

# The Association Between Autonomy Need Satisfaction and Perceived Romantic Relationship Quality: The Mediating Role of Openness

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## Abstract

One of the most critical developmental tasks during the university years is to develop close romantic relationships. The quality of the relationship established is as important as the existence of these relationships. In this study, a model that examines the mediating role of openness in the association of autonomy need satisfaction and perceived romantic relationship quality among emerging adults was tested. The study group consisted of 510 university students. A personal information form, the Fulfillment Scale of the Needs in Romantic Relationships, the Relationship Maintenance Strategies Scale, and the Perceived Romantic Relationship Quality Scale were used to collect data. The initial analyses showed that there were positive and significant correlations between autonomy needs satisfaction, openness, and perceived relationship quality. In addition, the emerging adults whose autonomy needs were met were more open in their close relationships and, as a result, had a higher level of perceived romantic relationship quality.

## Keywords

emerging adults, autonomy need satisfaction, perceived relationship quality, openness, cultural perceptions

## Introduction

Close relationship quality is one of the greatest sources of happiness and well-being for people in many communities around the world, whether in Western cultures (Beckmeyer & Cromwell, 2019; Saphier-Bernstein & Taylor, 2013) or Eastern cultures (Fok & Cheng, 2018; Li & Cheng, 2015). According to social convoy theory, the hierarchy of individuals' close relationships changes according to developmental periods (Levitt, 1991). For example, developing close and intimate romantic relationships with others is one of the most critical tasks in transitioning from adolescence to emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). During emerging adulthood (approximately 18–29 years of age), romantic relationships are experienced more than during other periods (Roberson et al., 2017). These experiences are important for young people to get to know themselves and discover what kind of person they want in their lives. In other words, romantic relationships in the lives of individuals appear to contribute to their identity development as well as to meeting their need for closeness (Arnett, 2004). Romantic relationship experiences, which play a central role in the identity discovery of emerging adults, are also decisive in discovering the meaning of life (Maysseless & Keren, 2014). These are

important sources of emotional connection and contribute to the development of a positive self-concept (Furman & Collibee, 2014). Successfully establishing and maintaining romantic relationships has important repercussions in later stages of life (Arnett et al., 2014). Young people during this period seek companionship, emotional security, closeness, and love in their romantic relationships in order to be ready for long-term relationships (Simon & Barrett, 2010). The quality of emerging adults' romantic relationships and the support they receive from these relationships increase their psychological and emotional well-being, as well as their physical health (Kansky & Allen, 2018; Kiecolt-Glaser, 2018; Özdemir & Demir, 2019). Recent research shows that it is very

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important for emerging adults to develop and maintain close relationships with other people for romantic relationships (Arnett, 2006; Barry et al., 2009; Barzeva et al., 2021).

### *Self-Determination Theory in Romantic Relationships*

Recent studies on the processes of maintaining relationships have been examined from the perspective of self-determination theory, taking into account motivational foundations (Goodboy et al., 2022; Kluwer et al., 2020). According to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000), individuals have three basic needs, namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness, necessary for their well-being and personal development. The need for competence is the feeling of being able and effective in achieving desired outcomes (Reis et al., 2016) and coping with the environment (Ingledeu et al., 2004). Individuals who experience a sense of competence believe that they will successfully achieve their goals (Williams et al., 2002). The relatedness need includes the need to feel understood by others and to feel connected to them (Patrick, 2014). This need ensures that the individual has close and connected relationships with important people in their life (Reis et al., 2016) and feels support and satisfaction in their relationships (Ingledeu et al., 2004). Finally, autonomy refers to the individual's actions being self-determined, freely choosing behaviors that are compatible with their needs, and engaging in behaviors that are entirely approved by themselves rather than being under pressure (Deci & Ryan, 1985b, 2000; Weinstein et al., 2016). This definition emphasizes the uniqueness of choices and behaviors that are compatible with the individual's needs; careful, deep-thinking awareness of these needs; and the social environment's capacity to support them. Therefore, according to self-determination theory, fulfillment of the autonomy need plays a more critical role than that of other needs (Uysal, 2015).

Research shows that the fulfillment of needs plays an important role in the context of close relationships (Goodboy et al., 2022; Kluwer et al., 2020; La Guardia et al., 2000). For example, there is a positive significant relationship between the fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs and secure attachment (La Guardia et al., 2000) and emotional attachment in close relationships (Ryan et al., 2005). At the same time, the fulfillment of these psychological needs predicts general well-being (Eryılmaz & Doğan, 2013; Reis et al., 2016) and relationship quality (Patrick et al., 2007; Sağkal & Özdemir, 2019). As a result of Niemiec's (2010) research involving emerging adults, it was determined that contextual support for autonomy creates openness between couples and facilitates the development of high-quality relationships. When individuals support their own and their partners' autonomy, they regard such situations as opportunities for new learning and development, rather than seeing conflicts and differences in perspectives as threats to their own ego. Individuals whose need for autonomy is met in romantic

relationships are more open and accept the differences between them and their partners (Knee et al., 2002). Individuals who experience the fulfillment of more needs in their romantic relationships are less defensive and more understanding in conflicts and disagreements because they feel more autonomous in their relationships (Knee et al., 2005; Patrick et al., 2007). In addition, fulfillment of the autonomy need is also positively related to positive social interactions and coping strategies necessary to maintain the relationship (Knee et al., 2002). Individuals with higher autonomy are more supportive in their relationships (Hadden et al., 2015, 2017). Moreover, the satisfaction of autonomy needs in relationships promotes flexibility, honesty, uniqueness, awareness of needs, and openness (Hodgins & Knee, 2002). All of these factors are associated with relational well-being and satisfaction with relationships, and likely facilitate longer-term relationships (Niemiec, 2010).

### *Maintenance Strategies in Relationships - Openness*

One of the primary goals of relationship science is to understand factors that support healthy relationships and promote relationship maintenance (Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013). Scientists have drawn on the investment model (Rusbult et al., 1994), mutual interdependence theory (Dainton, 2000), and equity theory (Canary & Stafford, 1992) to conceptualize relationship maintenance. Four common definitions are used to conceptualize relationship maintenance: preserving the existence of a relationship, keeping a relationship in a stable state, keeping a relationship satisfying, and repairing a relationship (Dindia, 2003; Guerrero & Chavez, 2005).

The best-known perspective on relationship maintenance behaviors consists of Stafford & Canary, 1991 work based on equity theory. According to that theory, if the investments made in the relationship and the responsibilities taken are equal, the satisfaction levels of the partners increase, which supports the maintenance of the relationship and an increase in commitment to the relationship (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Hatfield et al., 1985; Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013; Ragsdale, 1996; Sprecher & Schwartz, 1994; Stafford & Canary, 1991). Stafford and Canary (1991) developed five typologies of relationship maintenance behaviors: (a) positivity (communicating with joyful and positive emotions), (b) openness (self-disclosure and meta-relational communication), (c) assurances (commitment, love, and loyalty), (d) social networks (being with friends to provide support and make the relationship fun), and (e) task sharing (responsibilities fulfilled for the functioning of the relationship) (Canary & Stafford, 1992). The use of these strategies contributes to maintenance of the relationship and affects its dynamics. It is stated that in romantic relationships partners mostly use the openness strategy to increase closeness to each other (Hess et al., 2007). Openness can direct the quality and dynamics of the relationship in a functional and healthy way. The use of the openness strategy in maintaining relationships predicts

commitment, satisfaction, and relationship quality (Canary & Stafford, 1992), as well as helping to protect the relationship from the negative consequences of stressful life events (Williams, 2019).

Openness contributes to the durability and longevity of relationships by allowing couples to discuss their feelings about the relationship directly, openly, and in a non-defensive manner (Canary & Stafford, 1992). Since relationship quality and satisfaction depend on the amount of effort both partners spend to maintain open communication (Canary & Stafford, 1992), it may be beneficial for couples to have open communication in their routine lives. In addition, sharing one's feelings and thoughts openly with one's partner can reduce relational distress (Reiter & Gee, 2008). Openness helps partners understand each other by encouraging them to talk about their current relationship status and the future of the relationship (Williams, 2019). Uncertainties can cause anxiety, stress, and intolerance in individuals (Brosschot et al., 2016; Buhr & Dugas, 2002). The use of the openness strategy in relationships can clarify ambiguous situations, so that partners can have an idea about the status and course of their relationship. It has also been determined that openness not only enables couples to feel understood by the other during conflict, but also has a protective function against the negative effects of conflict on relationship satisfaction (Gordon & Chen, 2016). As a result of a study conducted by Ogan (2021) with emerging adults, it was revealed that the strongest variable predicting openness is satisfaction in romantic relationships. As a result of another study, conducted by Reiter and Gee (2008), it was determined that there was a positive relationship between young people's open communication with their partners and the quality of their romantic relationships. The type, stage, and quality of relationships are also considered to be important in determining the level of use of relationship maintenance strategies (Anderegg et al., 2014; Büyüksahin, 2006; Hasta & Büyüksahin, 2006; Ogan, 2021; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 1999). Therefore, examining the perceived level of romantic relationship quality is important.

### *Perceived Romantic Relationship Quality*

Perceived Romantic Relationship Quality refers to the level of quality individuals perceive in their romantic relationships as a result of their broad and comprehensive evaluations of their relationships (Chen, 2015). While Fincham and Bradbury (1987) assess marital quality using the concepts of marital harmony, satisfaction, agreement, and marital success, Fletcher et al. (2000) evaluate relationship quality via the concepts of satisfaction, dedication, trust, intimacy, passion, and love. In a romantic relationship, if the perceived levels of satisfaction, dedication, trust, intimacy, passion, and love are high, the perceived quality of the romantic relationship is also high (Fletcher et al., 2000). Research shows that relationship quality can also be defined as having more positive or

beneficial romantic experiences compared to negative or potentially harmful experiences in a relationship (Collins, 2003; Collins et al., 2009). Low-quality relationships are characterized by anger, hostility, and high levels of conflict or controlling behavior between partners (Galliher et al., 2004). In contrast, high-quality relationships are characterized by partners expressing closeness and supportive behavior toward each other (Collins et al., 2009). As romantic relationship quality increases, individuals' levels of happiness (Demir, 2008; Emery et al., 2015), sexual satisfaction (van den Brink et al., 2018), positive emotions (Meyer et al., 2015), and subjective well-being (Eryılmaz & Doğan, 2013) also increase.

In relationships with high quality, individuals are seen to be more focused on their partners and develop a behavior style that is beneficial to them (Van Lange et al., 1997). Although perceived romantic relationship quality is thought to differ by gender, in a study where individuals' and their partners' evaluations of their relationship quality were taken into account, no differences were found in men's and women's evaluations of their relationships' quality (Kenny & Acitelli, 2001). Sabatelli (1988) emphasizes that relationship quality can be addressed by integrating subjective and objective evaluations made regarding the relationship. At this point, the difficulty in objectively evaluating individuals' current relationships constitutes a limitation in evaluating perceived relationship quality. Limited experience in romantic relationships established in emerging adulthood can also make it difficult to evaluate the relationship. Therefore, the amount and quality of the information observed in relationships established at a young age and the level of perception of this information are important in evaluating relationship quality (Gagné & Lydon, 2004).

*Present Study.* Developmental tasks of emerging adulthood include continuing to discover one's self-identity, continuing to become autonomous from one's family of origin, and making decisions about love and work (Arnett, 2000, 2014). In a longitudinal study conducted with emerging adults, Cohen et al. (2000) show that despite the romantic instability observed during this period, young people eventually move towards commitment to a long-term relationship. It is thought that determining the factors that contribute to the development of healthy romantic relationships among young people in the emerging adulthood period is very important for public mental health.

When studies conducted in recent years on this subject are examined, it is seen that research has been conducted on the satisfaction of basic psychological needs in romantic relationships (Eryılmaz & Doğan, 2013; Goodboy et al., 2022; Kluwer et al., 2020; La Guardia et al., 2000; Niemiec, 2010; Patrick et al., 2007; Ryan et al., 2005; Sağkal & Özdemir, 2019). According to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), individuals should feel that they are freely choosing their actions rather than feeling coerced or pressured by

others. Autonomy emphasizes the originality of behaviors and choices compatible with one's own needs (Weinstein et al., 2016), and this approach also supports relationship maintenance behaviors (Patrick et al., 2007). Individuals whose need for autonomy is met in romantic relationships behave more openly (Knee et al., 2002). Openness, one strategy for maintaining the relationship, increases relationship satisfaction and quality (Ogan, 2021; Reiter & Gee, 2008). An examination of the literature revealed no research that investigates these three variables together regarding the satisfaction of the need for autonomy in romantic relationships, openness, and perceived romantic relationship satisfaction during emerging adulthood. For this reason, it is thought that the results of the present research will provide more information on the subject and contribute to the literature.

In light of all this information, the aim of the present study was to examine the mediating role of openness in the correlation between autonomy need satisfaction and perceived romantic relationship quality. For this purpose, the following hypotheses were formulated:

**H1.** Autonomy need satisfaction is positively associated with perceived romantic relationship quality among emerging adults.

**H2.** Autonomy need satisfaction positively associated with openness among emerging adults.

**H3.** Openness positively associated with perceived romantic relationship quality among emerging adults.

**H4.** Openness mediates the connection between autonomy need satisfaction and perceived romantic relationship quality among emerging adults when age, gender and relationship duration are controlled.

The hypothesized model is presented in Figure 1. As seen in the figure, we hypothesized that higher levels of autonomy need satisfaction would promote higher levels of openness, which in turn would promote higher levels of perceived romantic relationship quality.

## Method

### Participants

The aim was to examine the mediating effect of openness between emerging adults' autonomy need satisfaction and their perceived romantic relationship quality. The relational scanning method in the descriptive scanning model was used. For this purpose, the scales, for which permission was obtained, were applied to undergraduate students studying at Dokuz Eylül University and İzmir Democracy University. After the applications were completed, 62 students who were not in a relationship and 18 students whose relationship duration was shorter than 6 months (as it was thought that this would not reflect relationship maintenance behavior) were excluded from the research. The relationship duration of the

other participants varied between 6 months and 3 years. As a result, all participants were heterosexual and have been in a romantic relationship for at least 6 months. None of them are married or engaged. Descriptive information about the participants in the study is presented in Table 1.

The participants of the study consisted of 510 heterosexual undergraduate students, 272 of whom were female (53.3%) and 238 were male (46.7%), between the ages of 20 and 25 ( $M = 22.4$ ,  $SD = 1.6$ ), attending various departments of Dokuz Eylül University and İzmir Democracy University in the 2022–2023 academic year. 21% of the participants have had a romantic relationship lasting 6 months, 29.8% for 1 year, 27.8% for 2 years, and 21.4% for 3 years.

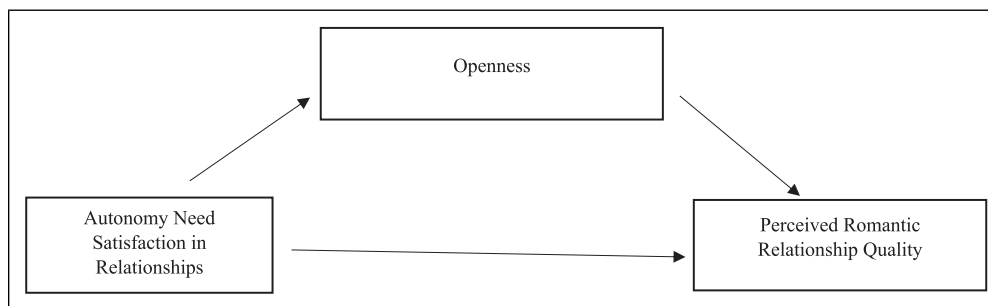
### Data Collection Tools

**Personal Information Form.** This was designed by the researchers to collect information about the participants' age, gender, and relationship duration.

**Romantic Relationship Needs Satisfaction Scale.** The Needs Satisfaction Scale, developed by La Guardia et al. (2000), was used to measure needs satisfaction in romantic relationships. It consists of nine items, three for each of the subscales of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The scale is a Likert-type scale rated from 1 (Not at all true) to 7 (Completely true). The scale was adapted to Turkish by Ozdemir & Sagkal, (2017). The internal consistency coefficient of the scale was calculated as .85. In the present study, only the autonomy subscale of the scale was used, and the internal consistency coefficient determined for the autonomy subscale was .83.

**The Relationship Maintenance Strategies Scale.** The Relationship Maintenance Strategies Scale (RMSS), developed by Canary and Stafford (1992), consists of a total of 29 items. The scale items are rated on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (neither agree nor disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The scale has five subscales, namely positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, and task sharing (Canary & Stafford, 1992). The Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the scale were found to be .86 for openness (Canary & Stafford, 1992). The scale was adapted to Turkish by Öz Soysal et al. (2019), and the reliability coefficients were found to be .96 for openness (Öz Soysal et al., 2019). In the present study, only the openness subscale of the scale was used, and the internal consistency coefficient determined for the openness subscale was .81.

**Perceived Romantic Relationship Quality Scale.** Fletcher et al. (2000) recommend using items 1, 4, 7, 10, 13, and 16 from the Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory (PRQC) to measure the perceived general romantic relationship quality instead of using the entire inventory. Participants rate items related to their current partners and relationships on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = Not at all; 7 = Very



**Figure 1.** The hypothesized model in the study. Note: Age, gender and relationship duration are controlled.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics of the Participants.

Variables		<i>n</i>	%	$\bar{X}$	SD
Gender	Female	272	53.3	22.4	1.6
	Male	238	46.7		
Age	20	83	16.3		
	21	90	17.6		
	22	93	18.2		
	23	81	15.9		
	24	92	18.0		
	25	71	13.9		
Relationship duration	6 months	107	21.0	2.7	1.8
	1 year	152	29.8		
	2 years	142	27.8		
	3 years	109	21.4		
Total		510			

much). The scale was adapted to Turkish by [Sağkal and Özdemir \(2019\)](#). The internal consistency coefficient of the scale was calculated as .86 ([Sağkal & Özdemir, 2019](#)). In the present study, the reliability coefficient of the scale was calculated as .71.

**Process**

Before the data collection process, permission to conduct the research was obtained from the Izmir Democracy University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee (Protocol no: 2022/97; Acceptance date: 01/11/2022, Decision no: 2020/11-05). Subsequently, the research topic was announced in the classes where the faculty members were teaching. The research was shared in classroom WhatsApp groups and social media accounts, and volunteer participants were asked to fill out the forms and share the scales. The personal information form and permission to use the scales were uploaded to an online platform. Participants who accessed the shared link were directed to an informed consent page containing information on the purpose of the research, privacy, and voluntariness. Those who marked the “I agree to participate in the research” option were able to access the scales within the research scope. The completion of the form and scales took approximately 20 min.

**Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were used to determine the characteristics of the participants and the internal consistency of the scales in the study, and the correlations between variables were analyzed using SPSS 24 (IBM Corp., 2015). Normal distribution indicators were analyzed using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov and Shapiro–Wilk tests. The results of these tests, which were expected to yield insignificant values, were significant for all variables. Therefore, another method for testing normal distribution, skewness and kurtosis values, was examined. According to [Kline \(2011\)](#), a skewness value of  $\pm 3.00$  and a kurtosis value of  $\pm 1.00$  or less indicate normal distribution. In the present study, the skewness values ranged from  $-0.486$  to  $-0.764$  and the kurtosis values ranged from  $-0.105$  to  $-0.588$ . However, the variables indicated a normal distribution based on examination of Q–Q plots and histograms and it was decided to apply parametric tests. Structural equation modeling (SEM) and bootstrap tool analysis ([Preacher & Hayes, 2008](#)) were used to investigate the mediating role of openness in the connection between the autonomy need satisfaction and perceived relationship quality, which was the aim of the study, using the software package AMOS 24.

**Results**

The results of the correlation analysis conducted to reveal the relationship between variables within the scope of the research are presented in [Table 1](#). The findings revealed that there were significant correlations between all variables. Accordingly, it was determined that there was a positive and moderate level correlation between autonomy need satisfaction and openness; a positive and moderate level correlation between autonomy need satisfaction and perceived romantic relationship quality; and a positive and moderate level correlation between openness and perceived romantic relationship quality. The correlation coefficients between the variables are shown in [Table 2](#).

After showing that the data exhibit a normal distribution and determining the correlation between the variables, a covariance matrix was created using the maximum likelihood

calculation. First, a measurement model consisting of the satisfaction of autonomy need, openness, and perceived relationship quality variables was tested. The goodness-of-fit indices obtained from the analysis showed that the model was confirmed ( $\chi^2/df = 2.13$  ( $p < .01$ ), CFI = .96, TLI = .95, AGFI = .94, IFI = .96, GFI = .95, NFI = .93, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .04).

### Direct Effect Model

After confirming the measurement model, the first hypothesis was tested before testing the mediation model in the study. The relationship between the predictor variable and the outcome variable was examined for the analysis question (Figure 2). According to the analysis results, autonomy needs satisfaction is external and perceived romantic relationship quality is internal in the latent variable structural model that was tested. The tested model is shown in Figure 2.

According to the results of the SEM presented in Figure 1, there is a positive and significant relationship between autonomy need satisfaction and perceived relationship quality ( $\beta = .42$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Thus, hypothesis *H1* is supported.

### Mediation Model

After the direct effect model as a result of the mediation analysis conducted by including age, gender and relationship duration as the control variables in the model, which examined the relationship between autonomy need satisfaction and perceived relationship quality, it was tested whether openness could play a mediating role in the association between these two variables, and the mediation model presented in Figure 3 was examined.

To test the other hypotheses of the study, a separate model was established with openness as a mediating variable. According to the results of the mediation model analysis, there is a positive and significant relationship between autonomy need satisfaction and openness ( $\beta = .59$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Thus, hypothesis *H2* is supported. Similarly, it was observed that as a mediating variable, there is a positive and significant relationship between openness and perceived romantic relationship quality ( $\beta = .77$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Thus, hypothesis *H3* is supported. At the same time, it was seen that the path coefficient from autonomy need satisfaction to perceived romantic relationship quality decreased when openness was included as a mediating variable, but it remained significant ( $\beta = -.03$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Autonomy

need satisfaction accounts for 36% of the variance in openness, and openness along with autonomy need satisfaction can explain 55% of the variance in perceived romantic relationship quality. When the goodness-of-fit values of the model were examined ( $\chi^2/df = 1.843$ , CFI = .96, TLI = .95, AGFI = .94, IFI = .96, GFI = .95, NFI = .93, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .04), it was seen that the model fit very well (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Based on these values, it can be concluded that the tested mediation model is confirmed. Age, gender and relationship duration do not confound the relationships that are specified in the model.

Path analysis based on the bootstrap method was conducted to confirm whether the openness variable plays a partial mediating role in the association between the autonomy need satisfaction and the perceived quality of romantic relationships. The results of the mediation analysis using the bootstrap technique showed that openness is a mediator in the correlation between autonomy need satisfaction and the perceived quality of romantic relationships ( $\beta = .46$ , 95% CI [.36, .57]). This supports hypothesis *H4*. The results of the bootstrap analysis are presented in Table 3 and Figure 4.

## Discussion

In the present study the mediating role of openness in the association between autonomy need satisfaction and the perceived quality of romantic relationships in emerging adults was examined. The correlation analysis results obtained before the mediation analysis showed that emerging adults with high autonomy need satisfaction perceived higher quality of relationships. This finding supported the first hypothesis of the study and was consistent with some previous studies in the literature (Patrick et al., 2007; Sağkal & Özdemir, 2019). It has been found that individuals who feel their needs are met in relationships experience more positive emotions and higher self-esteem and less negative emotions and conflict perception. In particular, it has been revealed that individuals whose autonomy needs are met perceive their relationship quality positively (Patrick et al., 2007).

The second hypothesis of the study, which was expressed as “Autonomy need satisfaction positively associated with openness among emerging adults” was also confirmed. In other words, university students whose autonomy needs are met in their romantic relationships can be more open in their close relationships. This finding was also consistent with some previous studies in the literature (Goodboy et al.,

**Table 2.** Correlations Between Variables.

Variable	Autonomy need satisfaction	Openness
Autonomy need satisfaction	—	
Openness	.51**	—
Perceived romantic relationship quality	.38**	.55**

\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

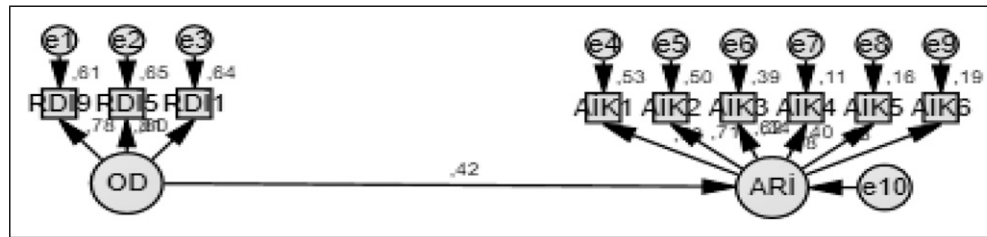


Figure 2. Analysis of the correlation between autonomy need satisfaction and perceived romantic relationship quality.

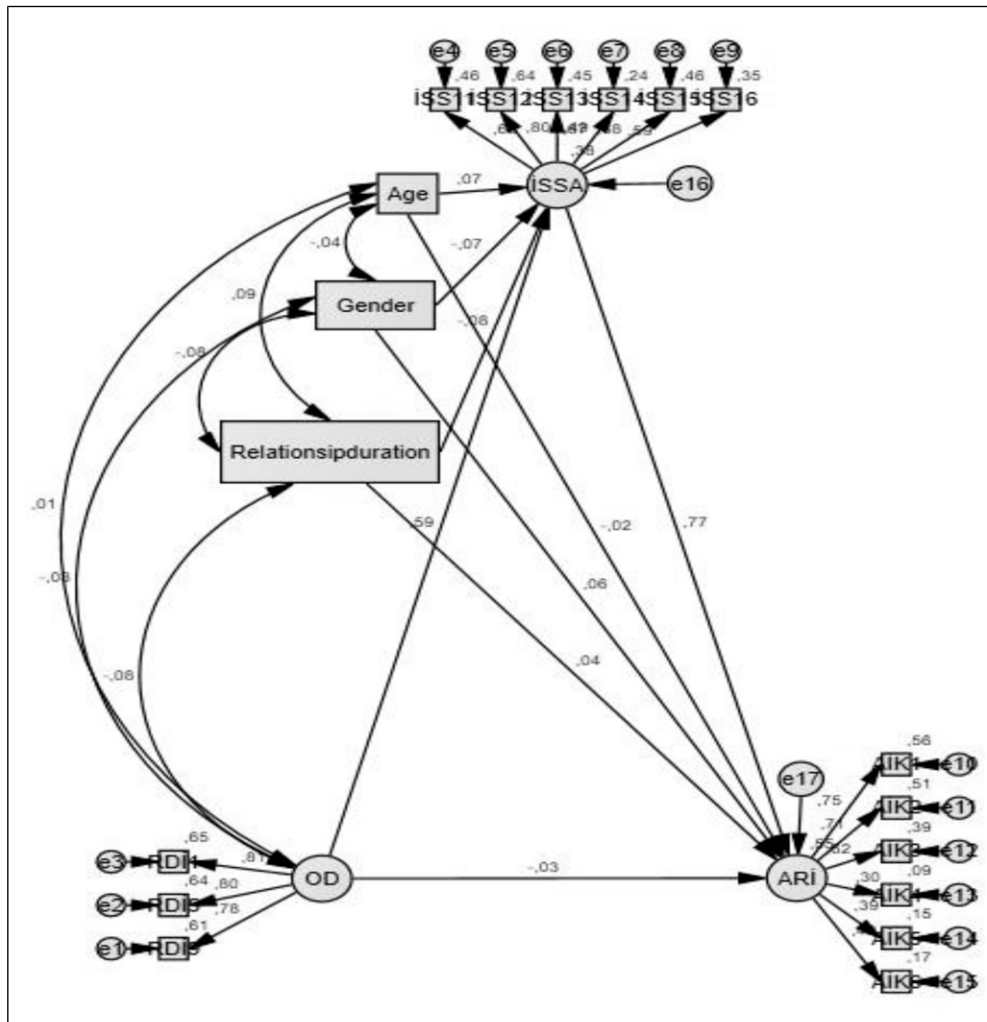


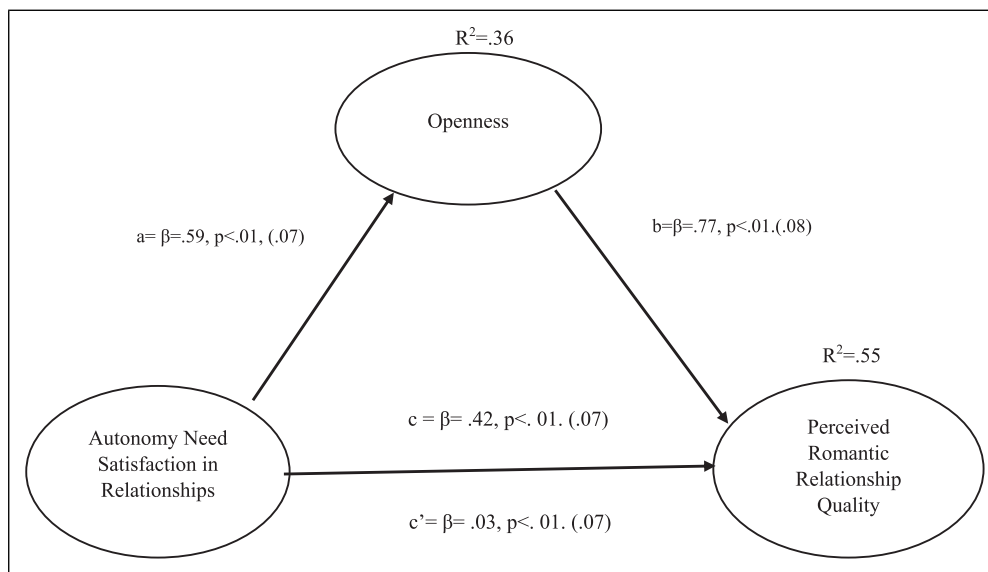
Figure 3. Analysis of the mediating role of openness in the association between autonomy need satisfaction and perceived romantic relationship quality.

2022; Hodgins & Knee, 2002). It has been determined that the existence of autonomy in relationships produces positive actor effects on openness in couples (Hodgins & Knee, 2002). However, research results published by Uysal et al. (2012) have shown that even when interindividual differences in general tendencies towards hiding oneself are controlled, a partner's self-concealment in romantic

relationships, including autonomy, inhibits the satisfaction of basic needs. Individuals who feel autonomous in their relationships behave completely in a way that they approve without pressure (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Weinstein et al., 2016). Thus, they can express their emotions and thoughts to the other person without restricting themselves. At the same time, the satisfaction of autonomy needs in

**Table 3.** Results of Structural Equation Model Analysis (N = 510).

Predictor variables	Outcome variables			
	Openness		Perceived relationship quality	
	$\beta$	SH	$\beta$	SH
Autonomy need satisfaction (c path)	—	—	.42*	.070
R <sup>2</sup>	—	—	.18	
Autonomy need satisfaction (a path)	.59*	.070	—	
R <sup>2</sup>	.36		—	
Autonomy need satisfaction (c path)	—		-.03*	.070
Openness (b path)	—		.77*	.080
R <sup>2</sup>	—		.55	
Indirect effect	—		.46 (.36, .57)	
Direct effect	—		-.03 (-.168, .098)	

\* $p < .01$ .**Figure 4.** Mediated model predicting the association between autonomy need satisfaction in relationships and the perceived quality of romantic relationships through the pathway of openness (N = 510). All values are unstandardized regression coefficients and their standard errors. \*\*\* $p < .01$ .

relationships is effective in increasing self-esteem by helping individuals to open up more easily without the fear of judgment, to be more honest, and to take responsibility, thereby reducing the use of cognitive defenses (Hodgins & Knee, 2002). This situation helps individuals to express themselves freely in romantic relationships and is thought to contribute to higher perceived relationship quality.

The third hypothesis of the study is expressed as “Openness positively associated with perceived romantic relationship quality among emerging adults.” When the findings were examined, this hypothesis was also confirmed. In other words, emerging adults who believe they exhibit openness in their romantic relationships also perceive the quality of their

relationship more positively. It is noteworthy that there are studies in the literature that support and contradict this finding. For example, the research conducted by Reiter and Gee (2008) showed that there is a positive and significant relationship between emerging adults’ open communication with their partners and romantic relationship quality. According to Canary and Stafford (1992), relationship quality and satisfaction can be improved if couples use open communication in their daily lives because it depends on the amount of effort both partners put into maintaining open communication. Additionally, sharing one’s emotions and thoughts with their partner can reduce relationship stress (Reiter & Gee, 2008). Moreover, it has been observed that communicating openly



with one's partner can reduce relationship stress that may arise from negative communication patterns. Openness also helps partners understand each other by encouraging them to talk about the state and future of their relationship (Williams, 2019). It has also been found that openness has a protective role against the negative effects of conflict on relationship satisfaction, as well as helping couples feel understood during conflicts (Gordon & Chen, 2016). However, research by Uysal et al. (2012) shows that partners who hide in romantic relationships negatively affect indicators of relationship quality, such as commitment and relational well-being. Research by Zhou et al. (2017) with Chinese emerging adult couples has shown that openness affects relationship quality differently depending on gender. On the other hand, research conducted by Akçabozan Kayabol and Hatipoğlu Sümer (2022) with married individuals found that openness had very little effect on relationship satisfaction. They interpreted this result as indicating that the importance of openness may decrease over time in long-lasting marital relationships and this situation may be different for newlyweds (Akçabozan Kayabol & Hatipoğlu Sümer, 2022). Our study was conducted with unmarried emerging adults. Therefore, different results may be obtained depending on the type of relationship. It is thought that more research is needed on the maintenance behaviors in relationships and the perceived quality of relationships.

The fourth and final hypothesis of the study is stated as "Openness mediates the connection between autonomy need satisfaction and perceived romantic relationship quality among emerging adults when age, gender and relationship duration, are controlled" and the findings confirm this hypothesis as well. In other words, emerging adults whose autonomy needs are met in their romantic relationships believe that there is more clarity in their relationships and, as a result, they perceive the quality of their romantic relationships more positively. There is no proposed model in the literature that considers these three variables together, and no research findings have been found that support or refute this conclusion. However, it is stated in the literature that individuals whose autonomy needs are met in relationships have higher levels of relationship satisfaction and quality (Hodgins et al., 1996; LaGuardia et al., 2000). Patrick et al. (2007) found a positive correlation between the perceived level of autonomy of the romantic partner and the level of relationship quality and individual well-being and a negative correlation with the level of conflict. The results of four experimental studies conducted by Niemiec (2010) determined the causal effect of social contextual support for autonomy on relationship quality after mutual self-disclosure. It has also been shown that individuals whose autonomy needs are met in relationships are less defensive in the face of conflicts and disagreements (Knee et al., 2005), establish more positive social relationships (Hodgins et al., 1996), and have coping strategies necessary to maintain the relationship (Knee et al., 2002). Therefore, being open instead of defensive can be an effective coping strategy. Individuals who can express their needs and expectations

without feeling pressured can contribute to their well-being and, consequently, to the satisfaction they receive from their relationships. Thus, they can develop an understanding and awareness of the relationship they are in. This understanding and awareness can provide a basis for making an accurate assessment of the quality of the relationship.

The present study contributes to the relevant literature on the association between the autonomy need satisfaction in romantic relationships and perceived romantic relationship quality by controlling age, gender and relationship duration. It is considered important because it is the first mediating study examining these variables in emerging adults. Considering that one of the most important developmental tasks of emerging adulthood is to establish and maintain close relationships, it has been observed that the satisfaction of autonomy needs in individuals' romantic relationships affects their clarity of sustaining the relationships and their evaluation of the relationships at a higher quality level. At this point, it was found that the satisfaction of needs is crucial in developing and maintaining healthy and high quality romantic relationships. In addition, mental health professionals who support individuals in developing and maintaining healthy and quality relationships can benefit from the empirical results reported in the present study. Furthermore, the individuals involved in our study conducted with emerging adults are also classified as the "I Generation" (Twenge, 2018). Among the characteristics of individuals in this young generation are experiencing their first dating and sexual experiences at later ages; intolerance towards inequalities due to gender, race, or sexual orientation; and a dominant individualistic perspective (Twenge, 2018). Therefore, it is thought that being more libertarian in their relationships in this generation could support their autonomy, enable them to exhibit more openness of behavior, and thus have an impact on increasing their perceived romantic relationship quality.

Arnett (2011) states that the development of independence and autonomy during emerging adulthood is a prerequisite for long-term commitments to others. For emerging adults, autonomy is associated with individuals taking more responsibility for self-discovery as well as choosing a relationship partner. It also helps provide insight into what may happen later in adult life (Arnett, 2011). As a result of the research conducted by Ducat and Zimmer-Gembeck (2010), it was found that autonomy support, warmth and relationship structuring in the romantic relationships of emerging adults were related to well-being and life satisfaction. In addition, it shows that the satisfaction of the need for autonomy in the romantic relationships of emerging adults ensures mutual openness between couples (Niemiec, 2010), making them less defensive, more understanding, and more supportive of their partners during conflicts, thus increasing their relationship quality (Hadden et al., 2015; Knee et al., 2005). The results of research on romantic relationship quality show that the romantic relationship quality of emerging adults is a protective factor against other negative relationships (Berge et al., 2014)

and reduces mental health problems (e.g., depression and anxiety symptoms) (Yu et al., 2015) and it increases physical health and well-being (Adamczyk & Segrin, 2015; Kansky & Allen, 2018; Kiecolt-Glaser, 2018; Özdemir & Demir, 2019). Based on all these research results, it is thought that it is important to focus on the positive romantic relationship quality of individuals in emerging adulthood and the structures that create this relationship quality. In line with the results obtained from this research, it is recommended to focus on the satisfaction of the need for autonomy and the development of openness behavior in psychological counseling, prevention and intervention studies to help emerging adults develop healthy relationships and have a positive relationship quality. It is also thought that it is important to include strategies for the satisfaction of basic psychological needs and maintaining relationships in the psychoeducation programs planned to be developed.

Along with the strengths of the current study, there are also some limitations. Firstly, the results obtained from the study can only be generalized to individuals in the emerging adulthood period. Secondly, because the study is a relational scanning model, it does not allow establishing cause-effect relationships between variables or obtaining information about changes over time. According to Karasar (2006), scanning models are appropriate for research that attempts to describe a historical or contemporary situation as it was or is. There are two sections to descriptive scanning models: general scanning and case scanning. The universal scanning technique includes the relational scanning paradigm. General scanning models involve scanning rules applied over the entire universe or over a sample taken from that universe in a world made up of numerous elements in order to obtain a general conclusion about the universe (Karasar, 2006). Relational scanning models, which are a part of this group, are employed in research models that seek to establish the existence or strength of covariation between two or more variables; as a result, they are regarded as appropriate for such studies (Cohen et al., 2000). However, longitudinal studies can be conducted to obtain information about changes and development over time. Other limitation of the current study is that the sample group consists of emerging adults studying at two universities in the city of Izmir. It is also recommended to conduct this modeling study with different and larger sample groups in Turkey to increase the validity and reliability of the model. In addition, it is thought that qualitative research is also needed to examine in more detail how participants perceive autonomy and openness. Furthermore, it is thought that studies using variables of positivity, assurances, sharing of tasks, and social networks, which are related to the satisfaction of other basic needs in self-determination theory, can provide us with more information on the subject. Finally, it is thought that studies conducted with different types of relationships (such as marriage, parent-child relationships, sibling relationships, and peer relationships) will yield more detailed information about the subject.

Finally, the findings of the current study are also important for the development of models aimed at establishing and maintaining healthy relationships, meeting needs, and perceiving relationships as high quality.

### Author's Note

This article is an original work which has not been submitted to nor published anywhere else. All authors have read and approved the paper and have met the criteria for authorship listed above.

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The raw data, analysis code/syntax, and materials used in this study are not openly available but are available upon request to the corresponding author. This study did not pre-register the plan for data collection or analysis.

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### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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