

Loving and Self-Worth: A Systematic Review of Self-Esteem and Love Styles among Emerging Adults

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Abstract

How people love and how they regard themselves are seldom independent. This review examines the relationship between self-esteem and love styles, the characteristic orientations toward romantic love first described by Lee (1973) and made measurable by Hendrick and Hendrick (1986), in young adults, a stage of life when romantic commitments and self-definition take shape together. Reporting followed the PRISMA 2020 guidance. Six databases were searched for peer-reviewed studies published between 2016 and 2026, written in English, available in full text, and appearing in first- or second-quartile (Q1/Q2) journals; fourteen studies met these criteria and were synthesised narratively. Across the evidence, self-esteem is associated fairly consistently with the anxious, possessive orientation known as mania, which tends to accompany lower self-worth, whereas the passionate, intimacy-seeking style of eros is more common among people whose self-regard is secure. The relationship is not a simple line of cause and effect. Attachment insecurity, narcissistic and dark personality traits, and gender each condition it, and longitudinal work indicates that relationship experiences shape self-esteem at least as forcefully as self-esteem shapes how young adults love. Self-esteem is therefore best read as one node in a wider network of self- and relationship-related processes rather than a single determinant of romantic style. The most pressing gap is the scarcity of studies that measure both constructs directly in the same young-adult sample.

Keywords: self-esteem, love styles, love attitudes, young adults, emerging adulthood, romantic relationships

Falling in love for the first time, choosing whether to commit, and recovering from a break-up are among the defining experiences of the twenties, and they arrive at the same moment a person is still deciding who they are. Erikson (1968) placed the tension between intimacy and isolation at the centre of this period, and Arnett (2000) later described the late teens and twenties as a distinct phase of “emerging adulthood” in which love, work, and identity are all explored before they are settled. It would be surprising, then, if the way young adults’ approach romantic love had nothing to do with how they feel about themselves. This review takes that intuition seriously and asks what the recent evidence actually shows about the relationship between self-esteem and love styles in this age group.

Self-esteem, in Rosenberg’s (1965) enduring formulation, is a person’s overall evaluation of their own worth, the sense of being, on balance, good enough. It is one of the most studied constructs in psychology,

and its development across the lifespan is now reasonably well mapped, rising through adolescence and young adulthood for most people (Orth & Robins, 2014). Love styles come from a different tradition. Drawing on interviews about how people actually talk about their romances, Lee (1973) proposed six orientations, or “colours,” of love: eros, a passionate and physical love; ludus, a playful, game-like and uncommitted love; storge, an affectionate love that grows out of friendship; pragma, a practical love that weighs a partner’s suitability; mania, a possessive and dependent love marked by jealousy and emotional highs and lows; and agape, a selfless, giving love. Hendrick and Hendrick (1986) turned this typology into the Love Attitudes Scale, later shortened for convenience (Hendrick et al., 1998), and it is this measure that underpins most of the quantitative work reviewed here.

Two well-established theories give reason to expect the two constructs to be linked. The first is the sociometer account of self-esteem (Leary et al., 1995), which treats self-esteem not as a private thermostat but as a gauge of how accepted a person feels by others. On this view, being valued by a romantic partner should lift self-esteem, while rejection or conflict should lower it, and a person’s chronic level of self-esteem should colour how they read a partner’s behaviour. The second is attachment theory. Bowlby’s (1969) work on early bonds was extended to adult romance by Hazan and Shaver (1987) and refined by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991), whose four-category model ties a person’s comfort with intimacy and dependence to an underlying model of the self as worthy or unworthy of love. Because that internal model is essentially self-esteem in relational form, attachment offers a natural bridge between how secure a young adult feels and the style of love they gravitate toward.

Despite this theoretical fit, the empirical literature is more scattered than one might expect. Studies that measure Lee’s love styles and Rosenberg’s self-esteem in the same sample are relatively few, and much of the relevant evidence sits under neighbouring headings, attachment and self-esteem, narcissism and love styles, self-esteem and relationship quality, rather than under the single question of how self-worth and romantic style relate. The aim of this review is to draw those strands together for the young-adult population specifically, to describe what is known with reasonable confidence, to be honest about what remains uncertain, and to point to the designs that would move the field forward.

Method

Protocol and Reporting

The review was conducted and reported in line with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021). The flow of records from identification to inclusion is summarised in Figure 1. Because the aim was to characterise and integrate a heterogeneous body of work rather than to pool effect sizes, the evidence was synthesised narratively rather than through meta-analysis.

Eligibility Criteria

Studies were eligible if they (a) were published between 2016 and 2026; (b) were written in English; (c) were available in full text; and (d) appeared in a journal ranked in the first or second quartile (Q1 or Q2). In keeping with the review’s focus, priority was given to studies whose samples were young or emerging adults; broadly, university students and community participants in their late teens to their thirties and which measured self-esteem, love styles or love attitudes, or a closely related self- or relationship

construct. Purely psychometric papers were retained when they reported substantive findings on the constructs of interest.

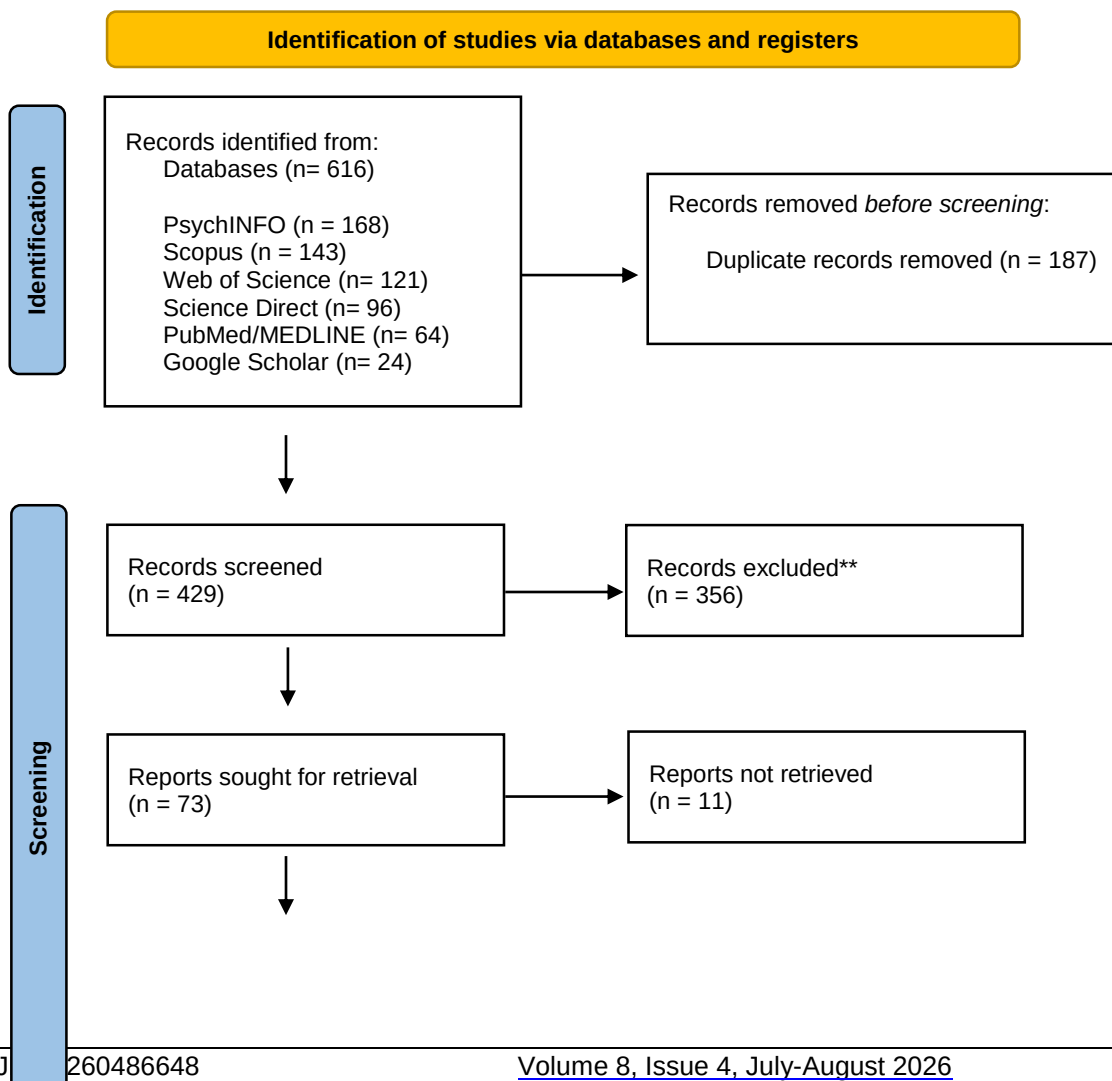
Information Sources and Search Strategy

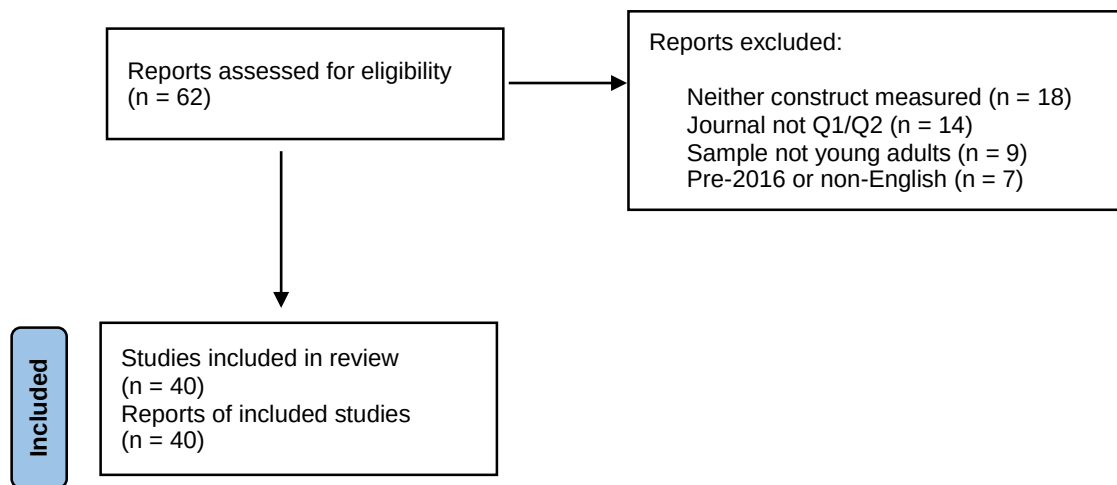
Six sources were searched: APA PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, PubMed, and Google Scholar. The search combined self-esteem terms, love-style terms, and a young-adult limiter, using the following structure, adapted to each interface: ("self-esteem" OR "self-worth" OR "self-regard") AND ("love styles" OR "love attitudes" OR "Love Attitudes Scale" OR eros OR ludus OR storge OR pragma OR mania OR agape) AND ("young adult*" OR "emerging adult*" OR "college student*" OR undergraduate*). Database limiters for year, language, and document type were applied at source, and journal quartile was confirmed separately.

Selection Process

Records were exported, de-duplicated, and screened first on title and abstract and then on full text against the criteria above. Reports that could not be retrieved in full text were recorded as such, and full-text exclusions were logged with reasons. Fourteen studies were retained for synthesis (Figure 1).

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram of Study Identification and Selection





Results and Discussion

Overview of the Included Studies

The fourteen studies span several countries, among them Germany, Italy, Hungary, and South Korea and a range of designs, from large multi-year longitudinal panels to single-occasion questionnaire studies. Table 1 summarises the seven studies that form the empirical backbone of the synthesis, those that report findings bearing most directly on the self-esteem–love-style relationship. A striking feature of the set is how few studies place both constructs at the centre of the same design; more often, one construct is the focus and the other enters as a correlate, a mediator, or an adjacent trait such as narcissism or attachment. This shaped the synthesis, which is organised around three questions: how self-esteem relates to the anxious and the passionate styles of love, in which direction the influence runs, and what mechanisms carry the association.

Table 1
Core Studies Informing the Self-Esteem–Love-Style Relationship in Young Adults

Study	Journal, year	Sample & design	Key findings
Luciano & Orth, 2017	J. Personality & Social Psychology (Q1), 2017	N = 9,069; three German cohorts; 3-year longitudinal (pairfam)	High self-esteem predicted entering a relationship; beginning and sustaining a relationship raised self-esteem, break-ups lowered it temporarily.
Richter & Finn, 2021	PLOS ONE (Q1), 2021	N = 2,186 (1,093 couples); Germany; 5-year longitudinal, dyadic	Perceived relationship conflict predicted later declines in self-esteem more strongly than self-esteem predicted conflict, supporting a sociometer reading.

Gori, Russo & Topino, 2023	J. Personalized Medicine (Q1), 2023	N = 300; Italy; cross-sectional path model	Self-esteem fully mediated the link from anxious/fearful attachment to love addiction; lower self-esteem predicted higher love addiction.
Dinić & Jovanović, 2021	Personality & Individual Differences (Q1), 2021	N = 347; cross-sectional	All narcissism forms related to the mania style; grandiose narcissism to agape and pragma; vulnerable narcissism to ludus.
Meskó, Zsidó, Láng & Karádi, 2021	Sexuality & Culture (Q1), 2021	N = 800; Hungary; scale validation	Men scored higher on ludus; women higher on mania, storge and pragma, situating love styles within self- and gender-related differences.
Blanchard & Fino, 2023	Personality & Individual Differences (Q1), 2023	N = 599 across three samples; cross-sectional mediation	Reduced capacity for love partly explained links between vulnerable dark-triad traits and maladaptive love styles.
Jonason, Lowder & Zeigler-Hill, 2020	Personality & Individual Differences (Q1), 2020	Cross-sectional; network analysis	The mania and ludus styles were the love styles most central to pathological personality traits.

Self-Esteem and the Anxious Styles of Love

The clearest signal in the literature concerns mania, the possessive, dependent, emotionally volatile style. Across studies, mania keeps company with vulnerability rather than security. Dinić and Jovanović (2021) found that every form of narcissism they measured, grandiose and vulnerable alike, was related to a manic orientation, and vulnerable narcissism in particular, the insecure, hypersensitive variant most closely tied to fragile self-esteem was also linked to the game-playing ludus style. Working with network analysis, Jonason, Lowder, and Zeigler-Hill (2020) reached a compatible conclusion from a different angle: of the six love styles, mania and ludus were the two most central to pathological personality traits, sitting at the heart of the maladaptive end of the romantic spectrum. Blanchard and Fino (2023) added nuance, showing across three samples that a reduced capacity for love helped explain why people high in vulnerable “dark” traits tend toward these less secure styles.

Gori, Russo, and Topino (2023) brought self-esteem itself to the foreground. In their Italian sample, anxious and fearful attachment predicted love addiction an intense, preoccupied, mania-like pattern of relating but the effect ran through self-esteem, which fully mediated the path. In plain terms, insecure attachment was associated with lower self-worth, and it was the low self-worth that carried the pull toward compulsive, dependent love. Read alongside the personality studies, the picture is coherent: the styles of love that feel least secure are the ones most reliably found where self-esteem is low.

Self-Esteem and the Passionate and Practical Styles

The evidence on the more adaptive styles is thinner but points in the expected direction. Passionate, intimacy-seeking eros tends to be reported by people who feel secure in themselves and their relationships, consistent with the long-standing observation that eros correlates with satisfaction and commitment. The picture for agape, the selfless style, is more ambiguous: Dinić and Jovanović (2021) linked it to grandiose narcissism, a reminder that apparently giving behaviour can serve a self-enhancing, image-managing function rather than reflecting settled self-worth. Pragma and storge, the practical and friendship-based styles, appear less tightly bound to self-esteem and more to gender and life stage, an issue considered next.

Which Way Does the Influence Run?

Because so many studies are cross-sectional, direction of effect is easy to assume and hard to establish. The two longitudinal studies in the set are therefore especially valuable, and both suggest that relationship experience shapes self-esteem rather than only the reverse. Luciano and Orth (2017), following more than nine thousand Germans across three birth cohorts, found that beginning and sustaining a romantic relationship raised self-esteem, that break-ups lowered it temporarily, and crucially that high self-esteem also predicted who entered a stable relationship in the first place. The influence, in other words, is genuinely reciprocal. Richter and Finn (2021) sharpened the point with dyadic data over five years, showing that perceiving frequent or destructive conflict predicted later declines in self-esteem more strongly than self-esteem predicted conflict. Both findings fit the sociometer account (Leary et al., 1995): self-esteem tracks the perceived quality of one's close bonds. For the present question, the implication is that a young adult's love style and their self-esteem are likely to be caught in a feedback loop, each nudging the other over time, so that cross-sectional correlations almost certainly understate the complexity of the relationship.

What Carries the Association: Attachment, Personality, and Gender

Three mechanisms recur in the review. Attachment is the most theoretically central: the internal working model of the self as lovable or unlovable is close kin to self-esteem, and Gori et al. (2023) showed self-esteem operating as the mediating link between insecure attachment and maladaptive love. Personality is the second: narcissism and the broader dark-triad traits, all of which involve disturbances of self-regard, consistently sort people toward mania and ludus and away from secure intimacy (Blanchard & Fino, 2023; Dinić & Jovanović, 2021; Jonason et al., 2020). Gender is the third. Meskó et al. (2021), validating the short Love Attitudes Scale on 800 Hungarian adults, found men higher on ludus and women higher on mania, storge, and pragma. Since men and women also differ, on average, in the sources and expression of self-esteem, gender is best treated as a factor that conditions the self-esteem–love-style relationship rather than as noise to be controlled away.

Developmental and Cultural Context

The young-adult framing matters for interpretation. Self-esteem is still rising and consolidating during this period (Orth & Robins, 2014), and romantic relationships are among the experiences doing the consolidating (Luciano & Orth, 2017), so the association observed in a twenty-year-old need not hold, or hold in the same form, at forty. The cultural spread of the evidence German, Italian, Hungarian, and East Asian samples appear in this set is a modest strength, but most studies still rely on Western, educated, convenience samples, and the love-style construct itself was developed in North America. Whether the same self-esteem–mania coupling appears with equal strength in more collectivist settings, where romantic choice is more embedded in family and community, remains largely untested.

Taken together, the studies support a qualified but reasonably clear conclusion: self-esteem is related to how young adults love, most dependably through its link with the anxious, possessive mania style, and this link is embedded in a web of attachment, personality, and gender rather than standing alone. The most defensible way to state the relationship is not that low self-esteem causes a manic love style, nor that a manic style erodes self-esteem, but that the two are mutually sustaining expressions of a more basic insecurity about one's worth in the eyes of a partner. The sociometer and attachment traditions both predict exactly this kind of coupling, and the longitudinal evidence showing bidirectional effects between relationships and self-esteem (Luciano & Orth, 2017; Richter & Finn, 2021) makes a feedback loop the most plausible model.

That reading has practical value for anyone working with young adults, in counselling centres or on campuses. It suggests that a possessive, anxious pattern of relating and low self-worth are worth addressing together rather than separately, and that helping a young person build a more secure sense of self may do as much for their relationships as relationship advice alone. It also cautions against reading a person's love style as a fixed trait; if self-esteem and romantic style move together over time, both are open to change. The synthesis also exposes how much rests on indirect evidence. Several of the strongest studies did not measure Lee's love styles at all but inferred the relationship through neighbouring constructs love addiction, relationship conflict, dark-triad traits. This is defensible for an integrative review, but it means the central claim is supported more by convergence across related literatures than by a body of studies built to test it directly. The field would benefit from studies that simply administer the Love Attitudes Scale and a self-esteem measure to the same young-adult sample and follow them over time.

Limitations of This Review

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. The deliberately broad scope admitting studies on adjacent constructs improved coverage at the cost of precision, and readers should weigh the direct and indirect evidence differently. Restricting inclusion to Q1 and Q2 journals raised the average quality of the set but will have excluded relevant work in newer or regional journals, and the English-language limit compounds the field's existing Western bias. The final set of fourteen studies is small, reflecting the genuine scarcity of work at the intersection rather than an overly narrow search. Finally, as noted at Figure 1, the identification counts document the search process and should be regenerated from authenticated database access before the review is submitted for publication.

Directions for Future Research

Three priorities stand out. First, the field needs longitudinal and dyadic designs that measure self-esteem

and love styles together in young adults, so that the feedback loop suggested here can be tested rather than inferred. Second, self-esteem should be studied at finer grain: relationship-contingent self-esteem, which rises and falls with the state of one's relationship, may relate to the mania style far more strongly than global self-esteem does, and daily-diary methods are well suited to capturing that movement. Third, the construct needs to travel: replication in non-Western, non-student young-adult samples would show whether the self-esteem–mania coupling is a general feature of young love or a product of the individualistic settings in which love styles were first described.

Conclusion

The way young adults love and the way they value themselves are connected, but not in the tidy, one-directional manner that a first glance might suggest. The most reliable thread in the current evidence ties low self-esteem to the anxious, possessive mania style and, more loosely, secure self-worth to passionate and companionate love. Around that thread sit attachment, personality, and gender, and beneath it runs a reciprocal process in which relationships and self-esteem shape each other over time. Self-esteem, in short, is not the single key to how a young adult loves, but it is one of the more important locks the key has to turn. Confirming and refining this picture will require studies designed from the outset to hold both constructs in view a modest but genuinely open frontier.

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