



Defining and Describing Situationships: An Exploratory Investigation

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Abstract

A romantic trajectory that has received little attention in the literature is “situationships,” which is a colloquial term used in some Western cultures to describe a complex relationship situation. According to Sternberg’s Triangular Theory of Love, experiences of companionate and/or consummate love are often preceded by romantic love. However, situationships may be experiences of romantic love, without increases in commitment. The goal of this study is to describe situationships using a mixed-methods, exploratory approach. The first phase of this study involved 28 participants in one-on-one, semi-structured Zoom interviews regarding their entire relationship history, and then identifying if any of these experiences were situationships. For the second phase, 261 participants completed an online survey regarding their three most recent relationship experiences. The goal of the first phase (qualitative analyses) was to define situationships and describe how these relationships were different from other relationships. The goal of the second phase (quantitative analyses) was to differentiate situationships from non-situationships using empirical data based on results from the first phase of the study. Using reflexive thematic analyses, situationships were defined as romantic relationships with no clarity or label, low levels of commitment, but similar romantic behaviors as established couples by means of affection and sexual behaviors and time spent together. Independent samples t-tests using Bonferroni corrections provided some support for the prescribed definition as there were significant differences regarding relationship quality and similarities regarding affectionate and sexual behaviors between situationships and non-situationships. These results reflect that people in a situationship are, for the most part, emotionally and sexually invested even if they are not in a fully committed relationship.

Keywords Situationships · Romantic relationships · Dating · Relationship maintenance

Introduction

People are often driven to form romantic relationships to meet their needs for belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Individuals form romantic relationships to meet a basic need to connect with others and to develop intimacy, ideas that have been theoretically supported by Erikson's theory of psychosocial development (1959), self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love. However, individuals vary in how they form relationships to meet this need for belonging. Recent studies have found that there are many trajectories that individuals take to form relationships (Jamison & Sanner, 2021). For instance, in many Western cultures, some individuals may take a "traditional" route by asking someone out, going on a date, and increasing dating frequency to establish commitment, also referred to as casual dating (Dindia & Timmerman, 2003), while others may date casually or experience short-term relationships, on-again-off-again relationships, or one-sided relationships (Cohen, 2016; Dailey et al., 2009).

The different approaches that individuals take to forming and maintaining a romantic relationship is supported by Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love, which illustrates how the development of love is based on experiences of intimacy, passion, and commitment. The presence or absence of these three variables and how they change over time can be used to differentiate different experiences in romantic relationships. Subsequently, many studies have focused on married couples or committed unmarried couples and found psychological and physiological benefits of these relationships (e.g., Braithwaite & Holt-Lunstad, 2017; Markey et al., 2007). However, less attention has been given to relationships that do not end up in marriage, despite calls from researchers (Cohen, 2016; Miller, 2018). Thus, the goal of the current study is to explore "situationships," which have been described in the lay literature as romantic relationships involving emotional connection and intimacy, but with a lack of steady commitment and labels (Battle, 2023; Van Epp, 2023). Although studies have started to examine these relationships, there is little empirical data that assists in defining situationships and even less on how these relationships differ from other types of traditional and non-traditional relationships. Therefore, this study aims to provide preliminary evidence to address this gap in the literature.

This exploratory study possesses some advantages. Not only does this study address an understudied topic, but it also uses a mixed-methods approach to explore what situationships are and how they are different from other relationships. Data comes in phases, with the first being one-on-one interviews and the second being an online survey. In both phases, participants provided details of their relationship history. Data from the qualitative study were used to establish a definition of situationships, and both qualitative and quantitative data were used to differentiate situationships from other relationships. This mixed-methods approach allows us to make inferences regarding the definition and descriptions of situationships. The results of this study can be used to better understand other the varied routes to forming relationships.

Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love

According to Sternberg (1986), romantic relationships can experience love depending on the presence of intimacy, passion, and commitment. Intimacy refers to how close and connected someone feels to another. The arousal that one experiences towards another is referred to as passion, and the dedication to another is illustrated by commitment. Depending on the presence or absence of these three variables, there are eight possible types of love. For example, individuals who experience high intimacy and passion, but low commitment, are said to have romantic love. Sternberg (1987) argues that for most romantic dyads, irrespective of culture, romantic love develops early during mating, where passion subsides and commitment increases, resulting in companionate love. Based on this theory, the goal is to achieve consummate love, where intimacy, passion, and commitment are all high. However, not all couples achieve this penultimate goal. In fact, other combinations of intimacy, passion, and commitment reflect different approaches and experiences to forming romantic relationships.

In Western cultures, once a romantic dyad forms, they tend to “experience increased emotional and (typically) physical intimacy over time and an expectation for future involvement with each other” (Jamison & Sanner, 2021, p. 848). This period is customarily filled with meaningful exchanges of personal information and greater amounts of quality time, which often results in either the promise of or an exclusive relationship. The goal is often to develop intimacy and commitment in hopes of forming a lifelong bond (Dindia & Timmerman, 2003). The high experiences of intimacy and passion provided by these studies reflect Sternberg's (1986) description of romantic love.

Romantic love appears to be a common type of relationship formation, particularly in Western cultures. In the U.S. one study found that 41.58% of college students reported at least one experience of romantic love (Jamison & Sanner, 2021). Additionally, findings from a study of 24,131 college students around the U.S. revealed that 51.26% of college students had experienced romantic love at least once in their lives (Kuperberg & Padgett, 2016). These studies also demonstrate how couples developed commitment over time. For some couples, companionate or consummate love takes a couple of months to fully develop from romantic love, but for others, romantic love ends with the end of a relationship (i.e., Rosen et al., 2008). For teenagers in the U.S., this process can take about six months, although more end in breakup than in love (Hensel & O'Sullivan, 2022). Even though individuals differ in the number of romantic relationships throughout their lifetime, individuals generally engage in romantic relationships for ten to fifteen years before getting married or making a long-term commitment to a person (Jamison & Sanner, 2021). Studies provide support that romantic love evolves into companionate and/or consummate love.

If love is not maintained, relationships commonly end. According to Koessler et al. (2019), forty-three ways of termination can be categorized into seven different tactics. The first is an avoidance/withdrawal tactic where an individual intentionally creates distance physically and emotionally to communicate a decreased interest in intimacy. In contrast, open confrontation tactics are when the individual uses communication that is open and honest to convey the end of a relationship. Manipulation

tactics involve the individual knowingly using manipulation to cause disagreements and issues until the termination. When an individual uses a positive tone or engages in self-blame, they take responsibility for these issues leaning toward the end of the relationship and tend to be conscious of the other person's feelings. Cost escalation is when a relationship becomes too costly or difficult for an individual by the other person emotionally or physically. De-escalation is a process when a partner who has already distanced themselves gradually terminates the relationship. The final tactic is distant/mediated communication, which involves the individual using technology to terminate the relationship.

When one or both partners seek to terminate a relationship, tasks once used for relationship maintenance are now reversed (Dindia & Timmerman, 2003). As Baxter and Wilmot (1985) described, the partner's familiarity does not differ throughout the termination, but intimacy and closeness declines. Over time, the familiarity will subside. Signs of termination in a relationship can be distinguished as low levels of contact, intimacy, and liking (Miller & Parks, 1982). Essentially, when intimacy, passion, and commitment are no longer present, the dyad is no longer in love and likely to dissolve.

Other Romantic Relationship Experiences

Although a significant number of individuals go from romantic love to companionate love, there are also other experiences of love that can be used to describe other types of relationships, such as hookups, casual relationships, and friends-with-benefits. In some instances, individuals may break up and get back together multiple times, also called on-again-off-again romantic relationships (Dailey et al., 2009). In other cases, individuals may experience one-sided relationships, meaning that individuals disagree on their relationship status (for example, someone thinks they are in a relationship, whereas the other person does not). Defining and describing these other relationship experiences is essential to help understand situationship.

Hookups are sexual relations with another individual with no plans for a romantic or exclusive relationship (Hollis et al., 2022). Hookups are defined as "a casual sexual encounter between two individuals that occurs outside of a romantic relationship but that does not necessarily involve penetrative sex" (Kuperberg & Padgett, 2016, p. 1070). Using tenets of Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love, passion is high, while intimacy and commitment are low, reflecting infatuation. Garcia et al. (2012) found that 60–80% of American college students had a hookup at some point in their lives. Casual hookups tend to only happen once or a few times and will mainly involve sexual experiences and avoid emotional intimacy (Owen et al., 2010). This type of relationship likely ends due to a lack of closeness and commitment (Wilder et al., 2023). Due to an absence of commitment, this type of love is often unstable.

Another approach to experiencing romantic relationships is friends-with-benefits. Friends-with-benefits are relationships in which friends engage in regular and consistent sexual activity without reporting intimacy or connection (Owen et al., 2013). Applying Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love, individuals in a friends-with-benefits relationship experience passion and commitment, but not intimacy, which is described as fatuous love. Individuals may experience fatuous love because

getting with a friend is safer physically and emotionally than hooking up with someone they may not know well (Furman & Shaffer, 2011). Forming friends-with-benefits relationships allows the individuals involved to have a lower risk of acquiring STIs with someone they feel comfortable with (van Raalte et al., 2021). Bisson and Levine (2009) found that among college students, 60% had been in at least one friends-with-benefits relationship. Although fatuous love can lead to romantic, companionate, or consummate love, in most cases, a friends-with-benefits relationship results in a strained friendship or the end of a friendship (Owen et al., 2013).

Next, one-sided relationships occur when one person has romantic feelings for someone who does not reciprocate those feelings. One-sided relationships are generally harrowing and heartbreaking experiences since romantic feelings are not shared between both parties (Minerva, 2015). This type of relationship is most similar to Sternberg's (1986) discussion of empty love. Intimacy and passion do not exist since reciprocity between two individuals is not present; yet, an individual remains committed to the idea of being with someone. One-sided relationships can either take place when a person is romantically interested in someone who is not interested in pursuing a romantic relationship, or when a romantic partner does not feel as strongly towards the other, which inevitably leads to the relationship being terminated (Bringle et al., 2013). A study by Bringle et al. (2013) indicated approximately 60% of 318 high school and college students in the U.S. reported having been in at least one one-sided relationship. The more emotionally invested individual tends to experience abandonment or rejection from the other person, and this rejection and abandonment will leave an individual feeling obsessed and in excruciating pain from their loss (Minerva, 2015).

On-again-off-again romantic relationships are described as the cycle of breaking up and then later reconciling several times (Dailey et al., 2009). These relationships are similar to romantic love, but commitment seems to continuously fluctuate. Individuals in these relationships may experience romantic love, then companionate and/or consummate love, then dissolution, and then romantic, companionate, or consummate love. Although many individuals experience the transition from romantic to companionate love, individuals in on-again-off-again relationships experience the end of a relationship before developing love again. As soon as the relationship ends and the on-again-off-again cycle begins, the level of stability felt within the relationship decreases (Dailey et al., 2013). As noted by Monk et al. (2022), on-again-off-again relationships, or relationship cycling, are positively associated with symptoms of psychological distress. It is most common for an individual in an on-again-off-again relationship to use the relationship as companionship until they or the other person finds someone else (Dailey et al., 2013). On-again-off-again relationships permanently end for many of the same reasons they ended the first time; the only difference is that the individuals do not go back on with the relationship again. The most common reasons for these individuals to stay broken up are cheating, communication problems, an individual finding another person, trust issues, and the relationship had run its course (Dailey et al., 2013). Essentially, these relationships evoke fluctuations in intimacy, passion, and commitment, until commitment is no longer present, resulting in the end of the on-again-off-again relationship.

The Present Study

As illustrated by the current romantic relationship literature, there are multiple ways to form, maintain, and terminate romantic relationships according to Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love. Most romantic dyads start with romantic love and evolve into companionate or consummate love (Sternberg, 1987). However, some individuals experience infatuation, fatuous love, empty love, or fluctuation across the different types of love, each representing different types of relationships, including hookups, friends-with-benefits, on-again-off-again relationships, and one-sided relationships. Sternberg (1987) argued that passion typically declines over time, whereas hookups, friends-with-benefits, and on-again-off-again relationships, commonly reflect elevated levels of passion. It is less common for passion to remain high over time, and in cases that passion contributes most to love, those relationships appear to be short-lived (Dailey et al., 2013; Owen et al., 2013).

Situationships are a new type of relationship that has been defined in lay literature as an unconventional relationship, involving noncommittal dating (Van Epp, 2023) and/or a sexually empowering experience (Kuburic, 2021). A consistent theme in situationships is that they tend to be described as having physical intimacy and emotional intimacy throughout the relationship, with varying or low levels of commitment (Battle, 2023). Using Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love as a guide, there is passion and intimacy, but no commitment, which represents romantic love. However, Sternberg (1987) argues that romantic love evolves over time, as passion declines and commitment increases. Situationships may be a relationship type where romantic love is stagnant. In these cases, an individual may (or may not) want the relationship to evolve into a committed relationship. One way to inhibit the development of commitment is by avoiding the relationship as exclusive. This absence of a label, which is echoed by lay literature on situationships (Van Epp, 2023), reflects one way that an individual avoids developing companionate or consummate love. This is different from the other relationship experiences discussed, where romantic love develops into companionate and/or consummate love, as well as other relationship types, such as hookups, friends-with-benefits, one-sided relationships, and on-again-off-again relationships, which each incorporate different amounts of intimacy, passion, and commitment during the course of the relationship. For instance, friends-with-benefits represents fatuous love, which includes high levels of passion and commitment, but limited in intimacy, whereas situationships may involve passion and intimacy, but low levels of commitment. Despite the increased conversation about situationships in the lay literature, there is limited empirical support for what this type of relationship is and how it impacts relationship quality. Thus, the goal of this study is to provide preliminary quantitative and qualitative data to define and describe situationships and how they compare to other types of relationships. Therefore, we aim to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What is the definition of a situationship?

RQ2: How are situationships different from other romantic relationships?

Methods

Procedures

This study was conducted in two phases. The first phase involved participants completing individual semi-structured interviews on Zoom and the second phase involved participants completing an online survey. The goal of the first phase was to identify what a situationship is, which was used to inform the second phase of this study. For both phases, participants were recruited from a large university in the Southeastern United States using convenience sampling. Volunteering instructors in Human Development and Family Science courses shared information about this study with their classes. This information included that participants could participate in a one-on-one interview when recruiting for Phase 1 or complete an online survey when recruiting for Phase 2. In the recruitment posts, participants were told that information was going to be collected regarding their relationship history. Those interested in participating in a Zoom interview were told to email a member of the research team to schedule an interview. During these interviews, participants were asked to describe every relationship experience they have had, regardless of the seriousness of the relationship, ranging from hookups to committed, long-term relationships. At the end of the interview, participants were asked to give their definition of a situationship, and then state if any of their past relationship experiences qualify as a situationship. It is important to note that all participants had an apriori definition of a situationship, and no participants asked research assistants to clarify what they meant by “situationship.” Interviews lasted approximately 32.15 min ($SD=8.64$ min).

For the second phase, those who were interested in participating were given a link to an online survey. The first page of the survey provided the consent form. Participants could not proceed to the survey without consenting to participate. Participants answered questions regarding their last three romantic relationship experiences (regardless of the nature of the experience). Participants also answered questions regarding the quality of each relationship, the frequency of affectionate and sexual behaviors, their investment, trust, and commitment in the relationship, questions about how the relationship started and ended, and questions regarding whether or not they introduced the partner to their friends and family. Because of space and time limitations, the number of relationships were limited to three, rather than asking about all relationship experiences. The online survey took approximately 30–45 min to complete. For both phases, participants were offered extra credit for their participation in this study. All aspects of this study were approved by the appropriate institutional review board.

Participants

Of the 28 participants who completed the interviews, 71.4% identified as female, and the rest identified as male (28.6%). The average age of interviewees was 20.80 ($SD=1.01$; range 18–26). Out of the 261 participants who completed the survey, 32 (8.2%) were male and 229 (87.7%) were female. The average age of participants was 19.89 ($SD=1.87$; range: 18–32). The participants reported their ethnicities as White/

Caucasian (71.6%), Black/African American (9.2%), Asian/Pacific Islander (1.9%), Hispanic (14.6%), and 2.7% reported “other.” The majority of participants were college sophomores (42.9%), followed by juniors (24.5%), freshmen (16.1%), seniors (15.7%), and (0.77%) reported as “other.” Participants were 84.3% heterosexual and 15.3% reported as other (see Table 1).

Measures and Analysis

The current study used a mixed-methods approach. Phase one involved qualitative data, which was collected through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews on Zoom. Phase two involved quantitative data, which was collected using an online survey. Details about data collection for each approach and the measures included in the online survey are included below. Means, standard deviations, reliability, and correlations for phase two are presented in Table 2.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

Undergraduate research assistants (RAs) collected qualitative data by completing semi-structured interviews on Zoom. The semi-structured approach was used to collect an appropriate amount of content for each relationship experience, using a set of pre-determined questions. As the interviews began, RAs read the following prompt to participants: “Please describe in as much detail as possible all the romantic relationship experiences you have had - from casual relationships to serious relationships to any relationship experiences you have had. In chronological order please talk about

Table 1 Demographics of study sample by relationship status

Variable		Situ- ationships (<i>n</i> =109)	Non-Situ- ationship (<i>n</i> =378)
Gender	Male	5 (8.8)	27 (13.2)
	Female	52 (91.2)	177 (86.80)
Age		19.49 (1.00)	20.02 (2.51)
Ethnicity	White/Caucasian	40 (70.2)	147 (72.1)
	Black/African American	5 (8.8)	19 (9.3)
	Asian/Pacific Islander	0 (0)	5 (2.5)
	Hispanic	11 (19.3)	27 (13.2)
	Other	1 (1.8)	6 (2.9)
Year in school	Freshman	9 (16)	33 (16.2)
	Sophomore	33 (57.9)	79 (38.7)
	Junior	11 (19.3)	53 (26)
	Senior	4 (8.8)	37 (18.1)
	Other	0 (0)	2 (1.0)
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	46 (80.7)	174 (85.3)
	Other	11 (19.3)	29 (14.2)

Note Quantitative data is presented as means with standard deviations in parentheses and categorical data is presented as counts with column percentages in parentheses. Independent samples t-tests show no significant differences with age ($t=1.57, p>.05, df=257$)

Table 2 Means, standard deviations, reliability, and correlations for quantitative study variables

Variable	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Satisfaction	3.27	1.13	0.89	---	0.71*	0.55*	0.33*	0.31*	0.34*	0.32*	0.34*	0.31*	0.36*	0.41*	0.33*
2. Commitment	2.95	1.27	0.82	0.41*	---	0.68*	0.51*	0.47*	0.46*	0.45*	0.46*	0.45*	0.45*	0.44*	0.44*
3. Communication	3.37	1.01	0.90	0.43*	0.53*	---	0.59*	0.56*	0.59*	0.59*	0.58*	0.60*	0.51*	0.49*	0.52*
4. Kissing	5.19	2.00	0.20	0.20	0.34*	0.40*	---	0.92*	0.81*	0.83*	0.76*	0.77*	0.62*	0.55*	0.62*
5. Making out	4.96	1.88	0.15	0.15	0.33*	0.40*	0.96*	---	0.85*	0.87*	0.79*	0.81*	0.65*	0.59*	0.65*
6. Light Petting	4.62	2.00	0.17	0.17	0.23	0.35*	0.78*	0.84*	---	0.93*	0.90*	0.87*	0.73*	0.67*	0.72*
7. Being Light Petted	4.70	1.94	0.14	0.14	0.26	0.35*	0.82*	0.87*	0.96*	---	0.89*	0.90*	0.71*	0.66*	0.72*
8. Heavy Petting	4.37	2.05	0.23	0.23	0.19	0.32	0.75*	0.79*	0.95*	0.92*	---	0.94*	0.77*	0.71*	0.79*
9. Being Heavy Petted	4.40	2.02	0.20	0.20	0.20	0.30	0.75*	0.80*	0.94*	0.93*	0.99*	---	0.79*	0.71*	0.80*
10. Performing oral sex	3.70	1.96	0.21	0.21	0.15	0.30	0.64*	0.69*	0.83*	0.80*	0.87*	0.85*	---	0.84*	0.80*
11. Receiving oral sex	3.51	2.02	0.26	0.26	0.18	0.31	0.63*	0.68*	0.82*	0.79*	0.86*	0.85*	0.93*	---	0.76*
12. Vaginal intercourse	3.84	2.15	0.09	0.09	0.13	0.26	0.62*	0.67*	0.83*	0.80*	0.88*	0.88*	0.85*	0.88*	---

Note Data for situationships are below the diagonal, whereas data for other relationship types are above the diagonal. Means for satisfaction, commitment, and communication are on a 5-point scale with higher means reflecting higher relationship quality and means for affectionate and sexual behaviors are on a 7-point scale, with higher means indicating more frequent behaviors

* $p < .00069$ per Bonferroni correction

how the relationship was initiated, what the relationship looked like, and how, if at all, did the relationship end. Please do not spare any details.” While participants provided information, RAs asked predetermined follow-up questions to glean more information regarding the romantic relationship experience, including how long the relationship lasted, how they met, what were the expectations of the relationship, and how the relationship ended (if applicable). After participants discussed their relationship history, RAs asked participants the following question: “What is your definition of a situationship?” After answering this question, participants were then asked if any of the relationship experiences they shared qualified as a situationship. It is important to note that all participants were able to provide an apriori definition of a situationship without asking the research assistants for clarity regarding what a situationship is.

Next, data from the interviews were transcribed, and information regarding situationships was separated from the rest of the transcript. More specifically, all the definitions of situationships were set aside from the rest of the interview data, and all the relationship experiences that participants labeled as a situationship were also separated. Next, reflexive thematic analyses (RTA) was used to analyze the definitions of situationships, and the experiences of relationship formation, maintenance, and dissolution based on situationship status. This analytic technique was used due to the inductive nature of the study, which considers the meanings behind the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). RTA involves six steps: familiarization of data, coding data, generating initial themes, developing and reviewing themes, refining and naming themes, and writing up the results (Braun & Clarke, 2022). First, three undergraduate research assistants (RAs) read and re-read the definitions and descriptions of situationships by participants until common ideas were identified, which resulted in initial codes, which involves assigning a phrase to a unit of meaning. The RAs met with three principal investigators to discuss and review the codes to ensure that participant experiences were accurately represented. This discussion was not to agree on a code but to make sure that the nuance of the meaning was not lost (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The codes were organized into themes that represented a central idea. These themes were named and further refined in subsequent meetings. The names of the themes were appropriate to identify the shared meanings from participant responses and how the themes related to each other. Because data was analyzed using RFA, inter-coding reliability is not required (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This same RFA approach was used to determine themes of relationship initiation, maintenance, and dissolution. Since RFA emphasizes meaning over the specific words used by participants, coding software was not used in this study. This approach is supported in other investigations (Toye et al., 2023; Warner et al., 2022).

Quantitative Measures

Situationship In the online survey, participants answered an open-ended question to describe the nature of their most recent relationship experience, their second most recent experience, and their third most recent experience, if applicable. Participants were encouraged to provide as much detail as possible regarding each relationship experience. Two principal investigators compared these descriptions with the defini-

tion that was officially created as a result of the qualitative analyses, and then label a relationship experience as either a situationship (*I*) or a non-situationship (*0*). A “non-situationship” was described as an established romantic relationship (i.e., someone asked someone out and there was an established period of relationship formation) or a relationship that had a clear label, such as “hook-up” or “friends-with-benefits.” All other non-labeled relationship experiences that reflected elements of the situationship definition found from the qualitative data (discussed later) were designated as “situationships.” The two principal investigators coded each relationship experience separately to establish consistency and reliability (Kappa=94).

Relationship Satisfaction Participants reported their relationship satisfaction for each relationship experience they described in the online survey. Relationship satisfaction was measured using the seven-item relationship satisfaction scale (Hendrick, 1988), which was selected for its consistent use in premarital romantic relationships (Graham et al., 2011) and strong psychometric properties (Vaughn & Baier, 1999). Example items include, “*How much do/did you love this individual?*” and “*How good is/was this relationship compared to most?*” Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*low*) to 5 (*high*). The McDonald’s Omega for this sample is 0.89.

Commitment Participants also reported their commitment to each relationship experience they described in the online survey using Stanley and Markman’s (1992) scale of commitment on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). This scale was selected given its use for non-married populations and strong psychometric properties (Owen et al., 2011). An example item is “*I like/liked to think of this individual and me in terms of ‘us’ and ‘we’ than ‘me’ and ‘him/her’.*” This scale has four items and displayed adequate internal reliability (McDonald’s Omega = .82).

Communication Participants reported their level of communication for each relationship experience using the 12-item couple communication scale by Grello and Harper (2001), which was selected for its use in understanding developing and developed romantic relationships (Little et al., 2011). Example items include, “*I openly tell this individual when I feel ignored by him or her.*” and “*I tell this individual when s/he has hurt my feelings.*” Responses are rated on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). The McDonald’s Omega for this sample is 0.89.

Affectionate and Sexual Behaviors For each relationship experience, participants reported their level of affectionate and sexual behaviors using the affectionate and sexual behavior questionnaire (Langlais et al., 2010). Participants responded to the following prompt: “*How often have you participated/did you participate in the following behaviors with this individual?*” Participants responded to multiple affection-

ate behaviors including kissing, French kissing, light petting, heavy petting, oral sex, and vaginal intercourse. Responses ranged from never (0) to daily (7).

Relationship Information Participants also answered other single-item measures about each relationship experience to gain descriptive information. These items included whether the relationship experience was long distance, the age difference between parties, the degree to exclusivity, the level of emotional investment, whether or not they or their partner was introduced to family and friends, the frequency of communicating through face-to-face interactions, texting, phone calls, social media interactions, and virtual calls, the degree of effort put into the relationship, how much they prioritized the relationship, and the degree of trust they reported in the relationship.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed primarily through independent samples t-tests. Once a definition was formulated for situationship, all the relationship experiences were examined by two principal investigators to determine which experiences met the definition of a situationship. Inter-rater reliability was high (98.4%), and discrepancies were discussed with one of the other principal investigators. Any relationship that was not a situationship, which included committed romantic relationships, one-night stands (hookups), and friends-with-benefits relationships, were coded as “other relationships.” Therefore, there were two groups—situationships ($n=109$) and non-situationships ($n=378$). Independent samples t-tests were used to compare relationship quality, affectionate, and sexual behaviors between these relationship categories. Given the exploratory nature of this study, Bonferroni corrections were used ($p < .005$).

Results

Definition of Situationships

To address the first research question, participants’ definitions of situationships, as provided in the semi-structured interviews, were analyzed. Based on participant responses, the most common themes that were discussed, in order of frequency, were: “no label,” “lack of clarity,” “physicality,” and “spending time together.” Other less frequent themes included, “one-sided,” “not official,” “not committed,” and “special circumstances.” Based on these characteristics, the research team met to establish a definition that reflected these responses. *A situationship is a relationship with someone in which there is a romantic connection, often involving time spent together, affection, and sexual behaviors, but no clarity or label.* Situationships can also be described as relationships that reflect low or fluctuating levels of commitment, and may be one-sided, where one participant wants more from the relationship than the

other, yet they still mimic dating relationships. Given definitions of situationships from participants, situationships sometimes occur as a result of special circumstances, such as going long distance. Additionally, individuals often introduce their situationship partner to others and go out in public together, but do not display their relationship online (on social media). It is common for individuals to introduce their situationship partner to friends and family, but a label is not given to the relationship. Participants reported some level of emotional investment when in a situationship, despite the lack of clarity in the relationship.

Characteristics of Situationships

To address the second research question, the descriptions of situationships were analyzed based on three different relationship processes: relationship formation, relationship maintenance, and relationship dissolution. Results from thematic analyses are presented by relationship process: relationship formation, relationship maintenance, and relationship dissolution. Results are further delineated by situationships versus non-situationships. A summary of the themes is presented in Table 3.

Relationship Formation

Situationships For relationship formation, a common theme specific to those who reported a situationship was that they met their partner *during nightlife activities such as at a club, bar, or party*. For example, one participant said, “I met M the week of Halloween at a club”, and another participant recalled, “I threw this party with my friend and this guy came and he ended up texting me after the party... and we would hang out a couple of times.” It was common for those individuals in situationships to meet their partner in social situations, such as a club or a party.

Non-situationships For those not in situationships, participants reported that they formed a relationship as a result of *extracurriculars or student organizations and family*. First, many participants reported meeting a partner through *extracurriculars or student organizations*. For example, one mentioned, “I did a play my senior year with this guy who was my love interest in the show, and after the show, he ended up asking me out.” Another participant mentioned meeting their partner at band, and another met their partner playing basketball for their schools. An additional theme that was commonly found with the formation of non-situationships was meeting a partner through their *family*. A female participant reported, “We went to the same church and like our families kind of knew each other.” Another participant mentioned that they just started dating their sibling’s friend once they started coming over to their house often. Many individuals mentioned that they met their partner through someone in their family or through extracurricular activities.

Overlap A common theme that arose with participants, regardless of relationship status meeting a partner through *school*. A woman in a situationship mentioned, “We

Table 3 Results of thematic analysis

Relationship Experience	Theme for Relationships	Theme for Situationships
Relationship Formation	Class	Class
	Mutual friends	Mutual friends
	Dating applications and social media	Dating applications and social media
	Hometown / Highschool	College events
	Work	Hometown/Highschool
	Religious events	Work
	Family	Fraternity/Greek life
	College events	Night clubs / Bars
	Student organizations	Student organizations
	Gym	Gym
Relationship Maintenance	Dates	Hanging out alone
	Posting on social media together	Texting/communication
	Public displays of affection	Sexual intimacy
	Give gifts	Introduce to friends
	Introduce and get introduced to family & friends	
	Talk about a future together	
	Quality time	
	Being intimate	
	Texting / communication	
	Exclusivity	
	Investing in partners interests	
	Making sacrifices	
Relationship Dissolution	Clear breakup	Fades out
	Conversation about breakup	Gets ghosted/no responses
	Fades to a situationship	Starts talking to someone else or dating someone else
	No future/could be a future	Cannot commit/does not want to be serious
	Distance / leaving for college	No relationship/future
	Cheating	No exclusivity
	Missalignment of values or goals	Blocking on social media
		On and off again relationship

were math partners in AP Calculus”, and an individual who was not in a situationship stated, “We met freshmen year of high school and... we got closer in those two years and we were like best friends and then, yeah, we both realized that we had feelings for each other.” These individuals met their partners by connecting with them in their classes at school. Another common theme that occurred for both groups was meeting their partner through their *job/work*. For example, one participant who was in a situationship said, “We never actually dated; he was just this guy that I met at work and we became friends and we acted like I guess like a situationship. He never asked me out or anything.” A woman who was not in a situationship said, “We worked together in a summer camp.” Several participants met their partners through their jobs. An additional theme that was found with all participants regarding relationship formation, is meeting a partner through a *mutual friend*. For instance, a male participant

who was in a situationship stated, “We met through a mutual friend of both of ours, so it was actually [my] brother’s girlfriend’s best friend.” A female participant who was not in a situationship stated, “Initially we just met through friends and then I think when people started having parties during COVID, we hung out more.” These individuals met their partners through mutual friends and connections. The last theme that was common for both types of relationships is meeting through a *dating app or social media*. A woman who was in a situationship reported, “Tinder, woooo, we met on Tinder”, and a female participant who was not in a situationship reported, “We met on Instagram and he slid into my DMs.” It was common for participants to meet partners using computer-mediated communication, such as apps and social media.

Relationship Maintenance

Situationships Relationship maintenance refers to how relationships are maintained. There were a few themes that differentiated situationships from non-situationships. Participants who were in a situationship mentioned they the relationship was *on and off again*. For example, a woman stated, “We liked each other kind of on and off for about a year or so.” Another participant talked about the confusion regarding their relationship status, and they agreed to take breaks to figure out if they still wanted to “test out the relationship.” Another common theme that participants who were in a situationship reported is *jealousy and/or doubting the relationship*. Participants said things like, “I was thinking like she still has feelings for her ex-boyfriend. What if she like goes back to him? That’s why I was really closed off.” and “Yeah, it just felt like sometimes he wanted to be with me and sometimes he didn’t at all.” Some participants experienced negative emotions while maintaining these relationships. Within situationships, a few participants reported being *exclusive* with their partner while other participants *were not exclusive*. An individual who was in an exclusive situationship stated “It was a little bit talked about. It was like, talked about who we’ve seen if we’ve seen anyone at all.” When a man who was not in an exclusive situationship was asked if exclusivity had been talked about, he stated, “I don’t think so, no, it was mainly a superficial relationship.” Some participants decided with their partner to be in an exclusive situationship while other participants decided to not be in an exclusive situationship or the topic of exclusivity was never discussed. An additional theme that was found through the maintenance of situationships was that individuals showed *affectionate gestures* towards their partners. A female participant mentioned, “He was really taking the initiative, saying like I want to go out with you and do things with you.” These participants showed their partner different affectionate behaviors throughout their relationship. Some participants reported going on *small and simpler dates*, while other participants reported that they never went on a date with their situationship partner. A participant who did go on dates with their partner reported, “We did go out to eat once or twice, but it was more casual” and a participant who did not ever go on a date with their partner reported, “Literally we

never went on dates, ever.” Participants varied on whether they went on dates with their situationship partners.

During situationship, participants reported that they would *casually talk and Facetime* their partner. For example, a female participant said, “And then we ended up [on] Facetime and just texting.” Another participant mentioned that they would only talk to their situationship partner when it was “convenient for them.” Many participants reported that there was *low/no emotional investment* throughout the situationship. A man said:

I was not looking for a relationship after my first one...I was interested in where this was going to take me and I didn't really know the girl quite that much, but then in the same token, I was not a 100% wanting to fulfill it because I'm liking going to college soon and wanted to explore my options...she definitely had more investment.

On the other hand, many other participants reported they were *highly emotionally invested* in their partner throughout the situationship. For instance, a female participant mentioned, “I would say he was pretty invested as well” and “I still think he is pretty invested.” Lastly, a common theme throughout the maintenance of situationships was that many participants had *higher expectations/wanted to date their situationship partner*. For example, a woman stated, “I expected that when I came back home, we would be exclusive and be together, but it did not make it that far.” Another participant mentioned that they thought they would act more like a couple in public, but that expectation was misguided. Many participants had higher expectations for where the relationship would go such as wanting to be in a more serious and committed relationship with their situationship partner.

Non-situationships The most common theme that differentiated situationships and non-situationships with relationship maintenance was that couples were *public on social media* and that they were in an *exclusive relationship*. A participant who was public on social media with their partner stated,

I would say Instagram was the main source of posting. It was not anything overboard. He probably posted me a total of three times on Instagram. I probably posted him a little bit more, maybe five times, and on his Instagram story, definitely a little bit more. Minimum of ten times.

A woman in an exclusive relationship reported, “From August on we were exclusive. Well, let me back up. September we were, exclusive September we went on our first date.” Throughout these relationships, participants were public on social media and often exclusive with their partners. An additional theme found through the maintenance of non-situationships was *meeting each other's families*. A man said, “Then later on she got to meet my family because we would like invite her to places or she would come over to my house or I would come over to her house.” Within non-

situationships, participants *had conversations about the future* with their partner. For example, one participant said, “And we would have conversations about doing long distance when we went to college, and so we had the goal to be together.” These individuals communicated that they had conversations with their partners about their futures together. Another common theme that was found with participants who were not in a situationship is that they were in a *long distance* relationship. For instance, a female participant stated that she and her boyfriend were “long distance, so we tried to just keep in contact a lot more. We would have like Zoom calls and like whatever, do group watch for movies, stuff like that.” An additional theme that was found for non-situationships was that participants reported doing many different *activities* with their partners. One woman said, “We started working out together and then like went to lunch after our workouts” and another participant said, “I’m learning golf, so we go to the range together sometimes, uh and we play tennis sometimes because I play tennis and soon lacrosse because I’m trying out for club lacrosse.” Participants not in situationships also mentioned that they went on dates. For example, one participant stated, “We sometimes go out to eat, every now and then we go out to like a restaurant or we may go on a beach date, we may go to like her favorite to mall, we may go watch a movie, we may stay at home and grab a few snacks and watch Netflix and chill together.” These participants did many different activities with their partners such as working out together.

Overlap A common theme that arose between both situationships and non-situationships was that in both forms of relationships, participants would *hang out* with their partners. A female participant in a situationship mentioned, “We just hang out for fun”, and a female who was not in a situationship mentioned, “We would hang out like maybe once a week or maybe like twice a week... he’d come over and we would just like watch TV or whatever.” These participants hung out with their partners in various ways throughout their relationships. Many situationships and non-situationships maintained their relationships by *communicating over the phone and through social media*. For instance, a participant in a situationship said “He walked me home... and then after that, we just like Snapchatted and talked” and a participant who was not in a situationship said, “We just like text all the time and FaceTime all the time.” Within these situationship and non-situationship relationships, partners communicated with one another through the phone and social media. Many participants in non-situationships as well as in situationships reported *meeting their partner’s family and friends*. However, some participants in situationships also reported never meeting their partner’s family or friends, meaning this theme varies according to context. For example, a woman in a situationship stated that her partner “Met some of my friends a little bit and I met his family” and a participant who was not in a situationship stated, “He met my really close friend group because we hosted, like our own prom, because my prom got canceled because of COVID, so he got to know them then, and then he met my parents a couple of times.” Two female participants, each in a situationship, mentioned that they never met their partner’s family. The last common theme that participants mentioned regardless of relationship status, was *physical intimacy* with their partner. A man who was in a situationship mentioned “Yeah all the way [sexually], we did not hesitate” and a female who was not in a

situationship mentioned, “Yeah, we had sex pretty often when we were in a relationship.” These participants were physically intimate with their partner throughout their relationship, regardless of whether it was a situationship or not.

Relationship Dissolution

Situationships One of the most common themes found for the dissolution of situationships was that the relationship ended because one party *did not want to be in a committed/long-term relationship*. For example, a female participant who did not want a relationship said, “I definitely liked him and wanted him to like me back, but I was conscious that it probably wasn’t going to happen for real because I wouldn’t really want to get in a relationship with him”, and a female participant whose partner and her did not want a relationship said, “We like both agreed to like not date because he doesn’t want a relationship and I don’t. We just want to focus on our degree and ourselves and like not to be in a relationship.” Another common theme that many participants reported being the reason the situationship ended was due to the relationship causing *too much emotional turmoil and having too much drama*. A woman mentioned:

Being in like that type of situation for a while is very detrimental and also like dealing with someone who has like a lot of mental health issues can be hard at times when they wanna like lean on you. Especially when it’s like this complicated situation and you’re like, well, I can’t ignore them because they’re really struggling right now.

These participants no longer wanted to deal with the stress that their situationship caused them, so they decided to terminate the relationship. Many situationships were terminated as both parties decided to *transition to dating* their partner. For instance, one participant stated, “I asked her out the next day and we became girlfriends.” Another participant said that they were dating already, so that they can now label each other as romantic partners. Although the situationship ended for some participants, that didn’t mean the relationship ended—it transitioned into a serious relationship. The last theme that was found regarding the dissolution of situationships was that the relationship *died off and faded away*. A woman stated, “I guess it just kinda fizzled like out. Like I think he wanted maybe to transition more like romantic aspect, but I wasn’t giving him anything to work with. So, we kinda just stopped texting and then kinda stopped talking.” Her experiences were not isolated as two other participants mentioned that they relationship just stopped as they spent less time together.

Non-situationships A common theme that differentiated between situationships and non-situationships with the dissolution of non-situationships was that they broke up through *social media or the phone*. For example, a participant said, “He broke up with me over the phone when I was on vacation with my family.” When the relationship status was clear, the end of the relationship wasn’t vague thus leading some to

directly breakup. The last theme that was found with dissolutions among those in non-situationships was *mental health reasons*. One participant stated,

I faced up to it and was like you know what this is not good for me right now I'm not feeling good, I'm not / I wasn't taking very good care of myself, and I just totally forgot what it was like to be happy and like content with how things were. So I decided, like you know I can't do this anymore.

These participants ended their non-situationships because of the mental health situation that they or their partners were in. Many participants who were not in a situationship mentioned that their relationship ending was a *mutual agreement*. For instance, a male stated, "It was mutual really, because we just felt that it wasn't going anywhere." In some cases, non-situationships were brought to an end mutually.

Overlap A common theme that was found for participants in situationships and non-situationships was *ghosted and/or got ghosted*. Ghosting is a dissolution strategy in which one partner abruptly ceases all communication to terminate the relationship (LeFebvre et al., 2019). A female who was in a situationship and ghosted their partner said, "I just ghosted him for a month and then started texting him after that" and a female who was not in a situationship and got ghosted said, "During the last week that we were dating, he completely ghosted me. Like he was not responding to my texts, very sporadic, and he was very odd." These individuals either got ghosted or ghosted their partner, which finalized the end of the relationship. Another common theme was that the relationship ended as a result of the relationship being *toxic and unhealthy*. A participant who was in a situationship mentioned, "This person was like a very unhealthy person... he kind of put me in this mentality that was like, oh, like you are the only thing that like, makes me happy like, makes me feel good. So I basically kind of felt, like, trapped in a way." Additionally, a participant who was not in a situationship mentioned, "It was like a horrible toxic relationship, cause he had a lot of family problems going on and he like didn't really know how to like handle it" and "He couldn't really handle his emotions well and like he wasn't good at communicating like and we would fight a lot, but we would fight like every day." These various relationships were terminated because they were toxic and unhealthy. *Long distance* was also a leading cause of relationships ending. A woman who was in a situationship reported, "It ended... maybe like the day after I got home, like, it was just clear that he, like, was like, if you're not here, then, like, I don't really see a point of us going forward because he was like, you're gonna go to Florida anyway because I'm from Georgia." Additionally, a participant who was not in a situationship reported, "He was going to college and I was still a senior or I was going into my senior year, so I was like, yeah, I don't want to date you when you're going to school." These relationships were terminated due to being long distance and apart from one another. An additional theme that arose a few times regarding the end of a relationship (regardless

of status) was *cheating and unfaithfulness*. For instance, one participant who was in a situationship and experienced their partner being unfaithful said:

We kind of got into a huge argument because I knew, like, he was, like, sleeping with other people and I was like, I like, don't want that and if you can't respect that, like, I'm out and then that's, like, pretty much how it ended.

Additionally, a participant who was not in a situationship and experienced their partner cheating on them said, "It ended because I found out he cheated on me because he went to a different school." Many participants' relationships came to an end due to cheating and unfaithfulness. Another common theme that was found within non-situationships was that the relationship concluded due to *safety concerns*. A participant who was in a situationship mentioned, "It was a lot of verbal abuse, manipulation, and controlling and that type of stuff." and "It ended against my own will, like my parents literally like took my phone and blocked him on everything." Another participant who was not in a situationship mentioned, "But we would argue a lot and we kind of like we both kind of got into like some legal issues with our arguments and we kind of had to just break up." Some participants mentioned various safety concerns that caused them to end their relationship to protect themselves. The final theme that arose regarding the dissolution of situationships and non-situationships was that participants felt that their *morals, life views, and future goals did not align with their partners*. An individual who was in a situationship detailed that the guy she talked to that his parents "were both cops, which is like fine, but [because] he was like very Republican and I am not Republican or like a Trump supporter, so it's just a couple conflicting moral beliefs." An individual who was not in a situationship reported that she "felt like our differences at the time and...our prospects for the future were like very different like it was for the better." These participants reported that their relationship was terminated due to conflicting morals, future goals, and life views.

Quantitative Results

The quantitative results of this study served to answer the second research question regarding the differences between situationships and non-situationships. Results of independent samples t-tests are found in Table 4. Because of the exploratory nature of this study, Bonferroni corrections were applied to all findings. Based on this analysis, there were some notable differences between situationships and non-situationships. First, markers of relationship quality were significantly different based on situationship status. Non-situationship experiences demonstrated higher satisfaction and commitment scores compared to situationships. However, there were no differences in communication, affectionate, or sexual behaviors using Bonferroni correction. These results are consistent with the qualitative results, providing support for the definition of situationships developed from the qualitative analyses.

Table 4 Comparison between situationships and non-situationships according to relationship quality and affectionate/sexual behaviors

Variable	Situationships ($n=109$)	Non-Situationship ($n=378$)	t
Satisfaction	2.95 (0.94)	3.37 (1.17)	3.42*
Commitment	2.48 (1.02)	3.09 (1.31)	4.48*
Communication	2.92 (0.88)	3.51 (1.00)	5.89
Affectionate Behaviors			
Kissing	4.52 (1.96)	5.41 (1.94)	4.13
French Kissing	4.51 (1.91)	5.11 (1.82)	2.92
Light Petting	4.08 (2.02)	4.79 (1.96)	3.27
Being Light Petted	4.18 (1.99)	4.87 (1.88)	3.29
Heavy Petting	3.90 (2.08)	4.51 (2.02)	2.75
Being Heavy Petted	3.92 (2.08)	4.56 (1.97)	2.88
Performing Oral sex	3.43 (1.99)	3.80 (1.94)	1.69
Receiving Oral Sex	3.30 (2.08)	3.58 (1.99)	1.23
Vaginal Intercourse	3.53 (2.10)	3.95 (2.16)	1.75

Note Data is presented as means with standard deviations in parentheses. Satisfaction, commitment, and communication are on 5-point scales, with higher scores indicating higher quality. Affectionate and sexual behaviors are on a scale of 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating more frequent behaviors

* $p < .005$ with Bonferroni correction

Discussion

The goal of this study was to provide a preliminary investigation of situationships by offering a definition and description, and by comparing and contrasting situationships from other relationships. A situationship is a relationship with someone in which there is a romantic connection, often involving time spent together, physical and sexual activity, but no clarity, label, or commitment. The qualitative and quantitative data highlighted few differences in relationship formation between situationships and non-situationships, and greater differences in maintenance and dissolution of those relationships. The primary similarities between situationships and non-situationships were how relationships were maintained, which was typically by hanging out with each other individually, communicating over the phone and social media, and being physically intimate, whereas they differed by defining exclusivity and/or not sharing the situationship online. Relationship dissolution was similar across these relationships since many struggled with being long distance, were worried about the health of their relationship, and infidelity, but situationships often ended because one person wanted a committed relationship and the other did not. These characterizations were further supported by quantitative data, that showed similarities in affectionate and sexual behaviors, but differences in relationship quality. Given these results, this study provided preliminary empirical support that defines and describes what situationships are.

Sternberg's (1986) descriptions of intimacy, passion, and commitment within his Triangular Theory of Love can be used to better understand situationships. Data in this study reveal that situationships are similar to the development of established relationships, through the presence of intimacy and passion. However, established relationships evolve into companionate and/or consummate love, whereas those in

situationships remain romantically in love. It appears that individuals in situationships actively avoid commitment, most notably by avoiding labeling their relationship, which is fairly consistent with lay articles that discuss and describe situationships within Western cultures. For instance, Miller et al. (2023) described situationships as relationships with no label and no commitment. Gupta (2023) described situationships as complicated relationships where people have not discussed commitment and the label is unclear. Situationships lack a label and commitment, but mimic other aspects of dating relationships, such as spending time together, introducing a partner to others, and engaging in sexual intimacy. Using Sternberg's (1986) theory, situationships differ from other relationship types as passion and intimacy remain high, but commitment continues to be low or absent. Some other unique elements of the definition of situationships in that they appear to be one-sided and influenced by context, at least for a few participants. In these cases, situationships may be similar to unrequited love, which are one-sided relationships most closely resembling empty love. Situationships appear to occur when couples go long distance, and commitment isn't established, but they still act like a couple by talking to each other consistently and finding ways to see each other. Essentially, situationships are similar to the development of established relationships, but differ in the absence of commitment.

Situationships differ from other relationships, like established relationships, hookups, friends-with-benefits, one-sided, and on-again-off-again relationships in how they are maintained and ended. Findings from this study show that situationships are different from established relationships, which have defined labels, exclusivity, and corroborated expectations. Hookups are relationships in which the goal of the relationship is sexual intimacy with no emotional connection, reflected by fatuous love. However, situationships involve sexual intimacy and emotional connection, representing romantic love. Friends-with-benefits are a relationship in which friends have sexual intimacy and are committed to this relationship, represented by infatuation. Yet, in situationships, there is an unspoken or spoken romantic interest in their partner, and commitment is lacking, reflecting a lack in companionate love. One-sided relationships are relationships in which one person is considerably more emotionally involved in the relationship than their partner. A situationship can sometimes be one-sided, due to one person's greater emotional attachment. However, in situationships, individuals appear to have similar emotional investment in their partner, but this would need to be confirmed in future dyadic studies on situationships. On-again-off-again relationships happen when a relationship becomes inconsistent and spaced out by breaks of the couple not being officially together. On-again-off-again relationships are unlike situationships because on-again-off-again relationships are a repeated cycle, where commitment is at least experienced once when the relationship is initially established. However, it is possible that a situationship could evolve into a friends-with-benefits relationship, presuming commitment forms and fluctuates over time.

Situationships and non-situationships also share similar characteristics. Participants in both situationships and non-situationships reported meeting their partners at school, at their jobs, through mutual friends, dating apps, and social media. There were relatively few differences regarding relationship initiation with this study, besides meeting during nightlife activities, such as clubs, bars, and parties, which

was more common with situationships. Situationships and non-situationships form similarly given the lack of variability in relationship formation in this study, as many participants talked about meeting in person through a mutual connection, at a social gathering, or online. The lack of variability in relationship formation may explain the similarities in relationship formation between situationships and non-situationships, specifically reflected tenets of romantic love. There are also similarities with relationship maintenance. Situationships are typically maintained through effortful gestures, going on simple non-public dates, casual talking, and video calling. For non-situationships, couples were public on social media, were in an exclusive relationship, met each other's families, had conversations about the future, and did public dyadic activities with their partner, such as going to the gym or vacationing together. Although relationship maintenance evoke intimacy, the differences in maintenance behaviors may be due because of differing levels of commitment. This finding is consistent with other studies that show when people are not in an exclusive relationship, they may fear commitment or struggle with establishing relationship permanence (Dindia & Timmerman, 2003; Hollis et al., 2022). In a situationship, generally, one person or both people involved have no interest in forming a committed or exclusive relationship and that is displayed in the way they choose to maintain the relationship. Overlap of relationship maintenance themes between situationships and non-situationships were communicating over the phone and through social media, meeting their partner's family and friends, and physical intimacy. These shared themes are all fairly common practices throughout any form of relationship no matter the degree of seriousness (Ogolsky et al., 2017). Every relationship is unique, which leads to variations in how relationships are maintained.

There was some variability in breakup experiences based on situationship status. Overlapping themes of dissolution between the different types of relationships were getting ghosted or ghosting their partner (meaning abruptly ceasing communication with a romantic interest/partner; LeFebvre et al., 2019), the relationship being toxic and unhealthy, distance, infidelity, safety concerns, and misalignment with their partner. The biggest difference found for the dissolution of situationships was that one party did not want to be in a committed/long-term relationship so the situationship was terminated. Participants also indicated that situationships dissolved due to drama or emotional turmoil, the individual transitioned to dating their partner, or the relationship died off/faded away. In other words, situationships ended when commitment formed, or if passion and intimacy faded away. Non-situationships dissolved by being broken up with through social media or the phone, due to mental health reasons, and mutual agreements. Variability in relationship dissolution can be explained by differences in commitment. When relationships are more committed, an official breakup approach, such as talking about the end of the relationship and/or ending due to personal or relational reasons, is more common. With situationships, a relationship may end due to the lack of clarity or commitment, or as a result of the possible one-sided nature of a situationship. Essentially, situationships were more likely to end non-formally, whereas other relationships reported more formal breakups.

Based on these findings, recommendations can be made to support the healthy development of relationships. First, research has illustrated that relationships are good for one's physical and psychological health, as long as they are high quality

(Braithwaite & Holt-Lunstad, 2017). In the current study, those in situationships reported lower quality compared to other relationships. Given this data, it is recommended that individuals avoid situationships or identify ways to make commitment known in situationships, particularly if both are invested in the relationship. By assigning a label or identifying commitment in the relationship, it is hopeful that the situationships can transition to a higher quality relationship, eventually achieving consummate love. Having these types of conversations before getting emotionally and sexually attached can help prevent individuals from being misled and put in a situation that they may not want to be in.

Limitations and Conclusions

Although the current study provides preliminary empirical data to define and describe situationships, it is not without limitations. First, the samples used for this study were homogenous in demographics and not generalizable as participants were all college students, representative of young adults. Future studies are encouraged to explore large, non-college samples with more diversity to better understand what a situationship is and how it is different from other relationships. Additionally, the first phase of this study required participants to reflect on their past relationships and then identify if the relationship was a situationship. Participants were also asked to rate the relationship quality of previous relationships in the second phase of this study. Because possible latency effects were not controlled, the qualitative and quantitative data are prone to retrospective and/or social desirability bias. To increase validity, it would be best to capture situationships in real time using longitudinal data. Future studies are encouraged to investigate those people who are currently in situationships to see if the data in this study can be replicated and/or verified. This study was also cross-sectional, which limits the ability to determine cause and effect. Longitudinal studies are recommended in the future to capture the initiation, maintenance, and dissolution of situationships. Because of the exploratory nature of this investigation, more research is needed to better understand situationships.

Although there were limitations, this study provided empirical support to define the undefined relationship status known as situationships. These relationships mimic dating relationships based on their maintenance strategies but are different in the lack of commitment and label. Based on Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love, individuals in situationships experience romantic love, but avoid transitioning to companionate or consummate love. Situationships are similar in how they form compared to other relationship trajectories but are different given the significantly lower levels of satisfaction and commitment. Based on the low levels of relationship quality, it is recommended that individuals avoid situationships or find ways to establish clarity in the relationship in order to transition to a different, hopefully healthier, relationship.

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