

## "Love Without Labels": A Phenomenological Study of Situationships Among College Students in Calamba City

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### Abstract

With the rising phenomenon of young adults settling into casual or noncommittal relationships, the researchers were interested in Calamba City college students' situationship experiences. They aim to seek answers as to how students felt and experienced in situationships, thus they conducted a study shedding light in their experiences. The researchers used sexual script theory (SST) by Gagnon & Simon (1998) as theoretical framework of the study, hence, became the basis in constructing the research questions, as well as the interview guide questions which circles around the following concepts: intra-psychic, cultural, and interpersonal scripts. Intra-psychic scripts focused on the participants' personal experiences while cultural scripts pointed on social norms based on their respective environments, and interpersonal scripts delved on their interactions with other people in a romantic or sexual way. Applying the hermeneutic phenomenological approach, 6 college students were interviewed about their lived experiences about their current situationships anchoring on the SST's intra-psychic, cultural, and interpersonal scripts. The researchers discovered that young adults feel uncertain towards their situationship partners and the current state of their relationship; the absence of labels, despite the presence of intimacy, often seen in committed relationships caused emotional conflicts in the situationship. The results gathered overall implied complex feelings tied in undefined and boundary-lacking relationships. Further research is recommended in exploring the nature and peoples' viewpoints in situationships to fully understand this phenomenon.

**Keywords:** situationship, casual relationship, college students, sexual script theory, phenomenology



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## INTRODUCTION

Situationship, a word that has gained popularity in modern dating, refers to a particular type of romance characterized by vagueness, no-strings-attached dynamics, and blurred lines; this referred to an undefined or boundary-less dynamic (Kuburic, 2023). Researchers saw situationships as an exciting and unclear mix in which this study explored the shifted landscape of dating norms among undergraduates at a university in Calamba City to examine the pattern commonly referred to as 'situationships'. A crucial research gap existed in understanding the motivations and long-term effects of situationships specifically among young adults. Labor (2020) noted that young Filipinos who appeared in dating apps tended to present themselves strategically to mirror what

they were after and interact with others who took advantage of the mobile. Young adults changed their way of dating, and one of the leading trends noticed was the increased cases of situationships. This phenomenon was, however, not very well understood, although it was a commonplace among today's youth (Agardh et al., 2022). Hence, the aim of this research to explore and describe the experiences of college students in Calamba City regarding situationships.

As an anchoring theory for this research, Gagnon and Simon's 1998 sexual script theory (SST) (as cited in Bleakley et al., 2023) stipulates that individuals internalize societal sexual norms which, in turn, shape sex-related thoughts and actions called sexual scripts. Agardh and his colleagues (2022) had three

scripting levels: intra-psychic, cultural, and interpersonal levels. They asserted that these scripts emphasize the interaction of personal and societal norms which impacted one's sexual encounters and behavior. The researchers used SST to explore and understand college students' experiences in their situationships. With this, SST became the anchor in structuring the research questions of this study.

The researchers' central question was to explore and describe the changing dynamics as experienced by college students toward situationships, shedding light on the evolving dating preferences and attitudes of college students in Calamba City. Specifically, this notion was divided into corollary questions:

1. What are the experiences of college students regarding situationships?
2. How do personal beliefs about relationships and sex influence college students' views on situationships?
3. How do societal norms impact how college students perceive situationships?
4. How do personal interactions in situationships vary among college students?
5. What potential intervention program can be developed based on the study findings and the researchers' insights to assist college students in navigating situationships?

The lived experiences of Calamba City college students in situationships were the primary focus of this study. The study was conducted at a campus in Calamba City because the college students who served as participants were enrolled the above stated campus. The results were limited to the research population, hence, cannot be used as a standard for individuals outside of this study.

## LITERATURES

This section presents studies and literatures on this subject. Journal articles, e-books, and

books are the sources that were used to compile the related literature.

Situationships and Modern Dating Culture. In today's dating culture, situationships were gradually becoming common as traditional relationship norms change. More and more young adults were accepting these unclear boundaries and commitments. Situationships created a flexible bond allowing people to navigate romantic relationships without being tied down by conservative restrictions (Langlais et al., 2024). However, the absence of explicit commitment in relationships could lead to uncertainties and emotional problems (Carmack & LeFebvre, 2019; Jelić, Krnić, & Šutić, 2022; Centeno & Manuel, 2023; Denby & van Hooff, 2023; Hung, 2023). Although young adults display emotional and sexual commitment similar to that of committed relationships, the lack of specific labels can lead to misunderstandings and difficulties in establishing expectations and boundaries.

Situationships offered an opportunity for emotional connections and companionship, especially in the current era of technological advancements and evolving social norms (Bandinelli, 2022; Chisom, 2021; Bandinelli & Cossu, 2023; Cabañes & Uy-Tioco, 2022; Cabañes & Collantes, 2023). The trend towards situationships showed larger cultural and social shifts, impacted by globalization, technological progress, and shifting gender roles. Contemporary dating behaviors of Filipino Gen Z individuals focused on practicality and personal growth, with a rising preference for developing friendships as the foundation of romantic connections (Atong et al., 2022; Santos, 2023; Torres, 2023). Furthermore, dating apps facilitated a more practical social interaction focused on establishing credibility, shifting the dating scene towards a digitally restricted way of life concentrated on increasing online visibility (Bandelli & Cossu, 2023; Ortega et al., 2023). Romantic relationships often involve a difficult balancing act between tradition and modernity as people move back and forth along societal demands and individual wants.

**Unrealism in Romantic Relationships.** The influence of media exposure on individuals' beliefs and expectations about romantic relations was an important aspect of research (Ray, 2022; Amelash, 2023). Disney movies often show romance in an idealized way, which might eventually lead to exaggerated hopes or too much expectation from someone or because of his pictures alone people think that they have high hopes that such things occur this way in real-life situations as well (Black et al., 2019; Carmack & LeFebvre, 2019; Bartolomey, 2022). The relevance of media in shaping our attitudes towards romance was better appreciated when one understands how media representation promotes unrealistic ideals that are harmful to personal relationships. When individuals hold unrealistic and unattainable beliefs such as avoiding conflict or placing trust in destiny, being in romantic relationships with them may breed discontent hence advocating for confronting these views so as to enhance positive romantic relationships (Bahul & Zagefka, 2021).

**Need to Belong with Others.** According to Chisom (2021), Bandinelli (2022), as well as Bahul and Zagefka (2021), there were a lot of studies that focus on close human bonds, social support, and an essential need for being members of a community. It has been noted that the chronically anxious tend to be strongly attached on social media platforms. They tend to seek some kind of approval or connection in order to fill the sense of belongingness through these online platforms and social media chains (Griffiths & Stănculescu, 2021; Liebers, 2022). The linkage of the need for belongingness with self-evaluations suggested the significance of feeling respected and being socially represented in predicting one's feeling of belongingness (Buctot et al., 2020; Magallanes & Suan, 2020; Adekkanattu et al., 2022; Alibudbud & Dayrit, 2022; Alpapara et al., 2022; Fabella & Litao, 2023; Kovac & Padede, 2023). These findings emphasized how much human beings require connections with others to know their worth.

The complex relationships between personality traits, romantic relationships, and social

networks emphasized the multifaceted nature of belongingness (Dunbar et al., 2019; Rhodes, 2020). In academic institutions, relationships among learners were needed to increase enjoyment and foster adjustment; they were also integral in associating overall satisfaction with one's own existence while feeling as if they belong to a school and its people (Baumeister & MacKenzie, 2019; Avci, 2023).

## METHODS

**Research Design.** This study used a qualitative research design, focusing on the phenomenological hermeneutic method. Neubauer and his co-researchers (2019) pointed out that phenomenology aimed to uncover the meaning behind people's unique experiences; it explores different sides of human life. Alternatively, hermeneutics explores and implements comprehension and explanation within human situations (Oddman, 1988, as mentioned by Ramsook, 2018). The researchers believed that hermeneutic phenomenology was the appropriate research design for this study due to their interest in exploring Calamba City college students' experiences in situationships and how they explore and interpret said experiences in understanding this phenomenon.

**Population and Sampling.** The population of this study were six (6) Filipino college students ranging from freshmen to seniors, and were enrolled in a campus in Calamba City, Laguna, Philippines. All the participants were in situationships, specifically those who were not in a labeled romantic relationship or relationship status is single. They were chosen as participants with the aim to focus on their lived experiences. The researchers used purposive sampling to select the participants in which it is often used in qualitative research as the participants personify or represent the whole population (Denieffe, 2020).

**Instrumentation.** The instruments used in this study were semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions focusing on the students' experiences in situationships. Experts in human behavior often use these kinds of interviews to

gather deep insights or in counseling work (Berler & Magaldi, 2020). Open-ended questions can be used on their own or with other discussion methods to explore topics, understand how things happen, and find out why certain things are linked (Bernard et al., 2019). A self-made pre-questionnaire was made by the researchers to sift participants who were in situationships and avoid selecting those who were in labeled romantic relationships and those who are not in situationships but think they were in one. For the results of this study to be valid and reliable, three trained experts in the psychology field, specifically psychometricians and psychologists, analyzed and validated the interview questions to be used in collecting data.

**Data Analysis.** Data generated from the structured interviews, with audio recording devices, were analyzed using thematic analysis was used. It identifies, sorts, and interprets gathered data to create emerging patterns and themes (Warren, 2023). With the researchers wanting to explore the college students' experiences in situationships and how these ambiguous relationships shape their thoughts and experiences, the aim is to find similar and striking responses that may align with the findings in the review of related literature of this study.

## RESULTS

The researchers were able to extract excerpts and create central and sub-themes which were organized into tables based from the data collection and analysis.

**College Students' Situationship Experiences.** Researchers have noted unique, yet similar patterns based on the responses shared by the participants. While the college students' experiences on situationships vary from one another, many responses seemed to be either related or similar, hence the researchers were able to form thematic tables detailing central and sub-themes. The results obtained showed the participants mainly experiencing negative thoughts and emotions (i.e., uncertainty, vulnerability, confusion) in situationships, with

testification that such relationships are undefined and boundary-lacking in nature; this made navigation in situationships challenging and emotionally draining. On the other hand, few striking responses said that situationships offered reprieve from certain problems participants face.

**College Students' Personal Beliefs about Relationships and Sex.** Anchored from the intra-psychic scripts of SST, the emerging themes under this finding were presented below.

Table 1  
*College Students' Personal Beliefs about Relationships and Sex*

CENTRAL THEMES	SUB-THemes	DESCRIPTION	CODES
1. Uncertainty in the Relationship	1.1. Lack of a Clear Label	P1: P1 shared that their situationship involved affection and constant communication but lacked a clear relationship definition.	uncertain, label, confusion
		P5: They explained that despite a strong connection and feelings of love, they hadn't discussed the nature of their relationship.	
	1.2. Mixed Signals	P4: P4 described the mixed signals in their situationship, feeling jealousy but mixed-signals, unable to express it due to the lack of a clear agreement.	Mixed-signals, uncertainty, actions, emotional, investment, misleading, actions
		P6: P6 shared that they spend a lot of time together and act like a couple, but their emotional relationship lacks an official label.	
2. Emotional Conflict	2.1. Jealousy and Boundaries	P3: P3 expresses feeling conflict about jealousy, unsure if they have the right jealousy to feel it without commitment.	jealousy, boundaries, self-control
		P4: P4 shared that jealousy is hard to address in their situationship due to the lack of an agreement, leaving them unable to resolve their feelings.	
	2.2. Self-awareness, Limitations, and Growth	P3: P3 emphasized the importance of self-awareness and knowing boundaries in self-awareness, situationship to avoid emotional conflicts.	Self-awareness, emotional control, limitations, growth, resilience, personal development
		P4: P4 stressed the need for self-awareness, recognizing the lack of commitment and understanding boundaries.	
3. Desire for Clarity and Navigating Emotional Expectations	3.1. Emotional Ambiguity	P1: Participant 1 described a situationship as a relationship with no label, where things feel unclear and undefined.	Emotional-uncertainty, confusion
		P5: Participant 5 explained that a situationship is a romantic relationship between two people that develops but remains undefined and without clarity.	
	3.2. Emotional Investment and Boundaries	P2: Participant 2 described a situationship as a confusing relationship where both individuals act like they are a couple, but neither has any rights to each other.	emotional investment, unsure, emotional boundaries, self-protection
		P6: Participant 6 explained that in their situationship, they have set boundaries, such as not being allowed to date others, but without a clear commitment or label.	
	3.3. Seeking Commitment	P2: Participant 2 expressed fear of seeking clarity in a situationship, worried that the answer they desire might not be the one the person provides.	Commitment, desire for label, fear of rejection, vulnerability
		P5: Participant 5 described a situationship as undefined, where there is no clear commitment, leaving the relationship in an ambiguous state.	
4. Beliefs and Values in Situationships	4.1. Openness and Communication	P4: Participant 4 described a situationship as a roller coaster ride, where emotions fluctuate between happiness and excitement, but also sadness, leading to future questions to question why they continue to stay in such an uncertain relationship.	Uncertainty, future questions
		P1: Participant 1 emphasized the importance of being open and honest with each other in a situationship, believing that clear communication is key.	
	4.2. Sex, Emotional Connection, and Boundaries	P5: Participant 5 expressed that open communication about feelings and expectations is crucial for a healthy situationship.	Openness, communication
		P2: Participant 2 mentioned that in a situationship, both emotional and physical connections can happen if both individuals are willing.	
	4.3. Love and hurt	P4: Participant 4 shared that entering a situationship is difficult if one's mindset is already fixed on either love or sex, as it can complicate expectations.	Consent, emotional connection, intimacy, boundaries, emotional responsibility
		P5: Participant 5 emphasized the importance of open communication in a situationship, even if the relationship lacks clear direction, to ensure both parties are on the same page.	
4.4. Mutual Support and Care	4.4. Mutual Support and Care	P3: P3 shared that the lack of commitment and a clear label in a situationship can cause emotional pain and confusion about one's place in the relationship.	love, hurt, uncertainty
		P6: Participant 6 explained that their view on love and sex fits their situationship because both individuals support each other, offering a sense of care and relief to one another.	

**Central Theme 1.** Uncertainty in the Relationship tackled the participants' doubts in their



respective situationships. Central to this uncertainty was the Lack of a Clear Label (Sub-Theme 1.1) and Mixed Signals (Sub-Theme 1.2), which created a sense of ambiguity about the nature of the relationship. Participants described how the absence of formal definitions led to confusion and insecurity, leaving them unsure about their roles and expectations within the relationship.

**Central Theme 2.** Emotional Conflict highlighted the internal struggles participants face. Sub-Theme 2.1: Jealousy and Boundaries explained that the presence of intimacy, yet absence of boundaries often led to tension and misunderstandings. However, these experiences also prompted Sub-Theme 2.2: Self-awareness, Limitations, and Growth, as participants navigated their emotions and sought to better understand their needs and limitations within the situationship.

**Central Theme 3.** Participants' definitions of a situationship centered on this theme. Desire for Clarity and Navigating Emotional Expectations, highlighting the complexities of managing undefined relationships. Sub-Theme 3.1: Emotional Ambiguity revealed that participants often grappled with unclear emotional boundaries, leading to confusion about their roles and expectations. Sub-Theme 3.2: Emotional Investment and Boundaries expounded that participants feel intimacy in the situationship despite having no clear labels and boundaries. In relation to this, some participants showcased Sub-Theme 3.3: Seeking Commitment as they hoped their ambiguous relationships would eventually gain a clearer label. Lastly, Sub-Theme 3.4: Questioning the Future displayed the struggle a particular participant shared in predicting the direction or longevity of their situationships.

**Central Theme 4.** Beliefs and Values in Situationships were identified in participants' beliefs about love and sex relating to situationships. Openness and Communication (Sub-Theme 4.1) were integral concepts in maintaining clarity and understanding situationships. Sex, Emotional Connection, and Boundaries (Sub-Theme 4.2) detailed that

situationships, according to the participants, require open communication to align emotional and physical expectations. Experiences of Love and Hurt (Sub-Theme 4.3) were common, as participants navigated the highs and lows of emotional vulnerability. Ironically, there was still Mutual Support and Care (Sub-Theme 4.4) present; intimacy persists amidst the unclear and anxious-ridden dynamics in situationships.

**Impact of Societal Norms on College Students' Perception about Situationship.** Cultural scripts of SST were highlighted in this particular result. Societal standards and assumptions regarding sex, considered as peoples' environment, influences their own comfort in relationships. The emerging themes under this finding were presented below.

Table 2  
*College Students' Perception about Situationship*

CENTRAL	SUB-THEMES	DESCRIPTION	CODES
5. Decision Making Factors in Situationships	5.1. Readiness and Acceptance	P1: Participant 1 emphasized that being ready and understanding the potential expectations are important factors when deciding to enter a situationship.  P6: Participant 6 highlighted the importance of being prepared for the possibility of sudden changes such as the other person leaving or developing feelings for someone else.  P4: Participant 4 shared that being self-aware and understanding one's own intentions are an important factor when deciding to enter a situationship.	Readiness Acceptance Emotional resilience
	5.2. Clear Intentions, Transparency and Boundaries	P5: Participant 5 emphasized that transparency and honesty are crucial to them even in a situationship as they believe clear communication strengthens the relationship.  P2: Participant 2 shared that over time they begin to realize they are gradually falling for the other person highlighting the emotional risk involved in a situationship.	transparency mutual intent boundaries mutual understanding
	5.3. Emotional Risk and Patience	P3: Participant 3 emphasized the need for patience and a broad perspective when entering a situationship as it requires patience and understanding.	emotional risk patience
6. Management of Personal Expectations and Uncertainty	6.1. Balancing Expectations	P2: Participant 2 expressed that in love the expectations depend on both individuals involved suggesting that mutual understanding shapes the relationship.  P4: Participant 4 shared that they recognized from the start that their situationship was without strings attached and lacked any formal agreement, but they were still aware of their feelings and the situation's nature.  P2: Participant 2 expressed fear of vulnerability, worried that the answer they want from the other person might not align with their expectations.	Expectations balance
	6.2. Fear of Vulnerability and Rejection	P4: Participant 4 shared that they avoid asking about the relationship's status choosing not to address it to avoid potential rejection or discomfort.	vulnerability rejection emotional protection
	7.1. Stigma and Negative Judgment	P5: Participant 5 shared that their parents get angry when their partner stays past midnight at their house without any clear label or courtship reflecting cultural norms that judge situationships negatively.  P4: Participant 4 explained that although they initially believed people should not engage in situationships their personal experience made it difficult to avoid or resist entering one highlighting the conflict between societal expectations and personal reality.  P3: Participant 3 explained that the lack of clarity in a situationship can lead to confusion as it creates emotional tension when one feels entitled to demands despite not being in an official relationship.	Societal judgment, family pressure, traditional values, generational gap, traditional values
7. Social and Cultural Expectations in Situationships	7.2. Emotional Strain and Confusion	P5: Participant 5 shared that accepting a situationship is difficult because it brings feelings of doubt and suspicion making them feel as though the relationship is being hidden or not fully acknowledged.  P4: Participant 4 expressed that exploring situationships is acceptable as long as one is aware of their own feelings and what they want from the experience emphasizing self-awareness.	confusion emotional conflict identity conflict
	7.3. Acceptance and Personal Growth	P4: Participant 4 shared that despite initially holding a negative view of situationships their personal experience made it hard to resist or avoid ultimately leading them to accept it.	personal growth open mindedness self awareness

8. Influence of Societal and Cultural Expectations on Situationships	8.1. Pressure to Define Relationships	P5: Participant 5 noted that traditional societal expectations demand clear official relationships with definite goals and there is pressure not to settle for anything less than that.	societal pressure, expectation to label, traditional values
	8.2. Doubts and Self-Reflection	P6: Participant 6 shared that society expects situationships to eventually lead to a formal relationship with the assumption that the couple will end up together and define their relationship. P2: Participant 2 described situationships as informal relationships where there is no official commitment, just communication and moments of happiness highlighting societal views that lack clear structure.	self-doubt, reflection, identity conflict
	8.3. Changing Perspectives on Modern Relationships	P5: Participant 5 expressed self-doubt questioning whether it is right to be in a situationship and reflecting on whether they should continue influenced by societal expectations of more defined relationships. P1: Participant 1 expressed that situationships are acceptable as long as both people are willing to take the risk even if they don't end up in a committed relationship. P4: Participant 4 acknowledged the changing times suggesting that as long as a person doesn't invest their whole life into a situationship it can be considered acceptable especially for women in modern relationships.	modern views, openness, evolution, risk-taking

**Central Theme 5.** Decision Making Factors in Situationship tackled the participants' decisions making. First, Readiness and Acceptance (Sub-Theme 5.1) was about how people must prepare themselves to enter a situationship; participants who show preparedness were more likely to understand a situationship from both positive and negative sides. Clear Intentions, Transparency, and Boundaries (Sub-Theme 5.2) highlighted the necessity of open communication regarding desires and expectations. Then, Emotional Risk and Patience (Sub-Theme 5.3) showcased participants navigating their feelings and the evolving nature of their connection.

**Central Theme 6.** Management of Personal Expectations and Uncertainty tackled about the participants' expectations and doubts in relationship. Sub-Theme 6.1: Balancing Expectations explained that expectations depend on both individuals involved, suggesting a mutual understanding. Sub-Theme 6.2: Fear of Vulnerability and Rejection, on the other hand, focused the worries of participants of being rejected.

**Central Theme 7.** Participants shared their Social and Cultural Expectations in Situationships. In Sub-Theme: 7.1: Stigma and Negative Judgement, participants explained that their personal experience made it difficult to avoid conflict between societal expectations. Sub-Theme: 7.2: Emotional Strain and Confusion focused on participants' confusion due to lack of clarity in their respective situationships. Lastly, they also expressed in

**Sub-Theme: 7.3: Acceptance and Personal Growth** that situationships are acceptable as long as one is aware of their own feelings when being involved in such undefined and boundary-lacking relationships.

Participants' traditional societal expectations are featured in Central theme 8: Influence of Societal and Cultural Expectations on Situationships. Sub-Theme 8.1: Pressure to Define Relationships showed the interplay between societal pressures, personal doubts, and developing relationship norms in shaping individuals' experiences with romantic connections. Sub-Theme 8.2: Doubts and Self-Reflection existed wherein participants expressed self-doubt whether they should continue their relationships. Finally, the landscape of modern relationships is changing, with Sub-Theme 8.3. Changing Perspective on Modern Relationships showcased participants embracing non-traditional forms of connection such as situationships.

**Variations in Situationship Interactions Among College Students.** This was anchored on the interpersonal scripts of SST. With humans being social creatures, this script focused on how people interact with each other in a romantic or sexual way. The emerging themes were the following:

**Table 3**  
**College Students' Situationship Interactions**

CENTRAL THEMES	SUB-THEMES	DESCRIPTION	CODES
9. Challenges in Establishing and Maintaining Boundaries in Situationships	9.1. Difficulty in Maintaining Mutual Boundaries	P2: Participant 2 shared that conversations about boundaries are inconsistent, sometimes happening and sometimes not, creating confusion as the relationship often returns to normal when they meet, making it feel disorganized. P6: Participant 6 explained that there are times when communication stops unexpectedly, and a sense of distance grows, but neither person knows the reason behind it, highlighting the difficulty in maintaining clear boundaries.	boundary- challenges, communication barriers, emotional- inconsistency
	9.2. Lack of Clear Expectations	P2: Participant 2 shared that sometimes, in a situationship, one may feel they have no right to ask about boundaries or expectations, leading to uncertainty. P3: Participant 3 explained that they often choose to keep their feelings to themselves in order to avoid pushing the other person away, indicating a lack of clear communication about boundaries. P5: Participant 5 mentioned that while there is honesty and openness in their situationship, they avoid setting clear expectations or boundaries to prevent complications in the relationship.	unclear- expectations, confusion, emotional self- preservation
10. Navigating Emotional Boundaries	10.1. Balancing Emotional Vulnerability and Boundaries	P3: Participant 3 explained that when they feel upset, they tend to bottle up their emotions to avoid conflict, choosing not to discuss their feelings. P6: Participant 6 shared that while they feel uncomfortable when the other person is with other girls, they don't communicate these feelings, preferring to keep their emotions hidden to maintain peace.	emotional vulnerability, balancing boundaries, emotional- suppression
11. External and Peer Influences on Situationship Dynamics	11.1. Impact of Societal and Peer Expectations	P5: Participant 5 mentioned that their friends advise against settling for less, which makes them question their situationship and feel unsure about it. P6: Participant 6 shared that their friends expect situationships to eventually lead to a committed relationship or label, which influences how they view the situation.	societal- pressures, peer advice, peer validation
12. Interpersonal Challenges in Situationships	12.1. Confusion from Mixed Signals	P1: Participant 1 shared that they struggle with confusion due to mixed signals, making it hard to understand the other person's true intentions. P6: Participant 6 explained that they often question themselves, wondering if the other person wants someone else or just enjoys the feeling of being in a relationship without actually committing.	mixed-signals, emotional- ambiguity, confusion
	12.2. Overthinking and Self-Doubt	P4: Participant 4 shared that overthinking is a major challenge, as they often feel drained and unsure about the future of the situationship. P6: Participant 6 mentioned that they often question themselves, wondering if there's something wrong with them, adding to the emotional strain of the situationship.	overthinking, self-doubt, self- questioning
	12.3. Emotional Frustration and Uncertainty	P2: Participant 2 expressed frustration with the on-and-off communication in the situationship, feeling uncertain about its consistency, although they noted that things feel normal when they meet. P5: Participant 5 shared the difficulty of managing expectations, mentioning that they often end up in denial, waiting for things to progress despite the lack of clarity. P6: Participant 6 noted the emotional strain of constantly questioning whether the other person has feelings for someone else, contributing to their uncertainty.	emotional- frustration, burnout, emotional- exhaustion

13. Managing and Addressing Relationship Challenges	13.1. Open Communication and Honesty	P1: Participant 1 emphasized the importance of constant communication and discussing things openly to ensure clarity and honesty about each other's feelings. P5: Participant 5 also highlighted the necessity of having open conversations about emotions, which helps establish boundaries and maintain understanding in the relationship.	open communication, honesty, clarity, boundary setting
	13.2. Pride and Vulnerability in Conflict Resolution	P2: Participant 2 shared that sometimes they raise their pride during conflicts but eventually find themselves lowering it to resolve issues. P6: Participant 6 mentioned that they maintain a balance, with some openness but still have things they keep hidden from each other, indicating difficulty in fully addressing challenges.	pride, vulnerability, conflict-resolution, ego
	13.3. Self-Control and Emotional Regulation	P4: Participant 4 emphasized the importance of self-control in maintaining a relationship, suggesting that having emotional restraint is crucial. P6: Participant 6 shared that sometimes, distancing from each other helps calm the situation and provides time to process emotions before reconciling.	self-control, emotional-regulation, calmness, emotional-management

**Central Theme 9. Challenges in Establishing and Maintaining Mutual Boundaries in Situationships** explored the difficulties participants encountered when trying to set and maintain personal boundaries in their situationships. Here, there were two (2) sub-themes: Difficulty in Maintaining Boundaries (9.1) shared how participants detailed unclear nature of their relationships made it challenging to establish limits and navigate acceptable behaviors and; Lack of Clear Expectations (9.2) focused on the absence of defined expectations which led to emotional distress and confusion, as participants felt uncertain about what they should expect from their situationship partners.

**Central Theme 10. Navigating Emotional Boundaries.** Participants also described emotional challenges participants faced while trying to balance vulnerability and boundary-setting is the focus of this theme. In Sub-theme 10.1: Balancing Emotional Vulnerability and Boundaries, participants described the internal conflict of being emotionally open while trying to maintain protective boundaries, which often led to them feeling emotionally strained and uncertain.

**Central Theme 11. External and Peer Influences on Situationship Dynamics** explored how societal norms and peer expectations affected participants' behaviors and decisions in their situationships. External pressures tackled in Sub-theme 11.1: Impact of Societal and Peer Expectations, such as the opinions of friends and society, often complicated participants' abilities in navigating their relationships freely and authentically.

**Central Theme 12. Interpersonal Challenges in Situationships.** Participants faced in maintaining clear communication and understanding within their situationships, thus the existence of Interpersonal Challenges in

Situationships. Here, participants experienced Confusion from Mixed Signals (Sub-Theme 12.1) which led to confusion and emotional uncertainty about the nature of their relationship. Additionally, Overthinking and Self-Doubt (Sub-theme 12.2) were noted as participants often doubted their actions or feared how their partner might react, leading to difficulty in addressing crucial topics like boundaries.

**Central Theme 13. Managing and Addressing Situationship Challenges** discussed participants' strategies for managing the challenges in their situationships. Three (3) sub-themes have emerged in this central theme. First, Open Communication and Honesty (13.1) was seen as crucial for addressing misunderstandings and ensuring both parties understood each other's feelings and boundaries. Second, Pride and Vulnerability in Conflict Resolution were one of several struggles participants were facing in situationships. Self-Control in Emotional Regulation (13.3) was observed among participants, such as taking time to cool off, as this was important for resolving conflicts and maintaining stability in situationships.

**Overall Emerging Themes.** 13 central themes were identified along with their corresponding sub-themes. It can be inferred that the college students in Calamba City have unique experiences pertaining to their situationships. Despite these, the presence of the thematic tables showcasing the central and sub-themes highlighted striking and similar responses obtained from the participants of this study.

In Problem 2 (college students' personal beliefs about love and sex), the researchers surmised that emotions and attachments were due to the participants investing emotional time and effort into their situationships in spite of having no labels or commitment. However, results of Problem 3 (college students' perceptions on situationships based on social norms) showed conflicting views of their experiences and how society viewed their ambiguous relationships. They mentioned the difference between traditional and modern dating and relationship

cultures and how some of the participants are pressured to put labels in their relationship even when the said relationship was an unclear and boundary-lacking one. Lastly, there seemed to be challenges in creating and maintaining boundaries in situationships as inferred in Problem 4 (college students' personal interactions in situationships). Intimacy bloomed between the participants and their partners' relationships, which created further complications on how they (college students) thought and felt about the bond created between them.

Potential Intervention Program. Based on the results of this chapter, the researchers created an intervention program entitled "Situationship Support Program" (SSP) which tackles college students' situationship experiences. The SSP focused on four (4) areas of concern inferred from the participants' interviews: 1) Uncertainty and Emotional Ambiguity; 2) Challenges in Boundaries; 3) Influence of Societal and Cultural Expectations; and, 4) Emotional Conflict and Coping Mechanism. Here, psychology-related strategies and activities were suggested (i.e., peer discussions, counselling, and seminars) to alleviate college students' negative situationship experiences and emotional well-being. This program aimed to give students more options and viewpoints to tackling their own situationships. Table 4 below shows the proposed intervention program.

**Table 4**  
*Situationship Support Program (SSP)*

AREAS OF CONCERN	OBJECTIVES	STRATEGIES & ACTIVITIES	TIME FRAME	PERSONS INVOLVED	SOURCE OF FUND	SUCCESS INDICATORS
Lived Experiences of UPHSD Calamba College Students in Situationships created by						
1. Uncertainty and Emotional Ambiguity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enhance self-awareness and clarify relationship expectations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>workshops- journaling: one-on-one counseling</li> </ul>	3 months (Monthly workshops, ongoing journaling, as-needed counseling)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>counselors</li> <li>psychologists</li> <li>peer mentors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>university wellness programs</li> <li>sponsorships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants demonstrate critical awareness of societal influences.</li> <li>Increased confidence in making relationship choices based on personal values.</li> </ul>
2. Challenges in Boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthen boundary-setting and assertiveness.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>peer discussions</li> </ul>	4 months (bi-weekly)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>counselors</li> <li>peers</li> </ul>	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants report improved confidence in asserting boundaries.</li> <li>Decrease in complaints about boundary violations in situationships.</li> </ul>
3. Influence of Societal and Cultural Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase awareness of societal pressures affecting relationship perceptions.</li> <li>Help students develop a mindset that balances personal values with external expectations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>psychoeducation seminars</li> <li>support groups</li> </ul>	5 months (seminars: quarterly; support groups: bi-weekly)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>psychologists</li> <li>peer mentors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>university wellness programs</li> <li>sponsorships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participants' improved ability to balance personal values with external expectations.</li> <li>Increased confidence in making relationship choices based on personal values.</li> </ul>
4. Emotional Conflict and Coping Mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Equip students with emotional regulation techniques.</li> <li>Provide emotional support and stress management strategies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>mindfulness and stress reduction workshops</li> <li>expressive therapy sessions</li> <li>one-on-one counseling</li> </ul>	6 months (workshops: monthly; therapy Sessions: weekly; counseling: ongoing)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>counselors</li> <li>psychologists</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>university mental health programs</li> <li>sponsorships</li> <li>therapy grants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduction in reported stress and emotional turmoil.</li> <li>Increased use of healthy coping mechanisms.</li> </ul>

The most responses the researchers obtained were the participants' feelings of Uncertainty and Emotional Ambiguity towards their respective situationships. Workshops, journaling, and one-on-one counselling for college students who have a difficult time handling their situationships for 3 months were proposed to monitor their progress throughout these particular interventions; counselors, psychologists, and peer mentors were also suggested to be involved due to their expertise in psychology which is integral in offering solutions to this issue.

Another area of concern inferred from the results in this chapter were Challenges in Boundaries. Due to the unclear nature of situationships, participants did not know where to draw the line in their respective intimate connections, therefore causing negative emotions and experiences. Peer discussions were suggested by the researchers to strengthen boundary-setting and assertiveness; having participants talk about their problems with their peers and counselors bi-weekly in 4 months may gradually alleviate some, if not most, of their worries in their situationships.

Influence of Societal and Cultural Expectations was also noted among the participants' responses. This was identified due to them weighing in other peoples' opinions in how they view their situationship experiences and what to expect from their partners. Thus, psychoeducation seminars and support groups were suggested as the researchers believed that more knowledge and similar experiences among other people would help college students think more rationally and do more sound choices in their relationships.

Lastly, participants were observed to have Emotional Conflicts and Coping Mechanisms that caused harm to their situationship experiences and emotional well-being. Mindfulness and stress reduction workshops, expressive therapy sessions, and one-on-one counseling may give outlet to college students to vent and process their emotions amidst their stressful situationships. 6 months was the



suggested wherein counselors and psychologists may spearhead such interventions and introduce students healthy and effective coping strategies in handling their situationships.

## DISCUSSION

This section presents the discussions, conclusion, and recommendations based on the results of the study.

**Emotional Ambiguity and Uncertainty.** A recurring theme is the lack of clarity in situationships, with participants describing emotional confusion due to mixed signals and undefined relationship labels. George (2024) supported this notion as he emphasized that uncertainty in modern dating led to emotional complexity. The lack of formal commitment often leaves participants unsure of how to interpret their partner's behavior, mirroring Fernandez' (2021) conclusions about emotional volatility in undefined romantic settings.

**Jealousy emerged despite the absence of exclusive agreements.** Participants acknowledged these emotions but were cautious about overstepping boundaries, reinforcing the idea that emotional reactions are not limited to committed relationships (Bunning, 2024). Some developed emotional attachments yet avoided addressing their feelings directly, contributing to psychological strain and feelings of vulnerability (Stiehler, 2023).

**Desire for Clarity and Boundaries.** Participants express a strong need for clear emotional boundaries and communication. Sub-themes reveal internal efforts to manage expectations and avoid emotional overinvestment. While some are seeking deeper commitment, others refrain due to fear of rejection or disrupting the dynamic. DiDonato's (2024) and Kim's (2023) researches showcased how fear of vulnerability often led individuals to withhold emotional needs in ambiguous relationships. These led the participants settling for volatile circumstances in which they go along with whatever happens

despite their hesitancy towards the unclear direction of the situationship.

Openness and communication are additionally mentioned as essential tools in navigating undefined relationships. This idea is supported by Harper (2020), who noted that mutual respect and emotional safety are fostered through clear, consensual setting of boundaries. Amidst the participants' respective situationships, they are aware of what aspects are needed to satiate their uncertainties with their situationship partners. However, they cannot voice their concerns out of fear in changing their current relationship dynamics.

**Beliefs and Values in Situationships.** Many participants view situationships as flexible yet emotionally taxing. They often balance romantic gestures with emotional restraint, expressing a need for intentionality and self-awareness. These strategies, as Brunning (2024) suggested, are key in navigating modern dating culture with a focus on self-growth and emotional resilience. Some participants express readiness in handling situationships, while others struggle and want to find ways in alleviating their uncertainties.

College students who adopted a mindset of readiness and acceptance cope better with the emotional ambiguity. Langlais et al. (2024) argued that people entering such relationships often understand the risks involved, including potential instability and emotional displacement. However, the ability to engage with honesty, patience, and emotional awareness helped participants build more respectful dynamics, despite the lack of formal commitment.

**Influence of Societal and Cultural Expectations.** Societal pressures shape the college students' experiences and perceptions. Some felt judged by family or peers, particularly regarding the legitimacy of non-traditional relationships. Brenner (2024) noted that stigma from older generations often label these arrangements as emotionally immature or unstable, increasing emotional strain and identity conflict.

Several participants highlighted how culture influenced their approach to intimacy and relationship expectations. These expectations led to internal conflicts—feeling torn between personal desires and societal norms. College students seek advice from friends in handling their situationships, but feel more pressured and conflicted due to contrasting ideas. They were advised that the students deserve better outcomes in the situationship and that they should do certain things, placing more expectations on them to handle their undefined relationships better despite seeking guidance in the first place. The need to define a relationship became a source of emotional tension, as individuals navigated between authenticity and external validation (Szwedo, 2022).

Despite these pressures, participants reported growing acceptance of relationships outside traditional ones, seeing them as opportunities for emotional growth and autonomy. This aligns with Tripathi (2024), who observed shifting societal attitudes toward prioritizing emotional connection over rigid romantic labels.

**Interpersonal and Emotional Challenges.** Participants struggle with maintaining emotional and interpersonal boundaries. Some college students express anxiety towards their situationships as they lack the conviction of setting boundaries in fear of their partners' reactions to possible changes. Unclear expectations often led to miscommunication and misunderstandings, consistent with the findings of Zepp (2024) and Epley et al. (2021), who stressed the emotional toll of unmet expectations in ambiguous relationships. Additionally, participants describe difficulty in balancing emotional vulnerability, as opening up excessively risks deeper emotional hurt. Gupta (2024) and Karremans (2024), as well as their colleagues, explained that without intentional boundary-setting, individuals in uncertain relationships are prone to heightened emotional strain and attachment insecurity.

External influences, including peer and cultural expectations, further complicated participants' capabilities in navigating situationships. Agardh et al. (2022) noted that these pressures often

push individuals to conform, even at the expense of personal comfort or authenticity. College students were observed to endure their situationship experiences while their negative feelings worsen in boundary-lacking relationships. Mixed signals and communication avoidance are also common. As Mejia (2023) and Kelly (2024) discovered in their respective studies, unclear emotional cues foster anxiety and self-doubt. Participants shared experiences of overthinking and internalizing misunderstandings, which led to emotional withdrawal and insecurity.

**Coping Strategies and Emotional Regulation.** Participants emphasized the open and honest communication in reducing emotional strain and maintaining clarity in undefined relationships. When partners discuss needs and expectations regularly, relationships feel more emotionally secure and satisfying (Hardesty et al., 2024). However, emotional control and pride also play roles in conflict resolution. Some participants avoid vulnerability to protect themselves, even if it limits emotional intimacy with their situationship partners (Freedman et al., 2021). Strachowski (2022) stressed the importance of regulating emotional responses to prevent misunderstandings from escalating, particularly in relationships lacking labels and boundaries.

**Recommendations.** Researchers recommend counseling and intervention programs not only for students but also for young adults in general. Navigating situationships can be difficult for some young adults, therefore appropriate psychology techniques may aid in their respective situations.

More participants were also recommended to give a more nuanced understanding of situationships. Additionally, future research may tackle one or several more angles of situationships by future researchers. While this research focused on college students' experiences, other studies may focus on other aspects, such as the culture of situationships or how society views these relationships, to name a few.

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