

LATE ADOLESCENT PERCEPTIONS OF ROMANTIC
RELATIONSHIPS AND ROMANTIC
EXPERIENCES

by

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ABSTRACT

Late adolescence (18–25 years old) is a developmental time period where a person is in a state of transition, growing out of adolescence and preparing for adulthood. Romantic relationships are a typical component of late adolescent development. In early adolescence, the concept of love has been described as being experimental, temporary, or short-term, while in late adolescence love involves deeper exploration of the qualities of a partner and of one's self. There are other romantic encounters late adolescents may experience that may not be considered relationships. Contemporary literature discusses romantic experiences as an attraction to another, interacting with individuals that are prospective romantic partners, and nonromantic or casual involvements with another. A closer examination into these activities suggests late adolescents may engage in hooking up behaviors and dating potential romantic partners during this developmental stage.

Presently, there are not consistent definitions of romantic relationships and romantic experiences and these definitions vary across empirical studies. The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify how late adolescents conceptualize romantic relationships and romantic experiences. A sample of 263 college students between the ages of 18 and 25 was surveyed. A qualitative content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) revealed distinct characteristics of both romantic relationships and experiences. Conceptualizations of romantic relationships included mutual exclusivity and boundaries, specific physical qualities, large amounts of time spent together, and positive relational qualities. Romantic experiences were conceptualized as using sex recreationally, exploring or dating without commitment, and moments of extraordinary connection between two people. Participants indicated that romantic relationships and romantic experiences were most distinct in terms of level of relational commitment and whether enduring emotional connection was present or not. Finally, participants indicated that romantic experiences can occur within and outside of a romantic relationship. Participants in this sample reported having had significantly more romantic experiences since the age of 18 when compared to their reported number of romantic relationships. Results are discussed in regard to existing literature.

CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Throughout history, the process of finding a spouse or soul mate has been one shaped by a number of components including social situations, cultural influences, and peer effect (Collins & Sroufe, 1999). Not only have individuals been consistently interested in the pursuit and discovery of a potential romantic partner (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Miller & Benson, 1999; Taylor, 1946), others have suggested that coupling and marriage might be perceived as a marker of fully transitioning into adulthood (James-Kangal, Weitbrecht, Francis, & Whitton, 2018; Stepler, 2017; Vespa, 2017). At present, the definitions of romantic relationships and romantic experiences vary (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Furman & Collins, 2009; Madsen & Collins, 2011). Not having common empirical definitions of these terms makes it difficult to study these phenomena. The current qualitative study was designed to understand how contemporary late adolescents (18–25 years old) conceptualize the phenomena of romantic relationships and romantic experiences from their own lived experience.

Romantic Relationships in Later Adolescence

Previous generations have labeled mate selection by a variety of terms. As early as 1900, men were *calling* upon young women, which means having a supervised visit with the woman in her parent's home to talk, sing, or play the piano in the parlor (Weigel, 2016). Over time, the young women were allowed to attend social gatherings with their caller, and a marriage proposal was very soon to follow. In the 1930s and 1940s,

individuals participated in *courtships*, which generally seem to have been a systematic progression of diverse activities between two people (Miller & Benson, 1999; Taylor, 1946) and varying by their acceptance among peers, social groups, culture, and society (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Kuperburg, & Padgett, 2016; Taylor, 1946). Within heterosexual courtships, men were expected to indicate romantic interest with women, and the familiarization process began by engaging in group activities with mutual friends (Miller & Benson, 1999). Following group interactions, the shared interactions transitioned to individual meetings, or casual dates, which eventually advanced to a more serious agreement, commonly called *going steady*—implying that the couple was in a committed romantic relationship where both parties shared a mutual affection, engagement, and marriage was likely to follow.

Same-sex mate selection has had a starkly different history. In the early 1900s, literature used the term *adhesive* or *invert* to refer to men that were sexually attracted to other men (Weigel, 2016). Across the United States, there were specific nightlife locations that men could enjoy a refreshment and the company of another man. Homosexuality was considered criminal, so men were forced to “hide in plain sight” to remain safe (Weigel, 2016, p. 53). To signal others, men would choose to wear colored articles of clothing, usually red or green, to indicate a similar sexual preference. Others would use hints in conversation, almost creating a code language. The usage of the term *gay* is thought to be derived from one commenting on the lively, joyous environment to suggest a romantic interest in another. Available research on same-sex relationships is

limited but growing (Cao et al., 2017). This could be due to the relatively recent increased acceptance of same-sex couples in society (Cao et al., 2017; Weigel, 2016).

In the United States, marriage is revered as a core value within society (James-Kangal, et al., 2018). During the mid-1900s, specifically 1940 through 1960, the rate in which individuals were marrying was high (Torr, 2011). In 1960, 72% of Americans over the age of 18 were married (Stepler, 2017). More contemporary investigations have indicated that marriage rates have significantly decreased in recent years; in 2017, only 50% of American adults were married. Not only are fewer Americans marrying, but the ones that decide to wed are doing so at older ages. The median age for women to marry in 1960 was 20.3 years, and in 2016 women were not marrying their romantic partner until roughly 27.4 years of age. The median age for men marrying has increased at a similar pace (Stepler, 2017).

Despite the delay of marriage, it has been proposed that contemporary coupling still follows a general pattern of casual interactions that have potential to form stable and serious relationships (Miller & Benson, 1999). However, romantic relationships are being redefined (Miller & Benson, 1999) while cultural expectations and social norms are shifting and changing (Kuperburg, & Padgett, 2016). Individuals often begin their dating experience as adolescents through participating in activities together within a group setting (Arnett, 2000). The dating experiences might evolve from group interactions to one-on-one encounters focused on emotional connections and potential engagement in sexual behaviors. This transition might seem obvious from a developmental perspective,

but the relational expectations of this transformative stage of life are clouded and may be undefined for the individual.

In later adolescence, romantic relationships are typically conceptualized by the presence or absence of an assortment of characteristics. A foundational and integral tenant of romantic relationships includes the persisting reciprocal acts of affection and care between two individuals (Collins, 2003; Collins & Welsh, 2009; Furman & Collins, 2009; Madsen & Collins, 2011). Stability, security, and commitment are also desired features of such relationships (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Barton et al., 2017; Madsen & Collins, 2011; Meeus, Branje, van der Valk, & de Weid, 2007), as well as intimacy and sexual encounters (Madsen & Collins, 2011; Miller & Benson, 1999). Still, perhaps the most distinctive quality of romantic relationships is the notion of the interdependence between individuals. The couple is drawn to the consideration of themselves as one unit, prioritizing shared goals and making life's greatest decisions together (Madsen & Collins, 2011).

Romantic Experiences in Later Adolescence

While the concept of romantic relationships encompasses some interactions and experiences that occur in late adolescence (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Barton et al, 2017; Collins et al., 2009; Furman & Collins, 2009; Madsen & Collins, 2011; Miller & Benson, 1999) there are many others to yet be defined. *Romantic experiences* have been identified as a range of behaviors, from attraction or having a crush on another to noncommittal sexual encounters (Collins et al., 2009). Romantic experiences have been categorized as occurring when two individuals become involved in behaviors and/or emotions that can

be seen as romantic. Such experiences may be perceived as ordinary for the developmental progression of relationships in early adulthood (Madsen & Collins, 2011; Miller & Benson 1999). However, romantic experiences may also be conceptualized as encounters that are independent of the advancement of a romantic relationship because future expectations and long-term commitment are not typically indicators of romantic experiences (Collins et al., 2009; Lyons et al., 2013; Madsen & Collins, 2011).

The cultural definitions and acceptance of romantic experiences have changed throughout recent decades (Weigel, 2016). At one time in history, women could be jailed for allowing a man to purchase them a meal, beverage, or an admission ticket to an event. This behavior was seen as deplorable and comparable to a harlot wooing a man in exchange for gifts. The more current cultural climate does not criminalize the act of dating, but there is still some confusion as to what interactions and behaviors are considered dating and how dating relationships are defined among social groups. Some researchers use the term dating as a way to label romantic relationships (Collins 2003; Collins et al., 2009; Madsen & Collins, 2011). Others outline characteristics of dating attributes, which include affection, intimacy, and potential sexual interaction (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Kuperburg & Padgett 2015, 2016), but it seems uncertain if researchers agree on what the expectations of commitment might be within dating relationships. The term dating could imply a low expectation for commitment (Madsen & Collins, 2011) or a high-level of commitment (Barton et al., 2017) between individuals. While the distinction of dating as a romantic experience or romantic

relationship is not clear, it is evident that dating has a variant meaning and is conceptualized differently from hooking up behavior.

Hooking up is a newer social phenomenon usually defined by physical encounters that do not necessarily have to lead to another encounter and much less a committed relationship (Berntson, Hoffman, & Luff, 2014; Lyons et al., 2013; Manthos, Owen, & Fincham, 2014; Owen, Fincham, & Moore, 2011). Most of the time, those participating in hooking up interactions are not doing so to find a partner with whom to form a committed relationship (Berntson et al., 2014; Manthos et al., 2014), but this does not mean that these interactions are negative experiences for individuals or that they would not consider forming a relationship (Owen et al., 2011). Men and women have indicated positive experiences with hooking up and some have reported feeling comfortable discussing the potential for future interactions or pursuit of a relationship with the person with whom they hooked up.

Purpose of the Current Study

Across literature, there has not been a consistent way to discuss or ask individuals about their romantic relationships or romantic experiences. Researchers have opted to provide pre-determined definitions or descriptions of a particular experience, such as hooking up (Bisson & Levine, 2009; James-Kangal et al., 2018; Manthos et al., 2014). Another approach has relied on having participants answer questions regarding their relational experience that are then used by the researchers to make their own determinations of relationship status (Boisvert & Poulin, 2017; Lyons et al., 2013; Meeus et al., 2007), but very few have given late adolescents an opportunity to provide their own

thoughts and definitions of differing experiences or relationships (Barton et al., 2017; Epstein, Calzo, Smiler, & Ward, 2009). The current qualitative study aimed to understand contemporary conceptualizations of romantic relationships and romantic experiences by allowing late adolescents to share their lived experiences with these phenomena.

CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Review

The following literature review explores the current research regarding late adolescent conceptualizations of romantic relationships and romantic experiences. First, a description of the developmental age group (18 to 25 years) and label of late adolescent is provided. Next, a theoretical perspective is considered as a framework for understanding and contextualizing mechanisms in which individuals use to make sense of symbols and meaning. Current research is then discussed to indicate what is currently known about romantic relationships and romantic experiences during late adolescence.

Late Adolescence

Defining Late Adolescence. Hall (1904), often credited as the father of adolescence, theorized that adolescent development is not complete until the mid-twenties. In more recent decades, Arnett (2000, 2004) has theorized that adolescence ends at age 18 or 19, as it is the typical time in which young people leave their parents' home and move into their own housing situation. However, most 18- to 19-year-olds are not married, have not started families, may rely on monetary parental support for housing and other basic needs, and will not begin their professional careers until their mid-twenties. For instance, in 2014, 35% of young men ages 18–34 were more likely to live with their parents than with a partner in their own living quarters (Fry, 2016).

Arnett (2000, 2004) posited that there is a new developmental time period between ages 18 and 25 that he titles *emerging adulthood*. However, other researchers disagree regarding the validity of emerging adulthood as a new development time period (Côté, 2014). In opposition Côté (2014) has argued that emerging adulthood is not a new developmental stage and that there are many issues with Arnett's conceptualization of emerging adulthood. Côté (2014) has refuted emerging adult by critiquing the representativeness of the samples in the research that have been used to support the development of a new universal developmental time period between adolescence and adulthood. From Côté's (2014) perspective, using the term emerging adulthood is detrimental to those between the ages of 18 and 25, especially to those facing hardship and economic disparity. In contrast, Bynner (2005) has argued that adolescence has been extended into the twenties because 18 to 25-year-olds are still accomplishing similar developmental tasks that are recognized as central during adolescent development. Consistent with Bynner (2005), Côté (2014), and Hall's (1904) conceptualization of adolescence extending into the mid-twenties, the term late adolescent will be used to further describe this age group of 18- to 25-year-olds in this study.

Development during Late Adolescence. Contemporary late adolescents view the meaning of reaching adulthood, and the roles in which they must fulfill in order to do so, differently than previous generations (Fry, 2016; Vespa, 2017; Weigel, 2016). Further, throughout recent decades the outcomes of common developmental milestones that late adolescents have achieved have differed greatly (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; James-Kangal et al., 2018; Miller & Benson, 1999; Vespa, 2017). The late adolescent continues

exploring and forming their identity, as one would in earlier adolescence, by experimenting with the hopeful possibilities and opportunities life has to offer (Arnett, 2004; Schwartz, Côté, & Arnett, 2005).

Tasks related to relationships, housing, and education are also central to late adolescence (Arnett, 1994, 2004; Boisvert & Poulin, 2017; Schwartz et al., 2005). Contemporary trends indicate that both men and women are waiting until an older age to marry, as well as delaying childbearing (Vespa, 2017). In the late 1970s, nearly 85% of women were married before age 29; in 2014, roughly 45% of women were married before 29. While late adolescents are delaying marriage and raising children, they are still choosing to cohabit. This living situation has been a fast-growing arrangement, suggesting that late adolescents may be opting to move in with a boyfriend or girlfriend as a precursor to marriage. In 2014, 8.9 million adults (ages 18 to 34) were cohabiting, an increase from 7.2 million in 2007 (Stepler, 2017). Others might also choose to live with roommates, maintain a home alone, or continue to live with parents or other extended family members (Vespa, 2017). This developmental stage is also marked by a period of future uncertainty with role transitions expected in education and possibly household composition (e.g. moving out of the family home, roommate situations, living with partners, college dorms) (Arnett, 1994, 2004; Boisvert & Poulin, 2017; Schwartz et al., 2005).

Late Adolescence and College. Attending college requires a level of commitment from the late adolescent, as college prepares the student for a professional career and allows them to begin constructing the foundation for adulthood (Arnett, 2004). The

college experience has become a common goal for many (not all) late adolescents to pursue. In 2016, the United States Census Bureau estimated that of the 31,296,577 young adults 18–25 years of age, nearly 43% of them were enrolled in undergraduate or graduate education.

Research supports the notion that college students at four-year universities experience cultural differences from their peers who have chosen other post-secondary pathways (Ashmore, Del Boca, & Beebe, 2002; Ashmore, Griffio, Green, & Moreno, 2007). Ashmore, Griffio, Green, and Moreno (2007) present two predominant subcultures of college student culture, including (a) academic and (b) sociosexual. The academic subculture features include specifics of typical higher education such as course attendance, library usage, and tutors. The sociosexual features of college student culture include a social structure that delegates with whom and in what capacity one should socialize, who is deemed attractive for dating or sexual behavior engagement, and how a student should utilize leisure time. While these are the primary two subcultures of college student culture, other features include various on-campus social groups or off-campus social groups, such as participating in a sorority or religious group. These other features can also contribute to cultural distinctions between college students and other late adolescents.

Symbolic Interaction Theory

Credited with foundational concepts of symbolic interaction theory, Mead (1934) developed his ideas on the acquisition of generation of symbols, meaning, and interaction in the early 20th Century (Stryker & Burke, 2000; Stryker, 2008). A foundational

proposition within the theory states that human definitions and meaning are derived by individuals through shared common norms, rules, and expectations communicated through social interaction (Giordano et al., 2006). These shared definitions influence the behavior or actions of late adolescents as they are continually interacting and socializing with the world (Norona, Welsh, Olmstead, & Bliton, 2017). When in new or unfamiliar social situations, it may be inappropriate to apply previously established meanings, and so new definitions and meanings must be created to adjust to appropriate behaviors and actions (Giordano et al., 2006). Therefore, as culture shifts, new expectations emerge with new shared meaning that ultimately change the rules associated with social interactions.

Shared culture impacts the development of romantic and sexual relationships and plays an active role in how these relationships are defined (Miller & Benson, 1999). Collins (2003) describes the importance of contextualizing the cultural factors at play in the lives of adolescents when forming romantic relationships. As late adolescents age into young adulthood, there is an increasing appeal to engage in romantic interactions as they cultivate their developmental advancement of identity and intimacy as well as a sense of independence from their parents (Miller & Benson, 1999). Expectations, social activities, and partner availability are all influenced by established meanings in the social and cultural context (Collins, 2003), and some societies are characterized and defined by cultural characteristics of romance (Miller & Benson, 1999). As cultural environments change, meaning and definitions of romantic relationships and romantic experiences are likely to change as well. It is imperative to examine the shared meanings of romantic

relationships and romantic experiences (Collins, 2003) and the current study aims to do this by giving voice to the shared experience of contemporary late adolescents with these phenomena.

Late Adolescent Romantic Relationships

Existing research provides a provisional, but inconsistent definition of romantic relationships for late adolescents. Much of the work done by Collins (2003; Collins & Welsh, 2009; Furman & Collins, 2009; Madsen & Collins, 2011) has been focused on creating clear and concise boundaries around what constitutes a romantic relationship in adolescence. Collins (2003) has defined romantic relationships as “on-going voluntary interactions that are mutually acknowledged...[that] have a peculiar intensity...marked by expressions of affection” (p. 2). In later work, Collins elaborated on the element of intensity in adolescent romantic relationships by discussing the intensity as the typical expressions of affection found within a relationship, paired with an anticipation of sexual experiences or behaviors (Collins & Welsh, 2009; Furman & Collins, 2009; Madsen & Collins, 2011).

In early adolescence, the concept of love has been described as being experimental, temporary, or short-term, while in late adolescence love involves deeper exploration of the qualities of a partner and of one’s self (Arnett, 2000, 2004). Although, Collins (2003) reported that adolescent romantic relationships are longer-term than previously thought and are patterned similar to adult relationships. He also concluded that these types of relationships have the ability to impact an individual’s development into adulthood. The longer-term nature of adolescent romantic relationships has led some

scholars to propose that the concept of commitment needs to be included in definitions of adolescent romantic relationships (Madsen & Collins, 2011).

When considering a partner for a romantic relationship, late adolescents desire security and stability (Arnett, 2000, 2004). Most are also looking for a committed, long-term partner, a candidate for marriage. As late adolescents develop, their relationship priorities change from having a best friend being the most important relationship in their life to a romantic partner taking this central role (Meeus et al., 2007). As this shift occurs, commitment becomes an increasingly more important component in relationships.

Researchers have explored commitment in adolescents' relationships. For example, Barton, Hurt, Futris, Sheats, McElroy, and Landor (2017) interviewed 20 African American adolescents ($m_{age} = 16$) who were recruited from a Boys' and Girls' Club in the Southeastern United States. The participants were required to engage in a relationship education program and be interviewed by researchers three times over a six-month period. Sixty-four percent described their romantic status as dating, but without commitment to one partner, and 27% reported being in a committed relationship. The in-depth interviews covered the adolescent experiences and beliefs about romantic relationships, focusing on central ideas around commitment. Three themes emerged through qualitative analysis of the interview data. In the first theme, participants generated a common definition of commitment that was divided into two parts. First, commitment was described as feeling supported, cared for, or being invested in by their partner. Secondly, adolescents described commitment as a lack of pursuing other romantic relationships, remaining honest and monogamous.

Barton and colleagues (2017) reported that the two additional themes included adolescents' perceptions of how commitment influences romantic relationships and how they perceived varying levels of commitment in different types of committed romantic relationships (i.e., dating and marriage). When participants felt like there was mutual commitment in their relationships, they also felt that their partners were reliable and better able to meet a partner's needs. Further, participants discussed a sense of permanency within the relationship when commitment was a part of the relationship. In contrast, some participants felt immediate apprehension of the quality and length of the relationship when types of noncommittal relationships were mentioned.

There is some agreement among researchers that adolescent romantic relationships between two partners require affection, intimacy, and commitment (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Barton et al., 2017; Collins, 2003; Collins & Welsh, 2009; Madsen & Collins, 2011; Miller & Benson, 1999), while some suggest there are other components that need to be included in the conceptualization of adolescent romantic relationships such as interdependence and sexual interaction (Madsen & Collins, 2011; Miller & Benson, 1999). Adolescents in romantic relationships focus on how outcomes, experience, decisions, and consequences could impact both as one unit, rather than remaining focused on themselves as individuals or single units (Madsen & Collins, 2011). As romantic relationships progress to more serious emotional connection and commitment, the likelihood of intimacy and sexual behaviors increase (Miller & Benson, 1999).

Late Adolescent Romantic Experiences

In contrast, there are other romantic encounters late adolescents may experience that might not be considered relationships. It is unclear what social activities comprise these romantic experiences, or what social and relational characteristics would distinguish or identify a romantic experience from a relationship (Furman & Collins, 2009). As such, there is far less consensus regarding how researchers should define romantic experiences. Collins, Welsh, and Furman (2009) present a working conceptualization of romantic experiences that, at a basic level, includes two individuals engaging in behaviors and emotions that have romantic features. Romantic experiences include attraction, interacting with individuals who are seen as prospective romantic partners, and nonromantic or casual involvements with another (e.g., having a crush, making out with someone, dating, or hooking up behaviors). These romantic experiences have been described as a typical stage of the development of serious romantic feelings and as precursory to future romantic relationships in early adulthood (Madsen & Collins, 2011; Miller & Benson, 1999). Conversely, some researchers discuss romantic experiences as activities that may stand alone, without the intent of commitment, long-term romantic feelings, or further expectations (Collins et al., 2009; Lyons et al., 2013; Madsen & Collins, 2011). A closer examination into these activities suggests late adolescents may engage in hooking up behaviors (Berntson et al., 2014; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Epstein et al., 2009) and dating romantic partners during this developmental stage (Madsen & Collins, 2011).

Hooking Up. Contemporary culture has created new rules surrounding the social role and expectations of sexual behaviors, although it is uncertain as to how individuals fulfill those roles and expectations (Arnett, 2004). Cultural definitions and normative behavior in regard to hooking up and dating in late adolescence are continuously being redefined as interactions and meaning changes within society (Miller & Benson 1999). Historically, it was widely socially inappropriate for late adolescents (especially women) to engage in sexual intercourse prior to marriage, but recent research suggests there is a shift in the acceptability of pre-marital sexual behaviors (Arnett, 2004; Collins et al., 2009; James-Kangal, et al., 2018; Miller & Benson 1999). Hooking up, defined as any one physical interaction (i.e., behaviors ranging from kissing to sexual intercourse) between two individuals without expectation of another interaction or committed relationship, has become a common phenomenon among late adolescents (Berntson et al., 2014; Lyons et al., 2013; Manthos et al., 2014; Owen et al., 2011).

As the definition implies, hooking up may be seen as a romantic experience (Collins et al., 2009) that does not have any long-term relational connections. In the literature, sexual interactions are typically categorized by frequency of the interactions, such as a one night only encounter, multiple sexual encounters with the same person without any level of commitment, or an ongoing sexual relationship described as short-term (Berntson et al., 2014; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Epstein et al., 2009). It is regularly suggested that individuals engaging in these types of sexual interactions are not seeking a relationship outside of the sexual encounter (Berntson et al., 2014; Manthos, et al., 2014).

Manthos and colleagues (2014) examined the hooking up behaviors and psychological factors of college students ($n = 339$; 18–25 years old). Participants completed surveys twice in a ten-week period that included items regarding hooking up behaviors, personal comparison of emotions, frequency of lonely feelings, symptoms of depression, general religiosity, and personal attachment style. Of the participants, nearly 30% were involved in hooking up at least one time during the ten weeks. Researchers reported that those with higher levels of symptoms of depression were more likely to participate in hooking up behaviors, and even implied that such behaviors might be motivated by coping with unhappiness by reaching sexual gratification. Higher personal religiosity scores indicated a lesser likelihood of a participant hooking up with another individual. These findings are consistent with information within other studies, suggesting that some traits and environments may predict the likelihood of noncommittal sexual encounters (Berntson et al., 2014; Manthos et al., 2014; Lyons et al., 2013).

Similarly, Owen et al. (2011) examined hooking up behaviors with 500 college students who reported having hooked up with another individual at least once in the 12 months prior to data collection. Specifically, the researchers focused on the emotional reactions of men and women after hooking up (including coital and non-coital hook ups [e.g., kissing and petting]) and whether the late adolescents had talked to (or planned to talk to) the other individual about committing to a relationship. The results indicated that gender played a somewhat minor role in different emotional reactions. Men and women both indicated that after hooking up their emotional reactions were positive, although men had slightly higher positive reactions than women. A majority of the women (65%)

hoped that their hook up partner would be interested in a committed relationship, while only 45% of men in the sample hoped for a similar outcome. Approximately half of both men and women in the sample reported that they had talked with their hook up partner about starting a committed relationship. Findings suggest that both men and women engage in hook up sexual behaviors and feel positive about those encounters, as well as experiencing comfortableness with communicating a desire for a committed relationship with that sexual partner.

Dating. It is unclear as to whether the term dating can be used to define romantic relationships or romantic experiences. Madsen and Collins (2011) use the term dating interchangeably with their usage of romantic experiences, which implies that two individuals are meeting for previously agreed activities without an expectation of commitment, especially a long-term commitment. However, at times dating is used to describe a romantic relationship between two individuals (Collins, 2003; Collins et al., 2009), or suggested as a normative behavior between two individuals that simply directly opposes engaging in hooking up behaviors (James-Kangal et al., 2018; Lyons et al., 2013).

Some researchers have made implications that dating may include specific characteristics similar to those of romantic relationships (Barton et al., 2017; Kuperburg & Padgett, 2015, 2016). Barton et al. (2017) found that their participants used the term commitment in a comparable way to when they used the term dating, although the respondents rarely actually used the word “dating.” There is some evidence that the act of dating may also include sharing resources and provide a sense of economic stability

(Kuperburg & Padgett 2015, 2016), which implies a level of commitment within the conceptualization of dating. However, Collins and Sroufe's (1999) research points to less focus on commitment and more of a focus on social acceptance. These authors described intimacy, as well as fellowship and interaction with peers, as common emotional desires and therefore reasons for dating in late adolescence. Dating is then indicated as an activity that is more likely to be marked by achieving social acceptance rather than the overall desire for intimacy. Finally, some researchers have used the term dating, but do not define the practice. For instance, Taradash, Connolly, Pepler, Craig, and Costa (2001) utilized the participants' identification of engagement with a romantic partner as an indicator for that individual's dating status, but do not offer characteristics of any interactions, behaviors, or other characteristics that would better define the term dating. Much of the current literature offers ambiguous, inconsistent descriptions of dating in adolescence, describing characteristics that have been used to discuss both romantic relationships and romantic experiences.

Recently, the internet and mobile apps have played more of an influential role in young adults' dating experiences (Geiger & Livingston, 2018; Peterson, Aye, & Wheeler, 2014), as well as hooking up experiences (Kuperburg & Padgett, 2016). Online dating has become particularly popular among late adolescents, its utility nearly tripling from 10% in 2013 to 27% in 2015 (Geiger & Livingston, 2018). A more rapid increase, 5% to 22% in the same years, can be found when considering those that use mobile dating apps. Many view online dating as an easy and effective way to meet new people (Geiger & Livingston, 2018; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Late adolescents are using technology to

engage in romantic behaviors, unlike any of the previous generations of 18- to 25-year-olds (Weigel, 2016), and this likely influences their perception of romantic relationships and experiences.

Measuring Romantic Relationships and Romantic Experiences

Given the complexity of late adolescent development and cultural influences, it is not surprising scholars have varying opinions and definitions for romantic relationships and romantic experiences. Some researchers who have utilized surveys to learn more about behaviors and relationships have also included specific, detailed descriptions of how the respondents should define hooking up encounters (Bisson & Levine, 2009; James-Kangal et al., 2018; Manthos et al., 2014). Similarly, Kuperburg and Padgett (2015, 2016) ask the respondent to use the definition accepted by self and their social circle(s) when considering survey questions on the subject of hooking up and dating encounters. It seems as though this strategy is intentional, although the researchers do not provide a space for respondents to offer their thoughts on how hooking up or dating encounters might be similar or different.

It has also been common among researchers to ask a series of survey questions about relational interactions and sexual behavior and to generate conclusions about sexual behavior and relationship status (Boisvert & Poulin, 2017; Lyons et al., 2013; Meeus et al., 2007). In one instance, respondents were asked to list the names of all the “romantic partners they had over the previous 12 months” as well as the length the interaction between the respondent and partner lasted (Boisvert & Poulin, 2017, p. 219). Interactions that continued for more than one month were used within the study and

labeled romantic relationships. In a similar way, Madsen and Collins (2011) asked about the number of dating partners in the last year when interviewing their study participants. A less common approach to understanding romantic relationships and romantic experiences has been to ask participants to provide their own definitions to concepts (Barton et al., 2017; Epstein et al., 2009). Epstein and colleagues (2009) chose a sample of men ($n = 20$) to examine how they defined various types of romantic experiences. In all interviews, questions that allowed participants to verbalize their own conceptualizations of the terms dating, hooking up, and friends with benefits were included.

Purpose of the Current Study

The review of literature indicates that there is a lack of clarity when defining romantic relationships and romantic experiences in late adolescence. This population is engaging in romantic experiences and romantic relationships as developmentally appropriate for their age group (Arnett, 1994, 2003; Schwartz et al., 2005), and some even participate in specific romantic experiences that do not require long-term commitments but typically include sexual interaction (Berntson et al., 2014; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Epstein et al., 2009; Lyons et al., 2013; Manthos et al., 2014; Owen et al., 2011). Shared meanings and new expectations surface as culture shifts over time (Giordano et al., 2006), and there is a need to examine and make sense of the rules associated with social interactions. In the existing literature, few researchers have provided participants with an option to share their individual perspectives and definitions regarding romantic relationships or romantic experiences (Barton et al., 2017; Epstein et

al., 2009). The purpose of the study was to create the opportunity to understand the conceptualizations and meanings of contemporary romantic relationships and romantic experiences from those that are directly participating in these relational interactions.

Research Questions

Research Question 1. How do late adolescents conceptualize romantic relationships and romantic experiences?

Research Question 2. Among late adolescents, are romantic relationships and romantic experiences conceptualized to be similar or different?

Research Question 3. Based on late adolescents' perceptions of romantic relationships and romantic experiences, what are the frequencies of each phenomenon?

CHAPTER THREE – METHODS

Methods

The current study was part of a larger study conducted to learn more about college students' overall well-being, their use of technology, and their romantic interactions. This present study focused explicitly on exploring the participants' conceptualization of both romantic experiences and romantic relationships. In this section, the sample, data collection, and data analysis procedures are presented.

Design

A qualitative design was used to consider perceptions of romantic relationships and romantic experiences. Qualitative design in research is used when there is a need to explore a specific population or gain understanding of variables that might be challenging to quantify (Creswell, 2013). Further, a qualitative design was selected, "... because we need a complex, detailed understanding of the issue" and this can only be accomplished through obtaining and exploring peoples' lived experiences (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). There are several methodological and analytic approaches within qualitative research. A conventional qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) approach was selected for this study in order to investigate the descriptions and definitions presented within the data. Conventional qualitative content analysis is utilized when the objective is to describe an event or experience, as well as when existing literature or research on the topic is limited (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Sample

The sample included 263 college students, all from one university in the northwestern region of the United States. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 25 ($m_{age} = 20.3$ years). Of the participants, 41 identified as male and 222 identified as female (see Table 1). The majority of the sample was Caucasian (90.1%; see Table 1), indicated that they were in their first or second year of college (53.8%), and reported a single marital status (96.1%; see Table 2). Further, a large portion of students was living in on-campus (36.0 %) or off-campus (52.1%) single student housing (see Table 1). Finally, the majority of participants identified as heterosexual (90.5%).

Measurement

A survey was created as part of a larger study on technology use, relationships, and college student well-being (see Appendix B). Qualtrics (see <https://www.qualtrics.com/>), a software program, was chosen to host the survey. A team of researchers used Dillman, Smyth, and Christian's (2009) recommended guidelines for survey and item development. Because a qualitative design was selected for the study, open-ended items were specifically constructed to allow participants to share their own perceptions regarding romantic relationships, romantic experiences, and potential similarities/differences between the two relational constructs. Once written, the researchers had the questions externally reviewed by providing two undergraduate students, two graduate students, and one faculty member with copies of the questions to assess for appropriateness. Only small word changes were recommended and implemented. In the final survey, participants were presented with demographic items.

Participant responses from five open-ended items from the survey were used in this study (see Table 3). Further, participants were asked two items, based on their personal definitions, to report the number of romantic experiences and romantic experiences that have had since turning age 18.

Procedures

The study was approved by Montana State University's Institutional Review Board (See Appendix A). Instructors of five undergraduate general education courses agreed to have their students ($N = 437$) complete an online survey for course credit or extra credit. One researcher went into each class to introduce the study, share informed consent procedures, explain how to access the survey, and how participation was documented. The informed consent form was provided on the first page of the survey (See Appendix B). If digital consent to participate was provided (i.e., clicking "accept"), the student was directed to the survey questions. If consent was declined (i.e., clicking "decline"), the student was directed to the end of the survey page thanking them for their consideration. Each instructor agreed to host an announcement on their online course management system (i.e., Brightspace; see <https://www.d2l.com/products/learning-environment/>) that included a link to the survey for student access. The online survey provided for the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants while still allowing them to earn credit or extra credit.

Table 1*Participant Demographics*

	<u><i>n</i></u>	<u>%</u>
Gender		
Male	41	15.6
Female	222	84.4
Total	263	100
Ethnicity		
White	235	89.4
Latino/Hispanic	7	2.7
African American	4	1.5
Asian	3	1.1
Pacific Islander	2	0.8
Middle Eastern	4	1.5
Other	8	3
Sexual Orientation		
Heterosexual	237	90.1
Bisexual	13	4.9
Lesbian	1	0.4
Pansexual	3	1.1
Demisexual	1	0.4
Declined to respond	7	2.7
Year in College		
Freshman	84	31.9
Sophomore	57	21.7
Junior	43	16.3
Senior 4th year	40	15.2
Senior 5+ year	38	14.4
Current Living Situation		
On-campus student housing	94	35.7
Off-campus student housing	137	52.1
With parents	9	3.4
With partner	20	7.6
With dependents	3	1.1

Table 2*Relationship Status of Participants*

	<i>n</i>	%
Single	134	51
Married	9	3.4
Divorced	1	0.4
Cohabiting	18	6.8
Dating	101	38.4

Table 3*Exploring Romantic Relationships and Romantic Experiences: Open-Ended Survey Questions*

How do you personally define “romantic relationship” for people in your age group?

Do you think your peers would agree with your definition of romantic relationships?
Why or
why not?

How would you personally define "romantic experiences" for people in your age group?

Would your peers agree with your definition of romantic experience? Why or why not?

From your perspective, what (if any) are the most distinguishing features between romantic experiences and romantic relationships?

Once the survey concluded, students were directed to a separate online survey to provide their names and email information to receive credit for participation. This approach ensured that no identifiable information was associated with participant responses. There was a 68% response rate. The study focused on traditionally aged college students (18–25 years old) and 33 participants were excluded from the sample because they were outside of the age range ($m_{age} = 33.7$ years).

Data Analysis

Research Question 1. The current study utilized a conventional qualitative content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This analytic approach allowed the specific content within the text data to direct the naming of themes and categories as they surfaced within participants' responses (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). For the current study, this method was advantageous because the responses of the students directly influenced the emergence of codes based on commonalities in participants' responses, instead of researchers providing pre-determined categories.

Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) guidelines for conventional qualitative content analysis were implemented. In order to investigate whether there were or were not gendered differences in responses, data were organized by gender. Further, to avoid misrepresentation or missing opportunities for highlighting different lived experiences by sexual orientation, responses from late adolescents who reported their sexual orientations as Bisexual, Lesbian, Demisexual, Pansexual, or declined to respond were reviewed to check for similarities and differences from those who identified as heterosexual. First, two independent researchers began by immersing (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the responses in order to gain a sense of the data as a whole. The two researchers met together to discuss the common "key thoughts and concepts" that were identified (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1279). These common key thoughts became the initial coding categories through discussion between the two researchers. Immersion revealed similarities between romantic relationships and romantic experiences in some concepts, but it was clear that there were more differences in key

thoughts between the two phenomena. Thus, two separate coding schemes were developed, and the data were analyzed separately with their own coding scheme. The researchers agreed on a series of potential codes, defined each code, and found examples from the data that represent each code—creating two coding schemes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The researchers determined that responses were consistent across participants regardless of gender or sexual orientation, and the two coding schemes represented all participants' responses.

Consistent with Creswell's (2013) coding recommendations, two researchers independently coded four pages of data regarding romantic relationships to ensure the accuracy of the coding scheme and established inter-coder agreement. The coders achieved 80% inter-coder agreement and the rest of the document was coded independently by the two independent researchers. Researchers then completed an identical process with the data regarding romantic experiences. The coders achieved an 81% inter-coder agreement and the remainder of the document was coded independently. Once the data set was fully coded, the two researchers checked for total percentage agreement. The data pertaining to romantic relationships had a calculated percentage agreement of 82% and the data pertaining to romantic experiences had a calculated percentage agreement of 84%. Both calculations were considered good inter-rater percentage of agreement in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). Disagreements within both data sets were resolved through consulting the original data and discussion between the two researchers. After coding was complete, the two independent researchers met

again to review commonalities among the codes that became “key categories” or themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1280). These themes were used to present the results.

Research Question 2. The data analysis procedures used in research question one (e.g., immersion, checking for consistencies/inconsistencies between gender and sexual orientation, code establishment, inter-percentage agreement, and identification of key themes) were identically followed in research question two. Strong inter-rater percentage of agreement (80%) for qualitative research (Creswell, 2013) was achieved in this analysis.

Research Question 3. The purpose of this research question was to analyze the frequency in which romantic relationships and romantic experiences occurred in late adolescence. Descriptive statistics were used to present participants’ self-reported number of romantic experiences and romantic relationships. A paired *t*-test was used to compare the frequencies of romantic relationships and romantic experiences. Researchers determined together the most appropriate places to integrate this information within the presentation of the qualitative results.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness of the results, a variation of member checking (Creswell, 2013) was implemented. *Member checking* occurs when researchers send the completed results section back to the participants and ask for feedback regarding accuracy (Creswell, 2013). In the current study, permission to access participants after study completion was not a part of the original approved IRB protocol. Instead, a

variation of member checking was used where researchers rely on review from people who are similar to the sample in terms of age and region but were not necessarily a study participant (Vaterlaus, Barnett, Roche, & Young, 2016). A researcher emailed three female and two male college students from the same region and who were between the ages of 18 and 25 to review the complete results. Results from both qualitative research questions (i.e., research questions one and two) were sent to the individuals. In order to check for the accuracy of the results, the following questions were asked of these late adolescents: (a) How did the results relate to your experiences with romantic relationships and romantic experiences?, (b) How did the results relate to your peers' (18- to 25-year-olds) experiences with romantic relationships and romantic experiences?, and (c) Do you recommend any specific changes? The respondents indicated that the results represented their experiences with the phenomena and did not recommend any changes to be made to the results.

CHAPTER FOUR – RESULTS

ResultsResearch Question 1

Research question one was designed to gain insight on late adolescent conceptualization of romantic relationships and romantic experiences. To answer this research question, two qualitative content analyses were completed. The results are presented below with perceptions of romantic relationships first followed by participants' reports regarding romantic experiences.

Romantic Relationships. In total, four themes were identified (See Table 4). The themes regarding late adolescents' conceptualization of romantic relationships included (a) mutual exclusivity and boundaries, (b) physical qualities, (c) time spent within a relationship, and (d) emotional qualities. Descriptions of each theme are reported in order of frequency. Participant gender and age are presented parenthetically with quotes to provide context.

Mutual Exclusivity and Boundaries. Participants often defined romantic relationships in regard to shared commitment between those involved. A female (18) participant described a romantic relationship as, "When people are committed to each other wholeheartedly and really work at the relationship together." Others used high-level commitment terms such as, "monogamous," and "mutual," as well as phrases like, "have been dating for a while," and "exclusively seeing each other." Commitment was

described as a reciprocal process. A female late adolescent (23) explained, “When two people choose to be mutually exclusive...and work together like a team.” Similarly, another participant (female, 22) included, “When two people are in a mutual exclusive relationship,” within her definition of relationships, and yet another participant described, “Two people who are mutually interested in one another and who are usually only involved with their partner...” (male, 18).

Table 4

Late Adolescent (N = 260) Conceptualizations of Romantic Relationships: Results from a Qualitative Content Analysis

Code	<i>n</i>	%	Example
Theme 1 Mutual Exclusivity and Boundaries			
Commitment	134	51.54	“The people are only focused on the person they like and aren't focused on others while in a relationship.” (female, 19)
Two people	92	35.38	“A romantic relationship would be two people in a...relationship.” (female, 21)
No commitment	53	20.38	“I have lots of friends who are dating multiple people at the same time.” (female, 23)
Polyamorous	5	1.92	“...how ever many [people] are in their relationship...” (female, 21)
Theme 2 Physical Qualities			
Sex	132	50.77	“Engaging in sexual acts with another individual.” (male, 21)
Physical attraction	20	7.69	“...attracted to each other physically.” (female, 18)
No sex	12	4.62	“A romantic relationship isn't just about sex.” (female, 22)
Theme 3 Time Spent within a Relationship			
Dates and hanging out	110	42.31	“...want to spend lots of time together whether it be dates, or just doing homework.” (female, 18)

Table 4 Continued

Romance	16	6.15	“...doing things to make your partner feel loved that you normally wouldn't do for others...” (female, 22)
Theme 4 Emotional Qualities			
Emotional intimacy	90	34.62	“Relationship at our age means encouraging their partner in all of their passions and desires so that they are a support system for their partner to achieve the goals...” (female, 18)
Future focused	37	14.23	“Someone who is ready to spend the rest of their lives with that person.” (male, 20)
Love	35	13.46	“I think a romantic relationship for someone my age is being with someone you truly love.” (female, 20)
Respect	20	7.69	“...expressing...respect toward each other.” (female, 18)
Friendship	17	6.54	“If you are together with someone and you are more than friends.” (female, 18)

Note. Total percentage exceeds 100% because line-by-line coding was used. Participants contributed to more than one code.

Although fewer shared the perspective, there were also some late adolescents who did not believe that commitment was essential in the conceptualization of romantic relationships or implied that if commitment was part of romantic relationships then maybe they do not have romantic relationships. Those holding this perspective used phrases like, “aren’t looking to settle down with anyone right now” and “do not like to commit.” Some participants offered an explanation for low-level commitment in romantic interactions. A male (18) late adolescent explained, “I usually just hear of people hooking up in college and never steadily dating someone.” Comparably, others suggested that late adolescents associate lack of commitment as a way to engage in physical behaviors with another without the expectation of long-term investment. A

female participant (21) echoed this sentiment by saying, “I’m more interested in having a good time.”

Relationships were commonly contextualized in reference to the number of people who have made a commitment to each other and within the theme more participants identified that a relationship occurs only between two people. For instance, participants described this relational boundary with phrases like, “only shared between those two,” “living life with this one person,” or “two people in a relationship.” Within romantic relationships, participants believed that the two people would have boundaries that supported their commitment to each other. A male (18) participant elaborated, “If both parties involved both consider it to be a relationship, then I would hope the two of them are really only interested in one another and aren't involved with other people romantically.” Another participant (female, 19) shared, “I consider a romantic relationship for my age group is when two people are in a committed exclusive relationship with one another.” A few participants ($n = 5$) indicated that people can be “polyamorous” and that commitment could be shared with more than two individuals within a romantic relationship. Supporting this perspective, a participant (female, 20) indicated, “Some people believe that there can be more than two people involved [in a romantic relationship].”

Physical Qualities. When conceptualizing romantic relationships many late adolescents focused on the presence or absence of sexual behaviors. Just over half of the participants (50.77%) included sexual contact as central to their definitions of romantic relationships. Physical attraction and sexual behaviors were mentioned using a variety of

terms such as, “physically intimate,” “sexual intimacy,” and “lots of sexual contact.” A late adolescent (female, 20) explained her definition of relationships as, “People who have expressed their heightened feelings of interest for one another and...engage in physical activity.” While most participants kept their descriptions broad, some specifically named “hugging,” “kissing,” and “making out” as specific physical behaviors that distinguished romantic relationships and could ultimately lead to sexual intercourse. A male (19) participant summarized, “A romantic relationship for my age group is when people are exploring the possibility for a relationship that could lead to being in a form of serious or committed relationship, usually based on physical attraction.”

A smaller portion of the participants (4.62%) highlighted that romantic relationships did not have to include sex. For instance, a female (21) participant stated, “Not all couples in a romantic relationship have sexual relations.” Another female (19) late adolescent’s response echoed the idea, “both like each other as who they are and not based off of sexual terms.” Some indicated that their religious values supported waiting to have sex until marriage.

Time Spent within a Relationship. According to late adolescents, romantic relationships include spending “a lot” or a “significant amount” of time together. Participants further shared that within romantic relationships partners prioritize time spent with each other by “setting time aside” from day-to-day activities. A participant (female, 19) described, “I believe that a ‘romantic relationship’ for people of my age is defined loosely as hanging out with someone on the weekends and focusing a majority of your time on that one individual.” The time spent together could be more formal like

“going on dates.” These dates could include “romantic gestures,” “nice” dates, or “surprises.” These gestures were described as “flowers,” “unexpected” and “gifts, such as a note.” Some participants had idealized perspectives of romantic relationships. For example, a female late adolescent (19) described a romantic relationship as, “being surprised with flowers and dinner and then a walk in the moonlight.”

Participants specifically indicated the importance of spending time throughout the day and also at night—“Spending time throughout the day together” (male, 19) and “...going on dates...doing things during the day and night” (female, 21). The time spent could also be less formal and participants explained that romantic relationships included “hanging out” as a common feature. Hanging out together could entail “cooking for each other,” “hiking,” “doing homework together,” “watching movies,” “doing active things,” and “going on adventures,” and over-the-top gestures were not seen to be essential. Summarizing the collective experience, a male late adolescent (19) explained, “A relationship where two people...share many memories together and just love to be around each other.”

Emotional Qualities. Late adolescents shared that there were distinguishable emotional qualities within their conceptualizations of romantic relationships. These emotional qualities included “trust,” “respect,” or seeking and receiving “consent.” A romantic relationship was thought to be an association where the romantic partners could “connect,” “share secrets,” and “care about” each other. These connections and confidences were thought to grow into “love,” “real love,” or “strong love.” In regard to emotional connection, a participant (female, 21) explained that a romantic relationship is:

A...relationship where both parties can count on the other for support. Deeply connected to one another. Being able to respect each other's values even if they don't align. Having a sense of trust that comes from giving the other the ability to hurt you but believing that they won't.

Some late adolescents indicated that a hallmark of romantic relationships is their focus on the future. A late adolescent (female, 18) pointed out, "I also don't really see the point in continuing to date someone if you can't see yourself marrying them." Within this future focus, participants indicated that emotional connections in romantic relationships are rooted in friendship and as the relationship progresses, they become "more than friends." Participants indicated that the goal of a romantic relationship might include being with "your best friend." As one participant (female, 23) divulged, "I have a feeling that every person my age wants to be dating their best friend. That is the ideal relationship for people my age."

Romantic Experiences. Three themes regarding late adolescents' conceptualization of romantic experiences were identified: (a) sex as recreation, (b) exploring without commitment, and (c) moments of "extraordinary" connection (See Table 5). These themes are reported in order of prevalence, and participants' gender and age are again included parenthetically with quotes to provide context.

Sex as Recreation. The majority of participants reported that sexual activities were synonymous to romantic experiences. Many participants simply stated, "Romantic experiences to me is just having sex with someone" (female, 20). Common words and phrases to describe this included "sex," "sexual encounters," and "sexual behavior," but also more specific activities like

Table 5

Late Adolescent (N = 258) Conceptualizations of Romantic Experiences: Results from a Qualitative Content Analysis

Code	<i>n</i>	%	Example
Theme 1 Sex as Recreation			
Sex	127	49.22	“People are just having sex and no real feeling[s] are involved.” (male, 19)
Hook up	30	11.63	“hooking up” (female, 18)
Kissing	26	10.08	“Kissing and beyond.” (male, 21)
Physical touch	18	6.98	“Like hand holding and cuddling would be romantic experiences.” (female, 19)
Theme 2 Exploring Without Commitment			
Going on dates	71	27.52	“Going on dates and doing things they both enjoy.” (female, 19)
Lower commitment	28	10.85	“Romantic experiences could happen with someone that you really like but may not be in a committed relationship with.” (female, 19)
Mutual interest	28	10.85	“Having an attraction towards another individual...” (female, 22)
Hanging out	25	9.69	“Romantic experiences for people in my age group would be dinner dates, outside hikes and skiing. Grabbing a coffee with them or a drink in the early evening.” (female, 22)
Friendship	8	3.10	“Having something happen that involves stronger feelings for someone than just friendship.” (female, 20)
Theme 3 Moments of “Extraordinary” Connection			
Occur in a relationship	55	19.38	“...experiences you share with your partner. They can be funny, or emotional but ultimately they bring you closer together with a significant other.” (female, 19)
Romantic gestures	31	12.02	“Someone that is willing to go out of their way to do a nice gesture for you.” (female, 18)
Intense feeling	19	7.36	“...something exciting, and usual create ‘heart-throbbing’ feelings.” (female, 19)

Note. Total percentage exceeds 100% because line-by-line coding was used. Participants contributed to more than one code.

“holding hands, kissing, making out” (female, 18) were frequently mentioned. Some participants provided a broad view of these interactions as “having sexual intercourse or being sexually active in some way” (female, 22) or “physically engaging with another person in a sexual manner” (male, 21). Sexual experiences could “hold meaning,” or “create intimacy,” but most often they were described in a way that implied an absence of future relational expectations from the other person. A participant (female, 19) shared, “A lot of people just have sex to have sex or fool around for fun.” Another late adolescent (female, 22) expressed her definition of romantic experiences as, “Sexual encounters without any amount of time spent dating.” A few participants used the exact term “hook up,” but others used different words to describe brief sexual encounters. A female late adolescent (24) pointed out, “Romantic experiences seem like they could be...sexual experiences or hook ups that don’t have the depth or...longevity of relationships. Like having short-term...interactions (sex) with someone without the expectation of reciprocation.”

Exploring without Commitment. Late adolescents described romantic experiences as an event that occurs with another person, usually with limited commitment by one or both parties involved. Nearly 28% of participants mentioned “dating” or “going on dates” when they described experiences. Late adolescents indicated specific dating activities such as “going to dinner or a movie” or simply “sharing experiences.” Other participants described similar activities as “hanging out.” However, the term “hanging out” was mentioned apart from “dating” or “going on dates” and was described as strictly as a desire for companionship with someone of interest. A participant (female, 19) said, “I

think this would be like...hanging out together in a nice setting, and just enjoying each other's company." Similarly, another participant related, "I would describe romantic experiences by...hanging out, basically enjoying each other's company." A male participant (19) echoed this idea:

I would personally define a "romantic experience" for people in my age group as being a unique experience in a sense that there is a significant non-physical desire to be with the other. An experience where two people could care less if sexual desires were met, but as long as they were in the company of each other.

Interest or attraction was commonly described as "really liking them" or a "mental and romantic attraction to another" (female, 19). Participants consistently referred to romantic experiences as "temporary" or "short-term." Lower-levels of commitment to another were described as "right now not for the future," "doesn't last or have any potential," and "no strings attached relationship." As one participant indicated, "experiences are more short-lived than relationships," (female, 25).

Focusing on various levels of commitment and expectations in human relationships, some participants used friendship as a basis for defining experiences. A participant (male, 20) indicated that romantic experiences are "being with your best friend that is of the opposite gender." Another participant (female, 21) specified, "Romantic experiences would be experience that surpass simple friendship." Phrases like "more than just a friend" and "flirty friendship" were also used.

Moments of "Extraordinary" Connection. The definition of experiences was also perceived as something that occurs within an existing romantic relationship with a partner. Participants used phrases similar to "quality time with their significant other"

(female, 20). When experiences transpire within relationships, usually a romantic gesture was included within the definition. A late adolescent male (19) described, “A romantic experience would be something you did together with your partner in your romantic relationship that has had special meaning or has become a cherished memory.” Similarly, another participant (male, 20) defined a romantic experience as, “Probably something very intimate between you and a significant other. It's not something that's a normal occurrence I think, but something more special that only happens so often.”

Romantic experiences were also described as moments of emotional connection or intense feelings—inside or outside of a romantic relationship. A late adolescent female (22) described, “I like to think of romantic experience as going out to a candle-lit dinner, or sharing your most guarded secrets to grow in deeper relationship with the other person.” Others used phrases like “a moment where I really connect with someone that makes the moment feel extraordinary” (female, 19) and “[an interaction that] makes you feel desired, sexy, beautiful, and/or special” (female, 21) were used to explain euphoric feelings that compose romantic experiences. Further, a female late adolescent (22) detailed physical and emotional indicators of romantic experiences, “I think a romantic experience is when you get butterflies in your stomach and your face becomes flushed and you have a sense of bliss.”

Research Question 2

Research question two was designed to understand any potential differentiation or distinction late adolescents have between romantic relationships and romantic experiences (See Table 6). A qualitative content analysis was completed to address this

question. Three themes were identified: (a) levels of commitment, (b) the presence or absence of emotional connection, and (c) romantic experiences occur within and outside of relationship. The results are presented below in order of frequency, Gender and age are included parenthetically with quotes for context.

Table 6

Late Adolescent (N = 250) Conceptualization of Similarities or Differences Between Romantic Relationships and Romantic Experiences: Results from a Qualitative Content Analysis

Code	<i>n</i>	%	Example
Theme 1 Levels of Commitment			
Higher commitment	112	44.8 0	“Romantic relationships are committed.” (male, 18)
Lower commitment	88	35.2 0	“A romantic experience is not actually dating someone exclusively.” (female, 19)
Theme 2 The Presence or Absence of Emotional Connection			
More than sex	59	23.6 0	“Romantic relationships imply that there is more to the relationship than just physical pleasure.” (male, 24)
One-time event	40	16.0 0	“Experience is just hooking up with someone for the fun of it” (male,19)
Theme 3 Experiences Occur Within and Outside of Relationship			
Cannot have a romantic relationship without romantic experience	35	14.0 0	“A romantic experience is something that happens sometimes during the course of a romantic relationship.” (male, 20)
Romantic experiences can be independent of a romantic relationship	27	10.8 0	“I think you can have multiple romantic experiences without being in a romantic relationship.” (female, 19)
Romantic experiences culminate in a romantic relationship	16	6.40	“Experiences are the little things that are perks and go into making a romantic relationship.” (female, 18)

Note. Total percentage exceeds 100% because line-by-line coding was used. Participants contributed to more than one code.

Levels of Commitment. Many participants highlighted varying levels of commitment as a main difference between romantic relationships and romantic experiences. Some participants mentioned commitment in relation to time and indicated that romantic relationships are more often long-term and romantic experiences are short-term. A female late adolescent (19) described, “A romantic experience is a short amount of time, whereas a romantic relationship is over a longer period of time.” Likewise, two participants elaborated, “the time spent (while in) experiences are short and relationships are long” (male, 19) and “A relationship is ongoing, while and experience is more ‘in the moment’” (female, 19). Participants also explained that commitment was critical within romantic relationships and less important in romantic experiences. For instance, a participant (female, 19) disclosed, “In a relationship, you are typically more monogamous. Romantic experience can happen with anyone anywhere. It is more random.” Another participant (female, 18) similarly stated, “Experiences can happen to any two people who may just like each other but romantic relationships are between two people who are committed to each other.”

The Presence or Absence of Emotional Connection. When describing differences, some participants separated romantic experiences and romantic relationships by sex with or without emotional connection. A participant (male, 18) clarified, “Romantic experiences are ‘hook ups,’ one or two time things. Relationships involve emotions (love, trust, etc.)” Romantic relationships were described as, “trying to build something,” “having to do with knowing someone on a more personal level,” and “your partner cares about you.” The participants labeled romantic experiences as “just trying to get in each

other's pants," "only physical," and "more about booty calls and such." Romantic experiences were consistently described by physical qualities, and relationships by "bonds," "care," and "love." A female (24) late adolescent elucidated, "Romantic experiences could be linked to 'hook ups' or 'one night stands.' The attraction is there but no connection. Romantic relationships require a connection, a deep connection."

Romantic Experiences Occur within and outside of Relationship. When considering romantic relationships and romantic experiences, late adolescents described both in relation to each other. Many indicated that romantic relationships cannot occur without romantic experiences being present, stating things like, "Romantic relationships can't really exist without romantic experiences," (female, 19) and "Experiences are part of a romantic relationship," (male, 19). Others expressed experiences as the actions and effort, or "building blocks," of romantic relationships. Romantic experiences can be a part of the initial stages of the relationship, allowing late adolescents to gain an understanding of the relationship dynamics as well as the preferences of another. A male (18) described, "a romantic experience is what leads up to a romantic relationship, and what brings you closer in a romantic relationship." Similarly, a female (19) stated, "Romantic experience is more to finding out how a relationship works."

Although participants indicated that romantic relationships could not exist without romantic experiences, they explained that romantic experiences could occur outside of relationship or without intention of forming a romantic relationship. As a participant (male, 19) stated, "You can have romantic experiences without a romantic relationship." A late adolescent (female, 19) further elaborated, "...you don't have to be in a romantic

relationship to have a romantic experience. You can kiss or go on a date with someone that you are not in a romantic relationship with.”

Research Question 3

Research question three was designed to quantify the frequency in which romantic relationships and romantic experiences were occurring among late adolescents. Results indicated that late adolescents reported an average of eight romantic experiences and one romantic relationship since the age of 18. Further, a significant difference in the reported numbers of romantic experiences ($m = 8.10, sd = 10.20$) and romantic relationships ($m = 1.18, sd = 2.17$) experienced by late adolescents since the age of 18 was identified; $t(255) = -6.29, p = .000$.

CHAPTER FIVE – DISCUSSION

Discussion

This exploratory study highlighted the conceptualization of romantic relationships and romantic experiences in late adolescence. Three research questions were posed to gain insight regarding late adolescent relationships and experiences, and the frequency in which they occur. Participants reported differences between the concepts in reference to commitment, sexual interactions, and emotional connection. No differences in gender or sexual orientation were identified in the qualitative examination of late adolescents' conceptualizations of romantic relationships and romantic experiences. The results are discussed in connection to existing research and theory.

Romantic Relationships

Late adolescents in the current study defined romantic relationships as relationships with high levels of commitment, a lot of time shared together, and the likelihood of sexual interactions. Mutual exclusivity and commitment have been referenced within contemporary literature (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Barton et al., 2017; Miller & Benson, 1999), but not as a key component in the definition of romantic relationships. In early works, Collins (2003) proposed a definition of romantic relationships that included the characteristics of mutual agreement, continuity, and affection that may lead to sexual experiences. In later work, it was suggested that since romantic relationships in adolescence similarly pattern those in adulthood, the concept of commitment should be included within the definition of romantic relationship (Madsen & Collins, 2011). As

findings from the current study suggest, commitment and mutually exclusivity are important in the designation of romantic relationships in late adolescence. In a study exploring relational commitment, Barton and colleagues (2017) found that when participants had shared feelings of commitment, they also felt a sense of reliability from their partner. Feelings of mutual commitment also lead to indications of permanency within the relationship.

Participants in the current study usually described romantic relationships as reciprocated occurrences between two partners. A smaller group of participants described relationships that would be categorized as polyamorous but still identified an importance of commitment. Consistent with the findings of Wosick-Correa (2010), polyamorous relationships can include the characteristic of commitment through the expression of boundaries.

The way in which adolescents have spent time together has evolved drastically across decades. In the early 1900s, men were *courting* women of interest by interacting with them under the supervision of their parents inside their home (Weigel, 2016). Once the pair began attending social gatherings together, an engagement was expected to follow. By 1940, men initiated romantic intentions with a woman of interest, and they engaged in group activities and events to become well acquainted with one another (Miller & Benson, 1999). Group gatherings eventually progressed to individual interactions that advanced to *going steady*, a committed romantic relationship that implied commitment, affection, and future marriage. It is clear the terminology used in relation to time spent in romantic relationships has evolved over time and the language

around these relationships will likely continue to change. Participants in the current study did not use the terms courting or going steady, rather they most often used terms *dating* and *hanging out* to describe the time spent with a partner. These terms still indicated the importance of partners spending time with one another in a romantic relationship.

The majority of participants in this study indicated that romantic relationships usually included sexual intercourse, but there were some who specifically stated that sexual intercourse does not necessarily have to be present to consider the partnership a romantic relationship. These participants indicated that kissing, hugging, and cuddling could be evidences of physical affection. One researcher acknowledged this finding by including the concept of affection within a description of romantic relationships and indicated that the relationship *may* lead to sexual behaviors (Collins, 2003). On average, adolescent males are initiating kissing behaviors as early as the age of 14 and adolescent females as early as 15; sexual intercourse initiation begins later, at 16 for males and 17 for females (Feldman, Turner, & Ararajo, 1999). In early adolescence, sexual intercourse behaviors commonly occur within committed, romantic relationships (Furman, Low, & Ho, 2009). According to the National College Health Association (2018), 44.2% of college students reported having had one sexual partner in the previous 12 months; 9.3% reported four or more sexual partners during the same time period.

Literature suggests that some romantic relationships are initiated in late adolescence for the purpose of finding a partner for future endeavors, such as marriage (Arnett, 2000, 2004; Madsen & Collins, 2011). A smaller number of participants indicated that this was indeed a goal and characteristic within their romantic

relationships, which aligns with the cultural acceptance of marriage as a core value within society (James-Kangal et al., 2018). Still, contemporary late adolescents are postponing marriage (Vespa, 2017) and cohabitation is becoming increasingly popular (Stepler, 2017), which may delay the desire for a long-term, serious relationship. This may be why fewer of the late adolescents in this study focused on the long-term view within romantic relationships.

Romantic Experiences

Existing research on romantic experiences has indicated that the experiences are inclusive of attraction (Collins et al., 2009) and behaviors that have romantic characteristics (Madsen & Collins, 2011). Late adolescents in this study explained that romantic experiences can include sexual encounters, going on dates, or romantic gestures. Generally, pre-marital sexual interactions have been socially unacceptable in previous generations, but there has been a more recent shift in acceptability among late adolescents (Arnett, 2004; Collins et al., 2009; James-Kangal et al., 2018; Miller & Benson, 1999). Sexual interactions without expectation for future commitment were mentioned frequently in the current study. These one-time sexual interactions have been referred to in the literature as *hooking up* (Berntson et al., 2014; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Epstein et al., 2009). Although, it is important to note that not all of the participants in this study used the term *hooking up* when they described this phenomenon and instead used terms like *one-night stand* and *noncommittal sex*. In contemporary research, *hooking up* has been described as sexual interactions categorized by the frequency of interaction (e.g., one night only, multiple encounters with the same person, or continuous sexual

relationship without mutual expectation of commitment) (Berntson et al., 2014; Bisson, & Levine, 2009; Epstein et al., 2009). Research also indicates that those involved in these sexual interactions are not interested in pursuing a romantic relationship outside of the interaction (Berntson et al., 2014; Manthos et al., 2014), which is consistent with the findings in the current study. Participants shared that romantic experiences were inclusive of other interactions that were not sexual in nature. Participants indicated that hanging out, sharing everyday happenings, and romantic gestures were also regarded as romantic experiences.

Romantic experiences were seen as potential steps that could be the start of two people beginning a romantic relationship, as well as happenings that exist within a romantic relationship. As Miller & Benson (1999) suggested, the formation of couple relationships still follow a pattern of unceremonious encounters that potentially form more serious, connected relationships. Still, romantic experiences can be independent of an expectation for future interactions, due to their noncommittal nature (Collins et al., 2009; Lyons et al., 2013; Madsen & Collins, 2011).

Distinguishing between Romantic Relationships and Experiences

According to participants in this study, romantic relationships and romantic experiences are distinguishably different and yet interconnected. Late adolescents reported having had significantly more romantic experiences when compared to romantic relationships. Qualitatively, romantic experiences, when directly compared to romantic relationships, were conceptualized as short-term interactions. Again, the research addresses the less-committal aspects of romantic experiences (Berntson et al., 2014;

Bisson, & Levine, 2009; Epstein et al., 2009), and it has been noted that the quality and duration of the relationship are questioned when considering noncommittal encounters (Barton et al., 2017). In contrast, research indicates that late adolescents seek committed partners that would be interested in longer-term partnerships and potentially marriage (Arnett, 2000, 2004).

The presence of emotional connection was identified to be another differentiation between romantic relationships and romantic experiences. Research offers a limited discussion of emotional connections in regard to either romantic categorization. Affection and care have been considered a foundational component in romantic relationships (Collins, 2003; Collins & Welsh, 2009; Furman & Collins, 2009; Madsen & Collins, 2011). Serious emotional connections are thought to be present in romantic relationships (Arnett, 2000; Miller & Benson, 1999). Some participants in the current study identified the presence of emotional connection within romantic relationships, and they indicated that romantic experiences were often only sexual encounters. This finding is consistent with the results found in the previous research question and in literature. Sexual interactions can be considered as a single encounter, without expectation of a further commitment or relationship (Berntson et al., 2014; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Collins et al., 2009; Epstein et al., 2009; Lyons et al., 2013; Madsen & Collins, 2011).

Romantic experiences and romantic relationships are also interconnected in some aspects. Participants indicated that romantic experiences can be encounters that serve as foundational components that can lead to the formation of a romantic relationship, or romantic experiences can be events or encounters that occur between late adolescents in

an existing romantic relationship. Researchers have yet to articulate experiences in this way, other than acknowledging the notion that partner selection tends to begin with casual interactions with potential to form a relationship (Miller & Benson, 1999).

Romantic experiences have also been conceptualized as relational interactions completely independent of romantic relationships. The literature supports this finding, suggesting that the temporary, short-term characteristics of romantic experiences do not always culminate in the formation of romantic relationships (Collins et al., 2009; Lyons et al., 2013; Madsen & Collins, 2011).

Symbolic Interaction Theory

A main tenant of symbolic interaction theory states that meaning making and definitions are generated through social interactions and the sharing of rules and expectations (Giordano et al., 2006). When experiencing new social interactions with others, late adolescents will use those interactions to define their environment. The qualitative method allowed for late adolescents to share their lived experience related the meaning of romantic relationships and romantic experiences. As culture has shifted over time and social expectations have changed, the terms in which literature has used to label romantic experiences and romantic relationships has been adjusted (Weigel, 2016). Seemingly historic terms such as *calling*, *courting*, or *going steady*, were not present in the data. The definitions of romantic relationships and romantic relationships in the present study are directly derived from the reports of late adolescents experiencing similar social interactions. Participants in this study indicated that the terms romantic

relationship and romantic experience held different meaning and explained how the two terms connected.

Implications

Presently, there are few empirical studies that have provided the opportunity for participants to self-define the concepts of romantic relationships and romantic experiences. Some studies have provided definitions of the terms for the participants (Bisson & Levine, 2009; James-Kangal et al., 2018; Manthos et al., 2014), while other studies have asked survey questions regarding relationship behaviors and sexual interactions to construct conclusions about participants' relationship status (Boisvert & Poulin, 2017; Lyons et al., 2013; Meeus et al., 2007). The current study, and previous researchers (Collins et al., 2009; Furman & Collins, 2009; Lyons et al., 2013; Madsen & Collins, 2011; Manthos, et al., 2014; Miller & Benson, 1999), provide support for the notion that there is a difference between romantic relationships and romantic experiences. This implies that it would be imperative that researchers have clear definitions of romantic experiences and romantic relationships in order to accurately measure the distinction between the two phenomena. Based on the responses of contemporary late adolescents in this study, a preliminary definition of romantic relationships could be mutual commitment between consenting individuals, that includes a significant amount of time spent together, emotional connection, and likely, but not always, includes sexual behaviors. Further, a preliminary definition for romantic experiences is proposed: a low-commitment interaction between consenting individuals that evokes an emotional response, which may include a variety of shared experiences and/or sexual behaviors.

These definitions are presented as preliminary and additional research is needed to identify their general utility.

Results from the current study lead to implications for future research. It would be important for scholars studying romantic relationships in later adolescence to avoid using various terms describing romantic interactions synonymously (e.g., using “dating” for both romantic relationships and romantic experiences). Late adolescents in this study provided clear delineation between romantic experiences and romantic relationships, but there may be opportunities for further clarity in these definitions. Providing definitions to participants regarding these terms would be helpful to distinguish between romantic experiences and romantic relationships, but it would also be prudent to allow participants to comment on the definitions during data collection (e.g., open-ended response option in a survey, a prompt in an interview schedule) to ensure that measurement tools are inclusive of participants’ conceptualizations of these phenomena.

The overarching nature of romantic experiences provides an opportunity for further exploration of the interactions that occur in this category in terms of definitions, frequency, and evolution to romantic relationships. Contemporary research has only presented a basic definition of romantic experiences (Furman & Collins, 2009). The findings in the current study indicate that romantic experiences are typically interactions that require low levels of commitment, can elicit strong emotions, and likely include sexual activities. While sometimes independent of romantic relationships, these romantic experiences also happen within a committed, long-term romantic relationship. Investigations of the types of romantic experiences occurring within romantic

relationships, and their frequencies, might be beneficial for researchers and practitioners alike.

The findings from the current study also have implications for relationship educators and mental health professionals. Participants in this study indicated differences between romantic relationships and romantic experiences, but in some instances, there were terms like *date* and *hanging out* that appeared to be a part of the conceptualizations of both terms. Educators and clinicians may want to provide the late adolescents they work with the opportunity to share their own definitions of each of these terms. Educators and clinicians could consider sharing results from this study to generate a starting place of discussion on these terms. By allowing late adolescents to share their beliefs, descriptions, understanding, and observation of both romantic experiences and relationships, the practitioner could potentially better contextualize the education or treatment plan by creating a shared understanding of the terms. Further, understanding how late adolescents conceptualize romantic experiences could normalize the disclosure of interactions (e.g., one-night stand) that might otherwise lead to feelings of shame and embarrassment. Further, as the results in the current study suggest, sexual intercourse was a key component within romantic relationships and romantic experiences. Public health practitioners should be aware of these behaviors to best provide knowledge and access to sexual education and advocacy.

Limitations and Conclusions

Limitations are present within this study. The current study was homogenous in terms of gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. Similarly, the sample selected for the

current study only included college-attending late adolescents and data was collected from only one university. It is possible that a more diverse sample may have different conceptualizations of romantic relationships and romantic experiences. Future research should replicate this study with a more diverse sample in terms of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and with late adolescents who have engaged in various educational/occupational pursuits. The current study's design allowed for an in-depth analysis of late adolescent conceptualizations of romantic relationships and romantic experiences, but the design also limits the ability to generalize to larger populations.

Despite the limitations, this study provided an important first step to clarify differences between romantic relationships and romantic experiences from late adolescents lived experiences with these phenomena. Results provided preliminary definitions of both romantic relationships and romantic experiences. Romantic relationships typically include individuals who are highly committed that enjoy spending large quantities of time together, staying emotionally connected, and are likely sexually active. Romantic experiences often include various shared interactions that are commonly sexual activities but can also entail interactions that elicit an emotional response. These definitions differ in terms of levels of commitment and emotional involvement in relation to sexual encounters. The results provide an opportunity for further research and refinement of these concepts, as well as preliminary implications of additional direction for practitioners and educators.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL LETTERS



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
For the Protection of Human Subjects
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MEMORANDUM

TO: Kala Frantz and J. Mitchell Vaterlaus
FROM: Mark Quinn *Mark Quinn cy*
DATE: November 18, 2016
SUBJECT: "College Students, Technology, and Relationships" [KF111816-EX]

The above research, described in your submission of November 18, 2016, is exempt from the requirement of review by the Institutional Review Board in accordance with the Code of Federal regulations, Part 46, section 101. The specific paragraph which applies to your research is:

- (b) (1) Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices such as (i) research on regular and special education instructional strategies, or (ii) research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.
- (b) (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.
- (b) (3) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior that is not exempt under paragraph (b)(2) of this section, if: (i) the human subjects are elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office; or (ii) federal statute(s) without exception that the confidentiality of the personally identifiable information will be maintained throughout the research and thereafter.
- (b) (4) Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available, or if the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.
- (b) (5) Research and demonstration projects, which are conducted by or subject to the approval of department or agency heads, and which are designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine: (i) public benefit or service programs; (ii) procedures for obtaining benefits or services under those programs; (iii) possible changes in or alternatives to those programs or procedures; or (iv) possible changes in methods or levels of payment for benefits or services under those programs.
- (b) (6) Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies, (i) if wholesome foods without additives are consumed, or (ii) if a food is consumed that contains a food ingredient at or below the level and for a use found to be safe, or agricultural chemical or environmental contaminant at or below the level found to be safe, by the FDA, or approved by the EPA, or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the USDA.

Although review by the Institutional Review Board is not required for the above research, the Committee will be glad to review it. If you wish a review and committee approval, please submit 3 copies of the usual application form and it will be processed by expedited review.



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MEMORANDUM

TO: J. Mitchell Vaterlaus, Whitney Whittecar, Cassie Merten
FROM: Mark Quinn [Signature]
Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

DATE: January 25, 2019

RE: "Late Adolescent Perceptions of Romantic Relationships and Romantic Experiences" [JMV012519-EX]

The above research, described in your submission of January 25, 2019, is exempt from the requirement of review by the Institutional Review Board in accordance with the Code of Federal regulations, Part 46, section 101. The specific paragraph which applies to your research is:

- (b) (1) Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings...
(b) (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement)...
(b) (3) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement)...
X (b) (4) Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records...
(b) (5) Research and demonstration projects, which are conducted by or subject to the approval...
(b) (6) Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies...

Although review by the Institutional Review Board is not required for the above research, the Committee will be glad to review it. If you wish a review and committee approval, please submit 3 copies of the usual application form and it will be processed by expedited review.

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM AND SURVEY ITEMS

College Student Well-being and Technology

Start of Block: Consent for Participation

**SUBJECT CONSENT FORM
FOR
PARTICIPATION IN HUMAN RESEARCH AT
MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY**

Project Title: College Students, Technology, and Relationships

You are being asked to participate in a research study about technology use and relationships among college students. I am a graduate student in the College of Education, Health and Human Development at Montana State University. I am conducting a research study to explore current trends with technology use and how this might be related to college student well-being. Technology has become a regular part of college students lives and it is important to generate research on how technology is used among college students.

Participation is voluntary. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete an online survey regarding your technology and well-being. The survey is expected to take approximately 30 minutes to complete and includes multiple option and short answer responses. Completion of the survey marks the end of your participation in the study.

Participation is voluntary and you can choose to not answer any questions you do not want to answer and/or you can stop at any time. Participation or non-participation will not affect your grade or class standing. Taking part in this study may help researchers to better understand how college-aged students' use technology and how technology relates to college student well-being. Participation in this study will involve no cost to you. You will not be paid for participating in this study.

Although the risks in this study are low, you may feel uncomfortable with the some of the questions. You are free not to answer any questions that cause discomfort and you can withdraw at any time by just exiting the survey. If questions stimulate discomfort, counseling services and Montana State University are available:

Counseling & Psychological Services
211 Swingle Hall
406-994-4531

<http://www.montana.edu/wwwcc>

Your instructor has agreed to provide extra credit for your participation. If you do not wish to participate you will be offered an alternative opportunity for extra credit. Your answers to survey questions will be kept confidential. Your name and class information will be collected via a link to a separate survey at the completion of the questionnaire. Thus, your name will never be associated with your responses, but will be used to document your participation for your instructor. Technology has become an integral part of the lives of college students. Research is just beginning to emerge on how technology affects its users. The knowledge gained from this study may be of value to the field of human development and subject of technology use among college students. The study is of no direct benefit to the participants.

Again, your participation in this research study is completely voluntary and will in no way influence your standing in this class. If you have any questions about this study you may contact: Kala Frantz (kalafrantz@gmail.com) or You may also contact the faculty advisor of this project: Dr.J. Mitchell Vaterlaus at j.vaterlaus@montana.edu. Questions about your rights as a research subject may be directed to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office of Montana State University at (406) 994-4707.

By selecting the accept button below you are indicating that you have read the consent form, understand that discomforts and risks of this study, and understand that you may later refuse to participate. If you do not wish to participate in this study, please select the Decline button, and your session will end.

ACCEPT

DECLINE

End of Block: Consent for Participation

Start of Block: Demographic Information

What year were you born?

1998 (drop down menu)

What month were you born?

January (drop down menu)

Which best represents your gender?

Male

Female

Other _____

Which best describes your ethnicity?

- White/Caucasian
- Latino/Hispanic
- American Indian
- African American
- Asian
- Pacific Islander
- Other _____

What is your current relationship status?

- Single
 - Married
 - Divorced
 - Cohabiting
 - Dating
-

Which of the following best represents your sexual orientation?

- Bisexual
 - Heterosexual
 - Gay
 - Lesbian
 - Pansexual
 - Decline to respond
 - Other _____
-

What is your current year in school?

- Freshman/ 1st year
 - Sophomore/ 2nd year
 - Junior/ 3rd year
 - Senior/ 4th year
 - Senior/ 5th+ year
-

What is your current living situation?

- On-Campus Student Housing
 - Off-Campus with Roommates
 - With parents
 - With partner
 - Other _____
-

If living away from parents, approximately what is the current distance (in miles) between you and your parents?

- 1 (drop down menu)
-

What best describes the parenting configuration in the household you grew up in?

- Mother and Father
- Single Mother
- Single Father
- Mother and Stepfather
- Father and Stepmother
- Adopted parents
- Grandparents
- Other _____

End of Block: Demographic Information

Start of Block: Romantic Relationships

The next section of the survey is going to ask you about romantic relationships during young adulthood.

How do you personally define “romantic relationship” for people in your age group?

Based on your definition of “romantic relationship” how many romantic relationships have you had since you were 18 years old?

0 (drop down menu)

What is the average length of your romantic relationships since you were age 18 or older?

I haven't had a romantic relationship since I was age 18 (drop down menu)

Do you think your peers would agree with your definition of romantic relationships? Why or why not?

End of Block: Romantic Relationships

Start of Block: Romantic Experiences

How would you personally define "romantic experiences" for people in your age group?

Based on your definition of "romantic experiences" how many romantic experiences have you had since you were 18 years old?

0 (drop down menu)

Would your peers agree with your definition of romantic experience? Why or why not?

From your perspective, what (if any) are the most distinguishing features between romantic experiences and romantic relationships?
