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From Courtship to Situationship: Understanding the Rise of Relationship Ambiguity in Young Adulthood

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ABSTRACT

While heterosexual relationships once followed a relatively linear path from courtship to marriage, contemporary relationship pathways have become less standardized and more ambiguous over time. This shift has contributed to the emergence of "situationships," a liminal relational form in which partners are neither fully committed nor entirely casual. Although situationships have quickly become part of the popular lexicon, there has been little sociological synthesis of this emerging relationship type. This review seeks to explain why, and under what conditions, relationship ambiguity has emerged, with a particular focus on situationships. We argue that situationships reflect broader transformations in the social, cultural, and technological landscape of young adulthood. By tracing intimate relationships from courtship to situationship, we show how situationships emerge as a distinct relational form and consider what this shift means for today's young adults. We conclude by suggesting directions for future research and highlighting important data and methodological opportunities.

1 | Introduction

The landscape of young adults' intimate (e.g., sexual and romantic) relationships has changed dramatically over the past few decades (Tillman et al. 2019). While relationships once followed a relatively scripted pathway from courtship to marriage, young adults' relationships have become increasingly ambiguous (Langlais et al. 2024; Wade 2017). Today, relationship ambiguity is understood as situations in which the status, expectations, and trajectory of a relationship remain unclear, undefined, or contested by one or both partners. Although ambiguous relationships—such as hookups, friends with benefits, booty calls—are not new, widespread social and economic changes have rendered relationship ambiguity an increasingly normative aspect of young adulthood (for review, see Wentland and Reissing 2014). Indeed, young adult dating is now characterized by the growing prevalence of "situationships" (Choudhry et al. 2022; Hardesty et al. 2024). Unlike other noncommittal relationships, such as hookups or friends-with-benefits, situationships emerge as a distinct relational form that reintegrates emotional intimacy—often absent in other ambiguous relationships—while avoiding commitment or labeling (Anderson and Phillips 2026; Langlais et al. 2024).

Understanding relationship ambiguity—particularly situationships—in young adulthood is especially important because it is during this period of the life course that young adults (ages 18–28) are expected to transition into adult roles, including marriage and parenthood (Arnett 2000; Shanahan 2000). Yet while the timing and sequencing of these role transitions have cascading consequences for life course outcomes (Shanahan 2000; Waters et al. 2011), young adults around the world are delaying these commitments, setting the stage for the emergence of more flexible and ambiguous relationship forms—such as situationships (Lesthaeghe 2014; Tillman et al. 2019). On one hand,

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situationships may offer young adults an innovative way to meet their emotional and physical needs without the constraints of commitment (see Armstrong et al. 2025). On the other hand, these liminal relationships may heighten uncertainty, blur expectations, and create ambiguity about relationship roles and trajectories (see Anderson and Phillips 2026). Despite this potential, research on situationships is still in its early stages. As a result, we have a limited understanding of how and why situationships, and relationship ambiguity more broadly, have become such common features of young adulthood (Choudhry et al. 2022; Langlais et al. 2024).

In this review, we synthesize research on the growing diversity of young adults' intimate relationships to better understand the rise of relationship ambiguity—specifically situationships—in young adulthood. We begin by exploring the social, economic, and cultural forces that have fundamentally transformed young adults' relationship pathways, facilitating the development of more flexible, less-committed relationship forms. We then delineate the transformation of traditional courtship practices from dating to hooking up, paying particular attention to how digital technologies afford relationship ambiguity, and ultimately examine the emergence of situationships. Next, we examine early research on the implications of situationships and consider how these ambiguous relationships may seem to enable more flexible forms of intimacy for some (Armstrong et al. 2025) while reproducing inequality within intimate relationships for others (Anderson and Phillips 2026; Langlais et al. 2024). We conclude by suggesting promising directions for future research and emphasizing the importance of studying relationship ambiguity in young adulthood.

2 | Structural and Cultural Drivers of Relationship Ambiguity

In many societies, marriage has historically functioned as the primary organizing framework for heterosexual romantic relationships, shaping the norms, expectations, and scripts for dating and courtship (Cherlin 2004; Coontz 2006; Juárez and Gayet 2014). In the mid-twentieth century, many young adults in the United States and other industrialized societies followed a relatively linear and compressed pathway from courtship to marriage to parenthood (Tillman et al. 2019). But today, marriage no longer holds the same compulsory status for adult life that it once did, though the extent and character of this shift varies considerably across cultural contexts (Juárez and Gayet 2014; Twenge et al. 2012).

Since the 1960s, widespread changes to the global gender system—including the rise of women's labor force participation, educational attainment, and economic independence—have transformed the landscape of marriage (England 2010; Gerson 2009; Lesthaeghe 2014). Men and women are getting married later in life, and a growing share of people never marry, particularly in the United States and parts of Europe and East Asia (Cherlin 2020; Lesthaeghe 2014; Raymo et al. 2015). At the same time, cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, and marital dissolution have become more common (Cherlin 2017; Juárez and Gayet 2014; Lesthaeghe 2014). Although marriage remains the norm in much of the world (Cherlin 2020), the timing, sequencing, and meaning of marriage have shifted substantially (Smock and Schwartz 2020). As a result, young adults—in both developed and developing countries—now experience more diverse and less standardized pathways into committed relationships, increasing the potential for relationship ambiguity (Juárez and Gayet 2014; Knopp et al. 2020; Tillman et al. 2019).

Alongside these shifts, young adults are forming relationships amid widespread uncertainty (Crosnoe and Cavanagh 2025; Juárez and Gayet 2014; Manning 2020). Traditional markers of adulthood—such as leaving home, completing school, becoming financially independent, getting married, and having children—have become increasingly delayed and, at times, perceptibly out of reach for many young people around the world (Furstenberg 2015; Juárez and Gayet 2014; Manning 2020; Twenge and Campbell 2018). Many scholars have linked these delays to broader social and economic shifts shaping young adults' life course trajectories. In both developed and developing countries, economic instability and weak labor-market opportunities delay both transitions out of the parental home and family formation (Juárez and Gayet 2014; Kim 2017; Vignoli et al. 2016). Research on low-income young adults finds that, despite aspiring to marriage, structural constraints—such as housing insecurity, job instability, and incarceration—reduce perceptions of partner "marriageability," diminish readiness for long-term commitment, and exacerbate relationship instability (Silva 2013; Tach and Edin 2011; Sassler and Lichter 2020; Turney et al. 2023). These constraints not only delay long-term commitment but also reshape its meaning, prompting many to reevaluate their approach to dating and marriage (Crosnoe and Cavanagh 2025; Lesthaeghe 2014; Tillman et al. 2019).

Indeed, in many parts of the world, relationship formation has shifted from being embedded within family, kin, and community networks to becoming a more individualized and private process (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). This shift parallels a rise in a culture of individualism that emphasizes personal autonomy and self-realization over institutional and familial obligation (Giddens 1991; Lesthaeghe 2014). For instance, in the Philippines, public courtship—or *panliligaw*—once made relationship formation a culturally structured and community-oriented process (Deniega et al. 2024; Pasion et al. 2023). However, as contemporary courtship becomes increasingly individualized and private, romantic relationships have become less subject to community and family oversight (Deniega et al. 2024; Pasion et al. 2023). Similarly, in India, matrimonial websites have increasingly replaced community matchmakers, affording young adults greater agency in partner selection—though family involvement remains common (Titzmann 2013). Ultimately, as relationship formation grows more individualistic around the world, young adults are gaining greater flexibility in determining when—and under what conditions—to pursue long-term commitment.

Accordingly, young adults are redefining their relationships through self-development and personal fulfillment rather than through timely transitions into adult roles (Lesthaeghe 2014; Twenge and Campbell 2018). Although most continue to view relationships as a source of personal fulfillment (Cherlin 2010), young adults increasingly see marriage as a capstone achievement that marks the attainment of other adult roles and resources (Tillman et al. 2019). As a result, many are delaying romantic commitment to prioritize their social and economic

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development (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Twenge and Campbell 2018). Though not all young adults adhere to this self-development imperative, most acknowledge it as a normative expectation of young adulthood (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Lamont 2021; Tillman et al. 2019). Yet rather than rejecting commitment altogether, many young adults explore relationship alternatives before eventually forming committed partnerships (Fallon and Stockstill 2018; Willoughby and James 2017), a pattern reflected in the rise of hookup culture.

3 | From Courtship to Situationship

Traditional courtship practices provided a clear and widely shared framework for forming heterosexual romantic relationships. Though practices vary considerably across cultural contexts, most remain structured by clear gender roles and expectations regarding who should initiate, plan, and progress romantic and sexual interactions (Eaton and Rose 2011; England et al. 2008). For example, in the United States, men are typically expected to invite women on dates, arrange logistics, and pay for activities in public settings such as restaurants or movie theaters. Physical intimacy—like kissing—might follow at the end of a date, with the relationship progressing over time. After several dates, men are expected to signal commitment by suggesting a transition into an exclusive relationship (Lamont 2021). Although not all relationships adhere to these conventions (Bartoli and Clark 2006; Lever et al. 2015), the script provides a framework for young people to rely on when forming relationships (Allison 2016; Ridgeway 2011). However, widespread changes in the social and technological context of young adulthood have rendered this relatively structured and predictable model of courtship less dominant over time.

3.1 | The Hookup Culture

As college became a key feature of young adulthood in the United States and elsewhere, dating was replaced by a new sexual script: the hookup (Bogle 2008; Wade 2017). For millennial young adults, hooking up quickly became the dominant sexual culture on college campuses (Dalessandro 2018; Wade 2021). Unlike dating, hookups are characterized by non-committal sexual activity ranging anywhere from kissing to intercourse (Bogle 2008; Wade 2017). The script is ambiguous by design, where hookups are meant to be casual, undefined, and not necessarily oriented toward the development of a romantic relationship (Wade 2017, 2021).

Though hookups can happen anywhere, the college campus provided a context ripe for the rise of the hookup culture (Bogle 2008; Wade 2017). In fact, early U.S. research found that hookups emerged from the Greek party scene, documenting a "hookup script" that typically involved fraternity parties, heavy drinking, flirting, dancing, and eventually, a hookup (Wade 2017). Lack of communication is central to this script, where sex is supposed to "just happen" (Lovejoy 2015). Discussing romantic interest, expressing romantic desire, or attempting to maintain emotional intimacy violates the scripts' casual expectations and, in doing so, risks one's ability to participate (Wade 2021). Yet, romantic relationships still emerge from hookups. Research shows that hookups often serve as a pathway into committed partnerships on college campuses (Allison 2019; England and Thomas 2006). However, the transition from casual hookup to committed partnership remains ambiguous, as young adults lack clear guidelines for navigating this shift (Lamont 2021; Wade 2017).

This ambiguity stems, at least in part, from the sexual imperative of young adulthood, which prioritizes emotionally detached, casual encounters over committed relationships (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Wade 2017). However, this imperative—and its (lack of) emotional expectations—has important implications for young adults. Gendered beliefs about intimacy presume women to be emotionally driven, while men are presumed to be emotionally detached (Schrock and Knop 2014), which creates challenges for women as they navigate the casual expectations of the hookup (Allison 2019; Wade 2021). In particular, Wade (2021) finds that to be a desirable partner, women must carefully manage their expressions of tenderness during and after hookups, while also limiting contact with hookup partners afterward. Doing so helps them avoid being labeled too "thirsty" or eager for a relationship. In this way, while the ambiguity of the hookup script may grant women more sexual freedom and empowerment than dating (England et al. 2008; Kalish and Kimmel 2019), hooking up often maintains a heteronormative hierarchy (Kettrey 2016; Wade 2017).

Although often framed as "sexual liberation," the hookup script places men in positions of control (Wade 2017). In heterosexual encounters, hookups reflect a "push-and-resist" dynamic in which men are expected to initiate and escalate hookups, while women are positioned as gatekeepers (Bogle 2008; Wade 2017). These gendered expectations are reinforced by the spatial organization of hookups, which often occur in men's living spaces (e.g., dorm rooms, fraternity houses), granting men greater control over the terms and progression of the encounter (Hirsch and Khan 2020). The gendered nature of the hookup script also privileges men's sexual pleasure, contributing to an "orgasm gap" where women report less sexual pleasure in hookups than men (Armstrong et al. 2012). This inequality is compounded by a sexual double-standard that rewards men for their sexual conquests but penalizes women who risk being labeled as "sluts" for hooking up (Armstrong et al. 2012; Wade 2017). Thus, while ambiguity affords some the freedom and flexibility to hookup, the gendered nature of the hookup script maintains a system that privileges heterosexual men over women.

Further, because access to campus social spaces is often structured by social and cultural capital (Wade 2017), participation in hookup culture is unevenly distributed along intersecting axes of sexuality, race, and class (Pham 2017). For instance, the heteronormative nature of the hookup script creates barriers for queer young adults (Pham 2017; Spell 2017). By privileging heterosexual men's sexual pleasure, the script limits pathways for queer women's sexual exploration, often limiting it to the trope of "straight-girls-kissing" (Budnick 2016), while gay men face more explicit barriers to entry (Kuperberg and Padgett 2015). The hookup scene is also marked by racialized and class-based boundaries (Pham 2017; Spell 2021, 7). For instance, working-class students—who often co-reside with parents—experience greater spatial separation from the campus hookup scene (Allison and Risman 2014). Whereas women of color, especially Black

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and Latina women, face compounding racist and sexist stereotypes that constrain their opportunities to participate. When they do engage in hookups, they are at greater risk of being stigmatized for their behaviors, pushing many to "opt out" or seek alternative relationship pathways (Pham 2017; Spell 2017). Ultimately, while hooking up was once largely confined to American campus life (Wade 2017), they have become increasingly common across many societies as digital technologies expand opportunities for intimacy and facilitate new, less clearly defined relationship scripts (Kohli et al. 2022; Lundquist and Curington 2019; Yu et al. 2022).

3.2 | Digital Dating and the Affordances of Ambiguity

While earlier generations relied on personal advertisements, pen-pal correspondence, and computer dating services to search for potential partners across geographic distance (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012), the rise of digital technologies—such as dating apps, social media, and texting—has transformed how young adults develop intimate relationships (Dalessandro 2018; LeFebvre 2018; Olmstead 2020). Today, nearly all young adults (ages 18–34) own a smartphone, most report almost constant texting and social media use (Mollborn et al. 2021), and more than half have used a dating website or app (Vogels and McClain 2023). These technologies have expanded people's access to potential partners, introduced new forms of algorithmic matchmaking, and facilitated more individualized and private forms of intimate connection (Courtois and Timmermans 2018; Rosenfeld et al. 2019). Now, as young adults' relationships unfold across multiple platforms—from dating apps to direct messages (DMs)—these technologies may be giving way to new forms of relationship ambiguity (Hanson 2021).

Dating apps have become a central feature of young adult dating (Hanson 2021). Once concentrated among midlife adults or those navigating "thin" markets (Rosenfeld & Thomas 2012), platforms such as Tinder, Bumble, and Grindr have expanded the reach of online dating to a new generation (David and Cambre 2016; Sumter and Vandenbosch 2019). This shift has largely been attributed to the digital affordances of the apps (Davis and Chouinard 2016; Hanson 2021). These affordances—or design features that shape interaction—structure how users build profiles, "match" with partners, and communicate, with important implications for on- and offline interactions (Davis and Chouinard 2016). For instance, the affordances of Bumble—which require heterosexual women to message men first—have been implemented to undermine gender inequality and grant women greater control over their online interactions (Young and Roberts 2023). Whereas Tinder's swipe-based design has been suggested to promote ephemeral, "gamified" interactions that encourage quick, informal connections, as users swipe through potential matches like a game of cards (David and Cambre 2016; Hobbs et al. 2017; Kettrey et al. 2024). Together, these affordances have effectively transformed online dating from a once stigmatized activity for older adults to a normalized, everyday practice for young adults.

Although committed relationships form through dating apps—and meeting online is a common way couples meet (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012)—many young adults interpret some affordances as prioritizing casual, often sexual, encounters over committed relationships (Christensen 2021; Dalessandro 2018; Kettrey et al. 2024). In fact, dating apps have become synonymous with "hookup apps" among younger generations of users (Christensen 2021; LeFebvre 2018). This is not only due to the affordances of their gamified design but also to the broader cultural contexts in which young adults are embedded. Even with Bumble, which was designed to shift gendered dating dynamics, research finds that users often revert to dating or hookup scripts as their online interactions evolve (Bivens and Hoque 2018; Kettrey et al. 2024; Young and Roberts 2023). In this way, the affordances of dating apps do not simply determine behavior; rather, users interpret them through existing dating norms and expectations. As the dominance of the hookup culture foregrounds young adults' experiences with intimacy, these platforms have effectively blurred the boundary between dating and hooking up (LeFebvre 2018).

Research shows that dating apps, such as Tinder, have given rise to a "hybrid hookup script" (Christensen 2021; Kettrey et al. 2024). This script reintegrates traditional dating scripts, which are absent in an on-campus hookup culture, while maintaining the expectation of a hookup (Christensen 2021). In these contexts, users must determine whether a Tinder date—often understood as a typical and sometimes safer next step—signals genuine romantic interest or implies an expectation of a hookup (Berkowitz et al. 2021; Christensen 2021; Hanson 2021). Even when users are not explicitly seeking hookups, ambiguous "you up" texts or messages to "meet up" via dating apps are often interpreted as attempts to assess consent to hook up (Dietzel 2024; Kettrey et al. 2024; Smith et al. 2025). That is, the cultural scripts associated with dating apps can reinforce the sexual expectations of young adulthood, often framing online interactions as oriented toward casual hookups. As a result, this hybrid script introduces new forms of ambiguity into early intimate interactions, as users must navigate competing dating and hookup scripts alongside the uncertainty of meeting online.

Although many dating apps have acknowledged this uncertainty by introducing new forms of identity verification (e.g., photo verification, active social media authentication) alongside profile prompts that allow users to specify what they are looking for (e.g., friendship, hookups, long-term commitment), they have yet to eliminate ambiguity altogether (Berkowitz et al. 2021; Hanson 2021). Rather, many young adults continue to question whether connections formed online are as safe, "authentic," or meaningful as offline relationships (Dalessandro 2018). That is, young adults must not only contend with the possibility of being harassed or "catfished" (i.e., deceived through false or misleading identities), but also with uncertainty surrounding their matches' expectations and intentions (Berkowitz et al. 2021). Given the anonymity of dating apps, users may continue to struggle to determine whether a match is authentic, trustworthy, or safe. This may be especially consequential for marginalized users—such as gender/sexual minorities and people of color—who must navigate this uncertainty alongside an elevated risk of (hetero)sexist and/or racist interactions on the apps (Buggs 2017; Thompson 2018). Thus, despite efforts to reduce uncertainty, dating apps continue to generate new forms of ambiguity that complicate young adults' efforts to develop "good" (or committed) romantic relationships (Dalessandro 2018).

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Beyond dating apps, young adults also describe texting or "sliding into the DMs" (i.e., direct messages) as a primary strategy for relationship initiation, maintenance, and dissolution (Goluboff 2016; LeFebvre et al. 2019). These digitally-mediated scripts begin as early as adolescence, too. Nearly half of U.S. teens report letting someone know they are romantically interested by friending them on social media, and just under half say they express attraction by liking, commenting, sending an emoji, or DMing that person (Groggel 2023; Lenhart et al. 2015). These strategies are also intentionally ambiguous, as online interactions can signal interest in subtler ways, shielding users from the embarrassment of in-person rejection. Eventually, these online strategies may evolve into a "just talking" phase—a common pre-dating ritual in which individuals communicate frequently through texting or social media, followed by in-person "hanging out" with the possible intent to pursue a relationship. Although "just talking" may resemble the courtship practices of earlier decades, scholars argue that it marks a key departure from traditional dating or hookup scripts (Sibley et al. 2024). This shift stems from the deliberate ambiguity surrounding the norms and definitions of "just talking," an ambiguity that is amplified by the conditions of communication technologies (Hardesty et al. 2024; Sibley et al. 2024).

For some, "just talking" will eventually evolve into a committed relationship, but for others, "just talking" may serve as an alternative to commitment (Sibley et al. 2024). Rather than "defining the relationship" (Knopp et al. 2020), many young people end up in persistent patterns of ambiguous, undefined talking stages. In a study of young adults who described their relationship status as "just talking," Sibley et al. (2024) found that participants commonly attributed this ambiguous relationship to the ubiquity of technology in their lives. Despite constant connection through texting and social media, they tended to keep commitment levels low because they assumed the other person was "just talking" to multiple people. In fact, communication technologies have been shown to make it increasingly difficult for young adults to assess their commitment to potential partners, in part, because they provide "too many options," leaving users feeling overwhelmed and less willing to commit (Hardesty et al. 2024; Sibley et al. 2024).

Indeed, research suggests that digitally-mediated communication, especially when multimodal (e.g., occurring across multiple platforms simultaneously), can blur relationship boundaries and diminish young adults' willingness to discuss the status of their relationship (Hardesty et al. 2024; Knopp et al. 2020). In turn, ambiguity plays a strategic role in these relationships, enabling young adults to balance their desire for emotional connection with the expectation of avoiding commitment. Practices like "ghosting" further intensify and normalize this ambiguity. Because users can inexplicably withdraw from "just talking," individuals may avoid expressing interest in romantic commitment, as many fear being labeled as "thirsty" or "desperate" for commitment (LeFebvre et al. 2019). Even as some relationships evolve, digital technologies continue to introduce ambiguity in this transition, as many describe the next step as "soft launching"—a digital phenomenon in which users intentionally "askew" photos of their partners online to subtly and slowly reveal them on social media (O'Gara 2026). However, while both "just talking" and "soft launching" may be preliminary steps toward commitment, they may also persist without progression. In these instances, prolonged and undefined interactions may evolve into a new, more ambiguous relationship: the "situationship."

3.3 | Defining the Situationship

The rise of hookup culture and digital technologies created a context ripe for the development of situationships. Combining emotional connection with the casualness of hooking up, situationships occupy an ambiguous middle ground between friends and romantic partners.

While overlapping with practices such as "just talking," they tend to reflect a more sustained relationship dynamic (Langlais et al. 2024) that allows for emotional intimacy while maintaining the personal freedom tied to singlehood (Armstrong et al. 2025; George 2024). While situationships resemble the delayed commitment and relationship uncertainty documented among low-income individuals (Edin and Kefalas 2011; Silva 2013; Tach and Edin 2011), emerging research—largely on college students and economically-mobile young adults—identifies situationships as a distinct, though related, form of relationship ambiguity.

In particular, research identifies three defining dimensions that distinguish situationships from other dating and casual relationships. First, rather than simply delaying commitment (Silva 2013), situationships combine emotional intimacy with sustained ambiguity surrounding commitment and progression (Anderson and Phillips 2026; George 2024; Langlais et al. 2024). Compared to hookups or friends-with-benefits, which are expected to be devoid of emotional attachment (Wade 2021), situationships include specific aspects of intimacy, like spending time together, meeting friends and family, and frequent communication via texting or social media (Anderson and Phillips 2026; Langlais et al. 2024). While these practices may mirror dating, situationships remain liminal—occupying an ambiguous space between casual and committed (Langlais et al. 2024). Notably, the opportunity to develop an emotional connection may position situationships as an alternative to emotionless casual sex (Armstrong et al. 2025; Langlais et al. 2024). By leaving relationships undefined, situationships reduce the vulnerability associated with openly pursuing commitment, reinforcing the nonchalance that increasingly characterizes young adult dating (Berkowitz et al. 2021; Wade 2021).

Second, situationships lack shared relationship scripts, leaving roles, expectations, and markers of progression and dissolution ambiguous (Deniega et al. 2024; George 2024; Langlais et al. 2024). Although some level of uncertainty is expected in the early stages of dating (Allison 2019), dating scripts maintain explicit stages of development (Eaton and Rose 2011; England et al. 2008) from courtship to "defining the relationship" (Knopp et al. 2020). Hookups also set rules in which partners are non-exclusive, emotionally detached, and expected to limit personal conversations (Wade 2021). Even friends-with-benefits have established rules, including non-exclusivity, avoiding partner labels, and refraining from discussing the future (van Raalte et al. 2022). Situationships, however, lack clear scripts for progression and dissolution, leaving many uncertain about

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when they begin or end and whether partners are seeing other people (Deniega et al. 2024). Instead, situationships emphasize the present, as partners live separately, maintain personal freedom, and, in some cases, pursue other intimate relationships (Armstrong et al. 2025; Deniega et al. 2024; George 2024).

Third, and relatedly, situationships are often prolonged and inconsistent (Anderson and Phillips 2026; Deniega et al. 2024; George 2024; Langlais et al. 2024). Unlike hookups or friends-with-benefits, which commonly involve short-lived or episodic sexual encounters (van Raalte et al. 2022; Wade 2017), situationships may persist over an extended period, often involving ongoing communication lasting from weeks to years (Anderson and Phillips 2026; Deniega et al. 2024; George 2024). At the same time, situationships can be inconsistent (Deniega et al. 2024). Rather than progressing toward a relationship (Lamont 2021), situationships may fluctuate between periods of emotional closeness and distance (Deniega et al. 2024), or end suddenly without warning (Deniega et al. 2024). Notably, this inconsistency differs from the churning, or on-again/off-again dynamics of other dating relationships (e.g., Halpern-Meekin et al. 2013). Whereas churning is marked by periods of dissolution and reconciliation, situationships remain continuously undefined. In fact, while dating often becomes less uncertain as couples reach key milestones (e.g., defining the relationship), situationships may become more ambiguous as prolonged, unstable relationship dynamics persist (Deniega et al. 2024). In this way, situationships are not simply early stages of romantic relationships—though some may evolve into commitment—but instead reflect a distinct relational form characterized by sustained ambiguity surrounding commitment, roles, and progression.

4 | The Implications of Situationships

The rise of situationships raises important questions about the implications of relationship ambiguity for young adults. Some studies suggest that situationships may allow individuals to meet their emotional and physical needs while prioritizing autonomy and self-development. In a U.S. study of midlife women, Armstrong et al. (2025) found that situationships provided women—especially Black and queer women—a way to challenge conventional relationship norms while still experiencing intimate connection and maintaining independence (Armstrong et al. 2025). Yet, research on young adults tells a different story. Unlike midlife adults, who may have already achieved key life milestones (e.g., marriage and parenthood) (Armstrong et al. 2025), young adults are still navigating these transitions, making the ambiguity of situationships particularly consequential (Willoughby and James 2017).

Indeed, studies show that for young adults, situationships are less satisfying than other relationship types—including committed partnerships—and are associated with heightened uncertainty, disorientation, and emotional strain (Anderson and Phillips 2026; Langlais et al. 2024). Young adults often enter situationships for different reasons: to explore flexibility, to seek romantic commitment, and to embrace the nonchalance associated with young adult dating (Anderson and Phillips 2026; Wade 2021). These divergent goals, however, may undermine relationship quality via exacerbated ambiguity. This is consistent with research showing that, in the absence of clear relationship scripts, individuals experience greater uncertainty, stress, and emotional insecurity (Denby and van Hooff 2024; Estlein et al. 2022; Sahib et al. 2023).

Relatedly, because situationships are devoid of commitment, emotional and physical intimacy can waver without warning, and communication can halt at any time, increasing uncertainty about the relationship's future (George 2024). In fact, young adults have described situationships as "soul-crushing" (Anderson and Phillips 2026, 15) because of their lack of commitment and clear relationship progression. These dynamics may be especially disorienting for those seeking romantic commitment, as situationships often dissolve once the emotional costs of an inconsistent and undefined relationship become unbearable (Langlais et al. 2024). Without a shared cultural script for commitment and progression, many question whether these situationships even constitute "real" relationships in the first place (Anderson and Phillips 2026). At the same time, a lack of social recognition from friends and family likely exacerbates this anxiety. Anderson and Phillips (2026) found that the emotional strain of situationships is often dismissed by others because the validity of the relationship is misunderstood, leaving many feeling isolated and invalidated by their experiences. Thus, although situationships may create opportunities for connection, they may ultimately reproduce—even intensify—the ambiguity and dissatisfaction associated with the hookup script.

This ambiguity may also be unevenly experienced. Research suggests that mismatched expectations do not just generate uncertainty but also create power asymmetries between partners (Anderson and Phillips 2026; Langlais et al. 2025), as individuals with lower levels of commitment are better able to set the terms of the relationship (Anderson and Phillips 2026). These asymmetries are likely sustained by the fact that some young adults enter situationships not as an end in itself, but as a pathway to commitment (Langlais et al. 2024; Dunn 2022). Yet, as situationships fail to progress romantically, many are left disempowered and suspended in a liminal space between casual and committed (Boyd et al. 2021; Dunn 2022; Langlais et al. 2024). For instance, Boyd et al. (2021) studied Black women's dating experiences and found that they sometimes lowered their expectations for romantic commitment when they unexpectedly found themselves in situationships. These compromises often left women dissatisfied with situationships because of their desire for long-term partnership and their partners' one-sided non-monogamy (Boyd et al. 2021; Dunn 2022). This work suggests that these outcomes are not only a product of ambiguity, but also of the structural conditions—such as systemic racism and heteronormativity—that constrain many young adults' intimate experiences (Armstrong et al. 2025; Dunn 2022). However, more research is needed to fully understand how situationships produce power asymmetries across diverse social contexts.

5 | Directions for Future Research

Despite increasing scholarly attention to situationships, the field remains emergent. Early work suggests that many young adults are generally dissatisfied with their situationships (Langlais et al. 2025), yet these experiences are likely not universal. Systems such as (hetero)sexism, classism, and racism undoubtedly shape how young adults navigate situationships. Therefore,

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more research is needed that captures the dynamic processes shaping situationships across social and cultural contexts. Drawing on insights from prior research, we begin to theorize how situationships may reshape patterns of intimate inequalities across the life course. In doing so, we highlight the potential of future research to illuminate the varied and complex consequences of relationship ambiguity, including the social conditions under which situationships are empowering for some and constraining for others.

5.1 | Gender, Sexuality, and Situationships

Situationships are likely deeply gendered, especially among heterosexual young adults. However, little research has systematically examined how gender structures these ambiguous relationships (Boyd et al. 2021; Dunn 2022). Prior research shows that when partners hold mismatched desires for commitment, those who are less emotionally invested may retain greater relational power within the situationship (Anderson and Phillips 2026). Yet, emotions are gendered (Eaton and Rose 2011; Schrock and Knop 2014), likely shaping how these power imbalances unfold.

Gendered beliefs about emotional expression, sex, and intimacy may produce unequal outcomes within situationships (Dunn 2022). For instance, "meaningless" or emotionless sex is often aligned with constructions of masculinity, granting men more freedom from the emotional risks of being in an undefined relationship (Wade 2021). Whereas women are socialized to prioritize emotional connection and relational development, suggesting that women may be more disadvantaged within heterosexual situationships (Hamilton 2007; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Indeed, although situationships may provide new opportunities to challenge these gendered scripts, studies suggest that in times of uncertainty, gender remains a salient frame for coordinating behaviors (Lamont 2020, 2021; Ridgeway 2011). Thus, gendered emotional imperatives may keep women in relationships-in-waiting, privileging heterosexual men by granting them emotional and physical access to women without the obligation of commitment.

Moreover, we know little about how situationships unfold among queer young adults. This is surprising given that queer theoretical perspectives challenge heteronormative ideals of commitment, monogamy, and singularity (Hammack et al. 2019). On the one hand, queer young adults may embrace the flexibility of situationships while undermining the power asymmetry inherent in these relationships. For instance, in her study of LGBTQ+ courtship practices, Lamont (2017) found that queer individuals rejected heteronormative relationship conventions by deemphasizing marriage and cultivating egalitarian relationships. In fact, many participants sought relationships that allowed them to exist outside the confines of heteronormativity, similar to midlife women who actively sought situationships (Armstrong et al. 2025). On the other hand, queer sexualities are not removed from gendered power relations. Masculinities and femininities continue to structure dynamics in queer relationships (Lamont 2017; Lamont et al. 2018; Moore 2008), and these patterns may carry into situationships. For example, while queer students critique the gendered double-standards of the hookup culture, they sometimes reproduce heteronormative scripts—such as dominant (coded masculine) and submissive (coded feminine) roles—to navigate ambiguity in their own relationships (Lamont et al. 2018). Ultimately, while queer communities have long resisted heteronormative dating scripts, the ambiguity of situationships may lead them to rely on gender as a framework to coordinate their behaviors (Lamont et al. 2018; Ridgeway 2011). Future research should consider how these patterns extend to situationships and whether they offer new pathways for young adults to explore intimacy in ways that challenge heteronormative ideals.

5.2 | Social Class and Situationships

Despite research on the socioeconomic contours of the hookup culture (Allison 2016; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013), little research has examined the extent to which social class structures situationships. Whereas earlier studies on hookup culture emphasized the importance of access to residential college contexts—stratified by students' social class backgrounds—for participating in the hookup scene (Allison and Risman 2014), situationships are less tethered to physical spaces. This difference may undermine socioeconomic barriers to participation as the rise of communication technologies facilitates these ambiguous relationships across a wider range of social and economic contexts (Christensen 2021; Pham 2017).

Still, important class differences may remain. Prior research has long documented relationship ambiguity among low-income and working-class people (Edin and Kefalas 2011; Sassler and Lichter 2020; Tach and Edin 2011). In these contexts, economic precarity often renders commitment too risky for those already navigating competing work-life demands. As a result, many describe relationships marked by delayed commitment, relationship instability, and uncertainty (Sassler and Lichter 2020; Silva 2013; Tach and Edin 2011; Turney et al. 2023). Although these relationships resemble situationships (e.g., George 2024; Langlais et al. 2024), it remains unclear whether they represent the same relationship form or whether the causes, consequences, and underlying motivations of situationships differ meaningfully across socioeconomic groups.

For instance, studies suggest that the meaning and significance of relationship commitment vary across social class. Though most young adults adhere to a self-development imperative (Allison 2016; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Lamont 2020), class-privileged young adults are more likely to view this period as one of sexual exploration (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Whereas less-privileged young adults are more likely to prioritize both their educational development and the development of lasting romantic relationships (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Pham 2017). This suggests that the extent to which young adults enter situationships—by choice or constraint—may vary by social class. Additionally, situationships may progress differently for low-income, unmarried parents. That is, if situationships result in pregnancy—especially where abortion access is restricted by law or limited by economic and geographic barriers—relationships may quickly evolve into cohabitation or dissolve into single parenthood (Kuang 2025; Tach and Edin 2011). In either case, marriage may become less central, as low-income parents often prioritize family stability over formalizing the romantic relationship (Edin and Nelson 2013;

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Kuang et al. 2019; Su and Emory 2020). Thus, future research should examine how situationships unfold amid economic precarity and nonmarital childbearing, and how these conditions shape distinct relationship trajectories.

5.3 | Intersectional Inequalities in Situationships

Ultimately, research must take an intersectional approach to fully capture the complexity of situationships. To date, studies on situationships have largely reflected the experiences of Black women (Boyd et al. 2021; Dunn 2022). Though situationships were not the primary focus of these studies, they emerged through Black women's accounts of liminal relationships. By centering their experiences, this work illuminates how situationships are shaped by intersecting systems of oppression (Armstrong et al. 2025). For instance, Dunn (2022) finds that young, economically mobile Black women's relationship aspirations are shaped by sexist and racist controlling images. Rather than embracing situationships, these women sought to construct relationships that challenged racist notions of Black "inferiority" by desiring committed, egalitarian relationships with Black men. Yet, despite this preference, structural conditions constrained their opportunities to access such relationships, often leaving them to navigate the ambiguity of situationships (Dunn 2022). Future research should continue to examine how multiple axes of inequality shape young adults' experiences with situationships.

Specifically, research should consider how hierarchies of desirability shape situationships. Research shows that intersecting systems of class, race/ethnicity, nationality, and gender shape who is deemed a desirable partner (Ang et al. 2021; Christensen and Malae 2026), with potential consequences for how people navigate situationships. For instance, within a campus hookup culture, white, thin, able-bodied women are idealized (Hamilton 2007; Wade 2017). Even when women of color fit dominant body ideals, they still encounter sexist and racist controlling images that can lower their perceived desirability in predominantly white spaces (Collins 2016; Curington et al. 2021). As a result, many marginalized women describe feeling "stuck" in the liminal space of a situationship (Dunn 2022; Monterrosa 2021). Similarly, in multiracial societies such as Singapore and Australia, racial hierarchies of desirability are further shaped by intersecting systems of gender, sexuality, and colonialism (Ang et al. 2021; Carlson 2020). In Singapore, for example, Chinese men—who are the racial majority—occupy privileged positions within same-sex dating markets while Malay and Indian men are marginalized (Ang et al. 2021). If desirability is a currency individuals can leverage within sexual markets, then those deemed more desirable (e.g., racial majority) may hold greater erotic capital, enabling them to more effectively navigate situationships (Christensen and Malae 2026). Still, more research is needed to situate these liminal relationships within broader systems of social stratification and to understand the intersecting processes that shape access to and experiences with situationships.

5.4 | Data and Measurement Opportunities

Our current understanding of situationships is limited by existing data and measurement. To begin, there is conceptual ambiguity around the term "situationship." The terms "situationships", "just talking," "casual relationships," and the like are often used inconsistently across studies. This inconsistency makes it difficult to compare findings across studies and to examine theoretical differences and overlaps among ambiguous relationships. Relatedly, large-scale survey data seldom include direct measures of situationships. Rather, data often collapse relationships into binary categories such as married versus non-married, rendering situationships—and other ambiguous relationships—invisible in existing survey data. Due to these constraints, we know less about the heterogeneity of singlehood—an important oversight, given young adults are remaining single longer than in previous generations (Tessler 2023).

We also know little about the long-term implications of situationships for young adults' life-course development, underscoring the need for more longitudinal research. For instance, important questions remain about how situationships change young adults' self-understandings and their desires for intimate partnerships over time. Do repeated experiences with situationships foster disillusionment about commitment, or are situationships another developmental stage in the transition to romantic partnership? Ultimately, as situationships become more prevalent, it is critical that we refine our data and measurement strategies to more accurately capture the diversity and development of intimate relationships across the life course.

6 | Conclusion

In this review, we have examined why—and under what conditions—relationship ambiguity has emerged among young adults, with a particular focus on situationships. We show that relationship ambiguity is not merely a matter of individual preference but reflects broader structural, cultural, and technological transformations shaping young adulthood. While the sexual culture of young adulthood was once dominated by the hookup script—which promoted casual sex over committed relationships—today's cohort of young adults appears to be rethinking this sexual imperative (Hardesty et al. 2024; Langlais et al. 2025). That is, in many parts of the world, young adults are having less sex (casual or otherwise) and staying single longer than previous generations (Lei and South 2021; South and Lei 2021). Yet young people are not rejecting intimacy altogether. Rather, situationships have emerged as a distinct relationship type—one that reintegrates emotional connection, often via communication technologies, while preserving the flexibility of low-commitment relationships. However, research suggests that young adults are generally dissatisfied with situationships (Langlais et al. 2025). Therefore, as situationships become increasingly common (Choudhry et al. 2022; Hardesty et al. 2024), it is critical that scholars take relationship ambiguity seriously. In doing so, research can more effectively capture the complex relationship dynamics that are transforming intimate inequalities in young adulthood.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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