

Perceptions of Benefits and Drawbacks in Maintaining Back Burner Relationships Online: A Report on Gendered Differences Among College Students

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Abstract

This report investigates the perceptions of college students regarding the benefits and drawbacks of maintaining back burner relationships online, with a specific focus on gender-based differences. A mixed-methods study design was utilized. Participants included 762 undergraduate students (71% female, 71% Caucasian, 92% heterosexual) from communication courses at a Southwestern university. Participants completed a Qualtrics survey, and data were analyzed using content analysis with a focus on thematic coding. Inter-coder reliability was established at 98%. Results identified distinct gender differences in the benefits and drawbacks of back burner relationships. Females reported benefits such as emotional comfort and maintaining friendships, while males noted confidence boosts and the potential for future relationships. Conversely, females highlighted drawbacks related to relationship strain and emotional toll, whereas males emphasized complications arising from attachment and temptation. This report enhances the understanding of how young adults navigate interpersonal romantic dynamics in the digital age, contributing to research on relationship alternatives and the role of technology in modern romantic relationships. The findings inform future studies on relational decision-making and gendered expectations in digital communication contexts.

Keywords: back burners, casual sexual relationships, communication technology, interpersonal

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduce the Problem

Modern romantic relationships are shaped by both face-to-face and technologically mediated communication. As individuals assess their relational satisfaction and alternatives (Rusbult, 1980), the notion of maintaining potential partners - termed "back burners" - has gained traction (Dibble et al., 2015). Back burner relationships involve ongoing communication with individuals who are potential romantic or sexual partners, maintained outside of one's primary relationship (Dibble & Drouin, 2014).

1.2 Explore Importance of the Problem

With the rise of digital platforms, maintaining back burners has transitioned online, especially among young adults heavily engaged with social media (Pew, 2021). Gender differences further complicate this dynamic, as men and women exhibit varying relational expectations and behaviors (Abowitz et al., 2009; Vangelisti & Daly, 1997). This study investigates these gendered perceptions in an online context.

1.3 Describe Relevant Scholarship

Research into psychological characteristics of individuals who keep back burners showed that people who seek back burner relationships tend to exhibit high levels of sensation-seeking behavior and unrestricted sexual orientation (Borzea & Dillow, 2017). Distinctly, back burners are not frequently the source for casual sexual

relational experiences (CSREs), despite similar levels of relational closeness (Dibble et al., 2019). Whereas traditionally, people keeping back burners may have a physical list of back burners, the advancement of electronic communication technology has shifted their correspondence with back burners to online and digital mediums, particularly social media (Dibble, et al., 2015). About 72% of adults are engaged with some variety of social networking sites; of those individuals, 80% of them fit within the 18-29 year old demographic (Pew, 2021). The prevalence of social media use among adults today has historically been assigned a negative connotation or detrimental role in romantic relationships (Utz & Beukeboom, 2011).

Within research into romantic relationships, differences between male and female members of the relationship with regard to expectations, beliefs, and standards continue to persist. For example, Vangelisti and Daly (1997) found that women's past romantic experiences often shape how they view and evaluate current relationships, which can lead them to report more issues or concerns with their current partners. Additionally, in a sample of undergraduate students, researchers have found that men and women vary in their opinions regarding what is important in a relationship, and in which circumstances they would likely engage in cheating in the relationship (particularly in cases where they know they would not get caught) (Abowitz et. al., 2009). Consideration of these differences highlights the need to investigate how these assumptions between males and females in romantic relationships manifest when thinking about back burner relationships, especially online.

1.4 State Hypotheses and Their Correspondence to Research Design

Given this information regarding back burner relationships, technology, and gender differences in relationship conceptualizations among younger, college-aged adults, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: Do male and female college students perceive differences in benefits of having a back burner relationship online?

RQ2: Do male and female college students perceive differences in drawbacks to having a back burner relationship online?

2. Method

2.1 Participant (Subject) Characteristics

Participants included N = 762 (71% female, 71% Caucasian, 92% heterosexual) undergraduate students from various communication courses at a southwestern university. The age range was 18 to 58, with a mean age of 21.33 (standard deviation: 3.11). In terms of relationship status, n = 122 (16 %) reported being casually dating, n = 311 (41 %) reported being single, n = 317 (41 %) reported being in committed relationships, and n = 6 did not report their relationship status. The research was IRB approved.

2.2 Measures

Participants completed a Qualtrics survey addressing communication behaviors and relationship alternatives. Two open-ended questions asked respondents to describe perceived benefits and drawbacks of maintaining a back burner relationship online. There were three phases to the analysis. Using Mongeau et al.'s (2013) work as a model, we did a content analysis to identify college students' benefits and drawbacks for back burner relationships. Three authors coded the data and determined categories for each set of data. Inter-coder reliability was 98%. First, each researcher independently read the answers to familiarize themselves with the data. Descriptive coding techniques were used in the first iteration. Second, the researchers met to compare codes and to ensure consistency in analysis. The codes were compared to each other and found to be similar. Third, after another cycle of coding that rendered no new codes, the codes were combined into categories and finally into themes.

3. Results

Based on the coding, there were definite themes that females and males had regarding back burner relationships. The results and examples of each theme are displayed in Tables 1 and 2. Results revealed that females and males noted some specific benefits for back burner relationships (see Table 1). The benefits of having a back burner relationship were similar between females and males (e.g., friendship, none, and the possibility of a future relationship). Interestingly, females and males had different perceptions of the drawbacks of back burner relationships (see Table 2). Females reported that the top drawback would be that it could be a relationship ruiner, whereas the main drawback for males was that they might become attached or develop feelings. Frequencies and percentages are provided in the tables. Interestingly, females reported more benefits and drawbacks for having a back burner relationship compared to males.

Table 1. Reported Benefits of Back Burner Relationships by Gender

Female Responses (N = 541)	Male Responses (N = 220)
1. Friendship (N = 119, 22%) • “We were friends first and always will be. It's also nice to have a guy perspective on guy problems” 2. No benefit/None (N= 108, 20%) • “None - I am committed to my boyfriend and as a leader in the church I need to set an example” • “None, it only brings distress onto the current relationship because it distracts from it” 3. Keep relationship going (N = 81, 15%) • “Not losing a close friend” • “To not burn any bridges because it did not work out” • “Don't lose contact with someone who was a big part of my life” 4. Possibility of a future relationship (N = 60, 11%) • “Possible relationship in the distant future, the comfort of knowing someone will always be there” 5. Having someone for physical needs (Romantic or just sex) (N = 54, 10%) • “They are there when I have physical needs, and they make me momentarily happy” 6. Cure boredom & Loneliness (N = 37, 7%) • “To have someone to talk to or hang out with when lonely and/or bored” • “He's someone I would never consider marrying or taking seriously as a boyfriend. He simply passes the time if I'm lonely. Bottom line, there are no feelings other than friendships. 7. Emotional need & comfort (N = 33, 6%) • “Having someone around who knows you on a level that others don't who can comfort or even tell you there's things you need to work on. complete honesty without the feeling of hurting the others feeling or hindering your relationship” • “It's nice to have someone who will always be there for you” 8. Rebound/Back up just in case current relationship doesn't work out (N = 27, 5%) • “Possibility of getting together if my boyfriend and I break up” 9. Having someone to do something with (N = 16, 3%) • “entertainment “	1. Friendship (N= 55, 25%) • “Past or present friend” • “Always having a friend that you can be with if life does not end up the way you planned.” 2. No benefit/None (N =48, 22%) • “There aren't really any benefits” 3. Possibility of a future relationship (N = 44, 20%) • “Possible relationship” • “The possibility of a great relationship sometime in the future.” 4. Confidence/ ego booster (N = 28, 13%) • “Ego booster, passes time, it's fun, I'm single. I don't know.” 5. Sex/ hooking up any time without emotional attachment (N = 24, 11%) • “Potential for sex” 6. Rebound/Back up just in case current relationship doesn't work out (N = 20, 9%) • Backup plan: “that in the case of breaking up with my current girlfriend, i would have a rebound.” • “Rebound Girls” • “Easy access”

Note. Percentages are based on gendered subsamples.

Table 2. Reported Drawbacks of Back Burner Relationships by Gender

Female Responses (N = 541)	Male Responses (N = 220)
1. "Current relationship ruiner" (N = 102, 19%) • "Makes partner jealous" • "Unfaithfulness" • "Creating a strain on the relationship"	1. Becoming attached or developing feelings (N = 46, 21%) • "Getting emotionally attached to either her or me."
2. "Complications/ Emotional Toll" (N = 91, 17%) • "Getting hurt in the process" • "Attachment" • "Can be draining/ stressful" • "Causes trust issues"	2. Complications/ Emotional Toll (N = 33, 15%) • "Drama" • "Hurt feelings" "brings back feelings" • "Don't want to burn the bridge"
3. Holding them back from potential future relationships (N = 86, 16%) • "I can't move on, because I want him"	3. Current relationship ruiner (N = 30, 14%) • "That it shows my disloyalty to my girlfriend, but I'm working on it"
4. Having to cut ties/ relationship ending badly (N = 81, 15%) • "Ending badly" and "cutting all communication"	4. Temptation (N = 29, 13%) • "Temptation, guilt, not being completely loyal to my girlfriend"
5. Brings up bad memories from past (N = 70, 13%) • "I have bad memories of our relationship"	5. Distance makes it hard (N = 22, 10%) • "Long distance, not a lot of clarity at first of what kind of relationship you are"
6. None (N = 65, 12%) • "nothing"	6. Only friends (N = 19, 9%) • "Perhaps having hangups and feelings where there isn't a real relationship anymore. Unless you're vocal about it, there is no guarantee they feel the same way. It's a bet, essentially" • "It could put me in the "friendzone"'"
7. Backburner themselves (N = 22, 4%) • "Getting jealous of current relationship" • "Where are we conversations"	7. None (N = 18, 8%) • "None, takes no time, doesn't cause conflict with my current relationship"
8. Comparing to future relationships (N = 16, 3%) • "Trying to see if we will actually be together one day"	8. Sexual relationship (N = 15, 7%) • "Sex"
9. Having to see them (N = 10, 2%) • "Seeing them in person and them hoping we will be more"	9. Annoyance (N = 7, 3%) • "Having to deal with their issues"
10. Waste of time (N = 5, 1%) • "Takes up so much time to maintain the relationship"	

Note. Percentages are based on gendered subsamples.

4. Discussion

Back burners remain a unique interpersonal relationship, eliciting a wide range of conceptualizations and interpretations from college-aged students (Dibble et al, 2023; Punyanunt-Carter, et al., 2024). Based on the results gleaned from the study, backburners are clearly a consideration among both female and male college-aged adults. They report similar positive aspects, but distinct drawbacks to maintaining back burners while in a committed relationship. Vangelisti and Daly's (1997) study attributes differences in relational satisfaction to different prior experiences in past relationships, which could account for the uniqueness of responses by gender. The common positive of desiring a friendship speaks to a possible need for interpersonal relations outside of the scope of one's romantic relationship. Of particular note is that female respondents had a seemingly more intentional desire to maintain a platonic interpersonal friendship, compared to males who have the possibility of a future relationship in mind when cultivating a backburner relationship. Prior findings, particularly from Abowitz and colleagues (2009) informs this disparity, as females are more invested in maintaining a current relationship, whereas males, who responded as willing to engage in cheating behavior if there is no reproach, appear to be more likely to consider and even cultivate a subsequent relationship should the current one fail. Females reported that back burners put a strain on their relationships for reasons relating to the relationship itself, such as jealousy or trust issues, whereas male students find the largest drawback to be a reason outside of the relationship, particularly developing romantic feelings for the back burner over their current relationship. This highlights a clear gender disparity in how problematic or sensitive subjects, such as the existence of a back burner relationship, are viewed

from a relational standpoint (how it affects the current relationship) versus a personal standpoint (how it affects the individual). This apparent gender difference in perceptions of relational issues warrants further examination into how the difference in relational threat examination forms in male and female college students.

A major limitation of the study is the greater educational attainment sample. While young college adults were the target demographic of the study, the responses will be representative of a college population, but not necessarily for those in a similar age range who are not attending college or university. Further research into back burners in communities that are not in the college context should be conducted. Demographically, the sample was disproportionately female, Caucasian, and heterosexual, leaving most of the thematic interpretations of the study limited to mostly female, Caucasian, and heterosexual perspectives. Future research should investigate the backburner phenomenon with an emphasis on sampling the perspectives of minority and non-heterosexual individuals, as well as more male participation, in order to understand that perspective at a more in-depth level.

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