



Preliminary Study on the Factors Influencing the Inception of Romantic Relationships in Adolescence

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Abstract

Based on literature that highlighted the importance of romantic relationships in adolescence and highlighted that parental attachment may play a decisive role in the development of romantic relationships, the present research aim to analyse, using tests and questionnaires, possible factors affecting the emergence of romantic relationships in adolescence considering parental attachment, quality of romantic relationships and self-esteem as variables. The data refer to a sample consisting initially of 99 adolescents (43 females and 56 males) between the ages of 14 and 17 years, attending an Italian Professional Institute. Subsequently, the study focused on subjects who claimed to be currently in a loving relationship (N=29). SPSS statistical software version 20.0 was used in the data analysis. The main results showed that a large part of the sample has secure attachment (44.8%), detected by SAT. Some of the main characteristics of love relationships (conflict, friendship, help, safety, intimacy, sexuality and future perspective) were taken into consideration. From the present study, the correlation between attachment and loving relationship does not appear to be confirmed, as claimed so far in the emerging literature, although the limited number of subjects involved may have been a limitation.

Keywords: Adolescence; Romantic Relationships; Safety; Friendship; Intimacy; Future Perspective

Introduction

Adolescence

Adolescence is that period of the developmental age characterised by the transition from the infant to the adult state of the individual. This period is characterised by several changes [1-7], for instance body changes. Intense

emotional experiences are associated with physical change: due to relevance of body changes and the configuration itself which drives to the research of new balances in relationships towards the world outside and one's own self; due to the earliness of the change with respect to the one experienced by the peers, that makes it more unexpected, or due to its delay that arouses anxieties and uncertainties in those expecting to change, comparing with those who have already

grown up [8].

Another type of change that occurs during adolescence concerns is the research of a new identity, intended as that set of mental representations that contain our biography, who we are and what we do, how we are, with whom and how we relate, what we have been, how we would like to be in the future, like a dossier that is updated moment by moment, that is continually consulted, that allows us to recognize ourselves every time, even while we experience change. This set of mental representations of ourselves is like an anchor that allows us to experience feelings of security [9]. Besides the construction of personal identity, besides physical and mental changes as well, another important element in this developmental stage is the gradual acquisition of a level of self-esteem, a purely subjective perception, unstable over time, dynamic and mutable. Self-esteem is a pattern which interacts with the surrounding environment, and it is based on the combination of objective information about oneself and subjective evaluations of this information [10]. Self-esteem can be influenced by external factors; in fact, Moksnes, et al. [11], in their research, found that as emotional stresses increase, the individual's degree of self-esteem decreases.

Moreover, in a study conducted by Sorensen [12], it was shown how the relationship with the partner affects the self-esteem of kids, since self-esteem is the essential prerequisite of love.

The adolescence period can put a strain on communication between parents because the conflict between the adolescent's need for autonomy on one side and protection on the other is expressed within the family through new and different forms of communication both verbal-such as silences, verbal aggression, increased conflict, provocations- and nonverbal -such as the way of dressing and posturing, relationship with food, ways of managing personal space. The latter is another change that occurs in this developmental stage.

Love in Adolescence

One of the main features of social development during adolescence is the emergence of the experience of love. Love in adolescence is often confused with falling in love, and it plays a special and significant role. According to Sternberg [13], love is a perfect synthesis of three factors: emotional (intimacy), motivational (passion) and cognitive (commitment). Starting from the combination of these three elements (intimacy, passion, and commitment), different types of love arise. Love has its own well-defined path: meeting, attraction, dependency, falling in love, love; thus, falling in love is a phase of love. Alberoni [13] defined falling in love as *"the nascent state of a collective movement*

in two". Falling in love promotes the process of autonomy from parents and acts as a reconciler with the outside world [1]. Tani, et al. [14], in their study, highlighted the five fundamental dimensions existing in friendship and romantic relationships: being together, security, help, intimacy, conflict. This study also showed how sentimental bonds have greater qualitative importance rather than friendship bonds, in subjects of both sexes. Females compared to males are found to be more capable of establishing and maintaining intimate relationships characterised by greater intensity and qualitative worthiness. Also, in females' samples, the nature and significance of friendship and romantic bonds remain constant from adolescence to adulthood. First loves are experienced with a lot of intensity, full of hopes, idealizations, and with suffering for moments of crisis or the end of the great love. Sorensen [12] focused on assessing the quality of adolescent relationships. Although adolescents' relationships last only a few weeks or months, they play a key role in their lives, they are important in developing the ability to form long-term relationships in adulthood; these relationships also affect self-esteem and shape personal values concerning love, intimate relationships, and sexuality. Romantic relationships help young people define their sense of identity, help young people build their personal concept of worth and develop interpersonal skills, while also providing emotional support; they also improve their communication and negotiation skills, developing empathy and emotional resilience and learning how to have and experience intimate relationships [12]. According to the literature, three quarters of teens between the ages of 16 and 18 have been in a relationship, dating, or on a date, and half of these teens have had a significant history. Thus, as the adolescent period progresses, young people enrich their relational experience with the other to meet/ satisfy their social-emotional needs. Furman, et al. [2], authors of the first contemporary theory of romantic development in adolescence, highlighted that romantic relationship partners become important figures in the functioning of four behavioural systems: 1) Belonging; 2) Reproductive System; 3) Attachment; 4) Support. The first two are salient in the context of the love relationship; while for the last ones, their importance increases with adulthood, and with the arising need to seek a new attachment figure. In Seiffge-Krenke' [15] longitudinal study a developmental sequence in the evolution of romantic relationships affecting adolescents and young adults is hypothesised. This study starts from the proposal of Brown BB [16], who divides adolescence and the transition to adulthood into four stages: 1) Initiation phase, where the mother figure is relevant, and goes from 11 to 13 years old; 2) Status phase, where peers play a key role and goes from 14 to 16 years old; 3) Affection phase, where peers and partner are equally significant and goes from 17 to 20 years old; 4) Bond building phase, where members of the couple consider themselves inseparable but retain autonomous personalities and goes from 21 years old

on. Therefore, the author believes that, from a developmental perspective, romantic relationships with a partner are built on previous experiences. The contribution of these previous experiences varies in relation to different developmental stages of the subject. Moreover, with this study [15], the relationship between the quality of the relationship with parents and that of the subsequent romantic relationship is confirmed, as well as the relationship between friendship and romantic relationship. Different authors confirmed the idea that the romantic relationship in adolescence is affected by the social context in which it is experienced, and that parents may influence the adolescent's love experience [17]. In this frame, attentive and loving care by primary caregivers, during the early years of life, play an important role in the construction of self-esteem and a sense of security, that will lead to a greater ability to experience an intimate relationship and it will lead to the formation of more positive representations regarding the intimate bond [18]. In addition, the parents' own relational experience provides the young person with interactive patterns concerning aspects of communication or ways to resolve conflicts [18]. Beth, et al. [3], Hazan et al. [19] showed that interactions between an adolescent and his or her partner reflect previous interactions with his or her parents and that parental experiences influence the adolescent's expectations of his or her partner. Finally, Scharf, et al. [18] found that acceptance and encouragement toward independence coming from parents are positively associated with the development of intimacy with a partner. However, the effects of parental behaviour in the couple relationship sometimes differ between boys and girls. For example, girls are much more influenced than boys by the relationship they experience with reference figures [20]. Friends are another factor influencing love relationships in adolescence. In fact, Furman [21] showed how experiences with friends and related expectations have an impact on the expectations of romantic relationships. Carver and collaborators [22], in line with Seiffge-Krenke's [15] research, supported the hypothesis that romantic relationships are constructed based on previous experiences, deriving from parental and peer group influence. The contribution of these previous experiences varies in relation to different developmental stages of the subject. Indeed, adolescents are immersed early in peer relationships [23].

This research aims to explore how adolescents establish meaningful relationships both within the family unit and outside it, with a particular focus on the romantic relationships, assessing possible factors affecting the arising of romantic relationships in adolescence, through significant variables: attachment, friendship relationships, self-esteem, and some characteristics of romantic relationships (conflict, help, safety, intimacy, sexuality, and future perspective). Based on scientific literature [3,15], we hypothesise that there is a

positive correlation between the quality of relationship with parental figures and characteristics of the relationship with a partner. In addition, based on the scientific studies and research [24-27], we expect that self-esteem has a significant influence on sentimental relationships.

Materials and Methods

Participants

99 Italian adolescents (43 females and 56 males) took part in the present research. The age of the sample, object of study, was between 14 and 17 years old, with an average age of 16 years and 1 month ($SD=0.96$). Overall, the subjects live within stable households (82.8%), in fact only 17.2% are children of separated couples. In the second part of the research, a sub-sample was created based on the results obtained from the initial questionnaire; in fact, 29 subjects (15 females and 14 males) were selected, with an average age of 15 years and 8 months ($SD=0.65$), who declared they were currently involved in a romantic relationship. Regarding the sub-sample, 93.4% of the 29 subjects live with both parents. The moms' average age was around 44 years and the dads' average age was around 47 years. Within the sub-sample, the percentage of children of separated parents is low (6.9 percent); in addition, 20.7 percent of the sample analysed live with grandparents and 56.9 percent report having at least one sister or brother.

This sub-sample comes from households with low-to-moderate sociocultural and socioeconomic status, considering the level of education and type of work. 36% of mothers have high school degree, 35% have middle school diploma, 23% have elementary school diploma and 6% are graduate.

Instead, 38% of fathers have middle school diploma, 31% have high school diploma and 31% have elementary school diploma. In addition, all subjects of the sample are of Italian nationality.

Procedures

All the procedures of this research are compliant with the ethical standards of the National Research Committee and the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki 1964. Before the study began, the parents of the adolescents were informed, through informed consent, and they were asked for permission to include their children in the research. All parents voluntarily signed the informed consent. Regarding the sample power (β), that is the probability of accepting the null hypothesis when it is false, we found a level of $\beta=0.50$. The sample power, considering that this is a preliminary study, is

acceptable taking into account limitations of the research. To carry on this study, we decided to divide the research into three meetings, during school hours, and they were carried out during September 2022. In the first meeting, an ad hoc exploratory questionnaire containing socio-demographic questions (age, gender), questions related to household composition, group of friends and love relationships was administered to each pupil. The administration took about 50 minutes. In the second and third meeting, specific scales were administered only to the adolescent (N=29), who in the part of the questionnaire related to romantic relationships affirmed that they were currently in a loving relationship. The data collection started in September 2022.

Measures

In the first meeting, a socio-demographic questionnaire was administered to the pupils. This ad hoc exploratory questionnaire also included items regarding friendship and its relevance and items regarding romantic relationships. Regarding the topic of friendship, the aim was to highlight how important, for each subject, friendship was (scoring on a 5-item Likert scale from “Not at all” to “Very much”); whether adolescent had friends and belonged to a group of friends; whether the pupils had a friend who he/she had a special relationship with (assessed on the basis of “yes/no” responses); and how often pupils saw friends in free time (scoring on a 5-item Likert scale from “At least once a day” to “Almost never”). Regarding the topic of romantic relationships, an initial question was asked to find out whether the subjects were currently in a romantic relationship (assessed from “yes/no” responses). Then, those who were in a romantic relationship were asked questions about the relationship (e.g., how long they have been dating the partner; whether they think they are in love; whether they confide in the partner; whether they happen to talk to their partner about a future together; how often they meet during their free time, excluding hours spent at school). Instead, those who stated that they were not in a romantic relationship were administered questions regarding past romantic relationships, whether they had ever been in love, and whether they would like to get engaged in the future. Finally, all subjects were asked whether they thought they were in love at the time and if “Yes,” if it was a requited love; and whether they had ever suffered from a break-up.

Separation Anxiety Test (SAT): In the second meeting, the Italian Version of the Separation Anxiety Test (SAT), by Klagsbrun, et al. [4], created by Attili [4], was administered to the subjects who were in a romantic relationship. The Separation Anxiety Test (SAT) is a semi-projective test, addressed to children and adolescents, that was developed to assess personality characteristics and risks of

psychopathological outcomes in children and adolescents, through reactions and responses to hypothetical separations from parents [4]. Each individual meeting was audio-recorded with the adolescent’s consent. In the Italian version [4], the SAT consists of two sets of six computer-processed illustrations (one for boys and one for girls). Three illustrations represent situations in which the child will be separated from his parents or mother just for a short time (moderate situations - M), and three illustrations represent long separations or separations that may be perceived as anxiety-inducing (severe situations - S). Following the presentation of the illustrations, 4 questions were asked to the adolescents:

- In your opinion, how does the child feel?
- In your opinion, why does the child feel this way?
- In your opinion, how does the child act now?
- In your opinion, how will the child act when (*Based on the different situations*)?

Semantic Differential: Semantic differential is a measurement scale designed to quantify the emotional and affective reactions that an object or event evokes, by making use of a set of bipolar scales (adjectives); this allows us to evaluate people’s attitudes. Adjective scales were created, starting with Capozza’s [27] Semantic Differential. The semantic differential, used in the following study, consisted of a series of scales, each of which is composed of nineteen pairs of bipolar adjectives (e.g., stable vs. unstable), between which a seven-position response rating scale is placed. In the third meeting, three semantic differentials were administered to the sample, one related to relationship with mother, one related to relationship with father, and one related to relationship with partner.

Romance Qualities Scales (RQS): Romance qualities scales is a multidimensional auto-administered questionnaire. This scale is composed of 22 items structured basing on Likert scale with five points (from “Absolutely True” to “Absolutely False”). The questionnaire consists of five sub-dimensions: Companionship (amount of time people voluntarily spend together), Conflict (frequency of disagreements with the partner), Help (mutual assistance and help, as well as protection in facing injustice and oppression of others), Safety (including trust and the ability to overcome problems together), Proximity (strength of emotional bond and attachment to the partner).

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale: The Italian version of Rosenberg [28] Self-Esteem, created and validated in the Italian context by Prezza, et al. [29] is a questionnaire to evaluate self-esteem. This scale is composed of 10 items with a four-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly agree,” to “Disagree at all”.

Data Analysis

Data was processed using SPSS version 20.0, released in 2009 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). Descriptive and inferential statistics were performed. Data were subjected to correlations (Pearson Correlation Coefficient). Bivariate correlations were used between RQS's variables, between the subcategories of the Maternal and Paternal Semantic Differential, and between RQS's variables and RSES. Finally, data from RQS and RSES were compared with those from the SAT.

Results

Regarding friendship, 93.1% of subjects have declared to belong to a friendship group and 89.7% have declared to have a special friend. When asked "How important is friendship to you?", 92% of the adolescents answered, "Very much."

Regarding the sentimental relationship, we focused our attention on the subgroup (N=29) of subjects who declared they were engaged in a sentimental relationship.

All the statistical analyses considered a $p < .05$ score statistically significant. Specifically, to make the comparison between nominal/categorical variables, we used the Chi-

square test, which is useful for checking that the frequencies of observed values fit the theoretical frequencies of a set probability distribution. The chi-square statistic is 0.7185. The p -value is .396626. Not significant at $p < .05$. The chi-square statistic with Yates correction is 0.3933. The p -value is .530596. Not significant at $p < .05$.

Within this group, 79.3% said that they are in love now, and almost all of them believed that they are reciprocated. Therefore, these subjects reported a positive view of their own romantic situation, even though a high percentage of them (86.3%) claimed to have suffered in the past from a broken relationship. To investigate the relationship between the partners, we used RQS and Semantic Differential. The semantic differential showed how the relationship with the partner is connoted as extremely positive, loving, stable, happy, affectionate, secure, satisfying, and solid. It is a supportive, confidential, and friendly relationship. In addition, it appears quite overprotective and partly possessive, but at the same time, very intimate and exclusive.

From the statistical analyses carried out it is useful to state that the confidence interval (95% IC) is 0.3852 to 2.0107 and the Odds ratio 0.8801 with a Significance level $P = 0.7619$ and z statistic 0.303 (Table 1).

	Very much	Quite	Little	Neutral	Little	Quite	Very Much	
Stable	16	11	1	1				Unstable
Lovely	20	5	1	3				Grumpy
Supportive	12	11	3	3				Unsupportive
Happy	19	6	2	1	1			Sad
Aggressive		3	9	6		7	4	Calm
Loving	17	10		2				Violent
Independent	4	6	5	6	2	4	2	Dependent
Safe	13	12	1	2		1		Unsafe
Satisfying	18	8		2		1		Unsatisfying
Strong	15	8	2	3	1			Fragile
Hostile	2	2	5	4		11	5	Quiet
Intimate	13	9	3	1	3			Distant
Confidential	15	6	4	1	1	2		Private
Boring	1	1	9	4	2	5	7	Interesting
Possessive	5	12	6	1		3	2	Free
Friendly	15	9	2	2			1	Unfriendly
Over-protective	8	12	1	1		4	3	Open
Serious	8	1	2	3	1	11	3	Playful
Conflictual	3	6	8	1		4	7	Peaceful

Table 1: Semantic Differential frequencies Relationship with partner.

Then, data obtained from RQS have been codified and analysed through SPSS software, version 20.0. Through the analysis of the correlations, using Pearson's r , some strong correlations between them have been detected. The existing correlation between *companionship* and *intimacy level* ($r=.55$, $p=0.01$) between partners turned out to be significant. As values related to *help* variables increase, the *safety* degree raises ($r=.37$, $p=0.05$). The *safety* degree towards a partner has a strong correlation with the *intimacy* level of teens

($r=.51$, $p=0.01$) and it is simultaneously related to the *future perspective* of adolescents ($r=.48$, $p=0.01$). This last variable also shows a correlation with the intimacy level of teens ($r=.41$, $p=0.05$) (Table 2). As long as adolescents make a selective choice of partner, this individual is considered as the ideal person to build, design and dream about a future with, but at the same time as a person who grows and builds strong relationships with, as if you wanted to become a single person.

	Conflict	Companionship	Help	Safety	Intimacy	Sexuality
Companionship	-,311					
Help	-,015	,355				
Confidence	-,128	,172	,368*			
Intimacy	-,171	,547**	,366	,505**		
Sexuality	,127	-,086	,019	,230	,020	
Future perspective	,238	,308	,258	,481**	,406*	,123

** Correlation is significant at level 0,01 (2-code).

* Correlation is significant at level 0,05 (2-code).

Table 2: Variables RQS correlations.

Regarding parental figures, SAT coding has highlighted that teens included in the present research show the following types of attachment:

- Secure (44,9%).
- Insecure avoidant (17, 2%).

- Insecure ambivalent (27, 6%).
- Disorganized (6, 9%).
- Confused (3, 4%).

	ML	FL	MNC	FNC	MS	FS	MF	FF	MSC	FSC	MI	FI	MSa
ML													
FL	,253												
MNC	,161	,172											
FNC	,412*	,549**	,512**										
MS	,743**	,407*	,379*	,394*									
FS	,320	,768**	,301	,628**	,442*								
MF	,388*	-,013	,670**	,376*	,451*	,077							
FF	,341	,640**	,453*	,858**	,440*	,607**	,263						
MSC	,754**	,232	,027	,292	,673**	,310	,178	,404*					
FSC	,239	,837**	,164	,434*	,319	,675**	-,088	,580**	,324				
MI	,131	,164	,465*	,204	,222	,269	,309	,086	-,078	,098			
FI	,419*	,479**	,422*	,661**	,371*	,691**	,292	,554**	,204	,430*	,441*		
MSa	,626**	,109	-,147	,379*	,540**	,289	,098	,332	,609**	-,015	-,131	,221	
FSa	,207	,830**	,110	,559**	,176	,615**	-,166	,629**	,254	,807**	,110	,415*	,056

* $p < 0,05$ (2-code); ** $p < (2-code)$.

Notes: ML= Mother loveliness; FL= Father loveliness; MNC=Mother Non-Conflicuality; FNC=NFather Non-Conflicuality; MS= Mother Support; FS= Father Support; MF=Mother Fun; FF=Father Fun; MSC=Mother Solidity-Confidence; FSC=Father Solidity-Confidence; MI=Mother Independence; FI=Father Independence; MSa=Mother Satisfaction; FSa=Father Satisfaction.

Table 3: Subcategories correlations of Semantic Differential, mother's and father's.

To analyse the existing relationship between adolescent and his/her parental figures, Semantic Differential has been used. Using SPSS, potential existing correlations between the areas which it is composed of can be observed: loveliness, non-conflict, support, fun, solidity/confidence, independence, and satisfaction about relationship with mother and father. As mother loveliness increases, level of mother support, fun, solidity/confidence, and satisfaction tend to increase. Likewise, for what concerns the increase of father loveliness, an increase in support, fun and non-

conflict levels is detected, as well as solidity/confidence and independence.

From Semantic Differential analysis, the relationship between adolescent and his/her mother turned out to be focused on aspects such as stability, loveliness, support, happiness, affectivity, safety, confidence, satisfaction, friendship, intimacy, and confidentiality. The important affective function carried out by the mother figure is confirmed (Table 4).

	Very much	Quite	Little	Neutral	Little	Quite	Very Much	
Stable	16	11	1	1				Unstable
Lovely	20	5	1	3				Grumpy
Supportive	12	11	3	3				Unsupportive
Happy	19	6	2	1	1			Sad
Aggressive		3	9	6		7	4	Calm
Loving	17	10		2				Violent
Independent	4	6	5	6	2	4	2	Dependent
Safe	13	12	1	2		1		Unsafe
Satisfying	18	8		2		1		Unsatisfying
Strong	15	8	2	3	1			Fragile
Hostile	2	2	5	4		11	5	Quiet
Intimate	13	9	3	1	3			Distant
Confidential	15	6	4	1	1	2		Private
Boring	1	1	9	4	2	5	7	Interesting
Possessive	5	12	6	1		3	2	Free
Friendly	15	9	2	2			1	Unfriendly
Over-protective	8	12	1	1		4	3	Open
Serious	8	1	2	3	1	11	3	Playful
Conflictual	3	6	8	1		4	7	Peaceful

Table 4: Semantic Differential frequencies Relationship with mother.

From Semantic Differential analysis, the relationship between adolescent and his/her father turned out to be slightly more aggressive, conflictual and hostile if compared with the relationship with his/her mother. At the same time, this relationship is more independent, free and playful than the maternal one. According to the results coming from Semantic Differential, even if to a lesser extent than the maternal one, the father/son-daughter relationship turned out to be in the whole sample (N=29) as positive, since great scores have been highlighted in items related to stability, loveliness, happiness, affectivity, confidence and satisfying (Table 5).

For both parental figures, the relationship turned out to be serious, often boring and possessive.

Regarding self-esteem, Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale has been used. Its coding highlighted that 99,9% of the whole sample shows a medium level of self-esteem, as scores range between 22 and 32. The average value of self-esteem level for the sample is 28,35 (ds=3.58). Starting from this, it appears that adolescents have positive feelings towards themselves and others.

	Very much	Quite	Little	Neutral	Little	Quite	Very Much	
Stable	6	11	5	1	1	2	3	Unstable
Lovely	4	14	5	2		2	2	Grumpy
Supportive	6	9	7	2	2	2	2	Unsupportive
Happy	10	10	3	4	1		1	Sad
Aggressive	3	1	11	2	2	8	2	Calm
Loving	10	10	5	3			1	Violent
Independent	3	9	6	6	2	2	1	Dependent
Safe	10	10	4	2	1	1	1	Unsafe
Satisfying	5	11	5	5	1		2	Unsatisfying
Strong	7	7	7	4	3		1	Fragile
Hostile	3	7	7	3	2	6	1	Quiet
Intimate	1	4	8	7	5	1	3	Distant
Confidential	2	9	7	2	2	3	4	Private
Boring	3	3	8	4	4	5	2	Interesting
Possessive	8	3	7	4	1	4	2	Free
Friendly	7	10	4	4	2	1	1	Unfriendly
Over-protective	10	4	3	3	1	7	1	Open
Serious	6	8	4	1	1	3	6	Playful
Conflictual	6	3	8	3	1	3	5	Peaceful

Table 5: Semantic Differential frequencies Relationship with father.

	Conflict		Help	Safety	Intimacy	Sexuality	Future perspective	Self-esteem
Conflict								
Companionship	-,311							
Help	-,015	,355						
Confidence	-,128	,172	,368*					
Intimacy	-,171	,547**	,366	,505**				
Sexuality	,127	-,086	,019	,230	,020			
Future perspective	,238	,308	,258	,481**	,406*	,123		
Self-esteem	-,495**	-,106	,005	,113	-,197	-,221	-,124	

*. $p < 0,05$ (2-code); **. $p < (2\text{-code})$.

Table 6: Variables RQS and RSES correlations.

Moreover, a comparison among data obtained from administration of three Semantic Differentials (mother, father and partner) and SAT has been carried out. By inserting the obtained scores of these tests in statistical software SPSS, no significant correlation between attachment with parental figures and quality of relationship with partner has been detected. According to the different subcategories detected in Semantic Differential, several existing correlations between

the relationship that adolescent lives with the parental figures and the one the adolescent lives with the partner have been detected:

- An increase of mother loveliness results in a higher fun with partner, an increase of father loveliness results in a higher independence with partner;
- An increase of both mother and father non-conflictuality results in a higher level of non-conflictuality, support

and fun with partner;

- Mother and father support do not influence significantly the relationship with the partner, whereas an increase in both mother and father level of fun results in a higher level of fun with partner;
- An increase in father independence results in a higher level of independence with partner, as well as an increase in level of satisfaction with father results in a higher level of satisfaction with the partner.

Then, the scores obtained by RSES have been compared

with the variables considered in the RQS test: this led to a very significant data, that is to say a negative correlation between conflict and self-esteem level ($r = .50$, $p=0.01$, Table 6).

Finally, the data of these two tools (RQS and RSES) have been compared with the SAT data, highlighting the existence of a positive correlation between attachment to the parental figures and the conflict in the relationship with the partner ($r=.50$, $p=0.01$) (Table 7).

	Conflict	Companionship	Help	Safety	Intimacy	Sexuality	Future perspective	Self-esteem
Conflict								
Companionship	-,311							
Help	-,015	,355						
Confidence	-,128	,172	,368*					
Intimacy	-,171	,547**	,366	,505**				
Sexuality	,127	-,086	,019	,230	,020			
Future perspective	,238	,308	,258	,481**	,406*	,123		
Self-esteem	-,495**	-,106	,005	,113	-,197	-,221	-,124	
Attachment	,504**	,030	-,198	-,040	-,055	,011	,333	-,275

*. $p < 0,05$ (2-code); **. $p < (2\text{-code})$.

Table 7: Variables RQS, SAT and RSES correlations.

Discussion and Limitations

Basing on the existing literature about the importance of romantic relationships in adolescence [1-2] and on researches about the importance of the parental attachment in the development of romantic relationships [3], the aim of the present study was to analyse the possible factors that affect the start of romantic relationships in adolescence, considering as variables parental attachment, quality of romantic relationships and self-esteem.

The data refer to an initial sample consisting of 99 adolescents (43 females and 56 males) aged between 14 and 17 years, attending an Italian Professional Institute. Then, the study focused on 29.8% of them who claimed to currently be in a romantic relationship.

According to this work, we know that many young people previously or currently had a partner, with whom they spend most of their daily time, thus confirming the research by Carver, et al. [22]: according to their work, starting from the age of 15 an increasing number of teenagers state involvement in romantic stories, some of which are long term relationships. Moreover, such relationships play a central role in the social life of the adolescent [30], and they are

the foundations for the future more mature relationships. Adolescents appear inclined to satisfy their needs for intimacy, affiliation, sexuality, identity and autonomy in romantic relationships [31]. In fact, a large part of the entire initial sample stated that they were previously or currently in love, and this is an aspect that confirms the importance of falling in love as a source of confidence and support needed during adolescence [32]. Moreover, it has been noted that relationships that adolescents have with their partner is a significant and positive aspect.

The other person stands as the one with whom it is possible to talk about any topic, from the simple issue at school to the problem within the family. These elements confirm studies [21] in which the positive peculiarity of the emotional bond with the partner is highlighted, it is different from other social bonds. Intimacy in romantic relationships is present thanks to the ability of adolescents to set a high emotional closeness with the partner, together with processes such as trust, understanding, comparison and mutual expression of love feelings [33,34].

The adolescent also sees the partner as an important figure allowing him/her to achieve greater independence and, in part, to emancipate from parental figures. The

considerations, stressed so far, explain the data obtained from the present work relating to the area of sentimental relationships in adolescence, it has been noted that as the help provided by one's partner in solving daily problems increases, the evaluation of the same as a figure capable of providing security gets better; this consideration involves an increase in the level of intimacy between the two guys, and this will lead them to a higher future perspective.

In addition, the level of intimacy turned out to be higher as time spent together and shared activities and interests increased. In general, the relationship between partners was satisfactory for both, thus being a fundamental element of growth. All this confirms the study carried out by Furman [21] according to which romantic relationships in adolescence contribute to the development of the teen's identity, to the change of relationships with the family and to the planning of the future life. The research shows that adolescent autonomy is established not so much at the expense of the relationship with parents, but based on the addition of a set of secure relationships, which will most likely last well beyond adolescence [35]. Therefore, this is not a phase in which attachment behaviours and needs are abandoned, rather it is the period in which these are gradually transferred to peers [36] and to the partner, if any.

For what concerns the relationship with parental figures, in the present study no negative characteristics of this bond emerged. The variables considered in the Semantic Differential relating to the relationships experienced with the parental figures (loveliness, non-conflict, support, fun, solidity/confidence, independence, and satisfaction) overall describe a relationship with a positive connotation. A large part of the sample has a secure attachment (44.8%) and this confirms the hypothesis of previous research according to which subjects with secure attachment modalities constitute the significant majority of non-clinical populations of adolescents [4,37].

They are subjects having a positive model of themselves and the others, they show a low degree of avoidance and anxiety. Faced with problems, they deal with them in a flexible way, actively facing them and looking to the other as a source of support [4,37]. However, statistically evaluating the data emerging from the SAT and the Semantic Differentials of the relationship experienced with both parental figures, no correlation between parental attachment and sentimental relationship arose; therefore, the present study disconfirms the data available so far in the literature [3,15,19,38].

In particular, as concerns the relationship with the father figure, literature suggests that the father plays an important role in relational and socialisation aspects, he is promoter of individuality and differentiation of the adolescent [39].

These elements have been summarily confirmed by the present study because, evaluating the relationship that the adolescent lives with the father, it arises that the adolescent has a slightly more aggressive, conflictual and hostile relationship with the father than with the mother, probably because he stands as an authoritarian figure who wants to convey discipline. At the same time, however, this relationship turns out to be more independent, open and playful, confirming the results highlighted by the study by Furman, et al. [40]. The father plays an important normative value-based function, without it the adolescent would fall into antisocial behaviour, directing him towards the process of identification [41].

Instead, for what concerns the relationship with the mother figure, it has been noted that the considered sample lives, in most cases, a stable, and calm relationship with the mother, as she is able to convey love and security to the son/daughter [42].

These characteristics are confirmed by psychodynamic theories according to which the mother plays an important role of holding [43] and containment [44]. Adolescents establish with the maternal figure a high degree of intimacy and confidentiality, confirming the important affective function carried out by her [18].

Finally, the sample has shown an average level of self-esteem, with scores between 22 and 32. It has been noted that as the conflict with the partner increases, the degree of self-esteem of the adolescent tends to decrease.

This element would seem to be obvious for several Moksnes, et al. [11] carried out a study with 1508 Norwegian students: they have identified a relationship of inverse proportionality between emotional stress and degree of self-esteem. The study conducted by Marone & Spina opens up the possibility for further exploration of the present research. Indeed, from the results that emerged, lockdown not only allowed young people to reflect on their relationships, but also exposed them to the risk of the dissemination of private, sexually related images on the Internet. It would be interesting to understand the impact that online friendships had on teens and how much sexual urges partially mediated by hormones influenced the increase in online partner search [45]. A recent by Lykens, et al. [46] conducted just before the pandemic, focused on adolescents' behaviours and opinions during online sexual exploration, relationship building, and online dating. The results showed that the internet and social media are channels for initiating romantic relationships and exploring sexuality through online flirting and dating. Many young people under the age of 18 use dating sites prohibited to them to make friends and engage in relationships [46].

The attentions paid towards the difficult adolescent age, parental relationships and with partners, have contributed to a broader vision of the topic and its possible related factors, showing similarities but also differences of the phenomenon in the Italian context compared to other national contexts.

However, the sample size and the narrow age range, which is the subject of our study, represent limitations for the present research. The use of projective tools, as the methods of investigation, highlights the subjective aspect, but at the same time they do not allow one to have an objective picture of attitudes and affective behaviours. The questionnaires and tests we used did not allow us to learn about the history and experience of each adolescent, even if some elements emerged, at least in part, in the space made available to the teenagers at the bottom of the initial questionnaire. Many have decided to spontaneously write something about themselves as a testimony to their need to be heard and to tell their story.

Potential future research should move towards the presence of likely gender differences in affective behaviours, broadening the spectrum of investigation to the national context.

While love relationships among young people have been taking new forms since the pre-pandemic period and due to the changes in society and role expectations, the limits imposed on individual freedom by lockdown have created an unusual and almost surreal of daily living, the effects of which will be better understood in the long run [47-50]. It would have been interesting to have been able to assess the differences regarding the factors influencing partner choice before and after the pandemic, but the restrictions that existed in 2019 did not allow such elements to be captured. Further developments could include the possibility of structuring ad hoc questionnaires aimed at capturing such differences.

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