More Than a Score? Indirect Associations between Credit Score and Romantic Relationship Quality in Emerging Adulthood

Abstract

Higher credit scores have unique financial benefits that may aid in emerging adults' efforts toward financial independence. Yet, it is unknown if higher credit scores may also yield romantic relationship benefits. In a sample of 916 U.S. emerging adults, we used structural equation modeling to test indirect associations between credit score and romantic relationship quality. Credit score was positively associated with financial self-efficacy and negatively associated with financial deception. Additionally, credit score was indirectly associated with romantic relationship quality through financial self-efficacy and financial deception. We encourage educators and clinicians working with emerging adults in romantic relationships to help these emerging adults learn how to establish credit and raise their credit score, which might improve financial and relational outcomes.

Key words: Credit, Young Adults, Financial Behavior, Financial Education

A credit score represents a calculation of creditworthiness or the likelihood that someone will repay their debts (Arya et al., 2013). This creditworthiness is associated with several important financial aspects of life. Specifically, higher credit scores are associated with lower insurance premiums (Arya et al. 2013; Li et al., 2015), increased ease of getting a loan (Levinger et al., 2011; Li et al., 2015), lower interest rates on loans (Knapp & Dean, 2018; Levinger et al., 2011; Li et al., 2015), a higher likelihood of getting a job, and a sustained ability to make good financial decisions over time (Li et al., 2015). For emerging adults, those who are between roughly ages 18–29 (Arnett et al., 2014), learning how to establish credit, raise a credit score, and experience these financial benefits may be particularly salient—yet difficult. Many emerging adults face several financial challenges such as student loans (Bartholomae & Fox, 2021), credit card debt (Kim & Chatterjee, 2021), financial anxiety (Potter et al., 2020), trying to understand financial instruction from their parents (Rea et al., 2019), and deciding whether to live with a romantic partner or not (Rea et al., 2020). With these developmental and financial challenges, learning how to establish credit and raise one's credit score may be the least of an emerging adult's financial worries.

However, establishing credit and raising a credit score—and potentially experiencing associated financial benefits—might help engender financial independence from their family, which emerging adults may desire (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adults' ability to achieve financial independence likely has financial implications but may also have *romantic relationship* implications. Indeed, emerging adults' ability to achieve financial independence may impact romantic relationship decision making (Willoughby & Carroll, 2015). Similarly, raising a credit score may *indirectly* impact emerging adults' romantic relationship quality through their financial satisfaction (i.e., financial self-efficacy) and financial behaviors (i.e., financial deception). Although there are established connections between credit score and *financial health*, research has yet to quantitively explore *indirect* connections between credit score and *romantic relationship health* in emerging adulthood.

In the current study, we began this exploration by testing indirect associations between self-reported credit score and romantic relationship quality in a sample of 916 emerging adults in romantic relationships. Examining these connections in emerging adulthood matters because this developmental period is characterized by both financial and relational milestones. Emerging adults are often seeking to establish financial independence from their families (Arnett, 2000)—which having a strong credit score may help to facilitate. Further, emerging adults often seek to establish a more enduring romantic relationship (Arnett, 2000). Scholars also suggest that emerging adults in romantic relationships can increase relationship commitment in this time period by integrating important aspects of life together (Shulman & Connolly, 2013)—perhaps including financial aspects of life. Put simply, understanding if higher credit scores may be associated with higher financial self-efficacy, lower financial deception, and higher romantic relationship quality might suggest whether helping emerging adults establish credit and raise their credit scores may help emerging adult romantic relationships develop during this important time period. Additionally, if there is evidence of a positive association between credit score and romantic relationship quality, then financial and relational counselors, clinicians, and educators might discuss this evidence as motivation for emerging adult clients in romantic relationships to establish credit and raise their credit score—helping these clients experience financial, and potentially relational, benefits.

Literature Review

Credit Score and Romantic Relationship Quality

Previous research suggests credit score might be positively associated with romantic relationship quality in emerging adulthood. Recent work has highlighted the importance of objective and subjective *financial knowledge* as they relate to romantic relationship satisfaction for emerging adults (Totenhagen et al., 2019). In a similar vein, we assume that testing subjective *and* objective measures of *financial behaviors* (i.e., like a credit score) may also matter for romantic relationship quality (i.e., the degree to which a romantic relationship partner is satisfied with and committed to their relationship and how much they can trust their partner) (Fletcher et al., 2000) in emerging adulthood.

For emerging adults specifically, subjective financial behaviors have shown associations with relationship outcomes. That is, as emerging adults attempt to mitigate financial challenges many of them tend to face (Bartholomae & Fox, 2021; Kim & Chatterjee, 2021; Potter et al., 2020; Rea et al., 2019, 2020), their romantic relationship may benefit. For example, when emerging adults perceived more positive financial behaviors for themselves and their partners, they also reported greater shared financial values (Wilmarth et al., 2021), which are associated with relationship satisfaction (Archuleta et al., 2013). In an emerging adult sample, high attachment anxiety and high attachment avoidance were also linked to lower romantic relationship satisfaction through a partner's less responsible financial behaviors (i.e., subjective items such as how often a participant's partner saves money each month for the future) (Li et al., 2020).

Other work that used an emerging adult sample suggests that perceived partner financial behaviors were indirectly associated, through perceived financial mutuality, with romantic relationship satisfaction (Mao et al., 2017). Likewise, when emerging adult partners perceived themselves as more passive in financial management, they reported more conflict with their partner (Novak & Johnson, 2017). Recently, other scholars found a positive association between financial behaviors (i.e., subjective reports) and romantic relationship flourishing in an emerging adult sample (LeBaron-Black et al., 2021a). This previous research suggests that subjective reports of financial behaviors may be associated with romantic relationship satisfaction in emerging adulthood.

However, research has yet to investigate how an objective measure of credit-related financial behavior—like a credit score—might relate to romantic relationship quality in emerging adulthood. Nonetheless, we suspect that our objective measure of credit-related financial behavior, credit score, might connect to romantic relationship health in similar ways as subjective financial behavior (LeBaron-Black et al., 2021a; Li et al., 2020; Mao et al., 2017; Totenhagen et al., 2019). Additionally, higher credit scores correlate with greater trustworthiness, less impulsivity, having a future oriented mindset (Arya et al., 2013), and better physical health (Knapp & Dean, 2018). In line with this previous literature, we suspected that a higher credit score might be linked to greater romantic relationship quality.

Financial Self-Efficacy as an Intervening Variable

In a review of couple finance research, Dew (2021) urged scholars to examine *why* certain financial variables (perhaps like a credit score) are associated with romantic relationship quality. In response to this urge, we examined two potential intervening variables between credit score and romantic relationship quality. The association between credit score and romantic relationship quality may be an indirect association through financial self-efficacy (i.e., the belief an individual has regarding their level of ability in performing financial behavior). Research to date has yet to explore how credit score relates to financial self-efficacy for emerging adults. However, higher credit scores may promote financial self-efficacy. For example, an emerging adult who has a higher credit score may feel more confident and efficacious about their finances given that credit scores reflect responsible borrowing and payment behaviors, whereas a person whose credit score is low or declines may have lower financial self-efficacy.

To our knowledge, research has yet to quantitatively explore if financial self-efficacy might be associated with romantic relationship quality. In other words, *financial behaviors* have shown benefits for emerging adult romantic relationships (e.g., LeBaron-Black et al., 2021a), but *financial self-efficacy* has not. However, research examining a related concept—subjective financial knowledge (i.e., self-assessed level of understanding of financial concepts and practice)—has found it to be associated with relationship satisfaction in emerging adult romantic relationships (Totenhagen et al., 2019). Therefore, we suspected that financial self-efficacy (i.e., which likely connects to financial behaviors) (Farrell et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2022; Serido et al., 2013) might also be associated with romantic relationship quality. Due to potential associations of credit score with financial self-efficacy and financial self-efficacy with romantic relationship quality, we predicted that financial self-efficacy may be a reason why credit score and romantic relationship quality might be associated.

Financial Deception as an Intervening Variable

Another financial process that may intervene an association between credit score and romantic relationship quality is financial deception (sometimes referred to as "financial infidelity," see Jeanfreau et al., 2018). Since financial deception (i.e., the degree to which a romantic partner is less than fully honest about finances, such debt and bills, with their romantic partner) is a construct just beginning to be explored in the literature, no study to our knowledge has yet examined associations between emerging adults' credit score and financial deception. However, previous work with married couples revealed a negative association between financial deception and trust in one's spouse (Dew et al., 2022). With this previous association in mind, credit scores are *positively* linked to trustworthiness (Arya et al., 2013), so credit scores may be *negatively* associated with financial deception. For example, an emerging adult who may pay off their credit card in full each month, evidencing trustworthiness, may be slightly less likely to financially deceive their romantic partner. Likewise, an emerging adult with a low credit score may feel shame and attempt to hide this, or the financial behaviors contributing to a lower credit score, from a romantic partner.

Researchers have begun to explore correlates of financial deception. One of the first financial deception studies found a negative correlation between financial deception and marital satisfaction (Jeanfreau et al., 2018). *iFidelity* survey data also showed that 62% of the participants who did not report financial deception from their partner were likely to be very happy in their relationship (Trujillo et al., 2019). However, only 36% of the participants who reported financial deception from their partner were likely to be very happy in their relationship (Trujillo et al., 2019). Research also indicates that one reason partners may financially deceive is to avoid anticipated financial conflict (Garbinsky et al., 2020; Jeanfreau et al., 2020). Perhaps partners who engage in financial deception may also have less trust in their relationship (Dew et al., 2022) and somewhat lower quality romantic relationships (Saxey et al., 2022a). Considered together, this literature suggests that financial deception might help explain why credit score and romantic relationship quality may be associated.

Couples and Finance Theory

The theoretical lens through which we viewed potential associations in this study is couples and finance theory (CFT) (Archuleta & Burr, 2015). CFT promotes research that acknowledges the interrelated nature of finances and marital relationships (Archuleta & Burr, 2015). Specifically, CFT uses a systemic lens to explain how couple relationships and financial processes are mutually related by viewing these systems as interconnected and embedded within broader ecological contexts, such as age and the economy (Archuleta, 2013; Archuleta & Burr, 2015). Within these biophysical and environmental contexts, the model outlines how *couple processes* (e.g., marital quality) are interconnected with *financial processes* (e.g., financial management practices and financial satisfaction) (Archuleta, 2013). Indeed, CFT posits that the way a couple navigates their finances is associated with their marital quality (Archuleta & Burr, 2015), which has been supported by the last decade of couple finance research (Dew, 2021; Glenn et al., 2019). CFT also proposes that financial processes (e.g., financial management practices and financial satisfaction) can impact each other (Archuleta & Burr, 2015). Applied to the present study, we examined how financial management practices (e.g., credit score) are associated with other financial management practices (e.g., financial deception) and financial satisfaction (e.g., financial self-efficacy), which in turn are connected to marital quality (romantic relationship quality)—all of which is embedded within the context of emerging adulthood. In the sections below, we elaborated on these theoretically and empirically informed associations.

Although originally designed for married couples, recent research suggests that CFT and its main tenets may also apply to unmarried emerging adults in romantic relationships (Saxey et al., 2022b). One financial process from the current study, credit score, is related to financial management practices (e.g., such as the frequency that a credit card is paid off in full each month) (Dew & Xiao, 2011). Although not a financial management practice itself, we conceptualized credit score as operating similarly as a financial management practice because if one’s credit score is higher, it may suggest more robust credit-related financial management practices.

CFT posits that financial management practices (here, credit scores) are associated with financial satisfaction (here, financial self-efficacy), defined as “satisfaction with one’s current financial situation and overall financial well-being” (Archuleta & Burr, 2015, p. 223). Although financial self-efficacy might be closely related to financial capability, we believe the way financial self-efficacy was measured in this study more closely reflects financial satisfaction. Financial self-efficacy might be influenced by the financial management practices associated with a credit score: when a person’s credit score improves (in part) from productive credit-related financial management practices, perhaps their financial self-efficacy—a confidence in these practices—might also improve. Likewise, CFT assumes that financial management practices (here, credit scores) are associated with other financial management practices (here, financial deception). For example, if an emerging adult in a romantic relationship consistently practices credit-related financial management practices that are often seen as trustworthy (e.g., paying off a credit card in full each month), perhaps this emerging adult might also be more trustworthy in their financial interactions with their romantic partner—potentially resulting in less financial deception.

Subsequently, these financial processes can impact marital quality (Archuleta & Burr, 2015). Because we used a sample of both married and unmarried emerging adults in romantic relationships, we examined general romantic relationship quality. If an emerging adult in a romantic relationship has established credit and raises their credit score, perhaps the improvement in financial self-efficacy that might come may benefit their romantic relationship quality. That is, because several challenges related to finances are common in emerging adulthood, if an emerging adult is confident in their credit-related financial management practices, perhaps they might be less stressed about their finances, which might benefit their romantic relationship (Falconier & Jackson, 2020).

Furthermore, less financial deception that might be associated with a higher credit score might benefit an emerging adult's romantic relationship quality (Jeanfreau et al., 2018; Saxey et al., 2022a; Trujillo et al., 2019)—perhaps by improving trust in the relationship (Dew et al., 2022). In essence, CFT supports a proposition that credit score (financial management practice) may be associated with romantic relationship quality and that these associations might be intervened by financial self-efficacy (financial satisfaction) and financial deception (financial management practice).

Hypotheses

The purpose of the current study was to test indirect associations between self-reported credit score and romantic relationship quality through financial self-efficacy and financial deception (see Figure 1). Given the dearth of research examining how credit scores are linked with relational outcomes, this study stands to make a novel and meaningful contribution to the empirical literature while also conferring important practical implications for educators and clinicians. Based on CFT and the previously outlined literature, we tested the following hypotheses for direct (H1) and indirect (H2) effects:

H1a: Credit score will be positively associated with financial-self efficacy and negatively associated with financial deception.

H1b: Financial self-efficacy will be positively associated with romantic relationship quality.

H1c: Financial deception will be negatively associated with romantic relationship quality.

H2: Credit score will be indirectly associated with romantic relationship quality through financial self-efficacy (H2a) and financial deception (H2b).

Method

Participants and Procedure

Our data come from the *Measuring Family Financial Socialization Project* (LeBaron-Black et al., 2021b)—funded by the National Endowment for Financial Education. Data were collected through Qualtrics Panel from 4,182 participants. To qualify for the study, respondents must have been living in the United States (U.S.) and been between the ages of 18 through 30 (i.e., roughly the years of emerging adulthood) (Arnett et al., 2014). The average participant took about 20 minutes to complete the survey, and those who completed the survey were compensated approximately $7.50. Because we were interested in romantic relationship quality, we retained only those participants who reported being in a romantic relationship (N = 1,950). Of the 1,950 who reported being in a romantic relationship, 956 (49% of the 1,950) indicated that they had requested their credit score within the last six months. Of the 956 participants that had requested their credit score within the last six months, 916 (96% of the 956) reported credit scores within the range of a credit score (i.e., 300–850) (Equifax, 2022). In the current study, we utilized data from the sample of 916 emerging adults who reported being in a romantic relationship, requesting their credit score within the last six months, and a credit score within the valid range of a credit score. Demographic information from this analytical sample can be seen in Table 1.

After instituting these inclusion criteria, we tested group differences between this group of 916 meeting all inclusion criteria and the 1,034 who reported being in a romantic relationship but who either (a) did not report requesting their credit score within the last six months or (b) did not report a credit score within the range of a credit score. We conducted a multivariate analysis of variance to test differences between these two groups in romantic relationship quality, financial self-efficacy, and financial deception. Based on Bandalos' (2002) criterion (i.e., *partial* $\eta^2 > .14$), we did not find any noteworthy group differences with these variables between emerging adults in romantic relationships who requested and reported a valid credit score versus those who did not.

Measures

Self-Reported Credit Score

The respondents who reported requesting their credit score within the last six months were asked, “What is your credit score?” Responses were open ended, but participants whose responses fell outside of the credit score range (i.e., 300–850) (Equifax, 2022) were excluded from the analytical sample.

Financial Self-Efficacy

The three items we used to measure financial self-efficacy are similar to previously used measures of financial self-efficacy (Rudi et al., 2020). Specifically, participants were shown the following three statements: “I am satisfied with the way I pay my bills,” “I feel good about money management,” and “I don't like the way I manage my finances.” Participants responded on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). We reverse coded the third item so higher scores represented greater financial self-efficacy. After reverse coding the third item, this measure achieved adequate reliability in our analytical sample ($\alpha = .79$).

Financial Deception

Our measure for financial deception came from a measure for financial deception from the *Couple Relationships and Transition Experiences* study (James et al., 2021). Those participants who reported being in a romantic relationship were asked, “How often would you say that you have been less than fully honest with your partner about financial issues in the past year? Such behaviors could include hiding cash, purchases, bills, or financial statements from them or not being fully truthful about your salary or debt.” In response, participants rated their experiences on a scale of 1 (Never) to 5 (Frequently). Higher scores represent a greater tendency to financially deceive.

Romantic Relationship Quality

Our romantic relationship quality measure is based on three subscales (i.e., satisfaction, commitment, and trust) from the *Perceived Relationship Quality Components Inventory* developed by Fletcher et al. (2000). Participants were asked questions like, “How satisfied are you with your relationship?” “How dependable is your partner?” and “How dedicated are you to your relationship?” Participants responded to each of the nine items on a scale of 1 (Not at All) to 7 (Extremely). Higher scores indicate higher romantic relationship quality. These nine items achieved high reliability in our analytical sample ($\alpha = .94$).

Control Variables

We included a few control variables—age, education, romantic relationship status, value of savings, and student loan debt—to attempt to account for socio-economic status of participants and potential differences between participants. First, we controlled for age (in years) because age in emerging adulthood tends to be associated with romantic relationship quality (LeBaron-Black et al., 2021a), which may suggest that romantic relationship quality might differ across the years of emerging adulthood. Because how much emerging adults owe on student loans (coded continuously as 0 = $0 to 9 = $100,000 or more) and how much education (coded continuously as 1 = less than high school to 7 = advanced degree [JD, MD, PhD, etc.]) they have gained may play a role in predicting financial self-efficacy, financial deception, and romantic relationship quality, we controlled for these two variables. Additionally, because our analytical sample includes those who are in different types of romantic relationships, we controlled for romantic relationship status (coded as 0 = not married; 1 = engaged; 2 = married). Finally, we hoped to also control for income. However, the three income control variables each had at least 61% of missing data, so we did not feel justified in using these variables. We did, however, include a control variable for value of savings (i.e., including savings accounts, government savings bonds, money market shared, and CD's) to account for potential differences in financial self-efficacy, financial deception, and romantic relationship quality across different savings levels (coded as 0 = $\leq$ \$1,000; 1 = > \$1,000).

Data Analysis

First, we estimated descriptive statistics and estimated bivariate correlations between study variables in SPSS version 28. Then, in Mplus version 8, we estimated a structural equation model (SEM) to test direct and indirect effects between credit score and romantic relationship quality. Specifically, we estimated direct effects from credit score to financial self-efficacy and financial deception and from the following variables to romantic relationship quality: financial self-efficacy, financial deception, and credit score. To determine the effect size for direct effects, we used Cohen's (1988) cutoffs (i.e., generally .1 through .29 is considered small, .3 through .49 is considered medium, and .5 and higher is considered large).

Additionally, we tested indirect pathways from credit score to romantic relationship quality through financial self-efficacy and financial deception. In line with previous recommendations (Hayes, 2018), we estimated 95% confidence intervals of indirect effects with 5,000 bootstraps to assess if the confidence interval included zero. If a statistically significant ($p < .05$) indirect effect had a 95% confidence interval that did not include zero and if the direct effect was not statistically significant, we suggested a full indirect effect. In a previous model, we included couple financial communication as a third potential intervening variable. However, after controlling for each of the control variables listed, credit score was not significantly associated with couple financial communication. Furthermore, the SEM without couple financial communication fit the data better, so we omitted couple financial communication from our model. For effect sizes of explained variance (i.e., R^2), we used Cohen's (1988) recommended cutoffs: approximately .01 to .09 is considered 'small', .09 to .25 is considered 'medium', and .25 and higher is considered 'large'.

By utilizing SEM, we were able to create latent variables for financial self-efficacy and romantic relationship quality—which likely reduced measurement error (Schumacker & Lomax, 2004). In our sample of 916 emerging adults, we had no missing data for any of the variables, except for with three of the control variables—each with less than 1.1% of missing data. For these cases of missing data, we used the full information maximum likelihood method. Finally, we used appropriate (i.e., theoretically justified) modification indices (Bowen & Guo, 2011) to improve model fit.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Bivariate correlations for main study variables are available upon request to the first author, and descriptive statistics of main study variables are listed below. For financial self-efficacy and romantic relationship quality, we created mean scores to obtain descriptive data. The average credit score for our participants, 681.92 (*SD* = 93.38; *Min-Max*: 321–850), is considered "good" (Courchane et al., 2008, p. 128). On average, participants had somewhat high (i.e., the mean, 3.77 out of 5, approaches "Agree") financial self-efficacy (*SD* = .94; *Min-Max*: 1–5). Additionally, the average participant response was between "Very rarely" and "Rarely" in terms of financial deception over the last year (*M* = 2.44 out of 5; *SD* = 1.41; *Min-Max*: 1–5).

The average participant tended to have a relatively high-quality romantic relationship (*M* = 6.10 out 7; *SD* = 1.11; *Min-Max*: 1.22–7).

Structural Model

After using appropriate modification indices, our model achieved good model fit statistics for CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR: CFI = .98; RMSEA = .03; SRMR = .03. The model explained 2% of the variance in financial deception (small effect size), 13% of the variance in romantic relationship quality (medium effect size), and 22% of the variance in financial self-efficacy (medium effect size). Standardized direct and indirect associations can be found in Figure 2.

We found several significant direct effects (H1). Specifically, self-reported credit score was directly associated with financial self-efficacy ($\beta = .24$, $p < .001$) and financial deception ($\beta = -.15$, $p < .001$). Likewise, financial deception ($\beta = -.21$, $p < .001$) and financial self-efficacy ($\beta = .18$, $p < .001$) were directly associated with romantic relationship quality. After accounting for the other variables in the model, credit score was not directly associated with romantic relationship quality.

Additionally, both indirect pathways (H2) had full indirect effects. Credit score was indirectly associated with romantic relationship quality through financial deception ($\beta = .03$, $p < .01$), and the 95% confidence interval of the indirect effect did not include zero (.01, .06). Similarly, credit score was indirectly associated with romantic relationship quality through financial self-efficacy ($\beta = .04$, $p < .01$), and the 95% confidence interval of the indirect effect did not include zero (.02, .07). In sum, H1a, H1b, H1c, H2a, and H2b were each supported by our findings.

Discussion

Through the lens of CFT (Archuleta & Burr, 2015), we examined the association between self-reported credit score and romantic relationship quality in a sample of 916 U.S. emerging adults and—in response to a recent recommendation to understand potential mechanisms linking finances and romantic relationship quality (Dew, 2021)—tested two potential intervening variables in this association. Our findings supported each of our two hypotheses, which we discuss next. First, we discuss how our results relate to CFT and the previous literature. Then, we explain implications of our findings for practitioners.

Financial Self-Efficacy as an Intervening Variable

Based on CFT (Archuleta & Burr, 2015), we suspected that credit score would be positively associated with financial self-efficacy, which our findings supported. That is, credit score was significantly and positively associated with financial self-efficacy (small effect size), which is in support of CFT's suggestion that financial management practices (i.e., credit score) are associated with financial satisfaction indicators like financial self-efficacy (Archuleta & Burr, 2015). We provide the first evidence, to our knowledge, that for emerging adults, credit scores—after accounting for age, romantic relationship status, value of savings, student loan debt, and education—seem to be positively associated with financial self-efficacy.

Additionally, we suspected that because of previous associations between financial behaviors and romantic relationship health (LeBaron-Black et al., 2021a; Li et al., 2020; Mao et al., 2017; Novak & Johnson, 2017) that the *belief* an individual has regarding their level of ability in performing *financial behaviors* (i.e., financial self-efficacy) might also contribute to romantic relationship quality. Our findings supported this prediction—due to financial self-efficacy's positive association with romantic relationship quality (small effect size). For financial self-efficacy, CFT's assumption that financial processes may impact romantic relationship quality (Archuleta & Burr, 2015) seemed to apply. Similarly, credit score was indirectly associated with romantic relationship quality through financial self-efficacy. In sum, as emerging adults establish credit and raise their credit scores, they may experience greater financial self-efficacy, which seems to benefit their romantic relationship quality.

Financial Deception as an Intervening Variable

Utilizing two assumptions from CFT (Archuleta & Burr, 2015), we hypothesized that credit score would be negatively associated with financial deception and that financial deception would be negatively associated with romantic relationship quality. Consistent with financial deception's previous negative association with trust in one's spouse (Dew et al., 2022) and credit score's positive association with trustworthiness (Arya et al., 2013), credit score was negatively associated with financial deception (small effect size).

Also consistent with the previous literature (Jeanfreau et al., 2018; Trujillo et al., 2019), financial deception was negatively associated with romantic relationship quality (small effect size). Furthermore, financial deception intervened the association between credit score and romantic relationship quality. These findings are in support of CFT's assumptions that financial processes can impact other financial processes and that financial processes can impact romantic relationship quality (Archuleta & Burr, 2015). That is, these two CFT assumptions seem to also apply to emerging adult romantic relationships—not just marital relationships (Saxey et al., 2022b). In sum, emerging adults who reported higher credit scores also reported engaging in less financial deception and, in turn, reported higher romantic relationship quality.

Limitations

Despite these contributions to the literature, the current study has several limitations. First, because we only had access to cross-sectional data, we could not provide the statistical rigor that longitudinal data and analysis could have. Although our findings supported our conceptual model, we cannot make any claim about the directionality between our variables, so our findings should be taken as cross-sectional associations—not temporally ordered associations. For example, it is possible that creating a healthy romantic relationship may provide motivation to increase financial self-efficacy (Dew, 2021). Thus, we urge future researchers to seek to replicate these findings using alternative research methods that can provide stronger support for temporal and causal associations, such as longitudinal methods and experimental or quasi-experimental designs.

Additionally, we only had a single-item measure for financial deception, which may not be as ideal as a multi-item scale. Future research and data collection efforts interested in assessing financial deception may consider using newly developed measures for financial deception (Garbinsky et al., 2020). Third, although having data on emerging adults' credit score, financial management practices/satisfaction, and a romantic relationship outcome may be rare, we relied on self-report data and did not use as robust methods of collecting credit score data as previous research (e.g., Levinger et al., 2011) that collected tax data and had both self-reported credit scores and actual credit score estimates. Utilizing actual credit score estimates, and not just self-reported scores, may provide further information about associations with romantic relationship quality. Furthermore, we did not examine the role emerging adults' parents might have played in establishing credit. For instance, an emerging adult's parents could have established, and paid off, a credit card for them. These emerging adults might have a higher credit score due to parental intervention. In essence, future research should include more robust measures for credit score and capture whether emerging adults' parents established and managed credit for them. Finally, we only had data from one partner, so we could not test associations, for example, between one partner's credit score and *the other partner's* perception of romantic relationship quality. Next, we offer tentative practical implications of our findings while recognizing that further research in this area is needed.

Implications for Practitioners

Specific to practice, our findings offer implications for educators and clinicians working with emerging adults. Seeking financial independence from family is often a key goal in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Yet, emerging adulthood is also often a stage of financial instability (Bartholomae & Fox, 2021; Kim & Chatterjee, 2021; Potter et al., 2020; Rea et al., 2019, 2020). Consequently, many practitioners; such as financial planners, educators, and clinicians (e.g., couple or financial therapists); are interested in promoting positive financial management practices for these emerging adults. Helping emerging adults establish credit and raise their credit score may have financial (Levinger et al., 2011; Li et al., 2015), health (Knapp & Dean, 2018), *and* relational benefits. Practitioners may consider sharing these benefits of higher credit scores to motivate their emerging adult clients in romantic relationships to establish credit and raise their credit scores.

Our results suggest helping emerging adults establish credit and increase their credit score may benefit their financial self-efficacy and that higher financial self-efficacy may benefit emerging adults' romantic relationship quality. Because emerging adults often experience an array of financial challenges, and may sometimes not handle these challenges well (LeBaron et al., 2020a, 2020b), they may have lower financial self-efficacy. The small effect size of the association between credit score and financial self-efficacy suggests that helping an emerging adult understand how to establish credit and increase their credit score may be a helpful intervention for increasing financial self-efficacy. In terms of *romantic relationship* intervention, financial self-efficacy might also be somewhat helpful for emerging adult romantic relationships.

Because financial deception is an emerging construct in the literature, understanding correlates of financial deception has received recent attention (e.g., Dew et al., 2022; Jeanfreau et al., 2018; Saxey et al., 2022a; Trujillo et al., 2019). Although the effect size was small, the negative association between credit score and financial deception indicates that credit scores might be a piece in the puzzle of financial deception. Indeed, partners with low credit scores may attempt to hide this potentially undesirable financial characteristic from their partner (or the financial behaviors that likely led to a low credit score). Consequently, clinicians might consider helping emerging adults in romantic relationships speak openly about their credit scores and normalize low credit scores—given that some emerging adults may have shorter credit histories and lower credit scores—as a potential means to promote communication about finances in the relationship. That is, discussing and normalizing low credit scores could lessen the tendency to financially deceive, which may benefit romantic relationship flourishing (Saxey et al., 2022a). It seems that for emerging adults, establishing credit and raising a credit score may lessen financial deception, which may—in small measure—benefit romantic relationship quality. Therefore, treating financial deception may have some relational benefits (Dew et al., 2022; Jeanfreau et al., 2018; Saxey et al., 2022a; Trujillo et al., 2019). Put simply, for emerging adults in romantic relationships, a credit score may, indeed, be more than a score.

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Table 1

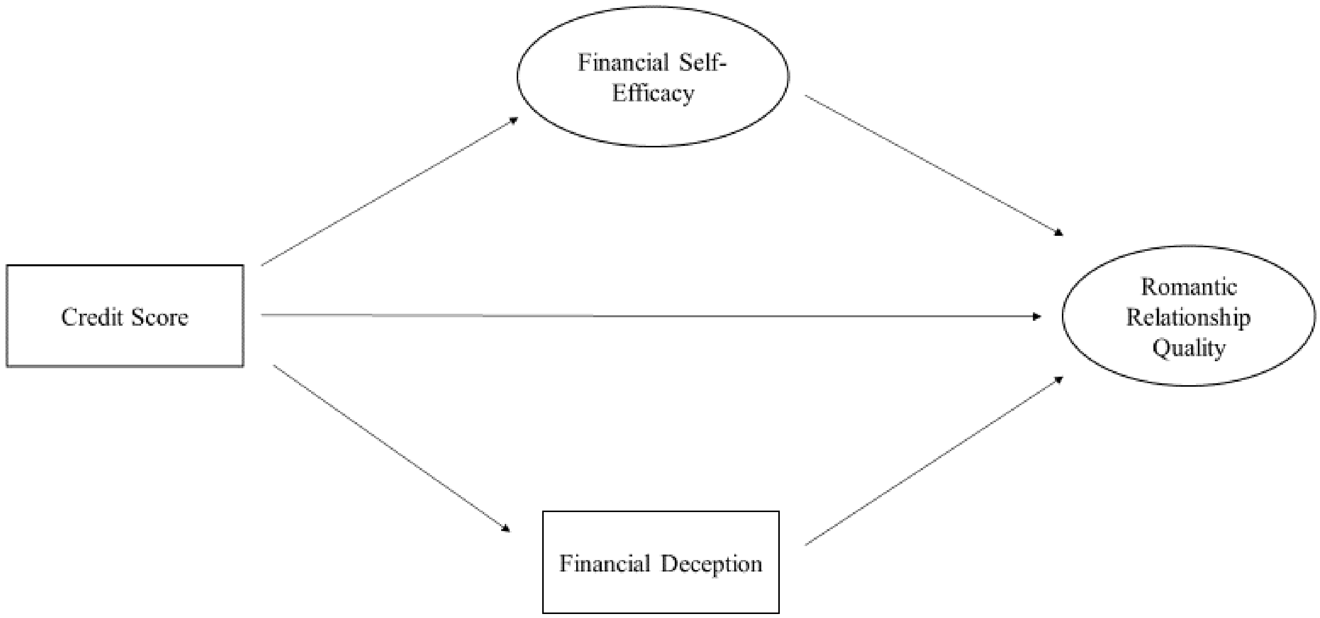
Demographic Statistics of the Analytical Sample (N = 916)

Demographic	***Mean or # (%)***	***SD***
Age	25.46	3.40
Participants who reported their sex as female	527 (57.5%)	--
Married	296 (32.3%)	--
Engaged	135 (14.7%)	--
Not married	485 (53.0%)	--
White	354 (38.7%)	--
Black	194 (21.2%)	--
Asian	104 (11.4%)	--
Latinx	169 (18.5%)	--
Participants with less than a Bachelor's degree	505 (55.1%)	--
Participants with at least a Bachelor's degree	408 (44.5%)	--
Student loan debt	1.87	2.61
Value of savings > $1,000	588 (64.2%)	--
Value of savings ≤ $1,000	319 (34.8%)	--

Note: *A score of 2 on the student loan debt scale represents having between $5,000 and $9,999 of student loan debt.*

Figure 1

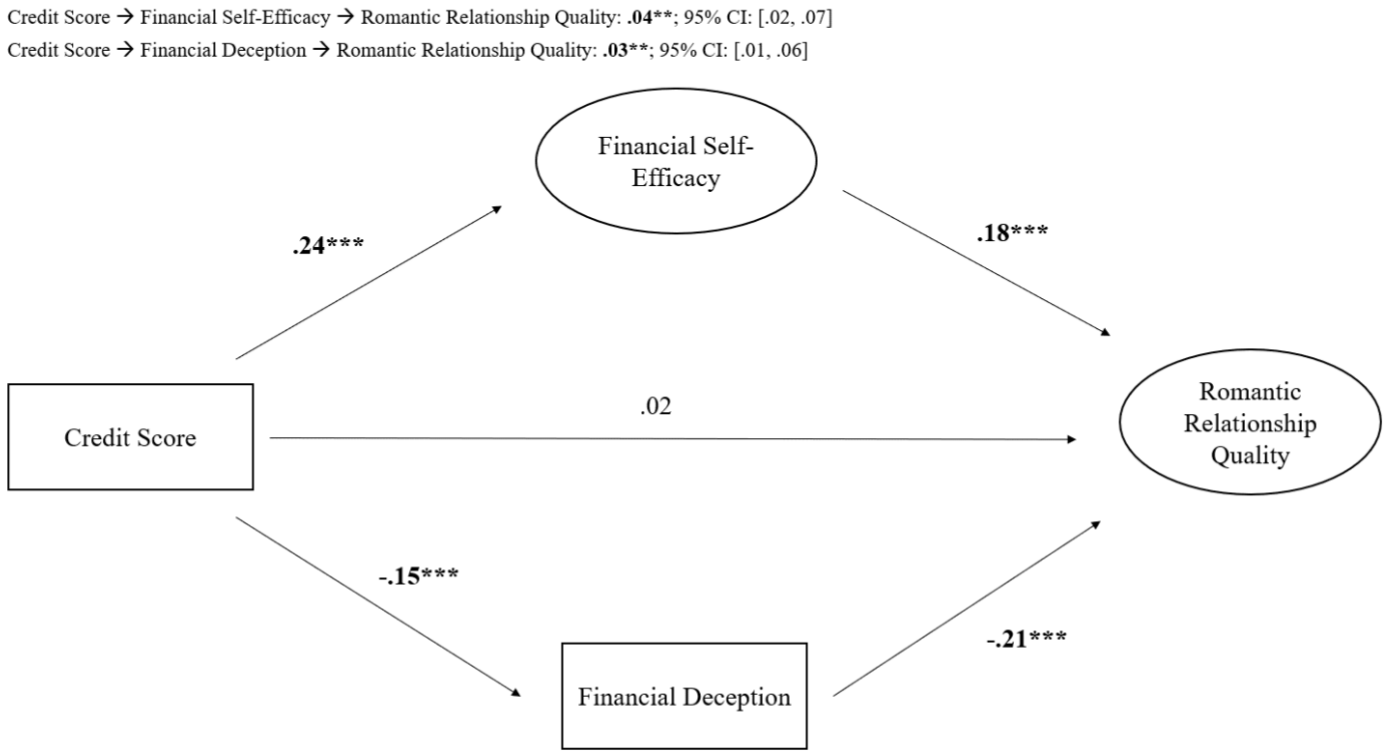
Conceptual Model of Indirect Associations between Credit Score and Romantic Relationship Quality



Note: For the sake of brevity, we do not show controlling for age, education, romantic relationship status, value of savings, and student loan debt. Ellipses represent latent variables, and rectangles represent observed variables.

Figure 2

Standardized SEM Results



*Note: Not shown in the figure for simplicity, analyses adjusted for age, education, romantic relationship status, value of savings, and student loan debt. Associations with control variables are available upon request to the first author. Ovals represent latent variables, and rectangles represent observed variables. CI stands for confidence interval, and 95% confidence intervals were estimated with 5,000 bootstraps. N = 916. ** p < .01, and *** p < .001.*