

Love of the Lotus: Exploring Romantic Relationships Among Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse

Charles Frederick M. Canoy

Laguna College of Business and Arts, Calamba City, Laguna, Philippines

Author Email: rickcanoy18@gmail.com

Date received: December 5, 2024

Date revised: December 18, 2024

Date accepted: January 2, 2025

Originality: 96%

Grammarly Score: 99%

Similarity: 4%

Recommended citation:

Canoy, C.F. (2025). Love of the Lotus: Exploring Romantic Relationships Among Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 3(2), 22-32. <https://doi.org/10.69569/jip.2024.0660>

Abstract. This study delved into the unique challenges faced by survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) in forming and maintaining romantic relationships. Romantic relationships, characterized by emotional connections and affection, are crucial for well-being, but CSA can lead to significant psychological effects, including PTSD, anxiety, and difficulties with trust and intimacy. In the Philippines, approximately 7 million children experience sexual abuse annually, underscoring the urgency of addressing this issue. The study was guided by Attachment Theory, which explains how early interactions with caregivers influence emotional and social growth, impacting the ability to form secure relationships in adulthood. Employing a qualitative research design, the Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) was used to gather in-depth personal narratives from five adult survivors in long-term romantic relationships. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling and interviewed using semi-structured questionnaires via videoconferencing. The findings revealed ten (10) emergent themes: Holistic Bonding Practices; Trust Issues, Emotional Guardedness; Intimacy Barriers and Anxieties; Post-Traumatic Trust and Intimacy Challenges, Insecure Attachments and Growth; Selective Disclosure and Cautious Communication; Effective Communication and Emotional Connection; Emotional Regulation Within Relationships; Constructive Relational Dynamics; and Setting boundaries, Strength, and Resiliency. Despite the significant impact of past trauma, survivors exhibited remarkable resilience and potential for growth within their romantic relationships. Key coping strategies were identified as effective communication, emotional regulation, and boundary setting. The study emphasized the need for trauma-informed therapy, education for romantic partners, community support, and policy changes to foster healing and empowerment for CSA survivors.

Keywords: Adult survivors of CSA; Child sexual abuse; Romantic relationships

1.0 Introduction

In the murky depths of adversity, the lotus flower rises, defying the odds to blossom into a symbol of resilience, strength, and transformation. Much like the lotus, survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) navigate the dark, muddy waters of their past traumas, striving to bloom in the light of new, healthy relationships. Their journey mirrors the lotus's ascent from the mud to bloom with purity and grace, symbolizing the potential for growth, healing, and beauty even in the most challenging circumstances. As it was, romantic relationships are emotional connections between individuals characterized by affection, love, intimacy, and companionship. These connections typically involve couples with a deep emotional bond and mutual affection. Romantic relationships, while taking various forms and sometimes leading to long-term commitments like marriage, are defined by the pursuit of romantic connection and emotional intimacy (Gómez-López et al., 2019). Partners engage in shared activities, create memories, and offer mutual support, fostering emotional closeness and vulnerability—key

aspects of healthy relationships. However, for survivors of CSA, these dynamics can become significantly more complex.

Additionally, recent studies have explored the extensive and interconnected effects of CSA on survivors, revealing profound impacts on mental health, interpersonal relationships, self-concept, and coping mechanisms. Rothman et al. (2021) documented significant and lasting effects, including depression, anxiety, and impaired psychosocial functioning among survivors. MacGinley et al. (2019) identified shame as a pervasive barrier to self-esteem and disclosure, while McTavish et al. (2019) linked delayed disclosure to a higher risk of PTSD. Survivors often struggle with revictimization, especially those with psychiatric disorders like PTSD (Mazarello et al., 2022; Papalia et al., 2021). Noll (2021) emphasized the role of biological, psychological, and environmental factors in contributing to long-term psychopathology in CSA survivors.

Furthermore, the impact of CSA on romantic relationships is equally significant. Survivors face challenges such as sexual shame and attachment issues, which affect relationship satisfaction (Barker et al., 2022). Attachment styles, like anxious and avoidant types and conflict resolution strategies, are shaped by the trauma of CSA (González-Ortega et al., 2021; Vitek & Yeater, 2021). Sexual dysfunction, often rooted in psychological distress, is another common consequence of CSA (Gewirtz-Meydan, 2022; Gewirtz-Meydan & Opuda, 2022). Moreover, sexual self-concept and identity play crucial roles in shaping survivors' sexual well-being and relationship satisfaction (Astle et al., 2023). Baumann et al. (2020) highlighted that a supportive relationship can help mitigate sexual difficulties, while Easton (2019) underscored the benefits of early disclosure in improving mental health outcomes.

In addition to mental health challenges, CSA survivors face barriers to developing trust, vulnerability, and intimacy within romantic relationships. Their emotional scars often manifest in difficulties with trust, anxiety, and communication, leading to conflicts and misunderstandings. Survivors may struggle with low self-esteem, sexual difficulties, and heightened anxiety, all of which can strain romantic relationships. Bates-Duford (2019) noted that survivors' emotional reactions linked to trauma often complicate relationship dynamics, contributing to emotional distress and, in many cases, depression. Trust, effective communication, and constructive conflict resolution become even more crucial for survivors as they navigate the complex emotional landscape of their relationships. Despite these challenges, therapeutic approaches and social support systems have been shown to foster resilience and healing in survivors. Mindfulness, compassion-based interventions, and narrative couples therapy contributed to post-traumatic growth and relationship satisfaction (Francis-Laughlin & Rusca, 2020; Westerman et al., 2020). Additionally, the presence of supportive partners can play a significant role in the healing process, offering emotional security and facilitating the development of healthier attachment styles. However, the role of intimate partners in either supporting or hindering recovery is not fully understood, indicating a significant gap in the literature.

This study aims to address these gaps by exploring the lived experiences of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse in the context of long-term romantic relationships. Focusing on the dynamics within these relationships seeks to understand how survivors and their partners overcome the challenges posed by CSA. The research also aims to identify coping mechanisms and the role of intimate partners in the healing journey, to contribute to the creation of more effective support systems and interventions. Ultimately, this study aspires to offer a deeper understanding of the complexities of romantic relationships for CSA survivors, helping to promote long-term resilience, mental health, and well-being.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The study employed a qualitative research design using an interpretative phenomenological approach. As Tenny et al. (2022) describe, qualitative research is well-suited to exploring in-depth human experiences and social processes, making it ideal for understanding the complex phenomenon of how adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) navigate romantic relationships. This method relies on interviews and observations to uncover meanings and patterns within the lived experiences of survivors, emphasizing the need for a deep, nuanced understanding.

To delve into these experiences, the study utilized the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, which is designed to identify patterns within groups. This approach allowed the researcher to understand the intricate dynamics of romantic relationships of CSA survivors, as it is especially well-suited to studying the personal and emotional experiences central to the phenomenon under investigation.

2.2 Research Locale

This study focused on adult CSA survivors in long-term romantic relationships lasting over three years. Participants were recruited primarily through referrals from support groups and clinics, ensuring trust and privacy. The interviews were conducted online using platforms like Google Meet, providing flexibility and enabling participants to engage from the comfort of their own homes. This virtual environment promoted openness and a sense of security, key elements in discussing sensitive personal experiences.

2.3 Research Participants

The study focused on adults who had experienced sexual abuse during childhood and were currently in romantic relationships lasting at least three years. A snowball sampling method was employed due to the topic's sensitive nature. Initial participants, identified through referrals from clinics and support groups for CSA survivors, were asked to recommend other individuals who met the criteria. Snowball sampling provided a trustworthy and ethically sensitive way to reach participants while ensuring their shared background in CSA and long-term romantic relationships.

This sampling approach also promoted a sense of community and trust among participants. By recruiting through trusted referrals, participants were more likely to feel comfortable, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the process. The method aligned with ethical standards, as it avoided invasive inquiries about participants' past abuse experiences while ensuring they fit the study criteria (Parker et al., 2019). Following Creswell and Guetterman (2019), the study included five (5) participants, all adult female survivors of CSA currently in romantic relationships exceeding three years. The participants were selected for their potential to offer insights into the challenges and resilience of navigating intimate relationships as CSA survivors.

The table below provides a summary of the participant's profiles:

Table 1. Participants of the study				
Participant	Gender	Age	Length of Current Relationship	Age at the Time of CSA
KM	Female	30	8	7 years old
MG	Female	26	9	14 years old
MA	Female (LGBTQ+)	24	3	13 years old
PM	Female	28	5	15 years old
PJ	Female	23	6	8 years old

2.4 Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview instrument was employed to examine participants' lived experiences, focusing on their romantic relationships. The instrument consisted of ten open-ended questions to explore critical dimensions of participants' relational dynamics, including attachment styles, trust, intimacy, communication patterns, and resilience. To ensure the instrument's rigor, the interview guide underwent a validation process conducted by five experts specializing in clinical psychology, trauma-informed care, relationships, and research. This process aimed to confirm the questionnaire's clarity, relevance, and content validity. Key themes addressed in the guide included attachment styles and emotional bonds, trust and vulnerability in relationships, the influence of early romantic experiences on current dynamics, communication challenges, and the role of coping mechanisms and personal growth in romantic partnerships. The validation employed the Lawshe formula to calculate the Content Validity Ratio (CVR), which yielded a perfect score of 1.0 for all items. This result indicated that every question effectively measured the constructs it intended to assess, reinforcing the instrument's reliability and alignment with the study's objectives (Dovetail, 2023).

2.5 Data Gathering Procedure

The study's data-gathering procedure employed social media for participant recruitment and videoconferencing applications, such as Google Meet, for conducting interviews. Recruitment began with referrals sourced from social media, clinics, and support groups for individuals with histories of childhood sexual abuse. Clear information regarding the study's purpose and eligibility criteria was disseminated across these platforms, and

informed consent was obtained from participants meeting the criteria. Recruitment materials emphasized the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality measures, and the importance of their contributions to the research.

Interviews were scheduled based on participant availability, utilizing secure and private video conference sessions to overcome geographical limitations and foster a relaxed environment conducive to open communication. Videoconferencing was chosen for its practical advantages, including ease of scheduling, participant comfort, and integrated recording features for data accuracy. Participants were provided with a pre-interview briefing to address technical concerns. The informed consent process was reiterated at the start of each session, and participants were allowed to withdraw at any time without penalty. The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol to encourage participants to share their experiences openly. Recordings, conducted with participant consent, enabled precise transcription, which was subsequently analyzed qualitatively to derive insights while maintaining strict confidentiality and anonymity. Transcriptions underwent iterative analysis using Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) Miner Lite software, facilitating systematic coding, theme identification, and the development of a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

The researcher, despite being employed at an institution specializing in supporting victims of sexual abuse, did not recruit participants from the institution's client base, ensuring an independent participant pool. Referrals from clinics and other participants were used to verify eligibility, avoiding direct inquiries into participants' histories of abuse. This method preserved privacy, reduced re-traumatization risk, and prioritized participant comfort. Participants were thoroughly informed about the study's goals, processes, and potential risks or benefits. Informed consent was continuously obtained throughout the study, and confidentiality was strictly maintained through pseudonyms and secure data management. The research focused on participants' current romantic relationships and the impact of past experiences, emphasizing resilience, coping mechanisms, and personal growth rather than revisiting detailed accounts of past traumas. Ethical standards were rigorously upheld, with cultural sensitivity employed to mitigate bias and respect participants' diverse backgrounds. The researcher fostered a supportive environment, ensured voluntary participation, and promptly addressed concerns. Findings were transparently reported, contributing meaningful insights to the field while maintaining the dignity and well-being of the participants.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Theme A: Holistic Bonding Practices

In exploring how participants maintained emotional bonds in their romantic relationships, the theme of Holistic Bonding Practices emerged, underscoring the importance of specific bonding behaviors like physical touch, acts of service, verbal affirmations, quality time, and open communication. These practices serve as the foundation for intimate connection and underscore the universal human need for closeness. This theme aligns with Adult Attachment Theory, which posits that early caregiving experiences shape one's approach to relationships in adulthood and that secure attachment involves comfort with intimacy, autonomy, and effective communication (Gause et al., 2022). Participants' emphasis on physical touch, verbal affirmations, and open communication resonates with secure attachment principles, promoting emotional attunement, responsiveness, and accessibility within romantic partnerships.

Individual experiences further illuminated this theme. KM, for instance, attributed her comfort with physical touch to her affectionate family background, explaining, *"Yung family background ko kasi... close rin kami sa isat-isa, yung nanay tyaka tatay ko very maalaga rin sa amin. Even our relatives, close talaga kami."* She noted that affectionate gestures were essential in her romantic relationship, sustaining her emotional connection with her partner. MG, in turn, highlighted how pairing physical touch with acts of service strengthened her bond with her partner. She explained, *"Ayoko na ma-feel niya na nakakalamang ako in terms sa favor niya sakin na siya yung mas maraming nagagawa for us in terms of the acts of services sa bahay."* Similarly, MA described combining words of affirmation, quality time, and gift-giving as a multifaceted approach to fulfilling various emotional needs. PM spoke about the significance of effort, listening, and openness in building trust, stating, *"I make a conscious effort to be present in the relationship, listening attentively to my partner's thoughts and feelings, and expressing my own openly and honestly."* For PJ, transparency, open communication, and resilience were critical, allowing her and her partner to navigate

challenges together. She described her approach to communication as more than an exchange; it is a commitment to nurturing their emotional connection: *"It is not just about communication; it is a commitment to nurturing our emotional connection. When my partner does something that touches me, I express my gratitude and love wholeheartedly."* These findings resonate with existing literature on relationship satisfaction and emotional bonding among survivors of childhood adversity. Research by Vaillancourt-Morel et al. (2021) found that survivors often struggle with lower perceived partner responsiveness and relationship satisfaction; however, proactive communication and resilience can mitigate these challenges. This study similarly indicates that participants who engage in open communication, quality time, and resilience-building practices can foster emotional bonds despite past trauma.

3.2 Theme B: Trust Issues and Emotional Guardedness

The impact of past sexual abuse on participants' ability to form and maintain emotional bonds in relationships was profound, particularly in terms of trust deficits and emotional guardedness. Grounded in Adult Attachment Theory, which posits that early adverse experiences can lead to insecure attachment styles marked by anxiety and avoidance (Civilotti et al., 2021), the findings illustrate how childhood sexual abuse (CSA) shaped survivors' emotional openness and capacity for connection with their partners. Participants recounted how intrusive memories and flashbacks resurfaced during intimate situations, triggering emotional distress and hesitation. For instance, KM described the persistent impact of her trauma, stating, *"I have forgiven him already. Pero, 'yung idea na nangyari saakin andoon padin. So, even if nagkaroon na ako ng boyfriend, matagal na kami, andoon pa rin siya hindi siya nawawala."* Similarly, MG shared her struggle with intimacy, explaining, *"...emotions ko during yung period nung 'nag-aano' kami. Minsan nai-iba, parang feeling ko iba yung 'umaano' sa'kin, ganyan. Na-iba yung image."* These experiences often led to a conflict between the desire for connection and the discomfort triggered by past trauma, resulting in emotional withdrawal and guarded behavior.

Participants also described persistent feelings of fear, anxiety, and mistrust as obstacles to forming relationships. MA shared how the betrayal inherent in her abuse fostered deep mistrust, saying, *"I find it challenging to trust men with my emotions, leading to guardedness and reluctance to open up."* This pervasive mistrust often led to emotional distance, as survivors anticipated betrayal and relied on self-protective strategies such as maintaining emotional walls to avoid vulnerability. PM explained, *"As a result, I approached relationships with a guarded heart, doubting the intentions of those I encountered,"* highlighting the difficulty of achieving meaningful connections. Diminished self-esteem further complicated survivors' relationships, as many participants linked their feelings of unworthiness to the lasting effects of CSA. PJ noted, *"The trauma distorted my view of relationships and boundaries, making it difficult to engage openly. The experience also affected self-esteem, making it hard to accept love and affection."* These internalized negative perceptions perpetuated cycles of insecurity and emotional detachment, hindering their ability to engage openly with partners.

These findings align with the broader literature on CSA's impact on adult relationships, supporting the work of Bates-Duford (2019), who highlighted trust issues and emotional regulation difficulties as primary challenges for CSA survivors in intimate relationships. Additionally, Bates-Duford found that survivors' self-esteem issues often hindered relational dynamics, as diminished self-worth made it difficult for them to accept love and affection, a finding echoed in this study's participants.

3.3 Theme C: Intimacy Barriers and Anxieties

Responses to questions about challenges in building intimacy highlighted the complex, layered obstacles that survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) face in forming close, intimate connections. The lasting impact of trauma often disrupts the development of such relationships, fostering mistrust and reinforcing pervasive negative emotions. Grounded in Adult Attachment Theory, the findings reveal that early trauma often leads to anxious or avoidant attachment styles, characterized by deep fears of intimacy and trust issues.

Participants described significant challenges with intimacy due to past trauma, particularly in physical closeness and emotional vulnerability. MA shared, *"There were moments that I avoided sexual contact altogether, which strained the intimacy in my relationship,"* illustrating how traumatic memories resurfaced during physical closeness, causing discomfort and tension. Similarly, KM expressed her struggle with sharing her past, saying, *"Even up until now, naiisip ko parin 'yung nangyari saakin before, hindi ako comfortable na I-kwento sa kaniya 'yun. Kasi paminsan naiisip ko*

siya, paminsan na a-anxious ako.” This hesitation to disclose past experiences created barriers to emotional connection.

MG echoed this sentiment, explaining her internal conflict, *“Kada naman ginagawa namin yung something doon sa relationship namin like sex, naiilang ako...ang tumatakbo roon sa isip ko is, ‘paano ko ba sasabihin sa kanya na may nangyari sa’king ganito?’”* This fear of judgment or misunderstanding often prevented participants from opening up fully. Trust, a foundational aspect of intimacy, was deeply compromised; as PM noted, *“Past traumas can erode trust in oneself and others. It becomes challenging to open up fully...to trust that your partner will understand and support you without judgment.”* These difficulties in establishing trust and openness sometimes led to dissatisfaction and frustration in their relationships.

These findings align with existing research on intimacy challenges for trauma survivors. Gewirtz-Meydan (2022) highlighted the common experience of physical intimacy struggles due to traumatic memory reactivation. Similarly, Castaneda (2020) emphasized that survivors’ reluctance to share traumatic experiences often inhibited intimacy due to fear of judgment and misunderstanding, supporting the current study’s findings regarding challenges in disclosure.

3.4 Theme D: Post-Traumatic Trust and Intimacy Challenges

Responses to questions on how past experiences shaped trust and connection in romantic relationships revealed enduring challenges with trust and intimacy, highlighting the profound psychological imprints of early trauma on survivors’ relational dynamics. These effects are consistent with Adult Attachment Theory, suggesting that adverse childhood experiences often lead to anxious or avoidant attachment styles that complicate adult relationships. Participants shared that trauma shaped their approach to trust, prompting heightened caution and defensive mechanisms to safeguard against potential emotional harm. For instance, PM described how her past experiences created a reluctance to fully invest emotionally, stating: *“Previous encounters of betrayal or disappointment have made me naturally cautious when it comes to opening up and trusting others.”* Similarly, PJ noted the ongoing process of navigating trust, explaining, *“It is an ongoing journey to learn to balance trust with caution and to recognize when my past experiences might be influencing my decisions in relationships.”*

Physical intimacy also proved challenging, as participants described how it could trigger distressing memories of past trauma. KM shared that intimate moments sometimes evoked past abuse, causing anxiety and withdrawal: *“Even if kapag gusto niya maging intimate, parang nag a-ask padin siya ng permission. Very respectful naman siya. ‘yun nga lang, kapag nga lang na ganoon na nag hi-hit siya, na ti-trigger siya.”* Survivors often relied on understanding partners to manage these emotional responses, underscoring the importance of sensitivity within the relationship. Concerns about being judged further compounded the difficulties in forming deep connections. Many participants hesitated to disclose their past experiences, fearing negative judgment or misunderstanding. MG conveyed this tension, stating: *“Noong nag si-simula palang kami, hindi nga ako makapag-sabi sakaniya ng nangyari saakin. Kasi nga fear of being judged explaining it kung bakit ganon...”* This reluctance to share deeply personal experiences created inner conflicts, as survivors yearned for genuine connection but held back due to fear of vulnerability. Lingering fears and insecurities were also prevalent among participants, reflecting the lasting psychological effects of trauma. MA articulated this sentiment, noting: *“My relationships with men left me with lingering fears and insecurities.”* Survivors often required frequent reassurance and validation from their partners, which placed emotional demands on the relationship as they navigated feelings of vulnerability.

The findings on lingering fears and insecurities align with Alix et al. (2019), who examined the role of social support for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA). The study indicated that insecurities and fears of abandonment were prevalent among trauma survivors, often destabilizing their relationships. These insights support the present study’s observations that trauma’s lingering effects manifest as pervasive fears, insecurities, and trust issues, underscoring the importance of supportive, understanding partnerships to foster healing and emotional safety.

3.5 Theme E: Insecure Attachments and Growth

Participants’ reflections on early romantic relationships revealed a dominant theme of Insecure Attachments and Growth. This theme explores how past romantic involvements shaped their ability to trust, engage intimately, and

develop resilience and self-understanding. The accounts highlight how early experiences profoundly influenced relational patterns and emotional health, often as formative moments in Adult Survivors' lives that shaped their approach to later relationships. Many shared that while they could establish trust to some degree, they often hesitated when it came to physical intimacy. KM recounted, *"Nag t-trust din naman ako, nakapag-build din naman ako ng trust sakaniya. Pero, when it comes to the intimate part, 'yun 'yung medyo hindi."* This hesitation, often rooted in unresolved trauma, created challenges in balancing trust with vulnerability and hindered deeper emotional connections.

Some participants described how their partial ability to trust negatively affected their relationships. MG expressed concerns about disclosing personal trauma, fearing betrayal or exploitation: *"Hirap na hirap ako sumubok din ng ibang relationship to tell that story, kasi parang hindi ko nga sure kung ikaw na talaga. Mamaya ipag-kalat mo pa na meron nangyari pala saakin na ganito. So, nag take advantage ka pa saakin... lalo mo pang dagdagan 'yung sexual trauma ko."* This fear led to strained communication and barriers to forming stable, trusting bonds with their partners. Others recounted experiences of manipulation, control, and even abuse in past relationships, which left emotional scars that shaped future relational patterns. MA reflected, *"It involves various forms of manipulation, control, and abuse, making it difficult to maintain a healthy and balanced connection with my partner. The verbal and physical abuse had long-lasting effects on my mental and emotional well-being, leaving scars that impacted my future relationships and personal growth."* These negative encounters deeply influenced their attitudes toward trust and intimacy.

Feelings of insecurity and a lack of direction further complicated relationships for many participants. PM shared, *"This lack of direction impacted various aspects of the relationship, leading to misunderstandings, conflicts, and ultimately, failure... I found myself caught in a negative cycle of insecurity and toxicity, where my behaviors pushed my partners away, further reinforcing my feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness."* These struggles affected romantic connections and hindered personal development, perpetuating feelings of unworthiness. Despite these challenges, participants recognized the growth that emerged from these painful experiences. PJ highlighted this, stating, *"Despite the challenges, these experiences taught me about what I do and do not want in a relationship, paving the way for growth and learning in my current relationship."* These moments of self-reflection and resilience allowed participants to establish clearer boundaries and better understand their needs, forming a foundation for healthier relationships moving forward.

According to González-Ortega et al. (2021), early romantic experiences significantly impact attachment style and an individual's approach to intimacy. This research aligns with the current findings, highlighting that while adverse experiences may initially hinder trust and intimacy, overcoming these difficulties can foster resilience and self-understanding.

3.6 Theme F: Selective Disclosure and Cautious Communication

Participants' reflections on communication strategies in past relationships highlighted the importance of balancing openness and caution in building supportive romantic relationships, especially for individuals who have endured traumatic experiences like childhood sexual abuse (CSA). Many participants shared that while maintaining open communication on most topics, they were hesitant to disclose their CSA experiences due to fear of judgment or misunderstanding. KM expressed, *"Kapag may nararamdaman ako sinasabi ko... Pero, may reservations, which is 'yung about doon sa experience. Kapag related na roon, doon ako medyo hindi na nakakapag-open, ng freely. Kasi, takot akong ma-brought up."* Others, like PM, noted initial difficulties in opening up, stemming from fears of rejection or abandonment: *"I struggled to communicate effectively with my partners about my thoughts, feelings, and concerns. I lacked the courage to initiate these conversations, fearing rejection or conflict."* These apprehensions often created barriers to emotional connection, requiring survivors to navigate vulnerability cautiously.

For some participants, eventually disclosing their CSA experiences proved transformative. MA shared how this openness fostered trust and understanding: *"I was transparent with my partner about my past experiences and the trauma I've endured. This level of openness allowed me to establish a foundation of trust and understanding from the beginning."* Establishing clear expectations and boundaries also emerged as a key strategy for maintaining healthy relationships. PJ highlighted, *"I communicate with my partner by setting clear expectations and boundaries... I openly discuss possible triggers for disagreements and fights. I vocalize treatments I won't tolerate and express what makes me*

happy.” By adopting proactive communication practices, survivors cultivated a safe and supportive relational environment.

Research by Fuller Thomas et al. (2019) supports these accounts, emphasizing the importance of communication for emotional health in relationships involving trauma survivors. Their work indicates that selective disclosure strategies help survivors manage the delicate balance between openness and self-protection. Furthermore, it establishes that when survivors disclose their trauma in a supportive context, relational satisfaction and emotional intimacy can increase. Fuller Thomas et al. also found that establishing clear boundaries and open communication is essential for trauma survivors, as these strategies create safety and predictability in relationships – fundamental for trauma recovery.

3.7 Theme G: Effective Communication and Emotional Connection Within The Relationship

For individuals with childhood trauma, Effective Communication and Emotional Connection emerged as crucial in building strong romantic relationships. Participants described strategies that fostered closeness, including consistent verbal affirmations of affection, acts of service, and fostering openness. KM emphasized daily expressions of love, noting, *“Every day I always say, ‘I love you.’ Parang walang lumipas ‘yung araw na hindi ko sinabi sakaniya ‘yun... That is how I nurture our relationship.”* Others highlighted thoughtful actions that demonstrated care, such as MG’s account of providing financial and emotional support during her partner’s challenges: *“I saved him from distress ng financial incapacity niya... making participants feel seen and valued.”* Open and honest dialogue also played a pivotal role, with MA sharing, *“Continuously being open and honest with my partner creates an atmosphere of trust and authenticity... Empathizing with my partner’s experiences strengthens our bond and emotional connection.”* Participants underscored the value of empathizing with their partner’s perspectives, as PM explained: *“Since we both work in the same industry, I understand the challenges we face... allowing me to empathize with him and offer support.”* Finally, engaging in shared activities, such as PJ’s effort to participate in her partner’s interests, further enriched their connections: *“Going out of my way to become better at these games... creates opportunities for us to bond and have fun together.”*

Research on relationship dynamics by Westerman et al. (2020) supports these findings, highlighting how acts of service and shared activities reinforce emotional bonds. Studies show that openly discussing feelings and empathizing with a partner’s perspective is linked to increased intimacy and relational resilience. These underscore the broader relevance of the participants’ strategies in promoting strong, supportive romantic relationships, illustrating how emotional connection can be enhanced through intentional communication and thoughtful gestures.

3.8 Theme H: Emotional Regulation and Effective Communication within Relationships

Navigating stress and conflicts in romantic relationships necessitates a blend of Emotional Regulation and Effective Communication strategies. Participants described employing methods like maintaining composure during disagreements, channeling stress into productive activities, and fostering open dialogue to address issues constructively. KM illustrated the value of self-regulation, sharing, *“Kapag medyo emotional ako... iniintay ko lang muna na, bumaba ‘yung emotions ko at kapag kaya ko na siyang kausap nang hindi ako nadadala ng emotions ko, that’s the time na kakausapin ko siya.”* This approach reduced impulsive reactions and promoted thoughtful discussions. Others, like MG, described sublimating stress through physical or household tasks, saying, *“Tumataas ‘yung adrenaline ko sa trabaho, gumawa ng gawaing bahay. Ayun na ‘yung projection ko nung stress.”* Open communication emerged as a cornerstone of conflict resolution. MA emphasized, *“Confronting difficult situations through open communication demonstrates a willingness to address issues head-on and work through challenges together.”* Participants also highlighted the importance of clearly expressing thoughts and feelings without assigning blame, as PJ shared: *“I directly express my thoughts and feelings... avoid blaming my partner, stick to one argument at a time, and do not sweat the small stuff.”* These strategies fostered mutual respect, empathy, and collaborative problem-solving, reinforcing trust and emotional safety.

Research supports the findings related to childhood sexual abuse (CSA) and its effects on emotional regulation and communication in adult relationships. CSA survivors often face challenges in managing emotions and maintaining open communication due to deep-seated trauma and trust issues stemming from their past experiences (McTavish et al., 2019). Johnson et al. (2019) further emphasized that self-composure and emotional

regulation are crucial for CSA survivors, as these skills help mitigate intense emotional responses triggered by relational stress.

3.9 Theme I: Constructive Relational Dynamics

In exploring the positive aspects and personal growth within romantic relationships, the theme of Constructive Relational Dynamics emerged as pivotal, particularly for survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA). Participants emphasized respecting boundaries as essential for trust and safety, with KM reflecting, *"Respect your partner in all aspects... Not just physically, sa lahat ng aspeto."* Emotional support and companionship were also highlighted, as MG shared, *"Yung comfort lang ng asawa ko 'yung nagiging sandalan ko, itself. Pero siguro kung ako lang mag-isa, hindi ko talaga kaya."* Open communication was consistently valued for resolving conflicts and fostering mutual understanding, with MA stating, *"Confronting difficult situations through open communication demonstrates a willingness to address issues head-on."* Participants also found that honest dialogue encouraged self-reflection and growth, as PM described: *"Addressing these communication challenges has been instrumental in building a healthier version of myself."* Observing partners' strategies provided additional learning opportunities, with PJ noting, *"I have learned new approaches and strategies for managing difficult situations."* These relational dynamics cultivated emotional safety, resilience, and mutual growth.

Research supports these findings, indicating that respecting boundaries is crucial for maintaining trust and preventing conflicts, particularly in relationships involving individuals with past trauma (Baumann et al., 2020). The presence of companionship and emotional support during challenging times significantly enhances relationship satisfaction and stability. Furthermore, Vaillancourt-Morel et al. (2023) underscore that open communication is essential for conflict resolution, ensuring both partners feel understood and valued. This aligns with their study's findings that transparent and honest dialogues enhance relational quality and facilitate collaborative problem-solving. Additionally, self-reflection and self-improvement are vital for fostering personal growth and a deeper understanding of emotional needs, which are critical for sustaining healthy relationships.

3.10 Theme J: Setting of Boundaries, Strength, and Resilience

The theme of Setting Boundaries, Strength, and Resilience encapsulates how survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) manage challenges and foster growth within adult romantic relationships, reflecting their journey toward self-protection and empowerment. Participants emphasized the importance of setting boundaries to safeguard emotional well-being and asserting control, with KM expressing, *"naging tough ako or parang naging strength ko siya... that I should never allow this again to happen without my permission or my consent."* Survivors establish a sense of safety and autonomy by defining personal limits, fostering more predictable and supportive relational dynamics. Strength and resilience were also central, as participants described how their experiences, though painful, cultivated profound inner resolve. MA shared, *"By drawing on bravery, hopefulness, empathy, and resourcefulness, I continue to overcome challenges and build fulfilling and meaningful connections with others."* This resilience developed through adversity, equips survivors with tools to navigate relational challenges and foster emotional intimacy.

The literature supports the importance of setting boundaries, especially for survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Establishing boundaries is a critical aspect of self-care and emotional regulation, enabling individuals to protect themselves from further harm and maintain mental health. Research indicates that survivors who establish clear boundaries navigate relationships more effectively, reducing feelings of overwhelm or re-traumatization (Fletcher et al., 2021). Moreover, as suggested by Guggisberg et al. (2021), strength and resilience are attributes that CSA survivors often develop. These qualities signify a remarkable capacity for endurance and adaptability, essential for overcoming the long-term impacts of trauma and fostering healthy, supportive relationships. Resilience is a dynamic process involving positive adaptation in adversity, which is critical for sustaining romantic relationships. Additionally, resilience can be cultivated through supportive relationships, self-reflection, and therapeutic interventions, highlighting the potential for growth and healing even after significant trauma.

4.0 Conclusions

This study provides significant insights into the lived experiences of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) and their navigation of romantic relationships. Through qualitative analysis, ten themes emerged, capturing the complexities of trust, intimacy, communication, and resilience within these relationships. Survivors

highlighted the importance of holistic bonding practices, emotional regulation, and effective communication in fostering meaningful connections. While past trauma introduced challenges such as trust issues and intimacy barriers, participants demonstrated remarkable resilience, employing strategies like setting boundaries and cultivating emotional regulation to build stronger relationships and achieve personal growth. These findings underscore the dual realities of the enduring impacts of CSA and the transformative potential of healing and empowerment.

This study is firmly grounded in Adult Attachment Theory, which underscores early relational experiences' influence on adult relationships' dynamics. The theory posits that secure attachment facilitates the development of healthy emotional bonds, whereas insecure attachment is associated with significant challenges in establishing trust, fostering intimacy, and regulating emotions. Survivors of CSA, as evidenced by this study, often struggle with attachment-related challenges, such as emotional guardedness and trust issues, stemming from early trauma. However, the findings suggest that through therapeutic interventions, boundary-setting, and emotional self-regulation, these individuals can experience a shift toward more secure attachment behaviors. Participants demonstrated a growing capacity for resilience, crucial in moving from insecure to secure attachment patterns, allowing them to navigate relationships more effectively and foster emotional closeness with partners.

The study highlights several contributions. It reinforces the critical role of trauma-informed approaches in addressing the unique needs of CSA survivors. Findings emphasize the necessity of safe spaces for survivors to explore trust, intimacy, and emotional connection, offering practical recommendations for therapeutic and relational interventions. The themes also underline the importance of educating partners about trauma-informed support techniques, enhancing mutual understanding and relational satisfaction. This aligns with attachment theory's assertion that secure relationships require both individuals to be attuned to each other's emotional needs and respond with empathy and support.

To advance this field, the study recommends future efforts to expand access to trauma-informed therapy and support groups, develop culturally sensitive interventions, and advocate for policy changes to protect survivors and extend legal remedies. Establishing peer networks and launching public education campaigns are also essential to destigmatize CSA and promote supportive environments for survivors. Longitudinal research exploring the intersectional experiences of CSA survivors is encouraged, aiming to inform comprehensive and inclusive practices for fostering resilience and relational well-being. By integrating these strategies, society can better support CSA survivors on their journey toward healing and fulfilling romantic relationships, facilitating their development of more secure attachment patterns and ultimately improving relational outcomes.

5.0 Contributions of Author

The author conducted and funded the research, which underwent a thorough panel review and underwent editing for language and format.

6.0 Funding

This research is self-funded and is not funded by any private or local agency.

7.0 Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest about the publication of this paper.

8.0 Acknowledgement

The researcher extends heartfelt gratitude to his advisor, Mr. Bernard Christopher A. Catam, for his invaluable expertise and unwavering support and to Dr. Ma. Lorena M. Tagala, thesis writing professor, for her dedicated assistance and insightful guidance. Appreciation is also given to Mr. Ronel John E. Tarcilo for his meticulous data analysis and to the thesis committee members—Dr. For their constructive critiques, Sheililo R. Amihan, Dr. Ma. Lorena M. Tagala, and Dean Alfredo G. Perez. Thanks are extended to validators Ms. Shien G. Roscain and Ms. Marjualita Theresa T. Malapo for ensuring the reliability of the research instruments and to colleagues and fellow graduate students for their camaraderie and support. The researcher is deeply grateful to the study participants for their openness, to Ms. Hanna Erika E. Laviña for her expertise and guidance, and to family and friends for their patience, encouragement, and love—especially his parents and the love of his life, whose belief, understanding, and inspiration have been a source of strength. Above all, profound thanks go to God Almighty for His guidance, strength, and clarity throughout this journey.

9.0 References

- Alix, S., Cossette, L., Cyr, M., Frappier, J.-Y., Caron, P.-O., & Hébert, M. (2019). Self-Blame, Shame, Avoidance, and Suicidal Ideation in Sexually Abused Adolescent Girls: A Longitudinal Study. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 29(4), 432–447. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2019.1678543>
- Astle, S., Anders, K. M., McAllister, P., Hanna-Walker, V., & Yelland, E. (2023). The Conceptualization and Measurement of Sexual Self-Concept and Sexual Self-Schema: A Systematic Literature Review. *Journal of Sex Research*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2023.2244937>
- Barker, G. G., Volk, F., Hazel, J. S., & Reinhardt, R. A. (2022). Past is present: Pathways between childhood sexual abuse and relationship satisfaction. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 48(2), 604–620. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12522>
- Bates-Duford, T. (2019). Romantic Relationships following Childhood Sexual Abuse. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/y7vpyexe>

- Baumann, M., Bigras, N., Paradis, A., & Godbout, N. (2020). It's Good to Have You: The Moderator Role of Relationship Satisfaction in the Link Between Child Sexual Abuse and Sexual Difficulties. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 47(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623x.2020.1797965>
- Castaneda, N. (2020). "It's in Our Natures Daughters to Protect Our Families... You Know?": The Privacy Rules of Concealing and Revealing Latina Child Sexual Abuse Experiences. *Journal of Family Communication*, 21(1), 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2020.1856851>
- Civilotti, C., Dennis, J. L., Acquadro Maran, D., & Margola, D. (2021). When love just ends: An investigation of the relationship between dysfunctional behaviors, attachment styles, gender, and education shortly after a relationship dissolution. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 662237. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.662237>
- Creswell, J. W., & Guetterman, T. C. (2019). Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research (6th ed.). Pearson
- Dovetail. (n.d.). Understand Content Validity: Guide, Examples & FAQs. Retrieved from <https://dovetail.com/research/content-validity/>
- Easton, S. D. (2019). Childhood disclosure of sexual abuse and mental health outcomes in adulthood: Assessing merits of early disclosure and discussion. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 93(0145–2134), 208–214. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.04.005>
- Fletcher, S., Elklit, A., Shevlin, M., & Armour, C. (2021). Predictors of PTSD Treatment Response Trajectories in a Sample of Childhood Sexual Abuse Survivors: The Roles of Social Support, Coping, and PTSD Symptom Clusters. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 36(3–4), 1283–1307. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260517741212>
- Francis-Laughlin, C., & Rusca, K. A. (2019). Strengthening vicarious resilience in adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse: A narrative approach to couples therapy. *The Family Journal*, 28(1), 106648071989493. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480719894938>
- Fuller-Thomson, E., Lacombe-Duncan, A., Goodman, D., Fallon, B., & Brennenstuhl, S. (2019). From surviving to thriving: factors associated with complete mental health among childhood sexual abuse survivors. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 55(6), 735–744. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-019-01767-x>
- Gause, N. K., Sales, J. M., Brown, J. L., Pelham, W. E., Liu, Y., & West, S. G. (2022). The protective role of secure attachment in the relationship between experiences of childhood abuse, emotion dysregulation and coping, and behavioral and mental health problems among emerging adult Black women: A moderated mediation analysis. *Journal of psychopathology and clinical science*, 131(7), 716–726. <https://doi.org/10.1037/abn0000772>
- Gewirtz-Meydan, A. (2020). The relationship between child sexual abuse, self-concept and psychopathology: The moderating role of social support and perceived parental quality. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 113(0190–7409), 104938. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104938>
- Gewirtz-Meydan, A. (2022). Sexual Dysfunction Among Childhood Sexual Abuse Survivors: The "Functional" Dysfunction?. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 7(48), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623x.2022.2044944>
- Gewirtz-Meydan, A., & Opuda, E. (2020). The Impact of Child Sexual Abuse on Men's Sexual Function: A Systematic Review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 1(23), 152483802093913. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838020939134>
- Gómez-López, M., Viejo, C., & Ortega-Ruiz, R. (2019). Well-Being and Romantic Relationships: A Systematic Review in Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 16(13), 2415. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16132415>
- González-Ortega, E., Orgaz, B., Vicario-Molina, I., & Fuertes, A. (2021). Adult Attachment, Conflict Resolution Style and Relationship Quality among Spanish Young-adult Couples. *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*, 24, e5. <https://doi.org/10.1017/SJP.2021.4>
- Guggisberg, M., Bottino, S., & Doran, C. M. (2021). Women's contexts and circumstances of posttraumatic growth after sexual victimization: A systematic review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 699288. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.699288>
- Johnson, D. J., Holyoak, D., & Cravens Pickens, J. (2019). Using narrative therapy in the treatment of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse in the context of couple therapy. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 47(4), 216–231. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01926187.2019.1624224>
- MacGinley, M., Breckenridge, J., & Mowll, J. (2019). A scoping review of adult survivors' experiences of shame following sexual abuse in childhood. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 27(5), 12771. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.12771>
- Mazzarello, O., Gagné, M. E., & Langevin, R. (2022). Risk Factors for Sexual Revictimization and Dating Violence in Young Adults with a History of Child Sexual Abuse. *Journal of child & adolescent trauma*, 15(4), 1113–1125. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-022-00462-5>
- McTavish, J. R., Sverdlichenko, I., MacMillan, H. L., & Wekerle, C. (2019). Child sexual abuse, disclosure and PTSD: A systematic and critical review. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 92(92), 196–208. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.04.006>
- Noll, J. G. (2021). Child Sexual Abuse as a Unique Risk Factor for the Development of Psychopathology: The Compounded Convergence of Mechanisms. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology*, 17(1), 439–464. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-081219-112621>
- Parker, C., Scott, S., & Geddes, A. (2019). Snowball Sampling. In P. Atkinson, S. Delamont, A. Cernat, J. W. Sakshaug, & R. A. Williams (Eds.), *SAGE Research Methods Foundations*. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526421036831710>
- Rothman, K., Georgia Salivar, E., Roddy, M. K., Hatch, S. G., & Doss, B. D. (2019). Sexual Assault Among Women in College: Immediate and Long-Term Associations With Mental Health, Psychosocial Functioning, and Romantic Relationships. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 36(19–20), 088626051987015. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260519870158>
- Tenny, S., Brannan, J. M., & Brannan, G. D. (2024). Qualitative study. In *StatPearls*. StatPearls Publishing. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK470395/>
- Vaillancourt-Morel, M.-P., Rosen, N. O., Pélouin, K., & Bergeron, S. (2021). Maltreatment in Childhood and Perceived Partner Responsiveness in Adult Romantic Relationships: A Dyadic Daily Diary and Longitudinal Study. *Child Maltreatment*, 28(1), 107755952110572. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10775595211057230>
- Vaillancourt-Morel, M.-P., Bussi eres, E.-L., Nolin, M.-C., & Daspe, M.-E. (2023). Partner Effects of Childhood Maltreatment: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 25(2), 152483802311734–152483802311734. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380231173427>
- Vitek, K. N., & Yeater, E. A. (2020). The Association Between a History of Sexual Violence and Romantic Relationship Functioning: A Systematic Review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 22(5), 152483802091561. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838020915615>
- Westerman, G., McCann, E., & Sparkes, E. (2020). Evaluating the Effectiveness of Mindfulness and Compassion-Based Programs on Shame and Associated Psychological Distress with Potential Issues of Salience for Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse: A Systematic Review. *Mindfulness*, 11, 1827–1847. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-020-01340-7>