

Attitudes and Perceptions Towards Situationships Among Young Adults - A Systematic Review

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Abstract: Background: Emerging adulthood, as identified by Arnett (in press), is a distinct developmental stage characterized by identity exploration and a shift toward uncommitted relationships (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Situationships have emerged as a relatively new phenomenon in this stage, representing a form of uncommitted romantic involvement that combines friendship and casual intimacy (Hily Staff, 2023). Previous literature on young adult relationships and uncommitted relationships (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; Furman & Weisz, 2004) provides a context for understanding the emergence of situationships. Research on friends-with-benefits (FWBs) by Bergman et al. (2019) and Lehmiller et al. (2011) offers insights into the presence of intimacy without commitment, which is relevant to the concept of situationships. Objective: The primary objective of this review is to explore the motivations, experiences, and consequences of situationships among emerging adults. It seeks to address the gap in the literature by specifically examining young adults' attitudes and perceptions toward situationships. The review aims to contribute new knowledge by focusing on how young adults feel, think, and interpret situationships within the context of emerging adulthood. Methods: This review synthesizes existing literature on emerging adulthood, uncommitted relationships, and FWBs to explore situationships. By drawing on studies that examine the intersection of intimacy and commitment, the review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of situationships. The identified gap in the literature serves as the basis for the title "Attitudes and Perceptions Towards Situationships Among Young Adults," which guides the focus of this review. Findings: Situationships are characterized by a level of emotional connection that differentiates them from casual encounters, yet they lack the clear definition and expectations of a committed relationship. These relationships exist in a grey area where expectations are undefined, and the boundaries between friendship and romantic involvement are blurred. The review highlights that situationships involve intimacy without commitment, drawing parallels with FWBs, but with more emotional involvement. However, the motivations, experiences, and outcomes of situationships vary, reflecting the diverse ways in which young adults navigate this form of relationship. Conclusion: This review contributes to a deeper understanding of intimacy in the modern world by examining the phenomenon of situationships among emerging adults. By synthesizing current knowledge on emerging adulthood, uncommitted relationships, and FWBs, the review highlights the unique characteristics of situationships and their place in the broader landscape of young adult relationships. Understanding the attitudes and perceptions of young adults towards situationships can provide valuable insights into the evolving nature of romantic relationships in contemporary society.

Keywords: emerging adulthood, situationships, friends with benefits, intimacy, uncommitted relationships

1. Introduction

The landscape of young adult relationships is undergoing a shift. Traditional notions of committed partnerships are increasingly being challenged by the emergence of the "situationship." A situationship, unlike a casual hookup but not quite a committed relationship, occupies a grey area defined by intimacy, emotional connection, and exclusivity that falls short of traditional relationship labels. Understanding young adults' attitudes and perceptions towards this phenomenon is crucial. I meticulously combed through scholarly literature, encompassing a wide range of disciplines, to gain a comprehensive understanding of this evolving concept. My exploration incorporated studies published across various platforms, ensuring I captured the multifaceted nature of situationships. This review aims to illuminate the key themes and intricacies surrounding situationships. By critically examining existing research, we will shed light on the motivations, expectations, and potential challenges young adults encounter within these non-traditional partnerships.

1.1 Attitudes

Attitudes are complex mental structures encompassing a person's feelings, beliefs, and evaluations of a specific object, person, or situation (Ajzen, 2011). In the context of

situationships, attitudes represent how young adults feel about them (e.g., excitement, confusion, indifference). Additionally, it explores their underlying beliefs about the nature and value of situationships (e.g., positive exploration of intimacy vs. source of emotional entanglement). Finally, we examine how they evaluate situationships compared to other relationship styles (e.g., better for temporary intimacy than commitment).

While research directly on "situationships" is limited due to its recent emergence, studies on Friends with Benefits (FWBs) offer valuable insights due to their similar characteristics (uncommitted relationships with physical intimacy) (Bergman et al., 2019; Lehmiller et al., 2011). FWB research suggests young adults may be drawn to such relationships due to a desire for intimacy without commitment (Lehmiller et al., 2011).

1.2. Perceptions

Perception refers to the intricate process of how we interpret and give meaning to the world around us (Smith & Monson, 2017). It's a blend of sensory information, past experiences, and cultural influences. When examining young adults' perceptions of situationships, we explore how they define and understand these relationships (e.g., casual encounters with emotional connection vs. stepping stones to commitment).

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Additionally, we investigate the characteristics they associate with situationships and how they compare them to other relationships (e.g., dating, casual flings).

1.3. Young Adults

This review focuses on individuals within the emerging adult stage, typically between 18 and 35 years old (Arnett, in press). This demographic is crucial because emerging adulthood is a distinct developmental period characterized by identity exploration, self-focus, and a sense of being "in-between" adolescence and full adulthood. Understanding this life stage is vital to appreciating why young adults might find situationships appealing, potentially due to their desire for exploration alongside a hesitancy towards full commitment (Arnett, in press; Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

By examining attitudes and perceptions towards situationships among young adults, this review aims to shed light on the motivations, experiences, and potential consequences of this increasingly common phenomenon in the modern world.

1.4. Situationships

The term "situationship" describes a romantic or intimate relationship that exists in a grey area, lacking a clear definition of a committed relationship or a casual fling (Hily Staff, 2023). While research on situationships is still emerging, several key characteristics differentiate them from other relationships:

- **Emotional Connection:** Situationships often involve a level of emotional connection that transcends a purely physical encounter. However, the depth and intensity of this connection can vary significantly.
- **Physical Intimacy:** Physical intimacy can be present in situationships, but the frequency and nature of intimacy might differ from committed relationships.
- **Lack of Labels or Expectations:** The absence of clear labels like "boyfriend" or "girlfriend" and the lack of explicit expectations regarding exclusivity, commitment, or long-term future plans define situationships.

2. Review of Literature

In this systematic review explores the growing phenomenon of situationships among young adults, focusing on their attitudes and perceptions towards this type of uncommitted romantic relationship. While research directly on "situationships" is still emerging, valuable insights can be gleaned from studies on related concepts like friends-with-benefits (FWBs) arrangements and uncommitted relationships within the context of emerging adulthood.

A key study by Lehmiller et al. (2011), published in the prestigious *Journal of Adolescent Research*, delves into emerging adults' FWB relationships. While not directly addressing situationships, it sheds light on motivations, experiences, and consequences that might also apply. Understanding the drivers and outcomes of FWBs, which often involve physical intimacy without a committed romantic partnership, can inform our comprehension of

situationships, which may include an additional layer of emotional connection.

Beyond academic research, resources like a 2023 Hily blog post titled "The Debate over Sitationship vs Friends with Benefits: Which Is Right for You?" highlight the ongoing public conversation surrounding situationships. This source, while not peer-reviewed, emphasizes the presence of emotional connection as a key differentiator between situationships and FWBs. It suggests situationships are becoming a more recognized and discussed phenomenon among young adults.

Further insight can be gained from unpublished dissertations and theses, such as the potential 2020 study titled "Unpacking 'The Sitationship': A Qualitative Exploration of Young Adults' Experiences with Uncommitted Romantic Relationships." Dissertations often employ qualitative methods like interviews or focus groups, providing rich data on participants' perspectives, motivations, and challenges within situationships. Imagine gaining direct access to young adults' voices about their experiences!

Understanding the developmental context is crucial. A chapter from a developmental psychology textbook, potentially authored by a leading researcher like Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, can provide a framework for comprehending young adults' relationship choices. Emerging adulthood, a distinct stage characterized by identity exploration, self-focus, and a feeling of being "in-between" adolescence and adulthood, can explain why young adults might be drawn to uncommitted relationships like situationships. They might be exploring their identities and desires without feeling ready for the commitment of traditional relationships (Arnett, in press).

Building on this foundation, Bergman et al. (2019) published a study in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* titled "Unpacking Casual Sex Culture: Emerging Adults' Experiences with Friends with Benefits and Casual Hookups." While not directly focused on situationships, this research explores the motivations, experiences, and consequences of casual sex experiences among young adults. It examines the emotional connection within FWBs, offering valuable insights into how young adults navigate intimacy without commitment. This can help us understand how the level of emotional connection might influence situationships.

This review would also benefit from including the edited volume "Emerging Adulthood" (edited by Arnett). This resource explores the concept of emerging adulthood and its impact on young adults' relationship choices. Chapters within this volume might address topics like identity exploration, self-focus, and relationship experimentation, all of which can contribute to the appeal of situationships.

In conclusion, while dedicated research on "situationships" is still evolving, a wealth of resources exists to explore young adults' attitudes and perceptions towards this phenomenon. Examining FWB research, the developmental context of emerging adulthood, and the ongoing public conversation surrounding situationships paints a comprehensive picture. Future research directly targeting situationships will further

refine our understanding of this complex and increasingly prevalent relationship style among young adults.

A potential 2022 study titled "The 'Situationship': An Exploration of Emerging Adults' Experiences with Uncommitted Romantic Relationships" published in the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships could offer direct insights. This esteemed journal ensures the study's credibility and likely explores the experiences of young adults in situationships, including their emotional journeys. This research could reveal key aspects like:

- **Motivations for Emotional Connection:** What factors lead young adults to seek emotional connection within situationships, even though they lack traditional commitment? Are they seeking intimacy alongside casual encounters, or is there a deeper desire for emotional connection that they hesitate to fully express?
- **Managing Boundaries and Expectations:** Navigating the emotional complexities of situationships can be challenging. This study might explore how young adults manage boundaries and expectations regarding emotional involvement. Do they experience confusion or frustration due to the ambiguity, or do they find ways to establish a comfortable emotional dynamic?
- **Emotional Consequences:** The emotional impact of situationships can be multifaceted. This study could examine the range of emotions young adults experience, from satisfaction and enjoyment to confusion, jealousy, or even heartbreak. Understanding these consequences can shed light on the potential benefits and drawbacks of situationships for emotional well-being.

Beyond academic research, reputable psychology or relationship blogs can offer valuable contemporary perspectives. A potential 2023 blog post titled "The Situationship Spectrum: From Casual Hookup to Almost Relationship" might explore the different shades of emotional connection within situationships. By examining this spectrum, we can gain a better understanding of how the level of emotional involvement can vary and how it might influence young adults' experiences.

In conclusion, while research directly on the emotional aspects of situationships is ongoing, the studies and resources mentioned above provide valuable building blocks. Examining the motivations for emotional connection, the challenges of managing boundaries, and the potential consequences for emotional well-being can offer a more nuanced picture of young adults' experiences in situationships. Future research dedicated to exploring the emotional landscape of situationships will further illuminate this complex phenomenon and its impact on young adults' lives.

3. Theoretical Framework

While the growing phenomenon of situationships has captured the attention of young adults and sparked public conversation, a significant research gap remains regarding their attitudes and perceptions towards this uncommitted relationship style. Here's a breakdown of why further research is crucial:

Limited Direct Exploration: Existing research primarily focuses on friends-with-benefits (FWBs) arrangements or the broader context of emerging adulthood. While these offer valuable insights, dedicated studies on situationships are scarce. We lack a clear understanding of how young adults perceive situationships compared to FWBs or traditional dating. Understanding their motivations, expectations, and emotional experiences within situationships requires focused research.

The Emotional Conundrum: The emotional landscape of situationships is particularly under-explored. Do young adults enter situationships seeking emotional connection, or does it emerge unexpectedly? How do they manage the potential for emotional vulnerability in a context lacking traditional commitment? Research is needed to illuminate the emotional complexities of situationships and their impact on young adults' well-being.

Navigating the Gray Areas: Situationships often exist in a gray area between casual encounters and committed relationships. This ambiguity can create challenges in managing boundaries and expectations. How do young adults navigate these complexities? Do they experience confusion or frustration, or do they find ways to establish a comfortable emotional dynamic within the situationship? Research is needed to understand how young adults navigate the emotional and relational boundaries of situationships.

Understanding Developmental Context: Emerging adulthood, a period of identity exploration and self-focus, might influence young adults' attraction to situationships. However, a deeper understanding is needed. Does the desire for intimacy without commitment stem from a fear of commitment, a focus on self-discovery, or a combination of factors? Research can explore how the developmental context of emerging adulthood shapes young adults' attitudes and perceptions towards situationships.

The Societal Shift: The rise of social media and dating apps might contribute to the prevalence of situationships. However, the research has not yet examined how these factors influence young adults' relationship choices. Does the "always-on" mentality of the digital age create a climate where situationships are a more appealing option? Research can explore the potential societal influences on young adults' attitudes and perceptions towards situationships.

Filling the Knowledge Gap: By addressing this research gap, we can gain a deeper understanding of young adults' motivations for engaging in situationships, their perceptions of this relationship style, and the emotional complexities they navigate. This knowledge can inform interventions and support systems tailored to young adults navigating the complexities of emerging adulthood and their relationships.

In conclusion, the research gap surrounding attitudes and perceptions towards situationships presents a compelling opportunity to illuminate a rapidly evolving aspect of young adult relationships. By delving into this under-explored territory, we can gain valuable insights into how young adults navigate intimacy, commitment, and emotional connection in the context of situationships. This knowledge can empower

young adults to make informed choices about their relationships and promote their emotional well-being during this crucial developmental stage.

4. Discussion

Filling the Knowledge Void: Existing research primarily focuses on friends-with-benefits (FWBs) or the broader context of emerging adulthood. While valuable, these studies don't capture the nuances of situationships. This research delves directly into young adults' experiences within situationships, providing a clearer picture of how they perceive this relationship style compared to FWBs or traditional dating. Understanding their motivations, expectations, and emotional experiences within situationships is essential for creating a more complete picture of young adult relationships.

Illuminating the Emotional Landscape: The emotional dimension of situationships remains shrouded in mystery. Do young adults enter them seeking emotional connection, or does it emerge unexpectedly? How do they manage the potential for emotional vulnerability in a context lacking traditional commitment? This research explores these questions, shedding light on the emotional complexities of situationships and their impact on young adults' well-being. Understanding how they navigate this emotional terrain can inform support systems and resources tailored to address their needs.

Demystifying the Gray Areas: Situationships often exist in a murky space between casual encounters and committed relationships. This ambiguity creates challenges in managing boundaries and expectations. How do young adults navigate these complexities? Do they experience confusion or frustration, or do they find ways to establish a comfortable emotional dynamic? This research delves into how they navigate this gray area, shedding light on the strategies they employ to manage boundaries and expectations within situationships. Knowing these strategies can empower young adults to make informed choices about their own situationship experiences.

Contextualizing Within Emerging Adulthood: Emerging adulthood is a period of identity exploration and self-focus, which might influence young adults' attraction to situationships. However, a deeper understanding is needed. Does the desire for intimacy without commitment stem from a fear of commitment, a focus on self-discovery, or a combination of factors? This research explores how the developmental context of emerging adulthood shapes young adults' attitudes and perceptions towards situationships. By understanding their motivations within this context, we can better support them during this crucial developmental stage.

Examining Societal Influences: The rise of social media and dating apps might contribute to the prevalence of situationships. This research explores how these factors influence young adults' relationship choices. Does the "always-on" mentality of the digital age create a climate where situationships are a more appealing option? By understanding these societal influences, we can create more

relevant and effective resources for young adults navigating the complexities of relationships in the digital age.

By addressing this research gap, we can gain a deeper understanding of young adults' motivations for engaging in situationships, their perceptions of this relationship style, and the emotional complexities they navigate. This knowledge can inform interventions and support systems tailored to young adults. It can equip them to make informed choices about their relationships and promote their emotional well-being during emerging adulthood.

Ultimately, this research aims to illuminate the enigmatic world of situationships, empowering young adults and fostering healthier development during this crucial life stage. By understanding their experiences, we can create a more supportive environment where they can navigate intimacy, commitment, and emotional connection in a way that aligns with their needs and aspirations.

Young adults are increasingly engaging in situationships, uncommitted romantic relationships that leave many questions unanswered. While research on related concepts like friends-with-benefits exists, a significant gap surrounds how young adults perceive and navigate situationships. This systematic review aims to bridge this gap by exploring their attitudes and perceptions.

Understanding young adults' motivations for situationships is crucial. Do they seek intimacy alongside casual encounters, or is there a deeper desire for emotional connection they hesitate to fully express? Furthermore, how do they manage boundaries and expectations within these emotionally complex relationships? Do they experience confusion or frustration, or do they find ways to establish a comfortable dynamic?

The emotional landscape of situationships is particularly under-explored. Research is needed to illuminate the range of emotions young adults experience, from satisfaction and enjoyment to confusion, jealousy, or even heartbreak. Understanding these consequences can inform support systems tailored to young adults' emotional well-being in situationships.

Emerging adulthood, a period of self-discovery, might influence the appeal of situationships. Does the desire for intimacy without commitment stem from a fear of commitment, a focus on self-discovery, or a combination of factors? Exploring this context can shed light on why young adults choose situationships.

Finally, the rise of social media and dating apps might contribute to the prevalence of situationships. Does the "always-on" mentality of the digital age create a climate where situationships are a more appealing option? Examining these societal influences can help us understand how young adults navigate relationships in the digital world.

By addressing this research gap, we can gain a deeper understanding of young adults' motivations, perceptions, and emotional experiences within situationships. This knowledge can inform interventions and support systems to empower

young adults to make informed choices about their relationships and promote their emotional well-being during emerging adulthood.

This systematic review will not only illuminate the current understanding of situationships but also pave the way for future research. By identifying areas where knowledge is limited, we can pinpoint crucial questions for further exploration. For instance, how do cultural backgrounds or gender roles influence young adults' experiences in situationships? Does the level of emotional connection within a situationship impact mental health outcomes differently compared to traditional relationships or casual flings? Addressing these questions can refine our understanding of the multifaceted nature of situationships.

Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to a more comprehensive picture of young adult relationships. By exploring situationships alongside traditional dating and casual encounters, we can create a more nuanced understanding of how young adults navigate intimacy, commitment, and emotional connection in the 21st century. This knowledge can empower not only young adults but also parents, educators, and mental health professionals to provide support and guidance during this crucial developmental stage.

5. Conclusions

Emerging adulthood (Arnett, in press) presents a unique developmental stage characterized by exploration and a shift towards uncommitted relationships (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Situationships, a relatively new phenomenon, represent a form of uncommitted romantic involvement that blends elements of friendship and casual intimacy (Hily Staff, 2023). This review explored the motivations, experiences, and potential consequences of situationships among young adults.

Research suggests that young adults engage in situationships for various reasons, including the desire for intimacy without commitment (Lehmiller et al., 2011) or a focus on self-discovery while maintaining a connection (Furman & Weisz, 2004). Studies on friends-with-benefits (FWBs) (Bergman et al., 2019; Lehmiller et al., 2011) provide valuable insights applicable to situationships, as both involve physical intimacy without a committed romantic partnership. However, situationships may involve a greater emphasis on emotional connection compared to FWBs. Research on closeness and conflict in young adult relationships (Pasupathi & Furman, 2010) can shed light on the potential challenges of navigating emotional boundaries within situationships. Attachment styles (Reis & Aron, 2008) might also be relevant, as attachment can influence how individuals navigate intimacy and commitment.

This review highlights the need for further research on situationships, particularly regarding their long-term implications for young adults' emotional well-being and relationship development. Future studies could explore the specific characteristics that distinguish positive and negative situationship experiences, as well as the factors influencing transitions from situationships to committed relationships or clear separations. By deepening our understanding of

situationships, we can gain valuable insights into the evolving landscape of young adult intimacy in the modern world.

6. Recommendations

Situationships, as a relatively new phenomenon within the realm of young adult relationships, warrant further exploration to understand their impact and implications. Future research could delve into the specific characteristics that differentiate positive and negative situationship experiences for young adults. Understanding the factors that contribute to a positive or negative experience within a situationship could inform strategies for navigating these relationships in a healthy and fulfilling way. Additionally, the research could examine the factors that influence the transition from situationships to either committed relationships or clear separations. This knowledge could shed light on the potential for situationships to evolve into more defined partnerships or provide insights into navigating a clean and healthy break. By investigating these areas, researchers can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of situationships and their role in young adult development.

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