

The romantic relationships of adopted adolescents

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Abstract

Introduction: There is a gap in the literature on the romantic relationships of adopted adolescents. To address this issue, the present study has three aims: (1) to explore differences between adopted and non-adopted adolescents in terms of their involvement in and the length of their romantic relationships; (2) to explore the quality of these relationships; and (3) to analyze associations between affective relationships and well-being in both groups.

Method: The sample comprised 276 adopted (64.5% girls; mean age 16.3 years, 73.9% international adoptees) and 276 non-adopted (48.3% girls; mean age 16.3 years) adolescents, all of whom participated in the Spanish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey.

Results: Similar romantic relationship rates and lengths were found among adoptees and non-adoptees, as well as between international and domestic adoptees. Adoptees reported more emotional support and conflicts in their romantic relationships than their non-adopted peers. Finally, associations between the quality of the romantic relationships and well-being were similar for both groups, with more conflicts being linked to lower levels of well-being, and more emotional support and affection correlating with higher levels of well-being.

Discussion: The data suggest more similarities than differences between adopted and non-adopted adolescents. However, although this indicates that romantic relationships are yet another example of recovery for adopted boys and girls, further research is required, with larger and more diverse samples from multiple countries, to explore the differences observed in more detail.

KEYWORDS

adolescence, adoption, quality of relationships, romantic relationships

1 | INTRODUCTION

Adoption studies have facilitated a better understanding of human developmental processes. Psychology and other disciplines have benefited from the results of the different avenues of research pursued in this field (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010), which have provided insight into concepts such as the impact of early adversity, resilience, differential sensitivity, and differential pathways and timeframes for physical and psychological recovery, among others. This knowledge has enabled authors to explore some of the most important questions posed by researchers working in the field of family and development, such as the extent to which children can recover from early adversity and the conditions that foster this process (Brodzinsky & Palacios, 2023). We know, for example, that some physical aspects (e.g., weight, height, and body mass index) are easier to recover, whereas others (e.g., head circumference) are harder (Johnson et al., 2018); and that some elements of attachment, such as behaviors, recover rapidly, whereas others linked to the individual's representational model are more resistant to change (Román et al., 2012, 2022). A person's attachment model constitutes the basis not only of their family relationships, but also those they establish outside the family circle with friends and romantic partners, for example.

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Research into adoption has found that, despite early adverse experiences, adoptees are generally well-adjusted and have good mental health, much like their non-adopted peers (Askeland et al., 2017). Furthermore, most adopted adolescents are well-adapted and integrated into their adoptive families (e.g., Paniagua et al., 2019). However, research into adoptees faces a number of challenges, including the need to explore differences in terms of both adoption systems (e.g., international versus domestic adoptions (Dekker et al., 2017) and the legislative framework and history of adoption present in different countries.

1.1 | Adoption in Spain

In Spain, previous studies have found better adjustment levels among internationally adopted children than among those adopted domestically (Paniagua et al., 2020), who often have more mental health problems and higher levels of licit substance consumption than the general population (Sánchez-Sandoval & Melero, 2019). The findings of both these studies may be explained by the specificities of the adoption process in Spain.

Although the frequency of international adoption increased in many countries after the Hague Convention, this increase was particularly significant in Spain, where this kind of adoption went from being nearly nonexistent to very common within a short period of time, resulting in what has been dubbed the international adoption boom (Juffer et al., 2011; Palacios, 2010). The peak of this boom occurred in 2004, when Spain witnessed 5541 international adoptions in a single year (Selman, 2010). Most of the children adopted in the late 1990s and early 2000s were adolescents at the time the data for the present study were collected. Domestic adoption, in contrast, did not undergo a similar increase, but rather remained as low as it had been previously (for further information, see Moreno et al., 2022).

All domestic adoptions in Spain must be arranged through the Child Protection System, with no provision existing for private domestic adoption or some of the alternative options available in other countries. Domestically adopted children in Spain have therefore usually been exposed to situations of abandonment, neglect, maltreatment, or abuse before their adoption. Consequently, studies carried out in Spain comparing the two adoptee profiles (domestically and internationally adopted children) have found that domestically adopted children score worse than their internationally adopted counterparts for various different adjustment indicators, including friend satisfaction, bullying, health-related quality of life (HRQL), and perceived support from classmates (Moreno et al., 2022; Paniagua et al., 2020, 2022).

1.2 | Romantic relationships among adopted adolescents

To date, little is known about the romantic relationships of adopted adolescents. Indeed, a meta-analysis conducted by DeLuca Bishop et al. (2019b) on romantic relationships among adoptees and foster children includes only one article on adolescents (Cohen & Westhues, 1995). In addition to being conducted almost 35 years ago, this article (Cohen & Westhues, 1995) only analyzes the percentage of respondents who had a romantic partner and said partner's skin color, with this information being provided in a paragraph on partners located in one of the subsections dedicated to peer relationships. Existing evidence on romantic relationships usually refers to adulthood, often using marriage as an instrument, as indeed observed in DeLuca Bishop et al.'s (2019b) meta-analysis. Adult data indicate no differences in marriage rates or relationship quality between adoptees and non-adoptees (e.g., Despax et al., 2021; Feeney et al., 2007; Tieman et al., 2006). Although when these findings are transferred to adolescent romantic relationships, one may expect similar results in terms of having/not having a partner and relationship quality, when one considers the challenges that adoptees face in terms of peer relationships, difficulties would not be surprising.

Although prior research has observed that, fortunately, adopted children display good adjustment in many development factors, peer relationships remain somewhat problematic. Several studies conducted in different countries over recent years have found that adoptees have more difficulties establishing peer relationships (DeLuca Bishop et al., 2019a), suffer from more peer rejection and are classified as more antisocial and aggressive (Cáceres et al., 2021), and have lower levels of social competence than their non-adopted counterparts (Palacios et al., 2013). However, not all the results are negative. A meta-analysis by DeLuca Bishop et al. (2019a) reported that, despite adoptees' challenges in initiating peer relationships, once they were established, their quality was similar to those of non-adoptees.

1.3 | Romantic relationships and well-being

In addition to the general lack of research on adopted adolescents' romantic relationships, very few studies have examined the effect of these relationships on well-being. Until the beginning of the 21st century, few studies had explored the developmental impact of romantic relationships during adolescence (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). However, recent research with normative adolescent community samples has concluded that relationships are essential for both early

(Davila et al., 2009) and later (Shulman et al., 2011) adolescent development. Romantic relationships during adolescence are both positively and negatively associated with important outcomes. For example, Gómez-López et al. (2019a) reported that adolescents who were currently involved in a romantic relationship scored higher for positive interpersonal relationships and life development; however, they also found that those who had never had a romantic relationship had higher levels of self-acceptance and independence. These same authors, concluded that romantic relationships in adolescence and emerging adulthood were generally associated with well-being (Gómez-López et al., 2019a). However, this conclusion derives from a meta-analysis in which only 18 out of 112 studies included people under the age of 17 years, and of these, one third focused on dating violence, a testament to the scant research conducted on romantic relationships from a normative development perspective. Furthermore, well-being was commonly evaluated through the absence of illness (Gómez-López et al., 2019b), rather than through specific well-being measures. Indeed, despite the positive conclusion referenced above, many studies associated adolescent romantic relationships with depression, attributing the increase in depression levels observed to the stress associated with this type of relationship (Chen et al., 2009; La Greca et al., 2009; Joyner & Udry, 2000). Other studies postulate that the association between depression and adolescent romantic relationships may be mediated by relationship quality, finding that low-quality relationships intensify depression (La Greca & Harrison, 2005; Welsh et al., 2003), whereas positive relationships may protect against these emotional states (O'Sullivan et al., 2019). As these examples indicate, much has yet to be discovered about the role played by romantic relationships in adolescent well-being, particularly in nonwhite Western societies, on which most research into adolescent romantic relationships has focused to date (Connolly et al., 2023).

The present study has three research aims: (1) to explore differences between adopted and non-adopted adolescents in terms of their involvement in and the length of their romantic relationships; (2) to understand the quality of these relationships and to examine differences between groups; and (3) to analyze correlations between romantic relationships and adolescent well-being. Due to the differences found previously between domestic and international adoptees in Spain (e.g., Paniagua et al., 2020), differences between these two groups will also be examined. The absence of previous research in this field meant that the authors were not able to formulate initial hypotheses regarding what they expected to find; hence the exploratory nature of the study. Despite the absence of hypotheses, however, the study aims to further our general understanding of adolescent romantic relationships, specifically those of adopted adolescents, which remain, to the best of our knowledge, largely unexplored.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Participants

Participants were drawn from a representative sample of young people who participated in the 2017–2018 Spanish edition of the *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children* (HBSC) study. Multi-stage stratified cluster sampling was used to guarantee sample representativeness. The strata used were age group (11–12, 13–14, 15–16, and 17–18 years), geographic area (by autonomous community in Spain), type of school (public or private), and school location (rural or urban).

Of the total sample, 541 were adoptees. A comparison group was established comprising a random sub-sample of all non-adopted adolescents who responded to the HBSC questionnaire. The comparison group was equivalent to the adopted group in terms of both age and ratio of boys to girls, and had responded to exactly the same questionnaire. To ensure that only adopted adolescents were included in the adopted group, youths who, at the moment of data collection, were currently in contact with Child Protection Services for purposes other than adoption were eliminated from both this and the comparison group.

Although the Spanish HBSC study surveys adolescents aged between 11 and 18 years, the questions regarding romantic relationships are only administered to those aged 15 years and over. Consequently, our final sample comprised 276 adopted adolescents (64.5% girls, 35.5% boys, no missing data). Of these, 73.9% were international adoptees (26.5% from Asia, 21.6% from Eastern Europe, 11.0% from Latin America and 3.0% from Africa), and 26.1% were domestic adoptees. The average age at data collection was 16.26 years ($SD = 1.13$). The comparison group of non-adoptees comprised 267 adolescents (48.3% girls, 51.7% boys, no missing data), with an average age of 16.33 years ($SD = 1.20$) at the time of data collection. Regarding age at placement, 50.0% of the adopted sample reported being adopted at the age of 1 year or younger, 30.8% between the ages of 2 and 6 years, and 10.1% at age 7 years or older. The remaining 9.1% either did not know or could not recall the age at which they were adopted.

2.2 | Instruments

In accordance with the research aims, participants' adoption status (adoptees vs. non-adoptees), sex, and age were recorded, along with the following measures from the HBSC questionnaire.

2.2.1 | Having or having had a romantic partner

Participants responded yes or no to the question: “Do you currently have a romantic partner?”. If they answered “no”, they were asked “Have you ever had a romantic partner?”, with the response options again being yes or no. If they answered “yes” to either of the questions, they were then asked about the length and quality of the relationship in question.

2.2.2 | Length of the romantic relationship

Participants were asked about the length of their current or prior relationship (How long have you been/were you with your partner?), with three response options: less than 6 months; 6 months to 1 year; and more than 1 year.

2.2.3 | Quality of the romantic relationship

Three scales from the Network of Relationships Inventory (Buhrmester & Furman, 2008) were used to measure relationship quality. Each scale comprises three items rated on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = “Little or none” to 5 = “the Most.” The nine items address three dimensions of analysis: conflict (e.g., How much do you and your romantic partner disagree and quarrel? Cronbach's alpha = 0.89), emotional support (e.g., When you are feeling down or upset, how often do you depend on your romantic partner to cheer you up?, Cronbach's alpha = 0.78), and affection (e.g., How much does your romantic partner like or love you?, Cronbach's alpha = 0.93). These questions were only posed to those who had responded “yes” to one of the previous questions (“Do you currently have/Have you ever had a romantic partner?” and “How long have you been/were you with your partner?”).

2.2.4 | Well-being

Personal well-being was measured using two instruments: *KIDSCREEN* (Ravens-Sieberer & and the European *KIDSCREEN* group, 2006), which evaluates HRQL through 10 items focused on the past week, with questions such as “Have you felt fit and well?”, “Have you felt full of energy?” and “Have you felt lonely?”. Response options range from 1 = “not at all” to 5 = “always.” The second instrument used was a Cantril Ladder (1965). Adolescents rated how satisfied they were with their life on a scale ranging from 0 = “best possible life” to 10 = “worst possible life.” To facilitate the interpretation of the results, answers were recoded so that 10 corresponded to “best possible life.”

2.3 | Procedure

The Spanish HBSC study complies with the international network's protocol. Specifically, the questionnaire must be completed at school during school hours, participant anonymity and confidentiality must be ensured, and the questionnaire must be answered voluntarily by the adolescents themselves (Roberts et al., 2009). In Spain, students completed the HBSC survey online by means of a computer-assisted web interviewing system. Ethical approval was obtained from the Andalusian Biomedical Research Ethics Coordinating Committee, PEIBA: 0746-N-17.

2.4 | Data analysis

To respond to the first aim of the study, a chi-squared test was performed to compare the group of adoptees (domestic and international) with the non-adoptee control group in terms of having or having had a romantic relationship and the length of said relationship. To respond to the second aim, that is, to explore possible differences between the subgroups in the quality of their romantic relationships, means comparison tests were carried out. Student's *t* tests were used to compare adoptees and non-adoptees, and Snedecor's *F*-distribution was used for the three-way comparison between non-adoptees, domestic adoptees, and international adoptees. The unequal variances *t* test was used when Levene's test indicated the absence of equality of variance. Finally, to respond to the third aim, that is, to explore the role of adolescent romantic relationships in well-being (DV), means comparisons were performed when the IVs were qualitative and correlations were calculated when they were quantitative. Moreover, given that the correlations were found to be significant in some groups but not in others, a set of regression equations was performed to test the interaction effect. The quantitative IVs were centered as suggested by Aiken and West (1991).

All analyses followed the same sequence: first, adopted adolescents were compared with their non-adopted counterparts, and then three-way comparisons were carried out distinguishing between international adoptees, domestic adoptees, and non-adopted participants. Pairwise deletion was applied in each analysis to remove missing data.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Having or having had a romantic partner and length of the relationship

The adopted and non-adopted groups were compared in terms of current and prior relationship rates, with the results indicating no differences between them (current relationship: $X^2_{(1)} = 2.42$; $p = .120$; previous relationship: $X^2_{(1)} = 1.89$; $p = .169$). Of the total sample, 28.9% of adopted adolescents and 22.8% of the comparison group claimed to have a romantic partner, and 40.7% of adopted adolescents and 47.9% of non-adopted adolescents claimed to have had a romantic partner previously (see Supporting Information S1: Figure 1).

Furthermore, no differences were observed between adopted and non-adopted adolescents in terms of relationship length, referring to either current ($X^2_{(1)} = 1.55$; $p = .462$) or previous relationships ($X^2_{(1)} = 0.85$; $p = .654$). The most frequent response was "less than 6 months" for both current (42.9% for both groups) and past relationships (58.5% and 66.3% for adopted and non-adopted participants, respectively). However, it is important to note that 38.6% of adopted and 30.4% of non-adopted adolescents claimed to currently be in a romantic relationship lasting more than 1 year, and 20% of adopted and 14.4% of non-adopted adolescents reported having had a previous relationship lasting more than 1 year.

Following the same steps described above, we next compared non-adoptees, domestic adoptees, and international adoptees in terms of rates and lengths of romantic relationships. In the adopted group, 39.9% of domestic and 25.8% of international adoptees claimed to currently have a romantic partner, and no differences were observed between the three groups in this regard ($X^2_{(2)} = 3.17$; $p = .205$). However, significant differences with a small-to-moderate effect size were found between the percentage of domestic adoptees (59.0%), international adoptees (33.1%), and non-adoptees (47.9%) who reported having had a previous romantic relationship ($X^2_{(2)} = 10.45$; $p = .005$, *Crammer's V* = 0.174). These results indicate that whereas a higher-than-expected percentage of domestically-adopted individuals claimed to have had a previous romantic relationship, the opposite was true for their internationally-adopted counterparts, among which the percentage was lower than expected.

In terms of relationship length, even though 50.0% of domestic adoptees' current romantic relationships had lasted 1 year or longer at the moment of data collection, compared to 34.1% among international adoptees and 30.4% among non-adoptees, these differences were not significant ($X^2_{(4)} = 3.16$; $p = .420$). Finally, the most frequent duration of past romantic relationships was less than 6 months in all cases (54.5% among domestic adoptees, 64.9% among international adoptees, and 63.3% among non-adopted adolescents), with no differences being observed between the groups ($X^2_{(4)} = 1.50$; $p = .826$) (Table 1).

3.2 | Quality of the romantic relationship

Adolescents who claimed to have or have had a romantic partner answered questions about the quality of their relationships. Adopted adolescents reported more conflicts ($M_{\text{Adopted}} = 2.10$, $M_{\text{Non-adopted}} = 1.70$; $F_{(1,245)} = 8.96$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$) and more emotional support ($M_{\text{Adopted}} = 3.38$, $M_{\text{Non-adopted}} = 3.05$; $F_{(1,247)} = 5.46$, $p = .020$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$) than their non-adopted counterparts (see Supporting Information S1: Figure 2). No differences were observed in affection ($M_{\text{Adopted}} = 3.70$, $M_{\text{Non-adopted}} = 3.93$; $F_{(1,246)} = 2.33$, $p = .128$). Table 2 presents the disaggregated results for the domestic and international adoptee subgroups, and compares them with those of the non-adopted group. As can be observed, the only difference was fewer conflicts in the non-adopted group ($M_{\text{Non-adopted}} = 1.70$, $M_{\text{Domestic}} = 2.10$, $M_{\text{International}} = 2.10$). However, although the mean conflict level was similar among both domestic and international adoptees, the Bonferroni test revealed that the difference observed was actually between the non-adopted group and internationally-adopted adolescents ($p = .019$), with no statistically significant differences being observed between the non-adopted group and domestically-adopted adolescents ($p = .073$).

3.3 | Having or having had a romantic partner, HRQL, and Life Satisfaction

Next, an analysis was conducted to assess whether having or having had a romantic partner was associated with HRQL and Life Satisfaction within each of the three groups. Only those adolescents who claimed to have or have had a romantic partner were included in these analyses. The results indicated an association between currently being in a romantic relationship and

TABLE 1 Descriptive of having or having had a romantic partner and length of the relationship by non-adopted, domestically adopted, and internationally adopted adolescents.

	Current RR* Fr (valid %)		Prior RR** Fr (valid %)		Length current RR* Fr (valid %)		Length prior RR** Fr (valid %)	
	Yes	Not	Yes	No	<6 months	6–12 months	<6 months	6–12 months
Non-adopted	56 (22.8%)	190 (77.2%)	91 (47.9%)	99 (52.1%)	24 (42.9%)	15 (26.8%)	17 (30.4%)	20 (22.2%)
Adopted	70 (28.9%)	172 (71.1%)	70 (40.7%)	102 (59.3%)	30 (42.9%)	13 (18.6%)	27 (38.6%)	14 (21.5%)
Domestic	20 (33.9%)	39 (66.1%)	23 (59%)	16 (41%)	6 (30%)	4 (20%)	10 (14.5%)	6 (27.3%)
International	41 (25.8%)	118 (74.2%)	39 (33.1%)	79 (66.9%)	19 (46.3%)	8 (19.5%)	14 (34.1%)	6 (16.2%)

Note: *RR = Romantic Relationship. **Only adolescents who report not currently being in romantic relationships are asked about their past relationships.

TABLE 2 Differences in quality of the romantic relationships between non-adopted, domestically adopted, and internationally adopted adolescents.

	Non-adopted <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Domestic adopted <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	International adopted <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>F</i> (<i>p</i>)
Conflict	1.70 (0.78)	2.10 (1.00)	2.10 (1.20)	4.98 (0.008)
Emotional support	3.05 (0.82)	3.49 (1.37)	3.27 (1.35)	2.77 (0.064)
Affection	3.93 (1.08)	3.57 (1.30)	3.73 (1.33)	1.62 (0.201)

TABLE 3 *t*-values regarding the association of having or having had a romantic partner with HRQL and Life Satisfaction.

	HRQL		Life Satisfaction	
	Current romantic relationship	Past romantic relationship	Current romantic relationship	Past romantic relationship
Non adopted	$t_{(233)} = 0.41$	$t_{(181)} = 0.34$	$t_{(112.3)} = -2.21^*$	$t_{(179.1)} = 0.65$
Domestic adopted	$t_{(50)} = -0.65$	$t_{(33)} = -1.19$	$t_{(56)} = -1.39$	$t_{(36)} = -0.04$
Internationally adopted	$t_{(142)} = 0.257$	$t_{(109)} = 1.66$	$t_{(156)} = 0.69$	$t_{(115)} = 1.32$

Abbreviation: HRQL, health-related quality of life.

* $p < .05$.

TABLE 4 Correlations between quality of romantic relationships and health-related quality of life (HRQL) and Life Satisfaction.

	HRQL				Life Satisfaction			
	Non-adopted <i>r</i> (<i>n</i>)	Adopted <i>r</i> (<i>n</i>)	Domestic <i>r</i> (<i>n</i>)	International <i>r</i> (<i>n</i>)	Non-adopted <i>r</i>	Adopted <i>r</i> (<i>n</i>)	Domestic <i>r</i> (<i>n</i>)	International <i>r</i> (<i>n</i>)
Conflict	-.15 (118)	-.26** (104)	-.38* (34)	-.16 (59)	-.22* (126)	-.30*** (120)	-.36* (39)	-.21 (69)
Emotional support	.14 (119)	.20* (106)	-.06 (34)	.16 (60)	.02 (127)	.15 (121)	.14 (39)	.06 (69)
Affection	.27** (118)	.15 (105)	.03 (35)	.14 (57)	.18* (127)	.15 (120)	.14 (40)	.05 (66)

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p = .001$.

lower Life Satisfaction ($t = -2.21$, $p = .029$) in the non-adopted control group. No other significant differences were found between those who had/did not have or had/had not ever had a romantic partner in terms of either HRQL or Life Satisfaction (Table 3) in any of the different subgroups analyzed.

3.4 | Quality of the romantic relationship, HRQL, and Life Satisfaction

Table 4 presents the correlations found between the three measures of romantic relationship quality (conflict, emotional support, and affection), HRQL and Life Satisfaction. The first two columns in the table present the results of the comparison between the adopted and non-adopted groups, whereas the third and fourth columns present the results for domestic and international adoptees separately.

Since an analysis of the first two columns (adopted vs. non-adopted) revealed apparent differences between the adopted and non-adopted groups in every correlation between the quality of the romantic relationship and well-being, moderation effects were tested using regression analyses (see Supplementary Material Table 1). The results revealed no moderation effect: Conflict—HRQL ($t = -0.23$, $p = .820$), Emotional support—HRQL ($t = 0.11$, $p = .916$), Affection—HRQL ($t = -1.11$, $p = .267$), Conflict—Life Satisfaction ($t = -0.22$, $p = .823$), Emotional support—Life Satisfaction ($t = 0.81$, $p = .420$), and Affection—Life Satisfaction ($t = -0.18$, $p = .856$). In other words, the results revealed similar associations between relationship quality and well-being among both adopted and non-adopted adolescents.

Finally, an interaction effects analysis was conducted to analyze differences between domestic and international adoptees in the relationship between the quality of romantic relationships and well-being. No differences were found (Supporting Information S1: Table 2): Conflict—HRQL ($t = 1.16$, $p = .248$), Emotional support—HRQL ($t = 0.54$, $p = .587$),

Affection—HRQL ($t = 0.54$, $p = .267$), Conflict—Life Satisfaction ($t = 0.96$, $p = .339$), Emotional support—Life Satisfaction ($t = -0.37$, $p = .711$), and Affection—Life Satisfaction ($t = -0.45$, $p = .654$).

4 | DISCUSSION

The main aim of the present study was to explore adopted adolescents' romantic relationships. The principal finding is that these relationships are very similar to those reported by non-adopted adolescents.

Adopted youths reported similar rates to their non-adopted peers in terms of currently having a romantic partner. The only other study of which we are aware that was conducted with adoptees also found similar romantic relationship rates among both adopted adolescents and their siblings, who were used as a comparison group (Cohen & Westhues, 1995). In our study, we also found similar rates between adopted and non-adopted participants in terms of having had a romantic relationship in the past, and in the length of the current/previous partnership. The most frequent relationship duration in both groups (corresponding to approximately half of all responses) was less than 6 months. Nonetheless, it is important to point out that approximately one third of the relationships reported had lasted more than 1 year. This contrasts with that reported by Viejo Almanzor et al. (2013), who found that 45% of respondents had had relationships lasting longer than 1 year. However, their sample included participants up to the age of 21 years, and it was generally older individuals who had maintained longer-lasting relationships. In contrast, our sample comprised adolescents aged between 15 and 18 years. Nevertheless, our results are consistent with those reported by Viejo Almanzor et al. (2013) in that approximately one third of all participants claimed to have a romantic partner. This similarity is hardly surprising since the two studies were conducted in the same country and therefore measure the same culture. Indeed, around 58% of the adopted adolescents in our study claimed to have or have had a romantic relationship, many lasting more than 1 year, and these relationships were associated with well-being. Far from being of minor relevance then, romantic relationships are important for those experiencing them. From a developmental perspective, these stable relationships provide a context in which young people can initiate healthy sexual encounters. Moreover, as well as fostering attachment, providing they are of good quality, they may also foster healthy relationships in the future (Ballonoff Suleiman et al., 2015; Connolly et al., 2023; Jorgensen-Wells et al., 2021; Shulman et al., 2020).

Differences were observed, however, between domestic and international adoptees in terms of prior romantic experience, with a higher percentage of domestic adoptees having had a previous relationship. As stated above, having a romantic partner can be a positive experience and can constitute an ideal developmental context, providing the relationship is a quality one. However, early initiation into romantic encounters can also be considered an indicator of unhealthy relationships if it occurs too early or at a nonnormative moment (Connolly & Mc Isaac, 2011), or when it is linked to substance abuse (Miller et al., 2009) or poor family and school relationships (Doyle et al., 2003). Further research is required to determine whether the fact that domestically adopted adolescents tend to engage earlier than their peers in romantic relationships has positive or negative consequences.

Regarding relationship quality, differences were observed between adopted and non-adopted adolescents, with international adoptees reporting more conflicts than domestic adoptees and non-adoptees. In contrast, adoptees reported receiving more emotional support than non-adoptees. As stated earlier, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to analyze romantic relationships among adopted adolescents, making it difficult to compare these results with anything reported in the extant literature. Nonetheless, our data suggest that adoptees experience romantic relationships more intensely than non-adoptees, in both negative (more conflicts) and positive terms (emotional support). This differential experience may be linked to the impact of adoption on attachment. Due to their prior experiences, upon arrival in their new families, adopted individuals may display more insecure or disorganized attachment indicators, something which may require a longer recovery period than other aspects (Román et al., 2012, 2022). The high scores obtained for emotional support may indicate a strong desire for closeness and emotional reliance, traits that, combined with a tendency toward more interpersonal conflict, are typical of individuals with insecure attachment. Moreover, previous evidence supports the higher conflict levels reported by adopted adolescents than their non-adopted peers, in that it portrays adopted youths as experiencing more difficulties in their peer relationships (Cáceres et al., 2021; DeLuca Bishop et al., 2019a, 2019b; Palacios et al., 2013). Also, the greater emotional closeness experienced by adopted adolescents may indicate a stronger ability to emotionally connect with their partner, which in turn may constitute a new indicator of the success of and need for this child protection measure. Despite these differences, however, the small effect size found and the lack of differences in the third variable analyzed (affection) mean that the data continue to indicate normality among adopted adolescents, who are similar in these respects to their non-adopted counterparts.

Finally, the role of romantic relationships in well-being (evaluated through HRQL and Life Satisfaction) was similar in both groups. Despite the small effect size, higher scores for conflict correlated with lower levels of HRQL and Life Satisfaction, whereas emotional support and affection were positively associated with these two measures. Once again, the data indicate that good-quality romantic relationships constitute a positive developmental context (Gonzalez Avilés et al., 2021). However, they may also constitute a risk if they are of poor quality (Bouchey, 2007; Gómez-López et al., 2019b).

Consequently, the association with adjustment is determined not by having or not having a romantic partner, but rather by relationship quality. During adolescence, adopted youths may still be resolving issues with their family connections, as well as dealing with the ramifications of their previous abandonment.

The present study has certain limitations which should be taken into consideration. Firstly, the small sample size (only 276 adopted adolescents, with more girls than boys and more international than domestic adoptees) limited both the scope of the analyses themselves and the statistical power of the study in general. Nonetheless, the HBSC surveys a representative sample of the adolescent population enrolled in school, collecting data on 19,584 adolescents aged between 15 and 18 years in 2018. The 276 adolescents in our study therefore represent the entire adopted population that was present in the classrooms on the day the data were collected and who completed the questionnaire at the same time as their classmates, thereby avoiding the typical bias of research carried out with nonnormative groups. Rather than being selected through associations that encourage research participation, these 276 adolescents were simply in their classrooms and responded to the questionnaire along with their classmates. Given that Spain has one of the highest rates of international adoption in the world—second only to the United States (Espinosa, 2020)—a larger representative sample would be difficult to find.

The adopted sample also contained a higher percentage of girls than boys. However, this imbalance is a faithful reflection of adoption in Spain. International adoptees originate predominantly from China and, due to that country's one-child-only policy, it is typically girls who are given up for adoption. For example, in 2004, at the height of the international adoption boom in Spain, China was the main country of origin, with 2389 adoptions, followed by Russia with 1618 adoptions and a more balanced distribution by sex (Selman, 2012). A larger and more balanced sample would have resulted in more in-depth data analyses, enabling exploration of differences in accordance with sex or sexual orientation, issues that are undoubtedly relevant when discussing romantic relationships. It would also have enabled comparisons not only in terms of adopted/non-adopted adolescents, but also (in the case of international adoptees) in relation to country of origin. In addition to the small sample size (and as a result of it), the strategy for dealing with missing data was pairwise deletion, which maximizes the amount of data used in each calculation and therefore optimizes the statistical power, but may generate bias if the missing data are not randomly distributed.

The present study also has other relevant limitations linked to the fact that the instruments used to assess romantic relationships were self-administered. Future research may wish to use more sophisticated measures that are capable of measuring relationship dynamics and include observable aspects of the relationship that may also prove enlightening. Furthermore, all the instruments used were self-report measures, a circumstance that inherently imposes limitations in comparison with more intricate measurement methods. Also, the present study was unable to include information about participants' race/ethnicity, gender identity, or sexual orientation, all of which are key aspects in the issue under analysis. Future studies aiming to expand existing knowledge about adoptees' romantic relationships during adolescence should strive to shed light on these aspects that we were unable to analyze here.

Despite these limitations, however, the present study makes a relevant contribution to the extant scientific literature, especially considering (1) the difficulty of accessing specific samples such as adoptees; (2) the large population of adopted adolescents present in Spain in 2018, with access being gained to more than 200 members of this population; (3) the scarcity of studies analyzing romantic relationships in the general adolescent population from a developmental and normative perspective; and (4) the absence of such studies with nonnormative samples. We believe our research provides insight into adolescent romantic relationships—beyond the traditional community samples of white Western adolescents—by examining a population that has suffered early childhood adversity and, according to our results, has proven itself to be resilient. Our data reveal similarities between adoptees and non-adoptees in terms of the rate and duration of their romantic relationships, and indicate that such relationships have a similar impact on well-being, although adoptees tend to experience them more intensely than their non-adopted peers.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The database used for the analyses in this paper will be available in the institutional repository of the University of Seville (<https://idus.us.es/> and more specifically <https://idus.us.es/handle/11441/126789>).

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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