

Article

Commitment, Pleasure, or Both? Understanding Greek Millennials' Relationship Strategies

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Abstract

Romantic relationships are central to adult life, yet contemporary social, cultural, and technological transformations have reshaped how individuals navigate intimacy. This study examines how Greek millennials conceptualize short- and long-term romantic relationships, situating partner preferences and relational strategies at the intersection of evolutionary predispositions, cultural scripts, and digital mediation. Using a qualitative design grounded in social constructionism, ten heterosexual Greek millennials aged 27–42 were recruited via convenience and snowball sampling. Semi-structured interviews explored traits prioritized in partners, self-presentation strategies, and the influence of social and digital contexts. Reflexive thematic analysis identified three main themes: (1) Gendered Moral Economies of Long-Term Partnership, (2) Negotiating Social Scripts in a Digitally Mediated and Disillusioned Context, and (3) Conditional Commitment and the Stratification of Intimacy. The findings indicate that while some partner preferences align with Sexual Strategies Theory, they are heavily mediated by patriarchal norms, digital performativity, personal experiences of trauma, and age-related reflexivity. Short-term relationships were valued for pleasure and autonomy yet morally differentiated from long-term commitments. Overall, the study highlights the dynamic, contextually embedded, and reflexively constructed nature of contemporary romantic strategies among Greek millennials, offering insights for evolutionary, sociocultural, and digital perspectives on intimacy.

Keywords: Greek millennials; romantic relationships; sexual strategies; digital mediation; gender norms

1. Introduction

Romantic relationships constitute a central domain of adult life, fulfilling fundamental psychological needs for intimacy, belonging, and stability [1]. They are strongly associated with mental health, emotional regulation, and life satisfaction [2,3], while shaping long-term well-being and the capacity for sustained commitment. Yet, the meaning and structure of romantic relationships are not static. Social, cultural, and technological transformations have reconfigured how young adults navigate intimacy, giving rise to diverse forms of both short-term and long-term relational arrangements.

Short-term relationships (STRs)—including casual dating, one-night encounters, and non-committed involvement—have become increasingly prevalent among emerging adults [4,5]. These arrangements reflect broader cultural values emphasizing personal freedom, self-exploration, and delayed commitment, in contrast to earlier norms privileging marriage as the primary endpoint of intimacy. Digital technologies have accelerated



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these shifts: dating applications such as Tinder and Bumble have expanded access to potential partners while normalizing casual relational scripts [6,7]. At the same time, long-term relationships (LTRs) continue to be associated with commitment, loyalty, and trust, underscoring the coexistence of divergent relational models within contemporary societies [5]. Understanding how individuals navigate these competing models is essential for contextualizing mate selection preferences and relational strategies.

The millennial generation (born approximately 1982–1997) offers a particularly informative lens through which to examine these developments. Shaped by economic precarity, rapid technological change, and global crises, millennials face relational conditions distinct from those of previous cohorts [8]. They are frequently described as highly educated and individualistic, prioritizing autonomy and self-fulfillment while delaying or reconsidering traditional institutions such as marriage [9,10]. The proliferation of social media has further transformed dating practices, contributing to what has been described as “hook-up culture,” characterized by continuous comparison, curated self-presentation, and the perception of abundant alternatives [11]. Together, these socioeconomic and technological transformations raise important questions about how relational strategies are formed and negotiated, particularly in relation to gendered expectations.

Social constructions of gender continue to exert a powerful influence on intimate life. Normative ideals of masculinity and femininity shape not only appearance and behavior but also relational roles, framing romantic partnerships as markers of adult identity and social success [12,13]. Theories such as self-expansion [14] and self-determination [15] further conceptualize romantic relationships as contexts for personal growth, identity formation, and emotional regulation. Importantly, these frameworks highlight that relational motives are embedded within broader cultural narratives that define what “successful” intimacy should entail.

Sexual Strategies Theory and the Greek Context

Sexual Strategies Theory (SST) [16] provides a prominent evolutionary framework for understanding variation in short- and long-term mating preferences. The theory proposes that men and women have evolved partially distinct reproductive strategies, leading to sex-differentiated preferences—such as men’s stronger emphasis on physical attractiveness and women’s greater prioritization of resource stability. However, subsequent research has demonstrated that these patterns are neither uniform nor invariant; rather, they are shaped by ecological, economic, and sociocultural conditions [17,18]. Contemporary debates therefore center on the extent to which mating strategies reflect evolved predispositions versus adaptive responses to shifting social environments. This tension between biological and sociocultural explanations lies at the core of ongoing discussions in mating research.

Despite a substantial international literature on mating strategies and relationship formation, empirical research on millennials’ relational strategies in Greece remains limited. Existing studies have largely relied on quantitative methodologies, demographic indicators, or cross-national comparisons [19,20], offering limited insight into subjective meanings, partner preferences, and culturally specific relational negotiations. Although Greece has traditionally been characterized as one of the most family-oriented societies in Europe—where marriage, kinship ties, and religious norms historically structured the life course [19,20]—recent decades have witnessed significant demographic and attitudinal shifts.

Marriage rates have steadily declined since the post-war period, while the mean age at first marriage has increased substantially for both men and women [21,22]. Moreover, survey research indicates that younger cohorts, particularly women, increasingly postpone marriage and view cohabitation as either an alternative or a precursor to marriage [19]. Female students, in particular, appear to prioritize educational attainment and financial

independence over early marriage, reflecting a weakening of traditional family stereotypes and greater relational autonomy [19]. These shifts unfold within a broader socio-economic context marked by prolonged economic instability, youth unemployment, and limited state policies supporting family formation [19,20]. Such structural constraints intersect with enduring cultural scripts emphasizing family solidarity and long-term commitment.

Research on Greek intimate relationships further highlights the centrality of emotional intimacy, mutual support, and shared daily activities as perceived benefits of long-term partnerships [23]. Relationship quality among Greek couples appears to be structured around dimensions of intimacy, agreement, independence, and sexuality [24], reflecting a negotiation between closeness and autonomy within a Mediterranean cultural context. Additionally, studies on relational maintenance indicate that Greek individuals primarily adopt problem-solving strategies and seek external input (e.g., friends, relatives, psychologists) when managing relationship difficulties, suggesting a collectivist orientation toward relational regulation [25]. Emerging relational practices, including digital sexual communication, further illustrate generational shifts in intimacy expression, particularly among younger and non-heterosexual populations [26]. Collectively, these findings suggest that romantic partnering in Greece is shaped by the coexistence of traditional norms and contemporary individualistic aspirations, producing a hybrid relational landscape.

The Greek context is therefore theoretically significant for examining SST [16]. While SST posits evolved sex-differentiated mating preferences, cultural scripts and social norms shape how these predispositions are expressed and negotiated [27,28]. Cultural “scripts” function as cognitive maps that guide expectations in romantic interactions, and these scripts are embedded within broader social norms and structural opportunities [29,30]. In a setting characterized by strong family orientation, delayed economic independence, shifting gender roles, and evolving attitudes toward marriage and cohabitation, relational strategies may reflect both evolutionary predispositions and culturally embedded adaptations.

The present study addresses this gap by exploring heterosexual Greek millennials’ perceptions of short- and long-term relationships, with particular attention paid to the traits they prioritize in potential partners and the motives underlying their preferences. Specifically, the study asks: (1) What characteristics do Greek millennials aged 27–42 seek in a potential mate? (2) Which factors shape their relational strategies? and (3) To what extent do their preferences align with or diverge from the predictions of Sexual Strategies Theory? By situating SST within the lived realities of Greek millennials, this study critically evaluates the interplay between evolutionary predispositions, sociocultural transformations, and individual meaning-making. In doing so, it contributes to broader theoretical debates on human mating strategies while offering contextually grounded insights relevant to relationship counseling, gender scholarship, and relational well-being in Southern European settings.

2. Materials and Methods

The aim of this study was to explore how heterosexual Greek millennials construct meanings around short- and long-term romantic relationships. Given the focus on subjective experience and socially constructed understandings, a qualitative design grounded in social constructionism was adopted [31,32]. Social constructionism assumes that knowledge and meaning are produced through language, discourse, and social interaction rather than existing as objective truths. This epistemological stance was appropriate for examining how relational preferences and strategies are shaped within specific cultural and generational contexts.

2.1. Participants and Recruitment

Participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. Inclusion criteria required participants to (a) be Greek nationals, (b) be aged between 27 and 42 years (thus falling within the millennial cohort), and (c) identify as heterosexual and cisgender. Snowball sampling carries the risk of selection bias and homogeneity [33]. To mitigate this, efforts were made to recruit participants from diverse educational and occupational backgrounds, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' Characteristics.

Pseudonym	Age	Profession	Romantic Status
George	29	Singer	Single
Lampis	33	Sailor	In a Relationship
Kostas	35	Restaurant Manager	Single
Panos	27	Dentist	Single
Fotis	32	Math Teacher	Single
Kate	29	Biologist	Single
Chiara	29	Special Education Teacher	Single
Irene	42	English Teacher	Married
Elizabeth	28	Accountant	Single
Mina	31	English Teacher	In a Relationship

Ten individuals participated in the study (five cisgender women and five cisgender men). The sample size was determined based on considerations of depth and information power, as the study sought rich, detailed accounts rather than broad generalizability. Data collection continued until thematic sufficiency was reached, whereby no substantially new patterns were identified across interviews.

2.2. Procedure and Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted by the first author. Interviews took place in a private room at the first author's university and lasted between 20 and 40 min. All interviews were conducted in Greek and later transcribed verbatim.

An interview guide, developed from the relevant literature, included open-ended questions such as "How would you describe an ideal short-term relationship?", "What qualities do you prioritize in a long-term partner?" and "Do you think men and women approach relationships differently? If so, how?". Prompts were used to encourage elaboration and clarify meanings. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, and identifying details were removed or altered to preserve anonymity.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University of Derby Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. 100609253). All participants provided written informed consent and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke [34]. This approach is compatible with a social constructionist epistemology, emphasizing the active role of the researcher in interpreting and constructing themes.

Analysis proceeded through six recursive phases: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts, (2) systematic coding of meaningful segments,

(3) development of initial themes, (4) refinement and review of themes across the dataset, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) selection of illustrative excerpts. Coding was both inductive, allowing themes to result from participants' accounts, and theoretically informed, drawing on concepts from Sexual Strategies Theory and related literature.

The first author conducted the primary coding and initial theme development following the principles of reflexive thematic analysis. Throughout the analytic process, both authors engaged in ongoing reflexive discussions to critically examine interpretations, challenge assumptions, and refine thematic development. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's [34] approach, the aim of these discussions was not to establish inter-rater reliability or coding consensus, but to deepen analytic insight and enhance reflexivity. Differences in perspective were treated as a valuable resource for interpretation rather than as discrepancies requiring resolution through agreement.

2.4. Reflexivity and Trustworthiness

Given the constructionist orientation of the study, reflexivity was considered integral to the research process. Both authors reflected on how their own gender, cultural background, and theoretical positioning may have shaped data interpretation. Reflexive notes were maintained during data collection and analysis.

Credibility and transparency were enhanced through maintaining detailed analytic records, including transcripts, coding frameworks, theme development documents, and field notes. The inclusion of verbatim excerpts in the findings further supports interpretive transparency and allows readers to evaluate the analytic claims.

3. Results

3.1. Theme 1: Gendered Moral Economies of Long-Term Partnership

This theme captures how participants constructed desirable long-term partners and how they positioned themselves as relational subjects. Across interviews, accounts revealed a patterned gender asymmetry: men described an idealized "good woman," while women emphasized the necessity of "security" in a partner. At the same time, both groups presented themselves as modern, reflexive, and self-aware individuals. The tension between traditional partner ideals and contemporary self-presentation reflects an ongoing negotiation between inherited gender scripts and modern individualistic identities.

Two interrelated subthemes were identified: (1) The 'Good Woman' and the Secure Provider, and (2) Reflexive Masculinity and Independent Femininity.

3.1.1. The "Good Woman" and the Secure Provider

When discussing long-term partner preferences, both men and women initially emphasized mutual communication, shared values, and compatibility. Sexual satisfaction was acknowledged as important but largely framed as something that could "develop over time," suggesting that relational stability outweighed immediate chemistry in long-term considerations. However, gender-differentiated patterns became evident as discussions deepened.

Male participants frequently invoked a familiar archetype of the "good girl" or "good mother." This ideal woman was described as "simple," "conservative," "easygoing," and notably "without a past." The phrase "without a past" functioned discursively to signal sexual modesty and limited prior romantic experience. Participants also referenced traits associated with domesticity and caretaking, implicitly positioning the ideal partner as nurturing and oriented toward the home. As one participant stated:

"For a long-term relationship, I think the most important thing is this: 'This woman could make a good housewife.'"

Interestingly, while these descriptions were recurrent, many male participants attributed such expectations to “other men,” thereby distancing themselves from overtly traditional views. This rhetorical distancing suggests an awareness that explicitly endorsing traditional gender hierarchies may be socially undesirable. Yet, despite this distancing, the archetype itself remained largely intact, indicating the persistence of traditional relational norms within contemporary discourse.

In contrast, female participants consistently foregrounded “security” as the primary criterion in long-term partner selection. Security was articulated in both material and emotional terms, though financial stability was repeatedly emphasized. Participants described the ideal man as economically successful, socially established, and capable of providing not only basic needs but also a certain lifestyle. The construction of the desirable male partner extended beyond economic competence to include emotional steadiness and protective capacity, particularly in light of perceived societal instability and gender-based violence:

“Women prioritize the feeling of security above all else. . . stability, financial security, emotional security. . . a good father figure.”

The emphasis on provision and stability closely aligns with long-standing gendered expectations of men as protectors and providers. Notably, however, women’s accounts rarely valorized emotional softness or vulnerability. Instead, the ideal partner was depicted as “disciplined,” “consistent,” “dynamic,” and “not impulsive”—traits that combine emotional control with strength. Thus, the construction of the “secure man” merges financial capability with controlled masculinity, reinforcing a model of holistic strength rather than emotional expressiveness.

Taken together, these narratives reveal a reciprocal pattern: men valorized nurturance and modesty in women, while women emphasized protection and provision in men. Although participants frequently framed these preferences as pragmatic or natural, the symmetry of these constructions reflects deeply embedded gender scripts that resonate with both sociocultural norms and evolutionary interpretations of long-term mating strategies. Notably, male participants often positioned such expectations as characteristic of “other men” rather than explicitly claiming them as their own. This rhetorical distancing may indicate an awareness that overt endorsement of traditional gender expectations has become less socially acceptable in contemporary discourse, even as the underlying preferences remain evident in participants’ accounts.

3.1.2. Reflexive Masculinity and Independent Femininity

While partner preferences appeared to reproduce conventional gender archetypes, participants’ self-presentations told a more complex story. Male participants commonly described themselves as honest, reflective, and capable. Honesty was framed not only as transparency about past experiences but also as clarity of intention. Several men emphasized intellectual depth and self-analysis, positioning themselves as “thinking” individuals who engage critically with society and personal development:

“I consider myself a thinking man. . . I have sat down and analyzed various aspects of my life, society, and more.”

Others foregrounded industriousness and competence, describing themselves as “hard-working” and practically capable. This construction of the self reflects a form of reflexive masculinity—grounded not solely in dominance or authority, but in rationality, responsibility, and self-awareness. Such accounts suggest that contemporary masculine identity is negotiated through intellectual and moral positioning rather than overt assertions of control.

In contrast, female participants consistently presented themselves as strong, autonomous, and boundary-setting. Independence was articulated across financial, emotional, and personal domains. Women emphasized initiative, resilience, and self-determination:

"I'm dynamic. . . I take initiative. . . I have a will for life and problem-solving skills."

These self-descriptions align with feminist discourses of empowerment and autonomy. Women portrayed themselves as active agents in their romantic lives, capable of asserting needs and refusing unsatisfactory dynamics.

Importantly, this self-construction appears to sit in partial tension with their expressed desire for security in male partners. While women sought strength and stability in men, they simultaneously framed themselves as independent and self-sufficient. Similarly, male participants largely reproduced conventional masculine ideals in their partner preferences, while their self-descriptions framed these ideals in more reflexive and self-development-oriented terms. Rather than indicating a departure from traditional masculinity, this suggests its reinterpretation through contemporary discourses of self-awareness and personal growth.

This juxtaposition reveals a hybrid relational landscape. Participants inhabit a cultural context in which egalitarian ideals and traditional expectations coexist. As a result, partner selection preferences reflect enduring gendered archetypes, while self-presentations reflect modern individualism and reflexivity. Rather than representing a simple continuation of traditional norms or a complete departure from them, these narratives illustrate the negotiation of competing relational scripts within the millennial generation.

3.2. Theme 2: Negotiating Social Scripts in a Digitally Mediated and Disillusioned Context

This theme captures how participants understood the broader forces shaping their relational expectations and partner preferences. Across interviews, individuals positioned themselves as simultaneously influenced by and critical of societal norms. Romantic decision-making was framed not as purely personal choice, but as embedded within powerful social scripts—concerning beauty, gender roles, marriage, digital culture, and life course transitions.

Three interrelated subthemes were identified: (1) Internalizing and Resisting Societal Ideals, (2) Digital Exposure and the Crisis of Authenticity, and (3) Trauma, Aging, and the Recalibration of Standards.

3.2.1. Internalizing and Resisting Societal Ideals

Participants demonstrated acute awareness of the extent to which societal norms shape perceptions of attractiveness, desirability, and relational success. Beauty standards were described as externally imposed and largely unquestioned, with the *"ideal man"* characterized as tall and financially successful, and the *"ideal woman"* as slim, hairless, and conventionally feminine. Notably, female participants articulated these standards with greater specificity, suggesting a heightened familiarity with appearance-based scrutiny. Yet this awareness did not translate into claims of immunity. Instead, participants described social influence as pervasive and nearly inescapable. As one participant reflected:

"We are not even aware of how much influenced we are. . . You can't distinguish, or imagine, a different reality."

This narrative constructs socialization as deeply internalized, shaping not only preferences but imagination itself. Participants framed themselves as products of normalized expectations, even as they critically recognized them. Such accounts reveal a tension between reflexive consciousness and structural embeddedness: individuals see the system but remain within it.

Marriage and reproduction further illustrated this ambivalence. Participants described a persistent “social goal of completion” through family formation, yet contrasted it with their lived experience of transient and unstable relationships. One participant articulated this contradiction explicitly:

“On the one hand there is this goal of completion, family and kids. . . on the other hand, there is no such thing actually, everything is short-term.”

This dissonance reflects a broader generational uncertainty. Traditional milestones remain symbolically powerful, yet participants perceived contemporary relational landscapes as fragmented and temporary. The result is not outright rejection of marriage and family, but a sense of structural mismatch between inherited expectations and present realities.

3.2.2. Digital Exposure and the Crisis of Authenticity

Technology, particularly social media, was constructed as a defining feature of participants’ generational experience. Several described themselves as the “*last blessed generation*,” positioned at a transitional moment between pre-digital intimacy and hyper-mediated interaction. This framing produced a subtle nostalgia for an era perceived as more authentic and less saturated by comparison.

Participants emphasized that digital platforms have amplified access not only to information, but to potential partners and lifestyle imagery. While increased choice was acknowledged, it was simultaneously framed as destabilizing. Social media was described as promoting superficial criteria—appearance, wealth, travel, status—at the expense of emotional depth:

“Social media has a huge influence. . . lifestyle, physical appearance. . . if they travel a lot, if they have a good car.”

These narratives suggest that digital environments intensify evaluative comparison and commodify relational worth. The “*search for authenticity*” emerged implicitly as a counter-ideal: participants expressed concern that younger generations may prioritize curated presentation over genuine communication.

Importantly, however, participants did not position themselves as detached observers. They acknowledged difficulty in escaping these dynamics, recognizing that their own partner preferences and expectations are shaped within this digital ecosystem. Thus, social media was constructed as both a tool of empowerment and a mechanism of distortion—expanding opportunity while complicating authenticity.

3.2.3. Trauma, Aging, and the Recalibration of Standards

Beyond societal and technological influences, participants identified personal history and aging as central forces reshaping relational strategies. Previous romantic experiences—particularly those described as traumatic—were portrayed as transformative. Participants repeatedly emphasized that they were “*not the same*” after certain relationships, suggesting that emotional hurt recalibrated expectations and boundaries:

“The traumas that we’ve been through. . . these are elements that make us change.”

Trauma functioned not merely as an emotional wound but as a legitimizing framework for stricter standards. Participants framed their evolving criteria as evidence of growth, maturity, and self-protection. In this way, personal suffering was discursively transformed into self-knowledge.

Age was similarly constructed as a catalyst for intentionality. Many described becoming more selective over time, less tolerant of superficial dynamics, and increasingly conscious of time as a limited resource. One participant stated:

“Now I’m not wasting my time. Age definitely matters.”

Aging was therefore linked to heightened self-awareness and strategic decision-making. While societal and digital influences were often described as external pressures, aging and trauma were framed as internal developments that enabled resistance and recalibration.

These accounts suggest that millennials' relational strategies are shaped through a dynamic interplay between structural forces and personal evolution. Participants portrayed themselves as embedded within powerful social and technological systems, yet capable of reflexive adjustment through experience and maturation. Rather than passive recipients of societal norms, they appear as negotiating agents—oscillating between compliance, critique, and adaptation.

3.3. Theme 3: Conditional Commitment and the Stratification of Intimacy

This theme captures how participants differentiated between short- and long-term relationships and the conditions under which commitment was considered meaningful. Across accounts, intimacy was stratified: long-term relationships were framed as investments oriented toward stability and family formation, whereas short-term encounters were positioned as spaces of pleasure, immediacy, and limited responsibility. Importantly, participants did not treat these categories as morally equivalent; long-term commitment was imbued with depth and legitimacy, while short-term involvement was often described as functional and emotionally contained.

Two subthemes were identified: (1) Commitment as Investment, Stability, and Family Project, and (2) Short-Term Relations as Pleasure-Oriented and Emotionally Bounded.

3.3.1. Commitment as Investment, Stability, and Family Project

For most participants, long-term relationships were implicitly or explicitly linked to the prospect of family formation. Commitment was not described merely as exclusivity, but as orientation toward shared future goals—particularly marriage and children. Long-term partnership was constructed as a stabilizing life project, marked by intentionality and responsibility.

Stability emerged as a central organizing concept. Participants described long-term commitment as requiring emotional consistency, trustworthiness, and reliability. Several framed it in economic terms, invoking the language of “*investment*.” Notably, this investment was sometimes gendered, with men portrayed as investing time, effort, and financial resources in anticipation of future familial returns:

“Long term for me means family and kids. . . This kind of stability. . . to (make a man) invest. This investment.”

The metaphor of investment suggests that commitment is not only emotional but strategic. Long-term relationships were constructed as cumulative and future-oriented, contrasting sharply with the immediacy associated with short-term encounters.

Beyond pragmatic considerations, participants emphasized emotional bonding as a defining feature of long-term commitment. Bonding was described as depth, connection, and mutual support—qualities deemed unattainable in short-term contexts:

“I want to have a bonding with the person, which is something you can’t have in a short-term encounter.”

In these accounts, long-term relationships were positioned as morally and emotionally superior. They were framed as spaces where intimacy, vulnerability, and shared growth become possible. Importantly, while participants recognized the effort and compromise required, such effort was presented as meaningful rather than burdensome. Commitment thus appeared as both a social expectation and a personally valued aspiration.

3.3.2. Short-Term Relations as Pleasure-Oriented and Emotionally Bounded

In contrast, short-term relationships were primarily constructed around physical attraction, sexual chemistry, and enjoyment. Participants frequently described these encounters as “fun,” “superficial,” or “simple,” emphasizing their limited emotional scope. Physical appearance was foregrounded more explicitly in short-term contexts than in long-term ones, where compatibility and stability dominated.

Several participants openly acknowledged lowering standards for short-term involvement, focusing on immediate gratification rather than long-term compatibility:

“I would only focus on. . . the looks. . . I just want to have fun.”

Short-term engagement was characterized by emotional containment. Participants described deliberately avoiding attachment or deeper knowledge of the other person, suggesting that emotional detachment functions as a protective boundary. One participant stated:

“I don’t want to get emotionally attached, I don’t care how the other person is as a human, I just want to have fun with him.”

Such statements illustrate a clear compartmentalization of intimacy. Emotional depth and moral evaluation were reserved for long-term contexts, while short-term encounters were treated as instrumental and self-focused. However, this framing was not entirely celebratory. Although short-term relationships were associated with freedom and spontaneity, they were also implicitly constructed as lacking substance.

Notably, the contrast between short- and long-term strategies closely mirrors classical distinctions in mating theory: long-term contexts emphasized stability, investment, and parental potential, whereas short-term contexts foregrounded physical attraction and sexual access. Yet participants did not articulate these patterns as biologically driven. Instead, they framed them as practical, situational, and influenced by life stage, emotional readiness, and social conditions. This suggests that while behavioral patterns may align with established theoretical distinctions, their subjective justification is rooted in lived experience rather than evolutionary logic.

4. Discussion

This study examined how Greek millennials navigate short- and long-term romantic relationships, situating their relational strategies at the intersection of evolutionary predispositions, gendered cultural scripts, economic precarity, and digitally mediated social life. While several findings resonate with propositions from SST, the data suggest that partner preferences and relational behaviors cannot be understood as fixed evolutionary outputs. Rather, they are socially mediated, morally evaluated, and reflexively reconstructed through lived experience. The findings point to what may be conceptualized as contextualized strategic pluralism: evolved predispositions expressed through locally specific cultural scripts and recalibrated under conditions of economic uncertainty and generational change.

Importantly, these dynamics unfold within a Greek sociocultural landscape characterized by historically strong family orientation, declining marriage rates, rising age at first marriage, and increasing normalization of cohabitation [19–21]. This hybrid context—where Mediterranean familism coexists with delayed adulthood and neoliberal individualism—provides a theoretically rich setting for examining how mating strategies are culturally negotiated.

4.1. Gender, Security, and the Persistence of Relational Scripts

Participants' partner preferences showed partial alignment with SST [16]. Men's emphasis on fidelity and domestic orientation and women's prioritization of stability and security mirror patterns identified in evolutionary research. However, the qualitative data complicate a purely evolutionary interpretation.

In the Greek context, women's invocation of "security" extended beyond economic provision to include emotional reliability, psychological safety, and protection from gendered vulnerability. Security thus functioned not merely as access to material resources but as a response to broader structural insecurities. In a national setting marked by prolonged economic crisis, high youth unemployment, and delayed financial independence from the parental home [20,35], relational stability acquires heightened salience. For many Greek millennials, economic precarity directly shapes timelines of cohabitation, marriage, and family formation. Preferences for stability may therefore reflect adaptive responses to structural uncertainty as much as evolved mate-selection tendencies.

Similarly, the recurring "good wife" archetype articulated by male participants reflects the endurance of culturally embedded patriarchal ideals. Traits such as modesty, nurturance, and domesticity are not only evolutionarily interpretable but historically sedimented within Greek gender norms and kinship structures [36]. Within a society long organized around strong family cohesion and maternal centrality, such expectations resonate with enduring familial scripts [19,20]. Even as marriage rates decline and women increasingly pursue higher education and financial autonomy [19,20], traditional relational archetypes retain symbolic force.

These findings suggest that evolutionary dispositions operate within, rather than outside of, cultural structures. What SST describes as evolved preference may be amplified, stabilized, or refracted through local gender regimes. In Greece, patriarchal legacies and familistic norms appear to interact with evolutionary predispositions in shaping partner ideals.

4.2. Self-Presentation, Gender Negotiation, and Delayed Adulthood

The findings further reveal asymmetries between partner expectations and self-presentation. Male participants constructed their own desirability around honesty, competence, and work ethic—qualities aligned with responsibility and reliability. Female participants foregrounded independence, resilience, and strength, reflecting generational transformations in gender identity shaped by educational expansion and shifting labor market participation [37–39].

However, the coexistence of progressive self-identities with conventional partner expectations reveals an unresolved negotiation. As Thompson et al. [40] argue, gender performances are embedded in broader cultural narratives that shift more slowly than individual identities. Women's self-construction as autonomous subjects does not automatically dissolve the relational expectations historically placed upon them.

These tensions are further intensified by delayed transitions into stable adulthood. Rising age at first marriage [21] and prolonged residence in the parental home complicate traditional life-course sequencing. Millennials thus occupy a transitional cultural moment in which autonomy is valorized, yet full independence—economic and relational—is often structurally postponed. Relational strategies emerge within this suspended adulthood, balancing aspiration with constraint.

4.3. Digital Mediation, Regulatory Ideals, and Emerging Relational Practices

Participants' reflections on social media underscore the role of digital environments in intensifying evaluation and self-surveillance. Although many recognized the artificiality of

online beauty standards and curated identities, they simultaneously described difficulty escaping these norms. This ambivalence echoes Butler's [41] notion of regulatory ideals, wherein normative standards shape subjectivity even when consciously critiqued.

Digital mediation also intersects with generational shifts in intimacy practices. Research among Greek-speaking populations indicates that contemporary intimate relationships are structured around dimensions of intimacy, agreement, independence, and sexuality [24], while emerging forms of sexual communication, such as sexting, reflect evolving expressions of desire and experimentation, particularly among younger cohorts. These practices do not signal moral decline but rather diversification of relational scripts within a digitalized environment.

At the same time, participants expressed nostalgia for pre-digital intimacy and concern about superficiality in contemporary dating culture. Short-term relationships were normalized and often embraced, yet they were rarely granted the emotional legitimacy attributed to long-term partnerships. Rather than signaling erosion of commitment, the data suggest stratification: exploration and visibility are amplified in digital contexts, but enduring attachment remains symbolically privileged.

4.4. Strategic Plasticity, Life-Course Reflexivity, and Experiential Adaptation

A particularly salient finding concerns the recalibration of preferences through experience. Participants described past relationships, betrayal, and personal growth as reshaping their expectations and boundaries. Aging was framed as increasing reflexivity and intentionality. These narratives challenge rigid interpretations of SST that assume relatively stable mating strategies [16].

Rather than fixed predispositions, relational orientations appear dynamically reconstructed across the life course. This plasticity does not negate evolutionary influences but suggests they are filtered through biography. Mate preferences emerge as adaptive not solely in reproductive terms but in experiential ones: individuals learn from relational outcomes and adjust accordingly.

In a context where cohabitation may function as a precursor to marriage [19] and relational experimentation precedes long-term commitment, such reflexivity may represent a culturally patterned sequencing strategy rather than deviation from long-term orientation.

4.5. Moral Hierarchies and the Reconfiguration of Commitment

Participants' distinction between STRs and LTRs aligns with prior research documenting differences in emotional investment and perceived benefits of intimacy [23]. However, the present findings extend this literature by demonstrating a clear moral hierarchy.

While STRs were described as pleasurable and exploratory, they were simultaneously framed as emotionally limited or lacking depth. LTRs, in contrast, were associated with bonding, family formation, existential meaning, and social recognition. This symbolic centrality is particularly notable in Greece, where despite declining marriage rates and postponement of first marriage [21], long-term partnership remains closely linked to adulthood and familial integration.

Cohabitation may function as a transitional arrangement [19], yet it rarely replaces the aspirational status of enduring partnership. Commitment, therefore, is not abandoned but temporally reorganized. Millennials' narratives suggest conditional sequencing: autonomy and exploration are valued in earlier stages, but long-term stability retains moral primacy.

4.6. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The exclusive focus on heterosexual Greek millennials restricts the cultural and relational scope of the findings. Different patterns may emerge across sexual orientations, socio-economic strata, or generational cohorts.

Furthermore, the sample consisted predominantly of single participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to individuals in long-term committed relationships or alternative relationship structures. Additionally, self-reported interviews may be shaped by social desirability bias, particularly in relation to egalitarian ideals and moral evaluations of casual intimacy. Finally, the cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point in time; longitudinal research is needed to trace how relational strategies evolve across life stages.

Future research should adopt comparative and longitudinal designs, incorporate diverse sexual orientations, and further examine how economic precarity and digital mediation shape desirability, authenticity, and partner selection. Integrating feminist, sociocultural, and digital theories with evolutionary frameworks may yield a more comprehensive account of contemporary intimacy formation.

5. Conclusions

Although aspects of the findings align with SST, Greek millennials' relationship strategies cannot be reduced to evolutionary imperatives alone. Partner preferences and relational behaviors are mediated by patriarchal legacies, economic insecurity, Mediterranean familism, digital performativity, and the transformative impact of lived experience. In the Greek case, romantic relationships emerge within a hybrid sociocultural landscape: a collectivist tradition emphasizing family continuity coexists with neoliberal pressures toward autonomy and self-realization. Millennials' relational strategies reflect negotiation between inherited familial scripts and contemporary individualist aspirations.

Beyond supporting an interactionist account of mate preferences, this study makes three main contributions. First, it demonstrates how evolutionary frameworks such as SST are refracted through a specific socio-cultural configuration—in this case, the Greek context is shaped by familism, prolonged economic precarity, and delayed transitions into adulthood. Second, it shows that partner preferences are not only socially influenced but also morally structured, particularly in the clear hierarchical distinction participants draw between short- and long-term relationships. Third, the findings highlight the importance of life-course reflexivity, illustrating how relational strategies are actively recalibrated through experience rather than remaining stable over time. Together, these insights extend existing models by foregrounding the dynamic, morally embedded, and contextually situated nature of contemporary intimacy.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

STRs	Short-Term Relationships
LTRs	Long-Term Relationships
SST	Sexual Strategies Theory

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