

Research Article

Identifying Motivations for Relationship Alternatives: Analyzing College Students' Backburner Relationships

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Abstract: Backburner refers to a desired prospective romantic/sexual partner with whom one interacts with the purpose of possibly creating a future romantic or sexual relationship. Modern technology has made it easier to develop and maintain relationships with backburners. This study analyzed the different motivations that individuals ($N = 762$) use towards their backburner relationships. Results from this study revealed that there were six main motivations for backburner relationships: 1) sex or possibility of sexual intimacy; 2) previous romantic feelings with this person (e.g., first love, previous romance, ex-boyfriend/girlfriend); 3) to maintain a friendship in hopes of a potential romantic relationship; 4) because it is exciting or fun to keep in contact with this person; 5) social contact to keep tabs on their life; and 6) there is no true motivation. Findings suggest that individuals typically communicate with their backburner relationships through text messages.

Keywords: backburners, motivations, casual sexual relationships, communication technology, interpersonal communication

1. Introduction

Freeman et al. (2023) reported that dating is perceived by college-aged people as an activity without expectation of marriage. Expectations of marriage have significantly declined in recent years, and dating duration has increased for college students. As relationship length increases, commitment, satisfaction, and sexual activity decline. Therefore, in accordance with Rusbult's (1980) investment model of romantic relationships, as commitment and satisfaction decline, interest in and evaluation of desirable alternatives increase. In the absence of marriage expectations and with declining commitment and satisfaction, people may seek to fulfill these needs from other sources, including backburner relationships. Rusbult (1980) introduced the investment model of relationships, which posits that individuals engaged in relationships engage in an ongoing evaluative assessment of these relationships. This evaluation involves comparing the benefits of staying in the relationship versus ending it (Rusbult, 1980). A subsequent study by Rusbult et al. (1986),

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building upon this framework, found that perceived costs of a relationship were not effective predictors of satisfaction or commitment, although there was an important exception.

Commitment is central to Rusbult's (1980) investment model. The model defines commitment as a desire to maintain a relationship despite the potential challenges and obstacles it may present. According to Rusbult's (1980) investment model, commitment plays a pivotal role in influencing an individual's decisions regarding whether to remain in a relationship or to terminate it. Higher levels of commitment are associated with a greater willingness to overcome obstacles and maintain the relationship, even in the face of unfavorable circumstances. This perspective provides a comprehensive framework for understanding relationship dynamics beyond the mere assessment of rewards and costs.

The challenge of using perceived costs as a reliable indicator of relationship satisfaction presents a multifaceted issue. In line with the investment model, individuals in romantic relationships might already have acquaintances within their social circle. This allows them to compare their current partners with potential alternative relationships — a concept known as a “backburner” (Dibble et al., 2015, 2019, 2023). Examination of the psychological traits associated with those who engage in backburner dynamics has revealed a tendency toward seeking sensation and having an open sexual orientation (Borzea & Dillow, 2017). The conventional notion of maintaining a physical list of backburners has evolved due to the rise of electronic communication methods, particularly social media platforms (Dibble et al., 2016). Roughly 72% of adults partake in various forms of social networking, with 80% of this demographic falling in the 18-29 age range (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). The prevalence of social media usage among adults has historically been associated with negative connotations and is often seen as having adverse effects on romantic relationships (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011).

Romantic and sexual relationships have changed over the past half century (Mongeau et al., 2013). During the 1950s and 1960s, sexual intercourse was reserved for marriage (Sprecher, 2013). In the 1970s, it was commonly accepted for those in firmly committed relationships to engage in premarital sex (Sprecher, 1989). However, promiscuity and liberal sexual attitudes increased drastically towards the 21st century, and modern standards for sexual behavior are very different than they were 50 years ago. For example, sexual relationships outside of marriage or committed relationships, like sexual hook-ups and friends-with-benefit relationships, are common and culturally acceptable (Bogle, 2008; Epstein et al., 2009; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Sprecher et al., 2021). This trend is especially evident among college students, who tend to have permissive attitudes about sex and intimacy as compared to other adults (Sprecher et al., 2021).

Approaches and views towards romantic partners have also transformed throughout the decades. Fletcher (2002) suggested that most individuals consider the obtainability and suitability of other potential romantic partners. Recent research has suggested that these partners are not only considered, but they are also communicated with, and modern communication channels facilitate these communications (Dibble & Drouin, 2014; Dibble et al., 2015).

As previously mentioned, the term backburner is commonly used to describe a potential romantic or sexual partner with whom one maintains communication, potentially leading to a future romantic or sexual relationship (Dibble & Drouin, 2014; Dibble et al., 2015; Dibble et al., 2018). The investment model of relationship development posits that partners engage in a give-and-take of rewards and costs to attain satisfaction and commitment in the relationship (Rusbult, 1980). The commitment to a relationship is influenced by the perceived value of rewards received from the partner and the level of investment made in the relationship (Rusbult, 1980). Moreover, individuals may compare their current relationship to potential alternatives to assess its value and costs (Fletcher, 2002; Rusbult, 1980). In the context of the investment model, backburners represent alternative options to one's current relationship status (Dibble et al., 2015). In simpler terms, people maintain backburner relationships, whether they are already committed or not, as a readily available alternative in case they wish to change their current romantic/sexual situation. Due to their prevalence in popular culture, particularly among college students, and their relevance to human sexuality, backburners may be comparable to casual sexual experiences such as hookups and friends with benefits (Aubrey & Smith, 2013; Bishop et al., 2019; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Hughes et al., 2005; Stein et al., 2019).

Data show that people indeed communicate with backburners, using modern electronic means such as Facebook and text messaging (Dibble et al., 2015). This communication aims to intensify romantic and/or sexual attraction while keeping the backburner away from the person's current relationship situation. In essence, the alternative partner remains on the backburner while the admirer tends to their existing romantic situation, which may include being single.

For a relationship to qualify as a backburner, two conditions must be met. Firstly, there must be some level

of romantic and/or sexual interest on the part of one individual (the admirer) in another person (the backburner). The backburner may or may not be aware of the admirer's feelings and may not even know they are considered a backburner. Secondly, communication is a crucial factor. People must engage in some form of communication with their backburners. This communication can take on a romantic, sexual, or platonic appearance, but it is the act of communication that distinguishes backburner relationships as a unique subset of desirable connections. Due to the exploratory-descriptive nature of this study, no hypotheses were created determining the motivations of backburner relationships. Rather, the researchers were interested in answering the following research question (RQ):

RQ: What are the motivations college students have to communicate in a backburner relationship?

2. Method

2.1 Participants and procedure

Undergraduates ($N = 762$, 71% female) from a large southwestern university in the United States served as participants. Participants averaged 21.33 years of age (range 18-58, $SD = 3.11$). The sample was primarily Caucasian (71%), followed by Hispanic (17%), Black (7%), and Asian (5%). It is important to note that text messaging was the most-used means for communicating with a backburner (56.1%), followed by Facebook (11.8%), Instagram (10.3%), Twitter (8.4%), Snapchat (7.6%), mobile telephone calls (3.8%), e-mail (0.6%), video conferencing (e.g., Skype, 0.6%), and other (0.3%). Participants were told that the researchers were interested in how individuals communicate with relationship alternatives before they completed an Internet-based battery of measures, such as the commitment subscale of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998), the Passionate Love Scale (Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986), and the Relationship Maintenance Scale (Stafford et al., 2000), which are not pertinent to the current study. The full survey took approximately 45-60 minutes for participants to complete. Students participated in exchange for extra credit, and the research was internal review board approved. Before they participated in this study, participants were provided with informed consent. Participants were told that their answers would be confidential and anonymous. Other options were provided for students who did not want to participate in this particular study.

At one point during the survey, participants read the following:

Backburners are people we are romantically and/or sexually interested in, who we're not currently committed to, and with whom we keep in contact that we might someday connect romantically and/or sexually. People can have backburners whether or not they're already in a committed romantic relationship with someone else. Backburners can also take different forms. For example, backburners could be former romantic/sexual partners or current sexual partners, provided we're not committed to them, we still desire them romantically and/or sexually, and that this desire is one of the reasons we keep in touch with them. Finally, we may end up getting together with some of our backburners, while we may never get together with others.

With this description in mind, participants were asked to specify the communication channel they used most (e.g., text messaging, Facebook, instant messaging) to interact with the backburners they communicated with most (i.e., their most important backburner). Participants were asked basic demographics and questions regarding how they communicate with their backburner. Most importantly, participants were asked open-ended questions about their motivations and communication behaviors toward backburner relationships. Specifically, participants had an open response area where they were asked to answer this question: What are your motivations for maintaining a backburner relationship? Our research focus was only on the motivations for backburner relationships and the data were a subset of a larger study.

2.2 Data analysis

Using Mongeau et al.'s (2013) work as a model, we performed a content analysis to identify college students' motivations for backburner relationships. The results produced an emic trend. This trend revealed groups and classifications developed because a typology of backburner relationships did not previously exist. Three authors coded the data and determined categories for each set of data. The authors discovered that there were specific words that were repeated often within the comments. As an index, the authors looked at these prevalent keywords and phrases that were quite evident in the data. If there were any comments that fell into multiple categories, then they were put in another

pile in a separate category. Afterward, after initial sorting, the reviewers collectively looked at all comments within the “multiple category” and decided which category they belonged to decide about the most dominant theme. Inter-coder reliability was 97% (Cronbach, 1951), which is considered to be excellent. Eventually, there were six motivations that transpired from the data. It is important to note that not every participant revealed a motivation. Some did leave their answers blank.

2.3 Results

The inclusion criteria for this study were that participants needed to have at least one backburner relationship, and the exclusion criteria were participants who had a hundred or more backburner relationships. Nineteen participants reported having over 100 backburners, and, thus, we determined that these were extreme outliers that would skew our data. The extreme scores, which accounted for 2.49% of the sample, were removed from the data set to help provide a more typical representation of the phenomena and add external validity to our findings. After removing the 19 outliers, the researchers also reviewed the 762 surveys and deleted any that were not complete or did not have a backburner relationship, resulting in 515 participants. Again, the final sample included mainly Caucasian women (70%). Most of the participants reported having one backburner, with a median number of backburners of 3.00 ($SD = 9.12$, $n = 515$), ranging from 1 to 20. Overall, of the 515 participants, 67.58% reported at least one backburner relationship. Consequently, 32.42% did not report a backburner relationship. The most popular way to contact and communicate with their backburner relationships was through text messages.

Participants explicitly stated their motivations for having backburner relationships. There were six distinct categories for backburner relationships (see Table 1 for a synopsis and general summary). First, sex or the possibility of sexual intimacy ($N = 137$, 26.6%) was the main motivation for having a backburner. Participants noted that they were yearning for or wanting sex. Sample comments were “I might want to hook up,” “Sex,” and “Purely physical.” Participants felt that having backburners in their lives was like having a backup sex partner. Many noted that they continued a relationship in hopes that there would be possible sex with this backburner. It is important to note that the frequencies between men and women about having a backburner for sex were very similar.

Table 1. Frequencies and comments example statements for each category of motivation

Category	Example statements	N	(%)
Sex or possibility of sexual intimacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I might want to hook up, I always have someone there. - Soley [sic] to hook up - Purely physical - Most times, it's because I have been without sex for some time and need a “fix” 	137	26.6
Previous romantic feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - he was my first boyfriend, and someone I'll always be friends with. - We dated in high school. Seeing him at XXX made me realize still had feelings for him - he's my ex-boyfriend and wants to see if there is still anything there 	111	21.5
To maintain a friendship in hopes of a potential romantic relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I am strictly friends with them currently, but if I were single could see myself potentially dating them because they are good guys and what I would consider a good partner. - Wanting it to go somewhere and make it an official relationship. Just to keep a conversation going with her. Maybe one day it will turn into something. 	98	19.0
Because it is exciting or fun to keep in contact with this person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - fun - entertainment - out of boredom, it is fun 	53	10.3
Social contact to keep tabs on their life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They contact me just to see how things are and say hey. - We have a lot in common and know a lot about each other's past, we genuinely care to catch up with each other and hear how the lives of the other are going. - to keep in touch for friendship purposes only & reminisce on high school and old memories. - one of them used to be my best friend and I miss him sometimes, but I don't contact him often. 	42	8.1
No true motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nothing - None 	30	5.8

The second motivation was previous romantic feelings with this person (e.g., first love, previous romance, ex-

boyfriend/girlfriend) ($N = 111$, 21.5%). Many people stated some sort of past relationship with this person and wanted to see if there was something there. Sample comments are “We dated in high school (sic)” and “He’s my ex-boyfriend and wants to see if there is still anything there. Hence, the feelings might still be there, yet for whatever reason, they could not commit to the relationship. In turn, they kept this person as a backburner.

Third, participants reported another motivation was to maintain a friendship in hopes of a potential romantic relationship ($N = 98$, 19.0%). Some participants noted that they had a strong friendship with this person and were yearning for something more. Participants reported statements like “wanting it to go somewhere and make it an official relationship” and “just want to keep a conversation going with her. Maybe one day it will turn into something.” Participants mentioned statements about how friendship was more important and that it was necessary to maintain a non-platonic relationship, but the other person wished for something more romantic.

Fourth, participants said they kept backburners because it was exciting or fun to keep in contact with this person ($N = 53$, 10.3%) and actually used the words “fun” and “entertaining”. Backburner relationships were a source of entertainment, and they enjoyed having one. Participants said that having a backburner brought more pleasure and excitement to their lives. For some, keeping a backburner on the side was thrilling because they might be caught by their current romantic partners. For others, it was amusing to keep a backburner because they found the interactions to be exhilarating.

The fifth motive was social contact to keep tabs on their lives ($N = 42$, 8.1%). Many of these statements in this theme were focused on being informed about their lives in some way. Sample statements were “they contact me just to see how things are and say hey” and “We have a lot in common and know a lot about each other’s past; we genuinely care to catch up with each other and hear how the lives of the other are going.” Participants said that they wanted to know what was happening in the other person’s life and wanted to be involved with their life, just in case they might have the opportunity to develop a more romantic relationship. Similar to the third category about keeping a friendship, participants in this category made it known that their motivations were clear and they wanted more than a friendship, but their backburner might already be involved with another person. Hence, timing was an issue in pursuing the relationship further.

Lastly, there were no true motivation(s) ($N = 30$, 5.8%) and actually reported “none” or “no reason”. Participants said that they didn’t know why they had backburner relationships. They even stated that “I don’t have any motivation, but I just do.” They mentioned that they never thought about why they had backburner relationships, but they have them for no reason. This could be genuine due to the fact that they never thought about it, but it could also be that they truly don’t have any motivation.

3. Discussion

Most participants claimed to have backburners. Also, commitment to a current partner triggers a perceptual devaluation of one’s alternatives (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989), making those alternatives seem less attractive to the committed individual. Research from this study reveals that there are clear distinct motivations behind having and maintaining a backburner relationship. If a backburner’s attractiveness is diminished, then we would also expect a dampened effort to have and find backburners. Dibble and Drouin (2014) found no difference in the number of backburners reported by singles and those in committed relationships. Thus, people are having backburner relationships, and the motivations to have backburner relationships are interesting. The findings from this study help researchers understand more about backburner relationships. These categories help us make sense of these complex relationships.

The influence that technology has on communication plays a large role in the current world of dating (Rappleyea et al., 2014; Stevens & Morris, 2007). Younger adults (18-24 years) are the most common consumers of the Internet. Overall, both men and women used the same amount of online communication, but the modes of communication they utilized differed. Technology advances have made it easier to maintain, initiate, and terminate romantic relationships. It is possible to assume that technology has also allowed people to have more backburner relationships. The findings reveal a diverse range of insights into the nature of these relationships, shedding light on both the quantitative distribution of backburner associations and the multifaceted motivations that drive individuals to maintain such connections. The reported average number of backburners ($M = 2.30$, $SD = 5.12$, $n = 515$) highlights the varying degrees of engagement in these relationships, ranging from minimal to substantially higher counts. Despite the apparent dispersion in reported

numbers, the median of 3.00 and the mode of 2 indicate a central tendency wherein the majority of participants report having between two and three backburner relationships. The decision to exclude outliers reporting over 100 backburner relationships was warranted, given their relatively small occurrence and potential skewing effect on the data.

The motives underlying the persistence of backburner relationships exhibit notable diversity, encapsulated within six discernible categories. First, participants commonly cited the possibility of sexual intimacy as a key motivation. Maintaining backburners was often likened to having a contingency plan for sexual engagement, implying a readiness to pursue such connections if the opportunity arises. This outcome underscores the significance of physical intimacy within the context of backburner relationships, with both genders expressing similar inclinations in this regard. Second, participants indicated a past romantic connection as a motivating factor. The persistence of feelings from prior romantic experiences created a rationale for retaining these relationships. Participants seemed to navigate an internal struggle — sometimes described as a fiery limbo (Banas et al., 2021; Birnbaum & Finkel, 2015) — between residual emotions and an inability or unwillingness to fully commit to these connections, thus relegating them to the status of backburners. A parallel motivation surfaced in the third category, where participants sought to maintain a friendship in the hopes of transforming it into a more intimate relationship. This category reinforces the nuanced nature of backburner relationships, with participants emphasizing the primacy of friendship even as they desired to progress to a romantic dimension. The asymmetry between the intentions of the participants within this category further underlines the complexities of relational dynamics. Fourth, the theme of excitement and novelty emerged as a motivation for backburner relationships. Participants articulated a sense of thrill associated with having a backburner, whether rooted in the secrecy of the engagement or the exhilaration of the interactions. This category underscores the potential interplay between emotional gratification and the maintenance of these relationships. Fifth, participants expressed a desire to monitor the lives of their backburner partners, possibly in anticipation of an opportune moment to transition into a more intimate relationship. Similar to the motivation centered on friendship, this category underscores the intricate balance between aspirations for deeper connection and the constraints of timing and existing commitments on both sides, perhaps another indicator of the fiery limbo. Last, the sixth motivation, characterized by an absence of clear rationale, highlights the complexity of human relationships. Some participants seemed to engage in backburner relationships without explicit justifications, suggesting a certain degree of inertia or habituation in maintaining these connections.

The primary mode of communication within backburner relationships was through text messages, indicating a preference for digital communication methods. This shift towards electronic mediums aligns with the broader trend of technological advancement reshaping interpersonal interactions. This study supports the idea that technology influences the ways in which people may communicate in romantic relationships. Kindred and Roper (2004) found college-aged students are utilizing instant messenger to fulfill a need for interpersonal communication. Leung (2001) also found that college students found instant messaging as an outlet not only for relaxation and entertainment but a place for affectionate communication and to feel a sense of inclusion and desirability. Although the development of social media and technology has progressed to other outlets, the majority of popular social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) still employ the instant messaging feature. A majority of these participants noted that they have backburner relationships in order to maintain a relationship or possibly have a future relationship. Hence, technology has made it easier for people to maintain contact with each other and maintain backburner relationships.

Rusbult's (1980) investment model assumes that people evaluate and maintain their commitment to a relationship partner based on three factors: satisfaction, comparison, and investment. The data from the current study reveal motives associated with comparison and perceived future satisfaction. For example, several participants wrote responses similar to this participant's: "If I were single, I could see myself potentially dating them because they are good guys and what I would consider a good partner. Thus, consistent with Rusbult's (1980) theory, there is a clear indication of the evaluation of alternatives. Only 26.6% of our sample reported sex, or the possibility of sex, as the motive for the backburner relationship. This is important because, in most cases, the reason for the backburner relationship may not be sexual but rather as a potential long-term relationship partner. A sort of backup plan in case something doesn't work out with the current front burner.

4. Limitations and conclusion

The questionnaire was long, and participation was incentivized by extra credit. Participants might not have been

sincere or genuine. Second, the sample was primarily female (70%), Caucasian, and composed of college students. Based on the demographic questions taken in this study, the college student population tends to include individuals with higher education and often higher socio-economic status. Third, participants could have been providing socially desirable answers. Even though participants were told that the study was confidential and anonymous, relationship alternatives may be perceived as infidelity or cheating. Although each of these issues can be troublesome, we note that our research largely coincides with that of Dibble and Drouin (2014), who, using a primarily Asian sample, found similar numbers of backburners reported by both singles and those in committed relationships. Nonetheless, we look to future research to determine the extent to which our findings generalize.

Future research should continue to examine backburner relationships and the specific ways that people maintain those relationships. This research revealed that participants completed shared tasks with their backburners. Future research should investigate exactly what types of shared tasks are being done with their backburner. Future research should also analyze different communication variables in backburner relationships, such as cultural differences or socio-economic status differences. It would be interesting to see what specific sets of personality or individual characteristics lead to having a backburner relationship.

The research surrounding backburner relationships continues to examine a wide variety of motivations and objectives for relational maintenance. Like previous research, the current research is consistent with the same behavior that suggests the need for people to continue to seek prospective social and sexual partners. Utilizing technology for communicating with backburners was also consistent with previous research. We did not measure how backburners initiated their relationships. Although we know that the primary context for their communication is texting, we do not know the percentage of our participants who met online vs. in person, or even if they have ever met in person. Future research needs to explore the degree to which backburners are proximal, physical, or purely digital in nature.

Communication and motivations for backburners may vary for each relationship. Exploring relationship maintenance strategies for all types of backburner relationships is important so we can see how these relationships are maintained. Relational maintenance strategies may also suggest whether the relationship is of a romantic or sexual nature. Future research will further explore backburners and continue to produce information associated with relationships. This study's exploration of backburner relationships offers a nuanced understanding of their prevalence and underlying motivations. The diversity of these motivations underscores the intricate interplay of emotional, social, and personal factors that influence individuals' decisions to maintain these connections. This investigation provides valuable insights into the complexities of modern relationships in the context of evolving communication technologies. Future research could delve deeper into the psychosocial implications of backburner relationships, their effects on existing partnerships, and their resonance within a rapidly changing social landscape.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest in this study.

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