Psychology, Society & Education (2026) 18(3), 47-56

Psychology, Society & Education

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Risk factors for romantic breakup in emerging adulthood: a systematic review

Raúl Jurado*, Daniel Falla & Carmen Viejo

Universidad de Córdoba, Córdoba (Spain)

Keywords

Youth
Interpersonal relations
Love
Social psychology
Behavior

Abstract

Couple relationships and breakups are frequent during emerging adulthood, a stage characterized by social exploration and instability in various developmental areas. However, there is no frame of reference from which to approach the main risk factors for these breakups during this period, despite the significant impact that such experiences can have on the mental health of those involved. Therefore, the aim of this systematic review is to examine the variables that recent studies have identified as key risk factors associated with breakup in emerging adulthood. Following PRISMA guidelines, a structured search was performed in the Web of Science and Scopus databases. A total of 1,779 articles published between 2007 and 2024 were reviewed, with 23 meeting the inclusion criteria. The results show that breakups are influenced by individual factors (e.g., age or substance use), relational factors (e.g., low commitment and satisfaction), and contextual factors (e.g., work and income). These findings offer a foundation for designing psychoeducational interventions aimed at fostering healthier romantic relationships.

Factores de riesgo de la ruptura sentimental en la adultez emergente: una revisión sistemática

Palabras clave

Juventud
Relaciones interpersonales
Amor
Psicología social
Comportamiento

Resumen

Las relaciones de pareja y las rupturas son frecuentes durante la adultez emergente, una etapa caracterizada por la exploración social y la inestabilidad en diversas áreas del desarrollo. Sin embargo, no existe un marco de referencia desde el que abordar los principales factores de riesgo de estas rupturas durante este periodo, a pesar del importante impacto que estas experiencias pueden tener en la salud mental de las personas implicadas. Por lo tanto, el objetivo de esta revisión sistemática es examinar las variables que estudios recientes han identificado como factores de riesgo clave asociados con la ruptura en la edad adulta emergente. Siguiendo las directrices PRISMA, se realizó una búsqueda estructurada en las bases de datos Web of Science y Scopus. Se revisaron un total de 1,779 artículos publicados entre 2007 y 2024, de los cuales 23 cumplían los criterios de inclusión. Los resultados muestran que las rupturas están influenciadas por factores individuales (por ejemplo, la edad o el consumo de sustancias), factores relacionales (por ejemplo, el bajo compromiso y la satisfacción) y factores contextuales (por ejemplo, el trabajo y los ingresos). Estos hallazgos ofrecen una base para diseñar intervenciones psicoeducativas destinadas a fomentar relaciones románticas más saludables.

* *Corresponding author:* Raúl Jurado. Departamento de Psicología, Facultad de Ciencias de la Educación y Psicología, Universidad de Córdoba, Avda. San Alberto Magno, s/n, 14071, Cordoba, Spain. m92juorr@uco.es

Cite this article as: Jurado, R., Falla, D., & Viejo, C. (2026). Risk factors for romantic breakup in emerging adulthood: a systematic review. *Psychology, Society & Education, 18*(3), 47-56. https://doi.org/10.21071/pse.v18i3.19085

Received: 3 March 2026. *First review*: 1 August 2026. *Accepted:* 18 September 2026.

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ISSN 1989-709X | © 2026. Psy, Soc & Educ.

Romantic breakups are common during emerging adulthood, with studies indicating that up to 98% of young people experience at least one (Morris & Reiber, 2011). Although exploration and instability are normative features of this developmental stage (Arnett, 2004), romantic relationships during emerging adulthood serve as a critical training ground for long-term intimacy. Consequently, experiencing a breakup can severely disrupt this developmental trajectory, often leading to intense sadness, anxiety, feelings of guilt (Mendoza-Guerrero et al., 2021), or even more serious symptoms, such as episodes of depression or suicidal ideation (Stanley et al., 2023). To date, the scientific literature has predominantly focused on analyzing the psychological and physical impacts of this process (Norona et al., 2017). However, the grieving process can manifest differently across individuals and have distinct consequences for them (Carter et al., 2018), which are fundamentally shaped by the specific factors and variables that preceded the dissolution (Aguirre-López et al., 2024). While some individuals adapt effectively and experience personal growth (Chau et al., 2022), others experience profound emotional distress (Ding et al., 2021). Despite the clear link between pre-breakup dynamics and post-breakup adjustment, the analysis of risk factors that lead to romantic dissolution has received significantly less scientific attention, particularly regarding young couples. Furthermore, understanding the risk factors associated with relationship dissolution contributes to the development of prevention and intervention strategies aimed at promoting more stable relationships.

Individual, relational, and contextual risk factors

To understand the multi-determined nature of relationship dissolution, this study adopts the holistic framework proposed by Cate et al. (2002). This ecological approach is uniquely suited for emerging adulthood, as it accounts for the complex interplay between personal development, developing dyadic patterns, and shifting socio-cultural environments.

Individual risk factors are defined as the personal characteristics or dispositions of members of a romantic relationship (Cate et al., 2002). In the general population, individual traits such as anxious and avoidant attachment styles, alongside high levels of belief in fate, have been established as robust predictors of romantic breakups (Le et al., 2010). Their influence may be particularly pronounced during emerging adulthood, given the ongoing process of identity exploration that characterizes this developmental stage. Furthermore, variables such as anxiety or depression (Hahn et al., 2021) have been identified in young couples as risk factors for lower relationship satisfaction and low levels of commitment, which could lead to breakup.

Relational factors refer to those aspects that arise directly from the dynamics between the members of a couple (Cate et al., 2002). The quality of the relationship is one of the relational factors that has received the most scientific attention. In the general population, low levels of commitment and lack of love have been associated with a higher probability of relationship breakup (Le et al., 2010). In this sense, the Investment Model (Rusbult et al., 1998) provides a well-established framework for understanding relationship stability. The model proposes that relationship satisfaction, perceived quality of alternatives, and investments jointly determine commitment, which in turn is the most proximal predictor of relationship persistence. According to this framework, individuals are more likely to maintain a relationship when they experience high satisfaction, perceive few attractive alternatives, have invested substantial resources in the relationship, and consequently develop stronger commitment.

Furthermore, ineffective conflict management (Harris et al., 2025) and substance use (Shorey et al., 2025) frequently trigger a severe deterioration of the relationship. In the most severe cases, these maladaptive dynamics can escalate into relational violence, which represents the ultimate expression of a low-quality relationship (Taquette et al., 2019) and could act as a direct catalyst for dissolution.

Finally, contextual factors refer to aspects related to the environment in which the relationship develops (Cate et al., 2002). These factors have received little attention in the literature; in the general population, only low support for the relationship from one's social network has been identified as a predictor of breakup, especially among women (Le et al., 2010).

The present study

To date, only one meta-analysis has analyzed romantic breakups from a predictive perspective (Le et al., 2010). While Le et al. (2010) provided a foundational overview by including non-marital relationships, their study suffered from significant limitations: it aggregated data across a broad age range (from young adolescents to older adults), precluding age-specific conclusions, and the data collection ended in 2006. Since then, profound social shifts have radically reshaped the romantic landscape of emerging adults. These include the widespread acceptance of diverse emotional bonds (e.g., non-monogamous or same-sex relationships) and the pervasive influence of digital technologies on communication and dating (Bernal-Vélez et al., 2023; Minaya, 2021). Consequently, contemporary emerging adults face unique risk variables that older literature could not capture. This systematic review addresses these critical gaps by examining romantic breakups among young adults using contemporary evidence. To ensure a focused synthesis, this review narrows its scope strictly to relationships during emerging adulthood, a pivotal period in which early prevention efforts can foster long-term relational stability.

Based on these assumptions, this systematic review is designed to identify the main risk factors for romantic breakups among young people by adopting a holistic perspective that integrates individual, relational, and contextual domains. Specifically, the study is guided by the following research question: "What are the primary individual, relational, and contextual risk factors that predict romantic dissolution among emerging adults?".

Method

Protocol and registration

This systematic review was not prospectively registered in PROSPERO or any other registry. However, the study design and reporting closely adhered to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). A completed PRISMA 2020 checklist is provided as Table S1 on Supplementary material.

Search strategy

The scientific literature search started on July 24, 2024, and finalized on September 8, 2024 (encompassing all records published up to that date, starting from 2007). The search was conducted in Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus. Both index the vast majority of high-impact journals in social sciences, behavioral sciences, and family studies, ensuring that the core body of literature on romantic breakups is successfully captured while minimizing indexation redundancy.

The search was executed using a combination of terms and Boolean operators, applied to the "Topic" field in WoS (which includes title, abstract, and keywords) and "Title, abstract, keywords" in Scopus. The general search string was: (break* OR split* OR separat* OR rupture* OR dissol* OR terminat* OR rift) AND (romantic OR couple OR partner) AND ("emerging adult*" OR youth* OR young*). The precise search syntax and history for each database are documented in Table S2 on Supplementary material to ensure reproducibility (PRISMA-S compliant).

Before conducting the search, we checked for the existence of systematic reviews published on the subject or that met the stated objective. To do this, the same combination of terms described above was used, adding: [...] AND ("systematic review" OR meta-analysis). One systematic review was identified that addressed risk factors for relationship breakups, but it did not address the specific research question posed in this study (Le et al., 2010).

The EndNote reference management software package (Clarivate, 2025) was used to store, organize, and effectively manage the articles found. Lastly, a systematic search for grey literature was performed during September 2024 using the same keywords and Boolean operators as the main search. Specifically, unpublished manuscripts, conference proceedings, and book chapters published between 2007 and 2024 were searched within WoS and Scopus. Additionally, doctoral dissertations and theses were searched and retrieved through the Open Access Theses and Dissertations (OATD) database. This multi-source approach was implemented to obtain a more complete picture of the state of knowledge on the subject.

This study did not involve human participants, as it was a systematic review. Therefore, approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was not required.

Eligibility criteria

The criteria used for including articles in the final sample were: 1) scientific articles published in peer-reviewed journals; 2) written in English. Only studies published in English were included because it is the predominant language of publication in the field of psychology, and this criterion ensured a consistent and feasible screening and data extraction process; 3) published between 2007 and 2024 (both included); 4) the study sample consisted of participants ages 16 to 31. The standard age range for emerging adulthood is 18 to 29 (Arnett, 2000). A minor adjustment of ±2 years (extending the range from 16 to 31) was theoretically justified to accommodate transitional developmental phases (late adolescence and the prolonged transition to adulthood) and to include robust longitudinal studies that began tracking cohorts slightly before age 18 or ended shortly after age 29; 5) empirical studies; and 6) studies that explored at least one risk factor for relationship breakup. For the purpose of this review, "romantic relationship breakup" was operationally defined as the voluntary or involuntary dissolution of a romantic partnership. A "risk factor" was operationally defined as any individual, dyadic, or environmental variable, predictor, or antecedent significantly associated with an increased likelihood of relationship dissolution or a higher self-reported propensity to break up.

Data collection, screening, and extraction

A total of 1,779 records were identified (Scopus = 1,090; WoS = 689). A total of 310 duplicate studies were removed (289 automatically via EndNote; 21 manually). The screening process involved three reviewers. First, two reviewers independently screened the titles, abstracts, and keywords of the 1,469 unique records. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached, resulting in 181 articles being retained for full-text assessment. Next, the full texts of these 181 articles were independently assessed by all three reviewers to determine their eligibility for inclusion. Reviewer agreement during the full-text screening was 92.3%. This process resulted in a final sample of 23 articles (Figure 1). No documents were included after the grey literature search.

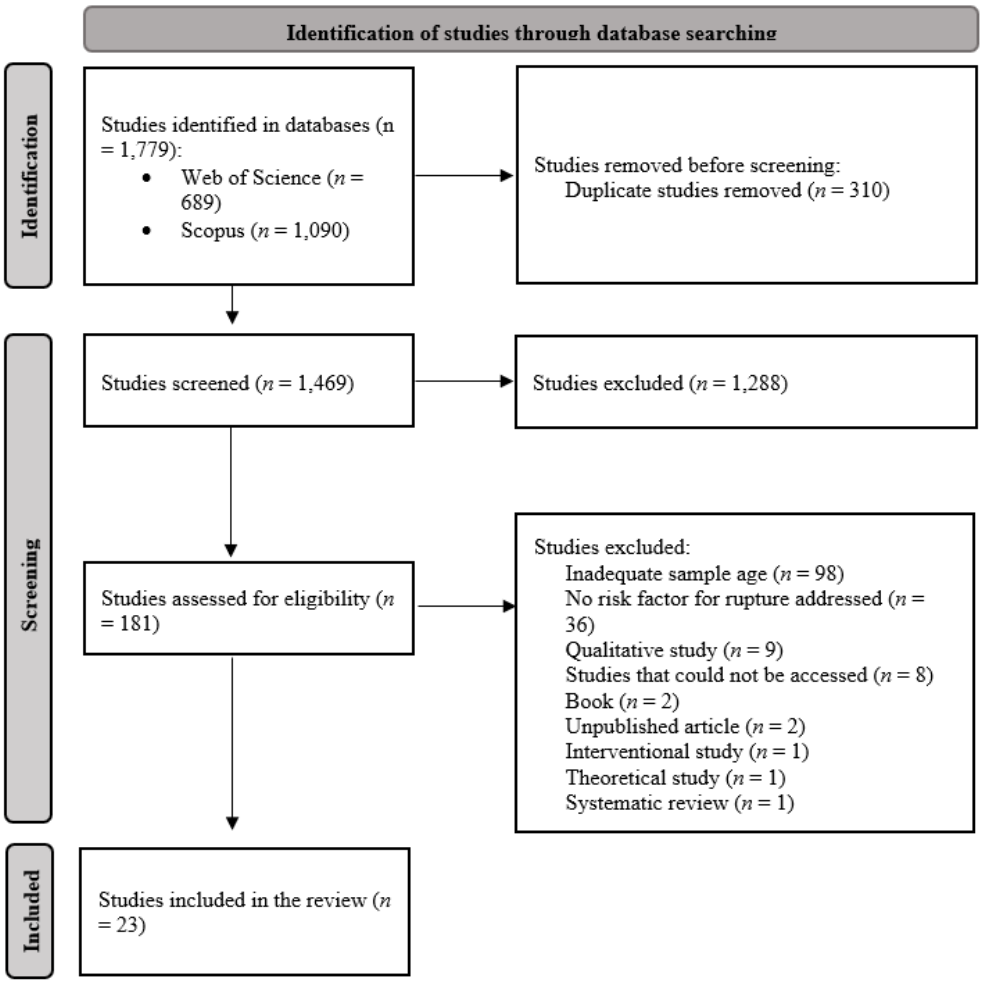
Data extraction was performed independently by one reviewer using a standardized spreadsheet, and subsequently verified and double-checked for accuracy and completeness by a second reviewer. Any ambiguous, missing, or unclear data within the primary studies (e.g., missing gender distributions or sample demographics) were flagged and discussed among all authors; if the information could not be resolved or retrieved, it was reported as "not specified" (NS) in the synthesis table.

Quality assessment and risk of bias

To assess the methodological quality of the final sample, we used the *Newcastle-Ottawa Scale* (NOS; Wells et al., 2000) to evaluate the 23 included studies. This tool was chosen because it is well-suited for assessing internal validity and risk of bias in cross-sectional and longitudinal studies. Each study was eva-

Figure 1

Identification, screening, and selection of studies



luated independently by two reviewers, and disagreements were resolved by consensus. Rather than using NOS scores as an exclusion threshold, the quality scores were used to contextualize the strength of the evidence. A comprehensive breakdown of the quality assessment for each study is presented in Table S3 on Supplementary material, and the main findings regarding risk of bias are integrated into the Discussion.

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using a qualitative synthesis approach. The results of the selected studies were compared and summarized according to the types of risk factors included. No statistical software was used, as the purpose of this review was to identify patterns, similarities, and differences among the findings of recent studies related to the topic.

Results

A total of 23 articles met the inclusion criteria for the systematic review (see Table S4 on Supplementary material).

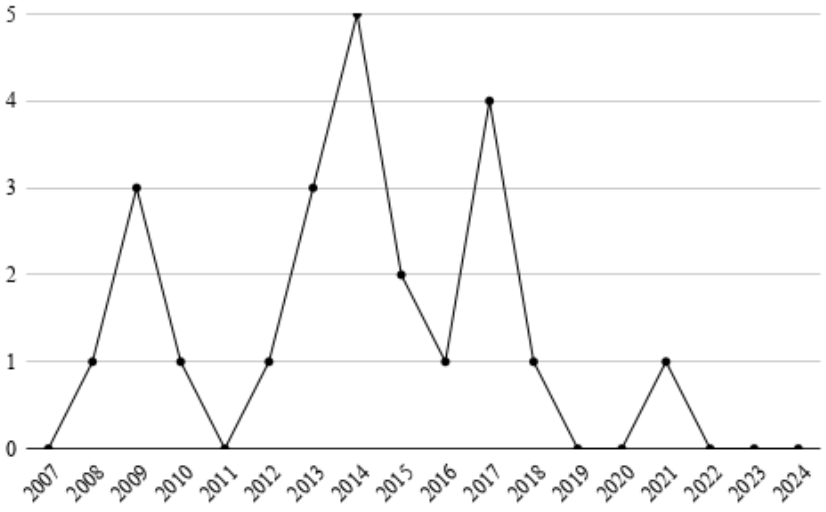
Characteristics of the publications included

Regarding the characteristics of the included publications, descriptive statistics were used to calculate the reported percentages based on the total number of included studies ($N = 23$). Most publications were concentrated between 2013 and 2017 (65.22%, $n = 15$), with fewer studies published afterward. Figure 2 visually describes the chronological distribution of the included literature, highlighting a peak on publications during this five-year period. In terms of geographic distribution, the vast majority of the samples originated from the USA (78.26%, $n = 18$). The remaining 21.74% ($n = 6$) represented a diverse international context, distributed across Europe ($n = 3$), Asia ($n = 1$), North America ($n = 1$), and Oceania ($n = 1$).

Most studies were longitudinal (82.61%, $n = 19$), with sample sizes ranging from 69 to 7,888 participants, generally below 1,000 (91.3%, $n = 21$). Participants were aged 17 to 31, with most studies showing a female predominance (65.22%, $n = 15$); a few included only men (8.7%, $n = 2$) or had balanced gender distributions (26.09%, $n = 6$).

Figure 2

Number of articles per year



Risk factors for juvenile breakups

Following Cate et al. (2002), results are organized into individual, relational, and contextual factors. The percentages reported per factor are not mutually exclusive, as a single study often reports multiple risk factors; consequently, the sum of the Individual, Relational, and Contextual percentages exceeds 100%. Figure 3 illustrates these categories, providing an overview of the proportion of studies that identified risk factors within each domain.

Individual factors appear in 65.21% (n = 15) of studies. Age is the most frequently reported individual variable, appearing as a significant risk factor in 17.39% (n = 4) of the studies, although 7 studies (30.43%, n = 7) did not report associations between age and relationship dissolution. Furthermore, there was considerable heterogeneity in the operationalization of "younger age", with some studies defining it strictly by chronological age at the start of the relationship, while others defined it relatively by life stages or transition periods. Younger age, both in general terms and in specific situations –such as leaving the parental home (Moors & Bernhardt, 2009), getting married (Kreager et al., 2013), or having a first child (Kanji & Schober, 2014), especially in the case of women– is associated with a higher probability of breakup (Moors & Bernhardt, 2009).

Likewise, excessive substance use, mainly alcohol, appears to be a risk factor for separation in 13.04% (n = 3) of the studies included in this review. These studies emphasize the discrepancy in consumption patterns between partners, with a greater predictive weight for a breakup when it is the woman who drinks excessively compared to the man (Leonard et al., 2014). However, in other studies, heavy alcohol consumption alone did not prove to be a direct or significant predictor of breakup (Helgeson et al., 2014; Vennum et al., 2017). Furthermore, it is worth noting that other commonly consumed substances analyzed in the literature, such as tobacco or marijuana, showed no significant relationship with the risk of separation (Helgeson et al., 2014; Leonard et al., 2014).

In the field of attachment theory, a direct contradiction was identified across studies: while having an avoidant attachment style predicts lower relationship quality and a higher risk of breakup in North American and Canadian samples (Philippe et al., 2013; Young & Furman, 2014), in cross-cultural samples (China and Australia), an avoidant style was associated with a lower likelihood of experiencing a breakup (Moore et al., 2012).

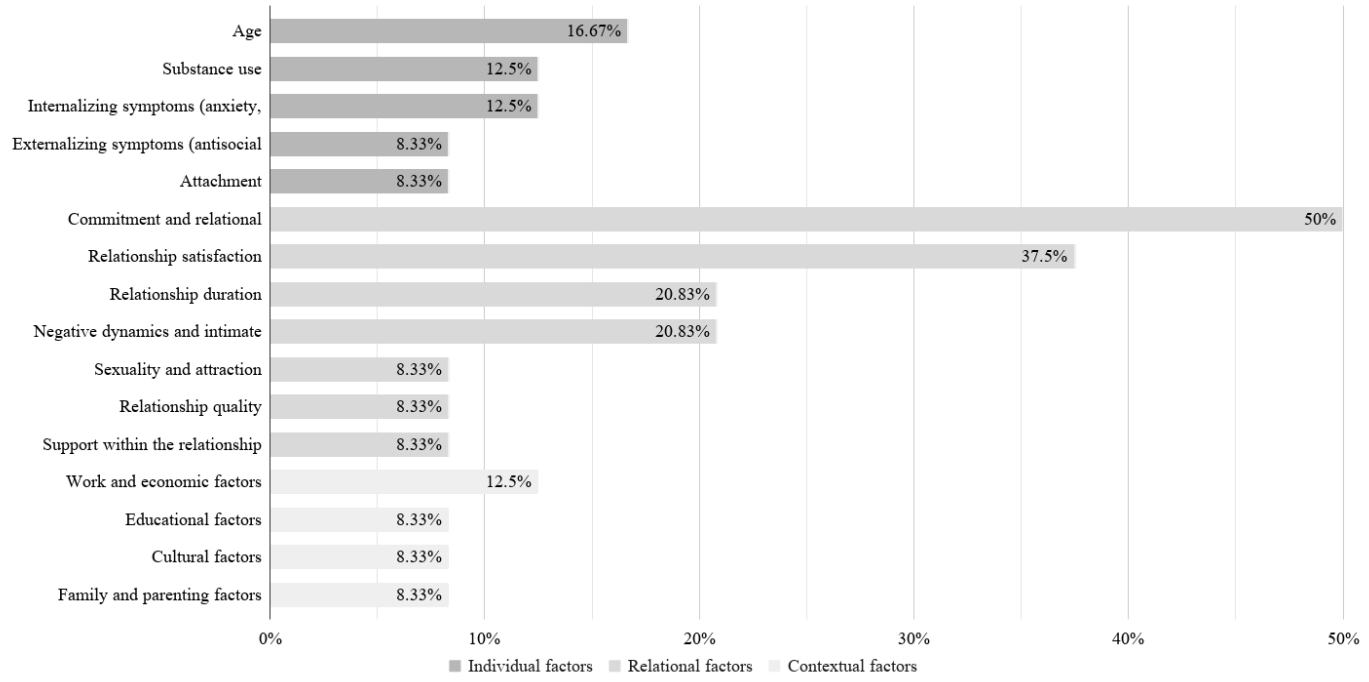
Various internalizing symptoms are also identified as risk factors (13.04% of studies, n = 3). Variables such as social anxiety (Porter & Chambless, 2017) and depression, especially in men, increase the risk of breakup. Depression is not only directly associated with a higher probability of relationship dissolution, but also with an increase in other risk factors, such as problematic alcohol consumption (Leonard et al., 2014). Despite this, a clear inconsistency is observed in the literature, as multiple longitudinal studies revealed that participants' general depressive symptoms, global anxiety, or psychological distress had no significant effect on relationship stability (Helgeson et al., 2014; Lantagne et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2012; Vennum et al., 2017).

Furthermore, this substance use, together with social anxiety, is related to lower relationship satisfaction (Porter & Chambless, 2017). This suggests that individual factors do not act independently, but also affect dimensions of relationship quality, which may, in turn, be relational risk factors for breakups. Along these lines, 82.6% (n = 19) of the studies reviewed address relational risk factors associated with romantic breakups. Within this group, half of the studies (52.17%, n = 12) point to factors related to commitment, agreements within the couple, and extradyadic involvement.

In relation to commitment, the findings suggest that lower levels of this construct are associated with a higher probability of breakup. It is observed that commitment tends to be lower

Figure 3

Identified risk factors



in relationships with non-monogamous agreements or without explicit agreements, compared to those that establish monogamous agreements (Godfrey et al., 2021). Thus, the type and clarity of agreements within the couple may also represent an important relational factor associated with relationship dissolution. In addition, several studies indicate that a greater perception of available alternatives to one's current partner, or higher-quality ones, is associated with a higher probability of dissolution of the current relationship (Copp et al., 2015). Regarding extradyadic involvement, a significant association was found between sexual and emotional infidelity and relationship breakup, both when it was acknowledged by the participants and when it was attributed to their partners (Negash et al., 2014).

Another determining risk factor, identified in 39.13% (n = 9) of the studies, is relationship satisfaction, with lower levels of satisfaction predicting a higher risk of breakup (Lee et al., 2010), divorce (Kreager et al., 2013), and a lower probability of transitioning to formal commitments, such as marriage (Moors & Bernhardt, 2009). It should be noted that the construct of "relationship satisfaction" showed methodological heterogeneity, being assessed via multidimensional validated scales in some studies and single-item self-reports in others.

Shorter relationship duration is another significant risk factor (21.74% of studies, n = 5) (Negash et al., 2014). The same percentage of studies (21.74%, n = 5) conclude that negative relational dynamics, including poor conflict management, low communication quality, and intimate partner violence, were also significant predictors of breakup, with emotional or psychological abuse showing stronger effects than physical violence (Roberson et al., 2017). In the marital sphere, physical and psychological victimization increased divorce risk, particularly when women had greater economic or educational resources (Kreager et al., 2013).

This last finding is linked to contextual factors, which are present in 30.43% (n = 7) of the studies. Although some of them are related to education, culture, or family, those referring to economic status are the most prominent, addressed in 13.04% (n = 3) of the studies included. In this regard, it has been observed that lower household income contributed by women increases the risk of divorce in marriages without violence, while in contexts of intimate partner violence, the pattern is reversed: women with higher incomes are more likely to separate (Kreager et al., 2013). Likewise, dissolution is more likely in cases of dual unemployment or when the married mother works full time (Kanji & Schober, 2014). Financial support provided by the biological father to the mother when she lives with a new partner also represents a risk to the new relationship, especially if the stepfather is unemployed (Petren et al., 2018).

Discussion

The objective of this study was to review the risk factors associated with relationship breakups during emerging adulthood through a systematic analysis of scientific studies conducted in recent years.

Romantic relationships, at different stages of development, often involve different needs, expectations, and behavior patterns (Boisvert et al., 2023). Social contexts also vary across

ages, as do individuals' levels of development (Hawkins et al., 2024; Mitra & Arnett, 2021). Therefore, one of the defining criteria of this review is its focus on romantic relationships that occur during emerging adulthood, a developmental period characterized by specific social and erotic-emotional development (Viejo & Ortega-Ruiz, 2023). With this premise, a total of 23 articles were included, most published between 2013 and 2017, with three-quarters conducted in the United States, indicating limitations for cross-cultural generalization (Moore et al., 2012). Sample sizes were generally small to moderate, reflecting challenges in longitudinal research.

The findings confirm that breakup risk is influenced by individual, relational, and contextual variables. Among individual factors, age stands out: younger ages are associated with a higher risk of separation (Moors & Bernhardt, 2009), perhaps due to a lack of maturity and emotional stability (Arnett et al., 2014). In addition, this predictor is linked to specific circumstances, especially for women. In this regard, the probability of breakup increases when marriage occurs at an early age (Kreager et al., 2013), or when the mother is very young (Kanji & Schober, 2014). These milestones involve profound changes that require emotional stability and adequate resources to cope with them, and the lack of these can lead to conflict and higher levels of stress and anxiety (Norona et al., 2017).

Conversely, the evidence regarding internalizing symptoms displays substantial inconsistency. While isolated studies link social anxiety (Porter & Chambless, 2017) or clinical depression in men (Leonard et al., 2014) to relationship dissolution, a significant majority of longitudinal studies found no direct effect for general anxiety, depressive symptoms, or psychological distress (Helgeson et al., 2014; Moore et al., 2012; Vennum et al., 2017). This discrepancy suggests that anxiety or depression does not directly cause breakups on its own. Instead, they can act as a background strain: when someone experiences emotional distress, it hurts commitment and reduces overall relationship satisfaction, which eventually increases the risk of a breakup (Hahn et al., 2021).

Externalizing traits, such as individual aggressiveness or antisocial behavior (Lantagne et al., 2017), represent personal risk factors that disrupt interpersonal functioning. When unmanaged, these individual tendencies manifest as relational dynamics characterized by destructive conflict and intimate partner violence (Harris et al., 2025). Relational factors, such as conflict or violence in the couple, are also linked to romantic breakups. Conflict is inherent in relationships and arises from perceived differences in interests or goals (Lucchesi & Lobinger, 2024). However, positive conflict resolution based on open communication and respect can improve the quality of the relationship (Johnson et al., 2021). This shows that what really increases the likelihood of a couple breaking up is not the presence of conflict, but how it is handled. The inability to resolve it effectively (Roberson et al., 2017), as well as poor communication (Copp et al., 2015), can lead to resentment, emotional distancing, and a progressive deterioration of the relationship (Taquette et al., 2019), significantly increasing the risk of separation.

In addition to predicting breakups, poor conflict management is one of the main factors leading to the development of violent dynamics within the couple (Harris et al., 2025), which significantly decrease satisfaction (Taquette et al., 2019). In the specific context of gender-based violence, the probability of breakup is higher when women have more economic and educational resources (Kreager et al., 2013), since people with greater economic stability, not depending on their partner in this regard, consider better alternatives outside the relationship (Abramsky et al., 2019). In addition, a high level of education is related to the non-normalization of violence and, therefore, to the acceptance of separation as a valid option (Kreager et al., 2013).

However, the most frequently cited relational risk factors in the literature are commitment (Edwards et al., 2015) and satisfaction (Vennum et al., 2017). Low levels of both variables increase the likelihood that a young couple will break up. This finding could be explained by the traditional Investment Model (Rusbult et al., 1998). This model suggests that relationship continuity depends on four factors: commitment, satisfaction, perceived quality of alternative partners, and degree of investment in the relationship. Specifically, when satisfaction is low, feelings of frustration, disappointment, and unhappiness tend to predominate, reducing the sense of gratification and the perceived value of the relationship (Sánchez-Aragón, 2024). This leads to a decrease in motivation to maintain the relationship, as people tend to seek relationships that promote well-being. When commitment is low, the individual does not perceive the relationship as one meriting the effort necessary to sustain it, so they do not prioritize its maintenance. This weakens the emotional bond, reduces the willingness to overcome difficulties, and increases the likelihood of seeking alternatives (Lin et al., 2022), which, in turn, is also a predictor of relationship breakups (Young & Furman, 2014). The operationalization of alternatives and commitment agreements connects directly to contemporary changes in romantic relationships. For instance, the systematic evidence indicates that explicit non-monogamous agreements or a lack of clear relational boundaries correlates with lower commitment and higher breakup rates (Godfrey et al., 2021). Similarly, while digital environments were not explicitly measured as separate variables in primary studies, they implicitly structure the "perceived quality of alternatives" (Copp et al., 2015) by offering continuous access to potential partners through dating platforms and social media (Bernal-Vélez et al., 2023).

Although relational and individual factors help us to understand many of the mechanisms that can lead to breakups, it is also necessary to consider the role of the context in which the relationship develops. In this regard, Le et al. (2010) showed a single contextual risk factor for romantic breakups: low support for the relationship from the social networks. This finding has also been replicated in the present study. However, some other contextual factors such as education, culture, and family have been found that could influence the breakup process. This suggests that in recent years, research has been approaching youth breakups from a broader and more holistic perspective, one that includes environmental variables.

In this regard, the most prominent contextual predictor relates to the workplace and economic spheres. For example, full-time employment among mothers is associated with greater marital instability (Kanji & Schober, 2014), since, despite working, an unequal distribution of domestic tasks and childcare persists. As a result, the time available for the couple or for rest is drastically reduced, which can lead to conflict and lower levels of satisfaction in the relationship (Genta, 2021). When both partners are unemployed the financial and emotional burden also intensifies significantly, which, in turn, can increase the risk of breakup due to the increased stress and anxiety associated with this circumstance (Kanji & Schober, 2014).

Overall, the results support a multidimensional understanding of breakup risk in emerging adulthood, where personal vulnerabilities, relational dynamics, and socioeconomic conditions interact.

Limitations and future directions

This systematic review has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, no meta-analysis was performed to provide a quantitative synthesis of the findings, as the limited number of studies per risk factor precluded an analysis with sufficient statistical power or homogeneity. Second, search strategies were restricted to specific databases. Although WoS and Scopus were selected as comprehensive multidisciplinary databases, omitting other standard psychological repositories (e.g., PsycINFO or PubMed) may have limited coverage. Furthermore, restricting the search exclusively to English-language publications introduces a potential language bias, which should be considered when generalizing these findings. Third, the search string itself presents limitations; key terms such as "divorce" were not explicitly included, although many articles covering this topic captured other terms from our search strategy. Additionally, considering only peer-reviewed journal articles leaves the review susceptible to publication bias, favoring studies with statistically significant results. Finally, several of the included studies presented methodological quality limitations that warrant caution in drawing broad conclusions.

Despite these limitations, this review provides an updated overview of the factors that increase the likelihood of breakups in young adulthood. However, relationship dynamics are constantly evolving, influenced by social, cultural, and even technological changes. The rise of social media, dating apps, and digital hyperconnectivity have reshaped the ways in which relationships are initiated, maintained, and ended, creating new opportunities but also new challenges, such as public exposure and the constant availability of alternatives to one's partner (Bernal-Vélez et al., 2023). These changes are accompanied by a transformation in the way we conceive of love and relationships, reflected, for example, in the emergence of unconventional relational structures (such as open relationships) and in a growing appreciation of individual well-being over maintaining the relationship at all costs (Godfrey et al., 2021).

In light of this evolving landscape, continued research is essential. Future studies should incorporate more diverse cultural contexts and larger, more representative samples to enhance generalizability. Greater attention should also be paid to emerging variables linked to digital environments. Moreover, longitudinal and dyadic designs would allow for a more precise examination of temporal and reciprocal processes, thereby clarifying potential causal pathways underlying relationship instability.

Practical implications

The findings suggest that prevention and intervention programs should focus on strengthening relational skills during emerging adulthood. Promoting effective conflict resolution, communication skills, emotional regulation, and commitment-building strategies may reduce breakup risk. Additionally, psychoeducational programs in universities or community settings could foster social-emotional competencies and awareness of relational risk factors.

Conclusions

Romantic breakups have a significant impact on the emotional well-being of youth (Carter et al., 2018). Understanding the risk factors associated with this phenomenon is essential to expanding knowledge about relationship stability at this stage of development. The findings of this systematic review confirm that breakups are influenced by individual, relational, and contextual variables. Age, unresolved conflicts, lack of commitment, and low relationship satisfaction stand out as factors that can be decisive.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: R.J., D.F., C.V.
Methodology: D.F., C.V.
Formal analysis: R.J., D.F., C.V.
Investigation: R.J., D.F., C.V.
Data curation: R.J., D.F., C.V.
Supervision: D.F., C.V.
Writing – Original draft: R.J., D.F., C.V.
Writing – Review & editing: R.J., D.F., C.V.

Funding

This work was funded by the University of Córdoba [Becas Semillero de Investigación, Research Incubator Grants, 2024]. In addition, this study is part of the projects entitled *Challenges and risks in adolescent erotic-romantic experiences: the multidimensionality of romantic competence in the framework of courtship (CoSCo) [PDI2020-119855RA-I00, 2020]*, and *Developmental challenges linked to the socio-affective adjustment and the quality of youth couples (ASAP) [PID2024-161557NB-I00, 2024],* both funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation.The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

Declaration of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as the analyses developed are not from new data sets.

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Supplementary material

https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/D8FBT