

BRIEF REPORT

Romantic Relationships and Psychological Well-Being During the Transition to College

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Despite normative shifts in interpersonal relationship dynamics during the transition to college, family and friends continue to promote enhanced psychological well-being. However, it is unclear how romantic relationships change and contribute to well-being during this period. The present study investigated trajectories of romantic relationship involvement, characteristics, and experiences across the college transition and their implications for concurrent internalizing symptoms.

Method: Participants were 215 late adolescents in their first year of college in the United States ($M_{\text{age}} = 18.15$ years; 77.2% Female, 19.1% Male, 3.8% Other Gender; 51.6% Asian American, 24.7% White, 17.7% Latinx, 6% Other Ethnicity). Participants completed an online questionnaire in each of three academic terms (T1: October 2022, T2: January 2023, T3: April 2023) and 14 consecutive daily checklists at T1 and T3.

Results: Of those in romantic relationships (34.4%), most reported that their relationship originated before college and was maintained across the first year of college. Relationship quality varied by time and relationship origin, being lower at T2 particularly for students in college-originating relationships. Quality rebounded at T3 for those in college-originating relationships while those in pre-existing relationships reported somewhat lower quality. Finally, higher relationship quality and fewer average number of daily negative relationship experiences predicted fewer concurrent depressive symptoms.

Conclusions: Romantic relationships may serve as promotive or risk factors for psychological well-being amidst challenging transitional periods. Given the stability of romantic relationships during this time, future research should investigate how romantic relationships can be bolstered to better support psychological well-being during this developmental transition.

An estimated 61% of adolescents in the United States transition to college upon completing high school (National Center for Education Statistics 2024). For these youth, the college transition signifies an important shift in adolescents' social worlds, wherein adolescents begin to adopt adult roles and responsibilities (Arnett 2000; Fuligni et al. 2022). Navigating increasing independence, academic pressures, and economic responsibilities across this transition can be challenging (Sladek and Doane 2015; Taylor et al. 2014), and adolescents frequently report heightened levels of depression, anxiety, and stress as a result (Conley et al. 2020; Kroshus et al. 2021; Pryor et al. 2009). Despite transitional challenges, social relationships remain

critical for psychological well-being during this time. Indeed, family and friend support and attachment are predictive of fewer internalizing symptoms during the college transition (Anderson et al. 2021; Hefner and Eisenberg 2009; Pittman and Richmond 2008; Raffaelli et al. 2013; Taylor et al. 2014). At the same time, reduced parental contact, challenges maintaining high school friendships, and difficulties adjusting socially to the college environment are common (Conley et al. 2014; Lefkowitz 2005). While social relationships are essential for well-being during the college transition, normative relational shifts may temporarily weaken their effectiveness as social resources.

The present study extended research on psychosocial resources during the college transition by investigating how romantic relationships change and contribute to psychological well-being during this time. Romantic relationships become an increasingly significant aspect of young people's lives across adolescence, and by late adolescence, relationships are often longer in duration and characterized by greater emotional intimacy, commitment, and support (Furman 2002; Furman and Shaffer 2003; Manning et al. 2014; Shulman and Connolly 2013; Suleiman et al. 2017). Alongside the pursuit of educational and career goals, learning to establish and maintain committed and cohesive romantic relationships is a key task of this developmental period (Shulman and Connolly 2013). Despite increasing scientific attention to romantic relationships during late adolescence, no studies to our knowledge have examined romantic relationship trajectories during the transition to college, a unique window of opportunity to explore how youth begin to integrate romantic partnership into their larger life plans. Given the developmental salience of romantic relationships and that late adolescents often spend more time with their romantic partner than with family or friends (Furman and Shomaker 2008), romantic relationships may be uniquely positioned to provide important psychosocial resources during the transition to college. Though prior studies have examined the implications of romantic relationships for college students, little is known about how romantic relationships change and contribute to psychosocial adjustment during the college transition.

Romantic relationship involvement, characteristics, and experiences may be relevant for psychological well-being during the college transition. Late adolescents in a relationship experience fewer internalizing symptoms as compared to their peers (Gala and Kapadia 2013; Gómez-López et al. 2019; Whitton et al. 2018). These mental health benefits, however, often depend on specific relationship characteristics. Longer, more stable relationships, for example, offer greater support and intimacy than short-term relationships (Connolly and Johnson 1996; Lantagne and Furman 2017), aspects of relationship quality linked to better psychological outcomes (Braithwaite and Holt-Lunstad 2017). Interestingly, relationship origin – whether the relationship began before or during college – is an unexplored but potentially salient relationship characteristic for psychological well-being during the college transition. Partners in pre-existing relationships may more effectively provide social resources to each other given greater prior experience doing so, enhancing mental health. Alternatively, consistent with studies of long-distance relationships (Waterman et al. 2017), maintaining a pre-existing relationship while managing novel responsibilities may be challenging, particularly if partners do not attend the same university – potentially resulting in diminished well-being.

Relationship experiences, including relationship quality and daily interactions, also play a significant role in mental health. Higher relationship quality in adolescence consistently predicts fewer internalizing symptoms during adolescence and adulthood (Beckmeyer et al. 2018; Gómez-López et al. 2019; Kansky and Allen 2018), and greater support, a dimension of relationship quality, has been found to predict fewer internalizing symptoms during the college transition (Lee et al. 2018, 2020). Further, negative daily relationship experiences (e.g., conflict)

have been found to predict worse same day affect and greater internalizing symptoms in adolescence (Ha et al. 2014; Kansky and Allen 2018; Rogers et al. 2018).

The goal of the present study was to characterize the nature of youths' romantic relationships across the transition to college and their implications for relationship experiences and psychological well-being. First, we evaluated whether youths' relationship involvement, characteristics, and experiences changed across the college transition. Second, we investigated whether the origin of the relationship would predict relationship experiences, including relationship quality and daily positive and negative experiences, during the transition to college. Finally, we tested whether youths' relationship involvement, characteristics, and experiences contributed to internalizing symptoms during this period. Consistent with prior research, it was hypothesized that relationship involvement, greater duration and stability, and more positive and fewer negative experiences would predict fewer internalizing symptoms. Given the lack of empirical investigations of relationship origin, no directional hypotheses were posed.

1 | Method

1.1 | Sample

Participants were first-year college students recruited in fall 2022 from a large public university in the United States. During each of three academic terms, participants completed a 45-min online questionnaire (T1: October 2022, T2: January 2023, T3: April 2023). At T1 and T3, participants also completed checklists of their daily activities for a 14-day period. All procedures for this study were reviewed and approved by the UCLA Institutional Review Board. The final sample consisted of 215 participants (T1: $M_{age} = 18.15$, $SD_{age} = 0.48$), yielding 565 person x time observations across all three waves (retention rates: T2 = 89%, T3 = 82%). At T1, 77.2% of participants identified as female, 19.1% as male, 1.4% as another gender identity, and 2.4% declined to report. The sample was ethnically diverse, with the majority identifying as Asian American (51.6%), followed by European American (24.7%), Hispanic or Latino (17.7%), African American (1%; labeled here as “Other Ethnicity”), multiple ethnicities (2.8%; labeled here as “Other Ethnicity”), and 2.3% declined to report.

1.2 | Measures

1.2.1 | Romantic Relationship Involvement

All participants completed a standard single item assessing romantic relationship involvement: “Are you currently dating/ in a relationship?”, with possible responses of “Yes”, “No”, or “Maybe”. Those who responded “Yes” or “Maybe” were classified as being involved in a romantic relationship. A total of 74 participants (T1: $M_{age} = 18.16$, $SD_{age} = 0.48$) reported being in a relationship during at least one time point, yielding 156 person x time observations in the relationship subsample. Of participants in the relationship subsample, 75.3% identified as female,

20.5% as male, 2.7% as another gender identity, and 1.4% declined to report. The majority identified as Asian American (46.6%), followed by European American (28.8%), Hispanic or Latino (19.2%), African American (1.4%; labeled here as “Other Ethnicity”), and multiple ethnicities (4.1%; labeled here as “Other Ethnicity”). ANOVA analyses revealed no significant demographic differences between the full analytic sample and the subsample of those involved in a romantic relationship during at least one time point (age: $F(1,263) = 0.07$, $p = 0.793$; gender: $F(1,282) = 0.10$, $p = 0.753$; ethnicity: $F(1,281) = 0.40$, $p = 0.526$).

Participants who reported being involved in a romantic relationship at a given time of measurement completed additional relationship characteristic and experience measures at that time.

1.2.2 | Romantic Relationship Characteristics

1.2.2.1 | Relationship Duration. Participants reported the length of their relationship by responding to the question, “How long have you been in your current or most recent relationship?”. Duration was coded in terms of months.

1.2.2.2 | Relationship Origin. Participants who reported a relationship duration that began before university housing move-in were coded as being in a pre-existing relationship, and those whose relationship did not predate move-in were coded as being in a college-originating relationship. This initial coding was then validated by responses to the question, “Where did you meet your romantic partner?”. Possible responses included, “At my high school or hometown”, “At college”, or “Somewhere else (please describe)”. To address minimal discrepancies between indicators, participants who reported meeting their romantic partner at college were recoded as being in a college-originating relationship regardless of duration.

1.2.2.3 | Relationship Stability. Participants reported the initials of their partner at each time point. Stability was operationalized at T2 and T3 as retaining the same partner from the previous time point.

1.2.3 | Romantic Relationship Experiences

1.2.3.1 | Romantic Relationship Quality. Participants in a relationship completed the 7-item Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick 1988), including items such as “How well does your partner meet your needs?” and “In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?”. Responses ranged from 1 to 5. A mean composite score was created, with higher scores indicating higher relationship quality (as: T1 = 0.80, T2 = 0.91, T3 = 0.86).

1.2.3.2 | Daily Relationship Experiences. Adolescents reported whether they had five relationship experiences every day for a 2-week period, including both positive (spent time, communicated with, and got along with a romantic partner) and negative (had a lot of demands made by and argued with a romantic partner) experiences (Fuligni et al. 2002). Average daily sum scores at each timepoint were calculated for positive and negative experiences respectively.

1.2.4 | Psychological Well-Being

All participants completed the 20-item Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (Radloff 1977), responding to items such as “You felt depressed” on a scale of 1 (“Rarely or none of the time”) to 4 (“Most or all of the time”). A mean composite score was calculated, with higher scores indicating greater depressive symptoms in the past week (as: T1 = 0.91, T2 = 0.91, T3 = 0.93). Anxious symptoms were measured by the 20-item trait subscale of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory for Adults (Spielberger 1983), with items such as “I feel nervous and restless”. Responses ranged from 1 (“Not at all”) to 4 (“Very much so”). A mean composite score was calculated, with higher scores indicating greater anxiety (as: T1 = 0.93, T2 = 0.92, T3 = 0.94).

1.3 | Analysis Plan

Concurrent two-level multilevel models (MLMs) were leveraged in the present study. This approach was chosen to control of the effects of repeated measurement while maximizing statistical power. MLMs allow for the utilization of observations at all available time points (level-1; time) in the same statistical models while accounting for dependency, or correlations of residuals from the same sampling unit (level-2; person) (Hoffman and Walters 2022). Analyses comparing relationship involvement with non-involvement thus utilized 565 person x observations from the full analytic sample of 215 participants, while analyses involving relationship characteristics and experiences included 156 person x time observations from a subsample of 74 participants involved in a romantic relationship during at least one time point.

First, MLMs were conducted with academic term as a within-person predictor to examine change in relationship involvement, characteristics (duration, origin, and stability), and experiences (quality and daily experiences) across the first year of college. Next, the extent to which relationship experiences differed by the origin of the relationship was analyzed with relationship origin and academic term as within-person predictors in two-level MLMs. A final set of MLMs tested the implications of relationships for psychological well-being by treating relationship involvement, characteristics, and experiences as within-person predictors of anxious and depressive symptoms. To control for differences in internalizing symptoms according to gender and ethnicity found in prior studies (Anderson and Mayes 2010; Pfeifer and Allen 2021; Salk et al. 2017), gender and ethnicity were included as dummy-coded between-person predictors in all models, with female and Asian American as the reference groups.

2 | Results

2.1 | Relationship Involvement and Characteristics

As shown in Table 1, approximately 25%–30% of students reported being in a romantic relationship at each time point. Relationships had existed for about 12 to 15 months and

TABLE 1 | Frequencies and descriptives of relationship involvement, characteristics, and experiences.

Variable	T1 %/M (SD)	T2 %/M (SD)	T3 %/M (SD)
Relationship involvement			
Yes	25.40	29.50	28.40
No	74.60	70.50	71.60
Relationship stability ¹			
Stable	—	86.70	78.80
Unstable	—	13.30	21.20
Relationship origin ²			
Before college	84.00	65.50	64.00
During college	16.00	34.50	36.00
Relationship duration ^{2,3}	11.82 (10.80)	13.15 (12.46)	15.45 (13.11)
Relationship quality ²	4.53 (0.47)	4.29 (0.77)	4.37 (0.57)
Daily positive experiences ²	2.32 (0.70)	—	2.38 (0.44)
Daily negative experiences ²	0.14 (0.21)	—	0.13 (0.18)

Note: T1 = October 2022, T2 = January 2023, T3 = April 2023.

¹Computed from self-report partner initials. Stable indicates having the same romantic partner across time points (%_{T2}: T1–T2, %_{T3}: T2–T3).

²Measure completed only by subsample of participants in a relationship at the current time point.

³Units are months.

TABLE 2 | Relationship involvement and characteristics according to time.

	Relationship involvement b (SE)	Relationship stability b (SE)	Relationship origin b (SE)	Relationship duration b (SE)
Intercept	−1.68 (0.31)***	3.02 (1.17)*	−1.74 (0.70)*	8.28 (2.24)***
Time	0.09 (0.15)	−0.65 (0.61)	0.57 (0.34)	3.21 (0.20)***
Male	0.01 (0.48)	−1.01 (0.80)	1.22 (0.93)	−2.06 (0.20)***
Other gender	2.18 (1.31)	−0.45 (1.40)	0.86 (1.78)	7.86 (7.20)
European	0.55 (0.44)	−0.48 (0.74)	−0.22 (0.84)	4.50 (3.37)
American				
Hispanic or Latino	0.45 (0.51)	−0.68 (0.88)	−0.64 (1.01)	−2.14 (3.92)
Other ethnicity	1.44 (0.94)	15.55 (2639.02)	0.83 (1.51)	−3.55 (6.44)

Note: Relationship involvement model includes observations from all 215 participants pooled across three time points, while relationship stability, origin, and duration models utilize observations from the relationship subsample of 74 participants. Time was coded with T1 as the baseline (Time = 0); T1 = October 2022, T2 = January 2023, T3 = April 2023. Gender and ethnicity were included in all models as dummy-coded covariates, with female and Asian American as the baseline. Stable indicates having the same romantic partner across time points (T2: T1–T2, T3: T2–T3). Duration units are months.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

generally originated before college, with few changes in partners (Table 1). As expected, relationship duration significantly increased across the year (Table 2). MLM results indicated no additional changes in relationship involvement and characteristics across the year (Table 2).

2.2 | Relationship Experiences

Although generally high at all time points, relationship quality significantly decreased across the year (Table 3).

Given the pattern of observed means, an additional model was fit with dummy-coded terms for time (reference group: T2) to allow for different rates of change in quality across adjacent academic terms. Results indicated that relationship quality significantly decreased from T1 to T2 ($\beta(SE) = 0.18(0.08)$, $p = 0.034$), but did not significantly change from T2 to T3 ($\beta(SE) = -0.01(0.08)$, $p = 0.944$). Participants in relationships reported over two positive and fewer than one negative relationship experience per day (Table 1). Positive and negative daily experiences did not significantly depend on time (Table 3).

TABLE 3 | Relationship experiences according to time.

	Relationship quality b (SE)	Daily positive experiences b (SE)	Daily negative experiences b (SE)
Intercept	4.50 (0.12)***	2.49 (0.13)***	0.12 (0.04)*
Time	−0.09 (0.04)*	−0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.02)
Male	−0.25 (0.19)	−0.29 (0.21)	−0.01 (0.07)
Other gender	−0.16 (0.37)	−0.40 (0.35)	−0.11 (0.11)
European american	−0.11 (0.17)	−0.33 (0.19)	0.08 (0.06)
Hispanic or Latino	−0.07 (0.20)	−0.20 (0.21)	−0.005 (0.07)
Other ethnicity	−0.004 (0.32)	0.01 (0.36)	−0.08 (0.11)

Note: Models utilize observations from a total of 74 participants across three time points (relationship quality) and two time points (daily experiences), respectively. Only observations during which participants reported being in a romantic relationship were included. Time was coded with T1 as the baseline (Time = 0); T1 = October 2022, T2 = January 2023, T3 = April 2023. Gender and ethnicity were included in all models as dummy-coded covariates, with female and Asian American as the baseline.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 4 | Relationship experiences according to relationship origin.

	Relationship quality b (SE)	Daily positive experiences b (SE)	Daily negative experiences b (SE)
Intercept	4.33 (0.11)***	2.51 (0.13)***	0.14 (0.04)*
Relationship origin	−0.24 (0.07)*	0.07 (0.09)	0.01 (0.03)
Male	−0.12 (0.18)	−0.30 (0.22)	−0.01 (0.07)
Other gender	−0.07 (0.33)	−0.43 (0.35)	−0.12 (0.11)
European american	−0.15 (0.16)	−0.32 (0.19)	0.08 (0.06)
Hispanic or Latino	−0.13 (0.18)	−0.13 (0.22)	−0.01 (0.07)
Other ethnicity	0.06 (0.30)	0.001 (0.36)	−0.09 (0.11)

Note: Models utilize observations from a total of 74 participants across three time points (relationship quality) and two time points (daily experiences), respectively. Only observations during which participants reported being in a romantic relationship were included. Relationship origin was effect coded for multi-level analyses (Precollege = −1, College = 1). Gender and ethnicity were included in all models as dummy-coded covariates, with female and Asian American the baseline.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

2.3 | Relationship Experiences According to Relationship Origin

Relationship origin significantly predicted relationship quality, with students in pre-existing relationships reporting higher relationship quality than those in college-originating relationships (Table 4). Given the changes in quality over time reported earlier, a follow-up model was run to examine interactions between time (dummy coded; reference group: T2) and relationship origin. The interaction between origin and the dummy-coded variable for T1 was significant, indicating that relationship quality declined more steeply for those in college-originating relationships from T1 to T2 than those in pre-existing relationships (Figure 1; $\beta(SE) = 0.26(0.10)$, $p = 0.011$). Additionally, the interaction between relationship origin and the dummy-coded variable for T3 was significant, suggesting that from T2 to T3, relationship quality declined in pre-existing relationships but increased in college-originating relationships ($\beta(SE) = 0.26(0.09)$, $p = 0.004$). Daily positive and negative relationship experiences, however, did not depend upon relationship origin (Table 4).

2.4 | Relationship Experiences, Characteristics, and Psychological Well-Being

As shown in Table 5, those with higher quality relationships and fewer negative daily experiences reported fewer depressive symptoms. Relationship experiences, however, did not predict anxious symptoms. Relationship characteristics (stability, origin, and duration) were not associated with either depressive or anxious symptoms (β s: [−0.02, 0.02], SE s: [0.03, 0.03], ps : [0.444, 0.451]), and there were no differences in psychological well-being between those involved in romantic relationships and those not (β s: [−0.12, 0.02], SE s: [0.005, 0.07], ps : [0.077, 0.647]).

3 | Discussion

Despite notable contributions to psychological well-being during late adolescence (Gómez-López et al. 2019), the role of romantic relationships during developmental transitions is largely unexplored. The present study extended research on adolescent romantic relationships by investigating how these

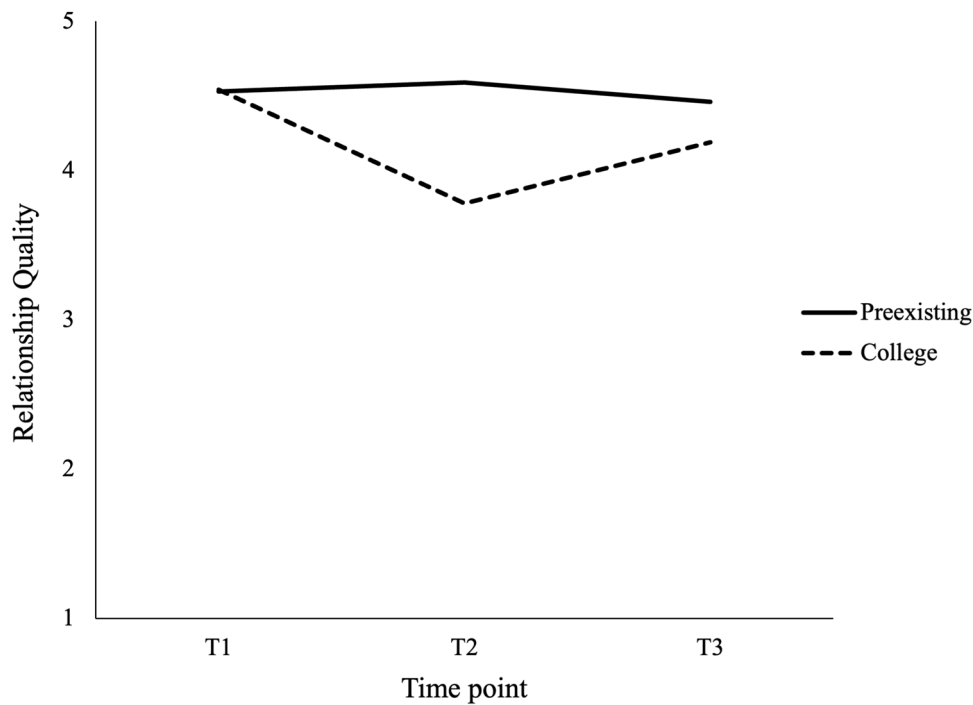


FIGURE 1 | Average romantic relationship quality over time by relationship origin. *Note:* Figure reflects observed mean relationship quality at the wave-level.

relationships change and contribute to internalizing symptoms during the transition to college, a period often associated with increased depressive and anxious symptoms (Cleary et al. 2011; Fruehwirth et al. 2025). We observed that relationship involvement, characteristics, and daily experiences were consistent during the transition to college. Relationship quality was high on average but lower during the second academic term than the first, particularly for students in college-originating relationships. Quality was higher on average during the third term than the second for those in college-originating relationships, while those in pre-existing relationships reported somewhat lower quality. Finally, depressive symptoms depended on youths' relationship quality and the frequency of negative daily experiences.

Approximately one-third of our sample engaged in a relationship during at least one academic term of their first year of college. This rate is consistent with recent large studies of late adolescent (Lei and South 2021; Yarger et al. 2021) and college student (Beckmeyer et al. 2023) dating experiences that suggest notable declines in adolescent dating and sexual behavior in recent decades (Twenge and Park 2019), particularly in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic (Yarger et al. 2021). Further, some youth may navigate the changes associated with the college transition by prioritizing academic, economic, and platonic social endeavors before engaging in romantic relationships.

Most reported relationships originated before college, had existed for a year or more on average, and were maintained. Apart from increasing in length, relationship involvement, characteristics, and daily experiences did not change across the year, suggesting that romantic relationships may be more stable at this life stage than commonly portrayed, even amidst rapid life

changes. Though relationship quality was high on average, quality decreased over the first year of college, particularly from the first to second academic term. Like other challenging life transitions (e.g., parenthood), the novel demands of the college environment may initially strain romantic relationships, temporarily diminishing their quality (Doss et al. 2009).

Students in relationships originating before college reported overall higher quality relationships than those in college-originating relationships. Social exchange theory posits that as relationships increase in length, romantic partners become increasingly interdependent and begin to prioritize dyadic gain above individual gain, resulting in noted increases in relationship quality (Connolly and Johnson 1996; Freeman et al. 2023; Lantagne and Furman 2017; Zimmer-Gembeck and Ducat 2010). Partners in pre-existing relationships also likely benefit from greater practice providing support and navigating life challenges as a dyad, experience that may make partners better able to meet each other's needs despite transitional stressors (Lantagne and Furman 2017).

Importantly, changes in relationship quality over time depended on the origin of the relationship. Both college-originating and pre-existing relationships were lower in quality during the second academic term than in the first term. On average, relationship quality was higher in the third academic term than the second, but only for those in college originating-relationships. Those who met their romantic partner in college are perhaps more likely to be in the same environment and stage of life, with common college experiences and life goals (e.g., academic, financial). Coordinating life plans with one's romantic partner is theorized to be a central developmental task during the transition to adulthood (Shulman and Connolly 2013) and greater cohesiveness, proximity to one's

TABLE 5 | Multi-level estimates of relationship experiences as predictors of internalizing symptoms.

	Depressive symptoms			Anxious symptoms		
	Quality b (SE)	Daily positive experiences b (SE)	Daily negative experiences b (SE)	Quality b (SE)	Daily positive experiences b (SE)	Daily negative experiences b (SE)
Intercept	2.12 (0.10)***	1.92 (0.28)***	1.93 (0.11)***	2.49 (0.11)***	2.34 (0.28)***	2.38 (0.12)***
Relationship experience	−0.14 (0.07)*	0.04 (0.11)	0.63 (0.29)*	−0.07 (0.06)	0.04 (0.11)	0.46 (0.28)
Male	−0.15 (0.17)	0.06 (0.18)	0.06 (0.18)	−0.27 (0.18)	−0.03 (0.20)	−0.03 (0.19)
Other gender	0.64 (0.32)*	0.61 (0.29)*	0.67 (0.28)*	0.90 (0.34)**	0.96 (0.32)**	1.00 (0.31)**
European American	−0.15 (0.15)	−0.05 (0.16)	−0.11 (0.15)	−0.20 (0.16)	−0.17 (0.17)	−0.22 (0.17)
Hispanic or Latino	0.07 (0.17)	0.08 (0.18)	0.08 (0.17)	0.08 (0.19)	0.04 (0.19)	0.04 (0.19)
Other ethnicity	0.16 (0.28)	0.54 (0.30)	0.59 (0.29)*	0.07 (0.30)	0.44 (0.32)	0.48 (0.32)

Note: The specific relationship experience predictor in each model is denoted by the column header (i.e., quality, positive daily experiences, and negative daily experiences) under Depressive and Anxious symptoms. Models utilize observations from a total of 74 participants across three time points (relationship quality) and two time points (daily experiences), respectively. Only observations during which participants reported being in a romantic relationship were included. Relationship experiences were centered at their respective grand mean values. Gender and ethnicity were dummy-coded with female and Asian American as the baseline.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

romantic partner, and increases in relationship maturation may contribute to the noted reversal of this trend for college-originating relationships. Daily relationship experiences, however, did not depend on relationship origin, which may reflect the widespread continuous use of technology to facilitate daily relationship experiences (Holtzman et al. 2021).

Finally, neither relationship involvement nor characteristics predicted internalizing symptoms. However, higher relationship quality and fewer negative daily relationship experiences predicted fewer depressive symptoms during the college transition. Findings build on existing research on relationships and well-being during adolescence, underscoring that having a relationship does not universally promote or diminish psychological well-being. Rather, the content and quality of the relationship seem to be most important for psychological well-being (Collins et al. 2009; Gómez-López et al. 2019; Karney et al. 2007), even during the uniquely challenging transition to college.

Important strengths of the current study include a diverse sample representative of the larger undergraduate population at the target university and the inclusion of three time points and 2-week daily diaries across the first year of college. This design allowed for comprehensive examination of changes in romantic relationship involvement, characteristics, and experiences across the acute transition to college. Findings provide novel insight into the normative developmental trajectory of romantic relationships as adolescents are beginning to assume adult social roles, establishing a foundation for prospective adult romantic partnership (Arnett 2000; Collins et al. 2009; Madsen and Collins 2011; Seiffge-Krenke 2003; Shulman and Connolly 2013). Estimates of the experiences of youth identifying as multi-ethnic, African American, or another gender identity should be interpreted with caution given that relatively fewer participants reported these identities in the current sample.

The current study's investigation of relationship features unique to the college transition, such as the origin of the relationship, extends current understanding of the conditions in which romantic relationships may serve as psychosocial resources that support successful navigation of challenges during this developmental transition. As this is the first study to our knowledge to examine the role of relationship origin for relationship experiences and psychological well-being, future studies should further seek to replicate these findings and investigate whether relationship origin indirectly contributes to psychological well-being through an effect on relationship quality. Continued longitudinal research would serve as an important next step to assess the longer-term psychosocial implications of romantic relationships during the college transition, as well as provide greater clarity of the directionality of associations between relationship experiences and psychological well-being. Additionally, a larger subsample of participants in relationships and dyadic data inclusive of both romantic partners would improve our ability to comprehensively examine relationship dynamics during this age-normative transition.

Adaptive romantic relationship experiences promote psychological well-being amidst the unique challenges of the

developmentally salient transition to college, while maladaptive experiences confer risk. Studies of social assets during this transitional period should further investigate how romantic relationships may contribute to adaptive navigation of the college transition, an important precursor to the fulfillment of adult social roles (Arnett 2000; Holt et al. 2018). Intervention efforts should seek to foster positive and reduce negative relationship experiences amidst heightened periods of risk for psychological well-being, establishing a foundation for psychosocial adjustment in adulthood.

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Ethics Statement

The study was conducted in compliance with APA ethical standards and the procedures were reviewed and approved under the University of California, Los Angeles IRB.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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