Love Me, Love Me Not:
A Study on the Impact of Romantic Relationships on College Students
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Abstract

This study is an exploration of participants’ romantic relationship status and how it impacts daily functions such as mental health, social status, and academic status. This study also reported on hook-up participation and sexual satisfaction. There was a significant positive correlation found between social status and mental health – participants who had more platonic relationships had significantly better mental health. There was no significant difference found in terms of gender, relationship type, sexuality, or age. These were all compared by mental status, social status, overall relationship quality, sexual satisfaction, and hook-up culture participation. This study has an emphasis on undergraduate students’ lives.

Keywords: Romantic Relationships, College Students, Academic Status, Social Status, Mental Health, Relationship Quality, Hook-up Culture, Sexual Satisfaction, Gender, Sexuality
Introduction

Love provides meaning to people’s lives. It gives them security, happiness, a safe place, and so much more. People need relationships to function. Humans are incredibly social beings. People value the relationships they form and spend an immense amount of time strengthening them. Everyone has experienced a relationship at some point in their life — the possibilities include romantic, familial, or platonic. People encounter their relationships daily. Twenty-five percent of college students experience love addiction at some point during their college experience. Love addiction, which will be discussed more in detail later, and unhealthy relationships happen simultaneously. Unhealthy relationships can be damaging to anyone who experiences them, so it is vital to understand their full impact.

College is a period of heavy social and mental development in a traditional-aged student’s life. Once students are in college, they are surrounded by new people, and their entire social lives are their new platonic relationships. Along with college comes hook-up culture, which has become incredibly normalized within college communities to the point where people have become numb to their impact. It is important to note that relationships look different for college students. This can be credited to the different environment that college students experience. For example, one is placed in a community with only their peers with little to no supervision. Therefore, it should be expected that students have a different outlook on relationships. This paper will explore the impact of romantic relationships over a wide variety of topics based on current literature to provide a further understanding of the current field of research.

Theories of Love

Love can mean a lot of different things. It can be experienced with family, friends, or from a romantic aspect, and contains three components: caring, need-attachment, and intimacy (Fehr 2015). Love can be defined as an attitude that people hold towards someone or something. As Fehr (2015) explained, there are multiple kinds of love. One being passionate love. Passionate love can be defined as a very emotional kind of love, revolving around dramatic emotions, arousal, and sexual attraction. Passionate love is the kind experienced with one partner, typically. It is normally associated with desire, for example; when one is found physically attractive. However, there also need to be other factors within this such as passion and compassion. Romantic love also occurs in relationships. It can be defined as sexual attraction, desire, time spent together, touching, and wanting to be together.

People find mates in many ways. The most influential factor in choosing a mate is propinquity (Gunaydin 2017). When two people live close, they are much more likely to become mates. Additionally, when someone is in the same lifestyle, they are more likely to become mates. This could include similar classes or similar friends. Finding a romantic partner to spend one’s life with is one of the most important decisions a person can make. A partner will be someone’s main source of support and a big contributor to their mental health. People are significantly more likely to consider a person as their potential mate simply if they sit close to each other in school; this could show how much of the functionality of love is subconscious acts.
Attachment style can play a crucial role in people’s lives and how they form bonds. Attachment styles shape how a person experiences and regulates emotion, how they deal with their romantic relationships, and their motives and goals within a relationship (Pietromonaco 2015). Avoidant attachment styles are defined by Morey (2013) with an example of when a child experienced a caretaker who did not show care or responsiveness past providing the essentials. People who have avoidant attachment styles have less frequent phone use than secure attachment styles (Morey 2013). According to Murray (2015) 91% of adults own cell phones. Internet infidelity is becoming more prevalent as internet use grows. Since cheating is easier to do online, it becomes easier to hide and achieve. The access to alternative partners grows, and people can easily have an emotional affair without ever leaving their home; this could also relate to how college students are beginning to take a new perspective on relationships. For example, they may not be setting firm boundaries with one another, which could leave the potential for emotional infidelity.

It is possible to predict failure within a relationship. According to Gottman (2017) there are Four Horsemen to predict failure which are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. An important sign is body language, when one becomes physically closed off to their partner a key predictor of failure is shown. It can be hypothesized that body language can predict mental status in comparison to body language. For example, if one is open physically to a partner then they are also open mentally, and vice versa. A harsh start up within communication can also predict failure. This can be defined as one partner immediately being negative and accusatory within a conversation, which would quickly shift to a disagreement. Related to failure within a relationship, there is also violence within a relationship. According to Fletcher (2022) women are equally as violent as men within relationships.

This research is lacking in updated research on technology. Technology is rapidly developing and plays a significant role in everyone's lives today. Within the past few years there have been countless new social media platforms, and older ones are constantly developing. Due to this – we can predict a lifestyle change, which can impact many things. As mentioned, technology plays a significant role in relationships. More dating apps are surfacing, new social media platforms, and new ways for possible infidelity exist.

**Relationship Maintenance**

Maintaining a healthy relationship with one’s partner can be difficult. Especially when they do not have much previous experience. When traditional students move to college, it is generally their first time living away from home. This can mean a new kind of freedom, one that they have not previously experienced. There are many things that can distinguish a healthy relationship. One is the dynamic of cost and reward. Within relationships people look for maximum rewards with minimum costs (Miller 2022). Costs can be anything financial or psychological. The equation that exists within a relationship is outcomes = rewards – costs. If a different relationship exists with a higher reward, hypothetically their current relationship will be left to pursue the other option (Miller 2022). To understand relationships, one needs to know how they function first. The relationship maintenance process refers to possible relationship threats. For example, level of commitment could predict relationship length and attractive alternatives. Additionally, the more satisfied someone is with their relationship, the more forgiving they are (Miller 2022).

Stressors can play a significant role in how relationships function. Stress being experienced in other areas of life can cross over into relationships. Stress can be defined as the
response a person has to a situation that is out of their control (Karney 2013). However, how someone deals with stress can be in their control. People experience stressors with relationships, school, social life, and mental health. If partners deal with stress collaboratively then their relationship will likely strengthen, and if it is dealt with independently then it will likely weaken. Stressors can play many roles in students' lives; some may find stress as motivation, whereas others may find stress as something that inebriates their ability to function.

This research lacks diversity. Most of these studies focus on white, heterosexual relationships. To understand the population, a larger, more diverse sample is required. People maintain love differently; it could be hypothesized that relationships other than heterosexual will also be functional, it is unknown due to the lack of research. Research on other relationship types will benefit the field by providing a better understanding of how people function regularly. It is outdated to assume that everyone can fall under a heterosexual classification. Relationships are rapidly developing; it is a fair assumption that research needs to develop as society does. Many relationships are excluded from society, but they could be included within research on relationships.

**Social Status**

Romantic relationships are a major defining piece of one's social life. In college, students' social lives are rapidly changing and developing. They are placed in an unfamiliar environment surrounded by their peers, as opposed to living with their family. A key factor in the lives of college students is hook-up culture. Hook-ups are becoming more common among students, which can be defined as any sexual behavior from kissing to sexual intercourse with no expectation of commitment (Bible 2022). According to Bible (2022), around 75% of college students chose to participate in hook-up culture rather than a serious romantic relationship. Women have negative experiences in terms of sexual, social, and psychological. Regarding the sexual aspect; college students account for 50% of newly diagnosed STI’s each year (Bible 2022). Additionally, in a study done by Hayden (2016) including 465 female students, 98% of participants experienced unwanted physical touch with a sexual intent. This can be damaging to women's social status because they can become more hesitant to socialize due to the negative consequences.

Females become more isolated than males when in a relationship, along with a more irregular lifestyle (Schmidt 2015). Overall, according to Schmidt (2015) students who are in romantic relationships experience more negative emotions. A negative correlation appears to occur between social status and romantic status in college. Braithwaite (2010) says that young adults have a nontraditional way of looking at romantic relationships, meaning that they do not necessarily follow the margins of marriage. According to Milstein (2019) students report more sexual satisfaction when there was an orgasm present. Once students were in a relationship for at least six weeks sexual satisfaction tends to increase (Milstein 2019).

Social norms play an influential role in how people act in public; different social norms could be how people interact with their social circle daily, or how people act at work. Norms are especially important for college students since they are experiencing so many social differences, and students experience social norms more often. The inflation of need for social norms can be credited to the unfamiliar environment that students are experiencing. It could be hypothesized that people tend to participate in hook-up culture due to their peers participating. They tend to drift from their current norms to adapt into a new culture. Gower (2020) suggests gender and social norms play a crucial role in intimate situations, and it was also suggested that a fully
consensual sexual interaction can only occur in healthy relationships, meaning that an emotional bond was also necessary for a consensual sexual interaction to take place. It is hypothesized that social norms can be a contributing factor to the rough estimated 90% of sexual assaults that do not get reported (Gower 2020). It also could be predicted that students participate in hook-ups due to social norms.

This research is lacking in a comparison of male and females. The current research talks about how men thrive socially while in relationships, whereas women tend to struggle. However, the difficulties for men and positive for women are not discussed in depth. It would be useful to see every point of view of the research. There are specific social standards for women in relationships. All these social norms play a role into how women function within a relationship, and there could be a possible correlation between women's functionality in a relationship with social norms.

Mental Health

Many things can impact the mental health of students. College students experience a lot of different stressors, these can range from financial, academic, or social. People experience and handle stressors every day. These stressors will impact students' mental health along with their relationships and how they handle them. Relationship status and relationship quality could be positively correlated. If a relationship is going poorly, and is becoming an independent stressor, then mental health could also decrease. There are many factors that go into mental health. Mental health regarding relationships can correlate with many aspects of a student's life. College students struggle with mental health very often.

Love addiction is a behavioral addiction that can occur within a relationship, which can include a compulsive need for relationships despite the possible negative consequences. Love addiction is a common factor that can come up in unhealthy relationships. People need love in their lives, but there is a balance that needs to be found. There are a variety of love addiction dynamics. The dynamics are obsessed/obsessive, codependent, narcissistic, and ambivalent. Obsessed/obsessive refers to the need to always have their partner present. Partners may do anything to keep their obsession once they gain it. Codependent refers to the most common form, which is also a learned behavior. In this dynamic a partner will obsessively work to make sure their partner's needs are met. This often becomes overbearing, and their partner becomes their source of self-esteem. The narcissistic dynamic refers to when one partner is using a position of power to exploit their partner. It is normally an abusive relationship and very emotionally manipulative. The goal is to hold power of their partner instead of attempting to make them satisfied. The ambivalent dynamic refers to when one partner avoids true intimacy within the relationship, it becomes prevalent when there is a need to commit. All these dynamics tend to begin harmlessly until one partner has experienced euphoria with their end goal. For example, if a codependent partner met all their partner's needs or a narcissistic partner gained power over their partner. Love addiction is left up to a therapist's discretion to diagnose since it is not included in the DSM-5. However, 25% of college students are diagnosed with love addiction (Sanchez 2022). This often concurring with another disorder such as anxiety, depression, or drug use.

Academic Status

Students tend to struggle with academics more when they are in a romantic relationship, meaning they tend to have lower grades compared to single students. According to Schmidt (2015) students in a romantic relationship spend less time studying due to the time dedicated to
their relationship. Students have also had a struggle with retention increase (Meeker 1994). They find it more difficult to focus and retain current information in general. It could be hypothesized that this is due to the social media culture that has been constantly and rapidly progressing. According to Meeker (1994) female students consistently outperform male students, and older students outperform younger students. There is a positive correlation between students' academic performance and their partners' academic performance (Giordano 2008). Students in a romantic relationship also have lower attendance (Schmidt 2015). This can become a potential stressor for students since they will need to catch up on work and slowly fall behind. According to Giordano (2008) it was hypothesized that girls have a stronger relational orientation and center their romantic relationships more in comparison to boys.

Mental health also has an impact on academic performance. For example, Meeker (1994) found that students who reported elevated levels of anxiety at the beginning of the year had significantly poorer grades at the end of the academic year. Academic performance can already be damaging on its own, without the added pressure of a romantic relationship. This can apply especially because romantic relationships can be their own stressor as well. Specifically, regarding mental health, it can predict academic performance. Family can also play a role in academic performance, and the level of support that a student may receive (Giordano 2008).

Conclusion

Relationships are necessary for humans to function. They form who people are, and shape so many aspects of one’s life. Relationships are messy and difficult; they are hard to be in at times. College students’ social and academic status affect them more than they realize. It is hard to understand how much of an impact that they have when it is not regularly talked about. A study done on the impact romantic relationships in college have on mental status, social status, and academic status will allow the possibility for a correlation to be found.

It would be interesting to explore the comparisons between previous research and new research in a more diverse way. An increased sample size would benefit this research, to give people a fuller understanding of the impact of relationships. Future research could include a more inclusive view. Future research will address the question ‘How does participation in a romantic relationship during college impact academic status, social status, and mental health?’ It is hypothesized that students will have lower mental health, worse academic status, and worse social status based on previous research.

Methods

Participants

106 undergraduate students from a small college in southwest Colorado voluntarily participated in this study. 32 were male and 68 were female, then the rest were a combination of non-binary/third gender. Ages ranged from 18-56, with an average of 21.68 of the participants were Caucasian/White, then 37 of participants were Native American/Indigenous/Alaskan Native. 61 participants identified as heterosexual, 26 participants identified as bisexual, 4 participants identified as homosexual, 4 participants identified as pansexual, 3 participants identified as asexual, and 2 participants identified as demisexual. 32 of the participants were seniors in college, 23 were juniors, 23 were freshman, and 19 were sophomores. Regarding relationship status;’ 49 participants were single, 41 participants were in a committed monogamous relationship, 7 were in a committed nonmonogamous relationship, and 8 were in a
causal relationship. 58 participants did not participate in hook up culture, 17 did participate in it, and 26 used to participate but do not anymore.

Materials and Procedure

There will be an observational survey done on the romantic status, social status, academic status, and mental status of students. The survey will include multiple different pieces starting with demographics (Appendix A), then relationship status (Appendix B), following is a relationship quality measurement (Appendix C) adapted from Espen Roysamb, Joar Vitterso, and Kristian Tambs. Then there is a social status measurement (Appendix D), adapted from the Lubben Social Network Scale. Then the last two sections include academic status (Appendix E), and mental health measurement (Appendix F). There will be an implied consent at the beginning of the survey with a debriefing section at the end.

My hypothesis is that students who are in a romantic relationship will perform worse in academics, have worse mental health, and poorer social status. This could be credited to the isolation that a romantic relationship includes. In addition to the investment that a relationship acquires. I would predict that a correlation can be found between a romantic relationship in college and social status, mental health, and academic status.

The survey was designed on Qualtrics and sent out to students via email and social media. After participants had taken the survey, they were debriefed on Qualtrics. Once responses were collected, I used SPSS to analyze our data. I used multiple Pearson correlations to analyze data.

Results

There was no significant difference found between relationship status and social status, mental status, overall relationship quality, GPA, or sexual satisfaction (all $p > .05$). Relationship status included monogamous, casual relationship, and nonmonogamous relationship. The monogamous factor did not contribute to any results.

Figure 1: Comparison of Relationship Status
There was no significant difference between gender and mental status, overall relationship quality, social status, hook-up culture participation, or GPA (all \( p > .05 \)). Gender was compared as male versus female.

*Figure 2: Comparison of Genders*

![T-Test Results of Male vs Female](image1)

There was no significant difference between sexualities and social status, mental status, overall relationship quality, GPA, or sexual satisfaction (all \( p > .05 \)). Sexualities were compared as heterosexual versus other sexualities. Overall, sexuality did not impact any results.

*Figure 3: Comparison of Sexualities*

![T-Test Results of Sexualities](image2)

There was a significant correlation between mental health and social status. Figure 4 shows a positive correlation between the two (\( r = .35, p = .001 \)). Platonic relationships had more of an impact on participants mental health than romantic relationships.

*Figure 4: Correlation of Mental Status and Social Status*
Discussion

The results of the present study do not support the hypothesis that romantic relationships will have a negative impact on the academic status, social status, and mental health of college students. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the direct impact that romantic relationships have on college students’ lives. This pattern of results is not consistent with previous literature on romantic relationships. Previous literature shows that romantic relationships will impact students’ lives; they will have worse mental health, a poorer social status, and a poorer mental status. Meanwhile, this study showed no correlation between romantic relationships and any aspect of their lives.

There was a positive correlation found between social status and mental health. Students who had more platonic relationships had better mental health. Overall, platonic relationships were more important for students’ wellbeing according to this study. Students should focus on their relationships with their friends, as it will increase their mental health.

Implications

The results of the present study do not support the hypothesis that romantic relationships negatively impact mental status, social status, and academic status. There was no correlation between romantic relationships or mental status, social status, and academic status. The purpose of this study was to investigate what role relationships play in undergraduate college students’ lives. This pattern of results is not consistent with previous literature on romantic relationships in college. Previous literature suggests that romantic relationships can be damaging and cause irregular lifestyles. Meanwhile, this study suggests that there is no implication.

In general, there was no significant correlation between romantic relationships and college students' quality of life. There was a significant positive correlation was found between social status and mental health. Additionally, when people had more close relationships, excluding their current partner, they were more likely to have a healthier mental health status. One interpretation of these findings is that romantic relationships do not have any impact on college students' lives, which is highly unlikely. Another interpretation is that platonic relationships have more of an impact than romantic relationships when it comes to mental health. People value their friendships more, and friendships are more likely to have an impact.
Strengths

There were multiple different strengths worth mentioning for this study. To start, the participants included 106 different college students, which is a strength in terms of the external validity of this study. Another strength of this study is the fact that participants were able to give their own definition of a romantic relationship. This did not limit participants in any way, and they were able to make their own limits within a relationship.

Limitations

One limitation is the fact that an observational survey was used. This could have impacted on the results. Only 17 students reported being involved in hook-up culture. This is not consistent with other literature. In this survey, hook-ups were defined as any sexual behavior from kissing to sexual intercourse with no expectation of commitment. Due to this being an observational survey, and the survey was online, there is no way of knowing if participants were completely truthful. The survey being self-reporting can also impact different results.

As mentioned before, most of the participants were female. This could have impacted results as well. Females have a different perspective on relationships as male. According to previous literature, relationships have a different impact on their life than males. This could have impacted on the different definitions given, and they may have conformed to a specific societal view of romantic relationships from standards that have been set on them for many years.

Future Directions and Conclusions

Despite these limitations, the present study has enhanced our understanding of the relationship between romantic relationships and college students' lives. We hope that the current research will stimulate further investigation of this important area. Future research should include specifics on where romantic relationships impact college students' lives. If relationships did not have any impact, then people would not invest themselves in them. Additionally, future research should include further research on hook-up culture. The study had a very low participation rate for hook-up culture, which is contradictory to previous literature. Future directions should also include a previous relationship definition. I think that this impacted the results by giving participants an opportunity to look define a relationship within societal views, as opposed to their own relationship.
Bibliography


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