The Association Between Satisfaction and Academic Outcomes

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For students, supportive relationships are a key component for promoting engagement in their courses (Handelsman et al., 2005) and is, subsequently, correlated with academic success in college students (Svanum & Bigatti, 2009; Bishop et al., 2023). One type of relationship, the romantic relationship, is, according to Bishop and colleagues (2023), "developmentally significant" for many emerging adults (18–24-year-olds) during college. They go on to say that romantic partnership tends to be more "salient, longer lasting and impactful" during this period. It is logical then that in close relationships where couples report being satisfied, an association with students' academic outcomes may emerge. The present study seeks to further study the potential association between romantic relationships and academic success by considering one characteristic of the relationship namely, satisfaction.

Previous research on the topic of how romantic relationships may relate to academic outcomes describes an effect still not well understood. For instance, in their research, Schmidt and Lockwood (2017) find a lack of relationship between being in a romantic relationship while in college and student's grade point average (GPA). To calculate GPA, the authors asked participants to, over a school year, list their single-semester GPA. This information was then used to calculate a mean for the fall and spring semester. Past studies support the decision to look at the GPA of college students and the factors that may influence it since GPA is considered an objective measure of academic success (Richardson et al., 2012) as well as being the most frequently used measure of academic success according (York et al., 2015). Going back to the work done by Schmidt and Lockwood (2017), it was shown, in the same study, that being in a romantic relationship was significantly associated with missing class more often throughout the

semester. This kind of behavior can be concerning because class attendance has been found to be a reliable predictor of GPA (Crede et al., 2010).

Class attendance is one component of student engagement, which is another complex variable that is made up of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional components (Fredricks et al., 2004). In their research, Bishop and colleagues (2023) examined the relationship between academic support given by romantic partners and college students academic achievement. Interestingly, even though participants of the study reported receiving academic support from their partners, it was not found to be directly related to student engagement or GPA. More importantly though, the paper was able to demonstrate that student engagement was a predictor of GPA. The findings of this article and those of the previous one can be grouped into an argument against being in a romantic relationship while in college. Yet, they both go on to discuss the prudent decision for future studies to take into consideration features of the relationship, such as satisfaction, as a possible moderating factor of the relationship between being in a romantic relationship and academic outcomes.

A possible explanation for the authors' suggestion is that relationship features, like satisfaction, can be linked with other important variables. For example, relationship satisfaction has been observed to lessen the adverse effects of stress in men and women (Røsand et al., 2012). An example of this effect is seen in Baker and colleague's (2021) investigation into how social support from close partners is related to college students' academic outcomes. Another observation that came from this study was that participants tended to seek out academic support from partners more often when they reported being academically stressed (Baker et al., 2021). It may therefore not be sufficient to ask students only about relationship status since a more nuanced picture of relationships could reveal a previously unknown relationship.

The present study tested whether relationship satisfaction is correlated with academic performance in the form of GPA and student engagement. To test this hypothesis, we used an online questionnaire that asked college students in a relationship about their relationship satisfaction and a number of academic outcomes including engagement and GPA. We hypothesized that relationship satisfaction is positively correlated with student engagement and subsequently GPA. More specifically, participants who report higher satisfaction with their relationship will report higher levels of student engagement and GPA.

Method

Participants

There were 19 respondents to the online questionnaire, however only17 participants (mean age = 21.7) completed the entire survey. Participants were young adults that were enrolled in a 4-year college or university and who were also involved in a romantic relationship for at least 4 months. The participants were recruited via two methods: email and via word of mouth. Further, participants were not compensated for their effort. More than half of participants (64.7%) self-identified as cis-gender women followed by cisgender men (29.4%) and finally one participant identified as non-binary (5.9%). Overwhelmingly, participants identified as being heterosexual (94.1%), with only one participant that reported being bi-sexual. The racial identity make-up of our sample was diverse with 29.4% Asian Americans, 23.5% White or European American, Black or African American and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander each made up 5.9%. There were also some participants who identified as being multiracial (2%).

Materials

The current study asked participants to fill out an online questionnaire generated through the Qualtrics platform. The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions in total with four demographic questions and one screener question (to exclude those not in relationships). There were 16 questions related to relationship satisfaction and four questions related to student engagement.

Constructs

To measure the participants' relationship satisfaction, we used an abbreviated version of the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI: Funk and Rogge, 2007). The CSI contains 32 questions however, we just used the first set of 16 due to its length. An example of a question asked would be, "In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?". Then the participant would indicate the level to which they agree by choosing a statement like "All the time", or "Most of the time" and so on. The participants responses were coded and the summed for the final score.

The final score was a sum of the numerical values of the Likert scale-based questions. To measure participants' academic engagement, we used three items from Handelsman et al.'s (2005) Student Course Engagement Questionnaire (SCEQ). The items included statements about student engagement which participants would then have to indicate on a Likert scale how similar their behavior was to the statement. For example, one item presented was the statement "Doing well on tests". Participants would then rate on a scale of agreeableness from one to five and these responses would be summed for the final score.

Procedure

Participants were sent the link to the questionnaire through the previously mentioned methods and were asked to complete the questionnaire via their own personal laptop or internet

connected device. After reading the consent form and agreeing to take part in the current study, participants were first asked a screener question that ensured they met the qualifications for the study. In this case participants needed to be in a committed romantic relationship for at least 4 months. After the screener question, participants answered questions targeted at their demographic information such as race, gender, and sexual orientation. After this, participants were asked about their attitudes and beliefs regarding their romantic relationship, followed by questions related to academic engagement and self-reported GPA. All procedures were approved by the University of Texas at Dallas Institutional Review Board.

Results

Participants had a mean Couple Satisfaction Index (CSI) score of 81.65 ($SD = 14.11$) and mean academic engagement score of 12.18 ($SD = 2.58$). To determine whether romantic relationship satisfaction and academic success were related, we ran a series of Pearson's correlation. There was no significant correlation between relationship satisfaction and academic engagement, $r(15) = .28$, $p = .28$ (see Figure 1 for scatterplot). Further, there was no significant correlation between relationship satisfaction and GPA, $r(15) = .18$, $p = .49$ (see Figure 2 for scatterplot).

Discussion

In this study, we tested whether relationship satisfaction was related to academic outcomes in a sample of undergraduate students. After analyzing the results, we found that relationship satisfaction was unrelated to both self-reported student engagement and cumulative GPA. These results give us a better understanding of the specific circumstances under which romantic relationships may relate to academic performance.

Our hypothesis that relationship satisfaction would be associated with student engagement and GPA was unsupported. This is in line with the literature related to this subject that found just being in a romantic relationship while in college was unrelated with GPA (Schmidt & Lockwood, 2017). The lack of association is also in line with findings by Bishop et al. (2023) which observed that college students who received academic support from their peers, but not romantic partners, was associated with student engagement. Future research should consider other characteristics of romantic relationships the like the type (long distance, whether both individuals are taking courses etc.) as they may moderate the association between romantic relationships and academic performance. The limitations of our study could have also played a role in finding a lack of association. This study had a low number of participants the majority of which were cis-gendered heterosexual women. Further, the measurements for GPA were not verified since they were self-reported. This could lead to participants not reporting the correct information

In conclusion, the present study examined the potential relationship between relationship satisfaction in college attending students and their academic outcomes. While we did not find a significant relationship, we recommend that future research in this area use a larger sample, as well as taking into account other features of the relationship to enhance our understanding of factors that may affect student academic outcomes.

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Figure 1

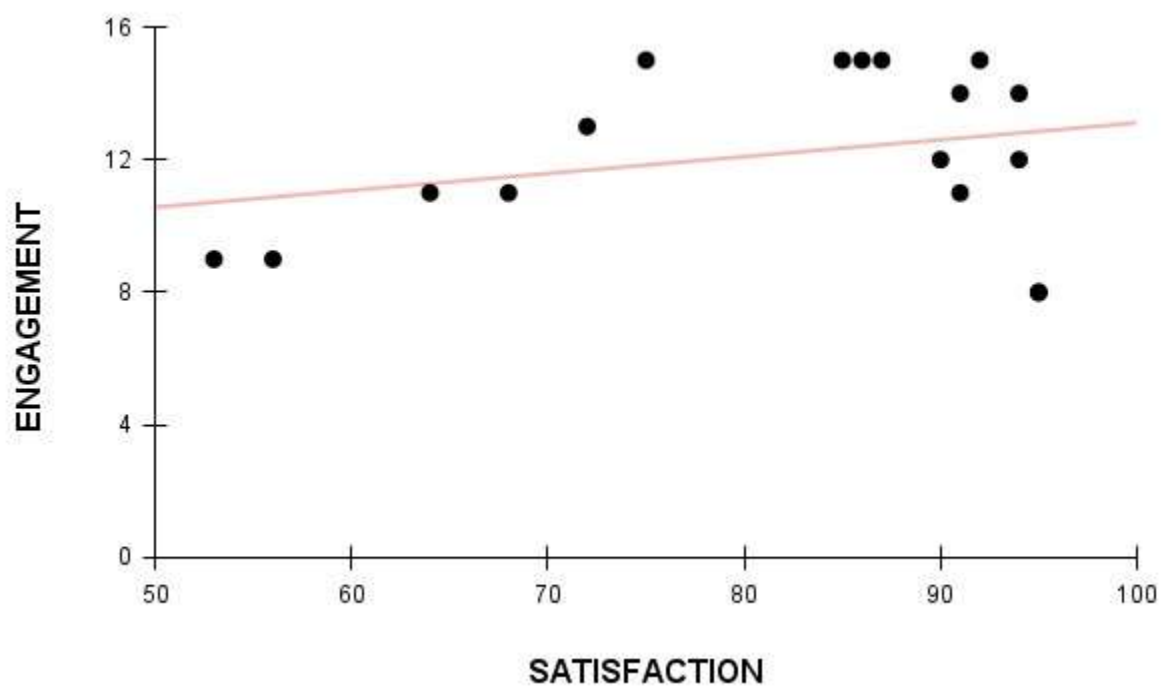*Relationship Satisfaction vs Academic Engagement*

Figure 2

Relationship Satisfaction vs GPA