

Theoretical Construction of Love Anxiety: A Multi-Stage Relational Threat Model

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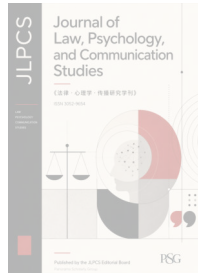
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Abstract

Contemporary romantic relationships are increasingly marked by ambiguous boundaries, delayed commitment, social media comparison, and sociocultural pressure, which may intensify anxiety across the romantic trajectory. This conceptual article proposes love anxiety as a cross-stage relational threat response characterized by persistent worry, tension, rumination, avoidance, jealousy, and reassurance seeking during love attainment, relationship initiation, confirmation, maintenance, loss, and future commitment. Integrating the triangular theory of love, adult attachment theory, relational uncertainty theory, rejection sensitivity, intolerance of uncertainty, self-worth contingency theory, social media relationship research, and the Love Confirmation Mechanism Model, the article develops a Multi-Stage Relational Threat Model. Six theoretical dimensions are proposed: love attainment anxiety, relationship initiation anxiety, relationship certainty anxiety, lovability anxiety, loss and separation anxiety, and commitment and future anxiety. The model clarifies conceptual boundaries and offers directions for qualitative inquiry, scale development, validation, and cross-cultural testing.

Keywords: love anxiety; romantic relationships; relational uncertainty; attachment anxiety; rejection sensitivity; love confirmation; commitment anxiety

1. Introduction

Romantic love is often understood as a source of intimacy, attraction, commitment, and well-being. Yet in lived relational experience, love is also frequently accompanied by worry, vigilance, jealousy, rumination, avoidance, reassurance seeking, and fear of loss. Individuals involved in romantic contexts are not only concerned with whether they love another person. They also ask whether they can obtain love, whether they are worthy of being loved, whether the other person is serious, whether the relationship can be recognized and confirmed, whether the relationship is stable, whether external conditions will undermine it, and whether the relationship has a viable future. When these questions remain unresolved, romantic love may become a salient source of anxiety.

This phenomenon is particularly relevant in contemporary relationship contexts. First, relationship initiation has become more complex. Ambiguous dating practices, tentative online interaction, informal romantic involvement, and delayed commitment make it difficult for

individuals to determine whether a relationship has actually begun or whether a partner has serious relational intentions. Second, relationship maintenance now takes place within an intensified information environment. Social media increases the visibility of partner behavior, ex-partners, peer relationships, and idealized relational displays. Prior research suggests that Facebook use can elicit romantic jealousy (Muise et al., 2009), partner surveillance on social networking sites is associated with attachment insecurity and relational uncertainty (Fox & Warber, 2014), and different platforms may elicit different levels of jealousy (Utz et al., 2015). Traces of past relationships and opportunities for social comparison may also amplify retroactive jealousy and threat appraisals (Frampton & Fox, 2018). Third, many young adults face family expectations, peer comparison, economic insecurity, career uncertainty, marriage timing norms, and perceived competition in partner markets. Love therefore becomes not merely an interpersonal emotional experience but also a site where self-worth, life planning, and social evaluation intersect.

Existing research has provided rich resources for understanding



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anxiety-related experiences in intimate relationships. Adult attachment research has clarified how attachment anxiety is associated with fear of abandonment, doubts about partner availability, and excessive reassurance seeking. Dating anxiety research focuses on social-evaluative concerns and interactional difficulties in dating contexts. Fear of being single research explains how concern about lacking a partner can shape mate selection and relationship decisions. Research on relationship obsessive-compulsive symptoms examines intrusive doubts about whether one loves the partner, whether the partner loves oneself, and whether the relationship is “right.” Relational uncertainty research explains how uncertainty about the self, partner, and relationship affects relational development. Rejection sensitivity research explains why individuals anxiously expect, readily perceive, and strongly react to rejection cues. These research traditions are highly relevant, but they usually address specific relational stages, mechanisms, or symptom profiles. They do not yet provide a sufficiently integrative framework for understanding relational threat responses across love attainment, relationship initiation, relationship confirmation, relationship maintenance, relationship loss, and future commitment.

This article therefore proposes love anxiety as an integrative construct. The argument is not that prior studies have ignored anxiety in romantic relationships. Nor is love anxiety intended to replace attachment anxiety, dating anxiety, fear of being single, relationship obsessive-compulsive symptoms, relational uncertainty, or general anxiety. Rather, the theoretical contribution lies in synthesizing explanatory resources that have remained dispersed across different traditions and in developing a cross-stage model of relational threat processing throughout the romantic trajectory.

This article is positioned as a conceptual article and integrative theoretical review. Conceptual articles do not rely on new empirical data to test causal hypotheses; rather, they reorganize existing theories, concepts, and findings to generate new explanatory frameworks. Jaakkola (2020) identifies several routes for conceptual articles, including theory synthesis, theory adaptation, typology development, and model building. The present article follows a theory synthesis and model-building strategy. It addresses four research questions: Can love anxiety be proposed as a relatively independent psychological construct? What is the core psychological mechanism of love anxiety? What theoretical dimensions may constitute love anxiety? How may love anxiety shape romantic relationship behavior, relationship quality, and psychological well-being?

As a theoretical review, this article does not aim to exhaustively cover all empirical studies under a single established keyword. Instead, it conducts a purposive conceptual synthesis around the theoretical question of how anxiety in romantic love can be conceptualized. Three bodies of literature are integrated. The first concerns the composition, recognition, and confirmation of love, including the triangular theory of love, the self-expansion model, prototype approaches to love, and the Love Confirmation Mechanism Model. The second concerns adjacent constructs that explain anxiety in intimate relationships, including adult attachment, dating anxiety, fear of being single, relationship obsessive-compulsive symptoms, relational uncertainty, rejection sensitivity, and intolerance of uncertainty. The third concerns contextual amplification and outcome pathways, including social media comparison, relationship maintenance, the investment model, relationship dissolution, relationship-contingent self-esteem, and cross-cultural research on love. By comparing these literatures in terms of their explanatory objects, relational stages, core mechanisms, and conceptual boundaries, this article derives the definition, theoretical dimensions, and multi-stage relational threat model of love anxiety.

This article does not adopt a systematic review or meta-analytic design because love anxiety is still at the stage of construct proposal and theoretical development. Existing studies do not yet form a homogeneous literature organized around a shared term, measure, or empirical question. A systematic review at this stage would likely

reduce the problem to a single adjacent construct, such as attachment anxiety or dating anxiety, and would not accomplish the cross-stage and cross-mechanism synthesis required for construct development. A conceptual article is therefore more appropriate for the present aim: to distinguish overlapping constructs, clarify conceptual boundaries, and propose a framework that can guide future empirical research.

2. Related Concepts and Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Theories of Love

Sternberg's (1986) triangular theory of love conceptualizes love as comprising intimacy, passion, and commitment. This framework is useful for understanding love anxiety because anxiety does not occur outside love but within the gap between individuals' expectations for intimacy, passion, and commitment and the uncertainty surrounding their realization. Earlier measurement work distinguished romantic love from liking and attachment-related affection (Rubin, 1970), whereas prototype approaches suggest that “love” is not a sharply bounded category but a concept organized around typical features and culturally shared understandings (Fehr & Russell, 1991). Berscheid (2010) further emphasized that love should be understood across temporal development. Together, these perspectives suggest that love anxiety should not be reduced to a single emotion or a single relational status but should be situated within the composition, recognition, and temporal unfolding of love.

Within the intimacy component, individuals may worry that they cannot form deep emotional connection or that disclosure of the true self will lead to rejection. Within the passion component, they may worry about insufficient attractiveness, unreciprocated desire, declining romantic intensity, or replacement by another person. Within the commitment component, they may worry that the relationship cannot be confirmed, stabilized, publicly recognized, or sustained against economic, familial, occupational, or long-distance pressures. Love anxiety is therefore a contextualized form of anxiety organized around whether intimacy can be obtained, passion can be reciprocated, and commitment can be realized.

Close relationship research also highlights the connection between romantic love, self-expansion, self-other overlap, and relationship ideals. The self-expansion model proposes that individuals enter close relationships partly to expand their identities, resources, and capacities (Aron & Aron, 1986; Aron et al., 1992). Ideal standards research suggests that people evaluate partners and relationships according to dimensions such as warmth-trustworthiness, vitality-attractiveness, and status-resources (Fletcher et al., 1999; Fletcher & Simpson, 2000). Love anxiety may therefore arise not only from the question “Am I loved?” but also from the question “Does this relationship meet my ideals for love, partner quality, and future life?”

Love also involves the interpretation and confirmation of relational signals. Song's (2025) Love Confirmation Mechanism Model proposes that individuals infer whether love is expressed and confirmed through verbal, behavioral, nonverbal, and relational-outcome signals. Song (2026) extends this model cross-culturally, arguing that love-confirmation signals are not fixed but culturally interpreted. Cross-cultural work likewise indicates that meanings of love, marriage, intimacy, and relational legitimacy vary across societies (Dion & Dion, 1993; Levine et al., 1995; Karandashev, 2017), and that the triangular theory of love requires cross-cultural psychometric examination (Sorokowski et al., 2021). These perspectives are directly relevant to love anxiety: anxiety is likely to be heightened when confirmation signals are ambiguous, inconsistent, culturally misread, or difficult to interpret.

2.2. Adult Attachment and Attachment Anxiety

Adult attachment research typically describes romantic insecurity along the dimensions of attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Hazan and Shaver (1987) conceptualized romantic love as an attachment process, extending attachment theory from parent-child bonds to adult romantic relationships. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) further developed a four-category model organized by models of self and others. Fraley, Waller, and Brennan (2000) revised self-report attachment measurement using item response theory, and subsequent work supported the reliability and validity of the ECR-R dimensions (Sibley et al., 2005). Attachment anxiety is associated with fear of abandonment, concerns about partner availability, excessive reassurance seeking, and heightened sensitivity to rejection cues.

Attachment anxiety is an important foundation for theorizing love anxiety, but the two constructs are not equivalent. Attachment anxiety primarily explains concerns about partner availability, responsiveness, and abandonment within attachment-relevant relationships. Love anxiety has a broader stage range. Individuals may worry about failing to obtain love even before a specific partner exists; they may fear initiating a relationship before an attachment bond has formed; they may become preoccupied with whether an ambiguous relationship can be confirmed; and they may experience anxiety about marriage, family approval, economic conditions, and long-term planning even when partner responsiveness is not in doubt.

Thus, attachment anxiety captures a central part of love anxiety, especially loss and separation anxiety and concerns about partner responsiveness. However, it does not fully cover love attainment, relationship initiation, relationship confirmation, lovability, and future commitment anxiety. Love anxiety should therefore be conceptualized as broader than attachment anxiety while still incorporating attachment anxiety as a key vulnerability factor.

2.3. Dating Anxiety

Dating anxiety research focuses on nervousness, avoidance, fear of negative evaluation, and interactional difficulty in dating contexts. Glickman and La Greca's (2004) Dating Anxiety Scale for Adolescents shows that dating anxiety is associated with adolescent functioning and internalizing distress. This tradition provides a direct theoretical basis for the relationship initiation dimension of love anxiety.

Nevertheless, love anxiety is not limited to dating interaction. Dating anxiety typically centers on asking someone out, meeting in person, managing interaction, and avoiding social embarrassment or rejection in dating episodes. Love anxiety includes these concerns but extends beyond them. It also involves whether an ambiguous interaction is becoming a relationship, whether the other person is serious, whether relationship confirmation will occur, whether an existing relationship will remain stable, whether love can be regained after relationship loss, and whether future commitment is viable. Dating anxiety is therefore best understood as a stage-specific manifestation of love anxiety during relationship initiation rather than as an umbrella construct.

2.4. Fear of Being Single

Fear of being single refers to concern about not having a romantic partner or not finding one in the future. Spielmann et al. (2013) showed that fear of being single predicts settling for less in romantic relationships and may shape mate selection and relationship maintenance decisions. This research is especially relevant to love attainment anxiety.

Fear of being single overlaps with love anxiety but does not exhaust it. Its core object is the state of lacking a partner. Love anxiety includes this concern but also encompasses worries that occur within relationships, such as whether the relationship is confirmed, whether

one is truly loved, whether the partner will leave, and whether future commitment is possible. Entering a romantic relationship may therefore transform rather than eliminate anxiety: a person may move from "Will I ever find love?" to "Is this relationship real?" or "Will this relationship last?" Fear of being single is consequently a front-end component of love anxiety, whereas love anxiety also includes intra-relational and future-oriented threat responses.

2.5. Relationship Obsessive-Compulsive Symptoms

Research on relationship obsessive-compulsive symptoms examines intrusive doubts and compulsive reassurance seeking about romantic relationships. Doron et al. (2012) developed the Relationship Obsessive Compulsive Inventory to assess obsessive doubts regarding one's feelings toward the partner, the partner's feelings toward oneself, and the "rightness" of the relationship. Later research further examined symptom interference and maladaptive beliefs in relationship obsessive-compulsive disorder (Doron et al., 2016).

Relationship obsessive-compulsive symptoms overlap with love anxiety in rumination, repeated doubt, and reassurance seeking. However, the conceptual level differs. Relationship obsessive-compulsive symptoms emphasize intrusive thoughts and compulsive behaviors, often at clinical or subclinical levels. Love anxiety is conceptualized as a continuously distributed relational threat response in the general population. Not all repeated romantic concerns should be pathologized as obsessive-compulsive symptoms. Love anxiety may become clinically relevant when worries become intrusive, uncontrollable, and associated with compulsive checking or reassurance seeking. Relationship obsessive-compulsive symptoms may therefore represent a high-intensity, symptomized form of some love anxiety processes, but they should not be treated as the only framework for explaining ordinary romantic anxiety.

2.6. Relational Uncertainty and Partner Responsiveness

Relational uncertainty provides a central mechanism for love anxiety. Solomon and Knobloch (2001) and Knobloch and Solomon (2002) showed that uncertainty in close relationships concerns not only the relationship itself but also the self and the partner. Self-uncertainty concerns questions such as "What do I want in this relationship?" and "Am I attractive or lovable?" Partner uncertainty concerns whether the partner is serious, interested, and responsive. Relationship uncertainty concerns what the relationship is, whether it is stable, and whether it has a future. Later work shows that relational uncertainty affects relational information processing, conversations about the relationship, interactional difficulty, and face-threat appraisals (Knobloch & Solomon, 2005; Knobloch et al., 2010).

This framework maps directly onto love anxiety. Self-uncertainty corresponds to lovability anxiety; partner uncertainty corresponds to uncertainty about partner responsiveness and relationship confirmation; relationship uncertainty corresponds to stability, loss, separation, and future commitment anxiety. Thus, the immediate source of love anxiety is often not love per se but the individual's inability to determine the self's relational value, the partner's intentions, and the relationship's future.

From the perspective of love confirmation, relational uncertainty can be understood as failed or insufficient confirmation. When individuals cannot obtain adequate confirmation through verbal commitment, consistent behavior, emotional responsiveness, public recognition, or institutional arrangements, the relationship is more likely to be interpreted as unstable, ambiguous, or unsustainable. The relational turbulence model also suggests that relational uncertainty and partner interference shape appraisals of everyday irritations (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004), whereas open communication about uncertainty may affect intimacy development (Theiss & Solomon, 2008). These find-

ings support the placement of uncertainty processing at the core of the love anxiety model.

Partner responsiveness research further indicates that feeling understood, validated, and cared for is central to intimacy and relationship security (Reis et al., 2004; Reis, 2012; Reis & Gable, 2015). Love anxiety is therefore not only an abstract concern about relationship status; it is closely tied to whether individuals can perceive stable, clear, and interpretable responsiveness from the partner.

2.7. Rejection Sensitivity, Threat Appraisal, and Intolerance of Uncertainty

Rejection sensitivity is another key mechanism for love anxiety. Downey and Feldman (1996) define rejection sensitivity as a disposition to anxiously expect rejection, readily perceive rejection, and intensely react to rejection cues. This mechanism is highly relevant to romantic contexts because love involves self-disclosure, being chosen, being evaluated, and the possibility of rejection.

Rejection sensitivity can also create self-fulfilling dynamics. Individuals high in rejection sensitivity may interpret ambiguous partner behavior as threatening and respond in ways that worsen relationship quality (Downey et al., 1998). Interpersonal rejection can elicit depression, anger, and aggression (Ayduk et al., 2001; Leary et al., 2006), while ostracism threatens needs for belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence (Williams, 2007). The “threat” in love anxiety is therefore not limited to relationship breakup; it also concerns threats to self-worth, belonging, and existential confirmation.

From a threat appraisal perspective, the core of love anxiety is not “loving too much” but appraising rejection, loss, uncertainty, and self-worth damage as highly threatening. Anxiety research shows that intolerance of uncertainty is closely related to worry (Freeston et al., 1994; Buhr & Dugas, 2002; Carleton et al., 2007; Carleton, 2016) and may function as a transdiagnostic factor across anxiety and depression (McEvoy & Mahoney, 2012). This broader literature supports conceptualizing love anxiety as uncertainty intolerance and threat appraisal in romantic contexts. When individuals cannot tolerate relational ambiguity, delayed responses, changing partner behavior, social media cues, family pressure, or future-planning discrepancies may be interpreted as romantic threats.

3. Conceptual Definition of Love Anxiety

Based on the above theoretical synthesis, love anxiety is defined as a persistent tendency toward worry, tension, rumination, avoidance, or excessive reassurance seeking during love attainment, relationship initiation, relationship confirmation, relationship maintenance, relationship loss, and future commitment, triggered by relational uncertainty, threats to lovability, uncertain partner responsiveness, rejection expectations, and sociocultural pressure.

This definition has four core attributes. First, love anxiety is cross-stage. It can occur before a relationship exists, during ambiguous involvement, at relationship initiation, during relationship maintenance, in relational crisis, after breakup, and when long-term commitment is being considered. Individuals may worry about not obtaining love, about whether an ambiguous interaction can become a relationship, about whether an existing relationship is confirmed, or about whether love can withstand future pressures.

Second, love anxiety is threat-appraisal based. It is not determined simply by the intensity of love but by how individuals interpret romantic risks. The same relational cue, such as delayed replies, lack of public recognition, or uncertain future plans, may be interpreted as benign by one person and as rejection or relational deterioration by another. Love anxiety emerges when romantic cues are interpreted as signals of rejection, loss, reduced self-worth, or future failure.

Third, love anxiety involves self-worth. Romantic relationships do

not merely concern whether one is liked; they also concern whether one is lovable, attractive, relationally competitive, and capable of maintaining a valued intimate bond. Sociometer theory conceptualizes self-esteem as a monitor of social acceptance and rejection (Leary et al., 1995). Self-worth contingency theory suggests that when self-worth depends on success or validation in a specific domain, failure in that domain produces stronger emotional consequences (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Crocker et al., 2003). Relationship-contingent self-esteem research further shows that individuals whose self-esteem depends heavily on romantic relationships experience stronger emotional fluctuations in response to relational events (Knee et al., 2008). When love is treated as proof of personal worth, relational uncertainty is especially likely to become lovability anxiety.

Fourth, love anxiety has behavioral consequences. Individuals may respond through dating avoidance, delayed confession, monitoring, repeated reassurance seeking, relationship testing, jealousy, rumination, or excessive accommodation. These behaviors may temporarily reduce uncertainty but may also damage trust, intensify conflict, and maintain anxiety over time.

Based on conceptual analysis, six theoretically presumed dimensions of love anxiety are proposed, detailed in Table 1. These dimensions are not presented as empirically validated factors but should be treated as theoretical dimensions that require qualitative exploration and quantitative validation.

4. Distinguishing Love Anxiety from Adjacent Constructs

Love anxiety overlaps with several established constructs but has a distinct conceptual range. To avoid construct proliferation, it should be defined as an integrative, cross-stage, relational-threat-oriented construct rather than as a substitute label for existing concepts. The conceptual distinctions are summarized in Table 2.

The theoretical claim is therefore that love anxiety is a relational threat response system across the full romantic trajectory. Existing concepts illuminate important portions of this system, but no single construct fully explains the sequence from love attainment to future commitment.

5. A Multi-Stage Relational Threat Model of Love Anxiety

The Multi-Stage Relational Threat Model of Love Anxiety proposes that love anxiety is produced by the interaction of individual vulnerabilities, relational contexts, and sociocultural conditions. These factors activate romantic threat appraisal and uncertainty processing, which then generate different dimensions of love anxiety and shape relational and psychological outcomes. The conceptual flow is illustrated in Figure 1.

The model assumes that love anxiety is not caused by a single factor but by a sequential process of vulnerability, relational cues, threat appraisal, anxiety dimensions, and behavioral consequences. Individual vulnerabilities shape sensitivity to ambiguous relational cues. Relational contexts provide the cues that can be interpreted as threatening. Sociocultural factors increase the meaning and stakes of romantic relationships for self-worth and future life. These three sources can mutually amplify one another.

Individual vulnerabilities include low self-esteem, attachment anxiety, rejection sensitivity, and intolerance of uncertainty. These factors affect the threshold for romantic threat appraisal. Low self-esteem weakens the belief that one is lovable. Attachment anxiety heightens vigilance for loss and abandonment. Rejection sensitivity increases the detection of rejection in ambiguous cues.

Relational contextual factors include ambiguity, insufficient re-

Table 1: Proposed Dimensions of Love Anxiety Across the Romantic Trajectory

Dimension	Primary Stage	Dominant Threat Appraisal	Typical Phenomenology	Likely Regulatory Response
Love attainment anxiety	Before relationship formation	Love may be unavailable, unattainable, or competitively out of reach	Worry about not finding a suitable partner, not being desired, or failing in the partner market	Withdrawal from dating opportunities, upward comparison, overinvestment in self-presentation
Relationship initiation anxiety	Early interaction and dating	Expressing interest may produce rejection, embarrassment, or loss of face	Tension around confession, first dates, ambiguous signals, and negative evaluation	Delayed disclosure, avoidance of escalation, indirect testing of interest
Relationship certainty anxiety	Ambiguous or developing relationship	The relationship may not be real, mutual, exclusive, or publicly recognized	Recurrent concern about status, seriousness, labels, public recognition, and commitment signals	Clarification seeking, checking partner intentions, monitoring inconsistencies
Lovability anxiety	Across stages, especially after self-disclosure	The self may be inadequate, unattractive, replaceable, or unworthy of love	Shame, self-doubt, sensitivity to comparison, and fear that the “real self” will be rejected	Excessive accommodation, reassurance seeking, concealment, self-silencing
Loss and separation anxiety	Maintenance, crisis, and post-loss periods	The partner may withdraw, abandon, replace, or forget the relationship	Fear of being ignored, replaced, abandoned, or unable to recover after separation	Clinging, protest behavior, surveillance, rumination, breakup distress
Commitment and future anxiety	Long-term planning and commitment transition	The relationship may fail under family, economic, distance, career, or marriage pressures	Worry about marriage, family approval, finances, relocation, timing, and long-term compatibility	Repeated future checking, postponement, conflict over plans, risk-avoidant decision making

Note. The dimensions are theoretical domains proposed for future qualitative and psychometric validation, not empirically confirmed factors.

Table 2: Conceptual Boundaries Between Love Anxiety and Adjacent Constructs

Adjacent Construct	Con-	Shared Explanatory Territory	What It Does Not Fully Capture	Expected Boundary Evidence in Future Research
Attachment anxiety		Hypervigilance to partner availability, abandonment concerns, and reassurance seeking	Anxiety before attachment formation, relationship confirmation concerns, and sociocultural future-pressure concerns	Love anxiety should predict confirmation-seeking and future-commitment distress beyond ECR-R attachment anxiety
Dating anxiety		Fear of negative evaluation and distress during dating encounters	Anxiety during relationship maintenance, loss, post-breakup rumination, and long-term commitment planning	Initiation anxiety should correlate strongly with dating anxiety, whereas other dimensions should show weaker overlap
Fear of being single		Concern about lacking a romantic partner now or in the future	Intra-relational uncertainty, partner responsiveness, lovability threats, and relationship loss	Love attainment anxiety should be the closest dimension, but certainty, loss, and future anxiety should add incremental validity
Relationship obsessive-compulsive symptoms		Intrusive relationship doubts and compulsive reassurance seeking	Non-obsessional, stage-based romantic threat responses and normative uncertainty processing	Love anxiety should remain meaningful at subclinical levels and should not require compulsive symptom severity
Relational uncertainty		Uncertainty about self, partner, and relationship definition	Affective arousal, self-worth threat, avoidance, jealousy, and regulatory behavior	Relational uncertainty should function as a cognitive antecedent or mediator rather than a complete substitute
General anxiety		Trait-level worry, tension, and intolerance of uncertainty across life domains	Romantic-specific content, partner-market pressure, confirmation signals, and relational behavioral regulation	Love anxiety should explain relationship outcomes after controlling for general anxiety and intolerance of uncertainty

Note. The table frames love anxiety as an integrative but bounded construct. Future validation should test both convergent validity and incremental validity.

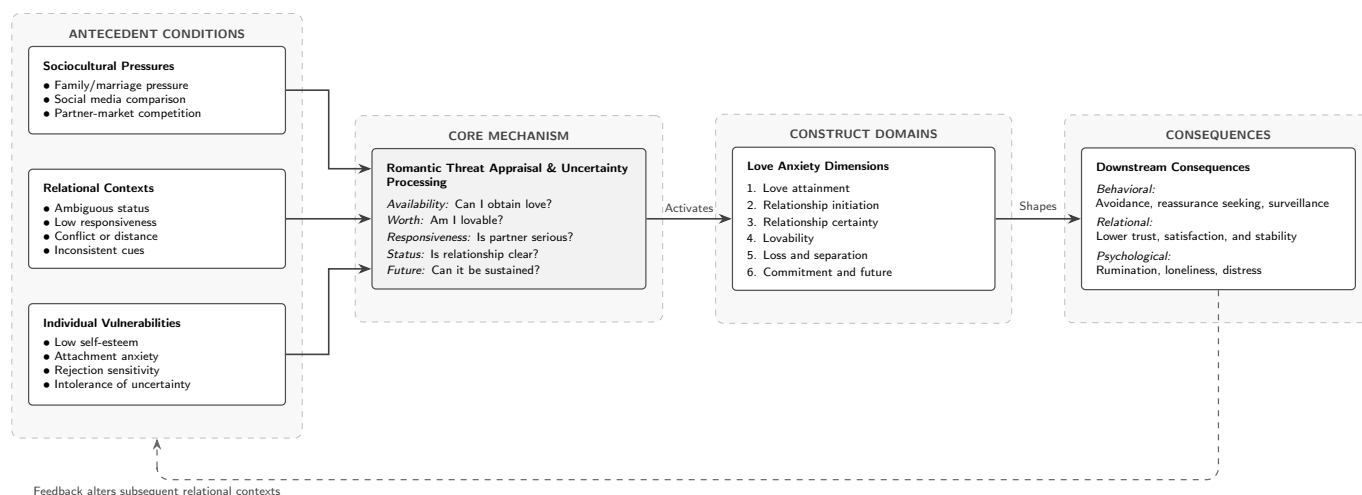


Figure 1: Multi-Stage Relational Threat Model of Love Anxiety

Note. The model identifies how antecedent conditions converge to activate romantic threat appraisals, precipitating multidimensional love anxiety and downstream behavioral, relational, and psychological consequences.

sponsiveness, conflict, lack of public recognition, long-distance arrangements, separation experiences, ex-partner involvement, inconsistent relationship progression, and discrepancies in future plans. These factors provide proximal triggering cues. Love anxiety is often activated by concrete relational events because they touch relationship status, partner intention, and future stability.

Sociocultural factors include family marriage pressure, peer comparison, social media comparison, age norms, marriage and fertility timing expectations, economic pressure, and perceived partner-market competition. These factors amplify the threat value of romantic uncertainty.

The core mechanism of the model is romantic threat appraisal and uncertainty processing. Individuals evaluate five questions: Can I obtain love? Am I worthy of being loved? Is the partner serious and responsive? Is the relationship clear, stable, and sustainable? Can future commitment be realized? Love anxiety is activated when these questions are interpreted as high risk, low control, low certainty, and highly consequential for self-worth.

Love anxiety may shape relationship behavior and psychological well-being through multiple pathways. Behaviorally, it may lead to dating avoidance, difficulty progressing the relationship, reassurance seeking, partner surveillance, jealousy, relationship testing, conflict escalation, or excessive accommodation. Relationally, it may reduce satisfaction, trust, intimacy, and commitment stability. The investment model suggests that satisfaction, alternatives, and investments shape commitment (Rusbult, 1980; Rusbult et al., 1998). Love anxiety may therefore undermine stability by reducing satisfaction, increasing perceived alternative threats, and weakening commitment certainty.

6. Theoretical Propositions

Proposition 1: Love anxiety is a cross-stage relational threat response rather than an emotional experience that occurs only within established romantic relationships.

Proposition 2: The direct psychological mechanism of love anxiety is romantic threat appraisal concerning love attainment, relationship stability, lovability, partner responsiveness, and future commitment.

Proposition 3: Higher relational uncertainty increases love anxiety, especially relationship certainty anxiety, loss and separation anxiety, and commitment and future anxiety.

Proposition 4: Low self-esteem, attachment anxiety, rejection sensitivity, and intolerance of uncertainty constitute individual vulner-

ability factors for love anxiety.

Proposition 5: Family marriage pressure, peer comparison, and social media comparison may amplify love anxiety, especially love attainment anxiety, lovability anxiety, and commitment and future anxiety.

Proposition 6: Love anxiety may affect relationship quality and psychological well-being through reassurance seeking, relational avoidance, jealousy, partner surveillance, and emotional rumination.

7. Future Research Directions

Future research should first conduct qualitative interviews with single individuals, people in ambiguous relationships, dating individuals, individuals in committed relationships, people after breakup, and individuals facing marriage or long-term commitment decisions.

Second, an item pool should be generated from literature review, qualitative interviews, and open-ended questionnaires. Experts in close relationship psychology, psychometrics, and counseling psychology should evaluate content validity.

Third, item analysis and exploratory factor analysis should be conducted in large samples. Researchers should examine item discrimination, item-total correlations, internal consistency, and preliminary factor structure.

Fourth, confirmatory factor analysis should be used to test the optimal structure of love anxiety.

Fifth, criterion-related and incremental validity should be examined. Love anxiety should be tested in relation to attachment anxiety, dating anxiety, fear of being single, relationship obsessive-compulsive symptoms, relational uncertainty, rejection sensitivity, general anxiety, relationship satisfaction, commitment, loneliness, and psychological distress.

Sixth, measurement invariance should be tested across gender, age, relationship status, cultural background, urban-rural background, and marriage pressure. Cross-cultural research is particularly important because love-confirmation signals may carry different meanings across cultural contexts.

8. Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

This article makes three main theoretical contributions. First, it proposes love anxiety as an integrative construct. Second, the article identifies romantic threat appraisal and uncertainty processing as the core mechanism of love anxiety. Third, the article develops a Multi-Stage Relational Threat Model and six theoretically presumed dimensions that can guide future scale development and empirical validation.

The practical implications are also significant. In counseling, the model can help practitioners distinguish whether a client's distress primarily concerns inability to obtain love, fear of initiating a relationship, inability to confirm a relationship, threats to lovability, fear of loss and separation, or anxiety about future commitment. For relationship education, the model can help young adults recognize how relational uncertainty, social media comparison, and family pressure shape romantic judgment.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, C.S. and Q.W.; theoretical framework and model development, C.S. and F.C.; literature synthesis, C.S., F.C., and Y.R.; writing—original draft, C.S.; writing—review and editing, F.C., Q.W., and Y.R.; supervision, Q.W. All authors have read and approved the submitted version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for the integrity of the work.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article because no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

AI Use Statement

Generative AI tools were used only for language editing. The authors reviewed and verified all AI-assisted content and remain fully responsible for the manuscript.

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