

# Decoding love signs: The role of perceived relational red flags in mate selection criteria among Filipino young adults

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## Abstract

Abuse and infidelity are common relational conflicts in the Philippines. The prevalence of this growing social problem among Filipinos has also been observed in their calls regarding these warning signs in a romantic partner. Hence, this study explores how these issues influence young adults' mate preferences by examining their lived romantic experiences. Utilizing criterion purposive sampling, ten diverse stories of heterosexuals were evaluated through semi-structured in-depth interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis to understand the complexity of experiential meanings of participants who have had long-term relationships with their previous ex-lovers and are currently engaged in committed relationships. Participants denoted relational red flags encompassing emotional distance, deception, emotional labor, destruction, and emotional manipulation. These turbulent behavioral patterns deliberately cause the deterioration of their previous relationship while they consider the dimensions of warmth, competence, and attractiveness when choosing an ideal mate. These preferences mentioned are similar to the desirable qualities of their current partners. Findings also assert that relational red flags were perceived as the diametric bases for mate selection, non-negotiable deal breakers, and a lesson to captivate dealmakers. Considering the rising numbers of reported domestic violence victims, including psychological abuse in relationships, this research has compelling implications for Gender and Development and Anti-Violence Against Women. Further, it is also pertinent to counseling psychology practices, especially in the current status and emerging development of Couples Therapy, which primarily handles relationship issues during the pre-marital stage.

**Keywords:** *counseling psychology, gender and development, long-term relationship, mate preferences, relational red flags*

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## 1. Introduction

Humans are inherently social beings, with relationships crucial for survival and well-being because interpersonal bonds provide a sense of attachment that shapes people's lives. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the physiological safety, love/belonging, esteem and self-actualization may all be used to explain why relationships exist (Maslow, 1943; Pichère & Cadiat, 2015). The Harvard Study of Adult Development suggests that building loving relationships is the strongest predictor of life satisfaction. The connections formed with others will reap the benefits of one's happiness and fulfilling life, rooted in the world's most powerful driving force—love (Waldinger & Schulz, 2016).

A “red flag” signifies signals of potential issues in a relationship, indicating whether it is healthy or destructive. While usually seen as any signs of impending danger, White (2016) defines relational red flags as any undesirable qualities such as—characteristics, behaviors, or traits—that a person would not want in a romantic partner. These negative characteristics can be costly to a healthy, stable relationship because they conflict with the individual's expectations, similarities, and compatibility.

In the Philippines, red flags in relationships are frequently discussed on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, providing a space for individuals to share their frustrations and seek help regarding abuse, manipulation, and cheating issues. This emerging concern is notably prevalent among young adults and has also been apparent in their calls for these warning signs of domestic violence, a reality they face every day (Malig, 2021). According to the Mental Health PH, the most identified observable red flags in relationships involve contempt, suspicion, lack of communication, dishonesty, impatience, rigidity, dependence, conformity, lack of reciprocity, lack of empathy, lack of appreciation, lack of growth, and poor conflict resolution (Mojica, 2022). These warning signs highlight the need for greater awareness and vigilance in addressing destructive relationship conflicts.

While selecting a mate is among the most important life decisions a person will ever make, with a personal set of standards shaping how they envision themselves engaging in healthy romantic relationships without crossing the bare minimum. Mate selection is vital for societal and human development, typically involving complex decision-making (Svenson, 1996; Candolin, 2003; Li et al., 2016). In a qualitative study by Alavi et al. (2014), Malaysian postgraduate students prioritized religious beliefs, mental health, profession, physical attractiveness, and financial status in their mate preferences. These factors were

closely followed by intelligence, sociability, physical health, refinement and neatness, physical appearance, education, character, and purity, highlighting both internal and external qualities.

When examining mate choices, scholars often focus on the qualities that individuals value in a mate. However, it is not just about what they want; it is also crucial to consider non-negotiables in relationships (Jonason et al., 2020). Consequently, dealbreakers assist individuals in eliminating potential partners who do not fit their standards. Hence, the emergence of this phenomenon has significant implications, particularly as reports of domestic violence in intimate relationships rise, with many seeking mental health services for relational conflicts. In a study released by the National Demographic and Health Survey conducted by the Philippine Statistics Authority in 2022, the data showed that 17.5% of Filipino women aged 15 to 49 experienced "any form of physical, sexual, and emotional violence" from their partners (Tunac, 2024). According to Balahadia et al. (2022), emotional abuse is the most common type witnessed regardless of age, location, civil status, occupation, or educational attainment. Due to its covert nature, it is believed to be challenging to recognize, though it might result in growing distinct psychological issues in later life (Homoroc et al., 2022).

In light of this, the Philippine National Police reported 7,424 incidents of the Anti-Violence Against Women Act violations in 2022 (Sicat, 2023). As revealed by Irish and American studies, negative social interactions and relationships, particularly with intimate partners, heighten the risk of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts (Mental Health Foundation, n.d.). Relational red flags have been continually and inventively addressed worldwide for years despite the lack of empirical research on the nature of the phenomenon. Although there are previous studies about the issue, there is still a notion that has not yet been explored, especially on how these love signals arise in a long-term relationship and how they play a role in mate selection. Thus, this study specifically aims to identify the red flags encountered by Filipino young adults in their long-term romantic experiences, understand how they interpret the emergence of these warning signs, explore gender differences in mate preferences, and ultimately determine the influence of perceived red flags in relationships when choosing an ideal partner based on the mate selection criteria of Filipino young adults.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Relational red flags

*Relational red flags* refer to warning signs in romantic relationships concerning the undesirable disruptive characteristics of an intimate partner (White, 2016). It is also regarded as deal breakers or the behaviors, values, and traits of a mate that a person genuinely disagrees with in a relationship. These are non-negotiable issues that, if raised, would result in the deterioration of commitment. Furthermore, these are also defined as a signal disaster by Anchor Light Therapy Collective (2023), which indicates signs of controlling behavior, unrealistic expectations, unhealthy jealousy, lack of respect for boundaries, dishonesty, deception, unwillingness to compromise, emotional manipulation, disregard for partner's feelings and needs, abusive language, and refusal to take responsibility for actions. Though widely discussed, most of these displeasing qualities can be hard to detect in romantic experiences.

Moreover, Porter et al. (2014) examined any associations between initial encounters with romantic partners that raised warning flags and subsequent patterns of relational conflict. They identified three conflict styles (mutual constructive, demand/withdraw, and mutual avoidance), five red flags (displayed a lack of interest, demonstrated narcissistic-like behavior, was overly sexual, too possessive, or drank too much), and one green flag (did not show any desire). Regression analysis showed that a partner's lack of interest was positively correlated with the demand/withdrawal and mutual avoidant conflict style; while possessiveness was negatively linked to mutual constructive conflict style but positively associated with demand/withdraw and mutual avoidant conflict styles.

On the other hand, the general public's awareness of domestic violence has risen dramatically over time. A recent local study indicated that childhood learned behavior/conditioning, economic stress, and alcohol consumption are the factors that influence men to commit violence against their partners (Tuason & Augusto, 2024). Conversely, Badua et al. (2023) examined the lived experiences of Filipino male victims of domestic violence, and they revealed that men suffered from more emotional abuse (such as low self-image, gaslighting, betrayal, and abandonment) and social abuse (such as social discomfort and coercive control) than physical abuse. They also endured psychological abuse, which led to their self-destructive thoughts. Their narratives provided an in-depth

understanding of domestic violence and underscored the need for inclusive support to all survivors.

### ***Mate selection criteria***

*Mate selection criteria* refer to an individual's cue preference for specific attributes or characteristics when choosing an ideal partner (Buss, 1989; Buss & Schmitt, 2019). It contributes substantially to forming romantic relationships by guiding people in evaluating potential mates. Buss and Schmitt (2019) explore the complex and evolving nature of mate preferences and how these preferences manifest in behaviors and relationship dynamics; the findings show that gender roles and contemporary sociocultural changes influence conventional evolutionary mate choices. Gender differences in mate selection were also examined, and the analysis indicates that although there are certain similarities, including the appreciation of kindness and intelligence, there are also clear distinctions, especially in placing significance on traits like physical health and resource acquisition. Men favorably emphasize physical attractiveness in their ideal partner, while women frequently prioritize industriousness and financial capacity in potential mates.

Similarly, Hou et al. (2020) review the role and impact of resources on selecting a partner, and they argue that an individual's choice between luxuries and necessities determines their mate preferences, with financial and time resources playing an essential role in the decision-making process. Moreover, a study by Rafiee (2022) also probed that women place higher importance on psychological and financial factors as they were explicitly more interested in a partner's noble character and ability to manage the family, while men put great value on fertility or a partner's capacity to be a housewife. With this, both men and women concurred that social, familial, cultural, and psychological aspects were vital in selecting a partner despite these gender-based variations in mate preferences.

Bernarte et al. (2016) also conducted a local study on the desirable traits of Filipino youth in mate selection, demonstrating significant disparities in male and female preferences across six trait dimensions: physical, social, personality, skills, achievements, and spirituality. While both genders ranked some attributes equally, women generally valued all traits more than men. Nonetheless, this study indicates that both men and women greatly appreciated the criteria of love in trait desirability in forming and maintaining a meaningful intimate relationship with an ideal partner.

### *Deal Breakers in Mate Selection*

Jonason et al. (2015) investigate and identify relationship deal breakers and how they operate across relationship situations. This research is distinct from other studies that emphasize partner qualities that people seek rather than those they avoid. They link deal breakers with undesirable personality traits, unhealthy lifestyles, and different mating tactics in sexual, romantic, and friendship contexts. Findings suggest that individuals with less constrained mating strategies reported fewer dealbreakers, while those with higher mate value reported more. This study highlights the complex interplay between dealbreakers and desirable traits. It is consistent with adaptive attentional biases in human social cognition, providing a deeper understanding of how individuals navigate social relationships.

Meanwhile, Csajbók et al. (2023) analyzed the factor analytic models of deal breakers in mate selection. They revealed six factors: gross, addicted, clingy, promiscuous, apathetic, and unmotivated; while forty-nine dealbreakers were categorized into unattractiveness, unhealthy lifestyle, undesirable personality traits, differing religious beliefs, limited social status, divergent mating psychologies, and differing relationship goals. Results showed that women rated dealbreakers less desirable, as did those with higher mate value and less interest in casual sex. Being clingy and gross were the most repulsive traits in the short-term relationship, and being apathetic and gross in the long-term relationship. Thus, dealbreaker systems are innate mechanisms people have developed to assist them in avoiding making poor mate choices. It is shaped by their prior experiences and factors like age, attractiveness, sociosexuality, and investment in commitment.

Nevertheless, the Interdependence Theory of Relationships, a social exchange theory, highlights the balance of rewards and costs in interpersonal interactions (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959; Van Lange & Balliet, 2014). It is a relevant theoretical foundation for understanding the role of relational red flags in mate selection, as it asserts that people evaluate relationships based on perceived benefits and drawbacks, which affect their decision to stay or leave. There are two levels of evaluation: the personal comparison level, in which individuals assess relationship outcomes based on their expectations, and the comparison level for alternatives, where they consider the possible benefits of other relationships. Thus, this theory provides insight into how perceived relationship red flags significantly influence mate selection among Filipino young adults, as these warning signs break the cost-benefit balance essential to maintaining healthy, fulfilling relationships.

### 3. Methodology

This study employed an interpretive phenomenological approach as it is intended to make sense of the participants' meaning-making in their lived romantic experiences and provide an extensive understanding of their mate selection preferences based on the perceived relational red flags. There were 10 Filipino young adults (5 men and 5 women) selected through criterion purposive and snowball sampling. They are 21 to 26-year-old heterosexual males/females who ended a long-term relationship (at least two years) with an ex-partner and are currently engaged in a committed relationship. As stated in Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory, serious romantic companionship usually starts with emerging adults grasping life satisfaction, intimacy, and happiness before settling down and forming a home for a family (Santrock, 2022).

A semi-structured interview guide comprising open-ended questions was designed to comprehensively understand participants' relationship narratives. To ensure the validity and feasibility of the interview questions, a pilot test was conducted with a one-sample case of a participant as a preliminary study. Before the actual interviews, a screening protocol was also implemented to assess the mental state of the participants. This step was taken to mitigate potential psychological risks the research instrument might induce. The ethical considerations for participants and the significance of their contribution to investigating the phenomenon were also thoroughly explained. With this, the study is committed to ensuring the highest standard of ethical conduct in research by the general principles of respect, beneficence, and justice anchored on the PNU Code of Research Ethics Framework (Rungduin, 2021). Then, the in-depth interview was conducted after they signed the informed consent form, acknowledging they had read and understood the outlined terms and voluntarily permitted participation in the study.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed to identify emerging themes essential for the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of the findings. IPA is a double-hermeneutic collaborative qualitative approach as it explores experiential meanings through the interpretive process between the researcher and the participant rather than being a theory-driven analysis (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). The study adopted the six steps of IPA: (1) reading and re-reading, (2) initial noting, (3) developing emergent themes, (4) searching for connections across emergent themes, (5) moving to the following cases, and (6) looking for patterns across issues (Engward & Goldspink, 2020). The obtained data were profoundly

interpreted and validated through expert review, peer debriefing, and member checking to ensure credibility and confirmability, reflecting the meanings of their romantic experiences.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

This research aims to explore the lived romantic experiences of Filipino young adults to examine how perceived red flags in relationships affect their mate selection preferences. Based on the data obtained, the findings are further discussed in the following areas.

**Table 1**

*Overview of lived romantic experience of Filipino young adults*

Emerging Themes	Subthemes
<b>1. Perceived relational red flags</b> - Red love signals were perceived as turbulent patterns of destructive attributes and behaviors from an ex-partner that caused the deterioration of their relationship.	Emotional distance Deception Emotional labor Destruction Emotional manipulation
<b>2. Emergence of relational red flags phenomenon</b> - The rise of red flags in relationships stems from the cultural glorification of risky intimate partner traits, which society often uncritically romanticizes.	Distorted perception of love Conditioned response Result of relational tolerance Relationship killer
<b>3. Mate selection criteria</b> - The trait desirability standard of men and women in their mate preferences includes trustworthiness, sociability, capability, assertiveness, and physical appearance.	Warmth Competence Attractiveness
<b>4. Influence of relational red flags on mate selection</b> - Adverse romantic experiences provide valuable insights, particularly in recognizing warning signs in relationships, which is significant for choosing potential partners.	Diametric bases for mate selection criteria Non-negotiable dealbreakers Lesson to captivate dealmakers



#### ***4.1. Perceived relational red flags***

***Emotional distance.*** It is the detachment of a couple from each other due to unwillingness to express their thoughts and feelings fully. Participants perceived their partners as emotionally distant, which can be seen as stonewalling and passive aggression. Stonewalling is a silent treatment for putting space among couples since it entails declining to engage in communication (Feurman, 2023). While passive aggression is a behavioral pattern of indirectly expressing negative emotions such as resentment and anger rather than directly addressing them (Hall-Flavin, 2021). This intentional withdrawal during a disagreement can be upsetting, disruptive, and damaging to the partnership.

*“Sudden blocking without any explanation. It happened repeatedly.” —Chweng*  
*“She’s upset about something. I’m not aware because it’s not communicated to me, and sometimes it causes arguments between us.” —Ian*

Additionally, insensitivity could be a reason for emotional distancing, as P8-Luwi shared that his ex-girlfriend lacks awareness of anything she would say, not considering his feelings. The findings also revealed that these patterns of emotional distance may be caused by incompatibility or a personality and values mismatch between the couple. As P9-Jon ascertained, differences in views, principles, beliefs, or likes could impede emotional connection in the relationship because they often do not understand each other in many aspects.

Every couple encounters some degree of relationship tension indicators. It is practically difficult to get things done effectively most of the time due to constantly shifting emotions, demands, expectations, and conditions. So, it can be challenging to connect, communicate, and resolve issues within a relationship when one or both parties become emotionally distant. While many factors can lead to distance, common causes are high stress levels, unhappiness in relationships, differing love languages, and emotional needs (Regain, 2024). With this, it is essential to understand that distance usually develops gradually, regardless of whether a partner has withdrawn. Hence, it is crucial for couples to be attentive and sensitive to the signs of emotional distance, as most fail to recognize something wrong with their relationship until they feel considerably detached from their significant other.

**Deception.** It is the act of intentionally deceiving and betraying a partner about the actual state of a situation. Deception in a relationship is present as withholding information and outright lying, such as infidelity, secrecy, and dishonesty. Based on the in-depth interview, most female participants experienced deception, such as cheating issues with their ex-partners. As P1-Yvonne stated, she never thought about being cheated on until she caught her ex-boyfriend flirting with other girls on social media. Meanwhile, P2-Sayi mentioned that she considered it a red flag if they had to hide their relationship from their parents and friends. With this, being unfaithful means breaking the commitment to their partner, which could be seen even in such a manner of deceiving and keeping secrets.

Deception can accumulate progressively, causing distrust and other relationship conflicts (Knobloch et al., 2021; Stritof, 2023). When deceived or cheated on, some lose faith in the truth of their perceptions and subjective experiences, destroying their sense of reality. Although it is widely frowned upon, infidelity is unquestionably rampant. Given this discrepancy, it is of the utmost importance for every couple to discuss how they intend to handle their cheating issue and assess the extent of openness and honesty in their relationship.

**Emotional labor.** In relationships, emotional labor is the unhealthy duty governing one's feelings to appease a partner (Yang & Chen, 2021; MasterClass, 2022). It involves egocentrism, codependency, and immaturity. Egocentric partners may lack compassionate empathy as they are consumed by self-absorption, selfishness, and self-centeredness. This could also lead to a lack of compromise as one partner only thinks about oneself, refusing to understand their partner's situation. This belief that one must always be considered and understood and not own up to mistakes could drain the partner enabling it. From the findings, some male participants shared their encounters of egocentrism with their ex-girlfriends.

*“It was always about her and not fully listening to my heart. She thinks that all girls should be understood, but it's not fair—guys have feelings too.” —Jon*

On the other hand, codependency was also experienced by P6-AJ since his ex-girlfriend became emotionally reliant on him. This constant need for attention and care has left him feeling confined and unable to attend to his own needs. Being a codependent partner who is always taking advantage and seeking demand may cause constant anxiety because of

the burden for the other half to give care and support. It could also contribute to making their relationship dysfunctional.

*“She was overly dependent on me and couldn’t manage without me. I thought it was cute and clingy at first but over time, I felt trapped because she relied on me for everything and I had to consider her in all my actions.” —AJ*

Immaturity is also part of emotional labor, which is a significant reason relationships did not work because of its toll of social expectations and responsibility, as said by P7-Ian since he often had to watch over her ex-girlfriend, acting as a babysitter rather than an equal partner. Being immature causes stress and pressure, leaving the other partner emotionally exhausted. Research reveals that those who engage in more emotional labor than partners have more mental health problems, including higher levels of anxiety and depression (Rusnak, 2024). With this, significant emotional labor places a person under much mental stress, which is detrimental for couples and can result in burnout, conflicts, and even the relationship's downfall.

***Destruction.*** It refers to the turbulent behavioral pattern and toxic dynamics that are detrimental to the well-being of a partner being mistreated. Most participants describe this red flag as destructive behavioral patterns that could kill their relationship, such as disrespect, insecurity, discourtesy, contempt, unreasonable anger, irrational jealousy, privacy invasion, financial irresponsibility, emotional neglect, and poor conflict resolution.

*“We argued almost every day with short-lived reconciliations and recurrent breakups. He would just walk out and only apologize when he realized how much he hurt me.” —Ria*

On the other hand, P4-Chweng revealed that her ex-boyfriend might be insecure about seeing her thrive in the professional world, which impedes their personal growth because of a man’s ego. In addition, she also experienced discourtesy and contempt, in which she received negative criticism from her ex-boyfriend, asserting that it made them feel more like rivals. This disruptive behavior also includes unreasonable anger and irrational jealousy of a partner, which makes a partner feel emotionally suffocated and smothered.

Furthermore, privacy invasion in a relationship is a sign of unhealthy boundaries. P10-Mikko implied that his ex-girlfriend monitors his social media accounts, crossing the

line of his personal space. While a financially irresponsible partner could also contribute to the relationship turmoil as P7-Ian shared his experience with his ex-girlfriend mishandling their savings due to overspending for purchases and outings. Nonetheless, emotional neglect and poor conflict resolution were also significant causes of the destruction of relationships in which a partner never makes an extensive effort to address concerns after having arguments.

*“He just made a bare minimum effort to fix things, only communicating through chat and never visiting me, even though he has a car and can go other places. He often sends gifts after making mistakes and apologizes afterward. I’ve lost count of how many times this cycle repeated. He curses at me, blocks me, then apologizes and sends things to my house. I’m fed up with this situation and have reached my limit.” —Chweng*

Although some participants revealed that they talked about their problems and negative traits, no changed behavior or action was exhibited that could resolve the conflict. They also discussed that they withdrew from communicating after heated arguments to the point that the fighting never ended. Kieslich and Steins (2022) imply that discussing tensions in conversation may increase perceived stress, particularly for partners who frequently resort to insistent conflict resolution strategies. This cycle of problematic behavior patterns could lead to the destruction of relationships.

***Emotional manipulation.*** This behavior intends to mentally distort and emotionally exploit their partners to influence and gain advantage. It may be seen as possessiveness, guilt-tripping, controlling, gaslighting, and love bombing. With this, participants mentioned that they had possessive ex-partners who feared losing them. Fundamentally, possessiveness is a form of ownership with a fear of abandonment (Sachdev, 2022). It is rooted in insecurity, which may be why they don't trust their significant others when hanging out with friends. Referencing P2-Sayi, P6-AJ, and P10-Mikko shared their encounters with possessiveness in their previous romantic relationship in which their ex-partners isolated them from their friends because they wanted their sole attention. This deprivation of social connections caused a strain in their relationships.

*“He doesn’t accept my friends and wants to be the only one in my life. This has led to frequent arguments. I keep defending my friends because they were part of my life before we got together.” —AJ*

Some participants also experienced guilt-tripping and controlling behavior of their ex-partners, using threats to take advantage of them and get them to do what they wanted. It also involves restricting them from wearing the stylish clothes they want, which triggers ex-partners to get mad and be jealous as experienced by P1-Yvonne. Similarly, gaslighting in relationships has been cultivated to impose doubts or make partners question themselves. It occurs when their partner convinces them they're overlooking or misinterpreting events. To dominate their partners, the gaslighter portrays their convictions and emotions as acceptable truths. In the context of P7-Ian, as his ex-girlfriend, he professes concern about something and accuses him of an act he knows he did not commit. The practice prompts him to mistrust his senses and reality, unsettling him about the scenario.

*"Besides being controlling, he also shifts the blame and gaslights me into believing I'm at fault when I'm not." —Sayi*

Aside from gaslighting, others are also overwhelmed by love bombing, which entails immense effort and passionate interest to sway a partner through showering gifts, flattery affirmations, and extreme displays of affection and attention to gain control of their partner. Their ex-partners habitually love-bomb them every time after their disruptive arguments and emotional detachment. According to Klein (2023) and Right to Equality (2023), love-bombing and gaslighting are two forms of psychological abuse used by people in intimate relationships. Both are damaging behaviors that can have long-term adverse effects for victims.

#### ***4.2. Emergence of relational red flags phenomenon***

Relational red flags are perceived as follows:

***A distorted perception of love.*** Relational red flags emerged from the distorted reality of affection in which destructive behaviors have been romanticized. In this instance, P1-Yvonne was warned by her friends about her ex being a playboy. But since he was her first boyfriend and she believed she was his "end-game," she ideally thought she could change him. Most female participants have misguided views of love regarding the red flags of their ex-partners since they usually justify their undesirable and destructive behaviors, which is why it has been normalized and lasted in their long-term relationships.

*“When he gets jealous of other guys, I romanticize it. It makes me happy because it means he loves me.” —Yvonne*

*“I used to justify it. Even though I knew he’s lying, I told myself he was probably just afraid to tell me because we might argue again.” —Ria*

According to White (2016) and Anchor Light Therapy Collective (2023), red flags in a relationship might be tricky to spot because some of these undesirable traits could make a romantic partner feel special and loved. It has been romanticized because society and culture are permeated with tales of toxic and destructive relationships presented as romantic. Fairytales and romantic stories portrayed in movies and fictional books promote the notion that romantic love entails obsession, passion, or fighting for something or someone that is not even attainable. These misconceptions about romantic love can provoke people to put up with toxic behaviors and even emotional abuse because they think it will result in a long-lasting relationship, even if it is more likely to sabotage their mental health.

***A conditioned response.*** This notion is the learned behavior developed throughout the relationship in response to mistreatment. Some participants admit that they also possess relational red flags, a learned behavior that has developed throughout their toxic relationships in response to the insistent negative experiences induced by them. Their partners heavily influenced their undesirable traits during their long-term relationships, which enabled the turbulent pattern of disruptive behaviors. As P1-Yvonne and P10-Mikko shared, they were conditioned to respond with the red flags of their ex-partners by imposing the same punishment and restriction on them.

*“I’m very strict and don’t want him interacting with other women, especially those I don’t know. He’s the same—it feels suffocating. Since he’s like that with me, I do the same to him.” —Yvonne*

*“When we argued, we started forbidding each other from going to events with friends, like we were just getting back at each other.” —Mikko*

These social exchange responses are supported by the Interdependence Theory of Relationships which suggests that interacting people shape one another's experiences (Van Lange & Balliet, 2014). Participants' learnt undesirable behaviors stem from the mutual influence between partners. The toxic dynamics in their relationships established a cycle of

reciprocating control and punishment, reinforcing destructive behavioral patterns. As Yvonne and Mikko stated how they modeled their partners' restrictive actions, fostering the nature of mistrust and dominance. These costs outweighed the benefits, resulting in their tumultuous, dysfunctional relationship.

***As a result of relational tolerance.*** It is the outcome of persistently tolerating the undesirable behaviors of a partner and still unquestioningly loving them. Since most participants tolerated the undesirable behaviors of their ex-partners, it seems to be normalized in the relationship. They had the choice to end their commitment but continued to love their ex-partners blindly. Though this does not equate to approval they acknowledge, it will never stop until they allow it. Findings revealed that most female participants tolerated the cheating issues in their previous relationship.

*“He didn't care about my feelings because he knew I wouldn't leave him. He got used to always being forgiven after every time he cheated, even when he didn't deserve it.” —Coreen*

Related to the study by Leyson et al. (2022), which sought to gain a more thorough understanding of the lived experiences of Filipino young adults in a tumultuous relationship and the factors that contributed to their decision to stay, it was found that young adults persisted because they felt guilty for wanting to end it and believed the problematic phase would pass. They thought they had found the one, and so they had given compassion for their partner. However, they have been mistreated and have gone through psychological, emotional, and verbal abuse as a result of being in a toxic relationship. All of these factors contribute to the decline of their mental health.

***As a relationship killer.*** It can be described as turbulent behavioral patterns in which people turn against one another's attempts to form emotional connections, which could deliberately cause the deterioration of a relationship. The perceived relational red flags of the participants, such as emotional distance, deception, emotional labor, destruction, and emotional manipulation, contribute to the relationship turmoil that caused their breakup.

*“My final straw was when I broke up with her because she was too dependent. Even at family gatherings, she expected me to keep chatting and cater her concerns.” —AJ*



Participants also mentioned that their encounters with red flags have a tremendous toll on their mental and emotional well-being as they experience stress, emotional trauma, relationship anxiety, self-gaslighting, emotional exhaustion, self-isolation, and depression. P2-Sayi mentioned that she still experiences relapse occurrences and projects trauma from her ex-boyfriend. Participants also experience suicidal tendencies, low self-esteem, and a loss of sense of self or identity crisis after the breakup. On a positive note, participants also narrated how they focused on coping strategies to heal their heartache. P4-Chweng and P10-Mikko pamper themselves by doing everything they could not do in their previous tumultuous relationship. Participants also noted that they indulge in routines that could divert their attention, such as stress-eating, working out, hanging out with friends, shopping, praying, exploring, and self-caring. They go out to spend time for themselves, allowing them to feel liberating happiness again within their inner peace.

Despite everything that happened, participants still value the lessons instilled by their previous long-term relationships as they make rules and expectations for their following commitment that they would never tolerate gaslighting and ignore deal breakers in relationships. They also realized the importance of practicing self-compassion, raising standards in choosing a partner, providing a sense of comfort, and setting healthy boundaries even by considering getting close to significant other's friends. Moreover, compromising in a relationship and fostering empathy and understanding with a lover could help them achieve their personal growth.

Participants have grasped coping strategies helpful in their healing as they regained themselves with self-preservation and self-love. This is supported by the study of Crudo-Capili (2015) about lived experiences in romantic relationships of selected women, which concludes that women choose to leave a toxic relationship that leads to their happiness. After being cheated, hurt, and lied to by their partners, women who view relationships as essential to their well-being realize that they must end it to be whole again. This compassion for oneself reminds them not to give everything to their partner to please them since it wards off their way to self-actualize.

#### ***4.3. Mate selection criteria***



**Warmth.** It is the dimension that captures perceived intent traits of trustworthiness and sociability. Most women prefer the warmth traits of a man, such as reserved, courteous, reliable, gentle, humorous, considerate, empathetic, kind, caring, communicative, jolly, supportive, and faithful. Similarly, most men prefer the warmth traits of a woman, such as kind-hearted, empathetic, sincere, demure, religious, compassionate, jolly, affectionate, honest, and soft-spoken.

*"I prefer someone who doesn't yell, who is gentle, and who corrects issues privately rather than calling me out in public." —Ria*

*"I want someone who understands my feelings and is willing to lower her pride. She should also be able to adjust for me, as a relationship requires mutual consideration." —Mikko*

**Competence.** It reflects traits that are related to ability or capability and assertiveness. Women also prefer competence dimensions that reflect traits of forthcoming, responsible, composed, ambitious, mature, money-wise, accountable, family-oriented, hardworking, practical, and inquisitive. Men also considered their desired women's perceived competence ability, such as intelligence, perseverance, mindfulness, maturity, open-mindedness, caring, financial responsibility, and boldness.

*"Aside from being good with budgeting and handling finances, I also want someone responsible with household chores." —Coreen*

*"I prefer someone who is smart and strives for excellence in what she loves doing. I'm attracted to conservative and modest women who think and act thoughtfully. I also appreciate someone who can regulate their thinking and emotions." —Luwi*

Warmth and competence were incorporated from the two universal dimensions of human social cognition by Fiske et al. (2007). According to the theory, the warmth dimension captures traits related to perceived intent, such as friendliness, helpfulness, sincerity, trustworthiness, and morality. In contrast, the competence dimension reflects traits related to perceived ability, such as intelligence, skill, creativity, and efficacy.

**Attractiveness.** It encompasses the quality of physical attributes that are pleasing and appealing to the beholder. The mate selection criteria of female and male participants also include those they perceive attractive. Physical attributes are considered, as P1-Ria has a

certain preference for a tall and chinito man. Some male participants also prefer attractive traits of a woman, such as being pretty, tall, fair-skinned, and physically appealing. Moreover, participants also asserted that their mate preferences are similar to the desirable qualities of their current partners. As they describe the present state of their relationship, they note that most of them are thriving merrily with their healthy, committed serious connection. Thus far, their bond is going well as they described their love life as comforting, God-sent, happy, healthy, and blessed. And even based on how they narrate and describe their experience with their present lover, they seem content and delighted, which radiates with their positive outlook on their love story.

#### ***4.4. Influence of relational red flags on mate selection***

The participants highlighted the following when it comes to how they see relational red flags in mate selection.

***Diametric bases for mate selection criteria.*** The perceived relational red flags are standards for choosing their ex-partners' opposite traits. More so, participants mentioned that they do not want to experience tumultuous relationships again, so their perceived relational flags became their basis for being wary of those undesirable traits in choosing an ideal partner.

*“I don't want to experience what I went through before. That's why I'm looking for a partner who is the opposite of what I experienced in the past.” —Sayi*

***Non-negotiable dealbreakers.*** Relational red flags are unassailable traits that one should be wary of when choosing a potential partner in order not to experience them again. In this aspect, participants tend to avoid experiencing a toxic relationship again by checking the non-negotiables in a relationship before settling on commitment again. With this, they are encouraged to inspect the background history of past relationships of their potential partners before as a preventive measure for possible consequences of committing to another intimate relationship.

***A lesson to captivate dealmakers.*** The perceived red flags in relationships are valuable experiences that allow participants to choose wisely for their ideal mates. These provide significant insights into how to maturely handle a new romantic relationship with a

potential mate. Participants want to commit to someone they would marry in the future with desirable traits; hence, these red flags should be considered to save people from another possible heartbreak.

*“I learned from my past, so after getting hurt, I told myself that my next relationship would be the last and would be with the person I plan to marry.” —  
Jon*

Participants also signify the benefits of their current relationship to their life and well-being. They also claimed that they feel a sense of tranquility, happiness, satisfaction, physical wellness, support, inspiration, motivation, confidence, personal growth, and self-compassion encompassing self-care and self-love. Furthermore, participants also shared that they have foreseeable plans and expectations with their current lovers, which involve settling down in the future, growing and achieving dreams together, getting work, saving up, traveling and getting married in the future, and blissfully building their own family. Moreover, they also asserted that God-centeredness, trust, respect, communication, understanding, compassion, compromise, patience, commitment, and assurance are the fundamental keys to a healthy and fulfilling relationship that they look forward to in the promising future.

## 5. Conclusion

This interpretative phenomenological study sought to explore the lived romantic experiences of young Filipino adults that emphasize the red flags they encountered and how these contribute to the selection of their mate preferences to establish a significant healthy relationship. Findings indicate that young adults perceive red flags in their previous long-term relationships involving emotional distance, deception, emotional labor, destruction, and emotional manipulation. The relational red flags phenomenon emerged as a distorted perception of love, a conditioned response, a result of relational tolerance, and a relationship killer. Despite the unfortunate romantic encounters in the past, participants still value the insights they have learned as they make standards and expectations for their succeeding commitment. While both men and women prefer the attributes of trustworthiness, sociability, capability, assertiveness, and physical appearance of their ideal mates., these preferences, especially the warmth and competence traits, are also similar to the desirable qualities of their current partners. Hence, it evidently shows that perceived relational red flags influence

their mate selection criteria with the motivation to strive for a fulfilling relationship that significantly contributes to happiness and life satisfaction.

Understanding the significance of romantic relationships in one's life requires a thorough study of the red flag phenomenon to grasp its notable relevance to interpersonal relationships, mainly in behavioral and social sciences. This will considerably help individuals be aware of their partner's negative traits detrimental to their general well-being. Ignoring these warning signs could result in long-term misery from unhealthy and abusive relationships. Considering the surging number of reported domestic violence victims, including the psychological abuse of an intimate partner, this research has substantial implications for Anti-Violence Against Women, constituting a terrible violation of human rights. This concern is one of the serious issues for public health as it strongly exemplifies gender inequality by specifically attacking women due to societal stigma and discrimination. Hence, it is crucial for emerging adults to be vigilant of relational red flags to save themselves before settling down and forming a home for a family. Having a good set of standards in a potential mate also encompasses taking into account the gender roles and expectations of both parties to attain the inherent value of gender equality. Above all, this study is also pertinent to counseling psychology practices, especially in the current status and emerging development of Couples Therapy that most handles relationship issues. This substantial notion has various empirical implications, especially since it thoroughly highlights the importance of relationships in social and health psychology.

This study is limited to the experiences of heterosexuals, and so it recommends exploring the lived romantic encounters of homosexuals. It also highly suggests investigating the factors that contribute to the problematic behaviors that cause the deterioration of a relationship, specifically family history, parental involvement, peer influence, and physical proximity. It is also encouraged to determine the red flags encountered by middle-aged adults who have been separated due to broken marriages. Lastly, it is of further interest to highlight the lived romantic experiences of married couples and analyze the underlying factors that could affect their marital relationships. In such a manner, this could provide valuable insights and understanding of other relationship dynamics, focusing on the marital and familial relations that have a meaningful impact on improving Family Therapy in counseling practices.

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