

UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN BALANCING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS AND ACADEMIC RESPONSIBILITIES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY.

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the romantic involvement and academic responsibilities among university students in Dili, Timor Leste. This study aimed to 1.) Explore the lived experiences of university students in balancing romantic relationships with their academic responsibilities; 2.) Describe the positive and negative effects of romantic involvement on students' academic motivation and performance; 3.) Understand the strategies students use to manage time, emotions, and responsibilities while engaged in romantic relationships. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews from three universities in Timor-Leste: Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL), Universidade Católica Timorense (UCT), and Dili Institute of Technology (DIT). Participant responses were collected through semi-structured questionnaire. Qualitative data were recorded and analyzed through thematic analysis. The thematic analysis generated fourteen codes that were organized into four major themes: (1) Romantic Relationships as Source of Academic Motivation and Support, (2) Challenges of Romantic Relationships on Academic Performances, (3) Importance of Time Management and Prioritization, and (4) Communication as a Key to Relationship and Academic success. Results showed that most of the students had positive experiences in balancing love and learning. However, there were a few challenges that the participants faced. Future research is recommended to use a larger sample size and explore other factors related to romantic involvement to gain deeper understanding of students' experiences.

Keyword: Romantic relationships, Academic responsibilities, University students

1. INTRODUCTION

Love is a universal experience that affects all people. It shapes the way people behave, think, and perceive the world around them. How people feel influences perception, attention, memory, and cognition, which affects how individuals understand and respond to their surroundings (Brosch et al., 2013). Moreover, it affects the way people make decisions, experience emotions, and respond to other people in their lives. Emotions strongly influence how people make decisions and interact with others by affecting what drives them and how they respond (Lan, 2024; Babková & Repiská, 2025).

Everyone will experience the different forms of love, which can be in a platonic, family, or romantic nature, at various stages of life. Among

these, romantic love becomes meaningful during young adulthood, which is a stage of life where identity is formed, emotions are developed, and responsibilities increase.

Engaging in a romantic relationship is not uncommon among students in institutions of higher learning. Such relationships emerge amidst academic obligations and expectations. As students struggle with these obligations, they can face challenges such as juggling their emotions and their studies. While such relationships may offer them support, boost their confidence and morale, they can face challenges such as time management and dealing with stress and conflicting priorities (Tin et al., 2025).

In fact, it is common for students in universities to have romantic relationships. Romantic

relationships emerge in addition to studies and personal ambitions. Students can experience challenges such as juggling their emotions with studies. Even though romantic relationships can be a source of support, self-esteem, and comfort, they can also present issues such as time management, stress, and conflicting resolutions. Research shows a positive relationship can boost students' well-being and motivation (Gómez-López et al., 2019) compared to a stressful relationship which can influence students' attention and performance negatively (Barry & Madsen, 2010).

In Dili, Timor Leste, young people pursuing higher education may also engage in romantic relationships. As university students navigate early adulthood, many may begin forming intimate relationships while simultaneously meeting academic expectations. This stage of life requires students to manage emotional commitments, time demands, and personal priorities alongside their educational responsibilities, often at a relatively young age.

While international studies have explored the relationship between romantic involvement and academic responsibilities among university students. There is a notable lack of published empirical research examining how university students in Dili balance romantic relationships with their academic responsibilities.

1.1. Objectives

This study aimed to explore how romantic involvement influences the academic responsibilities of university students in Dili, Timor-Leste.

Specifically, it attempted to:

1. Explore the lived experiences of university students in balancing romantic relationships with their academic responsibilities.
2. Describe the positive and negative effects of romantic involvement on students' academic motivation and performance.
3. Understand the strategies students use to manage time, emotions, and responsibilities while engaged in romantic relationships.

1.2. Significance of the Study

The results of this study provided insights into the influence of romantic relationships on the academic responsibilities of university students in Dili, Timor-Leste. It contributed to the limited local literature by providing insights into students lived experiences, challenges, and strategies for balancing romantic relationships with academic responsibilities. The findings provided valuable information for students, parents, educators, university administrators, and future researchers, and served as a basis for guidance programs, counselling interventions, and future studies.

For Students, the outcome assists students in comprehending how being in a relationship will affect their prioritization, motivation, and well-being in school. Additionally, it assists them in making better decisions, such as time management and maintaining a good work and personal life balance in terms of their performances.

For Educators and University Administrators, this research provides important information that aid in developing creative programs, advice, and assistance for students to fit what they need. As educators realize the pressure students go through in relationships, they will be able to assist them better in staying on track with studies.

For Parents and Guardians, this study enables them to grasp how emotions and relationships influence students' behaviour and performance. Additionally, this helps them to offer better advice and emotional support to their children as they grow towards becoming self-reliant.

For Future Researchers, this research benefits local research by providing additional information. Additionally, this research serves as a point of initiation for future research concerning relationships and academic performance in Timor-Leste.

1.3. Statement of the Problem

University students involved in romantic relationships may experience consequences on their academic performance, daily routines, and emotional well-being. However, there is limited research on how university students manage their romantic relationships alongside their academic responsibilities.

The goal of this research was to explore the lived experiences of university students in romantic relationships and examine how these relationships influence their academic responsibilities and daily lives, as well as how students balance both.

To address this gap, the study is seeking to answer the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of university students in balancing romantic involvement with their academic responsibilities?
2. What positive and negative effects, if any, do romantic relationships have on students' academic motivation and performance?
3. What strategies do students use to manage their time, emotions, and responsibilities while in a romantic relationship?

1.4. Scope and Delimitation

The study examined the impact of romantic relationships on academic responsibilities among university students in Dili, Timor-Leste. The study examined students' experience in handling love and learning, including how romantic relationships affected students' time management, motivation, emotions, and concentration in their learning. Students were under graduates with a minimum of one-year in a romantic relationship. This study did not focus on students outside of Dili and did not include students from other areas such as senior high school students and postgraduates. This research examined academic performance based on students' collective experience and views but did not focus on students' actual performance.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological design. This approach is chosen to gain a deep understanding of the "lived experiences" of students. Tus (2021) demonstrated in a similar study on romantic relationships and academic performance, a qualitative approach allows a rich exploration of how students perceive the balance between their love life and their studies, rather than simply measuring statistical correlation. The focus will be on describing the common meaning

for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon.

2.2. Participants of the Study

The study was conducted in Dili, Timor-Leste, specifically focusing on undergraduate students from Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL), Universidade Católica Timorense (UCT), and Dili Institute of Technology (DIT). This research used purposive sampling to select participants. Qualified participants were interviewed and meet the following inclusion criteria:

1. Participants are currently enrolled as undergraduate students in UNTL, UCT, or DIT.
2. Participants have been in relationships for at least one year.
3. Willing to participate and share their personal experiences regarding their grade and relationship dynamics.

A total of 24 qualified participants were interviewed, consisting of 6 males and 18 females in all the sampling sites.

2.3. Data Collection

Participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and Participant Consent Form (PCF) outlining the study's aims and processes, voluntary participation, withdrawal right, confidentiality, publication of the results, data storage details, and benefits of the research. The transcript from each participant were saved and coded in a separate Word document file.

2.4. Research Instruments

The data were obtained through conducting semi-structured interviews. These instruments allowed us researchers to ask questions while maintaining the flexibility to probe deeper into specific responses. The research questionnaire was adapted from the instrument developed by Mutchrea et al. (2017), with modifications made to suit the objectives and context of the present study. The respondents answered the following questions:

1. Can you describe your current romantic relationships and how long have you been together while studying at the university?

2. How does being in a relationship influence your motivation to attend classes or complete assignments?
3. Have you noticed changes in your grades or academic focus since you started this relationship?
4. Do you consider your partner a “support system” or “distraction “when it comes to study?
5. How do you divide your time between spending time with your partner and studying for exams?
6. When you have a conflict or an argument with your partner, how does it affect your ability to study or perform in class?
7. How do you handle the pressure if your partner wants more attention during a busy exam week?
8. What strategies do you use to ensure your romantic life does not negatively affect your degree?
9. What advice would you give to other university students who are trying to balance love and learning?

2.5. Data Analysis

The collected questionnaire responses were analyzed using thematic analysis adapted from Braun and Clarke (2026). The process began with thorough reading and familiarization with the data, followed by coding significant statements and phrases.

These codes were organized into themes that represent patterns and insights within the participants’ experiences. Themes were reviewed and refined through an interactive process to ensure they accurately reflect the data.

To enhance credibility, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary themes with selected participants for validation. The analysis was conducted manually, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity throughout.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 24 undergraduate students participated in this research. The questionnaires were given to students who met the participant requirement. The demographic profile of the respondents is presented in table 1 to provide context for the results and discussion. It shows the distribution of

participants by gender, age group, institutions, and length of relationship.

CHARACTERISTICS	CATEGORY	FREQUENCY
GENDER	Male	6
	Female	18
AGE BRACKET	Below 25 years	24
	25 years and above	0
INSTITUTION	DIT	8
	UNTL	8
	UCT	8
RELATIONSHIP DURATION	1-3 years	15
	More than 3 years	9

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants

Most of the respondents were female (75%), while the rest were male (25%). All respondents were below 25 years old (100%), indicating that the participants were predominantly young adults. Across the three institutions, there were 8 participants from each (33.3%), indicating that no bias of data was involved. The largest group of respondents had been in a relationship for 1-3 years, while the remaining had been in relationships for more than 3 years. This demographic profile shows that the study mainly involved young, female college students from three institutions with different durations of romantic relationship experience.

PARTICIPANTS RESPONSES	CODES
My partner motivates me to study hard.	Academic Motivation
We support each other during difficult subjects.	Academic Support
Arguments affect my concentration.	Emotional Stress, Conflict Affecting Concentration
I prioritize my studies first.	Academic Prioritization
We communicate to solve problems.	Effective Communication
I manage my time between studies and my partner.	Time Management
My partner helps me when I'm stressed.	Emotional Support
Sometimes relationships waste study time.	Academic Distraction
We study together.	Collaborative Learning
Balancing relationships and studies are important.	Relationship Academic Balance
We create schedules to balance our studies and relationships.	Scheduling
We understand each other.	Mutual Understanding
We discuss issues and find solutions together.	Conflict Resolution
I stay calm and control my emotions during conflicts.	Emotional Regulation

Table 2. Participants Responses and Codes

Using the participants' transcribed responses, table 2 shows a total of fourteen codes were made. From these codes, 4 main themes were generated. The themes include: (1) Romantic Relationships as Source of Academic Motivation and Support, (2) Challenges of Romantic Relationships on Academic Performances, (3) Importance of Time Management and Prioritization, and (4) Communication as a Key to Relationship and Academic Success.

Theme 1: Romantic Relationship as Source of Academic Motivation and Support

Academic motivation and academic support were common experiences among participants in romantic relationships. A few of students stated that their partners inspired them to work hard in order to meet their academic goals and keep up with their educational duties. The participants stated that they considered their partners as their sources of motivation, who inspire them to attend lectures, do assignments, and persevere during difficult academic times. Also, participants indicate that they receive academic assistance from their partners through collaborative study sessions, exchange of information, and reminders regarding academic work. These findings are consistent with Bishop et al. (2023), suggested that support from romantic partners can contribute to students' academic engagement and success.

"In this relationship, he supports me a lot with my studies and always motivates me." — Participant E, DIT

In addition, participants reported that emotional support and collaborative learning have a positive effect on their academic lives. As per participants, their partners would motivate and support them in times of stress, and they also work together in helping each other understand complex topics or study difficult subjects. It could be interpreted from the above result that supportive interactions may promote academic motivation, engagement, and performance. Social support positively predicts academic engagement by predicting academic motivation, and collaborative learning motivates students to actively engage in the learning process (Chen et al., 2023; Loes, 2022).

"My partner helps me the most when I feel burned out because of school. He is my support system." — Participant A, UCT

"We support each other in subjects we don't understand." — Participant E, UCT

Theme 2: Challenges of Romantic Relationships on Academic Performances

This theme indicates that love relationships may at times influence the academic success of students negatively, due to academic distractions and emotional stress, spending too much time on relationships, and other factors that would make it difficult for them to concentrate and study. This finding is similar to what Peltz & Clemens et, al n.d discovered regarding the adverse effects of relationship pressure on academic functioning.

"We spend more time chatting, calling, walking together, and spending time with each other instead of focusing on schoolwork." — Participant B, UNTL

"When there is a conflict, that influence makes me lose focus on school." — Participant I, DIT

From these results, it showed that relationship conflicts affect concentration among students, whereas proper time management enables them to cope with academics and romance simultaneously. It was stated by respondents that arguments and misunderstandings often distracted them from studies, but through time management techniques such as scheduling they managed to stay focused, which are similar to the findings of Roberson et al. (2015).

"Arguments affect my concentration." — Participant F, DIT

"I use a schedule; I set aside time for study during the week and reserve time in the evening to communicate with my partner." — Participant H, UCT

Theme 3: Importance of Time Management and Prioritization

Participants revealed that time management, academic priorities, scheduling, and achieving balance between studies and personal relationships were some of the key methods employed by students. They expressed how they prioritized their education, planned study schedules, and allocated specific time for their partners to ensure that academic responsibilities and personal life did not conflict. These strategies enabled the participants to focus on their education while maintaining healthy personal relationships. Effective time management and self-

regulation contribute positively to academic achievement and help students balance multiple responsibilities (Adams & Blair, 2019; Lourenço & Paiva, 2024).

"I always manage my daily time well by prioritizing my studies first." — Participant A, DIT

"Clear schedule: homeworks first, date last." — Participant B, UNTL

"I use a schedule; I set aside time for study during the week and reserve time in the evening to communicate with my partner." — Participant E, DIT

"We have to manage our time well." — Participant E, UCT

Theme 4: Communication as a Key to Relationship and Academic Success

According to the student's response in this study, it reveals that effective communication, conflict resolution, mutual understanding, and emotional regulation were important in maintaining both romantic relationships and academic performance. It became evident from the interviews that through effective communication, the participants were able to overcome differences among themselves and learn about one another's academic obligations. This contributed to minimizing misunderstandings and ensuring that students remained focused on their learning. Sathyamurthy et al. (2024) and MacCann et al. (2024) suggest that open communication, receptive listening, emotional intelligence, and effective conflict resolution are essential for maintaining healthy and satisfying romantic relationships.

"We always communicated with each other whenever there was a problem." — Participant A, DIT

"We communicate with each other to resolve our problem." — Participant H, DIT

"We understand each other so that we don't disturb them during their studies." — Participant E, DIT

"I always choose to speak calmly and openly with my partner." — Participant D, DIT

Positive Effects of having Romantic Relationship on Academic Motivation and Performance

Romantic relationships can positively influence students' academic lives through academic motivation, academic support, academic prioritization, and effective communication. Participants shared that their partners motivated them to study harder, supported them during academic challenges, encouraged them to prioritize their studies, and maintained open communication to resolve problems. These factors helped students stay focused on their academic goals while maintaining healthy relationships. Social and relational support enhances students' academic motivation, engagement, and achievement, while positive interpersonal relationships contribute to greater academic success and persistence among university students (Bishop et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2023).

"My partner always motivated and supported me to focus on my studies." — Participant A, DIT

"We always learn together and support each other whenever we face difficulties in certain subjects." — Participant E, UNTL

"I always manage my daily time well by prioritizing my studies first." — Participant C, UCT

"We always communicated with each other whenever there was a problem." — Participant B, DIT

Participants also stated that emotional support and collaborative learning positively influence their academic experiences. The participants mentioned that their partners would encourage and help them during stressful times and that they also assist one another with studying and comprehending challenging subjects. These results imply that supportive romantic relationships can improve both academic motivation and learning. Chen et al. (2023) has shown that social support positively predicts academic engagement and motivation, while supportive learning environments encourage students to participate more actively in their academic activities.

"I always manage my daily time well by prioritizing my studies first." — Participant A, DIT

"My partner helps me the most when I feel burned out because of school." — Participant A, UCT

"We always learn together and support each other whenever we face difficulties in certain subjects." — Participant A, UNTL

"I can keep the romantic relationship by communicating and balancing with each other; I give time each day for my partner and for my studies." — Participant F, DIT

Emotional support and teamwork between partners contribute positively to students' academic lives. Students shared that their partners motivated them during challenging times and helped them understand subjects they found challenging. These results imply that supportive romantic relationships can improve both academic motivation and learning. Social support enhances students' academic engagement and motivation, while collaborative learning encourages active participation and supports the achievement of academic goals (Mendo-Lázaro et al., 2022).

"Organize my study schedule and the schedule for extra activities." — Participant A, DIT

"We understand each other and avoid problems." — Participant E, UCT

"We always communicated with each other whenever there was a problem related to studying or other activities." — Participant B, UNTL

Negative Effects of having Romantic Relationship on Academic Motivation and Performance

The common issues experienced by the university students of this study involved in romantic relationships include stress arising from emotional stress, conflict interfering with concentration, and academic distraction. These findings are similar to Pritchard & Wilson (2003) research that links relationship stress to academic adjustment and concentration among college students. In most cases, misunderstandings, arguments, jealousy, and relationship issues contributed to stress and interference with concentration and distraction from academics among the participants. At times, these issues interfered with students' ability to concentrate on studies and their academic performance.

"When we have a problem, it always affects my concentration." — Participant D, DIT

"When there is a conflict, that influence makes me lose focus on school." — Participant J, UCT

"When we do not call or communicate, misunderstandings and anger can arise, which can

affect both partners and make it harder to concentrate on studying." — Participant B, UNT

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

4.1. Conclusions

This study examined university undergraduate students lived experiences regarding the influence of romantic involvement on academic responsibilities. The study identified four main themes and it shows that most participants considered romantic relationships as having a positive influence on their academic lives. Students viewed their partners as sources of motivation, emotional support, encouragement, and academic assistance, which contributed to their ability to pursue academic goals and remain focused on their studies.

The study also found that balancing romantic relationships with academic responsibilities sometimes gives challenging experiences. While many students successfully managed both aspects of their lives, they also encountered difficulties such as emotional stress, conflict affecting concentration, and academic distractions. These experiences prove that maintaining both academics and relationships require plenty of effort and adjustment.

Furthermore, the findings identified both positive and negative effects of romantic relationships on students' academic performance. Participants reported that their relationships mostly enhanced their motivation to succeed academically through mutual encouragement, support, and shared goals. However, some students experienced challenges such as academic distractions, conflicts that affect concentration, and emotional stress that interfered with their academic responsibilities. Despite these difficulties, positive experiences were more commonly reported than negative ones.

Moreover, the study also revealed that students applied various strategies to balance their romantic relationships and academic responsibilities. Among these, effective communication appeared as the most important strategy, allowing students and their partners to discuss expectations, resolve misunderstandings, and support each other's academic goals. In addition, participants mentioned the importance of time management and prioritization in helping them fulfil both relationship and academic tasks.

These strategies allowed students to maintain healthier relationships while staying committed to their educational objectives.

4.2. Recommendations

Future researchers should replicate this study using a larger sample size and a wider range of participants from different universities and academic programs. The present study was limited to 24 undergraduate students, which may not fully represent the experiences of the broader student population.

Universities should promote student support programs that help students balance romantic relationships and academic responsibilities through seminars, counseling, or workshops on time management, communication, and emotional wellness.

Future studies may also compare the experiences of students in different year levels, courses, or cultural backgrounds to identify possible differences in perceptions and coping strategies.

Researchers may explore other factors related to romantic involvement, such as mental health, academic stress, or social support, to gain deeper understanding of students' experiences.

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