

“Part of Me Still Expects a White Knight”: Expectations and Experiences of Single Emerging Adults’ Romantic Development



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Sela Adegbile

Faculty Advisor: Nicole K. Watkins, Ph.D.

Introduction

- Forming romantic relationships during emerging adulthood is considered an important developmental task (Furman & Collibee, 2014),
- Recent trends indicate more emerging adults delaying romantic relationship commitment.
- While singlehood is a choice for some (Adamczyk, 2017), others may be single due to a reliance on learned social scripts that set unrealistic expectations (Lippman et al., 2014).
- The present study** aimed to explore how romantic relationship experiences of single emerging adults mis/aligned with their expectations.

Participants & Procedures

- N = 72 single emerging adult college students
- Age: Mean = 19.98 years old, SD = 1.28
- Female: 62% European American: 53% Heterosexual: 70%
- Open-ended responses to the question: **“Have your experiences with romantic relationships so far matched with your expectations for relationships? How so?”** were analyzed using thematic analysis.
- Three independent reviewers created initial codes from open-ended responses.
- The author and advisor identified sub-themes and higher-level categories based on the initial codes.
- Self-report questionnaires were administered to participating students at two time points 1.5 months apart in Fall 2021
- Participants received academic credit.

Results

Results of thematic analysis revealed 5 main themes.

1. Idealistic Expectations

Participants expressed idealistic expectations for their relationships, often citing the media, rom-coms, books, and other external sources to guide their expectations. However, others did not specify source of these expectations

“I was raised with “one true love” movies and books and that hasn’t happened but part of me still expects a white knight “

2. Expectations developed overtime from observing external models

Participants observed external models like the media, friends and family, and their past relationships to help influence their expectations for romantic relationships

“I don’t have experience with romantic relationships, but from the ones I’ve observed they don’t match my expectations. The relationships I’ve observed lack communication, respect, and passion.”

3. Experiences have not met expectations

Participants described various reasons for this, including: expectations misaligning with their partners’, situational factors, self blame for failed relationships, sustaining a relationship was more difficult than expected, or the expectation to have more romantic involvement than in reality.

“I think that my romantic relationships have contained love, but have become muddled due to my partner wanting to be polygamous in relationships.”

Results (continued)

4. Expectations and experiences have aligned

Sometimes, positive expectations led to positive experiences, while others had negative expectations that matched their negative experiences.

“In fact, my experiences have matched my expectations [for romantic relationships] because I expected that I won't have any romantic pull, and it turns out that I don't have romantic pull. And I'm ok with that.”

5. Expect specific characteristics of their relationship

Participants held expectations for the characteristics of their partner, or for the type of relationship that they desired e.g., short term vs. long term, intimately exclusive or open.

“I have participated in more meaningless hookups than I would have preferred. I would like to be in a romantic relationship”

Discussion

- Single emerging adults took inspiration from various sources to develop their expectations about romantic relationships. Sometimes, when those sources depicted a “perfect” romance, participants were left with idealistic expectations that often failed to be met in reality.
- This research highlights how social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and parasocial interaction theory (Horton and Wohl, 1956) can influence emerging adults’ relationship expectations.
- In realizing where romantic relationship expectations are derived, one can better understand why some single emerging adults are (dis)satisfied with their romantic relationship outcomes.