

Narratives of Romantic Disappointment in Young Adults in the Light of Relationships: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract— This study explored the experiences of romantic disappointment among young people in an Indian socio-cultural setting. The study was based on romantic expectations, longing for closure, cultural factors, coping mechanisms, and self-reflection as contributors to romantic disappointment. This study sought to explore the understanding of romantic disappointment in non-western settings due to the scarcity of literature on romantic disappointment in such settings.

For this research, a qualitative narrative inquiry methodology was used. In total, fifteen participants aged between 18 and 30 years old experiencing romantic disappointment were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling methods. Data collection took place using semi-structured interviews. The data was analysed using deductive thematic analysis. The theories used for this study included Cognitive Theory, Attachment Theory, Choice Theory, Relationship Theory, and Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love.

It was found that unrealistic expectations, uncertainty in the modern relationships, and contradictions between the traditional and modern values significantly contributed to the formation of disappointment among the participants. The participants reported feeling sad, confused, grieving, and doubting themselves, as well as coping with these feelings using introspection and gaining emotional support. Despite the fact that disappointment in romance brought about suffering, the participants also mentioned personal growth, increased emotional intelligence, and resilience as outcomes of romantic disappointment.

It can be concluded that romantic disappointment is both painful and transforming, which makes it necessary to provide culturally appropriate emotional and psychological support.

Index Terms— romantic disappointment, young adults, romantic expectations, need for closure, coping mechanisms, meaning-making, emotional resilience.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Romantic Relationships in Young Adulthood

Romantic relationship plays an important role in the emotional and psychological development of individuals from 18 to 30 years old. In fact, according to Erikson's theory, this is the time when intimacy versus isolation takes place, and close relationships play a key role in people's psychological and emotional development (Erikson, 1968).

Delayed marriages and changed social norms increased the number of romances that people experience at the stage of adolescence. At present, romance not only becomes a significant source of happiness but also creates additional problems for many young individuals.

In addition to cultural and societal factors, young adults tend to idealize the concept of "true love" that will last forever. Break-ups create problems related to personal dissatisfaction and inability to form healthy romantic relationships that are associated with higher self-esteem and emotional security (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Furman & Shaffer, 2003).

Moreover, betrayal, dissatisfaction, and disappointment lead to such negative outcomes as depression, low self-esteem, and problems with identity development (Sprecher, 2001). Therefore, the impact of romantic experiences on identity formation and psychological well-being cannot be ignored.

1.1.1 Romantic disappointment

Romantic disappointment is the psychological pain one experiences when the expectations in a romantic relationship go unfulfilled. This may be caused by various issues, such as betrayal, lack of emotional connection, ghosting, confusion regarding intentions, or simply unfulfilled expectations.

The consequences may range from a damaged sense of self-worth, to the destruction of one's beliefs about

love, resulting in sadness, rage, confusion, guilt, or even numbness.

People could end up blaming themselves or feeling hopeless about their future romantic relationships.

Such responses vary according to individuals' attachment styles, previous life experiences, and their culture (Bowlby, 1988; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2007). In Indian culture, society's expectations may further aggravate the negative emotions experienced by individuals.

1.1.2 Romantic Expectation and Idealism

Romantic expectations refer to the notion of how love is supposed to operate based on influences of upbringing, culture, experience, and media. Young adults tend to have romantic expectations that are overly idealistic and inflexible.

Concepts such as "true love conquers all" and "there is one perfect individual" may cause disillusionment when these concepts fail to materialize in reality. Media representations of the ease of romantic love tend to neglect important aspects of communication and negotiation necessary in a healthy relationship (Galician, 2004).

Expectations based on gender roles can also be another problem since women tend to emphasize emotional intimacy while men are expected to control their emotions (Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

In India, cultural traditions like arranged marriage tend to clash with contemporary ideals emphasizing emotional connection and personal choice.

1.1.3 Need for Certainty and Closure in Love

Need for certainty in love is defined as the requirement of clarity, assurance, and emotional security within relationships. Poor communication, emotional detachment, or instabilities in interactions may lead to uncertainty and frustration (Granier et al., 2005; Sbarra & Ferrer, 2006).

Dating trends that include ghosting and situationships generate uncertainty. Uncertainty in case of breakups might result in rumination, overthinking, and blaming oneself.

For Indians, who view relationships in terms of commitment and family obligations, uncertainty might be particularly troubling. While certainty contributes to emotional stability, excessive need for certainty may cause emotional problems.

1.1.4 Meaning- Making and Personal Reflection after Romantic Disappointment

Following a romantic disappointment, people tend to do meaning-making whereby they reflect on what happened in order to make sense of the situation (Park, 2010).

The end of a relationship may be a threat to one's identity and future expectations, hence making them think more about the way they felt, what they need emotionally, and how they relate with other people. Meaning-making helps someone gain emotional maturity and become resilient.

In some cases, people get into ruminative thinking, while in others, it becomes an effective tool for processing the experience. Meaning-making therefore supports emotional growth and identity reconstruction (Adler et al., 2016).

1.2 Indian Socio-cultural Context

The romantic encounters of Indian youth arise from the conflict between their traditions and modern relationship ideologies. They tend to balance their family acceptability and gender roles with their need for intimate relationships and free will (Ntting, 2010; Chakaborty, 2010).

Romantic failures remain silent experiences since heartbreaks only receive social recognition when they happen within the context of marriage. There is the danger of emotional repression and shame because of the lack of social acceptability.

Mobile applications and Western media have brought about autonomy and casual dating as well as confusion and unrealistic expectations. Gender roles continue to have an impact on emotional displays, since males are not allowed to be emotional and females are shamed for being open.

1.3 Factors shaping the experience and coping with Disappointment

1.3.1 Developmental Neuroscience and Romantic Vulnerability

The period of young adulthood comes with the continued brain development in individuals. For instance, prefrontal cortex, which is associated with decision making and emotional regulation, develops until late twenties (Steinberg, 2005).

The limbic system, which is associated with emotions and reward, on the other hand, remains extremely active during this period. Hence, the imbalance between the two systems may be responsible for

emotional impulsiveness, emotional outburst, and difficulty dealing with broken heart.

1.3.2 Emotional Labor and Gendered Coping Patterns
Emotional labor refers to the management of one's own and other people's emotions based on certain social requirements (Hochschild, 1983).

While women are socialized to keep emotions harmonious and offer support to partners, men are socialized not to express their feelings. Hence, women may be exhausted following breakup while men tend to hide their emotions, avoid them, engage in rebound relationships or become physically aggressive.

1.3.3 Emotional Labor Following Breakup

After breaking up with partners, women may continue analyzing previous conversations and looking for emotional explanations (Hochschild, 1983; Bifulco et al., 2002).

In addition, men tend to suppress emotional trauma because of culturally imposed masculinity that does not allow emotional vulnerability (Mahalik et al., 2003).

1.3.4 Digital Intimacy and Ambiguous Loss

In today's dating culture, relationships emerge via digital apps such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Tinder, and Bumble. Digital intimacies establish emotional connections but lead to insecurity and excessive thinking (Nash, 2020; Karapanos et al., 2016).

Techniques such as ghosting and breadcrumbing generate ambiguous loss when emotional absence takes place without a closure (Boss, 1999). Often, it hinders recovery processes and causes self-blaming experiences.

In collectivistic societies such as India, when face-to-face breakup communications are restricted, ambiguous loss seems particularly difficult to overcome.

1.3.6. Peer Influence and Social Scripts in the Romantic Meaning Making

Peers have significant impact on the way young people perceive romantic experiences. Friends define social norms associated with love and breakups (Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

Social scripts like "get over them fast" or "block them permanently" might foster emotions suppression or performative recovery. Social scripts might help to

cope well or cause emotional avoidance and rebound behaviors (Furman & Shaffer, 2003).

1.3.7 Help-Seeking Behaviour and Coping Mechanisms

Indian youth tend to resist the idea of consulting a mental health professional regarding their distress due to a relationship breakup. Breakups are usually downplayed unless there are serious indications (Deb et al., 2016).

The strategies used for overcoming this problem include emotional regulation, hard work, rebound relationships, peers, and internet sources. Cultural stigmatization, fear of condemnation, and patriarchal social norms prevent seeking assistance.

A person-centered approach and narratives could allow the individuals to process their grief, increase emotional intelligence, and find positive meanings in these experiences (White & Epston, 1990; Patel et al., 2011).

1.3.8. Post-Traumatic Growth and Romantic Resilience

Another outcome of romantic disappointments is post-traumatic growth (PTG), which implies that negative events can bring positive outcomes in life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

As a consequence, people gain new skills and emotional strength, become more resilient to future losses, establish appropriate boundaries in their relationships, and have more realistic expectations (Cann et al., 2010). The notion of romantic resilience is based on acceptance, re-evaluation, and growth after experiencing heartbreak (Seery et al., 2010). Meaning-making and storytelling are crucial for dealing with the consequences of breakups.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

The research draws on five interrelated theories including Cognitive Theory and REBT, Attachment Theory, Choice Theory by Glasser, Relationship Theory by Gottman, and Triangular Theory of Love by Sternberg.

1.4.1. Cognitive Theory and Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT)

According to Cognitive Theory, emotions are the products of interpretation and not experience itself (Beck, 1976). REBT proposes that irrational beliefs cause negative emotions (Ellis, 1962).

Irrational beliefs such as “I need love to be happy and have value” contribute to intense heartbreak. REBT allows an individual to detect and alter such irrational beliefs (Ellis, 1994; David et al., 2005).

1.4.2. Attachment Theory

According to Attachment Theory, infant care experiences determine later romantic attachment styles (Bowlby, 1969, 1982; Ainsworth, 1978).

A secure attachment style allows for effective management of relationship-related stress, whereas an anxious style is characterized by avoidance of loss and an avoidant style by denial of feelings (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

1.4.3 Choice Theory by Glasser

Choice Theory assumes that behavior is based on one's need for love, belongingness, freedom, and power (Glasser, 1998).

Romantic disappointment happens due to failure of meeting one's emotional needs. As a response to the situation, people withdraw, find somebody else to blame for, or attempt to reconnect again and again.

1.4.4. Gottman's Relationship Theory

This theory is concerned with specific interaction strategies that help either build or destroy relationships (Gottman, 1994; 1999).

Failure of answering one's emotional needs leads to a feeling of being rejected.

Gottman's theory also identifies harmful strategies of criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling as destructive interaction strategies.

1.4.5. Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love and Types of Love

According to Sternberg, there are three factors contributing to love: intimacy, passion, and commitment (Sternberg, 1986).

In their young adulthood years, people tend to idealize the concept of consummate love, while in reality it is much more complicated with some types of unbalanced love.

1.5 Rationale of the Study

Romantic disappointment is an emotionally important phenomenon which is a common experience among young people. However, little research has been conducted regarding their subjective interpretation and

experience of romantic disappointment. Research has focused more on outcomes of relationship as well as consequences of breakups. In addition, there has been limited research regarding the meaning making in romantic disappointment among Indians. The present study attempts to look at this phenomenon through the lens of romantic expectations and need for certainty.

1.6 Objectives of study

The present study aims to:

1. Explore young adults' narrative and interpretation of their experiences of romantic disappointment.
2. Examine the role of romantic expectations, certainty needs, and cultural influences in shaping these experiences.
3. Understand the processes of meaning-making and personal reflection following romantic disappointment.
4. Identify gendered patterns, emotional coping strategies, and socio-cultural factors that influence responses to relational loss.
5. Highlight the developmental implications of romantic disappointment for identity formation, resilience, and future relational outlooks.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. Romantic Beliefs and Expectations

Romantic ideals and expectations determine the approach one takes to relationships. Some of the ideals include “one true love,” and “love conquers all.” According to Pinsky (2025), there is no correlation between idealized beliefs and relationship satisfaction or psychological well-being, although unreasonable expectations were associated with disillusionment and self-reflection. This is consistent with the cognitive-behavioural theory that unreasonable expectations contribute to relationship dissatisfaction. Attachment can be a source of expectations. According to Yadav (2025), secure attachment was associated with realistic expectations and satisfaction, whereas anxious attachment was associated with fear of abandonment and a need for reassurance. On the other hand, people who exhibit avoidant attachment suppress their emotions and withdraw themselves from interaction during stressful periods. This makes them dissatisfied with the relationship.

Cultures are another important variable when assessing romantic expectations. In this regard, Blair

and Madigan (2016) found that Chinese women prefer ambition and education, whereas men prefer caretaking characteristics and physical beauty. Cultural constraints make people reluctant to open up to each other and engage in intimacy.

Similarly, Bejanyan, Marshall, and Ferenczi (2014) found that collective and traditional Indian culture contributed to romantic ideals.

Overall, romantic expectations are shaped by attachment, culture, and cognitive schemas, and their mismatch with reality often contributes to disappointment.

2.2. Romantic Relationships and Psychological Well-being

Several studies indicate that relationships can contribute significantly to psychological well-being. According to the findings of Graziano, Alfieri, and Lanz (2024), romance can affect depressive symptoms via couple and identity satisfaction, thereby demonstrating that romantic stress is reflected in both relationships and personal identity.

The systematic review conducted by Gómez-López, Viejo, and Ortega-Ruiz (2019) has indicated that romantic relations may boost self-esteem and life satisfaction on one hand and may also result in anxiety, jealousy, and depression on the other. The review emphasized the importance of studying resilience and growth alongside distress.

Thus, the quality of a romantic relationship appears to be key to whether it contributes to well-being or disappointments.

2.3. Developmental Pathways and Romantic Trajectories

Romantic disappointment in young adulthood is closely linked to developmental experiences. Boisvert, Poulin, Dion, and Carbonneau (2023) found that stable and early romantic experiences predicted greater satisfaction and intimacy in adulthood, while inconsistent involvement was linked to insecurity, jealousy, and avoidance.

Similarly, González Avilés, Finn, and Neyer (2021) reported higher loneliness among continuous singles and greater distress among frequent partner changers. Moderate and stable dating experiences predicted better adjustment.

Kansky and Allen (2018) showed that supportive long-term adolescent relationships fostered competence and

security, while short-term involvements produced conflict and insecurity. Likewise, Rauer, Pettit, Lansford, Bates, and Dodge (2013) linked supportive parenting and secure maternal bonds with stable adult romantic paths. Together, these studies show that romantic disappointment reflects long-term developmental patterns shaped by childhood, peers, and adolescent relationships.

2.4. Stability and Instability in Relationships

Relationship stability consistently predicts positive outcomes, whereas instability predicts insecurity and distress. Boisvert et al. (2023) linked sporadic involvement with jealousy and avoidance, while González Avilés et al. (2021) reported loneliness among singles and distress among frequent changers. Kansky and Allen (2018) similarly found that frequent involvement increased insecurity, whereas long-term involvement fostered competence. These findings suggest that unstable relational histories increase vulnerability to disappointment through insecurity, mistrust, and poor coping strategies.

2.5. Emotional Processes in Romantic Disappointment

Romantic disappointment is both emotional and cognitive. Yadav (2025) found that anxious attachment heightened fear of abandonment, while avoidant individuals suppressed emotions and disengaged. Graziano et al. (2024) showed that conflict and low intimacy increased depressive symptoms, and González Avilés et al. (2021) linked frequent relationship changes with emotional distress.

Disappointment is therefore commonly experienced through anxiety, jealousy, insecurity, and depression, with emotional regulation playing an important role in coping.

2.6. Gender Differences in Romantic Experiences

Gender shapes romantic expectations and disappointment. Blair and Madigan (2016) found that women emphasized pragmatic partner qualities and were less comfortable with early intimacy, while men prioritized caring traits and appearance.

Yadav (2025) further showed that anxious and avoidant attachment styles distorted men's expectations and increased dissatisfaction. Gender therefore interacts with attachment and cultural norms in shaping romantic disappointment.

2.7. Cultural Contexts of Romantic Disappointment

Romantic disappointment is strongly shaped by culture. Bejanyan et al. (2014) found that collectivism and traditional gender roles in India reinforced idealized beliefs and family-centered mate preferences, increasing disappointment when relationships failed to meet social expectations. Blair and Madigan (2016) similarly showed conflict between traditional norms and modern dating desires in China. Thus, disappointment in collectivist societies often includes both personal and cultural pressures.

2.8. Relational Scripts and Internal Models of Love

Internal models of love strongly shape romantic experiences. Attachment and developmental studies by Yadav (2025), Rauer et al. (2013), and Kansky & Allen (2018) show that caregiving and peer experiences shape expectations, emotional regulation, and relational scripts. Avoidant individuals may normalize disengagement, whereas anxious individuals may catastrophize conflicts. Romantic disappointment therefore reflects long-standing emotional and cognitive frameworks, not only present relationship circumstances.

2.9. Romantic Disappointment as a Developmental Turning Point

Romantic disappointment is often perceived negatively; however, it can be a facilitator for positive change in an individual's development. According to Graziano et al. (2024), disappointment can have a negative impact on identity satisfaction but may also contribute to self-reflection. Non-conventional dating experiences were found to affect self-esteem and life satisfaction in such a way that identity negotiation was stimulated (González Avilés et al., 2021).

The review conducted by Gómez-López et al. (2019) indicates that despite challenges, romantic experiences are a factor in the promotion of personal growth.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative research design employing narrative inquiry to investigate the subjective nature and process of experiencing and interpreting romantic disappointments. Narrative inquiry design was appropriate since it provided the

researcher with an opportunity to learn from personal life experiences of the individuals by listening to stories in which they recount how they lived through their experiences. It enabled to gain a deeper understanding of emotions, thoughts, meanings, and experiences during romantic disappointments.

3.2. Sample

A total of 15 young adults (10 Female, 5 Male) aged between 18 and 30 years old were recruited as participants for the study if they had experienced a romance disappointment in any form of breaking up, being rejected, ghosted, or unmet expectations in their relationship. The study employed the use of purposive sampling to select participants since they possessed the characteristics required in the research. Snowball sampling was also utilized whereby participants recommended potential participants to join the study.

3.3. Data Collection

Data collection involved the use of semi-structured interviews. This included preparation of an interview guide that comprised open-ended questions to enable participants to give detailed responses about their experiences. The questions covered issues relating to expectations of the relationship, emotional responses, uncertainty, coping mechanisms, closure, among others. A demographic questionnaire was used to collect some background information including the person's age, sex, education level, and relationship status to ensure heterogeneity in the sample size. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent to ensure accuracy in capturing their narratives.

Interviews were conducted either in person or via online channels such as Zoom and Google Meets. It took between 45-60 minutes and audio recordings were done. Further probes were asked as needed.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

The study was guided by ethical considerations. Prior information about the purpose of the study was provided along with confidentiality and right to withdraw from the process anytime. Informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews. Confidentiality of the data collected was ensured by ensuring that the transcripts contained no identification information. Participants' emotional boundaries were respected when discussing their experiences.

3.5. Data Analysis

The data was analysed using thematic analysis. Transcripts of all interviews were done verbatim and examined several times in order to get acquainted with data. Thematic coding of data was done inductively by taking into consideration theoretical concepts that included romantic expectations, attachment, certainty, disappointment and meaning making. Codes with similar concepts were grouped under themes and sub-themes.

Analysis of themes was informed by Cognitive Theory, Attachment Theory, Choice Theory, Relationship Theories and Triangular Theory of Love by Sternberg. The theories made it easier to comprehend emotional processing of romantic disappointment among young adults.

IV. RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

The following table displays all those themes and sub themes that emerged after the interview transcripts were coded and interpreted.

Table 1- List of emerged themes and sub themes

Themes	Sub themes
Expectations in romantic relationships	Emotional needs
	Relational values
	Personal boundaries
	Belief systems
Relational Uncertainty	Inconsistent communication & avoidance
	Need for reassurance & validation
	Minimizing concerns & justifying partner behaviour
	Unequal emotional investment
Experiences of Betrayal	Forms of infidelity
	Boundary violations
	Emotional impact
Emotional Attachment & Investment	Attachment patterns
	Fear of loss
	Difficulty detaching
Psychological Distress in Romantic Disappointment	Negative self-perception
	Emotional conflict
	Emotional vacuum
Psychosocial Coping	Social support
	Coping strategies
	Social management

Attachment to the Past	Idealization of the past
	Attachment to shared memories
	Difficulty detaching from the past
Meaning-Making and Life Reorientation	Reflection on personal behaviour and relationship patterns
	Growth & transformation
	Loss & grief
	Life disruption
Post-Relationship Adjustment	Internal closure and Acceptance
	Identity & independence
	Relational learning

Interpretation

Theme 1: Expectations in Romantic Relationships

Participants entered relationships with emotional needs for support, understanding, safety, and validation. They valued trust, honesty, loyalty, and mutual respect while wanting to maintain individuality and personal boundaries. Many held idealistic beliefs about love, such as expecting effortless understanding, while others feared abandonment or disappointment. These expectations were shaped by social media, peers, culture, and developmental experiences. When reality did not match these expectations, participants experienced dissatisfaction and emotional strain, laying the foundation for romantic disappointment.

Theme 2: Relational Uncertainty

Participants described relationships becoming emotionally unstable due to inconsistent communication, mixed signals, and avoidance of important conversations. This uncertainty increased their need for reassurance and validation. Many minimized concerns or justified their partner's behaviour to preserve the relationship, despite feeling emotionally neglected. Unequal emotional investment created frustration, insecurity, and overthinking. Romantic disappointment emerged gradually as emotional confusion and imbalance weakened participants' sense of security.

Theme 3: Experiences of Betrayal

Betrayal acted as a major turning point in participants' relationships. Experiences such as infidelity and violations of trust, loyalty, or respect disrupted emotional safety and exclusivity. Participants reported intense emotional reactions including hurt, anger,

shock, and disillusionment. Many also questioned their own judgment and self-worth after these incidents. These experiences transformed uncertainty into painful clarity, deeply shaping participants' views on trust and future relationships.

Theme 4: Emotional Attachment and Investment

Participants were deeply emotionally invested in their relationships, often depending on their partner for reassurance, comfort, and security. Fear of losing the relationship made it difficult to address problems or leave unhealthy situations. Even when aware of dissatisfaction, many struggled to detach emotionally because the relationship had become central to their well-being. Greater emotional attachment increased vulnerability, making disappointment and separation especially painful.

Theme 5: Psychological Distress in Romantic Disappointment

Romantic disappointment caused significant emotional and psychological distress.

Participants commonly experienced self-blame, guilt, low self-worth, and negative self-perception. Emotional conflict was also common, as they simultaneously felt love, anger, hope, and sadness. Many described an emotional vacuum after the breakup, marked by loneliness and emptiness. These experiences affected both emotional stability and thought patterns, making recovery emotionally exhausting and complex.

Theme 6: Psychosocial Coping

Participants used different coping methods to manage emotional pain. Social support from trusted people provided comfort, reassurance, and emotional relief. Some coped through work, hobbies, distraction, or avoidance. While certain strategies promoted healthier adjustment, others only provided temporary relief without addressing deeper emotions. Participants also engaged in social management by hiding their struggles and presenting themselves as "fine" in public. Coping was shown to be an ongoing and evolving process influenced by personal and social factors.

Theme 7: Attachment to the Past

Participants found it difficult to emotionally detach from past relationships. Many idealized the relationship by focusing more on positive memories

while overlooking negative experiences. Shared memories and emotional connections continued to hold strong meaning, making healing slower and more difficult. Everyday reminders often reactivated emotional attachment, leaving participants feeling emotionally stuck. This theme highlights how deeply meaningful relationships continue to influence individuals even after they end.

Theme 8: Meaning-Making and Life Reorientation

Participants gradually began reflecting on their relationship patterns, emotional needs, and personal behaviour. Alongside grief over the lost relationship and imagined future, many experienced confusion, emptiness, and disruption in their sense of direction. Over time, however, participants started gaining emotional insight and self-awareness. The experience became a source of personal growth, helping them better understand themselves and relationships. Romantic disappointment thus acted both as emotional pain and as a catalyst for transformation.

Theme 9: Post-Relationship Adjustment

Participants slowly moved toward acceptance and emotional recovery. Internal closure developed as they gained clarity and emotional distance from the relationship. Many reconnected with their identity outside the relationship and became more emotionally independent. They also reflected on lessons learned, recognizing unhealthy patterns and developing healthier expectations and boundaries for future relationships. This phase reflected resilience, self-growth, and the gradual rebuilding of emotional stability after romantic disappointment.

V. DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Expectations in Romantic Relationships

The theme reflects the expectations participants carried into relationships and how unmet expectations gradually contributed to disappointment. Their expectations were shaped by emotional needs, beliefs about love, and hopes for connection.

Many participants described wanting simple emotional support, care, and consistency. One participant said, "good relationship for me was like the person who is there for you in your hard times I should be very comfortable around that person." Another shared, "I expected that he should give me enough

time basic basic things, nothing too much honestly.” Even small gestures mattered emotionally: “even if he had come for like half an hour or something, I would be more than happy.” These accounts show that emotional availability and effort were central to how participants understood love.

Participants also expected mutual effort, honesty, and trust. One participant stated, “Things should be from both sides he should do something by himself,” while another said, “trust is of course like the base of any relationship.” When partners’ actions did not match these expectations, participants experienced dissatisfaction and confusion.

Maintaining individuality was equally important. One participant wanted “somebody who understands me for who I am somebody who does not force me to lose me individuality.” Another realized later, “I should have my life as well everything was only about him before that.” This reflects the tension between emotional closeness and preserving one’s identity.

Participants’ beliefs about love also shaped their expectations. Some held pessimistic views, such as, “Things don’t work out people usually get bored and get detached,” and “anybody close to you, is going to leave you.” These beliefs created insecurity and influenced how they interpreted relationship difficulties. Overall, unmet needs for emotional presence, reciprocity, trust, and individuality created a gap between participants’ expectations and experiences, shaping their feelings of romantic disappointment over time.

Theme 2: Relational Uncertainty

This theme highlights how participants gradually began feeling unsure and emotionally insecure in their relationships. Rather than a sudden change, uncertainty developed through mixed signals, poor communication, and inconsistent emotional connection.

A major source of uncertainty was inconsistent communication and avoidance during conflicts. One participant shared, “Whenever we fought, there would be a literal gap of one week where we wouldn’t speak at all.” Another said, “he would avoid me and reply late there was no calm discussion.” Even temporary improvements felt unstable: “things used to change for a day or two then again it would go back to the same.” These patterns increased insecurity, confusion, and emotional distance.

As uncertainty grew, participants increasingly sought reassurance and validation. One participant said, “I would ask him what exactly was wrong He never clarified things.” Others became insecure or depended on visible signs of affection, such as, “I was constantly telling him to unfollow her,” and “I expected him to show it publicly too.” In the absence of clear communication, participants relied on small signs for reassurance, but inconsistency only deepened their doubts.

Many participants also ignored or justified problematic behaviour to preserve the relationship. One shared, “I ignored a lot of things even from the beginning,” while another said, “I tried to justify his behaviour.” Some felt their emotions were dismissed, as reflected in, “he would constantly try to normalize everything saying ‘it’s fine.’” Emotional attachment often led participants to suppress their discomfort: “I ignored a lot of things because I was so in love with this person.”

Unequal emotional investment further intensified uncertainty. Participants often felt they were putting in more effort, as seen in, “I felt like I was the only one putting in effort,” and “everything was only about him I stopped paying attention to myself.” Even when effort was sometimes mutual, imbalance created insecurity and emotional strain.

Relational uncertainty developed slowly through poor communication, need for reassurance, ignored red flags, and unequal effort. Over time, this led to overthinking, emotional exhaustion, and a weakened sense of security, making romantic disappointment more intense.

Theme 3: Experience of Betrayal

The theme captures moments where participants’ trust and emotional safety were clearly disrupted. Unlike earlier uncertainty, these experiences made participants confront realities that did not match what they believed about their relationships.

A major part of this theme was infidelity and emotional involvement with someone else. One participant shared, “I get to know that he might be probably cheating on me later I found out there was somebody he liked.” Another recalled, “he said ‘I might be liking somebody.’” Even without direct admission, participants sensed emotional distance: “it felt like he had feelings for her.” These experiences show that betrayal was felt not only through actions,

but also through emotional disconnection and divided attention.

Participants also described boundary violations that created discomfort and suspicion. One participant reflected, “I wasn’t able to maintain boundaries with them,” while others felt uneasy about their partner’s closeness with someone else: “he was very attached to her,” and “he even had her photo in his highlights.” Though sometimes subtle, these incidents contributed to the feeling that something was wrong.

The emotional impact of betrayal was intense. Participants described hurt, insecurity, and self-doubt, such as, “I was feeling betrayed maybe I’m not enough,” and “I became very insecure.” Some experienced strong emotional distress: “I felt completely depressed mostly guilt, shame and sadness.”

Dishonesty further deepened the pain. One participant said, “she should have been truthful instead of betraying me,” while another shared, “you didn’t tell me the truth has sort of shaken my ground completely.” This loss of trust felt destabilizing and made it difficult to trust again: “I can’t trust you again after knowing everything.”

Overall, these experiences marked a turning point where doubts became difficult realities. Betrayal not only intensified disappointment but also affected how participants viewed trust, safety, and future relationships.

Theme 4: Emotional Attachment and Investment

The theme points to the depth of participants’ emotional attachment and how it intensified their experience of disappointment. For many, the relationship became central to their emotional life, identity, and daily routine.

Participants described becoming deeply invested in the relationship, often neglecting themselves in the process. One participant shared, “I was so much into that relationship that I stopped paying attention to myself everything was only about him,” while another said, “I loved him while forgetting myself.” Some described the relationship as all-consuming: “my world revolved around this person.” These accounts show how emotional attachment became a major source of comfort and fulfillment.

A strong fear of loss also shaped participants’ experiences. Letting go felt extremely difficult, even when the relationship was unhealthy. Participants said,

“I never wanted to leave him,” and “I had never even imagined a life where he wasn’t there.” Some repeatedly returned to the relationship because “we felt we couldn’t stay apart.” This suggests that attachment was driven not only by love, but also by fear of separation.

As a result, detachment and moving on became emotionally exhausting processes. One participant shared, “it took me a little time to completely move on,” while another said, “moving on wasn’t easy it took three years.” Some actively struggled to hold on, “I pleaded ‘please give me one last chance’,” while others described a persistent emotional attachment: “I only want him and no one else.”

Emotional attachment created both closeness and vulnerability. Because participants were deeply invested in the relationship, conflict and separation felt especially painful, making disappointment feel like the loss of something central to their emotional world.

Theme 5: Psychological Distress in Romantic Disappointment

This theme emphasizes on intense emotional and psychological impact of romantic disappointment. Participants described not only sadness, but also confusion, self-doubt, and emotional exhaustion that affected their sense of self and ability to cope.

A major aspect of this distress was negative self-perception. Many blamed themselves for the relationship outcome, saying, “I blamed myself maybe I could have done better,” and “I kept thinking about what I could have done differently.” Some experienced low self-worth, “I felt like I’m not good enough,” while others focused on lost effort and time, “I put so much effort into something that didn’t last.” These experiences affected how participants viewed both the relationship and themselves.

Participants also described emotional conflict and mixed feelings. One shared, “I felt relief but at the same time I was sad,” while another said, “some part of me was happy it ended but another part couldn’t let go.” Others struggled between guilt and freedom, or questioned relationships altogether: “I wondered if this is what a relationship is really like.” This reflects the confusion participants felt while trying to understand their emotions.

Another important aspect was the emotional emptiness that followed. Many described feeling drained, numb, and exhausted, “I became totally numb I felt nothing

at one point,” while others experienced intense emotional overwhelm, “I had no energy left I would cry continuously,” and “I would cry so much that I would have no energy left and I felt completely drained.” This shows how consuming the experience was, affecting both emotional and physical functioning, “I was completely drained and exhausted from crying, and I couldn’t even think properly.” Psychological distress was not a temporary reaction but an ongoing struggle.

Participants were coping not only with the loss of the relationship, but also with rebuilding their self-worth, emotional stability, and understanding of themselves.

Theme 6: Psychosocial Coping

This theme sheds light on how participants tried to cope with and make sense of their emotional experiences after romantic disappointment. While earlier themes highlight distress and confusion, this phase shows how individuals began responding to that pain in different ways, gradually trying to regain a sense of control and emotional balance.

A major source of support was their social circle. Friends, and sometimes family, helped participants process their emotions and feel less alone. Many spoke about reconnecting with people they had distanced from, “I spent time with my friends I got back in touch with all of them,” while others relied on emotional expression, “I used to call her and cry every day she was there for me.” These connections also offered perspective, “one of my closest friends helped me realize that this is not okay and I deserve better,” and reduced loneliness, “she helped me deal with it a lot better I felt less lonely.” In some cases, family provided stability, “my mom was very supportive and she was the one who calmed me down.”

Alongside this, participants engaged in personal coping strategies. Some tried to reframe their experiences, “I convinced myself that whatever happened, happened for the best,” while others approached it as a learning process, “I did some meditation and tried to move on by taking it as a lesson.” There were also simple, everyday ways of coping, “dark chocolate helped me a lot it became like an anchor for me,” showing how even small actions brought comfort during distress.

Another aspect of coping involved managing what they shared with others. Many chose to hide or limit information about their relationship, “my family didn’t

know about it I just said he moved somewhere else,” and “I had to lie at home every time I met him that created guilt.” Others were selective, “I managed what others think didn’t really share everything,” reflecting how they balanced their emotional reality with social expectations.

Coping was a layered and evolving process. Participants moved between seeking support, finding personal ways to manage their emotions, and controlling how much they shared with others. Even when these strategies were not perfect, they helped participants slowly process their experiences and move toward emotional adjustment.

Theme 7: Attachment to the Past

This theme illustrates how participants remained emotionally connected to past relationships even after they ended. The relationship continued to stay active in their memories, thoughts, and imagined futures, making it difficult to fully move on.

One aspect of this attachment was the idealization of the past. Participants often focused on emotionally meaningful moments, such as, “that feeling of getting the person you love that happiness is something else.” Another shared, “I truly deeply wanted that person that made it memorable.” Many also remained attached to the future they had imagined, as seen in, “I imagined a lot of things with him I imagined my future with this person.” This shows that participants grieved not only the relationship, but also unrealized possibilities.

Shared memories further strengthened this attachment. Relationships became linked to important life phases, making them harder to let go of. One participant shared, “we met in 8th grade that whole journey stayed with me,” while another said, “school memories stayed with me they made it very memorable.” The relationship was connected not only to the person, but also to personal experiences and growth.

Participants also repeatedly revisited memories and unanswered questions. One shared, “memories kept coming back sometimes it felt overwhelming,” while another said, “I keep replaying that moment again and again.” Some intentionally revisited the past, “I freely revisit all those things which I used to have earlier with her,” while others remained stuck with unresolved questions: “there were so many questions which I never got answers to.” Many also imagined alternative outcomes, asking, “what if maybe if it still was there, then would it be different”

Attachment to the past made healing slower and more difficult. Participants remained emotionally connected through memories, imagined futures, and unanswered questions, making it harder to fully accept the end of the relationship and move forward.

Theme 8: Meaning-Making and Life Reorientation

The theme centers around how participants gradually tried to make sense of their experiences and reorganize their lives after romantic disappointment. Unlike earlier themes focused on distress, this phase involved reflection, learning, and adjustment.

An important part of this process was reflecting on personal behaviour and relationship patterns. One participant shared, “I realized that I should have my life as well not everything should revolve around one person,” while another said, “I understood how much we should invest ourselves in a relationship.” Participants also developed clearer ideas about healthy relationships: “I learned what an actual relationship should be like” and “I understood how things actually should be in a relationship and what is healthy.” These reflections show that participants were reconstructing their understanding of relationships through their experiences.

Many participants also described personal growth and transformation. One shared, “this experience taught me a lot I learned to think about myself,” while others said, “now I’m very clear what I want and what I don’t want,” and “I understood things more clearly now.” There was a stronger focus on self-worth and well-being, reflected in, “I have started valuing my mental health a little more,” and “I know where to draw a line and I know how to respect myself better now.” Some experienced this as emotional growth: “it made me a better person and it helped me grow emotionally.”

At the same time, participants continued to experience grief and loss. One participant shared, “leaving all those things behind was difficult not just him but his family too,” while another said, “I was sad because I lost many connections.” Some also struggled with the permanence of the ending: “the person you wanted so much is gone forever.”

Participants further described how romantic disappointment affected multiple areas of life. One reflected, “I felt like I wasted a lot of my time and efforts,” while others said, “I lost friendships I lost many pThis theme reflects a gradual process of rebuilding. Participants were simultaneously learning,

grieving, and adjusting, leading to a reorientation of their priorities, boundaries, and understanding of relationships moving forward.

Theme 9: Post-Relationship Adjustment

This theme represents how participants gradually adjusted to life after the relationship, showing greater acceptance, emotional stability, and independence. Unlike earlier phases of confusion and distress, this stage involved integrating the experience and moving forward.

An important part of this adjustment was developing acceptance and internal closure. One participant shared, “I felt relief things were clear for me,” while another said, “I had to accept that okay, it’s not there anymore.” Acceptance often came with mixed emotions, as reflected in, “I felt relief along with a little bit of sadness.” Over time, some participants reframed the experience positively: “whatever happened was for the best.” Others described feeling emotionally lighter, saying, “I don’t have any emotional baggage or emotional burden while I speak about it now.” These responses show that closure did not mean forgetting the relationship, but reaching a point where it no longer felt emotionally overwhelming.

Participants also described rebuilding their identity and independence. One participant reflected, “I should have my life as well that’s what I learned,” while others said, “now I’m very clear from the beginning about my expectations,” and “I can finally live without depending on someone else.” For many, this adjustment took time: “it took me a little time to completely move on.” These experiences show a gradual rebuilding of self, outside the relationship.

Many participants also carried important relational learning into future relationships.

They became more aware of balance and mutual effort, as seen in, “things should be from both sides not one-sided effort.” Trust was viewed differently, with one participant saying, “trust is only to an extent you also have to trust yourself.” Others gained clarity about future partners and relationships: “I understood what kind of partner I actually want,” and “I have learned to be more reassuring and a better person through this experience.”

This phase reflects emotional resolution and personal growth. Participants were able to acknowledge the past, learn from it, and rebuild a more independent and

secure sense of self. Romantic disappointment remained significant, but it no longer carried the same emotional intensity, allowing participants to approach future relationships differently.

This research examined young adults' feelings related to their experience with romantic disappointment. Expectations, the need for certainty and meaning-making process were identified as key aspects of disappointment.

To start with, one can say that romantic disappointment is not simply experiencing sad feelings after breaking up, but also changing perceptions of oneself and beliefs associated with love as well as influencing further romantic experiences. The expectations were the most influential factors. People had some kind of idealised vision of romantic relationships which formed on the basis of past experience and social environment. The disappointment was observed when the reality did not match those expectations. In addition, the need for certainty contributed to post-breakup adjustment. Inability to provide answers to some questions and lack of certainty caused an emotional distress. Finally, participants still felt emotional attachment to previous relationships despite ending them.

The meaning-making aspect included positive and negative consequences of disappointment. In some cases, people had gained emotional and personal development while others developed self-doubt.

In conclusion, romantic disappointment is a highly impactful phenomenon that affects people's self-esteem and future relationships.

6.1 Implications of the study

This study has practical and theoretical implications for romantic relationships. It shows that we need to deal with expectations, overthinking and difficulties in handling uncertainties in romantic relationships. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy can help people manage their distress better in romantic relationships.

Another important implication of the study is about the meaning-making aspect of relationships. Counselling interventions can help people become more self-aware, develop self-compassion and create self-stories about their romantic relationships. Programs that teach people about psychology and education for young people might be helpful in building realistic expectations about romantic relationships and coping with distress in romantic relationships.

The study also found that emotional literacy is an important factor in romantic relationships. It will be good for people to learn how to handle their relationships and distress in a more productive way. The study also shows that idealised depictions of love on media can increase dissatisfaction and self-doubt about romantic relationships.

Finally, developing attitudes about romantic relationships may help people cope with stress in romantic relationships, in better ways. This means that people need to be flexible when it comes to relationships and learn to adapt to the changing circumstances of romantic relationships.

6.3. Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations associated with this study. First, since a small qualitative sample was used, generalizations cannot be made from the results. This is due to the fact that the participants were from a particular culture and demography.

Second, since the study adopted a qualitative research method, researcher bias may have affected the themes developed during the data analysis process. The responses may also have been influenced by the social desirability bias.

Third, the emotional state of the participants during the interview sessions might have influenced the degree of response. Fourth, the study was only focused on a single time period.

6.4 Suggestion for Further Research

Further research can be done in the form of quantitative studies or mixed methods research to determine relationships between expectations, uncertainty and overthinking in general. Adding other variables, for example attachment styles, personality or past experiences in relationships will increase knowledge even more.

Including diverse sample from different age groups, culture and social economic status will make studies more applicable and useful. Longitudinal research might contribute to the knowledge of how emotions and meanings are formed with time.

Research should also be done to see how social media relationships influence expectations and psychological state of people experiencing disappointment in romantic relationships. Comparative studies focusing on gender and type of relationships can shed light on similar and different things.

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