

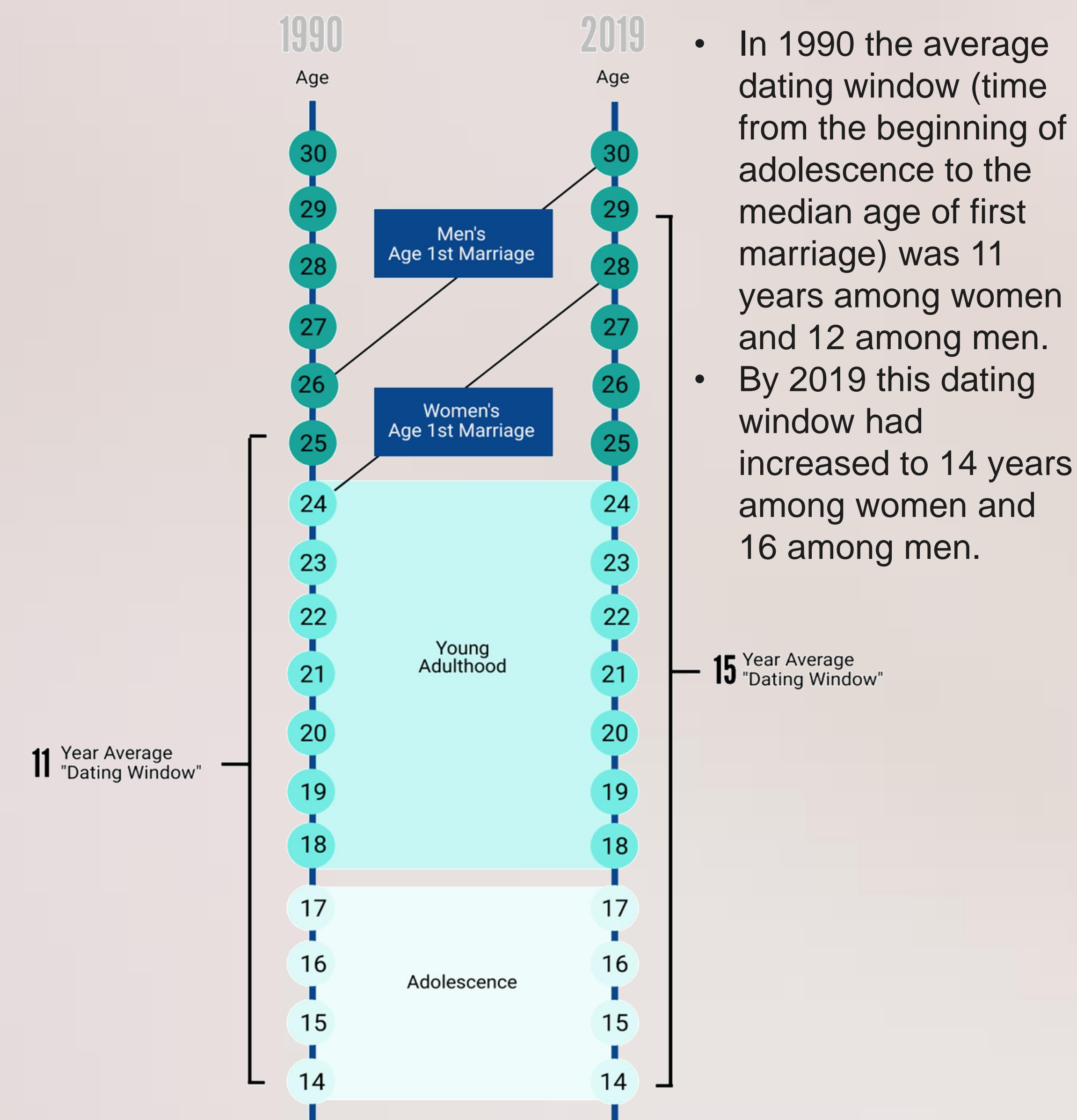
# Relationship Quality and its Measurement Among Adolescents and Young Adults: A Review of the Literature

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## Abstract

Although there is growing interest in the quality of adolescents and young adults' (A&YA) romantic relationships, the way relationship quality is defined, conceptualized, and measured is not consistent throughout the literature, making it difficult to draw general conclusions on the correlates and implications of A&YA's relationship quality. The purpose of our project is to present an overview of the measurement trends and findings regarding relationship quality among A&YA. We conducted a comprehensive review of journal articles, book chapters, and reports published over the past decade. Our investigation uncovered a wide range of measures but a consistent emphasis on instability and conflict. We conclude with an overview of the implications with a focus towards comprehensive measurement construction and policy directives addressing instability among A&YA.

Figure 1. Timeline of Adolescent and Young Adult Relationships



- In 1990 the average dating window (time from the beginning of adolescence to the median age of first marriage) was 11 years among women and 12 among men.
- By 2019 this dating window had increased to 14 years among women and 16 among men.

## How is relationship quality defined in the scholarship on A&YA relationships?

Relationship Quality (RQ) = How “Good” or “Bad” is the relationship?

- An individual's or a couple's subjective evaluation of their relationship.

However...

- It is difficult, and may not make sense, to capture RQ for A&YA's the same way we do older adult relationship quality. So, multiple different factors need to be considered.

## A&YA Specific Factors

- Compared to adolescence, commitment and other contexts (e.g., duration, union status) are more salient in young adulthood.
- Adolescent RQ is more complicated to study than young adulthood—affection, intimacy, sexual activity, and conflict emphasized.

## What do we know about A&YA relationship quality from current scholarship?

RQ in Adolescence differs from RQ in Young Adulthood—but they are connected

- In long-term relationships, compared to young adults, adolescents report lower confidence and more conflict in their relationships.
- Compared to adolescents, young adults report more intimacy and interdependence.
- While A&YA relationships vary in trajectories of stability and quality, most are either committed and healthy or informal/exploratory—*fewer A&YAs are in harmful or ambiguous relationships.*

## Research Emphasizes Instability and Conflict

- Research on A&YA romantic relationships often focus on the “bad.” There are two related reasons for this. First, marriage is increasingly delayed (see timeline). This leads to an increased potential for instability, dissolutions, and multiple partners. Second, this instability is associated with relationship conflict and violence.

BUT...

- Evidence indicates this emphasis may be flawed. First, as we state above, A&YA relationships tend to be either committed or exploratory, not volatile. Second, when these relationships dissolve, they do so for good reasons—A&YA's are selective. They break-up with partners when they are not fitting their relationship needs or expectations.

## What are the limitations of current scholarship?

### Available Data

- Nationally representative survey data rarely captures the complexities of RQ in A&YA, so studies often rely on small participant samples.

### Lack of Consistency

- Sample types
- Theory
- Measures of relationship quality
- Definition of relationship types

### Other Challenges

- Instability: A&YA relationships often end, even without conflict. Is stability central for A&YA RQ?
- Ambiguity: Not all A&YA relationships are well-defined. Should RQ measures address this?
- Complexity: How do we create measurements that capture all relevant factors for RQ?

## Policy Recommendations

- For adolescents, emphasize exploratory dating, less on long-term commitment or stability.
- For young adults, emphasize communicating relationship needs and expectations.
- For all A&YA, emphasize knowing when to end a relationship and why.

Figure 2. Dimensions of A&YA Relationship Quality

Couple Interaction	Satisfaction	Context (for YA)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Affection</li> <li>Emotional support</li> <li>Instrumental support</li> <li>Coercion</li> <li>Controlling behavior</li> <li>Criticism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fulfillment and met needs</li> <li>Communication</li> <li>Shared activities</li> <li>Support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Duration of relationship</li> <li>Expectations for the future (commitment)</li> <li>Union status (dating, cohabiting)</li> </ul>

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## Featured MAST Center Research | Relationship Patterns & Trends

Our research is designed to understand marriage and romantic relationships in the U.S. and to improve programs that aim to strengthen these relationships. More specifically, our work on relationship patterns and trends is focused on population-based research and data to better understand trends, predictors, dynamics, and outcomes of marriage and relationships in the U.S..



## MAST Center Data Tool | Relationship Quality \*Coming Soon\*

The MAST data tool is a detailed summary of relationship quality measures available in large national data sets. These summaries include survey question wording and responses, respondent descriptions (when applicable), variable names, and years/survey waves collected. The data tool will be searchable by topic area, key word, year, and data set.



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