LESS FUSION WITH OTHERS, AND MORE I-POSITION AS A KEY TO ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AMONG EMERGING ADULTS*

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the association between the dimensions of differentiation of self-emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others- and perceived romantic relationship quality among Turkish emerging adults. The sample consists of 424 individuals aged 18 to 29 who have been in a romantic relationship for at least six months. Data were collected using the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory, Differentiation of Self Inventory- Short Form, and a demographic form. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was performed to determine whether the dimensions of differentiation of self-predict overall perceived romantic relationship quality, after controlling for gender, student status, education, income, and relationship type. Results revealed that I-position and the low level of fusion with others positively albeit weakly predicted perceived romantic relationship quality. In contrast, emotional reactivity and emotional cutoff were not significant predictors of perceived romantic relationship quality. The findings were discussed in relation to the relevant literature, with implications highlighted, and recommendations presented.

Keywords: *Differentiation of self, Perceived romantic relationship quality, Emerging adulthood.*

BELİREN YETİŞKİNLERDE ROMANTİK İLİŞKİ KALİTESİNİN ANAHTARI OLARAK DAHA AZ BAŞKALARIYLA İÇ İÇE GEÇME, DAHA FAZLA BEN-POZİSYONU

Öz

Bu çalışma Türkiye'de yaşayan beliren yetişkinlerde benliğin ayrımlaşmasının boyutları -duygusal tepkisellik, ben-pozisyonu, duygusal kopma ve başkalarıyla iç içe geçme- ile algılanan romantik ilişki kalitesi arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Örneklem, 18-29 yaş aralığında ve en az altı aydır romantik bir ilişki yaşayan 424 kişiden oluşmaktadır. Veri toplama aracı olarak Algılanan Romantik İlişki Kalitesi Ölçeği, Benliğin Farklılaşması Envanteri-Kısa Formu ve demografik form kullanılmıştır. Cinsiyet, öğrencilik durumu, eğitim, gelir düzeyi ve ilişki tipi kontrol edildikten sonra, benliğin ayrımlaşması boyutlarının algılanan romantik ilişki kalitesini yordayıp yordamadığını görmek için sıralı çoklu regresyon analizi yapılmıştır. Sıralı çoklu regresyon analizinin sonuçları ben-pozisyonu ve düşük düzeyde başkalarıyla iç içe geçmenin algılanan romantik ilişki kalitesini olumlu yönde ve zayıf şekilde yordadığını ortaya çıkarmıştır. Buna karşılık, duygusal tepkisellik ve duygusal kopma alt boyutları algılanan romantik ilişki kalitesini anlamlı düzeyde yordamamıştır. Bulgular ilgili alanyazın çerçevesinde tartışılmış, uygulama önerileri vurgulanmış ve öneriler sunulmuştur.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Benliğin ayrımlaşması, Algılanan romantik ilişki kalitesi, Beliren yetişkinlik.*

*The current study is presented as a part of the first author's master's thesis which was submitted to the Department of Educational Sciences, TED University in June 2024 under the supervision of the second author. In this context, the first author was responsible for creating the main framework and content of the manuscript while the second author was responsible for shaping the manuscript, checking the analyses, and proofreading of the manuscript.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Emerging adulthood, which encompasses ages 18 to 29, represents a crucial developmental phase marked by exploration and decision-making, particularly in areas like career paths and romantic relationships (Arnett, 2000). A key challenge during this period is simultaneously cultivating intimate relationships and developing differentiation of self—a psychological process that entails a balance between autonomy and intimacy in relationships (Bowen, 1978). This perspective highlights the complexity of emerging adulthood as a time of self-discovery and relational growth. The emphasis on differentiation of self is particularly insightful, as it underscores the tension between personal autonomy and deep emotional connections. The ability to navigate this balance can significantly influence long-term relational and psychological well-being. Therefore, achieving these two tasks is vital in this developmental phase.

Romantic relationships play a pivotal role in the developmental trajectory of emerging adults, providing a context for emotional growth and identity exploration (Arnett, 2000; Arnett et al., 2014; Arnett & Mitra, 2020). These relationships serve as the basis for intimacy and self-discovery, influencing individuals' perceptions of themselves and their partners. Furthermore, during the intimacy versus isolation stage -the sixth stage of Erikson's (1968) psychosocial development theory- individuals strive to build meaningful relationships and establish a family (Miller, 2009). Consequently, during emerging adulthood, the need for intimate relationships becomes essential, and the absence of such relationships may lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation. Moreover, the quality of these romantic relationships is intricately linked to the degree of differentiation of self—an individual's capacity to maintain emotional autonomy while engaging intimately with others as depicted by Bowen's family systems theory (BFST), which sets the theoretical background of the current study (Bowen, 1978; McGoldrick et al., 2016). Research has consistently shown that higher levels of differentiation of self are associated with healthier and more satisfying romantic relationships across various stages of adulthood (Calatrava et al., 2022). Relatedly, during emerging adulthood, differentiation of self reflects an individual's ability to achieve emotional, cognitive, and behavioral independence from their family of origin. This stage is not merely a demographic transition but also a period of self-definition, where individuals take responsibility for their choices and make independent decisions separate from their familial influences.

Given that forming quality romantic relationships and achieving differentiation of self are essential developmental tasks for emerging adults, investigating the relationship between perceived romantic relationship quality and differentiation of self within this demographic is vital. Nevertheless, there is a notable lack of research focusing on unmarried emerging adults, despite the significance of understanding how differentiation of self influences perceived romantic relationship quality. Besides, to have a deeper comprehension of the concept of differentiation of self, Lampis et al. (2019) suggested that it is imperative to do study encompassing diverse cultural groups. There is a scarcity of studies on the differentiation of self in Türkiye (Işık et al., 2020). Hence, it is imperative to undertake research on the differentiation of self. In this regard, this study aims to address this gap by exploring how the dimensions of differentiation of self relate to the perceived romantic relationship quality in emerging adulthood. By examining these dynamics, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the developmental processes during this pivotal life stage.

1.1. Emerging Adulthood

As aforementioned, emerging adulthood spans the ages of 18 to 29 largely due to the extended duration of academic pursuits and the trend of marrying and becoming parents later in life (Arnett et al., 2014). During this phase, individuals have the opportunity to explore and develop their identities in various domains, including life philosophy, career paths, and romantic relationships (Arnett, 2000). That's why emerging adulthood is defined by identity development, which includes people developing their own worldview, forming healthy romantic relationships, being emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally independent from others. During this period of development, two primary objectives are to be achieved: initiating romantic relationships and developing a sense of individuality through differentiation of self (McGoldrick et al., 2016).

Several studies in Türkiye indicate that emerging adulthood typically encompasses individuals aged 18 to 26 who reside in urban areas, are still pursuing their education, and often do not yet feel fully comfortable

identifying as adults (Doğan & Cebioğlu, 2011). Although there are various studies conducted with emerging adult samples in Türkiye (Akın et al., 2020; Atak & Çok, 2010; Doğan & Cebioğlu, 2011; Yeler et al., 2021), the studies are often conducted with middle and late adult samples and more studies are needed with emerging adult samples (Atak & Çok, 2010).

1.1.1. Perceived Romantic Relationship Quality in Emerging Adulthood

Romantic relationships are characterized as ongoing, reciprocal communication between individuals that includes specific displays of compassion (Collins et al., 2009). According to Arnett (2000), initiating romantic relationships and engaging in intimacy within these relationships is a crucial developmental task during emerging adulthood. Emerging adults necessitate intimate connections, and the absence of such ties leads to feelings of loneliness and isolation (Erikson, 1968). Furthermore, the manner in which this stage is accomplished in the context of romantic relationships has a profound influence on individuals' behavior in social, sexual, and psychological aspects, as well as their selection of partners and expectations for future relationships. Consequently, perceived romantic relationship quality, which pertains to individuals' subjective assessments of their relationships, becomes increasingly significant during this stage. According to Fletcher et al. (2000), perceived romantic relationship quality consists of six fundamental components: satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust, passion, and love. Consequently, it is crucial to consider these multiple constructs when evaluating perceived romantic relationship quality. This approach is significant because it provides a comprehensive measurement of perceived romantic relationship quality by incorporating various dimensions. There are few current studies in the literature examining perceived romantic relationship quality with emerging adults (e.g., Cui & Fincham, 2010; Sağkal & Özdemir, 2019). On the other hand, as stated, since establishing romantic relationships is a crucial task during emerging adulthood (Erikson, 1968; McGoldrick et al., 2016), the quality of romantic relationships becomes important at this stage (Arnett, 2000). Therefore, the sample for this study was limited to only emerging adults. Considering the importance of establishing quality romantic relationships in emerging adulthood, it is important to investigate the factors associated with romantic relationship quality during emerging adulthood, where differentiation of self rises as an important correlate.

1.1.2. Differentiation of Self in Emerging Adulthood

An equally significant developmental task in emerging adulthood is the differentiation of self from the family of origin, which is as crucial as forming a romantic relationship (Bowen, 1978; McGoldrick et al., 2016). Differentiation of self, as defined by Bowen (1978), refers to the extent to which an individual can maintain a harmonious equilibrium between intimacy and autonomy in relationships, as well as in their cognitive and emotional functioning. Bowen (1978) states that differentiation of the self begins in early infancy, continues throughout childhood and adolescence, and is fully formed in emerging adulthood when emerging adults establish themselves independently from their family of origin, as depicted in his family systems theory.

The differentiation of self comprised four fundamental dimensions: emotional reactivity, taking an I-position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others. Emotional reactivity is the tendency of individuals to react with emotions that suppress their thoughts, which is also a suppression of differentiation of self (Bowen, 1978). Emotionally reactive individuals cannot distinguish between thoughts and feelings. On the other hand, low emotional reactivity refers to maintaining calm in stressful circumstances, finding feasible alternative solutions, and making concessions (Lampis et al., 2018).

Among the dimensions of differentiation of self, the healthiest one is the ability to take an I-position. Taking an I-position refers to the capacity of individuals to speak responsibly and independently about their thoughts, emotions, and beliefs (Bowen, 1978). Individuals who can adopt the I-position may establish relationships with their family of origin and other people that maintain a balance between independence and togetherness. They don't feel under pressure to live up to others' expectations since they can own their thoughts and feelings (Tuason & Freidlander, 2000). They can accept responsibility for their actions and communicate their thoughts to the other party without worrying about acquiring their approval (Bowen, 1978).

The tendency to cut contact physically or psychologically with a significant other to resolve an interpersonal disagreement is known as the emotional cutoff (Bowen, 1978). Individuals who tend towards emotional cutoff tend to keep an exaggerated distance from others and isolate themselves. In other words, emotional cutoff can be defined as becoming emotionally isolated and withdrawn (low differentiation) or maintaining ties with the environment without fear of losing its identity (high differentiation) (Tuason & Friedlander, 2000).

Lastly, fusion with others refers to the condition of establishing dependent relations with significant others and lacking a distinct sense of self and others. Fused individuals perceive remaining away from others as an unsafe situation, and they wish to be deeply involved in the lives of others because their sense of self is fairly weak (Bowen, 1978). In other words, fusion with others can be defined as being overly attached to others (low differentiation) or maintaining relationships with a clear sense of self (high differentiation) (Tuason & Friedlander, 2000). BFST (Bowen, 1978) indicates that individuals who differentiate themselves from their family of origin form a unique identity and accept their partner's identity without fusion; thus, they can establish romantic relationships with quality. These dimensions act as indicators of an individual's level of differentiation of self and fall under the broader concept of differentiation of self. Given the critical role that differentiation of self plays during emerging adulthood, it is vital to explore all related to this construct throughout this developmental stage.

1.1.3. Differentiation of Self and Perceived Romantic Relationship Quality in Emerging Adulthood

Recent research has found a strong connection between the differentiation of self and the perceived romantic relationship quality (Calatrava et al., 2022; Kalkan & Aydoğan, 2019). Also, there are several studies investigating the association between perceived romantic relationship quality and each dimension of differentiation of self separately. According to these studies, a low level of emotional reactivity (Lampis, 2015; Lampis et al., 2017; Skowron, 2000), a low level of emotional cutoff (Skowron, 2000; Yousefi et al., 2009) and a low level of fusion with others (Skowron, 2000; Yousefi et al., 2009) positively predict perceived romantic relationship quality. On the other hand, I-position predicted perceived romantic relationship quality (Kalkan & Aydoğan, 2019; Skowron, 2000; Yousefi et al., 2009).

Furthermore, despite the fact that differentiation of self is recognized as one of the key developmental tasks for emerging adults (McGoldrick et al., 2016) and the quality of romantic relationships is crucial during this stage (Arnett, 2000), there is a paucity of research exploring the association between differentiation of self and perceived romantic relationship quality. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no studies have specifically investigated this association in an unmarried emerging adult sample. Consequently, the current study aims to assess whether perceived romantic relationship quality and differentiation of self are associated among unmarried emerging adults. Additionally, considering the practical implication of this study, it can serve as a valuable resource for psychological counselors working with couples. Since improving clients' perceived romantic relationship quality is a fundamental objective in couple counseling, understanding how changes in the dimensions of differentiation of self relate to improvements in perceived romantic relationship quality can be instrumental in achieving this goal.

1.2. The Current Study

The goal of the current study is to examine the association between the dimensions of differentiation of self- emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others- and perceived romantic relationship quality among emerging adults in Türkiye. To the goal of the study, the research question and hypotheses proposed are as follows:

Research question: To what extent do the dimensions of differentiation of self-emotional reactivity, I position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others-predict perceived romantic relationship quality in emerging adults?

Hypothesis 1 (H1): The low level of emotional reactivity will positively predict perceived romantic relationship quality.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): I-position will positively predict perceived romantic relationship quality.

Hypothesis 3 (H3): The low level of emotional cutoff will positively predict perceived romantic relationship quality.

Hypothesis 4 (H4): The low level of fusion with others will positively predict perceived romantic relationship quality.

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

The sample was selected via convenience sampling, and the data was collected from volunteer participants. The following inclusion criteria were used for the recruitment of the participants: (a) being at least 18 and at most 29 years old, (b) not being married, and (c) being in a romantic relationship for at least six months. Since the components of perceived romantic relationship quality develop over time (Overbeek et al., 2007) and romantic relationships typically attain stability after at least six months (Knapp, 1978), the study included the criterion of having been in a romantic relationship for a minimum of six months.

In this context, 462 emerging adults were recruited. However, six did not meet the age criterion, and 32 did not meet the relationship duration criterion; therefore, they weren't included in the analysis. The last sample of the main study comprised 424 participants aged between 18 and 29 (M = 23.17, SD = 2.41). Of the total sample, 51.4% were women (n = 218), and 48.6% were men (n = 206). While the majority of the total sample (81.8%) (n = 347) were students, 18.2% (n = 77) were not. Of the total sample, 68.4% (n = 290) were high school graduates, and 25% (n = 106) graduated from a university. The remaining had a master's (5.7%) (n = 24) or a Ph.D. (.9%) (n = 4) degree. Regarding the income ranges of participants, 37.5% (n = 159) had no income, 36.8% (n = 156) had an income between 1 ₺- 11402 ₺, 8.7% (n = 37) had an income between 15001 ₺- 25000 ₺, 8.3% (n = 35) had an income of 25001 ₺- 40000 ₺, 8% (n = 34) had an income between 11403 ₺- 15000 ₺ and .7% (n = 3) had an income of 40001 ₺ and above (at the time of data collection, 1 ₺ corresponded to approximately 27 ₺). When the romantic relationship status of the participants was evaluated, most participants had a romantic partner (70.1%) (n = 297). The remaining were engaged (11.6%) (n = 49), cohabiting (10.8%) (n = 46), or both cohabiting and engaged (7.5%) (n = 32). The relationship duration of the sample varied between six and 84 months (M = 19.68 months, SD = 13.51).

During the emerging adulthood stage, individuals may struggle to completely relinquish the dependencies formed during adolescence and may not fully grasp their responsibilities as adults. However, unlike adolescents, emerging adults often possess professional and educational experiences (Arnett, 2000). Given that emerging adulthood is a transitional period, individuals in this stage may not rely on their families of origin to the same extent as in adolescence, nor have they fully established their independence as seen in middle adulthood. Additionally, because academic pursuits take longer than in previous years (Arnett et al., 2014), some individuals may continue their education, earn their own income, or engage in both activities. As a result, as understood from the demographic characteristics of the sample, this study's sample reflects a diverse range of educational backgrounds and income levels.

2.2. Data Collection Instruments

2.2.1. Perceived Relationship Quality Components (PRQC) Inventory:

Perceived romantic relationship quality was measured by the PRQC Inventory. PRQC Inventory was developed by Fletcher et al. (2000). There are a total of 18 items in the inventory, and it consists of six subscales, which are satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, trust, passion, and love. There are no reverse items in the inventory. Each item is answered on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*). These items evaluate the relationship and partner. The higher the scores obtained from PRQC, the higher the perceived romantic relationship quality. The total scores obtained from the answers given to the inventory items vary between 18 and 126. One sample item for the satisfaction sub-dimension is "How satisfied are you with your relationship?". A sample item for

the commitment sub-dimension is "How committed are you to your relationship?". One sample item for the intimacy sub-dimension is "How intimate is your relationship?". One sample item for the trust sub-dimension is "How much do you trust your partner?". One sample item for the passion sub-dimension is "How passionate is your relationship?" and a sample item for the love sub-dimension is "How much do you love your partner?". In Fletcher et al.'s (2000) study, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .85 and higher (α = .88 in Study 1 and α = .85 in Study 2) (Fletcher et al., 2000). PRQC Inventory was adapted into Turkish by Özgülük Üçok et al. (2024), confirming its factor structure. In the current study, the total score of PRQC was used, and the Cronbach Alpha coefficient calculated for PRQC is .95.

2.2.2. Differentiation of Self Inventory- Short Form (DSI- SF):

Differentiation of self was measured by DSI-SF. The DSI-SF was developed by Drake et al. (2015). There are 20 items in the inventory, and it consists of four subscales, which are, respectively, emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others. There are six items each for the emotional reactivity and I-position subscales, three items for the emotional cutoff subscale, and five items for the fusion with others subscale, 15 of which are reverse. Each item is answered on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all characteristic of me,* 6 = *very characteristic of me*). Since the emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others subscales consist entirely of reverse items, higher scores obtained from these subscales indicate that the individual displays the relevant trait less. On the other hand, since the I-position subscale contains only one reverse item, higher scores obtained from this subscale indicate that the individual has a better ability to take an I-position. The higher the scores obtained from DSI-SF, the more differentiation of self. The total scores obtained from the answers given to the inventory items vary between 20 and 120. One sample item for the emotional reactivity subscale is "At times my feelings get the best of me and I have trouble thinking clearly". A sample item for the I-position subscale is "I tend to remain pretty calm even under stress." One sample item for the emotional cutoff subscale is "I tend to distance myself when people get too close to me", and a sample item for the fusion with others subscale is "I usually need a lot of encouragement from others when starting a big job or task." Additionally, the reliability coefficient of Cronbach's alpha for the entire inventory was .88. For emotional cutoff, I-position, emotional reactivity, and fusion with others, the corresponding Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients were .80, .70, .79, and .68 (Drake et al., 2015). DSI-SF was adapted into Turkish by Sarıkaya et al. (2018), confirming its factor structure. In the current study, all the subscales of DSI-SF were used, and the Cronbach Alpha coefficients calculated for each subscale are as follows: .78, .61, .66, and .72, respectively, for emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others.

2.2.3. Demographic Form

A demographic form was used to determine if the participants fit the inclusion criteria and to get information about the participants' individual and relational characteristics. The demographic form included data on the participants' individual information, such as age, gender, education, income, and relational characteristics, such as romantic relationship status and romantic relationship duration.

2.3. Data Collection Procedure

Prior to initiating data collection, approval was acquired from the Human Research and Ethics Committee at the authors' affiliated university (hidden for anonymity). Data collection took place from September to the end of October 2023. The sample was reached via convenience sampling, and data was gathered from volunteer participants. The data was collected online using Google Forms, which allowed for the creation of an online version of the informed consent and instruments. These were distributed to participants via social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Instagram. The Google Forms link included an announcement outlining the purpose of the study, indicating that it aimed to investigate factors related to participants' perceived romantic relationship quality. Prior to data collection, each participant provided their informed consent. Upon clicking the link, participants were first presented with an informed consent form that needed to be approved. If they consented, they were then able to access the demographic form and other measures. Completing the instruments took approximately 10 to 15 minutes.

2.4. Data Analyses

The current study aimed to investigate the association between the dimensions of differentiation of self-emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others- and perceived romantic relationship quality. To achieve this aim, the data was analyzed using several steps. Before the main analysis, first the raw data was screened. At this stage, it was checked whether the participants met the inclusion criteria, and the data of the participants who failed to fulfill the inclusion criteria were determined, and these participants were excluded from the analyses. Before performing the analyses, each variable's standardized z-scores were calculated in order to identify outliers. The findings showed that none of the cases fell outside of the range of +-3.29, and cases ranged between -2.60 and 1.82. Since participants were required to answer all of the questions on the online form, no missing data was found. Afterward, the assumptions of hierarchical multiple regression analysis-normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity, independent errors, and influential observations- were tested. The assumption of normality was assessed using the skewness (range between .10 and -1.13) and kurtosis values (range between -.13 and -1.28). To check the linearity and homoscedasticity assumptions, regression plots were created. Also, tolerance values (within the ranges between .26 and .66), VIF values (lower than 10), and the inter-correlation coefficients among the variables (ranging from .43 to .81) showed that there was no multicollinearity. In addition, as the Durbin-Watson value was found to be 1.7 (between the value of 1 and 3) the independent errors assumption was met and the value of Cook's Distance was discovered to be .04 (less than 1) the influential observations assumption was met. Second, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to determine the associations among the dimensions of differentiation of self and perceived romantic relationship quality. Then, t-test and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to test whether perceived romantic relationship quality differs with respect to demographic variables. Finally, hierarchical multiple regression analysis was performed to see whether the dimensions of differentiation of self-emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others- predict overall perceived romantic relationship quality. SPSS Version 22 was used for all analyses (IBM Corp., 2013).

3. RESULTS

3.1. Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations

The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were utilized to investigate correlations among the variables (Table 1). Results depicted that there was a positive correlation between emotional reactivity and emotional cutoff ($r = .76$, $p < .01$); emotional reactivity and fusion with others ($r = .81$, $p < .01$); emotional cutoff and fusion with others ($r = .77$, p < .01). Also, the low level of emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others were positively correlated with I-position ($r = .51$, $p < .01$; $r = .49$, $p < .01$; $r = .58$, respectively). Additionally, as demonstrated in Table 1, the low level of emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others were positively correlated with perceived romantic relationship quality ($r = .43$, $p < .01$; $r = .45$, $p < .01$; $r = .52$, $p < .01$, respectively). On the other hand, there was a positive correlation between I-position and perceived romantic relationship quality ($r = .55$, $p < .01$). In this situation, the lowest correlation was between emotional reactivity and perceived romantic relationship quality ($r = .43$, $p < .01$), and the highest correlation was between emotional reactivity and fusion with others ($r = .81$, $p < .01$).

Table 1: Bivariate Correlations Among the Study Variables

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
1. Emotional reactivity	19.04	7.96					
2. I-position	23.53	6.70	.51**				
3. Emotional cutoff	10.64	4.37	.76**	.49**			
4. Fusion with others	17.82	6.58	.81**	.58**	.77**		
5. PRQ	101.63	23.76	.43**	.55**	.45**	.52**	

Note. M and *SD* are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. PRQ = Perceived Relationship Quality. Higher scores on emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others subscales indicate less emotional reactivity, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others. Additionally, higher scores on the I-position subscale indicate higher ability to take an I-position.
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

3.2. T-test and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Results

T-test and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were conducted to test whether perceived romantic relationship quality differs with respect to demographic variables. According to t-test results, there was a significant gender difference on the criterion variable (perceived romantic relationship quality): t (420) = 6.38, p < .05. Findings showed that men have higher perceived romantic relationship quality (M = 108.88, SD = 15.98) compared to women (M = 94.79, SD = 27.61). Also, there was a significant student status difference on the criterion variable of the study: t (420) = 5.73, p <.05. Findings depicted that students have higher perceived romantic relationship quality (M = 104.64, SD = 22.19) compared to non-students (M = 88.09, SD = 25.97).

Additionally, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted in order to examine the education level, income level, and romantic relationship type differences in the perceived romantic relationship quality. Accordingly, there were significant mean differences across education level on the criterion variable of the study: F (3,420) = 7.67, p < .01. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD revealed that participants who were high school graduates had higher perceived romantic relationship quality than participants who were university graduates and had a master's degree. Moreover, there were significant mean differences across income level on the perceived romantic relationship quality: F (5,418) = 8.81, p < .01. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD revealed that participants who had no income had higher perceived romantic relationship quality than participants who had an income between 11403 ₺- 15000 ₺, and 25001 ₺- 40000 ₺. Participants who had an income between 0 ₺- 11402 ₺ had higher perceived romantic relationship quality than participants who had an income between 11403 ₺- 15000 ₺, 15001 ₺- 25000 ₺ and 25001 ₺- 40000 ₺. Additionally, results showed that participants who had an income of 40001 ₺ and above had higher perceived romantic relationship quality than participants who had an income between 15001 ₺- 25000 ₺. Lastly, there were significant mean differences across romantic relationship types on the perceived romantic relationship quality: F (3,420) = 11.58, p < .01. Post-hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD revealed that participants who had a romantic partner and participants who were engaged had higher perceived romantic relationship quality than participants who were cohabitating.

3.3. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis

As perceived romantic relationship quality differs with respect to demographic variables, hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted in order to control these demographic variables that may be confounding in the analysis. In the first step of the hierarchical multiple regression analysis, the demographic variables-gender, student status, education, income, and relationship type-were entered into the model dummy-coded. In the second step, independent variables, which are the four dimensions of differentiation of self-emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others- were entered (Table 2). The demographic variables in the first step accounted for 18% of the variance in perceived romantic relationship quality (R^2= .18, F (5,418) = 18.89, p <.001). Emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cutoff, and fusion with others entered in the second step, explaining 49% of the variance in perceived romantic relationship quality (R^2= .18, F (4,414) = 43.63, p <.001) after controlling for the effect of demographic variables. I-position (β = .36, p <.001) and low level of fusion with others (β = .24, p <.001) positively predicted perceived romantic relationship quality. On the other hand, emotional reactivity (β =-.06, p> .05) and emotional cutoff (β = .12, p> .05) didn't significantly predict perceived romantic relationship quality.

Table 2. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis: Prediction of Perceived Romantic Relationship Quality from Gender, Student Status, Education Level, Income Level, Relationship Type and Dimensions of Differentiation of Self

Step and Variable	B	SE	ß	t	p	Partial r
Step 1						
Gender	-13.41	2.14	-0.28	-6.27	<.001	.00
Student Status	-16.24	3.01	-0.26	-5.40	<.001	.00
Education Level	-4.11	1.90	-0.10	-2.16	<.05	.00
Income Level	-0.44	0.48	-0.04	-0.90	.37	.21
Relationship Type	-3.21	1.39	-0.11	-2.32	<.05	.43
% Variance explained R^2=.18						
Step 2						
Gender	-5.43	1.97	-0.14	-2.76	<.001	-.28
Student Status	-15.05	2.42	-0.24	-6.21	<.001	.00
Education Level	-5.79	1.52	-0.15	-3.81	<.001	.00
Income Level	-0.60	0.39	-0.05	-1.54	.12	.21
Relationship Type	-1.75	1.12	-0.06	-1.56	.12	.43
Emotional reactivity	-0.19	0.21	-0.06	-0.87	.39	.43
I-position	1.27	0.15	0.36	8.26	<.001	.55
Emotional cutoff	0.66	0.33	0.12	1.97	.26	.45
Fusion with others	0.86	0.25	0.24	3.40	<.001	.52
% Variance explained R^2=.49						

4. DISCUSSION

The current study aimed to examine to what extent the dimensions of differentiation of self predicted perceived romantic relationship quality. Results of the analyses showed significant differences in perceived romantic relationship quality with respect to gender, student status, education, income, and relationship type. Thus, after controlling for the effect of demographic variables, findings revealed that emotional reactivity and emotional cutoff did not predict relationship quality, whereas I-position and fusion with others did.

The findings indicate that men perceive their romantic relationship quality to be higher than women do. This discrepancy can be attributed to the fact that women tend to have higher standards in romantic relationships, making them more likely to feel that their expectations are not met, leading to lower satisfaction (Vangelisti & Daly, 1997). Additionally, the results showed that students reported higher perceived romantic relationship quality compared to non-students. Similarly, high school graduates perceived their romantic relationships more positively than university graduates and those with a master's degree. Furthermore, participants with no or low income reported higher relationship quality than those with higher incomes. This may be explained by the fact that most participants were high school graduates currently pursuing university studies and had little to no income. Since students are often financially supported by their families, they are largely free from financial stressors, which have been negatively associated with romantic relationship quality (Jackson et al., 2023). Lastly, the study found that non-cohabiting participants reported higher perceived romantic relationship quality than those who were cohabiting. This could be due to cohabiting individuals experiencing more conflicts, negative communication (Willoughby et al., 2011), and aggression (Rhoades et al., 2012) compared to those who are not living with their partners.

After controlling for the effect of demographic variables, H1 was rejected that a low level of emotional reactivity did not predict perceived romantic relationship quality. There are inconsistent findings in the literature about the association between a low level of emotional reactivity and relationship quality among different cultural orientations. For example, in more individualist cultures such as U.S. and European countries, a low level of emotional reactivity has been found to be associated with romantic relationship quality. On the other hand,

in more collectivist cultures such as Türkiye, studies indicate no significant association between a low level of emotional reactivity and relationship quality (Kalkan & Aydoğan, 2019). Emotional reactivity, characterized by individuals reacting with emotions that suppress their thoughts (Bowen, 1978), may be influenced by cultural norms surrounding emotional expression. In Turkish culture, difficulties in recognizing and communicating emotions may hinder the expression of emotional experiences (Voltan-Acar, 2019). This cultural context suggests that emotions and thoughts affect behaviors in a balanced way. When emotional experiences are suppressed or unexpressed, thoughts tend to dominate, leading to a diminished ability to engage in open emotional exchanges within relationships. Consequently, the lack of observable emotional reactivity among the Turkish emerging adult sample may explain its absence as a predictor of perceived romantic relationship quality.

Confirming H2, the I-position predicted perceived romantic relationship quality, showing consistency with prior findings (Kalkan & Aydoğan, 2019; Yousefi et al., 2009). Taking an I-position refers to the capacity of individuals to speak responsibly and independently about their thoughts, emotions, and beliefs (Bowen, 1978). Individuals who are capable of taking the I-position may establish relationships that maintain a balance between independence and togetherness (Tuason & Freidlander, 2000), and this balance creates quality relationships. Especially during the emerging adulthood period, individuals develop the skills to express themselves, set boundaries with others, and maintain balance in social relationships. Establishing boundaries allows individuals to both strengthen their individual identities and establish healthy relationships that are balanced in terms of independence and togetherness. This interplay between asserting one's individuality and engaging with others is essential for relationship quality. Therefore, the ability to articulate one's thoughts and feelings independently is a strong predictor of perceived romantic relationship quality.

Rejecting H3, the low level of emotional cutoff didn't predict relationship quality, contrary to prior findings (e.g., Yousefi et al., 2009). Emotional cutoff can be defined as becoming emotionally isolated and withdrawn (Tuason & Friedlander, 2000). Isolation is negatively associated with the collectivistic social structure; thus, it is less evident in Turkish society, which has a more collectivistic culture (Hofstede et al., 2010). In Turkish society, being together is valued, and being alone as an individual is perceived as being isolated. That is why emotional cutoff is rare in Turkish society; individuals are highly fused with others, and it is negatively associated with romantic relationship quality (Yousefi et al., 2009). Overall, this cultural emphasis on togetherness suggests that emotional cutoff may not manifest in the same way in Turkish emerging adults. Their strong connections with others likely mitigate the risks associated with emotional isolation, leading to different dynamics in romantic relationships. Consequently, the rarity of emotional cutoff within this cultural context further underscores the importance of maintaining interconnectedness, which may have a more significant impact on relationship quality.

Lastly, the low level of fusion with others predicted relationship quality, confirming H4. This means that the individuals who are less fused with others have more perceived romantic relationship quality, corresponding to the prior studies (Yousefi et al., 2009). Fusion with others refers to the condition of establishing dependent relations with significant others and lacking a clear sense of self and others (Bowen, 1978). The implications of this finding are profound, as they highlight the importance of self-concept clarity in relationship dynamics. Individuals with a well-defined sense of self tend more to avoid losing their identity in relationships, which enables them to engage more authentically with their partners. This clarity contributes to healthier relationship dynamics, as it allows for individuality while fostering intimacy. Moreover, individuals with greater self-concept clarity can navigate relational challenges more effectively, leading to enhanced relationship satisfaction (Lewandowski et al., 2009). This explains how individuals who are less fused with others have greater self-concept clarity and have more relationship quality.

In conclusion, the study underscores the importance of understanding the dimensions of differentiation of self within the context of perceived romantic relationship quality among emerging adults. By exploring emotional reactivity, I-position, emotional cutoff, and fusion, the research sheds light on the nuanced relational dynamics that define this developmental stage, offering valuable insights for practical applications in counseling and relationship education.

4.1. Limitations of the Study

The first limitation of this study is that considering its cross-sectional nature, a causal relationship between the variables can't be inferred. Second, as self-report measurement instruments were used in the study, participants may have given socially desirable responses, resulting in a social desirability effect. Third, since the convenience sampling technique is used in this study, selection bias may be present. Although this method helps reach individuals who are available and eager, there is limited control over the sampling process. As the convenience sampling method is not a random sampling technique, this restricts generalizability (Heppner et al., 2007). Furthermore, the sample consisted of emerging adults who were mostly university students, and all were heterosexual. Thus, the result of this study isn't generalizable to all emerging adults. Lastly, since the data for this study were gathered via an online Google form, there is a possibility that results may be compromised by not following the testing procedure because the researcher was not present when each instrument was administered. This might jeopardize the data's reliability. On the other hand, including only participants with internet access in the study poses a problem in terms of generalizability.

4.2. Recommendations

Although Bowen's family systems theory (BFST) was developed in the United States, many components of it may apply to more collectivistic nations such as Türkiye as well. To gain a deeper understanding of the differentiation of self, Lampis et al. (2019) recommended conducting research across a range of cultural groups. Nonetheless, research on the differentiation of self is scarce in Türkiye (Işık et al., 2020); thus, more research is recommended. Therefore, to confirm the results of the current study and verify whether similar associations exist in other cultural groups, cross-cultural studies are recommended.

Moreover, as the perceived romantic relationship quality is a dynamic construct that evolves and transforms over time, cross-sectional studies cannot adequately explain these facts. For this reason, future studies can be carried out using longitudinal or experimental studies. Therefore, it can be inferred whether the changes in levels of dimensions of differentiation of self cause a change in perceived romantic relationship quality over time or whether changes in perceived romantic relationship quality cause a change in levels of dimensions of differentiation of self over time.

Also, since the convenience sampling method is used in this study, selection bias may be present. There is limited control over the sampling process, even though this method helps reach individuals who are available and eager. As the convenience sampling method is not a random sampling technique, this restricts generalizability (Heppner et al., 2007). Therefore, probability sampling methods can be used in future studies. Also, as the sample consisted of emerging adults who were mostly university students and all were heterosexual, the study result isn't generalizable to all emerging adults. Therefore, the study results need to be replicated with more diverse samples consisting of emerging adults with different education levels, diverse gender identities, and sexual orientations. Additionally, the current study's sample exhibited heterogeneity with respect to gender and romantic relationship status. Thus, this situation may have impacted individuals' dimensions of differentiation of self and perceived romantic relationship quality. Therefore, gender and romantic relationship status may be taken as control variables in future studies. Lastly, in this study, to investigate whether the dimensions of differentiation of self predict overall perceived romantic relationship quality, data was collected from participants who have been in a romantic relationship. However, since there is only data about one partner's perception, it is not possible to compare it with what the other partner reports. To achieve this, future research is recommended to include dyadic data.

4.3. Implications

Firstly, in terms of the theoretical implication of this study, there is limited research on the differentiation of self, highlighting the need for studies across diverse cultural contexts to enhance our understanding of this concept (Lampis et al., 2019). Additionally, research on the differentiation of self is particularly limited in Türkiye (Işık et al., 2020). Given this gap in the literature, this study is crucial as it contributes to the existing body of knowledge. Furthermore, most studies investigating the association between perceived romantic relationship

quality and differentiation of self have typically involved married participants in middle adulthood (e.g., Calatrava et al., 2022; Kalkan & Aydoğan, 2019; Yousefi et al., 2009). It has been suggested that this research area should also be explored with unmarried emerging adults (Işık et al., 2020). Consequently, this study aimed to investigate the association between perceived romantic relationship quality and differentiation of self with an unmarried emerging adult sample, thereby enhancing the uniqueness of this research. Moreover, Türkiye is in the process of cultural change and is moving from collectivism to individualism (İmamoğlu, 1998). In cultures characterized by strong collectivist values, dependence on one's family of origin is often viewed positively, whereas individualistic cultures encourage individuals to cultivate a differentiated self (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2014). Given that emerging adults are navigating this social change, conducting research with this demographic is particularly important.

Secondly, from a practical perspective, one of the most common goals in couple counseling is to increase the relationship quality of clients; hence, psychological counselors may first start with accompanying their clients to foster their differentiation of self to increase their relationship quality. As the I-position and the low level of fusion with others positively predicted perceived romantic relationship quality in this study, psychological counselors can perform interventions that will enable clients to take an I-position without being fused with others.

Additionally, by using the Differentiation of Self Inventory-Short Form (DSI- SF), psychological counselors can get an idea about their clients' degrees of differentiation of self. Getting information about the clients' degrees of differentiation of self may help the counseling sessions recognize the clients' maladaptive behavioral patterns. In particular, by determining in which dimension of differentiation of self the client has problems, necessary interventions can be planned (Lampis et al., 2018).

Also, the study results may encourage psychological counselors to conceptualize cases from a more multigenerational perspective. Although not measured in the current study, in Bowen Family Systems Therapy, families are examined through a multigenerational perspective (Bowen, 1976), as family interactions and relationship patterns are inherited by the following generation (Carr, 2006). Therefore, unless people review and change the patterns passed from earlier generations, these behaviors will likely be repeated in the current generation. The repetition of certain behaviors is more likely to occur if family members tend to be either emotionally overinvolved (fused) or emotionally cutoff (psychologically or physically) from one another (Gladding, 2015). For this reason, working with the family as well as the client is crucial (Dolz-Del-Castellar & Oliver, 2021). In this context, the current study encourages psychological counselors to examine clients' family interactions and relationship patterns from a multigenerational perspective using techniques such as genograms in therapy sessions.

Ethical statement

The research was approved by the TED University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Disclosure Statements (Beyan ve Açıklamalar)

1. The authors of this article confirm that their work complies with the principles of research and publication ethics (Bu çalışmanın yazarları, araştırma ve yayın etiği ilkelerine uyduklarını kabul etmektedirler).

2. No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors (Yazarlar tarafından herhangi bir çıkar çatışması beyan edilmemiştir).

3. This article was screened for potential plagiarism using a plagiarism screening program (Bu çalışma, intihal tarama programı kullanılarak intihal taramasından geçirilmiştir).

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