

**Young Adults' Experiences and Coping Strategies Following the  
Termination of a Significant Romantic Online Relationship**

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## **Declaration**

I, Lineo Dorah Seselinyane (student number 215129644), hereby declare that the treatise for MA Psychology (Counselling) to be awarded is my own work and that it has not previously been submitted for assessment or completion of any postgraduate qualification to another university or for another qualification.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a grey rectangular background. The signature reads "Lineo Dorah Seselinyane" in a cursive, flowing script.

**Lineo Dorah Seselinyane**

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## Abstract

The Internet has made it feasible for people to establish and maintain romantic relationships online. Research findings indicate that high levels of intimacy are often experienced online, and individuals find these relationships to be meaningful, with high levels of relationship satisfaction reported. Some of these online romantic relationships are, however, terminated at some stage, leading to a painful experience. Limited research has been conducted on the experience of terminated online romantic relationships and coping strategies employed. The primary aim of this study was therefore to explore and describe young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online romantic relationship. Lazarus and Folkman's psychological stress and coping theory and relevant literature were utilised to conceptualise the study. A qualitative approach was employed in order to meet the aim of the study. The study utilised purposive and snowball sampling. The participants included nine undergraduate students at Nelson Mandela University and one working adult, all of whom met the inclusion criteria. Data was obtained through in-depth interviews, and the collected data was analysed using thematic analysis. Based on the findings of the study, the experience of a terminated online romantic relationship has an adverse impact on individuals' overall functioning. However, there seem to be coping strategies that are effective in overcoming the turmoil caused by online romantic relationship termination. This study has therefore generated an understanding of young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online romantic relationship.

**Key words:** Coping strategies, experiences, online relationships, termination, young adults.

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# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**

### **Chapter Overview**

This chapter aims to orientate the reader to this research study. The researcher begins by contextualising the study by providing the relevant background information that is associated with the study, followed by the problem statement. Thereafter, the aim of the study is highlighted. Additionally, the adopted research methodology is briefly discussed in the next section. Lastly, the outline of chapters included in this study is provided.

### **Context of the Research**

According to Bonebrake (2002, p. 551), “You met him/her where? On the Internet? You must be careful” might be a common reaction when someone shares that he or she is in an online romantic relationship. The negative reactions from people are mostly due to security concerns over online relationships such as fraud, deception, the possibility of encountering a sexual predator (Couch & Liamputtong, 2007; Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012), as well as the stigma that online romantic relationships are for desperate people who cannot find dates in face-to-face interactions (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). Lately, the stereotypes and stigma regarding online romantic relationships are slowly diminishing as some people are reporting satisfying experiences with online romantic relationships (LeFebvre, 2018; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Cyberspace and its relational possibilities are changing the way satisfactory relationships are formed and maintained even among people who have never met in person (Coontz, 2005). There may no longer be such a strong distinction between those people who meet someone online and those who do not because of the breadth and depth of online relationships (Droge & Voirol, 2011; Lawson & Leck, 2006).

Young adults are among those utilising the Internet to develop and communicate with romantic partners (Fox & Warber, 2013) and openly share their emotional states, photos, and other content related to their romantic relationships (Carpenter & Spottwood, 2013). It is not surprising that young adults are pursuing and seeking love online. Based on Erikson's (1968) model of psychosocial development, young adults at this stage have a need to find love and establish meaningful romantic relationships (Hendrick, 2004). These online romantic relationships for young adults fulfil one of the most basic human needs, which is a need for belonging, and often contributes positively to overall satisfaction with life (Degenova, 2008). Romantic relationships are crucial as they play an integral role in improving individuals' quality of life and wellbeing (Jenkins, Buboltz Jr., Schwartz, & Johnson, 2005), while failure to establish and maintain satisfying romantic relationships will result in loneliness and isolation at this stage (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010).

Relationship formation and dissolution are two basic processes in any romantic relationship (Kwak, Chun, & Moon, 2011). Online dating has received a great deal of scholarly attention and some researchers have focused on the psychological impact of online romantic relationships (Wong & Yazdanifard, 2015). Most research studies focus on how online relationships are formed, maintained, the perceived satisfaction thereof (Kwak et al., 2011; Huang & Yang, 2013), and the authenticity of online romantic relationships (Couch & Liamputtong, 2007). Research findings indicate that individuals often experience high levels of intimacy online and find these online romantic relationships to be meaningful (Froneman, 2016; Whitty, 2008; Zaczek & Bonn, 2006), which contribute to greater social and psychological wellbeing (McCrown, Fischer, Page, & Homant, 2001).

Some of these online romantic relationships are terminated at some stage. Termination of a significant romantic relationship is one of the most universal and difficult experiences of early adulthood (Robak & Weitzman, 1998). The loss of a relationship can bring intense

confusion and pain (Noller & Feeney, 2006). In the context of online romantic relationships, the termination of a relationship is characterised by disconnecting from the romantic partner (Gershon, 2010; Haimson, Andalibi, Choudhury, & Hayes, 2018) by “blocking” or “unfriending” the partner on social network sites (SNSs). The disconnection does not only occur on SNSs, but emotionally and psychologically as well, which usually precipitates negative ramifications and emotional volatility (Priest, Burnett, Thompson, Vogel, & Schvaneveldt, 2019). Following the break-up, one of the most frequent questions include “How long will it take to get over the break-up?”, which indicates a need for coping skills (Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Existing research has documented the effects of face-to-face romantic relationship dissolution and various helpful factors that contribute to adjustment, such as passage of time, initiator status, a new romantic relationship, social support, and so forth (Barber, 2011).

On the other hand, it appears that research pertaining to online romantic relationship dissolution has not been extensively conducted (Carpenter & Spottwood, 2013). Even the realm of how people cope with the termination of online relationships has not yet received the attention it deserves (Subrahmanyan & Šmahel, 2011). As a result, it prevents the necessary understanding of a phenomenon that is affecting many people directly or indirectly (Peris et al., 2002). The lack of studies on the termination of online romantic relationships and coping strategies is a failure to acknowledge that online relationships and their dissolution are an experience that belongs to the everyday life of a considerable portion of people with access to the Internet, and one which is growing exponentially (Döring, 2002; Subrahmanyan & Šmahel, 2011). This creates a bias that face-to-face romantic relationships are more meaningful and that all other forms of relationships are of a more limited nature in comparison (Peris et al., 2002).

## **Problem Statement**

People use SNSs to manage increasingly rich aspects of their lives, including establishing and maintaining online romantic relationships (Hand, Thomas, Buboltz, Deemer, & Buyanjargal, 2012). Research findings indicate that high levels of intimacy are often experienced online and individuals find these relationships to be meaningful, with high levels of relationship satisfaction reported (Froneman, 2016; Whitty, 2008; Zaczek & Bonn, 2006). As is the case with face-to-face relationships, online romantic relationships can be terminated by mutual agreement or by one of the partners for their own unique reasons (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2010). Since online romantic relationships can be very significant, the termination thereof can have an adverse impact on individuals (Field et al., 2010). After a break-up, people generally use different coping strategies in an attempt to cope with the internal or external demands of the break-up. Coping therefore becomes an integral part of a person's experience when dealing with a break-up (Shimek & Bello, 2014). Existing research focuses on the experiences of individuals after the termination of a face-to-face romantic relationship. Little research has been conducted pertaining to young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant romantic online relationship (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). For this reason, this research study aimed to explore the experiences and coping strategies young adults employ following the termination of significant online romantic relationships.

## **Research Aim**

The aim of this study was to explore and describe young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online romantic relationship.

## **Overview of Methodology**

This study adopted the epistemological positioning of a qualitative research approach (Shank, 2002). The researcher made use of an exploratory-descriptive design to gain new insights and to discover new ideas, and to increase knowledge of the phenomenon (Brink & Wood, 1998). While using the exploratory-descriptive design, the study was informed by the phenomenological approach, which focuses on the meaning of lived experiences (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999). Participants for this research study were recruited using a purposive and snowball sampling method. In-depth interviews were conducted with the participants until saturation was reached. Collected data was analysed using thematic analysis. The data was analysed to identify significant themes and sub-themes relating to the central research question, namely “What are young adults’ experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant romantic online relationship?”

## **Delineation of Treatise**

The structure of the remainder of the treatise is as follows: Chapter 2 provides an overview of the psychological stress and coping theory, focusing on stress and cognitive appraisal, levels of cognitive appraisal, factors that affect cognitive appraisal, the coping process, forms of coping, and coping resources, through which the researcher aimed to understand young adults’ termination experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant romantic online relationship. In Chapter 3, the focus is on positioning the research study within literature relevant to this study. In this chapter, attention is firstly drawn to young adults’ experiences of a terminated face-to-face romantic relationship, and secondly to the coping strategies utilised following the break-up. Chapter 4 provides an explanation of the research methodology that was utilised to conduct the research. This chapter includes the research design, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations. Chapter 5 outlines the findings and discussion of the research study.

Lastly, in Chapter 6, the strengths and limitations of this research study and recommendations for future research studies are discussed. The next chapter provides an overview of the theoretical framework that guided this research study.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Introduction**

Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) psychological stress and coping theory served as a theoretical grounding for this study. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), the psychological stress and coping theory identifies cognitive appraisal of a stressful situation and coping as two processes that are critical mediators in stressful situations and the outcome thereof. This theory, in conjunction with other literature related to cognitive appraisal of stress and coping, is discussed in this chapter. The researcher chose this theoretical framework because its concepts of cognitive appraisal and coping processes provide an understanding and indicates the relevance of the current research topic; namely young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online romantic relationship. This chapter therefore provides an overview of the concepts of stress and cognitive appraisal, levels of cognitive appraisal, factors that affect cognitive appraisal, the coping process, forms of coping, and coping resources.

#### **Stress**

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) reported that they were inspired by people's resilience in the face of adversity and this has led to many years of research on stress and coping. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) stated that the term "stress" is too broad to define and suggested that it should be treated as an organising concept for understanding a wide range of phenomena of great importance in human and animal adaptation. The concept of stress has therefore been understood and defined differently by different theorists and its meaning has evolved throughout the years (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). To encapsulate the term "stress", it is crucial to examine the stress stimuli that contribute to the experience of distress in people.

Stress stimuli include conditions arising from within or environmental events that are impinging on the person's wellbeing (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In this regard, stress can be used to refer to the psychological, emotional, and physical distress or strain people experience in attempting to meet the demands of daily life or following the occurrence of a single negative event (Anisman & Merali, 1999). This study particularly sought to explore young adults' experiences of a terminated online romantic relationships since the break-up is considered one of the most stressful situations an individual can experience (Agnew, Arriaga, & Wilson, 2008). The experience of a romantic relationship break-up can be a significant stressor in a person's life and can result in increased levels of psychological distress and decreased levels of life satisfaction, both at the time of the event and continuing into the future (Oriña, Collins, Simpson, Salvatore, Haydon, & Kim, 2011; Sbarra, 2006). Consequently, a break-up has considerable adverse effects on an individual's physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing (Field et al., 2010). The next section describes the process of cognitive appraisal during stressful situations.

### **Cognitive Appraisal**

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), cognitive appraisal refers to a person's subjective evaluation of a stressful situation in relation to his or her wellbeing. How people perceive and interpret stressful situations has an immense influence on how they will experience that stressful situation. This implies that during the break-up, an individual will make an evaluation of how the break-up impacts their wellbeing. The cognitive appraisal of the break-up by that particular individual regarding their wellbeing will have an influence on their post-break-up adjustment (Fagundes, 2011). It is therefore clear that cognitive appraisal of the break-up is most likely to differ from one person to another. As this theory also postulates that people may encounter similar stressful situations, their experience of the situations might, however, differ. This is because people differ in their vulnerabilities,

interpretation, and response to a stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Additionally, a previous encounter of a stressful situation will influence how an individual cognitively appraises a similar situation when it is encountered again, because of the previous learned coping skills (DeLongis, Coyne, Dakof, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1982; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The literature, however, consistently shows that irrespective of how many times individuals experience a break-up, it remains an unpleasant experience and each break-up might present its own unique challenges that require certain coping skills (Eastwick, Finkel, Krishnamurti, & Loewenstein, 2008; Field, 2017). The process of cognitive appraisal is also influenced by how the stressful situation affects matters that have personal significance to an individual (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Constructs of personal significance include beliefs, commitments, and goals that result in much distress when they are threatened or violated (DeLongis et al., 1982). The following section will outline the two levels of cognitive appraisal, namely primary and secondary appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

### **Primary cognitive appraisal.**

Primary appraisal involves a person's perception and interpretation of the encountered situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, as cited in Falconier, Huerta, & Hendrickson, 2016, p. 32). Three kinds of primary appraisal can be distinguished: (1) irrelevant, when the situation does not pose any implication for a person's wellbeing; (2) benign-positive, when the outcome of an encountered situation presents somewhat positive effects or enhances wellbeing; and (3) stressful, when the encountered situation presents harm/loss, threat, and challenges (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Expanding on situations where the appraisal is stressful, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified three ways in which the stressful situation can be appraised. Firstly, the stressful situation may be appraised to present a certain degree of harm, which is often accompanied by negative emotions such as sadness, worry, or anger. Secondly, stressful situations can be appraised as threatening when a person's values and

commitment to goals and beliefs seem to be violated. A threatening situation often produces anxiety, anger, and fear. Lastly, the stressful situation can be appraised as challenging. Challenging situations usually tend to evoke both negative and positive emotions such as excitement, eagerness, anxiety, and fear (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, as cited in Falconier et al., 2016, p. 33). In general, people's primary appraisal of a break-up is that it is a stressful event. Some literature has gone as far as labelling break-ups as detrimental and traumatic for some people (Rhoades, Kamp Dush, Atkins, Stanley, & Markman, 2011). The only time a break-up seems to have a positive effect is when it provides relief from a dissatisfying romantic relationship (Franklin, 2015; Sbarra & Ferrer, 2006). Following primary cognitive appraisal is secondary cognitive appraisal.

### **Secondary cognitive appraisal.**

According to Folkman and Lazarus (1980), the secondary appraisal of a stressful situation involves a person's evaluation of what needs to be done to combat a stressful situation. Secondary appraisal therefore involves considering different coping strategies regarding the stressful situation that was primarily appraised as either harmful, threatening, or challenging. This process takes place through the identification of available coping strategies that could aid in alleviating a stressful situation and the likelihood of each strategy yielding successful results. According to Mitchell (1969, as cited in Folkman & Lazarus, 1980, p. 36), secondary appraisal involves assessing the benefits and consequences of each coping strategy to a given goal. Individuals' unique characteristics have a significant influence on secondary appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For example, some people are able to think of coping strategies to deal with the aftermath of a break-up, such as seeking emotional support from loved ones, whereas others might engage in rumination and obsessive behaviours such as monitoring the ex-partner, which has the potential to hinder them from

identifying coping resources that are at their disposal (Cupach, Spitzberg, Bolingbroke, & Tellitocci, 2011).

Additionally, primary and secondary cognitive appraisal, at times, are followed by what is called re-appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). At times, new information emerges pertaining to the stressful situation, which has the potential to change how that situation was initially appraised. The nature of the new information can either improve the stressful situation or exacerbate it (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It is crucial to consider the interplay between primary and secondary appraisal because they both have an influence on the degree of the emotional reaction to the stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

### **Factors that affect cognitive appraisal.**

#### ***Personal factors that affect cognitive appraisal of stressful situations.***

Personal factors that affect cognitive appraisal include, but are not limited to, factors such as commitment to a particular goal and a belief that is held in a given stressful situation, which will (a) determine what is important for the wellbeing of a person; (b) mould a person's understanding of the stressful situation in relation to his or her emotions and coping efforts; and (c) provide the basis for evaluating outcomes (Wrubel, Benner, & Lazarus, 1981, as cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 56). The first personal factor to consider is commitment, which expresses that which is important to and has meaning to a person (Klinger, 1975, as cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 58). The more committed a person is to a particular goal, the more he or she is vulnerable to psychological distress when the goal is threatened or violated (Klinger, 1975, as cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 59). The level of commitment to a goal will also determine the willingness and the effort that a person will invest in dealing with a stressful situation. The second factor is a person's beliefs, which involve the individual's convictions of what life, in general, or specific situations, ought to be

like. A person's beliefs are shaped by various factors such as his or her surroundings, childhood experiences, community, and culture. Beliefs shape people's understanding and the meaning they attribute to a stressful situation (Bern, 1970, as cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 64).

***Situational factors that affect cognitive appraisal of stressful situations.***

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), the first situational factor to consider is the novelty of the stressful situation. Novelty refers to a person's lack of knowledge or connection to previous experience. When the stressful situation is encountered for the first time, it is most likely to be appraised as threatening and harmful. Previous encounters of a stressful situation, however, equip an individual with coping strategies that can be utilised when facing future stressful situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to Weinberg and Levine (1980, as cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 86), the second situational factor to be considered is the predictability of the stressful situation, which refers to that which a person can be certain of. The predictability of the situation has a positive correlation with coping because it refers to a certain degree of certainty. Contrary to this, the uncertainty of a stressful situation can become a barrier in mobilising coping strategies. Unexpected stressful situations result in shock and greater distress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

***Temporal factors that affect cognitive appraisal of stressful situations.***

According to Janis and Mann (1977, as cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 93), the first temporary factor to consider is the imminence of the stressful situation. Imminence refers to the amount of time before the stressful situation/event occurs. Some stressful situations often present cues that alert the individual of possible harm or danger before its occurrence. The timeframe plays an important role in the cognitive appraisal of a stressful situation. The timeframe is crucial in determining and devising coping strategies to deal with the stressful

situation. Insufficient time to mobilise coping strategies can present great psychological distress (Janis & Mann, 1977, as cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 98).

### **The Process of Coping**

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined coping as a continuous change in cognitive and behavioural efforts aimed at tolerating or managing external or internal demands considered to be taxing to or exceeding a person's resources. Ray, Lindop, and Gibson (1982) defined coping as the ability to solve daily life stressors and problems. These definitions of coping do not make a distinction between good or poor coping, but suggest that there is an effort made by a person to manage the demands, irrespective of whether the effort is successful or not. Coping therefore encompasses cognitive, affectual, and behavioural processes by which an individual deals with stressful situations (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Furthermore, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) identified two forms of coping, namely emotion-focused and problem-focused coping. These forms of coping are said to have two primary functions; the first of which is to manage or resolve stressful situations that cause distress to an individual, and the second is to govern the emotions related to these stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For the implementation of an effective coping strategy, it is crucial to examine the nature and context of a stressful situation in order to implement an appropriate coping strategy (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Neither the emotion- nor problem-focused coping strategy is superior to the other; the suitability and its usefulness are determined by the context and the nature of the stressful situation. Some people, however, have a preferred coping style that tends to be fixed over time, although coping should be considered as a dynamic and flexible process that is subject to change throughout the stages of a stressful transaction (DeLongis et al., 1982, as cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 149). The following section outlines emotion-focused and problem-focused coping.

## **Forms of Coping**

### **Emotion-focused coping.**

Emotion-focused coping is aimed at regulating emotional responses to a stressful situation. This form of coping is often utilised when a person cannot change a stressor but rather attempts to manage the emotional distress brought by the stressful situation (DeLongis et al., 1982, as cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 151). The lack of resources to respond to a stressful situation does not necessarily suggest that an individual will then adopt emotion-focused coping (Donald, Atkins, Parker, Alison, & Guo, 2016). Emotion-focused coping involves the use of behavioural and/or cognitive strategies to cope with a stressful situation – not a passive indulgence in emotions (Donald et al., 2016). For example, an individual may make use of social support to cope with the emotional turmoil of a break-up or seek professional help from a counsellor to deal with the turmoil of the break-up (Vogel, Wade, & Hackler, 2007). According to Baker and Berenbaum (2007), emotion-focused coping requires a person to actively identify, process, and express emotions. Consideration should be given to how individuals differ in their attentiveness and clarity regarding their emotions, emotional expression, and the avenues of expressing emotions. Furthermore, emotion-focused coping strategies are divided into two sub-categories, namely active emotion-focused coping and avoidant emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Active emotion-focused coping includes positive reframing and adaptive emotion-regulation strategies, whereas avoidant emotion-focused coping promotes self-distraction, consequently avoiding the stressor. Some avoidant emotion-focused coping strategies can be adaptive or maladaptive in nature (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).



### **Problem-focused coping.**

Problem-focused coping focuses on the implementation of practical problem-solving skills that will alter or change a stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused coping involves planning and direct action in tackling a stressful situation (Franks & Roesch, 2006). This requires problem-solving skills, which involve (a) the evaluation of a variety of potentially effective solutions for a particular problem, (b) the evaluation of advantages and disadvantages of each solution, and (c) the selection of an appropriate solution (D’Zurilla & Nezu, 1982, as cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 153). Problem solving can therefore be thought of as a rational, effortful, and purposeful activity aimed at changing a stressful situation (DeLongis et al., 1982, as cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 154). The advantage of problem-focused coping is that it provides a person with a sense of control. A sense of control promotes positive adjustment by increasing general competence and adaptation (D’Zurilla & Nezu, 1982, as cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 156). In relation to break-ups, problem-focused coping strategies will involve devising means to reconcile with the ex-partner and hopefully changing the decision to separate (Cupach & Spitzberg, 2004). If an attempt to reconcile with the ex-partner does not yield successful results, the relationship pursuer might be forced to accept the break-up because persistent attempts to reconcile with an unwilling ex-partner can seem harassing and invading (Cupach et al., 2011).

### **Personal Coping Resources During Stressful Situations**

According to Visotsky, Hamburg, Goss, and Lebovits (1961, as cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 158), the availability of personal coping resources such as good health is beneficial when dealing with stressful situations. Good health is a source of energy and motivation and can be useful in mobilising appropriate resources necessary to cope with a stressful situation. In addition, individual personal characteristics such as positive thinking, self-efficacy, and an internal locus of control are vital coping resources during stressful times

(Visotsky et al., 1961, as cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 159). Moreover, the interpersonal skills of a person, such as his or her ability to maintain healthy relationships and social support, are regarded as a coping resource during a stressful situation (Visotsky et al., 1961, as cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 164).

In addition, Visotsky et al. (1961, as cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 166) stated that attention should be paid to potential barriers that could hinder an individual from mobilising the personal resources necessary to deal with a stressful situation. Culture is identified as one of these barriers (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Some cultures may present with particular norms and preferred ways of dealing with stressful situations. For instance, in some cultures, women are socialised to be emotionally expressive and it is acceptable for them to display emotions, which contributes positively to their post-break-up adjustment, whereas men are often socialised to be assertive, self-reliant, and to display emotional control, which the literature suggests are characteristics that contribute to poor adjustment following a break-up (Díaz-Loving, Valdez, & Pérez, 2005; Merolla Weber, Myers, & Booth-Butterfield, 2004). Moreover, personal characteristics such as personality, preferences, fear of failure, intolerance for ambiguity, and dependency needs can further be a hindrance in mobilising coping resources. It is therefore crucial to identify the coping resources that an individual has at their disposal, as well as the barriers that limit their ability to make use of these coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The following section focuses on some of the criticisms of the psychological stress and coping theory.

### **Criticism of the Theory**

Some of the criticisms of the psychological stress and coping theory have been that the theory's concept of cognitive appraisal and coping is too simplistic and neglects to take into account the history and the anticipated future of the individual (Harris, Daniels, & Briner, 2004). According to Cox (1987), the cognitive theory of psychological stress and coping

assumes that a person has the capacity to appraise a situation and engage in coping strategies. However, not everyone can appraise their stressful situations objectively and devise helpful coping strategies. In addition, the two forms of coping do not offer much insight into other processes that may be involved in coping, such as personality influences, considering that some research suggests that personality characteristics play a part in coping processes. Furthermore, this theory does not describe a step-by-step process of coping and does not incorporate physiological response or acknowledge the genetic predisposing factors of people when reacting to stressful situations (Harris et al., 2004). Lazarus and Folkman (1984), however, made reference to and acknowledged the work of Selye (1936), which addressed physiological response stress, although the physiological response to stressful situations was not incorporated in their theory.

## **Conclusion**

The notion of what qualifies as a stressful situation has evolved throughout the years. In the same manner, the definitions of stress constantly change. According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), a stressful situation is cognitively appraised on the primary and secondary level by an individual, followed by the coping process. However, the process of appraisal and coping does not always occur in a linear way. The following chapter contains the literature review of the experience of non-marital terminated online romantic relationships and coping strategies utilised through this process.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

This study intends to explore and describe young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online romantic relationship. Little research has been conducted in relation to the current research question. As mentioned earlier, the majority of the existing research focuses on the experiences of individuals following the termination of a face-to-face romantic relationship and subsequent coping strategies related to the break-up. For this reason, this research study aims to explore the experiences and coping strategies young adults employ following the termination of significant online romantic relationships. This chapter will therefore provide an overview of existing research concerning young adults' experiences of face-to-face relationship break-ups, and the coping strategies they adopted in order to provide the context and relevance of the research aim.

#### **The Experience of the Termination of Non-Marital Romantic Relationships**

##### **Changes in belief systems.**

Traumatic life events tend to cause people to re-evaluate the beliefs they hold about themselves and the world, and ultimately reconstructing or modifying some of those belief systems (Bhaveena & Man Cheung, 2014; Cameron, Palm, & Follette, 2010). This notion applies to termination of romantic relationships as it can become a traumatic experience that has the potential to mould one's beliefs about future romantic relationships (Gilbert & Sifers, 2011; Felmlee, Sprecher, & Bassin, 1990; Oriña et al., 2011; Sbarra, 2006). In particular, the experience of a terminated romantic relationship has the tendency to challenge people's beliefs about their capabilities to maintain a successful romantic relationship (Fine & Harvey, 2006; Fleming, White, Oesterle, Haggerty, & Catalano, 2010; Simon & Barrett, 2010).

Moreover, people often develop negative beliefs about love or finding a satisfying future romantic relationship, which results in emotional volatility (Priest et al., 2019). This poor outlook on future romantic relationships is therefore identified as one of the factors that have a negative impact on post-break-up adjustment (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003).

### **Changes in self-concept.**

Self-concept is defined as a person's sense of "me" (James, 1890). This includes a person's set of roles, attitudes, beliefs, and how individuals think or feel (James, 1890). As individuals become closer to their partners in a romantic relationship, they incorporate aspects of their partner's self-concept into their self, thereby expanding the content of their self-concepts in the process (Aron & Aron, 1997). At times, the lines between the individuals' and their partners' self-concepts often become blurred (Mason, Law, Bryan, Portley, & Sbarra, 2011). Although some aspects of the self-concept remain fairly stable, some aspects are more prone to change over time as partners influence each other through their interactions in a relationship (McConnell, 2011). To illustrate how romantic relationships become embedded in people's self-concept, when the participants in Boals and Klein's (2005) study were asked to write about their experience of a break-up, the participants used the first-person plural pronoun "we" with reference to the former relationship. These authors found that when people reflected on their former romantic relationship, they tended to perceive their former partner and the self collectively (Lewandowski, Aron, Bassis, & Kunak, 2006). Similarly, Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, and Langston (1998) found that in a romantic relationship people use plural pronouns (e.g. we or us) and view the self as blended with the other.

When the relationship ends, people's self-concept also changes (McConnell, 2011). Individuals experience what is called self-concept contraction and shrinking following the break-up (Lewandowski et al., 2006). This means that the break-up is more likely to reduce certainty about who one is (Slotter, Gardner, & Finkel, 2010). When a person's self-concept

clarity decreases following a break-up, they are inclined to experience depressive symptoms (Bigler, Neimeyer, & Brown, 2001). In other words, break-ups threaten individuals' identities and significantly affect their self-beliefs. Therefore, the individual's self-concept undergoes dramatic changes both when they enter into and leave romantic relationships (Slotter et al., 2010).

### **Break-ups and mental health.**

The period following a break-up can be challenging to a person's psychological and emotional wellbeing (Monroe, Rohde, Seeley, & Lewinsohn, 1999; Simon, & Barrett, 2010). A study conducted by Sbarra and Ferrer (2006) revealed that the undergraduate students in their study who had recently ended their romantic relationships experienced symptoms that included longing for the ex-partner, sadness, anger, insomnia, headaches, avoidance behaviour, anhedonia, low libido, loss of appetite, and decreased satisfaction with life. Similarly, Mearns (1991) found that over 50% of college students experienced either clinical depression or moderate to severe depressive symptoms following the dissolution of a romantic relationship. It should, however, be noted that individual differences may account for and exacerbate the aetiology of depression within the break-up context (Catanzaro & Mearns, 1990). In addition, insomnia is one of the symptoms usually experienced following a break-up and has a significant effect on people's health-related quality of life (Hardison, Neimeyer, & Lichstein, 2005; Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). In an attempt to resolve sleeping problems, people might resort to medications or consume greater quantities of alcohol, which have an adverse effect at a later stage (Taylor et al., 2011). The abovementioned psychological and emotional difficulties were commonly reported by participants throughout many studies, irrespective of their social class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, yet the severity and duration of these symptoms vary (Kendler, Hettema, Butera, Gardner, & Prescott, 2003).

Besides a break-up having a negative effect on people's mental health, individuals' mental health prior to the break-up plays a significant role in how they will respond to and experience the break-up (Overbeek, Vollerbergh, Engels, & Meeus, 2003; Primeau, Servaty-Seib, & Enersen, 2013). For example, Boelen and Reijntjes (2009) argued that those who suffer from depression and anxiety expressed stronger emotional distress following the termination of a relationship. Research findings have demonstrated what seems to be a reciprocal relationship between the experience of depression and a break-up (Overbeek et al., 2003). It appears that existing depression amplifies the negative experience of a break-up, while, on the other hand, the break-up is a risk factor and a strong predictor of major depressive disorder among adolescents and young adults (Lee & Sbarra, 2013; Rhoades et al., 2011; Robak & Weitzman, 1998, as cited in Barutcu & Aydin, 2013, p. 786).

### **The role of attachment style and personality traits.**

Studies have shown that personal characteristics such as attachment style and personality traits have an influence on how people experience a break-up (Dailey, Pfiester, Jin, Beck, & Clark, 2009; Simpson & Rholes, 2017). Price, Hides, Cockshaw, Staneva, and Stoyanov (2016) suggested that non-initiators of a break-up who engaged in self-harming behaviour often had pre-existing psychological difficulties. Lee and Sbarra (2013) postulated that individuals with an insecure attachment style tend to perceive a break-up as personal rejection or abandonment and are inclined to engage in self-harming behaviour because of the overwhelming feelings of rejection and abandonment (Fisher, Brown, Aron, Strong, & Mashek, 2010). Thus, it appears that romantic relationship dissolution grief may contribute to suicide and suicide attempts in people with insecure attachment (Fordwood, Asarnow, Huizar, & Reise, 2007; Perilloux & Buss, 2008). On the other hand, Tashiro and Frazier (2003) identified neuroticism as a personality trait significantly related to the experience of much

distress following relationship dissolution because of the predisposition to anxiety and possible lack of coping skills when confronted with a stressful situation.

### **The reasons for break-ups.**

Feedback on the reasons for the termination of a romantic relationship serves the important function of providing the non-initiator with a sense of closure and an opportunity to reframe the break-up (Boelen & Van den Hout, 2010; Gilbert & Sifers, 2011). The reasons for the break-up provide answers not only to the non-initiator but also to family and friends (Buck, 2010; Fincham, 1991). Studies have shown that people who are uncertain about the reasons for a break-up tend to ruminate over the break-up (Cupach et al., 2011; Horwitz & Wakefield, 2007; Marshall, Bejanyan, & Ferenczi, 2013). The impediment of ruminating over a break-up is its limitation on a person's psychological capacity to develop the coping strategies necessary to deal with the heartbreak and possibly grow from the break-up (Cupach et al., 2011; Moberly & Watkins, 2008). Rumination over the break-up therefore produces negative emotions such as resentment, hopelessness, pessimism, and anger, and people are susceptible to carry this distress into future relationships (Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007; Wreford, 2016). On the other hand, research has shown that being certain about the reasons for a break-up allows a person to generate a coherent story regarding the break-up (Kansky, & Allen, 2018). This contributes to positive adjustment following the termination of a relationship (Kellas & Manusov, 2003).

### **Characteristics of a terminated relationship.**

Commitment has been identified as one of the characteristic of the former relationship that leads to greater emotional distress when the relationship dissolves. According to Rhoades et al. (2011), commitment in a romantic relationship involves a decision to love each other and to stay by each other's side. Helgeson (1994) noted that individuals who are particularly



optimistic about the future of their romantic relationship and invest in their relationship experience greater distress following a break-up. Similarly, Simpson's (1987) findings indicated that high investment in a romantic relationship leads to greater levels of distress following a break-up. Typically, the satisfaction of individuals in committed romantic relationships becomes complacent to the extent that they do not consider any alternative relationships (Tan, Agnew, VanderDrift, & Harvey, 2015). When a break-up does occur, individuals in this instance are forced to consider other future romantic relationships. Studies have found that termination of relationships that are characterised by high commitment often lead to the experience of depressive symptoms (Agnew et al., 2008; Chia-Wen, Pei-Di, & Yi-Chun, 2015).

#### **The initiator status.**

Initiator status is used to identify the one who decided to end the relationship (Waller, 2007). Being the initiator or non-initiator presents its own unique set of challenges and different adaptive problems following a break-up (Degenova, 2008). Research reveals that non-initiators of the break-up face emotional difficulty in the initial phase of the break-up and are more vulnerable to experiencing depressive symptoms (Attridge, Berscheid, & Simpson, 1995; Drigotas, 1996; Sprecher, Felmlee, Metts, Fehr, & Vanni, 1998), especially when the non-initiator had the expectation that their relationship would last for a long time (Fagundes, 2011). Moreover, the non-initiator's interpretation of the break-up plays a significant role in determining how they will experience the break-up and adjust to it (Perilloux & Buss, 2008). For example, non-initiators who perceive the break-up as an indication of unworthiness or lacking qualities of a desirable partner will experience a decrease in self-esteem and self-worth (Perilloux & Buss, 2008). This interpretation often leads to the non-initiator reflecting on the reasons that caused the break-up and attempting to make necessary changes that will yield success in future relationships (Perilloux & Buss, 2008).

The initiators of break-ups are often deemed the least affected by the break-up (Finkelstein, 2014). Perilloux and Buss (2008) found evidence that people tend to be less sympathetic to the initiators of the break-up. Initiators often experience criticism from people around them who suggest that they were doing something wrong, either by breaking up or by grieving the outcome of the break-up (Finkelstein, 2014). Research has shown that being the initiator of the break-up presents both advantages and disadvantages (Field et al., 2010; Sbarra & Ferrer, 2006). One advantage includes a certain level of perceived control over the termination of a romantic relationship, which contributes positively to post-break-up adjustment. Being an initiator gives one enough time to process the negative emotions that come with the break-up (Garimella, Weber, & Dal Cin, 2014). Additionally, the initiators often have an opportunity to establish a new romantic relationship that will assist with post-break-up adjustment (Perilloux & Buss, 2008; Sbarra & Emery, 2005; Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). The disadvantage of being the initiator involves being seen as a villain by non-initiators and mutual friends, while non-initiators of the break-up are viewed as victims (Perilloux & Buss, 2008). Being seen as a villain decreases future dating possibilities within the circle of friends shared with an ex-partner. At times, the initiators of the break-up not only lose their ex-partner, but also other friends who might not agree with their decision to break up (Perilloux & Buss, 2008).

### **Break-ups on social network sites (SNSs).**

Online romantic relationship termination is often followed by disconnecting from the ex-partner over SNSs (Gershon, 2010; Haimson et al., 2018). According to Madden (2012), people usually “block”, “unfriend”, or “defriend” the ex-partner on SNSs. Chou and Edge (2012) suggested that people “unfriend” or “block” their ex-partners because seeing happy photos of their former partners displayed on SNSs may create the impression that they are content and happy without them. To terminate contact with an ex-partner over social media

might seem as simple as a click of a button. In reality, the experience of the break-up often leads to decreased levels of life satisfaction, both at the time of the event and continuing into the future (Oriña et al., 2011; Sbarra, 2006).

The termination of contact with an ex-partner on social media after the break-up seems to be a favourable recourse. Lyndon, Bonds-Raacke, and Cratty (2011) suggested that maintaining contact with the ex-partner online may result in anxiety, longing to talk to the ex-partner again, obstruction in the healing process, and possible obsessive behaviours (Barutçu, 2009; Lyndon et al., 2011). Obsessive behaviours after a break-up may include monitoring the ex-partner on SNSs (Park, Sanchez, & Brynildsen, 2011). Monitoring the ex-partner on social media seems to be common behaviour, especially during the initial phase of the break-up. Lyndon et al. (2011) found that approximately 67% of participants reported to have stalked an ex-partner on social media at least once following a break-up, while 18% of participants reported more severe behaviours such as venting about the ex-partners on Facebook. For the ex-partner who is being monitored, this behaviour can be perceived as an invasion of privacy and they may resort to restricting the access of the stalker by blocking them on SNSs (Cupach et al., 2011; Field et al., 2010).

According to Sas and Whittaker (2013), in online romantic relationships there is a vast collection of digital possessions exchanged between the couples, such as photos, messages, and videos stored on the partners' electronic devices. These digital possessions have a significant meaning to the couple as they are symbols of love and an extension of the partner. During the break-up, these digital possessions may exacerbate the individual's negative experience by acting as a constant reminder of the loss and memories created during the relationship. To ease the heartache of the break-up, an individual may be required to sever all connections by deleting these digital possessions. There are several ways people deal with digital possessions after a break-up. According to Sas and Whittaker (2013), some participants

mentioned that deleting all the digital possessions reduced painful reminiscence and improved post-break-up adjustment. On the other hand, the participants who had chosen to store these possessions in an inaccessible manner to reduce the negative impact reported persistent romantic attachment to the ex-partner, which prolonged the grieving process. These participants were inclined to recall mostly the good memories and idealised the terminated romantic relationship (Sas & Whittaker, 2013). The process of digital disposal is difficult and is often accompanied by a form of a separation ritual usually performed after careful deliberation. Digital disposal can be an emotionally taxing process as individuals are required to re-engage with the possessions while deleting them (Boelen & Reijntjes, 2009; Del Palacio-González, Watson, & Berntsen, 2016; Rasmussen, Ramsgaard, & Berntsen, 2015).

### **Coping Strategies Employed Following the Termination of a Romantic Relationship**

Relationship break-ups appear prominent in the developmental stage of young adulthood and most people tend to experience more than one break-up in their lives (Arnett, 2015). One of the concerns people have is how to recover from the heartache of a break-up (Sbarra & Emery, 2005). Studies consistently show that there is no prescribed manner of dealing with the experience of a terminated romantic relationship; the process of healing is different for each individual (Gilbert & Sifers, 2011; Mancini & Bonanno, 2009; Mason et al., 2011). However, what is apparent during the break-up is a need for coping strategies that will transition people from the break-up to adjustment and growth. The following sub-sections therefore review some of the coping strategies that the literature has identified as coping strategies utilised to deal with a break-up.

#### **Self-compassion.**

The process of dealing with the experience of a break-up is made relatively bearable when people show compassion towards themselves (Zhang & Chen, 2017), especially for

individuals who attribute a break-up as a personal failure (Davis et al., 2003; Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007). The practice of self-compassion will enable them to overcome self-blame through the practice of genuine care for their own wellbeing despite the hardship of the break-up (Sprecher, Zimmerman, & Abrahams, 2010; Neff & Beretvas, 2013). Neff (2011) defined self-compassion as the sympathy extended towards the self when faced with a mistake or failure. Zhang and Chen (2017) suggested that self-compassion promotes positive adjustment following a break-up. Closely related to self-compassion is the practice of forgiveness, which emphasises forgiveness towards those who have transgressed against an individual and the self. Strelan and Covic (2006) viewed forgiveness as a process of dealing with a stressor that has occurred from what an individual perceives as interpersonal hurt. For instance, religious and spiritual practices can be a vehicle to express hurt and arrive at the level forgiveness that will enable a person to move on with life (Meneses & Greenberg, 2014). The majority of literature, however, focuses on forgiveness in relation to the maintenance and satisfaction in a romantic relationship following a transgression committed by one of the partners (Kato, 2016; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997). It will be beneficial to investigate the role of forgiveness as a coping strategy where the focus is not to repair the romantic relationship but rather to deal with the aftermath of the break-up (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002).

### **Meaning-making through reflection.**

People often engage in personal reflection in order to derive meaning from the break-up (Yildirim & Demir, 2015). Reflections on the break-up have an adaptive function, particularly when the intense emotions associated with the loss have dissipated and an individual can think objectively about their loss (Rollie & Duck, 2006). Reflection enables the former partners to account for their share of responsibility towards the termination of the relationship, thereby creating an understanding of why the former relationship did not work,

how to navigate future romantic relationship, and ultimately the acceptance of the break-up (Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007). Victor Frankl (1963, p. 179) realised the importance of deriving meaning in heart-breaking situations when he stated that “[s]uffering ceases to be suffering in some way at the moment it finds a meaning”. Frankl (1963) believed that people have the freedom under all circumstances to employ the will to find meaning, as well as to construct meaning (Frankl, 1963). Deriving meaning from a break-up will lead to increased personal insight, self-awareness, and growth (Marshall et al., 2013). Meaning-making is therefore linked to positive emotions and less distress following a break-up (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1999; Marshall et al., 2013).

### **Written expression.**

Written expression seems to be another avenue for processing the experience of a break-up (Lewandowski, 2009). Activities such as journaling offer individuals an opportunity to express and evaluate their thoughts and feelings concerning the break-up, thereby allowing them to positively reframe and gain new perspectives of the break-up (Lewandowski, 2009). For instance, Barber (2011) conducted a study and requested the participants who had gone through a break-up to participate in online journaling and an online chat as an intervention designed to cope with the break-up. The findings revealed that after 12 weeks, the participants reported decreased levels of anger, loneliness, and weekday alcohol use, and reported positive changes in their self-esteem. The findings of Barber’s (2011) study have been corroborated by other authors, suggesting that journaling particularly about the positive aspects of a break-up increases positive emotions and increased subjective wellbeing (Frattaroli, 2006; Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007).

### **Social support.**

Social support helps people to cope with the effects of a break-up by offering them a conducive emotional platform to make sense of the break-up (Vogel et al., 2007). Various studies have demonstrated that social support buffers the ill effects of stress by enhancing adaptive behavioural functioning and subjective wellbeing (Perilloux & Buss, 2008; Vogel et al., 2007). Even though the aforementioned studies have demonstrated the benefits of seeking social support, it remains an individual's choice to seek emotional support. Most of young adulthood post-break-up grief is attended to by friends (Benkel, Wijk, & Molander, 2009; Kaczmarek & Backlund, 1991, as cited by Finkelstein, 2014, p. 12). The break-up may go unnoticed by family members unless an individual makes a conscious decision to share the information with them (Gillen, 2011). In the context of online romantic relationships where the relationship may have been kept a secret, the individual may be less likely to seek social support from family and friends after the termination of such a relationship (Finkel et al., 2012). However, this does not suggest a person cannot receive emotional support because social support is not limited to family and friends; seeking professional interventions such as psychotherapy may be just as effective (Masten, Tusak, Zalar, & Zihlerl, 2009).

As mentioned earlier, even though research has demonstrated the benefits of social support when coping with a break-up, there are other factors that influence the likelihood of a person seeking social support (Perilloux & Buss, 2008). Some of these factors include culture and socialisation, which have an immense influence on the likelihood of an individual seeking social support after a break-up (Lewandowski et al., 2006). The literature has demonstrated the difference between males and females regarding their usage of social support (Shimek & Bello, 2014). For example, Márquez, Cruz del Castillo, and Balderrama (2017) found that there is a high prevalence of depression among women following the termination of their relationship because of their biological, environmental, and cultural risk

factors. Women generally cope better with a break-up because they are inclined to express their thoughts, emotions, and feelings about the break-up to friends and family (Malecki & Demaray, 2002; Masten et al., 2009; Slotter et al., 2010; Shimek & Bello, 2014). On the other hand, men tend to show overall poor adjustment following break-ups (Merolla et al., 2004). The argument is that men are often socialised to be assertive, self-reliant, and to display emotional control, which makes them less likely to seek emotional support (Merolla et al., 2004). Díaz-Loving et al. (2005) found that men dealt with a break-up by consuming alcohol and spending time with friends and acquaintances to evade the distress caused by the break-up, and do not necessarily discuss it.

### **Social media.**

Individuals are increasingly using the Internet to meet their emotional needs (Backstrom & Kleinberg, 2014; Clayton, Nagurney, & Smith, 2013). The advancement of technology has made it possible for people to overcome barriers in terms of accessing emotional support by acting as a temporary emotional outlet during a break-up (Cothill, 2014; Tong, 2013). The use of SNSs during a break-up has both advantages and disadvantages (Cothill, 2014; Tong, 2013). One advantage of SNSs identified by a study conducted by Cothill (2014) with young South African adults, reported that SNSs are regarded as an individual's network neighbourhood and a platform for interpersonal communication. Participants in Cothill's (2014) study further reported that they found Facebook useful as it provided them with a sense of connectedness, and served as an emotional outlet and a distraction from a terminated relationship. Moreover, interactions on Facebook were found to decrease feelings of loneliness during a break-up (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2010; Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012). A disadvantage of SNSs includes monitoring an ex-partner following the break-up (Clayton et al., 2013; Tong, 2013). According to Fox and Tokunaga (2015), monitoring the ex-partner is often seen in non-initiators of the break-up who are



uncertain about the reasons for the break-up and who want to see if the ex-partner has a new love interest (Clayton et al., 2013). Likewise, the participants in Cothill's (2014) study admitted to monitoring their former partners but they indicated that this triggered negative emotions such as anger, frustration, sadness, and loneliness, which delay the recovery process. The use of SNSs as a form of coping strategy, therefore, has both positive and negative effects on the recovery from a break-up (Clayton et al., 2013; Cothill, 2014; Tong, 2013).

### **Distraction.**

Some people may engage in various avoidance coping behaviours to distract themselves from the painful experience of a break-up (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). These avoidance coping behaviours may include directing one's focus to other areas of life such as hobbies, work, or finding new interests (Carson & Polman, 2009; Moulds, Kandris, Starr, & Wong, 2007). The literature identifies alcohol use and casual sex as some of the avoidance coping behaviours utilised following the termination of a romantic relationship (Barber, 2011; Wade & Delamater, 2002). Alcohol use intended to cope with a break-up can be maladaptive as it is associated with riskier behaviours such as drunk driving and casual sex (Dehart, Tennen, Armeli, Todd, & Mohr, 2009). Besides alcohol use, people seem to engage in casual sex to cope with a break-up. The non-initiators of the break-up may engage in casual sex after the break-up to cope with feelings of rejection, anger, and loneliness (Barber, 2011; Davis et al., 2003; Wade & Delamater, 2002). It is argued that during sexual intercourse, high levels of wellbeing are experienced and the frequency of sexual activity is positively associated with wellbeing (Gilbert & Sifers, 2011; Grossbard, Lee, Neighbors, Hendershot, & Larimer, 2007). However, not all avoidance coping strategies are maladaptive in nature; some avoidance coping strategies can be protective during psychological turmoil (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, & DeLongis, 1986). It is hypothesised that avoidance coping strategies can provide an

individual with time to mobilise social support and necessary coping resources to deal with a break-up (Field et al., 2010; Gillen, 2011).

### **New relationships.**

Rebound relationships have been identified as a form of an avoidance coping strategy and have been reported to increase people's subjective wellbeing (Barutçu, 2009). Rebound relationships are usually formed not long after the termination of a relationship to alleviate the emotional distress of the break-up (Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2015). They provide emotional detachment from the ex-partner while the focus is directed to the new partner (Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2015). For example, when Lewandowski and Bizzoco (2007) explored the effect of having a new partner on the adjustment following a break-up, the participants in the study who had rebound relationship immediately following the break-up reported more self-expansion and self-rediscovery than their counterparts who were single. Young adults who were in rebound relationships reported feeling less lonely and less preoccupied with the previous relationship (Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007). Research further proposes that rebound relationships increase one's self-confidence by providing an individual with a sense of desirability (Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2015).

### **Relaxation techniques.**

Relaxation techniques are behavioural coping strategies that are supported by research as a means of reducing the ill effects of stress (Norris, Carroll, & Cochrane, 1992; Stan, Collins, Olsen, Croghan, & Pruthi, 2012). Research suggests that exercise enhances the mental health of a person by decreasing anger, anxiety, and tension, while contributing to increased energy levels (Jong-Ho & Larry, 2011). Studies on mindfulness have demonstrated the positive effects of relaxation techniques that help individuals to cope with strong emotions as a result of stressful events (Baker & Berenbaum, 2007; Baer & Sauer, 2009). It is the

opinion of the researcher that little research has been conducted on the use of relaxation techniques as a coping strategy, particularly in reducing the negative turmoil associated with a break-up. It will be beneficial to evaluate the effect of relaxation techniques as a coping strategy, specifically in dealing with break-ups.

## **Conclusion**

The majority of the existing literature focuses on young adults' face-to-face romantic relationship break-ups and the coping strategies used. This literature review therefore served as a foundation for understanding the research topic of this study. The studies reviewed in this chapter consistently support that post-break-up experiences are difficult for young adults, but they are also a unique process for each individual (Field et al., 2010).

Romantic relationship break-ups are somewhat ordinary, developmentally appropriate stressors for many people, but can nonetheless present negative outcomes (Wreford, 2016). On the other hand, studies show that despite the distressing experience of the termination of a romantic relationship, there is an opportunity for personal growth and increased subjective wellbeing (Mason et al., 2011). Personal growth can be observed in character strengths, relationship-maintenance behaviours, and an increased sense of connectedness with others (Perilloux & Buss, 2008; Lewandowski & Bizzoco, 2007; Marshall et al., 2013). More so, the break-up can be a stress relief from poor-quality relationships (Franklin, 2015; Sedikides & Hepper, 2009; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

As indicated in the introduction of this chapter, there is a gap in the literature relating to this study's research topic. The lack of literature specifically relevant to online relationships demonstrates that research has not fully aligned itself to social changes (Franklin, 2015). Therefore, the goal of the research is to explore young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online relationship to gain greater insight

into online romantic relationships. The following chapter will outline the methodology adopted by the research in order to answer the research question.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter describes the methodology that was used to reach the aim of this research study. Research methodology is described as the scientific methods and techniques, including steps, procedures, and strategies, employed by a researcher to obtain valid knowledge concerning a research question (Mouton, 1986). This chapter discusses the methodological processes such as the research design and approach, the data-collection methods, sampling procedure, recruitment of participants, data-collection measures, research procedure, data analysis, the trustworthiness of the data analysis and findings, as well as the ethical principles that served as a guide for the researcher to answer the research question.

#### **Research Aim**

The aim of this study was to explore and describe young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online romantic relationship.

#### **Research Approach and Design**

This study adopted the epistemological positioning of a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research is described as a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning (Maxwell, 2013). The aim of qualitative research design is to explore, describe, and interpret the experiences of people by providing a rich account of how a phenomenon under investigation is experienced and the meanings people attribute to their experiences (Castellan, 2010). The use of a qualitative research design in this study allowed the researcher to uncover the perceptions, understanding, and interpretation of online romantic relationship break-ups as they were experienced by the participants and the coping strategies they subsequently employed. The advantage of the qualitative research method is that it takes into consideration

the contextual conditions in which people live and provides insight into human behaviour in its own context (Hancock, Windridge, & Ockleford, 2007). Furthermore, a qualitative research design takes into account the social, institutional, and environmental conditions in which the phenomenon took place (Hancock et al., 2007). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), the disadvantage of the qualitative research method is that it may be susceptible to the researcher's bias. In order to overcome personal biases in this study, the researcher suspended her personal experiences and existing thoughts about the phenomenon under the investigation. This process is called "bracketing".

This study employed an exploratory-descriptive design. The goal of an exploratory-descriptive study is to gain new insights, discover new ideas, and increase knowledge of the phenomenon (Brink & Wood, 1998). According to Bickman and Rog (1998), an exploratory-descriptive research design entails gathering information in an informal and unstructured manner. This research design was most advantageous for this study because little work has been conducted on this research topic (Burns & Grove, 2003). Using an exploratory-descriptive qualitative design allowed the researcher to explore and describe the phenomenon on which the study focused (Polit & Hungler, 1999); in this case young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant romantic online relationship. By employing an exploratory-descriptive design, the researcher will ultimately increase the knowledge base on this study's research question and topic (Burns & Grove, 2003).

While using the exploratory-descriptive design, the study was informed by the phenomenological approach, which focuses on the meaning of lived experiences (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999). The following section highlights the basic principles of the phenomenological approach.

### **Phenomenological approach.**

According to Giorgi (1985), the phenomenological approach focuses on clarifying the meanings of phenomenon from the lived experiences of the participants. The phenomenological approach seeks to understand how participants made sense of, understood, and interpreted their experiences (De Castro, 2003). The phenomenological approach was also considered suitable for this study because it enabled the researcher to accurately explore the lived experiences of the participants' online romantic relationship break-ups and their adopted coping strategies. The phenomenological researcher's role is to collect data from participants who experienced a phenomenon, followed by the development of a composite description of the core experiences of the participants involved (Burns & Grove, 2003; Hancock et al., 2007; Creswell, 2007). The researcher analysed the data from a phenomenological psychological reductionist viewpoint. This resulted in the suspension of the researcher's pre-existing ideas, beliefs, and knowledge, and the adoption of four main processes within the exploratory phenomenological approach, namely epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meaning (Moustakas, 1994).

### ***Epoché.***

Epoché is a Greek word meaning "to stay away" or "to abstain". It refers to the active suspension of a researcher's own biases, preconceived ideas, and pre-judgement (Butler, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). Furthermore, epoché is described as a continuous dynamic process of setting aside unexplained assumptions while a researcher becomes open to new experiences of ideas, feelings, and understanding of the phenomenon (Brook, 2005; Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). While conducting the study, the researcher was cognisant of her pre-existing ideas and thoughts about the researched phenomenon. Patton (1987) described epoché as

separate from bracketing as it is an “ongoing analytic process” adopted throughout the study. Bracketing, on the other hand, takes place during the data collection and interpretative moments when a researcher considers each of the identified phenomena for earnest inspection (Bednall, 2006). According to Groenewald (2004), it is not entirely possible for a researcher to be free from pre-existing ideas, thoughts, and existing knowledge about the research question. Therefore, the researcher is required to actively suspend pre-existing ideas and thoughts regarding the phenomenon by means of bracketing in order to obtain a description, the essence, and meaning of the individuals’ conscious experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

### ***Phenomenological reduction.***

According to Moustakas (1994), applying epoché alone is not sufficient; the researcher also needs to engage in phenomenological reduction. Phenomenological reduction focuses on the quality of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). By adopting this method, the researcher focused on the conscious experiences of the phenomenon as they were experienced by the participants. The researcher viewed the participants’ experiences in-depth to ensure that the description of their experiences was captured accurately. According to Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004), the researcher should think, imagine, and engage with phenomenon to appropriately describe them. The researcher subsequently read and re-read the participants’ transcribed interviews carefully and engaged with different experiences described by the participants. The researcher continued to engage in bracketing in an attempt to ensure that all pre-existing ideas about the research topic were suspended or set aside.

### ***Imaginative variation.***

Alongside epoché and phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation was considered by the researcher. Imaginative variation views the phenomenon from different perspectives through imagination (Giorgi, 2006). According to Moustakas (1994), the



imaginative process provides the researcher with the essence of the participants' experience, thereby exploring the different perspectives, positions, roles, and possibilities of meaning to achieve a detailed description of the phenomenon. The aim of imaginative variation is to arrive at structural descriptions of an experience and the precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced (Giorgi, 2006). Describing the essential structures of a phenomenon is the major task of imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). This process was followed during data analysis where the researcher read, re-read, coded, and formulated the structural themes of individuals' subjective experiences from the transcribed interviews.

### ***Synthesis of meaning.***

The final process of a phenomenological research approach is the synthesis of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). The goal of synthesis is to understand the phenomena through the development of an integrated statement about the experience (Giorgi, Giorgi, & Morley, 2017). This process requires the insights of the researcher who worked through all data collected to gain a sense of the whole phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher then discriminates the meaning units from the descriptions of the phenomenon being studied (Giorgi, 1985). The meaning units that are consistent statements of the participants' experiences are known as the structure of the experience (Giorgi et al., 2017). Here the researcher does not rehash the experience of the participants, but offers a deeper description of how the phenomenon occurred (Moustakas, 1994). During this stage, the researcher considered all the themes from the transcribed interviews and integrated them to provide a collective description of the phenomena as they were experienced by the participants. This process is depicted in the final stages of thematic analysis employed in this research study.

## **Data Collection**

The researcher employed specific research methods to discover and understand the phenomenon of young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online romantic relationship. These methods included the sampling procedure, recruitment methods, data-collection measures, and the research procedure. These methods are described in more detail below.

### **Sampling procedure.**

This study utilised purposive sampling. The main objective of purposive sampling is to select a sample that is representative of the population (Terre Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter, 2006). The advantage of using purposive sampling is that the chosen sample has specific characteristics related to the study, which ensure the suitability for participation in the study (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). All the participants recruited for this study met the inclusion criteria (see next section). Purposive sampling helped the researcher to obtain nine participants from the Nelson Mandela University student population to participate in the study. The researcher also made use of snowball sampling, whereby the participants of this study could identify other possible participants who met the criteria for participation, as recommended by Terre Blanche et al. (2006). One adult participant was identified through snowball sampling; this ensured that the sample of participants increased from nine to ten participants.

### **Recruitment of participants.**

The potential participants were recruited via email using Nelson Mandela University's Communique database. The research participation advertisement was sent to the email addresses of all registered students at the Port Elizabeth campus (see Appendix E). As mentioned in the above section, nine students responded to the research participation

advertisement and one adult participant was obtained through snowball sampling. One adult obtained through snowball sampling helped to increase the understanding of the phenomenon under study. The demographic information of one adult participants obtained through snowball sampling was similar to some of the student participants that were interviewed in relations to their age group. The only difference identified by the researcher was that the one adult participant was a working which did not make any significant difference to the findings of the study. The ten participants met the inclusion criteria necessary to participate in this study. The primary inclusion criteria as they appeared in the Nelson Mandela University email advertisement to participate in this study included that the participants:

- had previously been involved in a significant online romantic relationship that has been terminated;
- were fluent in English;
- resided in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan area; and
- were young adults between the ages of 18 and 35 years.

Young adults of any gender, culture, or sexual orientation could participate in this study irrespective of being part of the student population or not. The researcher included her email address in the Nelson Mandela University email to all registered students who were interested to participate in the study for them to make contact. The potential participants who met the inclusion criteria responded to the research participation advertisement by contacting the researcher via email and initial contact was established. The researcher addressed questions relating to the study and confirmed eligibility for participation before resuming with the interviews.

### **Data-collection measures.**

The data was collected in the form of individual in-depth interviews. According to Rubin and Rubin (2004), in-depth interviews are utilised to explore participants' perspectives on the research topic. The researcher who gathers such data must undertake in-depth interviews with the individuals who have a lived experience of the phenomenon (Adams & Cox, 2008; Rubin & Rubin, 2004). Phenomenology and interviewing explore how participants experienced phenomena, how they felt about them, the meaning they attributed to them, and the manner in which they talk about the phenomena to others (Patton, 1987, as cited in Kiruz, Crump, & Brien, 2007, p. 371). In-depth interviews are efficient methods of collecting primary data and help to uncover detailed and in-depth information from the participants (Allmark et al., 2009). The advantage of using this form of interview in the study was that the researcher could ask open-ended questions and could probe wherever necessary to obtain data that proved useful for the research topic. An in-depth interview provided the researcher with an opportunity to fully understand the participants' thoughts and behaviours relating to the research topic. The in-depth interviews were guided by the following interview schedule, which was followed by asking probing questions:

- Please tell me about your experiences after the termination of your significant online relationship.
- Please tell me about your coping strategies following the termination of your significant online relationship.

The interviews were conducted in a quiet and confidential environment (Nelson Mandela University Psychology Clinic [Uclin]). The duration of the interviews varied with each participant; however, the average duration of the interviews was approximately 16 minutes. All in-depth interviews were audio recorded and conducted in English. The

recordings were transcribed verbatim by an independent transcriber. The transcribed interviews, which were in the form of written text, were analysed using thematic data analysis.

### **Research procedure.**

The researcher adhered to all ethical regulations stipulated and obtained the required ethical clearance from the Nelson Mandela University. The researcher presented the proposal to the Department of Psychology for approval. Thereafter, the research proposal was submitted to the Faculty of Postgraduate Studies Committee (FPGSC) for the Health Science Faculty and the Research Ethics Committee (Human) (REC-H) at the Nelson Mandela University to obtain approval from these committees. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Deputy Vice Chancellor of Research and Engagement. Once institutional approval was granted, the researcher commenced with the research study (see Appendix D).

The researcher subsequently sent the email (see Appendix E) to all registered Nelson Mandela University students via the university's Communique database. The email provided information about the study, as well as details regarding participation, and requested potential participants to contact the researcher if they were interested to participate in the study. The suitability of participants to participate in the study was confirmed by asking prospective participants to complete a biographical questionnaire containing questions pertaining to the inclusion criteria (see Appendix B). Before resuming with the interviews, each participant was provided with an information letter (see Appendix A) that described the study, ethical considerations, and other applicable information regarding the research. The participants were encouraged to ask questions regarding the study to eliminate misunderstanding.

In adherence to the ethical guidelines, the participants were assured of ongoing confidentiality and their written informed consent was obtained before participating in the interviews (see Appendix C). The participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage of the study without fear of repercussion. Prior to the interviews, the researcher obtained

permission from the participants for the use of an audio-recording device for the interviews. The interviews were audio recorded to ensure accurate capturing of data. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and the written data was analysed using thematic analysis (see following section). To protect the identities of the participants, the researcher made use of pseudonyms. As per the ethical requirements, the data will be stored at the Nelson Mandela University's Department of Psychology with the supervisor for a period of five years for data analysis and verification. The researcher was aware that narrating the events regarding the break-up might result in emotional distress. The researcher was a counselling psychologist in training at the time of collecting data and emotionally contained the participants' emotional distress during the interview. Following the interviews, the researcher asked the participants whether they had experienced any distress as a result of participating in the study. None of the participants reported distress. Although no participants required referral, pre-emptive arrangements were made by the researcher to refer distressed participants to Uclin and the Student Counselling, Development and Career Centre.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to analyse the collected data. The purpose of thematic analysis is to identify and analyse themes and patterns emerging from collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The themes and patterns that emerge from the data must capture the essence of the data in relation to the research question (Creswell, 2013). In other words, the analysis of the words used by participants provided an understanding of their perception and the meaning they attached to their lived experiences of the events. According to Antaki, Billing, Edwards, and Potter (2002), the advantage of thematic analysis is that it is flexible and can be easily modified for the needs of the study. When using thematic analysis, a researcher should be aware of inconsistent themes that lack coherence within the data (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas,

2013). In this study, the researcher focused on the themes that were related to the aim of the study by following the stages provided as a guideline when using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is performed in six phases (Creswell, 2013). These phases are presented in a linear form; however, the researcher constantly moved through the collected data, codes, and themes until the analysis was completed. The following section illustrates the phases of thematic analysis according Braun and Clarke (2006) and how the researcher implemented each phase.

### **Phase 1: Becoming familiar with the data.**

In this first phase, the researcher familiarised herself with the transcribed data. The researcher immersed herself in the data through reading and re-reading the transcribed data. The researcher made notes as the transcribed data was read and audio recordings were listened to. Being immersed in the data allowed the researcher to start observing latent and semantic themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Phase 2: Generating initial codes.**

The researcher searched for patterned responses and meaning within the transcribed data. This led to the researcher identifying repeated responses (extracts) throughout the transcribed data. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), the researcher organised the data into meaningful groups in a systematic manner using coloured markers.

### **Phase 3: Searching for themes.**

This phase involved sorting similar repeated responses (extracts) into potential themes. The researcher searched for themes that had coherent and meaningful patterns within the data. The researcher observed the overlapping themes and the relationships not only with the themes but also in relation to the overall research study. According to Braun and Clark

(2006), during this phase the researcher must make a decision on which themes hold, and which ones need to be combined, refined, separated, or discarded.

#### **Phase 4: Reviewing themes.**

The researcher reviewed the themes and evaluated the validity of these themes in relation to the context of the study. The themes were reviewed to gauge whether they reflected the data. The researcher collapsed the themes that were not related to the research question. According to Shenton (2004), during this phase of the data analysis the researcher begins to observe a clear and identifiable distinction between themes and their significance to the research question(s). The researcher accordingly made use of an independent coder to ensure the credibility and integrity of the findings. Once the independent coder had given feedback on the findings of her coding, the researcher proceeded to the fifth phase.

#### **Phase 5: Define and name themes.**

This phase comprises defining and naming various themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Titles are therefore given to themes such that the reader has a clear idea of the nature or content of a theme by reading its title (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once a researcher has defined and named the themes and sub-themes, he or she should be able to describe how a theme fits in with the entirety of the description of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, the researcher and the independent coder created an integrated set of titles for themes and sub-themes, because both individuals had created their own unique names for particular themes and sub-themes. The researcher developed titles that accommodated both sets of titles. Both the researcher and the independent coder were satisfied with the meaning attached to the titles of the themes and sub-themes, and that no meaning was lost within the process of editing the titles of the themes.



### **Phase 6: To produce a write-up.**

The write-up tells a story of the data in a logical and non-repetitive manner (Braun & Clark, 2006). This phase involves writing a coherent and persuasive account about the themes that emerged from the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). While writing a report, the researcher embedded extracts from the interviews into her discussion of the findings to capture the essence of the point of the experience that the participants described, as well as contextualising these themes in relation to the research question and existing literature.

### **Trustworthiness of Data Analysis and Findings**

Taking into consideration that this study adopted the qualitative research design, the researcher utilised Lincoln and Guba's (1985) constructs to ensure the trustworthiness of the data analysis and findings. The main reason for ensuring trustworthiness of data is to persuade the reader of the relevance and worthiness of the findings (Shenton, 2004). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness is ensured through four constructs, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability.

#### **Credibility.**

Credibility refers to whether the interpretation of the data captures the participants' description of their experience (Shenton, 2004). Credibility is attained when participants recognise the reported research findings as their own experiences (Speziale & Carpenter, 2003). Hence, the researcher ensured that the interpretations of the meaning of the phenomenon reflected the participants' descriptions of their experiences. To ensure the credibility of the data analysis and research findings, the researcher made use of an independent coder as mentioned in the previous section.

### **Transferability**

The transferability a study involves the notion of whether the findings of the research can be applied to a similar context (Jensen, 2008). Transferability is concerned with the study's findings having meaning to others in similar situations (Shenton, 2004). As suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the researcher ensured transferability by providing a detailed description of the methods of data collection, the length of the in-depth interviews, and the number of participants involved in the study.

### **Dependability.**

According to Shenton (2004), the dependability of the research involves receiving similar findings when a study is repeated using the same research procedures, methods, and with similar inclusion criteria for participants. Dependability is therefore related to the consistency of the findings (Tobin & Begley, 2004). To ensure dependability, the researcher documented all the procedures undertaken while conducting the study. The researcher ensured that the process of documentation was logical, traceable, and clear to other researchers who would like to replicate the study. The processes were audited by the supervisor throughout the phases of the research.

### **Confirmability.**

Confirmability is demonstrated by the documented processes of how interpretations and conclusions were reached, which should demonstrate that the findings are free from bias (Tobin & Begley, 2004). The outline of the theoretical framework, methodology, and data analytical choices utilised in this study provide an opportunity for the study to be replicated by other researchers. In addition, the confirmability of this study was achieved by employing an independent research psychologist with expertise to code the collected data from the transcribed interviews.

## **Ethical Considerations**

There are ethical standards that a researcher needs to adhere to when conducting research to ensure that the study does not inflict any harm on the participants (Health Professions Council of South Africa [HPCSA], 2008). Ethics are regarded as a set of moral principles that are guidelines for an individual or group; they are widely accepted and offer rules and behavioural expectations regarding the correct conduct when conducting a research study (De Vos, 2002). In conducting this research, the researcher was consistent in adopting the *Belmont Report* (1979) and the HPCSA's (2008) ethical principles. These include institutional approval, researcher's integrity and competence, researcher bias, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, non-maleficence, and beneficence.

### **Institutional approval.**

The researcher presented the proposal to the Nelson Mandela University's Department of Psychology for approval. Following this, the research proposal was submitted to the FPGSC for the Health Science Faculty and the REC-H at the Nelson Mandela University to obtain approval from these committees. In addition, permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Deputy Vice Chancellor of Research and Engagement (see Appendix D). Upon receiving approval from these institutional committees, the researcher commenced with the research study.

### **Researcher's integrity and competence.**

The researcher had to ensure that the study was conducted with integrity and competency. The researcher had to remain cognisant of her pre-existing biases, assumptions, and her personal thoughts by constantly engaging in bracketing and applying the ethical principles provided as a guideline by the HPCSA (2008).

### **Researcher bias.**

The researcher utilised the four processes of the exploratory phenomenological approach for guidance in the study, namely epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). These processes were discussed in the previous section. The use of an independent coder according to Lincon and Guba's (1985) model of trustworthiness of data analysis helped to reduce the likelihood of researcher bias. Furthermore, the researcher adhered to the ethical principles of the *Belmont Report* (1979) and the HPCSA's (2008) guidelines. These guidelines include informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, non-maleficence, and beneficence.

### **Informed consent.**

The researcher ensured that the participants understood what participating in the research study would entail by providing them with the necessary information and answering their questions concerning participation in the study. This ensured that the participants could make an informed decision whether or not to participate in the study. The participants in the study were informed of their rights, i.e. to withdraw from the study at any stage, without any negative repercussion. They were informed of the advantages and the disadvantages of participating in the study. Thereafter, a written informed consent form was signed by all the participants.

### **Anonymity.**

Anonymity was ensured through the allocation of pseudonyms to participants to protect their identity (Creswell, 2007). All the personal information of the participants was only available to the researcher and was only used for the purpose of this study.

### **Confidentiality.**

The researcher ensured confidentiality by respecting the participants' dignity and protecting the participants from embarrassment, harm, and stigma (HPCSA, 2008). The participants' identification information was stored separately from the analysed data to ensure anonymity.

Confidentiality was assured to each participant in both the information provided and by means of signing the consent form. As per the ethical requirements of the Nelson Mandela University, the transcribed data will be safely stored by the research supervisor for a period of five years.

### **Non-maleficence.**

Following the interviews, the researcher asked the participants if they were experiencing any distress as a result of participating in the study. None of the participants reported being distressed. However, prior arrangements were made by the researcher to refer distressed participants to Uclin and the Student Counselling, Development and Career Centre, but none of the participants needed to be referred for counselling.

### **Beneficence.**

The participants in this study did not receive any incentive for participation. The participants were informed that their participation would aid in understanding young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant romantic online relationship.

### **Ethical Dissemination of Findings**

The findings of this study are submitted and published in the form of a treatise and made available to the Nelson Mandela University. This is a requirement for the fulfilment of

the degree of Master of Arts (Counselling Psychology). Additionally, the findings were made available to participants via email and personal feedback.

## **Conclusion**

This research study made use of a qualitative research design. It is an exploratory-descriptive study with the aim of exploring and describing young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online romantic relationship. This chapter outlined a comprehensive discussion of the methodological processes utilised. Information regarding the data collection, sampling procedure, data-collection measures, research procedure, and data-analysis method was provided. To ensure the trustworthiness of data analysis and findings, the researcher made use of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) model. This chapter further provided information regarding the ethical considerations that the researcher adhered to during the research process. These included institutional approval, researcher's integrity and competence, research bias, informed consent, confidentiality, non-maleficence, and beneficence. The findings of the study are presented in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### **Introduction**

This research was a qualitative, exploratory-descriptive study, which aimed to explore and describe young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online romantic relationship. The researcher utilised Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis to analyse the data and to derive the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data. The findings from the study are discussed in themes and sub-themes in relation to the research question. The discussion of findings is integrated with existing literature and the theoretical framework adopted by this study. This study therefore provides an understanding of the phenomenon that is being studied. Before the presentation of themes and sub-themes, it is important to consider the biographical information of the participants.

#### **Biographical Description of the Participants**

Ten participants who met all the necessary inclusion criteria participated in the study. Nine participants were obtained using purposive sampling from the student population and one adult participant was obtained through snowball sampling. Four participants were male and six participants were female. The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 34, and they represented both black and coloured ethnic groups. The in-depth interviews were guided by the following interview schedule (which was followed by asking probing questions):

- Please tell me about your experiences after the termination of your significant online relationship.
- Please tell me about your coping strategies following the termination of your significant online relationship.

The following section contains a discussion of the findings integrated with existing literature and the theoretical framework adopted by this study.

### **Identified Themes and Sub-Themes**

Table 1 depicts the themes and sub-themes that were identified as the experiences of a terminated online romantic relationship. Each main theme and sub-theme will be discussed under a separate heading.

**Table 1: Participants’ experience after termination of a significant online relationship**

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
The characteristics of the relationship while it was intact.	Level of daily online communication. Commitment to future plans. Emotional support.
Reasons for the break-up.	
Terminating contact with the ex-partner over social media.	
Overall functioning	Emotional distress. Physical distress. Behavioural distress.
Initiator status	Initiators’ experience. Non-initiators’ experience.
Decreased self-esteem.	
Previous life experiences	



## **The Characteristics of the Relationship While It Was Intact**

During the interviews, while the participants were sharing their experiences of their break-up with the researcher, some of the participants made links between their experiences of the break-up and the type of online romantic relationship they had. Participant 03 even went as far as requesting to first talk about her terminated online relationship experience: *“Can I please first speak about how it was like before the break-up and everything else?”*

As part of the main theme, the following sub-themes were identified: Level of daily online communication, commitment to future plans, and emotional support. These sub-themes will be discussed next.

### **Level of daily online communication.**

The participants in this study found their online romantic relationships real and implied that they felt the presence of their online partners in their lives. This seemed to have been facilitated by the level of daily online communication that took place between the partners. As Participant 06 stated: *“The break-up was very hard for me because I had to live with that person, I had to live with him online.”*

Additionally, Participant 06 provided the following illustration of her online communication interaction with her partner:

*After school, from school. Mornings, I would send him a text message. Whenever I have time, if he did send me a text message during the day, I would reply.*

Other participants seemed to have shared the same level of daily online communication interaction with their partners:

*Or will text the other person: “Good morning”, you know. And you know that after that, it will be a conversation and then after that you will continue with your own things. But you know, afternoon, whoever thinks of the other person will text or call again. At night, same thing. “Good night”. One person will do it or the*

*other person will do it. So now I think with that, with that routine was already*  
[Participant 01].

*Because obviously you go from talking to this one person continuously, the whole*  
*day, for most of your day* [Participant 05].

For Participant 10, daily online communication with the partner was helpful in tackling life's problems and sharing good times:

*So I felt like that person was already part of me because we laughed together, we*  
*cried together. If we had a problem, we solved it together, regardless of not having*  
*to meet each other.*

Furthermore, it appears that the daily online communication assisted to build trust and loyalty in Participant 06's online relationship:

*Basically he just has to know everything in order for you to keep everything going.*  
*That's where everything starts. He has to trust you. He has to know what you are*  
*up to and he has to know that you are loyal.*

The daily online communication interactions between the partners became an integral part of the relationship and led to distress when people disconnected after the break-up. Participant 06 reported that the break-up felt as though something was taken from her, as she was used to talking to her partner on a daily basis:

*Okay, it feels like a part of you has left. Even if it is a little thing, it is a little piece*  
*of you, but it feels like you have to get into a schedule where you now don't have*  
*to report to someone or where now you don't have to care for that person.*

Communication is a building block of relationships (Duck & Pittman, 1994), and essential for satisfying interpersonal relationships (Hecht, 1978). The more partners communicate, the more likely they are to become closer (Emmers-Sommer, 2004). More so, communication is significant in the context of online relationships where there is no physical

contact. The development and maintenance of online relationships are wholly dependent on communication (Rabby & Walther, 2003).

### **Commitment to future plans.**

The participants in this study had made plans with their former partners to meet face to face and it seemed that they were looking forward to meeting their online partners eventually. This is the statement from Participant 03, who seemed to have already imagined possible things they would do together when they finally met in person: *“And we also made plans about what we want to do when we meet up.”* This was the same desire expressed by Participant 08, who wanted to see his partner face to face: *“Ja, the expectations was we can be in the same room, the same place, at the same time, other than being online.”*

Some of these plans made by the participants with their partners included long-term plans that would have potentially shaped their trajectory. Participant 04 was willing to align his career prospects with his romantic relationship interests by relocating closer to his partner in another city:

*Because, ja, I was like, ja, no I want to move to Jo’burg. The hustle is better that side than this side. So I was like, “As soon as I am done, I am coming to you” and like she knew that was the end goal.*

Participants 05, 07, and 10 seemed to have made a decision to be with their partners long-term; this included relocating and possibly becoming a family.

*So the relationship was that strong because we are planning for me to come over there so that we would settle down as husband and wife; we were going to have children and everything [Participant 05].*

*So due to we are far away from each other, because she resides in New York, United States of America... So the relationship was that strong because we were*

*planning for me to go over there so that we would settle down as husband and wife [Participant 07].*

*So we had plans. We had already planned how our first day would be like and five years to come [Participant 10].*

Commitment in an online relationship is characterised by communicating important life plans and even merging individual plans to those of a partner's (Simpson, 1987). This leads to an expectation that the relationship will remain intact over time, which has the propensity to lead to great distress when the relationship is terminated (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001; Rhoades et al., 2011). Therefore, the more committed a person is to a particular goal, the more he or she is vulnerable to psychological distress when the goal is threatened or violated (Klinger, 1975, as cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 59).

### **Emotional support.**

Experiencing emotional support in a relationship makes people comfortable to disclose their vulnerabilities, fears, and weaknesses, which can help to facilitate intimacy between the partners (Collins & Miller, 1994, as cited by Clark, 2000, p. 763). Research findings indicate that the emotional support people receive from romantic partners is associated with greater social adjustment and wellbeing (Lee & Goldstein, 2015); emotional disconnect therefore becomes a painful experience for the individuals (Loving & Slatcher, 2013). This was evident for some of participants in this study. For example, Participant 03 indicated that the emotional support she received from her partner made her brave enough not only to disclose her fears but also to confront them. She also wondered that now that the relationship had ended, who would support her emotionally:

*Like things, like my fears and what I wanted to do for the future. But then now the person decides to call it quits and then now I have to go back to: Who do I speak to if I have a problem? Who do I speak to if maybe I am feeling pressure or*

*something since I was still at school?*

Two participants felt that the kind of emotional support they received from their partners made them feel understood:

*And all my pains, I could express them to him and he would understand from that point. So that's the kind of connection that we had [Participant 03].*

*So meeting someone online who actually understood me and didn't want to judge me but only to love me, it kind of made me feel accepted and I got some sense of, like, belonging [Participant 02].*

In summary, although the nature of their online relationship was not the focus of the study, it emerged as a significant factor in the level of distress experienced by the participants following the termination of their online relationships. This information provided the researcher with a context and deeper understanding of the participants' experience of the break-up. The findings of this study thus suggest that the characteristics of the relationship while it was intact have a significant influence on an individual's experience of a break-up. The following section focuses on the impact the reasons for the break-up had on the participants' experience of the termination of romantic online relationships.

### **Reasons for the Break-Up**

There were events that had occurred in the former relationship that led to some of the participants ending their romantic online relationship. For example, Participant 04 indicated knowing that his partner was unfaithful was enough reason to end the relationship and to move on with his life:

*So she is like, ja, she did something and I asked: "What?" She is like: "Ja, something happened with someone." I said: "No, it is cool. You don't have to worry. I think we will just go our separate ways."*

This was similar for Participant 07, who decided to end his online relationship and move on with his life after he was informed that his partner's life was threatened by her former boyfriend who was a gangster and wondered whether she should continue her online romantic relationship with Participant 07:

*So that her life would not be in danger because you know how all these gangsters do their things? ... So that was the reason why I said: "Okay, let me leave her"...*

*So let me not be selfish. I sacrificed that years we had been together, you know.*

For some participants who did not choose to end the relationship it was hard to accept the reasons given to them as the cause for the break-up. Participant 03 said that at the time of her break-up she thought that the reasons given to her by her ex-partner that he wants to focus on the church were inadequate to terminate the relationship, but later on she understood her ex-partner's point of view:

*Ja, but for me, I think it was an excuse to say: "Okay no, I can't be with you anymore because of church and this and that" because I didn't understand the concept of that as we didn't meet, as we were not in physical contact in a way... I felt like I think it was an excuse. But now I understand.*

Participant 10 requested the reasons for the break-up to see if she could not rectify what she might have done wrong and save her online relationship; however, this was not possible:

*I wanted to know the reasons for the break-up and if there is no way we can stop this break-up and then just continue with the relationship.*

Knowing the reasons for the break-up does not take away the pain it caused a person (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003). However, the reasons for the break-up provide a person with a sense of closure and an opportunity to reframe the break-up (Boelen & Van den Hout, 2010; Gilbert & Sifers, 2011). The reasons for the break-up allow an individual to generate a

coherent story regarding a recent break-up, which is positively correlated with overall adjustment (Kansky & Allen, 2018; Kellas & Manusov, 2003). Moreover, accounting for what led to a break-up serves as a catharsis, and maintains social identity and integrity by providing answers not only to the individual but also to the family and friends (Buck, 2010; Fincham, 1991).

Participant 02 was not provided with the reason for the break-up and this led to rumination over the break-up, which seemed to have had a negative impact on his post break-up adjustment:

*And since there was no reason actually given to me as to why we should have, umm... sorry, the reason why we broke up. So I was left with tons of questions that I had to answer on my own.*

This is consistent with previous findings that suggest that uncertainty about the reasons for a break-up tend to cause rumination and is a poor predictive factor of post-break-up adjustment (Cupach et al., 2011; Moberly & Watkins, 2008).

Uncertainty with regard to the reasons for the break-up seemed to have made Participant 02 sceptical about future online relationships:

*Sjoe... So the break-up sort of like created an uncertainty [Interviewer].*

*Yes, about the online world. Yes... Not to trust too much... And not to expect a lot from people online, yes [Participant 02].*

The literature suggests that individuals who are uncertain as to why a relationship ended are most likely to ruminate on the negative feelings following a break-up and are likely to carry this distress into future relationships (Marshall et al., 2013). The next section focuses on the termination of contact with the ex-partner over social media.

## **Terminating Contact with the Ex-Partner over Social Media**

During the break-up, people who are in online relationships disconnect from their ex-partners over SNSs by “blocking”, “unfriending”, or “defriending” them (Madden, 2012). Participant 01 indicated that her ex-partner disconnected from her on SNSs for three months following their break-up. She acknowledged that this helped her to cope better with the break-up as maintaining contact with the ex-partner again on social media as friends was difficult for her:

*Then for a good three months, he deactivated all his social networks... That also helped. I thought the friendship thing would work but it actually didn't work as much. It is like he didn't believe that we were over.*

Several participants reported similar experiences and indicated that they did not want to maintain contact with their ex-partners on social media and reduced their use of SNSs at that particular stage:

*And so I just didn't want anything to do with my phone. I deleted almost everything. I didn't talk to anyone and, you know, I just had to, like, come to terms that this person isn't in my life anymore [Participant 05].*

*So I deleted everything that got to do with him [Participant 09].*

*So it was that way. A few things. I started exams. I locked out all social media, like WhatsApp and Facebook... Because, like, ja, I didn't want any pictures of her popping up [Participant 04].*

Terminating contact with an ex-partner on SNSs seems to be helpful in coping with a break-up (Lyndon et al., 2011). Research shows that maintaining contact with a former partner on SNSs at times gives the impression that the ex-partner is content and has moved on with life and they are coping better with the break-up, which tends to be upsetting for the other one who is struggling to cope with the break-up (Chou & Edge, 2012).



Participant 04 blocked not only the ex-partner, but unfollowed their mutual friends who could remind him of his ex-partner:

*So I didn't unfriend them. I just said "unfollow" them, like they didn't know that I can't see their stuff anymore.*

Maintaining contact with an ex-partner on SNSs can become an avenue for monitoring an ex-partner (Clayton et al., 2013; Tong, 2013). This is best depicted by the statement made by Participant 09:

*Yes. Yes, because at first it was fine. But then when I started, after a few weeks I started going through, searching him and going through his things because I just wanted to see how he is doing. Then I found that he is happy or it showed that he is happy. So ja, that's when I realised that the feelings that are coming, all the sadness, insecurities and stuff.*

The literature suggests that the main reason people monitor their ex-partner over SNSs is to see how they are coping with the break-up and to monitor the ex-partner's new love interests (Clayton et al., 2013). This also applied in the case of Participant 09, who wanted to see if her ex-partner had moved on with his life:

*But then a few... a few weeks later, when I saw that the person has moved on, posting things on Facebook, and that's when it started, umm, hurting in a way. But it wasn't a very big... a big deal. But the pain was there.*

This participant went as far as comparing herself to her ex-partner's new partner. This is what she said:

*No, not really, because just going through the pictures, I stalked the girl as well... There were some things she had and I thought to myself: "Oh, maybe it is because she has bigger boobs [Participant 09]."*

Several studies have documented the negative effects of monitoring an ex-partner, such as anger, frustration, sadness, loneliness, and a delay in the recovery process (Cupach, & Spitzberg, 2004; Lyndon et al., 2011; Fox & Tokunaga, 2015). This is also supported by other international studies conducted by Madden (2012) and Sas and Whittaker (2013), as well as a South African study conducted by Cothill (2014) suggesting that terminating contact with the ex-partner over SNSs appears to be a good decision in the long term as it prevents one from monitoring an ex-partner's progress, which can be detrimental to one's emotional wellbeing. The next section focuses on the overall functioning of the participants following the break-up, particularly their emotional reaction to the break-up, physical distress, and behavioural changes that took place.

### **Overall Functioning**

Relationship break-ups can impact almost all areas of a person's life, including social, emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual wellbeing (Buck, 2010). The following sections outline the sub-themes emotional distress, physical distress, and behavioural changes experienced by the participants during the break-up.

#### **Emotional distress.**

According to Simpson, Campbell, and Berscheid (1986), people may not realise how closely tied they are to their partners until the dissolution of the romantic relationship. The loss of emotional attachment manifests in the form of intense negative emotions that occur in a romantic relationship as a result of unmet expectations, closeness, or interdependence. This is illustrated by the following statements made by several participants who shared their emotional responses to their break-ups:

*So that was my experience of the break-up. I was sad [Participant 01].*

*I was sad, yes [Participant 02].*

*I was, like, really feeling very down and lonely [Participant 06].*

*I felt disappointment mainly [Participant 08].*

*And it hurt me so bad, to a point where I cried by myself, in my room [Participant 10].*

*Yes, there was anger in me and I felt broken and, umm, I didn't know how to react [Participant 10].*

*It was just anger, but then, umm, the anger wasn't directed towards anybody close to me. It was directed to him [Participant 09].*

*A heartbreak. What can I say? I feel... I felt betrayed [Participant 09].*

These emotional reactions experienced by the participants in this study are similar to the findings of Sbarra and Ferrer's (2006) study, which revealed that the undergraduate students who at the time of their study had recently ended their romantic relationships experienced emotions ranging from longing for the ex-partner, sadness, to anger. Different emotional responses exhibited by participants can be attributed to their individual cognitive appraisal of the break-up. The psychological stress and coping theory postulates that how people perceive and interpret stressful situations has an immense influence on how they will experience that stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). People may encounter similar stressful situations; however, their experience of the situations might differ. This is because people differ in their vulnerabilities, interpretation, and response to a stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

### **Physical distress.**

Some of the participants in the study reported experiencing physical distress following the break-up. Participant 04 indicated that he is not an emotional person, but reported a great deal of physical distress:

*No, I am not emotional, not that emotional person but, like, there was, like, chest*

*pains ... It is like, joh, you want to cry but you can't cry... Chest pains. Like proper chest pains, like, joh, you can't breathe. Like, joh, like you can't eat and then, like, ja, it is like the pit of your stomach.*

Both Participants 07 and 05 reported losing weight at the time of their break-up:

*Because you will see that the way this person used to look like is no longer the way he is looking like... [Participant 07].*

*Physically, ja ... All of a person, I was thinking too much. I get slender a little bit slender... Ja, I lost weight... I was throwing up. I was losing a lot of weight [Participant 05].*

Participant 05 elaborated further on her physical symptoms and mentioned how her body felt cold at the time of her break-up:

*Umm, I felt like cold. Like my whole body, it was like I was put in a fridge... Like my whole body just went cold and I couldn't really think of anything else.*

According to Field (2017), these physical symptoms indicated by participants after a break-up could possibly be as a result of heartbreak. Physical symptoms at times can be so severe that they mimic symptoms of a heart attack. The heartbreak can cause an increase in stress hormones, specifically cortisol dysregulation, and are bound to compromise the immune system's functioning (Guo, Deng, He, Deng, Xuang, & Huang, 2014), possibly resulting in the abovementioned physical symptoms by the participants.

### **Behavioural distress.**

Furthermore, there were participants who noticed some behavioural changes during the break-up. Participant 04 indicated that he loves food, but this was not the same during the break-up; even people around him started noticing this change:

*So it was like, it was that and then like, ja. A whole lot of... I couldn't eat for like... Not couldn't eat but like I wasn't interested in food... And I love food... Ja, ja, for*

*a while and then like everyone and my mom is like, ja, this one is going through something.*

Participants 04 and 03 further elaborated on their sleeping patterns, noticing that they started sleeping more:

*It was like... I just like was sleeping because I get home and then I sleep*  
[Participant 04].

*So, for me, it was going to school, coming back, and then sleep. That's it*  
[Participant 03].

It seemed for Participants 05 and 03 that their emotional state following the break-up had an impact on their daily face-to-face interactions and their ability to direct their daily goals.

*I felt like a zombie, like I was just... I was doing everything without aim, without purpose, just trying to get through my day* [Participant 02].

*That's what I did most of my time. So I would go to school, come back, be in my room, not do anything for, like, I don't know how long* [Participant 03].

To some extent, several participants in this study reported experiencing emotional, physical, or behavioural changes following their break-up. The findings of this study indicate that the termination of an online romantic relationship at times is likely to impact a person's overall functioning. The following section focuses on the initiator status regarding the experience of the termination of online romantic relationships, particularly on the experience of the participants who initiated the break-up and the non-initiators of the break-up.

### **Initiator Status**

The initiator status is used to identify the one who decided to end the relationship (Waller, 2007). The following sub-themes are discussed in the next sections: initiators' experience and non-initiators' experience.

### **Initiators' experiences.**

Initiating a break-up is not an easy task (Finkelstein, 2014). Baumeister, Wotman, and Stillwell (1993) report that the initiators of a break-up often experience anxiety on how to execute it and struggle with the guilt of hurting their former lover before and after the relationship has ended. It appears that this was the experience of Participant 01, who decided to end her relationship:

*It is very overwhelming to think and know that you are going to be breaking a person's heart but at the same time you have to be selfish. You have to think of yourself.*

As much as being the initiator of the break-up appears to have challenges, the literature suggests that the advantage of being the initiator of the break-up is having a sense of perceived control and sufficient time to work through the emotions associated with the break-up (Frazier & Cook, 1993; Waller & MacDonald, 2010). This is depicted by the following response from Participant 01, who indicated that she worked through the emotions associated with the break-up and healed from the break-up before she ended the relationship:

*So now what was happening with me was that I would actually experience that while I was preparing to end it and so it was really an emotional rollercoaster for me and the day that I ended it, was the day that I realised that actually now I am healed... You heal before you leave.*

It seems that being the initiator of the break-up can be imposed upon a person by circumstances. This is was the case with two other participants in this study who felt they needed to end their relationships due to certain circumstances in their former relationships.

Participant 07 decided to terminate his relationship because he felt his partner was in danger (not necessarily that he did not want to be with her anymore):

*So that her life would not be in danger because you know how all these gangsters do their things? ... So that was the reason why I said: "Okay, let me leave her" ... So let me not be selfish. I sacrificed that years we had been, you know?*

After Participant 05 decided to initiate the break-up with his romantic partner, he linked his experience of the break-up to an emotional trauma:

*And there was a time I was like: "What am I living life again?" ... You understand? I thought I have found someone that I love. So why did it happen to me? I was like passing through emotional trauma, you know?*

This experience was similar for Participant 04, who decided to terminate the relationship after discovering that his partner was unfaithful (not necessarily that he did not want to be with her anymore):

*So she is like, ja, she did something and I asked: "What?" She is like: "Ja, something happened with someone." I said: "No, it is cool. You don't have to worry. I think we will just go our separate ways..." So it was just a break-up.*

Although Participant 04 decided to end the relationship, he still felt disappointed about losing a partner and he thought it was unfair that he was faithful in the relationship while his partner was not faithful. He added:

*You feel like an idiot because it is like, it is not like a thing like I don't get offers but I am turning down offers here and someone isn't reciprocating that and ja, so that's the thing.*

### **Non-initiators' experiences.**

The non-initiators of the relationships in this study did not expect the break-up and this caused great emotional distress for them. The uncertainty of the stressful situation results

in shock and greater distress and may act as a barrier in mobilising coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The following was reported by Participants 02 and 03:

*Well, at first it was a bit of a shock... And since there was no reason actually given to me as to why we should have, umm... Sorry, the reason why we broke up* [Participant 02].

*Trying to understand what's really happening, what really caused the break-up, because for me everything was fine and then out of the blue, on a certain day he said no, we can't go on* [Participant 03].

Studies suggest that a break-up is not easy to cope with, especially when a person feels it is something that was imposed by another person (Field, 2017; Speer, 1998; Simpson, 1987). The following statement by Participant 03 illustrates the abovementioned point made by these authors:

*And I have spent days sort of indoors. I didn't want to go out because that was very difficult for me to accept and I couldn't... I couldn't continue in a way or not continue in that sense, but I couldn't find sort of meaning in terms of relationships because I was kind of stuck, not knowing what to do, like how to make sense of it.*

The unexpectedness of her online relationship break-up left Participant 10 feeling hopeless and pessimistic about future romantic relationships.

*So I felt like it was, like this decision was the end, like I was never going into relationships again. That's how I felt... And I felt like out of all people, I didn't expect this person to do me like this. That's why I say it was so bad. The break-up was so bad.*

Similarly, Participant 03 was not only feeling sceptical and pessimistic about future romantic relationships but the break-up also made her doubt the intentions of people around her.



*So it wasn't... I sort of disconnected from everyone. I didn't want anyone in my circle because I felt like people can't be trusted. You actually tell them your deep things and then at the end they throw it in your face or they feel like no, this is now too much. I need to step back a bit.*

The literature suggests that a terminated romantic relationship has the tendency to challenge people's beliefs about future relationships and their capabilities to maintain a successful relationship (Simon & Barrett, 2010). People usually have negative beliefs about finding love or a satisfying future (Priest et al., 2019). This poor outlook on future romantic relationships is identified as one of the factors that have a negative impact on post-break-up adjustment (Davis et al., 2003).

Considering both the experience of the initiators and non-initiators in this study, it is the researcher's opinion that both initiators and non-initiators may have experienced the same intensity of distress and that the only difference might be the timeframe and the readiness for the break-up. According to the psychological stress and coping theory, the timeframe plays an important role in stressful situations. What causes greater psychological stress is when people think they have insufficient time to mobilise coping strategies necessary to combat the stressful situation (Janis & Mann, 1977, as cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 98). The following section focuses on the experience of decreased self-esteem following a break-up.

### **Decreased Self-Esteem**

Research indicates that following a break-up, particularly the non-initiators of the break-up often experience decreases in their self-esteem as the break-up might be perceived as an indication of lacking the qualities of a desirable partner (Perilloux & Buss, 2008). This was the experience of Participant 02, as he indicated that he interpreted the break-up as an indication of not being good enough.

*What could have gone wrong? ... A lot of questions like that... Maybe I was not good enough.*

Participant 09 reported going as far as comparing herself to her ex-partner's new romantic partner and noticing some physical characteristics that she lacked that could have contributed to the break-up:

*There were some things she had and I thought to myself: "Oh, maybe it is because she has bigger boobs".*

Researchers suggest that people whose self-esteem is based on their romantic relationship may interpret a relationship break-up as a setback with respect to feeling important and valuable, and thus suffer loss in self-esteem (Luciano & Orth, 2017). Therefore, romantic rejection by a person whom one loves and is attracted to can lead to decreased self-esteem (Mason et al., 2011).

### **Previous Life Experiences.**

For some participants their previous experiences exacerbated their experience of the break-up. Some participants used their childhood experiences as a lens to interpret the break-up. Participant 02 perceived the termination of his online romantic relationship as proof that there was something wrong with him as he recalled the hatred that people had towards him because of his sexual orientation. Participant 02 shared the following:

*And I couldn't relate to anyone... And people couldn't relate to me. Others liked me for how different I was. Others hated me for it... And there were a lot of people who were open about hating me for it... So probably there was something wrong with me.*

Furthermore, Participant 03 shared that the online relationship was significant to her, as she recounted that as a child she did not have a good relationship with her parents:

*So for me, from my background and from where I come from, I wasn't given that*

*platform to actually connect with someone, even with my own parents... So getting someone who is there to that extent was very significant for me and I was kind of happy that there's actually someone who cares about me, who is willing to be close to me to that level... We could even share about, like I said, my fears, things that I wanted.*

These findings may be best explained by Bowlby's attachment theory. Attachment theory postulates that the relationships co-constructed with primary caregivers are the building blocks from which individuals construct future close emotional relationships (Fraley & Davis, 1997; Rodrigues, Lopes, Monteiro, & Prada, 2017). Some people tend to direct their attachments needs to their romantic partner's "attachment transference" (Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997). This is highlighted in the following statement by Participant 03:

*Like, I didn't have a father figure in my life... So it was that kind of: "Okay, so I am trying to get a male figure in my life"... It means they will all run away or they will all not be here... Maybe it is me. Maybe there is something wrong that I do.*

Previous life experiences of relating have an immense impact on how people understand the formation, maintenance, and termination of romantic relationships (Fagundes, 2012). Participant 06 recalled the following:

*But I grew up with that mentality that you can never trust people, you can never give people the affection or you can never... People never feel like you are enough to them... So I believed that being on my own was the best thing that I could ever do for myself... So I could solve every problem without having to sit down and talk to a person that this is going on, this is going on.*

## Coping Strategies

According to the psychological stress and coping theory, a break-up can be classified as a stress stimulus that impinges on a person's wellbeing (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It is therefore fitting to evaluate the coping strategies adopted by the participants in this study to cope with their break-ups.

Table 2 depicts the themes that were identified as coping strategy of a terminated online romantic relationship. Each main theme will be discussed under a separate heading.

**Table 2: Participants' coping strategies following termination of a significant online relationship**

<b>Themes</b>
Reflecting on the break-up
Social support
Establishing new relationships
Distraction
Relaxation techniques
Spiritual wellbeing
Seeking professional help

### **Reflecting on the break-up.**

Following termination of their online relationships, the participants in this study mentioned that they reflected on the impact the break-up had on their lives. Participant 03 particularly wondered how to navigate the break-up:

*And where to from the break-up? That was my question. Where to from the break-up?*

This statement from Participant 03 is reflective of the secondary appraisal where a person makes an evaluation of what needs to be done to combat a stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This evaluation usually leads to considering different coping strategies regarding the stressful situation that was primarily appraised as either harmful, threatening, or challenging. Furthermore, Participant 03 attempted introspection to ensure the success of her future relationships:

*Like I was wondering. I was doing a lot of self-introspection in terms of trying to understand if maybe there's something that I need to improve in case I meet someone that I have to connect with. But for me it was, sort of, I don't know... I did a lot of self-questioning.*

In the same manner, Participant 02 also reflected on her role in the break-up. This is highlighted in the following comment:

*I was just questioning and trying to make sure that I understand, reflecting everything back on me.*

Upon introspection following the break-up, Participant 06 made the following discovery about herself:

*I am a very impatient person and I saw that I speak what I feel. I don't ever hide anything. I listen to my feelings a lot because I believe for everything to work, you have to speak how you feel. So it really did help me.*

Reflection seemed to have brought understanding and clarity regarding the break-up; especially for Participants 01 and 07:

*That this person is at a better place now. You are also at a better place now. Don't worry. This person will be fine. You will be fine without this person [Participant 01].*

*You understand? I came to realise that what I did was the best thing I should have done [Participant 07].*

Participant 01 could even notice the positives from the terminated relationship:

*Then there, I will be happy and I will be like: "Oh my God, these were like very good, like, experiences with this person... This person helped me grow in this way and that way. So actually I might miss this person and I am happy that this person was in my life actually. So, ja.*

The level of distress and adjustment following a break-up has been linked to the ability to process and understand a break-up and its impact on an individual's wellbeing (Yildirim & Demir, 2015). Research suggests that individuals who reported being certain of the reasons for the break-up experienced fewer problems adjusting after the dissolution (Yildirim & Demir, 2015). Additionally, a reflective process is necessary as it enables the ex-partners to account for their contributions to the break-up (Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007). The ultimate goal of reflection is to reframe the break-up and derive meaning that will often lead to increased personal insight, self-awareness, and growth (Marshall et al., 2013). The following section focuses on the role of social support played in participants' lives during their break-up.

### **Social support.**

Research findings suggest that social support enables people to deal with the effects of a break-up by offering them a conducive emotional platform to make sense of the break-up (Perilloux & Buss, 2008; Vogel et al., 2007). It seems as if emotional support from family and friends played a significant role in assisting several participants in this study to cope with the termination of their online romantic relationships. This is depicted in the following statements by the participants:

*Support system is very important. It is very important in the sense that these people were there for me. These people were there for me and there for him, his*

*friends, and his family, as well because each, our families knew we were with this person. They knew we were in an online relationships with these people* [Participant 01].

*What else helped? My friends... They were like: "Ja, she doesn't deserve you." Like: "Ja, ja, ja" [Participant 04].*

*My friends. Talking to friends that knew about him, ja... They just told me it is fine. You never met him. He was lying all along. Those things, to make me feel better [Participant 09].*

*Yes, actually when I told my roommate about it, she said: "Right now I would not have advised you to just be on your phone. I would advise you to talk to other people. Get somebody. Don't look for a relationship but just talk to the other people" [Participant 10].*

*Actually that my friend really played a major role in reviving me back to life because I was dead already [Participant 05].*

The psychological stress and coping theory views coping resources as crucial in the process of coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). One such example is the interpersonal skill to mobilise social support during stressful situations, which has a direct effect on the appraisal attached to the stressor, which in turn has an indirect effect on the coping process.

Studies indicate that social support is not limited to face-to-face contact and that people are increasingly using the Internet to meet their emotional needs (Backstrom & Kleinberg, 2014; Cothill, 2014; Clayton et al., 2013). The participants in Cothill's (2014) study conducted with young adult South Africans, reported that during their relationship dissolution they found Facebook useful as it provided them with a sense of connectedness, and it served as an emotional outlet and a distraction from the break-up. Additionally, interaction on Facebook has been found to decrease feelings of loneliness after a break-up

(Burke et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2012). Participant 08 reported engaging with other people online, which served as a distraction from the break-up:

*So I started talking to people, online as well, because I had other friends online but it was not like I was serious with them. So I, like I was trying to keep myself busy or chatting normally to people and not think about whatever. So I think that helped also.*

Participant 02 indicated that meeting people online acted as a “bandage” at the time of his break-up:

*I don't think meeting people online, other people online actually... Ja, it was... Ja, it... Umm... It acted as a bandage.*

The following section focuses on how establishing new romantic relationships influenced the participants' experience of their terminated online romantic relationships.

### **Establishing new relationships.**

A rebound relationship is described as a relationship that is initiated shortly after the end of a significant romantic relationship, before the feelings about the former relationship have been fully resolved (Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2015). Rebound relationships can be a form of distraction from painful feelings as people often experience despair and loneliness following the end of a relationship (Spielmann, MacDonald, & Wilson, 2009). The literature suggests that rebound relationships alleviate the emotional distress of a break-up by providing emotional detachment from the ex-partner while the focus is directed to the new partner (Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2007; Brumbaugh & Fraley, 2015). Although the following participants did not label their new relationships as rebound relationships, Participant 02 reported that establishing new romantic relationships following the break-up helped by boosting his self-confidence and sense of desirability. More so, the new relationships



disconfirmed the negative views this participant held of himself. The following is an extract from the interview:

*What is it that these new relationships have provided you to deal with the break-up? What were they proving in terms of dealing with that break-up? [Interviewer].*  
*Umm... I don't know if this is far-fetched. Self-confidence... Knowing that there is nothing wrong with me. People can actually talk to me and like me for who I am and they can accept me... But ja, there was that thing that made me feel like there's nothing wrong with me... Yes, people can talk to you; people do like socialising with you; there's nothing wrong with you... You are not the freak that you think you are [Participant 02].*

Participant 03, whose self-esteem had been affected by the break-up, reported that she too struggled to cope with the break-up until she found a new romantic relationship. It appears that the new relationship disconfirmed some of the negative beliefs she had about herself:

*I was never okay. Umm... Umm, for me, what made things alright was getting another relationship... It is crazy, but hey, I did it. So it was that kind of... When the other guy came, I was: Okay, maybe there is nothing wrong with me... So it was that. Okay, he was sort of just confirming if that in a way... So when the other guy came, it was after how long, I forgot. So it was sort of: Okay, maybe there is nothing wrong with me.*

The motives for establishing new relationships have an influence on a person's post-break-up adjustment (Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007). For instance, Participants 08 and 04 reported that their new relationships did not have much significance in their post-break-up adjustment because they were not serious about these relationships. Participant 04 started meeting people face to face:

*And then they hooked me up... not hooked me up but like set me up with a few*

*people to try like distract... No, not relationships. Just pastimes... Ja, it was nice times.*

Participant 08 started meeting people online, although he reported that he was not serious about these relationships. The following extract conveys this:

*Yes, yes. What I did was I started talking to other people... In order to overcome that state of rejection or what I say, disappointment... So I started talking to people, online as well, because I had other friends online but it was not like I was serious with them. So I, like, I was trying to keep myself busy or chatting normally to people and not think about whatever. So I think that helped also... It was like casual.*

The following section focuses on the role of distraction in helping the participants cope with the break-up.

### **Distraction.**

Distraction can be useful in reducing the stress and anxiety that are debilitating to the individual (Roth & Cohen, 1986). Distraction is an avoidance coping strategy geared towards decreasing the emotional distress associated with stressful situations, without necessarily altering the stressful situation (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). An avoidance coping strategy at the time of the break-up can provide an individual with an opportunity to mobilise coping resources needed for post-break-up adjustment (Boelen & Van den Hout, 2010; Wreford, 2016). For some participants, the break-ups occurred in the midst of academic responsibilities. In order to accomplish academic tasks successfully, the participants indicated that they had to redirect their focus from the break-up to a desired goal. This is highlighted in the following statements of the participants:

*The first week after the breakup, I was just: Okay, I have to get my degree. There's nothing else that can change my mind right now. I just have to focus on university*

*and then get through this week and then get through the month and get through the year [Participant 05].*

*So I was, like, I don't care. I don't have time and it is exam time [Participant 04].*

*And it was during exam time... Now I had to focus on my exams but I couldn't focus. It was hard for me [Participant 03].*

Although the participants reported focusing on their academics, it appears that the break-up still had negative consequences on their academic performance.

*But it did in a way, but not to an extent that I fail exams... It is just my performance dropped... Ja, umm... Joh, exams were like... It was quite stressful because I have got two re-writes [Participant 04].*

According to Participant 04, another way of distracting himself from the break-up was by consuming alcohol more than he usually did; however, he indicated that drinking alcohol took place for a short time before he realised that it was not helping him to cope with the break-up:

*So it is a thing that like, all of a sudden, now you are drinking, like, okay, bottles of tequila, like twenty shots of tequila, like but you are only just like a three tequila type of guy.*

The following section focuses on the relaxation techniques the participants adopted in dealing with the termination of their online romantic relationships.

### **Relaxation.**

Three of the participants reported that they engaged in exercise and relaxation techniques such as mindfulness, taking walks, jogging, and listening to music. The participants stated that these relaxation techniques helped them to cope with strong emotions related to the break-up by calming them:

*Ja, it definitely helps you calm down because I practise mindfulness* [Participant 05].

*And just walking, let's say, by the beach and then just listening to the water, listening to the waves* [Participant 10].

*Ja, I, specifically I loved jogging. So I would really... When I am feeling really down, I would take my earphones, go for a jog and I believe to me that was a part of letting go of something, running away, or steaming off something and taking my mind to a wonderland* [Participant 06].

Studies suggest that exercise and relaxation techniques enhance the mental health of a person by decreasing anger, anxiety, and tension, while contributing to increased energy levels (Jong-Ho & Larry, 2011). Studies demonstrate the positive effects of relaxation techniques in helping individuals to cope with strong emotions that resulted from stressful events (Baker & Berenbaum, 2007; Baer & Sauer, 2009). The following section focuses on how spirituality aided the participants to cope with the termination of their online romantic relationships.

### **Spiritual wellbeing.**

Three participants reported employing spiritual and religious coping strategies in dealing with the distress brought by the break-up. These practices include mindfulness, seeking spiritual guidance, and attending church:

*It definitely helps you calm down because I practise mindfulness* [Participant 05].

*Okay, he was trying to let me know that God has a better purpose for me, better plans for me, that if actually this thing happened, that God is aware of it, you know... He was talking scriptural words, you know, those encouraging words* [Participant 07].

*Also, like... like at that point I was like, ja, let me just drown my sorrows and then*

*like, I say: "Ag, okay, I am done. Let me just go back to church" [Participant 04].*

Spiritual wellbeing is viewed as a multidimensional concept. Mathad, Rajesh, and Pradhan (2017) defined spiritual wellbeing as the affirmation of life in a relationship with God, self, community, and environment that promotes wholeness. Spiritual wellbeing encompasses all internal resources that help an individual to cope well with stress (Landis, 2009), which include self-compassion, mindfulness, connectedness to the environment, forgiveness, and religious practices (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Neff, 2003). Various studies have shown that quality of life can increase through spiritual and religious coping strategies during stressful times (Akin & Akin, 2017; Carmody, Reed, Kristeller, & Merriam, 2008; Fabricatore, Handal, & Fenzel, 2000; Taheri-Kharamah, 2016). The following section focuses on the role of professional help in dealing with a break-up.

### **Seeking professional help.**

Seeking professional help did not emerge as a main theme in this study; however, the researcher deemed it as significant information that will aid in understanding the research question. Participant 05 mentioned that her break-up might have triggered an onset of depression, which resulted in her seeking professional help:

*Ja, ja, I went to student counselling over here... Because I couldn't afford a therapist... And one of the doctors over there, she diagnosed me with clinical depression and anxiety and I had to be put on anti-depressants immediately.*

Participant 05 further indicated that being on medication helped to ease her experience of the break-up:

*I feel a lot better since the anti-depressants because before that, I was like a walking nightmare... I could tell that. So once I was put on the anti-depressants, I kind of had to like coach myself into a better mindset.*

The literature suggests that people do not usually consider a break-up to warrant an intervention from a counsellor (Jones & Beck, 2007). The only time young adults seek professional help is when they remain grieving over their lost relationship for a long period of time without relief (Robak & Weitzman, 1998). However, seeking professional help could be of great importance considering that research shows that a break-up can pose a risk factor for the onset of depression and is a strong predictor of major depressive disorder among adolescents and young adults (Lee & Sbarra, 2013; Rhoades et al., 2011).

## **Conclusion**

It is evident from the findings of this study that the majority of the participants valued their online romantic relationships and that the termination therefore presented a set of challenges for each of them. These findings provide good insight into the factors that contribute to the individual's experience of a break-up. It was clear that different aspects of each online relationship and the distinct personal characteristics of the participants played a significant role in their interpretation and experience of the break-up. The majority of the coping strategies highlighted by the participants in this study seemed to be predominately emotion-focused coping strategies aimed to cope with the emotional distress caused by the break-up. However, based on the psychological stress and coping theory, both emotion-focused and problem-focused strategies are typically used in any given stressful situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). By adopting various coping strategies, the participants were able to cope with the distress caused by their break-ups.

The chapter to follow provides a discussion of the strengths and limitations of this study, along with recommendations for future research, as well as the researcher's personal reflections.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Strengths, Limitations, and Recommendations**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter 6 concludes this research study by providing a summary of the methodology used and the findings of the study. Furthermore, the strengths are discussed in order to provide an overview of the positive aspects that were encountered by this study. Thereafter, the challenges and shortcomings that were faced during the study are discussed in the limitations section. Lastly, certain implications of the findings of this study also reveal possible avenues for future research, which are discussed as recommendations for future research.

#### **Summary of Methodology**

The aim of this research study was to explore and describe young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online romantic relationship. By critically exploring existing literature and theory, this study aimed to fill the gap of understanding young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online romantic relationship. To the researcher's best knowledge, no other research study has explored this specific phenomenon. The research question was: "What are young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online romantic relationship?" In order to answer this research question, and thereby gain a comprehensive understanding of young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online romantic relationship, a qualitative approach was chosen. In particular, an exploratory-descriptive design was employed in this study. The goal of an exploratory-descriptive study is to gain new insights, discover new ideas, and increase knowledge of the phenomenon (Brink & Wood, 1998). This research design was most advantageous for this study because little research has been conducted on the current research

question (Burns & Grove, 2003). While using the exploratory-descriptive design, the study was informed by the phenomenological approach, which focuses on the meaning of lived experiences (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999). The phenomenological approach focuses on clarifying the meanings of a phenomena from the lived experiences of the participants (Giorgi, 1985). The phenomenological approach enabled the researcher to accurately explore the lived experiences of participants' terminated online romantic relationships and the coping strategies they adopted as a result.

Participants were obtained using purposive and snowball sampling in order to select participants who met the inclusion criteria. Once suitable participants were identified, appropriate information could be provided and a suitable interview date and time could be established. The participants were asked to complete a biographical questionnaire and sign a consent form. In-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted with each participant. After the completion of the face-to-face interviews, the interviews were transcribed verbatim, which provided the data (in the form of text) for analysis. Thematic data analysis was used to categorise the data into themes and sub-themes, which ultimately allowed for synthesis of the descriptions of the essence of meaning of the phenomenon in question. An independent research psychologist simultaneously analysed the data according to the same method of analysis – thematic data analysis. From the data-analysis process, verified by the independent research psychologist, the essence of young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online romantic relationship could be described. Upon completion of this study, the participants will receive feedback regarding the research process, findings, and outcomes of the study. The following section contains the summary of the findings.



## Summary of the Findings

On posing the question, “*Please tell me about your experiences after the termination of your significant online relationship*”, the researcher identified the following themes and sub-themes related to this question:

- 1) The characteristics of the relationship while it was intact (*Sub-themes: Level of daily online communication, commitment to future plans, and emotional support*);
- 2) Reasons for the break-up;
- 3) Terminating contact with the ex-partner over social media;
- 4) Overall functioning (*Sub-themes: Emotional distress, physical distress, and behavioural changes following the break-up*);
- 5) Initiator status (*Sub-themes: Initiator and non-initiator status*);
- 6) Decreased self-esteem; and
- 7) Previous experiences.

The first main theme, *The characteristics of the relationship while it was intact*, was revealed to be a significant determinant of distress following the termination of an online romantic relationship. These relationships seemed to be a meaningful part of the participants’ everyday lives. The sub-themes, namely *Level of daily online communication*, *Commitment to future plans*, and *Emotional support* are briefly discussed below.

The first sub-theme, *Level of daily online communication*, described how daily online communication facilitated the development and maintenance of the participants’ online relationships. The participants indicated that the daily online communication made them feel the presence of their partners in their lives. This communication was helpful in terms of problem solving, building trust, and sharing daily plans. The literature suggests that communication is significant in the context of online relationships because they are wholly

dependent on communication for their development and maintenance (Rabby & Walther, 2003).

The second sub-theme, *Commitment to future plans*, highlighted how participants made plans and goals together with their former partners, such as meeting face to face, relocating, and possibly getting married. Seeing these plans and goals not manifesting caused distress for these participants. Research shows the more committed a person is to a particular goal, the more he or she is vulnerable to psychological distress when the goal is threatened or violated (Klinger, 1975, as cited in Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 59).

The third sub-theme, *Emotional support*, which the participants in this study received from their former relationships, played a significant role in the distress they experienced following the break-up. These participants reported that they felt accepted by their former partners and they could disclose to them things they could not disclose to other people. More so, the participants reported feeling understood by their ex-partners. Research suggests that the kind of emotional support people receive in a relationship promotes self-disclosure about their vulnerabilities, fears, and personality weaknesses, which can help to facilitate intimacy between the partners (Collins & Miller, 1994, as cited in Clark, 2000, p. 763).

The second main theme, *The reasons for the break-up*, described how the participants made sense of their break-up. There were circumstantial reasons that caused some of the participants to terminate their online relationship and made them move on. Other participants felt that the reasons provided to them were not sufficient to cause the break-up, while the participants who were not given reasons for the termination of the relationship spent time ruminating over the break-up. However, knowing the reasons for the break-up did not take away the pain caused by the break-up. The reasons for the break-up are only useful for post-break-up adjustment as they provide an individual with the ability to generate a coherent story

regarding their break-up, which is positively correlated with overall adjustment (Kansky & Allen, 2018; Kellas & Manusov, 2003).

The third main theme, *Terminating contact with the ex-partner over social media*, described how terminating contact with ex-partners seemed to be a favourable recourse for the participants who were certain that their online relationship has ended. Some of the participants preferred to “block” their ex-partner on social media, while other participants completely refrained from using social media in the initial stage of the break-up. The participants seemed to think it was a necessary step to terminate contact with their former partners on social media in order to cope with the break-up as they found it emotionally taxing to maintain contact with an ex-partner. This seemed to help the participants in coping with the break-up. Research shows that maintaining contact with an ex-partner on social media may result in longing to talk to the ex-partner again and may hinder recovery from the break-up (Bevan, Ang, & Fearn, 2014; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Lyndon et al., 2011; Marshall, 2012). Maintaining contact with the ex-partner on SNSs did not appear to be helpful as it provided an opportunity to monitor the ex-partner, which seemed to evoke anger, insecurity, and sadness. Research reveals that monitoring an ex-partner has an adverse impact on the recovery from the break-up (Clayton et al., 2013; Tong, 2013).

The fifth main theme, *Overall functioning*, highlighted how the break-up impacted the participants’ functioning. The following is a discussion of the sub-themes *Emotional distress*, *Physical distress*, and *Behavioural changes*.

The first sub-theme, *Emotional distress*, highlighted the emotional reactions to the break-up, which included anger towards the ex-partner and themselves, and feeling hurt, lonely, sad, and disappointed following the termination of their online romantic relationship. The literature suggests that individuals become closely tied to their partner; therefore, at the

time of a break-up, the loss of emotional attachment to the partner manifests in the form of intense negative emotions (Simpson et al., 1986).

The second sub-theme, *Physical distress*, highlighted how the participants experienced physical symptoms such as lack of appetite, weight loss, chest pains, and stomach pains. Heartbreak can cause an increase in stress hormones, specifically cortisol dysregulation, and is bound to compromise the immune system's functioning, resulting in the abovementioned physical symptoms by the participants (Guo et al., 2014).

The third sub-theme, *Behavioural changes*, described behavioural changes that the participants experienced after the break-up. They observed hypersomnia, change in eating patterns, lack of motivation, and changes in their usual interactions with people. It seemed the emotional state of these participants following the break-up had an impact on their ability to direct their daily goals as they used to prior to the break-up.

The sixth main theme, *Initiator status*, referred to the one who decided to end the relationship. Being the initiator or non-initiator presents its own unique set of challenges and different adaptive problems following a break-up (Degenova, 2008). The following is a brief discussion of the sub-themes *Initiators' experiences* and *Non-initiators' experiences*:

The first sub-theme, *Initiators' experiences*, described the experience of the participants who initiated the termination of their online romantic relationship. The initiators of the break-up in this study reported experiencing emotions such as guilt and sadness before terminating their online romantic relationship. Some initiators of the break-up in this study were driven by various circumstances in their lives to terminate their online relationship. One participant indicated that although it was hard for her to initiate the break-up, she had time to work through her emotions and she felt that she was healed before terminating her relationship. Boelen and Reijntjes (2009) suggest that although the initiators of the break-up

experience negative emotions at the initial phase, they tend to exhibit better recovery than the non-initiators of the break-up.

The second sub-theme, *Non-initiators' experiences*, highlighted that some participants were somewhat shocked by the break-up as it was unexpected. These participants had expectations that their relationship would last for a long time because of the expressed commitment from their former partners to the relationship. The unexpectedness of the break-up caused great emotional distress for these participants because they still had a desire to continue with the relationships. The literature suggests that the non-initiators of the break-up who have a desire to continue with the relationship struggle to accept and cope with the break-up (Speer, 1998).

The seventh main theme, *Decreased self-esteem*, described how the break-up affected the self-esteem of the participants. Following the break-up, some participants perceived themselves to be lacking the qualities of a desirable mate and interpreted the break-up as an indication of not being good enough. One of the participants reported going as far as comparing herself to her ex-partner's new romantic partner. Research, however, suggests that a decrease in self-esteem after a relationship break-up is only temporary and that the person's self-esteem will recover (Luciano & Orth, 2017).

The last main theme, *Previous experiences*, described how previous experiences contributed to participants' experience of emotional distress following the termination of an online romantic relationship. The break-up for some of the participants was a confirmation that there was something wrong with them and they felt rejected, given that some of these participants indicated that they did not have a good relationship with their parents during childhood and that others were hated in their communities and did not feel like they belonged. These previous experiences of the participants can best be understood by Bowlby's attachment theory, which suggests that people tend to transfer their childhood attachment

needs to their romantic partners (Fagundes, 2011; Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997). When the relationship ends, they feel rejected and abandoned (Lee & Sbarra, 2013). The following is a discussion of the coping strategies utilised by the participants in this study.

On posing the question, “*Please tell me about your coping strategies following the termination of your significant online relationship*”, the researcher identified the following themes:

- 1) Reflecting on the break-up;
- 2) Social support;
- 3) Establishing new relationships;
- 4) Distraction;
- 5) Relaxation techniques;
- 6) Spiritual wellbeing; and
- 7) Seeking professional help.

The first main theme, *Reflecting on the break-up*, highlighted that the participants spent time reflecting on the impact of the break-up on their lives, their roles in the break-up, and how to navigate future relationships. The level of distress and adjustment following the break-up has been linked to the ability to process and understand a break-up and its impact on the individual’s wellbeing (Yildirim & Demir, 2015). Additionally, a reflective process is necessary as it enables the ex-partners to account for their contributions to the break-up (Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007).

The second main theme, *Social support*, described how support from friends and family seemed to be of great help in coping with the break-up. The participants indicated that the quality of the social support was an important factor in their recovery from the break-up. Apart from face-to-face emotional support, some participants reported receiving emotional support online. Research demonstrates that social support buffers the ill effects of stress and

enhances adaptive behavioural functioning and subjective wellbeing (Masten et al., 2009; Vogel et al., 2007).

The third main theme, *Establishing new relationships*, described how new relationships following the break-up boosted self-confidence and a sense of desirability for some participants. The participants mentioned that a new relationship disconfirmed the negative views they held of themselves of not being good enough and validated their self-worth. Establishing a new relationship seems to be a favourable recourse as research shows that young adults who are in rebound relationships report feeling less lonely and less preoccupied with the past relationship (Saffrey & Ehrenberg, 2007).

The fourth main theme, *Distraction*, revealed that distraction was employed by the majority of the participants in this study to accomplish their academic tasks as their break-ups occurred in the midst of academic demands. The participants indicated that they had to redirect their focus from the break-up to the academic tasks at hand. This proved to be particularly helpful, although the negative ramifications of the break-up were still evident. This avoidance coping strategy can be helpful when one is confronted with debilitating emotional distress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Another avoidance coping strategy identified by one of the participants was excessive consumption of alcohol. Alcohol consumption as a coping strategy is maladaptive as studies have shown that excessive alcohol consumption leads to risky behaviour (Dehart et al., 2009; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980).

The fifth main theme, *Relaxation techniques*, highlighted how relaxation was deemed effective by various participants who reported to have engaged in relaxation techniques such as meditation, mindfulness, jogging, taking walks, and listening to music. The participants stated that these relaxation techniques helped them to cope with strong emotions related to the break-up by calming them. Studies suggest that exercise enhances the mental health of a

person by decreasing anger, anxiety, and tension, while contributing to increased energy levels (Jong-Ho & Larry, 2011).

The sixth main theme, *Spiritual wellbeing*, illustrated that spiritual wellbeing was an important aspect for several participants who employed spiritual and religious coping strategies in dealing with the distress and deriving meaning from the break-up. The spiritual and religious practices included mindfulness, seeking spiritual guidance, and attending church. Several studies have indicated that quality of life can increase by using spiritual and religious coping strategies during stressful times (Akin & Akin, 2017; Carmody et al., 2008; Fabricatore et al., 2000; Taheri-Kharameh, 2016).

The last theme, *Seeking professional help*, was not considered a main theme; however, it provided information pertaining to the research question. Seeking professional help following the break-up seemed to have been a suitable solution for one of the participants who was formally diagnosed with depression after her break-up. She indicated that being on medication helped to ease the depressive symptoms and the anxiety at the time of her break-up. The literature has highlighted that a break-up can be a risk factor for the onset of depression and a strong predictor of major depressive disorder among adolescents and young adults (Lee & Sbarra, 2013; Monroe et al., 1999).

The findings of this study suggest that the termination of a significant online relationship can cause great distress to an individual's overall functioning, however by adopting coping strategies, one can recover from the experience. The following section provides the strengths and limitations of the study, as well as recommendations for future research.



### **Strengths of the Study**

This study provides new insights and an enhanced understanding of young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online romantic relationship, since to the knowledge of the researcher no other research study has explored this phenomenon specifically. The participants agreed that their online romantic relationships were significant to them and the termination thereof had a negative impact on their general wellbeing. There was therefore a need for coping skills in order to overcome the adverse effects of their break-up. The findings of the study might be relevant to mental healthcare practitioners who deal with relationship concerns.

The qualitative methodology employed by this study is considered to be a significant strength. In utilising individual in-depth interviews, the participants in the study were given the opportunity to describe their experiences fully, which provided rich and detailed descriptions of their experiences of their terminated online romantic relationships and the coping strategies they employed to cope with the distress. The in-depth interviews allowed flexibility in that the participants could freely volunteer information that they deemed significant and the researcher could probe when necessary. Although the study has some strengths, it is important to mention the limitations of the study, which are discussed in the next section.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Even though some strengths were evident in this research study, certain limitations could also be identified. This research utilised a small sample of participants due to the qualitative nature of the research. Therefore, the findings of this research cannot be generalised. However, the aim of qualitative research is not necessarily to generalise the findings, but transferability is rather of importance since future studies of the same nature should be applicable in similar contexts. The implication of the transferability of this study

would be affected by contextual information such as the age, race, gender, and socio-economic status of the participants, which were not addressed in this study. Moreover, the participants in the study constituted university students and included one working-class adult, which could affect the study's transferability.

In addition to the limitations of this research, this study's inclusion criteria focused on young adults, therefore other possibly significant age groups were not considered. In a similar manner, the study did not explore gender and cultural differences regarding participants' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of their online romantic relationships. Despite these limitations, this study revealed important findings that contribute to the existing literature. For this reason, this study provides important insights into young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online romantic relationship.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

It is the opinion of the researcher that the findings are not only relevant for academics, but also for professionals to design specific interventions aimed at helping individuals to cope with break-ups, especially for helping professionals working with relationship concerns. The following is a statement made by participant 05 who sought professional help following termination of her online romantic relationship:

*Ja, ja, I went to student counselling over here... Because I couldn't afford a therapist... And one of the doctors over there, she diagnosed me with clinical depression and anxiety and I had to be put on anti-depressants immediately.*

The recommendations are as follows: Firstly, it is recommended that future research, if possible, should focus on the experiences of both partners who were involved in the online romantic relationship as some of the participants never received clarity and views of the break-up from their previous partners. This was demonstrated by participant 02:

*And since there was no reason actually given to me as to why we should have, umm... sorry, the reason why we broke up. So I was left with tons of questions that I had to answer on my own.*

The absence of both partners' views create a gap in fully understanding the phenomenon. Interviewing both partners may provide a more comprehensive understanding of relational dynamics and the experiences of the break-up of both partners. Secondly, it might be of benefit to explore the role that gender and culture play in the experiences of online romantic break-ups and the coping strategies utilised respectively. Lastly, the participants adopted different coping strategies simultaneously, which makes it difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of each coping strategy in assisting them to cope with the break-up. It will be beneficial to study each coping strategy in detail, particularly evaluating what makes each coping strategy effective.

### **Personal Reflections**

In conducting this research my writing skills grew tremendously. There were times I felt challenged and frustrated but the guidance and the patience of my supervisor helped a lot. This project required time and focus to complete, and at times I had multi-task to ensure that there was progress being made. The most rewarding part of the study was engaging with the participants who so willingly shared their experience that at some stage in their lives was a difficult experience. Before conducting the current research study, I was wondering how authentic and significant can these online romantic relationships be to those pursuing them. The information that I had been exposed to regarding online romantic relationships prior to conducting my study was always mixed with positive and negative outcomes. In order to overcome my own personal biases regarding the phenomenon I adopted bracketing. I was very cognisant to suspend my personal experiences and existing thoughts regarding the phenomenon by developing a genuine curiosity regarding participant's experience and a

desire to report their experiences objectively. This process was aided through the use of open ended questions which allowed participants to talk free about their experience without being directed. As the participants were sharing their experiences I was deeply honoured to have had a chance to have a glance into their inner world. Most importantly they offered insight into a phenomenon that is yet to be researched and understood.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter provided a summary of the key elements of this study in order to bring the study to a close. The methodology used provided an understanding of how the findings of the study were produced. Based on the integration of findings with relevant literature and theory, several recommendations could be made that may further enhance knowledge in this field. This research gathered data from a small sample; however, the researcher is of the opinion that the findings still provide meaningful insight into the experiences of significant online relationships and coping strategies that are useful after the termination thereof. Therefore, the aim of this research study was reached and the information gained through the study elicited an understanding of young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online romantic relationship.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Participant Information Letter



**SOUTH CAMPUS**  
**FACULTY OF HEALTH SCIENCES / DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY**  
Tel. +27 (0)41 504-2354 Fax. +27 (0)41 504-2101  
psychology@nmmu.ac.za

#### **YOUNG ADULTS' EXPERIENCES AND COPING STRATEGIES FOLLOWING THE TERMINATION OF A SIGNIFICANT ONLINE ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP**

My name is Lineo Dorah Seselinyane. I am an intern counselling psychologist at the Nelson Mandela University. I am conducting research on young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online romantic relationship. The letter below will give you more information:

**Title of Study:** Young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online romantic relationship.

**Aims:** The aim of the study is to obtain an understanding of young adult's experiences and coping strategies following the termination of significant online romantic relationships. The understanding will be obtained through the description of participants' lived experiences of the termination of a significant relationship and coping strategies that were employed following the termination of relationship.

**What will happen to the findings:** The findings of the research will be published in a treatise, which will be available from the Nelson Mandela University library and the Department of Psychology.

**Confidentiality/Anonymity:** The identities of all participants will be confidential; your name will not appear in any published material. You will be required to fill in your details on a standard Nelson Mandela University consent form for legal purposes; however, this form will be kept separate from any data-collection material. Your contact information will only be available to the primary researcher and will only be used to contact you to notify you about the research project (i.e. time of data collection, availability of findings). You have the right to withdraw at any stage of the study without any repercussion.

**What do participants need to do:**

- Once you have been identified as a potential candidate, I will contact you for an interview should you meet the research requirements.
- Once contacted, you will be required to take part in a 45- and 60-minutes interview that will be conducted in English where information will be collected regarding the aims of the research.
- You will be required to sign a legal consent form; this form will state that you are voluntarily taking part in the study and understand what the study is about.
- All the interviews will be audio recorded, and the collected data will be stored for the purpose of data analysis and verification.
- To protect participants' identity, the researcher will make use of pseudonyms.
- After all the data have been collected, it will be analysed by the researcher; you will not be required to do anything else.
- Once the findings have been evaluated, you will be emailed a brief summary of the findings.

- You are welcome to contact me at any time if you have any questions or concerns, before or after data collection.

**Participation Requirements:**

To participate in the study you should:

1. have been involved in a significant online romantic relationship that has been terminated, irrespective of when and how long the online romantic relationship lasted;
2. be fluent in English;
3. reside in the Nelson Mandela metropolitan area;
4. be a young adult between the ages of 18 years to 35 years.

Thank you for taking time to read this information letter. Your involvement in this research project will provide invaluable data. If you know of anyone who would be interested in this study, please forward their details to me. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Lineo Dorah Seselinyane

[S215129644@mandela.ac.za](mailto:S215129644@mandela.ac.za)

072 175 5621

Supervisor: Dr Tania Lambert

HOD Psychology: Prof. Louise Stroud

## Appendix B: Biographical Questionnaire



Age: .....

Sex:.....

Email address: .....

Which culture do you identify with:.....

Are you fluent in English? (Please circle the appropriate answer)

Yes

No

Do you live in the Port Elizabeth area? (Please circle the appropriate answer)

Yes

No

Have you experienced an online romantic relationship break-up? (Please circle the appropriate answer)

Yes

No



Was the online romantic relationship significant (meaningful or important) to you? (Please circle the appropriate answer)

Yes

No

Do you think you coped with the break-up? In other words, have you dealt with the break-up?  
(Please circle the appropriate answer)

Yes

No

Which social networking sites do you use / did you use to interact with your ex-romantic partner? (Please tick the appropriate answer(s))

Facebook

Twitter

Instagram

Gmail+

MySpace

Pinterest

Other .....

## Appendix C: Informed Consent Form



<b><u>RESEARCHER'S DETAILS</u></b>	
<b>Title of the research project</b>	Young Adults' Experiences and Coping Strategies Following the Termination of a Significant Online Romantic Relationship
<b>Reference number</b>	
<i>Principal investigator</i>	Lineo Dorah Seselinyane
<b>Address</b>	41 Rubin Crescent street, Summerstrand
<b>Postal Code</b>	6019
<b>Contact telephone number</b> <small>(private numbers not advisable)</small>	072 175 5621

<b>A. <u>DECLARATION BY OR ON BEHALF OF Participant</u></b>		<i>Initial</i>
I, the participant and the undersigned	(full names)	
<b>ID number</b>		
<b><u>OR</u></b>		
I, in my capacity as	(parent or guardian)	
of the participant	(full names)	
<b>ID number</b>		
<b>Address (of participant)</b>		

<b>A.1 HEREBY CONFIRM AS FOLLOWS:</b>		<b>Initial</b>
<b>I, the participant, was invited to participate in the above-mentioned research project</b>		
<b>that is being undertaken by</b>	Lineo Dorah Seselinyane	
<b>From</b>	Department of Psychology	
of the Nelson Mandela University.		

<b>THE FOLLOWING ASPECTS HAVE BEEN EXPLAINED TO ME, THE PARTICIPANT:</b>			<b>Initial</b>
2.1	<b>Aim:</b>	The aim of the study is to explore and describe young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online romantic relationship.	
2.2	<b>Procedures:</b>	I understand that I will be required to take part in an interview that will be conducted in English.  I understand that the interview will be audio recorded, and the data collected from the interview will be stored for the purpose of data analysis and verification.	
2.3	<b>Risks:</b>	I realise that the interview will cost me time and that it will include information regarding my experience of online romantic relationship and coping strategies after termination. In the event that participating in the research study causes any distress to me, I will contact the researcher and the researcher will therefore make an appropriate referral to the University Psychology Clinic (Uclin) or Student Counselling, Development and Career Centre.	

2.4	<b>Possible benefits:</b>	As a result of my participation in this study knowledge will be generated on young adults' experiences and coping strategies following a termination of a significant online romantic relationship.			
2.5	<b>Confidentiality:</b>	My identity will not be revealed in any discussion, description, or scientific publications by the investigators. The researcher will make use of a pseudonym to protect my identity.			
2.6	<b>Access to findings:</b>	Any new information or benefit that develops during the course of the study will be shared as follows: Feedback of the findings will be emailed to me after the research had been finalised by the Department of Psychology.			
2.6	<b>Voluntary participation / refusal / discontinuation:</b>	My participation is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw at any stage of the study without any negative repercussion.	YES	NO	
		My decision whether or not to participate will in no way affect my present or future care / employment / lifestyle	TRUE	FALSE	

<b>3. THE INFORMATION ABOVE WAS EXPLAINED TO ME/THE PARTICIPANT BY:</b>								<b>Initial</b>
Lineo Dorah Seselinyane								
In	<b>Afrikaans</b>		<b>English</b>	X	<b>Xhosa</b>		<b>Other</b>	
and I am in command of this language, or it was satisfactorily translated to me by								
(name of translator)								
I was given the opportunity to ask questions and all these questions were answered satisfactorily.								

<b>4.</b>	No pressure was exerted on me to consent to participation and I understand that I may withdraw at any stage without penalisation.	
<b>5.</b>	Participation in this study will not result in any additional cost to myself.	

<b>A.2 I HEREBY VOLUNTARILY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE ABOVE-MENTIONED PROJECT:</b>		
Signed/confirmed at	On	20
Signature or right thumb print of participant	Signature of witness:	
	Full name of witness:	

Signature of interviewer		Signature of witness:
		Full name of witness:



## Appendix D: Permission to Conduct the Study with Nelson Mandela

### University Students



P.O. Box 77000. Nelson Mandela University  
Port Elizabeth. 6031. South Africa. [www.mandela.ac.za](http://www.mandela.ac.za)

Professor Andrew Leitch  
Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research and Engagement  
Nelson Mandela University (South Campus)

Faculty of Health Sciences  
Department of Psychology  
Nelson Mandela University (South Campus)  
Researcher: Miss Lineo Dorah seselinyane  
Email: [seselinyanel@gmail.com](mailto:seselinyanel@gmail.com)  
Research Supervisor: Dr Tania Lambert  
Email: [Tania.lambert@mandela.ac.za](mailto:Tania.lambert@mandela.ac.za)  
Tel: 041 504 2357

29 July 2018

Dear Prof. Leitch

#### **RE: REQUEST TO RECRUIT NELSON MANDELA UNIVERSITY STUDENTS FOR RESEARCH PROJECT**

I humbly request your permission to recruit from Nelson Mandela University student population for my research study titled “*Young Adults’ Experiences and Coping Strategies Following the Termination of a Significant Romantic Online Relationship*”. The aim of this study is to explore and describe young adults’ experiences and coping strategies following

the termination of a significant online romantic relationship. Ethical issues were carefully considered and the Health Sciences faculty representatives of the FPGSC have cleared the study, and REC-H has given the study ethical approval (H18-HEA-PSY-008). Please find the attached RECH-H letter.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Lineo Dorah Seselinyane

(Researcher)

Dr Tanina Lambert

(Research supervisor)



## **Appendix E: Advertisement for Research Participation**

Dear Nelson Mandela University Student,

My name is Lineo Seselinyane and I am currently completing my master's degree in Counselling Psychology. As part of my degree it is necessary to complete a research treatise. The title of my research study is "*Young Adults' Experiences and Coping Strategies Following the Termination of a Significant Online Romantic Relationship*" (Ethics clearance reference number: H18-HEA-PSY-008). The aim of the study is to explore and describe young adults' experiences and coping strategies following the termination of a significant online romantic relationship.

To be able to participate in the research study you must:

1. have been involved in an online romantic relationship which you considered to be significant. However, the online romantic relationship must have been terminated, irrespective of when and how long it lasted;
2. be fluent in English;
3. reside in the Nelson Mandela metropolitan area;
4. be between the ages of 18 years to 35 years

Participants will be required to participate in a 45-minute to 60-minute audio-recorded interview that will be conducted in English. You will be required to sign a consent form before commencing with the interview. If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me on [seselinyanel@gmail.com](mailto:seselinyanel@gmail.com) or [S215129644@mandela.ac.za](mailto:S215129644@mandela.ac.za). I will send you further details of the research project.

**Lineo Dorah Seselinyane – Researcher**

**Dr Tania Lambert – Research Supervisor**