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LOVE, MARRIAGE AND FAMILY  
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

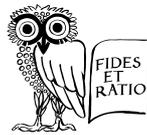


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# Age of sexual initiation, attitudes towards sexuality, and marital relationships in adulthood<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *Introduction:* The age of sexual initiation constitutes a significant formative factor for so-called sexual scripts and is linked to the quality of intimate relationships formed in the future. Researchers indicate that early sexual debut may be associated with a risk of permissiveness and relationship instability, whereas later initiation fosters the formation of higher quality and more stable marital unions. The aim of the study was to analyze the relationship between the age of sexual initiation and the quality of marital relationships in adulthood, as well as to verify the hypothesis regarding the mediating role of attitudes towards sexuality in this process. *Method:* The study involved a group of 455 young adults (222 men and 233 women) aged 20–35 who were in marital relationships. A diagnostic survey model was employed using six standardized research tools (measuring attachment/bonding, love, communication, mate selection, sexual satisfaction, and global relationship quality) and an original questionnaire regarding attitudes and sexual biography. Correlational analyses, difference tests, and mediation analysis were used to verify the hypotheses. *Results:* The research showed that a later age of initiation co-occurs with a lower number of sexual partners and a higher level of maturity regarding attitudes towards sexuality. The direct link between the age of initiation and marital quality proved to be weak. A key finding is the confirmation of mediation: the relationship between the age of initiation and the quality of the marital relationship disappears when attitudes are taken into account, and attitudes towards sexuality play a significant mediating role in the relationship between the age of initiation and marital relationship quality. This indicates that individuals with mature attitudes (integrating the sensual sexual sphere with the emotional and evaluative ones), regardless of the age of initiation, form more satisfying relationships, although these attitudes correlate more frequently with later sexual initiation. *Conclusions:* The study revealed that the direct relationship between the age of initiation and marital relationship quality is weak and loses statistical significance after accounting for attitudes towards sexuality (mediation effect). This means that early initiation does not directly determine lower marital relationship quality in adulthood, but rather acts indirectly – through its association with the formation of immature, instrumental attitudes towards sexuality. It is these attitudes, rather than the biographical fact from the past itself, that constitute the key predictor of current marital quality, particularly in the dimensions of perceived mate selection and emotional bonding. The results suggest that the negative consequences of early initiation can be mitigated by shaping mature, integrated attitudes towards sexuality in young people.

**Keywords:** attitudes towards sexuality, marital quality, sexual initiation, sociosexuality, young adults

## 1. The role of early sexual experiences in the process of shaping attitudes toward sexuality and the quality of intimate relationships in adulthood, in light of the literature

Adolescence is a period of dynamic psychophysical changes leading from childhood to adulthood. Alongside biological (procreative) and psychological

maturation, sexual development is activated at this time, enabling the experience of sexual desire, the search for partners, and engagement in sexual behaviors with them (see Bancroft, 2019). The ability to experience sexual desire appears in boys between the ages of 10 and 16 (Beisert, 2021a), and in girls typically between the ages of 18 and 24 (Z. Lew-Starowicz, 2004). Men reach full sexual maturity in their third decade of life, while women attain it in their fourth decade (Beisert, 2021a). During adolescence, a clear discrepancy is observed: in boys, the need to

<sup>1</sup> Article in Polish language: [https://stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/65pl\\_komo.pdf](https://stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/65pl_komo.pdf)

relieve sexual tension precedes emotional development, whereas in girls, emotionality develops more rapidly than sexual needs. Only in adulthood does sexual integration occur, balancing the sensual and emotional aspects (Beisert, 2021a).

During adolescence, young people form romantic relationships in which they fulfill emotional and sexual needs (Jamison & Sanner, 2021; Kotiuga, Yampolsky, & Martin, 2022). Although engaging in genital sexual activity requires psychobiological maturity (Beisert, 2021b) as well as psychosexual maturity, which integrates sexual drive with emotionality and a system of values (Z. Lew-Starowicz, 2004), it has become increasingly common to initiate sexual intercourse before reaching this level of maturity. Although sexual debut during this period is often regarded as a developmental norm (Jee & Lee, 2020), many researchers do not doubt that the timing of sexual initiation plays a key role in psychosocial development, influencing the quality of future marital relationships. The beginning of sexual life is considered a milestone developmental event (Higgins, Trussell, Moore, & Davidson, 2010; Vasilenko, Lefkowitz, & Maggs, 2021) that may constitute a turning point in adolescents' psychological and cognitive functioning (Vasilenko, Lefkowitz, & Welsh, 2014).

Analyses indicate an acceleration in the age of sexual initiation among cohorts born between the 1920s and the 1970s, followed by a stabilization of this trend (Sprecher, O'Sullivan, Verette-Lindenbaum, & Willetts, 2021). Global trends toward a decreasing age of initiation have resulted in the current average being 16 years in most countries, and it continues to decline (Baldus et al., 2023; Jee & Lee, 2020), whereas in 2006 the average age was 18 years (Wellings et al., 2006, as cited in Bancroft, 2019). Although dynamic changes in women's sexual behavior in the 1960s and 1970s led to a leveling of sexual activity between the sexes (Bancroft, 2019), early sexual debut (before the age of 15) still occurs more frequently among boys (Költő et al., 2025).

Most adolescents aged 14–18 engage in autoerotic or partnered sexual activity (Kotiuga et al., 2022). Researchers observe varying ages of sexual initiation and classify them as early (before the age of

15–16), normative (around the age of 18 or between 15/16 and 18), and late, occurring at age 19 or later (Harden, 2012).

Early sexual experiences (before the age of 15) concern 8.9–10% of American adolescents (McClinton Appollis et al., 2021), and 20% of boys and 15% of girls in Europe, although these rates vary regionally. Among girls, the prevalence of sexual activity was 2% or less in Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, compared with 29% in Finland and 49% in Denmark (Greenland). Among boys, the rates ranged from 5% in Kyrgyzstan to 38% in Bulgaria (WHO, 2024). An increase in sexual activity among 12–13-year-olds has also been reported in Korea (Jee & Lee, 2020; Ryu, 2023). In Poland, there are few studies on this topic. Existing, older research estimated that 27.1–27.7% of 15-year-olds had experienced sexual initiation, with a higher proportion among boys (Komorowska-Pudło, 2013; Woynarowska, 2006).

In recent years, other trends have also been observed – some adolescents are increasingly postponing sexual activity and dating, as confirmed by data from the United States (Twenge & Park, 2019) and the WHO report (2024). This decline, particularly visible over the past two decades, has been linked by researchers to the widespread use of smartphones, which, by limiting face-to-face interactions, foster a so-called “slow life strategy” and the postponement of adulthood (Twenge, 2021). A similar, slight decrease in rates of early sexual initiation across 37 countries (mainly between 2014 and 2022) was also reported by Költő et al. (2025).

In recent decades, the position of many researchers regarding the consequences of adolescent sexual activity has been changing. Although the negative effects of adolescent sexual behavior are still being examined (see Walters & Lefkowitz, 2023), a perspective that normalizes such activity or highlights its positive aspects is becoming increasingly common (Walters & Lefkowitz, 2023; Vasilenko, Walters, Clark, & Lefkowitz, 2022). However, these latter perspectives usually concern later sexual activity rather than the timing of sexual initiation itself (Vasilenko et al., 2022). Despite these shifts, analyzing the consequences of the onset of sexual life – taking into account the age at which it occurs – remains crucial.

Analyses distinguishing early (before the age of 15/16) and later sexual initiation indicate a broader range of negative consequences associated with the former (Bancroft, 2019). The consequences of early initiation encompass physical, social, and psychological domains (Walters, Lefkowitz, 2023). In the psychological dimension, they include behaviors that are congruent or incongruent with one's sense of self, as well as anxiety about social evaluation, including parents' reactions or uncertainty about a partner's feelings (Christopher, 2001, as cited in Walters, Lefkowitz, 2023), along with moral dilemmas (Vasilenko et al., 2022). Lew-Starowicz (2004) emphasizes that failures at this stage may disrupt psychosexual development and negatively affect romantic relationships and self-esteem. Boys evaluate sexual initiation significantly more positively than girls (Higgins et al., 2010; Schwartz, Coffield, 2020; Walters, Lefkowitz, 2023; Vasilenko et al., 2022). Feelings of excitement, pride, and satisfaction tend to predominate among them (Higgins et al., 2010; Schwartz, Coffield, 2020), and the sexual act itself is often treated as a confirmation of masculinity (Higgins et al., 2010), while their sexual activity is subject to less stigmatization (Conley, Klein, 2022). Among women, sexual initiation is more often associated with a predominance of negative feelings, including pain, discomfort, and less frequent satisfaction (Conley, Klein, 2022; Richters et al., 2022; Vasilenko et al., 2014; Vasilenko et al., 2022). The experience is frequently accompanied by anxiety, shame, and feelings of guilt (Vasilenko et al., 2022), regret (Boydell, Wright, Smith, 2021; Hawkins, DeLuca, Claxton, Baker, 2023; Schwartz, Coffield, 2020; Walters, Lefkowitz, 2023; Vasilenko et al., 2022), as well as fear of parents' reactions (Schwartz, Coffield, 2020) and loss of reputation (Vasilenko et al., 2022). A characteristic feature among girls is ambivalence of emotions – the co-occurrence of joy with pain, shame, or regret (Schwartz, Coffield, 2020; Vasilenko et al., 2022), while psychological satisfaction (Higgins et al., 2010) derives mainly from emotional closeness (Vasilenko et al., 2022). Early initiation of sexual activity more often results in regret due to making the decision too quickly (McClinton Appollis et

al., 2021), with feelings of regret predominating among girls (Boydell et al., 2021; Schwartz, Coffield, 2020; Sprecher et al., 2021).

A key cause of gender differences in satisfaction lies in psychobiological determinants (Conley, Klein, 2022). Men's higher ratings of pleasure result from the relative ease of achieving orgasm (Schwartz, Coffield, 2020), which in their case is an innate capacity (Z. Lew-Starowicz, 2004). In women, orgasm is a complex and often acquired phenomenon, conditioned by neuroendocrinological and psychosocial factors (bonding, sense of security, self-esteem, and older age at initiation). This process requires learning, which may be hindered, for example, by entrenched masturbatory habits, and early experiences themselves may permanently "encode" sexual responses for the future (Z. Lew-Starowicz, 2004).

Vasilenko et al. (2014) indicate that sexual behaviors – through the cognitive appraisal of one's own actions – affect mental health. Adolescents who are sexually active during puberty (especially girls) are characterized by lower self-esteem and a higher risk of depression and suicidal ideation. Early initiation also increases the risk of infections and unplanned pregnancies (Jee, Lee, 2020; Steele, Simons, Sutton, Gibbons, 2020; Xu, Norton, Rahman, 2021), which entails consequences such as abortion, early marriage, discontinuation of education, or perinatal complications (Khalili et al., 2020). A younger age at initiation further correlates with risky sexual behavior (Lu et al., 2023; Steele et al., 2020), including multiple casual partners and lack of protection (WHO, 2024), as well as exposure to relationships with HIV-infected individuals or partners who use violence (McClinton Appollis et al., 2021). Steinberg (2008) hypothesizes that engagement in risky behaviors is linked to a "developmental gap" between emotion and reason: the limbic system, driven by dopamine and sensation seeking, matures much faster than the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for planning and impulse control. Contemporary neurobiological research supports this model (the so-called Dual Systems Model), indicating that heightened sensitivity to social reward during adolescence, combined with still-developing control mechanisms, promotes risk-taking decisions made without full awareness of their consequences

(Duell et al., 2022), which may also apply to early sexual activity. This means that adolescents already have a strongly developed need for reward, while their self-control is still under construction. Zbigniew Lew-Starowicz (2004) describes this phenomenon as psychosexual immaturity (the predominance of emotion over rationality). He emphasizes the importance of the proper development of the so-called levels of sexual drive in adolescents. Maturity of the first and second levels of sexual drive (responsible for the physiological capacity to engage in sexual intercourse, experience orgasm, and sexual arousal) is achieved during puberty, whereas maturity of the third level (responsible for integrating sex, among other things, with personality, value systems, and higher-order emotionality) is reached approximately 10 years later. According to Beisert (2021b), readiness for sexual intercourse requires psychobiological maturity, encompassing both relational competencies (intimacy, trust, knowledge) and the body's immunological capacity. The latter – manifested in chemical and mechanical barriers – is of key importance in the context of early initiation. Girls, despite later sexual debut and fewer partners, show higher infection rates than boys (Miller et al., 2004), which Vasilenko et al. (2014) explain by the specific nature of infection risk for the receptive partner.

A later age of sexual initiation is associated with a predominance of positive experiences, including higher physical and psychological satisfaction and a stronger sense of attractiveness both at the time of initiation and later in life (Higgins et al., 2010; Vasilenko et al., 2021). The beneficial psychological outcomes observed during this period (Vasilenko et al., 2021) result from less frequent risky behaviors (Steele et al., 2020) as well as greater cognitive maturity and relational competencies (Vasilenko et al., 2021). This translates into lower levels of stress (Vasilenko et al., 2021) and a reduced risk of depression (Lu et al., 2023).

The course of sexual initiation – depending on the balance of experiences – has long-term implications for future functioning and sexual well-being (Smith, Shaffer, 2013; Vasilenko et al., 2022). McClinton Appollis et al. (2021) demonstrated that regret over early sexual initiation and lower well-being are more

often reported by older women (aged 20–24) than by adolescents (aged 15–19), which results from the possibility of a more mature re-evaluation of the past. Early and negative experiences constitute predictors of health risks (Higgins et al., 2010; Smith, Shaffer, 2013), with their emotional consequences being more severe for women (Townsend, Wasserman, 2011). Considering the long-term consequences related to the formation of intimate relationships, early initiation (particularly before the age of 16) is found to correlate with lower relationship quality in adulthood (Kahn, Halpern, 2018). It increases the risk of infidelity (Vu, Tun, Karlyn, Adebajo, Ahonsi, 2011), divorce (Paik, 2011; Teachman, 2003), and premarital pregnancies (Kugler, Vasilenko, Butera, Coffman, 2017; Paik, 2011), fostering permissive attitudes (Paik, 2011) and risky partner choices (Kugler et al., 2017). Smith and Wolfinger (2024) confirm the association between the number of sexual partners – which correlates with early initiation (Kahn, Halpern, 2018) – and the risk of divorce, a relationship that Perry (2020) explains by a weakening of marital commitment in favor of a preference for sexual variety. Marital quality is also affected by the long-term consequences of sexually transmitted infections, which are correlated with early initiation and the number of partners (Kugler et al., 2017). Chlamydia and gonorrhea pose risks of infertility, ectopic pregnancy, and chronic pain. The HPV virus is responsible for cancers of the genital organs as well as the head and neck, and AIDS remains one of the leading causes of death among young adults (Bosch et al., 2002; Gray-Swain, Peipert, 2006; Heron, 2007; Gillison et al., 2008, as cited in Vasilenko et al., 2014).

The age at initiation is not merely a biographical fact but a foundation for the formation of sexual scripts – cognitive schemas that organize future experiences (Gagnon & Simon, 1973, as cited in Beisert, 2023). Because early sexual encounters create enduring interpretative frameworks (Smith, Shaffer, 2013), the timing of initiation is directly linked to the shaping of attitudes toward sexuality, which can be analyzed in the context of sociosexuality. The nature of one's sociosexual orientation (that is, the quality of attitudes toward sexuality) is, to a large extent, associated with the quality of marital relationships.

Simpson and Gangestad (1992) defined sociosexuality as a continuum ranging from a restricted orientation (investment in long-term relationships, commitment, and intimacy) to an unrestricted orientation (a pursuit of sexual behavior in short-term, non-committal relationships with multiple partners). This model was further developed by Penke and Asendorpf (2008), who identified three dimensions: behavioral (number of partners), attitudinal (evaluation of sex without love), and desire (fantasies about individuals outside the relationship). Age at sexual initiation functions as a mechanism linking biological and personality traits with attitudes defined in this way. Longitudinal research conducted in the Philippines showed that men who matured biologically earlier also initiated sexual activity earlier, which led to the development of a more unrestricted sociosexuality (Gettler, Rosenbaum, Dennis, Bechayda, Kuzawa, 2025). Similarly, when personality traits are taken into account, individuals with lower Honesty–Humility (a tendency toward manipulation) and lower Emotionality (emotional coldness) statistically begin sexual activity earlier, which fosters the consolidation of an orientation toward sex without commitment (Brazil, 2024).

An extensive sexual partner history is referred to by French, Altgelt, and Meltzer (2019) as “enduring susceptibility.” These researchers indicate that unrestricted sociosexuality is a predictor of lower marital satisfaction and its more rapid decline, as well as a higher risk of marital dissolution. Individuals with unrestricted sociosexuality are characterized by heightened sensitivity to alternatives, a lower boredom threshold, and weaker conflict-resolution competencies. Two mechanisms underlie these associations: relationship inertia (Rhoades, Stanley, 2014; Sassler, Lichter, 2020) and the cognitive availability of alternatives (Rhoades, Stanley, 2014). Early entry into relationships activates a “path dependence” mechanism and promotes “sliding” into subsequent stages (e.g., cohabitation) without deliberate commitment decisions, which lowers the quality of later marriage (Rhoades, Stanley, 2014; Sassler, Lichter, 2020). A richer partner history, in turn, intensifies the tendency to compare one’s current spouse with previous partners – both in terms

of sexual performance and physical attractiveness or communication – which weakens satisfaction and the sense of relational uniqueness (Rhoades, Stanley, 2014). An additional “partner effect” is also observed: high unrestricted sociosexuality in men reduces their partner’s satisfaction (especially during dating), although formal commitment may mitigate this effect (Webster et al., 2015). Conversely, high relationship satisfaction may inhibit sociosexual drives and the desire for infidelity (Pricope, Huțul, Karner-Huțuleac, Huțul, 2025)

According to Zbigniew Lew-Starowicz (2004), the quality of sexual initiation determines future attitudes: in line with the law of generalization, success strengthens self-esteem, whereas failure generates inhibitions. Maturity, emotional bonding, and congruence with one’s values protect against disappointment. Negative experiences may permanently encode dysfunctional patterns, leading to vaginismus and dyspareunia (Leiblum, 2005), anorgasmia (Z. Lew-Starowicz, 2021), or male orgasmic disorders (M. Lew-Starowicz, 2021). This process, explained by conditioning and script theories (Bancroft, 2019), is particularly strong in women due to the phenomenon of imprinting (Z. Lew-Starowicz, 2004).

Later initiation (after the age of 19) correlates with higher relationship quality, more deliberate partner selection (Vasilenko et al., 2022), a smaller number of partners (Harden, 2012), and more effective communication (Busby, Carroll, Willoughby, 2010; van de Bongard, de Graaf, 2020), which reduces the risk of divorce (Teachman, 2003). The restricted sociosexuality model promotes the integration of the physical, emotional, and meaning-based dimensions of sex, thereby maximizing satisfaction (Busby, Hanna-Walker, Leavitt, Carroll, 2022). The highest levels of well-being and communication quality are achieved by homogamous couples – those with convergent, conservative attitudes and a later timing of sexual initiation (Busby et al., 2010).

In summary, the age at sexual initiation is associated with the formation of cognitive matrices that determine the role of sexuality within a relationship – specifically, whether sexuality will serve as a bond strengthening the marriage or as a source of conflict and a motive for seeking gratification outside

the relationship (Willoughby, James, 2017). Early onset of sexual activity is linked to more frequent cohabitation and to treating cohabitation as a form of “testing,” while viewing marriage as a finished product rather than a process of shared growth. Willoughby and James (2017) describe this as the “Marriage Paradox,” whereby young adults, despite valuing marriage, paradoxically make its realization more difficult through early sexual initiation and serial cohabitation. The authors challenge the myth of the necessity of “testing” partners, arguing that delaying sexual debut fosters emotional competencies, making sex a “bond” that emerges from commitment rather than merely a source of physical gratification.

## 2. Methodological foundations of the author’s empirical research

The study aimed to analyze the relationship between the age of sexual initiation and attitudes toward sexuality, as well as the quality of marital relationships among young adults. The research problem was formulated as the following question: What is the relationship between the age of sexual initiation and the quality of marital relationships in adulthood, and what role do attitudes toward sexuality play in this process?

The hypothesis assumed that the age of sexual initiation is moderately associated with the quality of respondents’ marital relationships, and that attitudes toward sexuality act as a mediator: early initiation determines the formation of immature attitudes, which in turn are associated with lower quality of marital relationships.

The dependent variable was the quality of the marital relationship, measured across the domains of bonding, love, marital communication, perceived partner matching, sexual satisfaction, and overall relationship quality. The independent variable was the age of sexual initiation, while attitudes toward sexuality served as the mediating variable.

A diagnostic survey method was applied, using six standardized research instruments: Józef Szopiński’s Marital Bond Scale (1980), Robert Sternberg’s Love Measurement Questionnaire (Wojciszke, 2010), the

Marital Communication Questionnaire by Maria Kaźmierczak and Mieczysław Płopa (Płopa, 2006), the Marital Matching Questionnaire by Jan Rostowski and Mieczysław Płopa (Płopa, 2006), the Sexual Satisfaction Scale by Deborah Davis and colleagues (2006), and Graham Spanier’s Marital Quality Measurement Questionnaire (Cieślak, 1989).

Data concerning the age and partners of sexual initiation, as well as selected elements of respondents’ sexual biography, were collected using an author-designed questionnaire. Attitudes toward sexuality were measured using an original Likert-type Attitudes Scale. These attitudes were classified as mature or immature in accordance with the concept of restricted versus unrestricted sociosexuality proposed by Simpson and Gangestad (1992).

The statistical analysis was conducted using the nonparametric Spearman’s rho correlation coefficient ( $\rho$ ) to examine relationships between the age of sexual initiation and relationship quality, attitudes toward sexuality, and selected elements of respondents’ sexual biography, as well as between attitudes toward sexuality and relationship quality. In addition, the Kruskal–Wallis H test for independent samples was applied, supplemented with post-hoc multiple comparison tests using the Bonferroni correction (for analyzing differences between types of initiation partners in relation to age at initiation). Both statistically significant results and trend-level results ( $p < 0.09$ ) were taken into account due to the exploratory and unique nature of the study.

The sample was selected using a purposive, non-random sampling method. Participants were married individuals aged 20–35, born in the late 1980s and 1990s. The study included 233 women and 222 men. The mean age of men was 29.79 years, and of women 27.91 years. The average duration of marriage was 4.69 years for men and 4.19 years for women. The mean length of the relationship prior to marriage was 3.49 years for men and 3.09 years for women. The mean age of sexual initiation was 18.43 for men and 18.42 for women.

### 3. Age of sexual initiation and attitudes toward sexuality and marital relationship quality – results of the author’s study

The first step of the analysis was to determine whether the age of sexual initiation was associated with the relational context in which sexual debut occurred. The Kruskal–Wallis H test for independent samples was used, supplemented with post-hoc multiple comparison tests with Bonferroni correction. Analysis of the context of sexual initiation revealed statistically significant differences in the age of initiation depending on the type of partner, both among men ( $H = 67.09$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and women ( $H = 18.92$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The effect was substantially stronger among men ( $\epsilon^2 = 0.31$ ) than among women ( $\epsilon^2 = 0.08$ ) (Table 1).

A detailed analysis showed that men who initiated sexual intercourse with their current spouse constituted the oldest group at the time of sexual debut ( $M = 20.67$ ). Significantly younger were those who debuted in romantic relationships with partners who did not later become their spouses ( $M = 17.63$ ), while the youngest were men whose initiation occurred in non-romantic relationships (e.g., acquaintances, little-known individuals, or people newly met) ( $M = 16.98$ ). Women who experienced the onset of their sexual life with partners who are their current spouses initiated sexual activity the latest ( $M = 19.54$ ). No significant age difference

Table 2. Age at sexual initiation and other elements of respondents’ sexual biography characteristics

Characteristics of respondents’ sexual biographies	The age at sexual initiation			
	Men		Women	
	$\rho$	p	$\rho$	p
Length of the relationship before initiation	0.31	0.001	0.03	0.611
Evaluation of initiation	-0.17	0.021	-0.16	0.018
Number of partners	-0.58	0.000	-0.42	0.000
Attitudes toward sexuality	0.30	0.000	0.26	0.000

Source: Own study

was observed, however, between women debuting with a “former partner” ( $M = 18.23$ ) and those with a “casual partner” ( $M = 17.50$ ).

The age of sexual initiation was also found to be correlated with other elements of respondents’ sexual biography. Specifically, respondents’ age at sexual initiation correlated with the length of the relationship before young men decided to initiate sexual activity, with women’s adult evaluations of their sexual initiation, and with the number of sexual partners in their lifetime sexual experience (Table 2).

The results confirmed that the younger men were when they initiated sexual activity, the shorter the time they spent building their relationships and/or relational bonds with the partners of that experience ( $\rho = 0.31$ ;  $p = .001$ ). Among women, this relationship

Table 1. The relationship between age at sexual initiation and the type of initiation partner

Types of partners in sexual initiation	Respondents’ age at sexual initiation						
	N	M	SD	Me	H	p	$\epsilon^2$
<b>Men</b>							
Romantic partner – current spouse	73	20.67 <sup>a</sup>	3.11	20			
Former romantic partner	98	17.63 <sup>b</sup>	1.51	18	67.09	0.001	0.31
Non-romantic partner	51	16.98 <sup>c</sup>	2.07	17			
<b>Women</b>							
Romantic partner – current spouse	99	19.54 <sup>a</sup>	2.98	19			
Former romantic partner	110	18.23 <sup>b</sup>	2.1	18	18.92	0.001	0.08
Non-romantic partner	24	17.5 <sup>b</sup>	1.5	18			

Source: Own study. Letters a, b, c in the mean column indicate significant differences between groups (in the post-hoc test).

was not statistically significant. An earlier age of initiation was associated with a poorer retrospective evaluation of the experience among respondents of both sexes (men:  $\rho = -.17$ ;  $p = .016$ ; women:  $\rho = -.16$ ;  $p = .018$ ). A younger age at the onset of sexual activity among respondents of both sexes correlated with a higher number of lifetime sexual partners (men:  $\rho = -.58$ ;  $p < .000$ ; women:  $\rho = -.42$ ;  $p < .000$ ). The later respondents experienced their sexual debut, the longer they built their relationships before initiation, the more positively they evaluated the experience, and the fewer partners they reported in their sexual biographies.

The earlier the respondents initiated sexual activity, the lower the level of maturity of their current attitudes toward sexuality (men:  $\rho = .30$ ;  $p < .000$ ; women:  $\rho = .26$ ;  $p < .000$ ). These individuals more frequently exhibited permissive beliefs approving of casual sex and the separation of sexual and emotional spheres. A more detailed analysis of these attitudes showed that such respondents more often believed that early sexual activity does not affect the capacity for love in adulthood and that it is worthwhile to engage in sexual intercourse during adolescence. They evaluated sexual activity with multiple partners as a satisfying experience and as a means of finding

Table 3. The relationship between age at sexual initiation and the quality of respondents' marital relationships

Quality of respondents' marital relationships		Age at sexual initiation			
		Men		Women	
		$\rho$	p	$\rho$	p
Marital bond	Empathy	0.08	0.239	0.09	0.152
	Mutual understanding	0.07	0.285	0.06	0.400
	Cooperation	0.10	0.134	0.11	0.086
	Full bond	0.08	0.210	0.09	0.165
Love	Passion	0.14	0.036	-0.02	0.744
	Intimacy	0.07	0.282	0.08	0.210
	Commitment	0.11	0.090	0.12	0.079
	Full love	0.11	0.088	0.06	0.336
Communication toward spouse	Support	0.15	0.029	0.08	0.205
	Commitment	0.08	0.221	0.01	0.934
	Depreciation	-0.19	0.005	-0.06	0.384
	Full communication	0.14	0.042	0.05	0.411
Marital match	Intimacy	0.06	0.411	0.09	0.185
	Similarity	0.15	0.029	0.12	0.061
	Self-fulfilment	0.15	0.023	0.19	0.004
	Disappointment	-0.14	0.032	-0.12	0.072
	Full match	0.15	0.027	0.15	0.024
Sexual satisfaction	Physical	-0.10	0.144	-0.12	0.073
	Emotional	-0.05	0.428	-0.08	0.242
	Feeling of control	0.03	0.667	0.00	0.956
	Full satisfaction	-0.05	0.478	-0.08	0.212
Quality of relationship	Compability	0.05	0.498	0.11	0.090
	Satisfaction	0.13	0.057	0.12	0.072
	Cohesion	0.13	0.051	0.15	0.025
	Emotional expression	0.03	0.680	0.09	0.179
	Global quality	0.10	0.161	0.14	0.028

Source: Own study

a lifelong partner. Men displaying immature attitudes toward sexuality tended to treat sexual activity as a way of confirming their masculinity. Women in this group also emphasized aspects of personal development associated with engaging in sexual activity with multiple partners. Compared to those with mature attitudes toward sexuality, they more strongly endorsed sexual freedom and non-committal partnerships. The later respondents decided to initiate sexual activity, the less frequently they expressed the attitudes described above. The results indicate a highly significant relationship: the later the age of initiation, the higher the level of attitudinal maturity in adulthood.

An analysis of correlations between age at initiation and current marital quality revealed a number of associations which, although weak in terms of effect size, form a coherent pattern: earlier sexual initiation is associated with lower relationship quality (Table 3).

A low age of sexual initiation among male respondents correlated with a lower level of love measured on the passion scale ( $\rho = .14$ ;  $p = .036$ ) and, at the level of a statistical trend, with a lower level on the commitment scale ( $\rho = .11$ ;  $p = .090$ ). The lower the age at which men initiated sexual activity, the lower their level of communication with their spouses measured on the support scale ( $\rho = .15$ ;  $p = .029$ ), and the higher their level measured on the deprecation scale ( $\rho = -.19$ ;  $p = .005$ ).

Among female respondents, a low age of sexual initiation was associated, at the level of a trend, with a lower sense of partner compatibility ( $\rho = .11$ ;  $p = .090$ ), a lower level of cooperation ( $\rho = .11$ ;  $p = .086$ ), and a lower level of commitment to relationship development ( $\rho = .12$ ;  $p = .079$ ). The earlier the women initiated sexual activity, the higher – at the level of a trend – their level of physical sexual satisfaction ( $\rho = -.12$ ;  $p = .073$ ).

Among respondents of both sexes, a low age of sexual initiation was also correlated with lower scores in the domain of perceived marital matching. Individuals who initiated sexual activity early were characterized by a lower sense of self-realization in marital roles within the relationship (men:  $\rho = .15$ ;  $p = .023$ ; women:  $\rho = .19$ ;  $p = .004$ ), a lower level of perceived similarity with their spouses (men:

$\rho = .15$ ;  $p = .029$ ; women:  $\rho = .12$ ;  $p = .061$ ), and a higher level of disappointment with the marital relationship (men:  $\rho = -.14$ ;  $p = .032$ ; women:  $\rho = -.12$ ;  $p = .072$ ). These respondents also reported lower levels of overall relationship satisfaction (men:  $\rho = .13$ ;  $p = .051$ ; women:  $\rho = .12$ ;  $p = .072$ ) and a lower sense of coherence in their relationships with their spouses (men:  $\rho = .13$ ;  $p = .051$ ; women:  $\rho = .15$ ;  $p = .025$ ).

In the subsequent part of the study, an analysis was conducted of the relationship between attitudes toward sexuality and marital quality. The data on this analysis are presented in Table 4.

Although the direct relationship between age at sexual initiation and marital quality is weak, attitudes toward sexuality – which, as shown above, are related to the age of initiation – prove to be closely associated with relationship quality. Mature attitudes correlate positively with nearly all dimensions of marital functioning.

With the exception of physical sexual satisfaction and the assessment of emotional expression within the marital relationship among female respondents, the data clearly indicate that the more mature the attitudes toward sexuality held by respondents of both sexes, the more satisfying the quality of their relationship. This applies to marital bonding in the domains of empathy (men:  $\rho = .41$ ;  $p < .000$ ; women:  $\rho = .44$ ;  $p < .000$ ), mutual understanding (men:  $\rho = .34$ ;  $p < .000$ ; women:  $\rho = .38$ ;  $p < .000$ ), and cooperation (men:  $\rho = .37$ ;  $p < .000$ ; women:  $\rho = .41$ ;  $p < .000$ ), as well as to love in the domains of passion (men:  $\rho = .20$ ;  $p = .001$ ; women:  $\rho = .23$ ;  $p < .000$ ), intimacy (men:  $\rho = .35$ ;  $p < .000$ ; women:  $\rho = .33$ ;  $p < .000$ ), and commitment (men:  $\rho = .30$ ;  $p < .000$ ; women:  $\rho = .36$ ;  $p < .000$ ).

Displaying more mature attitudes is associated with a greater ability to communicate support (men:  $\rho = .40$ ;  $p < .000$ ; women:  $\rho = .36$ ;  $p < .000$ ) and commitment (men:  $\rho = .16$ ;  $p = .011$ ; women:  $\rho = .25$ ;  $p < .000$ ) toward one's spouse, along with lower levels of deprecation (men:  $\rho = -.28$ ;  $p < .000$ ; women:  $\rho = -.39$ ;  $p < .000$ ). Respondents of both sexes in this group experience greater emotional sexual satisfaction (men:  $\rho = .31$ ;  $p < .000$ ; women:  $\rho = .20$ ;  $p = .002$ ) and a stronger feelings of control (men:

Table 4. Respondents' attitudes toward sexuality and the quality of their marital relationships

Quality of respondents' marital relationships		Respondents' attitudes toward sexuality			
		Men		Women	
		$\rho$	p	$\rho$	p
Marital bonding	Empathy	0.41	0.000	0.44	0.000
	Mutual understanding	0.34	0.000	0.38	0.000
	Cooperation	0.37	0.000	0.41	0.000
	Full bond	0.38	0.000	0.42	0.000
Love	Passion	0.20	0.001	0.23	0.000
	Intimacy	0.35	0.000	0.33	0.000
	Commitment	0.30	0.000	0.36	0.000
	Full love	0.32	0.000	0.33	0.000
Communication with spouse	Support	0.40	0.000	0.36	0.000
	Commitment	0.16	0.011	0.25	0.000
	Depreciation	-0.28	0.000	-0.39	0.000
	Full communication	0.34	0.000	0.40	0.000
Marital match	Intimacy	0.28	0.000	0.36	0.000
	Similarity	0.41	0.000	0.40	0.000
	Self-realization	0.42	0.000	0.38	0.000
	Disappointment	-0.41	0.000	-0.52	0.000
	Full match	0.45	0.000	0.52	0.000
Sexual satisfaction	Physical	0.23	0.000	0.04	0.562
	Emotional	0.31	0.000	0.20	0.002
	Feeling of control	0.22	0.000	0.20	0.001
	Full satisfaction	0.30	0.000	0.16	0.011
Quality of relationship	Compability	0.23	0.000	0.21	0.001
	Satisfaction	0.50	0.000	0.38	0.000
	Cohesion	0.35	0.000	0.33	0.000
	Emotional expression	0.16	0.012	0.06	0.380
	Global quality	0.41	0.000	0.36	0.000

Source: Own study

$\rho = .22$ ;  $p < .000$ ; women:  $\rho = .20$ ;  $p = .001$ ), while men also report higher physical sexual satisfaction ( $\rho = .23$ ;  $p < .000$ ).

A higher level of maturity in attitudes toward sexuality also correlates with a stronger sense of marital matching in the areas of intimacy (men:  $\rho = .28$ ;  $p < .000$ ; women:  $\rho = .36$ ;  $p < .000$ ), perceived similarity (men:  $\rho = .41$ ;  $p < .000$ ; women:  $\rho = .40$ ;  $p < .000$ ), and self-realization (men:  $\rho = .42$ ;  $p < .000$ ; women:  $\rho = .38$ ;  $p < .000$ ), along with a lower level of disappointment in the mutual relationship (men:  $\rho = -.41$ ;  $p < .000$ ; women:  $\rho = -.52$ ;

$p < .000$ ). These spouses are characterized by higher overall relationship quality in terms of consensus (men:  $\rho = .23$ ;  $p < .000$ ; women:  $\rho = .21$ ;  $p = .001$ ), satisfaction (men:  $\rho = .50$ ;  $p < .000$ ; women:  $\rho = .38$ ;  $p < .000$ ), and cohesion (men:  $\rho = .35$ ;  $p < .000$ ; women:  $\rho = .33$ ;  $p < .000$ ), with men additionally showing higher quality in emotional expression ( $\rho = .16$ ;  $p = .012$ ).

The comparison of the data presented in Tables 3 and 4 reveals a clear disparity: attitudes toward sexuality are much more strongly associated with marital quality than age at sexual initiation itself.

Consequently, the final stage of the study involved testing the hypothesis that attitudes mediate the relationship between age at sexual initiation and marital quality. A regression analysis (Baron and Kenny’s mediation model) was conducted for the relationship quality indicators. The aim of this analysis was to examine whether the mediating role of attitudes toward sexuality also applies to specific areas of marital functioning: bonding, love, communication, perceived partner matching, sexual satisfaction, and overall relationship quality (for these analyses, global scores from each scale measuring the respective area of relationship functioning were used).

To verify the hypothesis regarding the mediating role of attitudes toward sexuality in the relationship between age at sexual initiation and marital functioning, a series of regression analyses was conducted following the logic of a mediation model. Analyses were performed separately for women and men. The independent variable (X) was age at sexual initiation, the mediator (M) was attitudes toward sexuality, and the dependent variables (Y) were the relationship quality indicators: bonding, love, communication, perceived partner matching, sexual satisfaction, and overall relationship quality.

Table 5 presents standardized regression coefficients for the paths: a (X → M), b (M → Y controlling for X), and c’ (X → Y after including M). In addition, point estimates of the indirect effect (ab = a × b) and the total effect (c = c’ + ab) were calculated. The total effect was treated as an auxiliary indicator of the overall strength of the relationship. The values of ab and c are presented as effect sizes based on standardized β coefficients.

The obtained results indicate a consistent pattern of relationships in both study groups and are consistent with the interpretation that the association between age at sexual initiation and marital relationship quality may operate primarily through an indirect mechanism related to attitudes toward sexuality. In all analyzed models, a positive and significant association was observed between age at initiation and attitudes toward sexuality (path a; β approximately 0.30–0.37; p < 0.001), indicating that a later age at initiation co-occurs with more mature attitudes. At the same time, attitudes toward sexuality were positively and significantly related to each of the analyzed indicators of marital relationship quality (path b; β = 0.15–0.57).

Table 5. Attitudes toward sexuality as a mediator of the relationship between age at sexual initiation and marital relationship quality – results of mediation regression analyses

Dependent variable (Y)	Sex	a (X→M) β	b (M→Y) β	c’ (X→Y) β	ab (indirect effect)	c (total effect)
Marital bond	Men	0.37***	0.47***	-0.10 ns	0.18	0.07
	Women	0.30***	0.32***	0.01 ns	0.10	0.11
Love	Men	0.37***	0.37***	-0.06 ns	0.14	0.08
	Women	0.30***	0.23**	0.03 ns	0.08	0.11
Marital communication	Men	0.37***	0.37***	-0.06 ns	0.14	0.08
	Women	0.30***	0.30***	-0.02 ns	0.09	0.07
Sense of marital match	Men	0.37***	0.57***	-0.10 ns	0.21	0.12
	Women	0.30***	0.40***	0.03 ns	0.12	0.15
Sexual satisfaction	Men	0.37***	0.32***	-0.12 ns	0.12	0.00
	Women	0.30***	0.15*	-0.05 ns	0.05	-0.01
Overall relationship quality	Men	0.37***	0.44***	-0.05 ns	0.17	0.12
	Women	0.30***	0.33***	0.04 ns	0.10	0.14

Source: Own study. Explanations: Path a – relationship between the independent variable (age at initiation) and the mediator (attitudes); Path b – relationship between the mediator and the dependent variable (controlling for the independent variable); Path c’ – direct relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable after including the mediator. Significance levels: \*p < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01; \*\*\*p < 0.001; ns – statistically non-significant result (p > 0.05).

An analogous pattern of relationships was observed in both groups: age at initiation was positively associated with maturity of attitudes toward sexuality (men:  $a = 0.37$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ; women:  $a = 0.30$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and these attitudes were positively related to each of the examined indicators of relationship quality. The strength of the mediator's association with relationship quality varied depending on the analyzed aspect, with the highest  $b$  coefficients observed for perceived marital match, especially among men ( $\beta = 0.57$ ), and the lowest for sexual satisfaction among women ( $\beta = 0.15$ ).

After controlling for attitudes toward sexuality, the direct effects of age at initiation on the dependent variables (path  $c'$ ) did not reach statistical significance in any of the analyzed models. This pattern of results is consistent with a mediation interpretation, indicating that the associations between age at initiation and relationship quality may operate mainly through attitudes toward sexuality. Due to the cross-sectional nature of the data, these conclusions are descriptive and do not allow for causal claims.

Analysis of the size of the indirect effects ( $ab$ ) indicates that the strongest indirect component concerned perceived marital match in both men ( $ab = 0.211$ ) and women ( $ab = 0.120$ ), as well as marital bond among men ( $ab = 0.174$ ). Total effects ( $c'$ ) were small (approximately 0.07–0.16), and for sexual satisfaction in both groups they were close to zero. In the model of perceived marital match among men, a discrepancy in the signs of the direct and indirect effects was observed (negative  $c'$  with positive  $ab$ ), which may indicate inconsistent mediation; however, the direct effect did not reach statistical significance.

In summary, the conducted analyses indicate that attitudes toward sexuality play an important mediating role in the relationship between age at sexual initiation and marital relationship quality. The direct association between these variables, observed in simpler analyses, disappears after accounting for attitudes, suggesting that the co-occurrence of age at initiation and relationship quality is largely related to the level of maturity of attitudes toward sexuality.

#### 4. Discussion of the results

The study aimed to analyze the relationship between age at sexual initiation and the quality of marital relationships in adulthood, with particular attention to the mediating role of attitudes toward sexuality. The obtained results allowed for a positive verification of the main research hypothesis, indicating that although the timing of sexual debut is linked with the quality of the marriage, the key mechanism explaining this relationship is the level of maturity of attitudes toward the intimate sphere. These conclusions correspond with contemporary trends in couple psychology (see Vasilenko et al., 2022), which move away from simple biographical determinism toward the analysis of complex processes underlying the development of relational competencies.

The first important finding is the demonstration of a clear association between age at initiation and the relational context of this event. The present study showed that individuals who initiated sexual intercourse later – both women and men – were more likely to do so within a relationship with a partner who later became their spouse. This result aligns with the model of “sexual restraint” described by Busby et al. (2010), who suggest that postponing initiation fosters better partner knowledge and the development of emotional intimacy prior to physical intimacy, thereby increasing the likelihood of relationship stability. Conversely, early initiation, which in the present study was correlated with engagement in risky behaviors and lower selectivity (particularly among men), confirms earlier findings by Kugler et al. (2017) regarding the specificity of early, non-romantic sexual experiences.

The analysis also confirmed previous research conclusions (WHO, 2024) that early sexual initiation co-occurs with a greater number of sexual partners across the lifespan (in the present study  $\rho = -.58$  for men) as well as with a poorer retrospective evaluation of the first sexual experience (cf. McClinton Appollis et al., 2021). This phenomenon can be explained by the theory of “availability of cognitive alternatives” proposed by Rhoades and Stanley (2014), which posits that a richer relationship history may lead to habitual comparisons between one's current spouse

and previous partners, thereby weakening the sense of uniqueness of the current relationship. Moreover, the observed association between early initiation and feelings of disappointment corresponds with findings by McClinton Appollis et al. (2021) and with the imprinting theory described by Zbigniew Lew-Starowicz (2004). According to this perspective, negative or unsatisfying first experiences may become a lasting interpretative template that makes it more difficult to derive satisfaction in later, stable relationships.

A key element of the discussion is the confirmation of the link between age at initiation and the formation of specific attitudes toward sexuality. The present study showed that earlier sexual debut correlates with immature attitudes – permissive, hedonistic, and separating the sexual sphere from the emotional one. This is consistent with the concept of unrestricted sociosexuality (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991; Penke & Asendorpf, 2008), characterized by an orientation toward a greater number of partners and sex without commitment. As French and colleagues (2019) note, such an orientation constitutes a “lasting vulnerability” that a partner brings into marriage, thereby reducing its stability. The counterpoint to this model is later initiation, which in the present study was associated with more mature attitudes, reflecting the model of integration of the physical, emotional, and meaning-related spheres described in Busby et al.’s (2022) concept of “sexual wholeness.”

Concerning the direct relationship between age at sexual initiation and marital quality, the study showed that this association is weak, although statistically significant (earlier initiation was linked, among other things, to lower marital relationship quality in terms of perceived partner match – intimacy, similarity, and self-realization – as well as satisfaction and sense of coherence, and to higher levels of relationship disappointment). This confirms reports by Kahn and Halpern (2018) and Teachman (2003) on the negative consequences of early initiation; however, the low strength of these correlations suggests that chronological age alone is not the decisive factor.

The most important contribution of this study is the empirical confirmation of the mediating role of attitudes. It was shown that the direct relationship between age at initiation and marital quality loses

significance once attitudes toward sexuality are taken into account. This means that early initiation lowers relationship quality mainly when it becomes the basis for the development of immature, instrumental sexual scripts (in the sense proposed by Gagnon and Simon, 1973, as cited in Beisert, 2023). This finding sheds new light on the mechanism of the “path-dependent” process (Sassler & Lichter, 2020): it is not so much the fact of early sexual activity that determines the future, but rather the cognitive schemas and values consolidated as a result – “cognitive matrices,” as described by Willoughby and James (2017).

Particularly noteworthy is the observation of the strongest mediation effect in the domains of perceived marital match and relational bonding. This suggests that attitudes shaped over the course of one’s sexual biography function as a filter through which spouses evaluate the fit and value of their relationship. Individuals with more mature attitudes (correlating with later initiation) demonstrate higher competencies in building closeness and communication, which supports Busby et al.’s (2010) claims about the better communicative preparedness of couples who chose to postpone intercourse. In summary, the results indicate that age at initiation acts as a “catalyst” (Willoughby & James, 2017) in the formation of attitudes that in adulthood become either a key resource or a burden for marriage.

## Conclusions

The conducted analyses lead to the conclusion that the age at which sexual life begins is not an isolated biographical fact, but rather an important element of a broader pattern of functioning in the intimate sphere, closely linked to the relational context of sexual initiation. Later initiation of intercourse more often occurs within romantic relationships and frequently involves partners who later become spouses. In contrast, early initiation of sexual life correlates with a shorter period of acquaintance before first intercourse, a more negative retrospective evaluation of the experience, and a greater number of partners across the lifespan. The study also demonstrated a moderate but consistent association between early initiation and the development of less mature atti-

tudes toward sexuality in adulthood, characterized by a hedonistic and instrumental approach and by separating the physical from the emotional sphere.

A key research finding is that the direct impact of age at initiation on marital relationship quality is weak, whereas the decisive role is played by attitudes toward sexuality that have developed over time. Mediation analysis confirmed that age at initiation affects marriage indirectly: early experiences shape certain beliefs, which only subsequently determine levels of bonding, communication, or the sense of an appropriate partner match. This means that mature attitudes toward sexuality constitute a current psychological resource with far greater potential to influence relationship well-being than the mere chronology of past events. The strongest effects of this mechanism were observed in the evaluation of perceived marital match and relational bonding, whereas sexual satisfaction proved to be a more complex and multifactorial phenomenon.

When interpreting these results, certain methodological limitations must be taken into account, including the cross-sectional nature of the study, which prevents strict causal inference, and reliance

on self-report methods, which carry a risk of bias. An additional challenge concerns the need for further validation of the instruments used, as well as the specificity of the sample selection. Accordingly, it is recommended that future research adopt longitudinal designs, which would allow the dynamics of change over time to be tracked. It would also be advisable to extend analyses to include additional control variables such as personality traits, attachment style, religiosity, exposure to pornography, and cybersex.

The conclusions drawn from this research have important implications for educational and therapeutic practice. They suggest the need to shift the focus in prevention from concentrating solely on the normative age of initiation toward supporting the development of mature, integrated attitudes toward sexuality and intimacy. For marital counseling, this means that relationship difficulties more often stem from entrenched beliefs and the way experiences are integrated than from sexual history itself. Consequently, therapeutic work should focus on understanding and modifying partners' current attitudes and on fostering relational responsibility, avoiding oversimplified judgments based solely on the past.

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# Romantic relationships across generations: a psychological perspective on generations X, Y, and Z<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *Introduction:* Sternberg's (1988) theory of love identifies passion, intimacy, and commitment as central components of romantic relationship quality. However, contemporary research highlights additional psychological factors influencing relationship satisfaction, such as empathy, openness, sexual satisfaction, communication, financial stability, health, career development, and overall quality of life. The present study aimed to examine generational differences in psychological determinants of romantic relationship quality among individuals from Generations X, Y, and Z. *Method:* The study was self-report, quantitative and longitudinal. Four standardized instruments with strong psychometric properties were used: the Affective Communication Index (Floyd & Morman, 1998), the Forgiveness Scale (Toussaint et al., 2001), the Sexual Satisfaction Questionnaire (Nomejko & Dolińska-Zygmunt, 2011), and the Interpersonal Commitment Questionnaire (Stanley & Markman, 1992), along with a demographic survey. *Results:* Generation X respondents demonstrated higher quality affective communication, a capacity for forgiveness, and interpersonal commitment. Generation Z respondents, in turn, reported statistically significantly higher sexual satisfaction than Generation X and Y respondents. *Conclusions:* These findings offer practical implications for couple therapy, particularly in tailoring interventions to the emotional and communicative needs of different age groups. The observed intergenerational differences underscore the importance of flexible, age-sensitive therapeutic approaches aimed at enhancing relationship quality.

**Keywords:** affective communication, forgiveness, generations, interpersonal commitment, romantic relationships.

## 1. Introduction

A romantic relationship is understood as a mutual, voluntary relationship based on closeness and intimacy (Clark & Grote, 2013). Psychologists agree that a satisfying romantic relationship is associated with the fulfilment of many important psychological needs, which include the need for closeness, passion, and support (Śmieja, 2018). One of the fundamental aspects of how individuals forming such a romantic relationship evaluate it is their well-being, strongly related to its quality, assessed by researchers for both formal and informal relationships (Adamczyk, 2017). Nowadays, it seems desirable to define romantic relationships on a scale from highly disintegrated to those characterized by the highest quality of partnership, without labelling them as successful

or unsuccessful (Brudek, Jasik & Steuden, 2018). According to the assumptions of the systemic theory (Plopa, 2005), a romantic relationship constitutes a whole, constantly interacting and expressed in the intensification of specific factors, without excluding periodic difficulties and conflicts. This is its dynamics (Brudek et al., 2018), which is also taken into account in the theory of love (Sternberg, 1988). In the related literature, the concept of a *qualitative romantic relationship* is defined in a non-uniform manner due to the large number of determinants. It is assumed to denote a subjective assessment of the relationship on many dimensions (Ryś, 2004). The psychological variables most frequently mentioned in this context include: openness, empathy,

<sup>1</sup> Article in Polish language: [https://stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/65pl\\_wale.pdf](https://stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/65pl_wale.pdf)

sexual satisfaction (Janicka & Niebrzydowski, 1994), love, interpersonal bond, intimacy, similarity, motives for choosing a marriage partner, as well as partners' satisfaction with the relationship and relationship stability (Rostowski, 1987), satisfaction with the shared achievement of goals, full participation of spouses in social life, partners' financial situation, professional work, and general standard of living (Chmielewska, 2019). It is emphasized that relationship satisfaction is understood as the degree of satisfaction with various aspects of its functioning (Ryś, 2004). Sternberg's (1988) three-factor concept presents an interesting perspective on the components of love, which plays a key role in a romantic relationship. The author distinguished three components of love: intimacy, passion, and commitment (Sternberg, 1988). In this study, the ones included in the model encompassing factors determining the quality of a romantic relationship were those grounded in the theory of love. These are: commitment (Janicka & Szymczak, 2017; Rostowski, 1987; Wojciszke, 2003), affective communication (Wałęcka-Matyja & Szkudlarek, 2019), a capacity for forgiveness (Charzyńska & Heszen, 2013; Ryś, Greszta & Grabarczyk, 2019), and sexual satisfaction (Nomejko & Dolińska-Zygmunt, 2014). Their understanding and significance for shaping the quality of a romantic relationship are discussed below.

### 1.1. Some conditions of a romantic relationship

Commitment is one of the three components of love (Sternberg, 1988) that contribute to maintaining a romantic relationship. It is subject to conscious control by both partners. Its varying intensity may indicate the strength of commitment, the desire to remain in the relationship that sustains the romantic relationship, or may refer to a sense of obligation to remain in the relationship or decide on its dissolution. *Interpersonal commitment* can be considered on three dimensions. The first dimension is personal commitment, understood as experiencing positive feelings towards the partner and the relationship created with him/her. The second dimension is moral commitment, which defines values and personal beliefs regarding the seriousness of the relationship. The final dimension is structural commitment, which

refers to the constraints associated with ending the relationship. The costs that a person may incur as a result of leaving a relationship include primarily emotional, material, and social costs that limit the individual's ability to end the relationship (Janicka & Szymczak, 2017).

Communication in romantic relationships serves the purpose of communicating, sharing experiences and feelings, expressing needs, and expressing feelings. This occurs through two main channels: verbal and non-verbal. Non-verbal communication, which encompasses gestures, facial expressions, physical contact, and body posture, as well as eye contact and tone of voice, often reinforces or weakens the verbal message (Wałęcka-Matyja & Szkudlarek, 2019). Proper communication between romantic partners reflects the high quality of a romantic relationship, contributes to resolving existing conflicts (Ryś et al., 2019), and reduces the risk of romantic relationship disintegration (Modzelewski, 2017). Related to communication and also crucial to experiencing satisfaction in a romantic relationship, intimacy, as distinguished by Sternberg (1988), is only to a certain extent subject to the partners' awareness. It is defined as positive feelings and actions (e.g., mutual understanding, exchange of intimate information, mutual sharing of experiences) leading to greater attachment and closeness between partners. Most behaviours that constitute intimacy evoke positive emotions related to the ability to communicate, provide support, and share understanding (Wojciszke, 2003). Considering the component of intimacy in romantic relationships, three types of communication between partners can be distinguished: supportive, committed, and depreciating (Wałęcka-Matyja & Szkudlarek, 2019). An interesting type of communication distinguished by Floyd is *affective* (emotional) *communication*. It is understood as intentional behaviour aimed at expressing feelings of closeness, care, and affection for another person. Partners in a romantic relationship feel the need to be loved and appreciated, and affective communication allows them to express and satisfy these needs, both verbally and non-verbally. It also contributes to feelings of happiness and increases self-esteem (Floyd et al., 2022). It can be divided into individual categories of affective behaviour, including verbal and non-verbal

communication, as well as expressions of support (Walęcka-Matyja & Krawczyk, 2023). It has been observed that high-quality communication between partners promotes greater sexual satisfaction and increases satisfaction with the romantic relationship (Nomejko, Dolińska-Zygmunt, & Mucha, 2017). Individuals entering into a romantic relationship, through effective communication and resolving existing difficulties, have the opportunity to experience a high-quality relationship, which facilitates conflict resolution (Ryś, 2004). The role of conflict in a romantic relationship is crucial because, in extreme cases, it can lead to its disintegration. The explanation for the occurrence of conflicts in communication is based on the assumptions of Bateson's double bind theory (1956; 1996). In situations of conflicting messages, focused on neutral verbal messages, combined with facial expressions and behaviours that send contradictory signals, the partner may experience confusion, helplessness, and tension. A person receiving a double bind message is placed in a paradoxical situation that prevents them from responding adequately (Nodar, 2022). When you are wronged by the partner, the ability to forgive is an important factor that stabilizes the relationship (Dacka, Kulik & Nowak, 2023; Ryś, 2004). In this study, a capacity for forgiveness is understood as the ability to forgive oneself, forgive others, but also as a sense of being forgiven by God (Charzyńska & Heszen, 2013).

The three components of love identified by Sternberg (1986), apart from commitment and intimacy, also include passion, which is almost entirely unconscious to the partners in a romantic relationship. Partners are motivated to connect with each other by seeking physical closeness, touch, arousal, and sexual contact. However, as the relationship progresses, passion tends to decline significantly, which may result, among other things, from a realistic view of the partner. It is assumed that sexuality has a similar developmental dynamics within a relationship. It concerns the establishment of interpersonal relationships, as well as physical and mental processes related to sexuality. It plays an important role at various stages of human life and is related to the concept of sexual health (Kucharski & Rzepa, 2017). Psychologists agree that it can be considered a predictor of the

bond and quality of relationships between partners (Żak-Łykus & Nawrat, 2013). In this study, sexual satisfaction is understood as overall satisfaction with sexual contact with a partner, taking into account aspects such as pleasure from sexual intercourse, thinking about it, and any negative thoughts related to it (Nomejko & Dolińska-Zygmunt, 2014).

To summarize the discussion so far on romantic relationship satisfaction, it should be emphasized that it is composed of many factors and is linked to the quality of the relationship and the actions taken by romantic partners. Psychologists believe that such behaviours include: proper communication, emotional responses, as well as cognitive and motor activity. In turn, undertaking such actions will be determined by the individual's functioning style, personality type, and character traits (Rawicka & Rzepa, 2017).

## **1.2. Generationality and the image of a romantic relationship**

Terms such as *generationality* or *generation* can be used interchangeably. They refer to the totality of people living at the same time and of a similar age. Generations are shaped by key experiences related to situations occurring in their reality, i.e., generation-forming events, which include economic crises, war, political transformations, and even Poland's accession to the EU (September, 2005). Each subsequent generation differs from the previous one, although they still retain some behavioural patterns passed down through socialization. This study analyses the perception of romantic relationships by individuals from Generations X, Y, and Z.

Generation X refers to individuals born in the second half of the 20th century, between 1961 and 1985. When considering the general concept of a romantic relationship from a Generation X perspective, it is worth considering the results of research conducted in this area. It was found that most Generation X women believe that a romantic relationship is characterized by a similar level of commitment, caring for one's partner, and verbal and non-verbal expressions of love. The image of a relationship is also illustrated by an emotional bond with the partner, who shares both positive and challenging emotions.

In the opinion of Generation X women, a romantic relationship is shaped by mutual, interpersonal, positive feelings between partners and is based on sexual exclusivity. Gen X men share the view that a romantic relationship is based on demonstrating a similar level of commitment, caring for their partner, and expressing love verbally and non-verbally. Interestingly, they also understand it as a relationship that brings them joy (Celik, Bingul & Kaya, 2020).

Generation Y was born primarily in the 1980s and 1990s. It is estimated that these individuals were born between 1980 and 2000 (Dewanti & Indrajit, 2018). Due to growing up amidst rapidly evolving technology, they are also referred to as the Digital Nation (Wasylewicz, 2016). Generation Y women and men have similar perspectives on romantic relationships, suggesting they understand them in terms of the emotional bond with a partner, the commitment and effort involved in continuing the relationship, and the verbal and non-verbal expressions of love. They also tend to understand relationships as exclusive in terms of sexuality. Differences between Generation Y and Generation X respondents include the perspective of a romantic relationship as fulfilling one's own needs, alleviating feelings of loneliness, as well as taking into account the very process of flirting and falling in love, which allows partners to get to know each other better. This partially confirms the view that Generation Y prefers to wait to get married and get to know the person with whom they will form a close relationship better. This is because in this type of situation, it is possible to break up the relationship more easily if the partner does not sufficiently meet expectations than in the case of a formal relationship (Celik et al., 2020).

Generation Z is made up of people born at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, between 2000 and 2012. It is also known as Generation C (*connected, computerized, communicating, and change*) (Radut, 2021). Comparing Generation Z's perspective on romantic relationships with that of Generations X and Y, a significant similarity in views is observed. Both women and men perceive romantic relationships through the prism of emotional bonding, mutual positive feelings, and

shared experiences with a partner. A romantic relationship is also understood as caring for a partner, commitment, and effort put into continuing the relationship, and expressing love to a partner verbally and non-verbally. Generation Z women also tend to understand relationships as sharing shared love and feeling loved, as well as expressing sexual interest and building the intimacy one experiences exclusively with a partner, to a greater extent than men. Among men, however, there is also the concept of building a romantic relationship as a way to meet mutual needs and a relationship aimed at alleviating the feeling of loneliness (Celik et al., 2020).

In summary, each generation exhibits both similarities and differences in their perception of the world and patterns of functioning in the environment compared to their predecessors. Generational diversity is a result of the actions of previous generations and is the result of the ongoing process of developing new, most often adaptive, patterns of functioning in a changing environment. In the area of romantic relationships, their dynamics can be considered from both a dyadic and a generational perspective, bearing in mind that they are conditioned by numerous factors. This interesting scientific perspective inspired us to examine whether, and if so, how, romantic relationships change over time. The study attempted to determine whether there is differentiation in the dimensions that determine the quality of a romantic relationship across Generations X, Y, and Z. The research question is as follows:

- Is there differentiation, and to what extent, across Generation X, Y, and Z groups in romantic relationships, in affective communication, capacity for forgiveness, interpersonal commitment, and sexual satisfaction?

Based on the related literature, the following research hypotheses were formulated.

- Hypothesis 1. People from Generations X and Y are characterized by higher skills in affective communication than people from Generation Z.
- Hypothesis 2. Generation X and Y individuals are more forgiving than Generation Z ones.

- Hypothesis 3. Generation X individuals demonstrate higher interpersonal commitment than Generation Y and Z individuals.
- Hypothesis 4. People from Generations X and Y report lower sexual satisfaction than the ones from Generation Z.

## 2. Materials and method

### 2.1. Study participants

The study involved 174 participants, including 88 women (50.6%) and 86 men (49.4%). The participants ranged in age from 18 to 63 years. Three comparative groups were identified based on their generational background. The Generation X group consisted of 60 people (34.5%) aged 45 to 63. The second group, representing Generation Y, included 63 people (36.2%) aged 24 to 44. The third group consisted of 51 people (29.3%) aged 18 to 23, representing Generation Z (Radut, 2021). The characteristics of the study group are presented in Table 1.

### 2.2. Procedure

The self-report, quantitative and longitudinal study was conducted in 2025 using the CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interview) technique on the Microsoft Forms platform<sup>2</sup>. While online research has many advantages, it also has limitations. These include the researcher's limited control over external factors that arise during the study. To mitigate response bias, control questions were used to gauge participant attention. Participants received a link to Microsoft Forms, which contained four questionnaires, a socio-demographic survey, and an informed consent form. The study was anonymous and voluntary. Participants were informed of the possibility of withdrawing at any stage, and participation in the study was not compensated. Purposeful selection of participants was employed, using the snowball sampling method. The following inclusion criteria

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the study group (N = 174)

Demographic variables	n	%
Place of residence		
City over 500,000 inhabitants	68	39.1
City 100,000–500,000 inhabitants	47	27
City up to 100,000 inhabitants	49	28.2
Rural area	10	5.7
Having children		
Yes	98	56.3
No	76	43.7
Type of relationship		
Cohabitation	93	53.4
Marriage	81	46.6
Length of relationship		
2-5 years	60	34.5
6-10 years	56	32.2
11 years or more	58	33.3

were adopted: informed consent to participate in the psychological study, age between 18 and 63 years, and being in a heterosexual romantic relationship lasting more than two years. This period of a relationship is considered a critical juncture, after which a relationship is formalized or disintegrates (Wieteska, 2017). Exclusion criteria were as follows: failure to provide informed consent to participate in the psychological study, age under 18 or over 63 years, not having a romantic partner, being in a homosexual romantic relationship, and duration of the romantic relationship less than 2 years. Data obtained from the study were processed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 29 under license from the University of Lodz.

### 2.3. Materials

The study utilized four questionnaires with good psychometric properties: Floyd & Morman's (1998) Affective Communication Index, Toussaint et al.'s (2001) Forgiveness Scale, Nomejko & Dolińska-Zygmunt's (2014) Sexual Satisfaction Questionnaire, Stanley & Markman's (1992) Interpersonal Com-

<sup>2</sup> The study was conducted by Julia Martynek, a participant of a master's seminar in psychology.

mitment Questionnaire, and a socio-demographic survey. The survey provided data on gender, age, place of residence, whether the participants had children, the degree of formality of their relationships, and their duration.

*The Affective Communication Index* by Floyd and Morman (1998), adapted by Wałęcka-Matyja (2020), consists of 15 items and measures the intensity of affective communication in adults. The instrument assesses the overall score and two dimensions: support and non-verbal communication, and verbal communication. Respondents provide responses on a seven-point Likert scale, where 1 means *Never* and 7 means *Always*. The Affective Communication Index is a reliable and valid instrument (Cronbach's alpha is 0.95 for the overall instrument, 0.89 for the verbal communication dimension, and 0.93 for the support and non-verbal communication dimension) (Wałęcka-Matyja, 2020). In this study, Cronbach's alpha coefficient values for the individual subscales were: support and non-verbal communication  $\alpha = 0.86$ , verbal communication  $\alpha = 0.88$ , and for the entire instrument  $\alpha = 0.90$ .

*The Forgiveness Scale* by L. Toussaint et al. (2001), adapted in Polish by Charzyńska and Heszen (2013), assesses the intensity of forgiveness capacity across three dimensions: self-forgiveness,

forgiveness of others, and a sense of forgiveness from God. It consists of nine items, and participants respond to them on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – *Strongly disagree*, 5 – *Strongly agree*). The reliability of the instrument for the overall forgiveness index is 0.75, for the self-forgiveness scale 0.65, for the forgiveness of others scale 0.75, and for the sense of forgiveness from God scale 0.91. The tool is considered sufficiently reliable for conducting psychological research (Charzyńska & Heszen, 2013). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient values for the individual subscales were: self-forgiveness  $\alpha = 0.80$ , forgiveness of others  $\alpha = 0.82$ , and sense of forgiveness from God  $\alpha = 0.98$ .

*The Interpersonal Commitment Questionnaire* by Stanley and Markman (1992), adapted in Polish by Janicka and Szymczak (2017), consists of 19 items and measures three dimensions of commitment: concern for one's partner's well-being, relationship importance, and bond with one's partner. Participants respond on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates *Strongly disagree* and 7 indicates *Strongly agree*. This method has satisfactory validity and reliability for the individual subscales: bond with one's partner (Cronbach's alpha = 0.88), relationship importance (Cronbach's alpha = 0.70), and concern for one's partner's well-being (Cronbach's

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the studied psychological variables (N = 174)

	Variable	M	Me	SD	Sk.	Kurt.	Min.	Max.
Affective Communication Index	support and non-verbal communication	63.64	63	6.45	0.046	-0.816	47	77
	verbal communication	16.16	16	4.03	0.363	0.291	6	28
	overall score of affective communication	79.81	79	9.64	0.187	-0.795	59	105
Forgiveness Scale	forgiving oneself	9.86	4	12.87	1.74	1.51	1	45
	forgiving others	14.46	4	14.86	0.788	-1.06	1.60	48
	overall score of forgiveness	2.98	2.77	0.94	0.2	-0.956	1	4.93
Sexual Satisfaction Questionnaire	overall score	30.85	30	5.43	0.042	-0.439	14	40
Interpersonal Commitment Questionnaire	bond with partner	57.51	58	9.50	-0.103	-0.765	36	77
	relationship importance	25.97	25	4.85	-0.116	-0.838	14	35
	concern for partner's well-being	12.13	12	3.75	0.102	-0.274	3	21

M – mean; Me – median; SD – standard deviation; Min – minimum; Max – maximum; K – kurtosis; Sk – skewness

Table 3. Intensity of affective communication in the study groups of people from generations X, Y and Z

Variable	X (n = 60)		Y (n = 63)		Z (n = 51)		F	df	p	η²
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD				
support and non-verbal communication	67.06	5.72	62.31	6.10	61.25	6.09	15.49	171	<0.001*	0.15
verbal communication	17.35	2.30	15.88	4.11	15.11	5.12	4.63	171	0.011*	0.05
general index of affective communication	84.41	7.31	78.20	9.32	76.37	10.5	12.40	171	<0.001*	0.12

\*p < 0.05

alpha = 0.75) (Janicka & Szymczak, 2017). In this study, the values of Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the individual subscales were: bond with partner  $\alpha = 0.92$ , importance of the relationship  $\alpha = 0.88$ , concern for the partner’s well-being  $\alpha = 0.90$ .

*The Sexual Satisfaction Questionnaire* by Nomejko and Dolińska-Zygmunt (2014) measures sexual satisfaction in two areas: sexual attractiveness and sexual activity. The tool consists of 10 items, and respondents respond to them on a four-point Likert scale, where 1 means *Not at all true* and 4 means *Definitely true*. The Sexual Satisfaction Questionnaire is a valid and reliable tool (Cronbach’s alpha is 0.89) (Nomejko & Dolińska-Zygmunt, 2014). In the present study, its Cronbach’s alpha was  $\alpha = 0.92$ .

### 3. Results

The statistical analysis assumed normal distribution, citing the central limit theorem, which states that the distribution of variables is close to normal when the sample size is over 30 (Szymczak, 2018). The assumed significance level was  $\alpha < 0.05$ . Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the psychological variables included in the study.

#### 3.1. Affective communication in the compared groups of study participants

In the first step of the analysis, it was checked whether there were any differences in the scope of affective communication in the groups of people from generations X, Y, and Z. The obtained results are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 4. Post-hoc test results for differences in affective communication in the study groups of people from generations X, Y and Z

Variable	Generation group (I)	Generation group (J)	Difference of means (I-J)	p	95% confidence interval	
					Lower limit	Upper limit
support and non-verbal communication	X	Y	4.74	<0.001*	2.21	7.27
		Z	5.81	<0.001*	3.12	8.49
	Y	X	-4.74	<0.001*	-7.27	-2.21
		Z	1.06	0.626	-1.66	3.79
	Z	X	-5.81	<0.001*	-8.49	-3.12
		Y	-1.06	0.626	-3.79	1.66
verbal communication	X	Y	1.46	0.043*	0.03	2.88
		Z	2.23	0.015*	0.37	4.09
	Y	X	-1.46	0.043*	-2.88	-0.03
		Z	0.77	0.659	-1.33	2.87
	Z	X	-2.23	0.015*	-4.09	-0.37
		Y	-0.77	0.659	-2.87	1.33
general index of affective communication	X	Y	6.21	<0.001*	2.63	9.78
		Z	8.04	<0.001*	3.87	12.20
	Y	X	-6.21	<0.001*	-9.78	-2.63
		Z	1.83	0.594	-2.64	6.30
	Z	X	-8.04	<0.001*	-12.20	-3.87
		Y	-1.83	0.594	-6.30	2.64

\*p < 0,05

The results in Table 3 indicate statistically significant differences in affective communication between the compared groups. The highest means for the overall affective communication index, the support and non-verbal communication dimension, and the

Table 5. Intensity of forgiveness capacity in the groups of surveyed people from generations X, Y and Z

Variable	X (n = 60)		Y (n = 63)		Z (n = 51)		F	df	p	η²
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD				
forgiving oneself	11.91	14.50	7.31	10.12	10.60	13.59	2.10	171	0.125	0.02
forgiving others	16.28	15.70	13.67	14.72	13.30	14.06	0.69	171	0.503	0.008
general index of forgiveness	3.63	0.82	2.77	0.87	2.49	0.69	30.41	171	<0.001*	0.26

\*p < 0,05

Table 6. Post-hoc test results for differences in forgiveness capacity in the study groups of people from generations X, Y and Z

Variable	Generation group (I)	Generation group (J)	Difference of means (I-J)	p	95% confidence interval	
					Lower limit	Upper limit
general index of forgiveness	X	Y	0.85	<0.001*	0.48	1.21
		Z	1.13	<0.001*	0.79	1.48
	Y	X	-0.85	<0.001*	-1.21	-0.48
		Z	0.28	0.12	-0.06	0.63
	Z	X	-1.13	<0.001*	-1.48	-0.79
		Y	-0.28	0.12	-0.63	0.06

\*p < 0,05

verbal communication dimension were observed in the Generation X group, while lower means were observed in the Generation Y and Generation Z groups. To determine which means differ significantly, the Games-Howell test was used, taking into account the heterogeneity of variances. The results are presented in Table 4.

Considering the results presented in Table 4, it was found that the mean scores for all dimensions of affective communication differed statistically significantly between the compared groups. Generation X respondents achieved higher mean scores on the general index of affective communication than respondents from Generations Y and Z. For this variable, no statistically significant differences were observed between participants from Generations Y and Z. The mean scores for the support and non-verbal communication dimensions were significantly

higher for Generations X than for Generations Y and Z. No statistically significant differences were observed between Generation Y and Generation Z for this variable. Generation X participants achieved higher mean scores on the verbal communication dimension than the ones from Generations Y and Z. For this variable, no statistically significant differences were observed between participants from Generations Y and Z.

### 3.2. Forgiveness capacity in the compared groups of study participants

In the second step of the analysis, it was determined whether there were differences in forgiveness capacity among groups of people from generations X, Y, and Z. The obtained results are presented in Tables 5 and 6.

The results of the analyses presented in Table 5 suggest that statistically significant differences in the dimensions of forgiveness capacity were revealed in the overall forgiveness score variable. The highest mean scores were recorded in the Generation X group (M = 3.63; SD = 0.82), slightly lower in the Generation Y group (M = 2.77; SD = 0.87) and in the Generation Z group (M = 2.49; SD = 0.69). For this variable, η² = 0.26, indicating a very strong effect between the overall forgiveness score variable and the age groups. The results obtained for the forgiving others and forgiving oneself variables did not reveal statistically significant differences between the compared groups of Generations X, Y, and Z. To determine statistically significant differences between the compared groups in the mean scores on the overall forgiveness score variable, the Games-Howell test was conducted, taking into account the heterogeneity of variance. The results are presented in Table 6.

Table 7. Intensity of interpersonal commitment in the study groups of people from generations X, Y and Z

Variable	X (n = 60)		Y (n = 63)		Z (n = 51)		F	df	p	η <sup>2</sup>
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD				
bond with partner	62.05	7.01	56.19	9.30	53.80	10.30	12.87	171	<0.001*	0.13
relationship importance	28.36	3.39	25.07	4.77	24.27	5.36	13.09	171	<0.001*	0.13
concern for partner's well-being	12.13	3.75	12.04	3.97	10.96	4.33	5.32	171	0.006*	0.05

\*p < 0,05

Table 8. Post-hoc test results for differences in interpersonal commitment in the study groups of people from generations X, Y and Z

Variable	Generation group (I)	Generation group (J)	Difference of means (I-J)	p	95% confidence interval	
					Lower limit	Upper limit
bond with partner	X	Y	5.85	<0.001*	2.34	9.37
		Z	8.24	<0.001*	4.18	12.31
	Y	X	-5.85	<0.001*	-9.37	-2.34
		Z	2.38	0.408	-2.03	6.81
	Z	X	-8.24	<0.001*	-12.31	-4.18
		Y	-2.38	0.408	-6.81	2.03
relationship importance	X	Y	3.28	<0.001*	1.51	5.05
		Z	4.09	<0.001*	2.01	6.16
	Y	X	-3.28	<0.001*	-5.05	-1.51
		Z	0.80	0.681	-1.48	3.09
	Z	X	-4.09	<0.001*	-6.16	-2.01
		Y	-0.80	0.681	-3.09	1.48
concern for partner's well-being	X	Y	1.18	0.121	-0.23	2.60
		Z	2.27	0.004*	0.62	3.92
	Y	X	-1.18	0.121	-2.60	0.23
		Z	1.08	0.354	-0.78	2.95
	Z	X	-2.27	0.004*	-3.92	-0.62
		Y	-1.08	0.354	-2.95	0.78

\*p < 0,05

The obtained results (Table 6) suggest that the mean scores for the overall forgiveness score differ significantly between the compared groups. Generation X respondents achieved higher mean scores for the overall affective communication score than Generation Y and Generation Z ones. For this var-

iable, no statistically significant differences were observed between the mean scores of Generation Y and Generation Z participants.

### 3.3. Interpersonal commitment in the compared groups of study participants

In the next step of the analysis, an attempt was made to check whether there were differences in interpersonal commitment in groups of people from generations X, Y, and Z. The obtained results are presented in Tables 7 and 8.

Considering the results presented in Table 7, it was found that mean scores for all dimensions of interpersonal commitment differed statistically significantly between the compared groups. Generation X respondents achieved higher mean scores for dimensions such as bond with partner, relationship importance, and concern for partner's well-being than Generations Y and Z. To determine which groups differed significantly in mean scores for interpersonal commitment, the Games-Howell test was used, taking into account the heterogeneity of variance. The results are presented in Table 8.

The obtained results (Table 8) suggest that the mean scores for interpersonal commitment differ significantly between the compared groups. Generation X individuals achieved higher mean scores on variables such as bond with the partner and relationship importance than participants from Generation Y and Z. For these variables, no statistically significant differences were found between the mean scores of Generation Y respondents and the ones from Generation Z. Statistically significant differences were also found between Generation X and Generation Z in the variable of concern for the partner's well-being,

Table 9. Intensity of sexual satisfaction in the study groups of people from generations X, Y and Z

Variable	Z (n = 51)		Y (n = 63)		X (n = 60)		F	df	p	$\eta^2$
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD				
sexual satisfaction	33,49	5,20	31,06	5,18	28,38	4,81	14,10	171	<0,001*	0,14

\*p < 0,05

Table 10. Post-hoc test results for differences in sexual satisfaction in the study groups of people from generations X, Y and Z

Variable	Generation group (I)	Generation group (J)	Difference of means (I-J)	p	95% confidence interval	
					Lower limit	Upper limit
sexual satisfaction	X	Y	-2.68	0.011*	-4.84	-0.52
		Z	-5.10	<0.001*	-7.38	-2.82
	Y	X	2.68	0.011*	0.52	4.84
		Z	-2.42	0.032*	-4.68	-0.17
	Z	X	5.10	<0.001*	2.82	7.38
		Y	2.42	0.032*	0.17	4.68

\*p < 0,05

with Generation X participants achieving higher mean scores than Generation Z ones. For this variable, no significant differences were found between Generation X and Generation Y respondents or between Generation Y and Generation Z ones.

### 3.4. Sexual satisfaction in compared groups of study participants

In the last step of the analyses, an attempt was made to identify whether there were differences in sexual satisfaction among groups of people from generations X, Y, and Z. The obtained results are presented in Tables 9 and 10.

The highest mean overall sexual satisfaction score was observed in the Generation Z group compared to the results achieved by the ones from Generations Y and X. For the overall sexual satisfaction score,  $\eta^2 = 0.14$ , indicating a strong effect between the sexual satisfaction variable and age groups. To determine

which groups differed significantly in terms of mean scores on the sexual satisfaction variable, a Tukey HSD test was conducted, taking into account the homogeneity of variance. The results are presented in Table 10.

Considering the obtained results (Table 10), it was assumed that the mean scores for the sexual satisfaction variable differed significantly between the compared groups. Generation Z respondents achieved higher mean scores than Generation X and Y ones. At the same time, Generation Y respondents obtained higher mean scores than Generation X ones

## 4. Discussion of results

The obtained results of the psychological study allow us to give a positive answer to the formulated research question as well as refer to the research hypotheses. This is because differentiation was found in affective communication, forgiveness capacity, interpersonal commitment and sexual satisfaction in the groups of people from generations X, Y, Z.

Considering the psychological variables included in the study, we first of all referred to the variable of affective communication. It was found that respondents from generation X obtained significantly higher mean scores in both support and non-verbal communication and verbal communication than the ones from generations Y and Z. There were no statistically significant differences in affective communication between generations Y and Z. Interpreting the obtained result, it is believed that it has a connection with greater life experience and the ability of expressing emotions. Psychologists indicate that, on the whole people, who are older are more effective in processing non-verbal material (recognizing and processing emotions) than younger ones (Szczygiel

& Jasielska, 2008). It has been noticed that with age the level of support and positive communication with the partner grows while the level of jealousy and negative interactions decreases in both women and men. People who are younger tend to focus on the protection of their own autonomy and achieving their own goals in a relationship. Older people who are in a long-lasting relationship will over years develop the abilities of positive communication, solving conflicts and heading for a mutually agreed goal. Family commitments are of greater and greater importance for them (Kaleta & Mróz, 2018; Jolin, Lafontaine, Lussier & Brassard, 2023).

While analysing forgiveness capacity in people of generations X, Y, Z, it was found that the highest mean scores in this respect had been obtained by the respondents from generation X. There were no statistically significant differences between people from generations Y and Z as far as the aspect of general forgiveness was concerned. It was noticed that the age of the respondents did not cause any significant difference in case of forgiving oneself and others. Due to the uneven number of responses, we did not include the mean scores of the respondents for the variable of a sense of forgiveness from God. Interpreting the obtained results, it was assumed that forgiveness capacity is developed with age, as people gain experience. Young men most frequently demonstrate revenge behaviours, characterized by a willingness to take revenge on the person who has harmed them. In the middle-age period the prevailing type of behaviours is avoidance, and in old age – kindness for the harmer. Women tend to demonstrate kind behaviours regardless of age. Over years a person not only gains experience but also grows emotionally, which allows them to react to harming situations in a more adaptive way than young people (Ghaemmaghami, Allemand & Martin, 2011). Explanation for the results obtained in the study can also be looked for in the theory of social learning by Bandura (1977). Over the lifespan a person not only gains and develops their abilities but also observes and interprets other people's behaviours. Pointing to the obtained results, with age people learn how to react to specific situations and achieve the desired goal. Moreover, studies

show that young people perceive forgiveness as an interpersonal process and elderly people as an intrapersonal one, which could also explain different approaches of people of different ages to reaching agreement in a romantic relationship (Zahorcova, Drstakova & Masarykova, 2023). Psychologists assume that forgiveness capacity is also determined by other factors, which include satisfaction with life and general well-being. People at a younger age characterized by a poorer capacity for forgiveness may not feel satisfaction with life in a degree comparable with older people (Kaleta & Mróz, 2018).

Another psychological variable analysed in this study was sexual satisfaction. It was discovered that people from generations X and Y felt lower sexual satisfaction than people from generation Z. At the same time, people from generation Y obtained higher mean scores in this respect than people from generation X. The results obtained in the author's study indicate that both women and men of older age assess satisfaction with their sexual contacts with their partner lower than younger people whereby men usually assess their sexual satisfaction higher than women (Kucharski & Rzepa, 2017). Psychologists assume that with age satisfaction with intimate contacts tends to decrease. However, it is not connected with age itself, but it can also result from other factors, such as: self-esteem, communication quality, intimacy level, hormone level changes, intellectual ability and physical vitality. These factors may lead to a decrease in desire and frequency of sexual contacts with a partner (Nomejko & Dolińska-Zygmunt, 2019; Rausch & Rettenberger, 2021). Over time, a decline is observed in both one's own sexual satisfaction and the partner's sexual activity and the willingness to meet their needs. However, it has been emphasized that a positive attitude toward the ageing process and adaptation to ongoing changes can increase satisfaction with intimate contact (Skoblow, Drewelies, & Proulx, 2023). Younger people demonstrate a more generally positive attitude toward sexuality, which translates into higher self-rated sexual satisfaction. A factor that may be important in the context of satisfaction with intimate contacts is the sense of support from one's partner. It has been shown that

support, understanding, and closeness from a loved one increase sexual satisfaction (Miguel, Humboldt, & Leal, 2024).

The final factor determining the quality of a romantic relationship examined in our study was the variable of interpersonal commitment. It turned out that Generation X respondents achieved the highest mean scores in this area, on the dimensions of bond with the partner and relationship importance, compared to people from Generations Y and Z. For these variables, there were no statistically significant differences between the mean scores of Generation Y respondents and Generation Z ones. Statistically significant differences were found between Generations X and Z for the variable of concern for the partner's well-being, with Generation X respondents achieving higher mean scores than Generation Z ones. For this variable, no significant differences were observed between Generation X and Generation Y participants and between Generation Y and Generation Z ones. The obtained results suggest that Generation X participants understand romantic relationships as shaped by tradition, commitment, and community. For them, the foundation of a romantic relationship is mutual, deep commitment, which is reflected in responsible family formation and the fulfilment of social obligations. In contrast, Generation Y and Z participants more often perceive romantic relationships as a transaction that can result in immediate personal benefits. Researchers often describe younger generations' romantic relationships as "liquid love," meaning their short-term nature and lack of deep commitment to the relationship itself (Samad, 2025). Psychologists believe that with age, people develop skills and gain experiences that support the formation and maintenance of lasting romantic bonds. They argue that young people are capable of showing their partners support to a similar degree as older people, but such behaviours are intended to

test the feasibility of building a long-term relationship with another person. Furthermore, younger individuals are more likely to express jealousy and a desire to control their partner, which can lead to more conflict-ridden relationships. It has been suggested that older people strive for a stable romantic relationship, while younger ones value their autonomy within a relationship to a greater extent. However, with age, an individual's ability to compromise and strive for a stable and satisfying relationship increases (Lantagne & Furman, 2017).

The results of the presented psychological studies suggest not only differences in the determinants of romantic relationship quality across generations X, Y, and Z, but they also provide a clarification of their scope. This knowledge is considered valuable, particularly from the perspective of family psychology. Several limitations of the conducted research include the use of self-report measures targeted at individuals in romantic relationships, online research, the inability to assess cause-and-effect relationships, and the homogeneous cultural context. However, it appears that the obtained results may facilitate a deeper understanding of the dynamics and scope of changes in affective communication, interpersonal commitment, forgiveness capacity, and sexual satisfaction in romantic relationships across generations. They can support therapists working with couples in improving satisfaction with romantic relationships, and be used by specialists and institutions to develop psycho-educational programs on relationship building, emotional expression, proper communication, and the process of forgiveness. A significant conclusion from the research is the need to adapt psychological interventions to the specific needs of different age groups, as observed intergenerational differences indicate the need for a flexible therapeutic approach that takes into account diverse emotional and communication needs.

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# Ressentiment as a silent destroyer of romantic relationships: The importance of attachment styles and life satisfaction in the context of relationship duration<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Partner relationships play a key role in human functioning, being an important source of emotional support, security, and a sense of belonging. Contemporary psychological research increasingly focuses on the factors determining the quality and durability of relationships, among which particular importance is attributed to attachment styles and less to the phenomenon of resentment. Attachment styles, formed in early relational experience, determine the ways of regulating closeness, trust, and dependence in partner relationships. On the other hand, resentment, understood as a relatively permanent emotional and cognitive disposition of a hidden nature, can act as a “silent destructor” of the relationship, influencing the interpretation of the partner’s behaviour, the emotions experienced and the subjective assessment of the relationship. The paper aims to show the relationship between attachment styles, the level of resentment and life satisfaction in relationships of different seniority. The study included 144 people (72 women and 72 men) in partnerships, with two groups separated: people in relationships lasting up to 7 years and over 7 years. The Attachment Styles Questionnaire (KSP) by M. Plopa was used in the research (2008), the Life Satisfaction Scale (SWLS) by E. Diener and colleagues, and in the Polish adaptation Z. Juczyński (2001) and the Resentment Questionnaire (KRe-Psy) developed by M.G. Karbowski (2025). The results indicate that both attachment styles and the level of resentment are significantly associated with life satisfaction in a partnership, regardless of its duration. Resentment manifests itself as a correlate that lowers the quality of relationships, co-occurring especially with non-secure attachment styles. In relationships with more than 7 years of experience, higher relational satisfaction is associated with a lower severity of the key components of resentment – *reluctance* ( $\rho = -0.781$ ), *contempt* ( $\rho = -0.802$ ), and *regret* ( $\rho = -0.603$ ) – suggesting that as the quality of relationships decreases, persistent forms of hostility and feelings of harm increase. This means that in long-term relationships, resentment takes on a relatively chronic character and is associated with a lower rating of the relationship. On the other hand, in relationships up to 7 years of age, relational satisfaction has the lowest level in connection with *revenge* ( $\rho = -0.832$ ) and *jealousy* ( $\rho = -0.541$ ), while other manifestations of resentment are uncorrelated with the quality of the relationship. The results of the study emphasise the universal importance of the analysed variables in and the need for further research, especially of a longitudinal nature, enabling a better understanding of the dynamics of these relationships during the duration of the relationship.

**Keywords:** attachment styles, life satisfaction, partnerships, resentment.

## Introduction

Interpersonal relationships, and in particular partnerships, are one of the key areas of human functioning (Bühler et al., 2021). Their quality has a significant impact on an individual’s mental well-being, sense of meaning in life and overall satisfaction with life (Stahnke & Cooley, 2020). Satisfaction with life in relationships, understood as a subjective sense of fulfilment and satisfaction with relationships, has

been the subject of intensive psychological research for years (cf. Pfund et al., 2020; see: Gold et al., 2024; Roth et al., 2024). The authors of these studies focus primarily on identifying the mechanisms determining the durability and quality of partner relationships, looking for factors that favor their stability or lead to their gradual disintegration. Confirming that people who experience lasting and stable satisfaction

<sup>1</sup> Article in Polish language: [https://stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/65pl\\_karb.pdf](https://stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/65pl_karb.pdf)

in a relationship are more likely to have higher levels of life satisfaction and better emotional functioning and mental health (Braithwaite & Holt-Lunstad, 2017; Downward et al., 2022).

In the literature on the subject, special attention is paid to the role of attachment styles, which are formed in early relational experiences and affect the ways of regulating closeness, the effects of anxiety or interpersonal trust (Bao et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2022). At the same time, research points to the importance of the value system of partners as a factor determining the way of interpreting relational experiences and the level of satisfaction with the relationship. Compatibility of values, especially in the area of relational and prosocial values, is associated with a higher quality of relationships and a greater sense of emotional stability (van der Wal et al., 2023). On the other hand, a study in Slovenia, carried out by the Kus Ambrož et al. (2021) show that the presence of love in a relationship was associated with a person's subjective perception of its quality, but had no effect on the self-esteem of the stability of the relationship.

Therefore, it seems reasonable to further explore this area, because despite the growing number of studies on attachment styles and value systems, relatively little attention has been paid to resentment as a complex psychological phenomenon that can serve as a hidden destructor of partner relationships. Resentment manifests itself as a relatively permanent emotional-cognitive attitude, developing in conditions of frustration, experienced injustice and a sense of powerlessness of the individual. Its essence is not limited only to experiencing negative emotions, but includes the process of systematic distortion of the perception of reality and secondary re-evaluation of the value system (Karbowski, 2025). In this sense, resentment can lead to permanent deformations of the partner's assessments, relationships and one's own position in the relationship, while remaining a regulatory mechanism of a compensatory nature.

The importance of the length of the relationship also remains an important and still insufficiently explored issue. The length of a relationship is associated with different emotional dynamics, ways of coping with conflict, and self-esteem and perceived conflict, as shown by the study of Rauthmann et al. (2021) in the German family panel.

Empirical research indicates that relationship satisfaction is not static, but changes during the relationship. Analytics Bühler and Orth (2024) in a large longitudinal study show that Relationship satisfaction changes differently depending on whether the relationship lasts or ends, and what kind of relationship the person is in later; Participants who started a new relationship after a breakup had higher initial levels of satisfaction in the new relationship than in the previous one, while satisfaction in relationships that fell apart declined faster than in those that continued. On the other hand, the latent class growth analysis approach by Roth et al. (2024) shows that different couples follow different trajectories of satisfaction – some show stable high levels, others decreases, and still others various forms of changes over time, which is proof that satisfaction does not change in a homogeneous way across the entire population of the surveyed couples.

Longitudinal studies on partner satisfaction show an interesting relationship that overall levels of satisfaction often undergo gradual reduction over the years of the relationship (McNulty et al., 2016), which is consistent with the dynamic trajectory of satisfaction model (Anderson et al., 2012). Therefore, the popular concept of 'seven-year itch' is widely discussed in cultural and educational literature, but does not function in peer-reviewed psychological studies as a clearly confirmed crisis point after exactly seven years (Williamson & Lavner, 2019).

On this basis, it is reasonable to distinguish between relationships with shorter and longer experience (e.g., less than 7 years), which may be characterised by different emotional dynamics, the level of adaptation to difficulties, and ways of regulating tensions and resolving conflicts. Relationships with different durations may also differ in susceptibility to destructive factors, such as chronic relational frustration or growing resentment. At the same time, the length of the relationship can modify the way in which attachment styles and the value system recognised by partners affect the subjective assessment of the quality of the relationship. In the light of these arguments, it can be assumed that the analysis of resentment as a "silent destructor" of partner relationships allows for a deeper understanding of the

mechanisms that mediate between relational experience, its interpretation, and long-term satisfaction with the relationship. The analysis aims to deepen the understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying the quality of partner relationships and to indicate potential implications for therapeutic and preventive practice.

## **1. Psychological determinants of the quality of partner relationships: attachment styles, satisfaction dynamics and the role of resentment**

The paper's theoretical part discusses attachment theory as one of the key approaches explaining the quality of partner relationships, with particular emphasis on life satisfaction in a relationship as an important indicator of relational well-being and its relationship with the functioning of an individual in a close relationship. Next, the theoretical foundations describing the changes in the level of satisfaction during the relationship are presented, considering the differences between shorter and longer relationships and the dynamics of these processes. Next, the author's approach to resentment as a relatively permanent emotional and cognitive mechanism, leading to the distortion of relational evaluations and the re-evaluation of the value system, which is the theoretical basis for the analysis of resentment as a "silent destructor" of partner relationships, is presented.

### **1.1. Attachment styles and functioning in partner relationships**

Attachment theory is one of the fundamental approaches explaining the functioning of an individual in close interpersonal relationships, including partnerships. Started by John Bowlby in 1958 in the article *The nature of the child's tie to his mother*, the concept of attachment assumes that the need for closeness with an important person has a biological basis and has an adaptive function, serving emotional regulation and a sense of security (Bowlby,

2022; Eilert & Buchheim, 2023; Messina et al., 2024). Early relational experiences with caregivers are internalised in the form of so-called internal operating models, which affect the way we perceive ourselves and others, and the "attachment pattern as an internal active model creates the early experience on which later personality and behaviour depends" (Plopa, 2019, p. 490).

Bowlby's concept was directly referred to by Mary Ainsworth, who in the 1960s and 1970s – first in field research in Uganda and then in a longitudinal project in Baltimore – empirically verified and operationalised attachment styles (Ainsworth, 1967; Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Lamb, 1980). Developing Bowlby's concept, Ainsworth distinguished three basic attachment styles: safe, anxious-ambivalent, and avoidant, emphasising the key role of the caregiver's availability and responsiveness in forming bonds (Ainsworth, 1969). The safe style is associated with a sense of trust in the attachment figure, the ability to explore and effective regulation of emotions, which is conducive to building stable and satisfying interpersonal relationships (Włodarczyk, 2016). On the other hand, post-protection styles develop in conditions of inconsistent, rejective or unpredictable care and are associated with difficulties in terms of closeness, trust, and affect regulation (Plopa, 2019).

In adult partnerships, attachment styles manifest themselves in an analogous way, as shown by Hazan and Diamond (2000), treating this relationship as an attachment process based on the same attachment functions (safe base, safe haven, maintaining closeness, separation distress) was developed based on key observed similarities between infant attachment traits and romantic attachment traits (Barbaro et al., 2021).

People with a secure attachment style tend to have higher levels of intimacy, commitment, and relationship satisfaction, as well as better communication and a lower frequency of conflict compared to those with anxious or avoidant styles (Sagone et al., 2023). These partners perceive themselves and others in a positive way, which promotes the durability of the relationship.

On the other hand, people with an avoidant attachment style often avoid emotional closeness, show reduced trust in their partner and less willingness to

engage in the relationship (Bhavya & Naila, 2024; Freeman et al., 2023; Swets & Cox, 2023; Yilmaz et al., 2023). The anxious-ambivalent style is associated with an increased fear of abandonment, excessive vigilance towards relational signals and a reduced sense of security in the relationship, which negatively affects relational satisfaction (Metellus et al., 2025; Plopa, 2019). Research indicates that post-secure attachment styles promote the intensification of conflicts, reduced quality of communication and emotional instability in partner relationships (Hansom & Guerrero, 2025).

From the presented considerations, a picture emerges that the anxious-ambivalent style (attachment anxiety) is associated with an increased fear of rejection and hypervigilance to signals of threat to the relationship, which results in a lower level of satisfaction and difficulties in the functioning of the relationship (González-Ortega et al., 2021; Rodriguez et al., 2020). On the other hand, unsecured attachment styles promote the intensification of conflict processes and destructive behaviours, weakening the quality of communication and the emotional stability of relationships (Gazder & Stanton, 2020). In this sense, the author of this study shares the opinion that the following approach retains a high research value, because emotional and cognitive processes come to the fore, capable of modifying fixed patterns of functioning during the relationship. One such mechanism is resentment, which can grow based on chronic relational frustrations and gradually play the role of a hidden but important factor destabilising the partner bond.

### **1.2. The level of satisfaction with the relationship in the perspective of the relationship**

The level of satisfaction with a relationship is defined as a subjective assessment of the degree of satisfaction and fulfilment that an individual experiences in a partnership relationship (Freihart et al., 2023; Zhan et al., 2022). It includes both emotional, cognitive, and behavioural components, referring to the fulfilment of emotional needs, the quality of communication, closeness, support, and the overall

balance of experiences resulting from living together with a partner (Fallis et al., 2016). This satisfaction serves as an important indicator of the quality of the relationship, and at the same time a predictor of its durability and stability (Józefacka et al., 2023).

The literature emphasises that the level of satisfaction in a relationship is a dynamic phenomenon, changing with the duration of the relationship. Relationships with a shorter duration are more often characterised by a high level of emotional intensity, idealisation of the partner, and the dominance of positive affects, which promotes a higher initial level of satisfaction (Wider et al., 2025). Over time, the relationship is subject to adaptation processes, in which conflict coping skills, mutual support, and the ability to negotiate problems arising from differences begin to play an important role (Bühler et al., 2021).

Cassepp-Borges et al. (2023) indicate that the impact of passion/affect components on satisfaction depends on the stage of the relationship, which is directly connected to the thesis that the role of emotions vs. stability/security changes depending on the duration of the relationship. Relationship satisfaction is broadly defined as a subjective assessment of positive (passion) and negative (insecurity) thoughts in a relationship (Gable & Poore, 2008), compared to the relationships and experiences of others (Wachelke et al., 2007). Attachment styles also remain an important moderator of the level of satisfaction with a relationship. Securely attached people show a higher and more stable level of satisfaction, regardless of the length of the relationship, which results from their ability to regulate emotions and respond adequately to the needs of their partner (Duemmler & Kobak, 2001). On the other hand, post-protection styles, especially anxiety and reluctance, are associated with reduced satisfaction with relationships, greater susceptibility to frustration, and intensification of tensions as the relationship lasts (Burchell & Ward, 2011; Langeslag et al., 2013).

The outlined analyses allow for a better understanding, especially in the context of understanding relationship satisfaction as a dynamic construct, the meaning and conditions of which are subject to change with the length of the relationship. In the long term, cognitive and emotional processes related

to the interpretation and integration of relational experiences begin to play an increasingly important role. However, this approach does not fully exhaust the analysed issue, because resentment is of particular importance, which – growing on the basis of chronic frustration – can gradually distort the subjective assessment of the quality of a partner relationship and undermine its stability.

### **1.3. Psychological resentment as a mechanism of distortion of relational assessments**

In the context of contemporary changes, it is increasingly clear that resentment can act as a mechanism that distorts the way relationships are understood, influencing the interpretation of the partner's intentions and the assessment of the value of the bond itself. Modern communication technologies, particularly social media, can have a negative impact on the functioning of partner relationships. Research shows that social media addiction is associated with an increase in psychological distress and decreased satisfaction in relationships (Hoşgör & Güngördü, 2025; Satıcı et al., 2021). Excessive use of platforms, such as Instagram, as well as streaming games, can lead to an increase in conflicts and a decrease in satisfaction, especially with limited attention to the partner (Bouffard et al., 2021; Herrero-Báguena et al., 2025; Karbowski, 2023b; Mukherjee & Ghosh, 2025). In addition, envy caused by social media content is associated with lower life and relational satisfaction through communication disorders (Kovan, 2023; Vaillancourt et al., 2024); and mental health and self-esteem issues (Reer et al., 2019; Vogel et al., 2014). In this context, the importance of resentment as a complex and at the same time insufficiently operationalised psychological phenomenon is becoming more and more clear, i.e., showing it according to empirical indicators consistent with the accepted theoretical model. Resentment is not a transient affective response, but a relatively perma-

nent emotional-cognitive attitude in which negative emotions – such as jealousy, grief, envy, or a sense of harm – are internalised and secondary cognitive rationalisation (Karbowski, 2023a).

The key mechanism constituting resentment is the process of re-evaluation, which consists not in changing reality itself, but in distorting the way it is evaluated. As Scheler points out, this deformation takes place at the stage of passing experience into consciousness, i.e., in the area of axiological experience of the world, leading to permanent shifts in the hierarchy of values (Scheler, 1961). From a psychological perspective, resentment can be understood as a costly regulatory strategy in which emotions are not extinguished or integrated, but perpetuated and built into the individual's interpretive schemes (Campbell-Sills & Barlow, 2007; Gross, 1998).

By referring to functional models of emotions, resentment is located at the intersection of affect, mood, and cognitive evaluation, which distinguishes it from individual emotional reactions (Lazarus, 1993; Scherer, 1984). As a long-term regulatory “setting”, it promotes cognitive-emotional rigidity, intensification of projection and perpetuation of hostile interpretive schemes (Frijda, 1988; Hofmann et al., 2016). As a consequence, growing emotional frustration is conducive to the perpetuation of hostile attributions and negative patterns, which may be the basis for the development of resentment as a “silent destructor” of relationships. Interesting research indicates that in such partnerships, the experience of phubbing can occur<sup>2</sup> and lead to a gradual distortion of the partner's assessments, attributing threatening intentions to him, and a decrease in the ability to empathise and mentalise (Chmielik & Błachnio, 2022; Karaman & Arslan, 2024; Ni et al., 2025; Zhan et al., 2022).

This approach seems convincing, particularly concerning the fact that resentment has a compensatory function: enabling the individual to maintain a subjective sense of meaning and coherence of the self in conditions of chronic relational frustration, but at the expense

2 *Phubbing (phone and snubbing)* is a form of behaviour that involves directing attention to a mobile device at the expense of the person present in direct interaction. It manifests itself, e.g., by checking notifications, conducting text correspondence or browsing online content during a face-to-face conversation. This phenomenon is interpreted as a factor weakening the quality of interpersonal relationships, conducive to the feeling of loneliness, intensification of conflicts in relationships and lowering self-esteem in people experiencing this form of ignorance.

of deforming axiological and relational evaluations. This conceptualisation found its operationalisation development in the KRe-Psy Psychological Resentment Questionnaire by Mariusz G. Karbowski (2025), showing resentment as a multidimensional construct including the temporal dimension (perpetuation of harm), spatial (generalisation of assessments), energy (regulatory cost), and informational (interpretative rigidity) (2025, pp. 94–97).

At this point, the author's position is justified because, from the perspective of partner relationships, resentment appears as an imperceptible variable, the effect of which intensifies especially in conditions of reduced satisfaction and long-term tensions in relationships. Longitudinal studies Bühler and Orth (2024) over relationship satisfaction show that its decline – especially when the relationship enters a phase of greater routine and adaptation burden – is associated with an intensification of negative affect and costly patterns of interaction (e.g., negative communication and conflicts), which promote the accumulation of frustration and emotions, such as anger, reluctance, or jealousy (Bühler & Orth, 2024; Jolin et al., 2022; Pirrone et al., 2023; Zorlular & Uzer, 2022).

The outlined position allows us to better understand that the presented research on relationship satisfaction in the perspective of relationship seniority and its analysis is not sufficient without taking into account the axiological processes that mediate between the experience of the relationship and its subjective evaluation. This justifies the need for research on resentment as a hidden but important mechanism of destruction of partner relationships.

## 2. Own research

### 2.1. Subject and purpose of the research

The subject of the research, the results of which are presented in this paper, is the analysis of the functioning of partner relationships in the context of satisfaction with life in relationships, attachment styles, and psychological resentment, understood as a relatively permanent emotional and cognitive

mechanism that distorts relational evaluations and leads to a re-evaluation of values. Particular attention was paid to the importance of relationship seniority as a differentiating factor in the dynamics of life satisfaction and the susceptibility of a relationship to hidden destructive processes. The research aims to examine the relationship between attachment styles, the level of life satisfaction in a relationship, and the intensity of resentment in partner relationships of different lengths. An important research assumption is also to determine the extent to which resentment mediates between satisfaction with life in a relationship and its subjective assessment, acting as a “silent destructor” of the quality and stability of the partnership bond.

### 2.2. Research problems and hypotheses

The research problem of this study focuses on determining to what extent and how resentment, understood as a relatively permanent emotional-cognitive attitude, plays the role of a hidden destructive mechanism in partner relationships, as well as on the analysis of how its intensity is related to attachment styles and the level of life satisfaction in a relationship in relationships of different years.

In order to empirically verify the research problem, the following research questions were formulated, referring to the analysed variables and the characteristics of the studied group:

1. What attachment styles do the participants present?
2. Is the level of resentment significantly related to subjectively assessed satisfaction with life in a relationship?
3. Does the length of time of a partnership differentiate the level of satisfaction with life in a relationship and the intensity of resentment?

Based on the theoretical findings and literature analysis, the following research hypotheses have been formulated:

1. The attachment style and the level of psychological resentment significantly correlate with the level of life satisfaction in a partnership.
2. People who represent a secure attachment style are characterised by a higher level of life satisfaction in a relationship compared to people who present post-secure styles, i.e., anxious-ambivalent and avoidant.
3. At the same time, people declaring a high level of satisfaction with life in a relationship are characterised by a lower level of psychological resentment compared to people with low life satisfaction.
4. In long-term partnerships, it is associated with a higher level of satisfaction with life in a relationship than in relationships with a shorter duration.

### **2.3. Variables and their indicators**

In the adopted research model, attachment styles and relationship seniority serve as independent variables that affect the level of life satisfaction in a relationship, while psychological resentment is an intermediary variable explaining the mechanism by which relational experiences and attachment patterns translate into a subjective assessment of the quality of a relationship.

### **2.4. Data collection method, group characteristics and research tools**

Research on attachment styles, psychological resentment and the level of life satisfaction in a relationship among couples with different relationships was conducted using quantitative methods, in particular the technique of a diagnostic survey using standardised questionnaires. The study included couples in relationships with up to 7 years of experience and couples in relationships over 7 years, which made it possible to analyse differences in relational functioning, considering the duration of the relationship.

The studied group consisted of adults of various ages (from 25 to 65 years), education (primary, secondary, tertiary) and places of residence (villages, cities with up to 50 thousand inhabitants, from 50 thousand to 200 thousand inhabitants and over

200 thousand inhabitants). Such a sample structure allowed to obtain empirical material with high socio-demographic heterogeneity.

At the stage of planning the research procedure, a clear distinction was made between two comparison groups: couples whose relationship experience did not exceed 7 years, and couples with relationship experience of more than 7 years. Each group initially consisted of 160 people (80 pairs). After verifying the completeness and correctness of the questionnaires and rejecting incomplete sheets, 72 couples were qualified for further analysis, which constituted a total of 144 respondents.

The research was conducted in paper form. In the first stage, the participants in the study filled out a sociodemographic metric, including basic information about age, education, place of residence, and seniority of the relationship.

Three psychological tools were used in the study: *Attachment Styles Questionnaire (KSP)* by M. Plopa (2008), *Life Satisfaction Scale (SWLS)* by E. Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (2010) in the Polish adaptation of Z. Juczyński (2001) and *Psychological Resentment Questionnaire (KRe-Psy)* prepared by M. G. Karbowski.

### **2.5. Results of the study**

Statistical analyses were carried out using the Yamami program. The analytical procedure was planned in order to answer the formulated research questions and verify the hypotheses. In the first step, the basic descriptive statistics for the analysed quantitative variables were calculated, and then the Shapiro–Wilk test was used to assess the normality of the distributions. Table 1 presents only the results obtained using the *Life Satisfaction Scale (SWLS)* and the *Attachment Styles Questionnaire (KSP)*, as the data from the *Ressentiment Questionnaire (KRe-Psy)* are rank-based and require a different analytical approach.

Table 2 presents the results of the Durbin–Conover post hoc test, which made it possible to identify statistically significant differences between the analysed variables. Significant differences between the safe style and other attachment styles were shown ( $p < .001$ ), while the differences between the

anxious-ambivalent and avoidant styles did not reach statistical significance. This means that the respondents most often presented a secure attachment style, while the other styles were at a lower level.

The results presented in Table 3 concern the relationship between attachment styles and the perceived level of life satisfaction in a relationship in the surveyed people. In order to assess the strength and direction of these relationships, Spearman's rho correlation analysis was used, adequate due to the abnormal distribution of the investigated variables.

Similar results were obtained for the correlation of variables: the level of perceived satisfaction and the reluctance style of attachment (Spearman's rho  $-0.454, p < .001$ ). Also in this case, the higher the tendency to show an avoidant attachment style, the lower the satisfaction felt in the subjects.

Table 4 indicates the result of the Spearman's rho correlation for the variable: the level of perceived satisfaction and individual manifestations of resentment depending on the length of the relationship.

In relationships with shorter experience, a diverse and less unambiguous pattern of dependencies is observed. *Reluctance* ( $\rho = 0.176$ ), *hatred* ( $\rho = 0.123$ ), *envy* ( $\rho = 0.205$ ), and *rudeness* ( $\rho = 0.188$ ) show weak positive correlations with life satisfaction in a relationship, which may indicate that in the early stages of a relationship, negative emotions do not always lower the subjective assessment of life satisfaction in a relationship, and are sometimes neutralised by emotional intensity, idealisation of the partner, or rationalisation mechanisms. At the same time, there are clearly negative correlations for vengeance ( $\rho = -0.422$ ), jealousy ( $\rho = -0.541$ ) and particularly

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the studied quantitative variables (N = 144)

	M	Me	SD	SKK.	Kurt.	Min.	Max.	W	$\rho$
SWLS	25.3	26.4	4.13	-0.04	0.06	13	36	0.912	<.001
Attachment Safe Style	44.8	47	4.81	-2.52	7.38	25	56	0.664	<.001
Anxiety-ambivalent attachment style	18.1	15.0	5.82	2.59	7.03	9	42	0.577	<.001
Attachment Avoidant Style	26.3	27.0	5.13	-0.05	0.07	14	37	0.831	<.001
Ressentiment Questionnaire	40.8	45	5.12	-2.44	7.12	26	58	0.688	<.001

Source: Own study.

Table 2. Comparison in pairs (Durbin-Conover test) for exhibited attachment styles

			Statistics	$\rho$
Safe style	-	Anxiety-ambivalent style	26.32	<.001
Safe style	-	Avoidant style	23.44	<.001
Anxiety-ambivalent style	-	Avoidant style	1.18	0.261

Source: Own study.

Table 3. The relationship between attachment styles and the level of life satisfaction felt in a relationship

		Safe style		Anxiety-ambivalent style	Avoidant style
The level of life satisfaction felt in a relationship	Spearman's rho	0.621	***	-0.441***	-0.454***
	$\rho$	<.001		<.001	<.001

Source: Own study.

strong for the tendency to revenge ( $\rho = -0.832$ ). This means that in short-term relationships, hostile, active forms of resentment, directed at acting against a partner, are strongly associated with a decrease in life satisfaction. The lack of data for regret suggests that in this phase of the relationship, this emotion may be less aware of or not yet formed as a permanent attitude.

In relationships with a longer experience, the pattern of dependence changes significantly and becomes more consistent and unambiguously negative. *Reluctance* ( $\rho = -0.781$ ), *contempt* ( $\rho = -0.802$ ), *regret* ( $\rho = -0.603$ ), and *hatred* ( $\rho = -0.482$ ) show strong or moderate negative correlations with relationship life satisfaction. This means that in long-term relationships, chronic, «silent» forms of resentment particularly strongly undermine the quality of life in a partnership. Vengeance also remains significantly negatively associated with satisfaction ( $\rho = -0.474$ ), which indicates the perpetuation of hostile interpretive and emotional patterns. On the other hand, positive but weak correlations for envy ( $\rho = 0.190$ ), rudeness ( $\rho = 0.198$ ), and jealousy ( $\rho = 0.476$ ) may suggest that in long-term relationships, certain emotional tensions are sometimes reinterpreted as manifestations of commitment or are secondarily normalised within the stable structure of the relationship.

The results indicate that the length of relationship significantly moderates the relationship between the manifestations of resentment and satisfaction with life in a relationship. In shorter relationships, active and impulsive forms of resentment (revenge, jealousy, vengeance) have a destructive effect, while in long-term relationships, passive, fixed emotional-cognitive attitudes, such as reluctance, contempt, or regret, have a particularly strong effect. This confirms the concept of resentment as a “silent destructor” of partner relationships, which has a greater intensity with the duration of the relationship and gradually distorts the subjective assessment of the relationship.

Table 5 presents descriptive statistics necessary for the comparison of the isolated groups. The data clearly show that people who function in relationships with a longer period of experience (over 7 years) feel more satisfied with life in a partnership. This is indicated by both the mean values (26.7 vs 29.3) and the median

Table 4. The relationship between resentment and the level of perceived life satisfaction – the Rho Spearman correlation

Manifestations of resentment	Up to 7 years	Over 7 years
Reluctance	0.176	-0.781***
Hatred	0.123	-0.482**
Envy	0.205	0.190
Vengeance	-0.422**	-0.474**
Revenge	-0.832***	0.201
Rudeness	0.188	0.198
Contempt	0.021	-0.802***
Jealousy	-0.541***	0.476**
Regret	Lack	-0.603***

Source: Own study. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (designations adopted exploratory on the basis of correlation strength).

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for Mann-Whitney test results

	Relationship Seniority	N	M	Me
Level of satisfaction	up to 7 years	72	26.7	24.0
	over 7 years	72	29.3	31.0

Source: Own study.

(23 vs 31). In other words, it can be considered that people in long-term relationships feel more satisfied with life than people in short-term partnerships.

### 3. Discussion of results

At the beginning of the discussion of the results, it is necessary to refer to the main research goal, which was to determine to what extent and how resentment – understood as a relatively permanent emotional-cognitive attitude – plays the role of a hidden destructive mechanism in partner relationships, as well as to examine how its intensity is related to attachment styles and the level of satisfaction with life in relationships of different lengths. Both the theoretical and empirical parts of the work have been designed in a coherent way, so as to enable a multifaceted explanation of the

formulated research problems and the interpretation of the results obtained in the light of contemporary psychological concepts.

The first research question concerned the identification of attachment styles presented by the people participating in the study. Its formulation was the basis for the hypothesis assuming that the attachment style and the level of psychological resentment significantly correlate with the level of satisfaction with life in a partnership. The empirical results obtained confirmed the validity of this hypothesis. The correlation analysis showed a strong positive relationship between a secure attachment style and the level of life satisfaction in a relationship ( $\rho = 0.621$ ), which is shown in Table 3. This means that the higher the level of secure attachment style in the surveyed people, the higher the declared level of satisfaction with life in a partnership. The obtained correlation coefficient was characterised by very high statistical significance ( $p < .001$ ), which indicates the stability and reliability of this relationship. A different dependency pattern was observed for post-hedge styles. There was a negative correlation of moderate strength between the level of life satisfaction in a partnership and the anxiety-ambivalent style, also statistically significant ( $\rho = -0.441$ ;  $p < .001$ ). This result indicates a significant relationship between the intensity of the characteristics of the anxious-ambivalent attachment style and the level of subjectively felt satisfaction with life in a partnership.

The presented results are consistent with the findings of the literature on the subject. In longitudinal studies by Metellus et al. (2025), based on the theory of attachment and life satisfaction and the role of jealousy, it has been shown that a higher intensity of the anxiety-ambivalent attachment style features significantly predicts a decrease in the level of satisfaction with the relationship at later points of measurement, which confirms the hypothesis of the negative impact of anxious attachment patterns on the quality of relationships.

The second research hypothesis, derived directly from the first research question, assumed that People who represent a secure attachment style are characterised by higher levels of satisfaction with life in a relationship compared to people presenting

post-protection styles, i.e., anxiety-ambivalent and avoidant. The empirical results obtained unequivocally confirmed the legitimacy of this hypothesis. The correlation analysis showed strong positive significance between a secure attachment style and the level of satisfaction with life in a relationship ( $\rho = 0.621$ ), which is presented in Table 3. This means that the higher the level of the characteristics of the secure attachment style, the higher the level satisfaction with life in a partnership. High value of the correlation coefficient and its very high statistical significance ( $p < .001$ ) indicate the significant nature of this relationship. The empirical results are in full agreement with the current state of psychological knowledge. In the literature on the subject, it is consistently emphasised that a secure attachment style promotes higher levels of relationship satisfaction, better emotional regulation, and more adaptive patterns of interpersonal functioning, while the dimensions of attachment insecurity – anxiety and reluctance – are associated with reduced relational satisfaction (Candel & Turliuc, 2019; Lozano et al., 2021; Quan et al., 2025; Rodriguez et al., 2020).

As a consequence, the analysis of the data obtained allows us to conclude that a secure attachment style is an important factor conducive to life satisfaction in a partnership, while secure styles are associated with an increased risk of reduced life satisfaction from the relationship. These results provide a solid basis for further analyses, in which secure attachment can be treated as a resource to protect the relationship from the negative impact of destructive processes, including growing resentment.

The research question on which the third hypothesis was based was whether the level of psychological resentment is significantly related to the assessed satisfaction with life in a partnership. The hypothesis assumed that people declaring a higher level of life satisfaction are also characterised by a lower intensity of psychological resentment compared to people with lower satisfaction with life in a relationship. The obtained empirical results allow us to confirm this hypothesis. Spearman's analysis of the rho correlation, presented in Table 4, showed statistically significant relationships between the level of life satisfaction in a relationship and selected manifestations

of resentment, with the nature and strength of these relationships differentiating depending on the length of the relationship. In particular, people declaring higher life satisfaction showed a lower intensity of resentment emotions, such as reluctance, contempt, vengeance, or regret, which confirms the assumption that resentment has a destructive impact on the subjective assessment of the quality of a relationship.

This approach seems convincing, especially with regard to the data from research on unforgiveness and satisfaction from life in couples, including the motivation of revenge and withdrawal (Guzmán-González et al., 2020), cynical hostility (Segel-Karpas et al., 2024) and negative communication. In connection with Johnson et al. (2021), research shows that higher satisfaction with life in a relationship co-occurs with a lower intensity of persistent negative emotional-cognitive configurations (e.g., reluctance, vengeance, contempt), which systematically distort the partner's assessment and reduce the subjective quality of life in the relationship.

The third research question, which preceded the formulation of the fourth hypothesis, concerned the relationship between the length of service and the level of perceived satisfaction of life in a relationship, and the moderating factor was resentment. This hypothesis assumed that in relationships with a longer duration, a higher level of satisfaction with life in a relationship is observed than in relationships with a shorter period of experience and a lower level of psychological resentment. The empirical results obtained partially confirmed the validity of this assumption. The analysis of the data showed that people in relationships with more than 7 years of experience declared a significantly higher level of life satisfaction in a relationship compared to people in short-term relationships. At the same time, significant differences in the level of psychological resentment were observed between the studied groups. This result suggests that while a longer relationship is conducive to a higher sense of stability and satisfaction, it does not completely eliminate resentment processes that can build up as a result of long-term relational tensions and accumulated emotions.

Analyses of the results of people in relationships with more than 7 years of experience, numerous statistically significant negative correlations were observed

between the level of satisfaction and key manifestations of resentment. Particularly strong relationships concerned such components as *reluctance* ( $\rho = -0.781$ ;  $p < .001$ ), *contempt* ( $\rho = -0.802$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and *regret* ( $\rho = -0.603$ ;  $p < .001$ ). This means that the higher the level of satisfaction with life in long-term relationships, the significantly higher the intensity of emotions of the nature of permanent hostility, depreciation of the partner and a fixed sense of harm. These results unequivocally support the hypothesis of resentment as a destructive mechanism, the severity of which remains inversely proportional to the quality of life in a partner relationship in the long term. Also, the manifestation of resentment in the form of vengeance showed a moderate, significant negative correlation in both shorter ( $\rho = -0.422$ ;  $p < .01$ ) and longer ( $\rho = -0.474$ ;  $p < .01$ ) relationships, suggesting that retaliatory tendencies and retaliatory impulses are generally inconsistent with high levels of life satisfaction, regardless of the length of the relationship. However, it is worth noting that the strength of these dependencies was more clearly marked in long-term relationships.

In the group of relationships up to 7 years old, the picture of dependency was less clear. Although significant negative correlations were noted for vengeance ( $\rho = -0.832$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and jealousy ( $\rho = -0.541$ ;  $p < .001$ ), many manifestations of resentment (e.g., reluctance, hatred, envy, rudeness) did not show statistically significant associations with the level of life satisfaction. This may indicate that in the earlier phases of the relationship, negative emotions of a resentful nature are less consolidated and more often compensated by emotional intensity, idealisation of the partner or adaptation mechanisms.

Relating the results of one's own research to the literature on the subject, one can notice a consistent regularity: in reports with shorter experience. Reluctance and hatred are less likely to take the form of a fixed disposition, and are more often found as intense but short-term reactions emerging in the conditions of a rapid escalation of the conflict (McCurry et al., 2024; Overall, 2020). In such a system, they primarily serve as an indicator of the crisis and are sometimes associated with a rapid, clear decline in life satisfaction in a relationship, characteristic of couples entering a breakup trajectory (Bühler & Orth, 2024; 2025). In other words,

in shorter-term relationships, strong negative emotions are more likely to signal a turning point in relationship dynamics than to provide a stable emotional-cognitive pattern. A different picture is revealed in long-term relationships, where hatred, regret, or grief can take the form of „silent” hostility – less expressive, more chronic, and embedded in a long-term sense of harm and the accumulation of unresolved conflicts. Such a profile is conducive to the preservation of hostile interpretive schemes and systematic attribution of intentions that threaten the relationship to the partner, which leads to a gradual distortion of assessments in partner relationships. This mechanism corresponds well with the results by Li et al. (2024) and Sowan (2023), who have shown that hostile attributions of partner behaviour have a multidimensional structure (direct hostile attribution, indirect enemy attribution, and benign attribution with potentially protective significance) and thus can constitute a cognitive “scaffolding” to maintain hostility in the relationship. In the perspective of this paper, this means that with the passage of time, the risk of moving from an episodic emotional reaction to a relatively permanent attitude increases, which perpetuates a negative interpretation of the partner’s behaviour and can create a basis for resentment as a “silent destructor” of the bond.

Analysis of the results of our own research in comparison with the literature on the subject indicates that jealousy, reluctance, regret, contempt, and envy play an important role in shaping the dynamics of partner relationships, with their meaning and mechanisms varying depending on the length of the relationship. In shorter-term relationships, these emotions are more likely to relate to social comparisons, such as the perceived attractiveness of the partner, the level of attention received or personal successes, and their intensity is sometimes reinforced by the insecurity of the relationship and the fear of rejection. A special context conducive to the activation of jealousy is social media, which provide ambiguous interpretative stimuli (Xu et al., 2023). This phenomenon has been described in detail in studies of Sullivan (2021), in which online jealousy was operationalised as a reaction to ambiguous online scenarios (e.g., partner activity in social media, exchange of messages) and then analysed in three components: emotional, cognitive, and

behavioural. Of particular importance are the cognitive-behavioural components, including suspiciousness, excessive monitoring and checking of the partner’s activity, which, as the results indicate, can transform over time into a relatively stable style of functioning in the partner relationship, conducive to the growth of resentment. In long-term relationships, jealousy and envy are more often associated with an assessment of the imbalance of contributions to the relationship, and thus with a cognitive balance (“who gives more”, “who sacrifices more”), which is conducive to the perpetuation of feelings of harm and resentment. Such a mechanism has been confirmed in studies by Bühler and Orth (2024), which indicate that long-term comparisons in relationships and the perception of injustice are important predictors of a decrease in satisfaction and the growth of negative emotions of a resentful nature. A similar pattern is observed with regard to manifestations of resentment, such as revenge and vengeance. In relationships with shorter experience, they are more often impulsive and reactive, appearing in response to fresh relational transgressions (e.g., betrayal, lying, rudeness), especially in people with increased sensitivity to rejection. Research by Clemente and Espinosa (2021), Gómez et al. (2021), and Ferreiros and Clemente (2023) indicate that vengeful responses in such situations are predicted both by the nature of the partner’s alleged transgression and by personality traits in the area of individual differences, which promote adaptation strategies in men from the Dark Triad (Jonason et al., 2009). In long-term relationships, revenge, and vengeance are less likely to take the form of overt retaliation, and more often manifest as “cold” revenge, associated with rumination, a fixed sense of harm, and hostile attributions of the partner’s intentions. This mechanism is consistent with the results of Li et al. (2024), which show that chronic hostility in relationships based on cognitive schemes, conducive to interpreting the partner’s behaviour as intentionally harmful.

The largely confirm the hypothesis, especially with regard to long-term relationships. Empirical data suggest that high life satisfaction has a protective function against the accumulation of resentment, while its growth – especially in the form of reluctance, hatred, contempt, and regret – is an important in-

indicator of reduced quality of relationships with life satisfaction in a partnership. These results reinforce the thesis of resentment as a “silent destructor” of relationships, the importance of which is revealed primarily in the long-term dynamics of relationships and whose impact is gradual, but structurally destabilising the partnership bond.

## Summary

The issue of this paper concerned the topic “Ressentiment as a Silent Destroyer of Romantic Relationships: The Importance of Attachment Styles and Life Satisfaction in the Context of Relationship Duration”. At the starting point of the summary, it is reasonable to refer to the main research goal, which was to determine whether and how resentment – understood as a relatively permanent emotional-cognitive attitude – can or does serve as a hidden destructive mechanism in partner relationships, as well as to determine how the level of its intensity remains related to attachment styles and life satisfaction in relationships of varying duration. The concept of the work, integrating the theoretical and empirical parts, was constructed in a way that ensured consistent implementation of the research goals, which enabled both an in-depth analysis of the problems posed and the interpretation of the results in relation to contemporary psychological paradigms.

Such a construction made it possible to interpret the results not only at the level of simple correlations, but also in the perspective of relationship dynamics

(up to 7 years vs. over 7 years), in which the processes of accumulation of tensions and consolidation of a repressed emotional-cognitive reaction, directed towards people, situations or oneself in the form of negative affective components, such as aversion, jealousy, hatred, grief, contempt, or envy, up to the desire for revenge.

Overall, the results of the work largely confirm the hypotheses and allow us to formulate a conclusion about the key importance of resentment from life satisfaction in the perspective of partner relationships. Satisfaction appears as a protective resource, while resentment – especially in the form of reluctance, jealousy, contempt, and regret – appears as an indicator of a reduced quality of life and a mechanism that can act gradually, but structurally destabilisingly. From the perspective of the relationship experience, it is particularly important to distinguish between episodic emotions and fixed attitudes: it is the perpetuation of negative interpretative patterns and the re-evaluation of assessment that seems to be the central mechanism by which resentment becomes a silent destructor and erosion factor in the partner relationship. These results are not only cognitive, but also application-related: they indicate the need to identify persistent manifestations of resentment early and strengthen resources related to secure attachment. In this sense, this approach is a contribution to the development of psychology, combining the attachment perspective, life satisfaction with the concept of resentment understood as a silent killer in a partnership, especially significant in the context of the relationship experience.

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# Family ties as an essential element of the Catholic family vocation<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In its doctrine on marriage and the family, the Catholic Church focuses on what it means to be (in terms of the vocation to holiness) a good parent, child, grandparent, brother, sister, etc. However, even if the norms, etc., or in other words, the “duties and privileges” promulgated by the Magisterium of the Church in relation to the Catholic family, result from its supernatural origin (described by theology and ethics), it should be emphasized that the very nature of the fact of giving birth to a child (i.e., having offspring), there is an (essential) obligation to protect and promote the family thus created in the world. Accordingly, the “marital and family” norms established for this purpose, a particularly important collection of which can be found in the Code of Canon Law (hereinafter: CIC/83)<sup>2</sup>, cover a very wide range of human existence. It can be said that they begin with determining which related persons are not allowed to marry and end with matters of same-sex relationships or free unions. However, existential situations are so complex and changeable that they often suggest the need for further clarification of previous determinations. This also applies to matters related to kinship. For example, the CIC/83 does not provide a general definition of a Catholic family (i.e., in a single canon). However, such an attempt can be found in the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* (cf. nos. 48-49). In particular, when it states that: “By their very nature, the institution of marriage and conjugal love are oriented toward the procreation and education of offspring” (cf. no. 48). The same applies to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (cf. nos. 2201-2206)<sup>3</sup>, the exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (cf. no. 18), etc. Therefore, it seems that a normative clarification of the concept of the Catholic family, particularly in terms of relationships arising from kinship (e.g., by introducing such a definition into the CIC/83), could help to better understand and further refine pastoral discipline in this area.

**Keywords:** kinship, canonical doctrine of the Church, marriage, need for normative clarification, vocation of the Catholic family.

## Introduction

If the modern family is in crisis (see statistics on relationship breakdowns and modern forms of cohabitation), and if it is disparaged in nihilistic, liberal, left-wing, and other circles, it is primarily as the family that calls itself Catholic (cf. Burkacka, 2017, 61-93). Often, attacks on its concept and institution, as well as on its way of life, take the form of defamatory insinuations, especially when the normative sexual ethics practiced by it (in these environments) are presented as a “culture of rape” (cf. Kuszewska, 2024). However, it must be admitted that in the social sphere, the concept is usually used correctly

and refers to a deep community of life based on spiritual bonds, i.e., built on Christian vocation (i.e., on God’s grace) and on blood ties when it comes to having offspring (Piotrowska, 1996, pp 109-123; Wierzbicki, 2023, pp. 19-53).

However, a particular feature of the changes taking place is that previously, civil law, as expressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948, Article 16), understood the family in the classical sense<sup>4</sup>. Its legal basis was the legally contracted marriage between a man and a woman (Kubala, 2017, p. 11). Today, for exam-

1 Article in Polish language: [https://stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/65pl\\_bial.pdf](https://stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/65pl_bial.pdf)

2 *Kodeks Prawa Kanonicznego* (KPK/83) [Code of Canon Law]. (1984). Poznań: Pallottinum.

3 *Katechizm Kościoła Katolickiego* (KKK) [Catechism of the Catholic Church]. (1994). Poznań: Pallottinum.

4 Article 18 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland [Konstytucja Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej] states: *Marriage, as a relationship between a man and a woman, family, motherhood, and parenthood are under the protection and care of the Republic of Poland.* This implies that the institutions of family and marriage are closely related, but nevertheless separate.

ple, Polish law does not provide a single, general definition of the family. What is more, *the Family and Guardianship Code* (cf. Article 23 of the Family and Guardianship Code), as well as *the Social Assistance Act* and *the Family Benefits Act*, consider the mere relationship between a woman and a man (marriage), and even cohabitation and running a household (cf. Art. 27 of the Family and Guardianship Code) as sufficient grounds for recognizing such a community as a family (cf. Wójcik-Skwarska, 2013, p. 63-100).

The Catholic Church does not stand idly by and watch this situation (i.e., the one outlined above) but takes care to ensure that (in matters of marriage and family) norms adequate to its vocation are in force in the form of various types of regulations, recommendations, commands, and prohibitions. We can refer here to the entire Magisterium concerning marriage and family, which is particularly expressed in the 1983 Code of Canon Law (and its amendments) – hereinafter: CIC/83. It was not without reason that Pope Paul IV and then Leo XIV called the family “*the canon of true love between a man and a woman*” (cf. Paul V, 1968; Leo XIV, 2025). Here we find the thesis that it is love, the community of married life, and the birth of a child to parents belonging to the Roman Catholic Church that are the elements that mark the existence of a Catholic family and its mutual rights and obligations. The pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* (hereinafter: GS) states that “*The family has its origin in the marital union, which the Second Vatican Council defines as a «covenant». In this covenant, a man and a woman «give themselves to each other and accept each other»*” (Second Vatican Council, 1965, no. 48; see John Paul II, 1994, no. 7; Ziółkowska, 2018, p. 17).

Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the aim of this analysis is to re-emphasize the importance of those norms in Catholic law that regulate the issue of kinship as the basis for understanding and describing the Catholic family’s calling to holiness. The question is how kinship, having its normative regulations in Church teaching, fits into the definition of the concept of the Catholic family and, thus, into its protection and

promotion. An important reference here is canon 226 § 2 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law, which justifies the responsibility of parents for the upbringing of their children by nothing other than the relationship of kinship (the gift of life). It states that “parents, because they have given life to their children, have a very important duty and right to raise them” (cf. Pastwa, 2011, pp. 398-408). An additional aspect here is that this canon does not provide any justification as to why it refers (citing the issue of kinship) to the parental duty to provide a Christian upbringing rather than a Catholic one. Ultimately, adequately regulated in CIC/83, the issue of adequately highlighting the duties and rights arising from the fact of kinship is also very important so that the faithful can understand what strictly belongs to them (as a right and as a duty) in today’s culturally changing world. This is particularly important when they find themselves in specific circumstances that pose challenges for them (cf. the situation of impediments to marriage).

## 1. Kinship and the protection of vocation to holiness in marriage and the Catholic family: some canonical aspects

If the concept of the vocation of the Catholic family (in the ethical and theological sense) remains an essential principle for the realization of love between a man and a woman and their children, and in general, love for God and people, it seems that confirmation of this position in a normative sense should be sought in CIC/83, i.e., where issues such as the following are discussed:

- a. close kinship as an obstacle to marriage.
- b. the right and obligation to bear children in marriage;
- c. the rules of adoption of a child and the effects of such an act;
- d. matters of the legal personality of the child
- e. the obligation to raise a Catholic child as a close relative.

### 1.1. Close kinship as canonical impediments to marriage

In the legal system of the Catholic Church, certain bonds are considered obstacles (e.g., breaking bonds, etc.) to marriage. They are formulated in such a way as to be closely related to the realization of the goal that the Church associates with the concept of the “sacrament of marriage.” The aim is to protect the good of married life, the health of children, the sanctification of the spouses, the good of the faith of believers, etc. Therefore, if “based on positive divine law, natural law, or for the sake of the public good or the public good combined with the private good, certain persons are considered incapable of entering into marriage” (May, 2017, 37), then the CIC/83 primarily refers to close relatives as such an impediment<sup>5</sup>. Considering the relationship resulting from descent from a common ancestor, it binds persons in the direct line and up to the fourth degree in the collateral line – can. 1091 of the CIC/83 (ibid.: § 4, “marriage is never permitted if there is doubt as to whether the parties are related in any degree in the direct line or in the second degree in the collateral line”). Similarly, there are also regulations when there is a legal relationship, i.e., resulting from adoption – can. 1094 CIC/83 (Góralski, 2012, 9).

Furthermore, considering the effects of Catholic marriage, there are other norms that the Church derives from the fact that the persons concerned are related. This is a matter of children of legitimate descent – can. 1137 CIC/83; a person legally recognized as the father – can. 1138 § 1 and § 2; legalization of offspring – can. 1139; 1140; 1161 § 1 CIC/83 (see Góralski, 1997, 45-55). The same applies to affinity – can. 1092 CIC/83. It does not

derive from blood ties, but from marriage, yet its line and degree are determined according to the line and degree of kinship. Such a (legal) relationship is, in principle, lifelong. Neither divorce nor the death of one of the parties breaks the bonds created (in this way) between the two families (Woźnicki, 2016, 191-210). Another (similar) issue is spiritual kinship (it concerns relationships resulting from baptism). It appears in the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches (cf. can. 811 § 1)<sup>6</sup> as an impediment to marriage. This is important when entering into mixed marriages (Nowicka, 2011, pp. 247-271).

The element that unites all these normative solutions provided by the Magisterium of the Church is not a desire to hinder the conclusion of marriage, but a desire to care for the spiritual well-being of the spouses, parents, children, relatives<sup>7</sup>, etc. This task is also served by the norm that “*children of legitimate origin are those who were born at least 180 days after the marriage was contracted or within 300 days of the dissolution of the marriage*” – can. 1138 § 2 CIC/83. A similar dimension (i.e., protecting the dignity of children) can be seen in the provision that “*children of illegitimate origin acquire legitimacy through the subsequent marriage of their parents, valid or presumed, or through a rescript of the Holy See*” – can. 1139 CIC/83. Furthermore, it is important that kinship is always determined from the child’s mother, in accordance with the principle that “*the mother is always known*” (Pochopień, 2024, pp. 32-33). In the case of children whose parents cannot be determined, the principle that the mother and father of the child are invented applies. “*Usually, John is entered as the father and Anna as the mother*” (ibid.; cf. Struzik, 2019, pp. 248-252).

5 The point is that a relative is someone who has a common origin (genetic or formal, e.g., as a result of adoption) and shares a family bond – this can be a direct relative (parents, children, grandparents, grandchildren) or an indirect relative (siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins) – or, in the colloquial sense, a “soul mate.” This is someone with whom we feel a deep, spiritual connection and therefore feel a sense of responsibility.

6 *Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium* (CCEO) [The Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches (CCEC)]. (1990). Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

7 For the sake of precision, it should also be noted that the relationship between a child and a parent is a first-degree direct kinship, resulting from descent from a common ancestor (one birth). The civil-legal (as well as canonical) significance of this fact is that parents are the legal representatives of the child (parental authority); that the closeness of direct kinship (parents/children) is of key importance in marriage and statutory inheritance.

## 1.2. The right and obligation to have children within marriage

The Magisterium of the Catholic Church, dignity and holiness (etc.), which constitute the essential content of the Catholic family vocation, are linked to the fact that the intimate life of spouses should be directed towards the procreation of children. The point is that the sexual acts that spouses should be capable of performing are intended to enable them to conceive offspring. In other words, marital acts are understood here as (human) sexual activity that is “*intrinsically capable of conceiving a child*” (unity of the body), can. 1061 § 1 CIC/83 (Czujek, 2015, p. 430).

This obligation does not apply to couples who cannot have children due to infertility or other valid reasons. The opposite is true when the obstacles are psychological in nature, i.e., when they cause the spouses to be sexually impotent. According to can. 1084 § 1 CIC/63: “*a prior and permanent inability to perform the conjugal act, whether on the part of a man or a woman, whether absolute or relative, renders the marriage invalid by its very nature*” (Stawniak, 2021, pp. 85-111). If the impediment of incapacity is doubtful, whether the doubt is legal or factual, the marriage should not be prohibited, nor should it be declared invalid while the doubt persists (cf. can. 1084 § 2 CIC/83).

Therefore, if (in accordance with can. 1098 CIC/83) the infertility of the spouses “*neither prevents the marriage from being contracted nor renders it invalid*” (cf. can. 1084 CIC/83 § 3) (see Pietrzyk, 2021), the situation is different when there is a positive act of will excluding the possibility of having children (arising either before or at the time of marriage). Such a situation renders the sacrament invalid (cf. can. 1101 § 2; can. 1055 § 1; can. 1096 § 1 CIC/83). This would be a simulation of marital consent, an act incompatible with the essential purpose of marriage, misleading the other party (Góralski, 2005, 55-68). On the other hand, marriage is considered consummated “*if the spouses have undertaken a marital act capable of procreation in a human way*”: can. 1061 § 1 CIC/83 (see Sztymiler, 2000, pp. 103-122).

One of the fundamental rights of a child, as a member of a Catholic family, is to be conceived as an expression of mutual love between spouses and the result of their mutual gift to each other. Furthermore, the child has the right to know about their own identity, resulting from the requirement for spouses to conceive a child: *ex proprio coniuge*. “Parents have a shared responsibility to accept their conceived offspring, and when it comes into the world, it gains the right to belong and have its place in the family” (Błasiak, 2010, p. 134). Thus, it is not possible to speak of a «right to have a child», but only of the possibility of becoming a parent through the right to engage in sexual acts within marriage (Grochowina, 2013, p. 56). In Catholic doctrine, a child is treated as a “gift from God,” and thus the concept of a “right to a child” is an incomprehensible contradiction of this fact (cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2024, nos. 48-49; cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1987). In certain situations, this would authorize procedures and techniques such as *in vitro* fertilization, surrogacy (surrogate motherhood), cloning, sex change, contraception, or abortion (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2024, nos. 48-49). Moreover, this would lead to a complete relativization of marital and parental ethics. In other words, if it is said that “a child has a right to parents,” etc., this means that it has a right to be loved by its father and mother, i.e., to be accepted by them with the dignity of nature and supernatural vocation.

The question of conceiving a child (i.e., understood as the duty of procreation) should be accepted in a spirit of generosity (i.e., nobility of heart). According to the encyclical *Humane vitae*, procreation (in the first place) should be dependent on positive conditions, i.e., on the existing possibilities of the spouses to conceive and raise a child. The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* expresses this as follows: “Parents, trusting in God’s providence and cultivating a spirit of sacrifice, give glory to the Creator and strive for perfection in Christ when, with a sense of noble, human, and Christian responsibility, they fulfill the task of procreation (Second Vatican Council, 1965, no. 50; cf. Zakrzewska and Zakrzewski, 2014, p. 324). In second place should be those

conditions that are objective obstacles. The principle is as follows: if there are “just reasons for introducing intervals between successive births, resulting either from the physical or psychological conditions of the spouses or from external circumstances” (Paul VI, 1967, no. 16; Machinek, 2018, p. 25).

Another aspect that comes within the scope of kinship (i.e., in addition to subjective dignity) is that if a child is entitled to detailed legal protection from the moment of conception, the law grades the resulting responsibility depending on who the person is and what their relationship to the child is. This understanding is supported by the regulation contained in Book VI of the Code of Canon Law/83. It is entitled “Offenses against human life and liberty.” According to its provisions, “whoever causes an interruption of pregnancy, after the effect has occurred, is subject to excommunication by the force of law” (can. 1398). This means that, in the first instance (i.e., due to the blood ties that have been formed), the responsibility for bringing the conceived child to birth lies with the parents: the father and mother. Similarly, when they decide to have an abortion. Only then do the doctor, nurse, pharmacist, etc., as those without whom the abortion could not take place, become responsible (see Biały, 2018, p. 63-78). It seems that this is also the reason why, in Church doctrine, abortion is not treated as a means of regulating the number of children in a family, nor as a woman’s right to choose whether she wants to have a child or not (cf. Gębka, 2018, pp. 147-167).

For the same reason, the Catholic Church also demands from the state, as a coexisting institution, similar protection for the good of individual members of the Catholic family, i.e., the good of the relationships created by the conception of a child. In view of the above, a believer, on the basis of canon 19 and in relation to canon 22 of the Code of Canon Law/83, if he or she has an obligation to take into account the regulations of state law, should first know when and

why it is good and when it is bad. This applies, for example, to the Act on the Ombudsman for Children<sup>8</sup>. It states that “a child is every human being from conception to the attainment of majority” (Article 2(1)). Furthermore, the Ombudsman for Children is obliged to protect the rights of children, in particular “the right to life and health protection” – Article 3(2) (1) (Act of January 6, 2000, on the Ombudsman for Children, 2000, No. 6, item 69).<sup>9</sup>

### **1.3. Norms regarding the adoption of children and the protection of kinship rights**

The concept of dignity and vocation of the Catholic family also includes the issue of child adoption, which has its canonical dimension in the case of such phenomena as adoptive or foster families. According to canon 110 of the Code of Canon Law/83, children who have been adopted in accordance with civil law “are considered to be the children of the person or persons who have adopted them” (Szczot, 2019, pp. 2534-2536). Pope John Paul II understood this to mean that “physical infertility can provide spouses with an opportunity for another important service to human life, such as adoption” (John Paul II, 1981, no. 14).

These are forms of child care that do not raise fundamental social doubts as to their concept and the main functions they perform, “although they are quite diverse” (Kuryłowicz, 2011, p. 36). According to the Charter of Family Rights, the following are considered forms of family care: adoption, family-type children’s homes, and foster families (Charter of Family Rights 1983, 39)<sup>10</sup>. They differ in that a child is placed in an adoptive family on a permanent basis, while a foster family or children’s home offers temporary care. This means that “in cases where biological parents cannot do so” (Sitarz, 2019, p. 239), children should be provided with the best possible conditions for their stay and development. The condition here is that no attempts should be made to replace the existing bonds between children and their natural parents.

8 Ustawa z dnia 6 stycznia 2000 r. o Rzeczniku Praw Dziecka [Act of 6 January 2000 on the Commissioner for Children’s Rights]. (2000). *Dziennik Ustaw*, No. 6, item 69. <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20000060069>

9 Ustawa z dnia 6 stycznia 2000 r. o Rzeczniku Praw Dziecka [Act of 6 January 2000 on the Commissioner for Children’s Rights]. (2000). *Dziennik Ustaw*, No. 6, item 69. Retrieved from <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20000060069>

10 Holy See. (1983, October 22). *Charter of the rights of the family*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana. [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/family/documents/rc\\_pc\\_family\\_doc\\_19831022\\_family-rights\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_19831022_family-rights_en.html)

It is important to note that adoption is synonymous with taking a child into the family and granting them all the rights and responsibilities that come with it. This is in line with the anthropological principle that “*in the genealogy of the person recorded there is a family genealogy*” (John Paul II, 1994, no. 11). The point is that by encouraging adoption, the Church indicates that an adopted child should be treated in such a way that they can feel like a child born into the family. “*Regardless of blood ties, true paternal and maternal love is also ready to accept children from other families, providing them with everything they need for life and full development*” (John Paul II, 1995, no. 93). “*Motherhood is not only a biological reality, but has many different manifestations*” [...] “*Adoption is one of the most generous forms of motherhood and fatherhood*” (Francis, 2016, no. 178). The civil legal act (in Poland) that contains regulations on adoption is the above-mentioned *Family and Guardianship Code*, which in Articles 114-127 regulates the conditions for adoption, the entities that can adopt and be adopted, as well as indicates its types and possibilities for possible termination. The adoption procedure is regulated by Articles 154-175b of the *Act on Family Support and the Foster Care System* (see Krajewska, 2025, p. 152).

#### 1.4. The legal personality of a child as the personality of a person due to them from birth

Legal subjectivity is (primarily) the ability of a person to be the subject of rights and obligations. According to the Magisterium of the Church, every human being possesses such subjectivity from the moment of conception, and it is called natural. However, those who receive Holy Baptism acquire so-called specific legal capacity. Accordingly, if in CIC/83 the legislator draws attention to the child's right to life, to the sacraments, to a Catholic upbringing, etc., these rights are based on natural legal personality as well as on specifically ecclesiastical personality, when, for example, baptism enrolls the child in the community of the Church – can. 96; 97 § 2 (Sitarz, 2019, p. 85).

Moreover, a person can obtain legal capacity on the basis of their desire and their salvific faith, which gives them access to participation in the salvific mission of the Church. Thus, for example, catechumens have the right to baptism and ecclesiastical burial – can. 206 CIC/83 (Korzyński, 2016, p. 21). Legal capacity acquired in this way cannot be lost or taken away from someone for any reason.

Therefore, legal subjectivity is a norm that allows the Church, in the face of new and old threats to the human family, and in particular when it comes to the decline in births, to conduct pastoral care “*promoting the dignity of every human person*” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2024, no. 59), thereby building a culture of love, life, and fertility in Catholic families, in place of a culture of death and nihilistic passivity or infertility, and same-sex unions.

#### 1.5. The obligation to provide a Catholic upbringing to a child as a close relative

The canonical norm reads as follows: “*Parents have the most important duty and the primary right to provide, according to their abilities, for the physical, social, cultural, moral, and religious upbringing of their children*” – can. 1136 of the CIC/83. When it comes to religious education, the legislator strictly refers to the child's right to receive a Catholic education. This right stems primarily from canons 793-995 codified in Book (III) of the Code of Canon Law/83, entitled: “*Catholic Education*.” The legislator stipulates here that “*parents and those who take their place have a duty and at the same time a right to choose the means and institutions by which, taking into account local conditions, they can better provide for the Catholic education of their children (can. 793 § 1)*” (Sitarz, 2019, p. 95). And if they fail to fulfill this obligation, there are appropriate criminal sanctions.

This is a characteristic expression for understanding the importance of family ties and the rights and obligations arising from them, as well as for defining the concept of a Catholic family. It refers to a relationship of dependence that is unambiguous when the question is asked: why parents? Why not the state or grandparents or even more distant relatives, etc. (cf. Biały, 2024, p. 363). The point is that the

parental relationship is the first and most appropriate space for building authority, trust, and love (i.e., relationships resulting from kinship). Therefore, it is not surprising that the CIC/83, in canon 226 § 2, specifies this as follows: “Parents, due to the fact that they have given life to their children, have a very important duty and right to raise them; that is why it is primarily the responsibility of Christian parents to ensure the Christian upbringing of their children, in accordance with the teachings of the Church” (Biały, 2020, pp. 21-32).

In other words, it is the Catholic family, understood as a special community of life, i.e., one that is called to holiness, that can provide these guarantees (related to the good of the child), i.e., to ensure the child’s well-being, understood here as an adequate, integral, Catholic upbringing and Catholic personal development. For this reason, it is called the first and very important social unit (cf. Mierzejewski, 2011, pp. 123-140).

## Conclusions

The current doctrine of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church considers those elements that define the Catholic family as a community of life between a man, a woman, their children, and other relatives who are called to holiness to be immutable and particularly important. It requires that such a community be based on sacramental marriage, which is conditional on the fulfillment of a whole set of conditions, such as that the parties be baptized (in the Catholic Church) and wish to have and raise Catholic offspring. This is specifically reflected in CIC/83.

In other words, the dignity of the Catholic family is associated with its natural structure, i.e., the question of who constitutes it, and then offspring (i.e., kinship), but also the Christian vocation, which has a supernatural dimension. For this reason, the Catholic family is most often referred to as the “domestic church,” but also as a complex socio-religious phenomenon (i.e., as the basic social unit). Thus, it is an entity that is very sensitive to all social, religious, moral, and other changes and situations, requiring

promotion and protection. It is not without reason that the 1965 pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* spoke of “promoting the dignity of marriage and the family” (cf. GS 47-48). Hence, the Church constantly reminds us that free unions, cohabitation, etc., do not (and cannot) constitute an institution such as the Catholic family (Pontifical Council for the Family, 2000).

The norms concerning kinship (apart from those contained in CIC/83) are also spread throughout the Magisterium of the Church and have varying doctrinal weight. For example, impediments to marriage due to kinship are set forth in CIC/83 can. 1091-1092, and norms for the adoption of a child, apart from can. 111 § 1, etc., are found in CCC 2374-2379. Also important in this regard are the provisions found in the Charter of the Rights of the Family, Article 4f, the exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, No. 41; the encyclical *Evangelium vitae*, no. 93, and the Letter to Families *Gratissimam sane*, no. 22. They specify normative obligations, but also explain in their own way why and when issues of kinship require clarification.

It should also be added that there are other documents in the Magisterium of the Church (not included in this analysis) that explain and point to the evil of practices that indirectly affect the dignity of the Catholic family, and in this case, the dignity of kinship relations. Although this was not the subject of this analysis, it is worth emphasizing that these issues concern heterologous *in vitro* procedures (cloning), surrogacy, sex change, adoption of children by homosexual couples, etc. Important norms on these issues can be found in: Instruction *Donum vitae*, part II, no. 2; the encyclical *Evangelium vitae* (cf. nos. 37-38); the instruction *Dignitas personae* (cf. nos. 17, 28-29); the declaration *Dignitas infinita* (cf. nos. 48-50; 60); the Charter of the Rights of the Family (cf. art. 4b-c), etc.

In light of the current Magisterium of the Church, it seems that the thesis can be made that founding a Catholic family means creating a community based on sacramental marriage, living together, having children, and sharing responsibility, thus creating irreversible, valuable bonds. The key aspects of establishing such a family are the decision to live together, have

children, and take responsibility for spouse and children. This shared life means living together, dividing responsibilities, and building everyday life. It means support, i.e., creating security, mutual appreciation, and psychological and material assistance. It means planning as conscious decisions about the future.

Therefore, in the sense of “the needs postulated by the author of this analysis,” what comes to the fore is that CIC/83 does not contain a canon that provides a general definition of the Catholic family. For example, it should be understood in the generational sense (i.e., in terms of kinship) and ritual. That is, it is (primarily) formed by parents and their children; that is, a man and a woman who are baptized in the Catholic Church and realize God’s call to holiness in the Roman Catholic (or, more broadly, Catholic) rite. That all other obligations, e.g., sacramental ones, regarding the institution of marriage and family, are established on this basis<sup>11</sup>, for example, the notion that “the family arises from marriage” (including the relationships that constitute the extended, multigenerational family). Importantly, CCC no. 2202 provides some clarification on this issue, i.e., through the concept of the Christian family and the obligation of Christian upbringing.

The same is true in the constitution *Gaudium et spes* nos. 47-48, in the exhortation *Familiaris consortio* no. 18. Therefore, it can be seen that in a broader, i.e., theological and ethical context, “the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, in describing the nature of the family, defines this concept and specifies its structural elements” (Banaszak, 2014, p. 401).

A particularly sensitive aspect (in normative terms) is the possibility of the so-called *blessing of homosexual unions*, granted by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (cf. the declaration *Fiducia supplicans*, Vatican, December 18, 2023). This poses another ethical and canonical challenge (i.e., requiring adequate clarification in CIC/83), even if (according to the Holy See’s declaration) it is not an attempt to equate such a union with a Catholic family, but merely an act of blessing people in a relationship (and outside of worship). The point is that in the context of kinship, i.e., a recognized element constituting the principles of striving for holiness, it is important that people living in such an irregular (homosexual) relationship are not able to procreate (without the intervention of biotechnology, etc.) offspring, i.e., enter into natural and spiritual relationships resulting from blood ties in a sanctifying manner.

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<sup>11</sup> This would make it possible to establish in a normative sense whether a family where parents are baptized in the Catholic Church, but living „still” without marriage, is already a Catholic family.

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# The mediating roles of fear of intimacy and sexual communication in the relationship between alexithymia and sexual satisfaction among young men<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Sexual satisfaction is an important indicator of sexual health and relationship functioning, yet young men who have difficulties recognizing and expressing emotions may experience lower satisfaction in their intimate lives. The present study addressed the research problem of whether and how alexithymia relates to sexual satisfaction in young heterosexual men by testing fear of intimacy and sexual communication as sequential mechanisms. In an online cross-sectional survey, 153 men aged 18–30 years who were in a romantic relationship (≥ 6 months) completed measures of alexithymia (TAS-20), fear of intimacy (FIS), sexual communication self-efficacy (SCSES), and sexual satisfaction (SSS). It was hypothesized that higher alexithymia would be associated with greater fear of intimacy, which would be linked to lower sexual communication, and in turn to lower sexual satisfaction. Serial mediation analyses (PROCESS Model 6, bootstrapping) supported the hypothesized pathway: alexithymia was indirectly related to sexual satisfaction through increased fear of intimacy and reduced sexual communication. The direct association between alexithymia and sexual satisfaction was attenuated after accounting for the mediators. The model explained 38% of the variance in sexual satisfaction. These findings suggest that intimacy-related avoidance and difficulties in sexual communication may explain why alexithymia undermines sexual satisfaction, highlighting potential targets for prevention and couple-focused interventions.  
**Keywords:** Alexithymia, Fear of intimacy, Sexual communication, Sexual satisfaction.

## Introduction

Sexual satisfaction constitutes a key dimension of human sexuality and is defined as “an affective response resulting from a subjective evaluation of the positive and negative aspects associated with one’s sexual relationship” (Lawrance & Byers, 1995, p. 268). It is widely recognized as one of the primary indicators of sexual health (Flynn et al., 2016), and lower levels of sexual satisfaction have been consistently linked to poorer psychological functioning (Carcedo et al., 2020), an increased risk of adverse health outcomes (Dekker et al., 2020), and reduced stability of long-term romantic relationships (Connidis, 2007/2013). Given its broad significance, a growing body of research has focused on psychological and relational factors that differentiate levels of sexual satisfaction.

One such factor is alexithymia, which has repeatedly been identified as an important predictor of diminished sexual and relational well-being.

Alexithymia – literally “no words for emotions” – is a multidimensional construct encompassing difficulties in identifying feelings (DIF), difficulties in describing feelings (DDF), and an externally oriented thinking style (EOT) (Swart et al., 2009). It is often conceptualized as a relatively stable trait associated with difficulties in distinguishing emotional from physiological arousal, as well as problems in expressing emotional states (Duquette, 2020). These deficits negatively affect interpersonal functioning by hindering the formation and maintenance of close, emotionally satisfying relationships (Hesse & Floyd, 2011). A sub-

<sup>1</sup> Article in Polish language: [https://stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/65pl\\_nowi.pdf](https://stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/65pl_nowi.pdf)

stantial body of literature indicates that alexithymia is associated with multiple adverse outcomes in the domain of intimate life: individuals with higher levels of alexithymia report greater sexual distress (Ribeiro & Pereira, 2023), lower sexual satisfaction (Sharyati, 2010), and lower relationship satisfaction (Frenn et al., 2022). Berenguer et al. (2019) demonstrated that elevated alexithymia in women is associated with dyspareunia, reduced arousal, orgasmic difficulties, and overall dissatisfaction with sexual life. Alexithymia has also been linked to hypoactive sexual desire disorder (Carvalho & Nobre, 2010).

Intimacy represents a fundamental component of satisfying sexual relationships, as it involves the willingness to share emotions, thoughts, and experiences with a close partner, thereby fostering emotional security, trust, and mutual understanding (Birnie-Porter & Lydon, 2013; Giovazolias & Paschalidi, 2022). Fear of intimacy – understood as difficulty disclosing one’s emotions and thoughts to another person – disrupts this process and is associated with poorer relationship quality and lower sexual satisfaction (Descutner & Thelen, 1991). It may manifest as reluctance to disclose personal information, avoidance of emotional conversations, or discomfort in situations of physical closeness, all of which impede the development of emotional bonding (Vangelisti & Beck, 2007). Numerous studies have demonstrated a direct association between alexithymia and fear of intimacy (Sullivan et al., 2015; Besharat et al., 2014). Among individuals with high levels of alexithymia, these difficulties may be further exacerbated by reduced mentalization capacities and ineffective interpersonal emotion regulation, which additionally constrain the ability to maintain closeness (Durmaz & Baykan, 2020; Nowicki, 2025a; Pérusse et al., 2012). Lyvers et al. (2022) showed that fear of intimacy largely accounts for the association between alexithymia and lower relationship satisfaction, as heightened fear leads to emotional avoidance, reduced engagement, and greater interpersonal distance, thereby weakening both intimacy and relational satisfaction. Research also points to strong links between alexithymia and insecure attachment styles (Montebarocci et al., 2004), which promote self-protective strategies at the expense of closeness and intensify fear of intimacy (Jinyao et al., 2012;

Ścigala et al., 2021). These patterns are often rooted in adverse childhood experiences – such as emotional neglect or inconsistent caregiving – that hinder the development of secure attachment and foster negative expectations toward intimate relationships (Taylor & Bagby, 2004). In adulthood, this translates into difficulties with emotional sharing and trust-building, ultimately reducing relationship satisfaction and sexual well-being (Pietromonaco et al., 2013).

Sexual communication constitutes another key determinant of sexual and relational well-being. It encompasses verbal and nonverbal ways of expressing needs, desires, boundaries, and concerns related to sexuality within a romantic relationship (Liberacka-Dwojak & Wilkość-Dębczyńska, 2024; Mallory et al., 2019). Open and clear communication facilitates mutual understanding, helps align expectations, and reduces the risk of misunderstandings (Byers & Demmons, 1999; Mallory, 2022). Although the direct association between alexithymia and sexual communication has not been extensively examined, available evidence suggests that individuals high in alexithymia use fewer positive and more negative communication behaviors (Pérusse et al., 2012). They tend to be less expressive, experience discomfort when disclosing emotions, and show difficulties processing emotion-related language (Hesse & Floyd, 2011). Zdankiewicz-Ścigala et al. (2024) found that alexithymia is associated with reduced use of emotionally laden words, and that this relationship is mediated by fear of intimacy. Communication deficits also undermine overall relationship satisfaction (Frye-Cox & Hesse, 2013), and similar mechanisms within sexual communication have been shown to diminish sexual satisfaction (Nowicki, 2025b). It is therefore plausible that poorer sexual communication mediates the association between alexithymia and lower sexual satisfaction.

The aim of the present study was to test a serial mediation model in which alexithymia influences sexual satisfaction through fear of intimacy and sexual communication among young men. Individuals with elevated levels of alexithymia often experience difficulties engaging in emotionally meaningful interactions and exhibit heightened fear of intimacy, which may hinder open discussion of issues related to romantic relationships. These difficulties may, in turn,

reduce the quality of sexual communication, a key determinant of sexual satisfaction. Accordingly, it was hypothesized that alexithymia would predict higher levels of fear of intimacy, which would subsequently be associated with poorer sexual communication, ultimately leading to lower sexual satisfaction.

## 1. Method

### 1.1. Participants and procedure

A total of 153 young heterosexual men participated in the study. Participants were recruited through online platforms and university notice boards to ensure a diverse sample in terms of relationship experiences and demographic backgrounds. The age range of participants was 18 to 30 years ( $M = 23.3$ ,  $SD = 4.6$ ), reflecting a young adult population that is typically in the developmental stage of establishing intimate relationships. All participants were currently involved in a romantic relationship lasting at least six months to ensure that they had sufficient experience in close and sexual relationships for the study measures to be applicable.

Participants were required to complete a series of self-report questionnaires assessing alexithymia, fear of intimacy, sexual communication, and sexual satisfaction. The surveys were administered online using a secure data collection platform, which allowed participants to complete the measures anonymously and at their convenience. Prior to participating, individuals were provided with detailed information about the study's objectives, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation. They then provided informed consent electronically before proceeding to the questionnaires.

### 1.2. Measures

#### 1.2.1. Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20; Parker et al., 1993)

The Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20) is a widely used self-report measure assessing difficulties in recognizing, describing, and cognitively processing

emotions. The instrument comprises 20 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), producing total scores ranging from 20 to 100, with higher scores indicating greater alexithymia. The TAS-20 includes three subscales: Difficulties in Identifying Feelings (DIF), Difficulties in Describing Feelings (DDF), and Externally Oriented Thinking (EOT). The scale demonstrates strong psychometric properties and has been validated across various cultural contexts. The Polish adaptation by Ścigala et al. (2020) showed good reliability and validity.

#### 1.2.2. Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS; Descutner & Thelen, 1991)

The Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS) assesses reluctance and discomfort related to forming emotionally close and intimate relationships. It measures the degree to which individuals experience difficulties in sharing personal thoughts and emotions, both within existing romantic relationships and when considering the development of new intimate connections. The FIS consists of 35 items rated on a five-point Likert scale. The Polish adaptation was prepared by Roszak and Falis (2014).

#### 1.2.3. Sexual Communication Self-Efficacy Scale (SCSES; Quinn-Nilas et al., 2016)

The Sexual Communication Self-Efficacy Scale (SCSES) is a 20-item instrument evaluating individuals' confidence in their ability to communicate effectively about sexual topics within intimate relationships. The measure encompasses five domains: contraceptive communication, negative sexual messages, positive sexual messages, sexual history, and condom negotiation. Although originally developed for adolescents, the SCSES has been successfully validated and applied in adult populations. Items are rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all confident*) to 4 (*very confident*), with higher scores indicating greater sexual communication self-efficacy. The Polish adaptation was developed by Liberacka-Dwojak and Wilkość-Dębczyńska (2024).

**1.2.4. Sexual Satisfaction Scale (SSS; Meston & Trapnell, 2005)**

The Sexual Satisfaction Scale (SSS) is a comprehensive 30-item measure assessing multiple dimensions of sexual satisfaction. Items are rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), with higher scores reflecting greater sexual satisfaction. The instrument measures five domains: (1) Contentment, referring to emotional fulfillment and pleasure derived from sexual activity; (2) Communication, assessing the ability to discuss sexual needs and preferences; (3) Compatibility, reflecting perceived sexual harmony within the relationship; (4) Relational Concern, capturing the influence of relationship dynamics on sexual satisfaction; and (5) Personal Distress, indicating anxiety or dissatisfaction related to sexual experiences. The Polish version was adapted by Janowski and Czyżykowska (2013) and has been validated for both men and women.

**2. Data analysis**

All statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 26) and the PROCESS macro. The analytic procedure proceeded in several stages. First, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis) were calculated to evaluate the distributional characteristics of each variable. Pearson correlation coefficients were then computed to examine bivariate associations among alexithymia, fear of intimacy, sexual communication, and sexual satisfaction.

To provide a clearer picture of alexithymia severity in the sample and enable group-based comparisons, participants were classified into quantile-based

alexithymia groups using TAS-20 total scores: the bottom 25% (low alexithymia), the middle 50% (average alexithymia), and the top 25% (high alexithymia). Group differences in fear of intimacy, sexual communication, and sexual satisfaction were examined using one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA). When the assumption of homogeneity of variances was violated (Levene’s test), Welch’s ANOVA was used and Games–Howell post hoc comparisons were conducted; otherwise, standard ANOVA with Tukey HSD post hoc tests was applied. Effect sizes were reported as eta squared ( $\eta^2$ ).

Next, a serial mediation analysis was performed using PROCESS Model 6 to test the hypothesized indirect effect of alexithymia on sexual satisfaction through fear of intimacy and sexual communication. The total indirect effect was computed using the standard formula: . The significance of indirect pathways was assessed using a nonparametric bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples, and 95% bias-corrected accelerated confidence intervals (BCa CIs) were generated to determine whether effects differed significantly from zero.

**2.1. Description of correlations**

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine the associations among the study variables. As shown in Table 1, alexithymia was negatively correlated with both sexual communication and sexual satisfaction, and positively correlated with fear of intimacy. Fear of intimacy was negatively associated with sexual satisfaction and sexual communication. In contrast, sexual communication was positively correlated with sexual satisfaction, indicating that effective sexual communication plays a key role in enhancing sexual satisfaction within intimate relationships.

Table 1 Means, Standard Deviations, Skewness, Kurtosis, and Pearson Correlations Among Study Variables for Males

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>sk</i>	<i>k</i>
1. Alexithymia	62.32	9.21	-				0.28	-0.42
2. Fear of Intimacy	48.43	7.45	0.38***	-			0.11	-0.65
3. Sexual Communication	29.12	8.02	-0.26***	-0.20**	-		-0.33	-0.18
4. Sexual Satisfaction	43.56	11.13	-0.21***	-0.27***	0.23**	-	-0.14	-0.47

Note: M mean, SD standard deviation, SK skewness, K kurtosis \*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\*p < .001.

Table 2. Means of Study Variables by Quantile-Based Alexithymia Group and One-Way ANOVA Results

Outcome	Low (n = 38) M (SD)	Average (n = 77) M (SD)	High (n = 38) M (SD)	Test	df	F	p	$\eta^2$	Post hoc
Fear of intimacy	44.9 (6.9)	48.3 (7.2)	52.0 (7.6)	ANOVA	2, 150	12.10	< .001	.14	Tukey: High > Avg > Low
Sexual communication	33.4 (7.6)	29.4 (7.9)	25.7 (8.1)	ANOVA	2, 150	10.06	< .001	.12	Tukey: Low > Avg > High
Sexual satisfaction	49.2 (10.6)	43.8 (11.0)	39.6 (11.5)	Welch	2, 73.4	9.21	< .001	.11	GH: Low > High; Low > Avg

Note: Welch ANOVA and Games-Howell (GH) post hoc tests are used when homogeneity of variances is violated; otherwise, standard ANOVA with Tukey HSD is reported.  $\eta^2$  = eta squared.

### 2.2. Exploratory group comparisons across alexithymia severity

To facilitate interpretable group comparisons with balanced group sizes, participants were divided into quantile-based alexithymia groups using TAS-20 total scores: the bottom 25% (low; n = 38), the middle 50% (average; n = 77), and the top 25% (high; n = 38). Group descriptives are shown in Table 2.

One-way ANOVAs were then conducted to compare these groups on fear of intimacy, sexual communication, and sexual satisfaction (Table 3). For fear of intimacy, the group effect was significant,  $F(2, 150) = 12.10, p < .001, \eta^2 = .14$ , with Tukey post hoc tests indicating a graded increase (high > average > low). For sexual communication, the ANOVA was also significant,  $F(2, 150) = 10.06, p < .001, \eta^2 = .12$ ; Tukey tests showed lower communication in the high alexithymia group compared with the average and low groups. For sexual satisfaction, heterogeneity of variances was assumed; therefore, Welch's ANOVA was used and was significant,  $F(2, 73.4) = 9.21, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$ . Games-Howell comparisons indicated that the low alexithymia group reported higher sexual satisfaction than both the average and high groups.

### 2.3. Serial Mediation Model explaining male sexual satisfaction

The serial mediation model examined the association between alexithymia and sexual satisfaction among males, with fear of intimacy and sexual communi-

cation serving as mediators. The overall model was significant,  $F(3, 147) = 35.20, p < .001$ , explaining 38% of the variance in sexual satisfaction ( $R^2 = .38$ ).

Alexithymia demonstrated a significant total effect on sexual satisfaction ( $c = -0.45, SE = 0.08, t = -5.63, p < .001$ ). The direct effect of alexithymia on fear of intimacy was also significant ( $a_1 = 0.50, SE = 0.06, t = 8.33, p < .001$ ). Fear of intimacy, in turn, had a significant negative effect on sexual communication ( $d_{21} = -0.60, SE = 0.07, t = -8.57, p < .001$ ). Alexithymia also showed a negative association with sexual communication ( $a_2 = -0.15, SE = 0.07, t = -2.14, p = .034$ ). In the final equation, fear of intimacy was negatively

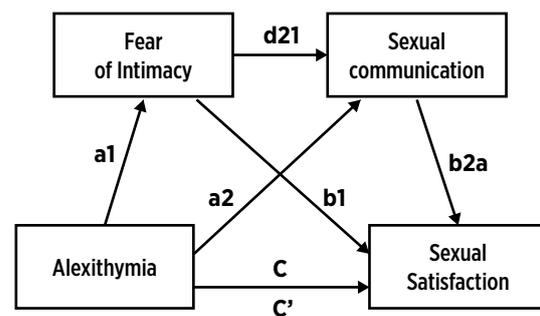


Figure 1. Theoretical model of serial mediating roles of Fear of Intimacy and Sexual Communication in relationship between Alexithymia and Sexual Satisfaction

(c) A direct effect of the impact of Alexithymia on the Sexual Satisfaction. (a1, b1) An indirect effect of the impact of Alexithymia on the Sexual Satisfaction, including Fear of Intimacy. (a2, b2) An indirect effect of the impact of Alexithymia on the Sexual Satisfaction, including Sexual Communication. (a1, d21, b2) An indirect effect of the impact of Alexithymia on the Sexual Satisfaction, including Fear of Intimacy and Sexual Communication. (c') A direct effect of the Alexithymia on the Sexual Satisfaction, taking account of the impact of both mediators.

Table 3 Regression coefficients for the serial mediation model

Outcome variable	Predictor	Path	B	SE	t	p
Fear of intimacy (M1)	Alexithymia (X)	a1	0.50	0.06	8.33	< .001
Sexual communication (M2)	Alexithymia (X)	a2	-0.15	0.07	-2.14	.034
Sexual communication (M2)	Fear of intimacy (M1)	d21	-0.60	0.07	-8.57	< .001
Sexual satisfaction (Y)	Fear of intimacy (M1)	b1	-0.20	0.08	-2.50	.014
Sexual satisfaction (Y)	Sexual communication (M2)	b2	0.55	0.05	11.00	< .001
Sexual satisfaction (Y)	Alexithymia (X)	c'	-0.05	0.06	-0.72	.41

Note: Unstandardized coefficients (B). N = 153. The overall model was significant,  $F(3, 147) = 35.20$ ,  $p < .001$ , explaining 38% of the variance in sexual satisfaction ( $R^2 = .38$ ).

associated with sexual satisfaction ( $b_1 = -0.20$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $t = -2.50$ ,  $p = .014$ ), whereas sexual communication positively predicted sexual satisfaction ( $b_2 = 0.55$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t = 11.00$ ,  $p < .001$ ). When both mediators were included, the direct effect of alexithymia on sexual satisfaction became non-significant ( $c' = -0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t = -0.72$ ,  $p = .41$ ), indicating full mediation.

The indirect effect of alexithymia on sexual satisfaction through fear of intimacy and sexual communication was statistically significant (point estimate =  $-0.24$ , 95% BCa CI [ $-0.26, -0.22$ ]). The specific indirect effect via fear of intimacy alone ( $a_1 \cdot b_1$ ) and via sexual communication alone ( $a_2 \cdot b_2$ ) were also tested, alongside the total indirect effect, and are typically summarized in a table of indirect effects with bootstrap SEs and BCa confidence intervals.

### 3. Discussion

The aim of the present study was to verify a serial mediation model designed to identify the mechanisms through which alexithymia may contribute to reduced sexual satisfaction, with particular emphasis on fear of intimacy and sexual communication as sequential mediators. Consistent with previous empirical findings (Sharyati et al., 2010), alexithymia was found to be negatively associated with sexual satisfaction, supporting the assumption that difficulties in recognizing and expressing emotions may adversely affect outcomes related to sexual functioning. Prior

research also suggests that alexithymia lowers sexual satisfaction by limiting the capacity to experience sexual fantasies and by attenuating the emotional depth of sexual experiences (Scimeca et al., 2013). The findings of the present study extend this literature by demonstrating that this association is fully accounted for by two co-occurring interpersonal processes, which together clarify how and why alexithymia may undermine sexual well-being.

Intimacy is also significantly associated with sexual satisfaction (Montesi et al., 2013), whereas its deficit is linked to an increased risk of sexual dysfunction (Bumby et al., 1997) and reduced sexual activity between partners (Reis & Grenyer, 2004). The first mediator, fear of intimacy, significantly explained the relationship between alexithymia and sexual satisfaction. Fear of intimacy refers to reluctance or discomfort associated with sharing personal emotions and thoughts with a close partner (Descutner & Thelen, 1991). Individuals with high levels of alexithymia often exhibit emotional avoidance, a limited capacity for emotional expression, and relational patterns consistent with insecure attachment styles (Montebarocci et al., 2004; Hesse & Floyd, 2008). These characteristics constrain the development of emotional closeness, which constitutes a fundamental foundation of relationship quality. Emotional distance may, in turn, hinder the creation of a safe and trust-based environment conducive to satisfying sexual interactions. Moreover, fear of intimacy may also be associated with discomfort experienced during physical contact. This suggests

that not only psychological and emotional closeness, but also physical touch itself, may be perceived as uncomfortable by individuals with high levels of alexithymia. Consequently, these difficulties may limit the experience of mutual pleasure and a sense of connection during sexual encounters.

The study further identified sexual communication as a second key mechanism linking alexithymia to sexual satisfaction. Sexual communication represents a behavioral component of relational functioning and is essential for fostering mutual understanding and coordinating sexual expectations. Drawing on the theoretical framework proposed by MacNeil and Byers (2005), the influence of sexual communication on sexual satisfaction can be conceptualized through two pathways: instrumental and expressive. In general, alexithymia is associated with less adaptive communication patterns – such as reduced expressiveness and heightened interpersonal withdrawal (Frye-Cox & Hesse, 2013) – which appear to extend into the sexual domain and constrain individuals' ability to articulate needs, preferences, and boundaries. From an instrumental perspective, these difficulties may impede discussions of sexual concerns and the negotiation of mutually satisfying arrangements. From an expressive perspective, they may weaken emotional closeness and reciprocal self-disclosure, both of which are necessary for establishing a sense of safety and interpersonal synchrony in intimate relationships. As a result, communication barriers may prevent couples from achieving sexual compatibility and from responding effectively to sexual difficulties, ultimately leading to reduced sexual satisfaction.

Importantly, the serial mediation pattern observed in the male sample suggests that the effect of alexithymia on sexual satisfaction operates entirely through intimacy-related processes. This finding supports the notion that, among men, emotional difficulties may be more likely to manifest as relational withdrawal, which subsequently impairs communication and sexual functioning. Although some previous studies have emphasized the role of intimacy particularly in women's sexual relationships (Berenguer et al., 2019; Czyżowska et al., 2019), the present findings indicate that intimacy and communication are equally crucial for men's sexual well-being. In other words, men

with high levels of alexithymia experience greater discomfort related to both physical and psychological intimacy, which contributes to difficulties in communicating sexual needs and concerns and, consequently, leads to lower reported sexual satisfaction.

## **Practical Implications**

The present findings carry important implications for clinical practice and work with couples, as they indicate that fear of intimacy may constitute a central barrier to satisfaction in romantic relationships and may form a key mechanism through which alexithymia is associated with diminished relational and sexual well-being. Accordingly, interventions aimed at enhancing emotional awareness and developing skills related to recognizing and expressing emotions may indirectly improve sexual satisfaction, for example by reducing avoidance of closeness and strengthening the quality of communication within the relationship.

When working with individuals exhibiting alexithymic traits, clinicians should consider not only intrapsychic difficulties in emotion regulation, but also interpersonal patterns of withdrawal and avoidance that hinder the formation of secure bonds. Because coping with negative emotions is particularly challenging for individuals with alexithymia, a useful therapeutic focus may also involve enhancing the capacity to understand and interpret the emotional states of others. Improvements in this area may facilitate perspective-taking, promote more effective coping with interpersonal conflicts and emotionally challenging situations, and ultimately strengthen social bonds, interpersonal functioning, and relationship quality.

Although alexithymia is often conceptualized as a relatively stable trait, evidence from clinical research suggests that certain components – particularly those related to emotional awareness – may be amenable to change through interventions grounded in cognitive-behavioral approaches (Thorberg et al., 2016). Fear of intimacy likewise represents a modifiable mechanism and may constitute an important therapeutic target for individuals seeking help for

relationship difficulties (Stanton et al., 2017), especially when accompanied by discomfort with emotional disclosure and closeness. Relationship-focused approaches, such as Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), which emphasize emotional expression, attachment-related fears, and the development of secure relational bonds (Johnson, 2019), appear particularly promising. In addition, communica-

tion-oriented interventions – including components of sex therapy that promote open dialogue about needs, desires, and boundaries – may improve functioning in couples experiencing intimacy-related difficulties. Strengthening partners' capacity for clear, responsive, and emotionally attuned communication may thus represent a key pathway to enhancing both relationship quality and sexual satisfaction.

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# Men's mental health in the context of hegemonic norms of masculinity: A developmental and interdisciplinary literature review<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article is a review and provides an interdisciplinary analysis of the relationship between socio-cultural constructions of masculinity and men's mental health based on the current state of research. The aim of the study is to identify the mechanisms through which hegemonic patterns of masculinity influence the emotional functioning of individuals, as well as to indicate the possibilities for transforming these patterns through educational and self-educational activities. The authors analyze masculinity norms as social constructs that reinforce patterns of behavior promoting independence, strength, emotional restraint, and detachment from one's own mental health struggles. From a pedagogical perspective, attention is drawn to the need to redefine dominant models of masculinity towards patterns that support the development of reflectiveness, empathy, and readiness to take pro-health actions, including seeking psychological help. In order to formulate conclusions, a systematic review of the scientific literature available in key databases was conducted: PubMed, PsycINFO, Embase, Web of Science and Google Scholar. The search was based on logical combinations of keywords related to masculinity, mental health, cultural gender, upbringing, and emotional expression. The analysis of the collected material confirms the existence of a strong link between the internalization of traditional models of masculinity and a limited ability to recognize and express emotions, a reluctance to seek professional support, and the reinforcement of beliefs that hinder adaptive mental functioning. There is a growing need to create educational and upbringing environments that will foster the development of masculinity as an open, flexible construct integrated with the well-being of the individual. The article presents a proposal for emotional life pedagogy as an area of influence that supports men's mental health and enhances their relational and psychosocial capital. The conclusions drawn from the analysis can form the basis for the design of educational programs and social strategies aimed at supporting men in the process of identity building in accordance with the values of a contemporary, multidimensional model of health.

**Keywords:** emotionality, gender norms, men, mental health, pedagogy.

## Introduction

Men's mental health is increasingly becoming the subject of research and analyses of growing significance, due to the specific emotional conditioning of this group. Psychological research data indicate that men more frequently than women conceal the difficulties they experience and are slower to undertake self-seeing actions, which is associated both with the internalisation of norms concerning "masculine" resilience and with fear of judgement from their surroundings (Frąckowiak-Sochańska, 2016). These difficulties may manifest in risky, impulsive

or self-destructive behaviours that often develop in conditions of silence, shame and a sense of helplessness (Kucharska, 2023).

From a psychological perspective, emphasis is also placed on the role of emotion regulation mechanisms, which in many men develop under conditions of limited opportunity to express fear, sadness and despair – a situation that promotes the use of avoidant strategies or the suppression of experienced states (Stradomska, Kielan, Walewska-Zielecka, 2020). There is also empirical evidence that men may be at greater risk of death by suicide because they are socialised

<sup>1</sup> Article in Polish language: [https://stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/65pl\\_dwor.pdf](https://stowarzyszeniefidesetratio.pl/fer/65pl_dwor.pdf)

to adhere to certain masculine norms. These norms promote engagement in painful and provocative life events, resulting in a greater “acquired capability” for suicide (Granato, Smith, Selwyn, 2015). Furthermore, excessive pressure on men to conform to traditional masculinity patterns increases the risk of suicidal behaviours (Pirkis, Spittal, Keogh, Mousaferiadis, Currier, 2017; Struszczyk, Galdas, Tiffin, 2017).

From a pedagogical perspective, emphasis is placed on the influence of the upbringing and school environment, in which boys often function under high expectations of self-reliance, control and resilience in the face of adversity. This limits the development of emotional competencies and reinforces the belief that revealing weakness is something undesirable (Modzelewska, 2024). The emotional functioning of adult men is also influenced by family experiences and intergenerational messages that may determine patterns of responding to stress and interpreting one's own experiences (Ochońska, 2025).

Social norms that define appropriate masculine roles and behaviours are assimilated from the earliest years. The pressure to conform to masculine ideals can be enormous, and boys and men who deviate from normative masculine roles and behaviours are often socially punished. Being limited to a set of behaviours deemed appropriately masculinity-affirming can seriously restrict healthy behaviours and emotional responses that could buffer young men during the often stressful period of adolescence (King, Shields, Sojo, Daraganova, Currier, O'Neil, King, Milner, 2020).

In the context of contemporary health and educational challenges, there arises a need for a broader perspective on masculinity as a cultural construct subject to transformation. This approach requires an interdisciplinary perspective combining psychology, sociology, pedagogy and the philosophy of education. From a pedagogical perspective, it becomes important to promote models of masculinity based on a balance between strength and sensitivity, reason and emotionality, action and reflection. Only such an approach enables the creation of environments supporting the development of men's full potential and the reduction of risk arising from normative, rigid gender roles.

The aim of this article is a comprehensive analysis and synthesis of current knowledge on the relationship between socio-cultural constructions of masculinity and men's mental health, taking into account the risk of psychopathology and barriers to seeking support. The discussion also focuses on identifying pedagogical strategies of upbringing and self-education that may support the formation of masculinity norms conducive to emotional openness and psychological well-being. In this connection, the following research question was formulated: What is the relationship between socio-cultural constructions of masculinity and men's mental health, and what pedagogical strategies can support positive changes in this area?

In order to answer this question, a review of English-language literature available in five key databases was conducted: PubMed, PsycINFO, Embase, Web of Science and Google Scholar, using combinations of keywords: men, suicide, risk, masculinity norms. The article takes the form of a narrative review with elements of a systematic approach; clear inclusion criteria were applied, although no formal quality assessment of the studies was conducted.

The article is based on an interdisciplinary approach combining the perspectives of psychology (research on men's mental health and emotionality), pedagogy (strategic educational and upbringing interventions), sociology (analysis of social and gender norms) and the philosophy of education (reflection on identity, development and self-education of the individual). Such a framework enables a comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon and the identification of solutions at both individual and systemic levels.

## **1. Masculinity as a relational and culturally variable construct**

Culture permeates human behaviour, including the meanings and interpretations shared by individuals and social groups. The identity of every person is nourished by and rooted in the world of culture (Kwiatkowska, 2024). Which emotions are considered socially acceptable for men? What constitutes a man's social value? The answers to

these questions are encoded in cultural norms, systems of meaning, and potentially play a key role in intensifying the psychological pain experienced by individuals, depending on whether or not they meet these standards (Iacoviello, Valsecchi, Berent, Borinca, Falomir-Pichastor, 2022).

Traits and behaviours considered masculine and/or feminine are actively constructed by their social and historical context and thus change across culture and time. Contemporary Western culture typically defines masculinity and femininity as orthogonal constructs, with masculinity encompassing traits such as strength, independence, ambition, authoritative leadership and rationality, while femininity is associated with traits such as care, sensitivity, dependence and emotions (Neilson, Singh, Harper, Teng, 2020). However, dominant norms and expectations regarding the psychosocial functioning of men also exist in other cultural contexts, e.g. camps for displaced persons in Uganda (Kizza, Knizek, Kinyanda, Hjelmeland, 2012), rural farming communities in Australia (Kunde, Kólves, Kelly, Reddy, de Leo, 2018), and inner cities in Brazil (Meneghel, Duran Gutierrez, da Silva, Grubits, Hesler, Ceccon, 2012).

Although masculinity norms take diverse forms in various cultural and social contexts, traditional ones are usually described as hegemonic because they contribute to maintaining the advantageous position of men in the gender hierarchy (Messerschmidt, 2019). Hegemony refers to male cultural power in society, perpetuating gender inequality by encompassing both the domination of men over women and over other (often minority) groups of men. Masculinity norms are contextualised (changing across time and space) and relational (hierarchically positioned and referenced against femininity and non-hegemonic masculinities). Although conceptualisations of masculinity have moved away from the notion of a “single” masculinity toward the recognition of “multiple” masculinities, among these many masculinities there exists an idealised, hegemonic masculinity that represents the universally recognised standard (Jewkes, Morrell, Hearn, Lundqvist, Blackbeard, Lindegger, Quayle, Sikweyiya, Gottzén, 2015).

As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) indicate, hegemonic masculinity describes the dominant and “currently most honoured way of being a man” (Connell, Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832).

Endorsement of socialised masculinity norms and traditional ideologies about what contemporary men should be like – so-called traditional masculinity ideologies – can be understood as socially and culturally defined ideas about what a hegemonic man should be and how he should behave. There is empirical evidence that the internalisation of traditional masculine norms varies with age, and that conformity to masculinity is most strongly endorsed by young men (King et al., 2020).

A systematic review of studies on gender attitudes from 29 countries (primarily Western) found that physical strength, endurance, competitiveness and heterosexual performance are of key importance for teenage masculinity norms (Kågesten, Gibbs, Blum, Moreau, Chandra-Mouli, Herbert, Amin, 2016). In turn, Australian research demonstrates that young men are becoming more progressive with respect to certain elements of masculinity. They declare less support for norms concerning violence, greater openness to participation in traditionally feminine activities such as housework or cooking, and greater openness to having non-heteronormative friends. At the same time, certain masculine norms remain entrenched – many young men retain the ideals of “acting strong,” being “the primary breadwinner” and “fighting back when pushed around” (The Men’s Project & Flood, 2018). In the Polish context, attention is drawn to the fact that the process of these changes does not lead to the disappearance of traditional patterns but rather to their reformulation. Urszula Kluczyńska (2017) describes the phenomenon of hybrid masculinity, combining elements of sensitivity with traditional patterns of strength, which in effect produces a new form of male dominance and reproduces existing power structures.

Despite the increasing diversity of masculinity patterns, hegemonic norms continue to play a dominant role in the socialisation process, which generates the need to analyse their impact on the psychosocial functioning of the individual and men’s mental health.

## **2. Men's mental health in the context of masculinity norms**

Research on boys' maturation indicates that mental health constitutes one of the most serious developmental challenges, with as many as 47% of teenagers reporting difficulties in this area – difficulties that often remain beyond the possibility of open disclosure due to social expectations concerning “masculine” emotional restraint. From a developmental perspective, boys thus function in a space of tension between genuinely experienced difficulties and norms mandating control, self-reliance and resilience (*Dojrzewanie polskich chłopców* [Maturation of Polish Boys], 2023).

In the process of upbringing, boys are socialised into traditional masculinity ideologies through disapproval from parents, peers or teachers, or through social sanctions. In this way they adopt and internalise (at least partially) traditional masculinity norms. However, strict adherence to these norms entails negative consequences and limits the ability to live to one's full potential. Some men may fear negative social reactions or negative judgements when they do not behave in accordance with traditional masculinity norms. As a consequence, they may experience gender role conflict (Eggenberger, Komlenac, Ehlert, Grub, Walther, 2022).

Since hegemonic masculinity norms often portray men as tough, aggressive, independent and emotionally inexpressive, having mental health problems, expressing emotions, sensitivity or worries, or needing help from others may be a situation in which some men experience gender role conflict (O'Neil, 2013).

Data from the World Health Organisation report (2018) on men's health demonstrate the influence of gender norms on mental health and the necessity of developing new strategies aimed at meeting the needs of their well-being. The American Psychological Association Boys and Men Guidelines Group report (2018) indicates that men who tend to conform to hegemonic patterns are at greater risk than women of being victims of violent crimes, imprisonment or death in road accidents. As Anna M. Kłonkowska (2024) observes, research on masculinity shows that aspiration to traditional

masculinity patterns is associated with numerous risky and anti-health behaviours, such as substance abuse, reckless behaviour, avoidance of medical help, denial of bodily weakness or treating the act of asking for support as a sign of weakness. These behaviours, although harmful, are often a form of demonstrating belonging to hegemonic masculinity or an attempt to achieve it.

Anisur Rahman Khan, Kopano Ratele and Najuwa Arendse (2020), based on their research, demonstrate that men who value more traditional masculine norms are more frequently engaged in health-damaging behaviours and less likely to undertake health-promoting behaviours. These men also exhibit tendencies to conceal weakness, ignore self-care and reluctantly seek medical and professional help. These practices can adversely affect various aspects of physical and mental health, increasing the risk of illness, injury and death. Socially learned norms of traditional masculinity limit men's ability to seek support or disclose feelings. During crises, men also exhibit weaker protective capacities than women, based on social networks, family bonds and a sense of meaning in life. They are, however, more inclined to externalise their social and individual turmoil. Conducted meta-analyses also indicate that certain masculine norms are associated with poorer mental health outcomes (Wong, Ho, Wang, Miller, 2017).

Due to patriarchal, traditional masculine norms that discourage some men from showing weakness, cisgender men often feel constrained in revealing their emotional and physical ailments to others. They may be reluctant to seek support for fear of social stigmatisation, ill treatment or being perceived as weak or disturbed. Moreover, the pursuit of certain masculine norms, such as self-reliance, is associated with poorer mental health in adults (Cleary, 2019).

As Lynch, Long and Moorhead (2018) indicate, in general terms self-reliance appears to be a positive trait, as it promotes independence. However, the potentially positive effects of self-reliance may be limited if they inhibit communication and help-seeking during anxiety or mental health crises. It is evident that the stigmatisation of mental health constitutes a barrier to seeking support; however, additionally,

for young men this may be more acutely felt, as poor mental health and help-seeking may be at odds with their internalised masculine norms.

Men are typically socialised in ways that discourage them from admitting to feelings or showing sensitivity (Seidler, Dawes, Rice, Oliffe, Dhillon, 2016). For this reason, they may suppress emotions for fear of being perceived, or perceiving themselves, as weak or unmanly (Rice, Oliffe, Kealy, Seidler, Ogrodniczuk, 2020). Norms of emotional suppression undermine men's ability to understand, process and manage their own emotions and psychological suffering (Akotia, Knizek, Hjelmeland, Kinyanda, Osafo, 2019).

Empirical evidence indicates that men are less likely than women to use formal mental health services (Frąckowiak-Sochańska, 2017). This difference may result from higher levels of stigmatisation of men regarding mental illness and help-seeking (Mackenzie, Visperas, Ogrodniczuk, Oliffe, Nurmi, 2019) and/or a lack of services aligned with men's preferences (Liddon, Kingerlee, Barry, 2018). Research findings from German-speaking samples suggest negative associations between endorsement of traditional masculinity norms and help-seeking. War veterans, when asked why they did not seek help for psychological issues, cited an aspect closely related to masculinity norms: "individual coping" (Siegel, Dors, Brants, Schuy, Rau, 2018). Furthermore, men with strong gender role conflict were less likely to raise the topic of sexual health in conversations with a specialist (Komlenac, Siller, Bliem, Hochleitner, 2019). Finally, men who strongly identified with traits traditionally perceived as masculine proved less inclined to utilise psychotherapy (Eggenberger, Fordschmid, Ludwig, Weber, Grub, Komlenac, Walther, 2021).

An important issue concerning mental health remains the problem of depression. According to the concept of male depression, men more frequently experience externalised symptoms such as aggression and substance abuse, while women more frequently experience internalised symptoms (Price, Gregg, Smith, Fiske, 2018). It has been found that the presence of externalised symptoms reduces men's ability to seek help and leads to less favourable treatment of depression compared to men who exhibit inter-

nalised symptoms. A number of qualitative studies concerning men's views on mental health provide evidence indicating that they perceive depression as inconsistent with expectations concerning the male gender role (Krumm, Checchia, Koesters, Kilian, Becker, 2017). They associate it with feminine attributes such as weakness or do not take it seriously as a disease (Rondet, Parizot, Cadwallader, Lebas, Chauvin, 2015).

In this context, the persistent difference in suicide statistics is particularly alarming – the number of suicides committed by men exceeds the number committed by women in virtually every country in the world (Naghavi, 2019). Women more frequently attempt suicide, while men more frequently use "lethal" methods such as firearms or hanging. Suicidologists link this tendency with the cultural pressure for effectiveness and the identification of non-fatal self-harm with failure. Additionally, lower rates of utilisation of psychological and psychiatric services among men may contribute to higher global rates of death by suicide (WHO, 2020).

The complexity of the suicidal phenomenon encompasses both epigenetic and structural factors (Pirkis et al., 2017; Turecki, Brent, Gunnell, O'Connor, Oquendo, Pirkis, Stanley, 2019); however, the literature emphasises a strong association between male suicides and psychosocial factors such as unemployment, occupational and relational crises, depression and substance abuse (Yang, Lau, Wang, Lau, 2019). In a systematic review conducted by Bennett and colleagues (2023), as many as 68 risk factors for male suicide were identified – including addiction, single status and a diagnosis of depression (Richardson, Robb, O'Connor, 2021). Critical analyses of masculinity indicate that pressure to meet unattainable masculinity ideals and the suppression of emotions may be key predictors of suicidal behaviour (Andoh-Arthur, Knizek, Osafo, Hjelmeland, 2018; Cleary, 2019; Granato et al., 2015).

Based on the literature review, it can be stated that hegemonic masculinity norms exert a significant, multidimensional impact on men's mental health, limiting their ability to express emotions, seek support and adaptively cope in crisis situations. This phenomenon points to the necessity of incorpo-

rating a pedagogical perspective, encompassing the processes of upbringing and self-education, in order to promote alternative, more inclusive masculinity patterns conducive to psychological well-being.

### **3. The role of upbringing and self-education in taming emotionality and redefining masculinity**

Contemporary masculinity patterns are sometimes perceived as restricting emotional expression, which can be interpreted as the effect of a culturally entrenched model of emotional restraint and self-sufficiency. From early childhood, men learn that emotional expression threatens their position and belonging to the group, and that showing sensitivity exposes them to exclusion and loss of respect. This suppression constitutes a form of psychological violence towards themselves, which men learn as an element of growing up. Paradoxically, the cultural imperative of insensitivity means that men often experience emotions intensely but ineptly – which results in frustration, isolation and an increase in self-destructive behaviours, including suicidal ones (Reeser & Gottzén, 2018).

There is a growing need to redefine masculinity norms – ones that promote self-awareness, empathy and openness to help. This transformation is supported by both upbringing and self-education, which enable a departure from oppressive gender patterns and the development of healthy emotional mechanisms. The family – as the primary socialisation environment – plays a key role in transmitting norms concerning emotionality and gender. Boys learn through observation what is “masculine” and what is “non-masculine,” and often internalise stereotypes reinforced by media, peers and institutions (King et al., 2020).

In households where emotions are a taboo subject and gender roles are rigidly divided, the risk of psychological withdrawal and loneliness increases. Conversely, in families where there is balance and conversations about emotions are the norm, alternative masculinity patterns develop – ones open to closeness

and relationships (Waling, 2018). Self-education gives men the opportunity to question harmful patterns and shape their own integrated identity.

Developing emotional intelligence, empathy, relational competencies and the skill of asking for help can have a preventive effect against suicidal risk (Gwyther, Swann, Casey, Purcell, Rice, 2019). Social programmes and campaigns are also needed that not only educate but also reduce the shame and stigmatisation associated with male emotionality. However, they should avoid simplified narratives that reinforce stereotypes, for example by linking help-seeking with a new “heroism” (Chandler, 2019). Otherwise, even good intentions may unconsciously perpetuate the belief that a man must first suffer in silence in order to earn the right to support (Seidler et al., 2016).

Upbringing and self-education should be recognised as key processes for shaping alternative forms of masculinity, free from oppressive scripts, yet deeply rooted in personal responsibility for one's own development. Emotional education, conducted both in the family and in the public sphere, can become a tool for men's emancipation from cultural roles that limit their ability to experience, name and regulate emotions. When a man receives permission – both social and internal – to experience weakness, fear, dependence or despair, a space opens for building healthy, authenticity-based relationships with oneself and with others. In this way, the redefinition of masculinity ceases to be merely a theoretical postulate and becomes a life practice, embodied in everyday gestures, language, attitudes and educational decisions that shape future generations of men.

In the context of the presented analyses, it is also worth indicating specific pedagogical strategies that may promote the redefinition of masculinity norms and support men's mental health. These include, among others, emotional education programmes (e.g. based on the SEL model – Social and Emotional Learning), equality education initiatives, and the introduction of content concerning diverse masculinity patterns into curricula and educational programmes. It also becomes essential to prepare teachers for working with boys in a manner that

takes their emotionality into account without reinforcing gender stereotypes. The pedagogy of emotional life as an educational project can, in this context, serve as a form of cultural correction, supporting the process of taming emotions and health-promoting behaviours.

## **Summary and conclusions**

The conducted analysis points to a clear relationship between socio-cultural masculinity norms and men's mental condition, with particular emphasis on the risk of suicidal behaviours. Traditional patterns of hegemonic masculinity, based on strength, self-sufficiency, emotional restraint and achievement pressure, constitute a significant risk factor for men's mental health. Their internalisation results in the stigmatisation of behaviours associated with seeking psychological support, which may lead to emotional exclusion, a sense of isolation and the intensification of self-destructive tendencies.

In response to these challenges, the article emphasised the importance of upbringing and self-education actions aimed at developing emotional competencies, interpersonal openness and the conscious reformulation of harmful gender patterns. The implementation of educational strategies based on promoting alternative masculinity models – taking into account the balance between strength and sensitivity, rationality and emotionality – may constitute an effective element in the prevention of mental health problems and suicidal behaviours among men.

In the context of rising suicide rates, the need for a thorough revision of the dominant narratives concerning masculinity and the development of prevention programmes that take into account the social and cultural conditions accompanying male socialisation appears well-founded. This process requires an interdisciplinary approach integrating psychological, pedagogical, sociological and health perspectives. It is essential to continue research into

how different socio-cultural contexts shape masculinity patterns and influence the ways in which men cope with emotions and crises.

It is also advisable to develop specialised forms of psychological and social support that are sensitive to the influence of gender norms. Creating safe spaces conducive to emotional expression, relationship-building and lowering the threshold for reaching out for help should constitute one of the main directions of intervention. Education in the area of mental health and masculinity, conducted both at the level of educational institutions and in the public sphere, should encourage critical reflection on traditional norms and support the development of positive and flexible gender identities.

The transformation of masculinity norms towards more inclusive ones that support mental health requires pedagogical actions aimed at developing emotional, communicative and relational competencies. The most important educational strategies include: emotional education implemented at all stages of education; the inclusion of the themes of masculinity and mental health in educational content on socio-emotional development; workshops developing interpersonal skills; and mentoring programmes for boys and young men presenting diverse masculinity models. Educational environments play a particularly important role – the family, school, peer groups and the local community – which, by strengthening reflectiveness, empathy and acceptance of emotionality, create space for self-education. It is precisely these environments that can initiate processes of self-reflection on gender identity, serving as a buffer against the pressure of social and cultural stereotypes.

Effective suicide prevention requires the cooperation of many sectors, including the education system, healthcare, social policy and non-governmental organisations. Only integrated, multidimensional strategies can meaningfully contribute to reducing risky behaviours and promoting men's mental health in the conditions of contemporary socio-cultural transformations.

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