

Original Research Paper

# Love in Crisis? How Young Women's Ideas and Experiences of Intimate Relationships are Reshaped by Conditions of Economic Austerity in Greece

Julia Kazana-McCarthy

Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths College, University of London, London, UK

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Email: j.kazana-mccarthy@gold.ac.uk

**Abstract:** This study seeks to examine intimate relationships and attitudes towards such ties, among Greek young women ( $n = 36$ ). In the wake of challenging structural situations surrounding the effects of economic austerity in Greece, the accounts of these young women are understood with reference to their options on finding and sustaining intimate relationships. It is argued that these accounts are filtered by the conditions of austerity, leading some women to question traditional ideas of patriarchy, gender norms and the desirability of maintaining ties with economically inactive men. However, the language through which the young women articulated experiences and attitudes towards intimate relations is highly individualising. These issues are assessed in the context of research on emerging adulthood focusing on how attitudes and practices relating to intimacy can be re-shaped through economic contexts.

**Keywords:** Intimacy, Crisis, Gender, Middle Class

## Introduction

The focus on intimate relationships is a well-established area of research in emerging adulthood, a period when adult roles and relationships are being tested and established (Arnett, 2004; Shulman, 2017; Norona *et al.*, 2018). These features of intimate relationships encompass decisions surrounding the criteria used to select a suitable partner, the establishment of beliefs about what counts as a meaningful relationship and the processes involved in sustaining or ceasing relationships (Lanz and Tagliabue, 2007). Such issues have become notably important in the context of independent living, or 'flying the parental nest' (Shulman and Connolly, 2013), during which the development of intimate relationships has significance for living arrangements among young people (Furman *et al.*, 2007). Arnett (2004) called emerging adulthood the age of *identity explorations*—the life period, where young adults attempt new possibilities in various areas of life, such as via establishment of intimate relationships.

Regardless of the importance of intimate relationships during emerging adulthood, these practices and beliefs have important social and economic contexts. Economic strains relating to unemployment, restricted social mobility and reduced financial security can

negatively impact on intimate bonds by placing pressure on intimate partnerships (Ambroz and Jelovac, 2015; Adams *et al.*, 2016). Macro-economic circumstances can raise stress levels and reducing self-esteem, which in turn affect their family and intimate relations (Boss *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, economic uncertainty and unemployment play a part in feelings of hopelessness among youth (Christodoulou *et al.*, 2016), with a direct impact on their prospects to invest in different forms of relationship (De Lange *et al.*, 2014). Despite these important contexts, emerging adulthood scholars have rarely investigated how cumulative periods of economic austerity can alter how young people place value on and re-frame, the role of intimate relationships.

This study focuses on 36 young, heterosexual women's ability to form and sustain stable romantic relationships in the context of Greek society. Emerging adulthood research continues to uphold intimate partnerships as key milestones in accomplishments of 'adulthood' and 'independence' (Arnett, 2000; Shulman and Connolly, 2013). Un/underemployment risks and related hardships can impose strain on intimate ties within the context of economic austerity (Galanaki and Leontopoulou, 2017). These economic conditions have further significance for young women's decisions about the desirability of an intimate partner, especially if employment and other economic criteria are negatively impacted.

The paper proceeds with understanding women's views on men's roles in relationships. Men, confronted with and affected by restricted options on finding work, are presented by these women as not exhibiting masculine performances towards dating rituals, with their own low mood, commonly linked to the effects of the financial crisis. As I will show, however, gender stereotypes for the perceived restricted intimacy in the aftermath of the socioeconomic crisis in Greece are not solely attributed to men's alleged failings of 'masculine performance'. Rather, it is also women who sometimes held themselves accountable for negatively affecting men's masculinities, resulting in instances of limiting dating and flirtation interactions. This study calls on scholars to place greater attention to the gendered consequences of the fiscal crisis. Despite some positive changes to gender roles, my participants were still fighting against patriarchal norms which rendered them accountable for their failure to commit themselves to stable relationships. These situations were regarded by these women as placing them in vulnerable economic and social situations associated with remaining single (referred to as 'spinsters'). The current crisis has not only caused financial adversities, but it has also intensified gender expectations and stereotypes pre-existing in Greek society. It is argued that although gender stereotypes were existent in the pre-crisis era, the current crisis has exacerbated these, rendering women's social positions more challenging as a result.

### *Young Women and Intimate Relationships*

The meanings of intimate relationships during youth may be defined as more transient, reflecting (Arnett, 2004) reference to intimacy as understandable within the context of youthful identity explorations. The youth life course period is also broad, with meanings surrounding relationships changing in accordance with notions of emotional and financial independence. Gala and Kapadia (2013) for example, discuss the positive effect a romantic relationship can have on the quality of life, including positive feelings of happiness and reducing negative states such as sadness and anger. Arnett (2004) explains that, unlike in previous generations where premarital sexual relationships were a taboo and sexual activity was restricted until marriage, emerging adults regard the exploration of various intimate relationships normal, as well as necessary for one's preparation to a serious commitment and marriage. Collins (2003), for instance, suggests that adolescent romance carries developmental currency for the more serious relationships which will come up in adulthood. Similarly, Silva (2013) argues that today's emerging adults, experiment and wait longer to get married, until they find a 'pure' relationship which meets their personal needs. This further points to intimate relationships being

understood by emerging adults as a matter of identity and lifestyle choice, rather than a matter of survival (Henderson *et al.*, 2013).

The absence of romantic relationships due to socio-economic factors, such as unemployment and lack of finances (Galanaki and Sideridis, 2019), are key predictors of emotional loneliness (Odaci and Kalkan, 2010). A poor work-life balance, such as low income, flexible labour and long hours, is associated with higher stress (Gounari, 2014; Yang *et al.*, 2018) and restricted time and energy for leisure opportunities. Negative economic events, such as job loss and unemployment, have been found to cause a range of negative experiences for the entire family, such as lower quality of partner relationship, more hostility and conflict between family members, less affection and less satisfaction with family life (Lombardi *et al.*, 2017). Unemployment also affects important psychological needs, such as sense of life purpose, status and activity (Paul and Moser, 2009), increasing symptoms of depression in the partner as well as in the job seeker (Schauss *et al.*, 2019).

Intimate relationships are also culturally specific and reflect gender norms in certain nations states. Despite increases in the volume of women in paid employment in Greece, as a nation it remains largely patriarchal (Kaparou and Bush, 2007). This includes capacities to leave the home before marriage which can partly account for reasons for extended co-residence with parents (Kazana-McCarthy, 2020). Attitudes to gender are however more complex. In a recent poll, 51% of Greek population think men should be given preferential treatment for jobs during tough economic times, which reduced to a quarter when accounting for respondents with higher education levels (Wike, 2019). Rates of marriage are still higher in Greece compared with the European Union average (55.3%), with 62.4% of Greeks married (Eurostat, 2017). Greece has a unique social and cultural context in comparison to other countries in Europe and North America (Marcos and Bahr, 2001). The role of the nuclear family is still dominant in Greece, because of the strong influence of the Orthodox Church on standards of behaving and living. Again, education here plays a major role in people's preferences for a traditional marriage with more educated respondents believing in egalitarian marriage, where both the husband and wife work and take care of the household and children (Wike, 2019). Meanings of relationships may carry different weight for men and women, in part, because of different social and cultural expectations. Despite evidence of men taking on greater roles in housework and related conjugal tasks, the primary ideology about marriage remains that women should make a house a home (Sanchez and Gager, 2000). Traditionally in Greece, through gender socialisation processes (Galanaki and Leontopoulou, 2017), women

are trained to put more emphasis on *caring* for their families, whilst men learn that they should *provide* for their families (Pnevmatikos and Bardos, 2014).

For young women, it is possible that in a severely depressed economic context they begin to re-think their intimate relationships. Unemployment and underemployment place limits on achievements of milestones of 'independence' such as affording a property, or even decisions to have children (Mortimer *et al.*, 2016). Changing employment patterns since the 2008 financial crisis in Greece, with a growth in temporary, insecure and poorly paid work (Featherstone, 2014; Kretsos, 2014) potentially lead to young women questioning the viability of intimate partnerships in situations where the abilities to be able to afford to live together are more challenging because of financial costs. Furthermore, for those women 'choosing' to be single, can have *stigmatic* consequences (Simpson, 2016). That stigma, "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (Goffman, 1963), can lead to women being disqualified from full social acceptance, devalued and disregarded because they remain unmarried (Cohen, 2019). King (2015) explains that even in recent years, single women have been regarded inferior to those who are married; single women are represented as 'selfish' and 'narrow-minded' without any rights to bodily or emotional intimacy (Holden, 2007). In Greece especially, cultural attitudes to women who remain single into their 30s and beyond (commonly defined as 'spinsters') remain negative and are often induced by family members who add pressure and gendered stigma on to women who do not conform to societal expectations (Pnevmatikos and Bardos, 2014).

### Methods

This study took place in Athens and Thessaloniki and comprised 36 women, with the majority from university-educated backgrounds. I was unable to find marked differences in the experiences of the participants living in either Thessaloniki or Athens, which may be induced by the small sample size. My participants' ages varied between 20 and 37. Given the current debate about the time frame of what could be considered 'youth', 'emerging adulthood' etc. (Walther, 2006), I chose to explore a longer spread of ages to assess any potential differences in the way that young women respond and cope with the crisis. Eurostat (2019) for example indicates that 61.2% women aged between 18 and 34 resided with their parents in 2017 (for a thorough analysis on cohabitation patterns in Greece see also Kazana-McCarthy, 2020). Where possible, I make reference during this article to patterns and differences in the experiences of these young women based upon their ages (referred to in each participant), although in general there were a number of commonalities identified.

The majority of my sample ( $n = 29$ ) were recruited through snowball techniques, where my initial

participants introduced me to their connections who were eligible and could contribute to the study. It was not a surprise, therefore, that those participants shared similar demographic profiles. The rest of my sample ( $n = 7$ ) were recruited through advertising my research using flyers in unemployment centres, coffee shops, as well as various social events I was invited to; the latter operated as a platform that made my project more widely known. Once again, the women who responded to my adverts had similar educational and social backgrounds to the women recruited via snowballing techniques.

The interviews were conducted in neutral venues (usually cafes or work offices) and in an in-depth and open-ended style, which facilitated a better understanding of my participants' complex behaviour (Fontana and Frey, 2005; Rubin and Rubin, 2005). The majority of the interviews lasted over 90 min, with some of them reaching a 3-h duration. All names included are pseudonyms. Interviews were conducted in Greek and translated and transcribed into English for coding and thematic analysis. It is only fair to admit that the distinction between my role as a Greek woman with similar experiences in the past and a researcher who now lives abroad, was not clear-cut. However, distance and experiences from life in the UK aided me to better understand my participants' feelings and meanings and critically analyse their accounts.

Finally, by transcribing and analysing data after each interview, rather than waiting until the completion of the research (Miles and Huberman, 1994), I managed to stay 'closer' to the data, refine themes, but also 'test' and better assess emerging themes established during that stage of the analysis (Prus, 1997). The approach I followed to data analysis was highly beneficial, as it allowed me not only to group general topics and patterns of the findings, but also cross-validate and assess the relevance of earlier established themes.

### *'Men are More Immature'. Perceived Excuses for Delaying Relationship Commitments*

There were a variety of challenges associated with the formation and maintenance of intimate heterosexual relations explained by the young women. Economic inactivity amongst the youth population in Greece throughout the years of the crisis has been well-documented (Kretsos, 2014; Eurostat, 2018) and whilst men and women were both affected<sup>1</sup>, a common theme in the data was women's concerns about the desirability of becoming involved romantically with young men. These complaints had several layers, but in general, tended to focus less on the structural barriers affecting men's labour market participation and instead more on the lifestyle choices and attitudes

<sup>1</sup>Youth unemployment levels have been twice the national average, with women experiencing higher unemployment risk (Kretsos, 2014).

regarded as factors which hindered their value as possible intimate partners.

Men's perceived lack of character and sufficient levels of responsibility for their social position in the hardships of the Greek crisis, was a major frustration articulated in these women's narratives. Sasa was specifically frustrated by men's reluctance to take on the responsibility of forming their own families, even when they had a job. Her account posited that men are not willing to leave their parents, whilst women tend to be stronger and more mature:

*A common problem is that men especially choose not to take on any responsibilities and even though they might have a job, they prefer to live with their parents. This means that they are not mature to form a family. The women are more mature and independent even now with all these hardships they are experiencing. [Sasa 30, Thessaloniki]*

Sasa argued further that economic instabilities and lay-offs, had a major impact on men's mentality over marriage. She explained that economic hardships established a new social order, making men reluctant to go ahead and perform their gender roles, even if not everyone had been directly affected by the crisis. Similar arguments were made by others. Sofia perceived how the new economic state had led young people - men especially-to procrastinate in relation to long-term commitments. Sofia's perspective that men's maturity was different (and lacking) compared to women was an attempt to individualise what she regarded as men's failings to take the same responsibilities as women. Sofia regarded the conditions of the crisis as having had considerable impacts on both men and women, except that men had adapted less effectively to these situations:

*I think that we all procrastinate-I guess men more than women and now especially they can use the excuse "you see how difficult things are... what sort of family do you expect us to form? And how are we going to make such a decision?" On the other hand, women are more mature and can adapt themselves better to adversities. [Sofia 31, Athens]*

Sofia explained that women had generally come to the realisation that intimate relationships needed to be adjusted to the new economic reality. Men's experiences of economic adversities, on the other hand, would make them more reluctant to commit themselves to a marriage which would require additional responsibilities.

In most interviews, men were represented by women as immature individuals who were doing their best to avoid commitments and responsibilities by prolonging

their period of singlehood and 'freedom'. On the contrary, women presented themselves and one another as more aware of the responsibilities that comprised adulthood (such as commitment to earning a reasonable income, owning an independent home and/or carrying out caring roles). Indeed, Fani who has been in a relationship for eight years shared her frustration about her partner's lack of motivation to pursue a career. Fani's partner lost his job as a cleaning assistant in a small restaurant. After several unsuccessful efforts to get a similar job (or any kind of job), he lost his confidence and gave up on trying. Instead, he started spending endless hours in his bedroom, playing videogames. Fani noted that "most men are like him because they don't want to put themselves at unease":

*He's been sitting in front of a PC playing videogames, using the pretext that due to the crisis there are no jobs and I say to him "hold on, the prime minister will call you in a minute and tell you 'come on, I need a minister'"! [Fani 24, Thessaloniki]*

Fani spoke of her miscarriage occurring during the first months of her pregnancy. Her boyfriend's reluctance to look for a full-time job and take on the responsibilities of her pregnancy made Fani question the quality and future of their relationship. In Fani's view, her boyfriend was not the same person anymore, as "men who do not pursue a career are not attractive", a finding similar to what (Silva, 2013) female participants argued about men.

The attitudes expressed by other women towards male partners were similarly negative, at times, re-inserting the longing for more traditional gender norms in Greece where men (allegedly) took on greater responsibilities to provide for the family - an argument which Nikoleta uses to frame her discontents with the attitude of contemporary young men in Greece. "Men", Nikoleta argued, "are scared kids and feels like you should put them in bed as you would with a baby". Nikoleta held women as well as men responsible for the hedonistic attitude they have adopted over the last few years, which she claimed had affected men's confidence:

*I think that what applies to men's attitude and mentality currently is what the 'little prince' used to say about the fox-that it takes time until you manage to tame it... I think that we should go back to those times, as both genders' attitude has been unacceptable and hasn't served anyone's interests anyway. The 'Sex and the City' model is old and obsolete and doesn't help anyone. Nowadays men are not flirting because they are scared kids and they can't imagine themselves married with*

*children. They need to feel safe and relaxed first.* [Nikoleta 29, Athens]

From these narratives, such as those of Nikoleta and Fani, assumptions are drawn about male partners' alleged immaturity and lack of effort to find work in the wake of the economic crisis. These concerns are framed as a wider challenge to previously held ideas of gender roles in relationships, Nikoleta explaining how males have allegedly become more passive and scared of commitment in the wake of the economic conditions surrounding them. These sorts of characterisations, of men failing to live up to their gender expectations as 'providing' and 'dictating' the rules of relationship enactment and flirtation, appear to be methods by which the women, at times, individualised the effects of the crisis-where men are claimed to have not taken sufficient responsibilities to find work, despite the adversities in the economy. These beliefs, shared by women, also corresponded with similar attitudes associated with dating rituals and again, expressed concerns with what the women perceived to be a shift away from traditional gender behaviour-where men were allegedly not pursuing women due to damaged masculinities brought about by the crisis.

*'Men do not Approach Women Anymore': Women's Reflections on Dating and Responsibility*

As already mentioned, women in Greece are encountered with a threefold challenge; first of all, the crisis has affected young people's potential to leisure, due to harsh working patterns and limited financial resources which do not allow them to socialise. On the other hand, dating practices remain important components of emerging adults in their experimentation for finding a suitable partner (Arnett, 2004). Such practices were still largely referred to by the participants as occurring via face-to-face interaction, rather than through computer-mediated applications. Greek society still engenders a strong importance on public interactions through coffee bars and other entertainment spots, where dating behaviour commonly occurs among young people. These physical sites were regarded by the young women as important zones for potential flirtation and dating. Finally, as I will show below, women who cannot commit themselves to long-lasting relationships with the perspective to get married, are likely to fall into the category of a 'spinster', which demotes them automatically to a less of a woman status.

My participants perceived men as not performing traditionally held dating rituals and flirtation. In particular, some thought of men as lacking confidence to pursue women, where comparisons were drawn between the pre-crisis era in which these dating rituals were said to have occurred more regularly. The narratives given by

the women were infused with social explanations for why men had seemingly lost their confidence to flirt with women, drawing on interpretations of how men's mental health and masculinities had been damaged since the crisis due to the long-term effects of unemployment. Yet, the narratives also contained personal frustration from the women, who perceived these situations affecting men as also affecting themselves through difficulties forming relationships in the first place, or otherwise maintaining them effectively.

At the time I interviewed Roxani, she had been single for over a year but she did not enjoy being alone. She explained that although she tried to have a social life, she was struggling to meet new people, as men were not keen on socialising with women they didn't know through their social network:

*Men do not approach women anymore and it's a given that they don't pursue us either! My interpretation for this is that in the past women used to be unapproachable for men and this had been an interesting challenge for men. Nowadays the roles have shifted significantly and men take everything for granted. The argument is that if you don't want to flirt with me, there are another 50 who are available and they might want me more than you! The relationships get really tough over time.* [Roxani 29, Thessaloniki]

Roxani held women responsible, in a subtle way, for men's reluctance to pursue them. Her perception was that gender roles have been re-shaped in Greece - away from a situation of women playing 'hard to get' as a stereotypical attribute of dating rituals - towards a point where men are no longer chasing women as before. Similar viewpoints were evident across several interviews. Nikoleta used an example from her parents' early romantic relationship, where they both adhered to their gender roles - her mother's strategy to not take any initiatives in their romantic interactions encouraged her father to pursue her. As her quote below shows, Nikoleta considered women accountable for the alienation between the two genders, removing men from any sort of critique:

*Nowadays, men do not take the initiative to come and talk to a woman they hadn't met before, as they used to in the past and I think that this is predominantly women's fault, as although they send a message to men that they are interested in them, as soon as men approach them, women turn them down. They just want to confirm themselves and feel flattered at men's expense. That had a very*

*negative impact on men's confidence who try to protect their ego from getting hurt.*  
[Nikoleta 29, Athens]

Nikoleta expressed her disappointment about women's behaviour by maintaining that they should have known better that men's self-confidence gets very easily affected. Therefore, in Nikoleta's view, women should be more understanding and sensitive to men's feelings and sense of confidence. Elli referred to women's attitudes towards men along similar lines to Nikoleta:

*In the past, I used to live in my own pink cloud that everything is about love and care. The more I get to know the society, the more I realize that everyone cares about themselves only and unfortunately, it's not just men, but also women who now think likewise. Everyone is interested in having fun only-women especially who have turned into bitches. In the past, women used to be more respectful. The new generation argues, swears, gets divorced and abandons children for nothing. With no reason young people cheat on each other, lie to each other and moan about everything.* [Elli 25, Athens]

Elli's arguments about contemporary norms around moral standards in relationships having deteriorated featured a broader critique that both men and women had become more selfish and self-seeking. In the wake of clear social pressures on relationships as a result of tensions and pressures associated with finances and maintaining work, Elli still upheld the view that there has been a growing tendency to abandon, rather than 'work on', relationship pressures.

Dating for some of the women had become a challenge due to difficulties finding time to meet suitable partners to go on dates, affected by extreme work commitments. Smaragda was one such example, who after a lengthy period of not having dated with anyone, agreed to meet a young man who was flirting with her on Facebook for a while. Despite declaring that she was not very happy with online dating platforms, she decided to meet him in a bar for a drink. The date did not go well according to Smaragda, due largely to the young man's inability to engage in open conversation with her. Rather than explaining this solely as a result of the character deficits of the man, Smaragda also attributed this persona to his damaged self-confidence stemming from unemployment:

*I didn't fancy him very much but I thought of giving him a chance. We hung out for a few times, we got to know each other, but he was saying nothing-he had his own issues. He was depressed, everything was black for him, whilst I am such a jolly person! He was*

*moaning all the time "I'm so bored, I wish I had a job...". We were going out and we were not saying a word, it was just myself talking... I mean, things are so much harder when the person sitting next to you says nothing...*  
[Smaragda 24, Thessaloniki]

Here it is important to mention that Smaragda was my only participant who openly talked about online dating as an alternative form of forming relationships. However, although online dating per se was not mentioned by the majority of my participants, those women spoke about their general struggle to catch up with the changes in dating rituals in conjunction with the financial crisis itself.

So far, issues surrounding challenges dating brought about by what some women perceived to be a lack of confidence exhibited by men have been referred to. These viewpoints comparably emphasise the deficits of men, however understood as part of the crisis denting masculine identities and self-confidence as a result of unemployment. Aside from more casual dating practices, the pressures of maintaining what were long-term relationships among some of the women were also felt. One dimension was the decline in excitement in the relationship due to male partners frequently spending long periods at home, without employment and alternative sources of activity. Anastasia cited how her relationship with her partner had seen a marked deterioration since his lengthy period of unemployment, during which arguments began to increase over the lack of love and expressions of intimacy, including going on dates and engaging in regular sexual activities as a couple. This reached a crisis point for Anastasia, who despite giving a very honest and reflexive narrative of her partner's lack of confidence resulting from unemployment, felt she could no longer maintain the relationship because of these pressures:

*I told him that it would be better to break up, because it was not going anywhere. You could see him panicking, getting red and asking for some water, but he was saying nothing at all! You could tell that he didn't want this to happen to him, however he couldn't express his feelings and I said "it's like you are telling me you are hungry. In front of you there is a pasta, a pie, pizza and some soup. Have something". "No, I don't want any of these". "Ok, order something different then. But you don't do either! You stay there starving and you do nothing. The food is here! Grab it! I'm asking you!" And he just stayed there looking at me...*  
[Anastasia 33, Thessaloniki]

Outside of the Greek context, studies (Dew *et al.*, 2012; Moura *et al.*, 2015) have examined the ways that economic situations may alter men's self-confidence and broader masculine self-identities. This finding, whilst drawn from women's perceptions of men's behaviour, indicates how traditional gender norms are also being re-evaluated by some of the women in the sample. This was combined with a sense of anxiety about finding a stable partner, with implications on the young women's sense of adult status. Conditions of austerity in Greece were understood as impacting on the breakaway from previous patterns of dating and flirtation, creating doubts about what women can do to begin a relationship in a context where men's status and self-confidence is also under threat along with women. This economic context should not however be understood in isolation from a much deeper gender politics in Greece, especially concerning the stigma of being single, or more precisely a 'spinster'.

### *The Stigma of Being a Spinster*

As a wider theme existing within the condemnatory responses of women towards certain actions and attitudes of men, was the fear explained by many women of being alone-a spinster, which carries a particularly negative connotation in Greek culture. A single woman in her early thirties may still be considered a 'spinster', especially if she is unemployed and cannot 'justify' her singlehood through her career choices (Loizos and Papataxiarchis, 1991). The judgments and stigma for women who don't have a significant other to share their lives with is well-documented in more recent literature as well (Simpson, 2016). Efforts to display complaints about what were regarded as 'traits' or 'attitudes' of certain men, were seen by the women as even more challenging to reconcile in a cultural context which condemns women more than men for being single. Dina's mother believed that if her daughter had a 'white marriage'<sup>2</sup> and then got divorced, her friends would stop considering her a spinster and would not ask again "what's wrong with Dina? She is neither fat nor ugly":

*I don't care about people calling me a spinster. I don't give a shit really! I get mad with it, because I genuinely believe that such a status has died. I don't know how to begin with now because I go nuts! Do you know why? Because what do you want from me? Do you want me to be divorced with a kid? I'll be honest and say to you that my mum has told me "you're 35; at least have a child and don't get married if you don't want to" and I respond "what are you*

*talking about?" And then she goes "yes and people will stop calling you a spinster"! And she makes me feel outraged because she finds such a discussion very normal! [Dina 35, Athens]*

According to Dina, her mother's generation assumed that by the age of 30 women are no longer attractive to men and valuable 'candidate brides' to the 'bridal market'. Dina's mother did not want her daughter to be distressed, as this could have a negative impact on her appearance, namely her hair colour could begin to turn grey! Behind all these pressures that my participants experienced through their mothers was the fear that their daughters faced a biological deadline - similarly explained in the previous theme - that conception chances become more difficult as a woman gets older. Dina resented her mother's scrutiny and expectation to look, act and be in ways which would adhere to the 'feminine ideal' (Pickard, 2018) she wanted for her daughter. Below, Sasa gave her own definition of the term 'spinster'. She reframed the concept of being a spinster, challenging its traditionally assumed connotations:

*You are not considered spinster any more. I don't think there are spinsters in our days. Even a 50-year-old single woman is not considered spinster nowadays. Personally, I call spinster a woman who moans about being alone and not necessarily a single woman. As long as you are active, social, you hang out and have fun, you are not a spinster. You don't need to get married in order to find happiness. Likewise, a married miserable woman might be considered spinster. Women used to be called spinsters in the old days, because they could not enjoy themselves out of marriage; they were condemned to misery just because they were singles and attached to the stereotype of a spinster. [Sasa 30, Thessaloniki]*

Sasa's quote describes what she deemed to be a shift in societal attitudes of people from her generation-that delaying marriage until your 30s is now socially acceptable. Her narrative is also significant in that it reflects an inherent frustration that her generational worldview has not been followed by that of her parents, whose conceptions of marriage are rooted in an 'old fashioned' vision. Sasa explained her belief that marriage should *not* be just about conforming to societal expectations, but about a decision informed by a willingness to want to find the right partner and live a happy life. These decisions to

<sup>2</sup>White Marriage is a marriage which does not include sexual intercourse between the couple. The couple may have a variety of reasons for this, such as social or economic. Another example is when somebody wants to disguise the sexuality of one or both partners.

marry, however, are not always a straightforward process of 'happy living' and especially when understood within the material context of the Greek crisis, they can be inherently risky.

## Discussion

This article has examined how young women negotiate love and intimacy in the general context of the financial crisis in Greece, as well as in response to postmodernity where intimate relationships are characterised by the breaking down of more traditional patterns in intimate relations. As identified in several studies, intimate relationships are an important aspect of emerging adulthood in experimenting and potentially finding a long-term intimate partner (Henderson *et al.*, 2013; Shulman and Connolly, 2013). However, as has been identified in this article, these experiences of navigating intimate relations are affected by the consequences of the post-2008 financial crisis which has placed considerable strain on opportunities for work, conditions of work, as well as other aspects of life, including the abilities to find and maintain intimate relationships. This follows previous studies which have found economic hardship as a strong predictor of declining relationship quality, through a range of psychological symptoms which place pressure on ties (Gudmunson *et al.*, 2007).

The conditions of the crisis have further resulted in renegotiation of relationships and gender expectations. The data have shown that the participants present men as responsible for the ways they confront structural hardships, such as unemployment and the consequential impact the latter has on their (in) ability to pursue women. Men were alleged to have stopped flirting with women, which was attributed to the crisis via low energy levels and a general despondency created by unemployment and lack of finances. That men have allegedly stopped flirting reflects on the one hand a frustration with men through their failure to enact a traditional masculine performance in relationships - the romantic idea of the man chasing the woman, for example, was certainly a viewpoint held by most of the sample. This finding is consistent with research on dating preferences among women (Puts, 2006). Previous studies describe how economic adversities are associated with a wide range of negative psychological symptoms, such as depressed mood, anxiety, low self-esteem, guilt and even physical illness (Gudmunson *et al.*, 2007; Jeon and Nepl, 2016). However, research on the impact of economic strain on spouses suggests that financial pressures affect men and women in different ways, often with a more negative one on the husbands' social role and identity (Antonakakis and Collins, 2014; Economou *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, men's inability to accomplish their

conceived 'duties' as financial providers can lead to low self-esteem, which in turn takes the form of devaluation and de-romantization (Jenkins *et al.*, 2002).

However, despite the claims that the Greek crisis has had a major bearing on experiences and attitudes towards intimate relations, the language through which the young women articulated these situations is moreover individualising. These narratives which explained men's 'character deficits', rather than structural sources of discontent, were used exactly as a critique for why the young women could not find or sustain quality ties with intimate male partners. The latter created feelings of stress and uncertainty in a stage of their life course already characterised by turbulence and instability. Examples of the crisis having affected men's confidence and overall masculinities all have plausibility as factors underpinning the effects of unemployment (Verick, 2009; Dew and Dakin, 2011), yet the language of male deficit was common in the narratives of the women.

Yet, why young women held such views about the need for men to perform 'traditional' masculine role performances could demonstrate several issues. One is the sense of loss of traditional Greek values and associations with the parent culture where it was assumed to be more common for men to initiate dating (Bird, 1996). This corresponds with the findings regarding the continued condemnation of single young women, known collectively by 'spinsters' (a term used especially by mothers towards their daughters). Greece still remains a society heavily influenced by masculine values of the Balkans in the North and the traditional familial roles of the male breadwinner from the Mediterranean (Ateljevic and Hall, 2007). Therefore, the perspectives of my participants may well reflect these same values, including challenges reconciling these shifting gender roles.

This study has broader implications for emerging adulthood research. It has provided an important cross-cultural 'case study' informing us of the ways through which the financial crisis has fused with long-standing gender norms in Greece, to explain several challenges in finding and sustaining relationships. Examples of emerging adulthood research focusing on intimate relationships are comparably few in number (Arnett, 2004; Connolly and McIsaac, 2009; Shulman and Connolly, 2013), especially in the context of cycles of economic hardship. Studies which develop these approaches further would be a welcome development, including those which examine men's perspectives of intimate relationships. Investigations which focus on nations undergoing similar changes in economic climates (e.g., Portugal, Italy) would also be valuable in assessing how far these findings are explainable by cultural, or indeed economic factors. The Greek case is arguably an extreme one as far as the magnitude and longevity of the crisis, yet it offers an important recognition of some of the ways through



which youth life pathways have been re-mapped because of these economic consequences. Intimacy is an important feature of these pathways and adds to an already difficult set of challenges which are being negotiated by the current cohort of Greek young people.

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## Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Surrey.

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