

# Chronological description of south Brazilian adolescents romantic behaviors

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**Abstract:** There is an extent Brazilian literature that focuses on sexual initiation and adolescent sexuality already exists, however, the investigation of romantic pre-sexual behaviors is still scarce. This study aimed at describing the age of onset of different romantic behaviors in teenagers of Porto Alegre and Canoas, in Rio Grande do Sul, in Brazil, seeking to identify a possible chronology. Adolescents ( $n = 380$ ), both female (66.2%,  $n = 240$ ) and male (33.8%,  $n = 123$ ), from public and private schools, with an age average of 14.6 years ( $SD = 1.47$ ), filled a sociodemographic questionnaire and the *Romantic History Survey*. Adolescents begin to be romantically interested in other people around 10-11 years, and this interest evolved at the 14-15 years range when a romantic relationship happens. There is a significant difference between male and female adolescents regarding the beginning of a romantic interest and dating because it happens to girls earlier than to boys. Qualitative studies, that include family, friends and romantic partners' perspective, may increase the understanding of this topic.

**Keywords:** adolescent development; adolescence; emotional development; dating; psychosocial development.

## DESCRIÇÃO CRONOLÓGICA DAS MANIFESTAÇÕES AMOROSAS DE ADOLESCENTES DO SUL DO BRASIL

**Resumo:** A literatura brasileira sobre iniciação sexual e sexualidade na adolescência é vasta, no entanto, verifica-se uma escassez de investigações sobre as manifestações amorosas pré-sexuais. Objetivou-se descrever a idade de início de diferentes manifestações amorosas de adolescentes de Porto Alegre e de Canoas, no Rio Grande do Sul, buscando identificar uma possível cronologia. Adolescentes ( $n = 380$ ) do sexo feminino (66,2%,  $n = 240$ ) e masculino (33,8%,  $n = 123$ ), estudantes de escolas públicas e privadas, com média de idade de 14,6 anos ( $DP = 1,47$ ), preencheram uma ficha de dados sociodemográficos e o *Romantic History Survey*. Verificou-se o início do interesse romântico aos 10-11 anos de idade, e aos 14-15 anos a efetivação desse interesse em um relacionamento amoroso. Foi observada diferença significativa quanto ao início do interesse romântico e de encontros amorosos conforme o sexo, mais precoces para as meninas em comparação aos meninos. Estudos qualitativos e que incluem a perspectiva de familiares, amigos e parceiros amorosos permitiriam ampliar a compreensão do tema.

**Palavras-chave:** desenvolvimento do adolescente; adolescência; desenvolvimento emocional; namoro; desenvolvimento psicossocial.

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## DESCRIPCIÓN CRONOLÓGICA DE LAS MANIFESTACIONES AMOROSAS DE ADOLESCENTES DEL SUR DE BRASIL

**Resumen:** En Brasil, la literatura sobre la iniciación sexual y la sexualidad de los adolescentes es amplia. Sin embargo, investigaciones sobre las manifestaciones amorosas pre-sexuales son aún escasas. Ese estudio tuvo como objetivo describir la edad de inicio de diferentes manifestaciones románticas en adolescentes de Porto Alegre y Canoas/RS, buscando identificar una posible cronología. Adolescentes ( $n = 380$ ) del sexo femenino (66,2%,  $n = 240$ ) y masculino (33,8%,  $n = 123$ ), estudiantes de escuelas públicas y privadas, con una media de edad de 14,6 años ( $DP = 1,47$ ), llenaron una ficha de datos sociodemográficos y el *Romantic History Survey*. Se verificó el inicio del interés romántico a los 10-11 años de edad y a los 14-15 años, el establecimiento de una relación amorosa, concretizando ese interés. Se identificó una diferencia significativa relacionado con el inicio del interés y de los encuentros amorosos según el sexo, más precoces para las niñas en comparación a los niños. Estudios cualitativos y que incluyan la perspectiva de la familia, amigos y parejas amorosas, permitirían ampliar la comprensión del tema.

**Palabras clave:** desarrollo de los adolescentes; adolescencia; desarrollo emocional; noviazgo; desarrollo psicosocial.

## Introduction

Adolescence is a period of experimentation of different roles and experiences, among them, those related to the romantic and sexual contexts (Feldman, Papalia, & Wendkos, 2013). According to Hebert, Fales, Nangle, Papadakis, & Grover (2013), in the relationships of friendship, the adolescents find a space in which they can develop the social skills necessary for success in other contexts with peers, such as romantic relationships.

In this direction, Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke (2001) argue that the motivations for a romantic relationship probably include a desire for intimacy, emotional security, and attachment, whereas motivations for sexual fulfillment may consist of pleasure, stimulation, conquest, and reinforcement of the sexual self-esteem. In this context, it is clear that the coexistence in groups of mixed pairs, coupled with the physical development and the emergence of sexual desires, leads to romantic attraction (Shulman & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001), which can, in turn, lead to sexual initiation.

In Brazil, Bretas, Ohara, Jardim, Aguiar Jr., & Oliveira (2011) affirm that more boys than girls have their first sexual experience, on average, at the age of 14 years (91% and 60%, respectively). Baptista, Maciel, Caldeira, Tupinambás, & Greco's (2012) study conducted with adolescents from Minas Gerais, in which the mean age at first sexual intercourse was 14.18 years ( $SD = 1.89$ ) corroborated this data. Likewise, Vonk, Bonan, & Silva (2013) found the age of 15 to 19 years for the sexual initiation of girls, and 12 to 14 years for boys, in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Tronco and Dell'Aglio (2012) highlighted that adolescents from public schools tend to have the first sexual intercourse with a mean age of 14.25 years, the mean of the boys being significantly lower ( $M = 13.94$ ) than that of the girls ( $M = 14.57$ ).

In addition to sexual initiation, we find few current studies on the age of the first kiss or the first occurrence of "going out," which could be considered the initial romantic manifestations of adolescents, preceding dating and sexual intercourse

(Heilborn, Bozon, Aquino, Knauth, Rohden, & Cabral, 2008). For example, a study by Borges and Schor (2007), conducted with male participants only, aged 15 to 19 years, in the city of São Paulo, showed the mean age of the first kiss, first date and first sexual intercourse as being, respectively, 11.5 years, 13.2 years and 14.9 years. Heilborn et al. (2008), based on a multicenter study with more than 200 participants, indicated 15 years as the age of first dating, with sexual initiation at around 16 years for adolescents of both sexes. We can note, then, that the first affective-romantic manifestations and the first pre-sexual experiences, which are usually present in dating relationships, predominantly occur before the age of 15 among Brazilians.

Despite the existence of a vast national literature focusing on sexual initiation and adolescent sexuality, there is still a paucity of research on pre-sexual romantic manifestations. These manifestations are still little known about the age and order of occurrence in Brazil, which was confirmed by a search of databases, such as Scielo and BVS Psychology, using the terms "Amorous Relationships" and "Adolescence" and "Romantic Relationships" and "Adolescence," in which we found only 23 articles (Scielo = 5, BVS Psychology = 18). Among these, just one focused on pre-sexual romantic manifestations (Melo & Mota, 2013). So, there is an essential gap in the literature, which indicates the need for further study on the theme, so that it is possible to evidence different stages of typical romantic development among Brazilian adolescents. Thus, the present study aimed at describing the age of onset of various romantic manifestations of adolescents from Porto Alegre and Canoas/RS, seeking to identify a possible chronology of the appearance of these demonstrations.

## Method

### Participants

Adolescents ( $n = 380$ ) of both sexes (female: 66.2%,  $n = 240$ ; male: 33.8%,  $n = 123$ ), with a mean age of 14.6 years ( $SD = 1.47$ ), students from public and private schools in Porto Alegre and Canoas/RS. Of these, 61.7% ( $n = 231$ ) attended elementary school and 38.2% ( $n = 143$ ) high school. The majority of the sample (85.2%,  $n = 324$ ) did not work and did not have children (97.3%,  $n = 370$ ). The mean family income reported by the adolescents was 4 to 6 minimum wages (equivalent to an average of R\$ 3,110.00 at the time of data collection), and they lived with a mean of 4.4 ( $SD = 2.12$ ) people. Regarding religion, 51.8% ( $n = 197$ ) reported Catholicism, and 26.8% ( $n = 102$ ) said they were "casual practitioners" of the religion of choice.

All the participants were part of a more extensive study, entitled "Romantic Relationships of Gaúcho Adolescents: Assessment and Psychosocial Intervention" (Levandowski & Wagner, 2010), from which this study derives. For this study, we contacted the adolescents in their schools. The schools ( $n = 13$ ) were chosen by convenience, with four belonging to the private school system and nine the public system. Participants could not present mental retardation or any other condition that

would prevent them from responding to the instruments. They had to be between the ages of 12 and 18 years and present authorization to participate from a person responsible. We should highlight that it was irrelevant whether the young people were involved in a romantic relationship or not at the time of the study.

## Instruments

*Sociodemographic Data Form*: adapted from Wagner and Mosmann (2010), aiming to characterize the sample regarding age, sex, income, schooling, religion, housing, children, and occupation.

*Romantic History Survey - RHS* (Buhrmester, 2001): a questionnaire assessing the age of occurrence (age of onset) and duration (in years) of different romantic and sexual manifestations of the adolescents for a romantic partner. The RHS items (e.g., At what age were you romantically interested in boys/girls? At what age did you have intimate friends of the opposite sex with whom you were not romantically involved? At what age did you feel that you were in love with someone?, etc.) are answered on a Likert type scale of five-points corresponding to the following age group intervals: 8-9 years, 10-11 years, 12-13 years, 14-15 years and 16-17 years. The participant must indicate the age at which the statements occurred and the periods at which the report may have continued to occur (e.g., started at 8-9 years and occurred up to 14-15 years). As the questionnaire evaluates several possible manifestations related to the romantic involvement in adolescence, the respondent may not have experienced some of these events. Thus, in the present study, participants were instructed not to complete the questions related to activities they had not experienced. The RHS does not provide any classification, serving to map the age and intervals of initiation of each romantic manifestation. In this study, the analysis focused on the age of onset of these manifestations. A translation-back-translation process of the original instrument (from English to Brazilian Portuguese) was performed, with English teachers and researchers with mastery of both languages, aiming to guarantee the adequacy of the content of the version used in this study. It is necessary to note that there are no validation studies of this instrument in Brazil or abroad.

## Procedures

*Data collection*: After the approval of the study by the Research Ethics Committee (CEP) of UFCSPA, we contacted several public (municipal and state) and private schools of Porto Alegre and Canoas/RS. After authorization from the Board of Directors, the researchers presented the study in different classes and returned to the school on another occasion for the application of the instruments with only the adolescents who had given the consent form signed by those responsible. Convenience chose the schools, that is, according to their willingness for the performance of the study. There was no exclusion nor withdrawal of the participants that returned the consent forms signed by

the parents. However, the rate of return of these signed documents, allowing the participation of adolescents, was approximately 20%, varying in each class and school.

The collection was carried out in a classroom assigned for this purpose. The two instruments were organized to form a single form, and each participant took approximately 30 to 45 minutes to respond. In the end, we placed the form in a brown envelope by the participant, sealed and numbered, which was the identification number in the study. We recorded all data in SPSS version 16.0 and double-checked by people blinded to the collection procedures, aiming to eliminate input errors.

We should clarify that, for a small number of participants ( $N = 26$ ), data collection took place online. We presented the study to the research team contact network in the schools, according to the procedures described above and, with a link, the adolescents accessed the form from their homes, at their preferred time.

*Data analysis:* It was decided to present only the data regarding the age of onset of the different romantic and pre-sexual manifestations of the adolescents, disregarding the information about their duration (occurrence interval). Descriptive statistical analyses were performed to characterize the participants and to present the results of each of the RHS items. We performed statistical analyses using the chi-square test to identify possible differences in response in RHS items according to the sex of the respondent. Besides, we conducted a bivariate correlation analysis between the RHS items and other sociodemographic variables of interest.

*Ethical considerations:* The study followed all ethical recommendations for researching with human subjects. The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of UFCSPA (authorization No. 1321/11) and analyzed by the board of directors of each of the schools and the State Department of Education of RS team. The parents/guardians entered their ID numbers in the online collection or signed the consent form in the face-to-face collection, and the adolescents expressed their agreement to participate in a separate consent form. The instruments used did not pose any risk to the participants.

## Results and Discussion

The descriptive analysis of the data (Table 1) indicated that most of the first romantic manifestations of the adolescents investigated occurred in the age group 12 to 13 years, followed by the age group 14 to 15 years. Items 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 demonstrate this preponderance. Considering the elements in which this was the most frequent age group, we found that these ranged from behaviors, such as holding hands (37.9% of 272 respondents said they had experienced this,  $n = 103$ ), to more complex feelings, such as being in love with someone or telling someone they love them, which were indicated by 41.9% of 313 respondents ( $n = 131$ ) and 40% of 240 respondents ( $n = 96$ ), respectively. Together, these items show romantic manifestations before a romantic relationship by some of the adolescents.

**Table 1. Results of the items of the Romantic History Survey – Romantic manifestations pre-romantic relationship.**

Item At what age...	Total of respondents	8-9 years	10-11 years	12-13 years	14-15 years	16-17 years
1. Did you not have dates and had not been romantically involved?	280	<b>74.6%</b> (n = 209)	12.1% (n = 34)	7.9% (n = 22)	4.3% (n = 12)	1.1% (n = 3)
2. Were you romantically interested in girls/boys?	326	16.3% (n = 53)	31.3% (n = 102)	<b>38%</b> (n = 124)	13.2% (n = 43)	13.2% (n = 4)
3. Did you have intimate friends of the opposite sex with whom you were not romantically involved?	258	<b>31.4%</b> (n = 81)	22.9% (n = 59)	29.5% (n = 76)	12.8% (n = 33)	3.5% (n = 9)
4. Were you interested in someone?	317	13.9% (n = 44)	34.7% (n = 110)	<b>36.3%</b> (n = 115)	11.7% (n = 37)	3.5% (n = 11)
5. Did you have 'group dates', where you would be with someone you liked at a party, movie, skating and so on, when friends were around.	275	4.4% (n = 12)	15.6% (n = 43)	<b>49.1%</b> (n = 135)	27.3% (n = 75)	3.6% (n = 10)
6. Did you date or go out with the same person at least once?	254	3.1% (n = 8)	12.2% (n = 31)	<b>48.8%</b> (n = 124)	29.9% (n = 76)	5.9% (n = 15)
7. Did you feel that you were in love with someone?	313	7.3% (n = 23)	19.8% (n = 62)	<b>41.9%</b> (n = 131)	25.2% (n = 79)	5.8% (n = 18)
8. Did you tell someone you loved him/her?	240	4.1% (n = 10)	13.8% (n = 33)	<b>40.0%</b> (n = 96)	30.8% (n = 74)	11.3% (n = 27)
9. Did you hold hands with someone?	272	12.5% (n = 34)	13.2% (n = 36)	<b>37.9%</b> (n = 103)	30.1% (n = 82)	6.3% (n = 17)

Source: The authors.

Conversely, it is interesting to observe (Table 1) that, in the age group of 8 to 9 years or before, the vast majority of 280 respondents (74.6%, n = 209) stated that they had not encountered or had involvement with love (item 1). Furthermore, in item 2, a

significant percentage responded that they were romantically interested in the age range 10 to 11 years (31%;  $n = 102$ ). The same happened with item 4, about "being interested in someone," in which 34.7% ( $n = 110$ ) of the 317 respondents reported the age range of 10 to 11 years and 36.3% ( $n = 115$ ) that of 12 to 13 years.

Thus, the data suggest that the first manifestations began, for the sample studied, at 10 to 11 years, and not before that, and that the vast majority of the adolescents were already romantically interested at 12 to 13 years of age. Also, it is possible to see that behaviors and feelings varied in intensity and complexity in this period of life, as indicated by the items of the RHS, which ranged from simple to more complex behaviors, such as being in love and telling someone that you love them. These findings agree with studies carried out with Brazilian samples, which indicate that the first affective-romantic manifestations and the first pre-sexual experiences occur predominantly before the age of 15 (Borges & Schor, 2007; Heilborn et al., 2008). Other Brazilian studies indicate that the beginning of sexual practice in adolescence, a direct consequence of romantic interest and pre-sexual experiences, would occur between 14 and 17 years of age (Santos, Albuquerque, Bandeira, & Colares, 2015), corroborating the idea that romantic interest and involvement would be part of a developmental sequence that would culminate in the sexual relationship of adolescents.

The findings of the present study also agree with the literature reviewed on the construction of a mixed friends network before romantic involvement, as concerning item 3 (having intimate friends of the opposite sex without being romantically involved), 31.4% ( $n = 81$ ) of 258 respondents reported the beginning of this behavior at the age range of 8 to 9 years or earlier. Also, in item 5 (group meetings in which someone who you were interested in participated) 49.1% ( $n = 135$ ) of 275 respondents reported the beginning of this behavior at the age range of 12 to 13 years. These results highlight the importance of the friend's network in the construction of romantic relationships in adolescence since adolescents seem to use this network as an environment conducive to their first romantic interactions. In this way, the idea conveyed in the international literature regarding the facilitating role of the peer group in romantic involvement, by enabling socialization in the romantic role and promoting behaviors and thoughts in this context, is confirmed (Hebert et al., 2013).

The findings also illustrate the developmental sequence theorized by Canadian and American researchers, namely: involvement of adolescents in peer groups formed by same-sex friends, followed by involvement in peer groups formed by friends of both sexes, followed by the first behaviors of romantic interest, and, later, of romantic involvement (Connolly et al., 2004). In agreement with this perspective, Shulman and Sneiffge-Krenke (2001) indicated the existence of an initiation phase, followed by a period of affiliation. These are characterized, respectively, by feelings of attraction and little contact with the person of interest and by more significant contact with the person of interest through mixed groups, which is corroborated by the findings of the present study.

As far as romantic relationships are concerned, Table 2 shows the items corresponding to manifestations of romantic involvement. In item 10, the age at which regular encounters with a person occurred, the majority (42.4%,  $n = 89$ ) of 210 respondents indicated the age range between 14 and 15 years as the starting point for this event. However, it is interesting to note that 41% of the respondents ( $n = 86$ ) indicated the age of 12 to 13 years as the moment that this behavior began, which suggests that, for an expressive part of the adolescents studied, this behavior already appeared at a previous moment. In the responses of the adolescents to other items, such as 11, 12 and 15, which demonstrate characteristics of commitment to a relationship, the majority considered the period of 14 to 15 years as the age of occurrence. This fact corroborates the idea that the more interactive and relational (as opposed to more subjective) romantic manifestations are more frequent for adolescents from the age of 14 years.

**Table 2. Results of the items of the Romantic History Survey – Romantic manifestations during the romantic relationship**

Item At what age...	Total of respondents	8-9 years	10-11 years	12-13 years	14-15 years	16-17 years
10. Did you date or go out with one person on a fairly regular basis for at least 2 months?	210	1.9% ( $n = 4$ )	7.6% ( $n = 16$ )	41% ( $n = 86$ )	<b>42.4%</b> ( $n = 89$ )	7.1% ( $n = 15$ )
11. Did you have an exclusive relationship for at least two months, where you only saw each another, but did not necessarily plan to date/marry or live together?	176	4.5% ( $n = 8$ )	6.8% ( $n = 12$ )	36.9% ( $n = 65$ )	<b>44.3%</b> ( $n = 78$ )	7.4% ( $n = 13$ )
12. Did you have a committed relationship in which you planned to date/marry or live together?	93	4.3% ( $n = 4$ )	5.4% ( $n = 5$ )	21.5% ( $n = 20$ )	<b>45.2%</b> ( $n = 42$ )	23.7% ( $n = 22$ )
13. Did you go through an emotionally intense breakup?	152	2% ( $n = 3$ )	8.6% ( $n = 13$ )	36.2% ( $n = 55$ )	<b>40.8%</b> ( $n = 62$ )	12.5% ( $n = 19$ )

(to be continued)



**Table 2. Results of the items of the Romantic History Survey – Romantic manifestations during the romantic relationship**

14. Did you end a romantic relationship with someone, where the person wished to continue?	172	1.7% (n = 3)	8.7% (n = 15)	<b>43.6%</b> (n = 75)	38.4% (n = 66)	7.6% (n = 13)
15. Were you married or living with a romantic partner?	31	6.5% (n = 2)	12.9% (n = 4)	25.8% (n = 8)	<b>35.5%</b> (n = 11)	19.4% (n = 6)

Source: The authors.

In general, the findings of this study are in line with those found in the Brazilian literature, which indicates the age of 15 as the age at which the first dating occurs (Heilborn et al., 2008). Likewise, these results corroborate the international literature, in which, according to the studies reviewed by Gembeck (2002), the average age of first dating was 15 years for North American white girls and 16 years for black girls.

Furthermore, in item 13, when asked about the experience of an emotionally intense breakup, 40.8% of the respondents (n = 62) indicated the age range of 14 to 15 years, suggesting that future repercussions of the romantic involvement also happen in this age group. These consequences can only occur at a time when the adolescent considers that he or she has established some form of romantic relationship. Complementing this finding, it is also interesting to note that in item 14, which asks about terminating a relationship, 43.6% (n = 75) reported the beginning of this occurrence at the interval of 12 to 13 years.

Together, these data suggest that it is at the age of 14 to 15 years that romantic relationships seem to become established and assume a character of commitment for the adolescents, as opposed to the previous period, marked by the emergence of romantic interest and more casual encounters, without continuity. Thus, there is an evidence of the developmental sequence since the manifestations appear to be increasing regarding quality and focus (from something purely individual and subjective to something relational and intersubjective). These findings agree with the international literature, which indicates the occurrence of such phenomena in a romantic development process in adolescence (Shulman & Sneiffge-Krenke, 2001). However, one limitation of the present study is that it did not investigate, among the manifestations, the occurrence of the first sexual relationship, which would be the expected outcome of this second group of phenomena, due to their interpersonal/intersubjective character.

**Table 3. Results of the chi-squared test - Differences between boys and girls in the 12-13 years age group.**

Item	Chi-squared	Frequencies
<i>At what age...</i>		
2. Were you romantically interested in girls/boys?	$\chi^2[4] = 12.895, p < .05$	Girls (f = 92;77.3%) Boys (f = 27;22.7%)
4. Were you interested in someone?	$\chi^2[4] = 14.021, p < .05$	Girls (f = 85; 80.2%) Boys (f = 21;19.8%)
6. Did you date or go out with the same person at least once?	$\chi^2[4] = 15.207, p < .05$	Girls (f = 85;80.2%) Boys (f = 21;19.8%)
7. Did you feel that you were in love with someone?	$\chi^2[4] = 18.672, p < .05$	Girls (f = 99;79.2%) Boys (f = 26;20.8%)
8. Did you tell someone you loved him/her?	$\chi^2[4] = 15.076, p < .05$	Girls (f = 73;76%) Boys (f = 23;24%)

Source: The authors.

In a second moment, to verify eventual differences in the responses to the RHS items according to the sex of the respondent (male or female), we performed chi-squared analyses, for which only valid cases were considered for the sex variable and the items of the RHS. As shown in the items in Table 3, there were significant differences between the frequencies of responses categorized by sex, with a preponderance of female respondents in the 12 to 13 age group. Thus, the girls demonstrated an earlier onset, in comparison to the boys, of different romantic manifestations, such as the emergence of romantic interest and the experience of a romantic encounter. Another result that corroborates this finding is the significant difference ( $\chi^2[4] = 11.936, p < .05$ ) found between boys and girls, regarding the response to item 11 of the age group of 14 to 15 years, "*At what age did you have an exclusive relationship for at least two months, where you only saw each another, but did not necessarily plan to date/marry or live together?*". Of 176 respondents, 76% (f = 56) were girls and 24% (f = 18) were boys.

These findings may be related, to some extent, to the onset of puberty, which is also more precocious in females (Shaffer, Kipp, Wood, & Willoughby, 2013), leading girls to show romantic interest before boys, since physical development and the emergence of sexual desires lead to romantic attraction (Shulman & Seiffge-Krenke, 2001). In fact, the mean age of the sample in the present study was 14.6 years, the average age at which boys reach spermatheche. However, girls reach menarche on average at age 12.5 years (Shaffer et al., 2013), which is in line with the above. In this

sense, Skoog & Özdemir (2015), in a study with Swedish girls, found that the emergence of secondary sexual characteristics was the main explanatory component for unwanted sexual harassment suffered by the adolescents. Thus, it can be hypothesized that the early onset of puberty in girls may lead to greater sexual exposure, something that may also contribute to the onset of romantic interest.

From this same perspective, Kindelberger and Tsao (2014) highlighted different motivations for engagement in a romantic relationship, which are based on different needs and systems (biological, group membership, attachment, and care). Thus, according to the authors, biological needs could direct the motivation for involvement in romantic relationships in early adolescence. However, a romantic relationship could also satisfy the group membership system, since the authors showed that one of the leading advantages of being emotionally involved with someone is support and companionship (Kindelberger & Tsao, 2014).

It is possible to understand the findings of the present study from the statements of Volpe, Morales-Alemán, & Teitelman (2014), derived from a qualitative research with 14 North-American adolescents. The authors identified social pressure for the involvement of girls in a romantic relationship, due to either social status or understanding this involvement as a norm of their peer group. Harassment by other men also influences the earlier romantic initiation of girls. In this way, both biological and social issues seem to be present in the early romantic initiation of girls. Although these aspects were not the focus of the present study, their consideration helps to understand the findings.

Finally, we performed a bivariate correlation analysis between the RHS items and other socio-demographic variables, such as mean family income, the number of people with whom the adolescent resided, religion and practicing a religion, parents' marital status, having children or not, and adolescent occupational status (working or not). However, we found no significant associations. It is also important to note that there were no significant differences between the participants who answered the instruments in person or online about all aspects investigated.

## Conclusions

This study aimed at describing the age of onset of adolescents from Porto Alegre and Canoas/RS different romantic manifestations, seeking to identify a chronology. The findings allow us to conclude that adolescents began to become romantically interested in other people in the age range of 10 to 11 years and that between 12 and 13 years the vast majority had already demonstrated the behavior of romantic interest towards someone. According to the data collected, this interest tends to present an evolution in the range of 14 to 15 years, when it becomes effective in a romantic involvement. In this way, adolescents leave romantic encounters, which begin to happen in the age range of 12 to 13 years, for more stable relationships from the age

of 14 to 15 years. Finally, the findings indicated a significant difference, according to the sex of the adolescent, regarding the moment of occurrence of some romantic manifestations, with the girls demonstrating more precocity about the interest and the experience of a romantic encounter.

These results allow us to broaden the knowledge about romantic relationships in adolescence in the Brazilian context. Although the results were from research conducted with adolescents from two cities in Rio Grande do Sul, they portray the reality found among adolescents of both sexes and from different socioeconomic levels. The limitation about the context of the sample could overcome in future multicenter studies with young people who are no longer attending school, for whom the chronology identified here may not correspond.

It is necessary to note that some limitations were found concerning the use of an instrument still untested in the country (RHS, Buhrmester, 2001). One of these would be the lack of validation of the RHS for the Brazilian population, which makes comparisons impossible. There were also difficulties in the completion of the instrument. For example, the participants were asked not to complete the items not yet experienced by them, which precludes an appropriate distinction between those questions that the participants did not fill out because they had not experienced them and those that they did not fill out due to some misunderstanding. Concerning the duration of the events described, the adolescents were instructed to indicate all the age groups in which these occurred. However, because answers presentation, there may have been a failure to interpret this instruction, with adolescents reporting, for the most part, only the age at which the event started, which made this second type of analysis unfeasible. It is, however, thought that the RHS provided interesting results and that its items, which focus on the evolution from romantic feeling to a romantic involvement, could be complemented by other statements that address the sexual interest and even sexual experiences, to which the phenomena studied here converge.

Studies that included data collection with family, friends and romantic partners would complement the understanding of the typical process of romantic development of Brazilian adolescents. They could also mitigate a possible collection bias in the present study, which relied only on adolescents self-reports, especially considering the delicate and socially taboo nature of the subject. However, even with the limitations highlighted, the findings of the present study provide important support for the development of interventions with this public, demonstrating the most relevant age windows for implementing educational actions regarding sexuality and conjugal health, for example.

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