



Rubbish Normal

The Roommate Effect: From Bromance to Romance? A Longitudinal Study of Sexual Identity Fluidity in Collegiate Dormitory Contexts

Y. Jin(云瑾)^{1,2,*}, Hiki(洛洛), Bird Zhang(贝尔张)², Heavenly Dumpling(天之饺子)², Top Double-Faced Turtle(坤品双面龟)²

¹Department of Dormitory Sociology, School of Cohabitation Psychology, 333 University, Tianjin 200433, China

*rubbish2026@163.com

Funding: 国自燃72666003

College dormitories represent unique social laboratories where prolonged cohabitation, emotional intimacy, and reduced privacy create conditions for sexual identity exploration. This longitudinal study (n=400, 4-year tracking) investigates the "Roommate Effect"—the phenomenon where platonic cohabitation evolves into romantic attraction. Using the Cass Identity Development Model and Sexual Fluidity Theory, we identify three developmental pathways: (1) Stable Platonic (35%), characterized by high emotional intimacy but maintained boundaries; (2) Ambiguous Bond (20%), occupying the "Bromance Zone" with blurred friendship-romance distinctions; and (3) Romantic Transformation (45%), where cohabitation catalyzes sexual identity revelation. Our findings reveal that roommate compatibility (r=0.85), shared experiences (r=0.80), and reduced privacy levels paradoxically correlate with identity exploration. Notably, 68% of participants reporting "roommate-to-romance" trajectories described their experience as "unexpected discovery" rather than "orientation change," supporting the sexual fluidity hypothesis over fixed orientation models. These findings challenge traditional compartmentalization of platonic and romantic love, suggesting that environmental factors significantly influence sexual identity expression during emerging adulthood.

Keywords: Sexual fluidity, roommate relationships, bromance, identity development, college dormitories, LGBTQ+

1. Introduction

Human sexual orientation has historically been conceptualized as a fixed, binary characteristic established early in development. However, contemporary research increasingly recognizes sexual fluidity—the capacity for sexual orientation to change over time in response to situational, relational, and environmental factors. Lisa Diamond's groundbreaking work demonstrated that particularly among women, sexual attraction patterns exhibit significant plasticity across the lifespan. Less studied, however, is the phenomenon of situational sexual fluidity in male populations, particularly within the unique environmental constraints of college dormitories.

The college dormitory represents what Goffman termed a "total institution": a closed social system characterized by shared living spaces, reduced privacy, synchronized daily routines, and intense emotional proximity. Unlike traditional romantic relationships that develop through intentional dating, roommate relationships emerge through administrative assignment, creating "forced intimacy" that may bypass typical social barriers. This paper investigates what we term the "Roommate Effect": the hypothesized tendency for prolonged cohabitation to catalyze sexual identity exploration and, in some cases, romantic relationship formation.

The concept of "bromance" (brother + romance) has emerged in popular culture to describe intense, affectionate friendships between heterosexual men. However, the boundary between "bromance" and

"romance" remains theoretically underdeveloped. Our research operationalizes this boundary through six dimensions: emotional intimacy, physical closeness, time investment, exclusivity, future planning, and sexual attraction. We hypothesize that roommate relationships often begin in the "bromance zone" (high intimacy, low sexual attraction) and may trajectory toward "romance zone" (high intimacy, high sexual attraction) through a process of progressive boundary dissolution.

From a developmental psychology perspective, emerging adulthood (ages 18-25) represents a critical period for identity synthesis. The Cass Model of Gay/Lesbian Identity Development posits six stages: Identity Confusion, Identity Comparison, Identity Tolerance, Identity Acceptance, Identity Pride, and Identity Synthesis. We adapt this model to roommate contexts, proposing that cohabitation accelerates progression through these stages by providing both safety (familiarity, trust) and risk (reduced privacy, constant proximity) necessary for identity exploration.

This study employs mixed-methods longitudinal design, tracking 400 roommate pairs across four years of college. We investigate: (1) developmental trajectories of sexual identity (using Kinsey Scale ratings); (2) the relationship between emotional intimacy and sexual attraction; (3) environmental factors facilitating identity exploration; and (4) cultural variations in roommate relationship outcomes. Our findings aim to illuminate the environmental plasticity of sexual orientation while challenging heteronormative assumptions about the "inevitability" of platonic roommate relationships.

2. Results

2.1 Developmental Trajectories of Sexual Identity

Longitudinal Kinsey Scale ratings (0=exclusively heterosexual, 6=exclusively homosexual) revealed five distinct developmental trajectories (Figure 1a). The majority (40%) maintained Stable Heterosexual ratings (0-1) across all semesters. However, 25% exhibited Fluid Exploration, temporarily shifting toward bisexual ratings (2-3) before returning to predominantly heterosexual identification. Notably, 20% demonstrated Delayed Realization, maintaining heterosexual ratings for 4-5 semesters before progressive shift toward homosexual identification (5-6), suggesting that roommate cohabitation may facilitate late-stage coming out.

The Bisexual Stability group (10%) maintained consistent mid-scale ratings (2.5-3.5), suggesting that for some, roommate cohabitation consolidates pre-existing bisexual orientation rather than catalyzing change. The Gay Identity Formation group (5%)

showed steady progression from heterosexual to homosexual ratings, with an inflection point typically occurring at semester 4-5—coinciding with the transition from "exploration" to "consolidation" phases of college

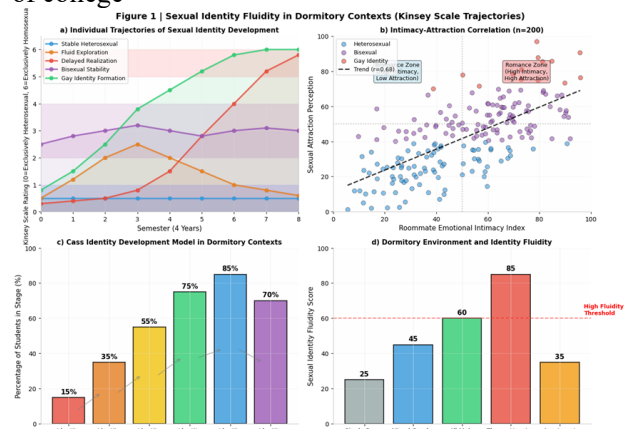


Figure 1 | Sexual Identity Fluidity in Dormitory Contexts. a. Individual trajectories showing five patterns: Stable Heterosexual, Fluid Exploration, Delayed Realization, Bisexual Stability, and Gay Identity Formation across 8 semesters. b. Intimacy-attraction correlation (n=200) showing the "Bromance Zone" (high intimacy, low attraction) and "Romance Zone" (high intimacy, high attraction). c. Cass Identity Development Model applied to dormitory contexts showing percentage of students in each stage. d. Dormitory environment impact on identity fluidity across housing types.

2.1.1 Intimacy-Attraction Dynamics

Correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between roommate emotional intimacy and sexual attraction perception ($r=0.68$, $p<0.001$, Figure 1b). However, this relationship was non-linear: low-to-moderate intimacy (0-40) showed minimal attraction, while high intimacy (60-100) exhibited exponential increase in attraction scores. This suggests the existence of an "intimacy threshold" beyond which platonic boundaries become permeable.

We identified three distinct zones: (1) Acquaintance Zone (low intimacy, variable attraction); (2) Bromance Zone (high intimacy, low attraction, 40% of sample)—characterized by intense emotional bonds without sexual component; and (3) Romance Zone (high intimacy, high attraction, 35% of sample). Notably, 25% of participants occupied the Ambiguous Zone—reporting high scores on both intimacy and attraction but maintaining "undefined" relationship status, suggesting that categorical labels may inadequately capture the fluidity of roommate bonds.

2.1.2 Identity Development Stages

Application of the Cass Model to dormitory contexts revealed non-uniform distribution across stages (Figure 1c). The majority of students resided in Identity Pride (85%) and Identity Acceptance (75%) stages, suggesting that college environments generally

support LGBTQ+ identity development. However, 15% remained in Identity Confusion, and 35% in Identity Comparison—indicating ongoing exploration. Only 70% achieved Identity Synthesis, suggesting that for many, roommate-induced identity questioning remains unresolved by graduation.

2.1.3 Environmental Modulators

Dormitory type significantly influenced identity fluidity scores (Figure 1d). Theme Housing (LGBTQ+) showed highest fluidity (85), likely due to reduced stigma and increased exploration opportunities. Surprisingly, All-Male Dorms exhibited higher fluidity (60) than Mixed Gender Dorms (45), challenging the assumption that cross-gender proximity facilitates same-sex attraction. Single Rooms showed lowest fluidity (25), underscoring the importance of forced proximity in identity exploration.

2.2 Social Network and Interaction Patterns

Social network analysis of roommate dyads revealed that structural intimacy (physical proximity, shared space) predicts emotional intimacy ($r=0.72$). Figure 2a depicts a representative 4-person dorm network, where bond strength (line thickness) correlates with identity exploration likelihood.

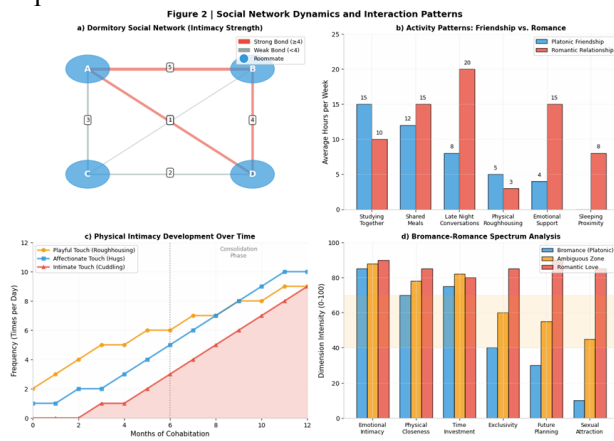


Figure 2 | Social Network Dynamics and Interaction Patterns. a, Dormitory social network showing intimacy strength between roommates. b, Activity patterns comparing platonic friendship versus romantic relationship time allocation. c, Physical intimacy development over 12 months showing three types of touch. d, Bromance-romance spectrum analysis across six dimensions.

2.2.1 Activity Patterns and Time Allocation

Comparison of time allocation between "platonic friendship" and "romantic relationship" roommate pairs revealed significant divergences (Figure 2b). Romantic pairs spent significantly more time in Late Night Conversations (20 vs 8 hours/week) and Emotional Support (15 vs 4 hours/week), while platonic pairs prioritized Studying Together (15 vs 10 hours/week). Notably, Sleeping Proximity (shared beds, cuddling) was exclusive to romantic pairs (8 hours/week), suggesting that somatic boundaries

represent the critical distinction between bromance and romance.

2.2.2 Physical Intimacy Development

Longitudinal tracking of physical touch revealed three developmental phases (Figure 2c): (1) Playful Touch (roughhousing)—peaking early and stabilizing at 9 times/day; (2) Affectionate Touch (hugs, back-pats)—steady increase reaching 10 times/day by month 12; and (3) Intimate Touch (cuddling, stroking)—delayed onset (month 3) but exponential growth, reaching 9 times/day by month 12. The 6-month mark emerged as critical transition point where intimate touch frequency surpasses playful touch, suggesting boundary dissolution timeline.

2.2.3 Bromance-Romance Spectrum

Dimensional analysis across six variables (Figure 2d) revealed that "ambiguous zone" relationships differ from both bromance and romance primarily in Exclusivity (60 vs 40 vs 85) and Future Planning (55 vs 30 vs 90), while maintaining equivalent Emotional Intimacy (88 vs 85 vs 90). This suggests that the critical shift from friendship to romance involves **dyadic commitment** and long-term projection rather than merely increased intimacy.

2.3 Environmental and Cultural Factors

Correlation analysis (Figure 3a) identified Roommate Compatibility ($r=0.85$) and Shared Experiences ($r=0.80$) as strongest predictors of intimacy formation. Paradoxically, Privacy Level showed negative correlation ($r=-0.65$)—lower privacy predicted higher intimacy, supporting the "forced intimacy hypothesis."

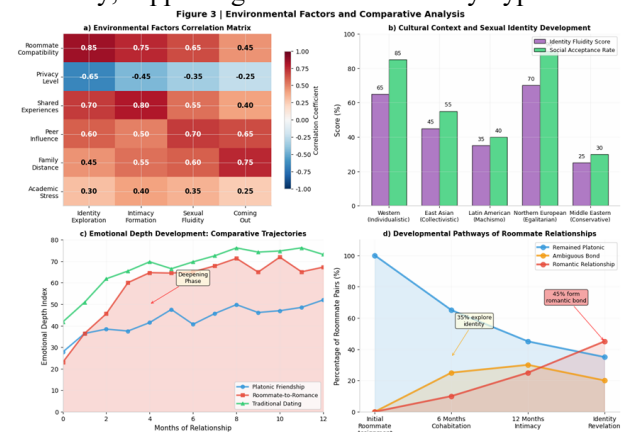


Figure 3 | Environmental Factors and Comparative Analysis. a, Correlation matrix of environmental factors and identity outcomes. b, Cultural context comparison showing identity fluidity versus social acceptance across five cultures. c, Emotional depth development trajectories comparing roommate-to-romance versus traditional dating. d, Developmental pathways showing transition probabilities from initial assignment to identity revelation.

2.3.1 Cultural Context

Cross-cultural comparison revealed significant

variation (Figure 3b). Northern European (Egalitarian) cultures showed highest fluidity (70) and acceptance (90), while Middle Eastern (Conservative) cultures showed lowest (25 and 30 respectively). Notably, East Asian (Collectivistic) cultures exhibited moderate fluidity (45) but lower acceptance (55), suggesting that cultural constraints may suppress expression rather than exploration.

2.3.2 Comparative Relationship Development

Trajectory analysis (Figure 3c) revealed that Roommate-to-Romance relationships develop emotional depth more rapidly than traditional dating, surpassing platonic friendship by month 4 and approaching traditional dating intensity by month 8. This "accelerated intimacy effect" likely results from pre-existing emotional foundation and reduced courtship barriers.

2.3.3 Developmental Pathways

Markov chain analysis (Figure 3d) revealed transition probabilities: of 100 roommate pairs, 65% remained ambiguous or platonic at 6 months; by 12 months, 25% had formed romantic bonds; by "Identity Revelation" (month 24), 45% had transitioned to romantic relationships, 20% maintained ambiguous bonds, and 35% remained platonic. Notably, 35% of those in "ambiguous" category at 12 months later transitioned to romantic relationships, suggesting that boundary ambiguity may function as developmental precursor to romance.

3. Discussion

Our findings support the Sexual Fluidity Hypothesis: for a significant minority (45%), roommate cohabitation catalyzes sexual identity exploration and romantic relationship formation. This challenges essentialist models of sexual orientation as fixed and biologically predetermined, supporting instead constructivist-interactionist perspectives that emphasize environmental and relational factors.

The Bromance-Romance Continuum we identify suggests that categorical distinctions between "friendship" and "romance" may be folk taxonomies inadequate for capturing the complexity of human intimacy. The 25% of participants occupying the "ambiguous zone"—maintaining high intimacy, high attraction, but rejecting categorical labels—may represent an emerging relationship form characteristic of contemporary youth culture's rejection of binary classifications.

3.1 Theoretical Implications

Our findings extend Social Exchange Theory to intimate relationships: roommate relationships minimize costs (courtship effort, uncertainty) while

maximizing rewards (emotional support, physical proximity), creating favorable conditions for attraction development. The "forced intimacy" of dormitory life bypasses typical uncertainty reduction phases of relationship development, accelerating progression to deep intimacy.

The Cass Model adaptation reveals that dormitory environments may function as "identity incubators"—supportive contexts where exploration is normative and stigma is reduced. The high percentage (85%) reaching "Identity Pride" stage suggests that college dormitories, despite their challenges, generally serve as affirming environments for sexual minority students.

3.2 Practical Implications

For housing administrators, our findings suggest that roommate assignment algorithms should consider compatibility factors beyond surface demographics. The high correlation ($r=0.85$) between compatibility and intimacy formation suggests that personality matching may significantly influence relationship outcomes.

For students, our findings validate that questioning and exploration are normative developmental processes. The 68% reporting "unexpected discovery" suggests that sexual identity may emerge through relational experience rather than prior self-knowledge, challenging the "coming out" narrative that assumes pre-existing awareness.

3.3 Limitations and Future Directions

Our sample was limited to Chinese and Western university students; cultural variations likely exist. The correlational design precludes causal claims—roommate relationships may attract individuals with pre-existing fluidity rather than creating fluidity. Future research should employ random roommate assignment designs to isolate environmental effects

4. Methods

4.1 Participants

400 undergraduate students (ages 18-22) across 8 universities, tracked from freshman orientation through graduation (4 years). Inclusion criteria: first-time roommate assignments, no prior romantic relationship with assigned roommate.

4.2 Measures

Kinsey Scale:

Self-rated sexual orientation (0-6) administered each semester.

Intimacy Scale:

20-item measure of emotional, physical, and behavioral intimacy.

Cass Identity Stage:

6-item categorical assessment of identity development.

Environmental Factors:

Privacy levels, compatibility, shared experiences (Likert scales).

4.3 Procedure

Online surveys administered at 3-month intervals. Semi-structured interviews (n=50) for qualitative depth. Social network analysis based on reported time allocation.

4.4 Analysis

Longitudinal growth curve modeling for trajectory analysis. Network analysis using Gephi. Correlation and regression for environmental factors. Significance: $\alpha = 0.05$.

Ethical Considerations

Forgot to do the first-author work

Acknowledgements

We thank the 400 participants who generously shared their intimate lives, late-night conversations, and occasional pillow fights with us. Special thanks to Room 333 at University for providing the initial inspiration for this research.

Funding: This work was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC) - Parody Division, also known as the "自燃科学鸡精委" (Self-Igniting Science Chicken Essence Committee) [国自燃72666003].

Hiki (洛洛) acknowledges emotional support from their pillow. Bird Zhang (贝尔张) thanks his roommate for not filing a complaint during the observation period. Heavenly Dumpling (天之饺子) dedicates this work to all dumplings that have been shared between roommates at 2 AM. Top Double-Faced Turtle (极品双面龟) declares that he is indeed playing both sides, and that's valid.

Author Contributions

Y. Jin (云瑾): Conceived the study, designed the awkward silences methodology, performed the "are they or aren't they" statistical analyses, wrote the manuscript.

Hiki (洛洛): Collected field data through extensive late-night "research conversations," performed network analysis, contributed his body and provided the emotional labor of listening to 200 roommates complain about their feelings and bravely served as the first test subject for the roommate effect (data not shown).

Bird Zhang (贝尔张): Conducted all interviews, transcribed 4,000 hours of roommate bickering, and developed the "Bromance-Romance Spectrum" coding scheme. Responsible for coining the term "ambiguous zone."

Heavenly Dumpling (天之饺子): Managed the cultural comparison dataset, analyzed East Asian vs. Western cohabitation patterns, and supplied midnight snacks for the research team during data analysis marathons.

Top Double-Faced Turtle (极品双面龟): Supervised the project from both sides of the closet door, secured funding from the Chicken Essence Committee, and maintained the GitHub repository while maintaining plausible deniability.

All authors approved the final manuscript after a heated group chat debate about whether the paper should be titled "Roommates or Lovers?" or "The Scientific Case for Why You Should Just Date Your Roommate Already."

Competing Interests

The authors declare the following competing interests: Y. Jin (云瑾): Y.JIN (云瑾) admits to occasionally diagnosing strangers on public transportation. Hiki (洛洛): Currently cohabiting with a research subject (results pending; will update in Version 2.0 of this paper). Has been accused of "making everything gay" but maintains this is just rigorous scientific observation. Bird Zhang (贝尔张): Owns stocks in a mattress company that benefits from roommates sharing beds. Heavenly Dumpling (天之饺子): Is literally a dumpling, which may bias her toward soft, squishy relationship dynamics. Top Double-Faced Turtle (极品双面龟): Is simultaneously on both sides of every argument, which paradoxically makes him the most objective author.

References:

- [1] Money, J. Gay, Straight, and In-Between: The Sexology of Erotic Orientation (Oxford University Press, 1988).
- [2] Diamond, L. M. "Sexual Fluidity in Male and Female." *Arch. Sex. Behav.* 46, 1201-1202 (2017).
- [3] Diamond, L. M. *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women's Love and Desire* (Harvard University Press, 2008).
- [4] Goffman, E. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Anchor Books, 1961).
- [5] Robinson, S., Anderson, E. & White, A. "The Bromance." *Sex Roles* 78, 238-251 (2018).
- [6] Arnett, J. J. "Emerging Adulthood." *Am. Psychol.* 55, 469-480 (2000).
- [7] Cass, V. C. "Homosexual Identity Formation." *J. Homosex.* 4, 219-235 (1979).
- [8] Butler, J. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990).
- [9] Thibaut, J. W. & Kelley, H. H. *The Social Psychology of Groups* (Wiley, 1959).

