

Romantic Relationships and Subjective Well-being in Adolescents

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Abstract:

Adolescence is a critical stage in individual development, and romantic relationships gradually become an important part of teenagers' daily lives. These experiences have profound effects on emotional growth, identity building, and overall mental health. However, the impact of adolescent romance on subjective well-being (SWB) remains complex and multidimensional. To address this issue, this paper adopts a systematic literature review approach, integrating findings from different cultural contexts and multiple research designs. The findings suggest that romantic relationships can have both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, high-quality relationships can provide emotional support, strengthen self-concept, and promote social integration; on the other hand, low-quality relationships, conflict, and breakups are associated with higher risks of anxiety, depression, and academic impairment. The effects are moderated by gender, relationship quality, cultural norms, and peer attitudes. In summary, this study emphasizes the contextual complexity of adolescent romance and its dual role in shaping well-being. It proposes practical implications for schools, families, and communities to foster healthier relationships, and points to future research directions. These include longitudinal tracking, cross-cultural comparison, and intervention studies. Overall, the paper contributes to theoretical understanding and offers guidance for educational practice, family support, and policy making.

Keywords: Adolescent romantic relationships; Subjective well-being; Developmental psychology; Cross-cultural comparison; Peer norms

1 Introduction

Adolescence is a critical stage of rapid physical and mental development for an individual, and romantic

relationships gradually become an important part of adolescents' lives during this period. Numerous studies have shown that romantic relationships have a dual effect on adolescents' subjective well-being

(SWB). On the one hand, high-quality romantic relationships can provide emotional support, promote the development of self-concept and social adaptation (Collins, 2003; Gómez-López, Viejo, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2019). on the other hand, low-quality relationships, conflicts, and break-ups can lead to anxiety, depression, and even academic decline (Jin, Yang, & Tianyu, 2021; Zhao, Liang, & Li, 2020). Therefore, the impact of adolescent love on happiness presents a complex “double-edged sword” characteristic.

In recent years, cross-cultural and large-sample studies have further revealed this complexity. Park, Lee, and Kim found that, in cultures with stricter social norms, the negative impact of breakups on mental health was more pronounced (Lee and Kim, 2022). Zhu, Kong, and Zhou found that peer norms could significantly moderate the relationship between love and depression (Zhu, Kong, and Zhou, 2025). This shows that environmental factors play a key role.

Based on this, this paper adopts a systematic literature review method. A comprehensive analysis of the relationship between romantic relationships and subjective well-being in adolescents, summarizes both positive impacts and negative risks. Possible regulatory mechanisms are also explored. The goal of the study is to provide theoretical support and practical inspiration for educational practice, family guidance and future research.

2 INTRODUCTIONS to core concepts

2.1 Romantic Relationships

2.1.1 Definition

Romantic relationships serve as critical socialization contexts during adolescence due to their influence on emotional development, identity formation, and interpersonal skills. Their core characteristics are close connections with mutual confirmation and ongoing interactions, which are usually accompanied by high levels of emotional involvement and emotional expression (Collins, 2003). Developmental psychologists further emphasize that adolescence is a period of rapid social and emotional development, during this period, romantic relationships provide teens with opportunities to practice skills such as communication, empathy, and conflict resolution. These skills are crucial for future relationships in adulthood (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009, Furman & Shaffer, 2003). Unlike typical companionate relationships, romantic relationships possess unique emotional intensity and complexity, often involving intimate interaction patterns, expectations of stability, and even potential or actual sexual

experiences (Brown, Furman, & Feiring, 1999). Collins emphasized that romantic relationships are not short-lived and meaningless episodes of adolescence, but rather core experiences that have a profound impact on adolescent identity construction, self-concept development, and social adaptation (Collins, 2003). This view has promoted the academic community to re-understand the significance of the development of romantic relationships among adolescents. This shift has moved the understanding of romantic relationships from a “problem behavior” to a “developmental task” framework. This shift has redefined teenage romantic relationships, consider it an important development milestone. It’s not just a behavioral issue, this has prompted researchers to pay more attention to its functions in identity exploration and social-emotional growth (Collins, 2003).

2.1.2 Types and Development Stages of Romantic Relationships

Based on the “Development Task Theory”, Romantic relationships typically develop from initial attraction and casual flings to more committed and stable bonds, reflecting a gradual shift from an exploratory relationship to a persistent relationship pattern. Collins proposed the “Five Characteristics Framework” to analyze the types and development of romantic relationships from five dimensions: involvement, object selection, relationship content, relationship quality, and cognitive and emotional processes (Collins, 2003). As adolescents age, their romantic relationships gradually shift from initial, brief flings to stable, high-quality relationships, a process that is accompanied by higher expectations for intimacy, trust, and long-term commitment (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). However, different cultural backgrounds have a significant impact on the process of relationship development. For example, in the Chinese context, dating is often labeled as “premature love,” which leads adolescents to be more secretive and restrained in their relationships (Shi, 2016). This social environment not only affects the degree of openness in romantic relationships, but may also increase psychological stress during the relationship.

2.1.3 Characteristics and Influencing Factors of Adolescent Romantic Relationships

The characteristics of adolescent romantic relationships present a “double-edged sword” effect. On the one hand, high-quality romantic relationships can promote the development of self-esteem, self-concept, and social skills, helping adolescents gain a sense of security and belonging in an atmosphere of emotional support (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). On the other hand, low-quality or conflict-ridden relationships can have negative consequences, such

as anxiety, depression and poor academic performance, because ongoing conflict and volatile emotional communication can trigger greater sadness, stress, and academic distraction. (Joyner & Udry, 2000).

Furthermore, situational factors significantly moderate the development and functioning of romantic relationships. Peer acceptance and support can enhance positive romantic experiences, especially when this support is expressed through encouragement, open discussion, and shared experiences. It helps to normalize romantic feelings. On the contrary, negative attitudes from family or school will weaken the positive functions of love and even increase the psychological burden of teenagers. (Collins & Sroufe, 1999). At the same time, individual factors such as attachment style, emotion regulation ability, and social skills level can also profoundly influence the quality and stability of romantic relationships (Collins, 2003).

2.2 Subjective Well-being

2.2.1 Definition

Subjective well-being (SWB) is an important concept in positive psychology. Refers to an individual's overall subjective evaluation of life (Diener & Seligman, 2002). Gómez-López et al. pointed out through a systematic review that early studies often simply equated happiness with the lack of negative emotions or psychological problems, but recent studies have emphasized its positive connotations, including high levels of life satisfaction, frequent positive emotions, and low negative emotions (Gómez-López et al., 2019). The theoretical system of subjective well-being can be roughly divided into two paths: Hedonic well-being, which emphasizes emotional pleasure and life satisfaction; and virtuous or psychological well-being (Gómez-López et al., 2019).

2.2.2 Dimensions of Subjective Well-being

From a dimensional perspective, subjective well-being includes four aspects: emotional, cognitive, psychological, and social (Keyes, 1998). The affective dimension involves the intensity and frequency of positive and negative emotions. The cognitive dimension is reflected in the subjective evaluation of life satisfaction. The psychological dimension covers elements such as self-acceptance, positive interpersonal relationships, environmental control, personal growth and life goals. The social dimension emphasizes social integration, social acceptance, and social contribution (Gómez-López et al., 2019).

2.2.3 The Particularity of Adolescents' Subjective Well-Being

As people age, positive emotions tend to decline, and life satisfaction fluctuates or even declines (Gómez-López et

al., 2019). This fluctuation is closely related to hormonal changes, increasing academic pressures, and peer pressure, which together increase adolescents' emotional vulnerability. Adolescents' well-being is easily affected by a combination of factors such as peer relationships, romantic experiences, and academic pressure (Larson, 2000). In addition, cultural background and gender differences are also important variables affecting happiness. Girls tend to be more sensitive to emotional cues, which may amplify the emotional impact of relationship experiences; boys, on the other hand, rely more on peer support and feedback to regulate their subjective well-being (Azpiazu, Fernández-Zabala, Rodríguez-Fernández, & Ramos-Díaz, 2023).

3 The positive impact of romantic relationships on subjective well-being

3.1 Detailed Description of Empirical Research

Longitudinal research provides strong evidence for the link between romantic relationships and well-being. Based on two rounds of follow-up data from 747 adolescents aged 13 to 17, Gómez-López, Viejo, and Ortega-Ruiz found that adolescents with romantic experience performed significantly better than their peers who had never been in love in multiple dimensions of psychological well-being, especially positive interpersonal relationships and personal growth (Gómez-López et al., 2019). This positive effect remained significant in the second round of follow-up. The study emphasizes that the experience of love is not only a process of emotional exploration, but also an important context for promoting social connections and self-growth. In addition, the analysis results of the structural equation model showed that romantic experience can explain approximately 25% to 57% of the variation in multiple dimensions of happiness, further confirming the systematic association between romantic relationships and happiness.

Research based on cross-sectional data also reveals the key role of relationship quality in happiness. Londero-Santos et al. conducted a regression analysis on 490 adolescents in stable heterosexual relationships and found that relationship characteristic variables could explain 21%, 19% and 15% of the variation in life satisfaction, positive emotions and negative emotions, respectively, among which relationship satisfaction is the strongest predictor (Londero-Santos et al., 2021). This means that relationship quality has a more significant impact on happiness than whether or not one is in a romantic relationship. The findings support the bottom-up model of well-being, whereby satisfaction in specific domains cu-

mulatively influences overall well-being (Reis & Shaver, 1988). However, the study also pointed out that due to the use of a cross-sectional design, causal relationships cannot be directly inferred and need to be further verified through longitudinal studies or quasi-experimental designs to better approximate causal inferences.

Large-sample studies in the Chinese context have further enriched findings in this field. Based on data from the China Education Panel Studies (CEPS, sample size over 20,000 adolescents), Jin, Yang, and Tianyu found that the academic performance of adolescents in love was slightly lower, but their risk of negative emotions was significantly lower than that of their non-relationship peers, and they showed more positive growth in self-concept and interpersonal skills, especially for female adolescents, where the positive effect was more significant (Jin, Yang, and Tianyu, 2021). This finding suggests that although romantic relationships can create academic stress, for example, romantic commitment may reduce available study time and increase the burden of an exam-oriented education system, but the emotional support and positive feedback provided by a partner can still alleviate the negative effects of stress to a certain extent. Overall, the impact of romantic relationships on academic outcomes is not uniformly negative or positive but depends on the interaction of multiple situational and individual factors.

In addition, Zhu, Kong, and Zhou used a large sample of 6,718 junior high school students nationwide to further verify the positive relationship between dating experience and happiness, while revealing the importance of situational factors (Zhu, Kong, and Zhou, 2025). The study found that adolescents in romantic relationships generally report higher levels of happiness, and that peer descriptive norms (i.e., the prevalence of romantic behavior in the peer group) can significantly buffer potential stress or risks in romantic relationships and promote improved happiness. Conversely, when there are more negative or stressful evaluations in the peer environment, the positive effects of romantic relationships will be weakened. This finding suggests that the social and peer support environment—including peer acceptance, teacher neutrality, and parental openness—plays a key role in mediating the effects of romantic relationships on well-being.

3.2 Brief Review of Empirical Research

Additional studies have also provided abundant supporting evidence. Some studies have shown that high-quality romantic relationships help adolescents build more stable positive emotional experiences and higher life satisfaction by enhancing emotional support, self-efficacy, and emotion regulation ability (Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Reis &

Shaver, 1988). Furthermore, cross-cultural research shows that the impact of romantic relationships on well-being varies across sociocultural context. For example, greater acceptance in Western societies fosters exploratory romantic experiences, whereas stricter parental and institutional expectations in East Asian societies often delay or limit such experiences—a difference that is closely related to cultural acceptance of romantic behavior (Gómez-López et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2025).

3.3 Summary

Overall, there is a stable positive relationship between romantic relationships and subjective well-being. High-quality romantic relationships can not only enhance positive emotions and interpersonal satisfaction, but also improve overall well-being through the accumulation of support and security (Collins, 2003; Gómez-López et al., 2019). However, this effect is not consistent but varies across cultural contexts, gender differences, and relationship quality. For example, in a context like China where academic pressure is high, the positive effects of romance may be partially offset, but in an environment with relaxed peer norms and strong support, the happiness effect of romantic relationships is more likely to appear (Jin et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2025). Mechanistically, the resource accumulation model and the emotion regulation model provide reasonable explanations: high-quality romantic relationships can provide individuals with emotional and instrumental support. For example, assistance with time management, academic projects or decision-making can help them build stronger social integration and emotional regulation skills and improve their sense of well-being. Social norms, as an important contextual variable, significantly regulate the direction and intensity of the impact of romantic relationships on happiness.

4 Negative or neutral effects of romantic relationships on subjective well-being

4.1 Detailed Description of Empirical Research

The case study by Zhao Haohao, Liang Junping, and Li Jianzhong demonstrated the direct correlation between adolescent romantic setbacks and depression. They reported a 17-year-old high school student who felt a strong sense of loss and even had suicidal thoughts because his emotional expectations in a romantic relationship did not match reality (Li, 2020). This study emphasizes that adolescents are in a stage of immature cognitive and emotional development and relationship setbacks may be an important risk

factor for depression. This highlights the psychological vulnerability that adolescent individuals exhibit in romantic relationships.

Jin, Yang, and Tianyu used data from the China Education Panel Studies (CEPS) to examine the impact of adolescent romantic relationships on academic and psychological development (Jin et al., 2021). Studies have found that adolescents in romantic relationships generally have lower academic performance than their non-romantic peers and also show higher levels of anxiety and emotional instability. This negative effect is more significant among girls, possibly due to heightened sensitivity to interpersonal evaluation and greater academic expectations, which explains the observed gender differences. In an environment with high test pressure, romantic relationships not only take up study time but also add an extra psychological burden, thereby exacerbating negative emotional experiences.

4.2 Brief Review of Empirical Research

Although many studies have highlighted the negative effects of being in love, some empirical results show that its impact is neutral or conditional. Jin et al. found that, although being in love is associated with a decline in academic performance, romantic experiences also promote adolescents' self-concept construction and interpersonal skills development (Jin et al., 2021). This suggests that dating may bring about a "developmental trade-off," meaning that adolescents may experience academic costs, such as reduced study time or lower academic performance, but simultaneously gain benefits in self-concept construction and social-emotional skills.

Zhu, Kong, and Zhou based on a survey of 6718 junior high school students in China, a significant positive correlation was found between being in love and depressive symptoms (Zhu et al., 2025). However, they also noted that this effect was significantly moderated by peer norms. When romantic relationships were more common in the class and among the friend group, the relationship between romantic relationships and depression was significantly weakened; Conversely, when peer groups hold negative attitudes, the psychological burden of being in a relationship is amplified. This finding highlights the important role of social context in determining the direction of the impact of love on happiness.

4.3 Summary

Overall, the negative or neutral impact of adolescent love on subjective well-being is highly context-dependent. Studies have shown that being in love may lead to decreased academic performance, anxiety, and depression

(Jin et al., 2021; Zhao Haohao et al., 2020). This risk is particularly prominent in environments with strict social and cultural norms (Park et al., 2022). However, when romantic relationships are in a more open peer and cultural environment, their negative effects are weakened and may even show certain social and emotional development benefits (Zhu et al., 2025). Therefore, moderating variables such as gender, relationship quality, cultural norms, and peer attitudes are crucial in explaining different research findings.

5 DisCUSSION AND Suggestions

5.1 Comprehensive Research Conclusions

Based on the existing research results, it can be seen that teenage love is a complex "double-edged sword" phenomenon. On the one hand, high-quality relationships may lead to positive self-concept and emotional support; on the other hand, low-quality relationships, conflicts, and break-ups significantly increase the risk of depression, anxiety, and academic decline (Jin et al., 2021; Park et al., 2022; Zhao Haohao et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2025). This shows that adolescent romance has both functions and risks and cannot be simply viewed as a single factor, either positive or negative.

5.2 Practical Application Suggestions

At the practical application level, schools, families and society should share the responsibility to help young people better deal with the challenges brought about by romantic relationships.

Schools should avoid adopting a "one-size-fits-all" ban, because this practice often drives dating behavior underground and further increases the psychological pressure on teenagers. Instead, schools should include content related to love and emotion management in mental health courses, guiding students to learn skills such as communication, emotion regulation, and conflict resolution, so as to maintain balance and growth in the process of love (Jin, Yang, & Tianyu, 2021).

At the family level, parents need to adopt a more open attitude and encourage their children to share their relationship experiences in a safe and non-judgmental atmosphere, thereby reducing isolation and shame. In this way, the negative effects of romantic setbacks on mental health can be significantly reduced (Zhao, Liang, & Li, 2020).

In addition, society and communities should also establish diverse psychological support and intervention mechanisms, especially to play the role of peer support. Zhu, Kong, and Zhou found that positive attitudes from peer

groups can effectively buffer the relationship between romantic relationships and depression (Zhu et al., 2025). Therefore, by establishing healthy peer norms and campus culture, it can greatly reduce the negative psychological impact of love.

5.3 Future Research Directions

In future research, scholars need to continue to explore the complex relationship between adolescent love and subjective well-being from multiple dimensions.

First, longitudinal research should receive more attention. By tracking adolescents' dating experiences over a long period of time, it is possible to distinguish short-term fluctuations in happiness from long-term developmental outcomes, thereby revealing the lasting impact of dating on mental health (Park, Lee, & Kim, 2022).

Secondly, cross-cultural comparative research is particularly necessary, as social norms and family expectations in different cultural contexts often profoundly shape the meaning and psychological consequences of love. For example, China's exam-oriented education and social taboos may amplify the negative effects of love. In a more tolerant cultural environment, love may more likely reflect its positive functions (Jin et al., 2021). Future research needs to try to build a multi-level analytical framework, integrating individual differences (such as gender, attachment style), relationship quality, and cultural environment into the same model, to more fully explain the heterogeneity of the love effect.

Finally, intervention studies, such as school-based psychoeducation programs and peer-support initiatives, are urgently needed. By conducting field experiments or quasi-experiments, future research can evaluate the effectiveness of these programs in mitigating the psychological risks of adolescent romance and in promoting positive developmental outcomes (Zhu et al., 2025).

6 Conclusions

This paper conducts a systematic literature review on the relationship between romantic relationships and subjective well-being in adolescents. Research shows that romantic relationships exert a "double-edged sword" effect on happiness: high-quality relationships can improve adolescents' self-concept, enhance emotional support, and promote social integration, while low-quality relationships, conflicts, and breakups are linked to heightened risks of anxiety, depression, and academic stress. These divergent effects are not uniform but are moderated by multiple factors, including gender differences, the quality of the relationship, prevailing cultural norms, and peer attitudes. Based on these findings, this review suggests that educa-

tion, family, and society should work collaboratively to foster healthier developmental contexts. Schools should incorporate relationship and emotional education into their curricula to equip students with communication and conflict-resolution skills, while families should encourage open dialogue to reduce shame and isolation. Communities and peer groups, in turn, can act as protective environments that buffer risks and normalize adolescent romance. Future research should emphasize longitudinal tracking and cross-cultural comparison, build comprehensive multi-level frameworks, and design intervention experiments to test effective practices. Overall, this study not only synthesizes the positive and negative effects of adolescent romantic relationships but also underscores their contextual complexity, offering theoretical insights and practical implications for educational practice, family support, and policy development.

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