

## Short Communication

# WYD?: Exploring the Potential Emotional and Sexual Benefits of “Situationships”

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**Abstract**

“Situationship” is a term that has been trending on social media, predominantly used by emerging adults to mean casual relationships characterized by ambiguity in emotional and romantic commitment. These casual relationships often feature emotional and physical intimacy without clearly defined labels. The present study of 213 adults, either currently involved in a situationship (n=79) or who had been involved in a past situationship (n=134), examined the extent to which these casual relationships meet relationship needs, measured by positive or negative emotional outcomes and sexual satisfaction, using partner-focused and self-focused items. Situationship ratings for current relationships were fairly high, with a mean of 6.94 (1-10 scale), whereas past situationship ratings were more neutral, with a mean score of 5.53.

Persons who rated their current situationship highly also report more positive emotions and higher sexual satisfaction, both in terms of partner satisfaction and self-satisfaction. However, these correlations were smaller for persons reporting on past relationships, which was likely skewed by the lower overall situationship ratings for past relationships, which in turn might have reflected a more jaded view after a situationship has ended. Future analyses will examine the qualitative data collected to obtain a more nuanced understanding of these findings. These findings suggest that the negativity in public discourse about casual relationships may be mistaken for emerging adults: situationships were generally high quality or neutral, indicating that emerging adults may find emotional and sexual satisfaction through relationships that do not meet the traditional labels of exclusivity or commitment.

**ABBREVIATIONS**

SR: Situationship Rating

**INTRODUCTION**

Situationships, a term that emerged in the early 2000s, are characterized by ambiguity in emotional and romantic commitment. Situationships often feature emotional and physical intimacy without clearly defined labels, blurring the lines between casual and committed relationships and challenging traditional definitions of relationships [1]. Despite their prevalence, situationships and their association with relationship satisfaction, emotional needs, and sexual satisfaction outcomes remain relatively unexplored. The primary research question underlying the present study was to examine the extent to which casual relationships, termed “situationships” by emerging adults and trending social media, meet relationship needs and are related to positive or negative emotional and sexual outcomes.

Traditional romantic relationships are associated

with greater life satisfaction, higher self-esteem, and lower psychological distress [2]. In particular, high-quality romantic relationships are associated with higher psychological well-being [3,4], increased self-esteem [5], and higher sexual satisfaction [6,7]. Relationship satisfaction has been studied as a specific predictor of sexual satisfaction for same-sex partners as well as mixed-sex partners [8,9].

Sexual activity, whether in a casual or committed relationship, could be motivated by various dimensions of the [10], hierarchy of needs pyramid: Sexual activity is a biological drive, sexual intimacy may create a sense of security as well as fulfill the need for belonging and love, sexually satisfying a partner may in turn satisfy self-esteem needs, and peak sexual experiences can be equated with other peak experiences of self-actualized persons [11]. Research has consistently demonstrated strong associations between sexual well-being and better health outcomes such as improved cardiac health [12], increased pain tolerance [13], successful aging [14], and increased longevity [15]. Research has found similar associations between sexual well-being and higher psychological well-

being [16], life satisfaction [17], lower depression [18], and lower anxiety [9]. Thus, when sexual well-being or sexual satisfaction is experienced – a separate construct from relationship satisfaction – it can lead to a variety of positive physical and mental health outcomes. The question raised is whether casual relationships facilitate similar positive outcomes.

Hookups, another type of casual relationships akin to situationships, are also defined by ambiguity, although they are generally standalone experiences that focus on physical sexual activities [19]. Research has found that hookups can have both positive benefits, such as reduced anxiety and increased psychological well-being for college students generally [20], as well as negative impacts on psychological well-being [21]. For LGBTQ+ individuals, casual sexual relationships have been associated with distinct, positive outcomes such as lower minority stress [22], and increased community connectedness [23]. Many LGBTQ+ individuals have reported more positive than negative outcomes from hookups, which has been hypothesized to be a result of the progressive sexual socialization in LGBTQ+ communities [24].

The present study examined the extent to which situationships can meet an individual's relationship needs, measured by positive or negative emotional outcomes and sexual satisfaction, in the context of both current and past situationships. We hypothesized that higher situationship ratings would be correlated with more positive emotional outcomes and higher sexual satisfaction. We explored the extent to which these associations differ depending on whether individuals were reflecting on current or past situationships. We also explored whether these associations would be different between heterosexual and sexual minority participants. We hypothesized that sexual minorities would have higher ratings than heterosexual individuals on their situationship rating, emotional outcomes, and sexual satisfaction.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

To examine these research questions, we conducted a mixed-method survey with open-ended questions recruiting participants using snowball sampling, social media posts, flyers, and outreach to LGBTQ+ organizations. Our sample consisted of 213 participants (65.6 %women; 23.3% men; 11.1% other gendered), aged 18-49 ( $M=22.58$ ). Thirty-seven percent ( $n=79$ ) responded to survey questions with reference to their current situationship and 63% ( $n=134$ ) responded with reference to their most recent past situationship.

## Entering/Ending Situationship

To measure the context when entering into a situationship, participants were presented with the question, "What were the circumstances when you entered into your situationship?" and instructed to select all responses that applied from a list of 13 items. Some response options included: "At a party," "Under the influence of alcohol," and "In an open relationship." To explore the context at the conclusion of a situationship, participants were asked, "What were the circumstances when you ended your situationship?" and again instructed to select all applicable options from a list of 11 items. A few provided responses included: "You started dating someone else exclusively," "The situationship caused too much emotional distress," and "Your friends or family encouraged you to end it." Participants were also provided two open-ended response fields: "I ended the situationship because:" and "My partner ended the situationship because:" to allow for more nuanced qualitative input. For both questions, participants were given the chance to explain other circumstances that influenced their situationship outcome with a "Something else" option and a space to specify.

## Emotional Outcomes

Emotional outcomes felt during a current situationship or most recent situationship experience were assessed using a modified version of the scale developed by McKeen [25], to assess emotions post hook-up. The original 10-item scale was altered to measure emotions during a current situationship or a most recent situationship (e.g. "During my *current* situationship I feel lonely", "In my *most recent* situationship I felt lonely"), with responses using a Likert-type scale between 1 = "*strongly disagree*" and 7 = "*strongly agree*". Five of the items required reverse coding, resulting in an overall higher score measuring emotional satisfaction in situationship experience. The reliability of the Emotional Outcomes scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha; with a Cronbach's alpha of .91 for current situationships and .84 for recent past situationships, indicating good internal consistency of the scale in this sample.

## Sexual Satisfaction

Sexual satisfaction was measured using the New Sexual Satisfaction Scale (NSSS-S) [26], a 13-item scale modified from the original 20-item scale, removing six items for redundancy and one item because it did not target subjective sexual satisfaction. For all sexual satisfaction items, response options ranged on a 5-point Likert-type scale from "*not at all satisfied*" to "*extremely satisfied*." Items assessed both individual satisfaction (e.g. "My

mood after sexual activity”) and satisfaction with one’s partner in a sexual context (e.g. “My partner’s emotionally opening up during sex”). Sexual activity was defined by stating that “sexual activity is defined as broadly as you personally define it and can include any intimate contact from kissing to touching to any activity that you find sexually pleasurable” at the beginning of the measure. This definition was included to ensure that penile-vaginal intercourse (PVI) was not the only act assumed to be sex/sexual activity. The reliability of the NSSS-S scale was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha; with a Cronbach’s alpha of .90 for current situationships ( $\alpha=.78$  for partner-focused items,  $\alpha=.81$  for self-focused items) and .89 for recent past situationships ( $\alpha=.77$  for partner-focused items,  $\alpha=.84$  for self-focused items), indicating good internal consistency of the scale in this sample.

To measure situationship satisfaction, participants were asked to rate their most recent past situationship or current situationship on a 10-point scale, with answers ranging from 1(worst) to 10 (best).

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 29. Analyses of differences based on sexual orientation were conducted after creating two groups: heterosexual/straight ( $n=85$ ) and bisexual/pansexual/queer ( $n=81$ ), as grouping sexual orientations separately lacked sufficient power to conduct analyses.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The sample consisted of 213 participants; 87.3% ( $n=186$ ) responded to the gender identity questions: 56.3% women ( $n=120$ ), 19.7% men ( $n=42$ ); 12.9% ( $n=24$ ) other gendered (gender queer, agender, genderfluid, non-binary, transman, transwoman, transfem). Participants were primarily emerging adults aged 18-49 ( $M=22.58$ ), 37 percent ( $n=79$ ) of whom were currently in a situationship and 63% ( $n=134$ ) had experienced a past situationship. Participants who reported their sexual orientation ( $n=170$ ) were sexually diverse: 50% heterosexual ( $n=85$ ); 25.9% bisexual ( $n=44$ ); 9.4% queer ( $n=16$ ), 2.4% gay ( $n=4$ ); 4.7% lesbian ( $n=8$ ), 5.3% pansexual ( $n=9$ ); 2.4% asexual/questioning ( $n=4$ ). Participants who reported their race and ethnicity ( $n=192$ ) were fairly diverse: 62.2% White/Caucasian ( $n=120$ ); 15% Asian/Asian American ( $n=29$ ); 10.9% Latinx/Latine/Latine American ( $n=21$ ), 7.8% Black/African American ( $n=15$ ); 3.1% Middle Eastern/Middle Eastern American ( $n=6$ ), 4.7% Biracial/Multiracial ( $n=9$ ); 1% Native American/Alaska Native ( $n=2$ ). The most selected context when entering a situationship was that they were already friends ( $n=96$ ), followed by through friends ( $n=78$ ), with being under the influence of alcohol

( $n=2$ ) or cannabis ( $n=16$ ) being added factors. The most selected reason for ending a situationship was that it caused too much emotional distress ( $n=38$ ), followed by becoming exclusive with a situationship partner ( $n=25$ ).

Situationship ratings for participants currently in a relationship ranged from 1-10 ( $M=6.94$ ,  $SD=2.24$ ), whereas ratings for participants reporting on their most recent past situationship ranged from 1-10 ( $M=5.53$ ,  $SD=2.27$ ), consistent with research that has found casual relationships can be satisfactory positive experiences despite not being labeled as exclusive or committed in a traditional sense [20]. Overall, situationship ratings were significantly higher for persons currently in situationships which could be a reflection of a tendency to view ongoing relationships, even casual relationships, in a favorable light.

Our hypothesis that higher situationship ratings would be correlated with more positive emotional outcomes and higher sexual satisfaction was supported, with stronger correlations for individuals who were reflecting on *past* relationships as compared to *current* relationships, except for emotional outcomes.

For those *currently in a situationship*, Situationship Rating (SR) and sexual satisfaction were positively correlated, for total items ( $r(67)=.350$ ,  $p=.003$ ), partner-focused items ( $r(67)=.332$ ,  $p=.005$ ), and self-focused items ( $r(67)=.338$ ,  $p=.005$ ). SR and emotional outcomes were positively correlated ( $r(67)=.777$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Similarly, for participants reflecting on *past relationships*, SR and sexual satisfaction for total items ( $r(99)=.402$ ,  $p<.001$ ), partner-focused items ( $r(62)=.403$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and self-focused items ( $r(62)=.368$ ,  $p=.003$ ). SR and emotional outcomes ( $r(99)=.708$ ,  $p<.001$ ) were positively correlated for recent past situationships as well. Table 1. These findings are consistent with prior research by Fleishman [8], and others that have found relationship satisfaction, albeit in traditional relationships, to be associated with sexual satisfaction as well as positive emotional outcomes [2-4].

Our hypotheses that sexual minorities would have higher

**Table 1:** Correlations Between Situationship Rating and Outcomes for Current and Past Situationships

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Situationship Rating		.350**	.332**	.338**	.777***
2. Sexual Satisfaction	.402***		.959**	.959**	.432**
3. Sexual Satisfaction Partner	.403***	.942**		.840**	.389**
4. Sexual Satisfaction Self	.368**	.939**	.770**		.439**
5. Emotional Outcomes	.708***	.365**	.355**	.247*	

Significance Levels: \*\*\* $<.001$ ; \*\* $<.01$ ; \* $<.05$

Note. The upper triangle indicates associations for individuals in Current Situationships; the lower triangle indicates associations for individuals reporting on a Past Situationship

ratings than heterosexual individuals on situationship rating, emotional outcomes, and sexual satisfaction were not supported. However, when exploring the differences in the correlations between variables, correlations were higher for participants with diverse sexual orientations as compared to the total sample in current situationships. For sexually diverse individuals currently in situationships ( $n=33$ ), correlations were higher across variables when compared to the total sample: SR and sexual satisfaction ( $r(31) = .479, p = .005$ ), partner-focused items ( $r(31) = .449, p = .009$ ), self-focused items ( $r(31) = -.469, p = .006$ ) and emotional outcomes ( $r(31) = .803, p < .001$ ). For sexually diverse persons reflecting on past situationships ( $n=38$ ), the comparison was more nuanced. While correlations between SR and sexual satisfaction ( $r(36) = .505, p = .001$ ) and partner-focused items ( $r(19) = .489, p = .024$ ) were higher, self-focused sexual satisfaction items were not significantly correlated and emotional outcomes ( $r(31) = .697, p < .001$ ) were slightly lower (Table 2).

Higher correlations found for sexually diverse participants support the hypothesis that casual relationships and their potential to satisfy relationship needs are different for the LGBTQ+ community, especially for individuals currently in situationships [22,23]. Situationships, when positively evaluated, may lead to higher levels of sexual satisfaction, reflecting more tolerant and diverse views about sexuality and sexual experiences [24].

It is acknowledged that the present study has several limitations common to survey research as well as a sample size lacking power to test moderation and mediation across variables. However, the gender, sexual, and racial diversity of the participants, as well as recruitment not solely within a college population, allows for some generalization across the emerging adult population regarding the potential benefits of casual relationships. Future data collection to increase the sample size will allow for more nuanced statistical analyses. Moreover, future analysis

of the qualitative data collected through open-ended questions will provide more detail about the contexts in which situationships can be positive as opposed to negative experiences. Our findings provide more evidence for positive outcomes as found by Winkeljohn [20], and counters the presumption that casual relationships are mostly negative experiences [21].

## CONCLUSION

Despite not being traditional or exclusive, highly-rated situationships are correlated with positive emotional outcomes and sexual satisfaction, both in terms of partner satisfaction and self-satisfaction. For sexual minority individuals the experience of being in a high quality situationship may have even more positive outcomes.

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**Table 2:** Correlations Between Situationship Rating and Outcomes for Sexual Minorities in Current and Past Situationships

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Situationship Rating		<b>.479**</b>	<b>.449**</b>	<b>.469**</b>	<b>.803***</b>
2. Sexual Satisfaction	<b>.505**</b>		<b>.960***</b>	<b>.954***</b>	<b>.578***</b>
3. Sexual Satisfaction Partner	<b>.489**</b>	.920***		<b>.832***</b>	<b>.502**</b>
4. Sexual Satisfaction Self	.345	<b>.896***</b>	<b>.650**</b>		<b>.609***</b>
5. Emotional Outcomes	<b>.697***</b>	<b>.397*</b>	<b>.448*</b>	.265	

Significance Levels: \*\*\*<.001; \*\*<.01; \*<.05

Note. The upper triangle indicates associations for individuals in Current Situationships; the lower triangle indicates associations for individuals reporting on a Past Situationship

Note: Bold indicates higher values than the overall sample.



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