

## Conceptualization of Addiction to Romantic Relationships: A Conceptual Model

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Addiction to romantic relationship is one of the prevalent disorders in the field of psychology. The objective of the present study is to formulate a qualitative model of addiction to romantic relationships.

**Methods:** The research is an applied study using discovery manner, in which, qualitative research method and grounded theory were utilized. The population was the entire people who were addicted to romantic relationships, selecting purposefully 100 samples for interview process. To collect data, in-depth interview was used, and then, after the implementation of the data, they prepared for analysis. The process of data analysis was deductive. In the other hand, there was no previous conceptual framework for coding and categorizing; rather, it was analyzed freely by coding technique of grounded theory.

**Results:** Regarding the results, the final model of the study comprised eight different concepts, including: affective mental, family, emotional, needs, critics, consequences factors, and the factors related to relationship.

**Discussion:** The results addressed the different context and dimensions of vulnerability to romantic relationships addiction, thus, considering the results of the present study, practitioners particularly psychologists can adopt appropriate intervention either in treatment or prevention of romantic relationship addiction.

**Declaration of Interest:** None

**Key words:** Romantic relationships, Addiction, Conceptualization.

### Introduction

Love is an extreme sense of liking a person or an object, A deep feeling, gentle passion or extreme attraction (1,2). Addiction to romantic relationships, in human relationships, is a behavioral pattern that an individual becomes addicted to feeling of love. People with addiction to romantic relationships might behave in very different manners. Indeed, most of addicted individuals may never notice that they have become addicted to love and romantic relationship, consequently, they won't seek therapy (3).

Regarding the fact that romantic relationships addiction is pathological phenomenon, consequently the results can be unpleasant and it can lead to financial problem, to lose a job, disability of family formation, physical and psychological illnesses and also sexual crimes and serial killings (4, 5, 6, and 7). The consequences can be even worse. Addictive romantic relationships are often involved in passion and bring high anxiety, which can lead the lover to inappropriate and dangerous thoughts, and even compel them (8). To the

extent that 90% of commitments in acid-sprays, in Iran, are related to romantic relationships (9). In addition, immature romantic relationships can harm the relationships and even lead to suicide (10). Psychology experts believe that "Inferiority and low self-esteem" in people who hadn't receive enough care, can lead them to excessive dependence and affective addiction (11). In a study, Fisher (12) demonstrated that family, experience of love failure, and psychological vulnerability are the most significant factors of addiction to romantic relationships. The related studies also show that sexual addiction can predict addiction to romantic relationships (13). Recently, in a study Redcay and Simonetti (14) identified different factors, such as personality traits, impersonal psychological states, family problems, and critics regarding relationship addiction. Likewise, Redcay and McMahan (15) addressed family problems, lack of self-control, and neglect of family, and affective problems. Fisher and colleagues (16) in *Conceptualization of love addiction* pointed the significance of beliefs about relationships, unmet needs, and behaviors at the beginning of relationship and frequent affective failures in addiction to love. The other studies also address the importance of emotional, psychological and family factors and psychological pathology (17,18,3). Considering the prevalence of addiction to romantic relationships in Iran (19), a scientific and accurate evaluation of this phenomenon is necessary. Through appropriate conceptualization, the theoretical structure can be made to address categorized concepts and predisposing factors. Considering the lack of comprehensive and also qualitative research regarding addiction to romantic relationships, it seems there is the need of qualitative and deep perspective; hence, conceptualization by qualitative method of grounded theory is necessary. In other words, researchers and theorists introduce some factors involved romantic relationships addiction based on their quantitative results, while utilization of a qualitative research based on lived experience of people with addiction to romantic relationships can provide deep and unbiased

insight for researchers and therapists. In addition, because of novelty and vagueness of this area, seemingly, through a qualitative research achieving a comprehensive and integrative perspective is possible and a confident structure for future researches can be provided.

Thus, the main question of the present study is how the qualitative concept and model of addiction to romantic relationships can be explained by grounded theory?

### Methods

In the present study, considering the objective and the fact that the subject is exploratory and also culture dependent, grounded theory was employed. The population included Iranian people who were referred to counseling and psychotherapy center in Tehran in spring of 2018. Samples selected purposefully among clients. The sampling process continued until data were saturated. After 10 interviews no new data emerges, but to ensure the absence of new data, the sampling process continued to 12 interviews. The inclusion criteria of research included, willing to interview, no history of drug consumption and/or drug abuse, absence of criteria for personality disorders based on MCMI inventory (scores under 75) and being at least 18 years old. The exclusion criteria included presence of psychotic disorders, drug addiction, and absence of desire to cooperate in the study. To collect data, in-depth interview was conducted. In order to conceptualization and formulation of qualitative model of addiction to romantic relationships, 12 persons with who were addicted to romantic relationships were interviewed. Then, content categorizing (coding) of collected data was done, and then, content - conceptual subcategories of relationship addiction were formed. In the second step, the subcategories transformed into several areas related to relationship addiction. After interview, transcriptions of content were made and prepared for analysis. Inductive data analysis was employed. On the other hand, there was no conceptual framework for coding and categorization in

advance, rather, the process was freely based on the coding technique in grounded theory. In practice, for the coding process, content of each interview was read accurately at the beginning, and then, the main concepts identified descriptively. In order to code data, the contents of each interview segmented (based on the contents and meaning regarding the purpose of study) and one code allocated to each segment and each of them named in the way that be accurately qualifier of the particular segment. The results were the identification of several codes which had very common concepts and meanings. Following the several screening, the codes were merged based on similarities and differences. The

results were derivation of categories and subcategories.

**Results**

Table 1 presents demographic characteristics (age, sex, education, occupation, and duration of relationship) for each of the 10 interviewees. According to the results, the age range of the interviewees is 20-40 years, 4 men and 6 women. The degree ranges from diploma to doctoral student and the duration of the relationship ranges from 1 to 5 years.

**Table .1** The demographic information of interviewees:

Table 1. The demographic information

| Number | Job                  | Education   | Sex    | Ege | Relationship duration (years) |
|--------|----------------------|-------------|--------|-----|-------------------------------|
| 1      | Customhouse employee | High school | Male   | 38  | 12                            |
| 2      | Worker               | High school | Male   | 28  | 1                             |
| 3      | Programmer           | Bachelor    | Male   | 37  | 1.5                           |
| 4      | Psychologist         | Master      | Female | 38  | 20                            |
| 5      | Counsellor           | PhD Student | Female | 40  | 11                            |
| 6      | Employee             | Master      | Female | 24  | 2                             |
| 7      | Employee             | Master      | Female | 27  | 7                             |
| 8      | Typist               | Bachelor    | Female | 30  | 2                             |
| 9      | Lab expert           | Master      | Female | 25  | 3                             |
| 10     | Painter              | Bachelor    | Male   | 20  | 2                             |
| 11     | Pilot                | Bachelor    | Male   | 30  | 4                             |
| 12     | Psychologist         | PhD         | Male   | 45  | 6                             |

The results of the qualitative analysis of the interviews resulted in the identification of five main themes with 25 sub-categories. A

summary of the results regarding the themes of emotional relationship addiction is presented in Table 2.

Table2. Identified concepts regarding addiction to romantic relationships

| Selective coding of main concepts | Axial coding                         |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Affective- mental factors         | Personality traits                   |
|                                   | Non-personality psychological states |
|                                   | Psychological pathology              |
|                                   | Psychological conflicts              |
| Family factors                    | Birth order                          |
|                                   | Mother related factors               |
|                                   | Father related factors               |
|                                   | Family challenges                    |
|                                   | Limitations and dogma                |
|                                   | Over-met needs                       |

|                      |                                      |
|----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| needs                | Unmet needs                          |
| Relationship factors | Relationship beliefs                 |
|                      | Interrelationship problems           |
|                      | Relationship criteria                |
|                      | Time related changes                 |
| Behaviors            | Early relationship behaviors         |
|                      | Behaviors during relationship        |
|                      | Behaviors at the end of relationship |
| Predisposing critics | During development                   |
|                      | Adulthood                            |
| Consequences         | Physiological                        |
|                      | Psychological recession              |
|                      | Sexual                               |
| Emotional factors    | Pleasant psychological states        |
|                      | Unpleasant psychological states      |

The concepts related to addiction to romantic relationships, identifying by qualitative method and interview listed as follow:

**1- affective-mental factors:** these factors comprised the entire factors related to mind, influencing addiction to love and romantic relationships. The identified indices for mental factors comprised personality traits, non-personality psychological states, psychological pathology, and psychological conflicts. For instance, participant1 states “I’m a pessimistic person, I just look at the dark side, and I’m stubborn and proud”. Participant 2 expresses “I can't trust people”.

**2- Family factor:** the second category of identified concepts related to romantic relationships addition is family factors. According to the results, birth order, the factors related to mother, the factors related to father, family challenges, and limitations and fanaticism are factors related to family category. For example, Participant 6 stated” after a particular time up to now, my father hasn’t been with us, he has been always at work”, then added " as long as I remember, my mom and daddy was struggling with financial control ". According to third participant's words "my father had two wife".

**3-Unmet and over-met needs:** the third category comprises unmet needs and over-met needs. For instance, the participant 12 says “In that relationship, she was giving me credit, and I was doing well”.

**4 - Relationship factors:** this category of factors directly related to the relationship status and the context in which it formed. It comprises the beliefs about relationship, relationship problems, criteria of making relationship, and the changes related to time. For example: “I go after someone who is above me”, “the guy I had relationship with, used to believe in me at the beginning of the relationship, because of it, we came to the relationship. But after a while everything reversed”.

**5 - Importance of behaviors:** these concepts are those related to relationship, which have influence on romantic relationship and love. This category comprises behaviors related to early relationship, during relationship, and at the end of relationship. For instance, Participant 3 said " it's like a relationship you're spending too energy for her /him" and added, “another problem is that he smokes”.

**6 - Predisposing factors:** predisposing factors consist of two concepts, including critics of developmental period, and critics of adulthood. For instance, participant 2 says, “the majority of my critics are because of hiding my relationships, it makes me anxious.

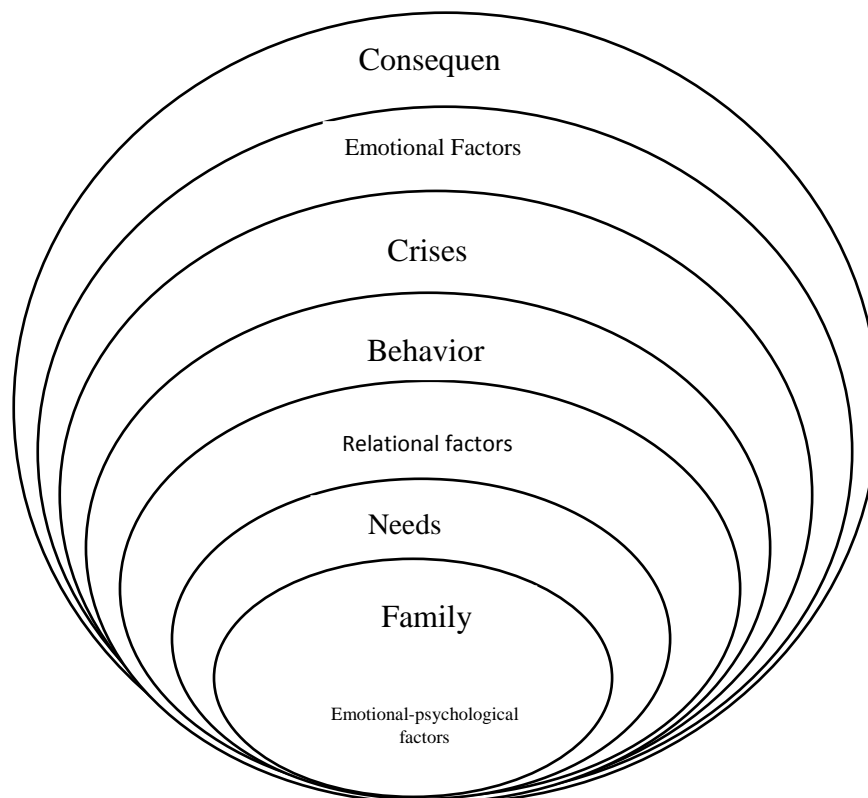
**7- Consequences:** According to the results, the consequences of addiction to romantic relationships comprised physiological, psychological recession and sexual. Participant 1 stated “if even I be in another relationship, I enjoy too little" and also says "I don't go at

work".

**8 - Emotional factors:** The last identified category is related to emotional factors, which comprised pleasant and unpleasant emotional states. For example, participant 4 says "fear, anger, shame, and inferiority, all of the negative emotions". Participant 8 also says "the regret have been with me that now, what if they won't be with me some hours later?" and

also says " yes, I used to get angry and, so I used to take it out on her".

Based on the aforementioned items, the final model of the study expanded as below. On the most central level, affective - mental factors are placed, and consequences are on the most exterior level. The other six categories are respectively on the second up to seventh level.



**Shape 1. Conceptual model of study**

### Discussion

Romantic relationships are deep interpersonal relationships, which encompasses desires and extreme feelings toward others and also comprises physical and affective connections; indeed, these relationships sometimes deviate from their usual and healthy statuses. Romantic relationship addiction refers to unhealthy and abnormal engagement in a relationship, which to some extent is a psychological and behavioral disorder. In this regard, the objective of present study is to conceptualize addiction to romantic relationships. Through Conceptualization the results of the interviews analyzing by

grounded theory approach, 8 basic concepts and 25 secondary concepts related to addiction to romantic relationships were identified. One of the basic concepts are affective - mental factors, which comprised 4 secondary concepts, including: personality traits, impersonal mental factors, psychological pathology, and psychological conflicts. This concept comprises multiple sources of personality, mental, psychological pathology, and interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts, which predispose people to engage in addictive romantic relationships. In this regard, there are several studies (20,21,22) addressed the role of personality,

psychological factors, psychological pathology, and psychological conflicts in development of romantic relationship addiction. In addition, it can be due to some cognitive beliefs and biases (23). In other words, beliefs and personality traits such as diversity seeking, attention seeking, narcissism and also presence of obsessive thoughts and behaviors can lead individuals to relationship addiction. These desires, needs and personal attitudes lead individuals to relationship addiction, because a romantic relationship can relieve the anxiety and distress to some extent. In other words, the addiction is as a coping strategy for anxiety and distress induced by obsession and other psychological disorders and also meeting personality needs such as diversity seeking and narcissism. In addition, regarding psychological conflicts, it's stated that symptoms in addictive relationships are vagueness and conflicts, which generally indicate ambivalence. These symptoms might cause confusion and maladaptive in the relationship (7). In other words, these interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts develop addiction to romantic relationships by increasing doubt and vagueness toward relationship.

The other concept is family factors, which comprises 5 secondary concepts, including: father related factors, mother related factors, family factors, birth order (first child), and limitations and fanaticism. According to the studies (24,7,25,26), family and affective processes of family atmosphere and its interaction patterns can make a susceptible context to addiction to romantic relationships. Thoughts and traumas, threatening the core of self, might harm the self-worthiness and induce some desires and behavior to compensate the deficits (27). Addiction to romantic relationships is an attempt to fill the emptiness, because, in the absence of this, will remain some holes of deficit (7). In dogmatic family and cultures, children are expected to behave based on restricted beliefs, similar to the family and culture, which can transform to addictive and obsessive behaviors (7,26). Thus, addiction to romantic relationships seems to be affected by damaged attachments

via family and is an attempt to meet their needs, relieve trauma and actualize the self. The striking point is that one of the identified secondary concepts of family is related to birth order of first children. One of the characters of first children, explaining relationship addiction, is that they are essentially born to be a commander and they assume that they are conceited. In addition, they are trainers of submissive and obedient persons (28). In this regard, the results showed, characters such as excessive conceited, perfectionism, and dominance are predisposing to relationship addiction (29).

Needs was the other main concept, which comprised two secondary concepts, including, unmet needs and over met needs. The evidence and studies show that the needs of connection to others, specifically the unmet ones lead to relationship addiction. Previously, other studies addressed the significant role of unmet and over met needs (13,30). Relationship addiction appears in sexual or romantic love, it is often an inappropriate attempt to meet generally emotional needs, which are deep desires in human being. On unconscious level, addiction to romantic relationships is a wrong defense, because they root in pathological unmet and over met needs (25).

In addition, the other concept was related to relationship, comprising 4 secondary concepts, including, beliefs about relationship, criteria of relationship, and time related changes. In this regard, it's shown that people with relationship addiction, usually fix on primary stage of addiction, which encompasses obsessions and insatiable desire to experience different aspects of the partner (31,4). This case, rather comprises beliefs and criteria of relationship. These beliefs and criteria encompasses overvaluing relationships and its satisfactory considering the criteria such as power of sexual need. These persons are fixed on this primary stage, since similar to drugs produces neurotransmitters that induce reward signals. As a result, they produce adoptive and learning synaptic patterns which boost this fixation (32). Regarding the inter-relationship problems and time related changes which is representative of negative aspects of

relationship, such as reduction of relationship quality, being one - way, and sticking on vicious cycles, developmental background and previous relationship pattern can be pointed. In other words, these persons had engaged in the previous relationship patterns, due to the deficits in the attachment, identity validation and support (33).

Behaviors at the early relationship, during the relationship, and the end of it, identified as behaviors concept. This concept, to a great extent, is representative of some behaviors such as touch, excessive attendance in the beginning of relationship, and also, impulsive behaviors such as quarrel and gambling during the relationship, and silence, avoidance, and rejection at the end of relationship. In this regard, it's shown that, in the early relationship, to reach high sense of joy and avoid the obsessive behaviors, approximation seeking behaviors emerge (4). Thus, excessive connection and attendance at the beginning of relationship reinforce via pleasurable instincts and desires. Indeed, following the formation of addictive relationship, symptoms such as mood fluctuations, obsession, compulsion, reality distortion, emotional dependence, personality change, risk taking, and losing of control emerges (34). Since these people are chasing compensation of deficits in safety, power, identity, belonging and meaning. Occurring of these behaviors are inevitable (4). Generally, excessive compensation leads to conflict with others and negative behaviors such as silence, begging, self - immolation and avoidance. Considering the fact that these behaviors are not adoptive, they can't bring positive consequences.

The other concept was predisposing critics, which comprised 2 secondary concepts of during development and adulthood. Regarding the developmental predisposing critics, it's shown the critics are generally affect attachment and identity (35), which cause the formation of desires to dominance and power (4) or desires to validation and support (34) in relationships. However, these needs exist in everybody, it's impaired in people with addiction to romantic relationships and being experienced as trauma. It can thus emerge in

negative way and lead to extreme compensation. In regard to predisposing critics in adulthood such as divorce, infidelity, unemployment, and so forth, engaging in addictive romantic relationships generally is an avoidance strategy for escape from experiencing psychological and emotional consequences. In other words, individuals, particularly in facing to divorce and infidelity, engage in another relationship by which in addition to getting identity validation, they can avoid experiencing of emotions such as shame, which is destructive to identity.

The concept of consequences comprised psychological and sexual recession, which is representative of unpleasant consequences of addiction to romantic relationships and can impair individuals in different dimensions. These consequences are the most similar aspects of addiction to romantic relationships and drugs and alcohol addiction. Experts believe that addiction to romantic relationships is similar to the other kinds of addiction with the same negative consequences (12,22,36) such as social, cognitive, and behavioral. These consequences are diverse and extensive to the extent that affects all aspects of personality and social areas (22,37,38). People with addiction to romantic relationships, are more vulnerable to physical illnesses such as asthma, diabetes, and gastric ulcer. They are often lethargic, weak, confused, lonely and depressed. They have unpleasant feeling of sadness, regret, and shame and denial is their major defense mechanism (7, 25). The other concept was emotional factors, comprising two secondary concepts of pleasant and unpleasant emotions. This concept represents that avoidance of unpleasant emotions such as fear, anxiety, shame, and anger and seeking pleasant emotion such as love, power, proud, pleasure are involving factors in relationship addiction. Other studies showed that emotional factors predict addiction to and romantic relationships (5,6). Accordingly, a key gradient in relationship addiction is the belief that romantic relationships have magic power. To the extent that they can protect against problems and pleasant emotions and develop all of pleasant emotions (36). Addiction to

romantic relationships is a psychological and behavioral disorder and its function is compensation of deficits in feeling of power, belonging, identity and meaning of life. In other words, it's an unconscious attempt to relieve the pains related to the past and now. It's a psychological captivity, instead of being a bonding. In this process, addicted person is biologically and emotionally dependent on relationship object (25). Hence, these individuals, in the romantic relationships, avoid unpleasant feelings and pursue pleasant feelings related to identity, attachment, power, meaning, and belonging. Addiction to romantic relationships is an unhealthy and abnormal form of romantic relationship, in which individuals engage to relationship to compensate deficits in emotions, safety, power, identity, and meaning. Hence, it's an unconscious attempt to avoid past and present pains. In this way, the objective of the present study is to assess addiction to romantic relationships by qualitative method for providing deep and extensive understanding.

- The goal of the discussion section is to interpret your findings and place them in the broader context of the literature in the area.
- How do your findings tie into the existing literature on the topic, or extend previous research? What do the results say about the broader behavior under investigation? Bring back some of the literature you discussed in the Introduction, and show how your results fit in (or don't fit in, as the case may be). If you have surprising findings, you might discuss other theories that can help to explain the findings. Begin with the assumption that your results are valid, and explain why they might differ from others in the literature.
- What are the theoretical and/or practical implications of your findings? How do these results relate to larger issues of human thoughts, feelings, and behavior? Give your readers "the big picture." Try to answer the question, "So what?" Final paragraph: Be sure to sum up your paper with a final

concluding statement. Don't just trail off with an idea for a future study. End on a positive note by reminding your reader why your study was important and what it added to the literature.

The method of the present study is grounded theory, by which it's possible to reach deep and clear understanding and provide a model for Conceptualization. Thus, based on the results, to some extent, it is possible to explain addiction to romantic relationships and also expand the studies regarding this area. In addition, based on the provided model by this study, educative and therapeutic model can be derived and also can be used for prevention programs. It should be noted, considering the significant role of culture and social variables in this area, the role of present study is limited to Iran. Moreover, considering the limitations to access to research samples, due to not referring to counseling center and cultural concerns, there were limitations to consider demographic criteria for homogenization of samples. Further researches is suggested for enriching literature in this area. Moreover, in future researches, based on the present results, therapy models can be derived, and then, the effectiveness can be examined. Regarding the practical implications, psychotherapists and couple therapists can the results of this study in the process of diagnosis and treatment of addiction to romantic relationships.

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