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Holding On to What Has Ended: Women's Experiences of Grief After Romantic Breakups

Bitene Tutunmak: Romantik Ayrılık Sonrası Kadınların Yas Deneyimleri

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ETHICAL STATEMENT: Prior conducting the research, ethical permission was obtained from the Ethical Committee of Middle East Technical University on 18.01.2024 under the protocol number "0036-ODTUIAEK-2024" and before the interviews, written consent and oral consent were given about the voice recordings which will be transcribed, and the data will be used as anonymous.

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Abstract

Aim: This study aimed to explore women's prolonged grief experiences following the dissolution of their romantic relationships and to understand how they made sense of these experiences.

Method: This study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) based on semi-structured interviews conducted with five heterosexual women aged 19–33. Each interview lasted 40–60 minutes and was transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed iteratively and ideographically, following IPA guidelines to ensure depth, rigor, and transparency. Themes were generated through repeated readings, line-by-line coding, and cross-case comparison, with analytic saturation achieved through convergence across participants.

Results: The analysis revealed five superordinate themes with their subthemes: (1) From Loss to A New Self (2) Continuing Bonds After Breakup, (3) Post-Breakup Questioning, (4) About the Loss, and (5) After the Loss. The findings showed that the loss experienced after the breakup extended beyond the partner to include future dreams, sources of happiness, and aspects of self. Participants' efforts to sustain the relationship, ongoing communication, idealization, and fantasies of reunion played a decisive role in prolonging the grief process.

Conclusion: Romantic breakups were experienced as the loss not only of a partner but also of identity, future plans, and sources of happiness. Participants' experiences related to the prolongation of their grief period as an ongoing experience rather than a clinical condition stemmed from participants' inability to withdraw their investment, showing breakup as a continued bond rather than an ending. Clinically, healing requires transforming this investment and reconstructing meaning, rather than enforcing abrupt detachment.

Keywords

prolonged grief, romantic breakup, relationship dissolution, interpretative phenomenological analysis

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Öz

Amaç: Bu araştırmanın amacı, romantik ilişkilerin sona ermesinin ardından kadınların yaşadığı uzamış yas deneyimlerini fenomenolojik bir bakış açısıyla incelemek ve bu deneyimlerin kadınlar tarafından nasıl anlamlandırıldığını ortaya koymaktır.

Yöntem: 19–33 yaş aralığındaki beş heteroseksüel kadınla yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmış ve görüşmeler Yorumlayıcı Fenomenolojik Analiz (YFA) ilkelerine uygun olarak yürütülmüştür. Her görüşme 40–60 dakika sürmüş; veriler, derinlik, titizlik ve şeffaflığı sağlamak amacıyla YFA yönergeleri doğrultusunda yinelemeli ve idiografik bir yaklaşımla analiz edilmiştir. Temalar, tekrar tekrar okuma, satır satır kodlama ve görüşmeler arasında yapılan karşılaştırmalar yoluyla oluşturulmuş; katılımcılar arasındaki örtüşmeler göz önünde bulundurularak doyum noktasına ulaşmıştır.

Bulgular: Analiz sonucunda alt temalarıyla birlikte beş üst tema elde edilmiştir: (1) Kayıptan Yeni Benliğe, (2) Ayrılık Sonrası Sürdürülen Bağlar, (3) Ayrılık Sonrası Sorgulamalar (4) Kayıp Üzerine ve (5) Kayıptan Sonra. Bulgular, ayrılık sonrası yaşanan kaybın yalnızca partnerin kaybıyla sınırlı olmadığını; aynı zamanda gelecek hayallerinin, mutluluk kaynaklarının ve benlik algısının kaybını da içerdiğini göstermiştir. Katılımcıların ilişkilerini sürdürme çabaları, iletişimin devam etmesi, idealizasyon ve yeniden birleşme fantazileri yasın uzamasında belirleyici rol oynamıştır.

Sonuç: Romantik ilişkilerde yaşanan ayrılıklar, yalnızca bir partnerin kaybı olarak değil; aynı zamanda kimliğin, geleceğe dair tasarımların ve mutluluk kaynaklarının yitimi olarak deneyimlenmiştir. Katılımcıların uzamış yas süreçlerini klinik bir durumdan ziyade devam eden bir yaşantı olarak deneyimlemeleri, duygusal yatırımlarını geri çekememeleriyle bağlantılı görünmektedir. Bu durum, ayrılığın bir sonlanmadan çok sürdürülen bir bağ niteliği taşıdığını ortaya koymaktadır. Klinik açıdan iyileşme ise, ani ve zorlayıcı bir kopuşu dayatmaktan ziyade, bu duygusal yatırımın dönüştürülmesini ve kaybın yeniden anlamlandırılmasını gerektirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

uzamış yas, romantik ayrılık, ilişkide kopma, yorumlayıcı fenomenolojik analiz

1. Introduction

Forming intimate and affectionate social bonds is an important part of young adulthood and is associated with higher levels of happiness and psychological well-being, romantic relationships are one of the most common ways of forming such bonds in young adulthood. Young adults' subjective meanings attached to these relationships may differ since every relationship involves different kinds of reasons that grounded love (Lopez-Cantero, 2018, pp. 690-692). As these relationships become woven into daily routines, future expectations, and one's sense of identity, their emotional significance often deepens beyond the behavioral markers of intimacy. Consequently, conflicts often arise, and relationships may dissolve.

The dissolution process can involve gradual emotional withdrawal or explicit termination, and its psychological effects vary depending on factors such as who initiated the breakup, attachment style, and relational investment (Fox & Tokunaga, 2015, pp. 491–498). Research has shown that breakups are associated with intrusive thoughts, anxiety, sleep problems, and depressive symptoms (Field et al., 2009, pp. 705-707), with women typically reporting higher distress than men. Individuals may also experience sadness, jealousy, and decreased self-esteem (Carter et al., 2019, pp. 45-46; Luciano & Orth, 2017, pp. 112-113), often interpreting the breakup as linked to personal shortcomings and experiencing it as a loss of attachment figure (Davis et al., 2003, pp. 50-52). Although breakups are commonly normalized as part of young adulthood, their emotional impact can be profound, particularly when the relationship has played a central role in one's sense of self or future orientation**.** It is important to notice the significant role of breakups in one's life. The loss that is experienced within the breakup encompasses not only the partner but also shared routines, memories, and imagined futures (Rhoades et al., 2011, pp. 366–374). This broader understanding of what is lost during a breakup lays the groundwork for situating breakup-related distress within grief and bereavement frameworks. Romantic breakups can be understood not merely as the ending of a relationship but as a multilayered loss experience in which the meaning structures that individuals have built in their lives are disrupted. Therefore, to fully grasp the impact of romantic dissolution, it is necessary to consider not only the relational context but also the conceptual tools offered by the literature on loss and grief. Romantic breakups, indeed, represent non-death-related losses that can be conceptualized within grief and bereavement frameworks (Cooley et al., 2010, pp. 565–567; Cooley et al., 2014, pp. 451–453). From this perspective, disruptions in interdependence may also alter self-concept (Slotter et al., 2010, pp. 148-149).

To better understand the nature of loss experienced after a breakup, it is helpful to distinguish between the internal and external components of grief. Grief, as distinct from mourning, refers to the internal experience of loss, whereas mourning denotes the outward and socially visible expression of that experience (Wolfelt, 2006, as cited in Reimer & Estrada, 2021, pp. 179-181). Within this framework, the post-breakup grief process is not only an emotional reaction but also an attempt to reorganize one's relational world and life narrative. Grief involves a reorganization of reality after loss (Attig, 1991, p. 387-390). This formulation resonates with phenomenological understandings of how individuals rebuild meaning after relational disruption. However, because this internal reorganization often remains invisible, the emotional impact of romantic breakups frequently goes unrecognized by society.

The intensity and duration of grief following a breakup vary depending on relational closeness, the possibility of reconciliation, encounters with the former partner, and behaviors such as social media monitoring (Dailey et al., 2012, pp. 165–189; Fox & Tokunaga, 2015, pp. 491–498). Specifically, individuals who wistfully engage with their ex and more impulsive individuals tend to experience higher stress, frequently monitor and interact with their ex and the ex's family and friends after the breakup (McDaniel et al., 2021, pp. 464–472). While grief symptoms usually diminish within 6 to 18 months (Bonanno et al., 2002, pp. 1150–1164), for some individuals they persist, becoming prolonged. From a psychoanalytic perspective, such persistence has been described as difficulty reorganizing one's relational world after loss (Hagman, 1995, pp. 909-925). Phenomenologically, this difficulty can be understood as challenges in restoring emotional continuity and reorienting oneself within everyday life following the dissolution of a significant relationship. Beyond grief frameworks, the psychological impact of breakups has also been linked to trauma-related responses, highlighting the broader emotional toll of relational dissolution. Breakups may thus constitute a traumatic experience with long-term effects on mental health and future relationships. Common reactions include depression, anxiety, and obsessive thoughts (Field, 2009, pp. 705–727).

In this study, the term prolonged grief is not used as a clinical diagnosis but as a phenomenological concept referring to the sustained emotional attachment and unresolved mourning experienced after the dissolution of a romantic relationship. While diagnostic frameworks such as the DSM-5-TR describe Prolonged Grief Disorder as persisting beyond twelve months and accompanied by functional impairment, this study adopts a non-pathologizing stance. The aim is not to evaluate symptoms against medical criteria but to explore how individuals live through and make sense of ongoing grief as part of their subjective experience. Thus, the expression prolonged grief in this research denotes an enduring affective process characterized by difficulties in emotional reorganization, continuing bonds with the lost partner, and challenges in reconstructing meaning and identity. This conceptualization allows for examining post-breakup experiences without confining them to psychiatric classifications, while still acknowledging the depth and persistence of the affective investment involved.

While previous literature often discusses the typical temporal boundaries of grief reactions or proposes diagnostic criteria for prolonged forms (APA, 2013) of mourning, such clinical framings do not fully capture the lived, experiential dimensions of breakup-related grief. What remains largely unexplored is how individuals themselves understand, narrate, and sustain their grief over time—particularly when the loss concerns a relationship that continues to exist in memory, fantasy, and social visibility (Rhoades et al., 2011, pp.366–374; Cooley et al., 2010, pp. 241-257). More specifically, prior studies have seldom examined how young women make sense of these prolonged experiences, how they describe the emotional and relational dynamics that keep the process active, or how they articulate the difficulties they face in reorganizing their sense of self after the dissolution of a romantic relationship (Attig, 1991, pp. 385–393; Hagman, 1995, pp. 909-925). Addressing this gap, the present study aims to explore how women aged 19–40 experience prolonged grief after a breakup, how they describe their past relationships and former partners, and what factors contribute to the persistence of their grief. To investigate these meanings, this study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a method that centers lived experience through a double hermeneutic process in which participants make sense of their grief while the researcher interprets their meaning-making (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, pp. 3-4).

2. Method

2.1 Participants

According to Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009, pp. 49–52), in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) it is important to work with a small and homogenous sample. Therefore, in this study participants were selected according to three criteria: age, sexual orientation, and the time passed after the breakup.

Homogeneity in this study was conceptualized in accordance with IPA's principle of "experiential homogeneity," which emphasizes shared lived experience rather than identical demographic characteristics (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, pp. 29–31). Although the targeted age range was 19–40, the final sample consisted of women aged 19–33, all of whom reported prolonged and unresolved grief following the dissolution of a romantic relationship. As Arnett, (2020, pp. 412-419) notes, identity-related developmental processes are particularly salient between the ages of 18 and 25, which contributes to the experiential alignment observed among the younger participants in the sample. Therefore, homogeneity in this study was achieved not through chronological similarity but through a shared experiential phenomenon of sustained post-breakup grief and continued emotional investment. This convergence of lived experience met IPA's methodological requirement for a small, purposefully selected, and phenomenologically coherent sample.

As another inclusion criterion, only women who had broken up with their partners at least two years prior to the interview were selected. Rather than relying on clinical timelines for when grief is expected to resolve, the two-year threshold was determined on phenomenological grounds. After two years, many individuals typically reorganize their emotional lives and establish a sense of continuity following relational loss; however, a smaller group continues to experience enduring attachment, unresolved emotional bonds, and persistent preoccupation with the former partner (Knöpfli et al., 2016, pp. 541–552; Field, 2009, pp. 705–727). Focusing on this group allows the study to explore how participants themselves make sense of grief that remains active, unfinished, and difficult to resolve despite the passage of time. For this reason, the two-year interval was adopted as a meaningful marker for identifying women whose breakup experiences were still ongoing and emotionally impactful.

Participants consisted of five women between the ages of 19 and 33; the time since the breakup ranged from 2 to 4 years, as presented in Table 1 with their pseudonyms. In line with IPA's idiographic commitment, the aim was to achieve depth and richness in the analysis. Therefore, data collection continued until participants' narratives provided a comprehensive, detailed, and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

Table 1. Participant information

Name	Age	Time passed after breakup
Aleyna	19	2.5 years
Nilay	23	2 years
Kevser	33	2 years
Umay	27	4 years
Leyla	23	3 years

2.2 Ethical Considerations

According to Yardley (2017, pp. 295-296), qualitative study has the advantage of in-depth analysis of participants' experiences. It is important for the researchers to show the participant's point of view without any bias and this could be possible if the data is analyzed carefully and objectively. In order to guarantee that, the data is read and analyzed over and over during the coding phase. Taking the transparency principle into consideration, the process of reflexivity, procedure and data analysis are shared in detail so that the reader can see as it is proposed in the Yardley (2017, pp. 295–296)'s article. In addition to that, the research has been done by following the steps of the IPA since Willig (2013, p. 57) stated the importance of systematicity for qualitative research's quality regarding the principle of commitment and rigor.

Moreover, considering the sensitivity to context principle, the sample was decided as women who are 19-40 years old after looking at the literature demonstrating the significance of forming and dissolution of the relationships in that stage of life (Arnett, 2020, pp. 412-419). In addition, prior conducting the research, ethical permission was obtained from the Ethical Committee of Middle East Technical University on 18.01.2024 under the protocol number "0036-ODTUIAEK-2024" and before the interviews, written consent and oral consent were given about the voice recordings which will be transcribed, and the data will be used as anonymous.

2.3 Procedure

Before the main interviews, brief initial meetings were conducted to check whether the applicants met the inclusion criteria and to inform them about the purpose of the study, confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw at any time without providing any reason. After obtaining informed consent, participants who met the criteria were scheduled for a semi-structured, in-depth interview.

The main interview questions were prepared before the interviews in accordance with the research questions and in total, six interviews were conducted with 5 participants, each lasting 40–60 minutes considering the participant's convenience. One participant was interviewed twice to gain more detailed information and to better understand the gaps in her narrative regarding the grief process.

Interview questions were open-ended so that the participants have the opportunity to bring their own experiences which will lead to an in-depth analysis. The interviews started with demographic questions followed by questions about the relationship itself, their former partner and their experiences after the relationship. The questions were unbiased that allow the participant to talk as much as they prefer to: 'Can you share how the relationship ended?'. Questions such as 'How do you define your ex-partner?', 'Did you have contact with your ex-partner?', 'Did you make an effort to obtain information about him?' were asked to understand the attributions of participants to their former partner and to investigate their connection and investment to their former partner after the breakup. In order to analyze participants' personal experience, questions such as 'What kind of thoughts were in your mind after the breakup?', "How did this breakup affect you?" were asked, these questions also aimed to explore participants' emotional experiences due to loss such as yearning or guilt and their thoughts which might indicate a continued investment to the relationship through rumination. More specifically, our questions about how the relationship ended, how the ex-partner was defined, whether contact continued, and what persisted in their minds after the breakup were intentionally structured to invite participants to express the very processes—ongoing preoccupation, emotional entanglement, identification, or longing—that characterize prolonged grief. By embedding these dimensions within open-ended prompts, the interview schedule allowed the phenomenology of grief to unfold organically through participants' narratives.

With consent, all interviews were audio-recorded, securely stored, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized by assigning pseudonyms and removing identifying details.

2.4 Reflexivity

Since IPA is a qualitative study that gives researchers the opportunity to be an active participant of the research process while collecting and analyzing the data, it is significant for the researchers to reflect on their experiences, point of views and theoretical approaches to ensure the reliability of the study (Willig, 2013, pp. 15-16).

Being an active participant of the study refers to the double hermeneutic nature of IPA. Reading, interpreting and focusing on some points of the narratives of the participants brings out different perspectives and unfolds the richness of IPA (Nizza et al, 2021, pp. 369–386). That is why it is important to emphasize the possible subjective effects of researchers.

To begin with, the research team consisted of clinical psychologists who work as expert practitioners and faculty members, all trained within a Lacanian psychoanalytic orientation. As clinicians conducting psychotherapy sessions, we frequently encountered patients whose grief after the end of a romantic relationship became prolonged. Reflecting also on our own experiences of grief following breakups, our interest in exploring the experiences of women whose grief persists for extended periods after a breakup has taken shape.

Moreover, researchers should both work on their impacts on the research and the effects of the research on themselves through the study (Demirtepe-Saygılı, 2021, pp. 5-6). To this end, we conducted supervisions among each other and peer supervision with other colleagues to examine our approach toward the research. In addition, while conducting the interviews we believe that our clinical orientation in Lacanian psychoanalysis influenced the process. Similar to our approach in psychotherapy sessions, during the interviews we closely attend to participants' recurring expressions, emphases, and ambiguities, and we probe the interview questions to facilitate their associations and enrich the data.

In parallel, the analytical process advanced through a dialectical integration of bottom-up and top-down approaches. In line with the epistemological foundations of IPA (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, pp. 79-82), the themes were primarily developed through a bottom-up, data-driven process, remaining closely attuned to participants' words, emotional nuances, and experiential meanings. At the same time, as clinical psychologists trained within a Lacanian psychoanalytic orientation, our theoretical sensitivity inevitably shaped how we attended to certain linguistic features—such as negation, idealization, or repetition—during the interpretative stage. This approach reflects IPA's double-hermeneutic structure, while researchers utilize their interpretive resources while striving to remain grounded in participants' accounts (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, pp. 3-4). For instance, although we recognized instances of negation expressed by participants (e.g., '…it turned into something like I was jealous of him… I was just joking…'), we did not directly thematize these latent dynamics; instead, we tried to prioritize allowing the analysis to be guided

by participants' lived accounts. Thus, the top-down orientation functioned as an interpretive lens rather than a determining framework, consistent with IPA's framework, enabling us to notice subtle patterns of meaning without imposing Lacanian terminology. Similarly, when deciding on theme names, we deliberately avoided theoretical terms and collectively revisited participants' quotations to discuss possible labels. This reflexive process aligns with calls for transparency and awareness of researcher influence in qualitative inquiry (Willig, 2013, pp.15-16; Demirtepe-Saygılı, 2021, pp. 1-16) and allowed us to balance IPA's inductive attention to lived experience with a theoretically informed sensitivity that enriched—rather than constrained—the interpretive depth of the findings.

2.5 Data Analysis

In line with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the data analysis followed an idiographic and iterative process (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, pp. 29-31). Each interview was transcribed verbatim and carefully read several times to ensure familiarity with the participant's narrative. Initial notes and codes were written to reflect descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments. Emerging themes were then developed from these notes, capturing the essential aspects of each participant's account while staying close to their words.

After the analysis of the first interview was completed, the next interview was conducted and analyzed in the same way. This step-by-step approach allowed themes to emerge inductively while preserving the idiographic focus of IPA. MAXQDA software was used to support the coding process, organization of data, and clustering of themes. Connections between themes were identified, and similar themes were grouped into superordinate themes.

Throughout the process, reflexivity was maintained by revisiting the transcripts, checking consistency between codes and themes, and comparing across cases while also respecting the individuality of each participant's account. The final stage of analysis involved clustering recurrent themes across participants into superordinate categories, which represent both convergence and divergence in the women's prolonged grief experiences after breakups.

3. Results

This study aimed to investigate the prolonged grief experiences of women following the dissolution of their romantic relationships. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The analysis yielded 5 superordinate themes with several subordinate themes, as presented in Table 2. These superordinate themes illustrate different aspects of the participants' prolonged grief process: changes in self-perception and identity (From Loss to A New Self), difficulties in detaching from the relationship (Continuing Bonds After Breakup), ongoing reflections and uncertainties (Post-Breakup Questioning), experiences of loss and its meanings (About the Loss), and emotional responses and ambivalences that persisted over time (After the Loss). Together, these themes provided a comprehensive understanding of how young women experience, interpret, and cope with prolonged grief after a breakup.

Table 2. Superordinate and Subordinate Themes

1. From Loss to A New Self 1.1. Transformation 1.2. Putting Myself First 1.3. Unwilling to Invest
2. Continuing Bonds After Breakup 2.1. Ons-and-Offs 2.2. Never-ending Communication 2.3. Sustainment of Love
3. Post-Breakup Questioning 3.1. Am I Right 3.2. Still Curious 3.3. Should I Fix Him 3.4. Carrying the Past
4. About the Loss 4.1 Loss of the Dream 4.2. Losing the Source of Happiness 4.3. Trying to Accept 4.4. Idealization

Table 2. Continued

5. After the Loss
5.1. Ambivalent Feelings
5.2. Every Gain Feels Like a Victory
5.3. Possibility of Reunion
5.4. (Un)expected Third Person
5.5. Withdrawal From Life

3.1. From Loss to A New Self

The overarching theme *"*From Loss to A New Self" captured the participants' post-breakup reconfiguration of self, priorities, and relational orientations. Although each subtheme highlighted a different aspect of this process, they converged on the idea that breakups trigger not only emotional distress but also enduring changes in how individuals perceive themselves and relate to others. Taken together, these subthemes illustrated that breakups are not merely relational endings but catalysts for broader personal change. Participants reported reconstructing their identities with greater self-protection, increased individual priority, and a cautious stance toward future attachments. Thus, this theme denoted the emergence of a new self-configuration: one that is more self-oriented, more guarded, and marked by both loss and self-renewal.

3.1.1. Transformation

It is possible to experience alteration even in the concept of self because of breakup and its emotional distress (Slotter et. al, 2010, pp. 147-148). Since the partners have lots of influence on each other, past relationships and breakups may lead to changes. For instance, Umay compares herself before and after the breakup "*I used to trust people and relationships more, and I was more relaxed and spontaneous. But after that breakup, that natural ease disappeared. Since then, I've never felt that comfortable again—I'm always on guard.*" This expression was important since it shows the transformation in the self-concept of the Umay clearly.

3.1.2. Putting Myself First

Participants shared how they focus on themselves soon after the breakup. They put emphasis on the fact that this is 'the time' or 'a duration' for them to focus on themselves. Nilay said that she spent time for herself while Aleyna was saying that she prioritized herself since it is the time for her "*It made me look inward and just focus on myself and my path. Right now, that's my only goal—working on myself and making that my priority, because this is the time for it*." Overall, after the breakup, participants needed time to reflect and enjoy, which can also be seen as an adjustment to their new life, prioritizing and focusing on themselves.

3.1.3. Unwilling to invest

Another common theme in the participants' narratives was their unwillingness to enter another relationship after the breakup. Nilay expressed this as a request to someone who wanted to be with her: "*I told him, 'I don't want to be in a relationship right now. I love you, but I need some time to get over this.' He understood.*" While Nilay was doing this to get over her past relationship, Kevser explained that she found it difficult to get close to someone after what she experienced: "*Probably, it's related to the anxiety or fear that comes with that kind of closeness, because I feel like I don't want to get that close to anyone. I mean, I feel like I don't want to establish that level of intimacy with new people*." In both narratives, it was clear that their past relationships influenced their potential future ones.

3.2. Continuing Bonds After Breakup

The overarching theme "Continuing Bonds After Breakup" highlighted the participants' difficulty in fully severing ties with past partners. Across the subthemes, they described relational cycles of breaking up and reconciling, ongoing contact through deliberate or coincidental efforts, and the persistence of affection long after the relationship ended. Together, these narratives showed that separation was often delayed or complicated by lingering patterns of interaction and enduring feelings, suggesting that love and connection can continue to bind individuals even after the formal end of a relationship.

3.2.1. Ons-and-Offs

There were some narratives suggesting that the pattern of participants restarting and ending the relationship contributed to keeping the relationship ongoing. For example, Nilay stated that they continued their relationship after they called it off and Kevser emphasized that this fluctuating situation kept her motivated to the relationship. Leyla described a similar scene where they were like having a relationship after the breakup *"When we go out, it feels*

like we're still in a relationship—there's this connection between us. It was strange. I'd reconcile; I still love him, and he knows it. We still talk, and I can feel his love for me too". Overall, keeping in touch after the breakup might end up in feelings of hope which delays the separation from the relationship as the participants mentioned.

3.2.2. Never-ending Communication

All participants stated that they continued their communication after the breakup, though in different ways. Their motivation and efforts stood out in this matter. Leyla emphasized the harm caused by this ongoing contact: *"Unfortunately, we have this weakness for each other, and we can't break off communication. But the more we stay in touch, the more we hurt each other and cause damage."*

3.2.3. Sustainment of Love

Another thing participants maintained after the breakup, alongside communication, was love. Lopez-Cantero (2018, pp. 691-692) notes that love can continue during the breakup process. Kevser shared: "*Even a few months after we broke up, the love I felt for him was still very strong. I loved him so much, thought about him, and worried about him. And honestly, I'm not quite sure how long that lasted.*" Similarly, Leyla explained: "*We didn't break up because our love ended; we genuinely loved each other. I haven't been able to accept the reality of still loving him*."

3.3. Post-Breakup Questioning

The theme "Post-Breakup Questioning" captured the participants' ongoing cognitive engagement with their past relationships. They reported repeatedly revisiting their own actions and decisions, entertaining persistent thoughts about their former partners, wondering whether change could have been possible, and holding onto scenarios and memories from the past. Together, these subthemes illustrated how breakups often trigger cycles of self-reflection, counterfactual thinking, and unresolved curiosity, indicating that the separation continued to occupy a central place in participants' inner worlds.

3.3.1. Am I Right

Participants talked about their indecision about their behaviors during the relationship. They gave examples of questions that they asked themselves such as Aleyna saying '*Was what I did the right thing? What would have happened if I hadn't done it? You know, a lot of things, really'*. These questions included possibilities that might arise if the participant had acted differently. In addition to this, Kevser questioned herself by saying '*I keep wondering if I really made him feel that sense of being overwhelmed. Did I actually do that to him? I've made mistakes too, and I can't help but think, was he right when he said that?*' and she also questioned the possibility of her ex-partner being right. Overall, all of these questions were directed at participants' selves, and they were repeatedly asked.

3.3.2. Still Curious

Participants shared their curiosity regarding what their ex-partner might be doing after the breakup. This curiosity was more like those that a person experiences within themselves in which they didn't try to find an answer outside. Nilay shared that her curiosity was about whether he was in a relationship with someone else. Aleyna also said that she wondered to him '*I can't help but think, has something happened between him and that girl? Is there something going on with her? Even though I don't want to think about it, this question somehow keeps popping into my mind*'.

3.3.3. Should I Fix Him

The question of whether there was a possibility of an ex-partner changing was expressed by Aleyna after she said she tends to heal people spiritually. Kevser was complaining about her ex-partner's inability to show his love and she had a motivation to change him. She also mentioned that she changed her mind during the relationship *'I've moved to a place where I can more easily accept that no matter what I did, it wouldn't have worked because this is the extent of his capacity. I've let go of the thought that I could have changed him or that the relationship would have worked if I had tried harder'*.

3.3.4. Carrying the Past

Participants expressed that they still think about the past. Aleyna talked about her feelings as something that she holds onto. Different aspects of the relationship became the subject for consideration such as the possibilities, arguments or feelings. Umay summarized her thoughts about possibilities as '*What if it were like this?'* and she shared details *'I wonder if things would have been different if we hadn't broken up at that moment, or if we had met a year later, would it have turned out differently'*.

3.4. About The Loss

After the relationship ended participants emphasized different things that they lost and how they conceptualized those losses under the subthemes Loss of the Dream, Loss of Sources of Happiness, Trying to Accept and Idealization.

3.4.1 Loss of the Dream

The ending of the relationship involved not only the real losses but also the loss of plans and possible experiences that might happen. Kevser talked about the loss of the life that she fantasized about living together with his former partner. Moreover, Umay mentioned the plans that she and her partner had and how she felt like left alone with those plans after the breakup by saying "*Like, we had plans together, like going abroad or moving in together, or him moving into my place, you know? And none of these were long-term plans; they were all short-term. And suddenly, it's like all of these were handed to me, and it's like he's saying, 'Okay, I'm leaving, and these things can stay with you; maybe I'll take them back later.' It was that kind of expectation".*

3.4.2. Losing the Source of Happiness

One of the specific feelings of loss after the breakup was losing the source of happiness for the participants. Kevser said that she felt like she lost the common things that she and her ex-partner laughed and enjoyed since there was no one that she could share those things as it was seen in *"It's like, some things that we only laughed about together, or some things that nobody else around me laughed at, you know? Like playing a game together, and there's no one else around playing it. So, it's like I've lost those things too, as if I've lost them along with him, actually, a little bit*". In addition, Umay mentioned her feelings of loneliness because of not being able to share the common things that they laughed with their former partner and loss of the friendship they had.

3.4.3. Trying to Accept

After the relationship participants mentioned their acceptance process of ending the relationship with different feelings and processes. For example, Kevser emphasized the anger she had about the things that she experienced during the relationship and how she used that anger while accepting to breakup by saying "*An overwhelming anger hit me, I got really mad, and I mean, I kept circling back to it, trying to make myself angrier. I read old messages, thought about what he did, talked to people, asked them things, like maybe he had told something to a mutual friend during our relationship, and I got angry at them. This anger lasted quite a while, by the way, I mean, I lived with this anger for a few months. While experiencing this anger, I think I eventually accepted it somewhere along the way*." Umay also mentioned that at the beginning she tried to not to think about the breakup to deny the reality but she let it go eventually as it can be seen in '*I was in a place where if I didn't think about it, if I ignored it, if I didn't accept it, it was like it wasn't happening. And that's why this two-year process happened, and then I let go. I mean, there's really no word to describe it, I truly let go'.*

3.4.4. Idealization

Idealization was one of the prominent concepts that the participant attributed to the former relationship and the partner. For example, Kevser mentioned that she thought about the idealized version of her former partner in her mind as criteria for her new possible relationships. Similarly, Umay described her past relationship with his former partner as the best that she could have experienced and talked about how she compared her subsequent relationship with the past by saying "*It felt like it could have been the most beautiful relationship I could have ever experienced, and I set a criterion for other people and relationships to be similar to it. It was a process where anyone who didn't make me feel that way, or wasn't like him, just didn't seem enough, and I couldn't really feel anything significant towards anyone else.*".

3.5. After the Loss

Participants mentioned about the experiences of loss the relationship under the different subthemes namely, Ambivalent Feelings, Every Gain Feels Like a Victory, Possibility of Reunion, (Un)expected Third Person and Withdrawal from Life.

3.5.1. Ambivalent Feelings

After the relationship ended participants expressed their ambivalence about being with the former partner and talked about the fluctuations in specific moments and throughout the time after the breakup about their feelings about returning the relationship. Leyla also mentioned 'If this process hasn't ended even in two and a half years, then I thought, *'I'll mourn this person for ten years, and will I keep wanting to make peace with them? I know the wrongs*

and injustices this person has done to me. I know we're incompatible. How do I even want to make peace with this person?'" As it can be seen, although her desire to be with her former partner changed in time and she didn't want to reunite, she continued to be in touch with him.

3.5.2. Every Gain Feels Like a Victory

The results showed that loss of the relationship was not a clear-cut process for the participants in terms of being ready to cut contact with their former partner. As an example, Umay said that "*Actually, I wasn't ready for them to exit my life completely, and I was somewhat accepting of prolonging their stay, I guess. It was a period where I thought it was benefiting me*" by emphasizing that she was not ready to lose his former partner completely and she was willing to accept any situation that would enable her to be with him. Similarly, Kevser mentioned that she was not willing to let go of the friendship part of the relationship even though the romantic part didn't continue. In both cases participants were trying to continue possible interaction with their former partner to gain possible benefits from them.

3.5.3. Possibility of Reunion

After the breakup getting back into a relationship might be possible in some situations. This possibility was mentioned as a fantasy of getting back together with hope and expectation of reuniting even after a long time as the Umay mentioned as "*Neither pain nor sorrow, maybe hope. Yes, hope. The idea of having someone in your life, the possibility that they might return one day. It's that expectation, you know? It's like a fantasy everyone has*". Similarly, Kevser talked about her thoughts about getting connected after the breakup as an imaginary situation where they will start talking again and consider being apart as a temporary process. Thus participants tend to see breakup as a temporary process and fantasize about possibilities of reuniting with their former partner.

3.5.4. (Un)expected Third Person

Participants talked about the new relationship and partner of their former partner as an expected yet surprising situation. Kevser mentioned her former partner's talking about his new relationship as something surprising since she would not think it would be something they would be talking about although there are some implications. Moreover, Umay talked about seeing her ex-partner's new relationship as something that she would have to accept when she sees, although it is something expected "*Like, I became like, 'Oh, okay, it's possible you also have someone in your life,' and I tried to carry on as if nothing had happened, saying, 'There's nothing, there's nothing,' but even that tiny question mark there, it's like, not knowing, guessing, seeing something different*". Thus, both participants emphasized the surprising part of talking about and seeing the new relationship of the former partner although they had ideas about those relationships but not in an explicit way that they must accept.

3.5.5. Withdrawal From Life

According to the study of Mearns (1991, pp. 332-333), breaking up from a romantic relationship might cause negative mood regulation and depression. Similarly, participants shared their experiences about the negative outcomes of the breakup especially the physical symptoms which they related to depression and anxiety. For instance, Leyla established a connection between the pain she felt and her being unable to complete daily tasks '*I tried to get through the pain of that breakup alone here, which is why I really don't like this city. I wasn't going to school; my absences were off the charts. I remember staying inside the house for six days without going out at all*'. Kevser also said she experienced physical symptoms which were related to the anxiety *'I went through a period where my anxiety was so intense, and I struggled to keep myself together. There was a time, about two weeks or so, where I didn't even get out of bed. I would just eat one toast or one banana a day. But during that time, I said to myself, 'I can't overcome this*''. Aleyna's words explained these symptoms explicitly with their cause '*Feeling sad can cause people to withdraw from things because your mood drops a bit, and you don't feel like doing anything as a result*.'

4. Discussion

This study explored the prolonged grief experiences of women following the dissolution of their romantic relationships and revealed that breakups are rarely experienced as a finite or discrete rupture. Instead, they emerged as extended and ambivalent processes in which participants simultaneously experienced transformation and paralysis, self-focus and longing, detachment and reinvestment. The superordinate themes identified—reconfiguration of identity, inability to let go, questioning, experiences of loss, and ambivalent aftermath—illustrated the complex and layered ways in which grief after breakup unfolds. What becomes evident is that grief here is not only about the loss of a partner but also about the continuing investment in a relationship that, in psychic terms, has not truly ended.

One of the most striking findings lies in the theme *From Loss to A New Self*, where participants described profound changes in their sense of self. As Slotter et al. (2010, pp. 148-149) argued, relationships deeply shape self-concept, and their dissolution produces disruptions in identity. Participants here echoed this, stating that their "natural ease" was replaced with guardedness, or that they now prioritized themselves. However, these changes were not simply growth-oriented. While *Putting Myself First* suggests empowerment through self-focus, as Nilay stated "*I'm learning that I don't need anyone else to feel good; I'm beginning to enjoy my own company and find fulfillment independently.*", *Unwilling to Invest* and *Transformation* show that transformation often came with reluctance, fear, and withdrawal as it can be seen in the narrative of Umay stating *"Back then, I could trust more, let go, and be spontaneous. After that relationship, that ease vanished—I haven't felt that relaxed since.*". Thus, identity reconstruction after breakup may involve both adaptive self-care and maladaptive avoidance. Participants avoided new intimate relationships with people, and their anxiety towards new romantic relationships shows the relationship between their hesitation and their former relationship. In the light of this, it can be said that even though they are in the process of focusing on themselves, their new perspective is based on their loss; the paradox here is that while participants constructed new selves, these selves were still organized in relation to the loss—they were "new" precisely because of the breakup, not despite it.

The theme *Continuing Bonds After Breakup* captures the persistence of emotional and behavioral investment. Participants described "*Ons-and-Offs*," "*Never-ending Communication*," and the "*Sustainment of Love*." For instance, Leyla said that "*It was all over the place. I never really felt wanted or loved. Sometimes we'd get close and I'd think, 'Maybe it'll get better if I try a little more.' Those small moments of affection kept me there for a long time.*" Leyla's account illustrates how intermittent moments of affection can prolong emotional involvement, even when the overall relationship remains unstable. Lopez-Cantero (2018, pp. 691-692) notes that love can persist through and beyond breakups, and this was explicitly voiced in statements such as, "*We didn't break up because our love ended*." Attachment theory provides a compelling framework: Bowlby (1980/1969, p. 174) conceptualized separation as triggering protest and searching behaviors, which explain the repeated attempts at communication, reconciliation, or simply checking on the ex-partner. These repetitions that participants experienced make sense in terms of the theoretical points that Bowlby proposed. Specifically, his statements regarding the repetition coincides with the findings of current study. The ex-partner remained not only alive but socially visible, which complicated detachment. Unlike bereavement, where absence is final, breakups allow for the possibility—sometimes illusory—of reconnection. This possibility sustains hope and prevents mourning from completing its course. In the study of Ohenewa & Meyer-Meitz (2025), it is shown that reminders of an ex-partner interrupt the healing process by avoiding getting rid of the past memories. This ongoing visibility keeps the possibility of reconnection alive, making it difficult for the separation to take its natural course. For example, Kevser mentioned seeing her ex-partner online in the video games she played and communicating through those games as: "*We started talking again through the game; I didn't quit playing, and he didn't either. After a while, our conversations slowly started to return to how they used to be.*"

Cognitive entanglement was prominent in *Post-Breakup Questioning*. Participants asked themselves, "*Am I right*?" or imagined alternative scenarios ("What if it had been different?"). Others expressed curiosity about whether their ex-partners had new relationships (*Still Curious*) or whether they could have "fixed" them (*Should I Fix Him*). Such rumination aligns with findings in grief literature showing that meaning-making and counterfactual thinking are central to how people process loss (Neimeyer, 2001, pp. 10-12). Yet in this study, such questioning seemed less about making meaning and more about sustaining connection. This pattern was evident in participants' reflections, particularly in the way they revisited past decisions and imagined alternative outcomes. Umay exemplified these questions as *"I sometimes wonder if things would have turned out differently if we hadn't broken up at that moment, or if we had met a year later."* By repeatedly returning to the past, participants kept the relationship alive in memory, fantasy, and imagination. This form of cognitive persistence delayed integration of the loss and perpetuated grief.

The narratives under *About the Loss* deepen our understanding of what breakup grief entails. Participants described the *Loss of the Dream*—shared plans and imagined futures; the *Losing the Source of Happiness*—shared jokes, unique forms of joy; and *Idealization*—the construction of the ex-partner as an unmatched benchmark. Freud (1886–1939/2024) p. 244) distinguished mourning from melancholia. Mourning involves withdrawing psychological investment from the lost object, whereas melancholia involves identification with it. The idealization described here is a clear example of melancholic incorporation: participants measured new partners against the idealized image of the lost one, thus internalizing the ex-partner as part of the self. As an example of this Umay said that: "*It felt like that relationship was the best I'd ever get, so I used it as a standard. When others didn't make me feel the same, they seemed not enough. I couldn't really feel anything strong for anyone else.*" In this situation, Lacan's (1998/1972–1973,

p. 189) notion of *objet petit a* is also useful: the lost partner functioned as the object-cause of desire, sustaining longing precisely through absence. Participants' insistence on comparison and idealization shows how the ex-continued to structure their desire and their relational field.

The ambivalent aftermath, reflected in *After the Loss*, shows how grief lingers through contradictory emotions. Participants expressed *Ambivalent Feelings*—anger at incompatibility coexisting with longing for reunion. They accepted "any gain as profit" *(Every Gain Feels Like a Victory),* and thus chose to prolong minimal contact rather than tolerate absence. They fantasized about *Possibility of Reunion* while simultaneously confronting the intrusion of (*Un)expected Third Person*. The new romantic partner of the participants' former partner emerged as a figure who was expected, yet still surprising and difficult to accept for them. As Umay stated "*I tried to act like everything was fine, telling myself maybe he had someone else. But even that tiny doubt—the not knowing, the guessing, sensing something had changed—hit me really hard.*", while participants tried on the one hand to view the presence of the new person in their ex-partner's life as something normal, on the other hand they attempted to ignore her as she could hinder their mental investment in their former partner. This also pointed the confusion between withdrawing from and maintaining that investment. These oscillations demonstrate how breakup grief is not a linear process but a circular one. The participants' experiences confirm that anger, denial, bargaining, and hope can coexist indefinitely rather than follow a sequence. *Withdrawal from Life* reflected experiences consistent with Mearns's (1991, pp. 332–333) observations on anxiety, withdrawal, and physical neglect following romantic breakups. Umay and Leyla described spending weeks in bed, eating very little, sleeping irregularly, and feeling unable to rejoin the rhythm of daily life. Their accounts suggested a state in which ordinary routines lost coherence and the surrounding world felt difficult to engage with. Moments such as waking with breathlessness, struggling to initiate basic tasks, or remaining confined to a single room illustrated how the impact of the breakup extended into bodily and experiential dimensions of their lives—affecting their sense of time, their relationship to their surroundings, and their ability to carry out even simple actions. These narratives illustrate how loss unsettled the structure of participants' everyday experience -shaping the pace of time, the feel of their environment, and their sense of what was possible to do.

Taken together, these findings suggest that prolonged grief after breakup is not a mere failure of coping but an active process of sustaining investment. Participants did not simply "fail to move on"; they actively maintained communication, indulged fantasies of reunion, and carried the past into the present. In Freud's (1886–1939/2024), p. 244) terms, this represents an "incomplete work of mourning"—emotional investment was not withdrawn but remained fixed on the lost object. As Leyla mentioned "*"I kept thinking, 'If I'm still stuck after two and a half years, maybe I'll mourn him for ten.' I kept going back and forth—wanting to reconcile, remembering everything he did to hurt me, and asking myself, 'We weren't even compatible… So why do I still want him back?*", participants' ongoing grief involved psychological processes that they themselves did not fully understand and that were not solely driven by a desire to be with their ex-partners. In Lacanian terms (1998/1972–1973, p. 189), the breakup revealed a structural impasse: the impossibility of satisfying desire without the Other who functioned as its organizing point. The persistence of investment allowed participants to maintain psychic continuity, even at the cost of ongoing pain. Thus, grief here is not only suffering but also a way of preserving selfhood in the aftermath of rupture.

Clinically, these findings have important implications. From an attachment-based perspective, therapy should acknowledge searching behaviors—whether through communication, social media monitoring, or curiosity—and gradually support clients in tolerating the absence of the partner without constant reconnection. From a psychodynamic lens, the work involves addressing idealization, ambivalence, and melancholic incorporation. Several participants appeared to have internalized their ex-partner as part of their identity explains why making new relationships is difficult. Lacanian psychoanalysis (1998/1972–1973, pp. 130-135) would frame the task as helping the subject confront their relation to desire beyond the lost object. Contemporary grief therapies that emphasize meaning-making (Neimeyer, 2001, pp. 261-293) may help participants reconstruct narratives that situate the breakup within broader life stories. Therapeutic approaches that help patients to work through ambivalence and validate their emotions both anger and longing, may also be beneficial for integrating contradictory emotions.

The originality of this study lies in extending grief literature to romantic dissolution, a context often trivialized compared to bereavement. The findings show that breakups can produce prolonged grief reactions that resemble bereavement in their intensity, ambivalence, and persistence. However, unlike death, the ex-partner's continued existence complicates mourning, making detachment elusive and sustaining the possibility of reunion. The study also contributes theoretically by highlighting the role of continued investment: participants could not move forward, not because they lacked coping skills but because they actively, and sometimes unconsciously, chose to sustain the

relationship in fantasy, communication, and identity. In this context, this shifts the frame from “failure to let go” to “refusal to withdraw investment,” a position that is painful but also protective.

5. Limitations

Limitations must also be acknowledged. The study focused on young women, and gendered social scripts about love, attachment, and relational investment may have shaped their experiences. The cultural context may also influence how individuals interpret loss, idealize partners, or engage in ongoing bonds. In addition, although we conceptualized homogeneity experientially rather than chronologically, the age range of the participants (19–33) may have influenced how they understood and narrated relational loss. Indeed, participants’ narratives clearly reflected this developmental divergence. The oldest participant frequently situated the breakup within the broader context of her previous relationships, referring to earlier abusive partnerships, depressive periods following prior separations, and a tendency to evaluate her current loss in relation to those earlier relational patterns. She also articulated longer-term and future-oriented expectations, such as imagining cohabitation, considering the possibility of reconciliation if her ex-partner sought therapy, and expressing a desire for him to remain in her life in some capacity. These descriptions suggest a layered and future-oriented meaning-making process. In contrast, the 19-year-old participant, who was experiencing her first romantic relationship, did not reference prior relational schemas or cumulative relational disappointments. Instead, she narrated the breakup primarily through themes of personal transformation, academic focus, and cognitive reflection, emphasizing issues of identity development rather than the loss of an anticipated shared future. Taken together, although participants shared the overarching phenomenon of prolonged grief, developmental differences may have shaped the intensity of emotional investment, temporal orientation, and the perceived meaning of the loss. Thus, while experiential homogeneity can be methodologically justified within the IPA framework, it is important to interpret the findings with awareness of how developmental positioning may have influenced participants’ breakup experiences. Future research may benefit from employing narrower age bands to capture more developmentally specific nuances of prolonged grief following romantic dissolution. Building on these considerations regarding developmental positioning, future research could also explore whether similar themes emerge in other groups, such as men, older adults, or individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

Moreover, participants of the study were all heterosexual women, therefore, the study included only the experiences of heterosexual women, and it was not possible to explore the experiences of women with different sexual orientations. In further studies, the prolonged grief experiences of women with different sexual orientations might be explored to gain a deeper understanding of the subject. Longitudinal designs would also illuminate how these themes evolve over time and whether continuing bonds eventually transform or dissolve.

6. Conclusion

This study highlighted that breakups in young adulthood can evoke grief processes that are prolonged, ambivalent, and deeply entangled with identity, desire, and relational investment. Far from being a simple act of detachment, breakup grief emerged as a layered experience involving continued communication, fantasies of reunion, identity reconstruction, and melancholic incorporation of the lost partner. Participants’ narratives demonstrated that grief persists not only because of the pain of separation but also because of the psychic necessity of sustaining bonds—whether through idealization, questioning, or ongoing contact. In this sense, prolonged grief after romantic dissolution reflects an incomplete work of mourning, where the ex-partner remains invested with meaning, shaping both selfhood and desire. By situating these findings within grief theory, attachment theory, and psychoanalysis, this study underscores the existential weight of breakups and challenges the common trivialization of romantic dissolution as a fleeting or minor life event. These findings can also contribute to therapeutic approaches that address relationship-based losses beyond bereavement, offering insights into how identity, attachment, and meaning-making processes unfold following romantic separation.

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Özet

Romantik ilişkiler, yakın ilişkiler kurmanın en yaygın yollarından biridir ve yetişkinliğe geçiş döneminde samimiyet ve bağlılık içeren ilişkiler kurmak tipik bir gelişimsel aşama olarak kabul edilir. Genç yetişkinlerin bu ilişkilere yükledikleri öznel anlamlar, beklentiler ve bağlılık düzeyleri farklılık gösterebilir ve çatışmalar ortaya çıkıp ilişkiler sona erebilir. Ayrılığın psikolojik etkileri, ayrılığı kimin başlattığı, bağlanma stili ve ilişkiye yapılan yatırım gibi faktörlere bağlı olarak değişebilir. Araştırmalar, ayrılıkların istemsizce akla gelen düşünceler, kaygı, uyku sorunları ve depresif belirtiler gibi etkilere yol açabileceğini ve bu etkilerin kadınlarda sıklıkla daha yoğun yaşandığını göstermiştir. Bireyler ayrıca ayrılığı kişisel eksikliklerle bağlantılı olarak yorumlayıp üzüntü, kıskançlık ve özgüven problemleri yaşayabilmektedir.

Ayrılıkla birlikte yaşanan kayıp yalnızca partneri değil, aynı zamanda paylaşılan rutinleri, anıları ve hayal edilen geleceği de kapsayabilmekte ve benlik kavramını değiştirebilmektedir. Ayrılık sonrası deneyimlenebilen yas, kayıptan sonra gerçekliğin yeniden düzenlenmesini içerir ve yapılan yatırımı kaybedilen nesneden uzaklaştırmayı gerektirir. Ayrılıktan sonra yaşanan yasın yoğunluğu ve süresi; ilişkideki yakınlık, barışma olasılığı ve eski partnerle karşılaşmalar gibi durumlara bağlı olarak değişebilir. Yas belirtileri genellikle 6 ila 18 ay içinde azalırken, bazı kişilerde bu belirtiler devam eder ve uzar. Psikanalitik bakış açısıyla bu durum, yas sürecinde kaybedilen nesneden psişik enerjinin uzaklaştırılamamasıyla ilişkilidir ve inkâr, öfke, pazarlık, depresyon ve kabullenme gibi aşamaların tamamlanamayan bir döngü hâline gelmesine neden olabilir.

Yasın genellikle altı ay içinde azalması ve bazen iki yıl süresince tekrarlaması beklenirken, uzun süreli yas; kaybı kabul etmekte zorluk, yoğun duygusal acı ve eski partnerle meşgul olma durumunu içerir. Yaygınlığına, muhtemel uzun vadeli etkilerine ve depresyon, anksiyete ve takıntılı düşünceler gibi belirtilerine rağmen, ayrılıklardan sonra uzamış yas üzerine yapılan araştırmalar sınırlıdır. Bu nedenle bu çalışmada, genç yetişkin kadınların ayrılıktan sonra deneyimledikleri uzayan yasın fenomenolojik yapısını anlamak ve bu sürecin uzamasına etki eden ilişkisel, bilişsel ve duygusal faktörleri incelemek amaçlanmıştır. Çalışmaya, en az iki yıl önce ilişkisi sonlanmış ve yaşları 19–33 arasında değişen beş kadın katılmıştır. Nitel araştırma deseni kullanılarak yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmış ve veriler Yorumlayıcı Fenomenolojik Analiz yöntemiyle incelenmiştir.

Analiz sonucunda alt temalarıyla birlikte beş üst tema elde edilmiştir: (1) Kayıptan Yeni Benliğe, (2) Ayrılık Sonrası Sürdürülen Bağlar, (3) Ayrılık Sonrası Sorgulamalar, (4) Kayıp Üzerine ve (5) Kayıptan Sonra. Bulgular, ayrılık sonrası yaşanan kaybın yalnızca partnerin kaybıyla sınırlı olmadığını; aynı zamanda gelecek hayallerinin, mutluluk kaynaklarının ve benlik algısının kaybını da içerdiğini göstermiştir.

Çalışmanın sonuçları, katılımcıların ayrılığı nadiren bir son ya da kesin bir kopuş olarak yaşadığını; bunun yerine ayrılığın uzun, döngüsel ve ikircikli bir süreç olarak deneyimlendiğini göstermiştir. İlişkilerin benlik kavramını derinden şekillendirmesi ve ayrılığın kimlikte değişimlere yol açmasıyla paralel olarak katılımcılar, ayrılıktan sonra artık kendilerini önceliklendirdiklerini belirtmişlerdir. Bu dönüşümün yalnızca güçlenme ya da olgunlaşma yönünde olmadığı; çoğu zaman isteksizlik, kaçınma, kırılganlık ve korku eşliğinde gerçekleştiği vurgulanmıştır. Kimliğin yeniden inşası paradoksal biçimde kayıpla ilişkili olarak organize edilmiş ve bu durum benliklerin, ayrılığa rağmen değil, tam da ayrılık sayesinde 'yeni' olduğu şeklinde yorumlanmıştır.

Katılımcıların eski partnerlerine yönelik devam eden duygusal ve davranışsal yatırımı; onların sosyal medya hesaplarını takip etme, partnerleriyle tekrar görüşme, iletişim kurma ya da eski partneri kontrol etme gibi tekrarlayan davranışlarda kendini göstermiştir. Eski partnerin sosyal varlığı ayrılığı zorlaştırmış ve kişinin yokluğunun kesin olduğu ölüm gibi durumların aksine, yeniden bir araya gelme ihtimalinin sürekli açık kalması, yas sürecinin tamamlanmasını engelleyen bir faktör olarak değerlendirilmiştir.

Katılımcıların ayrılık sonrası kendileriyle ilgili sorgulamaları, ilişkiyle ilgili kurguladıkları alternatif senaryolar ve eski partnerlerine yönelik zihinlerini meşgul eden sorular; ayrılıkla ilgili bir anlam yaratma çabasından ziyade, eski partnerle olan bağlantıyı fantazmatik düzeyde sürdürme işlevi göstermiştir. Bu düşünsel tekrarların, ilişkinin zihinlerde canlı tutulmasına hizmet ederek yasın sürmesinde etkili olduğu düşünülmüştür.

Ayrılık, gelecek planlarının ve mutluluk kaynaklarının kaybı olarak da deneyimlenmiş ve katılımcılar eski partnerlerini idealize ederek yeni ilişkilerini kaybedilen partnerin idealize edilmiş imajıyla karşılaştırmışlardır. Katılımcıların kaybedilen partnerlerini benliklerinin bir parçası olarak içselleştirdiği ve eski partnerlerinin yokluğunun arzuyu sürekli canlı tutan bir eksiklik işlevi görebileceği tartışılmıştır.

Ayrılık sonrası katılımcılar, öfke ile yeniden bir araya gelme arzusunun bir arada var olması gibi ikircikli duygular deneyimlemiş ve yokluğu tolere etmek yerine eski partnerleriyle teması çeşitli yollarla sürdürmüşlerdir. Yaşadıkları duygusal dalgalanmalar, yasın döngüsel bir süreç olduğunu ve inkâr, öfke, pazarlık, umut ve özlem gibi hislerin eşzamanlı ya da tekrar eden biçimlerde birlikte var olabildiğini göstermiştir.

Bu bulgulara dayanarak ayrılıktan sonra uzayan yasın sadece başa çıkmayla ilgili bir zorlanma değil, aktif bir yatırım sürdürme ve bağın kesilememesi süreci olduğu yorumlanmıştır. Yapılan duygusal yatırım geri çekilmemiş ve kaybedilen nesnede sabit kalmıştır. Lacanyen terimlerle ayrılık, arzunun düzenlenmesinde işlev gören Öteki'nin yokluğunda arzuyu tatmin etmenin imkânsızlığını görünür kılmıştır. Ayrıca yasın, ayrılığın ardından benliği koruma ve bütünlüğü sürdürme işlevi görebileceği düşünülmüştür. Sonuç olarak, ayrılık sonrası uzamış yas; katılımcıların yatırımlarını geri çekememesinden kaynaklanmış ve ayrılığın bir bitişten çok sürdürülen bir bağ olarak yaşandığını göstermiştir. Klinik açıdan sonuçlar, iyileşme için ani bir kopuş dayatmaktan ziyade yapılan yatırımın dönüştürülmesi, kaybın yeniden anlamlandırılması ve ilişkinin içsel düzeyde yapılandırılmasının desteklenmesi gerektiğini göstermektedir.