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Moderne Intimität im Wandel: Eine qualitative Studie zu den Erfahrungen von
Universitätsstudierenden mit „Situationships“

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Abstract EN

Situationships, often defined as a form of romantic involvement that falls between casual dating and committed relationships (Langlais et al. 2024), have so far received little attention in sociological research on relationship forms. However, they play an important role in the everyday lives of many university students. This thesis examines how university students in Vienna interpret their experiences in situationships, with a particular focus on unclear boundaries and expectations. A total of 15 narrative interviews were conducted with Generation Z students who have experienced a situationship before. The interviews were analyzed using the narrative interview analysis (Schütze 1983; Schütze et al. 2016) based on a symbolic interactionist perspective. The aim of the thesis was to gain insight into how students deal with unclear relationship forms and how they interpret these experiences retrospectively. The findings show that students do not primarily perceive situationships as failed relationships, but rather as meaningful experiences through which they were able to learn more about themselves, their romantic standards, and how to negotiate intimacy in an unstable dating scene.

Abstract DE

Situationships, oft definiert als eine romantische Beziehungsform zwischen zwanglosem dating und einer festen Beziehung (Langlais et al. 2024), haben in der soziologischen Forschung bislang wenig Beachtung gefunden. Gleichzeitig stellen sie für viele Studierende einen relevanten Bestandteil ihres Beziehungsalltags dar. Die vorliegende Masterarbeit untersucht deshalb, wie Studierende in Wien ihre Erfahrungen in Situationships interpretieren, wobei ein besonderer Fokus auf dem Umgang mit unklaren Grenzen und Erwartungen liegt. Insgesamt wurden 15 narrative Interviews mit Studierenden der Generation Z durchgeführt, die bereits Erfahrungen mit Situationships gemacht haben. Die Interviews wurden anhand der Narrationsanalyse (Schütze 1983; Schütze et al. 2016) aus einer symbolisch-interaktionistischen Perspektive analysiert. Ziel der Arbeit war es, Einblicke zu gewinnen, wie Studierende mit unklaren Beziehungsformen umgehen und wie sie diese Erfahrungen rückblickend interpretieren. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Situationships von den Befragten nicht in erster Linie als gescheiterte Beziehungen wahrnehmen, sondern als sinnvolle Erfahrungen, durch die sie

mehr über sich selbst, ihre romantischen Vorstellungen und den Umgang mit Intimität in eine instabilen Dating-Szene lernen konnten.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the term *situationship* has become common in everyday speech and media discussions. It describes a connection that feels romantic but remains undefined, without clear boundaries or commitment. Furthermore: *“Situationships can also be described as relationships that reflect low or fluctuating levels of commitment, and may be one-sided, where one participant wants more from the relationship than the other, yet they still mimic dating relationships”*. (Langlais et al. 2024, pp.1842-1843). Recent empirical studies show that such relationship forms have become a common feature of young adults’ dating experiences, reflecting broader shifts in contemporary intimacy (Choudhry et al. 2022; Deniega et al. 2024). These accounts point to dating experiences that do not fit established dating categories or partnership forms, which raises the question of why such arrangements emerge in the first place and how young adults understand and experience them.

Sociology has long observed that intimacy and relationships have changed in late modern societies. Giddens (1991) described modern relationships as being shaped by reflexivity, making them more fluid rather than following predefined relational norms. Instead, these more modern relationship forms are defined by a freedom to decide where the emphasis lies on equality, communication and emotional satisfaction (Giddens 1991). Bauman (2003) expanded on this transformation with the concept of *“liquid love”*, suggesting that emotional bonds have become more flexible but also more fragile, which makes them easy to be formed and dissolved. Together, these perspectives show that intimacy in contemporary society is defined by both freedom and uncertainty. The decline of shared relational scripts means that individuals must construct their own definitions of closeness, which can often produce the ambiguity and instability that characterize relationships such as situationships.

Illouz (2012, 2019) expanded this discussion by examining how emotional life in contemporary capitalism is shaped by ideals of control and self-management. Individuals are encouraged to regulate their feelings, present emotional restraint, and avoid dependence on others (Illouz 2019). This cultural emphasis on autonomy produces a paradoxical understanding of love, where connection is desired, but vulnerability is

seen as a risk. Situationships can therefore be seen as one result of this contradiction, as they allow emotional involvement without commitment and seem to promote individual freedom, but frequently create uncertainty and emotional strain (Langlais et al. 2024; Deniega et al. 2024).

These dynamics are especially evident during what Arnett (2000) describes as *emerging adulthood*, a developmental stage marked by exploration, instability, and the postponement of long-term commitments (Arnett 2000, pp. 473-476). In this period, individuals regularly prioritize education, career goals, and personal growth, which makes relationships more experimental and less clearly defined. Among university students, intimacy is therefore frequently approached as temporary or flexible, leaving room for adjustment as personal circumstances change. Recent studies have confirmed that situationships have become more prevalent, precisely because they remain undefined and temporary (Choudhry et al. 2022; Deniega et al. 2024; Langlais et al. 2025). At the same time, ambiguous relationships can become emotionally demanding particularly in cases of differing expectations, in which one partner seeks more commitment while the other maintains ambiguity, resulting in emotional exhaustion for the more invested partner (Deniega et al. 2024). Hochschild's (2012) concept of "emotion work" helps explain this as it shows how people manage and adjust their feelings to meet social expectations. In the context of situationships, this means enduring unmet needs and in turn suppressing disappointment to avoid appearing attached. Emotional life ultimately becomes a balancing act between wanting closeness and maintaining independence.

This master thesis takes these developments as a starting point to explore how university students interpret and reflect on their experiences in situationships. By looking at how they describe and make sense of emotional uncertainty, it seeks to understand what these experiences reveal about the changing meaning of intimacy in contemporary society. The following chapter presents the research question and aim that guide this investigation and outlines the theoretical and methodological foundations of the study.

2. Research Question and Aim of the Study

The thesis examines how university students experience and interpret *situationships*, a form of relationship that resembles conventional romantic relationships but lacks clear definition or commitment, particularly by one partner in the equation (Langlais et al. 2024). While the term has become familiar in public and media discussions, sociological research has only recently begun to examine how individuals themselves understand and navigate such ambiguous forms of intimacy.

The guiding question is:

How do university students interpret their experiences in situationships, particularly regarding unclear boundaries or expectations?

This study addresses a perspective that has thus far received little attention. Existing studies on contemporary intimacy have described the rise of flexible or non-committed relationships as part of a broader cultural change (Giddens 1991; Bauman 2003; Illouz 2012, 2019). However, these analyses regularly focus on structural explanations or cultural critique rather than on more individual assessments like Symbolic Interactionism, which reviews how individuals experience and interpret their relationships and actions through social interaction (Blumer 2013). Therefore, the focus in this study is shifted to focus on exploring how people *understand* relational uncertainty and how they reframe it into their lives.

There is a significant amount of literature on ambiguous relationship forms, like numerous studies on the concept of “friends with benefits” and “hookups”, many of which are concerned with definitions, prevalence (Olmstead et al. 2024) and broader outcomes like, emotional regulation and communication constraints (Knight 2014). They focus on how ambiguity is maintained through limited relational talk and different meanings attached to the same interactions (Knight 2024; Olmstead et al. 2024), something that is crucial in this study as well. Less of a focus is the subjective interpretive work that students themselves perform when narrating their situationships. Several studies have examined situationships in recent years (Choudhry et al. 2022; Deniega et al. 2024; Langlais et al. 2024; Langlais et al. 2025), but they remain at the descriptive level

and rarely trace how participants themselves reconstruct meaning and emotional understanding of their situationships.

As this is a relatively undeveloped area in research, closing this gap is vital for two reasons. First, this study brings into view the interpretive and emotional dimensions of intimacy that are commonly overlooked in large-scale or quantitative work. By centering on students' own narratives, it captures how they understand uncertainty, how they manage conflicting feelings of attachment and independence, and how they reframe ambiguous relational experiences as part of their personal development. This reveals the subtle and regularly hidden work that underlies emotional self-regulation and boundary management, offering insight into how individuals navigate the pressures and contradictions of modern intimacy.

Second, the research contributes to the sociological understanding of why such ambiguous relationships have become increasingly common and, in many cases, appealing. In a time when autonomy and independence are highly valued and emotional connection remains deeply desired (Giddens 1991; Bauman 2003), situationships appear to offer a compromise between freedom and closeness. They allow individuals to remain emotionally involved while avoiding the perceived constraints of traditional commitment. Illouz (2012) further argues that contemporary emotional life is shaped by ideals of control and self-management, which encourage individuals to approach love with caution and composure. Situationships illustrate this tendency in practice by showing how young adults balance vulnerability with self-protection and how they learn to align their emotions with expectations of autonomy. In this sense, this research can also open a discussion about the difficulties emerging adults face in navigating these new modern relationship forms that lack clear relationship scripts.

To address this gap, the study used an inductive qualitative narrative approach that centers on university students' own perspectives. Through narrative interviews, participants were encouraged to tell their stories in their own words and to reflect on how they understood and responded to emotional ambiguity in situationships. This approach aimed to explore how students construct, regulate, and interpret emotional uncertainty in situationships, and how these experiences are integrated into their life stories and future orientations. These orientations reflect distinct ways of explaining what unclear

boundaries and expectations meant for them. They show how they interpreted their own emotions, justified their actions, and drew lessons from these experiences.

Focusing on students in their twenties provided a particularly relevant context for this research. As Arnett (2000) describes, emerging adulthood is a period of exploration and transition in which personal freedom, instability, and self-definition play central roles. University students represent a big group in which these dynamics are visible, as the majority are in their twenties, experience constant shifting living arrangements and uncertain future prospects, which destabilize their current life stage. Within this environment, intimacy thrives without predefined roles or long-term expectations and is frequently negotiated alongside academic, social, and personal transitions (Arnett 2000). Situationships therefore offer an opportunity to study how emerging adults manage emotional uncertainty and construct meaning in relationship forms that mirror the openness and instability of their broader life circumstances.

Ultimately, this thesis aims to contribute to sociological understandings of intimacy and emotional life by showing how relational ambiguity is interpreted and emotionally managed. It highlights how students engage in emotion work to balance freedom and connection, and how visibility in digital environments shapes these experiences. By foregrounding the subjective, interpretive dimension of ambiguous relationships, the study offers insight into how university students learn to live, feel, and relate under the changing emotional conditions of contemporary society.

3. State of the Art

This chapter reviews current research on situationships and situates them within broader sociological and psychological debates on intimacy, youth, and social change. Since the term “*situationship*” has only recently entered academic discourse (Langlais et al. 2024), much of the existing research examines adjacent relational forms such as *friends-with-benefits*, *hookups*, and *on-off relationships*. While these relationship types are not identical, they do in fact share some key features, particularly ambiguity, lack of explicit commitment, and fluid boundaries. For this reason, the following chapter integrates

recent studies which explicitly analyze situationships with earlier work on comparable forms of undefined or semi-defined relationships. It is divided into six sections that move from conceptual clarification to social context, technological mediation, structural inequalities, and emotional consequences.

3.1 Definitions and Features of Situationships

Before examining situationships directly, it is useful to recall how romantic relationships are traditionally defined. *Romantic relationships*, like friendships, are ongoing and voluntary interactions that are mutually acknowledged by both partners rather than identified by only one person. What distinguishes them from other relational forms, like friendships and familial bonds, is their intensity, which is often expressed through emotional and physical affection, mutual commitment, and an expectation of sexual intimacy (Collins & Van Dulmen 2015, p.63). They are typically characterized by emotional closeness, stability, and exclusivity, creating a shared sense of belonging and continuity (Ruiner 2010, p.13-22). In most cases, partners are invested not only in each other's present lives but also in a shared future (Ruiner 2010, p.13-22). Mutual recognition, exclusivity, and predictability form the foundation against which newer, more fluid relationship forms can be compared.

Within this broader field of romantic and sexual relationships, *situationships* have gained increasing attention. Despite the fact that they resemble conventional romantic relationships through affection, companionship and even sexual intimacy, they differ by leaving boundaries, labels, and commitment deliberately undefined (Pushkar & Singh 2023; Langlais et al. 2024). In this way, situationships can be considered a relational form that challenges traditional expectations of exclusivity and long-term commitment by reflecting a broader cultural move toward flexibility and self-determination in intimacy.

To understand this difference more clearly, it is important to look at the concept of commitment. Commitment has long been considered as the key feature of romantic partnerships, expressing both the intention to stay together and the willingness to handle challenges as a couple (Kelley 1983 as cited in Dandurand et al. 2013). Traditional relationships are built on mutual investment, clear agreements, and a sense of reliability (see Lenz 2009, p.43; Ruiner 2010, p.13-22). Situationships include similar forms of

closeness, like shared routines and emotional and physical intimacy, but stop short of confirming a shared future. This absence of commitment is not accidental but central to how these relationships work. As a result, it allows partners to enjoy an emotional connection without taking on the expectations or obligations that usually come with commitment (Deniega et al. 2024; Langlais et al. 2024; Langlais et al. 2025).

Rusbult's Investment Model (1980) helps explain why this missing commitment matters. The model suggests that commitment depends on three main factors: how satisfied partners are, how attractive other options appear, and how much time or emotional energy they have already invested (Rusbult et al. 1998). A meta-analysis of primarily survey-based studies with 11,582 participants shows that satisfaction, perceived alternatives and investments are strong predictors of commitment, particularly in romantic relationships (Le & Agnew 2003). Extending this model to semi-defined relationships, survey research on friends-with-benefits arrangements among young adults in the United States shows that these mechanisms continue to predict commitment even when the relationship lacks a formal label (VanderDrift et al. 2012). Although these studies do not directly examine situationships, they indicate that commitment still plays a role, even if the relationship is undefined. People still weigh what they give and what they receive, even when there is no official label (Langlais et al 2025). As a result, situationships may feel emotionally significant while remaining unstable. Partners may invest time and emotions, but without mutual recognition of commitment, the relationship remains suspended between attachment and avoidance.

The growing use of the word *situationship* itself shows that this form of relationship has become socially visible (Choudhry et al. 2022). While the term appeared in popular culture, it has only recently entered academic discussion, meaning that empirical work remains limited and is largely concentrated in a small number of recent publications. As a result, the following section draws primarily on a limited set of mixed-methods studies, which currently provide the most systematic insights into this relationship form.

Situationships are described as an in-between position, where one is more emotionally and physically involved than just casually dating, but still avoiding explicit labels, clear boundaries or mutual commitment (Langlais et al. 2024, p. 1842). One of the few empirical studies that examines situationships in detail is a mixed-methods, exploratory

study with young adults in the United States, which combined semi-structured one-on-one Zoom interviews (n=28) with an online survey (n=261) focusing on recent relationship experiences. Participants described situationships using phrases such as “no label” “lack of clarity” and “not committed” with some participants referring to “special circumstances” like long-distance situations (p. 1842). Many reported introducing their situationship partners to friends or family but avoided public acknowledgment on social media, showing that these relationships can appear legitimate yet remain undefined (p. 1843). The absence of a label was not seen as temporary but as part of how the relationship worked. Langlais et al. (2024) also noted that situationships commonly follow a recognizable pattern. They usually begin informally, through shared social spaces, friendship networks, or online encounters, rather than through traditional dating rituals (p. 1843). They are sustained by texting, socializing, and sexual contact, while conversations about the future are typically avoided (pp. 1845-1847). Endings regularly involve ghosting or quiet withdrawal instead of open discussion, usually because one partner does not want a long-term commitment while the other does (p. 1848). Although participants described their experiences as emotionally meaningful, they also reported lower satisfaction, weaker communication, and less stability (Langlais et al. 2024, p. 1851).

Building on these findings, Langlais et al. (2025) further investigated why young adults remain in situationships at all. Using a mixed-methods design, the authors found that participants tended to stay when they felt emotionally invested, when communication about the future existed, and when they or their partners prioritized the relationship. Additionally, effort, trust, and fulfillment of emotional needs were also linked to higher satisfaction and commitment. The study concludes that people maintain situationships because these experiences can still provide emotional rewards and a sense of stability, even without formal commitment (Langlais et al. 2025, p.2962).

In summary, the currently available empirical literature suggests that situationships are best understood as a distinct form of romantic relationship that relies on closeness and shared experience while resisting traditional values of commitment and sometimes exclusivity (Langlais et al. 2024). Ambiguity is therefore not a side effect but the defining characteristic that differentiates them from committed partnerships. Since this

uncertainty shapes how these relationships function and are experienced, the next chapter explores how it can operate as a relational strategy and how young adults maintain it in everyday life.

3.2 Ambiguity as a Relationship Strategy

According to Deener (2017), ambiguity creates space for multiple interpretations of meaning and allows each person to navigate intimacy on their own terms. Thus, in intimate relationships ambiguity can be conceptualized as a relational condition in which meanings, expectations and boundaries remain open to interpretation, allowing partners to sustain intimacy while pushing aside key aspects of the relationship.

Building on this understanding, ambiguity can also be approached as something that is actively produced and maintained. Drawing on qualitative research on hookups in the United States, Currier (2013) introduces “strategic ambiguity” in the sociological context to describe the intentional use of vagueness as an impression-management strategy. In her analysis of hookups, ambiguous language is used deliberately to protect social identity, preserve autonomy and avoid the social consequences of defining intimate encounters (Currier 2013, p.705, 722). Ambiguity thus serves a functional role which allows individuals to remain flexible, while also managing how their relationships are perceived. On a similar note, Stanley et al. (2010) argue that maintaining ambiguity can even be perceived as practical, as it allows individuals to sustain their intimacy while avoiding the emotional risks associated with explicit commitment. From this perspective, ambiguity can function as a deliberate strategy through which closeness is managed, decisions are postponed and emotional exposure is limited (Stanley et al. 2010, pp. 238-242). Instead of being a passive state, it can be actively used to test compatibility, postpone decisions, or keep one’s options open.

If ambiguity is treated as a relational strategy, then the focus shifts to how such vagueness is enacted and recognized in everyday relationship practices. Empirical research. An U.S.-based study by Olmstead et al. (2024), which draws on participant-led accounts from emerging adults aged approximately 18 to 29, including a large sample of college-attending and non- college participants (N = 701), shows that ambiguity is sustained through routine interaction rather than explicit agreement. The authors found

that terms such as “hooking up”, are used purposefully to remain ambiguous, as it allows individuals to attach different meanings to the same behaviors. Everyday gestures such as meeting repeatedly, spending time together, or communicating frequently may signal commitment for one person, while remaining casual for the other (Olmstead et al. 2024, p.2721). Most participants defined “hooking up” as a connection with no commitment, no labels, and no emotional expectations (p. 2718). While this vagueness enables flexibility and autonomy, it also creates space for misunderstanding when partners interpret the same interaction differently (Olmstead et al. 2024, p.2723). These findings underline that ambiguity is not accidental but socially functional and shapes both communication and emotional experiences.

However, when expectations remain undefined, feelings can flourish in uncertain and unexpected ways, as they frequently develop before individuals can consciously decide what to do with them. This is described as “catching feelings” an experience in which attraction can emerge unexpectedly, creating a state of emotional intensity without clear direction (LeFebvre & Carmack 2020, pp. 155-157). Although individuals may recognize that their emotions have changed, they often choose not to act on this awareness, thus leaving the connection suspended between friendship and partnership. This delay offers protection from rejection and keeps the relationship open to multiple outcomes (p.156). Importantly, LeFebvre and Carmack (2020) note that this process can result in a *situationship*: the stage in which feelings have developed, and the emotional meaning of the connection has shifted, but the relationship remains unacknowledged or undefined (LeFebvre & Carmack 2020, p.155). In this sense, “catching feelings” is not only an emotional experience but a relational turning point that turns ambiguity into a recognizable form of connection. It shows that uncertainty can be actively used to manage attraction, test compatibility, and delay the moment when intentions must be declared.

Moreover, this use of uncertainty is not limited to situationships alone, as research on similar relational forms confirms that ambiguity is often maintained deliberately rather than by accident. This is particularly the case in the stage known as “just talking,” a pre-dating phase that functions as an intentional middle ground between friendship and formal dating (Sibley et al. 2024, p.276). This stage allows individuals to explore potential

partners, share emotional closeness, and even experiment with intimacy, all while avoiding the obligations tied to official partnership. Ambiguity in this phase serves several functions: it protects against rejection, helps manage expectations, and reduces pressure to define or publicize the relationship (Sibley et al. 2024, pp. 259-261). At the same time, the same openness that makes this stage appealing also creates insecurities as partners may struggle to determine whether the other is equally invested or involved with others (Sibley et al. 2024, p.272). As a result, ambiguity works both as a safeguard and as a source of tension, reflecting how young adults try to balance freedom with emotional connection.

Furthermore, whether such ambiguity is maintained or resolved is closely linked to individuals' readiness for commitment. Research on relationship formation indicates that people's willingness to define their relationships depends on whether they feel emotionally or practically prepared for long-term involvement (Hadden et al. 2018, pp. 1248-1249). When one partner views themselves as "not ready," the avoidance of commitment becomes a protective measure rather than a sign of indifference. However, such an attitude can create unequal dynamics, as the person maintaining ambiguity preserves autonomy, while the other remains in uncertainty. Such asymmetry mirrors many situationships, where one partner's caution coexists with the other's need for clarity. When one person feels unsure about defining the relationship, difficult topics are mostly postponed or avoided altogether. Instead of addressing expectations directly, they may rely on subtle cues or silence to maintain the fragile balance of the connection.

Communication, therefore, becomes a key mechanism through which ambiguity is sustained. Uncertainty mainly persists not because people are unwilling to talk, but because they carefully manage what can be said without disrupting the relationship's informal tone (Knight 2014). Even when honesty and openness are valued, conversations about boundaries or commitment are considered uncomfortable or risky. Such "*communicative dilemmas*", that have been observed in casual and ambiguous relationships, have revealed that individuals would rather choose to preserve harmony than seek clarity (Knight 2014, pp. 273-276). In situationships, this silence becomes part of the relationship's structure, like an unspoken rule that maintains connection while leaving its meaning unresolved.

Overall, ambiguity emerges as an intentional and functional element of modern intimacy. It allows individuals to experience closeness while keeping emotional distance, so they can maintain connection without fully committing and to explore relationships at their own pace. Nevertheless, this strategy also produces tension: the same flexibility that protects against vulnerability can also generate confusion, insecurity, and imbalance. As a result, ambiguity is not a flaw in situationships but rather their defining feature, serving as a means of managing intimacy under conditions of uncertainty. The following chapter explores why this relational strategy is especially common among university students, situating it within the broader social and developmental framework of emerging adulthood.

3.3 Emerging Adulthood

The concept of *emerging adulthood* provides a useful framework for understanding why situationships have become so widespread among university students. This life stage, usually between the ages of 18 and 25, is marked by identity exploration, instability, and a sense of being “in between” adolescence and adulthood (Arnett 2000, p. 469). During this time, young people typically postpone traditional milestones such as marriage, cohabitation or stable employment, focusing instead on education, self-development, and independence (Arnett 2000, p. 474). Since their lives are still in transition, their relationships tend to mirror this same fluidity and openness. As such, intimacy is approached as something to be explored rather than finalized, reflecting a bigger uncertainty about the future and one’s place within it (Arnett 2000, pp. 473-476).

Importantly, this fluidity is not solely rooted in individual development but reflects a broader cultural shift in how intimacy is structured. In previous generations, shared social scripts, such as “going steady”, provided clear markers on how to progress from dating to commitment (Stanley et al. 2010, p.239). These traditions would guide the development of relationships and help signal when a bond became serious. As these conventions have weakened, young adults are increasingly required to define the meaning, boundaries and expectations of their relationships themselves. This shift has been described as an “age of ambiguity”, in which distinctions between dating, cohabitation and committed partnership have become blurred (Stanley et al. 2010, pp. 238-242). From this point of view, ambiguity is not accidental but motivated by a desire

for safety and control, as clarity can expose people to the risk of rejection or loss, which makes uncertainty feel more manageable and less threatening. Many young adults have also witnessed high rates of divorce and family instability, which can reduce confidence in long-term commitment and make flexible arrangements seem more secure (Stanley et al. 2010, pp. 240-241). In this sense, maintaining ambiguous definitions of a relationship allows individuals to enjoy intimacy while avoiding the pressure or vulnerability that comes with making it official. As such, ambiguity can also hide potential differences between partners, since it allows relationships to continue smoothly by avoiding conflict over expectations or values (Stanley et al. 2010, p. 241). However, even though ambiguity may help preserve comfort and connection in the short term, it can create problems when partners eventually need clarity to move forward (Stanley et al. 2010, p. 242). Still, for many emerging adults, maintaining ambiguity provides a practical method to balance intimacy and independence amid the unpredictable circumstances of their transitional life stage.

Under these circumstances, orientations toward intimacy and commitment become socially patterned, making generational differences a useful lens for understanding such a contemporary relationship form. A comparative study by Khatri et al. (2024), based on a qualitative survey of 245 young adults in Jaipur, predominantly with members of Generation Z, shows clear differences between Millennials and Generation Z in their orientations toward relationships and commitment. While Millennials were more likely to idealize long-term stability, members of Generation Z tended to prioritize autonomy, self-discovery, and emotional independence (Khatri et al. 2024, p. 1243). This difference was linked to structural factors such as prolonged education, economic insecurity, and the influence of digital technologies (Khatri et al. 2024, p. 1239). As a result, flexible arrangements like situationships fit well within Generation Z's everyday lives, since they allow intimacy without compromising personal freedom. In this sense, the popularity of such relationships is not only a reflection of changing values but also a response to the uncertain social conditions in which young adults are growing up. This raises the question of how young adults manage the tension between autonomy and attachment differently within the same generational context. To answer this question, Jorgensen and Nelson (2018) identified several recurring social orientations among emerging adults that

capture these variations. The findings show that some individuals tend to move *toward* others, emphasizing emotional closeness and approval-seeking, while others orient away from others, prioritizing independence and self-protection (Jorgensen & Nelson, pp. 73-75). These orientations are not fixed personality types but fluid patterns that shift across social situations and depend on the current emotional needs of the person. The same individual may seek connection in one situation and distance in another, reflecting how ambivalence toward intimacy is an inherent feature of emerging adulthood itself (Jorgensen & Nelson 2018). Situationships seem to accommodate this dynamic particularly well, as they offer the emotional security of companionship without the constraints of formal commitment.

Seen together, these perspectives show that situationships fit naturally into the conditions of emerging adulthood. Delayed commitment, weakened cultural scripts, and heightened concern for independence all encourage relational forms that remain open-ended and reversible. For university students, engaging in situationships can be seen not simply as an expression of personal hesitation but as a way of managing uncertainty during a time when nearly every aspect of life; education, work, and identity ultimately remain ambiguous.

In today's generation, these developmental and cultural patterns are also closely tied to technological change. Digital platforms not only reflect the values of autonomy and flexibility but also actively shape how young adults meet, communicate, and maintain their relationships. The next section therefore examines how online environments and dating apps contribute to the normalization of situationships and make relational uncertainty easier to sustain.

3.4 Technology and the Normalization of Situationships

Situationships cannot be fully understood without considering the technological shifts that shape intimacy in student lives today. Digital platforms and dating apps have not only expanded possibilities for connection, but have also helped normalize ambiguity as an accepted feature of dating. Rather than just facilitating interaction, these technologies actively structure how relationships can be initiated, maintained and interpreted. By

making relationships easier to initiate and sustain without formal definition, they turn uncertainty into an ordinary and even expected feature of modern intimacy.

Digital media does not merely increase opportunities for connection, it also reshapes the interactional conditions under which intimacy unfolds. Continuous access through texting, social media, and messaging apps allows people to stay in contact without requiring effort or emotional commitment. Communication becomes frequent yet low-stakes (Sibley et al. 2024, p.266), giving the impression of closeness while avoiding the expectations of traditional dating. The nature of online interaction further reduces the pressure of face-to-face encounters, making it possible to “test the waters” without exposing vulnerability (Sibley et al. 2024, p. 269). Through curated profiles, selective self-presentation and controlled disclosure, intimacy becomes carefully managed (Sibley et al. 2024, p. 267). Because social platforms also widen the pool of possible partners, individuals can maintain several conversations at once, keeping multiple options open without social penalty (Sibley et al. 2024, p. 265). This creates a communication environment where constant attention does not require commitment, making low effort engagement feel normal. Thus, ambiguity becomes a practical and even strategic feature of digital dating, allowing connection to continue while keeping commitment and exclusivity open.

The abundance of choice offered by dating apps further reinforces this logic. Hobbs et al. (2017) observe that dating apps foster a sense of limitless possibility that makes detachment easier and commitment less urgent. In their mixed-methods study with Australian dating-app users, combining survey data from 365 participants and six in-depth interviews, the authors found that dating apps have created a new “network of intimacy”. This network expands romantic possibilities by enabling ongoing flirting, courtship, and partner search, while simultaneously increasing both opportunities for connections and anxieties around intimacy, self-presentation and emotional risk (Hobbs et al. 2017, p. 282). Rather than destroying ideals such as love or monogamy, this environment extends them into a context of constant availability and personal choice. This same abundance of choice also encourages detachment and strategic behavior, as individuals present themselves as desirable commodities within a competitive marketplace of options. Some participants described the experience as empowering,

while others felt reduced to profiles and images (Hobbs et al. 2017, pp. 281-282), revealing how the pursuit of connection is increasingly shaped by efficiency and visibility rather than mutual commitment.

As these app-based practices become routine, ambiguity and non-commitment are increasingly treated as normal features of dating rather than problems to be resolved. Individuals learn to navigate ambiguity as an expected part of online dating, initially framing digital platforms as playful or experimental spaces that allow attraction to be explored without any risk (Hanson 2021, p.88) . Later on, however, they come to see them as legitimate spaces for forming connections, while continuing to rely on humor and irony to manage the stigma of using them (Hanson 2021, p.88). This tension blurs the boundary between fun and sincerity, creating uncertainty about what others intend. Because every message can be interpreted in multiple ways, misunderstandings and ghosting become routine parts of interaction (Hanson 2021, p.89). Importantly, gendered patterns emerge in how ambiguity is navigated, with men more often engaging casually and women investing greater emotional and interpretive labor while also having concerns about safety and misinterpretation (Hanson 2021, pp.89-91). The same digital affordances that allow freedom and experimentation therefore reproduce asymmetrical forms of risk and responsibility. In this sense, the normalization of ambiguity not only sustains uncertainty but also reinforces existing gender hierarchies in digital intimacy.

These dynamics are further complicated by the diversity of motives that bring young adults to dating apps in the first place. Individuals use these platforms for a wide range of reasons, including seeking love, casual sex, maintaining easy contact, validating their self-worth, looking for excitement, or simply joining in on a trend (Sumter et al. 2017, p. 73). Because these motives coexist on the same platforms, individuals often enter interactions with very different expectations. One person may search for validation or distraction, while another hopes for something enduring. Such mismatches reinforce relational ambiguity, as partners hesitate to articulate intentions that might disrupt the interaction. Situationships emerge within this context as a relational form that allows connection to persist despite unclear goals and uneven investment.

Digital technologies have thus reshaped how young adults form and maintain relationships, but they have not done so equally for everyone. As mentioned by Hanson (2021), the same platforms that make intimacy more accessible also reproduce existing social patterns, influencing who feels more empowered in these uncertain relationship forms. The next chapter therefore turns to the question of power and inequality, asking how gender and social position shape who gets to navigate uncertainty on their own terms and who is left waiting for definition.

3.5 Gender, Power, and Inequality in Situationships

Ambiguous relationship forms are often framed as offering freedom from traditional expectations, yet research shows that they tend to reproduce familiar patterns of gender and power. The absence of clear expectations can create the appearance of mutual freedom, but in practice it conceals uneven involvement. When one partner avoids defining the relationship, they gain more control over its pace and limits, while the other person remains exposed to uncertainty and emotional strain. Rather than neutralizing power differences, unspoken arrangements often benefit the partner who is less emotionally invested, allowing detachment to function as an advantage (Stanley et al. 2010, p. 242).

These unequal experiences are not random but closely tied to gendered expectations around intimacy and care, as they reflect enduring norms that link masculinity with independence and femininity with care. Across research on casual and semi-defined relationships, men tend to describe ambiguous arrangements as opportunities for sexual freedom or autonomy, whereas women more often frame them in emotional terms, such as seeking connection or the possibility of a relationship (Lehmiller et al. 2010, pp. 281-282; Owen & Fincham 2011, p.318; Weitbrecht & Whitton 2020, pp. 10-11). As Weitbrecht and Whitton (2020) further argue, women are more likely than men to pursue casual sexual encounters with the hope that an emotional bond may develop, partly because gendered social norms continue to frame emotional intimacy as a more socially acceptable motivation for women than for men (Regan & Dreyer 1999; Currier 2013; Lovejoy 2015, as cited in Weitbrecht & Whitton 2020).

This asymmetry extends beyond just interactional arrangements into the emotional experience of individuals. Evidence from a survey-based study with heterosexual college students in the United States shows that non-committal sexual encounters are experienced differently by women and men. Drawing on responses from 221 students at a midsized U.S. university, Bradshaw et al. (2010) found that men more often expressed concern about losing independence if a casual connection became too serious, while women more frequently feared becoming emotionally attached to someone who would not reciprocate their feelings (Bradshaw et al. 2010, p. 668). These opposing concerns create an imbalance in which restraint and avoidance protect one side, whereas openness exposes the other. Emotional distance functions as a subtle means of control that determines when intimacy begins and when it is withdrawn and is therefore not simply a personal preference but a socially valued form of self-protection that reinforces existing power differences.

In conclusion, ambiguous relationships may appear to suspend traditional relational norms, but they usually reconfigure them instead. They benefit those able to remain emotionally detached while assigning emotional labor to those seeking connection. In this way, the cultural ideal of autonomy continues to outweigh that of mutual recognition, and emotional distance becomes a quiet expression of power. In the next chapter, the effects of this unequal imbalance will be portrayed more clearly.

3.6 Effects of Situationships

While situationships may initially feel low-risk, research consistently finds that these ambiguous relationship forms can become exhausting when uncertainty is prolonged over a longer period of time. The appeal of these arrangements often lies in their promise of intimacy without the obligations of commitment, which allows individuals to balance closeness and independence (Deniega et al. 2024, p.75). However, when expectations remain unclear or begin to diverge, the lack of open communication and undefined boundaries result in feelings of insecurity, loneliness, and emotional exhaustion (as cited in Deniega et al., 2024, p. 75). Accordingly, situationships are then viewed as temporary arrangements that typically last only a few months, since prolonged uncertainty becomes emotionally draining and difficult to sustain (Deniega et al. 2024, p.76). These

findings suggest that while situationships may initially feel liberating, they frequently undermine the well-being of the individuals when it persists over time.

The emotional strain associated with such instability can be better understood by looking at broader research on relationship quality and psychological well-being in emerging adulthood. In their quantitative study with 268 Italian emerging adults, all involved in heterosexual romantic relationships, Graziano et al. (2024) have found that high levels of conflict and low intimacy were associated with greater depressive symptoms, both directly and indirectly through lower relationship and identity satisfaction (Graziano et al. 2024, p. 7). These findings indicate that unstable relationships weaken emotional security and the sense of self that forms through mutual recognition. When applied to situationships, this suggests that ongoing uncertainty weakens the trust in one's own feelings and undermines self-confidence, turning temporary ambiguity into long-term emotional fatigue. This pattern mirrors what other relationship studies describe as *relational cycling*, which is seen as the process of repeatedly breaking up and reconciling with the same partner and results in increased relationship instability and thus lower levels of commitment, satisfaction, and effort to maintain the relationship (see Dailey 2016, 2019). As such, the instability of situationships does not only create freedom but also strengthens dependence. The inconsistency of a partner does not only lead to temporary distress, it also makes individuals repeatedly question their partner's actions on an everyday basis, which consequently leads to ongoing frustration, rumination, and preoccupation with uncertainty that can interfere with academic focus and even professional goals (Pushkar & Singh 2023, p.105).

Moreover, similar effects have been documented in research on other ambiguous relationship forms. A study on friends-with-benefits arrangements shows that such relationships are frequently accompanied by mixed emotional experiences, with women in particular reporting higher levels of psychological distress and stronger negative emotional reactions than men (Owen & Fincham 2011, pp. 316-317). These reactions were linked to what the authors call constraint commitment, which is a sense of being emotionally invested or "stuck" in the relationship, despite recognizing that the relationship would not lead to commitment (Owen & Fincham 2011, p.318). This combination of distress and perceived constraint suggests that emotional strain can

keep individuals tied to unstable relationships, even when they recognize their limitations.

In addition to psychological effects, relational consequences further reveal the destabilizing character of situationships. Due to their unstable characteristic, situationships often do not end through mutual agreement but rather fade through avoidance. Slow withdrawal, silence, and ghosting emerge here as typical practices of disengaging, allowing situationships to dissolve without confrontation (Langlais et al. 2024, pp. 1848-1849). Even in cases where strong emotional intimacy is experienced, overall satisfaction and perceived stability in situationships remain significantly lower than in conventional relationships (Langlais et al. 2024, pp. 1849-1850). This imbalance between closeness and recognition suggests that emotional connection alone cannot provide security when boundaries and expectations are undefined. Over time, repeated experiences of avoidance and non-communication may also undermine the development of trust and openness in future relationships, leaving long-term effects on how individuals approach intimacy.

Overall, the research reviewed in these chapters has shown that situationships reflect wider cultural transformations in intimacy, where autonomy and emotional restraint are more valued over openness and mutual recognition. Yet, much is unknown about how individuals themselves interpret and emotionally manage these experiences. The following chapter therefore develops the theoretical framework of this study, drawing on Symbolic Interactionism and the Sociology of Emotions to explain how people negotiate, interpret and learn from these uncertain relational bonds.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer 2013)

Blumer (2013) draws on the theoretical foundations of symbolic interactionism, which views human action, the self, and society as outcomes of ongoing social processes (see Blumer 2013). This perspective offers a useful framework for understanding how university students interpret their experiences in situationships, particularly when boundaries and expectations remain unclear. These relationship forms involve constant

interpretation of words, gestures, and silences, which makes symbolic interactionism an appropriate lens for examining how individuals define ambiguous situations, negotiate shared understandings, and adjust their behavior in response to one another.

Blumer (2013) explains that people's actions are guided by the meanings they attach to things rather than by external conditions alone (Blumer 2013, p. 64). These meanings are not fixed properties of objects or situations but are created and revised through interaction as people interpret what they encounter and adapt their behavior accordingly. The individual and society are deeply intertwined because shared norms and symbols provide orientation for interpretation, while personal definitions can gradually reshape collective understandings (Blumer 2013, p. 64). Accordingly, Blumer (2013) defined an "object" broadly to include physical things (such as a tree), social objects (such as another person), and abstract objects (such as moral values or ideas) (p. 75). People act towards all these "objects" according to the meanings they attach to them and as meanings evolve through new experiences, behavior changes as well. Since meanings are continuously created and revised, interaction becomes the key process through which they take form and are sustained in everyday life.

In Blumer's (2013) view, interaction is seen as the foundation of social life. Groups and societies arise through collective action, and interaction is therefore the process that sustains them. In every encounter, individuals then interpret one another's gestures and adjust their conduct accordingly (see Blumer 2013, p. 70). Meaning is negotiated through these exchanges, particularly through symbols that signal how an act should be understood. Gestures and words function as cues that suggest the intention behind an action and the response it invites. A clenched fist may indicate aggression, while a smile can convey sympathy, amusement or discomfort, depending on the context (Blumer 2013, p. 73). Language then holds a special role as it enables people to express complex meanings and clarify their intentions. To maintain coordination in such exchanges, individuals must be able to imagine how their actions appear to others. Blumer (2013) described this capacity as "taking the role of the other," referring to the ability to reflect on possible reactions and modify one's behavior in anticipation of them (Blumer 2013, p. 73). Misunderstandings and tension may occur when interpretations fail to align, yet even these moments are part of the ongoing interpretive process through which meaning

evolves. Social life, thus, depends on this continuous effort to read, to anticipate, and to respond to other people's perspectives.

Interaction, however, is not limited to communication between people. It also occurs within oneself, wherein individuals refer to objects, situations or feelings in their own mind, interpret their significance and decide how to act in response (Blumer 2013, pp. 77-78). Through this internal dialogue, people evaluate feelings, intentions, and possible actions. The self is not static but develops through ongoing reflection and experience (p. 79). What matters is not the objective condition of a situation but the meanings through which it is understood and acted upon.

This understanding of interaction is essential for the present research, as it highlights how any relationship form can take shape through ongoing interpretation rather than predefined roles. In situationships, where expectations and boundaries can often be unclear, meaning must be constantly negotiated between the two parties involved. With every gesture, text, or silence students reinterpret their connection, adjusting both their behavior toward the other person and the meaning they assign to the situationship. Applying Blumer's (2013) perspective makes it possible to analyze how students read one another's behavior, anticipate responses, and attempt to align their own actions accordingly. It also reveals how misunderstandings or unspoken assumptions can generate uncertainty, making interaction itself both the source of connection and of ambiguity.

To do this, it is first important to take methodological consequences into account. If social reality is constructed through interpretation, then researchers must examine how people themselves define and understand their experiences. Blumer (2013) emphasized that the researcher should not impose their own meanings onto the researched subjects, since this would risk obscuring how meaning actually developed. Understanding social life requires taking the standpoint of the actor and reconstructing how the situation was interpreted by them. For this, a clear reconstruction by the actor is necessary (Blumer 2013, pp. 127-128). Accordingly, this approach calls for close attention to participants' own definitions and a continual awareness of the researcher's interpretive position. From this perspective, behavior should be viewed as a response that arises from definition and interpretation rather than from external causation. Two individuals may experience

similar circumstances yet act differently depending on how they interpret them (Blumer 2013, pp. 129-130). The task of sociological research is to trace these interpretive processes and to understand how they shape the meanings people attach to their actions (Blumer 2013, pp. 132-133).

This principle also guides the present study and provides both its theoretical and methodological foundation. It explains how meanings of intimacy, boundaries, and expectations are created through communication and self-reflection and how these meanings guide behavior in relationships that lack clear definitions. Building on this interactionist view, the next section expands the perspective by focusing on how emotions and cultural frameworks shape these interpretations. Drawing on Hochschild's (2012) concept of "feeling rules" and Illouz's (2012, 2019) analysis of intimacy under capitalism, it explores how emotional life has become socially organized, commercialized, and increasingly uncertain.

4.2 The Social Construction of Emotion and Intimacy (Hochschild (2012) & Illouz (2012, 2019))

Symbolic interactionism provides a useful starting point for understanding emotions, since feelings are also shaped through interpretation and social exchange (Shott 1979). Emotions develop in relation to others through processes of interpretation, imitation, and feedback, which teach individuals how to experience and express feelings in ways that match collective expectations. As such, the social environment influences how feelings are understood and managed, but does not fully dictate emotional responses (see Shott 1979, p.1320). Emotions then follow the same interpretive process as all human action. They arise when individuals define a situation, assess its significance, and act according to that definition. Since meanings shift as experiences change, emotions remain fluid and context-dependent rather than fixed. This flexibility links emotional life directly to the core idea of symbolic interactionism, which sees all human conduct as interpretive and responsive to shared definitions of reality (Blumer 2013).

Building on this view, Hochschild (2012) developed a sociology of emotion that connects individual experience to broader social organization. She argued that every culture contains implicit *feeling rules* that tell people which emotions are appropriate to feel,

how intensely they should be felt, and toward whom they may be expressed (p. 70). These rules become visible when there is a conflict between what one actually feels and what one believes one should feel. They are not learned formally but are absorbed through social interactions, where approval, correction, or silence all signal how well emotions fit the situational context and demand. Everyday interactions can act as reminders of these rules; for example, a friend's reassurance, a joking remark, or even silence can indicate that one's feelings do not align with social expectations (Hochschild 2012, pp. 69-71).

Hochschild (2012) maintains that these rules are not evenly distributed but vary across social groups. In many Western, middle-class contexts, women are expected to manage emotions more carefully than men, habitually showing empathy and calmness while suppressing anger or frustration (p. 70). Adjusting emotions to these norms requires *emotion work*, a process in which people actively manage either the expression or the experience of feelings in order to conform to what is socially appropriate (Hochschild 2012, p. 51). Emotion work can involve changing one's outward display (*surface acting*) or one's inner emotional state (*deep acting*) (Hochschild 2012, pp. 50-52). Through these efforts, individuals maintain social harmony and reproduce the moral order of everyday life. This is especially important, as the regulation of emotion has become increasingly commercialized through capitalist societies. Hochschild (2012) took the service industry as an example, wherein the friendliness and conformity of the staff are part of the product being sold (Hochschild 2012, pp.3-9). Emotional management therefore sustains not only personal relationships but also institutional and economic systems. It reveals how cultural norms shape the way people feel and how this, in turn, supports broader social arrangements.

These insights help explain how students in situationships navigate emotional ambiguity. When boundaries and expectations are uncertain, individuals still rely on cultural rules that dictate what kinds of emotions are acceptable. Many of them hold back affection, hide disappointment, or downplay jealousy to avoid appearing too attached. Even without formal relationship scripts, they follow the unspoken rule that one should remain composed and in control, showing that social expectations about emotional restraint persist even in relationships that claim to reject convention (Hochschild 2012, pp. 69-71).

While Hochschild (2012) examined how emotions are managed in face-to-face interaction, Illouz (2019, pp. 221-223) expanded this logic to the wider cultural and economic conditions that shape intimacy. She argued that love and emotional life have become intertwined with capitalist rationality, forming what she called the *emotional economy* of late modernity (p. 222). In this system, people approach relationships through the same logic that guides consumer choice, through evaluating, comparing, and protecting their own emotional value. Intimacy becomes a field of strategic decision-making in which emotions are managed like investments. Illouz (2019) described this cultural condition as *scopic capitalism*, a social order structured by visibility, performance, and competition (Illouz 2019, p. 222). Digital technologies intensify these dynamics by turning encounters into exchanges of attention and validation, where emotional worth is measured by visibility and response (Illouz 2019, pp. 223-225). These processes reshape how people perceive themselves and others, producing a climate of self-presentation in which emotions are both performed and evaluated. Within these conditions, Illouz (2019, p. 94) identified *negative relationships*, connections characterized by uncertainty, fluid boundaries, and reluctance to commit, which mirror dominant ideals of autonomy and self-protection while generating instability and insecurity in attachment.

Illouz (2019, p. 78) argued that as traditional dating scripts erode, individuals experience what she termed *frame confusion*, a situation in which they cannot easily distinguish between casual and serious encounters. Sexual intimacy typically occurs before emotional meaning is clarified, leaving people unsure of how to interpret their experiences. This reversal makes emotional openness appear risky, while emotional restraint feels safer and more socially acceptable (Illouz 2019, pp. 78-80). In such a culture, independence and control are moral ideals, while vulnerability is seen as a sign of weakness. The modern *romantic self* is thus flexible and self-reliant but struggles to form secure attachments, finding stability elusive in a world that prizes freedom over commitment (Illouz 2019, pp. 242-246).

Illouz's (2019) framework situates personal feelings within the broader structures of capitalism and modern culture. The emphasis on autonomy, comparison, and choice does not simply change how people behave; it alters how they understand what love,

intimacy, and emotional investment mean in the first place (Illouz 2019, pp. 221-226). When emotions are interpreted through a market logic, relationships themselves become contingent and temporary, valued for the experiences they offer rather than the bonds they create.

The narratives of the students in this study reflect precisely these dynamics. Their hesitation, restraint, and fear of being “too invested” mirror the emotional scripts that both Hochschild (2012) and Illouz (2012, 2019) describe. Situationships, with their openness and lack of definition, are not free of structure but embody the same cultural logic that privileges control, freedom, and flexibility over commitment and emotional risk (Hochschild 2012; Illouz 2019).

These theories show that emotions are socially and culturally organized systems of meaning rather than spontaneous impulses (Shott 1979; Hochschild 2012; Illouz 2019). They demonstrate that emotional life is regulated by norms, shaped by economic and technological forces, and embedded in broader cultural ideals of autonomy and self-protection. Seeing emotions in this way allows this study to understand how young adults interpret their experiences in situationships, how they manage uncertainty, and how their emotional behavior reflects the wider structures of late modern intimacy (Hochschild 2012; Illouz 2019).

5. Methods

This research is situated within an interpretivist research approach and guided by the theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism. From this perspective, social reality is seen as something people create together through interaction and shared meaning (Blumer 2013). Experiences such as situationships are therefore not fixed or objective facts, but are shaped through interaction, which includes the process of communication, negotiation, and constant interpretation.

Within this framework, the narrative approach offered both a methodological orientation and a concrete method for collecting and analyzing data. The narrative interview focuses on how people construct and communicate their experiences in the form of storytelling, which reveals their interpretive framework of emotional and relational events (Schütze et

al. 2016). In this sense, the interviews in this study were not just accounts of what happened, but reconstructions of how participants interpreted their own relational experiences. A total of fifteen narrative interviews were conducted with university students in their twenties who met the inclusion criteria of having experienced at least one situationship in the past three years.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, using social media platforms, and recruitment flyers placed across university campuses and student hot spots in Vienna. Specifically, some of the hotspots were the university libraries/hallways and their pinboards, popular cafés near the Votivkirche and the University of Vienna (Café Votiv, Café Français, Weltcafé, CoffeePirates), the Unihof Campus Wien, the Uni Wien Mensa, the WU Campus and student spaces on site, the WKW FH Campus, the TU Campus and nearby pubs/bars (Trinity Pub, Four Bells Pub, Roxy Club) that students frequent. The aim was to reach students with diverse situationship histories while maintaining a shared generational context. The data was analyzed using Schütze et al.'s (2016) model of narrative analysis, consisting of formal text analysis, structural content description, analytical abstraction, and knowledge analysis. Each stage of the process was guided by the principle of remaining as close as possible to participants' perspectives and tracing how meaning was constructed within their narratives.

The following chapters outline each step of this process in more detail, describing how participants were selected, how the interviews were conducted, and how the data was collected and examined.

5.2 Data Collection

Field Access

The process of gaining access to the field and collecting data was guided by the interpretivist and symbolic-interactionist orientation of the study. The research aimed to provide a setting in which participants could narrate their experiences freely and in their own words, so as to understand how young adults interpret and learn from unclear boundaries and expectations in their situationships.

Data was collected through narrative interviews with university students aged between 20 and 29, who had experienced a situationship in the past three years. This age group

was chosen, as their relationship practices are shaped by digital media, changing social expectations, and a generally greater openness towards non-traditional forms of intimacy (Khatri et al. 2024). Interviewing them made it possible to explore how new ways of relating and defining closeness are developing in a generation for whom ambiguity can feel familiar rather than unusual.

Recruitment took place in several overlapping contexts that reflected this environment. Flyers were distributed in the university cafés, libraries, and various communal areas that were mentioned above, where students regularly spend time between or after classes and social activities. In particular, university buildings with designated study spaces, meeting areas, and shared facilities were targeted. Bulletin boards and established notice spaces were used wherever possible, including those in the building hallways and restrooms, as these sites are routinely accessed by students. In addition, short recruitment texts were shared on digital platforms such as student groups on WhatsApp and Instagram stories. These channels were chosen to complement in-person recruitment by increasing the visibility of the study beyond just the physical campus spaces. Combining in-person and online recruitment helped reduce reliance on a single access point and expanded the pool of potential participants beyond the vicinity of the flyer locations. While flyers in physical spaces appealed to those more active in their university life and were more present on campus, digital recruitment captured students who engage primarily through online networks and might not regularly visit their campus on-site. This combination reflected the hybrid social environment in which many situationships begin and unfold, making it especially well-suited for this research.

The recruitment materials were designed to speak directly to the intended group and to ensure that only participants matching the study's focus took part. To be eligible, participants had to be between 20 and 29 years old and have experienced at least one situationship as either ongoing or which has occurred within the past three years. This time frame was chosen to ensure that the experience was recent enough to be recalled in detail, while allowing enough emotional distance for reflection. One-month durations were included in the criterion, as existing research shows that situationships vary significantly in length, some ranging from just a few weeks to several years (Deniega et al. 2024), and that duration alone is not a reliable indicator of their subjective significance.

From a narrative perspective the analytical focus lies on the meaning participants attribute to these experiences rather than just on their chronological length. A comparatively brief situationship may therefore be experienced as more impactful than a longer one, depending on its emotional intensity and frequency of texting, meet-ups and sleepovers. Moreover, the inclusion of such a short duration allowed for the participation of individuals who were currently in a situationship at the time of the interview. In these cases, the experience was still unfolding, which made the process of uncertainty and negotiation especially accessible and therefore allowing the study to capture the experience while it was ongoing.

Considering the term “situationship” has diverse connotations, participants were asked to identify their own experiences based on their personal understanding. To avoid confusion, a short and inclusive description was provided on the recruitment materials: *“a romantic or sexual relationship that lacks clear labels, expectations, or commitment.”* This phrasing offered a shared point of reference for the participants without restricting how they interpreted their own experiences. The recruitment poster is included in Appendix I, both in English and in German, as both were distributed.

Interested participants contacted the researcher directly by email or through social media, the contacts were both found on the poster, which was also posted online and found on site. Since the topic of the research touches on intimacy and emotional experiences, the communication during recruitment placed particular emphasis on clarity, confidentiality and voluntary participation. The invitation texts explicitly stated that the study dealt with personal relationship experiences but that all information would be treated anonymously, hence any identifying data is pseudonymized. This careful framing helped to build initial trust and made it easier for interested students to approach the researcher.

The researcher’s own position within the student population also influenced the process of the field access. Sharing a similar social background was advantageous, as it facilitated trust and relatability, which are essential for recruiting participants in studies that address personal or emotionally sensitive topics such as intimacy and relationships. Being part of the same social world made it easier to identify and navigate the informal communication channels used by potential participants and to frame the study in a way

that matched their interests, humor, and language style. This familiarity helped with lower potential barriers of recruitment, as students were more inclined to engage with a researcher they perceived as understanding of their experiences. At the same time, maintaining professional distance by avoiding close acquaintances or individuals from the researcher's immediate social circle was crucial to prevent bias, protect participants' privacy, and ensure the authenticity of their narratives. This balance between insider familiarity and methodological distance enhanced both the quality and credibility of the data, allowing participants to speak openly while ensuring ethical and analytical integrity.

The combination of offline and online recruitment proved especially valuable, as it reached students with different communication habits, sexual preference and relationship experiences. This variety strengthened the analytical depth of the data, ensuring that the narratives reflected different ways of engaging with and interpreting situationships.

Sampling and Selection Criteria

To identify suitable participants for this study, a purposive sampling strategy was used. This approach involves the intentional selection of individuals based on specific characteristics that are directly relevant to the research question (Ritchie 2013). The aim was to reach participants who could offer detailed and meaningful accounts of their experiences with situationships. Within this strategy, a homogeneous sampling approach was applied, focusing on a group that shares certain social and institutional contexts while still allowing diversity in interpretation and experience (Ritchie 2013, pp. 158-159).

The study did not follow a theoretical sampling strategy. Instead, the inclusion criteria were defined prior to data collection on the basis of the research question and existing research on emerging adulthood (Arnett 2004) and situationships (Langlais et al. 2024; Deniega et al. 2024). This approach allowed the research to focus on a social context in which situationships are particularly common, while ensuring that participants shared a comparable life phase and institutional setting.

Selection Criteria

Participants were included in the study based on the following criteria:

1. They were students enrolled at a University in Vienna
2. They were between the ages of 20 and 29 and thus part of Generation Z
3. They had experienced at least one situationship, either ongoing or within the last three years
4. The situationship had lasted for at least one month

This set of criteria ensured that participants shared a comparable social context while offering different perspectives within it. Restricting the sample to those who had experienced a situationship within the last three years ensured that the memories were still vivid, while allowing enough distance for reflection. The minimum duration of one month was included to ensure that the situationship offered enough depth and continuity for narrative reconstruction, but also because situationships can be temporary and fleeting (Deniega et al. 2024, p.76).

University students were chosen because they are in the life stage of emerging adulthood, which is characterized by transition, exploration, and social change (Arnett 2000). The chosen age range of 20 to 29 years captures this phase, when individuals define their values and orientations in both personal and relational terms. It is a period marked by learning, self-reflection, and emotional experimentation, as well as by the ongoing negotiation between freedom, stability, and commitment (Arnett 2000). Research has shown that university life encourages informal relationship practices through expanded social networks and digital communication (Choudhry et al. 2022). During this phase, young adults explore identity, intimacy, and independence, in many cases balancing emotional closeness with a desire for autonomy. Another reason for focusing on university students is that those in their twenties are situated within a distinct technological and cultural context shaped by constant online interaction, shifting social expectations, and evolving dating norms. In this setting, situationships can appear as flexible and socially accepted arrangements rather than as deviations from conventional relationships.

Although participants differed in socio-economic, cultural, and religious backgrounds, they shared a similar institutional and generational context as university students.

Diversity in gender and sexual orientation was not predefined through inclusion criteria but resulted from an open recruitment approach in which the study invitation explicitly addressed all genders and sexual orientations (see Appendix I). Socio-economic or disciplinary backgrounds were not used as selection criteria because the focus of the study lies in subjective meaning-making rather than structural comparison. Similarly, cultural and religious questions were initially considered, but ultimately not included, as the aim was to understand how students interpreted their situationships, no matter what their cultural framework was. Although participants' upbringings and values may have shaped how they approached relationships in general, their narratives held similar experiences. This suggests that such relationship forms are shaped less by specific cultural settings and more by shared conditions of contemporary intimacy.

Narrative Interview

For this study, the narrative interview was conducted according to Schütze's approach, originally developed in 1983 and expanded in collaboration with Fiedler and Krüger in 2016 (Schütze 1983; Schütze et al. 2016). This method is based on the assumption that spontaneous autobiographical storytelling provides unique insight into how people process and structure their experiences. The aim is not only to gather factual information, but to reconstruct lived events and uncover the meanings participants attach to them. Through narration, people reveal how they interpret their experiences, which makes this method particularly suitable for exploring relationship dynamics and emotional processes.

According to Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr (2021), narrative interviews invite participants to recount a personally experienced process to an interviewer who is unfamiliar with the context (p. 108). This unfamiliarity creates what Schütze (1983) terms "*narrative constraints*," which motivate the narrator to explain background information, present the sequence of events coherently, and highlight what they themselves find meaningful. By reconstructing actions, transitions, and turning points, the storyteller simultaneously reproduces both external events and inner reactions (Schütze 1983; Schütze et al. 2016, p. 57). In this way, participants reanimate their experiences through storytelling, while the interviewer adopts a listening and facilitating role. The interviewer's task is to intervene

as little as possible, following the principle of openness in qualitative research (Heiser 2018, p. 162). Narrative interviews are therefore most appropriate when the research topic concerns personally lived processes such as biographies, romantic relationships, or professional experiences (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr 2021, p. 110). In line with Schütze's (1983; Schütze et al. 2016) model, each interview aimed to generate a spontaneous life-story segment that could later be analyzed in terms of its sequential structure (Schütze 1983; Schütze et al. 2016, pp. 56–58). The interview consisted of three main parts: the initial autobiographical narration, the immanent narrative probing, and the exmanent thematic reflection. This three-step structure corresponds to Schütze's (1983; Schütze et al. 2016) distinction between the main narration, the elaboration of latent storylines, and the subsequent reflection and theorizing phase (Schütze 1983; Schütze et al. 2016, p. 57).

The decision regarding the interview language was completely participant centered. During the initial contact, it often became apparent whether participants preferred German or English, based on the language they used to message the researcher. Regardless, before the interview, the participants were explicitly asked which language they felt more comfortable using to express their experiences. The choice of the interview language was therefore left entirely to the participants. Accordingly, either the German or English version of the interview guide was used, both of which had been prepared in advance. Each interview began with a short introductory conversation in which participants were informed about the study's aims, the procedure, and the ethical standards, including privacy and data protection. It was explained that, unlike in conventional interviews, the interviewer would remain silent during the first phase to allow for an uninterrupted flow of narration. This clarification helped participants understand that the purpose was storytelling rather than dialogue (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr 2021, p. 114). Before beginning the actual narration, participants were given a brief explanation and consent statement, which was read aloud to ensure full understanding. The wording used was as follows:

“Hello, thank you again for agreeing to take part in this interview. Before we begin, I would like to explain a few things and ask for your consent.

This interview is part of my master's thesis in sociology. The goal of the project is to explore how young adults experience and reflect unclear romantic situations they have been in. I am interested in how people talk about and make sense of these kinds of experiences in their own words. So, you can tell me as much as you want and in as much detail as you desire about your experience and how you felt at that time. You can talk about the entire situation, and I will listen closely and take some notes, but I will not interrupt you.

Everything you share will be kept confidential. Your name and any identifying information will be anonymized, and the audio recording will only be used for transcription and analysis. Your participation is completely voluntary. You can skip any question, pause at any time, or withdraw entirely if you wish. No explanation is needed."

This statement ensured that each participant was fully informed about the study's purpose and their rights before giving consent to proceed. Written consent forms were signed before recording, and verbal consent was confirmed again at the start of each session. The interview then began with an *open-ended narrative prompt* that encouraged participants to recall and describe an experience relevant to the research topic (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr 2021, p. 114):

"Please tell me about an experience you have had with situationships. Please start wherever feels natural for you and take your time to share as much detail as you would like about how it unfolded. Anything you remember about your experience is of importance."

In the first narrative phase, the interviewer adopted a passive and receptive stance, giving only minimal feedback such as "hmm," "okay," or nodding to indicate attention without influencing the story's content or order. The narration was considered complete once the participant reached a natural closure or invited further questions (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr 2021, p. 114). After the spontaneous narration ended, the *immanent follow-up phase* began. This part aimed to unfold those narrative threads that had been shortened, skipped, or left vague during the main narration (Schütze 1983; Schütze et al. 2016, p. 57). The interviewer referred to concrete episodes or expressions from the story and encouraged the participant to elaborate. Because the subject matter was personal and

often emotional, questions were phrased sensitively and with attention to tone. Examples of immanent follow-up questions included:

- *“You mentioned... could you tell me more about that?”*
- *“What exactly happened after...?”*
- *“Could you give an example of what you meant by...?”*
- *“Since you said..., were there topics or behaviors you avoided addressing?”*
- *“You mentioned differing expectations. How did you notice this difference?”*
- *“You mentioned feeling [x]. How did that feeling influence your actions at the time?”*
- *“Were there moments when you felt uncertain about how to behave in the relationship?”*

The third phase consisted of *exmanent or thematic questioning*, where the interviewer introduced prompts not directly linked to the narrative but relevant to the research topic. These questions supported reflection and helped participants articulate their own interpretations and self-theorizing processes (Schütze 1983; Schütze et al. 2016, p. 58). Examples included:

- *“Based on their actions, how differently do you think the other person might describe this experience?”*
- *“How has time changed how you view this experience?”*
- *“What would you tell someone who found themselves in a similar situation?”*

Finally, each interview concluded with a few reflective closing questions that gave participants space to summarize what they had learned or how they felt about the experience:

- *“Is there anything else you would like to share about this experience?”*
- *“Could you take something positive from this experience?”*
- *“Have you learned something from it?”*

Afterwards, several sociodemographic questions were asked regarding age, gender, sexual orientation, relationship status, and the duration and timeframe of the

situationship. To maintain an open and respectful atmosphere, interviews ended with a brief casual conversation to ease the transition back to everyday interaction. Participants were again assured that their data would be treated confidentially and anonymized in the transcripts.

Depending on personal preference, interviews were conducted either face-to-face in quiet public spaces such as cafés and university rooms or online via Zoom, depending on the participants' availability. Several interviews took place online as the period of the data collection fell during the summer months and some participants were abroad for a longer summer vacation. Allowing participants to choose the interview format intended to facilitate participation and to create conditions under which they felt comfortable narrating their experiences. Methodological literature suggests that narrative interviews can be conducted online under certain conditions, particularly when participants are familiar with digital communication formats and use them regularly in their everyday lives (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr 2021, p.117). At the same time, the authors note that online settings may limit aspects of co-presence, such as sustained eye contact or immediate feedback through subtle markers, which can be important for some interviewees when engaging in extended self-directed narration. However, when digital communication is part of the participants' everyday interactional use, online narrative interviews can function as a good alternative to face-to-face interviews (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr 2021, p.118). In line with this methodological perspective, participants' wishes for an online interview were taken seriously and the cameras were turned on for a more personal interaction.

The duration of each session varied according to participants' narrative rhythm. Some were naturally reflective and detailed, while others offered more concise accounts. As Schütze (1983; Schütze et al. 2016) observed, every narration follows its own dynamic, shaped by emotional tone, personality, and the interactional setting they are in. In this study, interviews lasted between 25 minutes and one hour. After each session, field notes were written to record contextual impressions and relevant non-verbal cues (Heiser 2018, p. 179).

The audio recordings were transcribed using *aTrain*, an AI-based offline transcription software developed by researchers at the Business Analytics and Data Science Centre at the University of Graz and tested by the Know-Centre Graz (Haberl et al. 2024). To ensure the quality and accuracy of the generated transcripts, each transcript was carefully reviewed while simultaneously listening to the corresponding audio recording. This manual verification process involved correcting transcription errors and checking the reproduction of the interview content. In the interviews with clear audio quality (where there was no background noise), the transcripts required only minor revisions. Otherwise, revisions were made in cases where the recording was not picked up properly, where slang expressions were used, or where participants switched between English and German (or used “Denglisch”) within the same interview. However, some systematic differences between the transcription outputs were noticeable. English transcripts tended to lack any grammatical structure or proper punctuation, while the German output perfectly structured the transcript in both instances. While this was taken into account, it did not disturb the analysis and was therefore not corrected into one format. Following the methodological principle of minimizing unnecessary interpretation during transcription, complex phonetic details were omitted, as they were not relevant to analyzing the stories and their meaning (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr 2021, pp.215-216). Since *aTrain* functions locally without internet access, it ensured a secure and data-protection-compliant transcription process. This demonstrates how AI-based tools can be integrated responsibly into qualitative research to improve efficiency without compromising ethical standards (Haberl et al. 2024).

After all interviews had been completed and transcribed, fifteen cases formed the empirical basis of the analysis. The following section provides an overview of these participants and their main demographic characteristics.

Overview of Participants

Presenting an overview of the participants who took part in the study helps to situate the empirical material and to make the sample composition transparent. Table 1 provides an overview of the key demographic characteristics of the interview participants. The sample consists of 15 university students between the ages of 20 and 26. Participants varied in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation, including male, female and

nonbinary individuals, as well as heterosexual, bisexual and homosexual orientations. While there were differences in personal and socio-economic backgrounds, all participants shared a broadly similar institutional and generational setting. This combination of comparability and diversity allowed for a nuanced exploration of how relational ambiguity is experienced and interpreted within a shared social environment.

The duration of the situationships varied considerably, ranging from one and a half months to more than three years, illustrating the considerable variability of this relationship form. This variation was considered during analysis and across both shorter and longer situationships similar interactional dynamics were observed. Participants described constant shifts between closeness and withdrawal, a reluctance to clarify the status of the situationship and the gradual formation of implicit boundaries and expectations, regardless of how long the situationship lasted. The main difference was the temporal persistence of these patterns. In longer situationships, phases of ambiguity and back-and-forth interactions tended to repeat over an extended period of time, often becoming normalized and difficult to resolve. In shorter situationships, similar dynamics were described, but the cycle ended earlier, typically when one partner established a hard boundary and ended the situationship completely. Additionally, duration did not determine the emotional intensity or subjective significance of the situationship. The interviews showed that brief situationships could be experienced as emotionally more impactful than longer ones, as the weight of the experience depended less on its duration than on the meaning participants attached to it.

Table 1. Key Demographic of the interview participants

Pseudo nym	Age	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Duration of Situationship	Time since Situationship until Interview
Gio	24	Male	Bisexual	8 months	2 years
Teo	24	Male	Heterosexual	3.5 years	1 year
Conny	22	Nonbinary	Homosexual	4-6 months	2 years
Luna	26	Female	Bisexual	2 months	1 month

Nadia	23	Female	Heterosexual	7-8 months	3 years
Vanny	20	Female	Heterosexual	9 months	1 year
Donna	23	Female	Heterosexual	4-5 months	3 years
Stefanie	23	Female	Bisexual	7 months	1 year
Clara	25	Female	Homosexual	6 months	2 years
Paula	25	Female	Heterosexual	4 months	4 months, then official
Oliver	23	Male	Heterosexual	2-3 years	4 months
Hanna	24	Female	Heterosexual	8 months	8 months
Shelly	21	Female	Heterosexual	2 months	ongoing
Fabio	25	Male	Heterosexual	6-8 months	2 years
Nana	25	Female	Bisexual	1.5 months	ongoing

5.3 Data Analysis

The analytical procedure follows Schütze's (1983) narrative method, originally formulated in 1983 and later revised and expanded in collaboration with Fiedler and Krüger (2016), which outlines a step-by-step reconstruction of biographical processes through narrative sequencing and process structures (Schütze 1983; Schütze et al. 2016). Within the interpretivist framework of this study, this approach provided both a methodological foundation and a concrete procedure for analyzing the material. Methodologically, narrative analysis rests on the assumption that social reality is produced through meaning and interaction (Schütze 1983; Schütze et al. 2016). Experiences such as relationships or personal transitions do not speak for themselves but become meaningful when people interpret and narrate them. Through storytelling, individuals organize their experiences, define causal relationships, and express how they perceive themselves in relation to others (Kleemann et al. 2013, p. 65).

In this sense, narrative analysis is more than a technical method; it is a way of approaching social reality. It assumes that people experience the world as a sequence of events, feelings, and reflections that they later transform into coherent stories. The way these stories are told provides insight into how individuals understand their own

biographies and position themselves within their social world. Schütze (1983; Schütze et al. 2016) define the purpose of narrative analysis as the reconstruction of the process structures of life courses, meaning the unfolding sequences of experiences, interpretations, and transitions through which people create a sense of continuity and identity (Schütze 1983; Schütze et al. 2016, p. 56). These processes link external events and internal orientations and reveal how people react to, adapt to, or resist particular circumstances.

Narrative analysis is therefore especially suited for this study, which examines how young adults interpret ambiguous relationship experiences. It makes it possible to trace how participants' accounts move between description, interpretation, and reflection, and how they construct meaning across time. As Schütze (1983; Schütze et al. 2016) emphasizes, storytelling allows access to the inner logic of experiences, showing how emotional responses and moral evaluations are connected to the course of events. Because narrators are selective in what they share, their stories always reflect both the lived reality and the social frameworks of interpretation available to them. The task of the analysis is to reconstruct this underlying logic of narration, not to verify objective facts (Schütze 1983; Schütze et al. 2016, p. 57).

A central requirement of narrative analysis is the availability of spontaneous, unstructured personal stories that capture lived processes rather than abstract opinions. Only when narrators are encouraged to speak freely about their own experiences can their biographical structure and subjective interpretation emerge clearly (Kleemann et al. 2013, p. 73). The use of narrative interviews in this project was therefore not only a data collection technique but also a methodological choice that aligns with the analytical framework. Since the interviews followed the principles of openness and minimal interference, they produced the kind of detailed, processual data required for narrative reconstruction.

The analytical procedure followed Schütze's (1983; Schütze et al. 2016) interpretive logic of sequential reconstruction, which involves working closely with the order and form in which experiences are narrated (Schütze 1983; Schütze et al. 2016, pp. 58-59). This principle is based on the idea that the meaning of a life event becomes clear only when interpreted in its chronological and situational context. Each interview was first assessed

individually as a single case to reconstruct the personal and social processes it contained. The focus was on understanding how participants structured their story, what turning points they underlined, and how they evaluated their experiences. After the detailed analysis of individual cases, the results were compared across participants to identify shared structures, differences, and contrasting orientations. This progression from case analysis to cross-case comparison reflects the inductive and interpretive nature of narrative analysis. The ultimate aim was to reconstruct typical patterns of experience and interpretation and to develop a typology that captured the main orientations toward relational ambiguity among Generation Z students (Kleemann et al. 2013, p. 76).

Following Schütze's model (1983; Schütze et al. 2016), the analysis proceeded through five interconnected stages: formal text analysis, structural content description, analytical abstraction, knowledge analysis, and contrastive case comparison. Each step built on the previous one but was applied flexibly to allow for deeper understanding.

Formal Text Analysis

The first step, formal text analysis, examined the structure and composition of each transcript. Narrative, descriptive, and argumentative passages were distinguished, as interviewees repeatedly alternated between storytelling and later explanations or evaluations (Kleemann et al. 2013, p. 77; Schütze 1983; Schütze et al. 2016). Earlier approaches tended to exclude non-narrative parts from the first phase of analysis. However, Schütze and colleagues (2016) later argued that reflective or explanatory passages are important because they show how narrators rationalize or distance themselves from certain experiences (pp. 66-69). In this study, these passages were therefore noted separately and reintegrated during later stages of interpretation. The remaining narrative text was then segmented into formal sequences based on linguistic markers that indicated shifts in time or perspective. Expressions such as “then” “after” or “before” as well as longer pauses, changes in tone, or topic transitions, were used to delineate boundaries between episodes (Kleemann et al. 2013, p. 80). In practice, these sequences varied in length from short passages of a few sentences to longer segments spanning several minutes of uninterrupted narration, depending on the density of the events and shifts in perspective. Each segment represented a meaningful unit within the

flow of narration. This segmentation allowed the researcher to trace how the story unfolded, to identify turning points, and to observe when participants introduced new emotional or thematic layers.

Structural Content Description

The next phase of the analysis focused on the detailed description of each sequence. The purpose was to reconstruct what happened, when it happened, and how the narrator described their role in it. Each segment was summarized and titled according to its main theme (Riemann 1987, p. 55). If a sequence was complex, a full sentence was used as a title to capture its meaning more accurately. In addition to thematic summaries, analytical notes were made about participants' self-presentations, social roles, and interactional orientations (Kleemann et al. 2013, p. 83). Related sequences were then grouped into broader thematic clusters that represented larger stages or recurring patterns within the narrative. This step produced a clear overview of the story's internal logic and of how different experiences were connected across time. In line with Schütze's (1983; Schütze et al. 2016) understanding of process reconstruction, the goal was to integrate external events and inner experiences into one coherent narrative process.

Analytical Abstraction

At this stage, the analysis moved beyond the concrete details of individual events and focused on the overall structure of the life course as presented by the narrator. Schütze (1983) refers to this as the "biographical overall shaping" (Schütze 1983, p. 286). While the previous step reconstructed individual sequences, turning points, and biographical situations, the analytical abstraction connects these separate parts to form a continuous developmental process.

The goal was to identify the dominant pattern that structured the participant's story and to see how different life phases or experiences were related to one another. In this step, the detailed descriptions from the structural content analysis were condensed into more general statements about each stage of life. These abstractions were then compared and linked together to show how the different phases followed one another and how they built the person's overall life trajectory (Schütze 1983; Schütze et al. 2016, pp. 58-59).

Central to this process was the way participants positioned themselves in relation to their experiences, in other words, how they understood what had happened and what role they saw themselves playing within it (Schütze 1983; Schütze et al. 2016, p. 58). The analysis asked how participants interpreted the course of their situationship: whether they saw themselves as active agents shaping events, as people affected by external forces, or as individuals undergoing change. By examining these orientations, it became possible to reconstruct the inner logic of their stories and to understand how they integrated moments of crisis, continuity, and transformation into their biographies.

Schütze (1983; Schütze et al. 2016) proposes four ideal-typical *biographical process structures* that help interpret how people describe the course of their lives:

- Action schemes, in which individuals present themselves as actively shaping their life course and pursuing goals intentionally.
- Institutional course patterns, where the biography follows externally prescribed structures or routines, such as education, work, or social expectations.
- Trajectory curves, where the narrator describes a process of decline or loss of control, are often accompanied by feelings of being overwhelmed or trapped by circumstances.
- Transformation processes, which emphasize gradual personal development or change, where the individual reinterprets past experiences and forms a new understanding of themselves.

The key difference between these structures rests in whether individuals describe themselves as having agency and control or as being passively affected by external conditions (Schütze 1983; Schütze et al. 2016, p. 58). In this study, these categories were used as interpretive tools to understand how participants constructed their situationships as part of their own biographical process, whether as something they initiated, endured, or learned from. Through this analytical step, the isolated events and emotional experiences described in the interviews were connected into broader life patterns, revealing how young adults positioned themselves within the flow of their own relational histories.

Knowledge Analysis

Once the structural reconstruction was complete, the next step was to explore how participants themselves made sense of their experiences. As the previous steps had reconstructed the sequence of events and biographical experiences, the knowledge analysis focused on the personal theories and interpretations that narrators developed to explain what had happened and what they learned from it (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr 2021, p. 308). These reflections typically appeared in more analytical or evaluative passages of the interview, especially during the exmanent follow-up phase, when participants were invited to discuss meaning and lessons learned. Schütze and colleagues (2016, pp. 68-69) emphasize that such reflections should not be read separately from the narrative structure, but in relation to the events that preceded them. The goal was to understand how individuals connected lived experiences to self-theorizing statements and how they constructed coherence out of ambiguity or conflict (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr 2021, p. 308). In this study, this process made visible how participants articulated lessons about emotional boundaries, dependency, and self-protection, and how they integrated these lessons into their sense of self.

Contrastive Case Comparison

The final phase of the narrative analysis focused on drawing insights through a systematic comparison of multiple individual cases. The aim here was to identify patterns of similarity and difference across cases which carried theoretical significance. As this step is inspired by the Grounded Theory methodology of Glaser and Strauss (1967), the analysis was guided by using both minimal and maximal contrast between cases to understand the range and variation of biographical experiences (Kleeman et al. 2013, p. 95). Minimal contrasts highlighted cases that were similar in their overall process structure but differed in specific details or orientations. For example, participants who entered situationships under comparable circumstances but responded differently to ambiguity or imbalance. Maximal contrasts, by comparison, emphasized cases that diverged most strongly in terms of motives, emotional responses, or outcomes. This dual strategy helped to capture the full spectrum of experiences, from short-lived and casual encounters to longer, emotionally demanding involvements.

Rather than relying on predefined analytical categories, the theoretical insights and analytical dimensions emerged inductively through the comparison itself. Each step of the process involved asking how individual cases illustrated, challenged, or expanded the emerging categories. This procedure ensured that the findings remained closely connected to the empirical material and were grounded in the participants' own accounts.

Important to mention, is that in accordance with Schütze's (1983; Schütze et al. 2016) methodological framework, the analysis proceeded beyond the reconstruction of individual cases. While the classical model usually presents the stages of the narrative analysis as distinct and consecutive sections, in this study they are integrated directly into the results chapter. This decision was made for two main reasons. First, given the scope of the material, a case-by-case reconstruction would have resulted in extensive repetition and an overly lengthy results section, which could have obscured rather than clarified the findings. Second, integrating the analytical steps into the presentation better reflects how the participants' experiences converged and diverged around shared structural dynamics.

Through this structure, the methodological steps of abstraction, comparison, and typology formation are fully preserved, yet presented in a format that remains coherent, reader-oriented, and appropriate for the scope of a master's thesis.

The following chapter applies this approach to the empirical material, tracing how young adults experience and interpret situations within their everyday social worlds.

6. Presentation of Results

This chapter presents the results of the narrative analysis and the contrastive comparison of all fifteen interviews. Following the methodological approach outlined earlier, it reconstructs how university students in their twenties experienced and interpreted situations, in regard to unclear boundaries and expectations. The analysis focuses on the processes through which participants understood ambiguous intimacy and, on the orientations, tensions, and turning points that shaped their experiences.

Across all interviews, several recurring narrative patterns have become visible. Although each story reflects an individual background and personal constellation, the accounts show structural similarities in how participants entered, sustained, and later reframed their situationships. The systematic comparison of minimal and maximal cases highlights these shared and contrasting dynamics, which together form the foundation for the typology developed throughout the results chapters.

Before moving to these overarching findings, the next chapter turns briefly to the individual narrative cases themselves. These short case reconstructions serve as an entry point into the material, offering a sense of the diversity and rhythm of the narratives before the analysis proceeds to the comparative dimensions that link them together.

6.1 Individual Case Reconstruction

Before presenting the cross-case findings, the following section briefly outlines the third step, the analytical abstraction, of each participant's narrative. This serves to give an overview of the individual life stories and to show how each situationship was reconstructed by the narrator. It connects the concrete experiences described in the interviews to the broader life course and situational background from which they emerged.

These reconstructions were developed in the third step of Schütze's (1983; Schütze et al. 2016) narrative analysis, which moves beyond single events and focuses on the overall biographical shaping of a person's story. Each summary presents the main phases of the participant's narrative, showing how the situationship developed, changed, and ended, and how it related to other areas of their life, such as study, work, or personal transitions.

The analytical abstractions are kept deliberately concise in order to maintain readability within the scope of this thesis. Their purpose is not to fully interpret the cases already, but to provide the reader with a clear understanding of how the participants narrated their relational biography. This allows the subsequent results chapters to be read with greater context and familiarity with the individual cases.

Case – Gio

Gio's situationship lasted around one and a half to two years and unfolded through phases of initial openness, growing imbalance, and later reflection. His connection

began as a casual encounter through a dating app and developed into regular contact that combined friendship with intimacy. From the beginning, neither he, nor his partner defined what they were to each other, which Gio initially experienced as fitting for his life circumstances. Nearing the end of his studies and expecting to move abroad, he considered himself emotionally and situationally unready for commitment. At this stage, the absence of clear expectations felt practical rather than unsettling.

As the connection deepened, Gio's self-understanding began to shift. He grew more emotionally attached while sensing that the other person maintained greater distance. When questions of exclusivity or commitment arose, they were addressed jokingly and remained unresolved. Gio described struggling to reconcile what he felt with what the situation allowed. His effort to adapt without fully articulating his needs created an inner tension between acceptance and disappointment. This pattern points to an ongoing attempt to find balance between closeness and autonomy, a central theme in how he interpreted his experience.

The turning point occurred during a disagreement about public affection. Gio's decision to leave rather than discuss the conflict revealed both his sensitivity to perceived rejection and his limited ability to communicate boundaries openly. The abrupt end of contact left him without closure, reinforcing his sense that he could not control the direction of the connection. Structurally, the course resembles a trajectory curve, moving from exploration toward loss of control.

Looking back, Gio interprets the experience as an early lesson in emotional readiness and boundary setting. He acknowledged that his uncertainty at the time, regarding his studies, career, and sense of self, shaped how he managed relational expectations. With distance, he reframes what once felt confusing as part of his personal development. This signals a transition into a transformation process in which the experience becomes integrated into a broader narrative of learning and maturity.

Case – Teo

Teo's situationship lasted about three and a half years and followed a recurring pattern of getting together, breaking up, and reconnecting. It began at the end of 2020 with a short dating phase that ended after one month when his partner expressed concern about how

their age difference and shared community might view their relationship. At that stage, Teo described himself as realistic and self-protective. He decided to end their contact to avoid becoming attached without reciprocation. This early decision shows an action scheme, since he actively took control to prevent disappointment.

A few months later, contact resumed, beginning a cycle that repeated several times over the years: renewed closeness followed by withdrawal. During their second attempt, Teo began to feel inferior and emotionally dependent. The lockdown period, with its lack of structure and social activity, enhanced this imbalance. When his partner told him to “get [his] life together” he felt deeply hurt and ashamed. His attempts to repair the relationship were unsuccessful and revealed the beginning of a trajectory process, moving from control toward emotional loss and uncertainty.

Subsequent reconnections repeated the same pattern. Each time she withdrew, Teo tried to re-establish contact, and when he became distant, she showed renewed interest. The relationship remained undefined, “dating and then not dating,” which kept him in a constant state of confusion. Over time, he stopped expressing his emotions out of fear of rejection and acted cheerful even when he felt bad. This emotional restraint became his strategy to keep the relationship stable. He also perceived his partner as more mature, confident, and “superior” while arguing or when it came to decisions. His inability to set boundaries strengthened the trajectory pattern, in which he adapted instead of changing the course of events.

Another important phase occurred during his semester abroad. Physical distance did not end the contact but led to more cycles of hope and disappointment. When he returned, the instability continued: brief reconciliations were followed by long silences. His final decision to end their contact in 2024 was the first time he consistently acted out of self-protection rather than dependence.

Looking back, Teo interprets the experience as a long process of learning about self-respect and emotional boundaries. He recognizes that the absence of clear expectations allowed patterns of dependency and imbalance to continue. With distance, he views the situation as a lesson that shaped his later approach to relationships. He now emphasizes openness, shared values, and clarity from the beginning. This

reinterpretation represents a shift from trajectory to transformation, as he turns an experience of confusion into a more stable sense of maturity and control.

Case – Conny

Conny's situationship lasted around four months and moved from curiosity and openness to growing uncertainty and later reflection. The experience occurred during early adulthood, when Conny was exploring intimacy and identity within a queer context for the first time in their life. Conny met their partner while bartending at a queer bar and they started a casual friendship, that soon turned into mutual attraction. From the very beginning, Conny describes their connection as undefined and ambiguous, as they recalled not knowing whether they were "just hanging out as friends or on a date". Although their connection was uncertain, Conny continued to engage in it, valuing the connection and attention it provided. At this early stage, the absence of clear expectations was unproblematic and not questioned.

However, over time, the feeling of inconsistency and emotional strain became more central. Their partner alternated between wanting something serious and pulling back, at times within just a couple of days. Conny found this exhausting but avoided addressing it directly as they feared making the other person uncomfortable. They focused on maintaining stability and prioritized their partner's needs over their own. This pattern of adjustment led to a trajectory process, as Conny moved from active participation to emotional restraint and uncertainty about their own role in the situationship.

This loss of control additionally shaped everyday interactions between the two. Conny describes having felt unsure how to behave in public or what gestures were appropriate for their partner. They began to rely on subtle cues instead of conversation, mainly trying to read their partner's moods through body language. Even the way their partner hugged became a sign for possible distance and rejection. The absence of open communication reinforced a state of anxiety and self-silencing for Conny.

The situationship ended gradually through silence rather than one of them making a decision. Conversations about the relationship became rarer, resulting in both withdrawing without any resolution. Conny described feeling drained from having to initiate emotional discussions while also fearing rejection, if they did do it. Once contact

faded, they realized how little of their own perspective had been voiced and how no boundaries were set on their part. This recognition marked the turning point, as they understood that avoiding conflict had replaced genuine communication.

In hindsight, Conny interprets the experience as overall formative. The period of uncertainty and emotional fatigue became a lesson about boundaries and self-expression. They now discuss expectations early, speak openly about compatibility, and end connections at the first sign of miscommunication. What once felt unstable has been integrated as a step toward emotional clarity and self-definition.

Case – Luna

Luna's situationship lasted around two months and developed through phases of hopeful involvement, growing frustration, and later reflection. It began when she met the other person through her sports club, and they started communicating intensively on social media. For several weeks, they texted daily, sharing details about their lives and building a sense of closeness. When they met in person, however, his distant and inconsistent behavior already created unease for Luna. Despite feeling disregarded, she continued the contact, interpreting his detachment as nervousness rather than rejection.

After they became physically intimate shortly after, contact remained frequent but lacked any definition. Their meetings took place almost exclusively at each other's homes, never in public, which left Luna unsettled. When she raised the wish to go out together or spend time outside, he avoided the topic or postponed plans altogether. His words and actions often contradicted each other, like when he claimed she was important to him, yet did not prioritize her. Luna tried to understand and accommodate this contradiction, hoping the connection would become more balanced over time and lead into an official relationship.

As the situationship continued, Luna noticed that she was investing far more effort than he was. She frequently travelled to his apartment, sometimes late at night, while he rarely came to see her at her place. When she addressed similar imbalances, he explained that he was indecisive if he liked her or not and was unable to give her the "attention" she wanted. Over time, this pattern left her insecure, anxious and emotionally strained. She began to question why he avoided being seen with her in public and why even small plans

were uncertain with him. The course of the relationship took on the form of a trajectory, shifting from early enthusiasm to frustration and loss of control.

The situationship ended when Luna decided to date someone else. The repeated cancellations and lack of commitment had become exhausting, and she no longer wanted to remain in an undefined connection. When her partner found out through one of his friends, he reacted irritably but made no attempt to clarify or continue contact. Luna sought a final conversation, but he avoided meeting and eventually ghosted her. The relationship ended silently, leaving her to process it on her own.

In hindsight, Luna interprets the experience as a turning point in self-awareness. At first, she blamed herself for being too invested but later understood that the instability stemmed from his avoidance rather than her expectations. Through distance, she reframed the experience as a lesson in communication and self-respect. This marks a transformation process, in which confusion and disappointment turned into greater emotional clarity and understanding of personal boundaries.

Case – Nadia

Nadia's situationship lasted about seven to eight months and developed in stages of initial curiosity, increasing imbalance, and eventual detachment. It began soon after the end of a long-term relationship, when she became close with a colleague she had previously known only in passing. Their contact grew gradually through small conversations and daily messages until they began meeting outside of work. Nadia approached the connection without specific expectations but felt drawn to the man's calm and reliable manner, which seemed more grounded than what she had experienced in her previous relationship. This sense of emotional steadiness made her hopeful that their connection would lead to a future relationship.

As they began seeing each other more regularly, their interactions settled into a pattern that blended intimacy with uncertainty. They met once or twice a week, shared personal stories, and eventually became physically involved. Early on, Nadia initiated a conversation about exclusivity, seeking to understand whether they were seeing other people. They agreed on sexual exclusivity without defining the relationship any further, which left the connection suspended between friendship and partnership, as they were

emotionally involved as well. For several months, this arrangement functioned smoothly on the surface, however the absence of clarity created ongoing tension between them. While Nadia valued the familiarity and attention, she started questioning how committed he truly was. Whenever Nadia raised questions about the future, he diverted the topic or made jokes to avoid any serious discussion on the topic. His reluctance to engage led her to withdraw from such conversations, convincing herself that patience might change things eventually. Over time, his control over when and how they met made her role increasingly passive. This unfolding pattern can be understood as a trajectory process, as she adjusted to his rhythm rather than asserting her own needs. The age gap reinforced this imbalance, as she associated his older age with emotional stability but later recognized it as avoidance and self-focus.

Gradually, the lack of progress and uneven commitment led Nadia to distance herself. She began texting other people and using dating apps again, while he was pending between seeking closeness and withdrawal. Each time she tried to move away, he became more interested and his renewed attention prolonged the uncertainty of their situation. When she decided to stop the sexual aspect of their connection, he suggested staying friends, something that confused Nadia even more. They continued to spend their nights together and maintained physical closeness without sex, turning it into an even more undefined connection. The situation eventually ended when she made a final decision to stop contact, acknowledging that the arrangement no longer met her emotional needs and just confused her more.

Looking back, Nadia understands this experience as a turning point in how she defines commitment and boundaries. What she initially read as emotional maturity she later saw as avoidance. Through reflection, she recognized how easily she had adapted to another person's indecision at the cost of her own clarity. This insight represents a transformation process, in which she turned frustration into self-knowledge and began to trust her own perceptions more strongly.

Case – Vanny

Vanny's situation lasted around nine months, including about five months of undefined involvement which was followed by four months in an official relationship. The course of events moved through stages of cautious optimism, repeated frustration, and

eventual resolution. It began in early 2024 when Vanny, who recently moved to Vienna for University, started using dating apps to meet new people. After several unremarkable encounters, she met Andy, with whom she immediately felt a stronger connection. Their early dates were pleasant and frequent, and Vanny found herself curious about how the relationship between them might develop.

During the first weeks, their connection felt promising yet uncertain. They met regularly, went on what felt like dates, and maintained consistent contact. However, despite this closeness, Andy avoided defining the relationship. When he later asked if she was fine with him dating other people, Vanny realized they had very different expectations of where this was headed. Having already stopped seeing others, she felt disappointed but agreed to let him explore, out of fear of losing him. This captured the start of an imbalance in initiative and communication. Their dynamic revealed a trajectory-like structure, as Vanny's attempts to clarify expectations repeatedly met resistance, which led her to accommodate his reluctance and suppress her own discomfort in order to maintain closeness.

As their connection deepened, Vanny increasingly took emotional responsibility, supporting Andy through personal difficulties while receiving little reassurance in return. After several months, Vanny raised the question of defining their relationship. Despite their closeness and regular contact, Andy again resisted commitment, claiming he was not ready for a relationship. When he proposed delaying the conversation about commitment to a fixed date, Vanny perceived it as avoidance but decided to wait once more, despite her growing frustration. By this point, she described feeling emotionally exhausted, constantly trying to be patient and understanding, while receiving nothing in return. The stagnation and one-sided emotional work reinforced the established trajectory structure, as she adapted to his indecision at the expense of her own needs.

The turning point occurred when, contrary to her expectations, Andy finally asked her to be his girlfriend. Although she had planned to end the relationship if he refused again, his sudden change of mind left her conflicted. She agreed after voicing her concerns about his past behavior, communication issues, and mental health. This decision defined a temporary moment of regained agency. For several weeks, Vanny felt satisfied and secure, believing the relationship had finally stabilized. However, over time, his

dismissive attitude, poor communication, and her continued effort to manage his emotions re-emerged. This resulted in them running out of topics to discuss, often sitting together in silence, and both feeling detached from one another. Vanny described acting more like a caretaker than a partner, constantly compensating for his lack of initiative. The relationship ended during a calm and mutual conversation when both acknowledged that they no longer saw a future together. Although the separation was emotional, it brought relief and a sense of closure, especially for Vanny.

In hindsight, she perceives the experience as a key step in understanding her emotional boundaries and expectations. What began as patience and empathy turned into a pattern of over-adaptation, which she later interpreted as a warning sign. Through distance, she reframed the situation as a learning process about self-respect, communication, and the limits of emotional responsibility.

Case – Donna

Donna's situation lasted around four to five months and moved through stages of excitement and uncertainty, while later ending in reflection. It began when she was twenty and met an American basketball player who had recently joined a local team in her Hungarian hometown. At the time, she described herself as looking for a distraction and excitement in her life, as she was struggling mentally. Looking for nothing serious, she messaged him on Instagram and met up with him soon after. On their first encounter, she ended up sleeping at his place and becoming more intimate with him. Donna recalls feeling safe and respected but noted that they never discussed boundaries or expectations about what they were openly.

In the early phase, their arrangement seemed casual and rather uncomplicated. They met regularly in private, without introducing one another to friends or family. Donna was aware that he was older, living there temporarily, and was unlikely to want a serious relationship. Nevertheless, she continued the contact, curious to see where it might lead, but not expecting an official relationship out of it. However, after some time, his behavior became increasingly contradictory. Although he avoided gestures typical of dating, such as going out together or spending time in public, he still showed attention and affection through messages and compliments. These mixed signals blurred the distinction between casual involvement and emotional closeness for Donna.

As these mixed signals continued, Donna began to develop stronger feelings. She described herself as realistic in knowing the situation would not develop further but admitted that part of her began to hope that it might. When she became more emotionally attached, she decided to end it, explaining to him that she did not want to get even more attached without clarity. He agreed, which left her disappointed, since she had secretly expected him to react differently. A few weeks later Donna resumed the connection, admitting she missed the attention and routine and was bored in her life. This repeated pattern of withdrawal and return reflected a trajectory structure, framed by alternating control and passivity.

Their situationship ended when he left the country at the end of the basketball season and their connection faded without conflict or closure. Donna later discovered that he had a partner and a child in the United States, which led her to reassess her entire experience. While she identified his behavior as misleading, she had also ignored her own doubts in order to keep the excitement alive.

Looking back, Donna considers the experience an important step in understanding her emotional needs. It helped her distinguish between attention and genuine care and made her more aware of the importance of honesty and self-respect. This retrospective insight embodies a transformation process in which she integrates the experience into a more confident sense of her boundaries and expectations.

Case – Stefanie

When Stefanie began seeing her match from a dating app, she described the connection as spontaneous and light-hearted. Over the following seven months, it developed into a pattern of hope, disappointment and renewed effort. At first, frequent messaging created a sense of closeness built on shared humor and daily conversation. Yet their first meeting felt unexpectedly flat, and after both left for separate vacations, contact paused. When they began talking again, communication was lively but uncertain, as he kept postponing another meeting until she asked whether they were becoming “pen pals”, which led to him agreeing to host a dinner at his place.

A turning point came when he sent a long message before the day of the dinner, explaining that he felt pressured to meet and believed they were at different stages of life because

he worked full-time while she was still studying. He also assumed she only wanted something casual, based on her stories about going out and her dating experiences. Stefanie was surprised by this misunderstanding and asked to meet in person to clarify. This meeting led to an open conversation in which they agreed to continue seeing each other and defined the connection as exclusively dating each other and seeing where it could lead. This agreement brought temporary stability and a summer of regular meetings, emotional closeness, and the feeling of a developing relationship, which Stefanie interpreted as signs that a relationship might develop.

Nevertheless, by autumn his engagement declined as he cancelled plans and ended their contact due to mental health issues. After several weeks of silence, Stefanie sent him a postcard, which reopened the conversation. They reconnected, but disagreements soon resurfaced. A minor incident of her sharing a screenshot of their messages with a friend led to an argument that he framed as a breach of trust. He ended the connection again, and Stefanie decided to block him to stop the emotional back-and-forth. Her continued willingness to reconnect despite recurring frustration revealed how much she was trying to stabilize a dynamic that no longer felt mutual.

Months later, they matched again on the same dating app and agreed to stay in touch casually. Despite this, emotional closeness between them returned, and he began confiding in her about his mental health struggles. Stefanie tried to remain supportive but felt increasingly drained by his inconsistency in what he wanted. This pattern of avoidance and reattachment repeated until early 2025, when the communication ended for good. The course of events reflected a trajectory process, moving from initial optimism to disillusionment and loss of control.

In retrospect, Stefanie describes the experience as a step toward understanding her limits in relationships. What once felt like empathy and openness turned into an awareness that emotional care cannot rely on one-sided effort. Through distance, she began to see how her own attempts to maintain harmony prevented her from setting boundaries altogether. This movement from endurance to self-awareness represents a transformation process, through which she reinterpreted uncertainty as part of her emotional development.

Case – Clara

When Clara met Tina through a mutual friend in the summer after the COVID-19 lockdown, she was drawn to the sense of lightness that surrounded her after the end of a pandemic. Having just come out of a long and emotionally demanding relationship, she approached this new connection with curiosity rather than clear expectations. What began as casual get-togethers and late-night calls, soon turned into regular uncertain contact that lasted for six months. While both agreed that they did not want a relationship, Clara later recognized that she had partly adopted this position to fit Tina's terms and avoid losing her.

As their contact deepened, Clara's emotional involvement increased, while Tina remained distant and inconsistent. She delayed responding to messages, declined invitations to parties, and kept their encounters limited to physical intimacy only. Clara began to feel that affection and initiative came mostly from her side, but she tried to stay patient, in the hopes that the dynamic between them would shift. The relationship gradually took on a trajectory structure, defined by Clara's growing investment and Tina's withdrawal, as efforts to seek clarity led to more uncertainty.

This imbalance intensified when Clara discovered that Tina was still seeing their mutual friend Stacy. At first, she dismissed this as casual, but over time, social media posts showing Tina and Stacy together made her feel more excluded and sidelined. When asked about it, Tina denied any exclusivity with Stacy, insisting that both connections were open. However, by winter, Clara felt that her contact with Tina had become hidden, while the other relationship was openly displayed. As communal friends asked Clara whether she was still with Tina, her answers became lies about her being okay with this arrangement and that they were just casual.

The turning point came when Tina admitted that she and Stacy were now officially a couple but in an open relationship. She suggested continuing to see Clara under this new arrangement, which Clara, still attached to the bond, agreed to at first. She soon recognized that this decision compromised her own boundaries and emotional well-being. The situation left her feeling sidelined and unseen, especially when Tina ignored her request to avoid posting about Stacy online. When Clara finally reinforced her

boundaries, Tina confirmed that she wanted to stay with Stacy instead and contact between them ended shortly after.

In hindsight, Clara interprets this experience as a painful but meaningful step in understanding her boundaries. What began as curiosity and openness turned into a lesson about self-respect and communication. She admitted that she repeatedly adapted to silence instead of expressing her discomfort and that emotional care requires reciprocity. Through reflection, the earlier imbalance evolved into awareness of her own needs, representing a transformation process in which uncertainty was integrated into self-knowledge.

Case – Paula

The situationship between Paula and Fabian lasted around four months and evolved through phases of initial curiosity, emotional entanglement, and eventual consolidation. They met on a dating app just one day before Fabian was due to leave for several weeks of work abroad, which led Paula to expect nothing more than a fleeting encounter. Yet the evening took an unexpected turn: they connected quickly, shared humor and physical attraction, and spent the night together. Paula described the atmosphere as unusually calm and emotionally safe, emphasizing that Fabian's attentiveness and warmth allowed her to feel at ease with aspects of herself that she normally viewed critically.

During his time abroad, they continued speaking daily through calls and messages. Paula appreciated his consistency and emotional openness, while at the same time remaining cautious about the intensity that had developed so quickly. Some of his affectionate messages reminded her of earlier experiences of "love bombing," which made her wary of becoming too dependent on the attention. When Fabian returned, their reunion felt simultaneously familiar and slightly distant. His quietness unsettled her, but his honesty and self-awareness reassured her that the connection between them was genuine, even if its direction was still unclear.

Over the following months, their involvement deepened but remained undefined. Fabian's recurring stress and emotional strain from previous experiences typically shaped the tone of their interactions, and Paula found herself pendling between moments of closeness and frustration. She cared deeply for him but also sensed that the dynamic

was beginning to revolve around his moods. Her repeated efforts to preserve the emotional balance between them gradually gave way to uncertainty and exhaustion. Although she occasionally considered ending their situationship, her growing attachment kept her invested despite the lack of clarity. This unfolding course of events can be understood as a trajectory process, in which emotional involvement intensified while Paula's sense of agency diminished.

As time went on, questions about boundaries and expectations became more unavoidable. While they had initially agreed on an open arrangement, Paula came to the conclusion that she no longer wanted to see other people, while Fabian continued to do so. Hearing about his sexual encounters left her distraught and further destabilized her sense of security within the situationship. During a trip to Berlin, she attempted to test her own position on openness by hooking up with someone else. The experience only reinforced her desire for exclusivity and made her aware that her wants had changed. When she told Fabian, he hesitated, explaining his need for independence, but eventually agreed to exclusivity. His eventual agreement to exclusivity marked a decisive turning point and brought the undefined phase of the situationship to an end.

Only after this clarification did their connection transition into a defined relationship. Paula described feeling calmer and more grounded once expectations and boundaries were made explicit. The labeling of their situationship into a relationship made her feel stable, which stood in sharp contrast to the uncertainty of the preceding months and allowed her to feel an emotional security she had not felt in a long time.

With distance, Paula interprets this period as an important step in her understanding of intimacy. Through the movement from a trajectory of imbalance to a transformation process characterized by reflection and reciprocity, she came to see that openness does not have to entail self-abandonment and that clarity can coexist with vulnerability. The experience became a reference point for how she wishes to approach closeness in the future, teaching her that emotional maturity emerges not from control but from the ability to communicate one's needs without fear of losing connection. Looking back, she saw the situationship as a formative process in which she learned to prioritize her emotional needs and limits more.

Case – Oliver

The connection between Oliver and his partner developed gradually over the course of two to three years, distinguished by a mixture of attraction, avoidance, and repeated attempts to maintain contact despite growing contradictions. They first met during a night out while Oliver was still in a relationship. Although mutual interest was clear, he decided not to pursue it until after his breakup a few months later. Once single, he reconnected with her and what began as casual messaging, soon turned into regular physical meetings. Their encounters took place privately and felt relatively comfortable, but they never spoke openly about their expectations or where their connection was heading. Oliver later described this phase as affectionate but undefined, a way of regaining freedom after his previous relationship.

Over time, the dynamic settled into a pattern of emotional and physical intimacy without commitment. When Oliver moved to Vienna and she remained in Linz, their contact became more irregular and started alternating between visits, messages, and long breaks. He continued seeing other women but avoided discussing it with her as he knew that she had developed stronger feelings for him. He admitted that he was aware of her expectations but avoided confrontation, explaining that he did not want to lose her company or take responsibility for her emotions. This silence allowed their connection to continue, but uncertainty deepened with each cycle of contact and distance.

As months passed, the relationship began to resemble a trajectory process in which phases of closeness alternated with withdrawal and conflict. The imbalance was most visible during nights out, when suppressed emotions surfaced due to alcoholic consumption. She expressed frustration about his behavior, while he responded with humor or distraction to avoid any serious discussion. After each conflict, there was a period in which they broke the contact but resumed it months later, mainly through social media. Oliver acknowledged this repetition as a pattern that neither of them could end. Both remained attached yet unable to communicate honestly about their dissatisfaction in the relationship.

A decisive moment occurred when a mutual acquaintance became involved, and she sent him a picture with a friend of hers he had been seeing behind her back. Although he initially laughed it off, he later acknowledged that his avoidance had turned into

deception and was no longer agreeable with him. After another short period of contact, their communication became strained once again as she continued to hope for commitment, and he would reject any notion of it. Their final argument, which Oliver described as their first honest conversation, ended with mutual recognition that the situation had become harmful for both of them and they should end it completely.

In retrospect, Oliver views his experience as a period of emotional immaturity and evasion. He understands that his reluctance to communicate, which initially was supposed to protect his independence, had instead prolonged the imbalance between them. Through reflection, he came to see that avoiding responsibility can itself become a form of control, shaping the emotional tone of a relationship even without intention. This movement from denial to recognition represents a transformation process, in which he integrated the experience into a clearer sense of accountability.

Case – Hanna

Hanna's situationship lasted around eight months, including three months in person and five months of intermittent long-distance contact. The course of events moved through phases of quick emotional attachment, growing confusion, and eventual disengagement. It began in late April, when she met an exchange student through a dating app. Their early communication was unusually intense, filled with daily messages and declarations of affection before they even met. In person, the connection felt less natural than expected, yet she continued seeing him because the attention felt reassuring, and their bond over text remained strong.

In the following weeks, they met regularly, usually at her apartment late in the evening. Their contact was very private, and he rarely messaged her while he was travelling Austria or meeting friends, something that left her uncertain. When he would return, he would act affectionate again, creating a pattern of distance followed by reassurance. Although Hanna knew his stay was temporary, she became increasingly attached and began to hope for continuity. Once he left the country in July, Hanna tried to reduce contact, but he reached out even more with affectionate messages and promises of the future, inviting her to Thailand to visit him.

She accepted his invitation and visited him for two weeks. During her stay, the imbalance between them became more visible. He was affectionate in private but distant in public, easily irritated, and subsequently very dismissive. Hanna found herself adapting to his moods and suppressing her feelings to avoid conflict. When she confronted him about this, he reacted with self-pity, and she had to comfort him instead of resolving the issue that was raised. This experience made her aware of how much she had compromised her own boundaries.

After returning to Austria, they stayed in touch briefly before his interest faded completely. He claimed his focus had shifted and contact between the two of them ended soon after. Later, Hanna discovered that he had a girlfriend during their entire situationship, which explained the secrecy and emotional inconsistency.

Looking back, Hanna sees the situationship as a difficult but formative experience. She became aware of how quickly she had adjusted to his behavior and ignored her discomfort to preserve closeness. Through reflection, she gained a clearer sense of self-respect and boundary-setting, transforming dependency into awareness. The dominant logic lies in her changing understanding of emotional reciprocity. What began as openness ended in the insight that affection without honesty cannot create stability.

Case – Shelly

Shelly's situationship lasted several months and unfolded through phases of initial emotional safety, growing ambiguity and gradual exhaustion. It emerged in the period following the end of a long-term relationship, which formed an important biographical background for how she interpreted closeness and uncertainty. After breaking up with her ex-partner, Shelly remained in contact with him through texting, meetings and continued sexual intimacy. Although the relationship had formally ended, the ongoing closeness created a sense of familiarity and security for Shelly. Over time, she began to see that this connection only benefited her ex-partner, as it had shifted into an undefined arrangement in which emotional attachment persisted without any commitment.

This prior experience shaped Shelly's expectations when she later became involved with a man from her circle of friends. At first, she rejected the idea of any romantic involvement, believing it would be inappropriate within their shared group, but his

continued effort changed her mind. They began meeting privately, and a first kiss and later intimacy followed. From the outset, both agreed that their connection would not become a relationship, which Shelly experienced as uncomplicated and safe. Yet as their communication became more frequent and routines formed, the line between casual and emotional attachment blurred.

As their contact intensified, routines formed and emotional involvement deepened for both of them, their situationship remained undefined. Shelly increasingly felt that they were enacting many elements of a defined relationship while simultaneously denying its label. Even though she enjoyed the closeness and familiarity, uncertainty began to grow, particularly when she noticed him spending time with other women. While openness had been agreed upon, these situations triggered feelings of jealousy for her. When tensions surfaced, their conflicts were followed by his reassurance, which allowed the connection to continue without resolving its underlying ambiguity.

Over time, this pattern took on the structure of a trajectory process. Emotional involvement intensified while Shelly found it increasingly difficult to articulate her own needs and boundaries. She described accepting situations that caused discomfort in order to preserve their closeness, explaining that the lack of definition made it difficult for her to justify her expectations or demands. The repeated cycle of emotional adjustment gradually left her feeling drained and uncertain about her own position within the situationship. Throughout this period, Shelly stayed in loose contact with her ex-partner, exchanging occasional messages that reminded her of how easily unclear attachments can persist even after separation. Despite this, Shelly explained her own reasons for wanting to stay in her situationship. Her main reason was to not be lonely and have someone to talk to and rely on, even though she knows the connection has an expiration date.

In hindsight, Shelly interprets the situationship as an important experience in understanding her attachment patterns. What initially felt like safety and openness slowly revealed itself as emotional endurance rooted in avoidance of clarity. Through reflection, she recognized that her search for connection had led her to accept ambiguity as a substitute for mutual commitment. This reinterpretation marks a transformation

process, through which she came to redefine intimacy as something that requires reciprocity and clarity rather than prolonged uncertainty.

Case – Fabio

Fabio's account follows a process that moves from curiosity and openness toward avoidance and withdrawal. After several years without dating, he joined a dating app mainly out of interest on what he was missing out on rather than looking for something serious. Once he matched with Wera, a six to eight months situationship developed quickly. In the beginning, their encounters were relaxed and intimate, mainly spent watching shows, cooking together, or talking for hours. The mutual understanding that neither of them wanted a relationship made the connection feel light and uncomplicated, giving Fabio space to explore closeness without pressure.

As the situationship deepened, subtle changes began to appear. His partner began expressing stronger affection through messages, gifts, and gestures of care, while Fabio noticed that his enthusiasm was slowly fading. He described reciprocating her attention more out of politeness than genuine desire and admitted that he regularly avoided conversations about feelings to prevent hurting her. What had started as uncomplicated closeness began to feel demanding, and he sensed a difference in their expectations that neither directly addressed.

As the imbalance grew, the relationship gradually assumed the characteristics of a trajectory process in which Fabio's quiet withdrawal stood in contrast to his partner's growing investment. He observed that she grew jealous and controlling, reacting critically to his social media habits and outings with female friends. These incidents made him feel increasingly restricted, reinforcing his view that they wanted different things from their connection. Although the emotional distance between them became bigger, he delayed ending the contact, explaining that he found it difficult to disappoint and hurt others. The situationship continued largely out of habit, mainly sustained by his reluctance to confront an uncomfortable situation.

A turning point came when the topic of exclusivity was indirectly brought up by her. Fabio realized that she interpreted their connection as a relationship, while he still considered it undefined. Wanting to avoid prolonging confusion, he decided to end their contact but

when he eventually tried to break up, she insisted that they did not need to change anything except the label, which confirmed to him once more that they had fundamentally different views of what was happening. He ended the situationship by text and later met her once more to say goodbye in person, describing the separation as calm and a weight lifted off his shoulders.

In hindsight, Fabio interprets the experience as a lesson in communication and emotional responsibility. He realized that his tendency to be kind out of politeness could send signals of affection and commitment he did not intend. What he understood as empathy was sometimes perceived by the other person as a reciprocal feeling, which prolonged uncertainty for both. Through reflection, he realized that consideration without clear boundaries can blur emotional intentions as much as dishonesty can. Learning from this, Fabio concluded that openness must include the courage to define limits early, even when doing so feels uncomfortable. This movement from avoidance to awareness represents a transformation process, through which he integrated the experience into a clearer understanding of how honesty and boundary-setting are essential for mutual respect and emotional clarity.

Case – Nana

Nana's situationship had lasted around six weeks at the time of the interview and followed a pattern of quick development, emotional hesitation, and growing detachment. She reconnected with an old work colleague on a dating app and within days they went on several dates. Intimacy developed early and Nana described this first phase as easy and spontaneous. They saw each other frequently and stayed in constant contact, enjoying the attention and comfort of regular exchange. The connection felt natural to her, but it remained unspoken that while he was looking for something deeper, she primarily valued the physical aspect of their closeness.

As their meetings became more frequent, the difference in their intentions started to become more visible. He expressed a clear wish to get to know her emotionally and regularly spoke about his feelings, whereas Nana avoided such conversations altogether. She described herself as affectionate in behavior but emotionally distant, preferring to keep things light and physical rather than developing deeper attachment. His openness sometimes made her feel pressured to reciprocate emotionally, which she did not want

to do. Despite noticing that he expected more than she could offer, Nana continued the contact, explaining that she did not want to let him go, even though she remained aware of her own emotional detachment.

The question of exclusivity arose indirectly when he joked that she might be seeing someone else. What began as a light remark turned into a serious conversation, during which Nana clarified that she was not dating anyone else and expected the same from him. He agreed, which temporarily eased her discomfort but also highlighted how differently they defined their connection. For her, exclusivity did not imply emotional commitment, while for him it confirmed that they were moving toward something more serious. At this point, the relationship slowly began to take the form of a trajectory process, marked by increasing emotional imbalance. While he sought emotional reciprocity and reassurance, Nana maintained distance and avoided addressing the mismatch directly.

This imbalance became more pronounced when he left for two-week trip to Morocco. He sent long, detailed messages and tried to maintain closeness by keeping her updated, whereas Nana reacted with growing indifference and doubt. His irregular communication irritated her, but she also admitted that she did not feel strongly enough to confront him. By the time he returned, the initial excitement had faded for her and their contact felt increasingly mechanical. When he asked if she was “playing with him,” she recognized that her detached communication might have appeared ambiguous and unsettling. Although she assured him that she wanted to continue seeing him, she privately knew she did not want to deepen the relationship. Despite this awareness, she did not end the contact, holding on to the possibility that her feelings might still change.

In hindsight, Nana describes the experience as confusing but revealing. She recognized that maintaining closeness while withholding emotional engagement had unintentionally produced mixed signals. What she considered honesty about her limits may have been read by him as temporary hesitation. Through reflection, she came to see that her avoidance of emotional openness not only safeguarded her independence but also prevented any genuine communication about expectations. This reinterpretation indicates a transformation process, through which she integrated the experience into a

clearer understanding of her own boundaries and the importance of mutual transparency in intimate connections.

6.2. Entry into Situationships

The participants described the beginning of their situationship as something that developed gradually rather than through a clear decision. Most accounts showed that these relationships started when participants were open to connection but uncertain about what kind of relationship they wanted. The findings indicate that situationships often grow from everyday interactions that eventually intensified over time due to frequent texting, spontaneous meetups, or spending increasing amounts of time together without any explicit talk about what the relationship meant.

Throughout the interviews, three broad patterns became visible. The first involved transitional contexts in which participants entered new or unstable life phases that made defined commitments feel out of place. The second pattern centered around curiosity and experimentation, where students approached intimacy as something to explore rather than formalize. The third pattern reflected the role of digital acceleration, as constant communication on apps and messaging platforms created emotional closeness faster than boundaries could be discussed.

These pathways illustrate how participants encountered relational ambiguity as part of their daily realities. The following section begins with the first of these patterns, focusing on how transitional phases created the emotional and social conditions under which situationships emerged.

Transitional Phases

When participants described how their situationships began, in numerous instances they determined these beginnings in phases of transition and personal change. These were moments when everyday life felt unstable and when students were still trying to find new emotional or social balance. Such transitions included moving to a new city, beginning or ending a relationship, or adjusting to new studies or work environments. Under these conditions, not defining the relationship seemed appropriate and even

necessary. Just as Arnett (2000) implied, ambiguity matched the broader sense of openness and uncertainty that characterized the students' stages of life.

A common pattern was their entry into a situationship after a breakup. Several participants described being emotionally exhausted but still wanting connection and care. They wanted to feel close to someone again without facing the intensity of a new commitment. In this phase, situationships functioned as a way to stay emotionally connected while avoiding the vulnerability that comes with defining expectations too early. One participant expressed this need clearly: *"Because of the relationship I had before, I really didn't feel like having another relationship right after, I just wanted to live life a little"* (Oliver, L.255-256). His statement captures the sense of wanting something easy, while also protecting himself at the same time.

These participants in particular, emphasized that what they missed was not the relationship label itself, but the ordinary companionship that comes with it. They wanted someone to share their daily experiences with, someone who would listen and offer support. Shelly described this feeling when she said, *"I need someone that listens to me, because a lot of things happen during the day, like stuff at work, someone annoys you, or something along those lines, and you just kind of need a person you can talk with."* (Shelly, L.269-271). Her words illustrate how the desire for emotional exchange and stability persisted even when a formal partnership felt too demanding. In her case, the situationship filled that gap by providing closeness, care, and routine communication without the pressure to fully commit.

Another recurring transitional context was relocation and the uncertainty of upcoming changes. Students who had recently moved to a new city or were about to leave, described how this instability shaped their decisions to be in a situationship. Starting university, preparing for internships, or planning to study abroad made the future feel uncertain. In this situation, entering a defined relationship felt out of sync with their mobility and openness to change. Gio captured this tension when he reflected on why he avoided commitment:

"I was probably going to move countries or move cities at least to do an internship or to pursue my professional career or even to study somewhere else, so that was a

problem point, I guess, but aside from those criteria and my emotional unreadiness to settle down as well, I was not really ready for a relationship” (Gio, L.33-37).

His explanation shows how life transitions and emotional unpreparedness are combined to make an undefined relationship feel more realistic in that moment, than a traditional partnership. Participants who entered situationships during such transitional periods often said that these connections provided them with stability in times of change. Regular meetings, shared meals, or simple check-ins created a sense of normality when other parts of life were still uncertain. Even though they were aware that these relationships might not last, the emotional consistency they offered was valuable. These experiences gave participants a sense of balance while their routines, environments, and identities were still taking shape. At this point in their stories, ambiguity appeared as a practical and adaptive response to their life transitions.

Curiosity and Distraction

Not all students entered situationships during periods of instability. For some, the appeal of this undefined form of connection lay in its openness and flexibility. These participants described their involvement as an intentional choice to explore intimacy without any fixed expectations. Situationships offered a way to experiment, to learn about themselves, and to bring variety into phases of life that felt routine or predictable. In their accounts, the absence of clear boundaries and expectations was not experienced as confusing or limiting but as a condition that made exploration possible.

Curiosity commonly appeared among participants who felt they had little previous experience with dating or romantic relationships. They compared themselves to peers who had already been through multiple relationships or casual encounters. This sense of difference did not create anxiety, but rather a mild awareness of having “missed out” on something typical for their age group. Entering a situationship became a way to gain that experience and to understand how dating worked in practice. Fabio explained this motivation when he said, *“I didn't really date much [...] I was like okay I should probably do it. I also want to kind of like see how dating is like” (Fabio, L.5-8)*

In Fabio's story, curiosity and self-development were closely interlinked. His situationship was not primarily about emotional dependence but about gaining social

and relational knowledge. It allowed him to explore intimacy in a way that felt both new and manageable. Therefore, the lack of fixed rules suited his initial goal well. The open structure of the situationship provided him with enough distance to protect his independence, while still giving him the opportunity to experience closeness. The flexible nature of online dating further reinforced this exploratory mindset. Fabio described how he constructed his dating profile to reflect both openness and caution:

“I just wanted to have fun you know and also on bumble there are options what you're looking for, and my option was: it's like nothing serious but I'm open to something more. Just in case. Because I wanted nothing serious, but I was like, if I just tried only fun then I'm gonna get random people and not actually dating experience, which is maybe kind of mean for people who look for something more serious” (Fabio, L.45-50)

His description illustrates how participants navigated the tension between experimentation and responsibility. They wanted experiences that felt real, but still remained within their control. Ambiguity allowed them to explore without fully committing, offering the chance to learn about intimacy while managing emotional risk.

For others, the main motivation was distraction rather than curiosity. One participant, who was living in her small hometown at the time of the situationship, described how boredom and repetition pushed her to look for change. She contacted a stranger online without a clear intention beyond wanting something to happen. Reflecting on it, she said: *“At the time I was just really going for feeling something exciting, something I'm not supposed to do” (Donna, L. 24-25)*. Her experience shows how the desire for stimulation and novelty could turn into a spontaneous pursuit of connection. The situationship provided intensity and secrecy that contrasted with the monotony of her everyday life. Because no expectations were defined, she could act freely without the need to explain or justify herself. The undefined character of the situationship gave her both excitement and a temporary sense of control.

Curiosity and distraction thus worked as active motivations for entering ambiguous relationships. In such cases, participants presented themselves as making situational choices that fit their personal aims at that moment. They sought experiences that were emotionally engaging yet flexible enough to remain manageable. Ambiguity functioned

as a framework that made this possible. It allowed them to connect, to learn, and to feel something new without surrendering autonomy.

Digital Acceleration

While some participants located the beginnings of their situationships in transitional phases or in a deliberate search for distraction, many emphasized the impact of digital communication on the development of their emotional attachment. Messaging apps, Instagram, and dating platforms were not described as the cause of these relationships but as the medium that shaped their pace and intensity. Constant accessibility, quick feedback, and emotionally charged exchanges condensed the process of getting to know someone. What might once have taken weeks of gradual encounters, now unfolded within days of continuous online interaction, creating a sense of closeness that felt immediate and complete.

Participants explained that this constant digital connection blurred the line between casual contact and emotional attachment. The early stage of texting was described as already resembling a relationship, as the rhythm of communication was so steady that any pause became noticeable. Luna remembered:

“We like texted each other, and we did that relatively intensely. Like the entire time. It was really intense over like two months, it was really just continuous texting 24/7 and a ton was just about our lives. Every day he knew what I was up to and I knew what he was up to, so yeah, we kind of knew everything about each other.” (Luna, L.16-20)

Her description shows how the frequency of messaging replaced the slower process of building intimacy offline. The constant exchange of details about daily routines created a feeling of familiarity and mutual knowledge that resembled closeness, even when both had met only a few times in person.

Other participants described how online interaction not only accelerated intimacy but also influenced its emotional tone. Warm and playful language, emojis, and affectionate nicknames appeared early in conversations and gave them a sense of lighthearted romance. One student explained how quickly her online exchanges took on this character:

“We started like texting on Tinder, and we texted for like a week and it already went into like this very cutesy, lots of compliments and like flirting, and I think we also started calling each other like baby and stuff before we even met [...] I felt closer to him over text than I did in person [...] but I thought you know what, I’m just gonna see where it goes because like he was really pretty and we got along so well over text” (Hanna, L.5-18)

For Hanna, the tone of online communication created warmth and a sense of connection that felt genuine to her. The emotional rhythm of the messages mattered more than the content itself.

Additionally, the structure of dating apps encouraged quick transitions from messaging to meeting and from meeting to emotional or physical involvement. Several participants described this pattern as exciting because it gave the impression of immediate compatibility. One participant summarized how “things evolved very quickly” with consecutive dates and early sleepovers after just a few days of contact (Nana, L.6–7). These accounts highlight how online interaction provided both the setting and the momentum for forming situationships. The speed of communication created a rhythm of emotional involvement that left little time for reflection. Constant availability through digital channels felt reassuring, especially after breakups or during relocation. Being able to reach someone at any time countered feelings of loneliness and uncertainty. However, the same qualities that made online contact comforting also made it fragile. Since the relationship developed primarily through screens, participants struggled to assess its actual depth. Delayed replies or short periods of silence could feel disproportionately meaningful, and the transition from online to offline communication sometimes revealed inconsistencies that were overlooked in the flow of daily messages.

Digital acceleration, therefore, shaped both the form and the experience of early intimacy. Online interaction allowed students to experience closeness while key aspects of the relationship remained undefined. The continuous exchange created a feeling of connection without requiring negotiation about what it meant.

Conclusion

Across the narratives, students interpreted the beginnings of their situationships as experiences that matched the rhythms and uncertainties of their everyday lives. They

understood the absence of clear expectations as situationally appropriate, not as confusing. Whether these connections began during life transitions or through curiosity, participants framed their entry as a realistic and fitting response to their personal circumstances. Entering an undefined relationship was often explained as a way to balance emotional needs with autonomy. Participants emphasized self-awareness and control when they said they were “not ready” or “seeing where it goes”. These expressions reveal how students interpreted uncertainty as a manageable condition that allowed them to explore closeness without immediate commitment.

Digital communication reinforced this interpretation by giving emotional closeness a sense of safety and availability. Constant contact was seen as evidence of care and mutual interest, even when the relationship itself lacked structure. In this way, technology helped create intimacy without clear negotiation of expectations.

Taken together, these results show that students both chose and drifted into situationships as ways of handling intimacy under shifting life conditions. They made sense of openness as either a deliberate choice or a gradual outcome of everyday interaction. In both versions, uncertainty was integrated into how they explained and justified their experiences. The next chapter examines how these meanings evolved over time, focusing on how participants managed communication, silence, and boundaries once uncertainty became an ongoing condition rather than a temporary phase.

6.3. Ambiguity and Boundaries

Across interviews, exclusivity was the most clearly defined boundary within a situationship. Many participants reported explicit agreements about sexual exclusivity, meaning that sexual intimacy was restricted to the two individuals involved in the situationship. At the same time, these agreements rarely extended to emotional or relational exclusivity, as these aspects were deliberately left ambiguous. Participants often stated that they were in principle free to get to know other people, even though such situations frequently led to discomfort, jealousy and a renewed desire for clarification of the situationship.

Despite a limited amount of established boundaries, some still remained unclear, especially regarding the overall status of the situationship and the range of behaviors

which were considered acceptable in such a relationship form. Unclear boundaries referred to the absence of explicit agreements about what the relationship constituted and where it was going. This included a lack of shared understanding regarding how to behave within the relationship, what could be expected from the other person and which boundaries should not be crossed. Since these issues were rarely communicated openly, expectations remained unclear and had to be negotiated implicitly through ongoing interaction, with each relationship developing its own set of informal rules. Ambiguity in this sense, meant that participants lacked shared reference points for drawing boundaries and therefore remained uncertain about what they were “allowed” to do or ask for. This uncertainty extended to relational practices such as holding hands in public, frequent texting, pet names, romantic dates, sleeping over, meeting friends or family, or just generally being seen together openly. Especially, since some of these behaviors were at times acceptable and at other times not, leading to uncertainty.

These unclear boundaries and shifting expectations influenced how participants communicated, what they asked for, and which lines they tried to draw. They did not experience the lack of clarity as a passive condition, but as something that required ongoing work. Ambiguity was actively managed by staying silent to avoid conflict, postponing conversations about defining the relationship or selectively setting limits.

This chapter examines how students lived with and maintained this openness. It focuses on the meanings and strategies they developed to keep intimacy intact, when the “rules” of the relationship were too uncertain.

Silencing of Needs

One of the clearest ways students described managing uncertainty was through silence. Many said they wanted more attention, recognition or clarity, but decided not to express these wishes. In their stories, silence was not simply absent but a deliberate practice that helped preserve their fragile bond. Speaking openly felt risky, while holding back appeared safe. Through this pattern, uncertainty became sustained by communication habits in which restraint replaced direct expression.

Participants frequently justified this self-silencing as a practical choice. Silence became both a coping strategy and a relationship norm that defined what could and could not be

said. Shelly described this mechanism clearly when reflecting on how she reconnected with her ex-partner, even though their new arrangement no longer matched what she wanted:

“For me, what I had with my ex, I slid into it [the situationship]. Because I had a clear goal of what I wanted, but I still wanted his closeness, of course, because I loved him. I was content with what he gave me, at least he gave me anything. And because of that, I slid into it, I lowered my standards and just thought, yeah okay, at least I’m in contact with him, at least he won’t leave me, at least he’s not with other girls” (Shelly, L.249-251)

Shelly described her silence as an act of self-protection. By accepting minimal attention, she secured continued contact and avoided completely losing him. This quiet compromise allowed stability but required emotional effort and lowered expectations. Her interpretation shows how uncertainty was maintained through emotional restraint that she justified as sensible and even necessary.

Clara described a similar dynamic. Having fallen for someone who was also involved with another woman, she consciously suppressed her needs so she could stay close to her partner:

“I really had no demands, if I am being honest. I was honestly putting all my needs completely aside, because I was so in love with her, to the point I honestly told her, you can stay together [with the other woman] like we can just stay the way it is now, just casual” (Clara, L.104-108)

For Clara, silence was a deliberate act of maintenance. She sensed that expressing desire for exclusivity could end the connection, so she withheld what she felt and accepted an arrangement that conflicted with her own wishes. Her silence turned into emotional regulation: a constant effort to appear composed and agreeable so that closeness would not be withdrawn. When her partner later suggested keeping things open, Clara reacted in the same way once more. Instead of objecting, she quickly adjusted to preserve the bond, telling others that the situation felt fine even though it did not. Her experience illustrates how silence extended beyond speech into self-

management. Containing emotions became a way to keep intimacy alive, even when it meant pushing her own needs aside.

Other participants described similar forms of restraint. They minimized jealousy, made excuses for their partner's cancellations, or positioned themselves as understanding to appear undemanding. Many described the ongoing effort to appear composed, adaptable, and relaxed. Some referred to this attitude as being "chill" or "low maintenance", qualities they associated with being an attractive or modern partner. This performance of ease helped them maintain connection but also reproduced the very lack of clarity that caused their discomfort.

Oliver's account showed this same pattern from the opposing perspective. Reflecting on his past situationship, he explained how his partner's quiet acceptance kept their relationship going:

"I just did my shit, we vaguely talked about things, or we didn't at all. She always overlooked what she suspected or looked away rather, because she liked me and still wanted to spend time with me" (Oliver, L.87-89)

Oliver understood that his partner's avoidance helped sustain the bond. Her willingness to overlook doubts reflected the same type of emotional containment that others described in themselves. Unclear boundaries persisted because both sides contributed to maintaining them. One withheld honesty and the other depended on that restraint to keep the relationship comfortable.

The silencing of needs illustrates how students made uncertainty bearable in everyday life. They managed openness, not by resolving it, but by adapting to it. Quiet endurance and emotional control became shared practices that preserved closeness while masking imbalance. This strategy kept intimacy intact but required continuous self-discipline and emotional effort.

Avoidance of Clarity

If the silencing of needs captured the internal side of self-restraint, the avoidance of clarity shows how uncertainty was sustained through everyday interaction. Participants explained that conversations about exclusivity, commitment or the future were

postponed, redirected or never occurred in the first place. They described how lack of definition became part of their daily life through small, repeated choices such as waiting, staying calm and steering away from uncomfortable topics. This avoidance was an active effort to protect closeness and prevent conflict.

For many, avoidance was experienced as caution rather than evasion. Participants emphasized that addressing expectations too early could upset the fragile balance or make them appear demanding. Their partners commonly expressed similar hesitations, saying they were not ready, were uncertain about the future, or preferred to “see where things go”. Accepting these statements without any challenge became a shared way of maintaining peace in the situationship.

Shelly’s retelling illustrates this dynamic well. Her situationship began with an ex-partner and although emotional and physical closeness returned quickly, definition did not. She recalled how he wanted to continue seeing her without naming the relationship:

“He liked that we saw each other, he liked that we met up. He also asked, can we have sex without a relationship? And I was really shocked. Because I thought to myself, huh? So, you do want to do everything that you do in a relationship anyway. You just don't want to have that title [...] Because if you treat someone badly in a situationship, nobody cares. Like no society will judge you for it, nobody will speak badly about you for it [...] But in a relationship, if you say yes, you treated me badly, then everyone will judge you. You're just under a lot more pressure. And I think he just didn't want that anymore.”
(Shelly, L.116-127)

Shelly explained that her partner wanted the comfort and intimacy of a relationship without the label that would make him accountable for his actions. In her view, the absence of definition allowed him to avoid responsibility while still receiving emotional and physical closeness. She recognized that this imbalance left her exposed to uncertainty, while he maintained control over distance and commitment.

Similar patterns appeared across other accounts, where postponement became routine. Participants described moments when serious topics surfaced but were quickly turned into jokes or ignored. Some admitted that they also contributed to this pattern to maintain

comfort. They described laughing off questions, changing the subject, or downplaying feelings to keep the atmosphere light. Avoidance thus became a cooperative act in which both sides participated in keeping things stable by leaving key issues unresolved. Oliver's experience demonstrates how this pattern could also extend over long periods of time. His situationship followed a cycle of closeness and withdrawal in which neither of them pushed for clarity. However, when his partner would approach the topic, he would deliberately stall the conversation to avoid discomfort:

"I just kind of stalled it [the conversation] and just wanted to chill out a bit. To be honest, this happened repeatedly, since the whole thing went on for a very long time. When I look back on it now, it was like a cycle that just kept repeating itself." (Oliver, L.83-86)

Oliver's description shows that avoidance was not passive but sustained through repetition. Each time a moment of definition approached, he delayed it and over time the postponement itself became a structure. The ongoing act of not deciding, allowed the relationship to continue while keeping expectations under control.

Participants additionally described the emotion work that accompanied this pattern. They monitored moods, interpreted silences, and searched for signs of attention or withdrawal. Without explicit discussion, they relied on small gestures to gauge closeness. Each encounter became a subtle test of whether interest remained or distance had grown. Avoidance transformed tension into an everyday interpretive task, instead of resolving it. Over time, this pattern was described as normal. The absence of defining conversations no longer seemed temporary but part of the relationship's rhythm. Staying vague became a mutual understanding that preserved calm. It created an atmosphere that felt safe yet stagnant, a space where intimacy persisted, but growth was blocked. As this ongoing avoidance solidified, participants began to find other ways of managing their relationships. Instead of seeking full clarity, they tried sustaining boundaries around specific aspects of closeness. These selective boundaries offered a sense of control within a situation that otherwise felt open-ended. The next subsection examines these selective boundary settings, showing how students actively regulated

intimacy and distance to keep the connection stable while protecting themselves from disappointment.

Selective Boundary-Setting

Selective Boundary-Setting

As uncertainty became part of everyday life, participants described finding ways to keep control over how close or distant they allowed themselves to be. Rather than drawing one clear line, students described boundaries as flexible markers that were continuously adjusted. These selective boundaries were reinforced when tension grew, softened when attachment returned, and changed according to the mood or circumstances of the situationship. Through this form of regulation, participants maintained the connection while trying to protect themselves from disappointment.

In practice, selective boundary settings meant managing closeness through small, reversible actions. Some reduced communication for a few days, others postponed meeting up or avoided emotional topics. When these limits felt too restrictive, they were lifted again. Boundaries were not fixed decisions but moving points of balance that allowed participants to cope with conflicting desires for intimacy and autonomy.

Shelly's experience illustrates this pattern clearly. Her involvement with her current situationship follows a cycle of anger and reconciliation. She described how she repeatedly forgives him, even though she would not under more serious circumstances:

"I keep saying, yeah, okay, whatever, it's nothing serious anyway, it doesn't matter. And that's shit too, because I don't set any boundaries for myself, like how badly can he screw up before I finally draw the line? Because I don't even know what this is. I keep thinking, yeah, okay, whatever, because he can get away with it. But actually, he can't get away with it, even if we don't have a label [...] How am I bending my standards so much in a situationship? Because in a relationship, I'm really strict. In a relationship, this wouldn't work." (Shelly, L.77-89)

Shelly's description shows how boundaries existed more in theory than in practice. Telling herself that "it's nothing serious" helped her minimize conflict and continue the relationship. Setting and crossing limits became a way to manage emotional tension:

withdrawing temporarily to regain control, then reconnecting when distance felt too heavy.

Fabio's story shows another version of this pattern. His situationship resembled a relationship in daily life. He and his partner met regularly, were publicly dating, shared routines, and were physically intimate, yet he continued to describe the bond as "not serious". The gap between his words and actions created boundaries that were more verbal than real. When he tried to end the relationship, his attempt revealed how fragile these limits were:

"I took the initiative and was like, I can't keep going like this, because I feel like you like me more than I like you. Like, I feel like you see this as a relationship, and for me it's not, and I can't do it. That's where I tried to break it off, and she said no, and then we just kept it going." (Fabio, L.422-425)

His effort to end contact immediately dissolved into continuation. The boundary existed as an intention but not as a sustained change. His narrative highlights how selective limits at times marked discomfort without transforming the relationship itself.

While Fabio's boundaries remained mostly verbal, others managed their uncertainty through emotional adjustment rather than an explicit talk. Vanny, for instance, described narrowing and expanding her limits. After discovering that her partner had kissed someone else, she decided to continue seeing him, but with lowered expectations. In her account, moments of reassurance, such as when he texted regularly or made small gestures of affection, briefly restored her sense of security. Yet as soon as his behavior became distant or inconsistent, doubts resurfaced. These shifts repeated over time, creating what she called "whiplash": alternating phases of calm and anxiety, depending on how attentive he seemed. To cope with this cycle, Vanny adjusted her own expectations. When she felt neglected, she tried to step back and tell herself not to care as much. When he reappeared or showed interest, she softened again and allowed closeness. Her boundaries were therefore fluid, influenced by how much confirmation she received from him. This constant recalibration gave her temporary stability but also kept her emotionally dependent on his next move.

For Conny, selective boundary settings appeared in their effort to interpret their partner's inconsistent behavior. Weeks that resembled a relationship alternated with distant periods that they had to decode by themselves. Due to the lack of communication in the situation, Conny learned to read small signals of closeness or withdrawal:

“I had to become more hyper-vigilant and figure out myself what is going on [...] Like sometimes I could tell by a hug if she was feeling distant or close again, if she's pushing for more distance or not, and that was the only way for me to tell” (Conny, L. 214-219)

Their description shows how boundaries were maintained through observation rather than dialogue. They adjusted their behavior according to subtle cues, using attentiveness as their main form of control.

Selective boundary setting emerged as a way to stay connected under unclear conditions. Participants used breaks, emotional restraint, or temporary withdrawal to create a sense of control, but they rarely maintained these limits for long. Each adjustment offered relief but also reintroduced uncertainty once contact resumed. In this way, boundary work did not resolve instability but kept it manageable enough to continue living with it.

Conclusion

According to the participants, living with uncertainty requires ongoing negotiation of communication, emotion and self-presentation. Students did not describe ambiguity as something that simply happened to them; they described how they worked to make it bearable.

Three recurring strategies became visible. The first was the silencing of needs, in which participants withheld emotions or desires to prevent conflict and preserve closeness. This restraint gave them temporary security but relied on the suppression of what they wanted. The second strategy was the avoidance of clarity, where defining conversations were postponed or redirected. Staying vague created calm and kept both sides comfortable, even as it reinforced the imbalance between them. Finally, selective boundary settings showed how participants used small, flexible adjustments to regulate closeness and distance. These limits provided a sense of control, yet were rarely sustained once the connection felt at risk.

Through these strategies, they managed openness through communication patterns, emotional regulation, and shifting limits that balanced autonomy with attachment. Ambiguity, in this sense, was not the absence of action but the result of many small, deliberate choices to keep relationships functioning without commitment.

The following chapter explores what these efforts meant to participants over time. It examines how they interpreted acknowledgment, attention, and public recognition within situationships, and how visibility shaped their sense of being valued or overlooked.

6.4. Recognition and Visibility

Visibility and recognition were central to how students understood uncertainty in their situationships. What made a connection feel real was not only what happened in private, but also whether it could be acknowledged in everyday life. Being introduced to friends, included in plans, or simply mentioned in conversation made the relationship appear legitimate and meaningful. When such gestures were missing, participants regularly interpreted this absence as a sign of invisibility or emotional distance. Recognition, therefore, operated as a form of validation. It indicated who counted and how secure their place within the relationship felt.

The following analysis explores three ways in which visibility and recognition shaped participants' experiences. First, it looks at hidden relationships, where being hidden became an accepted condition of intimacy. Second, it examines unequal visibility, in which acknowledgment was given selectively and reflected an imbalance in the situationship. Third, it considers temporary recognition, where visibility appeared briefly and functioned as a fragile source of reassurance.

Hidden Relationships

Some participants described relationships that remained almost entirely private. Their partners avoided public acknowledgment and their relationship mainly took place in private spaces. For these students, invisibility was not simply a side effect, but an established boundary that established what the relationship was allowed to be.

Hanna's story is a good example here. She recalled knowing that her partner wanted to keep their connection secret and even asked him directly if she should pretend not to know him in public. His answer confirmed what she had already suspected:

"I was like should I pretend I don't know you? Because I knew, he wanted to keep our thing [situationship] behind closed doors. Like I didn't fully know why, but I even suggested should I pretend I don't know you, and he was like yeah, please." (Hanna, L.266-268)

For Hanna, this moment defined the rules of their relationship. There was no negotiation or attempt to challenge his preference. Instead, she accepted that remaining unseen was a part of what kept the connection possible. This acceptance gave her a sense of stability but also required her to limit her expectations. She explained that the lack of visibility gradually shaped how much she allowed herself to hope for, saying that she adjusted to what was offered rather than asking for more.

This sense of adaptation was common among participants who found themselves in hidden arrangements. They learned to balance the comfort of ongoing contact with the discomfort of invisibility. Concealment was not always experienced as immediate rejection but as a subtle agreement about what could and could not be shared with others. Yet as other accounts show, once invisibility began to extend beyond mutual agreement and became tied to emotional withdrawal, it started to signal inequality rather than protection.

Luna's experience for example, shows how invisibility came together with emotional withdrawal. Her partner repeatedly cancelled meetings, avoided planning ahead, and left her uncertain about whether they would see each other all the time. Over time, she interpreted this as proof of emotional distance:

"I kept getting the feeling that he just didn't want us to be seen together. [...] And then I started dating someone else, because I just couldn't stand this uncertainty anymore, because it triggered extreme insecurities in me. I really felt so insecure with him, because I always had the feeling that he doesn't even want to see me, he doesn't want to be seen with me, he doesn't even like me, he won't even take me on dates. I felt worthless." (Luna, L.130-132/171-176)

Luna's story shows how visibility and emotional care became inseparable. Being seen in public would have confirmed belonging, while concealment implied rejection for her. The absence of any acknowledgment led her to question not only the nature of the relationship, but also her own standing within it. Her interpretation of feeling invisible was not simply about appearance but about what it symbolized, whether she was worth showing and whether her partner's reluctance to do so revealed something about his emotional investment. For her, public recognition and private attention were intertwined; both were measures of care. The lack of either, gradually transformed uncertainty into self-doubt.

Selective Recognition

This understanding of visibility as a social signal becomes even clearer when compared to Clara's experience, where recognition was not completely absent but unevenly distributed. Instead of being entirely hidden, Clara witnessed her partner granting visibility to someone else while keeping her private. This contrast made the inequality unmistakable: one relationship was legitimized through public affection, while the other remained confined to secrecy.

"I was also just standing there, in a larger circle of friends, kind of a bit like a side chick, and a lot of our friends knew that I was somehow still in the picture, like a third wheel. And still they kept presenting their love the entire time, and that was a really shitty feeling." (Clara, L.115-119).

Clara's experience demonstrates how visibility functions as a form of power within ambiguous relationships. The partner who controls what can be shown also controls how legitimate each bond appears. Public recognition becomes a symbolic resource that confirms one person's importance while diminishing another's. Unlike Luna, who struggled with uncertainty in private, Clara's invisibility was performed in front of others, turning her emotional marginalization into a shared social reality. Her position was not only emotionally painful but also publicly defined.

The contrast between these stories shows how visibility evolved from an internal boundary to an external marker of status. What began as discretion could easily become exclusion and once comparison entered the social space, invisibility took on a different emotional weight. And still, not all participants described visibility as entirely absent or

unequal. Some experienced it inconsistently, appearing in brief moments that offered reassurance before fading again.

Conclusion

Visibility emerged as a central way in which students made sense of uncertainty in their situationships. Recognition was not only about being cared for but about being acknowledged in a social world. When intimacy remained private, participants frequently questioned its legitimacy. Being seen together, introduced to friends or included in plans gave the connection substance, while invisibility reduced it to something easily denied.

The different forms of visibility described, revealed how relational value was communicated and controlled. Recognition functioned as a social resource that could affirm or diminish a person's place within the situationship. The power to grant or withhold it shaped how participants interpreted their own importance, exposing the social dimension of what otherwise appeared as private uncertainty. Visibility, therefore, made the boundaries of intimacy tangible. It determined who was allowed to be part of a partner's public life and who remained outside it. Through these dynamics, participants learned to read small gestures of acknowledgment as confirmation of belonging, even when they were inconsistent or temporary. The fragility of recognition showed that uncertainty was not only emotional but structured through everyday acts of inclusion and exclusion.

This chapter has shown that being visible meant being validated, while invisibility produced doubt and dependence. The next section builds on this understanding by examining how this uneven recognition translated into emotional hierarchies and patterns of control within participants' experiences.

6.5. Emotional Labor and Unequal Investment

Once unclear boundaries and expectations became part of their daily lives, participants no longer described uncertainty as something they simply endured. They spoke of the effort required to manage it and the emotional and practical work of keeping closeness intact when stability was missing. This chapter examines how that work unfolded in practice and how it affected those who carried it.

Withdrawal as Burden-Shifting

Participants recalled how imbalance in their situationships typically developed through recurring patterns of withdrawal. These moments did not occur randomly but followed a recognizable pattern. Whenever one partner sought more closeness, asked for clarity, or tried to discuss the relationship, the other tended to pull away. As such withdrawal represented more than absence; it was a response to emotional intensity that shifted the work of maintaining the relationship predominantly onto one side.

Across several accounts, participants said that attempts to talk about expectations were commonly met with silence or evasion. Oliver remembered how he consciously avoided conversations that might have required him to justify his behavior or define his intentions:

“Yes, I would say that the whole thing was simply cleverly avoided, because, mainly on my side, there was no interest in a conversation like that. I just knew at the time, even if such a conversation were to take place, I would have to justify myself for things for which, at that time, I saw no reason why I should have to justify myself. I didn't make any promises to anyone. I didn't say to anyone, okay, yes, this or that. I just did what I wanted without taking anyone into consideration.” (Oliver, L.265-271).

Oliver's explanation shows how withdrawal could serve as a way to maintain control. By refusing to engage, he preserved autonomy while transferring the emotional burden of uncertainty to his partner. Avoidance kept the situationship intact but only because someone else carried the work of communication and reassurance. Withdrawal acted as both a signal and a strategy. It interrupted the connection of the situationship, while also prompting action from the other side. Participants recognized that silence carried meaning and that it demanded a response. The one who withdrew could reassert control by letting the other partner compensate for the distance. In this way, ambiguity did not simply persist but was actively maintained through uneven responsibility.

For some, this imbalance extended beyond emotional contact to everyday organization. Partners who disengaged emotionally also decided when and how meetings would occur. Nadia described how her partner's lack of flexibility structured their time together and reflected his broader disinterest in reciprocity:

“He wasn't flexible at all, instead he expected extreme flexibility from me, that I would adapt to him. If I fit into his time or plan, then that was just fine, but it wasn't an active priority for him to see me or do anything with me.” (Nadia, L.174-178)

Nadia's description shows how withdrawal could operate through routine decisions about time and planning. By determining when contact was possible, her partner controlled both the rhythm and the quality of the relationship. She adjusted her own schedule to maintain closeness, while he contributed little to its continuity. This asymmetry transformed everyday organization into an extension of emotional imbalance, something that many of the participants recalled.

Withdrawal was one of the main ways uncertainty was reproduced. It often appeared when relationships approached moments of definition, functioning as a form of resistance that prevented further commitment. Each act of retreat shifted responsibility for repair and reassurance onto the other person. The result was an uneven distribution of emotional labor, wherein one partner managed connection through silence, and the other managed it through constant effort. This imbalance laid the foundation for what participants later described as compensatory work: the ongoing attempts to keep relationships intact despite unequal investment.

Effects of One-Sided Effort

As situationships became increasingly unbalanced, participants described how maintaining them affected their emotional and mental well-being. What began as small gestures of care or reassurance gradually developed into a form of emotion work that drained their energy and confidence. The more responsibility they took on for sustaining the relationship, the more they felt the consequences of acting alone. The effects of one-sided effort appeared as exhaustion, anxiety and resignation, each reflecting a different way of coping with ongoing instability.

Conny's narrative illustrates how emotional labor could accumulate slowly through daily communication. They explained that they became constantly alert to their partner's reactions, trying to choose words and tone carefully to avoid rejection or conflict. Over time, this carefulness turned into fatigue:

“[I was feeling] exhausted on one part because why am I doing the emotional labor of two people here? Why is it that I have to communicate for the both of us? And anxious on the other side because what if this conversation leads to this feeling of rejection again, what if this is the last time we discuss it, and then it just ends?” (Conny, L.240-243).

Conny’s reflection shows how ongoing effort blurred the line between care and fear. Conny was not only managing conversation but also trying to regulate their own emotions to prevent their partner from distancing herself. Each attempt to maintain closeness carried the risk of rejection, which made every interaction emotionally charged. Conny’s exhaustion stemmed from this dual task of sustaining both communication and composure. The sense of responsibility for the entire relationship produced anxiety rather than security.

Where Conny still acted through communication, Hanna’s experience shows what happened when that effort could no longer continue outwardly. When her partner stopped responding altogether, she described entering a state of immobilized waiting that affected her ability to focus on anything else:

“I felt really anxious, like sometimes I literally had full-on like breakdowns about it [...] It made me so crazy, and the thing is, when I’m so anxious as well, I can’t do anything else. Like I would just lay in bed and be on TikTok because I can’t do uni, I can’t study, I can’t do work, I can’t do anything. So, I would just be on standby, like wondering in my mind what happened for him to stop talking to me again” (Hanna, L.338-353).

Hanna’s description highlights the psychological cost of one-sided effort when active strategies to preserve the bond failed. The situationship continued to occupy her attention even in silence. Waiting became a form of work, replacing messages and conversations with endless monitoring and speculation. Her energy turned inward, directed toward maintaining hope in the absence of response. The absence of reciprocity did not release participants from effort; it transformed effort into waiting, worrying and imagining. In this sense, the work of sustaining the relationship continued within them.

Over time, some participants tried to regain control over this imbalance by changing how they related to it emotionally. Rather than allowing anxiety to dominate them, they sought

ways to protect themselves from its intensity. This shift did not necessarily resolve the imbalance but altered its expression instead. It marked a movement from restless endurance toward quiet adaptation, a way to live with uncertainty by reshaping one's own standards. Stefanie's account shows this adjustment:

"I think I just tried to be a cool girl, to chill out a bit and not let him get too close to me. And I knew that he was really busy. And then I also tried to be really busy. And I think, I just tried to get used to the bare minimum even though I wanted more."
(Stefanie, L.391-395)

Her narrative shows how one-sided effort could also take the form of adaptation. By mirroring her partner's detachment, she turned endurance into a form of emotional regulation. Rather than pushing for reciprocity, she worked on suppressing her own desires to maintain balance. What Hanna experienced as anxiety, Stefanie experienced as discipline. Both forms reveal the inner reorganization that participants underwent to preserve connections that no longer offered mutual engagement.

These accounts are some of the narratives that reveal how one-sided effort shaped participants' inner lives. Continued investment in uncertain relationships produced exhaustion, anxiety and self-restriction, which became normalized through repetition. Emotional labor was not limited to communication; it extended into thinking, waiting, and self-adjustment. Participants internalized instability as a personal task, convincing themselves that calmness, patience, or lowered expectations were necessary to keep intimacy intact.

Conclusion

The narratives in this chapter show that uncertainty in situationships did not exist passively, but was actively sustained through unequal effort. When one partner withdrew from responsibility, communication or emotional engagement, the burden of continuing and sustaining the connection shifted to the other. This transfer of work created a recurring pattern: one side maintained contact, adapted routines and managed emotions, while the other remained distant, but still present enough to keep the connection alive. Through this uneven exchange, ambiguity became a shared structure built from unequal labor.

Participants' accounts make clear that this imbalance had consequences that reached beyond the relationship itself. The person who carried the responsibility described exhaustion, anxiety and a gradual loss of confidence. Effort turned into endurance and care became a form of self-control. What began as an attempt to preserve closeness in many cases ended in emotional depletion. These experiences reveal how power in ambiguous relationships was exercised not just through explicit control but through withdrawal as well. Students understood uncertainty as work that had to be managed. They no longer interpreted ambiguity as freedom or something tolerable, like they had in the beginning. They experienced it as a responsibility that required communication, planning and emotional regulation to keep intimacy intact. At the same time, they learned that effort without reciprocity could not create clarity. The dynamic of withdrawal and compensation, therefore, captures a central aspect of how young adults interpreted and lived relational uncertainty, including who bore the burden of sustaining it and how that burden affected their well-being.

The chapters so far have traced how participants managed relational uncertainty in practice. However, as time passed, many began to reinterpret their experiences, transforming what had once felt confusing or draining into insight about themselves and their future relationships. The following chapter examines this process of learning and reframing. It explores how participants reinterpreted their situationships after they ended, how they integrated these experiences into their biographies, and what forms of knowledge about themselves and their boundary awareness emerged from living through uncertainty.

7. Interpretation of Results

This final results chapter examines how participants retrospectively interpreted their situationship experiences and the meanings they attached to the ambiguous boundaries and expectations that characterize these relationships. When reflecting, participants did not describe situationships simply as confusing or failed but instead highlighted distinct ways through which they understood intimacy, responsibility and selfhood in a relationship without any relational scripts.

The analysis revealed three main orientations that capture how students reflected on and learned from their situationships after they had ended. They represent the different ways university students interpreted and learned from unclear boundaries and expectations in situationships. It is important to note that these orientations are not fixed types, but recurring patterns of interpretation that appear across cases. While some participants moved between them, each highlights a particular way of giving meaning to the same structural condition of relational ambiguity.

7.1 Reclaiming Control through Boundaries

The first interpretive orientation centered on the realization that boundaries and clarity are essential for emotional balance. Participants who later adopted this view described that during their situationships, they deliberately stayed silent, changed themselves or avoided asking for clarification about expectations in order to preserve closeness. These actions reflected a conscious effort to manage the situation, in a context where no shared relationship definition existed.

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, this behavior can be understood as an ongoing process of interpretation (Blumer 2013). Rather than following fixed rules or objective conditions, participants oriented their actions toward the meaning they assigned to the situation as it unfolded. They continuously interpreted gestures, messages, silences and changes in tone in order to assess what kind of relationship they were in and which behavior would be appropriate. Within this interpretive process, silence and flexibility then took on specific meanings, as they were understood as signs of emotional maturity, consideration and respect for the other person's autonomy. By anticipating how asking for clarity might be received, participants often chose restraint instead of confrontation in an effort to maintain the situationship longer. This choice was aimed at preserving the relationship, even when it meant accepting ongoing ambiguity.

At the time, this strategy felt reasonable and even responsible. However, when participants later reflected on their experiences, they reevaluated the meaning of their own behavior. Looking back, they recognized that the same silence and adaptability had not in fact stabilized the relationship as intended but had instead allowed for imbalance

to persist. This reinterpretation illustrates Blumer's (2013) argument that meanings are not fixed but are revised through experience. Actions that initially felt appropriate were redefined once their long-term emotional consequences became visible. What had previously been seen as care was now understood as self-silencing that prevented honest communication and mutual negotiation.

This shift in interpretation was closely linked to how participants understood their emotional behavior during the situationship. Many described actively suppressing feelings such as disappointment, jealousy or frustration. They avoided expressing these emotions because they believed doing so would make them appear demanding, insecure or too invested. These practices can be explained using Hochschild's (2012) concept of feeling rules. Feeling rules are culturally learned expectations about which emotions are appropriate to feel and express in a given context (Hochschild 2012, p.70). Within situationships, participants oriented themselves on their partners' moods and the lack of definition of their relationship. Since nothing was established and no expectations were communicated, what was allowed to be felt was just as unclear as the situationship itself. In order to appease their partners, expressing discomfort or asking for clarity was considered risky and ultimately not seen as a good option. Thus, participants engaged in emotion work instead (Hochschild 2012) by actively managing both their inner feelings and their outward emotional expressions. This included downplaying hurt feelings, reframing disappointment as understanding, and convincing themselves that uncertainty was acceptable or just temporary. As a result, they took on the responsibility of upholding not just communication but the situationship itself. While emotion work helped maintain interaction and avoid conflict in the short term, it placed the emotional burden on the participant who was regulating their feelings, without resolving the underlying uncertainty of the situationship.

Through reflection, participants became aware of how this emotional regulation had shaped the dynamics of their situationship. They realized that by consistently suppressing discomfort and avoiding confrontation, they had not only adapted to ambiguity but had actively reproduced it. Their willingness to accommodate had protected the other person's comfort while gradually undermining their own emotional well-being and needs. This realization marked a moral turning point, as participants

began to understand that responsibility in relationships does not consist of enduring uncertainty indefinitely, but of making expectations negotiable and visible.

This reinterpretation can be further understood in relation to Illouz's (2019) analysis of late-modern intimacy. Participants' initial reluctance to articulate their needs reflected a broader cultural ideal that connects autonomy, flexibility and emotional self-control with desirability and strength. Within this emotional economy, being undemanding signals value, while expressing needs or setting boundaries risks being perceived as restrictive. Participants internalized this logic and understood emotional restraint as a moral achievement rather than as a possible source of imbalance. Only in hindsight did they start to question this. They had come to the realization that prolonged openness without clarification did not produce freedom or equality but instead generated insecurity and emotional fatigue. Reclaiming control through boundaries therefore represented a transformation in how participants understood intimacy and maturity.

In this orientation, setting boundaries became a way of restoring agency and moral balance. Participants redefined caring not as emotional endurance, but as the ability to articulate needs, limits and expectations openly. Through this change in perspective, boundaries emerged as a necessary condition for equality and reciprocity in any relationship form.

7.2 Redefining Openness as Conscious Choice

The second interpretive orientation addressed how participants differentiated between acceptable and problematic forms of openness in their situationships. Rather than rejecting undefined arrangements altogether, they developed a clearer sense of when flexibility felt fair and when it became burdensome. This distinction hinged on whether ambiguity was sustained by both individuals or resulted from unequal input.

Participants described situationships as functioning, when both people shared an understanding of the situationship's purpose and limits. In these cases, flexibility was experienced as intentional and manageable rather than uncertain. By contrast, the situationship became difficult when openness was upheld by one person while the other avoided addressing their expectations for the connection. What participants found troubling was not just the lack of commitment itself, but the lack of a shared orientation

that would allow both partners to act with the same understanding of the situation. In the beginning of the involvement, many assumed that not clarifying expectations was normal or even preferable, as it seemed to protect independence and avoid pressure. With distance, however, they came to understand that leaving expectations unclear was not neutral but an active condition that shaped the relationship. Participants explained that these arrangements only felt acceptable when both people clearly understood that the relationship would remain undefined and agreed to this arrangement on equal terms. When this shared understanding was missing, uncertainty became difficult to tolerate. In such cases, one person relied on the lack of definition to avoid responsibility, while the other waited for clarification that never came. From this perspective, flexibility was no longer evaluated primarily as a personal freedom. Instead, participants emphasized that feeling equal in the relationship, required knowing how the relationship was defined and what could reasonably be expected from it. Leaving intentions unspoken was now interpreted as a way of avoiding a shared definition of the relationship. By contrast, when limits and intentions were stated clearly, flexibility allowed both partners to navigate the relationship with orientation rather than guesswork. This pattern corresponds to what Illouz (2019) describes as frame confusion: once established dating scripts lose their guiding role, individuals must actively decide how to interpret closeness, intimacy and ongoing contact (Illouz 2019, pp. 78-80). Under these conditions, ambiguity no longer functioned as a shared space for flexibility but instead masked incompatible, unspoken expectations. Freedom, in retrospect, no longer meant avoiding definition but having enough clarity to decide whether to stay or leave.

7.3 Integrating Uncertainty into Self-Understanding

The third orientation focused on how participants used their relationship experiences to better understand themselves. After the relationship had ended or lost its significance, reflection shifted away from the other person and toward the participants' own behavior. They began to examine how they had acted, reacted and positioned their needs under the uncertain conditions of their relationship.

In this process, participants became more attentive to how they deal with unclear expectations. Some described realizing that they tended to wait for clarity instead of initiating difficult conversations. Others noticed that they remained in uncertain

situations longer than they should have or avoided addressing their discomfort directly. These observations emerged because the situationship offered few external guidelines, making participants' own responses and coping strategies more visible. As a result, participants developed different understandings of the role their situationships played. Some described that the situationship made already familiar behaviors more recognizable, allowing them to see the patterns they associated with earlier dating experiences. Others emphasized that the situationship confronted them with a level of prolonged uncertainty, that they had not encountered before. This in turn led them to develop new ways of dealing with ambiguity, such as postponing clarification and tolerating or adjusting their expectations.

Despite these differences, participants had similar reflections. The lack of clear structure prompted them to look back to their own actions and consider what they revealed about their needs, limits and ways of dealing with ambiguity. Rather than attributing uncertainty solely to the other person, participants began to understand how their own behavior shaped how the situation unfolded. This reflection aligns with Blumer's (2013) interactionist understanding of self-formation (Blumer 2013), as participants revisited specific moments in their experience and reflected on what their behavior at the time indicated about their priorities and boundaries.

Importantly, uncertainty was no longer understood solely as something imposed by the other person. Integrating uncertainty into self-understanding therefore meant turning a confusing experience into a source of self-knowledge. Participants described gaining clearer insight into how much uncertainty they are willing to tolerate in the future and which standards to hold on to. Their experience of situationships became a reference point that helped them learn their own boundaries and make more deliberate choices about communication, intimacy and commitment in the future.

In conclusion, these orientations show that university students did not interpret situationships merely as ambiguous or failed relationships, but as experiences through which they reassess emotional strategies, reflect on future romantic possibilities, and gain insight into their own needs, boundaries, and expectations more clearly.

8. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored how university students interpret their experiences in situationships, focusing on the meanings they attach to unclear boundaries and expectations. The aim was to understand how young adults understand emotional ambiguity in contemporary relationships and which recurring patterns of reflection they use to integrate their situationship into their lives. The study was guided by symbolic interactionism and the sociology of emotions, which provided a framework for understanding how meaning and emotions are socially constructed and negotiated within relationships.

The research followed a qualitative, interpretive design and was based on fifteen narrative interviews with university students in their twenties. This method allowed participants to describe their experiences and reflections in depth and in their own words. The analysis focused on how they constructed meaning around uncertainty, how they managed emotions in the absence of clear definitions, and how they later reinterpreted these experiences. Rather than aiming for generalization, the goal was to uncover patterns of interpretation that show how young adults experience unclear intimacy under changing social and cultural conditions.

The findings show that students did not experience ambiguity as accidental or purely individual. Instead, they interpreted it as part of a familiar relationship pattern in emerging adulthood that allowed intimacy to develop without explicit definition and responsibility. This corresponds well with Arnett's (2000) argument that young adults today inhabit a stage of life defined by experimentation and instability, instead of searching to settle down immediately. Additionally, this finding closely overlaps with empirical research on situationships and other similar relationship forms, which describe ambiguity as a common and frequently sustained feature of such relationships (Knight 2014; Langlais et al. 2024; Olmstead et al. 2024). In such an undefined connection, participants associated emotional restraint and independence with being a reasonable and considerate partner, particularly in the absence of clear expectations in the situationship. However, their reflections indicate that prolonged ambiguity became emotionally demanding. Feelings of confusion, self-doubt and imbalance were described once uncertainty persisted without any clarification on where the connection

was heading. These experiences reflect the observations from recent quantitative and mixed-methods studies showing that extended ambiguity is associated with lower relationship satisfaction and increased emotional strain, especially when expectations are not communicated (Deniega et al. 2024; Sibley et al. 2024). What the present study adds, is a clearer perspective of how these effects were interpreted retrospectively. Emotional strain was not always immediately recognized but became meaningful when participants reflected on how long they had tolerated uncertainty and how the responsibility for clarity had been unevenly distributed.

Technology also played a strong role in how participants experienced and interpreted situationships. Constant digital connection through messaging and social media intensified feelings of closeness but also made distance easier to perform. Similar findings have been reported by Langlais et al. (2024, pp. 1843-1848) and Sibley et al. (2024, pp. 265-267), who argue that digital communication accelerates both attachment and detachment. The students' experiences support Illouz's (2019, p. 222) idea of *scopic capitalism*, in which visibility and self-presentation shape the emotional response participants enact depending on the value they see in the situationship. Online interaction additionally encourages restraint and selectivity, as individuals try to remain desirable by appearing calm and unaffected. In this context, detachment becomes a social skill and vulnerability feels risky.

As participants reflected on these dynamics over time, their retellings increasingly shifted from describing interactional patterns to evaluating their own behavior within them. They identified moments in which they had adapted excessively, remained silent to avoid conflict, or prioritized their partner's comfort over their own needs. Importantly to note, is that these reflections were predominantly made by female participants. This pattern resonates with empirical findings showing that ambiguous relationship forms often benefit the partner who is less attached: men see these arrangements frequently as casual and non-committal, while women more often hope for emotional development and report greater frustration when this does not occur (Bradshaw et al. 2010; Weitbrecht & Whitton 2020; Hanson 2021). This emphasis must also be read in light of the sample composition, which mainly consisted of women. While these dynamics did not

characterize all women's accounts, they appeared in many of them and mirrored gendered patterns documented in mentioned existing research.

How these asymmetries were experienced and sustained cannot be separated from the communication channels under which situationships unfolded. According to the participants, digital communication was central from the very beginning of the situationship. Most connections were initiated on dating platforms or through social media and their contact quickly shifted to daily messaging that was described as frequent and emotionally intense. They emphasized that this continuous exchange accelerated feelings of closeness and attachment, even in the absence of clear agreement about the relationship. Similar findings have been documented in empirical research showing that digitally mediated dating enables rapid intimacy formation through constant contact, while postponing explicit clarification of intentions (Sibley et al. 2024). As the situationship continued, participants described how texting and social media became commonplace for monitoring the relationship. Changes in response time, tone, or frequency were closely observed and interpreted as possible indicators of shifts in interest, commitment or emotional availability. In this context, digital media did not only facilitate contact but structured the way participants evaluated the state of the situationship over time.

This thesis has shown that situationships occupy an important place in how university students navigate intimacy under conditions of unclear boundaries and expectations. They do not merely function as transitional or deficient relationship forms but act as meaningful milestones through which young adults grow and learn about relationships, boundaries, expectations and themselves. By focusing on retrospective interpretation, this study highlights that the significance of situationships lies not only in their formal structure, but also in the interpretive process they generate. Through reflection, participants transformed uncertainty into orientation: they developed clearer standards for what they seek in romantic relationships and how they wish to position themselves within them. In this way, situationships contributed to participants ongoing negotiation of intimacy and self-understanding in an unstable contemporary dating field.

9. Limitations and Further Research

Acknowledging the methodological limitations of this study is an integral part of ensuring transparency and reflexivity. The project was based on fifteen narrative interviews with university students in their twenties. This number was sufficient to explore individual meaning-making in depth and to identify recurring patterns across cases, but it naturally limits how far the findings can be generalized. The participants came from relatively similar social and educational backgrounds, which provided a coherent basis for comparison but restricted the diversity of perspectives within the sample. This homogeneity may have limited the study's ability to capture how structural or cultural differences shape the experience and interpretation of situationships. For instance, participants with more varied socio-economic conditions, migration backgrounds, or family norms might approach emotional openness, boundary-setting, and the negotiation of expectations in very different ways. However, because all participants were university students navigating comparable life phases, their accounts reflect a generational and educational milieu that values autonomy, self-development, and emotional reflection. This offered rich insight into how emerging adults interpret relational ambiguity but also means that the findings cannot reflect the experiences of individuals in other stages of life or under different social circumstances, such as varying access to education or familial and cultural expectations around commitment.

Beyond sample composition, aspects of the research design also shaped the kind of insights that could be gained. The use of narrative interviews was well-suited to the study's aim of understanding how students interpret their experiences in their own words but also posed certain challenges. Some participants were very reflective and talkative, offering detailed accounts of their thoughts and emotions, while others struggled to express themselves or kept their answers very brief. This created variation in the depth of material and in the interpretive access available to the analysis. In future projects, this could be balanced by conducting additional interviews or by using more flexible follow-up questions to encourage quieter participants to elaborate further. Despite these differences, the data still provided rich insight into how meaning is constructed around relational uncertainty.

Language use represented an additional condition that may have shaped the narratives that were produced in this study. While interviews were conducted in either English or German, neither language was the researchers first language or that of multiple participants. Research on qualitative interviewing shows that language shapes how experiences are narrated, influencing fluency, abstraction and even emotional nuance (van Nes et al. 2010). Narrating experiences in a second language may therefore have affected how participants articulated their situationships. Methodological research further highlights that language and translation shape how participants' accounts are represented in the findings and made accessible to readers (Temple & Young 2004; Goitom 2020). In this study, transcripts were analyzed in the original interview language and only selected quotations from the German interviews were translated into English for presentation purposes. Overall, the use of English and German may have shaped how participants articulated their experiences. Since language was not examined analytically, its potential influence represents a limitation that should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings. While the retrospective focus of the interviews aligned with the interpretive aim of the research, it also limited the extent to which the analysis could capture how ambiguity was negotiated as it occurred. Future studies could address this by adopting longitudinal or diary-based designs that follow relationships as they develop, or by conducting interviews with both individuals involved in the same connection. Studying situationships during their active phase could reveal how partners negotiate boundaries, expectations, and emotional needs in real time. Such work could examine how individuals handle uncertainty, communicate or avoid difficult topics, and interpret moments of closeness or distance.

As an interpretive researcher, my own position inevitably shaped both data collection and analysis. Being close in age to many participants led to rapport and encouraged openness during the interviews. Several participants described experiences that resembled those common within my own peer group, which likely helped my understanding of the topics at hand. At the same time, this familiarity risked producing selective attention during the conversations, as I may have unconsciously prioritized themes that felt personally recognizable or downplayed experiences that seemed less typical for my generational context. My own assumptions about emotional

communication, independence, or relationship norms might also have subtly influenced how I formulated follow-up questions or interpreted participants' accounts. During the analysis, I remained conscious of how my own beliefs could shape interpretation and took care not to project shared meanings onto participants' narratives. While my generational and social proximity to the participants helped create trust and openness in the interviews, it also required constant reflection on how my own perspective informed the questions I asked and the aspects of the narratives I emphasized.

Despite these limitations, the qualitative approach and narrative design proved effective for exploring how students give meaning to emotional ambiguity. The study offers a nuanced picture of how individuals negotiate intimacy in the absence of clear social scripts. Future research could build on these findings by further exploring how experiences of relational uncertainty affect other areas of life such as education, work, and emotional wellbeing. It would be valuable to examine whether early experiences with undefined relationships shape how young adults later approach intimacy and commitment. For example, long-term or mixed-method studies could further investigate whether people who have experienced situationships become more cautious in forming attachments, communicate differently in relationships, or develop new ways of balancing closeness and independence. Understanding these dynamics during the active phase of a situationship could provide essential knowledge about how young adults learn to handle emotional risk, negotiate mutual expectations, and define what intimacy means to them. This would not only broaden the empirical base of current research but also strengthen the theoretical understanding of how relational ambiguity functions as both a challenge and a learning process in contemporary forms of intimacy.

10. Literature

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Appendix I

HAD A SITUATIONSHIP

RECENTLY?

STUDY RECRUITMENT

As part of my master's thesis at the **University of Vienna**, I'm conducting interviews with students who have experienced romantic connections that weren't clearly defined — often referred to as situationships.

The focus is on your personal experiences, perspectives, and stories within such relationships; whether they're ongoing or have ended.



WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?

- You are between **20 and 29** years old
- You have experienced at least **one** situationship (lasting at least 1 month) **within the last 3 years**
- You are currently a **university student** in Vienna
- All genders and sexual orientations are welcome!

WHAT IS A "SITUATIONSHIP"?

A romantic or sexual relationship that lacks clear labels, expectations, or commitment. Share your experience with me!



INTERESTED OR HAVE QUESTIONS?

FEEL FREE TO CONTACT ME:

✉ anna.schmid@univie.ac.at
☎ [+43 664 23232323](tel:+4366423232323)

All information will be treated **confidentially**. The interview will last about **40-60 minutes** and will be scheduled individually via Zoom or face to face.



SCHON EINE SITUATIONSHIP

GEHABT?

STUDENTEILNAHME

Im Rahmen meiner Masterarbeit an der **Universität Wien** führe ich Interviews mit Student:innen, die romantische Verbindungen erlebt haben, welche nicht klar definiert waren – häufig auch als Situationships bekannt.

Im Mittelpunkt stehen deine persönlichen Erfahrungen und Perspektiven mit solchen Beziehungen, unabhängig davon, ob sie aktuell noch laufen oder bereits beendet sind.



WER KANN MITMACHEN?

- Du bist zwischen **20 und 29 Jahre** alt
- Du hast in den **letzten drei Jahren** mindestens eine Situationship erlebt (Dauer von mindestens einem Monat)
- Du bist **Student** an einer Universität in Wien
- Alle Geschlechter und sexuellen Orientierungen sind herzlich willkommen!

WAS IST EINE "SITUATIONSHIP"?

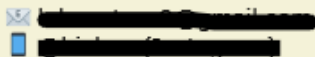
Eine romantische oder sexuelle Beziehung, die keine klare Zuordnung hat. Ohne Erwartungen oder Bindung.

Teile deine Erfahrung mit mir!



INTERESSIERT ODER HAST DU FRAGEN?

KONTAKTIERE MICH:



Alle Angaben werden selbstverständlich **vertraulich** behandelt. Das Interview dauert etwa **40–60 Minuten** und wird individuell vereinbart, entweder online via Zoom oder persönlich vor Ort.



Appendix II

Table 2: Documentation of AI-usage

<i>AI tool</i>	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Thesis part</i>	<i>Notes and examples (what was done)</i>	<i>Text example of the output</i>	<i>Input prompt</i>
OpenAI ChatGPT 4	Help with outline of the research draft	Structure	Used in the early phase to structure the thesis and explore possible chapter orders. Served as orientation only; final outline was written independently.	“A possible structure could be: Introduction → Theoretical Framework → Literature → Methods → Results → Discussion”	“Help me structure an outline for my master’s thesis on situationships.” — 17.02.2025
Research Rabbit/Elicit/Perplexity	Find useful connecting literature	Ch.3	Used to identify additional and adjacent literature after initial key texts were found manually; papers were checked individually for relevance. Most papers were not accessible over these tools, they were searched for individually on u:search, Scopus and Google Scholar. When the Journal seemed off, the Journal Impact Factor and h-index were checked for.	These three AI-tools are less with a prompt and more of a search engine, so there is no example output per se. I would put the title of a paper I wanted to know more about or a niche topic like GenZ dating vs. Millennials dating and it would put out connecting papers and I would read up on them individually.	“Find peer reviewed articles related to situationships and ambiguity like Langlais et al. (2024) and Deniega et al. (2024)” — there was not just one date, but rather when I would need it specifically during the State of the Art. This chapter was worked on multiple times during the span of six months, due to peer feedback and supervisor feedback.
OpenAI ChatGPT 4	Organize arguments and ideas	Ch.3	Used to organize arguments thematically and to improve coherence across sections; some things made no sense or did not align with what I intended to convey, only valuable or interesting points were taken into account. The ideas were restructured.	“Below is a clean narrative logic you can use either as a chapter structure or as the internal logic of a long theory section: Why situationships become possible and plausible Why ambiguity becomes normalized What situationships are, analytically	“What would be the best way to portray situationships logically? I want to start with the concept of Emerging Adulthood and end it with a clear point on the effects of situationships.” — 02.03.2025

				How situationships are lived and sustained What ambiguity does to people”	
OpenAI ChatGPT 4	Brainstorming	Ch.4	Used to brainstorm ideas, angles, and possible connections between empirical material and theory; served as inspiration only, so I could have an idea where to start.	“Yes, there are a couple good theories that would fit with the concept of situationships. Here are some examples you could read up on: 1.Symbolic Interactionism (Mead, Blumer) 2.Script Theory (Gagnon & Simon) 3.Doing Relationship (Schneider, Nentwig-Gesemann) 4.Destructuring Intimacy (Giddens, Illouz)”	“Are there any good main theories for situationships? I already know I want to use Illouz and Hochschild for my mid theories, but I still need a big lens, what should I read into.” — 02.03.2025
OpenAI ChatGPT 4/5	Linguistic: structuring the text (red thread)	Ch.3 Ch.6	Used to check whether sections were coherent and followed a clear and argumentative line; the suggestions were selectively adopted or rejected.	“In general, the paragraph does follow a recognizable line of argument, but the red thread could be strengthened. At the moment, several ideas are presented side by side without being clearly linked to one another. To improve coherence, it would help to make the central claim of the paragraph more explicit at the beginning and to ensure that each subsequent sentence clearly builds on this point. In addition, some transitions between sentences could be clarified, for example by briefly indicating how one idea leads to the next or by reducing minor repetitions. ”	“Does this paragraph make sense? Suggest improvements I could make to make my argument more coherent” — was a repeatedly used prompt for when I was unsure about my sentence logic throughout the thesis.
OpenAI	Linguistic: Improve stylistic	General	Used to improve fluency, clarity, and academic tone in	“Here is a selective list of academic paragraph openers	“What are some academic phrases I can

ChatGPT 5	form / wording		English as a non-native language; Some were used, while others did not fit well.	that are neutral, flexible, and well-suited for a master's-thesis: -This section examines... -The following paragraph focuses on... -An important aspect of this discussion concerns... -Building on the previous discussion, ... -Against this background, ... -In this context, ... -This becomes especially visible when... -From an analytical perspective, ... -Participants described... -Several interviewees emphasized...	use for beginning a paragraph?" — 20.08.2025
OpenAI ChatGPT 5	Linguistic: Improve stylistic form / wording	General	Again, to improve fluency, clarity, and academic tone in English as a non-native language; Some were used, while others did not fit well.	"What you're looking for are connection phrases that weave arguments together, rather than stacking them one after another. Below are usable, academic connectors that soften transitions and create a sense of <i>continuous reasoning</i> instead of "claim → claim → claim". - This dynamic extends to... -From this perspective, ... -In this sense, ... -Notably, ... -Equally important is... -Taken together, ... -Seen across accounts, ... -Rather, this led to..."	"I need good connection phrases between arguments that don't make my paragraph look claim by claim, give me some examples" — 15.09.2025

OpenAI ChatGPT 4/5 / DeepSee k	Linguistic: synonyms	Gener al	Used to find alternative wording for frequently repeated terms; final choices were made contextually while rereading the chapters.	“Here are suitable synonyms, grouped by tone and academic fit, so you can choose what works best in your text: frequently, commonly, regularly, typically, in many cases, at times, in some cases, as a recurrent pattern...”	“Give me suitable synonyms for this word: xxx.” — was used repeatedly but the main words asked were “often”, “interpret/interp retation” “reflect/reflecti on”, “analyze”, “participants”, “research/study ” “relationship form” “ambiguous” “unclear”
OpenAI ChatGPT 5	Linguistic: find repetitive points/argu ments	Ch.6	Used to identify repeated arguments across sections and to support decisions on shortening paragraphs. This was done very conservatively, as I did not want to lose important content. To ensure the quality of the output I additionally asked my colleagues for feedback aswell.	“The text contains a few points that are revisited multiple times with similar wording and emphasis, which creates some redundancy. In particular, certain ideas are repeated across sentences without adding new analytical depth. Here are some examples from the text you have provided...”	“Can you identify repetitive or redundant points in this text?” — this was also a repeated prompt when I felt like I was writing the same argument multiple times (since the results were very interconnected)
OpenAI ChatGPT 4/5 /Deepsee k	Help with understand ing passages in literature	Ch.4 Ch.5	Used to support comprehension of complex theoretical or methodological passages in academic texts; additionally, interpretations were checked against the original sources and reviews of the papers and with peers.	“Here is a much simpler, plain- language explanation of the text, while keeping the core meaning intact. I’ll explain it step by step and avoid technical wording as much as possible. Simplified explanation: Only texts that show a continuous social process (for example, a life story told as a sequence of events) can be analysed using	“Explain this paragraph for dummies without changing its meaning.” / “Explain the following text in way simpler terms”— repeatedly used throughout the thesis

Schütze's "symptomatic" method. This type of analysis starts by looking at the form of the text itself, not at interpretations or meanings right away. The goal is to first fully describe the sequence of what is being told..."					
aTrain	Transcription	Interview Transcripts	Output a transcription of the audio recordings of the interviews. The transcript output was chosen in their respective languages. Their quality was ensured by listening to the audio and correcting/reading through the transcripts at the same time.	Output were the transcription files	none

Note: All AI outputs were critically reviewed. Final wording, structure, and interpretation remain the sole responsibility of the author.

The use of AI-tools was generally very helpful throughout the process of writing this thesis, especially in the early stages when I was still unsure how to approach the topic and how to begin my research journey. While I already had a research topic and approach drafted, it was not very feasible, so I had to start from scratch with a new topic completely. At that point, ChatGPT supported me in organizing my thoughts, developing ideas, and gaining clarity about where I wanted my research to go. In the beginning, it was mainly used for brainstorming, refining the research topic, and creating an initial structure for the thesis. In this way, AI functioned as a helpful aid to arrange my thoughts and help me figure out a proper plan for the thesis, instead of sitting in front of a blank page.

Once I had developed a concise research topic, I went on the search for articles and books that I could read up on. As "situationships" are only an emerging research topic at the moment, there was very limited academic papers on this romantic arrangement. While some of the papers bibliographies were fruitful, AI-supported research tools such as Research Rabbit/Elicit/Perplexity were useful for further identifying relevant and thematically related literature. They helped me discover additional studies that connected my topic to adjacent

research areas, which allowed me to broaden the theoretical context of the thesis. However, it was necessary to critically assess all suggested literature by reading abstracts and full texts, as not all recommendations were closely related to the research question or even the research topic. While there were some extra articles on specifically “situationships”, they had to be excluded, as the Journals they appeared in were rather ambiguous. The literature that seemed interesting from the AI-output were cross-checked with u:search and Scopus, when these platforms did not have the articles, their Journals were checked for Journal Impact factor and h-index.

Since neither German nor English is my first language, AI tools were also helpful in supporting my understanding of academic texts. They were occasionally used to clarify complex passages and to restate arguments in simpler language. This was especially useful when authors expressed their ideas in a very dense or abstract way, which is usually the case in a lot of theory-based literature in Sociology. For example, Fritz Schütze’s 1983 paper about narrative interviews and how to analyze them, is in an extremely dense German writing style, that I could only understand with a simplified version and having the guideline from Kleemann et al. (2013) next to it. While this was extremely helpful, especially for my theory and methods chapter, the output was checked carefully against the original texts and sometimes discussed with peers as well to avoid any misunderstandings.

Additionally, ChatGPT and DeepSeek were mainly used for linguistic support. This included help with wording, sentence structure, synonyms, and overall clarity. As I have grown up with three languages at once, none of which use the same sentence structure or grammar, writing does not come easily to me. AI helped me improve the readability and flow of the thesis, when I was blind to my own writing and could no longer sense if it made sense for the reader or not. Importantly, these steps were mainly done once the thesis was already proofread by my peers, who had marked passages as unclear. All suggested changes were reviewed critically to ensure that they reflected my intended meaning and did not alter the argument.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of AI tools. They did not always understand prompts correctly, which sometimes led to irrelevant or misleading outputs and required additional time to correct. Literature suggestions were occasionally too far removed from the topic, did not include proper scientific Journals and explanations of academic texts were not always fully reliable. In the linguistic domain, suggested words or phrases sometimes carried meanings that did not fully fit the argument or were redundant in the given context, a careful reflection was necessary before using them.

Overall, AI tools can be very valuable when used with care and reflection. Their main benefit lies in supporting thinking, understanding, structuring, and language, rather than replacing independent academic work. Especially for students writing in a non-native language, AI can offer meaningful support if its use is accompanied by continuous critical evaluation. The responsibility for all interpretations, analyses, and conclusions in this thesis remains entirely with the author.