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Exploring the subjective micromotives of romantic contexts in different ages

Seminary work

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Vanusegruppide vahelised erinevused romantiliste kontekstide mikromotivatsioonides**Kokkuvõte**

Varasemad uuringud on näidanud romantiliste eelistuste dünaamilist ja ajas muutuvat olemust, kuigi nendes leiduvad laialdasemad populatsiooni tasandi ideed varjutavad individipõhiseid aspekte, mis neid trende põhjustavad. Käesolev uuring keskendus internaliseeritud romantilistele mikromotivatsioonidele, täpsemalt ideaalse partnerivaliku ja romantilise keskkonna kontekstides, ning nende varieeruvusele vanusegruppide lõikes. Kvalitatiivsele internetiküsitlusele vastas 117 inimest vanuses 19 kuni 68, avaldades avatud vastuseid romantiliste kontekstide ideaalidest. Teemaatilise analüüsi ja kvantitatiivsete statistikute abil leiti, et vanemad vastajad väärtustavad ühtsust ja elevust partneris, ning elevust ja kindlustunnet romantilises suhtes. Suhte funktsioneerimise aspektid nagu austus, piiride seadmine ja konfliktide lahendamine olid nooremate vastajate seas nii ideaalse partneri kui ka suhte aspektid. Tulemusi arutletakse arvestades internetiküsitluse metodoloogilisi piiranguid.

Märksõnad: mikromotivatsioon, partnerivalik, romantilised suhted, vanuseerinevused

Exploring the subjective micromotives of romantic contexts in different ages**Abstract**

Literature has shown romantic preferences to be dynamic and changing with time, though often researched at the level of global ideas, leaving the underlying psychological factors less understood. The study explored how internalized romantic micromotives, present in ideal partner preference and relationship climate, vary across age groups. Using a qualitative online questionnaire, 117 participants aged 19 to 68 provided open-ended descriptions of their ideals in romantic contexts. Thematic analysis and quantitative statistics showed that older respondents prioritized connectedness and excitement in a partner, while valuing excitement and security in a relationship. Relationship functioning aspects like respect, boundaries and conflict resolution were regarded as ideal in partner and relationship context by younger respondents. The findings are discussed further with methodological limitations.

Keywords: micromotivation, partner preference, romantic relationships, age differences

Introduction

One of the many core aspects of psychology and sociology is to understand human behaviour more profoundly. Studies in recent years have seen an increase in interest regarding partner preference and romantic relationships overall, as understanding how individuals select partners provides valuable insight into broader patterns of social behaviour and relationship formation (Little et al., 2011; Stallen et al., 2023; Simon et al., 2008). Nevertheless, current research has focused on more larger-scale trends of partner selection, often overlooking individual-level reasoning driven by “micromotives”. The utility of these forces are profound when regarding the dynamic nature of relationships. Especially with time, they evolve, reflecting shifts in values, life goals and social contexts. Thus, by investigating the micromotives underlying dating and partner selection in various age cohorts, this research aims to illustrate the interplay between individual motivators and larger social patterns.

Existing research on romantic choices across different age groups elucidates how priorities and behavioural patterns influence the shifting of relationship dynamics. As a pivotal age of self-exploration, individual differences in choosing stable and casual relationships during adolescence are emergent. According to Tartakovsky (2023), the pursuit of new experiences and sexual satisfaction is a dominant motivator for romantic relationships during this age period, often coexisting with the desire to give and receive love, care and emotional support. Some young adults are motivated by social status and approval from others that arises from engaging in these relationships, though these are usually less central.

When it comes to relationship dynamics, it has been found that adolescent and early adulthood relationships are generally more turbulent. Marked by high support but also elevated jealousy, control and conflict, these characteristics are rooted in self-focused motivations and limited relationship skills (Lantagne & Furman, 2017). According to Linares Martinez (2014), teenagers tend to seek their partner amongst their friend groups, basing their romantic judgement on similarities of a single socio-cultural trait, whose value is also determined by their peers. Younger adults have also been shown to prioritize short-term excitement and casual encounters (e.g. using dating apps) while older adolescents strive towards seeking stability and long-term relationships (Roca-Cuberes et al., 2023).

With increasing age, young adults accumulate more social experiences that guide their character development. In relationship contexts, this also refers to communicative skills, as individuals gradually prioritize mutual benefit and emotional intimacy over selfish motivations. This, in turn, tends to increase relationship length since individuals balance their own needs with those of their partners (Lantagne & Furman, 2017). Additionally, studies have shown the importance of early family experiences and interpersonal skills during this stage of life on romantic relationship functioning. Those who experienced a more positive family environment with better parenting were found to perform better at problem-solving tasks, exhibit non-violent behaviour and judge their relationship as more loving (Xia et al., 2018).

As time goes on and people start to reach their early thirties, the need for exploration and new experiences start to fade as stable and long-term relationships become increasingly desirable. Being in a committed relationship (like marriage) has been found to be associated with lower prevalence of depressive symptoms, higher self-esteem and better mental health for both genders (Grundström et al., 2021). Upon reaching this status of intimate self-involvement, the trends of relationship priorities follow the same path that has been highlighted beforehand: they seek long-term stability and emotional security in partnerships. Individuals in middle-adulthood prioritize relationships that provide a mutual “safe haven” during challenges like career demands or parenting transitions, which offers a supportive relationship environment that generates trust and self-esteem (Bell & Harsin, 2018). Characteristics like flexibility and negotiation are desirable for relationship functioning as well, since many individuals during their middle-adulthood navigate blended families, remarriage or co-parenting. (Wickrama et al., 2020).

Additionally, gendered preferences are prevalent in regards to partner selection and relationship functioning. Men tend to emphasize commitment, physical attractiveness and financial stability in partners, reflecting desires for security and social status, whereas women seek companionship, emotional support and socioeconomic compatibility, often looking for partners who avoid caregiving burdens (Tartakovsky, 2023; Bell & Harsin, 2018). Differences between the desired age of partners arise as well, since it has been reported that as men age, they seek to form romantic relationships with younger partners. The age preference increases with age, as Gottfried et al. (2024) reports that younger males were usually partnered with women approximately three years younger, while older adults had an age difference of nearly a decade. Women tended to partner with men a few years older, but

with age, this trajectory plateaued at around age 60, as they formed relationships with men roughly the same age.

In addition to partner preferences, late adulthood brings on changes regarding relationship dynamics as well, since emotional optimization, mutual well-being and meaningful connections are sought. For instance, socioemotional selectivity plays an enormous role during later life relationships as older adults prioritize emotionally rewarding relationships, often focusing on partners who provide companionship and shared history whilst avoiding conflict (Luong et al., 2010). This reflects the “we-oriented” goals of late life, where couples strive for unifying their lives and using more collaborative language (e.g., “we” instead of “i”). It is common that older adults set aside their self-centered desires and focus on altruistic motivations by investing in the emotional well-being of their partners, engaging in reciprocal caregiving to maintain interdependence and life satisfaction (Haase, 2023; Wickrama et al., 2020). This is also emphasized by longitudinal studies that show late-life marriages exhibiting more warmth, clearer boundaries and less covert conflict than midlife relationships, as couples prioritize harmony over disagreements (Bell & Harsin, 2018).

Evidently, there is a plethora of research focusing on the collective behaviour of larger societal groups and their emergent patterns of romantic preferences. However, an alternative approach of focusing thoroughly on individual subjectivity could provide valuable qualitative information that could aid our understanding why these larger patterns emerge. The term “micromotives” was first popularized by Thomas Schelling in his book *Micromotives and Macrobehavior*, published in 1978. The soon-to-be Nobel Laureate described these small-scale, individual preferences, motives and decisions as having a larger aggregate effect of producing societal level patterns - often with surprising results. Schelling emphasizes how seemingly insignificant preferences could result in macro-level changes (such as residential segregation). This culminates in his central argument of rational personal intentions oftentimes generating irrational social patterns, demonstrating how micromotives are not purely for personal utility but also shaped by social norms and interactions between the individual and the collective (Schelling, 2006).

Schelling’s theory could provide useful insights towards further understanding the complexity of social-level patterns and individual behaviour. In the context of romantic and dating preferences, this approach could be suitable for tackling large-scale partner

preferences occurring on the basis of collective individual motion. For example, Botzet et al. (2023) studied ideal partner preference of 250 women over the age of 17 via online questionnaire and found that the preferences for desirable characteristics of men (such as kindness, attractiveness, financial security etc.) were stable across age groups, whilst age-linked shifts regarding assertiveness increased and parenting intentions decreased after the late 20s. Although the study emphasizes broad stability of partner preferences across age groups, this population-level approach may overshadow the influence of individual micromotives. Even with the same age group, individuals may have vastly different micromotives based on their history and environment. They can shift rapidly in response to internal or external changes, meaning aggregate data may mask significant in-group variation by excluding choices that may differ from the average pattern for the respondents age group. According to Davis (1998), findings on the population-level cannot reliably predict individual behavior, meaning research focusing individual micromotives could capture meaningful distinctions that drive real-world partner selection for many.

Thus, when taking these methodological aspects into consideration, this research paper focuses on investigating the micromotives of partner preferences across age groups. Qualitative data is gathered in the form of a questionnaire of respondents from different age groups and the findings aim to propose an alternative approach of understanding societal-level “macro-behaviour”. Finally, the results are analyzed and compared to previous research, followed by an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of this paper.

The research question of this paper is “What are the ideal romantic context micromotives of different age groups?”. Taking existing studies into consideration, two main hypotheses can be formed regarding the age of respondents. Firstly, young adults (aged approximately between 18 and 30) seek excitement from their partners whereas older adults (aged 30+) seek stability. Secondly, the importance of emotional support and companionship rises with age, whilst the importance of physical attractiveness decreases.

Methodology

Study design

With the use of the online questionnaire, the research aims to collect long-answer and open-ended questions to explore subjective experiences, making it a qualitative study. A cross-sectional approach is utilized since data is collected at a single point in time, across

different age groups. In addition, as internalized micromotives have not seen much interest in research, an exploratory design is used to shed light towards potentially emergent trends.

There were numerous reasons for favouring an online format for the survey over face-to-face interviews or written questionnaires. For instance, it offered complete respondent anonymity, which increased the likelihood of truthful answers and ensured an ethical approach. An online format also made it readily accessible to everyone with internet connection and free time, increasing the number of responses.

Sample

120 people answered this questionnaire, of which 117 were suitable for analysis (20 men and 97 women). The respondents were Estonian-speaking adults with at least 18 years of age, spanning from 19 to 67 years ($M = 29.1$; $SD = 11.2$). For gathering the respondents, convenience sampling was used as the online link to the questionnaire was posted in different FaceBook groups consisting of adults of all ages. In addition, snowball sampling method became emergent as some acquaintances of the researcher decided to also share the link to the questionnaire. Anonymity was ensured with all respondents.

Materials

The responses were collected by a custom-made online questionnaire (created in LimeSurvey) composed of 6 open-ended questions designed to elicit qualitative responses, 2 of which were designed as “decoy” questions to add an extra measure of filtering out unserious answers. The open-ended questions were divided into three separate clusters, each comprising two questions and reflecting a different theme: ideal partner characteristics, ideal relationship environment aspect and a decoy cluster of ideal relationship length. Before answering questions in the first two parts, the respondents were instructed to create a vivid mental image of either their ideal partner or their ideal relationship. They were guided to imagine different aspects of a partner (appearance, behaviour, age, values, background etc.) and a relationship (time spent together, communication, relationship with relatives etc.), which aimed to create a proper state of mind for deeper self-reflection. Additionally, the last part of the survey included sample questions about the respondents age, gender and current relationship status. All of the questions and instructions were presented in Estonian and can be seen in Appendix A. Prior to releasing the questionnaire to the public, a pilot testing was conducted on 4 people of different ages to ensure clarity.

Before accessing the questions, the respondents were educated about the notion of micromotives and how they might be present in our daily activities. A sports example was used in this survey, which was described by the following:

“For example, Juhan and Juku both regularly play volleyball (an activity, which they both enjoy), but Juhan’s micromotive is the feeling of scoring a point whereas Juku’s micromotive is to spend time with his friends. But micromotivation can be even more specific. Maybe Mari likes the aesthetics of volleyball, Pille likes to be physically active after a workday, although Mart’s micromotivation is to lose weight by the sport. Toomas perhaps goes to play volleyball to meet someone attractive while Salme’s motivation is the sound of sneakers on the volleyball court. The method of self-analysis presented in this example is useful when filling this survey.”
(Translated from Estonian)

Additionally, a form of informed consent was shown, which ensures respondent anonymity. The questions could not be accessed without agreeing to this consent. After the questionnaire, the participants were debriefed about the true aim of the questionnaire. The pre-questionnaire information is shown in Appendix B.

Data analysis

After obtaining the necessary information from the survey, a content analysis was conducted on the 117 valid responses. A thematic analysis approach was deemed appropriate due to the qualitative nature of this survey, which allows for pattern analysis and interpretation without requiring burdensome prior knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The analysis process adopted a hybrid approach: firstly, the responses were coded into broader motivational categories of partners and relationship climate from the initial impression. Then, a bottom-up approach was implemented by thoroughly analyzing coded responses and identifying broader subjective themes that would encapsulate the underlying micromotives. In this step, constant comparison method was utilised, as comparing every response with every category and creating sub-categories allowed for more concise classification. Data from the second questions of both of the survey parts (e.g. “Why this aspect of ideal partner/relationship matters to you the most?”) were of crucial value in this step, as they allowed for in-depth exploration of micromotives. For example, “Partner honesty” was prioritized due to micromotivational security for one respondent, yet due to micromotivational mutual understanding for other. After establishing the themes, they were

properly defined and structured, which set the ground for identifying age trends. The responses and the themes were translated from Estonian afterwards.

Ethical considerations

Complete anonymity and confidentiality was ensured with all respondents. Participants had the right to withdraw any time throughout answering the questionnaire, though their answer would be saved. Each response was stored with a unique numerical ID, which possessed no information about the respondents' identity and could not be linked in any way to the respondents.

Results

Descriptive findings

Table 1 presents the descriptive findings of the questionnaire. Age of the respondents is divided into intervals in order to group answers based on relative adulthood periods. The number of responses in each age group, the groups' average age, standard deviation and gender proportions are highlighted as well. As it can be seen, the majority of the responses were submitted by female participants in their early 20s.

Table 1.

Descriptive statistics of the questionnaire.

Age of respondent	Number of responses (N = 117)	Mean age of age group (M = 29.1)	Standard deviation of age group (SD = 11.2)	Male respondents (N = 27)	Female respondents (N = 90)
19 - 30	81 (69.2%)	22.4	2.51	19	62
31 - 45	22 (18.8%)	38.4	4.43	6	16
45+	14 (12.0%)	52.7	6.23	2	12

Thematic analysis of ideal partner micromotives

Data from the first section of the survey (partner micromotives) yielded 124 code units. Data analysis categorized them under 10 broader themes, five of which were split into two sub-categories. Broad themes with under 3 responses were not included in the results,

and sub-themes with under 3 responses were tied back to their respective super-themes. An additional theme was created for responses which failed to meet the depth of reported self-analysis and reflected merely a trait, not a micromotive. Table 2 shows the themes and sub-themes, ordered according to the rank of each theme's representation among the respondents. The 3 most frequent ideal partner micromotives are explored in depth with sample responses from the questionnaire (translated from Estonian).

Table 2.

Themes, sub-themes and response statistics about micromotives regarding ideal partner characteristics.

Theme	Frequency (N=117)	Mean age (M=29.1)	Standard deviation (SD=11.2)
Relational understanding	21 (16.9%)	32.2	12.1
Mutual acceptance	16 (12.9%)	34.2	12.1
Interpersonal respect	5 (4.0%)	21	1
Perceived closeness	19 (15.3%)	26.2	10.5
Partner investment & effort	8 (6.5%)	25.8	10.8
Emotional warmth	11 (8.9%)	26.5	10.3
Positive affect	19 (15.3%)	31	11
Partner humor	7 (5.6%)	31.2	10.3
Boredom avoidance	12 (9.7%)	30.8	11.4
Sense of security	19 (15.3%)	25	7.2
Honesty & trustworthiness	11 (8.9%)	27.2	8.7
Partner reliability	8 (6.5%)	21.9	1.5
Self-partner trait interaction	12 (9.7%)	28.8	9.4
Conversational quality	9 (7.3%)	27.3	13.1
Enjoyable dialogue	5 (4.0%)	31	17

Instrumental discussion	4 (3.2%)	23	1
Transparency & sincerity	7 (5.6%)	26	8.4
Moral character	6 (4.8%)	24.2	5.2
Trait described without assessing micromotives	8 (6.5%)	43.8	10.8

Relational understanding

Nearly one-fifth of the respondents prioritized the micromotive of “relational understanding” in their ideal partner, which reflected the need to be understood and tolerated. They value a partner who creates a constructive relationship climate and takes their perspective into consideration. Respondents valuing the “relational understanding” micromotive had the highest mean respondent age ($M = 32.2$, $SD = 12.1$) of any broad theme (excluding the theme “Trait described without assessing micromotives”). Two sub-themes were identified within this theme: “mutual acceptance” and “interpersonal respect”.

Mutual acceptance. Respondents prioritizing “mutual acceptance” described their micromotives towards a partner as accepting, empathic, emotionally collected etc. A desire for relationship harmony and partner understanding is prevalent in the responses. For example, empathy was micromotivationally described as:

“...the foundation of a truly close relationship - the foundation of trust, friendship, understanding, mutual support and consideration for one another. Empathic capacity enables a person to see, feel, regulate their own behavior and attitudes in harmony with their close relationships, experiencing satisfaction in this sense of mutual alignment and shared movement...”. (Respondent ID: 289).

Acceptance micromotive was also brought out by some, one participant describing the significance as:

“I don’t want to feel as being judged or that my options are not taken into consideration”. (Respondent ID: 50).

Interpersonal respect. Respondents highlighting the motive of “interpersonal respect” valued their partners’ ability to know their boundaries, use acceptable

communication and behaviour strategies, and overall, treats the other person with decency. For example, respectful self-expression was described micromotivationally as

“Without respect, there is no relationship. Respect brings trust, honesty and care. If a partner does not value their companion and demeans them publicly or privately, the relationship is not sustainable”. (Respondent ID: 202).

Humbleness was also categorized under the “interpersonal respect” micromotive:

“In every relationship, the counterparts are individual wholes. Over time they change, ambitions rise and disappear, some similarities might grow into differences. I don’t believe that towards every new self-identity should be a similar partner, therefore I see, that from every mutual value and perspective, humbleness is the most important one as it maintains respect towards the other person and the relationship they created”. (Respondent ID: 10).

Comparing the age trends of these sub-themes, the “mutual acceptance” micromotive ($M = 34.2$, $SD = 12.1$) showed a vastly higher mean respondent age than “interpersonal respect” ($M = 21$, $SD = 1$), with the data being more spread out as well.

Perceived closeness

Responses categorized under the “perceived closeness” theme showed high prioritization of feeling loved and cared for. A partner, who makes them feel special and is aware of the other’s needs, is described by answers under this theme. Respondents associated with the “perceived closeness” micromotive had a lower mean age ($M = 26.2$, $SD = 10.5$) compared to the sample mean. Participants brought out different ways of their ideal partner showing affection, creating two sub-themes: “partner investment & effort” and “emotional warmth”.

Partner investment & effort. Respondents micromotivated by “partner investment & effort” are said to seek attentiveness and dedication towards caring for their needs. A partner’s desire to perform an action of minuscule importance, purely for the sake of the others’ wellbeing, is valued highly. For example, the underlying micromotives for dedication towards the partners’ needs was explored by:

“Their attachment, meaning being very committed towards myself (caring for my wellbeing, noticing my moods etc.) ...I feel very special, when someone gives attention to me, noticing the smaller details etc.” (Respondent ID: 65)

Attentiveness was the most mentioned trait in the “partner investment & effort” sub-theme, with one response exploring it as:

“This characteristic is very important to me, because it shows, that the person actually cares about me and what makes me happy. I don’t think there exists a better trait, which would truly show, if a person loves and cares for another”. (Respondent ID: 185).

Emotional warmth. Characterised by caring, helpfulness and support, responses categorized under “emotional warmth” sub-theme value a partner, who is romantic and makes them feel loved and special. A caring partner was the most mentioned ideal trait, which was micromotivationally explored by the following:

“A person, who you are with, must create a feeling of wanting to be with them all the time. If someone cares for you, they make it so you would feel good (cooks, asks how your day went, if you need help etc.) and what more do you want?” (Respondent ID: 230).

Another respondent wrote about their micromotive of emotional connection:

“A warm and safe feeling in me, which occurs when they look at me. It doesn’t happen often. This specific eye contact with so-called smiling eyes is a sign, that the other person is interested in you, they like you as a person and the gaze creates trust.” (Respondent ID: 158).

The average age of the respondents of these sub-themes fall under very similar values, with variance showing similar data distribution as well. “Partner investment & effort” theme ($M = 25.8$, $SD = 10.8$) showed a slightly younger age in contrast to the “Emotional warmth” theme ($M = 26.5$, $SD = 10.3$).

Positive affect

The “positive affect” micromotive theme was created for respondents, who prioritize a partner, who makes them experience positive emotions. Responses reflected qualities like

fun, humour, and adventureness, with the mean respondent age being the second highest of any theme ($M = 31$, $SD = 11$). Of these reports, two sub-themes were created: “Partner humour” and “boredom avoidance”.

Partner humour. All of the respondents categorized under this sub-theme wished their partner to have a good sense of humour. Some responses explored the characteristic even further, as it encapsulates more than merely making good jokes:

“Humour helps to overcome everything, difficulties in a relationship and life overall, anger, sulking, sadness and is intellectually stimulating. To do a “practical” joke (“*krutskiga*” *nali* in Estonian”), which others have trouble understanding, but the partner gets it, is a very connecting feeling.” (Respondent ID: 52).

The direction of humour was also mentioned as being important:

“Humour is important in many situations, if a partner knows how to joke about a situation and about themselves, the time spent together is more fun”. (Respondent ID: 121).

Boredom avoidance. Many were also intrigued by a partner, with whom it is possible to spend stimulating time together. Curiosity was one of the most popular traits in this sub-theme:

“It matters to me, because I myself am really for obtaining new experiences and knowledge, and I have yet to meet anyone, who shares the same amount of curiosity as me. This is why most people are boring to me.” (Respondent ID: 200).

Some reported a need for interestingness in a partner:

“An interesting person helps give freshness to a relationship, it doesn’t become menial, fun all the time, the spark remains.” (Respondent ID: 27).

When looking at the age trends, both “partner humour” ($M = 31.2$, $SD = 10.3$) and “boredom avoidance” ($M = 30.8$, $SD = 11.4$) share a nearly identical average respondent age, with the data being more spread out in the case of the latter.

Thematic analysis of ideal relationship micromotives

Thematic analysis of data about ideal relationship micromotives (section 2) resulted in 119 code units. Constant comparison method allowed for the creation of 10 broad themes, five of which were split into 2 to 3 sub-themes. As with the previous section, broader themes with less than 3 responses were not included in the analysis, and sub-themes with less than 3 responses were contextually tied to another sub-theme (if there were 3 sub-themes) or merged with a sub-theme back to their associated broad theme (in the case of 2 sub-themes). Table 3. shows the micromotive themes, sub-themes, average respondent age and standard deviation of each theme, ordered by the frequency of respondents in every broad theme. Again, three most popular themes are described with translated examples.

Table 3.

Themes, sub-themes and response statistics about micromotives regarding ideal relationship characteristics.

Theme	Frequency (N=116)	Mean age (M=29.1)	Standard deviation (SD=11.3)
Humorous and positive climate	17 (14.7%)	26.1	9.4
Relationship security	16 (13.8%)	32.3	10.0
Secure bond	10 (8.6%)	32.5	11.2
Honesty & trustworthiness	6 (5.2%)	31.8	7.4
Relationship intimacy	15 (12.9%)	28.8	9.4
Emotional connection	10 (8.6%)	24.2	7.5
Passionate climate	5 (4.3%)	35.8	11.5
Communicative climate	11 (9.5%)	27.3	11.5
Open communication	3 (2.6%)	23.7	3.1
Amusing communication	4 (3.4%)	35.5	15.9
Constructive conflict resolution	4 (3.4%)	21.8	0.4
Interpersonal attunement	10 (8.6%)	29.8	7.9

Mutual understanding	4 (3.4%)	32.3	9.6
Mutual respect	3 (2.6%)	23.3	4.7
Mutual awareness	3 (2.6%)	33	2.2
Relationship boundaries	6 (5.2%)	22.5	1.7
Individuality preservation	3 (2.6%)	21.6	1.3
“Togetherness” regulation	3 (2.6%)	23.3	1.7
Time spent together	6 (5.2%)	28.7	15.9
Personality compatibility	5 (4.3%)	32	11.2
Relational growth	3 (2.6%)	22	1.6
Trait described without assessing micromotives	25 (21.6%)	33	13.6

Note: The frequency and standard deviation are adjusted due to one of the respondents not producing an answer for the second section of the survey (mean age was unchanged).

Humorous and positive climate

The most popular micromotivation theme was “humorous and positive climate” with 17 responses claiming it to be their primary micromotive. They mentioned the desire to have a lot of fun and playfulness in a relationship, as their micromotive is mainly focused on the quality of time spent together. Humour was brought out multiple times, as one respondent described its importance as:

“Relationships don’t have to be serious, important things. Someone is needed, to make jokes in the evening and with whom you won’t get bored”. (Respondent ID: 59).

Few respondents highlighted the importance of a positive attitude and joyfulness in a relationship:

“Life has too much negativity and I believe that you are the same person as the ones you keep in your vicinity, meaning a positive company makes yourself more positive, in contrast to negative people dragging others down with their mindsets”. (Respondent ID: 200).

One intriguing response deeply reflected of their underlying micromotivation in the case of laughing about “objectively unfunny things”:

“It matters to me, because I think the only way for humanity to cope with tragedy is to laugh. When I feel sadness, and I feel it pretty often, then I would want to laugh with someone about something that you shouldn’t really laugh about, since it gives the feeling of being alive and a little bit of hope as well.” (Respondent ID: 220)

“Humorous and positive climate” theme had a relatively lower average respondent age ($M = 26.1$, $SD = 9.4$) compared to the sample average. Surprisingly, other themes related to the notion of hedonistic positive affect in the relationship, such as “time spent together” ($M = 28.7$, $SD = 15.9$) and “amusing communication” ($M = 35.5$, $SD = 15.9$), reported higher mean respondent ages in comparison to “humorous and positive climate”.

Relationship security

16 responses prioritized the micromotivation to feel secure within a relationship, characterized by mutual trust and the potential to rely on a partner. A desire for safety and reliance is explored by many. The average respondent age ($M = 32.3$, $SD = 10.0$) is the highest of any broad themes. Two sub-themes emerge: “secure bond” and “honesty & trustworthiness”.

Secure bond. Many responses valuing relationship security reflect the micromotive of creating a secure connection with their partner, which creates a feeling of safety. Loyalty became emergent, being described by one respondent as:

“It is important that you can count on one-another and it should be reaffirmed from time to time, for example with kind words or time commitment.” (Respondent ID: 56).

Additionally, micromotive of feeling safety was reflected through feeling to be loved or “the one”:

“If a romantic relationship is dynamic, where partners are open to their expression of feelings and define the partner/relationship as so-called “the one”, it creates safety and inspiration in me.” (Respondent ID: 312)

Honesty & trustworthiness. In many, relationship security is present in creating an honest and trustworthy environment, describing the micromotive as a cornerstone to a functioning relationship. For example, honesty and trustworthiness was reflected by the following:

“It gives a spine to the relationship, yet allows us to act independently without any worries.” (Respondent ID: 41)

“It (honesty in every situation) makes it easier to do everything, if you are honest towards yourself and others.” (Respondent ID: 236).

The mean ages of the “secure bond” ($M = 32.5$, $SD = 11.2$) and “honesty & trustworthiness” ($M = 31.8$, $SD = 7.4$) fall under similar values, showing a slightly larger variance of respondents under the first sub-theme.

Relationship intimacy

As the third most popular micromotive theme, “relationship intimacy” was present in responses who sought strong affection and dedication in a romantic relationship. Their judgement is driven by feelings of love and care, built upon a deep connection with their partner. The themes’ average respondent age ($M = 28.8$, $SD = 9.4$) was similar to the sample mean, with the data being more focused towards the mean. Relationship intimacy micromotive presented itself in different ways, which created the following sub-themes: “Emotional connection” and “passionate climate”.

Emotional connection. The majority of respondents in “relationship intimacy” reported valuing a supportive climate, where their partner takes their wishes into consideration and cares for them. This micromotivation for a deeper connection was explored as:

“...what transforms and grows a relationship is when partners are connected on a so-called soul basis. This means, that there is a wish to look beyond the tips of their toes, to make an effort for it, to understand the other and to account for every good and faulty part, which makes this person a person...” (Respondent ID: 301)

The notion of respondents feeling their partners prioritization was also present in responses:

“Everything else comes from this feeling: “butterflies in stomach”, self-esteem growth, wanting to be together, wanting and trying to be the perfect partner”.
(Respondent ID: 271).

Passionate climate. Highly valued relationship intimacy contained a different subjective micromotive for others, as they described their ideal climate with unconditional prioritization and affection:

“To me, my partner is my favourite person to spend time with, and I wish to be felt like that by him as well. Yes, we share different people-activities-hobbies etc., but in my ideal relationship the partner prioritizes spending time with me, offering and making plans in advance and letting me know throughout the day, keeps me on track.” (Respondent ID: 300).

This micromotivation was also described as something unexplainable, yet strong and foundational:

“An invisible connection with another, a feeling from the distance, communication without words, unexplainable attraction. This is the most important factor. Without it a relationship is mathematical and computational. And pointless.” (Respondent ID: 158)

The average age of the respondents with these sub-theme micromotivation differed greatly. “Passionate climate” ($M = 35.8$, $SD = 11.5$) had the highest average age of every theme and sub-theme whereas “emotional connection” ($M = 24.2$, $SD = 7.5$) was valued greatly by younger respondents on average.

Discussion

This study explored romantic micromotives underlying ideals of partners and relationships, with a focus on emergent age-related patterns. Respondents were educated about the presence and expression of micromotives, which set the stage, with the help of a guided instruction, to engage in deep self-analysis. Two different sets of characteristics were researched, as participants distinguished between ideal partner and relationship characteristics in different sections of the survey. The distinction between these categories rises from their interpretation: ideal partner micromotives reflect individual attributes, with emphasis on the subjective traits of the partner and their effect on the respondent (e.g. who the partner is).

Ideal relationship micromotives shift the perspective on underlying dyadic processes, as the relationship environment is created by subjective interaction between counterparts (e.g. what the relationship feels like). This allowed the respondents to explore their micromotives in different contexts.

The findings created numerous micromotives underlying romantic context ideals, suggesting the lack of a singular, universally accepted factor of a relationship or a partner that is sought after. When looking at ideal partner micromotives, most frequently mentioned themes were “relational understanding” ($n = 21$), “perceived closeness” ($n = 19$), “positive affect” ($n = 19$) and “sense of security” ($n = 19$). These micromotives account for nearly two-thirds of the total number of respondents, suggesting that respondents primarily conceptualize an ideal partner as someone who understands, respects, values and cares for them, while creating safety and providing entertainment. A similar set of micromotives is emergent in ideal relationship climates as well, with “humorous and positive climate” ($n = 17$), “relationship security” ($n = 16$), “relationship intimacy” ($n = 15$) and “communicative climate” ($n = 11$). Nearly half of the respondents would describe their ideal as a mutual safe-haven, rich in emotional connectivity and fun time spent together.

When taking age into consideration, distinct patterns emerge. The first initial hypothesis of younger adults prioritizing excitement and older respondents valuing stability is partially rejected. The ideal relationship micromotive pattern among older respondents is nuanced, as “relationship security” ($M = 32.3$, $SD = 10.0$), “passionate climate” ($M = 35.8$, $SD = 11.5$), “amusing communication” ($M = 35.5$, $SD = 15.9$) and “personality compatibility” ($M = 32$, $SD = 11.2$) were with the highest mean respondent age. These findings do point towards older respondents idealizing long-term stability as hypothesized. In fact, older respondents seem to value fun and excitement more than younger respondents as a sense of relationship functionality and stability is also present in their responses. The ideal relationship micromotives with the youngest average respondent ages are “constructive conflict resolution” ($M = 21.8$, $SD = 0.4$), “relationship boundaries” ($M = 22.5$, $SD = 1.7$) “relational growth” ($M = 22$, $SD = 1.6$) and “mutual respect” ($M = 23.3$, $SD = 4.7$). This would suggest that younger respondents’ ideal partner micromotives revolve around the ability to keep a relationship functional, not solely fun and excitement.

The second hypothesis states that emotional support and companionship increases with age, while physical attractiveness decreases. This hypothesis is partially accepted, as

ideal partner micromotive data showed “mutual acceptance” ($M = 34.2$, $SD = 12.1$), “positive affect” ($M = 31$, $SD = 11$) and “enjoyable dialogue” ($M = 31$, $SD = 17$) as the themes and sub-themes with the highest average respondent age. The essence of interpersonal connection is present in the findings, since they imply that older respondents value notions like emotional maturity, acceptance and sustained positive interactions in a partner. In contrast, the survey yields insufficient information about the age trends of physical attractiveness prioritization, which makes the second hypothesis only partially accepted. The findings show younger respondents prioritizing ideal relationship micromotives like “interpersonal respect” ($M = 21$, $SD = 1$), “partner reliability” ($M = 21.9$, $SD = 1.5$), “instrumental discussion” ($M = 23$, $SD = 1$) and “moral character” ($M = 24.2$, $SD = 5.2$), as they were with the lowest average respondent age. Relationship functionality is reflected from these micromotives, with conflict management and the establishment of ground rules playing a role as well.

Findings from the questionnaire partially align with trends from other psychological studies. Traits like kindness and supportiveness have been highly valued regardless of age (Lukaszewski & Roney, 2009; Botzet et al., 2023), with small changes regarding the level of importance. Similar patterns emerge from some previous literature: trust and communication, encapsulated in reliance and support, have been highlighted as more valued amongst younger participants (Hogan, 2015). This somewhat aligns with the findings of respect, reliability and conflict resolution micromotives having a greater proportion of younger respondents. In addition, Laursen & Jensen-Campbell (1999) reflects that adolescents have a greater emphasis on egocentric rewards, though it changes with age towards seeking rewards that favour both parties. This phenomenon could influence the micromotives of younger adults, since experiencing the presence of self-centered rewards in the past could gravitate respondents towards idealizing a partner and a relationship where mutual respect and conflict resolution exists.

On the other hand, the findings show divergence from previous literature. Scheibe et al. (2012) highlighted low-arousal positive emotions in relationships (e.g. emotional warmth and connectedness) as valued by both younger and older participants. Younger respondents equally prioritize high-arousal positive affect (such as excitement and fun), yet older respondents valued low-arousal emotions to a greater extent. These findings are mostly similar to the survey's, as micromotives reflecting emotional closeness were frequently mentioned. However, micromotives like “passionate climate” and “boredom avoidance” were idealized by older participants on average. One reason could be that our sample included

mostly people in early- and middle-adulthood, where the age differences are not as profound (discussed further in the Limitations section). Additionally, studies have highlighted a positive trend between respondent age and the preference of confidence or assertiveness in a partner, though present in a sample of women (Botzet et al., 2023). Our findings fail to report such a pattern, as not one respondent mentioned confidence or assertiveness. This could potentially be due to methodological differences: perhaps participants valued partner confidence or assertiveness to a certain extent, but did not regard them as singularly ideal.

In regards to methodological considerations, a noteworthy finding of the survey is present in the “trait described without assessing micromotive” theme. In both sections, the groups’ average age was higher than that of the sample ($M = 43.8$, $SD = 10.3$; $M = 33$, $SD = 13.6$). , which suggests that the responses’ inability to reach the desired micromotivational analysis was more profound among older respondents (further discussed in the Limitations section). This phenomenon of answers built upon circular reasoning amongst older adults (Rips, 2002) could be rooted in longer relationship lengths (Scheibehenne et al., 2010) and familiarity (Fredrickson & Cartensen, 1990) in unexamined relationship characteristics, leading to surface-level responses.

Limitations

The main limitations of this study concern the sample. As mentioned, the majority of respondents (69.2%) were between 19 and 30 years old, the findings primarily reflect the romantic micromotives of young adults. Although participants from older age groups were included, they yield a smaller relative sample size. This negatively influences the strength and generalizability of the discussed age-related comparisons, as the micromotives of midlife and older participants are relatively underrepresented. However, this age-imbalance reflects common limitations in digital surveys. The convenience and snowball sampling of acquaintances yielded a greater proportion of younger respondents since they are of the researchers’ age and spend more time on the internet (Eurostat, 2022).

In addition, the sample was mostly made up of female respondents, as only 27 answers were from male participants (compared to 90 female responses). This further limits the generalizability of prevalence of micromotives and their respective age-trends since male responses were underrepresented. This however, is another aspect of an anonymous online questionnaire, as voluntary participation regarding relationship and emotional topics tends to

attract more female participants rather than males due to conversational preferences (Goldshmidt & Weller, 2000).

Another aspect of this qualitative study would regard the study design. Because the study relied on a self-administered qualitative online questionnaire, there was no opportunity to ask follow-up questions, enhance clarifications or provide further instructions for greater depth. While the online format enabled for convenient and large-scale data collection, it may have had an effect on the depth of analysis of some responses. The micromotivational self-analysis style could have been difficult to grasp or the guided instructions before each section could have created more questions than produced answers. Thus, many responses were filtered out during thematic analysis (many of which from older respondents).

Further research on the topic of micromotives regarding romantic contexts would benefit greatly from methodological configurations. For instance, using qualitative real-time interviews (either in real life or by phone or video call) would allow for more accurate data collection, as the presence of an interviewer could ensure the clarity of the potentially misunderstood micromotivational self-analysis. Although the lack of anonymity could potentially hinder the participant from opening up, they would receive real-time information about guiding their analysis, potentially offering previously uncovered knowledge about themselves. Interviews could give the possibility of adjusting the desired sample as well in case of uneven age or gender distribution.

Conclusions

Micromotives of ideal partner characteristics and ideal relationship climate showed a wide array of personal characteristics that respondents deem as crucial. Ideal partner characteristics included notions of mutual understanding, respect, care and entertainment with distinct age differences: older respondents prioritize interpersonal connection, emotional maturity and positive interactions while younger respondents care more for conflict management and interpersonal respect. In the view of ideal relationship climate, long-term stability and excitement was more favoured by older respondents in comparison to younger participants valuing functionality. This suggests the micromotivational approach potentially highlighting deeper and internalized aspects of relationship priorities, which would differ from other surveys about partner and relationship preferences. However, the limitations of the sample distribution and study design could influence the interpretation of age-effect of

romantic micromotivations, meaning more future research could benefit to further aid the understanding of more specific differences between genders and different ages.

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Appendix A

Questions of the survey with guided instructions in original language

1) Micromotivations in the contexts of partner preference

G: Järgnevate seksisioonide jooksul palun üritage mõelda kaasa nii spetsiifiliselt ja ausalt kui vähegi võimalik! Mõtle enda ideaalse partneri peale. Keegi, kellega sina oleksid nõus veetma iga päeva enda ülejäänud elus täielikus rahulolus. Kujuta vaimusilmas ette tema välimust ning proovi luua enda ette terviklik pilt sellest inimesest. Kujuta ette, kuidas ta käituks erinevates situatsioonides, kui vana ta oleks, milliseid maailmavaateid ta omaks, milline oleks tema taust, huvid, minevik, prioriteedid jne.

Q1: Kui sa mõtled selle inimese peale, mis oleks tema puhul omadus, mida peaksid kõige olulisemaks? Mis oleks üks spetsiifiline omadus temal, mis trumpaks üle kõik teised omadused ja mis eraldaks ta kõigist teistest inimestest?

Q2: Miks see omadus sulle väga korda läheb? Mille pärast just see sinu jaoks kõige erilisem on?

2) Micromotivations in the context of relationship climate

G: Palun kujuta ette enda ideaalset romantilist suhet teise inimesega (ei pea olema sinu ideaalne partner). Sellist suhet, mis sinu jaoks praegusel hetkel oleks kõige rohkem õnnelikkust tekitav. Kujuta ette, kuidas veedaksid temaga aega, milline näeks välja teie omavaheline suhtlus, kas ja kui palju te üksteist näete, kuidas nad sinu tuttavatega läbi saavad jne.

Q1: Mõeldes enda ideaalse romantilise suhte peale, mis oleks sinu jaoks kõige tähtsam omadus? Mis oleks üks omadus, mis eraldaks selle romantilise suhte igast teisest, ning paneks sind seda hindama kui kõige paremat?

Q2: Miks see omadus sulle kõike rohkem korda läheb?

3) Micromotivations in the context of relationship length (decoy section)

Q1: Mõeldes enda praeguse elukäigu ning soovide peale, mis oleks hetkel sinu jaoks kõige ihaldatavam romantilise suhte pikkus teise inimesega?

Q2: Miks just see pikkus sinu jaoks kõige ihaldatavam on?

Appendix B

Pre-questionnaire information

Käesoleva uuringuga sooviksime teada saada rohkem teie sisemistest mikromotivatsioonidest. Tihtipeale on inimestele motivaatoriteks suuremad, abstraktsed aspektid (nagu raha, kuulsus, kindlustunne), kuid meie küsimustikuga sooviksime teada saada peidetud (ja tihti teadvustamata) motiive romantiliste suhete kontekstides, mis just teid isiklikult paelub. Järgnevatele küsimustele valesid vastusi ei ole, ning innustame teid osalema sügavas eneserefleksioonis. Kes teab, äkki avastate enda kohta midagi, mida varasemalt ei teadnud.

Näiteks Juhan ja Juku käivad mõlemad võrkpalli mängimas (tegevus, mis neile mõlemale väga meeldib), kuid Juhani mikromotivatsiooniks oleks see tunne, kui ta punkti skoorib, samas kui Jukul on peamine motivatsioon sõpradega koos aega veeta. Aga motivatsioon võib olla veelgi spetsiifilisem. Ehk Marile meeldib võrkpall esteetiliselt, Pillele aga meeldib pärast tööpäeva füüsiliselt aktiivne olla, samas kui Mardi mikromotivatsioon on spordi abil kaalus alla võtta. Toomas käib ehk võrkpallis hoopis, et kohata mõnda atraktiivset inimest, samas kui Salme motivatsiooniks on ka see hää, mida teevad tossud võrkpalliplatsil. Selles näites esitatud eneseanalüüsi meetod tuleb kasuks küsimustikule vastamisel.

Uuringus osalemine eeldab, et olete vähemalt 18-aastane. Küsimustik on anonüümne – Teie nime, IP-aadressi ega muid tuvastatavaid andmeid ei koguta. Uuringu käigus saadud andmeid kasutatakse üksnes teadustöö eesmärgil üldistatud kujul ning neid ei seostata üksikute vastajatega. Uuringu tulemuste põhjal valmib Tartu Ülikooli psühholoogia bakalaureuseõppe üliõpilase Joonatan Enni uurimistöö.

Küsimustiku täitmine kestab ligikaudu 5 - 10 minutit ning osalemine on täiesti vabatahtlik. Soovi korral võite täitmise igal hetkel katkestada. Kuigi uuring on anonüümne, ei ole juba esitatud vastuseid võimalik hiljem eemaldada.

Kui soovite Tartu Ülikooli psühholoogiaüliõpilasena saada uuringus osalemise eest katsepunkte/arvestustunde (0,25), palun kasutage küsimustiku lõpus olevat linki eraldi ankeedile, kuhu saate sisestada enda nime ja e-posti aadressi. Need andmed hoitakse uuringuandmetest eraldi ega ei seostata vastustega.

Joonatan Enni, TÜ psühholoogia bakalaureuseõppe üliõpilane (vastutav uurija)

Jaan Aru, PhD (psühholoogia), arvutusliku neuroteaduse ja tehisintellekti kaasprofessor (juhendaja).

Appendix C

Post-questionnaire information

Täname uuringus osalemise eest!

Käesoleva uurimusega soovime täpsemalt teada saada, kuidas inimeste mikromotivatsioonid romantilistes kontekstides ja partnerivalikus erinevad **vanusegruppide lõikes**.

TÜ psühholoogiatudengid saavad osalemise eest katsepunkte (0,25) järgneva ankeedi kaudu: (Ankeet) Lisage enda nimi ja meiliadress, millega tunde raporteerite.

Küsimuste puhul võite pöörduda järgnevate isikute poole:

Joonatan Enni (vastutav uurija): joonatan.enni@ut.ee

Jaan Aru (juhendaja): jaan.aru@ut.ee

Käesolevaga kinnitan, et olen korrektselt viidanud kõigile oma töös kasutatud teiste autorite poolt loodud kirjalikele töödele, lausetele, mõtetele, ideedele või andmetele

Olen nõus oma töö avaldamisega Tartu Ülikooli digiarhiivis

Joonatan Enni