



Investigating Epistemic Mistrust as a Social-Cognitive Mechanism in the Relationship between Perceived Partner Inconsistency and Emotional Contagion in Young Adult Romantic Relationships

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Abstract: The present study examined the relationship between perceived partner inconsistency, epistemic mistrust, and emotional contagion in romantic relationships among young adults. A quantitative, cross-sectional correlational design was employed with a sample of 149 participants recruited through convenience sampling. Standardized self-report measures were used to assess all variables. Results indicated a significant positive relationship between perceived partner inconsistency and emotional contagion, as well as between epistemic mistrust and emotional contagion. However, perceived partner inconsistency was not significantly associated with epistemic mistrust. Regression analyses further showed that both perceived partner inconsistency and epistemic mistrust independently predicted emotional contagion. Overall, the findings suggest that while partner inconsistency heightens emotional reactivity, epistemic mistrust operates as a separate social-cognitive factor influencing emotional susceptibility in relationships. The study contributes to understanding how trust and relational dynamics shape emotional experiences in contemporary romantic contexts.

Keywords: *Perceived Partner Inconsistency, Epistemic Mistrust, Emotional Contagion*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

Human beings are inherently social, with neurobiological systems designed to support attachment, co-regulation, and social learning. From an evolutionary perspective, the ability to form stable bonds enhanced survival through proximity, cooperation, and shared learning

(Fisher, 1998). Attachment theorists conceptualized these bonds as biologically adaptive systems that regulate distress and promote safety under uncertainty (John Bowlby, 1979). Similarly, Charles Darwin highlighted emotional expression as an adaptive mechanism for communication and group cohesion. These processes are supported by neurobiological systems involving oxytocin (bonding and trust), dopamine (reward), and cortisol (stress regulation), alongside neural circuits that enable empathy and emotional attunement (Carter, 2014; Aron et al., 2005; Ditzen et al., 2009; Singer et al., 2004). Higher-order processes associated with the prefrontal cortex further support understanding others' intentions and regulating emotional responses (Fonagy & Luyten, 2009). However, these systems evolved within relatively stable relational environments, whereas contemporary relationships are increasingly characterized by unpredictability.

Digitalization and shifting social norms have transformed romantic dynamics, increasing partner availability while reducing relational stability (Sorokowski et al., 2023; Ritzer, 2018). Modern dating often involves ambiguous commitment, mixed signals, and intermittent engagement patterns such as breadcrumbing. These dynamics resemble intermittent reinforcement, where unpredictability sustains engagement and intensifies emotional investment (Skinner, 1956; Jean-Richard-Dit-Bressel et al., 2018; Fisher et al., 2006). Although such mechanisms may heighten attraction, they can undermine emotional security and foster relational mistrust (Bowlby, 1969; Insel & Young, 2001).

Within this context, *mentalizing* the capacity to understand one's own and others' internal states becomes critical (Fonagy & Target, 2006). While stable attachments support this ability, relational inconsistency can disrupt it, leading to hypervigilance or reduced interpretive depth (Bateman & Fonagy, 2016). A related construct, *epistemic trust*, refers to the willingness to perceive social communication as reliable and meaningful (Fonagy et al., 2015). Persistent inconsistency, however, may shift this system toward epistemic mistrust, characterized by skepticism, vigilance, and difficulty integrating social information (Fonagy et al., 2022).

One consequence of such disruption may be increased susceptibility to *emotional contagion*, the automatic transmission of emotions between individuals (Hatfield et al., 1993). While this process supports empathy and co-regulation in stable relationships, it may become dysregulated in uncertain contexts, amplifying sensitivity to negative emotional cues and increasing emotional reactivity (Singer & Lamm, 2009). Together, these dynamics suggest that relational inconsistency may impair trust in social communication while simultaneously heightening emotional sensitivity.

1.2 Research Gap and Problem Statement

Contemporary romantic relationships are increasingly marked by ambiguity and inconsistent emotional availability, particularly in digitally mediated contexts (Finkel et al., 2012). Although relational inconsistency has been linked to emotional distress and attachment styles, the deep mechanisms underlying this association remain unclear (Campbell et al., 2019). In particular, limited research has examined how inconsistent partner behaviour influences individuals' trust in social communication. Epistemic trust has primarily been studied in developmental and clinical contexts, with little focus on its role in adult romantic relationships (Fonagy & Allison, 2014). Similarly, emotional contagion is well-established in interpersonal dynamics but has rarely been examined in relation to disrupted epistemic processes. There is a notable lack of integrative research exploring how perceived partner inconsistency may simultaneously undermine epistemic trust and increase emotional contagion.

1.3 Rationale of the Study

The present study addresses this gap by examining epistemic mistrust and emotional contagion in young adults as a result of perceived partner inconsistency. By integrating attachment, social-cognitive, and emotional frameworks, the study extends existing relationship research beyond descriptive associations to explanatory processes. Additionally, chronic relational uncertainty may have broader implications for psychological and physical health. Prolonged stress responses associated with relational instability have been linked to anxiety, depression, and physiological dysregulation (Segerstrom & Miller, 2004). In women, such stress may also contribute to conditions like Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, where hormonal imbalances may be exacerbated by psychosocial factors (Barry et al., 2011; Dokras et al., 2018). Overall, this study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of how relational inconsistency influences emotional experiences by identifying epistemic mistrust as a key co-occurring process.

2. Review of Literature

Bröcker et al. (2026) examined epistemic trust as the capacity to evaluate the reliability and relevance of social information. Using a naturalistic sample of 912 participants recruited via a mental health app, the study assessed epistemic trust, mistrust, and credulity alongside psychopathology and treatment engagement. Findings indicated that epistemic mistrust and credulity were associated with higher psychopathology, whereas epistemic trust predicted stronger therapeutic alliance and greater help-seeking. Conversely, mistrust was linked to

reduced treatment engagement, highlighting epistemic trust as central to psychological functioning and therapeutic processes.

Fontana et al. (2025) investigated the interplay between love addiction, attachment styles, epistemic stances, and emotional processing in 590 emerging adult women. Network analysis revealed attachment anxiety as the strongest predictor of love addiction, with epistemic credulity acting as a key bridge between attachment insecurity and compulsive relational behaviors. Epistemic mistrust showed a weaker but complex association. Difficulties in emotional identification were negatively associated with love addiction, underscoring the role of emotional processing. The findings emphasize the interaction of insecure attachment, maladaptive epistemic stances, and affective functioning in relational vulnerability.

Marx et al. (2025) explored emotional contagion in online video interactions using 104 participants (52 dyads). While self-reports indicated contagion across emotions such as happiness, anger, and sadness, facial coding detected contagion primarily for positive affect (e.g., smiling). Negative emotions were less visibly expressed and not significantly synchronized. These findings suggest that emotional contagion occurs in digital contexts, though its expression may vary depending on emotional valence and medium.

Asan et al. (2024) examined the role of mentalizing in daily interpersonal functioning among 218 participants over 21 days. Using the Movie Assessment of Social Cognition (MASC), the study found that mentalizing ability mediated the relationship between individuals' behaviors and their perceptions of others. Lower mentalizing was associated with weaker reciprocity and incongruence in interpersonal interactions, indicating that deficits in understanding mental states can disrupt adaptive social functioning.

Bincoletto et al. (2024) investigated the relationship between epistemic stances, defense mechanisms, interpersonal difficulties, and psychopathology in 385 adults. Results showed that epistemic mistrust and low epistemic trust were associated with greater interpersonal problems, reliance on maladaptive defenses, and higher psychological distress. Poor defensive functioning and disrupted epistemic trust emerged as significant predictors of symptom severity, highlighting their role in mental health vulnerability.

Campbell et al. (2024) explored epistemic trust within a mentalizing framework, emphasizing its developmental origins in early caregiving relationships. The study highlighted that adverse experiences such as trauma can disrupt epistemic trust, leading to difficulties in social learning, relational functioning, and increased psychological distress. The authors further proposed that psychotherapy restores epistemic trust through specific communicative processes, positioning it as a key mechanism underlying therapeutic change.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Aim

The current research paper will focus on examining the relationships between perceived partner inconsistency, epistemic mistrust, and emotional contagion in romantic relationships among young adults.

3.2. Research Question

How do perceived partner inconsistency, epistemic mistrust, and emotional contagion relate in contemporary romantic relationships?

3.3. Research Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between perceived partner inconsistency and epistemic mistrust
2. To examine the relationship between perceived partner inconsistency and emotional contagion.
3. To examine the relationship between epistemic mistrust and emotional contagion.

3.4 Hypotheses

H1: Perceived partner inconsistency will be positively associated with epistemic mistrust.

H2: Perceived partner inconsistency will be positively associated with emotional contagion.

H3: Epistemic mistrust will be positively associated with emotional contagion.

3.5 Variables

- **Predictor Variable:** Perceived Partner Inconsistency
- **Outcome Variables:** Epistemic Mistrust, Emotional Contagion

3.6 Research Design

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional correlational design to examine the associations among perceived partner inconsistency, epistemic mistrust, and emotional contagion.

3.7 Procedure

A total of 149 participants aged 18–30 years were recruited through convenience sampling via online platforms. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Participants completed a web-based questionnaire consisting of standardized self-report measures assessing perceived partner inconsistency, epistemic

mistrust, and emotional contagion, along with demographic information. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured.

3.8 Inclusion Criteria

- Aged between 18 and 30 years
- Current or past romantic relationship experience
- Ability to comprehend and respond to the questionnaire

3.9 Exclusion Criteria

- Outside the specified age range
- No romantic relationship experience
- Incomplete or invalid responses

3.10 Data Collection Instruments

Perceived Partner Inconsistency Scale (PPI) (Adapted version of the Perceived Partner Responsiveness Scale -PPRS) was initially created in 2004 by Harry T. Reis et al. The scale has a 9-point Likert scale, meaning that the answer choices go between 1 (Not at all true) and 9 (Completely true), making the participants rate such items according to the experience with their current or last romantic partner. The item 11 was eliminated to maintain conceptual consistency as well as to ensure that the scale more effectively captured the perceived partner inconsistency and internal consistency yielded to be $\alpha = 0.98$ which gives a scale an excellent internal consistency reliability.

Epistemic Trust, Mistrust, and Credulity Questionnaire (ETMCQ) was created by Peter Fonagy and his colleagues in 2017. The scale has 15 items to be rated on a 7 point Likert scale ($\alpha = .79$) between 1 (Strongly disagree) and 7 (Strongly agree). It is broken down into three theoretically independent subscales (see below), which are Epistemic Trust (ET), which is the openness to reliable information (Items 1, 2, 7, 8, and 13); Epistemic Mistrust (EM), which is the scepticism and vigilance (Items 3, 4, 9, 10, 14, and 15); and Epistemic Credulity (EC), which is the tendency to accept information blindly (Items 5, 6, and 12). According to the standard validation procedures, the scoring of Item 11 is not done. Scoring entails adding items in each subscale as opposed to calculating a summative score. Epistemic trust/ credulity was also not part of hypothesis testing since they are two different epistemic orientations and not the opposite ends of one continuum.

Emotional Contagion Scale (ECS) created by William J. Doherty in 1997 is a self-report measurement which involves the assessment of the vulnerability of the individual to unconsciously imitate or internalize the feelings of another person in the process of social

interactions. The scale is composed of 15 items that are rated with a 5-point Likert scale ($\alpha = .87$) and an answer can be 1 (Never true to me), 2 (Seldom true to me), 3 (Occasionally true to me), 4 (Always true to me). Emotional contagion was measured with the total score and higher scores indicate greater emotional contagion.

4. Results

The present study examined the relationships between perceived partner inconsistency, epistemic mistrust, and emotional contagion among young adults. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, and multiple regression analysis were conducted to analyze the data.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables*

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
PPI_Total	149	1.12	9.00	6.3435	2.21676
ETM_Total	149	1.00	7.00	4.5145	1.20714
EC_Total	149	1.00	4.93	3.6103	.70854
Valid N (listwise)	149				

Note. PPI= Perceived Partner Inconsistency, ETM= Epistemic Mistrust, EC= Emotional Contagion, $N = 149$.

Descriptive statistics for all study variables are presented in Table 4.1. Participants reported relatively high levels of perceived partner inconsistency ($M = 6.34$, $SD = 2.22$), and moderate levels of epistemic mistrust ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 1.21$) and emotional contagion ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 0.71$).

Table 2. *Pearson product-moment correlation between Perceived Partner Inconsistency-PPI, Epistemic Mistrust-ETM and Emotional Contagion- EC*

		PPI_TOTAL	ETM_TOTAL	EC_TOTAL
PPI_TOTAL	Pearson Correlation	1	.130	.288**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.114	.000
	N	149	149	149
ETM_TOTAL	Pearson Correlation	.130	1	.231**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.114		.005
	N	149	149	149

EC_TOTAL	Pearson Correlation	.288**	.231**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.005	
	N	149	149	149

Note. $p \leq .01$ (two-tailed)

Pearson product-moment correlation analysis (see Table 4.2.) revealed a significant positive relationship between perceived partner inconsistency and emotional contagion ($r = .288, p < .01$). Similarly, epistemic mistrust was positively and significantly associated with emotional contagion ($r = .231, p < .01$). However, the relationship between perceived partner inconsistency and epistemic mistrust was positive but not statistically significant ($r = .130, p > .05$).

Table 3. Regression analysis predicting Emotional Contagion from Perceived Partner Inconsistency

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.026	.170		17.846	.000
	PPI_TOTAL	.092	.025	.288	3.647	.000

Perceived partner inconsistency significantly predicted emotional contagion ($\beta = .288, t = 3.65, p < .001$), indicating that higher inconsistency is associated with greater emotional contagion.

Table 4. Regression analysis predicting Epistemic Mistrust from Perceived Partner Inconsistency

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	4.065	.299		13.590	.000
	PPI_TOTAL	.071	.045	.130	1.590	.114

Perceived partner inconsistency did not significantly predict epistemic mistrust ($\beta = .130, t = 1.59, p > .05$)

Table 5. *Regression analysis predicting Emotional Contagion from Perceived Partner Inconsistency and Epistemic Mistrust*

Coefficients ^a						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.557	.250		10.218	.000
	PPI_TOTAL	.084	.025	.262	3.354	.001
	ETM_TOTAL	.115	.046	.197	2.514	.013

Both perceived partner inconsistency ($\beta = .262$, $t = 3.35$, $p < .01$) and epistemic mistrust ($\beta = .197$, $t = 2.51$, $p < .05$) significantly predicted emotional contagion.

5. Discussion

The current research investigated the relationship between perceived partner inconsistency, epistemic mistrust and emotional contagion in young adult romantic relationships. Based on social-cognitive and emotional models, the results indicate that both relational unpredictability and trust-related processes are significant in their influence on the emotional experiences in relationships.

The initial aim discussed whether the perceived partner inconsistency was linked to epistemic mistrust. The opposite of this was to be expected since the relationship was positive but not statistically significant. It was found that both correlation and regression analyses revealed that perceived inconsistency was not a significant predictor of epistemic mistrust. This implies that it is not necessarily only through immediate relational incongruities that epistemic mistrust might arise, but rather through more enduring individual differences that were brought about by previous experiences of attachment and relational history. This is in line with mentalization-based approaches that focus on the fact that underlying disturbances in trust are usually based in the past, along with developmental experiences (Fonagy and Allison, 2014; Bateman and Fonagy, 2016).

The second objective investigated how perceived partner inconsistency was related to emotional contagion. As hypothesized, there was significant positive relationship, and perceived inconsistency was found to be a significant predictor of emotional contagion. This implies that those who think that their partners are not predictable are likely to internalize and reflect the emotional conditions of their partners. These results are in line with previous studies that have indicated that relational unpredictability enhances emotional vigilance and sensitivity to affective signals (Hatfield et al., 1994; Butler, 2011). Uncertain relational situations may

lead to people being more sensitive to emotional cues, and being more vulnerable to emotional contagion.

The third objective was that of the correlation between epistemic mistrust and emotional contagion. The findings showed that there is a strong positive relationship, in addition to the fact that epistemic mistrust is also a significant predictor of emotional contagion. This implies that, whenever people have trouble trusting relational information, they might more strongly depend on emotional cues, increasing their tendency to be emotionally absorbed. The result is in line with mentalization theory, which states that lower levels of epistemic trust result in a weaker ability to flexibly interpret social information and a heightened emotional reactivity (Fonagy and Allison, 2014; Bateman and Fonagy, 2016). It also aligns with previous results that have attributed the disrupted epistemic processes to emotional dysregulation in intimate relationships (Campbell et al., 2021).

Collectively, the results indicate that perceived partner inconsistency and epistemic mistrust are independent contributors of emotional contagion, and not a mediated pathway. Although inconsistency leads to an increase in emotional reactivity, through an increase in vigilance to relational cues, epistemic mistrust reflects a more general difficulty in the appraisal and integration of social information, which further increases emotional sensitivity.

On the whole, this work has added value to the modern relationship research by incorporating both the epistemic and emotional processes in the framework of the relational inconsistency. In line with previous research (Hatfield et al., 1994; Butler, 2011; Fonagy et al., 2015), the results point towards how unstable relational contexts may contribute to increasing emotional reactivity. Concurrently, epistemic mistrust seems to work as a comparatively stable vulnerability factor that contributes to the way people process information about relations (Bröcker et al., 2026; Campbell et al., 2021). These findings, combined with others, indicate that external inconsistency may not be the only cause of emotional distress in romantic relationships but that internal disruption of trust and social cognition can also be a cause of emotional distress.

Applicatively, these findings highlight the possibility of interventions that focus on emotional regulation and epistemic processes to be valuable. Such approaches like mentalization-based therapy can assist people in interpreting relational cues in a better way and decreasing the emotional reactivity, which will positively influence relationship functioning (Bateman and Fonagy, 2016).

5.1 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, its cross-sectional design limits causal interpretations among variables. Second, reliance on self-report measures may introduce biases such as social desirability and subjective interpretation. Third, the use of convenience sampling and a relatively homogeneous young adult sample restricts generalizability. Additionally, the non-significant relationship between perceived partner inconsistency and epistemic mistrust suggests that other factors (e.g., attachment style, past relational experiences) may play a stronger role.

Future research should adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to better establish causal pathways. Incorporating diverse samples and multi-method approaches (e.g., behavioral or observational data) would strengthen validity. Further studies could also examine moderating variables such as attachment styles, emotional regulation, or communication patterns to better understand these relationships.

5.2 Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings contribute to relationship psychology by integrating epistemic mistrust and emotional contagion within the context of relational inconsistency. The results suggest that emotional distress in relationships is shaped not only by external unpredictability but also by internal trust-related processes, supporting social-cognitive and mentalization-based frameworks (Fonagy et al., 2015).

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of addressing both relational dynamics and individual cognitive-emotional processes in interventions. Therapeutic approaches such as mentalization-based therapy may help individuals improve trust in social communication and regulate emotional reactivity. Additionally, promoting consistent communication patterns in relationships may reduce emotional contagion and enhance relational stability.

6. Conclusion

The present study investigated how perceived partner inconsistency relates to epistemic mistrust and emotional contagion in young adults. The results of the current research point out that emotional experiences within romantic relationships are greatly determined by both the relational processes and the individual thinking processes. In line with this, it was found that perceived partner inconsistency and epistemic mistrust correlate with increased emotional contagion and that people in unpredictable relational contexts might be more emotionally

reactivity and sensitive to the emotional states of their partners. Although perceived inconsistency did not significantly predict epistemic mistrust, the results indicate that mistrust may be influenced by more relational histories as opposed to immediate partner behavior. These results highlight the role of external relational patterns as well as internal trust-related processes in the explanation of emotional functioning in relationships. In general, the paper highlights that emotional stability might be aided by consistent and clear relational communication, and emotional vulnerability might be increased by unpredictability.

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