

Article history:
Received 12 January 2025
Revised 02 March 2025
Accepted 12 March 2025
Published online 01 May 2025

Strategies for Scaling Micro-Affections to Sustain Long-Term Bonding: A Qualitative Study of Hungarian Couples

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Article

How to cite this article:

Conti, M., & Kovács, E. (2025). Strategies for Scaling Micro-Affections to Sustain Long-Term Bonding: A Qualitative Study of Hungarian Couples. *Applied Family Therapy Journal*, 6(3), 1-9.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.aftj.6.3.15>



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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore and conceptualize the everyday strategies couples use to scale micro-affections—small, intentional acts of love and care—in order to sustain emotional closeness and long-term relational stability.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative design with an exploratory, interpretive approach was employed. Twenty Hungarian participants (10 couples) in long-term romantic relationships, ranging from 5 to 22 years, were selected through purposive sampling. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted until theoretical saturation was reached. The interviews, lasting 60–90 minutes, explored couples' practices for maintaining connection, emotional safety, and adapting to life transitions. Data were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using a thematic approach supported by NVivo 14. Open, axial, and selective coding were applied to generate categories and subcategories, while constant comparison, memo writing, and member checking enhanced analytic rigor and trustworthiness.

Findings: Three overarching themes emerged: nurturing everyday connection, sustaining emotional safety, and adaptive relationship growth. Couples sustained closeness through daily affectionate rituals, creative micro-gestures, and symbolic tokens of care. Emotional security was reinforced by responsive support, mutual vulnerability, quick conflict repair, gratitude, and respectful autonomy. Adaptive growth was maintained by updating love languages, co-creating future visions, sustaining playfulness, and integrating cultural traditions into evolving relational narratives. These strategies functioned as protective mechanisms against emotional distance and relational stagnation, enabling couples to maintain satisfaction despite external pressures and life transitions.

Conclusion: The findings demonstrate that sustaining long-term romantic stability relies on the intentional, iterative use of small-scale affectionate behaviors embedded within a safe and adaptive relational climate. Understanding these lived strategies enriches theoretical models of marital maintenance and provides culturally informed, actionable insights for couple therapy, relationship education, and prevention of disaffection.

Keywords: *Micro-affections; marital stability; emotional safety; adaptive bonding; qualitative research; Hungary*

1. Introduction

Long-term romantic relationships are sustained not only by major life commitments but also by subtle and recurrent patterns of emotional connection that help partners remain bonded over time. Research on marital stability has consistently shown that beyond structural factors such as legal commitment or shared resources, the quality of everyday emotional exchanges plays a decisive role in whether partners feel secure and satisfied (Koenig et al., 2024; Stanley et al., 2010). In recent decades, scholars have moved beyond macro-level predictors of stability to examine nuanced psychological and relational processes that help couples resist relational decay (Waldron & Farnworth, 2020; Wang et al., 2025). This shift responds to the recognition that sustaining closeness in long-term partnerships is a dynamic, adaptive process rather than a static achievement. Couples who succeed in maintaining satisfaction frequently rely on small-scale affectionate interactions—sometimes called “micro-affections”—that build a climate of warmth and resilience even amid stress (Kashdan et al., 2013; Philippe et al., 2013).

Micro-affections refer to ordinary yet intentional behaviors such as brief affirmations, comforting gestures, or small shared rituals that sustain positive emotional tone and reinforce relational security (Kashdan et al., 2013; Philippe et al., 2013). Such practices echo findings that affective quality during adolescence predicts later adult romantic functioning (Kansky et al., 2019). Research also indicates that couples who sustain emotional closeness cultivate adaptive cognitive and emotional strategies to interpret daily interactions constructively and maintain hope during difficult seasons (Del Palacio-González et al., 2017; Wells et al., 2016). The importance of subtle affective exchanges is further underscored by resilience studies, which show that partners who successfully “steel against adversity” in midlife rely heavily on consistent yet flexible supportive practices (Waldron & Farnworth, 2020). These findings collectively suggest that sustaining bonding is not reliant on grand gestures alone but on the cumulative power of frequent, emotionally attuned actions.

Emotional safety and vulnerability also appear central to long-term relational health. When partners feel secure to disclose vulnerabilities, admit distress, and share fears, they foster deepened intimacy and resilience against disaffection (Baher Talari et al., 2024; Wells et al., 2016). Conversely, when emotions remain unexpressed, alexithymia and emotional withdrawal predict lower perceived support and

greater relational fragility (Ghaedi et al., 2022; Wells et al., 2016). Cognitive factors shape these processes; difficulties in emotion regulation and cognitive distortions have been linked to increased marital dissatisfaction and disaffection (Baher Talari et al., 2024; Karbasian et al., 2023; Mahmoodian et al., 2021). Indeed, couples who cannot effectively repair conflict or regulate emotional distress risk progressive disengagement and even divorce (Ghaedi et al., 2022). Conversely, marital therapy frameworks emphasize that practicing forgiveness and supportive interpretation of each partner’s flaws fosters re-engagement and closeness (Baher Talari et al., 2024).

Sociocultural and contextual factors further influence how micro-affections and emotional safety are expressed and sustained. Cross-cultural research highlights how commitment functions and relational scripts differ depending on family dynamics and cultural expectations (Singh & Shanbhag, 2025; Stanley et al., 2010). For example, parental interference and extended family involvement in certain societies can challenge marital autonomy and threaten stability (Okonkwo, 2024; Singh & Shanbhag, 2025). In Hungary and other Central and Eastern European contexts, strong family networks may support bonding but also introduce normative pressures that complicate intimate emotional exchanges (Opekina & Saporovskaya, 2022). In some cultural climates, couples rely more on private rituals and shared personal history to maintain their bond despite external demands (Opekina & Saporovskaya, 2022; Philippe et al., 2013). At the same time, global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic have exposed vulnerabilities and prompted couples to rethink their strategies for maintaining connection under stress (Alquran, 2024). Studies show that marital compatibility and stability during crisis were bolstered by flexibility in communication and an ability to generate positive micro-moments despite environmental strain (Alquran, 2024; Dalhatu & Muhammad, 2024).

Personality and psychological resources also contribute to whether couples can sustain affectional bonds over time. Dark personality traits and low ego strength have been implicated in marital instability (Javadi Koma et al., 2024), while high empathy and self-regulation can buffer against these vulnerabilities and promote emotional closeness (Dehghani et al., 2011; Javadi Koma et al., 2024). Executive control and self-regulation capacities appear particularly important in maintaining faithfulness and resisting relational decline (Ueda et al., 2018). Psychological flexibility and growth after adversity have been associated with adaptive

cognitive processing of relationship challenges (Del Palacio-González et al., 2017). Likewise, couples who can maintain curiosity and a positive orientation toward each other's personal development tend to show stronger resilience (Kashdan et al., 2013; Waldron & Farnworth, 2020). These findings underscore that sustainable bonding involves not only dyadic routines but also individual intrapersonal competencies that fuel relational adaptability.

Moreover, recent scholarship has broadened the lens to include structural and contextual predictors alongside emotional and cognitive ones. Marital stability is shaped by factors such as financial security, education, and religious alignment, yet these structural conditions alone are insufficient without relational maintenance behaviors (Acquah et al., 2024; Dalhatu & Muhammad, 2024; Koenig et al., 2024). For instance, couples with comparable educational levels and shared value systems often report greater satisfaction, but this effect is mediated by their daily supportive practices and communication patterns (Acquah et al., 2024; Dalhatu & Muhammad, 2024). Research also shows that cultural and social constraints can limit open self-disclosure, making intentional strategies to nurture micro-affections particularly vital (Okoiye et al., 2025; Okonkwo, 2024). These findings suggest that while external resources set the stage, the lived experience of bonding hinges on how couples navigate their day-to-day interactions and adapt affectional patterns to shifting demands.

Together, this body of work illuminates the need to examine not only broad predictors of marital stability but also the subtle, iterative strategies couples employ to keep love vital across time. However, despite growing interest in emotional maintenance and resilience, there remains a gap in understanding the concrete, lived practices partners use to "scale up" micro-affections so that they continue to nurture satisfaction and secure attachment. Many studies have conceptualized bonding processes abstractly or have focused on interventions after relational decline, rather than exploring everyday behaviors that prevent disconnection (Kansky et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2025). Additionally, much of the existing research is concentrated in Western and North American contexts, with limited attention to how couples in Central and Eastern Europe, including Hungary, navigate relational sustainability under their unique cultural and familial dynamics (Opekina & Saporovskaya, 2022).

This study seeks to address these gaps by exploring the lived strategies Hungarian couples use to scale micro-affections and maintain long-term bonding.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design with an exploratory and interpretive orientation to identify strategies for scaling micro-affections that sustain long-term bonding in intimate relationships. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants who were in long-term romantic partnerships (minimum of five years together) and self-reported a high degree of emotional closeness and satisfaction in their relationships. Theoretical saturation guided sample size determination, with data collection continuing until no new themes or insights emerged. A total of 20 participants (10 couples) from Hungary were included. The participants varied in age (ranging from 27 to 52 years), relationship duration (5 to 22 years), and included both married and cohabiting partners. Inclusion criteria were willingness to reflect on personal relational practices, fluency in Hungarian or English, and consent to audio-recorded interviews.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted between January and March 2025. The interview guide included broad, open-ended questions to elicit participants' experiences and practices in expressing small acts of affection, adapting these micro-affections over time, and overcoming relational stagnation. Probes encouraged deeper exploration of specific relational events and how participants negotiated change and maintained closeness. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted face-to-face or via secure online platforms when in-person meetings were not possible. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Field notes were taken during and immediately after each session to capture nonverbal cues, contextual information, and initial analytic impressions.

2.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic approach informed by constructivist grounded theory principles. Interview transcripts were imported into NVivo software version 14 for systematic coding and theme development. The analysis proceeded in three stages: initial open coding to identify discrete concepts and actions; axial coding to connect categories and subcategories based on relationships and

conditions; and selective coding to integrate the emerging themes into a coherent framework of strategies for scaling micro-affectations. Constant comparison was used throughout to refine categories by comparing new data with existing codes. Memos documented analytic decisions and theoretical reflections to enhance transparency and rigor. To ensure trustworthiness, member checking was conducted with several participants who reviewed preliminary findings for resonance and accuracy. Additionally, peer debriefing with two qualitative research experts supported reflexivity and minimized researcher bias.

3. Findings and Results

The study included 20 participants (10 heterosexual couples) from different regions of Hungary who were in long-term romantic relationships ranging from 5 to 22 years

($M = 11.8$ years, $SD = 4.7$). Participants' ages ranged from 27 to 52 years, with the majority between 31 and 40 years old ($n = 9$, 45%), followed by 41–50 years ($n = 7$, 35%) and 27–30 years ($n = 4$, 20%). Twelve participants (60%) were married, while eight (40%) were cohabiting but not legally married. Regarding education, most held at least a bachelor's degree ($n = 13$, 65%), while five (25%) had completed secondary education, and two (10%) had vocational training. Participants were engaged in diverse professions, including education ($n = 5$), healthcare ($n = 4$), engineering and technology ($n = 3$), small business ownership ($n = 3$), and other service sectors ($n = 5$). Household composition varied, with 14 participants (70%) living with children and 6 (30%) without children. These demographic characteristics ensured a heterogeneous sample and reflected a broad range of experiences and perspectives relevant to sustaining long-term bonding.

Table 1

Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Nurturing Everyday Connection	Ritualizing Affection	Morning greetings; Goodnight texts; Warm farewells; Shared mealtimes; Small check-ins during day
	Creative Micro-Gestures	Personalized notes; Inside jokes; Thoughtful emojis; Quick supportive touch; Spontaneous compliments
	Symbolic Tokens of Care	Surprise coffee/tea; Favorite snack delivery; Shared playlists; Personal mementos; Photos of special moments
	Attuned Daily Conversations	Asking about partner's day; Active listening; Validation of feelings; Remembering small details
	Affirming Identity	Using affectionate nicknames; Remembering partner's preferences; Celebrating personal growth
2. Sustaining Emotional Safety	Responsive Support	Immediate comfort after stress; Checking emotional temperature; Providing reassurance; Noticing withdrawal
	Gentle Conflict Repair	Quick apologies; Soothing humor; Offering perspective; Non-defensive touch
	Mutual Vulnerability	Sharing personal fears; Expressing future hopes; Discussing regrets; Openness about needs
	Respectful Autonomy	Allowing space after disagreements; Honoring alone time; Supporting individual hobbies
3. Adaptive Relationship Growth	Gratitude Practices	Expressing daily thanks; Naming partner's strengths; Acknowledging invisible efforts
	Celebratory Micro-Moments	Marking small wins; Mini toasts; Happy dances together
	Co-Creating Future Visions	Discussing shared goals; Imagining future projects; Dream mapping; Planning symbolic events
	Flexible Affectional Strategies	Adjusting love language; Trying new routines; Re-negotiating couple rituals
	Sustaining Playfulness	Flirtatious teasing; Shared humor; Light-hearted surprises; Re-enacting old memories
	Integrating Change and Transitions	Revisiting expectations; Reframing role changes; Emotional check-ins during stress periods
	Rebuilding After Emotional Distance	Initiating gentle reconnection; Offering forgiveness; Creating safe conversation space
Relational Learning & Reflection	Couples reading/learning together; Reflecting on past conflicts; Joint therapy or workshops	
Maintaining Shared Cultural Roots	Celebrating traditions; Blending family customs; Using cultural symbols of love	

Theme 1 – Nurturing Everyday Connection

The first overarching theme, *Nurturing Everyday Connection*, captured participants' intentional use of small

yet meaningful actions to maintain closeness and warmth in their long-term relationships. Couples described how seemingly ordinary rituals—such as morning greetings,

sharing goodnight texts, or sitting together for breakfast—created a rhythm of emotional presence throughout the day. One participant said, “*Every morning before leaving, even if we’re late, we hug and say ‘jó napot, szerelmem’ [good day, my love]; it’s like pressing the reset button on love.*” Another noted that quick check-ins during work breaks, even just sending a heart emoji or a short “thinking of you,” strengthened the sense of ongoing togetherness. Creativity emerged as a sustaining force; partners frequently used personalized gestures like leaving a handwritten note on the fridge, exchanging inside jokes, or making playful playlists. Symbolic tokens of care, including surprise coffee deliveries, favorite snacks, or framed photos of memorable trips, were perceived as physical manifestations of affection. Attuned daily conversations also played a key role, with couples emphasizing listening carefully and validating feelings: “*When I tell him something that upset me at work, he always looks up, stops what he’s doing, and says, ‘I get it, that’s tough,’ and it makes me feel seen.*” Another dimension was affirming identity—remembering small personal details, calling each other by cherished nicknames, and celebrating individual growth. These micro-affections, though often brief, formed a reliable backdrop of love and stability that participants said was “easy to underestimate but impossible to live without.”

Theme 2 – Sustaining Emotional Safety

The second theme, *Sustaining Emotional Safety*, reflected couples’ deliberate strategies to keep their bond secure during everyday challenges and occasional conflict. Participants emphasized the importance of being responsive to each other’s stress or discomfort by offering immediate comfort, reassurance, and emotional check-ins. As one woman shared, “*When I’m quiet after a hard day, he doesn’t push me; he just brings tea and sits close until I’m ready to talk.*” Gentle conflict repair was repeatedly highlighted: quick apologies, soothing humor, and non-defensive touch allowed partners to de-escalate tension before it deepened. A husband described how they handled misunderstandings: “*If I snap, I try to return quickly and say, ‘I’m sorry, I overreacted.’ She smiles, and it’s over.*” Mutual vulnerability also emerged as a safety-enhancing practice; partners talked about sharing fears, future hopes, and regrets, creating space for emotional honesty. Respecting autonomy while remaining emotionally available was another vital strategy. Couples deliberately allowed one another alone time after arguments or supported personal hobbies without feeling threatened: “*He never makes me feel guilty for needing my painting evenings; he knows I come back lighter*

and happier.” Gratitude was identified as a daily habit that sustained warmth—openly thanking one another for invisible efforts like managing household tasks or offering comfort. Some couples created celebratory micro-moments, marking small wins and joyful events, from dancing in the kitchen after solving a tough day to toasting with sparkling water for achievements big and small. These practices cultivated a relational climate where partners felt safe to be imperfect yet deeply accepted.

Theme 3 – Adaptive Relationship Growth

The third theme, *Adaptive Relationship Growth*, highlighted how couples evolve their affectional strategies to keep love dynamic over the years. Many participants reported co-creating future visions by discussing shared goals, dreaming about projects, and planning symbolic events that renewed a sense of joint direction: “*We have a list of adventures; every January we add something new, even if it’s just a picnic by the lake.*” Flexibility was described as essential; partners adjusted love languages and rituals to accommodate life changes such as parenthood, career shifts, or health challenges. A participant explained, “*Before kids, we traveled a lot. Now it’s small date nights at home, but still just us.*” Sustaining playfulness—through flirtatious teasing, shared humor, and re-enacting memorable moments—was consistently framed as a protective force against emotional stagnation. Integrating change and transitions included revisiting expectations and performing emotional check-ins during stressful periods, such as relocation or job loss. Several participants recounted times of emotional distance and how they intentionally rebuilt connection: “*After my burnout, I pulled away; she just kept inviting me to small talks until I could come back.*” Relational learning also emerged, with couples reading books or attending workshops together to deepen understanding and resilience. Maintaining shared cultural roots—celebrating traditional holidays, blending family customs, and using cultural symbols of love—helped preserve a sense of shared identity across evolving life contexts. These adaptive strategies were described as “keeping love alive not by chance but by choice,” reflecting how enduring couples turn micro-affections into an evolving language of care that remains relevant through changing seasons of life.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to uncover the everyday relational strategies that long-term Hungarian couples

employ to sustain emotional closeness, and the analysis revealed three overarching themes: *nurturing everyday connection*, *sustaining emotional safety*, and *adaptive relationship growth*. These findings illustrate that sustaining marital and romantic stability is less about extraordinary acts and more about consistently enacted, emotionally meaningful behaviors that reinforce intimacy and resilience. Such results resonate strongly with the growing evidence that the longevity and quality of romantic partnerships rely heavily on micro-level relational maintenance behaviors (Kashdan et al., 2013; Philippe et al., 2013). By showing how couples consciously integrate affectionate rituals, responsive support, and flexible adaptation, the study provides a culturally situated understanding of how bonding is protected and revitalized over time.

One of the most salient findings was the deliberate cultivation of everyday connection through rituals, personalized gestures, and symbolic tokens of care. Couples in this study emphasized how simple greetings, affectionate nicknames, small surprises, and playful humor functioned as daily markers of love. This supports prior work showing that consistent positive affect and small affectionate behaviors play a critical role in sustaining marital satisfaction and buffering against disengagement (Kansky et al., 2019; Philippe et al., 2013). Research on the sharing of positive experiences further underscores that failing to capitalize on “good news” and joyful micro-moments can undermine satisfaction, particularly among partners with social anxiety (Kashdan et al., 2013). Our findings align with the notion that when partners intentionally affirm each other’s worth and celebrate mundane victories, they create a relational climate of security and appreciation. Moreover, the use of symbolic gestures and culturally meaningful tokens echoes prior observations that memory and shared narrative are directive forces in sustaining romantic ties (Philippe et al., 2013). By turning daily life into a stage for small yet consistent connection, couples reinforce a shared identity and a sense of “us,” buffering their relationship against erosion.

Equally significant was the theme of sustaining emotional safety. Participants highlighted how emotional availability, vulnerability, and gentle conflict repair sustained their long-term stability. This reflects the growing recognition that emotional security—not just structural commitment—is a cornerstone of enduring love (Koenig et al., 2024; Stanley et al., 2010). Our participants’ accounts of quickly apologizing after conflict and providing immediate comfort are consistent with studies showing that responsive support

mitigates emotional withdrawal and marital disaffection (Baher Talari et al., 2024; Wells et al., 2016). Emotion regulation capacities were also implicit in these practices; couples able to soothe distress and interpret conflict charitably protect themselves from chronic dissatisfaction, a finding mirrored in research on cognitive distortions and marital disaffection (Baher Talari et al., 2024; Mahmoodian et al., 2021). The deliberate expression of gratitude and appreciation within the sample aligns with resilience-focused models, which highlight that reinforcing positive meaning and acknowledging everyday contributions are protective factors for long-term couples facing adversity (Waldron & Farnworth, 2020). Furthermore, participants’ balancing of autonomy and closeness reflects a healthy dyadic regulation strategy: sustaining individuality while maintaining secure emotional bonds, a pattern also emphasized in contemporary relationship research (Jiao, 2022; Okoiye et al., 2025).

The third theme, adaptive relationship growth, offers an especially important contribution to understanding long-term relational resilience. Couples described how they periodically updated their love languages, adjusted rituals during life transitions, and intentionally co-created future visions. Such flexibility mirrors findings that long-term romantic commitment requires not only emotional warmth but also executive control and cognitive adaptability (Del Palacio-González et al., 2017; Ueda et al., 2018). When partners experience new roles or stressors, the ability to reinterpret past challenges and grow after adversity fosters posttraumatic growth and prevents chronic disaffection (Del Palacio-González et al., 2017; Wells et al., 2016). Our results also echo resilience-promoting practices identified in midlife couples, such as maintaining playfulness and hope during adversity (Waldron & Farnworth, 2020). Importantly, Hungarian couples appeared to integrate shared cultural traditions and narratives into their adaptive strategies, sustaining identity continuity amid change. This culturally grounded finding complements studies suggesting that couples draw on collective memory and cultural symbolism to protect relationship meaning (Opekina & Saporovskaya, 2022; Philippe et al., 2013). By blending adaptive innovation with culturally rooted practices, couples create a flexible yet coherent relational identity that evolves without losing its core.

These findings also intersect with sociocultural determinants of stability. For instance, while prior research indicates that education level, religion, and financial security predict marital longevity (Acquah et al., 2024; Dalhatu &

Muhammad, 2024), our data reveal that these structural factors function indirectly, providing a foundation on which affective maintenance strategies operate. Couples with stable resources could devote more emotional bandwidth to relational growth; however, without micro-affectations and adaptive strategies, stability alone did not guarantee warmth or satisfaction. This observation supports recent integrative models suggesting that structural and psychological predictors must be understood as interacting systems (Koenig et al., 2024; Okonkwo, 2024). It also underlines the culturally nuanced ways couples resist external pressures. For example, in contexts where extended family involvement can threaten autonomy, our participants relied heavily on private rituals and couple-focused identity to maintain closeness, aligning with research on managing parental interference (Singh & Shanbhag, 2025).

Notably, the present findings extend therapeutic and counseling frameworks that emphasize commitment, empathy, and forgiveness (Dehghani et al., 2011; Javadi Koma et al., 2024; Stanley et al., 2010). By mapping the lived strategies of resilient couples, this study shows how such abstract constructs become enacted daily. For example, empathy was expressed not only through deep conversations but also through anticipatory acts of care, like preparing a partner's favorite drink after a hard day. Similarly, forgiveness was embedded in swift, low-intensity repair behaviors rather than only formal reconciliation dialogues. Such details contribute to intervention science by offering therapists and educators concrete behavioral anchors that can be taught and modeled in couple enrichment programs. The adaptive dimension is particularly relevant for marital counseling in transitional life stages—parenthood, midlife career changes, or migration—where couples must renegotiate affection and shared meaning to maintain stability (Waldron & Farnworth, 2020; Wang et al., 2025).

Another significant contribution of this study is its cultural grounding. Much of the existing work on micro-affectations and marital maintenance comes from North America and Western Europe (Kashdan et al., 2013; Philippe et al., 2013), yet Hungarian couples navigate unique sociocultural and historical contexts. The blending of traditional values with modern partnership ideals appeared to influence how micro-affectations were expressed—balancing private romantic rituals with respect for familial obligations. This aligns with the argument that cultural adaptation is vital when translating marital stability theories across contexts (Koenig et al., 2024; Opekina & Saporovskaya, 2022). It also suggests that future research

should avoid one-size-fits-all models and pay closer attention to how local norms and social structures shape the enactment of emotional resilience strategies.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

While this study provides rich insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size, though appropriate for qualitative inquiry and guided by theoretical saturation, was relatively small and limited to Hungarian couples who self-identified as maintaining long-term satisfaction. This may have excluded couples experiencing severe distress or those using less conscious relational maintenance strategies. The reliance on self-reported narratives may also introduce recall bias or idealization of relationship dynamics; participants could present their partnerships more positively than reality. Additionally, all interviews were conducted with partners who were relatively well-educated and predominantly urban, which may not fully represent the experiences of couples from rural or lower socioeconomic contexts where relationship maintenance might look different. Finally, while cultural specificity is a strength, it also constrains generalizability; Hungarian relational scripts may not map directly onto those in other societies.

Future research would benefit from diversifying the sample demographically and relationally. Including couples at different relationship stages—such as newlyweds, those recovering from crises, or remarried partners—could reveal how micro-affectations emerge, evolve, or are reestablished. Longitudinal designs could examine how affectionate strategies change across life transitions and how early relational investments predict long-term satisfaction and stability. Cross-cultural comparative studies would also deepen understanding of how sociocultural environments shape micro-affection strategies; examining Central and Eastern European couples alongside Western or non-Western groups could reveal universal versus culture-specific patterns. Moreover, integrating mixed-method approaches, combining qualitative narratives with quantitative measures of relational satisfaction and stability, could strengthen the evidence base and link micro-affectations to measurable outcomes.

For practitioners, the findings emphasize the value of helping couples operationalize emotional connection through small, actionable behaviors rather than only focusing on large relational milestones. Counselors and therapists can encourage partners to cultivate daily rituals,

practice rapid conflict repair, and embed gratitude and vulnerability into ordinary exchanges. Educational programs for couples could highlight the importance of flexibility—teaching partners to revisit and adapt their affectional practices as life circumstances evolve. Additionally, integrating cultural traditions and shared identity into interventions may help couples maintain coherence while navigating change. Marriage preparation and enrichment programs might also use these findings to design exercises that teach couples how to co-create future visions and reinforce emotional safety early on, building resilience against long-term relational erosion.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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