
**“KAPAG RED FLAG... DEDMA?”: IDENTIFYING ‘RED FLAGS’
AMONG ADOLESCENT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS**

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the red flags in adolescent romantic relationships and their impact on emotional well-being, trust, and decision-making. Using a phenomenological design and Braun and Clarke’s Thematic Analysis, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with Senior High School students at Cordon National High School, selected via snowball sampling. The findings revealed five major themes: Ghost of Past Relationships, High Drama Addiction Cycle, Shifted Guarded Trust, Psychological and Emotional Well-being, and Personal Growth. Adolescents described experiences of trauma, emotional invalidation, pathological jealousy, avoidance of conflict, emotional withdrawal, and displacement of intimacy, which eroded trust, fostered possessiveness, and created relational instability.

The study also identified psychological mechanisms influencing adolescents’ decisions to stay or leave relationships, including Willful Ignorance, Cognitive Dissonance, Downplaying Behaviors, and Intentional Impermanence. These mechanisms demonstrate how adolescents rationalize or normalize harmful behaviors, sustaining unhealthy connections despite awareness of harm. While many reported stress affecting daily activities, social interactions, and academic performance, others reframed these experiences as opportunities for resilience and self-awareness.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of early recognition and intervention. It recommends that schools, parents, and communities provide education and guidance to help adolescents distinguish between genuine intimacy and destructive patterns, fostering healthier relationships and long-term psychological well-being.

KEYWORDS: Adolescent Relationships, Red Flags, Emotional Invalidation, Pathological Jealousy, Cognitive Dissonance, Personal Growth, Personal Growth.

INTRODUCTION

Romantic relationships among adolescents often reveal concerning patterns of negative and toxic behaviors, commonly referred to as “red flags.” These behaviors—such as deception, emotional manipulation, and invalidation of feelings—are warning signs of unhealthy and unbalanced relationships. Despite their harmful nature, many teenagers today tend to normalize or even gravitate toward such behaviors, leading to complications, wasted time in pointless arguments, and emotional distress.

Previous studies, such as Zhafira (2024), have highlighted the importance of recognizing red flags in young adults and underscored their societal impact. These behaviors not only compromise emotional well-being but also expose individuals to distressing experiences like gaslighting, temper outbursts, and over-dependency. Literature further identifies common red flags including excessive control, power imbalances, unstable emotional changes, emotional or physical violence, and commitment issues. These toxic behaviors may manifest in anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and chronic stress, all of which undermine an individual’s overall well-being. Similarly, Kumari and Bhandarkar (2024) emphasizes that toxic relationships perpetuate cycles of negative thinking, hesitation in decision-making, isolation, and internalized criticism, ultimately damaging mental health.

While existing researches have examined toxic behaviors in relationships broadly, there remains limited focus on how these red flags specifically affect adolescent romantic relationships. Generation Z adolescents, in particular, often struggle to identify and confront these behaviors due to a lack of awareness and guidance. This gap highlights the need for further investigation. Hence, the present study seeks to explore how adolescents can recognize red flags in romantic relationships, with the aim of equipping them to avoid toxic connections and safeguard their emotional and mental health. By identifying these indicators early, teenagers may foster healthier relationships and protect their overall well-being.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative research design to explore and identify the “red flags” in adolescent romantic relationships, particularly among Generation Z students in the Senior High School Department of Cordon National High School. Phenomenology was chosen because it emphasizes lived experiences and allows for a deeper understanding of human behavior, attitudes, and emotions, ensuring trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Informants were selected using snowball sampling, a non-probability referral technique where initial respondents recommended peers who met the inclusion criteria. Eligible informants were Senior High School students aged 18 and above who had experienced toxic behaviors in romantic relationships, had been in relationships long enough to know their partners well, and willingly provided informed consent.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which combined structured and unstructured formats to allow flexibility in probing responses while remaining aligned with the research questions. The researcher-made interview protocol was validated using the Content Validation Index (CVI) by subject experts in language and social sciences, and formal approval was obtained from the school principal. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly observed, with personal identifiers excluded to respect informants’ privacy.

Data gathering followed a systematic procedure: preparation and validation of instruments, securing institutional approval, identifying informants using snowballing, conducting interviews during free periods, compiling and encoding responses, excluding incomplete entries, and coding data. Thematic Analysis, following Braun and Clarke’s six-phase framework, was employed to analyze the data, enabling the identification, review, and reporting of themes grounded in informants’ lived experiences.

Ethical standards guided the entire process, with compliance to the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act 10173), informed consent, voluntary participation, and respect for respondents’ time. Principles of beneficence, nonmaleficence, respect for persons, and transparency ensured that the study was conducted with integrity and contributed meaningfully to adolescent well-being without causing harm or discomfort.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study aims to identify red flags among adolescent romantic relationships. Based on the data obtained, the findings are further discussed:

Table 1. Described Experiences of Adolescents in Their Romantic Relationships with Partners that Possess Red Flag Behaviors.

Informant No.	Responses	Themes	Sub-themes
1	It was really traumatizing, and because of that, you develop trust issues. It becomes so intense to the point that anyone who tries to get close to you or give you attention, you tend to avoid them because the fear is already there—that it might happen again.	Transference	The Ghost of Past Relationships
2	At first, I was happy because when I talked to him, I felt something genuine, even though it only lasted for a few months. Even though he was avoidant, the feeling was really different, so I endured it. They said it was fun because if there's a red flag, it's better since there's a thrill.	Dramatic Addiction Cycle	Intense Intimacy Mistakes
5	My experience was traumatic—I think it was mixed with different emotions. It was happy because I truly loved the person. It brought good things into my life and made me happy, but their bad behavior was very traumatic.		
3	Well, I probably became more cautious, even with my friends. I'm kind of cautious with them now too, so I tend to observe more. Usually, when you're close to your friends, you don't need to observe everything because you're comfortable with them. But now, because of the red flags I experienced in the past, I've become more observant.	Repeated Traumatization Fear	Shifted Guarded Trust
6	My experience was really bad. When I saw her bad traits, I could not handle it—I did not know what to do.		Psychological and Emotional Well-being
4	It feels good to be foolish sometimes. It feels happy and sad at the same time because, like my friend said, you still learn something from them. There are things you realize you should not do next time when you meet or talk to someone like that again. As they say, experience is the best teacher.	Rebuilding Self-Esteem	Personal Growth

Table 1 presents the themes derived from adolescents' experiences of toxic behaviors in relationships. The "Ghost of Past Relationships" reflects trauma from previous romantic encounters that lead to fear of commitment and avoidance of new partners. For example, one

informant described their experience as “traumatizing and developed trust issues,” which directly connects to the theme of Transference, where feelings from past relationships are unconsciously redirected onto new ones. This aligns with Przybylinski and Andersen’s (2012) findings that past relational experiences, particularly with caregivers, shape current romantic perceptions. It also resonates with Gamophobia (Cleveland Clinic, 2022), an irrational fear of commitment rooted in trauma and anxiety.

The “Dramatic Addiction Cycle” illustrates how some adolescents mistake intensity for intimacy. One informant admitted enduring avoidant behaviors because the thrill of conflict felt exciting, even describing red flags as “fun.” This reflects the unconscious pattern of seeking chaos as emotional regulation, where crisis and conflict substitute for genuine connection are present. Such behaviors highlight the theme of Intense Intimacy Mistakes, where adolescents equate emotional turbulence with closeness.

The “Shifted Guarded Trust” theme captures how past negative experiences lead to hypervigilance and cautiousness, even in existing friendships. One informant explained becoming “more observant” with peers after experiencing red flags, showing how fear of re-traumatization reshapes trust. This connects to the broader theme of Repeated Traumatization Fear, where individuals anticipate harm based on prior experiences, leading to guarded interactions and emotional withdrawal.

The theme of Psychological and Emotional Well-being emerges in accounts of distress and helplessness. One informant admitted, “I could not handle it, I did not know what to do,” reflecting the overwhelming emotional toll of toxic behaviors. This aligns with the concept of psychological overload, often described as “walking on eggshells,” where individuals constantly adjust their behavior to avoid triggering volatile partners. Such experiences contribute to anxiety, exhaustion, and burnout.

Finally, Personal Growth was evident in reflections that framed toxic relationships as learning experiences. One informant noted that despite the pain, they realized “things you should not do next time,” embodying the theme of Rebuilding Self-Esteem. This shows how adolescents can transform negative experiences into opportunities for self-awareness and resilience, reinforcing the idea that “experience is the best teacher.”

Overall, these themes—Ghost of Past Relationships, High Drama Addiction Cycle, Shifted Guarded Trust, Psychological and Emotional Well-being, and Personal Growth—illustrate how adolescents internalize and respond to toxic relationship patterns. Their accounts reveal impacts not only on trust and intimacy but also on daily functioning, with some reporting stress that affected eating habits, academic performance, and family interactions. These

findings underscore the profound influence of red flags on adolescent well-being and highlight the importance of early recognition and intervention.

Table 2. Perceived Red Flags by Adolescents in Romantic Relationships.

Informant No.	Responses	Themes	Sub-themes
1	The red flag I have observed in my partner is when he invalidates my feelings when I share something about my day and pays no attention to it. He can ignore me for weeks up to months, then assumes the relationship is fine and expects me to initiate conversation. He also gets jealous over groupmates in school even if I do not intend romantic interaction.	Feelings Dismissal and Possessive Behavior	Emotional Invalidation and Pathological Jealousy
2	Probably the red flags I have observed are lying—for example, she tells me “I am right,” but later I find out she is doing something different. Even small lies are red flags because they suggest bigger lies. I also observed she often distances herself without reason; in messages she is talkative, but in person she is distant, almost like she cannot commit.	Fear of Negative Consequences	Conflict Avoidance and Dishonesty
3	The lack of effort is the one I have observed. I was always the one putting in effort first, and naturally, I got tired. For months I thought I was the problem, but I realized I was not. I saw his inconsistency and lack of effort.	Neglect and Emotional Exhaustion	Behavior Efforts and Inconsistencies
4	What I have observed in my partner was being avoidant and prioritizing her feelings at the moment. When partners have a problem, they should solve it together, but she chose to prioritize herself.	Withdrawal and Self-Prioritization	Avoidant Behavior
5	What I have observed in my partner is immaturity and possessiveness. Whenever I’m with others like my friends, she gets jealous even with boys.	Possessive and Controlling Tendencies	Intense Immaturity and Pathological Jealousy
6	The red flags I observed were that he often prioritized his friends over me. When we had problems, he talked to his friends instead of me. He ignored me for days and spent more time with his female best friend than with me.	Echo Chamber Effect	Intimacy and Decision Displacement

The illustrated table presents the themes that emerged from the informants' personal responses after thorough analysis. Emotional Invalidation refers to the dismissal or rejection of someone's internal emotional experiences (Carrico, 2021), signaling that their feelings are unimportant or irrational. One informant shared, "he invalidates my feelings when I share something about my day and pays no attention to it," which directly illustrates this theme. Such invalidation undermines emotional connection and contributes to relational dissatisfaction.

Pathological Jealousy is characterized by irrational and unfounded suspicions of infidelity despite no evidence. An informant described, "he also gets jealous over my group mates in school even if I do not intend to engage in any romantic interaction," which demonstrates morbid jealousy as a red flag. This possessive behavior reflects excessive control and insecurity, often escalating into toxic relational dynamics.

Avoidance of Conflict emerged as another subtheme, where individuals evade confrontation or difficult conversations to maintain superficial harmony. One informant noted that their partner often lied about small matters, which later revealed deeper avoidance patterns. This behavior stems from fear of negative consequences and results in unresolved issues and resentment.

Emotional Withdrawal was observed when partners pulled back emotionally or physically, reducing communication and connection. This pattern, described by informants as prioritizing personal feelings over shared problem-solving, highlights how withdrawal diminishes reassurance and intimacy within relationships.

Displacement of Intimacy was evident when partners redirected emotional closeness toward friends rather than their romantic partner. One informant explained that their partner prioritized friends and discussed relationship problems with them instead of directly addressing issues together. This reflects the Echo Chamber Effect, where individuals seek validation from external sources, reinforcing their own beliefs while excluding dissenting voices. Such displacement weakens the primary relationship and fosters dependency on external influences.

Overall, these themes—Emotional Invalidation, Pathological Jealousy, Avoidance of Conflict, Emotional Withdrawal, and Displacement of Intimacy—capture the diverse red flags adolescents encounter in romantic relationships. These behaviors not only erode trust and intimacy but also contribute to psychological distress, possessiveness, and relational instability. The findings emphasize the importance of recognizing these patterns early to

prevent long-term emotional harm and to promote healthier relationship practices among adolescents.

Table 3. Effect of Red Flags in the Decision-Making of Adolescents to Stay or Leave the Relationships.

Informant No.	Response	Themes	Sub-themes
1	I chose to stay dumb because I hoped that she would change her behavior but it only got worse, and you could also say that I was blinded by love.	Willful Ignorance	Avoidance of Truth
2	Well, the red flags did affect my decision whether I wanted to leave the relationship, but I chose to stay because I wanted to enjoy every moment that I was with her even if I knew it was going to end.	Cognitive Dissonance	Relationship Challenges
3	That is what I told you before — you will never really know unless you try. I already tried, but I still did not stop. Maybe I gave too many second chances — maybe even a hundred, laughs — but all jokes aside his behaviors gave me thoughts of ending things with him, but I did not want to because I loved him.	Downplaying Behaviors	Rationalization
4	I chose to stay with him, because you know they say ‘it is better if it is a red flag’ because I also stayed for the thrill.	Intentional Impermanence	The Trap of Conceptualization

The findings in table 3 reveal several psychological and relational patterns that explain why adolescents remain in relationships despite recognizing red flags. Willful Ignorance refers to the conscious avoidance of knowledge or facts that would cause discomfort or necessitate change (Grossman & Hua, 2026). One informant admitted, “I chose to stay dumb because I hoped that she would change her behavior,” which illustrates how individuals deliberately ignore warning signs, rationalizing their partner’s toxic behavior as temporary or changeable. This avoidance of truth reflects a defense mechanism against emotional pain, even when evidence suggests otherwise.

Cognitive Dissonance describes the mental discomfort experienced when actions conflict with beliefs (McLeod, 2023). In relationships, this manifests when individuals justify staying despite knowing the relationship is unhealthy. One informant explained, “the red flags did affect my decision whether I wanted to leave...but I chose to stay because I wanted to enjoy every moment,” showing how conflicting desires—valuing happiness while recognizing

toxicity—create tension. This theme highlights how adolescents endure relationship challenges by rationalizing negative behaviors to preserve emotional satisfaction.

Downplaying Behaviors, often linked to minimization, occurs when harmful actions are trivialized or dismissed. One informant reflected, “Maybe I gave too many second chances—maybe even a hundred...but all jokes aside his behaviors gave me thoughts of ending things with him, but I did not want to because I loved him.” This rationalization demonstrates how love and emotional attachment can override logical decision-making, leading individuals to normalize repeated harm. Minimization not only invalidates one’s own feelings but also perpetuates cycles of tolerance toward toxic behaviors.

Finally, Intentional Impermanence captures the conscious acceptance of instability in relationships. One informant stated, “I chose to stay with him...because I also stayed for the thrill,” which reflects the trap of conceptualization—where red flags are reframed as excitement or intensity. This connects to the idea of Toxicity Addiction, where individuals mistake emotional turbulence for intimacy, believing that conflict or drama signifies deeper connection. Such rationalized acceptance of impermanence reveals how adolescents may equate instability with passion, thereby reinforcing unhealthy relational dynamics.

Overall, these themes—Willful Ignorance, Cognitive Dissonance, Downplaying Behaviors, and Intentional Impermanence—demonstrate how adolescents rationalize, minimize, or even embrace red flags in relationships. Their responses highlight the psychological mechanisms that sustain toxic connections, underscoring the need for awareness and education to help young individuals distinguish between genuine intimacy and destructive patterns.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the red flags present in adolescent romantic relationships and how these behaviors affect emotional well-being, trust, and decision-making. The findings revealed that adolescents experience a range of toxic patterns, including the Ghost of Past Relationships linked to transference, the High Drama Addiction Cycle where intensity is mistaken for intimacy, the Shifted Guarded Trust shaped by repeated traumatization and fear, and Psychological and Emotional Overload, often described as “walking on eggshells.” These experiences deeply influenced adolescents’ perceptions of relationships and their ability to form healthy connections.

Adolescents also identified specific red flags such as Emotional Invalidation, Pathological Jealousy, Avoidance of Conflict, Emotional Withdrawal, and Displacement of Intimacy. These behaviors eroded trust, fostered possessiveness, and created relational instability. The

presence of these red flags not only undermined intimacy but also contributed to stress, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem.

Furthermore, the study highlighted the psychological mechanisms that shape adolescents' decisions to stay or leave relationships. Willful Ignorance reflects the conscious avoidance of uncomfortable truths, while Cognitive Dissonance illustrates the tension between beliefs and actions. Downplaying Behaviors show how individuals minimize or rationalize harmful actions, and Intentional Impermanence reveals how instability is reframed as excitement or passion. These mechanisms demonstrate how adolescents rationalize or normalize toxic behaviors, sustaining unhealthy connections despite awareness of harm.

Overall, the conclusions emphasize that red flags in adolescent relationships have profound effects on emotional health, trust, and decision-making. Adolescents often struggle to recognize or confront these behaviors due to emotional attachment, lack of awareness, or rationalization strategies. Early education and intervention are therefore essential to help young individuals distinguish between genuine intimacy and destructive patterns, empowering them to build healthier relationships and safeguard their psychological well-being.

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