write Pro were utilized for the sole purpose of improving the grammar, clarity, and style of the English language. The manuscript's core ideas, analysis, and conclusions were originally drafted by the authors, and these tools were used only to refine the linguistic expression of the authors' original work. The authors take full responsibility for the intellectual content of this article.

Author's Contributions

Aufizzahra As Syafiyah conceptualized the research, conducted data curation, formal analysis, investigation, and methodology, and visualized the findings. She also wrote the original draft and contributed to the writing, review, and editing. Niken Hartati, the supervisor, was responsible for the conceptualization, funding acquisition, methodology, project administration, and validation of the study. Rida Yanna Primanita, the supervisor, was responsible for the conceptualization, funding acquisition, methodology, project administration, and validation of the study.

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