

The First One Who Got Away: Romantic Attitudes of Filipino Young Adults in Singlehood

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ABSTRACT

First romantic relationships significantly shape young adults' attitudes toward love, commitment, and emotional vulnerability, particularly when these relationships end. This study explores how the experience of a first romantic breakup influences future relationship attitudes and the decision to remain single among Filipino young adults. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten Filipino young adults (ages 18–30) who have remained single for at least three years following their first heterosexual romantic breakup. Thematic analysis identified three key findings: (1) emotional self-preservation, where the first breakup instilled a deep fear of emotional pain, leading participants to avoid future relationships; (2) shifting relationship expectations, in which past experiences redefined participants' views on love, commitment, and personal boundaries, resulting in greater relational caution; and (3) prioritization of independence, where participants viewed singlehood as a means of self-growth, autonomy, and the pursuit of personal goals. These findings suggest that first breakups create long-term psychological and relational shifts, influencing whether individuals actively seek new romantic relationships or embrace prolonged singlehood. This study extends theoretical perspectives on post-breakup adaptation and young adult identity development, highlighting how emotional resilience, self-concept, and relational expectations evolve after a first breakup. Practical implications include the need for guidance and counseling interventions that help young adults navigate breakup recovery, emotional resilience, and relational decision-making, ensuring they develop healthy perspectives on love and independence.

Keywords: attitudes, first romantic breakup, first romantic relationship, prolonged singlehood, young adult



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INTRODUCTION

Romantic relationships play a crucial role in shaping young adults' emotional and psychological development. The first romantic breakup is a particularly significant experience that can influence an individual's future relationship attitudes, emotional well-being, and decision-making regarding romantic involvement. While some individuals seek new relationships, others choose prolonged singlehood, a phenomenon that remains underexplored in the context of Filipino young adults. The decision to remain single for an extended period after a first breakup raises important questions about how past relationship experiences shape long-term attitudes toward love, commitment, and emotional vulnerability. Understanding these dynamics is essential, particularly in the field of guidance and counseling, where fostering emotional resilience and relational well-being is a key concern.

The intimacy vs. isolation stage in Erikson's (1968) psychosocial development theory highlights the importance of forming meaningful romantic relationships during young adulthood. Similarly, Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs underscores love and belonging as fundamental to well-being. However, while these theories suggest that individuals are naturally

inclined to seek romantic connections, they do not fully explain why some choose long-term singlehood after a breakup. Research on romantic dissolution has primarily focused on short-term emotional distress and coping mechanisms (Seraj et al., 2021; Wright & Jackson, 2023), yet little is known about the long-term impact of first breakups on relationship avoidance, relational expectations, and self-concept development, particularly in a Filipino cultural context, where familial and societal expectations heavily influence relationship decisions.

Additionally, romantic relationships and breakups are evolving in the digital age, shaped by shifting social norms, online dating, and new relationship structures such as situationships and hookup culture (Bandinelli, 2022; Lomanowska & Guitton, 2016; Dugan et al., 2023). These modern dynamics have altered perceptions of love, commitment, and singlehood, yet current research has not adequately addressed how these changes interact with early romantic experiences and long-term singlehood decisions. In the Philippines, where romantic relationships are deeply intertwined with cultural values and societal expectations (Tubale & Mabulay, 2023), remaining single may not solely reflect personal preference but also external pressures and relational experiences that discourage future romantic engagement. Given these complexities, exploring the intersection of personal, cultural, and societal factors in post-breakup relationship attitudes is critical to understanding how Filipino young adults navigate singlehood and romantic expectations.

This study fills an important gap in relationship psychology and human development research by investigating how first romantic breakups shape young adults' attitudes toward prolonged singlehood. Specifically, it examines (1) the perceived impact of the first breakup on romantic relationship attitudes and (2) the motivations behind the decision to remain single beyond the typical post-breakup recovery period. By analyzing the lived experiences of Filipino young adults who have remained single for at least three years following their first romantic breakup, this study expands current perspectives on romantic relationship trajectories and identity development. Findings will provide valuable insights into how young adults process early romantic experiences, navigate emotional recovery, and make relational decisions, offering practical implications for guidance counselors, educators, and mental health professionals in fostering healthy relationship attitudes and emotional resilience.

METHOD

Locale of the Study

Due to limited research on the topic, the study was conducted in the Philippines. It primarily targeted individuals aged 18 to 30 who met the requirements of the research. According to the most recent data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), 31.40 million Filipinos are aged 15 to 30, accounting for a sizable proportion of young people (PSA, 2022). These numbers increase the likelihood of acquiring the appropriate participant characteristics for the investigation.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore how first romantic breakups shape young adults' attitudes toward prolonged singlehood. Phenomenology was chosen as it allows for an in-depth examination of lived experiences,

capturing subjective meanings, emotional processes, and relational shifts following a breakup. This approach is particularly suitable for investigating how past romantic experiences influence future relationship attitudes and singlehood decisions over time.

Participants and Sampling

A total of 10 Filipino young adults aged 18–30 participated in the study (Table 1). Purposive sampling was used to select individuals who had remained single for at least three years following their first heterosexual romantic breakup, ensuring that participants had sufficient post-breakup experiences for reflection. The inclusion criteria required participants to have been in a first romantic relationship that lasted at least six months, experienced a breakup, and remained single for at least three years post-breakup. Those who had been in subsequent committed relationships or had only casual romantic encounters were excluded. The sample size was determined based on data saturation, meaning that themes were fully developed with no new insights emerging from additional interviews.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Participant Number	Sex Assigned at Birth	Age (years)	Religious Affiliation	Cultural Background	Occupation	Length of First Romantic Relationship	Length of Singlehood Following the First Breakup
1	Female	24	Roman Catholic	Tagalog	Corporate Worker	3 years	4 years
2	Female	22	Roman Catholic	Tagalog	Student	6 months	3 years
3	Female	23	Roman Catholic	Tagalog	Student	7 months	6 years
4	Female	21	Roman Catholic	Kapampangan	Student	1 year	5 years
5	Female	26	Roman Catholic	Tagalog	Teacher	5 years	4 years
6	Male	20	Roman Catholic	Tagalog	Student	4 months	5 years
7	Male	22	Roman Catholic	Tagalog	Student	3 years	3 years
8	Male	22	Born Again	Tagalog	Student	6 months	8 years
9	Male	25	Roman Catholic	Tagalog	Corporate Worker	1 year	5 years
10	Male	22	Adventist	Tagalog	Student	1 year	7 years

To enhance the contextual depth of the study, participants were selected based on gender, socio-economic status, educational background, and regional representation. Of the 10 participants, six identified as female and four as male. Their socio-economic backgrounds ranged from middle-class to lower-income households, and all had completed at least some level of college education. Participants came from both urban and rural areas, representing diverse regions of the Philippines to capture varying cultural influences on relationship attitudes. Beyond these demographic characteristics, participants' family backgrounds and prior relationship experiences were also explored, as these factors play a critical role in shaping relationship expectations. Several participants came from households with divorced or separated parents, which they linked to greater relational caution in their own romantic decisions. Additionally, some had experienced childhood adversity or emotional distress, which influenced their desire for emotional security over romantic engagement.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing for an in-depth exploration of participants' relationship experiences, post-breakup reflections, and current attitudes toward singlehood. The interview guide was developed based on a literature review of breakups, relationship attitudes, and singlehood, ensuring alignment with the study's objectives. The guide included questions that examined the emotional impact of the first breakup, changes in relational expectations, reasons for choosing prolonged singlehood, and future relationship intentions. The interview guide underwent pilot testing with two non-participating individuals to refine question clarity and avoid leading questions. Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom and Google Meet, based on participants' accessibility and preference. Each session lasted 30 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent to ensure accuracy. Verbatim transcriptions were prepared, and participants were given the option to review their transcripts to verify accuracy and clarify responses. This member-checking process ensured that participants' narratives were accurately represented in the study.

Ethical Considerations

This study received approval from the University Research Ethics Board, ensuring compliance with ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Ethical protocols included obtaining written informed consent, where participants were made aware of the study's objectives, procedures, risks, and benefits. Participants were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants, and identifying details were removed from transcripts, reports, and data storage files. All data were stored in a secured, password-protected database, accessible only to the researcher. These measures ensured that participants' privacy was upheld throughout the research process.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was used to analyze the interview data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. First, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts to identify preliminary patterns in participants' narratives. Second, initial codes were generated by labeling relevant text excerpts that reflected emotional responses, relationship perceptions, and motivations for singlehood. Third, these codes were grouped into broader categories, forming preliminary themes based on conceptual similarities. Fourth, themes were iteratively refined, ensuring they accurately represented the data without overlap or redundancy. Fifth, final themes were synthesized into key findings that explained post-breakup relationship attitudes and motivations for singlehood. Lastly, themes were cross-checked against participant quotes, theoretical concepts, and existing research to ensure alignment with qualitative rigor standards. To enhance analytical rigor, Microsoft Excel was used to systematically organize and code the data. Additionally, inter-coder reliability was established by having an external qualitative researcher review and validate a subset of the coded data. This process minimized subjective bias and ensured that the findings were derived systematically and consistently.

Reflexivity and Researcher's Role

Given the subjective nature of qualitative research, the researcher maintained reflexivity throughout the study to ensure objectivity. Reflexive journaling was used to document personal reflections and potential biases that could influence data interpretation. The researcher acknowledged personal perspectives on romantic relationships and actively engaged in memo-writing to ensure findings were grounded in participants' narratives rather than preconceptions.

Ensuring Rigor and Credibility

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of findings, the study employed multiple validation strategies. Member checking allowed participants to review transcripts and preliminary interpretations, ensuring the accuracy of their responses. Peer debriefing was conducted, where findings were discussed with other qualitative researchers to enhance analytical rigor and reduce bias. Triangulation was performed by comparing data with existing literature and theoretical frameworks, ensuring consistency and reliability. An audit trail was maintained to systematically record all methodological decisions, coding processes, and theme development, ensuring transparency and reproducibility. Additionally, thick descriptions were used to provide rich contextual insights into participants' experiences, enhancing the transferability of findings to similar populations. This methodological framework ensures that the study was conducted with rigor, ethical integrity, and transparency, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how first breakups shape young adults' decisions to remain single. The strategies employed contribute to the credibility and validity of the findings, making them relevant for guidance and counseling applications.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Perceptions of Romantic Relationships Following a First Breakup

Participants expressed varied perspectives on romantic relationships after their first breakup. While some continued to see relationships as a source of companionship and emotional fulfillment, others became more hesitant and wary, associating romantic involvement with emotional vulnerability and uncertainty. These attitudes align with Erikson's psychosocial development theory, which highlights young adulthood as a critical stage for establishing intimate relationships (Erikson, 1968). However, for those who actively chose singlehood, their decision can be understood as a form of self-preservation, as they struggled to balance the desire for intimacy with the fear of emotional distress.

Table 2. Perception Toward Romantic Relationship

Theme	Description
Romantic relationships often develop through shared environments and frequent interactions	This relates to the belief that romantic relationships typically form because two individuals are in the same environment, resulting in frequent interactions. The substantial possibility of regular meetings leads to a deeper relationship and, eventually, romantic feelings for each other.

Theme	Description
Romantic relationships are characterized by distinctive and defining dynamics	This refers to the notion within a romantic relationship that each has its own distinct dynamics, determining how a bond develops and how partners engage with one another.
Romantic dissolution typically arises from disruptions in established dynamics	This is the perception that romantic relationships terminate because of sudden changes in usual dynamics, such as life transitions, infidelity, or parental interference.
Romantic relationships embody both positive and negative aspects	This pertains to a balanced view of romantic relationships, which includes both positive and negative aspects. Romantic connections provide support, inspiration, and valuable lessons. On the downside, they can be time-consuming, involve sacrifices, potentially harm trust, and cause emotional distress.
Views on romantic relationships following a breakup diverge among individuals	This refers to the varying perceptions of romantic relationships following a first breakup. Some remain optimistic, believing in the potential of romance despite their past grief, while others become suspicious, plagued with doubt and fear of experiencing the same heartbreak again.

Understanding how Filipino young adults perceive romantic relationships throughout extended singlehood following their first relationship entails investigating their views on how relationships begin, grow, and progress, as well as their perspectives on breakup and post-breakup scenarios. This offers a comprehensive account of their comprehension of relationships from start to finish, showcasing the evolution of the following themes:

Romantic Relationships Often Develop Through Shared Environments and Frequent Interactions

Participants recognize the natural mechanism of attraction, in which proximity naturally leads to stronger bonds as relationships develop. Physical proximity, or the mere fact of being together in the same area, facilitates frequent contact and the development of attachments (Tobore, 2020). This fuels propinquity, or a sense of familiarity with another person, through geographical closeness and recurrent exposure to each other, increasing the likelihood of romantic sentiments developing further (Bode & Kushnick, 2021), stressing that love is frequently closer than realized. As such, participants frequently associate the start of romantic relationships with shared places and regular interactions, emphasizing the relevance of closeness and familiarity in building emotional attachments.

I got to know him during senior high school. He saw me dancing and asked our common friends who I was. These friends of ours then introduced us to each other (Participant 1).

I was riding a motorcycle as I went to Baywalk, and then I saw her—the person I ended up being in a first relationship with (Participant 10).

Despite this, it is crucial to acknowledge that not all initial interactions develop into romantic relationships; they require consistent effort to progress. Following the initial meeting, which participants saw as laying the framework, the further development of their first relationship was regarded as contingent on someone actively attempting to maintain the connection. Therefore, participants acknowledged that proximity alone is insufficient to foster a romantic relationship; consistency in developing the bond is as essential. While being physically close allows for contact, it is the continual effort to cultivate the connection that makes the relationship stronger.

She messaged me online back then, kind of jokingly flirty. After that, we kept chatting all throughout the summer, and then when classes came back in Grade 10, that is when we confessed our feelings for one another (Participant 7).

He showed interest in me, and I went along with it. It was the first time someone laid eyes on me, and since I was craving attention, I immediately grabbed the opportunity (Participant 2).

Indeed, prolonged engagement, whether through exchanges, shared activities, or close collaboration, is considered to pave the way for emotional relationships that may lead to romantic adoration. Such regular and continuous contact promotes familiarity and emotional warmth. These encounters increase emotional links and attachments (Fávero et al., 2021), allowing individuals to share their experiences, talk openly, and establish deeper connections over time. It converts connections from casual acquaintances or colleagues into emotionally significant components of the lives of one another.

Romantic Relationships Are Characterized by Distinctive and Defining Dynamics

Participants regarded romantic partnerships as having different dynamics that develop naturally between two people. These dynamics reveal intricate patterns of interaction, influence, and adaptability throughout the connection. They include the personalities, actions, and emotions of the partners, as well as the context in which the interaction occurs, all of which influence how the bond operates and evolves (Finkel et al., 2016). Together, these aspects create a distinct rhythm that governs how partners connect, communicate, and respond to one another. Since most participants were still young during their first relationship, the dynamics were frequently defined by a sense of youthful and carefree love at the outset. However, as the bond became deeper, so did the level of intimacy, increasing the connection between lovers. This adjustment allowed increased emotional connection and a deeper commitment to the

partnership. Conversations began to incorporate long-term goals for each other, encouraging more open communication and sharing of personal lives.

Of course, we were young, so it was like puppy love—it was more like going with the flow. But through time, I also cannot say it was just puppy love as what we had before was fine. There even came a point where our parents on both sides got to know each other too (Participant 10).

This demonstrates that even at an early age, people may feel genuine, profound feelings of romantic love. Such a progression highlights the ability of young hearts to transcend beyond the surface-level dynamics. It proves that age does not decrease the genuineness of love or the ability to form deep and lasting relationships. On the other hand, there are those who even at a young age recognize the significance of genuinely committing to and valuing a relationship. They saw relationships as long-term commitments from the start. They were resolved to maintain the relationship throughout time. Unlike usual young relationships, which are generally about having fun or gradually transitioning from casual to serious, these partnerships—particularly those identified as committed at the outset—were founded on defined goals, emotional engagement, and a strong commitment to seeing a future together immediately (Olderbak et al., 2017).

The commitment was already intense. We talked about commitment, the things that needed to be considered, and setting boundaries at that time—physically, financially, and emotionally. It was intense because we also made efforts to see each other, even though I was studying in Manila (Participant 9).

These relationship dynamics show that age does not preclude one from establishing a meaningful relationship. There is an obvious effort to enhance the connection, incorporate it into their identities and the lives of people they care about, and share a common desire to build a future together. Finally, the existence of social coercion is a significant dynamic that some participants sense in relationships. Social coercion refers to manipulative techniques used to force a partner to do sexual favors against their will or without their full consent. This hidden feature of certain intimate relationships includes actions such as control, dominance, or forcing a partner to engage in sexual acts (Tarzia & McKenzie, 2024).

During our relationship, I felt like if I did not give him what he wanted, he would leave me. The reason we always fought was because I did not agree with what he wanted. He always expects something to happen when we see each other, and when it does not, he would get disappointed and leave me for a few days. That is when I found myself questioning whether he really loved me or if he stayed only because he needed that from me (Participant 2).

Since this was the first experience of the participants with romantic relationships, their remarks show that they approached it with naivety and limited awareness of how to set or negotiate limits. They had no idea how to handle the circumstance, were unsure about what was right or wrong, and frequently questioned themselves. They thought this was how things should be in a relationship, which made them feel taken advantage of. On the whole, each relationship has its own dynamics, influencing how it grows and functions daily. Every relationship has its own set of rules, expectations, and interaction patterns, demonstrating how they are molded by both the person and the environment in which they occur.

Romantic Dissolution Typically Arises from Disruptions in Established Dynamics

The narratives of the participants illustrate the complexities of intimate connection disintegration, demonstrating how internal and external changes that disturb established patterns can result in breakups. Parental involvement, defined as a kind of separation caused by external forces, is identified as a potential cause of breakups. This outside influence interrupts the normal dynamics of the relationship, rather than changes emerging from within the couple. Such intervention is frequently driven by the reluctance of the parents to allow their children to participate in romantic relationships owing to worries about impulsive conduct that is more commonly associated with younger years.

By the second to the last week of January, let us just say there was an excess PDA [Public Display of Affection] inside the classroom. Then the following week, January 28, we were sent to the guidance office. Our parents were called in, and we were told that we had to break up (Participant 6).

Parents are concerned that the connection may become too intense, interfering with the academic pursuit of their children and professional goals, and drawing their attention away from the important aspects of their lives (Sugiyanto et al., 2020). Moreover, infidelity is another sort of breakup that participants reported. This happens when a violation of trust, such as cheating, disrupts the smooth dynamics of a partnership. It involves one partner betraying the other by having a physical, emotional, or sexual affair outside of the relationship.

I spoke with her, and our conversation seemed fine, but shortly after, things felt off again. A week later was her birthday, but she started avoiding me. I began to sense that something was not right like something was about to happen. Then, I found out she was breaking up with me because she had already been talking to someone else (Participant 7).

Infidelity has continued to be one of the leading causes of relationship breakdown, causing a significant rupture that undermines the core aspects of trust, confidence, and security while also breaking the ideal of exclusivity (Belu & O'Sullivan, 2024). This introduces a detrimental disruption to the current dynamics of the relationship. Hence, it has developed as a concerning tendency, especially in the context of first relationships, with it shattering the very

first time a person gives their heart to someone else. Finally, life transitions were also identified as a cause of relationship breakdowns. Whether it is moving into college, the workplace, or wherever, life transitions are pivotal moments that demand individuals to adjust to new realities, and pose changes to their routines, priorities, and environments. As stated by Beckmeyer and Jamison (2019), in early adulthood, individuals seek to balance their own developmental goals with their desire for intimate relationships. This dual pursuit often creates tension, as they navigate the balance between independence and interdependence, impacting various aspects of their lives, including their romantic relationships.

Our connection started to fade when we stopped seeing each other every day. Once we got to college, the influence of others on him became overwhelming. He began to change, adopting a party-boy lifestyle, and his perspective on life shifted entirely. He started telling me to get myself together. But eventually, I realized, "This is not who I am anymore." He tried to change me; he was no longer the person I once knew. He would compare me to others openly, saying, "You should dress like that, look at that girl over there." (Participant 1)

The life transformations of the participants had a significant influence on their relationship. However, the partnership struggled to keep up with the tide of change, resulting in misunderstandings and, eventually, the dissolution of their bond. As the seasons of their lives changed, so did their love relationship, but it was shattered by the weight of the end, painful separation. Indeed, every tale demonstrates the vulnerability of young relationships when confronted with change. These experiences highlight the complexities of romantic relationships, which are influenced by emotions, external forces, and life circumstances. It underlines how delicate relationships can be and the significance of remaining resilient and adaptable in the face of change. Life upheavals are unavoidable, and partnerships must be robust to withstand them; without resilience, one change might mean the end of the relationship. This viewpoint implies that young people regard romantic relationships as extremely fragile to internal as well as external challenges.

Romantic Relationships Embody Both Positive and Negative Aspects

Following their first breakup, participants realized that romantic partnerships are more than simply "rainbows and butterflies," but also include peaks and valleys. This dual perspective demonstrates that they see relationships as multifaceted and multidimensional, as opposed to idealizing the concept of an ideal "happily ever after." Thus, divergent views emerged when participants reflected on romantic relationships in general. Despite the pain they experienced, some of them still see romance in a positive light, as they remained hopeful after recovering and seeing the bigger picture. Participants unanimously acknowledged the beneficial influence these experiences had on their lives. They realized the importance of having someone to confide in—someone who could give emotional support, reassurance, and encouragement to achieve their goals. The lessons they learned while managing love,

vulnerability, and connection also improved their interpersonal abilities, emotional intelligence, and self-awareness.

The positive aspect, perhaps, lies in having someone you can confide in completely—a person with whom you can share everything without the worry of being a burden, as they are your partner. They are the constant presence who stands by you through it all (Participant 3).

One of the positive outcomes of all that was that I became more attuned to understanding others. Beyond just gaining insight into myself, I developed a deeper understanding of the needs of those around me, particularly a woman—her emotional needs, for instance (Participant 9).

While each participant may express these advantages differently, one thing is certain: the split took something away from them, but it also provided them with something worthwhile. This aligns with the study of Londero-Santos et al. (2021), stating that romantic relationships not only have an impact on well-being but also play an important part in personal development even after they terminate. On the other side, however, while romantic partnerships have brought beneficial experiences, participants also recognize their negative aspects. These include the time they consume, the sacrifices required for personal freedom, trust issues from betrayals, and the long-term emotional suffering they inflict.

It no longer felt like two individuals maintaining their own identities. Instead, it seemed as though we had to merge into one person. She had to know everything, and it became suffocating. I was not allowed to have friends or anyone else in my life, other than her. That is not right—it just did not sit well with me (Participant 9).

That is the lasting negative effect—it stays with you. Even though I believe I have moved past it most of the time, when I look back, I realize just how profoundly it affected me, because it truly broke me (Participant 2).

Such experiences, especially since it was their first time, carry a profound weight that continues to impact the participants long after the relationship ended. The emotional residue of those early experiences influences how individuals perceive themselves and their future relationships. Even as time passes, the lessons, suffering, and development from that initial encounter continue to shape their ideas and behaviors. By and large, while romantic partnerships provide invaluable lessons and possibilities for personal growth, they are also viewed as substantial obstacles that can leave long-term emotional scars on those involved. Regardless of how much time has gone by, the detrimental effects of their previous relationship are still readily apparent. As previously said, although research on this area is sparse, the primacy effect might have a significant influence. This cognitive bias implies that early events are recalled with considerable clarity and emotional intensity, frequently leaving a lasting imprint (Sabudu, 2019). Nonetheless, these opposing viewpoints illustrate the individualized

nature of the breakup process, demonstrating that each person processes and accepts their experiences differently.

Views on Romantic Relationships Diverge Among Individuals After a Breakup

Following the first romantic relationship, individuals often develop various perspectives, shaped by the breakup, the process of moving on, and their current state. According to Dugan et al. (2023), significant life experiences like partnership dissolution often lead to substantial shifts in personality development, ultimately shaping who a person becomes over time. The participants believe that their past experiences in their first romantic relationship have influenced their current beliefs and attitudes about love and partnership, which continue to impact their single status today. Their responses range from a positive view to persistent doubt and anxiety that comes with thinking about it.

I am hopeful for my next relationship—a better one, with improved communication, a deeper understanding of oneself, and a greater understanding of the other person (Participant 9).

It is scary in a way because what I think about when I enter a romantic relationship with a label is that it is not something guaranteed to be long-term, like forever, or that I will actually marry the person. So, it is a bit frightening (Participant 8).

The aftermath of the first romantic relationship certainly significantly shapes the perspective of the participants regarding the potential impact it brings. It highlights that for some, the pain provides a newfound sense of hope, allowing them to approach love with optimism and a new perspective. For others, however, it generates doubt, clouding their view of love with cynicism and suspicion. Yet, this only underscores the truth that the journey of every person is unique, with different ways of seeing the world and different paces at which they heal from the wounds of the past.

The Motivations of Filipino Young Adults to Remain Single Following Their First Romantic Breakup

Table 3. Motivations to Remain Single

Theme	Description
Single by personal choice	This is a circumstance in which an individual makes a conscious decision not to pursue or participate in possible romantic relationships. It entails either complete disengagement from romantic involvement following a breakup, in which the person neither initiates nor responds to any romantic communication, or engaging in romantic encounters with no intention of commitment, motivated

Theme	Description
	solely by a desire for companionship rather than a genuine emotional connection.
Single due to uncontrollable circumstances	This implies a circumstance in which singlehood is caused by external reasons rather than a conscious decision to abstain from romantic relationships. In this situation, a person actively pursues a romantic connection by participating in romantic experiences such as talking stage, courting, and so on. However, owing to variables beyond their control, such as incompatibility, poor timing, or rejection, the relationship fails to proceed, resulting in a brief and ultimately fleeting romantic experience.
Singlehood offers various advantages	This denotes the feeling that being single offers numerous benefits. Hence, individuals are motivated to remain in such a status rather than enter a relationship that may require sacrificing these benefits, such as their freedom to pursue personal goals, maintain peace of mind, and preserve their happiness.
External opinions influence singlehood but do not determine the choice to enter another romantic relationship	This pertains to a factor that influences the outlook of an individual on being single, such as pressure from family or the peer pressure of seeing everyone else in a relationship. However, despite these influences, participants believe that while these external factors affect them, they do not ultimately determine their decision to enter a new relationship.

To comprehend why Filipino young adults prefer to remain single after their initial romantic breakup, it is significant to determine whether this is a conscious decision or affected by uncontrollable factors. Furthermore, it is critical to consider the advantages of being single that reinforce this decision, as well as the external judgments that may influence it. This approach gives a deeper understanding of why people remain in this status years after a breakup. Therefore, the evaluation identified the following themes:

Single by Personal Choice

The decision to remain single following a first breakup differs from person to person. However, for some, it is a deliberate decision based on considerations such as healing, self-discovery, and achieving personal objectives. Participants deliberately avoid romantic interactions to protect themselves, waiting until they feel complete and resilient enough to face possible emotions again. This cautious approach not only protects them from potential heartache but also drives them to focus on personal growth, healing, and rebuilding their self-worth. Rather than seeking immediate gratification, some prioritize rediscovering themselves first (Mirsu-Paun & Oliver, 2017).

I realized that I was not ready yet because, even though some guys were trying to show interest, I still found myself comparing them to him [ex-partner]. There were parts of me that were still looking for those familiar traits in others. That is when I understood that I was not ready—I had not yet learned to appreciate someone for who they truly are (Participant 1).

Despite this, the innate human longing for connection retains a strong undercurrent. To balance this urge with their self-protection efforts, some participants engage in casual encounters—exploring connections but without fully committing. This permits them to enjoy companionship and other positive aspect of a romantic relationship without the emotional risks or the negative effects of a more serious romantic commitment. As Kelberga and Martinsone (2021) explain, non-committed relationships provide a transient but profound sense of emotional and sexual fulfillment, allowing individuals to experience intimacy on their own terms—without the constant obligations that define committed relationships.

After everything that happened, the following years were filled with casual conversations and non-committed interactions. There were no responsibilities involved; no burdens to bear, like needing to consistently fulfill certain expectations. We both understood that what we had was limited, with no obligations to each other, which made it easy. It was very convenient (Participant 8).

Notwithstanding these distinctions, it is apparent that choosing singlehood is motivated by a desire for autonomy and emotional security, highlighting how individuals navigate their own path to healing and self-protection on their terms. Furthermore, at the heart of this cautious approach is the dread of getting hurt again. Their motives for remaining single stem from a desire to avoid the vulnerabilities associated with romantic commitment. Instead, they direct their attention to areas of life that provide them with pleasure while minimizing emotional suffering, such as personal development, academics, professions, and hobbies. These pursuits provide individuals with a sense of agency and control over their enjoyment, which reinforces their decision to remain single.

Single Due to Uncontrollable Circumstances

Although some participants remain guarded, others keep an optimistic outlook toward love despite the difficulties they have endured. They recognize the beneficial features of romantic relationships and are willing to try again. However, external circumstances, such as timing, incompatibility, or rejections, frequently get in the way, keeping individuals single despite their wanting to find love.

I am not sure what caused things to unfold the way they did. Honestly, I never intended for it to remain at the talking stage, because nowadays, we view

relationships as progressing toward marriage. But in the end, that never materialized. Eventually, I came to accept that maybe we just are not meant to be together (Participant 10).

We started developing feelings for each other, but I had not fully moved on yet from my first relationship. When she confessed to me, I could not give her a direct answer, even though I knew deep down that I was starting to like her too. A few months later, we talked again, and that is when I finally admitted my feelings to her. However, by then, she had already met someone else (Participant 7).

Regardless of the sorrow and disappointments of the past, they were ready to give romantic love another chance. However, despite their willingness to love and efforts to go on, things beyond their control eventually prevented these ties from forming.

Singlehood Offers Various Advantages

While singlehood is generally linked with loneliness, research has shown that it may be beneficial to personal development (Van Den Berg & Verbakel, 2023). The benefits of singlehood are numerous and transformational, providing participants with the opportunity for emotional recovery as well as the freedom to pursue personal goals without the constraints that come with romantic relationships.

I am satisfied because if that had not happened, I would not have been able to do all these things. I have learned a lot during this time of singlehood, like how I can enjoy watching a movie alone, and how peaceful it is to sleep without worrying about replying to someone (Participant 5).

According to Barrocas (2023), sacrifice is inevitable in any relationship, whether platonic or romantic. Two parties usually need to compromise in their interest to benefit the other party or to maintain the relationship. Hence, being single means participants can accomplish things independently and at their own pace without making adjustments. Apart from this, another benefit following the emotional anguish of their first relationship and its end, singlehood has provided participants with much-needed time and space to recuperate, restoring their mental and emotional balance. They find peace and calm on their own, free of the complexity and strains of romantic relationships. As Atalay (2024) points out, solitude allows people to retreat within, allowing them to embrace and appreciate the peace of spending time alone.

I am truly happy being single, especially mentally. I already have so many things to worry about, so nothing adds to the burden. I do not have to please anyone to avoid being left behind (Participant 2).

While they find serenity and contentment in solitude, they occasionally experience a need for the companionship and intimacy that romantic partnerships offer. This aligns with the

psychosocial development theory of Erik Erikson in his stated intimacy versus isolation phase, where young adulthood is characterized by the need to form intimate relationships, including romantic ones (Czyżowska et al., 2019). Thus, such occasional yearning of the participants can be understood within this developmental framework.

I am happy, yes, and of course, I also have friends. But you cannot really avoid those moments, like when it is 10:00 PM. I just miss the feeling of being in love, though I am not at the point where I am eager to rush into it right away (Participant 4).

Similarly, this bittersweet emotional state may be explored via the lens of the hierarchy of needs by Abraham Maslow. According to its third level, individuals have a basic need for love and belonging, which may be met through a variety of relationships, including romantic ones (Trivedi & Metha, 2019). In the case of some of the participants, this need usually occurs at peaceful periods, when they are not distracted, when they witness others in relationships, or simply when reminiscing about the joy once found in a romantic bond.

I would say it is fulfilling enough when I have something to keep me occupied, like academics. But when I am idle, reading romance manga or watching anime, I cannot help but feel out of place. I end up thinking, “Sana all,” especially when my friends are all in relationships—posting anniversary stories on Facebook or Instagram (Participant 6).

This highlights the balanced perspective that people have after being single for an extended period. They celebrate their newfound freedom, but underneath this strength is a subtle desire for connection—the kind of intimacy they once had. Regardless, participants cannot deny that they genuinely relish being single. While their motivations differ, they all revolve around the freedom to accomplish things that were previously limited by their first relationships. They value the opportunity to act autonomously, without sacrifices or disturbances to their peace of mind. Many of the things they once felt deprived of are now within their grasp, and their renewed independence and tranquility motivate them to remain single and completely embrace this chapter of their life.

External Opinions Influence Singlehood but Do not Determine the Choice to Enter Another Romantic Relationship

Social reactions, whether supportive or not, play a key role in the mental procedures and emotional responses of an individual. This concept is consistent with the Social Baseline Theory, which holds that human cognitive and neurological capabilities are heavily impacted by external social interactions and settings rather than merely by internal mechanisms. The idea emphasizes the fundamental social nature of humanity, implying that emotional and cognitive responses are frequently calibrated in proportion to their social setting (Gross & Medina-DeVilliers, 2020). Therefore, external judgments and societal reactions clearly influence how

people perceive singlehood and their desires for romantic partnerships. While some individuals recognize the subtle pressures placed by their families or social networks, others are completely unaffected by these external expectations.

None. Most of my friends are single too, so when we are together, I do not feel the need to avoid being out of place. As for my family, my parents strongly prefer that we do not have any commitments—they like it that way. So, there is no pressure at all, really (Participant 2).

With family, it is always the same question: “When are you getting married?” Since they have seen my first relationship for such a long time, that creates pressure. People still ask about that person, and it gets tiring to keep explaining (Participant 5).

Despite the varying degrees of influence, participants consistently stress their autonomy in navigating their relationship status. They recognize that, while external viewpoints may influence their thinking, the ultimate agency rests with themselves. This self-awareness enables people to prioritize their personal beliefs and ambitions, giving them control over their lives. They forge their own path, determining whether they are ready to embrace novel relationships or remain blissfully single. This viewpoint emphasizes their tenacity and resolve to live genuinely, free of undue social or familial limitations, with the idea that they control the reins of their own life and can choose the pace and timing when they are ready. Ultimately, all of these depict the many ways in which people navigate their way through life, emphasizing that self-protection and healing are just as important as optimism and perseverance in forming the attitude toward relationships and singlehood.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Findings from this study extend Erikson’s psychosocial development theory by demonstrating that the failure to establish intimacy does not necessarily lead to isolation but can instead foster intentional self-development. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is also expanded by suggesting that love and belonging may be deprioritized in favor of self-fulfillment, particularly after an emotionally impactful experience such as a first breakup. These findings have practical implications for relationship counseling and mental health interventions. Counselors should develop programs that help young adults navigate breakups and construct healthy relationship perspectives. Emotional resilience strategies should be incorporated into therapy and educational settings to help individuals manage relationship anxieties without resorting to avoidance or disengagement. Universities and mental health practitioners can integrate relationship education and emotional coping mechanisms into student support programs, providing young adults with structured guidance on post-breakup emotional challenges. For policymakers and educators, findings suggest the importance of fostering discussions on romantic expectations, resilience, and self-worth. Schools and universities

should incorporate emotional well-being, attachment styles, and coping strategies into curricula, ensuring that young adults receive comprehensive education on relationships and mental health.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this study provides valuable insights into post-breakup relationship attitudes, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size was limited to 10 participants, which, while sufficient for thematic saturation, restricts the generalizability of findings. Future research should expand the sample to include diverse backgrounds, gender identities, and relationship histories. Second, this study focused exclusively on heterosexual relationships, limiting its applicability to LGBTQ+ individuals, whose experiences with breakups and prolonged singlehood may differ due to unique social and cultural influences. Third, reliance on self-reported qualitative data introduces potential recall bias, as participants' reflections may be influenced by subjective memory distortions. Future studies should incorporate longitudinal or mixed-method approaches, integrating quantitative measures of relationship satisfaction, attachment styles, and psychological well-being to enhance validity. In general, this study provides new insights into the impact of first romantic breakups on relationship attitudes and prolonged singlehood among young adults. Findings suggest that remaining single is an intentional decision influenced by psychological resilience, personal growth priorities, and external constraints, rather than simply an outcome of emotional distress. By expanding theoretical frameworks, informing counseling applications, and identifying avenues for future research, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of romantic decision-making and post-breakup self-concept development.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how first romantic breakups shape young adults' perceptions of romantic relationships and their motivations for prolonged singlehood. Findings revealed that remaining single is often a deliberate and adaptive decision shaped by psychological resilience, personal growth priorities, and external constraints, rather than merely a reaction to emotional distress. Participants navigated post-breakup experiences through self-preservation, prioritization of independence, and external situational factors, illustrating that singlehood is not inherently linked to isolation or social withdrawal. These insights challenge traditional perspectives on post-breakup recovery, demonstrating that young adults actively reshape their romantic outlooks, rather than universally seeking new relationships to restore emotional stability. From a theoretical perspective, this study extends Erikson's psychosocial development theory by demonstrating that young adults' experiences of intimacy do not always follow a linear path—some choose personal development over immediate romantic reintegration. The study also expands on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, emphasizing that the pursuit of love and belonging is not always prioritized in early adulthood. Instead, some individuals redefine their relational needs based on past experiences, self-concept changes, and personal goals, highlighting the fluid and contextual nature of human attachment and independence. These findings contribute to existing literature on romantic dissolution, identity formation, and relationship avoidance, providing a deeper understanding of how young adults

construct meaning from their first romantic experiences and develop alternative pathways to fulfillment and self-actualization. Beyond its theoretical contributions, this study has important implications for personal development, interpersonal relationships, and mental health interventions. For young adults navigating the emotional aftermath of breakups, these findings suggest that singlehood can be a space for self-growth and healing rather than a period of isolation. Guidance counselors and mental health professionals should recognize and validate the diversity of post-breakup experiences, offering interventions that promote emotional resilience, self-reflection, and relational decision-making. Counseling programs should move beyond reintegrating individuals into new relationships and instead focus on empowering young adults to make informed, autonomous choices about their romantic futures. Additionally, relationship education programs should emphasize healthy coping mechanisms, emotional regulation, and personal fulfillment outside of romantic involvement. Schools and universities can integrate discussions on relationship expectations, emotional well-being, and self-worth into student development programs, ensuring that young adults gain the tools necessary for healthy relationship decision-making. Public discussions on romantic relationships and singlehood should also evolve, moving away from the stigmatization of prolonged singlehood and recognizing it as a valid and often enriching life choice.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that must be considered. The small sample size limits the generalizability of findings, making it essential for future research to include a more diverse participant pool across different socio-economic, cultural, and gender backgrounds. The study focused exclusively on heterosexual relationships, overlooking the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, who may navigate breakups and singlehood differently due to distinct social and cultural influences. Future studies should examine how diverse identities shape post-breakup attitudes and relational trajectories. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported qualitative data introduces potential recall bias, as participants' reflections were shaped by memory and current emotional states. Future research should incorporate longitudinal studies or mixed-method approaches, using quantitative assessments of attachment styles, emotional regulation, and relationship satisfaction to provide a more comprehensive analysis. Further exploration of cross-cultural variations in post-breakup singlehood could reveal whether these findings are specific to Filipino cultural norms or applicable to other collectivist and individualist societies. Additionally, investigating gender differences in post-breakup decision-making could offer insights into how men and women process romantic dissolution differently, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of relationship development across demographics. Finally, future research should examine the impact of digital culture on post-breakup recovery, particularly how social media, dating apps, and online interactions influence young adults' decisions to remain single or re-enter relationships. In conclusion, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how first romantic breakups influence relationship attitudes and prolonged singlehood among young adults. By expanding theoretical frameworks, informing counseling applications, and identifying avenues for future research, it contributes to a growing body of literature on romantic decision-making, identity development, and emotional resilience. The findings underscore the importance of supporting young adults in navigating romantic transitions, ensuring they develop healthy

perspectives on love, independence, and emotional well-being. Rather than viewing singlehood as a failure to form relationships, this study highlights how it can serve as a path to self-discovery, empowerment, and personal fulfillment, reshaping the broader discourse on post-breakup life trajectories..

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