

The background image is a photograph of a cozy, dimly lit bar or restaurant. Warm string lights are strung across the ceiling and around the bar area. In the foreground, there are dark wooden tables and chairs. In the background, several patrons are visible: a man and a woman are seated at a table, and two women are standing near the bar. The bar itself has a wooden counter and shelves with various bottles and decorative items. A television screen is mounted on the wall, displaying a colorful image. The overall atmosphere is intimate and inviting.

COLLEGE AVENUE

ROMANTIC REALITIES

HOW SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS
SHAPE AROACE EXPERIENCES

CAN LOVE REALLY BE BOUGHT?

A LOOK INTO CONSUMER BEHAVIOR
AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF LOVE

WHEN DATING HAS NO NAME

ANONYMOUS ACCOUNTS
OF MODERN-DAY ROMANCE

A ROCKY MOUNTAIN STUDENT MEDIA PUBLICATION VOLUME 21 ISSUE 3 WINTER 2026

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FROM YOUR EDITORS

Relationships define the way we all live our lives. We constantly feel a sense of connection to people, places and things. Between sitting in your favorite coffee shop to late night talks with friends, even the split eye contact with the stranger you always see on campus, there is always some form of connection to the world around you that keeps you grounded.

In the Relationship Edition, we explore connections in all forms. From the places that grow to feel like home to situationships that leave us questioning everything, this issue shines a light on the beauty and complexity of being connected.

We hope that within these stories you find pieces of your own story and start viewing the relationships in your life a little differently.

Cover photo by Nicolette Wilks

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Photo by Nicolette Wilks

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Romantic REALITIES

Valentine's Day recently passed, and love was in the air. There were flower shops selling roses, candy hearts being exchanged in class, and everyone was hoping to impress their special someone.

At least, that's what most people imagine. In reality, not everyone has a "special someone," or even the same interest in romantic or sexual relationships.

Many people identify with the terms aromantic, asexual, or both, referred to as being "aroace." For them, this expectation regarding romance can become a source of unwanted pressure.

"I have seen so much, like, societal norms," said Soph Black, a CSU student who identifies as aroace. According to them, this expectation to pursue romance led to an extended relationship they weren't interested in, and later regretted.

"I realized that the emotions they were showing towards me were not something I could reciprocate. I felt guilty," they said.

"I eventually told them that 'I don't think I can have a relationship in the way that you want me to have a relationship with you,'" Black continued.

Even after ending the relationship, a feeling of guilt is something they continued to experience. Black explained that after having to express romantic love they didn't feel, expressing their authentic platonic love could feel disingenuous, as it reminded them of that relationship.

"They expressed 'I love you' over and over to me, and I said it back in the way that I thought was normal, and now I have issues expressing that to just my friends without feeling like I'm lying," Black said.

While the pressure of societal expectations can lead to unwanted romantic relationships, that pressure can also be a source of anxiety, especially for individuals figuring out if they're asexual or aromantic and to what extent.

Another student explained that her family is fairly religious, and there was often backlash against experiences not of the stereotypical heterosexual, romantic relationship. Because of these experiences, she preferred to remain anonymous, and will be referred to as Jane.

She explained that, growing up, she felt the same pressure to be interested in romantic relationships, and to her, it felt like something she couldn't live up to.

"I kind of felt like I was wrong, or that I was behind, or that I wasn't doing something right...and when I was growing up I didn't have the freedom to explore any of those aspects of myself," Jane said.

When others talked about their relationships or crushes, she just couldn't relate, and this made her feel broken. However, she explained how a conversation with her best friend changed that.

a whole community, of people different from what the world thought everyone should be like," she said.

She ultimately elaborated that she felt there would be less pressure around romantic and sexual relationships if there was more awareness of aromantic and asexual experiences.

"If I had heard more about that realm and those possibilities, maybe I wouldn't have felt...broken or wrong," she said, "and hopefully that would bring more room for open conversation without the need for fear or judgment."

Photos by Amanda Marken
Design & illustrations by Sarah Thomas



"I was kind of breaking down, not in tears, but like, trying to think through what I was feeling, and she kind of just stopped, was so calm and looked at me...and she said 'you're not broken, you're ok,'" Jane said.

It was through this friend that she first discovered the term aroace, and started reflecting on which relationships she actually wanted.

"Because I grew up in a way that I wasn't able to express any of those things, it made me realize that there was a world of, really

Written by Maxine Bilodeau

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COLLEGE STUDENTS & THEIR HOMETOWNS

Written and captured by Emma Winters

Home. It's a word that is so simple and yet so complex. When you get to college, the number one question that people ask you is 'Where are you from?' For me, that question resulted in me always saying 'Southern California.' My hometown is the same size as the undergraduate population at Colorado State University and the likelihood of someone actually knowing what I was talking about is slim to none.

Moorpark, California, is about forty minutes away from Malibu and an hour away from Los Angeles. The quaint town was the perfect place to grow up. I never had to worry about my safety and could walk around without checking whether someone was following me. But although it's picturesque, my relationship with it has changed drastically since coming to CSU.

I've made so many close friends and built a strong community in Fort Collins, so heading back to my hometown for holidays, while exciting, can also feel sad. Although I have my family and a few friends back home, it feels as if I'm a stranger in the town I grew up in.

People often say that they feel as if they revert back to their 17-year-old self when they go home, and for me, that couldn't be more true. Back under my parents' roof, going to my high school's events to see my sister dance and always running into people from my graduating class in Target makes me feel like I'm still in high school.



(Background) Rolling hills in Moorpark, Calif., Jan 16.
(Above) Moorpark city limit sign in Moorpark, Calif., Jan 16.

The newest construction in Moorpark has also recently created a disconnect between my roots and me. Every time I go home, there is another rolling hill that is being demolished for new housing to be put in, or a new building on High Street. The city that I once knew like the back of my hand now has me pausing and wondering what I missed.

In this photo story, I tried to encapsulate how the relationship between a college student and their hometown feels. From seeing the ever-changing city, to the graduation gown



that just sits collecting dust in my closet, a reminder of how involved I used to be in my city, there is always an underlying feeling of sadness when I return home. Who knows if one day that will change, or if I will always feel like a stranger in the town I used to roam freely, but one thing is for certain: No matter where I end up after graduation, Moorpark will always be a part of me, for better or for worse.



Illustrations By:
Photos By:



(Background) Overview of Moorpark, Calif., Jan. 16.

(Right) High Street Arts Center in Moorpark, Calif., Jan. 16.

(Bottom) New construction on High St. in Moorpark, Calif., Jan. 16.

(Pg. 10 top right) High St. in Moorpark, Calif., Jan. 16.

(Pg. 10 bottom right) Mayflower Market on High St. in Moorpark, Calif., Jan. 16.

(Pg. 10 middle left) Moorpark High School graduation gown in Moorpark, Calif., Jan. 16.

Design by Charlotte London



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WHEN DATING HAS **NO NAME**

ANONYMOUS ACCOUNTS OF MODERN-DAY ROMANCE

Written by Luke Purvis

The situationship started with a bang for a third-year Colorado State University (CSU) student during an October night after a flag football game outside the CSU Recreation Center. He offered her a ride home, where they enjoyed laughing about stories from their past and the professors they hate. When they reached her apartment, they sat in the car for another hour, doing more than talking.

Over time, their relationship deepened. They grabbed late-night drinks and did some karaoke. There were plenty of flirty jokes and a growing comfort in each other's presence. They slowly started to occupy more and more space in each other's routines. There was no official first date, just moments that felt special because they shared them.

Then, boundaries started to matter.

As time passed, the junior quietly stopped seeing other people. The other partner did not. This realization came unexpectedly

"I knew we weren't on the same page from the beginning, and my gut hit after that"



Sunday Supply Co. drawing in shoppers with a Valentine's Day themed sign, Fort Collins, Colo., Feb. 5.

through a dating app, Bumble, a notification seen over their partner's shoulder. "I knew we weren't on the same page from the beginning, and my gut hit after that," the junior said. "I felt dumb for assuming exclusivity when we never talked about it."

The junior, who felt very hurt, avoided bringing it up. "I didn't want to make them mad," they said. "I was depressed, but I kept

telling myself it was fine." The situationship fizzled without a formal ending, just leaving confusion rather than a confession.

In today's dating world, relationships come in many forms, sometimes not fitting within any traditional labels. This has led to the era of "the situationship," a romantic connection that exists in a state of ambiguity with no clear boundaries. Best of all, there are no expectations. Situationships have become common in campus life for many college students.

A situationship lies somewhere between a committed relationship and casual dating. It's more than friends with benefits, but less than a committed partnership. There are feelings of exclusivity involved, but rarely a clear conversation about what is really going on. A psychology major at CSU explained it as, "We spend a lot of time together, we've had sex, but we've never actually talked about if we're dating."

College is a time of self-discovery. Nobody is there to tell you what is right or wrong. The pressure to define relationships can feel overwhelming for many students, especially when they're already juggling academics and social lives. Situationships offer a way to explore connections without the cons of traditional relationships. One senior at CSU

If you find yourself in a situationship, the most important tool is honest communication.

put it this way: "It's like having my cake and eating it too. I can chill with someone at midnight and still not have to worry about defining my feelings to fit their personality."

Social media and dating apps play a significant role. While they make it easier to connect with others, they also add a level of uncertainty to situationships. Ghosting in 2026 has become a real emotional concern. You're making plans one day, then the next, you've been silenced. The fear of being ghosted leads some students to avoid expressing their true feelings, worried it might scare the other person away. The uncertainty can make situationships feel like walking a tight rope.

What are the pros and cons? They provide emotional support without the pressure of labels. However, the lack of definition can also lead to confusion and hurt feelings. "After months of hanging out, I realized I had no idea where we stood," says the CSU psychology major. "It made me upset, but I didn't want to ruin things." It's easy for expectations to become misunderstood without clear communication.

If you find yourself in a situationship, the most important tool is honest communication. While it feels awkward, talking openly about your feelings and expectations can help prevent misunderstandings. Are you both looking for something casual, or is one of you hoping for more? Checking in with yourself and the other person can make the experience more positive.

Situationships offer space for meeting someone's true needs. They may not offer the certainty of a deep relationship, but they can teach important lessons about self-discovery.



(Left) Older man and younger woman sitting at different tables reading books in Old Town, Fort Collins, Colo., Feb. 6.

Photo by Amanda Marken
Design by Ashlyn Hoffman

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Can *Love* Really be *Bought*?

Written By Aubree Wood

It is Jan. 3, and you walk into a department store for the first time since the holidays. Less than two weeks earlier, the store was filled with festive arrangements and displays with ample amounts of Christmas decorations and gifts. Today it looks a little different.

Hues of pinks and reds fill your vision. Candy hearts and decadent chocolates replace the heaps of red and green inventory, which have conveniently been placed in the back of the store with stickers marking them half off.

This is the reality of seasonal marketing in the United States, and after February 14th, St. Patrick will take center stage, sending Cupid to the sale rack.

For Americans, Valentine's Day is associated with bold declarations of love and appreciation. This is traditionally done via gifts, greeting cards, or a fancy dinner with the one you love. But what makes love a purchasable commodity, and what does that say about American consumer culture?

Valentine's Day has been celebrated in the United States since the 17th century, and up until the invention of advanced printing technology, it was custom to make handwritten letters or gift small mementos to loved ones. Then, in 1916, Hallmark saw their opportunity to profit from the holiday's cultural traditions and began producing premade Valentine's greeting cards.

As decades pass and consumerism reaches new heights, businesses have been able to employ targeted marketing strategies to continue profiting off of cultural consumer rituals.

Gina Slejko, an associate marketing professor at Colorado State University who specializes in sensory marketing, shared that "Valentine's Day is so iconic, with the colors and the decadence; you can almost smell the roses and taste the chocolates. It's a very sweet holiday. All those sensory attributes create this memory trace for what Valentine's Day is, and it becomes linked to all the positive and maybe even potentially negative experiences that we have with the holidays."

Since 1916, this country has endured numerous cultural and consumer shifts, yet Valentine's Day and other holidays continue on as testaments to the strength of consumer engagement. The National Retail Federation estimates that in 2026 consumers will spend \$29.1 billion in total to celebrate the holiday.

The Center for Strategic Communication at Montclair University studied the increased commercialization of the holiday and how that relates to social media landscapes. One data set they conducted was searching "Valentine's Day" on social media apps and viewing which keywords were associated with the holiday. In their research, they found that the term most associated with the day was





(Pg. 17) Candy and trinkets fill the shelves of the Dollar Tree as shoppers prepare gifts for Valentine's Day, Fort Collins, Colo., Feb. 5.

(Middle) Balloons fill the ceilings of Walgreens in the weeks before Valentine's Day, Fort Collins, Colo., Feb. 5.

(Left) Teddy bears sitting on the shelves of Walgreens waiting to be picked up for Valentine's Day, Fort Collins, Colo., Feb. 5.

(Below) South Broadway Country Club advertising several Valentine's Day themed events going on in Fort Collins, Colo., Feb. 5.



workshops to themed workout classes to romantic cooking classes, collective behavior reflects the demand for togetherness over isolated partnerships.

"I think those social trends are helping reshape what Valentine's is, and that's great. It's a holiday that consumers are ultimately going to shape through their dollars and how they spend their money," Slejko added.

At the end of the day consumers have the power to shape the market—and especially the holiday market. Commercialization may seem to have squeezed out all the love that is left for the holiday, but trends are changing, and Valentine's Day has grown to mean a whole lot more today than it did in the 17th century.

The holidays, and even Valentine's Day, do not demand the consumer's participation, but rather it is the consumer who willingly chooses to participate in these often monetary or traditional ways of expressing admiration. We participate because we like the candy hearts, we like the momentos, we like the tradition, and most of all, as humans, we need to find ways to display our love for each other.

(Above) Card displays overflow in the local Dollar Tree as Valentine's Day draws near, Fort Collins, Colo., Feb. 5.

(Right) Hearts fill the window of John Atencio Designer Jewelry displaying a ring glistening in the sun, Fort Collins, Colo., Feb. 5.

Photos by Nicolette Wilks
Illustrations & Design by Charlotte London



"shop" and was identified 131% more often than the term "love."

Their study also included that Valentine's Day messages not only targeted partners, but catered to singles. Popular hashtags included "#selflove" and "#selfcare."

Digital advertisements disrupt nearly every facet of daily life, and these Valentine's Day-targeted ads can become just another promotional annoyance. Ignoring them or rolling your eyes when scrolling past them on your screen, one discredits the power of the cultural rituals and the broader collective.

Slejko offered that "A lot of what Valentine's Day does is appeal to our need for love, belonging and connection with other people. Obviously, businesses have an opportunity to meet that need. And clearly, since there's such a large business around Valentine's Day, consumers do get some value from it; otherwise, they would not participate."

Society today is plagued by expectations of purchasing or gifting love to others, and Valentine's Day acts as the catapult for this assumption. But like consumer trends shifted in the 20th century, consumer trends are shifting again, and this time with a larger focus on sustainability and genuine connectedness. Additionally, younger generations are stepping away from relationship norms that characterized the past and expanding their reach of affection to friends, groups and even themselves.

"One thing that's really changing a lot, driven by younger generations, of course, is

ways to be more sustainable, the DIY culture, and even the solo movement... all these trends are kind of changing, yet Valentine's Day is still celebrated, so I think it provides another opportunity for consumers to maybe participate in purchasing but also participate in other activities that bring people together," Slejko said.

Community events, the prioritization of friendships over partnerships and the awareness of self-love have drastically reshaped how Valentine's Day is celebrated amongst the younger generation. Even Fort Collins businesses and groups are using the holiday as a way to gather together in community. From pressed flower art



A RECIPE FOR CONNECTION:

Maida Trattoria's Relationship with Fort Collins

Written By Greta Sturgis

In June 2025, when Maida Trattoria opened its doors in Old Town Fort Collins, the historic Avery building took on new life. Bringing generations of Italian family history and twists on classic specials, the restaurant was offered as a love letter to community, connection, and the joy of new experiences. There are many great options for a night out in Fort Collins, but this one absolutely deserves a spot on your rotation.

Behind the concept are Marli and McCabe Callahan, Fort Collins residents for 25 years and longtime pillars of the local food scene. The couple are Colorado State University alumni and own the Mugs coffee shops, uniquely positioning them to step into the local full-service dining scene. "Maida wouldn't be what it is without Marli," McCabe Callahan added. "She had a clear vision of what she wanted to bring to the Fort Collins community, and her attention to detail is one of the things that defines the restaurant today." What began as an idea for a sunset-facing, family-friendly Italian restaurant has put down roots in the city, grounded in the Callahans' commitment to hospitality.

"Our whole goal is that people feel fancy being here, but don't feel like they have to be fancy to be here," McCabe Callahan

(Right) A look into the dimly lit Maida Trattoria while folks gather for dinner, Fort Collins, Colo., Feb. 6.

(Below) Two people enjoy abnormally warm February temperatures on the patio of Maida Trattoria in Fort Collins, Colo., Feb. 6.



(Left) Old Town Fort Collins lights sparkle in the windows of Maida Trattoria in Fort Collins, Colo., Feb. 6.



said. This philosophy shows, from the approachable pricing to the craftsmanship in each dish, making Maida an inviting choice for diners who appreciate the thoughtfulness behind the establishments they support.

"It always feels so good to be proud of what you're offering," McCabe Callahan said. "The ingredients, the quality, those are very important to us." And it's true, the food whisks the rustic flavors straight from Maida, Italy, a small town off the southeastern coast that anchors McCabe Callahan's family lineage and surname, Maida. Dishes like chicken cacciatore, pasta parmigiana, and carbonara project the region's classic, homey flavors right into the heart of Fort Collins. The restaurant also offers half, full, and family-size portions, giving diners some much-appreciated flexibility.

That attention to detail extends beyond the plate. The Callahans are strong supporters of their employees, "If we take care of our people, then they're going to take care of the customers," McCabe explained, when asked about the couple's ownership philosophy. The result is a staff that radiates warmth and pride, including server Sam Grimes, recently named *NoCo Style's* "No. 1 Best Server," who has been with Maida since its opening.

Visually, Maida is just as thoughtfully composed as its mission. Designed by Marli Callahan, the interior features a warm, cozy elegance with personal touches, like a windowpane (originally from the Mugs building) that gives diners the chance to see

their food being made in real time. Family portraits speckle the walls, showcasing generations of the Maida family. The space has a way of grounding diners in its context, reinforcing the foundational values that shape the atmosphere.

Fort Collins is known for its vibrant dining scene, and Maida Trattoria adds a new, but familiar twist. The establishment prioritizes building relationships with its staff, its customers, and the Fort Collins community, shaped by family history, grounded in values, and infused with a sense of home (and, of course, Italy). True to the restaurant's tagline, the Callahans welcome diners "from our family to yours."

(Below) Delicate window decals displaying the Maida Trattoria logo to Old Town Fort Collins visitors, Fort Collins, Colo., Feb. 5.

Photos by Nicolette Wilks
Design by Jerod Barker



Time to Date

Written by Amanda Marken

As winter drags on, I tend to slow down and fully embrace being a homebody. At first, it feels cozy and relaxing. Then, somewhere along the way, my social life starts to dwindle. I become more likely to cancel plans, stay in and feel bored more often than I'd like to admit.

To break out of that cycle, my roommate, Jade Kautzsch, and I decided to make a conscious effort to stay socially active. Instead of letting the cold decide our plans, we tried out a handful of simple activities to see if leaving the house was worth it. Whether you're spending time with friends, a significant other, or yourself as a solo date, we hope you enjoy these ideas.

Picnic at Horsetooth

Thanks to the unexpectedly warm winter weather, a picnic at Horsetooth Reservoir turned out to be a perfect excuse to get outside. To make it more fun, we stopped at the grocery store and picked out unique snacks to try and rate. On colder days, a drive around the area works just as well.

Blindly Attending a Concert

Attending a concert without prior knowledge of the artist is a fun way to discover new artists. Although we did not attend a concert together, we have both done this independently and found it to be a great idea to discover new music and connect with the local community. The Aggie Theater provides affordable concert options with great lineups.

Where we had our first date



View of Horsetooth Reservoir from car in Fort Collins, Colo., Feb. 6.



Scenic view of Horsetooth Reservoir in Fort Collins, Colo., Feb. 6.

I always wear the sweater we thrifted together



Clothing rack with items on display outside of Bookstore On The Square in Fort Collins, Colo., Feb. 6.



Records on display shelf in All Sales Vinyl in Fort Collins, Colo., Feb. 6.

LOOK! That's my favorite album!!



Man and woman holding hands walking, with younger man and woman walking in the distance in Fort Collins, Colo., Feb. 6.

Walking Around Old Town

With a mix of local boutiques and thrift stores, Old Town is the perfect spot for a casual afternoon. We decided to pick outfits for each other, which was a fun way to support local businesses.

Reading Together

For slower days, reading together is an easy way to spend time together without committing to a big plan. We came up with the idea of picking out books for each other to keep staying in exciting.

Choosing a New Record

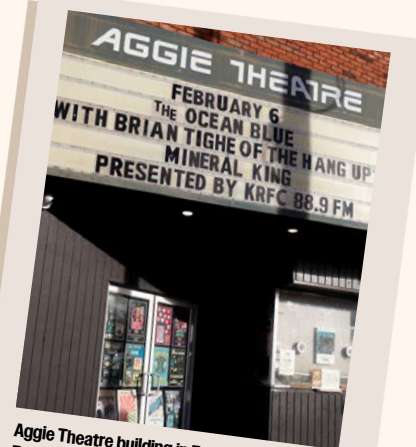
For our final idea, we visited a record store and chose a record at random. Listening to something new made staying in feel more exciting.

Winter doesn't have to be boring or isolating. With small efforts to try new things, winter can become just as exciting and memorable as the upcoming warm months.

What's your favorite Book?



Shelf of books in Old Town Library in Fort Collins, Colo., Feb. 6.



Aggie Theatre building in Fort Collins, Colo., Feb. 6.

Second Date? Yes or No

I'm glad I get to explore Fort Collins with you!

Illustrations & design by Charlotte London
Photos by Amanda Marken

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