Using a Socio-Ecological Framework to Understand Romantic Relationship Satisfaction Among Emerging Adults During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract
The formation and maintenance of satisfying romantic relationships, a developmental milestone for many emerging adults, has been challenged by the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, the impact of COVID-19 stress on relationship satisfaction has not been explored within the context of individual and relationship factors. Guided by a socio-ecological framework, this study used a longitudinal design to investigate the impact of individual-level (i.e., growth beliefs, destiny beliefs), couple-level (i.e., daily criticism), and societal-level (i.e., COVID-19 stress) factors on relationship satisfaction during Fall 2021. We also explored the moderating effects of destiny beliefs and growth beliefs. Results revealed relationship satisfaction was negatively associated with daily criticism, but not directly associated with destiny beliefs, growth beliefs, or COVID-19 stress. However, growth beliefs buffered against the negative impact of criticism on relationship satisfaction. These findings are consistent with the notion that growth beliefs may play a protective role in relationship processes.

Keywords
COVID-19, romantic relationship satisfaction, emerging adults, conflict, relationship beliefs

Emerging adulthood is a formative time where individuals between the ages of 18–29 are faced with more enduring decisions about various life domains than any other developmental stage (Arnett et al., 2014; Shulman & Nurmi, 2010; Shulman et al., 2014). During emerging adulthood, many individuals spend time forming and maintaining high-quality, intimate, and satisfying romantic relationships (Roisman et al., 2004; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Romantic relationships are voluntary and mutually acknowledged relationships that are distinguished by affection, as well as anticipated and/or current sexual behavior (Collins et al., 2009). Emerging adults may choose to achieve the milestone of establishing a satisfying romantic relationship by using their pre-existing beliefs about romantic relationships and current romantic experiences to determine what makes a satisfying relationship. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated stressors (e.g., fear of contracting the virus) has challenged emerging adults’ ability to form and maintain satisfying romantic relationships. More specifically, relationship researchers suggest COVID-19 related stressors are associated with increases in conflict and decreases in intimate behaviors, which may negatively impact relationship satisfaction (Luetke et al., 2020; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021).

Relationship satisfaction is a strong indicator of romantic relationship functioning and is related to individual and relational outcomes, such as individual well-being and relationship longevity (Bravo et al., 2017; Davila et al., 2017; Whitten & Kuryluk, 2012). A romantic relationship may be deemed satisfying based on relationship beliefs, relationship experiences, and situational contexts. For example, irrational individual beliefs about relationships (e.g., conflict is detrimental versus conflict is an opportunity for relationship growth), negative relationship interactions, and high stress environments may all negatively impact relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, because these factors do not exist in isolation, they must be considered together to fully understand their impact on relationship satisfaction. The socio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is a

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Emerging adulthood is a critical stage of development where those between the ages of 18–29 engage in exploration before assuming their adulthood roles (Arnett et al., 2014). Compared to adolescents, emerging adults have more independence and freedom but have yet to encounter the responsibilities that are normative in young adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2007). The independence and freedom associated with this developmental stage is a result of social and economic shifts that lead to an ambiguous pathway, which prompt a delay in the timing at which individuals settle into their adulthood roles and long-term commitments, thereby prolonging the entry into adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Wood et al., 2018). This shift is evident in industrialized societies as the age of entering the workforce, establishing financial independence, and first marriage has moved to the end of the third decade of life (Arnett, 2000, 2007; Germani et al., 2020). Now, those between the ages of 18–29 are engaging in self-exploration in various life domains, rather than the traditional markers of adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Arnett et al., 2014; Sharon, 2016). These changes mark emerging adulthood as a formative time where individuals learn from their experiences and begin to set the foundation for their adulthood lives.

Given the explorative nature of emerging adulthood, there are many developmental tasks associated with this period. Developmental tasks represent milestones based on socio-cultural normative expectations associated with a specific stage of development (Roisman et al., 2004). Some of the developmental tasks emerging adults engage in include exploring career choices, establishing financial independence, and developing high-quality, intimate, and satisfying romantic relationships (Arnett, 2000; Roisman et al., 2004; Taylor et al., 2013). Given the delay in long-term romantic commitments and increase in exploration, many emerging adults spend ample time learning what they value in romantic relationships through romantic experiences (Arnett, 2000; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Romantic relationships are also important for individual development, as research suggests that romantic relationships are more predictive of personal growth than friendships in emerging adulthood (Barry et al., 2009). For example, Barry and colleagues (2009) found that emerging adults’ perceived achievement of adulthood criteria was positively associated with their romantic relationship quality. Taken together, healthy and satisfying romantic relationships have important implications for both individual and relational well-being and functioning (Bravo et al., 2017; Davila et al., 2017).

A satisfying romantic relationship is one where one’s needs and expectations for love, support, and security are met (Gerlach et al., 2018). Relationship satisfaction is a strong indicator of healthy romantic relationship functioning and is predictive of one’s personal well-being and development (Demir, 2008; Padilla-Walker et al., 2017). High-quality, satisfying relationships can help emerging adults’ functioning through support and companionship as they balance the demands of this developmental period (Gala & Kapadia, 2013; Schwartz, 2016). Those who are in satisfying relationships also report fewer depressive symptoms, less substance abuse, and less emotional distress in their romantic relationships (Angulski et al., 2018; Rasand et al., 2012; Whitton & Kurylik, 2012). Given the positive association between relationship satisfaction and personal and relational well-being, much research has been devoted to understanding what promotes or hinders satisfying romantic relationships.

Predictors of Romantic Relationship Satisfaction

Implicit Theories of Relationships (ITRs)

Implicit theories are beliefs individuals hold about themselves and the world around them that guide their own behavior (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Social and personality researchers have extensively studied implicit theories to understand how mindsets contribute to development and identified two distinct mindsets: a fixed-mindset (i.e., beliefs that personal traits are unchangeable) and a growth-mindset (i.e., beliefs that personal traits can be developed; Burnette et al., 2013; Costa & Faria, 2018; Dweck et al., 1995; Dweck, 1996). These mindsets have been found to contribute to a variety of outcomes including academic performance, affect, and resilience in specific contexts (Blackwell et al., 2007; Burnette et al., 2013; Hwang et al., 2019; King, 2017; Yeager et al., 2019; Yaeger & Dweck, 2020). Given the promising findings in various areas of social and personality psychology, the implicit theories framework has been extended to interpersonal contexts such as romantic relationships (Kamrath & Dweck, 2006). To understand how implicit theories could help explain outcomes in romantic relationships, Knee (1998) introduced implicit theories of relationships (ITRs), consisting of two independent belief sets: destiny beliefs and growth beliefs...
which contribute to one’s idea of what constitutes a satisfying and successful romantic relationship.

Destiny beliefs are characterized by a belief in romantic destiny and that romantic partners are either compatible or incompatible (Knee, 1998). Some individuals believe there is only one person or a select few people in the world they are meant to be with to have a satisfying relationship (Franik et al., 2002). Research on ITRs has found that destiny beliefs are positively associated with maladaptive coping strategies and poor conflict resolution patterns (Dovala et al., 2018; Knee, 1998). These findings suggest that those who hold strong destiny beliefs likely view relationship stressors (i.e., conflict) as an indicator that their romantic relationship is not meant to be (Knee et al., 2003). Furthermore, destiny beliefs have also been found to negatively impact relationship satisfaction and commitment (Franik et al., 2002; Knee et al., 2001). For example, Franik et al. (2002) found that participants who adhered to beliefs about romantic destiny were more likely to base their relationship satisfaction on whether they perceived their partner as ideal compared to those who adhered to beliefs about relationship growth (discussed below). Similarly, Knee et al. (2001) found that those who reported high destiny beliefs and low growth beliefs were less satisfied with their romantic relationship as the discrepancy between their ideal partner and actual partner increased. Thus, holding the belief that individuals are meant to find their soulmate to fulfill their romantic destiny may be problematic for romantic relationships. However, it is important to note that destiny beliefs can be beneficial in some contexts. For instance, if one has strong destiny beliefs and perceives their current romantic partner to be their soulmate, they will likely experience high levels of relationship satisfaction (Franik et al., 2002; Knee et al., 2003; Weigel et al., 2016). Further, destiny beliefs may be beneficial if paired with a strong belief in relationship growth (Knee et al., 2003).

Growth beliefs reflect a belief in relationship growth and cultivation as a result of time and experiences (Knee, 1998). Individuals who hold high growth beliefs believe that a satisfying romantic relationship requires continuous work (Franik et al., 2002). Growth beliefs are associated with active coping in response to relationship stressors and can serve as a buffer against the negative impact of conflict on commitment (Knee, 1998; Knee et al., 2001). Those high in growth beliefs and low in destiny beliefs acknowledge the discrepancies between their ideal partner and their actual partner and remain relatively satisfied (Knee et al., 2001). Similarly, Franik et al. (2002) found that compared to those who adhered to beliefs about romantic destiny, those who adhered to beliefs about relationship growth remained satisfied in their relationships regardless of whether they perceived their romantic partner to be ideal. These findings suggest those who hold strong growth beliefs view relationship discrepancies as an opportunity to evolve and believe that effort is critical for satisfying relationships (Franik et al., 2002; Knee et al., 2003). Taken together, growth and destiny beliefs guide individuals to distinct relational goals, attitudes, and feelings, all important for relationship satisfaction (Mattingly et al., 2019).

Although relationship beliefs play an important role in relationship satisfaction, it is not the only factor to consider. Relationship satisfaction is also a product of specific relationship experiences and situational experiences. As emerging adults explore the domain of love, they will continue to shape and adjust their beliefs and expectations based on the experiences they encounter within the relationship and outside the relationship (Brunson et al., 2019; Knee, 1998; Norona et al., 2017). Consequently, individuals’ beliefs about romantic relationships should be considered within the larger socio-ecological context, as these beliefs may influence how one reacts and responds to relationship stress and external stress. Indeed, the socio-ecological model originally proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggests development is a function of influences from a variety of nested systems. As such, guided by a socio-ecological framework, the present study explores relationship satisfaction based on the role of ITRs (an individual-level factor) as well as contextual factors, including criticism within the relationship (a couple-level factor) and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (a societal-level factor).

**Criticism During Conflict**

Emerging adults experience an increase in conflict compared to adolescents (Chen et al., 2006) due to the change and uncertainty associated with emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Schwartz, 2016). Furthermore, it is hypothesized that the stress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic increases the potential for conflict within romantic couples (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). Resolving conflict in unhealthy ways can lead to dissolution (e.g., Birditt et al., 2010; Karney & Bradbury, 1995), poorer physical health (e.g., cardiovascular reactivity; Nealey-Moore et al., 2007), and poorer mental health (e.g., depression; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). One particularly negative way to deal with conflict is through criticism, whereby partners say mean or harsh things to each other, point out each other’s faults, and put each other down (Furman & Buhrmester, 2009). Criticism is a consistent and strong predictor of relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution (Chambliss & Blake, 2009; Gottman, 1993; Shulman et al., 2006) and one’s physical health (i.e., increased risk for heart disease; Smith & Baucom, 2017). Unfortunately, since people’s capacities to take their partner’s perspective and engage in effective problem-solving is reduced during times of the stress (such as the pandemic; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021), romantic partners may be more likely to resort to the use of criticism during conflict.

However, there is some research to suggest growth beliefs may protect against the negative experiences following conflict (Knee et al., 2004). For example, Knee et al. (2001) found that participants reported less commitment following conflict, but that this was reduced for those who held growth
beliefs. Thus, ITRs may play a role in understanding the impact of couple’s conflict resolution patterns yet ITRs remain largely unexplored within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. To address this gap in the literature, we consider the role of criticism (a couple-level factor) on relationship satisfaction, and how it functions within the context of COVID-19 stress and relationship beliefs.

**External Stressors and the COVID-19 Pandemic**

External stressors are sources of stress that originate outside of a relationship that pose a risk for both individual and relational functioning (Randall & Bodenmann, 2017). Stress that originates from external stressors (e.g., family or work problems, illness, unemployment, school; Falconer et al., 2015; Samios & Khatri, 2019) can spillover into one’s romantic relationship (i.e., the spillover hypothesis; Nelson et al., 2009). For example, negative work experiences spill-over and negatively impact romantic experiences (Samios et al., 2014). Thus, external stressors may diminish one’s available psychological resources to meet the demands of a romantic relationship, which can adversely impact relationship satisfaction (Samios & Khatri, 2019).

Though daily external stressors are typical for those in romantic relationships, external stress can also come from large-scale, sociohistorical events, such as natural disasters and global events. Indeed, the impact of societal-level factors on romantic relationship functioning has been well documented. For example, romantic partners’ post-traumatic stress symptoms are negatively associated with relationship quality following an earthquake (Marshall & Kuijer, 2017) and negatively associated with relationship adjustment following massive flooding (Fredman et al., 2010).

A recent example of a large-scale, sociohistorical event is the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly increased the number of external stressors for emerging adults, such as separation from close family and friends, uncertainty about the future, financial hardships, and fear of infection (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). These COVID-19 related stressors may deplete one’s psychological resources to appropriately deal with negative relationship experiences, resulting in adverse experiences in romantic relationships (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021). For example, Luetke et al. (2020) found individuals who reported more COVID-19 related conflict reported decreased intimate and sexual behaviors in their romantic relationships. Similarly, Williamson (2020) found that for couples with lower relationship functioning, satisfaction decreased at the onset of the pandemic (i.e., Winter 2019) and the early stages of the pandemic (i.e., Spring 2020). Yet, in general, Williamson (2020) found relationship satisfaction remained relatively stable. Thus, more research is needed on the role of COVID-19 related stress and its consequential impact on relational outcomes, such as deterioration in relationship satisfaction, within the context of other individual-level and couple-level factors.

Similar to the way relationship beliefs may buffer against declines in commitment and satisfaction following conflict, relationship beliefs may also buffer against the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Neff and Karney (2004) found that spouses’ external stress negatively influenced relationship perceptions, as well the way spouses processed those perceptions, which in turn lowered relationship satisfaction. In a more recent study, Balzarini et al. (2020) found that the extent to which one believes their romantic partner cares about, understands, and validates their thoughts and feelings buffered against the negative relationship between COVID-19 related stressors and relationship quality. Given these findings, we speculate ITRs may moderate the association between relationship (i.e., daily criticism) and external (i.e., COVID-19 pandemic) stressors.

**The Present Study**

The present study examines emerging adults’ relationship satisfaction in the context of individual-level (i.e., ITRs), couple-level (i.e., criticism), and societal-level factors (i.e., COVID-19 pandemic). Examining these factors through a socio-ecological lens will provide us with a more comprehensive understanding of how these factors relate to an important indicator of emerging adults’ romantic relationship functioning: relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, to address the limitations associated with cross-sectional research, we capture emerging adults’ day-to-day interactions and challenges through a short-term longitudinal study including a baseline assessment, a five-day daily diary, and a follow-up assessment one month later.

Individual-level factors such as pre-existing beliefs about the nature of romantic relationships may impact emerging adults’ romantic relationship satisfaction. More specifically, ITRs have been found to predict important relational outcomes including coping strategies and relationship satisfaction (Knee, 1998; Knee et al., 2001). As such, guided by previous research on ITRs, we hypothesize that destiny beliefs assessed at baseline will be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction assessed at follow-up (H1), whereas growth beliefs will be positively associated with relationship satisfaction assessed at follow-up (H2). Alongside individual-level factors, couple-level factors including criticism within a romantic relationship may also impact romantic relationship satisfaction. Because criticism is a type of negative interaction within romantic relationships, we expect criticism during the daily diary period to be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction assessed at follow-up (H3). We also examine the impact of a societal-level factor, COVID-19 related stress. We hypothesize COVID-19 stress assessed at baseline will be negatively associated with satisfaction at follow-up (H4). Past research suggests individual-level, couple-level, and societal-level factors likely have independent associations.
with relationship satisfaction. However, as guided by a socio-ecological framework, we acknowledge these factors do not exist in isolation. Thus, our first aim is to consider the impact of these factors simultaneously, which allows us to estimate the relative impact of individual-level, couple-level, and societal-level stressors on relationship satisfaction.

To fulsomely understand how these factors not only function simultaneously, but to also understand how they interact with one another, our second aim is to explore whether emerging adults’ ITRs serve as a risk or protective factor in response to couple-level and societal-level stressors. We pose that ITRs can guide emerging adults’ view of stressful situations and in turn, impact relationship satisfaction. We hypothesize that growth beliefs will buffer against the negative associations between criticism and relationship satisfaction (H5), whereas destiny beliefs will exacerbate the negative associations between criticism and relationship satisfaction (H6). Similarly, we hypothesize growth beliefs will buffer against the negative associations between COVID-19 stress and relationship satisfaction (H7), whereas destiny beliefs will exacerbate the negative associations between COVID-19 stress and relationship satisfaction (H8).

**Method**

**Participants and Procedure**

Participants included 382 emerging adults. We limited our sample to English-speaking participants, between the ages of 18–29 (M = 25.04, SD = 2.43) in a committed romantic relationship of at least one year (M = 4.39 years, SD = 3.67). The term committed romantic relationship was described to participants in the informed consent as “a dating relationship which you have made official (e.g., you have introduced each other as boyfriend/girlfriend/partner).” Our sample was 74.6% European American, 12.3% Hispanic/Latinos, 8.9% Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, 7.9% African Americans, and 1.3% Native American. Our sample included 267 women, 103 men, and 10 non-binary individuals. One participant preferred not to indicate their gender identity and one other participant selected “other.”

All online procedures were approved by [Removed for Review]’s Institutional Review Board. The study was posted as a series of HITs (human intelligence tasks) through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Participants were informed it was a three-part study (baseline survey, five-day daily surveys, and a follow-up survey) on romantic relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. Informed consent was completed by participants prior to completing the baseline online survey, hosted on Qualtrics. All subsequent surveys were posted as individual HITs, available only to those who completed the baseline survey. The baseline survey included questions regarding demographics, current relationship information, ITRs, COVID-19 stress, and a battery of psychological assessments. A week later, participants completed five, online daily diary surveys. The first daily diary survey was sent on a Thursday and the last survey was sent on a Monday. These surveys included items assessing criticism and participants’ reactions to these interactions. Four weeks later, participants completed a follow-up survey which assessed their relationship satisfaction, as well as a battery of psychological assessments. All data were collected during fall 2021 (September – December) and participants were compensated up to $18 for completing all three parts of the study.

**Measures**

**Implicit theories of relationships (ITRs)**

To assess beliefs about the nature of romantic relationships, participants completed the 22-item Implicit Theories of Relationships (ITR) Scale (Knee et al., 2003) at baseline. This measure consists of two 11-item subscales assessing destiny and growth beliefs. For destiny beliefs, sample items include “to last, a relationship must seem right from the start” and “potential relationship partners are either destined to get along or they are not.” For growth beliefs, sample items include “successful relationships require regular maintenance” and “without conflict from time to time, relationships cannot improve.” All items used a 7-point response scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) and 7 (strongly agree), with higher sum scores on each subscale reflecting a higher adherence of a given belief. Research has demonstrated the internal and external validity of ITR scale (Knee, 1998; Knee et al., 2003; Knee & Petty, 2013). Furthermore, research has suggested that growth and destiny beliefs are better represented as separate unidimensional constructs (Franiuk et al., 2002; Knee, 1998; Knee et al., 2001). The ITR scale has demonstrated good internal reliability for both destiny (α = .82) and growth beliefs (α = .74) in samples of undergraduate students (Knee et al., 2003), and in the current sample (α = .88 for destiny beliefs and α = .82 for growth beliefs).

**Criticism**

To assess criticism within emerging adults’ romantic relationships, we utilized three items from the criticism subscale of the Network of Relationships Inventory (NRI; Furman & Buhrmester, 2009). Participants were instructed to think about their interactions with their romantic partners the day before and rate each item using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (little to none) to 5 (the most). Participants completed this measure during each daily diary survey. A sample item includes “How much do you and this person say mean or harsh things to each other?” Scale scores were derived by adding these items across all days. The NRI is a widely used measure to examine the relation between negative interactions (i.e., criticism) and relationship outcomes such as relationship satisfaction, with negative interactions being negatively associated with relationship satisfaction (Johnson et al., 2018).
Table 1. Bivariate Correlations and Descriptive Statistics.

|       | 1    | 2    | 3    | 4    | 5    |
|-------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 1. Growth beliefs | —    | —    | —    | —    | —    |
| 2. Destiny beliefs | .002 | —    | —    | —    | —    |
| 3. COVID-19 fear | —.02 | .08  | —    | —    | —    |
| 4. Criticism      | .04  | .07  | —.03 | —    | —    |
| 5. Relationship satisfaction | .06  | .00  | —.04 | —.23** | —    |
| M (SD)           | 57.47 (9.28) | 41.46 (11.29) | 15.14 (6.54) | 11.24 (6.17) | 28.80 (6.08) |

Note. This table presents the bivariate correlations for all variables of interest, as well as the mean and standard deviations. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

The NRI’s negative interaction scale has also demonstrated good internal reliability (α = .90 for entire scale and α = .76 for conflict) among romantic partners. Similarly, in the current sample, the scale showed good internal reliability across all five days (α = .82-.92).

COVID-19 stress

To assess COVID-19 stress, participants completed an adapted version (Perz et al., 2022) of the original Fear of COVID-19 scale (Ahorsu et al., 2020) during both baseline and follow-up periods. This adapted version was validated in a sample of U.S. college students and includes more colloquial language for college students (e.g., “I am afraid of losing my life because of coronavirus-19”). The items in this scale measured participants’ level of worry about COVID-19. Participants rated 7 items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher sum scores indicating greater concern regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the items included was “I cannot sleep because I’m worrying about getting coronavirus-19.” The Fear of COVID-19 scale previously demonstrated excellent internal consistency in a U.S. college student sample (α = .91). Similarly, in the current sample, the Fear of COVID-19 scale demonstrated good internal reliability during the baseline assessment (α = .91).

Relationship satisfaction

Romantic relationship satisfaction was assessed during the follow-up survey using the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988). The RAS is a 7-item measure with a 5-point response scale. Sample items include “how well does your partner meet your needs?” and “in general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?” All items were summed to produce a total score of relationship satisfaction. A higher score on the RAS suggests higher relationship satisfaction. This measure has been used to assess perceived relationship satisfaction among college students’ romantic relationships (Sanderson & Evans, 2001; Zimmer-Gembeck & Petherick, 2006). Furthermore, the internal consistency of the RAS is high (α = .86) (Hendrick, 1988; Vaughn & Baier, 1999). For the present sample, the RAS demonstrated good internal reliability during the follow-up assessment (α = .91).

Analysis Plan

First, we examined the descriptive statistics and bivariate associations among all variables (see Table 1). Next, a series of path analysis models were conducted in Mplus v8.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). Specifically, we first tested the association between relationship satisfaction and individual-level factors, couple-level factors, and societal-level factors in three separate models. The first model tested whether destiny beliefs assessed at baseline were negatively associated with relationship satisfaction assessed at follow-up (H1) and whether growth beliefs were positively associated with relationship satisfaction (H2). A second model tested whether criticism during the daily diary period was negatively associated with satisfaction at follow-up (H3). A third model tested whether COVID-19 stress at baseline was negatively associated with satisfaction at follow-up (H4).

After conducting these initial tests for direct effects, a fourth model integrated all previous models to reflect individual-level factors, couple-level factors, and societal-level factors and the socio-ecological framework. This model allowed us to estimate the relative impact of individual-level, couple, level, and societal-level stressors on relationship satisfaction.

Our second aim was to examine whether growth beliefs and destiny beliefs buffer against or exacerbate the negative impact of criticism and COVID-19 stress on relationship satisfaction, which we tested using two path models in Mplus. Specifically, the first model tested whether growth beliefs and destiny beliefs moderated the association between criticism and relationship satisfaction such that growth beliefs buffered against the negative association between criticism and relationship satisfaction (H5) and whether destiny beliefs exacerbated the negative association between criticism and relationship satisfaction (H6). The second model tested whether growth beliefs and destiny beliefs moderated the association between COVID-19 stress and relationship satisfaction such that growth beliefs buffered against the negative association between COVID-19 stress and relationship satisfaction (H7) and whether destiny beliefs exacerbated the
negative association between COVID-19 stress and relationship satisfaction (H8). All interactions were created using the define command in Mplus. All missing data were estimated using full information maximum likelihood.

**Results**

**Descriptive Statistics**

All descriptive statistics and correlations between measures are reported in Table 1. In general, there were no significant correlations between destiny beliefs, growth beliefs, COVID-19 fear, and relationship satisfaction. However, criticism assessed during the daily diary period was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction during the follow-up assessment.

**Aim 1**

First, separate models were used to test the unique associations for each level of influence (i.e., individual-level factors, couple-level factors, and societal-level factors). Specifically, one path analysis model was used to test whether destiny beliefs were negatively associated with relationship satisfaction (H1) and growth beliefs were positively associated with relationship satisfaction (H2). A correlation between growth and destiny beliefs was also included to account for the potential shared variance between the two. Contrary with our expectations, neither destiny beliefs (β = .01, SE = .07, p = .93) nor growth beliefs (β = .07, SE = .08, p = .35) were significantly associated with relationship satisfaction one month later. In addition, growth beliefs and destiny beliefs were not significant associated with each other (β = .002, SE = .05, p = .97). Similarly, one path model was used to test whether criticism during the daily diary period was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction one month later (H3). Consistent with our hypothesis, criticism showed a significant negative association with relationship satisfaction (β = -.23, SE = .07, p = .001). Finally, one path model was used to test whether COVID-19 stress was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction (H4). Contrary to our hypotheses, COVID-19 stress was not significantly associated with relationship satisfaction (β = -.04, SE = .07, p = .59).

Next, an integrated model with all predictors was used to examine the relative influence of individual-level factors, couple-level factors, and societal-level factors (see Figure 1). Though the integrated model explained some variance in romantic relationship satisfaction ($R^2 = .07$, $p = .06$), contrary to our expectations, only criticism was significantly associated with relationship satisfaction. Criticism was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction, such that high levels of criticism were associated with low levels of relationship satisfaction.

**Aim 2**

Next, we tested whether growth and destiny beliefs moderated the association between criticism and relationship satisfaction, such that growth beliefs buffer against the negative associations between criticism and relationship satisfaction (H5) and destiny beliefs exacerbate the negative associations between criticism and relationship satisfaction (H6). Consistent with hypotheses, path analysis models showed growth beliefs buffered against the negative impact of criticism (β = .16, SE = .08, $p < .05$) on relationship satisfaction, such that those with low growth beliefs showed a negative association between criticism and romantic relationship satisfaction, but those with high growth beliefs showed a non-significant association between criticism and relationship satisfaction. However, contrary to hypotheses, destiny beliefs did not moderate the

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**Figure 1.** Integrated Path Model with Individual-level, Couple-level, and Societal-level Factors. Note. For each path, standardized betas are reported, with standard errors in parentheses. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.
association between criticism and relationship satisfaction ($\beta = .03, SE = .08, p = .74$). Moreover, the model explained a significant amount of variance in relationship satisfaction ($R^2 = .09, p = .03$).

Finally, we tested whether growth and destiny beliefs moderated the association between COVID-19 stress and relationship satisfaction, such that growth beliefs buffer against the negative associations between COVID-19 stress (H7) and destiny beliefs exacerbate the negative associations between COVID-19 stress and relationship satisfaction (H8). Though the model explained a significant amount of variance in relationship satisfaction ($R^2 = .09, p = .04$), contrary to hypotheses, neither growth beliefs ($\beta = .07, SE = .08, p = .39$) nor destiny beliefs ($\beta = .08, SE = .07, p = .26$) moderated the association between COVID-19 stress and relationship satisfaction.

**Discussion**

Using a socio-ecological theoretical framework, the present study investigated how emerging adults’ ITRs, criticism, and COVID-19 stress contributed to their relationship satisfaction. We adopted a novel approach by capturing daily criticism and external stress within the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. More importantly, we examined whether one’s relationship beliefs buffered or exacerbated the negative associations between criticism and COVID-19 stress and emerging adults’ relationship satisfaction. We found partial support for our hypotheses, as criticism was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, we found that high levels of growth beliefs buffered against the negative impact of criticism on relationship satisfaction. However, growth beliefs, destiny beliefs, and COVID-19 stress showed no significant direct associations with relationship satisfaction.

One of our aims was to examine the associations between ITRs and romantic relationship satisfaction. Previous work (Franiuk et al., 2002; Knee et al., 2001) has demonstrated a negative correlation between destiny beliefs and relationship satisfaction and a positive correlation between growth beliefs and relationship satisfaction. Though we expected our findings to be consistent with this work, we found no significant direct associations between ITRs and relationship satisfaction. One plausible explanation for the lack of direct associations between ITRs and relationship satisfaction may be related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Current theoretical frameworks (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021) explaining relational processes during the COVID-19 pandemic have yet to consider the role of pre-existing attitudes and beliefs about the nature of romantic relationships. Therefore, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, other factors such as social support or negative interactions (e.g., criticism) may directly impact relationship satisfaction more than one’s relationship beliefs. Rather, it could be these pre-existing beliefs may provide insight to how adaptive relationship processes work. Indeed, we found that growth beliefs buffered against the negative impact of criticism on relationship satisfaction.

Our finding that criticism was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction is consistent with previous empirical research (e.g., Chambless & Blake, 2009). We also found that individuals low in growth beliefs showed a negative association between criticism and romantic relationship satisfaction, but those high in growth beliefs (e.g., those who endorsed items such as “successful relationships require regular maintenance” and “without conflict from time to time, relationships cannot improve”) showed a non-significant association between criticism and relationship satisfaction. Thus, high growth beliefs buffered against the negative impacts of criticism on relationship satisfaction. This finding is also in line with previously mentioned theoretical research (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2021), which suggests that in order to effectively navigate stress and relationship problems during the COVID-19 pandemic, couples need to view themselves as a team, invest in problem-solving, work through problems when they are not depleted, see the stress of Covid as their problem (as opposed to their relationship in and of itself). Because individuals high in growth beliefs are more likely to employ these strategies, it is not surprising that we observed a buffering effect between criticism and relationship satisfaction. These findings suggest ITRs interact with relationship processes (i.e., conflict management), which in turn impacts relationship quality (i.e., relationship satisfaction).

Contrary to our hypothesis, there was not a significant negative association between COVID-19 stress and relationship satisfaction. Our findings are not in line with previous research suggesting external stressors may spill over into one’s romantic life and negatively impact romantic relationship functioning (spillover hypothesis; Shulman et al., 2014). This finding is surprising given that recent research examining the role of the COVID-19 pandemic on romantic relationship functioning suggest adverse relationship outcomes (Luette et al., 2020). However, in line with Williamson’s (2020) findings, it may be that those with lower relationship functioning (e.g., criticism, low growth beliefs) are more at risk for lower relationship satisfaction during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, it is possible that at the time of our data collection (Fall 2021), stress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic was lower than at the onset of the pandemic. This is evident as we captured the aftermath of the first vaccination round (September – December 2021) with case numbers declining, schools resuming in-person classes, and decreasing safety regulations in some places (i.e., no masks indoors and/or outdoors if vaccinated). In addition, there is evidence to suggest that the experience of the pandemic has changed over time (Orfei et al., 2022). In our sample, the average for COVID-19 stress was a score of 15.14, though the possible range for stress was from 0 – 35. Consequently, COVID-19 stress was arguably low in our sample. Thus, it is likely that the impact of COVID-19 stress on relationship satisfaction may change over the course of the pandemic, depending on the larger societal context. Last, the nonsignificant associations between COVID-19 stress and relationship satisfaction may
also be related to our measures not capturing other specific COVID-19 related stressors such as isolation, financial instability, and family members contracting the virus. More specifically, emerging adults’ fear may not be directly related to COVID-19 infection. Rather, more indicative COVID-19 related stressors for this age group may be interruptions in social interactions, school, and work (Halliburton et al., 2021). Further, because emerging adults have been shown to have a lower risk for serious COVID-19 infection and mortality (Hu et al., 2021), this may lead to less fear of COVID-19 infection overall, thus, not impacting their relationship satisfaction.

Implications

The present study demonstrated that although ITRs may not directly impact relationship satisfaction, they may play a role in adaptive relationship processes. As found in the present study, growth beliefs buffered against the negative impact of criticism on relationship satisfaction such that those with high growth beliefs did not show a significant association between criticism and satisfaction. In contrast, individuals with low growth beliefs showed a negative association between criticism and satisfaction. It is possible that one’s beliefs and expectations about the nature of romantic relationships may change in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, if stress is high during the pandemic, expectations for relationship partners may alter, which can have a (negative or positive) impact on romantic relationship functioning. Holding a belief that romantic relationships grow stronger in the face of challenging situations may be conducive to one’s romantic relationship functioning, whereas meeting expectations of destiny beliefs (e.g., relationship partners are either destined to get along or they are not) may be particularly challenging amidst the stress of a pandemic. These findings emphasize the importance of developing a wholistic understanding of relationship satisfaction during the pandemic, as both individual-level and couple-level factors played a role in relationship satisfaction. Moreover, these factors interacted with one another, highlighting the importance of considering how characteristics of the individual and characteristics of the couple affect one another. Therefore, not only do we need to consider factors at various levels, but also how they may interact with one another.

As previously mentioned, our findings suggest growth beliefs are a protective factor that have the potential to transform potentially negative relationship events (e.g., conflict) into opportunities to re-affirm the relationship. As suggested by Pietromonaco and Overall (2021), couples should learn to approach conflict as a team, seeing it as an opportunity to engage in problem-solving. Importantly, it can be helpful to view the problem as external to the relationship (e.g., the problem is the COVID-19 pandemic and associated stressors) which can further help couples come together as a team to tackle the problem. It is critical to also engage in conflict resolution when one (or both) partners are not depleted (Buck & Neff, 2012). To this end, it can be helpful to set aside time to discuss issues when both partners feel capable of having a difficult conversation (i.e., well rested, not directly after a recent COVID-19 restriction announcement that is increasing stress). It can also be useful to take breaks when needed, knowing not all problems need to be addressed or fixed in one discussion. Thus, there are many ways to leverage growth beliefs within a couple to help buffer the potential negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated stressors that have been identified in previous research (e.g., mental health, communication patterns; Fleming & Franzese, 2021; (Germani et al., 2020) Luetke et al., 2020)

Limitations and Future Directions

Though our longitudinal findings offer important insights for how growth beliefs can buffer against the negative impact of criticism on relationship satisfaction amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, these findings should be considered in light of the study’s limitations. First, our data were collected through online surveys hosted on Mturk. Though we employed CloudResearch’s tools to recruit a more diverse and representative sample, our sample does not represent a true random sample. As such, our findings are limited in their generalizability, especially as all participants need a reliable internet connection to complete our study.

Second, all constructs were assessed using single-informant self-report data. These data are an important first step in understanding the multi-level impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on emerging adults’ romantic relationships, but our findings can only speak to these individual’s perceptions of their own relationship beliefs, criticism within their romantic relationship, fear of COVID-19, and relationship satisfaction. Given the dyadic nature of romantic relationships, assessing criticism and romantic relationships satisfaction from both romantic partners would provide a more nuanced understanding of the associations between constructs. As such, future research on romantic functioning during the COVID-19 pandemic should strive to include dyadic data, which would allow us to examine whether partners are perceiving similar levels of criticism and satisfaction within the relationship. In addition, dyadic data would allow us to examine specific actor and partner effects. For example, it could be that one’s partner’s fear of COVID-19 has a direct or indirect impact on one’s own relationship satisfaction. It is possible that a partner’s fear of COVID-19 could promote relationship satisfaction (e.g., Rodrigues & Lehmiller, 2021) or undermine satisfaction.

A third limitation is our measure of COVID fear. Though the original measure (Ahorsu et al., 2020) and the adapted measure for college students (Perz et al., 2022) have been validated, the items reflect high levels of COVID-19 fear (e.g., I am very afraid of coronavirus-19; I cannot sleep because I’m worrying about getting coronavirus-19). As such, high scores on this measure could be rare and are likely related to general levels of anxiety. Indeed, anxiety demonstrates a significant positive association with fear of COVID-19 scores (Perz et al.,
Future research should consider possible interaction effects, as it is possible that fear of COVID-19 impacts relationships satisfaction for those anxiety or other comorbidities. It is also possible that individuals’ fear of COVID-19 has varied throughout the course of the pandemic (and will continue to change with access to vaccines and in response to emerging variants), which could explain why mean COVID-19 fear scores in our sample (15.14) were slightly lower than mean scores reported in the initial validation studies (e.g., 18.1 in Perz et al., 2022). Thus, as this area of research grows, it will be useful to examine trends over time by using meta-analytic techniques, which could explore whether the effect sizes in published and open-access research vary over the course of the pandemic. However, as mentioned above, the mean scores of our sample likely reflect emerging adults are less fearful of COVID-19 because they are at lower risk for serious COVID-19 infection and mortality (Hu et al., 2021). Assessing more concrete examples of stress (e.g., financial stress, isolation, loved one’s battling illness), as opposed to fear, may be more relevant for understanding relationship functioning in emerging adulthood. As discussed by Pietromonaco and Overall (2021), these external stressors, as opposed to general fear of COVID-19, could exacerbate individual vulnerabilities (e.g., anxiety) and increase negative dyadic interactions, thereby reducing relationships satisfaction. More generally, this measure only assesses individuals’ perceptions of a societal problem (COVID-19). The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted societies in a myriad of ways and alternative measures are needed to capture these effects at a societal level.

Conclusions

Our study builds upon existing literature on emerging adults’ romantic relationship functioning during the COVID-19 pandemic in a novel way by using a socio-ecological framework to consider the impact of individual-, couple-, and societal-level factors on relationship satisfaction simultaneously. In addition to offering a more comprehensive view on relationship satisfaction, the use of a short-term longitudinal design allowed us to capture criticism more accurately across five days. This study provides further support for the negative associations between criticism and relationship satisfaction. Consistent with previous research on ITRs, our findings also confirm the importance of holding growth beliefs to mitigate the negative impact of negative relationship events (e.g., criticism) on romantic relationship functioning. As the state of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to change and presents new external stressors (e.g., new variants, shifting school and work modalities), future research should continue to examine the contexts in which ITRs serve as risk and/or protective factors for romantic relationship functioning. In addition, future research should examine whether informing emerging adults of the associations between relationship beliefs and romantic relationship functioning alters the way they think about their relationships.

Author Contributions

Smith, J contributed to conception and design contributed to acquisition drafted manuscript critically revised manuscript gave final approval agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy Figueroa, J contributed to conception and design contributed to acquisition, analysis, and interpretation drafted manuscript critically revised manuscript gave final approval agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy DeLuca Bishop, H contributed to conception and design contributed to acquisition, analysis, and interpretation drafted manuscript critically revised manuscript gave final approval agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy Baker, E contributed to conception contributed to analysis and interpretation drafted manuscript critically revised manuscript gave final approval agrees to be accountable for all aspects of work ensuring integrity and accuracy.

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Open Practices

The raw data, analysis code, and materials used in this study are not openly available but are available upon request to the corresponding author. The data collection and analysis were not pre-registered.

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