

Torn Between Two Lovers: Master First or Mister?

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ABSTRACT

Balancing rigorous master's programs with committed romantic relationships poses profound tensions for many graduate students, yet supportive partnerships can transform challenges into strengths. This qualitative phenomenological study delved into the lived experiences of Filipino public school teachers pursuing master's degrees amid such relationships, illuminating motivations, hurdles, coping mechanisms, and guidance. Through asynchronous written interviews via Google Forms and Messenger with 17 purposively selected respondents from Philippine institutions (primarily Northern Mindanao), data underwent reflexive thematic analysis to unearth patterns. Four pivotal themes surfaced: career advancement intertwined with personal growth, fueled by relational security; time-emotional strains like guilt and exhaustion spilling into partnerships; coping via open communication, intentional scheduling, and mutual aid; and partner support as a cornerstone enabler of persistence. These insights advocate for institutions to offer tailored wellness initiatives, while students harness transparent dialogues and shared visions—offering a blueprint for harmonious academic-romantic integration in resource-constrained contexts like DepEd.

Keywords: master's students, romantic relationships, work-life balance, phenomenological study, partner support

INTRODUCTION

In the Philippines, many graduate students, particularly public school teachers pursuing master's degree, are motivated by career advancement, such as DepEd promotions and salary increase, while navigating committed romantic relationships that provide emotional support but demand careful balancing. This situation reflects a now growing trend where higher education enrollment has surged post-pandemic, yet personal life integration remains a key aspect of a student's success.

Local studies highlight gaps in institutional support for Filipino married or committed graduate students, who face unique cultural pressures from familial roles and work obligations without tailored counseling or flexible scheduling. For instance, a 2025 study on married higher education students emphasized ineffective communication and lack of spousal support as barriers to academic persistence (Ramos & Santos, 2025). Another local investigation revealed how emerging Filipino adults in relationships grapple with modern digital influences and heteronormative expectations, exacerbating isolation during graduate studies (Pangus, 2025).

Internationally, similar gaps persist in work-life balance frameworks for graduate students, with limited research addressing romantic partnership dynamics amid mental health declines and boundary management issues from 2020 onward. Ulus (2021) identified chronic guilt and spontaneity deficits in student partnerships, while a 2020 analysis of diverse graduate cohorts pointed to well-being erosion from unaddressed relational-academic overlaps (DiRamio & Schwartz, 2020).

This study explores the motivations, challenges, coping strategies, and advice of master's students navigating the demands of graduate studies while in committed romantic relationships—captured in the tension of "Torn Between Two Lovers: Master First or Mister?" By documenting these personal narratives, the research contributes to both international scholarship on work-life balance in higher education and practical guidance for students, partners, and academic institutions in the Philippine context.

Research Objectives

This research explored the experiences of master's students in committed romantic relationships, focusing on their motivations, challenges, coping strategies, and advice for balancing graduate studies and partnerships. Specifically, this research aimed to:

1. Examine the motivations for enrolling in a master's program while in a committed relationship.
2. Investigate the challenges, struggles, and concerns encountered in managing academic responsibilities alongside romantic relationships.
3. Identify the coping strategies employed by master's students to address these challenges.
4. Explore the insights and advice offered to others considering or pursuing a master's degree under similar circumstances.

Research Questions

This study explored the experiences of master's students in committed romantic relationships, focusing on their motivations, challenges, coping strategies, and advice for balancing graduate studies and partnerships. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What motivates you to enroll in a master's degree while being in a committed relationship?
2. What challenges, struggles, and concerns do you, as a master's student, encounter when managing both academic responsibilities and romantic relationships?
3. How do you cope with these challenges?
4. What insights and advice can you give to others who are considering or currently pursuing a master's degree under similar circumstances?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of master's students in committed romantic relationships, particularly public school teachers pursuing graduate degrees in the Philippines. Phenomenology was chosen as it prioritizes the subjective meanings individuals attach to their experiences, making it ideal for uncovering motivations, challenges, coping strategies, and advice in balancing academic demands with romantic partnerships. By collecting rich, firsthand narratives, this design illuminated how respondents interpreted the tension of "Torn Between Two Lovers: Master First or Mister?"—including the influence of cultural values, familial roles, and institutional contexts. The study specifically examined students in Philippine graduate programs to identify shared themes and contextual factors, such as post-pandemic enrollment surges and DepEd career pressures.

Respondent Selection

This study utilized purposive sampling to select master's students in committed romantic relationships, with a focus on public school teachers enrolled in graduate programs in the Philippines. Respondents were chosen based on three key criteria: they must be currently pursuing a master's degree, be in a committed romantic relationship (e.g., married or long-term partnered), and be willing to share detailed accounts of their balancing experiences. The recruitment process sought to include diverse perspectives by considering variations in program stages, relationship durations, and teaching backgrounds. Potential respondents were identified through professional networks, graduate student associations, and DepEd referrals, with initial screening conducted to verify eligibility before proceeding to in-depth interviews.

Locale of the Study

This study focused on master's students in committed romantic relationships, primarily public school teachers enrolled in graduate programs across the Philippines. The research included respondents from institutions in Northern Mindanao and other regions to capture regional variations in academic and relational dynamics.

Data Collection

This study collected data primarily through written interviews conducted via google form and Messenger, with supplementary follow-up interactions when clarification was needed. The researcher initially contacted potential respondents through professional networks, graduate associations, and DepEd channels, explaining the study's purpose and format. Respondents engaged in asynchronous written interviews, responding to semi-structured questions about their motivations, challenges, coping, and advice at their own pace. This method proved particularly effective for working teachers across different schedules, allowing them to provide thoughtful, detailed responses without real-time constraints.

Ethical Considerations

This study followed standard ethical protocols. Respondents provided written consent via email or Messenger and were informed of their right to withdraw anytime. All data was anonymized using pseudonyms and stored securely.

Data Analysis

The study employed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to examine compiled written responses from email/Messenger interviews. Following contemporary qualitative standards (Byrne, 2022), responses were systematically reviewed to identify patterns in balancing experiences. Initial codes were generated inductively, focusing on motivations, challenges, coping strategies, and advice, then grouped into themes through iterative comparison. To ensure rigor, peer debriefing (Nowell et al., 2017) and member checking (Birt et al., 2016) were utilized. The process was documented using an audit trail to track thematic development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Question 1: On the Motivations for Enrolling in Master's While in a Committed Relationship

Emerging Theme: Career Advancement and Personal Growth as Dual Motivators Enhanced by Relational Support

This theme captures the common drive among participants for professional elevation—such as better job opportunities, DepEd rankings, promotions, and expertise—intertwined with self-improvement, where committed relationships provide emotional security and shared future vision rather than hindrance. Participants consistently emphasized career-related imperatives alongside personal development, bolstered by partner support. For instance, KI1 stated, "To be a better version of myself through career growth and I believe I will have more work opportunities," while KI2 noted, "I have no choice but to enroll myself in Masters degree, because it is a requirement". KI8 and KI9 highlighted DepEd-specific incentives: "It's also needed for DepEd ranking" and "for DepEd ranking reasons". Relational synergy appeared in KI3's view of "Future Stability, mutual growth, role modeling, and strategic teamwork," KI4's emotional security enabling risks, and KI6's alignment of "shared goals" like financial security. KI16 reinforced this, pursuing competence as a Home Economics educator with unwavering partner aid, including logistical help. In the Philippines, DepEd teachers pursue graduate degrees for career progression under the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers, driven by economic stability and promotion points (Almonte-Acosta, 2020). A phenomenological study of 16 working graduate students identified career advancement and personal growth as primary motivations amid work-study balance (Dela Cruz & Reyes, 2025). Teachers perceive master's completion as essential for expertise accumulation and Expanded Career Progression framework advancement (Sarmiento et al., 2025). International graduate students' intrinsic motivation, including personal growth, strongly predicts resilience and satisfaction,

often sustained through supportive networks akin to relationships (Greiff et al., 2021). Achievement motivation in graduate contexts fosters effort despite barriers, with relational factors like reduced loneliness enhancing persistence (Saeedi et al., 2019/2020).

Question 2: On the Challenges in Managing Academic Responsibilities and Romantic Relationships

Emerging Theme: Time and Emotional Management Strains

Respondents highlighted struggles with time scarcity, guilt, exhaustion, and priority conflicts, often spilling academic stress into relational dynamics. Evidence includes KI1's "time management" issues and "guilt... when I cannot give enough time"; KI3's "mental exhaustion," "chronic guilt," and "to-do trap"; KI4's "managing expectations" and tension from overlapping deadlines; KI6's difficulty scheduling "quality time" amid exhaustion; KI11's "conflict in priorities" causing guilt; and KI17's overlapping demands leading to "physically and mentally exhausted" states and neglected time. Philippine research confirms these strains. Married students in higher education face dual demands requiring time management and support to avoid harmony disruptions (Ramos & Santos, 2025). Globally, romantic challenges exacerbate graduate mental health issues like distress and loneliness (Afshar & Smith, 2025). International students experience transitional academic-relationship strains impacting well-being (Lorenzetti et al., 2023).

Question 3: On Coping with These Challenges

Emerging Theme: Open Communication and Intentional Scheduling.

Participants relied on transparent dialogue, planning, mutual support, and boundary-setting to navigate strains effectively. Supports encompass KI1's "intentional effort... consistent communication" and support systems; KI3's "radical transparency," sharing syllabi, and "micro-date strategy"; KI5's "talk it out... communication and understanding"; KI6's "open communication" to explain workloads; KI12's time management, "communicating openly," and self-care; and KI17's "structured schedule," prioritization, and "honest communicating". Studies show that married students cope via time management, communication, and spousal support (Ramos & Santos, 2025). Graduate strategies include peer and relational aids for balance. Internationally, peer mentoring aids academic-relational coping for graduates (Lorenzetti et al., 2023). US students during COVID used distinct communication-patterned coping (Wang et al., 2022).

Question 4: On the Insights and Advice to Currently Pursuing Master's Degree

Emerging Theme: Partner Support as Essential Motivator.

The overarching narrative from participants across related questions reveals a common theme where committed partners provide unwavering emotional, logistical, and motivational support, enabling persistence in graduate studies despite relational-academic tensions. This theme emerges consistently from participant accounts, such as KI4 noting emotional security from the relationship facilitates risk-taking in academics; KI6 crediting the partner for contributing to shared goals; KI9 highlighting financial and emotional backing alongside understanding; KI16 praising full support including research assistance and travel logistics; and KI17 emphasizing encouragement that strengthens determination for mutual success. These statements underscore how partners transform potential obstacles into collaborative strengths. Philippine studies affirm this theme's relevance. Married graduate students rely heavily on spousal emotional and practical support to balance dual roles effectively (Ramos & Santos, 2025). Working Filipino graduate students report partner involvement as critical for overcoming time and financial strains in phenomenological accounts (Dela Cruz & Reyes, 2025). Among Generation Z Filipinos, romantic partners foster resilience through shared values and introspection during educational pursuits (Agbayani et al., 2025). Internationally, graduate students' relational partners buffer stress via adaptive coping, enhancing academic persistence (Wang et al., 2022). Peer and partner mentoring proves vital for international graduates managing life transitions (Lorenzetti et al., 2023). Romantic support mitigates mental health declines in university settings globally (Afshar & Smith, 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study illuminated the nuanced experiences of Filipino master's students—particularly public school teachers—in committed romantic relationships, revealing four interconnected insights that capture the "Torn Between Two Lovers" dilemma. First, motivations centered on career advancement (e.g., DepEd promotions and salary gains) intertwined with personal growth, amplified by relational emotional security and shared visions. Second, pervasive challenges included time scarcity, emotional exhaustion, guilt, and priority conflicts, often spilling academic stress into partnerships amid cultural and post-pandemic pressures. Third, effective coping relied on open communication, intentional scheduling, mutual support, and boundary-setting, transforming tensions into collaborative strengths. Fourth, partner support emerged as an overarching enabler, providing logistical, emotional, and motivational buffers essential for persistence. These findings highlight the synergistic potential of romantic relationships in graduate success, while exposing gaps in institutional and cultural support for balancing academic rigor with personal life in the Philippine context. The research enriches phenomenological scholarship on work-life integration, offering actionable narratives for students, partners, and educators navigating similar tensions globally.

RECOMMENDATION

Building on the study's findings, several targeted recommendations emerge for stakeholders supporting master's students in committed relationships, especially public school teachers in the Philippines. Graduate institutions and DepEd could implement relational wellness programs, including couple-inclusive workshops on time management and communication, alongside flexible scheduling options like modular deadlines or hybrid support sessions to mitigate emotional exhaustion and guilt. These agency and institutions should pioneer Relational Reciprocity Credits (RRCs), a tokenized system where spousal contributions to a student's academic load accrue redeemable credits toward faculty promotions or professional development units. Students and partners are encouraged to proactively cultivate "relational synergy" via pre-enrollment dialogues on shared goals, micro-dates, and boundary-setting rituals—while seeking peer networks for accountability. Future research could longitudinally track these dynamics to refine interventions, ensuring academic ambition harmonizes with romantic fulfillment.

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