Romantic Relationship Stability of University Students: The Role of Attachment and Self-Change

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Abstract
This study examined whether attachment and self-change predict relationship stability and whether relationship stability differs according to gender. The research data consisted of 403 participants, both online and face-to-face. Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine the predictive power of self-change and attachment on relationship stability in university students. Independent samples t-test was conducted to determine whether there was a difference in the relationship stability levels of the participants according to gender. According to the findings obtained from the analysis, university students' self-expansion, self-contraction, anxious attachment, and avoidant attachment levels significantly predict relationship satisfaction. Self-expansion, self-adulteration, self-contraction, and anxious attachment significantly predict the level of evaluation of the quality of options. Self-expansion, self-contraction, self-adulteration, anxious attachment, and avoidant attachment significantly predicted relationship investment, whereas self-expansion, self-contraction, self-adulteration, and avoidant attachment significantly predicted commitment. In addition, men's relationship satisfaction and relationship investment levels are significantly higher than women's. The findings were discussed and interpreted in line with the literature on relationship stability, and some suggestions were presented for researchers and practitioners.

Keywords: Relationship stability, Relationship satisfaction, Attachment, Self-change, University students

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Introduction

Interpersonal relationships are among the most essential needs for individuals. It is natural that humans, as social beings, grow up, try to understand the world, and lead their lives by forming meaningful and interactive relationships with others. While all close relationships may play a critical role in an individual's life, romantic relationships hold unique significance compared to other types of relationships (Büyükşahin, 2006). In particular, romantic relationships carry great importance in the lives of young adults, especially those aged between 18 and 26, since they are undergoing a key stage of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1968). University life, in which romantic relationships often become more prominent, is a period when individuals form new relationships and endeavor to make them long-lasting (Saraç et al., 2015). University life, including many developmental responsibilities specific to emerging adulthood, is a challenging period with multiple tasks such as separation from the family, adapting to new academic and social life, seeking closeness to a romantic partner, and completing one's personality development. In the course of this process, university students become more willing to establish close relationships or maintain their existing relationships as a result of increasing importance attached to close relationships so that they can accelerate social and emotional adaptation and ensure a healthy transition from adolescence to adulthood (Erikson, 1968; Mosher & Danoff-Burg, 2007). Therefore, individuals experience a change from superficial and unstable relationships to deeper and more stable relationships during this period (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Having a stable romantic relationship is of great importance for one's psychosocial and self-development (Furman & Rose, 2015), as a stable romantic relationship is closely related with an individual's well-being (Dush & Amato, 2005; Erikson, 1968) and physical health (Bookwala, 2005).

Relationship stability is defined by the course of the relationship in situations where individuals exhibit high levels of commitment, satisfaction, and investment in their relationships but have low levels of evaluating the quality of alternatives outside their current relationship (Büyükşahin, 2006). It was found that many variables, such as the effort individuals exert on their relationships and partners, the satisfaction they feel in the relationship, their levels of commitment, and their views on whether they might satisfy the need for attention from other sources, are related to relationship stability (Aktaş-Akbayrak, 2019; Taylor et al., 2003). As Rusbult and colleagues (1986) posit, individuals' decisions to maintain or end relationships depend largely on relationship satisfaction, relationship investment, and quality of alternatives. These three factors also determine the degree of commitment. According to Rusbult (1983), in a healthy romantic relationship, commitment will increase as relationship satisfaction and relationship investment increase, while levels of evaluating the quality of alternatives will decrease, making the individual continue the relationship. It is, on the other hand, also expected in a healthy relationship that as relationship satisfaction and relationship investment decrease, commitment will decrease, and evaluating the quality of alternatives will increase, directing the individual to end the relationship.

As the abovementioned processes unfold in romantic relationships, certain changes also occur in the individual's sense of "self". Previous studies show that romantic relationships directly affect one's self-esteem, self-perception, self-efficacy, and overall psychological functioning (Aron et al., 1995; Furman & Shaffer, 2003; Mattingly & Lewandowski, 2013; McIntyre et al., 2015). Emphasizing the importance of interaction in romantic relationships and that individuals shape many aspects of each other, Dinçer (2017) states that all close relationships have the potential to have a positive or negative impact on individuals' self-concepts. Moreover, these relationships could potentially not only affect individuals' selves but also change them (Tuncer, 2019). Considering the dynamic structure of the self-concept, it is natural for one to acquire positive or negative qualities or experience an increase or decrease in their content as a result of close relationships. These changes inevitably shape the romantic relationship. According to Mattingly and colleagues (2014), such changes could take place within two major dimensions: direction and valence. While the direction dimension refers to an increase or decrease in the content of the self, the valence dimension is related to whether the content of the self is positive or negative. Accordingly, self-change occurs in four ways: self-expansion (i.e. increased positive qualities), self-contraction (i.e. decreased positive qualities), self-pruning (i.e. decreased negative qualities), and self-adulteration (i.e. increased negative qualities).

Morgan and Shaver (1999) showed that it is necessary to understand individuals' attachment styles to their partners in order to understand stability, satisfaction, and commitment to romantic relationships. Bowlby's (1973) attachment theory, which conceptualizes human beings' tendency to form bonds with other people, proposes that this bond starts with interacting with the caregiver at birth and affects attachment to the partner in a romantic relationship and has a structure that could form the basis of close relationships. In this line, Hazan and Shaver (1987) argued that the individual establishes a romantic relationship similar to the relationship with their caregiver at an early age. Previous research suggests that if the attachment between the caregiver and the infant is firm and secure, the relationships established by the individual in adulthood also tend to be secure; however, if this

attachment in the early period is insecure, the relationships established in adulthood might also be insecure (Waters et al., 2000). This shows that attachment theory can also be applied to cases of partner attachment in romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Despite the importance of romantic relationships in an individual's life, increasing divorce rates, the ending of short-term romantic relationships prior to marriage, and the fact that some relationships end even if they are satisfying while others continue even if they are not satisfying, pushed researchers to investigate factors that may affect the maintenance or termination of romantic relationships (Buğa, 2009; Le & Agnew, 2003). Studies on the reasons underlying the decisions to continue or end romantic relationships are crucial for understanding the stability of romantic relationships (Le & Agnew, 2003). When the related literature is examined, it is seen that there are studies examining the relation between relationship stability and various variables. Some examples directly associated with relationship stability include individuals' attachment styles (Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994), levels of infidelity (Fricker, 2006), styles of coping with stress (Bilecen, 2007), personality traits, self-esteem (Doğaner, 2014), and irrational beliefs in romantic relationships (Saraç et al., 2015).

All things considered, the critical role of romantic relationships in general, the importance of relationship stability draws attention. The attachment styles, which are a result of early childhood experiences, and differentiations in the self-concept caused by changes in the romantic relationship are important factors that could affect the satisfaction felt from the romantic relationship. In addition, other factors that may affect the decision to continue or end one's romantic relationship include investment in a relationship, commitment to a relationship, and whether the individual would remain in a relationship despite other available alternatives. Accordingly, this study aims to contribute to the literature on romantic relationships by examining how individuals' attachment styles and changes that occur in their self-concepts as a result of romantic relationships affect relationship stability, relationship satisfaction, commitment in a relationship, investment in a relationship, and levels of evaluating other alternatives.

Method

Research Model

The research is designed as a relational survey model because it is aimed to examine the predictive roles of self-change and attachment levels of university students on relationship stability. The relational survey model aims to examine the change between two or more variables together (Karasar, 2014). Therefore, the dependent variable of this study is relationship stability, and the independent variables are self-change, attachment levels, and gender.

Research Group

Convenience sampling and criterion sampling were used in the selection of the research group. The reasons for choosing these sampling methods are twofold: In the convenience sampling method, which accelerates the research process, the researcher includes the individuals that can be easily reached; and in the criterion sampling method, it is thought that a certain period should pass for the participant to experience relationship stability and self-change, which are independent variables of the current research. For this reason, university students who have been in a romantic relationship for at least six months were selected for the research group. The data were collected from a total of 403 undergraduate students consisting of 316 females (78.4%) and 87 males (21.6%).

Data Collection Tools

In the study, the "Relationship Stability Scale (RSS)" was used to collect relationship stability data from undergraduate students. In order to collect data on self-change, the "Turkish Self-Change in Romantic Relationships Scale (TSCRRS)" was used. Lastly, "Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R)", was used to collect data on attachment. In addition, the researchers constructed a "Personal Information Form" to collect the participants' demographic information, including their gender, age, and duration of romantic relationships.

Relationship Stability Scale (RSS)

The "Relationship Stability Scale" used to collect data on relationship stability was developed by Rusbult and colleagues (1998). The scale was adapted into Turkish by Büyükşahin and colleagues (2005). Büyükşahin and Taluy (2008) revised the scale and added a commitment subscale consisting of 7 items. Following this revision, the scale was composed of four subscales (i.e. relationship satisfaction, evaluating the quality of alternatives, relationship investment, and commitment) with 37 items in total. The Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficients obtained in this study were .94 for relationship satisfaction, .86 for quality of alternatives, .76 for relationship investment, and .92 for commitment. In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficients of the scale were .90 for relationship satisfaction, .80 for evaluating the quality of alternatives, .82 for relationship investment, and .87 for commitment.

Turkish Self-Change in Romantic Relationships Scale (TSCRRS)

In order to collect data on self-change, the "Turkish Self-Change in Romantic Relationships Scale" was used. This scale, originally developed by Mattingly and colleagues (2014) and titled "the Relational Self-Change Scale", is an outcome of the adaptation study into Turkish done by Dinçer and colleagues (2018), which aims to determine the relational self-change experienced by individuals in romantic relationships. The Turkish Self-Change in Romantic Relationships Scale consists of four sub-dimensions. These sub-dimensions are self-expansion, self-contraction, self-pruning, and self-adulteration (Dinçer et al., 2018). Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses and criterion-related validity tests were conducted to examine the validity and reliability of this scale. This was conducted on two research groups, comprising 426 participants and 348 participants, respectively (Dinçer, 2017). The Cronbach's alpha values were .80 for self-expansion, .85 for self-contraction, .76 for self-pruning, and .63 for self-adulteration in the first application. In the second application, the Cronbach's alpha values were .80 for self-expansion, .85 for self-contraction, .74 for self-pruning, and .61 for self-adulteration (Dinçer, 2017). As for the current study, the Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficients of the scale were found to be .75 for self-expansion, .79 for self-contraction, .51 for self-pruning, and .60 for self-adulteration.

Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R)

The "Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised", developed by Fraley et al. (2000) and adapted into Turkish by Selçuk and colleagues (2005) was used to collect data on attachment styles. While 18 items of this inventory are related to the dimension of anxious attachment style, the other 18 items are for the dimension of avoidant attachment style. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the scale were calculated as .90 for the avoidance subdimension, and .86 for the anxiety subdimension. In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha internal consistency coefficients of the scale were .87 for anxious attachment and .85 for avoidant attachment.

Data Collection Process

Prior to collecting the data, permissions for applying the aforementioned instruments were obtained from the researchers who developed and/or adapted the scales. Afterward, the necessary permissions were obtained from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Committee at Hacettepe University. After obtaining the necessary permissions, a social media text was prepared, and the data collection process started via Google Forms. The social media text that called for volunteering participants was shared on Instagram, WhatsApp, and Twitter. With permission obtained from Yozgat Bozok University, additional data were collected from university students who have been in a romantic relationship for at least six months. Participants agreed to participate in the study by reading the informed consent form provided to them before filling out the scales sent to them.

Data Analysis

Since missing data and outliers in the data set should be identified before analyzing the data (Kline, 2011), an initial missing data analysis was performed. No missing data were present in the data set. In order to identify outliers, Mahalanobis distances were calculated, and 20 observations were consequently removed from the data set. Upon controlling missing data and outliers, descriptive statistics were utilized to determine the distribution of the variables. The scores obtained from the scales were analyzed in the context of the dimensions of the respective scales. In addition to descriptive statistics, the assumption of normal distribution was evaluated using skewness and kurtosis coefficients. Skewness and kurtosis coefficients between +3 and -3 indicate that data do not show a significant deviation from a normal distribution (Kalaycı, 2008). In this study, the skewness coefficients of the variables ranged between -1.58 and .58, and the kurtosis coefficients ranged between -.79 and 1.94. Accordingly, it was determined that the data showed a normal distribution.

A t-test was used to examine the scale scores according to demographic variables, and the Pearson Moment Correlation Coefficient was used to determine the relationships between variables. A Multiple Linear Regression analysis was done to determine the predictors of students' Relationship Stability Scale scores. In the regression analysis, a high level of correlation between predictor variables may affect the results (i.e. the multicollinearity problem). In this study, the multicollinearity problem was checked in two ways. First, the correlation coefficients between the variables were examined. The presence of a relationship higher than .90 between predictor variables indicates that there may be a multicollinearity problem (Pallant, 2007). The correlation coefficients between the dependent and independent variables vary between .51 and -.44, which indicated no multicollinearity problem. Secondly, tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) values were examined during each regression analysis. In a Multiple Linear Regression analysis, a tolerance value greater than .10 and a variance inflation factor (VIF) value less than 10 are essential indicators signifying that there is no multicollinearity problem (Hair et al., 2009). According to the results, the tolerance value was between .87 and .59, and the variance inflation factor (VIF) was

between 1.68 and 1.18. SPSS 26 package program was used in all steps of data analyses that were conducted in the course of the research.

Ethical Approval notification
Ethical permission (20.12.2021-E-35853172-300-00001927807) was obtained from Hacettepe University Institute of Educational Sciences for this research.

Results and Discussion

A Multiple Linear Regression analysis was conducted to determine the predictors of the participants' relationship stability scores. The RSS, used to assess relationship stability, constitutes the study's dependent variable and consists of four subdimensions. Therefore, each subdimension (i.e. relationship satisfaction, quality of alternatives, relationship investment, and relationship commitment) was analyzed as a dependent variable. Without determining the variables predicting each dimension of the RSS, the subdimensions of the TSCRRS and the ECR-R were included in the analysis as predictor variables. The findings obtained from the Multiple Linear Regression analysis are presented in Tables 1-5. The results related to relationship satisfaction are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Results of regression analysis for relationship satisfaction

Variable	B	Std. Err.	β	t	p	F (6,402)	R	R^2
Constant	37.19	1.54		24.18	.000***			
Self-Expansion	.37	.04	.37	8.44	.000***			
Self-Contraction	-.14	.04	-.17	-3.34	.001***			
Self-Pruning	.11	.06	.08	1.89	.059	34.37 ***	.59	.34
Self-Adulteration	.04	.07	.03	.62	.537			
Anxious Attachment	-.04	.02	-.14	-2.60	.010			
Avoidant Attachment	-.08	.02	-.22	-4.70	.000***			

***p<.001

As seen in Table 1, the regression equation for relationship satisfaction was significant ($F_{(6,402)}$ =34.37, p<.001). Self-expansion (β= .37, p<.001) explained relationship satisfaction positively and significantly, while self-contraction (β= -.17, p<.01), anxious attachment (β= -.14, p<.05), and avoidant attachment (β= -.22, p<.001) explained it negatively and significantly. On the other hand, it was found that self-pruning (β= .08, p> .05) and self-adulteration (β= .03, p> .05) were not significant predictors of relationship satisfaction. When the standardized regression coefficients are examined, the relative order of importance among the predictor variables in explaining relationship satisfaction was self-expansion, avoidant attachment, self-contraction, and anxious attachment. As a result of the regression analysis, 34% of relationship satisfaction was explained by self-change and attachment. The results regarding the level of evaluating the quality of alternatives are given in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of regression analysis for evaluating the quality of alternatives

Variable	B	Std. Err.	β	t	p	F (6,402)	R	R^2
Constant	24.58	2.9		8.47	.000***			
Self-Expansion	-.29	.08	-.18	-3.54	.000***			
Self-Contraction	.20	.08	.15	2.47	.014			
Self-Pruning	-.06	.11	-.03	-.56	.58	6.71***	.30	.09
Self-Adulteration	-.41	.13	-.19	-3.24	.001			
Anxious Attachment	.07	.03	.14	2.28	.023			
Avoidant Attachment	.01	.03	.01	.17	.86			

***p<.001

When Table 2 is examined, it is seen that the regression equation for evaluating the quality of alternatives was significant ($F_{(6,402)}$ =6.71 p<.001). Self-expansion (β=-.18, p<.001) and self-adulteration (β=-.19, p<.01) explained the level of evaluating the quality of alternatives negatively and significantly. In contrast, self-contraction (β=.15, p<.05) and anxious attachment (β=.14, p<.05) explained the level of evaluating the quality of alternatives positively and significantly. However, self-pruning (β=-.03, p>.05) and avoidant attachment (β=.01, p>.05) were not significant predictors of evaluating the quality of alternatives. When the standardized regression coefficients are examined, the relative order of importance among the predictor variables in explaining the level

of evaluating the quality of alternatives is self-adulteration, self-contraction, and anxious attachment. As a result of the regression analysis, it was seen that 8% of the scores pertaining to evaluating the quality of alternatives were explained by self-change and attachment. The results regarding relationship investment are given in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of regression analysis for relationship investment

Variable	B	Std. Err.	β	t	p	F (6,402)	R	R²
Constant	4.15	2.59		1.60	.11			
Self-Expansion	.46	.07	.28	6.28	.000***			
Self-Contraction	.14	.07	.10	1.99	.047			
Self-Pruning	.05	.10	.02	.53	.596	30.79***	.56	.32
Self-Adulteration	.67	.11	.31	5.91	.000***			
Anxious Attachment	.07	.03	.14	2.67	.008			
Avoidant Attachment	-.09	.03	-.15	-3.17	.002			

***p<.001

When the results given in Table 3 regarding relationship investment are considered, it is seen that the regression equation was significant (F(6,402) =30.79 p<.001). Self-expansion (β=.28, p<.001), self-contraction (β=.10, p<.05), self-adulteration (β=.31, p<.001), and anxious attachment (β=.14, p<.01) explained the size of relationship investment positively and significantly, whereas avoidant attachment (β=-.15, p<.01) explained the size of relationship investment negatively and significantly. However, self-pruning (β=.02, p>.05) was not found to be a significant predictor of relationship investment. When the standardized regression coefficients are examined, the relative importance of the predictor variables in explaining relationship investment is as follows: self-adulteration, self-expansion, avoidant attachment, anxious attachment, and self-contraction. As a result of the regression analysis, it was revealed that 32% of relationship investment was explained by self-change and attachment. The results regarding commitment levels are given in Table 4.

Table 4. Results of regression analysis for levels of commitment

Variable	B	Std. Err.	β	t	p	F (6,402)	R	R²
Constant	58.35	2.28		25.57	.000***			
Self-Expansion	.27	.06	.19	4.24	.000***			
Self-Contraction	-.27	.06	-.23	-4.31	.000***			
Self-Pruning	-.03	.09	-.02	-.38	.705	24.93***	.52	.27
Self-Adulteration	.38	.10	.20	3.79	.000***			
Anxious Attachment	-.01	.02	-.01	-.26	.794			
Avoidant Attachment	-.18	.03	-.35	-6.98	.000***			

***p<.001

The results presented in Table 4 indicate that the regression equation was significant (F(6,402) =24.93, p<.001). Self-expansion (β=.19, p<.001) and self-adulteration (β=.20, p<.001) explained the level of commitment positively and significantly, while self-contraction (β=-.23, p<.001) and avoidant attachment (β=-.35, p<.001) explained the level of commitment negatively and significantly. On the other hand, self-pruning (β=-.02, p>.05) and anxious attachment (β=-.01, p>.05) were not found to be significant predictors of the commitment level. When the standardized regression coefficients are examined, the relative order of importance of the predictor variables in explaining the level of commitment is avoidant attachment, self-contraction, self-adulteration, and self-expansion. As a result of the regression analysis, it was found that 27% of the level of commitment was explained by self-change and attachment. The results of the t-test conducted to examine the relationship stability scores according to gender are given in Table 5.

Table 5. Results of the t-test for relationship stability

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t-value	df	p
Relationship Satisfaction	Female	316	39.36	6.19	-2.00	401	.047**
	Male	87	40.60	4.78			
Evaluating the Quality of Alternatives	Female	316	18.78	9.39	-1.17	401	.240
	Male	87	20.14	9.96			
Relationship Investment	Female	316	26.74	9.82	-4.59	401	.000**
	Male	87	32.06	8.54			
Commitment	Female	316	56.71	8.38	.44	401	.662
	Male	87	56.27	8.40			

**p<0.05

As seen in Table 5, relationship satisfaction (t(401)=-2.00, p<.05) and relationship investment level (t(401)=-4.59, p<.001) differ significantly according to gender. However, no significant difference was found between genders for evaluating the quality of alternatives (t(401)=-1.17, p>.05) and commitment levels (t(401)=.44, p>.05). When the group averages were analyzed, it was found that the relationship satisfaction levels of males ($\bar{x}$=40.60, SD=4.78) were significantly higher than those of females ($\bar{x}$=39.36, SD=6.19). Similarly, the relationship investment sizes of men ($\bar{x}$=32.06, SD=8.54) were significantly higher than those of females ($\bar{x}$=26.74, SD=9.82). Evaluating the quality of alternatives (t(401)=-1.17, p>.05) and commitment levels (t(401)=.44, p>.05) did not differ significantly according to gender. The effect size for the difference between female and male university students' relationship stability subscales was calculated using Cohen's d. The effect size for relationship satisfaction between the groups was calculated to be .22. Accordingly, it is possible to infer that the effect of gender on relationship satisfaction is at a low level. The effect size for relationship investment sizes between the groups was calculated to be .58, suggesting a medium-level effect of gender on relationship investment.

The results of this study showed that relationship satisfaction predicts self-expansion positively and significantly, whereas self-contraction, anxious attachment, and avoidant attachment predict relationship satisfaction negatively and significantly. On the other hand, self-pruning and self-adulteration did not significantly contribute to the model. When the related literature is examined, it is seen that self-expansion and self-pruning, which are sub-dimensions of self-change, have a significant positive effect on relationship satisfaction, whereas self-contraction and self-adulteration have a significant negative effect on relationship satisfaction (Mattingly et al., 2014; Dinçer, 2017). In addition, previous research suggests that the processes related to self-expansion in relationships are highly effective in relationship quality. In other words, the processes of self-expansion increase the quality of individuals' relationships (Aron et al., 2000). These self-expansion processes are also effective in improving ongoing negative relationships (Carson et al., 2007). From this point of view, it becomes evident that in this study, similar results have been obtained on the relationship between self-expansion and self-contraction variables and relationship satisfaction. This is, however, not the case for self-adulteration and self-pruning. Moreover, many studies show that anxious and avoidant attachment styles have a negative relationship with relationship satisfaction (Büyükşahin, 2006; Fricker, 2006; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Keelan et al., 1994; Londero-Santos et al., 2020; Pistole et al., 1995; Sarı & Korkut-Owen, 2016; Umuç, 2021). These findings are in parallel with the findings obtained in this study. It is thought that it is an expected result for individuals with an avoidant attachment style to be distant toward their partners (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994); and for individuals with an anxious attachment style to have fluctuating feelings and thoughts toward their partners and often experience trust problems and fear of loss, and hence experience low levels of satisfaction from the relationship (Sarı & Korkut-Owen, 2016).

According to the results related to evaluating the quality of alternatives, self-expansion, and self-adulteration explain the level of evaluating the quality of alternatives negatively and significantly. In contrast, self-contraction and anxious attachment predict the level of evaluating the quality of alternatives positively and significantly. However, there is no significant relationship between self-pruning and avoidant attachment and evaluating the quality of alternatives. In the existing literature, no study examines the relationship between self-change and evaluating of the quality of alternatives, which is one of the components of relationship stability. It is an expected result that individuals evaluating other possible relationships and partners outside their romantic relationship exhibit a negative relationship with self-expansion. In other words, if an individual's romantic relationship positively affects their self-concepts, it will reduce the possibility of seeking for other relationships. Similarly, it

is expected that a decrease in positive qualities of the individual will also decrease thanks to the romantic relationship experience. Put more simply, the level of evaluating the quality of alternatives will increase with an increase in the level of self-contraction. However, a decrease in evaluating possible romantic relationship alternatives and the individual staying in the existing relationship may be related to one's culture despite the increase in negative qualities in the self-concept. According to Saraç and colleagues (2015), this may be due to the collectivist structure of Turkish culture. Individuals in collectivist cultures may show close ties with other individuals and live dependently rather than individually. In this context, although the individual knows that the relationship is harmful to them, they may hesitate to end the relationship and evaluate new alternatives.

Considering the studies on individuals' attachment styles and levels of evaluating the quality of alternatives, Fricker (2006) and Dewall and colleagues (2011) posited a positive relationship between evaluating the quality of alternatives and avoidant attachment. This means that individuals with an avoidant attachment style perceive relationships other than their current romantic relationship more positively. On the contrary, it was suggested in the studies examining anxious attachment and relationship stability that anxiously attached individuals have a low level of evaluating the quality of alternatives. In addition, it is thought that anxiously attached individuals do not evaluate possible alternatives due to their intense closeness to their partners and fear of losing them (Mikulincer & Erev, 1991; Simpson, 1990). In the study conducted by Umuç (2021), it was observed that there was a significant positive relationship between anxious and avoidant attachment styles and the level of evaluating the quality of alternatives. Taking into account the studies denoting a connection between evaluating the quality of alternatives and relationships that happened in the past or observed in the near environment, (Kayabaş & Atak, 2021), it is thought that the reason for the inconsistency between the findings reported in such studies may be environmental factors and past experiences.

In terms of the results on relationship investment, self-expansion, self-contraction, self-adulteration, anxious attachment, and avoidant attachment significantly predict the size of relationship investment, one of the components of relationship stability. While self-expansion, self-contraction, self-adulteration, and anxious attachment positively predict the size of relationship investment, avoidant attachment predicts it negatively. However, there is no significant relationship between self-pruning and relationship investment. No study examining the relationship between self-change and relationship investment was found when the related literature was reviewed. It is expected that the investment size in a relationship will increase with positive qualities of the self-concept during the romantic relationship because the individual is likely to make more significant investments in the relationship as they gain something from it. Nonetheless, it is thought that the individual may continue to invest in the relationship despite an increase in negative qualities, and a decrease in positive qualities, which may be due to beliefs about the romantic relationship and social learning (Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2018). For example, beliefs such as "love overcomes everything" may lead to expectations that differ from actual relationship dynamics. These beliefs may, in turn, lead individuals who tend to maintain the relationship despite increased negative qualities or decreased positive qualities to some unrealistic expectations.

Previous research suggests that the findings demonstrating individuals with avoidant attachment styles having low levels of relationship investment (Pistole et al., 1995; Shaver & Brennan, 1992) are in parallel with the findings of this study. The studies on the relationship between anxious attachment and relationship investment indicate that as the level of anxious attachment increases, the size of investment in a relationship also increases (Büyükşahin, 2006; Umuç, 2021). The results of these studies are consistent with the results of this study. It is expected that individuals with an anxious attachment style invest more in the relationship in order not to lose their partner, and individuals with an avoidant attachment style make low-level investments due to their more distant approach to the relationship.

As for the results on the level of commitment, self-expansion, self-contraction, self-adulteration, and avoidant attachment significantly predict the level of commitment, which is one of the components of relationship stability. Among these variables, self-expansion and self-adulteration predict the level of commitment positively, while self-contraction and avoidant attachment predict the level of commitment negatively. However, self-pruning and anxious attachment do not predict one's commitment to the relationship. According to McIntyre and colleagues (2015), while self-expansion and self-pruning have a positive relationship with individuals' behavior and motivation to maintain the relationship, in other words, with the level of their commitment, there is a negative relationship between self-contraction and self-adulteration and commitment. It is expected that the level of commitment will increase with increased positive qualities in the self-concept. Additionally, it is also expected that the level of commitment will decrease as the self-concept shrinks, meaning that the decrease in positive qualities increases with the romantic relationship. This is because an increase in positive qualities or a decrease in negative qualities will increase the individual's desire to stay in the relationship. However, an increase in one's

level of commitment despite an increase in negative qualities in the self-concept may be related to the individual's self-esteem and investment in the relationship. In particular, individuals with low self-esteem may tend to stay in the relationship even if their negative qualities increase, rather than ending the relationship. Similarly, when an individual invests in a relationship, they may be determined to maintain it even if negative qualities increase during the relationship.

The related literature suggests that the low commitment levels of individuals with avoidant attachment styles (Feeney & Noller, 1991; Pistole et al., 1995) are parallel to the results of this study. According to Rusbult's (1980) Investment Model, commitment entails the individual's desire to maintain the relationship, but it is an expected result for individuals with avoidant attachment style to have low levels of commitment due to their distance from the romantic relationship, hence their low levels of desire to stay in a relationship.

The results of the gender analysis indicate a significant difference in relationship satisfaction and relationship investment levels of university students. It was uncovered that both relationship satisfaction and relationship investment levels of males are higher than those of females. That is to say, males get more satisfaction from their romantic relationships and invest more in their relationships than females. However, evaluating the quality of alternatives and commitment levels do not show a significant difference based on gender. When the related literature is considered, the results of the studies examining the relationship between gender and relationship satisfaction differ from each other. While some studies concluded that there is no significant difference between relationship satisfaction, which is one of the components of relationship stability, and gender (Çelik-Zeren, 2020; Saraç et al., 2015; Satıcı & Deniz, 2018; Stackert & Bursik, 2003; Yılmaz & Gündüz, 2021); some others discussed that gender is a crucial variable predicting relationship satisfaction (Aslan-Yılmaz, 2019; Beştav, 2007; Buğa, 2009; Rusbult et al., 1986; Rusbult et al., 1998; Sarı, 2008; Vaillant & Vaillant, 1993). Consistent with the results of this study, some studies concluded that males have higher relationship satisfaction levels than females (Collins & Read, 1990; Debord et al., 1996; Falconier & Epstein, 2010; Sarı & Korkut-Owen, 2016; Lesch & Engelbrecht, 2011). Previous research on the relationship between relationship investment and gender shows that the obtained results could be different from each other. Whereas some studies suggest that females have higher levels of relationship investment than males (Duffy & Rusbult, 1986; Fitzpatrick & Sollie, 1999; Le & Agnew, 2003; Rusbult et al., 1998; Taluy, 2013), some of them report that males have higher levels of relationship investment than females (Akbalık-Doğan, 2010; Çelik-Zeren, 2020; Uyanık, 2022). On the other hand, there is no significant difference in evaluating the quality of alternatives and commitment levels according to gender. In this respect, the majority of the previous studies conclude that men's levels of evaluating the quality of alternatives are higher than those of women (Aslan-Yılmaz, 2019; Buğa, 2009; Büyükşahin et al., 2005; Çelik-Zeren, 2020; Le & Agnew, 2003; Rusbult et al., 1998). This implies that males are more moderate than females in evaluating romantic relationships outside of their existing relationships. The number of studies addressing commitment, one of the components of relationship stability, is extremely limited in the literature. This is likely to be due to the fact that commitment was not initially included in the adaptation study of the Relationship Stability Scale into Turkish, yet it was included in a later scale study. According to Çelik-Zeren (2020), the level of commitment does not differ according to gender. However, Rusbult and colleagues (1998) and Fitzpatrick and Sollie (1999) put forth that females have higher levels of commitment than males. The differing results encountered in such studies may be because the study groups consist of individuals with different cultural qualities. In addition, attributing different meanings to gender roles in societies and romantic ideologies may have caused differing views on romantic relationships (Dinçer, 2017).

Conclusion

This study found that university students' self-expansion, self-contraction, anxious attachment, and avoidant attachment levels significantly predict their relationship satisfaction. In contrast, self-expansion, self-adulteration, self-contraction, and anxious attachment levels significantly predict their level of evaluating the quality of alternatives. Self-expansion, self-contraction, self-adulteration, anxious attachment, and avoidant attachment significantly predict relationship investment, whereas self-expansion, self-contraction, self-adulteration, and avoidant attachment significantly predict commitment. Moreover, males have significantly higher levels of relationship satisfaction and relationship investment than females.

Recommendations

The relationship satisfaction subscale is mainly emphasized in the studies examining relationship stability. However, relationship satisfaction itself cannot determine or guarantee relationship stability (Le & Agnew, 2003; Rusbult et al., 1986). Therefore, it may be helpful for future research to address different variables in further studies to understand relationship stability better. According to Morgan and Shaver (1999), to understand romantic relationships, individuals' attachment styles should first be understood. In this line, it may be helpful to examine attachment styles, which have an essential place in an individual's life, in detail with different research designs.

Furthermore, it may be suggested for future research to include partners' attachment styles as a couple to understand relationship stability.

It is evident that some individuals want to stay in a romantic relationship even though they are not satisfied with the relationship, have yet to make a significant investment, have a low level of commitment, and have a low level of evaluating the quality of alternatives. On the other hand, some individuals want to end a romantic relationship even though they are satisfied with the relationship, made significant investments in the relationship, have a high level of commitment, and have a low level of evaluating the quality of alternatives. In the context of counseling, addressing the individual's decision to end the relationship or not may be very important for a healthy romantic relationship. Therefore, further studies on establishing healthy romantic relationships, one of the most important developmental tasks of adulthood, and terminating romantic relationships, which is often thought to be unhealthy for the individual, may be helpful for psychological counselors' works and practices related the romantic relationship process. In addition, developing intervention studies to prevent the negative self-change experienced by the individual during a romantic relationship might be beneficial in terms of helping individuals gain awareness about the process of self-change and establish healthier relationships. The intervention program, for instance, could be aimed at making individuals gain awareness of negative self-change in a relationship. This awareness could help individuals evaluate themselves and their relationships from a better perspective. In this regard, the program might focus on improving individuals' emotional competencies. Practical communication skills help individuals respond to emotional changes in a healthier way. It also has the potential to teach individuals healthy relationship skills and strategies, which could increase the individual's ability to cope with challenges they face in their relationship. Conducting studies to strengthen individuals' social support networks might help them receive the support they may need in the case of a negative self-change. Moreover, studies on the individual's personal development may help reverse the negative self-change processes and thus affect the individual's decision to end an unhealthy romantic relationship. Such studies may also increase the individual's self-confidence and contribute to developing a more positive perception of the self-concept.

Creating psychoeducation groups or developing intervention programs for couple therapies that address self-change in pre-marital counseling and couple therapies may be beneficial for young people to establish and maintain healthier romantic relationships. Intervention programs developed in this context might help individuals gain practical communication skills. In turn, having healthy communication could enable couples to share their feelings and understand each other. Education and therapies may provide couples with skills necessary to cope with stress and manage problems effectively. This can help them deal with potential difficulties emerging in the relationship more effectively. Activities aimed at strengthening the individual's sense of self-concept could also help couples improve each other. As a result, individuals could get satisfaction from the relationship, invest in it, and show commitment.

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Authors Contribution Rate
All authors contributed equally to the completion of the work.

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