

## ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP AND WELL-BEING: A REVIEW OF THE ROLE OF TRUST, LOVE EXPRESSION, COMMITMENT

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### ABSTRACT

While there is consensus that romantic relationships are important for personal growth and can potentially lead to positive emotions including happiness. Limited studies have looked at the specific mechanisms in which the relationship can contribute to well-being. This review is part of the attempt to further understand how romantic relationships can contribute to well-being by focusing on specific elements of the relationships namely trust, love expression, and commitment. Trust, love expression and commitment are arguably key aspects about romantic relationships that contribute well-being and therefore become the key focus in this review. A total of 48 studies were included in this review. This review emphasizes the importance of romantic relationships for well-being and highlights the role of trust, love expression, and commitment as key elements that should be focused on by future research in this area. In addition, this paper also discusses two Social Exchange Theory and PERMA as main theoretical framework in explaining the relationships between romantic relationships and well-being and the role of trust, love expression and emotions as elements in romantic relationships. This review highlights the need for more studies to look at these aspects from a bigger picture and to include sample from broader cultural context.

**Keywords:** Commitment, Love Expression, Psychological Well-Being, Romantic Relationship, Trust

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Although much past research has identified the importance of romantic relationships in contributing to psychological well-being, there is still limited understanding of the elements that contribute to relationship satisfaction and consequently well-being. The main objective of this article is to extensively evaluate the literature on romantic relationship research by emphasizing key elements that can lead to higher satisfaction of romantic relationships and in turn contribute to greater well-being. To achieve this aim, we first provide an overview of the romantic relationship and the significant correlation between romantic relationships and psychological well-being. This is followed by a discussion of trust, love expression, and commitment in romantic relationships. We argue that while these elements have all been examined separately throughout, they are all interconnected. There is a critical need for us to learn and comprehend.

In the final section of this paper, we use social exchange theory and PERMA theory to propose a possible conceptual model that can be used to examine trust, love expression, and commitment in a romantic relationship simultaneously.

## **2.0 METHODS**

We conducted an independent search for each variable and theory to find all potential studies that assess the relationship between romantic relationship, trust, love expression, commitment, and psychological well-being (Social Exchange Theory and PERMA Theory). We looked through a number of databases, including PsycINFO, ResearchGate, APA PsycArticles, Wiley Online Library, and Dissertation Abstracts. In order to find studies (articles, book chapters, and dissertations) referencing romantic relationships and other key terms associated with the two theories and published between 1958 and 2022, we searched databases of academic literature. We used a variety of search terms, such as social, interpersonal, young adult, support, affection, maintenance, happiness, and others, to gather the most comprehensive sample of relevant articles. Additionally, we manually reviewed the references in earlier reviews and studies that addressed with commitment, love expression, and trust.

## **3.0 DISCUSSION**

### **3.1 ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP**

The beginning of a romantic relationship usually involves two familiar but distant persons. Due to a shared interest, this relationship may develop into friendship at a later stage. A close friendship is most frequently initial point that develops into romantic relationship (Singer, 1987). According to Berscheid and Reis (1998), people find it simpler to get along with those who share commonalities. These similarities provide a person with a cozy and sense of safety that makes it easier for them to build emotional intimacy and trust with others. Trust therefore is a key element in this relationship.

A romantic relationship involves certain levels of sexual engagement in addition to emotional attachment (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). Typically, a romantic relationship is between two people who acknowledge each other and are in a relationship voluntarily (Collins et al., 2009). Mixed-gender relationships including one male and one female were common in romantic relationships. However, a relationship between two people of the same gender, often known as a homosexual relationship, can also falls under the description of a romantic relationship.

In the modern world, a romantic connection is seen as a personal issue of freedom of choice, where the person can decide with whom or how the relationship will begin. Free love refers to a person's ability to choose their partner for marriage or a romantic relationship without outside interference, such as their parents (Hatfield et al., 2007). While this personal freedom is more common in Western cultures, it is becoming more acceptable in Asian context.

Reviewing previous studies, it can be said that a romantic relationship is a type of attraction that typically has a sexual component (Fisher, 2004; Hatfield & Rapson, 2005; Hatfield, Rapson, & Martel, 2007). Although it is a way to convey affection, this sexual desire seems to make other sexual behavior more engaging. Unlike lust, which just emphasizes sexual desire, sexual attraction occurs in romantic relationships (Ellis, 1960; Fromm, 1956; Jankowiak, 1995). In fact, a romantic relationship is referred to as a blend of emotional intimacy and sexual behavior. Romantic love stresses physical expressions of romantic devotion in addition to emotional attraction to romantic partners (Furman et al., 1999). In this regard, love expression in the form of sexual or physical attraction is part of the key elements in romantic relationship. Such expression may not always be accepted and can be constrained by varying cultural, religious, and even personal ideals. Nevertheless, they remain as an important aspect of romantic love.

According to Sternberg (1986) Triangle Theory of Love can be used to categorize different kinds of love that exist within interpersonal relationships. Intimacy, passion, and commitment are the triangle theory of love's three primary pillars. Various facets of love will be represented by the blending of various elements. While passion relates to physical and sexual desire, intimacy frequently alludes to the emotional side of a relationship. The decision to fall in love and the

subsequent decision to maintain that love are both examples of commitment. According to Sternberg (1986), when all three of these elements are present, a successful and healthy romantic relationship can form and be maintained.

From the above discussion, romantic relationships often develop from familiar relationships where a person begins to build emotional intimacy and trust with others. The relationship is voluntary and entails physical attraction and sexual relationship (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Fisher, 2004; Hatfield & Rapson, 2005; Hatfield, Rapson, & Martel, 2007). Key ingredients include intimacy, passion, and commitment. Based on this discussion, we argue that trust, love expression, and commitment as key elements, and this paper focuses on these three aspects of romantic relationships. Before reviewing them individually, a discussion on how romantic relationship is related to well-being is presented.

### **3.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP IN PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING**

The relationship between romantic relationships and psychological health has been well-established. According to previous research, social relationships can support psychological well-being (Panahi et al., 2016; Tan & Karabulutlu, 2005; Dunn & O' Brien, 2009; Gulact, 2010). The social connection offers the assistance needed for a person to overcome obstacles in life. The individual will be able to perform better in the mental and physical areas of self-development if they have social support. According to Diener and Seligman (2004), an individual with a strong social bond is allegedly happier than someone without one. Positive emotions can make a person more adaptable and imaginative in their thinking. Additionally, a positive feeling is one of the components that can enhance well-being (Myers & Diener, 1995). With positive emotions and support, people are no longer constrained by negative emotions including fear. Fear might prevent someone from taking on tasks or moving forward.

On the other hand, prior research indicated that those with a lack of social relationships were less likely to form and maintain strong interpersonal bonds (Alferi et al., 2001; Leary, Twenge, & Quinlivam., 2006; Lee, Draper, & Lee, 2001; Lee & Robbins, 1998; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Downey & Feldman, 1996). The person with fewer social ties typically needs more affection and a sense of belonging from their partner. If these needs are not met, a person will start to feel anxious and suspicious.

They can become frequently overly emotional and susceptible to external influences. When someone lacks social relationships, the interpersonal trust they develop is likely to be weak. A minor unpleasant event might erode interpersonal trust, thus they need time before believing their partner. People with weaker social ties find it difficult to trust their romantic partners, and their relationships tend to end sooner than those with strong social ties (Cacioppo et al., 2006; Leary et al., 2006; Downey et al., 1998).

A romantic connection is one of the elements that determine a person's total subjective well-being (Campbell et al., 2005). Romantic relationships consistently give identity, support, and solace from psychological suffering to an individual throughout their adult development (Umberson & Karas Montez, 2010). Myers (2000) also emphasized that a person's entire well-being will benefit more from being in a healthy romantic relationship than from simply being in a relationship. An indication that a person is in a high-quality romantic relationship is when they rate their level of satisfaction in a relationship as high. This is because a romantic relationship's satisfaction can be used to describe its quality. As previously discussed, individuals in healthy love relationships can rely on their partners for support, which frees them from a lot of problems. As a result, the individuals would also feel more emotionally secure and stable. The best predictors of happiness for emerging adults were emotional security and companionship (Demir, 2008). A romantic relationship's intimacy, commitment, and trust were also discovered to be substantially connected with psychological well-being (Uysal et al., 2012).

The above discussion further highlights how romantic relationships can contribute to well-being. We argue that it is important to further break down elements of romantic relationships into specific aspects that are significant to well-being. We identified trust, love expressions, and commitment as key elements of romantic relationships that contribute to well-being. The following review will consider the role of each element in romantic relationship.

### **3.3 TRUST IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP**

Carsel (2020) describes trust as current motivational moods and willingness to rely on others to achieve an interdependent goal. This suggests that both parties will act in a way that assumes the other will carry out their responsibility. As result, any positive behavior displayed by one of the parties in the relationship would encourage similar behavior in another party. According to Rempel et al. (1985), dependability and predictability are the basis of trusts that can be built through witnessing their partner's conduct in the past. A person will be more likely to trust their partner when there is a greater presence of good and trustworthy behaviors in the relationship. Taking into account the dependability and predictability component, a person will find it easier to trust their partner if their partner exhibits more predictable positive traits.

Rempel et al. (1985) found that dependability was positively connected with love and happiness in a partnership. This led to the hypothesis that a romantic relationship would be more gratifying as the level of trust in the relationship grew. Several earlier studies have shown that trust is essential for promoting psychological well-being (Harpham et al., 2004; Berry & Welsh, 2010; Hurtado, Kawachi, & Sudarsky, 2011; World Health Organization, 2013). According to a study done in 2004 by Harpham et al., adolescents and young adults who lacked trust were more likely to have mental health issues. The potential connection between trust and both mental and physical health was also highlighted by the World Health Organization in 2013. This is due to the strong correlation between social support and trust (Berry & Welsh, 2010; Hurtado et al., 2011). The PERMA theory and past studies that predicted people with high social support would have superior physical and mental health both support this explanation.

Liu and Wang (2010) claimed that individuals with higher levels of compassion will prioritize cooperative aims in negotiations. This effect can be mediated by trust. According to Liu and Wang (2010), a compassionate individual would rather believe that the other individual's undesirable behavior was caused by uncontrollable outside circumstances. They discovered that a compassionate individual would anticipate the other individual behaving favorably in the future; this anticipation is known as trust. The compassionate individual would consider that everyone made mistakes and deserved a second opportunity.

Furthermore, Liu and Wang (2010) also claimed that when an individual has a positive opinion of another individual, they would like to preserve that individual's dignity while maintaining a good relationship with that individual. A win-win situation is also more likely to be proposed by the individual to optimize the benefits of a relationship for both parties. In other words, the individual will reduce and eliminate any negative behavior that can impair the relationship, such as mistrust, hostile communication, and dominating behavior.

The above discussion highlights the importance of trust in romantic relationships as part of the well-being enhancing variables. It also identifies possible pathways in which trust can play its role in contributing to well-being.

### **3.4 LOVE EXPRESSION IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP**

Many studies hypothesized that one of the most crucial factors in enhancing satisfaction in a romantic relationship is how much love is expressed (Floyd, 2006; Schutz, 1958; Gareis & Wilkins, 2011; Seki, Matsumoto, & Imahori, 2002; Kline, Horton, & Zhang, 2008; Wilkins & Gareis, 2006). Although the majority of these studies failed to make a clear distinction between short-term and long-term emotions, they did suggest that the expression of love can be thought of as an expression of emotions. For instance, anger or sadness are viewed as passing emotions in a

person's life, whereas love is thought to have a longer permanent impact. Love is something that must be expressed as well as felt (Wilkins & Gareis, 2006). Love can be shown in both vocal and nonverbal ways. Schutz (1958) added that affection is a way of giving and receiving love.

According to a study by Kline et al. (2008), there is a considerable variation in the ways that Europeans and East Asians communicate their love. This might be connected to differences in perspectives and beliefs about love. For married couples in America, marriage is an unconditional expression of their love. However, respect, care, and trust are the foundations of East Asian marriages. When it comes to cultural differences in how people define love in marriages, East Asians are inclined to identify love with giving, supporting, and being there for the other person, whereas Americans describe love as going out together. From this viewpoint, Kline et al. (2008) found that East Asians regard giving their spouse physical support as a sign of love. This might be leading to self-sacrificing, which is detrimental to long-term romantic relationship maintenance purposes.

Again, the above discussion highlights the importance of love expression in romantic relationships. Love expression is also subjected to culture and how love and romantic relationships are being viewed in that particular culture.

### **3.5 COMMITMENT IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP**

Sternberg (1986) defined commitment as the cognitive considerations that go into deciding whether or not to commit for the long term to a romantic relationship. Commitment to a relationship is largely influenced by cognitive decision-making, even though it is not wholly formed from it. From a cognitive perspective, commitment is hard to quantify, but there are tangible signs of it, such as how long a relationship has lasted. In other words, a person's continued involvement in a relationship over time indicates a strong mental commitment.

While conflict is part of the relationship, tolerance is an essential quality for a successful relationship with one's partner (Mehr et al., 2022). Learning to accept and be tolerant, may decrease the possibility of quitting a relationship because of persistent difficulty. According to Mehr et al. (2022), tolerance is the capacity to view challenging conduct in a broader context. This ideology and common humanity both advocate accepting others without bias. When people can realize that everyone is different and unique from one another, it will be simpler for them to build empathy and acceptance when their demands and interests do not align. Forcefully imposing one's own beneficial opinions on the spouse will have detrimental effects on the relationship, such as animosity and harmfulness. In the worst instance, this partner can find it difficult to commit to a relationship. In this regard, tolerance and acceptance are key elements leading to commitment in any relationships. Commitment ensure the continuity of such relationships thus providing positive emotions and well-being.

### **3.6 TRUST, LOVE EXPRESSION AND COMMITMENT IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS: SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY AND PERMA THEORY OF WELL-BEING AS THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In further illustrating how romantic relationships contribute to well-being via its three key elements of trust, love expression and commitment, this review selected two main theories. They were selected because they have been widely accepted in relationships and well-being research and highly relevant in this study. Social exchange theory explains the exchange process between two parties after undergoing the cost-benefit analysis. This theory was developed by Homans (1958). Homans (1958) believes that human beings will consider the potential rewards and costs when they get into a social relationship. Social exchange theory emphasizes the importance of rewards and costs. Rewards can be considered the positive outcome of social exchange whereas costs are the negative consequences or the resources that need to be exchanged. For example,

rewards in a romantic relationship can be love, care, pleasure, satisfaction, and mental support. The cost can be perceived as the effort and time that the individual contributes to the relationship.

Social exchange theory suggested human will make their social exchange decision by weighing the rewards and costs. If both parties feel that the rewards, they will receive are more than the cost they need to contribute to the relationship, most likely both parties will continue and maintain their relationship. On the other hand, if the relationship brings too many negative consequences from the social exchange, both parties most likely would give up on the relationship. Social exchange theory is fairly straightforward, making it easy for most people to grasp and comprehend. Homans (1958) use this theory to explain the reason why a certain relationship would succeed while some relationship would fail. The fundamental assumption for this theory is that a relationship will end when at least one spouse's expenses outweigh their advantages. Under the social exchange theory, certain action are taken to build intimacy and trust. This presumption relates to romantic relationships the most. However, not all relationships have these objectives (Miller, 2005). It raises questions about how two people weigh the costs and benefits to themselves or their reasons for engaging in the relationship when they are not concerned with building trust and intimacy.

In a romantic relationship, trust, love expression, and commitment are part of the capital to be exchanged. Both partners are motivated to build trust and commitment and express love to gain the same benefit from romantic relationships. This, in turn, maintain the relationships leading to satisfaction and psychological well-being. Based on our review and Social exchange theory, we argue that it is important to further explore the three variables in a single study. Yet, limited studies have focused on all three and thus represent an important gap.

PERMA theory of well-being illustrates the five core elements that assist an individual in achieving comprehensive well-being and discovering true meaning in life. The five elements of PERMA theory are Positive emotion (P), Engagement (E), Relationships (R), Meaning (M), and Accomplishment (A). This theory was introduced by Seligman (2011). This theory's strength lies in its ability to precisely pinpoint the components that would aid in fostering an individual's well-being. Seligman (2011) acknowledged that each of these five components is necessary for a fulfilling living, but he did not provide any guidance on how to do it. This model does not provide an impartial way to assess how well a person is doing in each of the fundamental areas of life.

PERMA theory is used to explain the relationship between a romantic relationship and psychological well-being. Seligman (2011) emphasized the importance of positive emotions. Fredrickson (1998) also indicated that positive emotions could do more than just contribute to survival. Seligman (2011) claimed that the most obvious indicator of well-being is positive emotions. Positive emotions can include hope, love, joy, pride, compassion, and gratitude (Seligman, 2011; Fredrickson, 2001). As stated above, individuals with a lack of trust are reported to be at higher risk of having a mental illness. Positive emotion is one of the strong indicators to maintain a healthy mental state of an individual (Gross, Uusberg, & Uusberg, 2019). From this perspective, trust can be viewed as a crucial element in promoting psychological well-being. When an individual can trust others, especially their spouses, they would more like to feel good and have positive emotions. These positive emotions would help them to have better physical and mental health.

PERMA theory also proposes that individuals will have a sense of accomplishment and pride when they achieved their goals or ambition in life. Seligman (2011) also suggested that those goals must be realistic and able to achieve. A healthy romantic relationship can be the goal for the individual (Abdel-Khalek, 2013). Trust, love expression, and commitment can be the factors that contributed to building a healthy romantic relationship. When individuals can build and maintain a healthy romantic relationship, they are most likely able to experience higher level of psychological well-being.

Besides that, PERMA theory also suggested that individuals should embrace the true self when spending time with a loved one. The action of opening up requires a certain degree of trust. For example, when individual feels compassion towards their partner, they are advised to show their true self instead of suppressing it. Showing true self and affection not only helps an individual to build a more meaningful relationship but it will also improve the quality and satisfaction of that relationship. When these needs have been fulfilled by the individual, they are more likely to maintain that relationship and experience psychological well-being.

Relationship can be one of the essential key elements for promoting holistic psychological well-being based on the PERMA theory. The more stable the interpersonal relationship the individual is experiencing, the more emotional and social support the individual would benefit from it. The satisfaction of a romantic relationship can be viewed as a positive construct in psychological well-being. PERMA theory remains the most applicable theory in explaining the elements that could help an individual to promote holistic psychological well-being. However, there is a need to further explore the sub-elements that could contribute to the five elements of PERMA theory. Trust, love expression, and commitment can be some of the sub-elements of relationships that should be studied that can help further refined PERMA theory of well-being.

#### 4.0 CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

The above discussion highlights the importance of romantic relationships for adults' well-being. It also discussed the potential role of trust, love expression and commitment as key elements of relationship determining relationship satisfaction and well-being. The two theories illustrate how the three elements should be examined within a single study in order to better capture the mechanisms of how they can work. Earlier, we highlight the importance of culture in this research area. Clearly, more studies should be conducted to fully understand how relationships can be related to well-being across wider cultural context.

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