

# Student Relationship Status and Their University Studies

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS –  
YORK UNIVERSITY

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## **Abstract**

Recent research pertaining to undergraduate students and their relationship status (RS) has been focused on the experiences and expectations of being single or in a relationship during full-time studies, mental health issues, and also student relationship breakup experiences. Drawing on data generated from our qualitative study of participant interviews using a 50/50 gender split, this study focuses on the effects of student RS and their school studies along with what pressures are acting upon them regarding their RS. From the findings we came up with the common themes: priorities, partner compatibility, independence, and social pressure and 13 sub-themes secondary to these. This paper raises awareness as to the pressures and issues undergraduate students face regarding their RS while progressing through their studies. We constructed a student relationship phase *S-Curve Model* giving a visual analytic account of where our respondents currently sit in relation to their RS. Following our conclusion and discussion we give some practical applications as a takeaway from the research study.

## 1.0 Introduction

This qualitative research study explores *the impact of relationship status on undergraduate students at York University*, focusing on how students' RS affects their studies and or grades. The study also looks at how their status impacts their emotional state and what pressures could be acting upon them regarding their RS. We classify relationship status as: (1) "single," the participant was not involved in a relationship when interviewed, (2) "attached," the participant had a relationship when interviewed.

The study's purpose is to gain insights and understanding as to how young adults in their early twenties, as full-time York University undergraduate students, perceive their RS. Of particular interest for studying this topic is the growing social pressure, through various media channels, on young adults for being in a romantic partnership based on anecdotal evidence with examples of: the intense commercialization of Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Christmas, New Years, and the portrayal of "couples" in movies and T.V. In addition, we look at whether being in a relationship has any impact on the students' social life.

The following results begin to fill the gap in the current undergrad student RS research that has neglected to consider the link between RS and their studies. Our research gains insights into the social pressures acting on students as they work through their undergraduate degree and how their RS has affected their emotional state when transitioning through relationship phases. Gaining specific knowledge on these issues allows for a deeper understanding of students' commitments and goals while going through university, their emotional states/transitions during breakups or new relationships and how this affects their studies. The research also helps explain the pressures students deal with and why their grades may be affected.

Research problem: The impact of relationship status on single or attached York University undergrad students in their early twenties. These questions guided our process: (1) What impact, if any, does RS have on school grades? (2) How does student RS impact their emotional state? (3) What pressures, if any, act upon students regarding their RS?

## 2.0 Literature Review

Several recent articles have addressed RS and full-time university students. A qualitative study by Finn (2013) explored ways in which respondents' experiences and expectations of relationships shifted and changed going in and out of different settings. The focus was personal relationships; family, friendships and partners. A narrative qualitative analysis of personal life stories through many interviews over 15-months. They studied 24 women aged 17-19 from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. Participants were from a 'working-class' town where university education was not common. Their findings: (1) single was preferred entering university because it idealizes individualism, experience and adventure, (2) committed relationships were also significant since these happened in first year and there were also local school preferences to be near their partner, (3) being acutely aware of the timid, unadventurous student, committed to boyfriend at home stereotype, (4) not against partnerships, but seeing them as *future* plans, (5) university processes impacted how commitment is understood and experienced, (6) maintaining partner relationships from home, seemed to some as the exacting image they wanted to escape (Finn, 2013). This study relates to ours with the focus of in and out of relationships and respondents' feelings. Our results were similar since most of our respondents had recent relationship transitions. This made us include the themes: independence, personal growth, loneliness, and freedom. Our focus was to find out if there was a direct connection between students' RS and their study routines.

In an online quantitative survey done by Whittton et al, the researchers wanted to see if involvement in nonmarital committed relationships was associated with university students' mental health such as: depression and drinking, and if there was a difference between genders. They had 889 undergrad students (604 women) aged 18-25, single or in an exclusive relationship, complete an online questionnaire. The participants were mostly Caucasian (84%) and 54% single. The results showed involvement in nonmarital committed relationships had fewer depressive symptoms and lower rates of clinically significant depression for the women participants but not the males. Further, having a committed relationship showed there was less problematic alcohol use for both genders (Whittton et al, 2013). This research was similar having a focus on mental health pertaining to university relationships, especially depression. Our data uncovered

depression-like symptoms also so we added the themes: relaxation, self-reflection, and uncertainty. We wanted to find out if students had mental stress or other that directly related to their study efforts and RS, and in which direction had the greatest impact.

Lastly, a qualitative grounded theory by Popadiuk and Hebert, explored changes university students reported experiencing after a breakup and how those changes came about. Eleven f/t student participants with 6 females, ages 19-24. Ethnicity was considered typical. The semi-structured interviews over 8-months, asked about participant experiences of breakup, and changes or outcomes they noticed resulting from the event. Positive change results: (a) learning something relevant for future relationships, (b) gaining inner strength and ability to handle stressful events, (c) feeling more independent, (d) gaining maturity and self-awareness, (e) shifting priorities. Negative change results: anxiety for finding a partner and doubts about trusting a new partner. The authors constructed a model with three phases: *Experiencing a Loss, Pulling Apart, & Moving Beyond*. The core category was: *moving-self-forward*, referring to movement oriented towards recovery after breakup, personal growth and change (Popadiuk & Hebert, 2008). This study was similar because of the breakup phase focus since we discovered this is a factor regarding students' focus ability toward their studies when they're in this phase of their RS. Because of this we incorporated the themes: priorities, partner compatibility, and social pressure. Our interest focused on if breakups were a consequence of students' focusing on their studies or their inability to multi-task.

Our research study is different from the current literature since the participants consist of long-term 'singles,' newer relationships, and recent breakups; more variance. This adds different perspectives to the literature and includes how RS affects both genders of students and also we add the elements of focus towards the effect on school studies and pressure on the student, the current literature doesn't touch upon these.

### **3.0 Researcher's Position**

To situate ourselves in this research, we believe it's important to clarify the researchers' biases and assumptions regarding this topic. Because our research study is sensitive and personal, we recognize how our own reflection could potentially affect the conduct and conclusions of the study. The researcher's position depends on their

experiences and context with the subject of the study, thus, there could be some common and or conflicting viewpoints regarding the research.

The researchers view single people as independent and strong people who are highly focused towards cultivating their personal growth and career. With regard to relationships, we classify their impact into positive and negative categories. We believe being in a relationship is good for emotional well-being and networking, but it can be a huge commitment and responsibility that may result in stress, distraction, and possibly loss of personal freedom. The researchers believe relationship distraction is subjective; could be positive for coping with stress or negative, getting in the way of career goals. Some assume there could be limitations with extracting complete and honest information from the male participants because of their male ego and the nature of the topic. It could be possible the researcher's values and expectations influenced the findings and conclusions of the study in some way.

After completion of our research not all of our assumptions held true with regards to the respondents. Some participants found relationships were positive for helping with their studies, if their partner was compatible. Another didn't care at this point in their life for having a relationship and this wasn't predicated on being career focused.

## **4.0 Methodology**

### **4.1 Data Collection**

We conducted six qualitative, face-to-face interviews, one participant at a time. This technique was used instead of a focus group due to sensitivity of the topic, since participants might refrain from sharing their personal stories in a group of people they don't know. These interviews used a semi-structured questioning style giving participants more freedom with their responses and allows interviewer's flexibility with questioning so follow-up questions can be utilized and the interviewer can probe for information.

Our first interviewee was a pilot interview, to ensure effectiveness and appropriateness of the interview style and questions. Interviews were recorded and had two researchers in the room. One researcher asked questions and promoted discussion, the other researcher operated the recording, took notes and studied non-verbal cues. See Appendix-A for interview questions.

## 4.2 Sampling Method

Participant sampling used was purposeful, convenience, and typical. There was a 50/50 split in gender among the six participants. Convenience sampling was used to engage participants more efficiently due to time constraints and the study needed undergrad students. All participants were ‘average’ York University undergraduate students, in their early twenties. See Appendix-B for a participant demographic table.

## 4.3 Data Analysis

After recording the interviews, each researcher listened to the audio and created a list of important themes. This ‘free-coding’ process is carried out to ensure that one’s point of view doesn’t affect another researcher’s view and to get multiple perspectives. Once completed, all four researchers as a group, shared and discussed their notes to organize the results. We developed an overall view of our findings and questioned how the data related to the research questions. Dominant themes for each interview were identified and divided into four common themes using axial coding. From these four, we further divided the data into subsidiary sub-themes to fit under the common ones. Participant quotes were noted and integrated into themes during the process. We ended with four common themes and thirteen sub-themes that outlined our data to ultimately guide us in answering the research problem.

## 5.0 Findings

### 5.1 Priorities

This common theme had many interviewees who said they were worked part-time jobs in order to pay for school things etc., which was one of their priorities. Our data also showed school work was a big priority. “Fred,” who started a new relationship recently and 60% of his friends are single, said his priority now and for the near future was his education. He says:

**“People who care about their academics, they don’t really care about having a relationship, it really depends on what kind of person you are.”**

“Lily,” who’s single along with all her friends, says relationships are definitely not a priority. She says:

**“It’s by choice, all of us don’t have time or meet the people we would want to date, I guess we’re just too busy being friends and being single together.”**

“Tara,” who’s single and has 75% of her friends in relationships, said her main priority is career focus and studying to be an accountant and lets all guys know this. She explains:

**“I’m open to going out for coffee as a friend but then again if it’s just a ‘coffee’ date I don’t mind. If he tries to make it into something serious, then I’m like no, not right now...even if I really like the guy.”**

#### 5.1.1 Work-Life Balance

This sub-theme was very apparent in the data as the respondents were all trying to juggle many things. Fred said he thinks your chosen major can be a big influence regarding whether you can juggle having a relationship or not, it depends on how rigorous it is. He said:

**“It depends on how focused you are and if you know exactly what you want to do in the future.”**

He isn’t concerned with his relationship status until at least age 30 – he’s too focused on school then his career. “Vincent,” who’s been single for a little while and has 90% of his friends single, says he feels stressed when trying to juggle too many things but also notes:

**“If you’re in a relationship with someone who also goes to school, then it gives you motivation to go to school and study together.”**

#### 5.1.2 Time Management

For this sub-theme our data showed that all respondents had issues with time management when related to the context of RS. Vincent explained his time constraints are a result of having six courses and a part-time job but that he is getting better marks now that he is single again. He says:

**“My average was like a ‘C’ or ‘C+’ and now it has become a ‘B+’ since becoming single.”**

Lily explains that she has a part-time job so there’s just no time for ‘dating’ anyway and feels that a relationship would take time away from her studies with less focus there. Tara gives her view of a tight schedule:

**“It’s not having the time, the accounting major takes so much time plus I’m working as well. There’s just no time for me to speak to someone or give someone the attention they deserve.”**

“Torch” who’s been in a relationship for six months, said that time management was very important when you’re in a new relationship because your studies are affected initially until you adjust to the new routine.

### 5.1.3 Personal Growth – Career Focus

For this combination sub-theme some respondents referred to being single as good for personal growth and career focus where others thought relationships were positive for personal growth and school work if they were aligned. Tara thought having a relationship could be positive:

**“I guess if you have the need to be in a relationship and that person boosts you to do well in your life, then it would be a positive impact in your life.”**

Fred is very school and career focused and so are his friends. He has this drive to be the best he can and says that his upbringing has something to do with this:

**“Your upbringing or culture and outlook towards school work and the future is a big factor for how you approach it.”**

Vincent says he just thinks about what’s best for him and his future, it’s not a priority to be in a relationship now because of focusing on other parts of his life and just moving forward with his goals. Torch views RS and growth this way:

**“When one is single they feel that they are not worthy of other people and that’s why they overcompensate by focusing on studying and sports...and they become better. In a relationship you feel you’re good enough so you stop trying even though you could be better.”**

Tara said she would rather have a proper job than being married in a couple of years.

### 5.2 Partner Compatibility

This other common theme mentioned throughout our participants as being a major factor in whether you continue with your relationship and study schedule as is or if there is a need to be single in order to continue along your path. Vincent said a person’s

maturity level was an important factor regarding the ability to keep a relationship going while being a full-time student:

**“Having a relationship could be positive toward school work but depends on the individual.”**

Tara believes relationships may be positive for school work, but it depends on the partner – there could be a positive effect on grades. Fred says it really depends on the person you’re with whether RS is positive or negative for how well you do:

**“Relationship status and your marks are dependent on the partner you’re with...relationships could take time away from your studies but it depends on the individual and or partner.”**

Lily says it depends on your partner, the relationship can be positive or negative on your school work, the need to be in a relationship is subjective – all depends on the individual.

#### 5.2.1 Distraction

This sub-theme had many respondents say that having a relationship while studying full-time was a big distraction, Torch however, said being single was a distraction because looking for a partner was more time consuming than having one. Tara explains:

**“Partners could cause a distraction with studies if they’re needy, depends on their goals... I would never my school work start to slide – relationships can be distracting.”**

Fred says he likes having a partner and allows for some distractions in his life. Lily says she likes being single because of less worries and can do what she wants:

**“I get to do whatever I want, so there’s less worry, it’s like a burden to have a boyfriend...Thankfully I only had a relationship during the summer so it didn’t affect my school work.”**

#### 5.2.2 Convenience

Some of our respondents in this sub-theme thought that having a relationship would be fine if it were convenient. Fred said it this way:

**“It depends on where she lives or goes to school as well, if she lives downtown then you have to go see her and stay over, taking time from you, if they go to the same school or are in the same neighbourhood, then it’s even better.”**

Tara says her friends are always trying to hook her up with people who they know are single, out of convenience, which she finds to be very annoying:

**“They always want to see me in a relationship so we can double date...If I’m going to be in a relationship, it’s with a guy who understands my educational need.”**

### 5.2.3 Uncertainty

With this sub-theme many respondents reflected on how the uncertainty of the relationship was negative towards school work or the uncertainty of their RS caused studying issues. “Olivia,” recently single but most of her friends have partners, says she’s always worrying and over-analyzing everything about relationships:

**“Being in a relationship is a lot of work and they can be very stressful, it affects my school work...could negatively affect my school work during some rough patches.”**

Vincent feels there’s uncertainty with relationships and how it would affect his school work but says he’s more productive when single:

**“If the relationship is not mature then you’ll be spending most of the time arguing with each other.”**

Tara believes if you’re single for a long time you feel you don’t need anyone – it builds into your subconscious.

### 5.3 Independence

Almost every respondent had experiences with this common theme. Our study focused on what effects could relationships have on a student’s sense of independence. The data showed relationships could influence student’s independence negatively or positively. Torch, said:

**“Being single makes you feel like a loner, and you feel the social pressure to be bigger and better...when you find someone, you feel less social pressure, better by yourself and more confidence.”**

He felt single was negative on his sense of independence, having to focus on his appearance and perception by others to make up for his lack of relationship.

“Fred” felt relationships could provide positive stimulus since you have a partner to talk with, acting as a stress reliever:

**“It takes away the stress just by talking to someone, knowing that someone cares if you’re alive at the end of the day...if you’re in a relationship you’re more calm and want to focus on studying.”**

He felt relationships can make an individual stronger and less susceptible to external pressure, a higher sense of independence. Some felt being single was positive for productivity. “Lily” always kept herself busy, becoming more independent:

**“I don’t really cope with being single, I just keep being busy. I’m always doing something like school work, my job, watching T.V., being productive... there’s a positive impact on school, I don’t have to focus on someone else.”**

### 5.3.1 Loneliness

As a sub-theme, our data relating to loneliness showed during special occasions, i.e., Valentine’s Day etc., many respondents felt negative effects of being single. “Tara” explained:

**“Sometimes I do feel lonely, especially on Valentine’s Day when I’m helping my friends find presents for their boyfriends.”**

Sometimes loneliness was not restricted to special occasions. “Olivia” said:

**“All my friends came to the gathering with their significant others and they are cuddling, touching, you feel like an outsider.”**

Our respondents felt loneliness at any time, it wasn’t dependent on commercialized holidays. Being single didn’t always make our respondents lonely; during exam time being single was perceived as having freedom.

### 5.3.2 Freedom

Many respondents in this sub-theme said during exam periods or when schedules were full, their preference was single, to focus on school. “Tara,” said she likes to put 100% into a relationship but didn’t have time now, feeling less guilty being single and more study time. “Olivia” said:

**“I go back home to do my assignments, then I realize it’s a good thing I’m not with someone since I don’t have time for that.”**

This gave Olivia freedom to organize her schedule the way she wanted and felt relationships would only constrain her study time.

### 5.3.3 Relaxation – Self-Reflection

Relaxation and self-reflection are interrelated sub-themes. Our respondents said they were at ease when single because of not having to worry about their partners. “Lily” said: **“Sometimes I like being lonely...I would rather be alone than with someone.”** Lily also said how she valued being alone to relax. “Vincent” felt relaxed when single because there weren’t expectations to behave a certain way or spend time with someone, allowing for self-reflection; he also feels the need to interact with classmates or friends.

### 5.4 Social Pressure

This common theme had direct or indirect influence on respondent’s decisions such as, long-term career focus or short-term for going out with friends or staying home and studying. Also, social pressures influenced their decisions towards relationships. “Olivia” stated:

**“Lots of my friends are Jewish, their beliefs are to marry young, then have kids...parents push them to start looking for a husband, then the pressure comes to me.”**

Our data showed clearly that the respondents were deeply affected by the views and expectations of those around them; they were sensitive to what others thought about their RS, which also impacted their self-esteem and their relationship decisions.

#### 5.4.1 Peers

Peers impacted on pressures to be in a relationship; respondents with a majority of their friends not single, felt increased pressure to be in a relationship. “Torch” explained:

**“My friends feel pressure to be in a relationship because I started the trend, I hope the rest of them follow through.”**

“Tara” felt singled out by her friends because most have relationships and was annoyed they always brought their partners to hangout. She feels pressure to find a partner because her friends always want ‘double date’ she says:

**“I only feel pressure when I’m with them. When alone I feel confident about my current status and accept it, whenever we go out, mostly their boyfriends are there so I wish I’m with someone, to give me that kind of attention.”**

She wanted some attention like her friends got, but only when they were present, meaning the friends affected her views on her RS.

#### 5.4.2 Family

Our data showed there was family pressure towards their studies. “Fred” had pressure from his father to do well and “Lily’s” mother told her school should be her first priority. When asked about her mother Lily said:

**“It’s true because instead of studying, you will be hanging out with them.”**

Respondents had contradicting peer and family influences. All felt peer pressure to find partners, while some had family pressure for completing their degree. “Fred” stated: **“My dad said I can’t get married until I’m 30.”** He explained his dad was divorced and didn’t want Fred to go through it, meaning his families’ past and present influenced his decision. The majority of interviewees stayed single or kept studies as a priority.

#### 5.5 Student Relationship Phases – S-Curve Model

Once we went through all the inductive data, it appeared there was some interconnectedness between what each respondent said regarding being in a relationship or not. We came up with this model as a visual analytic tool, explained below. See Appendix-D for the S-Curve Model chart.

- “Initial Phase” – if just coming out of a relationship, the student is distracted because of the breakup and there is a loss of focus on their school work or, they are in a new relationship and also lose focus here.
- “Productive Phase” – after a short while being in the negative or euphoria phase, there’s a transition into a new routine with the student being very focused on their studies or, the relationship has molded into somewhat of a routine in what we call the *Productive Phase*.

- “Wanting Phase” – eventually after a while there comes a time when the student gets lonely or bored from the routine and is in need of a change, they think about being in a relationship or finding a new partner in the *Wanting Phase*. Here again they lose some focus on school work and there’s a chance grades will go down.

We positioned our participants on this S-Curve Model according to their current relationship status and length of time.

## **7.0 Conclusions and Discussion**

Here we answer our three main research questions from our findings.

- 1. Relationship status impact on school grades:** Single students generally have more time to focus on school, which is positive for their grades, however, in rare cases they may look for a partner, which is distracting. Students in relationships tend to give new partners more of their time, which could be distracting, however, after a while they can develop time management skills and regain their focus.
- 2. Relationship status and impact on emotional state:** Single students mostly feel lonely on special holidays, i.e., Valentines, however, they like the freedom, relaxation, and self-reflection, which helps for personal growth. Students in relationships enjoy the monologue as this helps with school stresses, but they feel partner compatibility is important since this could have a negative influence on their studies.
- 3. Student pressure regarding their RS:** Single students have internal pressure from being goal motivated, which explains lack of relationship interest, while those in relationships feel it boosts their confidence and helps de-stress. Students’ external pressure comes from peers and family. Families pressure students to do well in school and focus on career aspirations, while peers push them towards relationships if the group is mostly non-single, otherwise, students feel left out.

### **7.1 Practical Applications**

- 1. University students should prioritize their life goals when they are in relationships and develop better time management skills so they can enjoy their undergraduate experiences, but not to the detriment of their studies. Retaking courses is very expensive not to mention time needed to finally complete them.**

**2.** Partner compatibility has a direct influence on students' school results and their emotional state, therefore it would be prudent if they were disciplined and selective when looking for partnership. If grades are below certain thresholds because the student lacked focus, this could limit chances for graduate school or employment opportunities.

## 7.2 Limitations and Challenges

The biggest limitation we faced was time with only four weeks to complete the study and the researchers had full-time undergraduate schedules that conflicted. For this reason, only six participant interviews were chosen. Also, a York U. labor disruption limited our scope of finding suitable and agreeable space by everyone for conducting the interviews. A few more participants may have been the saturation point.

There was a lack of triangulation in terms of interviewers, with two researchers interviewing the six participants because of our snowball sampling and we were only able to conduct two respondent validations because of time constraints. Ideally we would have had another interviewer and conducted checks with all respondents. Another limitation was lack of experience since this was our inaugural qualitative study and we may have received more in-depth participant responses with more experience.

### 7.2.1 Future Research

Expand the age category of the study to include graduate students or do a separate study and or broaden the scope of student participants to incorporate other various Canadian universities from across the country.

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## Appendix A: The Interview Questions

### Social Pressure Type:

- How many of your close friends are in relationships?
- Follow up – can you elaborate; what is the percentage?
- How does this make you feel?
- Probing – do you feel pressured to be in a relationship?
- Follow up – what type of pressure (if any) **\*\*Based on the pilot interview, there can be 2 types of pressure: internal vs. external\*\***
- How is being ‘single’/ or in a relationship affecting your studies? OR
- Do you think being single/ or in a relationship can potentially affect your studies
- Follow up – tell me about your schedule/routine; the important parts in your life?

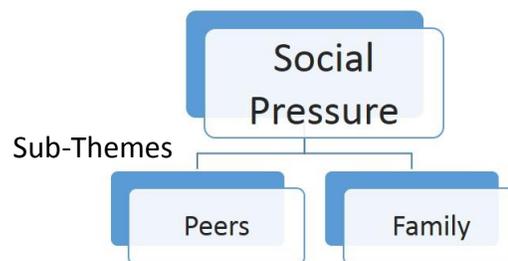
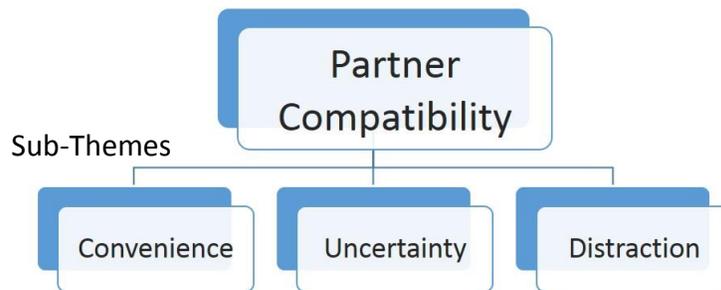
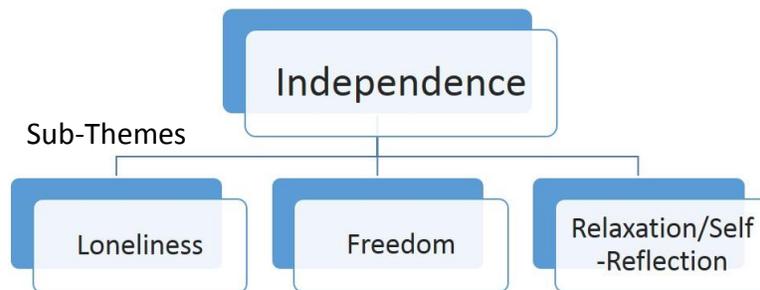
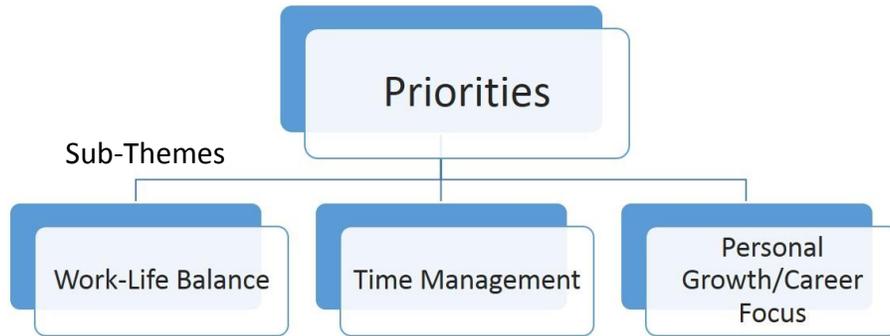
### Personal Type Questions:

- How long have you been single or (in relationship)? Alternately –
- Have you been in relationships before? (If yes), how long did those last on average?
- Do you like being single? How do you feel being single?
  - Follow up –do you want to be in a relationship? How do you feel being in a relationship?
- Devil's advocate – some people say being in a relationship will take time away from your studies, what is your perspective on this?
- Do you feel pressured to go out and meet people?
  - Follow up – how is it affecting your studies? or could it affect your studies?
- Do you feel lonely?
  - How do you cope with it?
- Do you think students’ need to be in relationships? (if they talk about themselves, then use "you" to replace "students")
- How do you think being single affects your grades or your studies?
- Do you think there are benefits being a single student, with F/T studying?

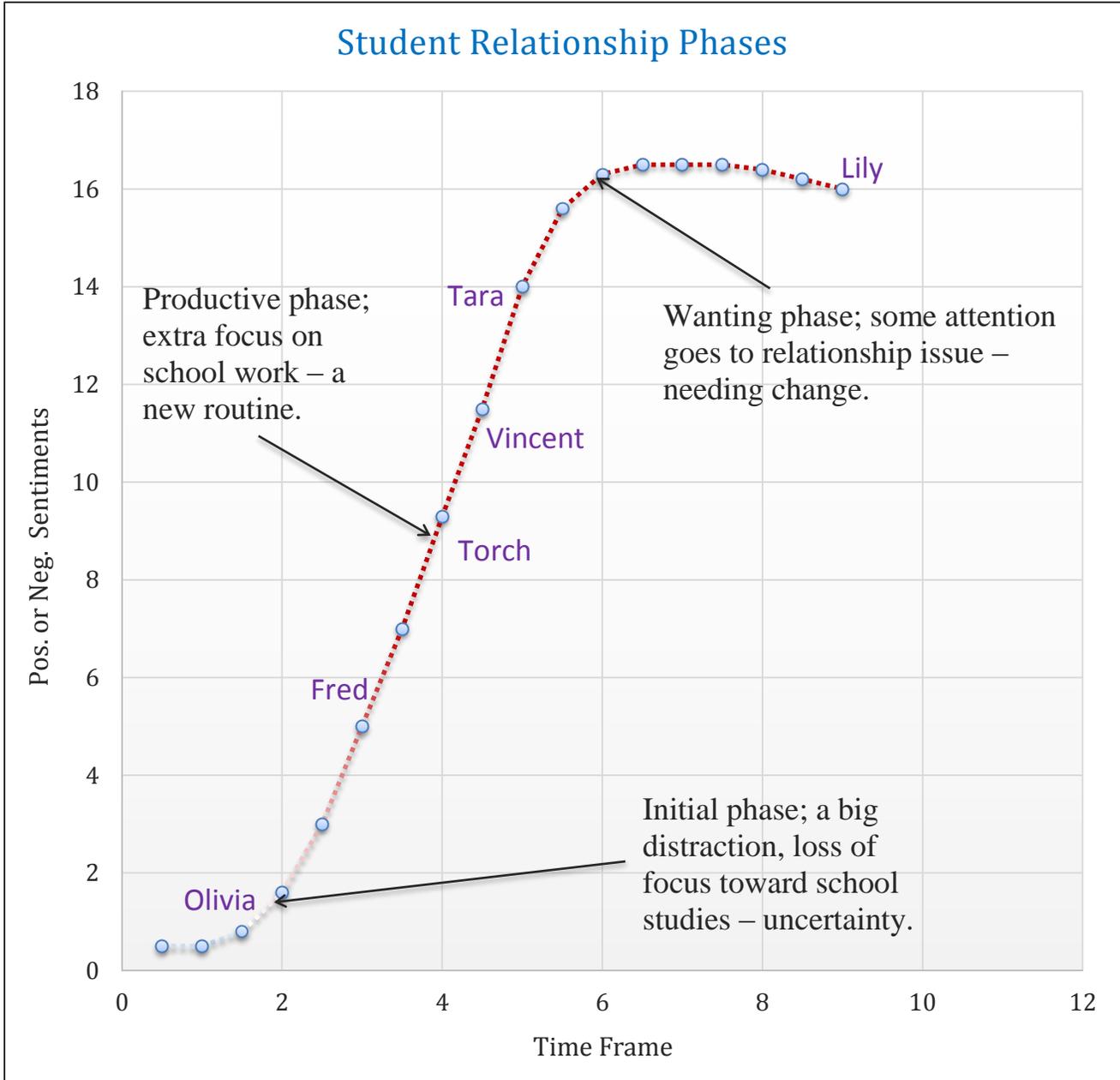
**Appendix B: Student Participant Demographic Table**

<b>Student Participant</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Relationship Status</b>	<b>Currently Working</b>	<b>University Major</b>
<b>Vincent</b>	Male	24	Single	Yes	Human Resource Management
<b>Fred</b>	Male	22	Attached	No	ITEC
<b>Torch</b>	Male	20	Attached	No	Kinesiology
<b>Tara</b>	Female	23	Single	Yes	Accounting
<b>Olivia</b>	Female	22	Single	No	Accounting
<b>Lily</b>	Female	21	Single	Yes	Health Studies

## Appendix C: Common Theme & Sub-Theme Diagram



**Appendix D: S-Curve Model of Student Relationship Phases**



## **Appendix E: Thank You Note to Participants**

We would like to thank all of our student participants for taking the time out of their busy schedules to meet with our researchers, which was out of your way. We express our gratitude for assisting us with our research study especially since the subject matter was of a personal and confidential nature and hope you did not suffer any embarrassment or were uncomfortable during any part of the interviewing process.