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*I love you: Normativity, power, and romance in metalinguistic commentary*

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Master of Arts  
in Linguistics

by

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*I love you*: Normativity, power, and romance in metalinguistic commentary

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## ABSTRACT

*I love you*: Normativity, power, and romance in metalinguistic commentary

by

Aris Keshav

*I love you* is one of the most meaningful utterances in English speakers' organization of intimate relationships. This thesis focuses on hegemonic understandings of *I love you* that are so powerful that they are rarely denaturalized or challenged, often remaining invisible or taken for granted. In order to understand the utterance and its relation to social norms, this study draws on metalinguistic commentary about the utterance on the social media platform Reddit, a popular online discussion forum. Focusing on two large communities, or subreddits, that are organized around normative gender categories, the commentary reveals a system of meaning behind *I love you* that is embedded in contemporary Western systems of power and norms surrounding love and romance. As shown by the data, saying *I love you* for the first time in a romantic relationship normatively functions as an invitation to commit to a particular kind of relationship, one which is particularly prized by society: a relationship that is moving towards a long-term, monogamous commitment culminating in marriage.

This thesis examines the construction of *I love you*, beginning with its discursive properties as a speech act. The analysis shows that the first *I love you* has a performative impact, and it is also the first pair part of an adjacency pair, creating an expectation that the interlocutor will complete the pair by immediately replying, *I love you too*. The recipient must decide if they will reciprocate with the second pair part, and accept the invitation, or

decline, and risk ending the relationship. In this sense, *I love you* can function as an ultimatum for a blossoming romantic relationship.

The thesis goes on to illustrate the challenges involved in saying *I love you*, including the tensions between sincerity and timing, and how people manage vulnerability and agency. Finally, it considers strategies for dealing with those challenges, such as ways of assessing sincerity and alternatives to saying *I love you too*. In sum, the analysis shows that metalinguistic discussion of *I love you* quickly goes beyond the scope of a single utterance: it is structured by ideologies about emotion, intersubjectivity, interaction, and power. This study contributes to the line of research that examines how people produce and maintain normativity, expanding beyond normative genders and sexualities to include the powerful norms surrounding love, romance, and relationships.

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## I. Introduction

“Who said it first, by the way?” 23-year-old Jane asks her mother, Xiomara, in the seventeenth episode of the popular television series *Jane the Virgin* (Urman et al. 2015), which ran from 2014 to 2019. Xiomara and her boyfriend Rogelio have recently moved in together when her daughter asks this question, and Xiomara is startled to realize that they “actually haven't said it yet. Is that weird? That we live together and haven't said 'I love you'?” Jane replies, “Maybe slightly unconventional, but I'm not one to judge,” rubbing her pregnant tummy in a reference to the series' premise, in which Jane gets pregnant before ever having sex due to a hospital mix-up. Jane's situation parallels her mother's: another “unconventional” order of prominent life events, just like moving in together before saying “I love you.”

The rest of the episode features Xiomara's elaborate attempts to coax Rogelio into saying the longed-for utterance. When she finally decides to just say it herself, Rogelio smiles and says, “And I am ... getting there with you as well.” Xiomara reacts with horror, and increasingly doubts the legitimacy of their relationship: “And ‘getting there’ was enough for you to move in with me?” In an unsuccessful attempt to placate her, Rogelio explains, “I have lived with [...] *many* women before, but I've only said *I love you* to three women in my life [...] my two ex-wives and my mother. Those words mean a lot to me.” Placing Xiomara among the multitudes of women he's lived with but not said *I love you* to only causes her more outrage and shame. She feels like she's being used for sex rather than valued as a romantic partner. The interaction is particularly painful because Xiomara's mother is currently giving her the silent treatment for moving in with Rogelio before he proposes



marriage. Evidently, both *I love you* and marriage proposals are important linguistic romantic milestones.

As Xiomara realizes, there is also an expected order for couples to move through both linguistic and non-linguistic romantic milestones. The fact that they have moved in together before saying “I love you” worries her, as it is a deviation from the normative path (“weird,” or at best “unconventional”), and this anxiety drives her to try to exchange *I love you* with her partner as soon as possible.

Rogelio's response reveals a fundamental tension between sincerity and timing in the first *I love you* scenario. Responding to the first *I love you* from a romantic partner with something other than an immediate *I love you too* can cause friction in the relationship, or even humiliation and anger. However, people may be reluctant to produce the utterance unless they “mean it.” As the analysis below reveals, “meaning it” is about more than authentic emotion. This is because of the words’ cultural weight and association with a particular form of long-term commitment. As Rogelio explains, with a rather blunt level of honesty, he has only said *I love you* to his ex-wives and his mother, women with whom he has had (or anticipated) life-long commitments, whether maternal or romantic. At the time of the episode, he doesn’t have that same level of feeling and commitment for Xiomara.

As this example shows, *I love you* is one of the most meaningful utterances in English speakers’ organization of intimate relationships. In order to understand the utterance and its relation to important social norms, this study draws on metalinguistic commentary about the utterance on the social media platform Reddit, a popular online discussion forum, focusing on two large communities, or subreddits, that are organized around normative gender

categories. Users' commentary reveals a system of meaning behind *I love you* that is embedded in contemporary Western systems of power and norms surrounding love and romance.

Scholars of language and sexuality have long recognized the necessity of considering not only those whose sexuality is marked as non-normative, such as queer people, but also those whose practices constitute the norm. This study contributes to the line of research that turns the focus to the norms themselves. Rather than simply focusing on speakers with normative genders and sexualities, however, this analysis focuses on normativities surrounding love and relationships. Understandings of *I love you*, often so powerful that they are rarely denaturalized or challenged, have gone almost completely unexamined in the field of language and sexuality.

Researchers have shown that uncovering the mechanics of normativity, (un)markedness, and naturalization is key to understanding an unequal distribution of power (e.g. Johnson 1997, Cameron 1997, Eckert 2011). Kitzinger (2005a, b), for example, draws on classic conversation-analytic concepts such as interactional trouble and (dis)preference to study heterosexuals qua heterosexuals. Her work illustrates how heteronormativity is co-constructed through strategies like locally initial proterms (e.g. *we* without prior specification as referring to a speaker and their heterosexual spouse) and relational and presumed family reference forms such as *husband*, *mother-in-law*, or *parents*. The lack of trouble caused by "speaking as a heterosexual" reflects the unmarked status of straight relationships in heterosexual talk. Similarly, Kiesling's (2004, 2005, 2006, 2018) extensive work on masculinity has shown how men use language to manage their powerful and unmarked social

status, which is closely linked to heterosexuality. For example, Kiesling (2005) examines how men must navigate their normative desire for homosociality, or same-sex companionship, while resisting the potential for its interpretation as stigmatized homosexual desire. Another theme of his research is how men perform “ease” within their positions of power, which naturalizes their place in gender hierarchies (Kiesling 2018). Kiesling (2004), for instance, shows how young men in fraternities use the word *dude* to produce a stance of “cool solidarity,” which contributes to this overall affect of ease. Overall, men perpetuate their dominance by positioning maleness and heterosexuality as a natural, invisible default while also managing the gender normativity of other men who seek to upset that naturalization (Kiesling 2006).

Like Kiesling’s analysis of *dude*, this thesis uses a specific phrase as an anchor from which to examine structures of power and normative sexuality. However, the domain of normativity considered here goes beyond previous literature that has focused on heterosexuality (e.g., Cameron 1997, Coates 2003, Eckert 2011, Kitzinger 2005a,b, Milani and Jonsson 2011) and/or men’s sexual dominance over or violence against women (e.g., Cook 1995, Ehrlich 1998, Johnson and Meinhof 1997, Thompson 2018). Normative sexuality includes many norms beyond heterosexual orientation and male dominance, such as monogamy, long-term commitment, and normative romantic sentiment. These norms shape the experiences of people of all genders and sexual orientations, and people in all possible configurations of romantic relationships, whether they are participating in the benefits or actively resisting. As of yet, these norms remain understudied in language, gender and sexuality.

This thesis argues that saying *I love you* for the first time in a romantic relationship normatively functions as an invitation to a particular kind of relationship: one that is moving towards a long-term, monogamous commitment, prototypically culminating in marriage. Because of this, the first *I love you* has a performative impact. *I love you* is also the first pair part of an adjacency pair (Schegloff 2007), which creates an expectation that the interlocutor will complete the pair by immediately replying, *I love you too*. The recipient must decide if they will reciprocate with the second pair part, and accept the invitation, or decline and risk ending the relationship. The data analyzed here suggest that non-reciprocation can be interpreted as refusal to progress to the expected next stage of a romantic relationship. This may be negotiated as the end of the relationship entirely, particularly if the person who said *I love you* first is invested in moving towards a long-term monogamous pairing. In this sense, *I love you* can function as an ultimatum for a blossoming romantic relationship.

A prominent theme in the data presented in this thesis is the apparent need for partners to make complicated, highly contextualized judgements of each other's sincerity, usually referred to in the data in terms of *honesty*. Because of the normative nature of *I love you* and the pressure to reciprocate, sincerity is most often questioned for the second pair part, but even those who say *I love you* first may be suspect under certain circumstances (e.g., when it is said during sex). A speaker is branded as dishonest or insincere not only if their production of the utterance fails to express the expected state of feeling, but also if they are not in fact seeking the expected type of commitment. The perceived absence of sincerity in this context can thus be taken as a sign both of individual moral failing and of a doomed relationship. The tension between sincerity and timing is a frequent topic of discussion in the

data. However, while some commenters acknowledge the hegemonic priority accorded to timing, there is widespread agreement in these data that sincerity is more important, if sometimes more difficult to navigate.

This thesis examines the construction of *I love you* by beginning with its discursive properties as a speech act and how it helps construct hierarchies of different types of intimate relationships. It then illustrates the challenges involved in saying *I love you*, including the tensions between sincerity and timing and the management of vulnerability and agency. Finally, it considers strategies for dealing with those challenges, such as ways of assessing sincerity and alternatives to saying *I love you too*. What this analysis makes clear is that metalinguistic discussion of *I love you* quickly goes beyond the scope of a single utterance: it is structured by ideologies about emotion, intersubjectivity, interaction, and power. When people tell the story of a relationship's first *I love you*, they are telling the story not only of a moment but of their relationship, and, in doing so, engaging deeply with local norms of love and romance.

## II. Background and theoretical framing

### A. *Normativity and I love you: Monogamy and the relationship escalator*

The hyper-valorization of long-term romantic monogamy does not correspond directly to straight or cisgender dominance: people of all genders and orientations engage with the norms in varying ways. However, the cultural preference for that relationship structure is also part of a system of power which is embedded within other systems of power. Histories of enslavement, colonialism, and class oppression directly shape the character of contemporary families and relationships. For example, Black families continue to be stigmatized and pathologized for failing to meet norms rooted in the patriarchy and white supremacy, such as the assumption that successful child-rearing takes place in two-parent families (Spillers 1987, Labennett 2008), and feminist scholars have elaborated the ways capitalism is served by the prioritization and exaltation of romantic relationships (Berlant 1998). People may not engage in long-term romantic monogamy for various reasons, including not being interested in romance or sex, wanting multiple romantic partnerships, wanting only platonic relationships, or preferring short-term connections. Cultural norms of love and romance touch everybody's life, whether they are in or seeking the most normative types of relationships, less normative relationships, or no relationships at all. These norms are also tied inextricably to other systems of power in ways that disproportionately impact poor people, trans and queer people, people of color, and people with disabilities. Understanding norms of love is therefore vital to grounding our understanding of romance and sexuality as well as power at every intersection of experience.

Berlant (1998) describes how intimacy itself is inseparable from the institutionalization of heteronormative relationships through marriage. A person's desire for intimacy is shaped by the societally laudable desire for “a life,” or the single narrative of romance, marriage, home ownership, and family-raising, which is held as an ideal. She asks, alluding to a children’s rhyme, “why, when there are so many people, only one plot counts as 'life' (first comes love, then [comes marriage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage])” (1998:286). Exchanging *I love you* plays a particular role in this “plot,” since the first *I love you* can mark the beginning of a committed romantic relationship, when couples begin their normative journey.

The single plot described by Berlant is also known as *the relationship escalator* (Gahran 2017): a “one-size-fits-all” approach to romantic relationships that involves a pre-determined series of steps towards “more” commitment in the form of long-term monogamy, cohabitation, marriage, and normative sexual relations. The relationship escalator model emerged from polyamory theory and practice, which along with asexual activism offers sources of organized resistance to norms surrounding love and relationships (e.g. de Lappe 2016, Decker 2015, Gahran 2017, Haritaworn et al. 2006). For example, polyamorous discourses challenge the normative expectation that one relationship will satisfy all of a person's social, sexual, and romantic needs, and present the alternative of building different relationships (both romantic and platonic) that each support a subset of one’s various needs (Haritaworn et al. 2006). This thesis draws on the discourses of resistance to normative romance developed by those with marginalized sexual and romantic practices, including

polyamorous people, in order to understand how romance, monogamy, and normative relationships are constructed in their unmarked form.

## ***B. Discursive properties of I love you***

### 1. *I love you* is a social construction

The meaning of *I love you* is naturalized, but not natural— it is meticulously socially constructed in historically and culturally specific ways. Likewise, people's conceptualizations and experiences of love and desire are highly culturally specific, as demonstrated by cultural anthropologists such as Lindholm (1998) and Kang (2017), historians of sexuality such as Cocks and Houlbrook (2006), as well as sociocultural linguists such as Hall (1995) and Ahearn (2003). Although sexual desire occurs in all human societies, romantic love appears to be less universal. It has been characterized as a particular obsession of modern Western cultural contexts, and Lindholm (1998) argues that it occupies such an important place in these contexts that it constitutes a form of the sacred. Even in counter-hegemonic (e.g., queer) relationships, romance is constrained by structures such as local and global sexual economies (e.g., Kang 2017). As communities change over time, their conceptions of love change as well (Cocks and Houlbrook 2006). Despite its contemporary importance, for example, romantic love was not widely considered a requirement for marriage, even in Western societies, until the Victorian era. Over a century and a half, the meaning of love has transformed, along with its associated institutional structures such as marriage laws.

Linguists have also examined the interplay between love and desire on the one hand, and social values on the other. Hall's ethnography of phone sex workers shows how desire is



designed and marketed in this context to tap into the cultural ideologies of the audience. Operators produce desirable personas by relying on linguistic practices that callers will recognize as indexing the racialized and gendered erotic dynamic that customers are seeking. To create an optimally satisfying experience for callers, Hall notes, “operators must vocalize stereotypes” (1995:201) that reveal the culturally situated nature of their desires. Ahearn (2003) provides the most thorough sociocultural linguistic treatment of love in her analyses of love letters written by young Nepali villagers in the 1990s. She demonstrates how letter-writers reconceptualized love as something desirable as it became linked to economic success during that decade, in part due to growing female literacy and regional development. This was a notable change from previous local conceptions of romantic love as an embarrassing sentiment that emerged between spouses over time. The new notions of love that emerged for young Nepalis in the ‘90s more closely resemble its construction in the discourse analyzed here: as a source of great fulfillment in which individuals agentively identify their mate for a “love marriage.” Together, these studies demonstrate that, far from being natural or universal, human understandings and experiences of love are inseparable from the larger social systems in which they are situated. Metapragmatic discourses about speech acts like *I love you* offer a window into those sociocultural particularities by offering direct interpretations of what the phrase means to people, and how they use it in their lives.

## 2. *I love you* is performative

As a milestone in a romantic relationship, *I love you* is a performative utterance (Austin 1962). It emerges from a pre-existing relationship, and simultaneously acts upon it in the

moment of its production, transforming the relationship. It is a fixed phrase with a specialized meaning that is removed when the arguments are changed: “We love him,” for example, does not retain the same illocutionary force. Many people consider the first exchange of *I love you* as “the beginning” of their relationship. As constructed by the speakers discussed in this thesis, the illocutionary force of *I love you* is ostensibly to communicate a specific kind of romantic feeling. Members of the communities discussed below seem to have specific ideas about what kind of emotion *I love you* should express – though it is rarely explicitly identified – such that other meanings are considered insincere. The perlocutionary effect of the first *I love you*, however, is not only that the speaker’s partner knows of their feelings, but also that an invitation to a serious romantic long-term commitment has been issued. Speech act theory has been criticized for its Western ethnocentricity (Rosaldo 1982), especially for its emphasis on individual intentions. Yet this perspective is in keeping with the epistemology that dominates the Reddit data, perhaps because of the site’s dominantly Western social context, in which intention is a primary factor in the evaluation of *I love you*.

Despite the utterance’s triple themes of affect, power, and performativity, *I love you* has yet to be fully theorized in sociocultural linguistics. The small body of existing research on the phrase takes a more cognitive, individual-centred approach rather than examining the utterance’s place in systematic structures of power. For example, Grabois (1999) examines how L2 speakers living in an L2 cultural environment acquire culturally-specific meanings of emotion-related words and phrases, gradually re-organizing their L2 lexicons to approximate native understandings of emotional concepts. Dewaele (2008), on the other hand, compares

the emotional weight of *I love you* in the various languages spoken by multilinguals, concluding that the phrase usually holds the “strongest” meaning in a speaker’s L1. Expressions of love vary widely between languages and cultures, and depending on a speakers’ levels of integration in their different cultural and linguistic environments, they tend to find more familiar expressions resonate more.

Likether research in language, gender, and sexuality that considers the performative implications of a single phrase (e.g., Kulick 2003 on *no*, Kiesling 2004 on *dude*), this thesis demonstrates how the range of functions behind a small unit of speech can be a pillar both supported by and upholding societal structures of power. This thesis goes beyond previous studies by drawing on interactional discourse to detail the dominant cultural understanding of a certain phrase, its transformation of individual relationships, and its connections to larger systems of power.

### 3. *I love you* is part of an adjacency pair

Because one of the strongest themes emerging from discussion on *I love you* is the timing of reciprocation, the concept of the adjacency pair from conversation analysis is particularly helpful (Schegloff 2007). In an adjacency pair, the first speaker’s turn creates a shared, immediate expectation of what the interlocutor will say next (Schegloff 2007:13). The first pair part creates a narrow range of options for the second pair part: certain responses are unmarked or preferred, while others are marked or dispreferred. Some classic examples of adjacency pairs are greetings, which invite a greeting in reply; questions, which create an expectation for answers; and offers, which call for an acceptance or refusal. In the case of the

first *I love you*, there is an interactional expectation that the second pair part, *I love you, too*, will be immediately produced. In addition to the discursive norm attached to any adjacency pair, the data analyzed below highlight the strong social pressures to reciprocate a declaration of love. Waiting or declining to provide the second pair part requires explanation and legitimation, because it flouts both conversational and social conventions. As this thesis shows, anxiety around receiving or producing the desired reply at the right moment drives speakers to select a time and method which will optimize their chances for the desired reply.

As shown in the analysis, the tension between timing and sincerity was the most pervasive theme to emerge from the data. Speakers are highly aware of the social pressure to respond immediately to *I love you*, and when the recipient replies immediately, questions may arise regarding the authenticity of their utterance. For the individuals in the data analyzed below, expectations surrounding the timing of *I love you* are recognized as a social imposition, while sincerity is presented as a natural value. However, timing is also regarded as a tool for assessing the authenticity of a partner's romantic feelings or intentions.

According to Searle's discussion of sincerity conditions in his theorization of Speech Act Theory (Searle & Vandereken 1985), when someone says *I love you*, they sometimes face scrutiny as to whether they are expressing the expected sentiment, particularly if the context is unconventional. What the analysis presented here suggests is that the sincerity of *I love you* is given such great importance because it is tied to the authenticity of love itself. Saying *I love you* to express something other than the socially expected (yet generally unspecified) meaning can clearly be used to inflict harm: for example, to manipulate someone into having sex or staying in an abusive relationship. However, other meanings are

more innocuous, but may still be considered problematic in a romantic context because they fall outside of societal norms of “genuine” romantic love: affection, sexual attraction, admiration, respect, or enjoyment of someone’s companionship or personality.

As an utterance, then, *I love you* carries a great deal of significance. It builds intimacy in a romantic relationship, grounded in the interactional and cultural contexts of the partners. Reciprocation and authenticity create opportunities for anxiety in dominant Western understandings of love, though people may also critique their own society’s norms regarding these concepts, as Redditors do in this data. Below, I discuss how these forces are managed in interactional discourse about *I love you*, and how that discourse reflects the escalator model of romantic relationships. The next section turns to the data analyzed in the remainder of this thesis.

### III. Data and methods

In order to explore ideologies about the interactional practice of saying *I love you*, this thesis examines data from the social media site Reddit. Reddit was chosen for its popularity, its highly interactive format, and the fact that users often post personal anecdotes that are viewable to a public audience.<sup>1</sup> Reddit is an online platform launched in 2005 with over 430 million active monthly users (Sattelberg 2020). As of 2020, the time of data collection, the site was the 7th most popular social media platform in the United States (Dean 2021), and it remains extremely active. However, it has format advantages over both Tumblr and Twitter: the former is often used as a site for blogging, rather than dialogic interactions, and the latter constrains the length of users' posts to 280 characters. Known as "Redditors," Reddit users are predominantly urban, American, white and/or Latinx, male, and between the ages of 18 and 29 (Duggan et al. 2013).

Within Reddit, there are subreddits, or smaller sub-forums, where users make posts which receive comments from other users in reply (Weninger et al. 2013). The website aims to be a forum for democratic discussion, with a system driven by posting, replying, and the ability for users to "up-vote" or "down-vote" a post or comment, which increases or decreases its visibility accordingly. Popular comments receive nested replies, which receive more nested replies, generating subtopics and topic shifts. A set of nested comments is referred to as a *thread*. The average post has a four-hour period of initial attention and

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<sup>1</sup> This study is not considered human subjects research by the UC Santa Barbara Human Subjects Committee. In addition to posts being publicly available and viewable without an account, contributors select typically pseudonymous usernames. In this paper, fictional pseudonyms have replaced the original usernames for additional anonymization. Users may delete content they have posted; if they delete their account without deleting specific posts or comments, however, the text remains on the site and appears with a redacted username.

activity, and top-voted comments occur early in this time frame. While some posts receive a large number of comments and attention, others are mostly ignored. Posts are most likely to become popular if the first comment appears early, and the most popular posts are shared to the main Reddit (Weninger et al. 2013).

The data in this thesis come from ten Reddit posts in two large subreddits, r/AskWomen and r/AskMen.<sup>2</sup> These subreddits were chosen for their popularity and high number of comments on normative discourses about *I love you*. While other subreddits discuss love and relationships, such as r/iloveyou and r/Relationships, these subreddits have far fewer instances of users directly discussing the utterance *I love you* than r/AskWomen or r/AskMen. Though r/AskWomen and r/AskMen are defined by binary gender, each subreddit has active members who do not identify with the gender in its name. Additionally, many users do not identify their gender, making it impractical to analyze comments by authors' gender identities. The cross-pollination of users of each gender is encouraged by the moderators, since the subreddits are presented as forums to ask for advice and learn from the perspectives of members of another gender. Some users identify their gender in their comments, while others include a gender as "flair," or additional descriptive text that appears next to one's username in posts and comments (although flair is often not gender-related, e.g., "Loser Dino Lover" or "Wolf Among Wolves"). When gender is not specified, I refer to users with gender-neutral pronouns. Rather than attempting a binary comparison between how women and men view *I love you*, I draw on the aggregate discourse to build a shared

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<sup>2</sup> Subreddits are conventionally referred to with the format "r/[name of subreddit]."

model of *I love you* in communities that value, maintain, and center normative genders and sexualities.

r/AskWomen was created about a month before r/AskMen, in the summer of 2010. Its official description is “a subreddit dedicated to asking women questions about their thoughts, lives, and experiences; providing a place where all women can comfortably and candidly share their responses in a non-judgmental space” (r/AskWomen 2020). As of May 2020, there were 1.4 million members, with around 3,500 active at any given time. Popular topics include mental health, friendship, work, fashion, physical health, family, and romantic and sexual relationships. The most popular post of all time asks how introverts feel about solitude.

Meanwhile, r/AskMen's official description was at the time of writing “the premier place to ask random strangers about the intricacies of the human condition. Just don't be an asshole about it. Also, go away” (r/AskMen 2020). Gender is not explicitly mentioned in the description, which characterizes the subreddit as full of “random strangers” offering insight about “the human condition,” reflecting the unmarked status of maleness in this community (like many others, and perhaps especially so on Reddit). Despite its description, the range of topics in r/AskMen is much more narrow compared to r/AskWomen. Nearly all the activity is about negotiating romantic and sexual interactions and relationships with women. Other, less popular, topics include urinals, office jobs, politics, childhood games, and relationships with family. The most popular post of all time asked, “Men of reddit who don't comment on posts, why don't you?” Like this one, many posts are addressed to “Men of Reddit.” As of



May 2020, there were 1.9 million members, with around 13.5 thousand active at any given time (r/AskMen 2020).

Most comments about *I love you* in r/AskWomen and r/AskMen take the form of anecdotes describing lived, hypothetical, or parodic *I love you* scenarios. Often, comments respond to prompting questions in posts where the authors are seeking advice. Commenters with *I love you* stories that lead to long-term relationships usually portray themselves as successful, inviting praise and encouraging others to follow their example for similar results.

For this study, I selected an equal number of posts matched for content with relevant comments from r/AskWomen and r/AskMen. Table 1 provides the ten posts analyzed, based on their content, and the number of comments made on each post. These posts were selected based on their direct discussion of *I love you*, rather than love or relationships more obliquely, the date of the original post (between 2014 and 2020), and the presence of comments from other users. Table 1 includes the initial post of each thread in its entirety, and provides a shorthand for each post. In all, the analysis included five posts from r/AskWomen, with a total of 813 comments, and five posts from r/AskMen, with a total of 302 comments. All comments were preliminarily analyzed, around 50 were selected for further analysis, and a sample of those are presented in this thesis. In the table, “SO” and “s/o” are abbreviations for *significant other*, i.e., romantic partner.

Table 1: Reddit threads analyzed in this thesis, with number of comments.

<b>Topic</b>	<b>r/AskWomen</b>	<b>r/AskMen</b>
The meaning of <i>I love you</i>	<p>r/AskWomen: Meaning of <i>I love you</i>.</p> <p>Women of Reddit, what does saying “I love you” to someone mean to you?</p> <p>18 comments</p> <p>February 25, 2018</p>	<p>r/AskMen: Meaning of <i>I love you</i>.</p> <p>Men of Reddit, what does saying “I love you” to someone mean to you?</p> <p>15 comments</p> <p>August 31, 2017</p>
When you are unwilling to say <i>I love you</i> back	<p>r/AskWomen: Unwilling to say it back.</p> <p>What should you say if someone says “I love you” and you're not ready/able to say it back? Maybe you're lying there with your SO and out pops the words. You care about them, don't want to hurt them, but saying it back would feel dishonest for whatever reason. How do you get out of the situation without making them feel totally rejected?</p> <p>44 comments</p> <p>January 31, 2015</p>	<p>r/AskMen: Unwilling to say it back.</p> <p>What is the appropriate response to “I love you” if you don't return her love?</p> <p>73 comments</p> <p>June 2, 2019</p>

<p>First vs. ongoing <i>I love you</i></p>	<p>r/AskWomen: First vs. ongoing <i>I love you</i>.</p> <p>When do you say “I love you” to your s/o, not for the first time, but in general? I'm not asking how soon is too soon to say “I love you,” or when you know you love your s/o, etc. After you've both reached that point and said it to each other, how often do you say it? In what instances? I grew up with married parents who hated each other and do to this day (but are still married), so I've never seen that dynamic before and I'm afraid it'll negatively impact my ability to share love.</p> <p>67 comments</p> <p>April 28, 2017</p>	<p>r/AskMen: First vs. ongoing <i>I love you</i>.</p> <p>Was the first 'I love you' you said to your SO real love, or do you think as time went on, you got to know what really loving someone means and you weren't in love with your SO at that first 'I love you'?</p> <p>107 comments</p> <p>February 11, 2019</p>
<p>Story of the first <i>I love you</i></p>	<p>r/AskWomen: Story of the first <i>I love you</i>.</p> <p>How did you or your SO first say “I love you”? How did it go?</p> <p>675 comments</p> <p>May 5, 2019</p>	<p>r/AskMen: Story of the first <i>I love you</i>.</p> <p>Who said “I love you” first in your relationship and after how long?</p> <p>15 comments</p> <p>March 1, 2020</p>

	<p>r/AskWomen: Did <i>I love you</i> change the relationship?</p> <p>The first “I love you” - What happens after saying these words to a partner for the first time? How did it make you feel? Did you have a conversation about it? In what ways did your relationship change (if at all)? Was it more magical or comfortable? I'd love to see a discussion about this!</p> <p>9 comments</p> <p>November 2, 2014</p>	<p>r/AskMen: Planned or accidental.</p> <p>When you first said “I love you” to your SO was it planned or accidental? If it was accidental did you still mean it and it just slipped out?</p> <p>92 comments</p> <p>June 18, 2019</p>
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The examples analyzed in the following section consist of comments replying to one of the posts in Table 1. In each example, the total number of upvotes a comment has received, minus its downvotes, appears as a small grey number next to the username: e.g. “easy-bob 2 points.” It is worth noting that, because of this calculation, controversial comments may appear with the same net number of upvotes as comments that receive little attention. All examples below received more total upvotes than downvotes.

All comments to the posts in Table 1 that contain metalinguistic content about the utterance *I love you* were analyzed qualitatively, with a focus on themes such as the meaning of the utterance, when and how it should be produced, and its effects on commenters’ relationships. The analysis also examined discursive and other linguistic structures that involve stance-taking (e.g. evaluative language), the negotiation of interactional expectations (e.g. the use of disjunctive forms like *but*), and orientation to perceived norms (e.g. general

or prescriptive structures such as *should* and generic *you*). The ways that authors position themselves in relation to *I love you* reveal norms that are tacitly accepted by some, actively embraced by others, and challenged by others still. The same norms appeared repeatedly throughout the data, regardless of individual users' stances toward them. Normativities of love and romance structure everyone's experiences in powerful and often invisibilized ways.

#### IV. Friends or “more than” friends: Ranking relationships

Although many relationships are understood to involve “love,” the meaning and effect of *I love you* vary greatly depending on the social relationship between the speaker and the interlocutor. Awareness of this contextual sensitivity is demonstrated by many users on r/AskWomen and r/AskMen.

##### A. *Quantifying the meaning of I love you*

In Example 1, which is in response to a question asking what saying *I love you* means to you, OAKTRE\_ addresses differences in the uses and possible responses to *I love you* when speaking to their “friends” or “homies” (line 1) as opposed to speaking to “a girl in a relationship” (lines 1-2):

*Example 1: r/AskMen: Meaning of I love you (2018)*

↑ OAKTRE\_ 2 points · 2 years ago  
1 ↓ I've told my friends that I love them, cuz I'd die for my homies, but I've never told a girl in  
2 a relationship that I love her. I feel like this would be weird because I definitely use the  
3 phrase more than others and it could comed across as expressing too much or too little.

OAKTRE\_ hints at a possible meaning of *I love you* in line 1: expressing that the speaker would die for the recipient. They contrast their liberal use of *I love you* with friends to their lack of experience using the phrase with “a girl in a [presumably romantic] relationship,” and treat these issues as related. If OAKTRE\_ said *I love you* to a romantic partner, she could interpret it as “too much or too little” based on OAKTRE\_'s established pattern of frequently using the utterance with their friends. Although it is not entirely clear what OAKTRE\_ means by “too much or too little” (line 3), one possibility is that using the phrase freely as they do with friends could be taken as a commitment to a more serious romantic relationship

that is not yet appropriate or desired, and hence “too much or too little” if the girl assumed it was meant the same way OAKTRE\_ intends the phrase with friends: to express platonic love. Overall, the user is highly aware of the utterance’s different meanings when used in different social relationships. Moreover, they are aware that the utterance’s meaning changes depending on the habitus of the speaker: the fact that they say the phrase often to friends affects its meaning even when they use it in a different context. OAKTRE\_’s comments also mirror the larger attribution of cultural value to romantic over platonic love, both by expressing concern about being misunderstood by girls, but not friends, and in their use of the unmarked phrase *a relationship*, which presumably refers to a romantic relationship since it is contrasted with OAKTRE\_’s friendships.

### ***B. The weight of the words***

Another example of attention to individual habitus can be seen in Example 2, a comment by the user JerryTd. Like OAKTRE\_, this user uses quantifying and materializing language to describe the intention and reception of *I love you* by referring to the “weight” of words:

*Example 2: r/AskMen: Meaning of I love you (Aug. 31, 2017)*

↑ **JerryTd** Sup Bud? 1 point · 2 years ago  
1 ↓ I've personally never put much weight to the words, but because of that I intentionally  
2 | never say it because I don't want to be mistaken.

In Example 2, JerryTd states that they don’t “put much weight to the words” (line 1) and even avoid using them in order not “to be mistaken,” perhaps because they do not intend to convey intense romantic feelings or invite a long-term commitment. They also qualify their

assessment with “personally” (line 1); in this way, they recognize that their own idiosyncrasies are secondary to the more widely agreed-upon cultural meaning of *I love you*, which is that it does have a great deal of force. JerryTd shows awareness that they must navigate the utterance's dominant social meaning, and they adapt to those expectations by avoiding using *I love you* entirely. They say that they “don't want to be mistaken” (line 2) without specifying what that mistaken meaning would be, which also suggests a broader shared cultural notion about this statement that differs from JerryTd’s own perspective. The allusions to the potential for misunderstanding that appear in both Examples 1 and 2 hint at some of the challenges involved in expressing romantic love.

Both OAKTRE\_ and JerryTd use quantifying language to evaluate different kinds of love, as well as calling attention to potential mismatches between individuals exchanging *I love you* in different kinds of social relationships. This process contributes to a construction of romantic love as “more” than or having greater “weight” (i.e., importance) compared to other kinds of love and relationships. Romantic love is repeatedly evaluated in this way across the dataset, for example, through reference to the idea of being “more than friends.”

### ***C. I love you as a romantic milestone***

Other comments also reproduce the unequal value of different kinds of intimacy. In Example 3, easy-bob outlines the different meanings of *I love you* depending on the relationship between the speaker and the interlocutor.



Example 3: *r/AskMen: Meaning of I love you (August 31, 2017)*

- ↑ easy-bob Male 1 point · 2 years ago
- 1 ↓ If its a platonic love (like for family and friends) it means I generally enjoy your presence
- 2 For a relationship, saying I love you is a major milestone IMO

Here, easy-bob contrasts platonic love felt “for family and friends” (line 1) with the love felt in “a relationship” that needs no further description. Referring to a romantic partnership as simply *a relationship* (see also Example 1, line 2) while other kinds of love are marked by the modifier *platonic* and accompanied by examples (“family and friends,” line 1), reinforces the normative status and centrality of romantic relationships in discourses about *I love you*. easy-bob’s usage also reflects everyday linguistic norms, in which talking about “a relationship” is frequently interpreted as reference to a romantic relationship, which further underscores this ideology.

In the comment in Example 3, easy-bob outlines the performative impact of *I love you* in different relationships. When he says *I love you* to family or friends, he means simply to convey that he “generally enjoy[s] [their] presence” (line 1). In a romantic relationship, however, saying *I love you* marks the transformation of a relationship: it is a “major milestone” (line 2). By referring to the utterance as a *milestone*, he invokes the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY (Lakoff & Johnson 1980). In easy-bob’s comment, this journey has milestones, which suggests a pre-determined path and a destination that need not be specified further.

The unspecified details across each of the first three examples illustrates the relevance of the escalator model of romantic love as a familiar, pre-determined sequence of actions leading to a known goal. In this model, saying *I love you* for the first time is a

transformative moment: often framed, discussed, and experienced by these Reddit users as the catalyst for a long-term partnership. The sections that follow describe how people in relationships navigate their first steps onto the escalator.

## V. “That 3-word ultimatum”: *I love you* as an invitation to long-term romance

In this section, I demonstrate that saying *I love you* for the first time can act as an invitation into a certain type of relationship: one that is monogamous, long-term, and romantic.

Replying with *I love you, too* can be an acceptance of the invitation, while lack of reciprocation may function as a rejection. In this sense, *I love you* can serve as an ultimatum, and many comments orient to this interpretation. The partner who expresses their love first thereby gains some power: they control the timing of the decision to continue or abandon the relationship (or, at least, to move it from ambiguity to a more clearly defined status).

However, in saying the phrase first, they also relinquish some power to their partner, who decides how to respond and by this determines the future of the relationship. This sudden shift in the dynamic may be why the partner who says *I love you* first often feel so vulnerable, and increasingly so when they are unsure of how their partner will respond. Meanwhile, the recipient may feel unnerved by the sudden need to address a potential ultimatum. Rather than a simplistic marker of power, then, saying *I love you* involves a complex power exchange between interactants.

### A. *Jealousy as a catalyst for I love you*

In Example 4, AeschylusBaby describes a situation one way that these complex power relations can unfold. In this case, the commenter explains how jealousy spurred their partner to say *I love you* first, linking the phrase to a desire for monogamy.

Example 4: *r/AskMen: Planned or accidental (2019)*

↑ **AeschylusBaby** 7 points · 9 months ago  
↓

1 Not a guy- but I was leaving for a trip I'd planned long  
2 before we were together and there was a group of male  
3 friends going (I was sleeping in the room with the girls  
4 though...but he was still a little jealous) we were talking  
5 about how it was upsetting him being out of contact and  
6 around guys and oh it was also his birthday when he said  
7 "ugh I don't know whether to yell at you or tell you I love  
8 you!" 10 years later it definitely worked out

In Example 4, fear of infidelity is presented as the catalyst for AeschylusBaby's partner saying *I love you* for the first time. The commenter's partner is "jealous" (line 4) that AeschylusBaby is going to spend time with "male friends" (lines 2-3) without him, on an overnight trip, which he perceives as a threat to their relationship. He reportedly reacts by saying, "ugh I don't know whether to yell at you or tell you I love you!" (lines 7-8), indirectly revealing his feelings in the process. By positioning himself as wavering between punishing AeschylusBaby for socializing with men other than him and saying "I love you," the partner suggests that either approach might mitigate the threat he fears. The couple likely already has at least an implicit agreement to be monogamous, since they both agree that it is "upsetting" to the male partner for AeschylusBaby to be out of contact and in a position to engage sexually or romantically with other men. However, *I love you* functions to explicitly secure a commitment to monogamy.

AeschylusBaby presents their story in a way that validates their partner's *I love you* as appropriately motivated. Their partner was jealous when he didn't necessarily have to be, since the trip was planned before their relationship started (lines 1-2), and AeschylusBaby were only sleeping in a room with "girls" (lines 3-4). However, the partner's jealousy is not

problematized; such a perspective is consistent with discourses that frame possessiveness as proof of love (Deri 2012). The comment lines up with many others that contain evidence for true normative love: It ends with a closing statement that is one of most common ways that commenters position themselves as successful in their relationships, and thereby authoritative on the subject of love. AeschylusBaby writes that “10 years later it definitely worked out” (line 8), inviting readers to fill in the missing information that the couple remains together. Long-term relationships are highly valuable by normative standards, hence the relationship can be succinctly described as having “worked out.”

### ***B. I love you and monogamy***

The centrality and logic of monogamy is explored by other commenters in their definitions of *I love you*. In Example 5, hendrixluvr1992 describes expectations of self-sacrifice and satisfaction which accompany a normative framework of love.

*Example 5: r/AskWomen: Meaning of I love you (Feb. 26, 2018)*

↑ **hendrixluvr1992** 2 points · 2 years ago  
↓  
1 It means that I've learned to really love everything about them and that it means I'm giving them  
2 everything and I hope in return I get it back. Saying i love you is important for me knowing that I'm  
3 happy and they are all I need .

Here, hendrixluvr1992 highlights the centrality of monogamy in the normative model of romance. To them, saying *I love you* to someone means that they are “giving them everything” and “hop[ing... to] get it back” in return (lines 1-2). Giving “everything” could imply sacrifice, but one that is balanced by the identification of the beloved as “all [one] need[s]” (line 3).

### C. I love you leads to a pre-determined path

Saying *I love you*, then, is often oriented to as an offer of a commitment to a particular kind of relationship, constrained by normative demands particular to culture and era. People are aware of how the utterance maps onto a particular kind of relationship, which is one reason they may want to avoid saying it, in order to avoid making that commitment (as in Example 2). In Example 6, MacPan20 describes what happened when they said *I love you* on a first date.<sup>3</sup> Their anecdote starts with an explicit “Warning,” reflecting the implicit advisory function of many anecdotes about *I love you* in these online communities, whether as an example to follow or an example of what to avoid.

#### Example 6: *r/AskMen: Planned or accidental (June 19, 2019)*

↑ **MacPan20** One Y Chromosome 13 points · 9 months ago · edited 9 months ago

↓ **Warning:** Do not try this unless you are sure about where to take the relationship from the get go.

1  
2

3 With that out of the way, I said it to her on our first date, and it just  
4 slipped out. We developed an insane amount of chemistry during the  
5 date, one thing led to another, and we ended up making out. After  
6 that, we found ourselves staring at each other, until she asked me if  
7 there was something I wanted to say. The heat of the moment gave  
8 me a confidence boost to say "Yes, there is. Might be weird to say  
9 this, but I love you. I really do."

10 After the date, I immediately worried that I might have come off as  
11 desperate, and that she might not want to meet me again. But to the  
12 contrary, she accepted a second date, where she reciprocated my  
13 words. Much later, she told me how she felt like reciprocating the day  
14 after our first date, but preferred to let me know in person rather  
15 than over text.

<sup>3</sup> This user’s gender flair is “One Y Chromosome,” most likely self-identifying themselves as a cis man, because a trans person would be less likely to base their gender on chromosomes. Nevertheless, I refer to this user as “they” because chromosomes are not a meaningful basis for gender identification.

Invoking the “do not try this at home” warning trope, MacPan20 advises readers that they should not say *I love you* on a first date unless they “are sure about where to take the relationship from the get go” (lines 1-2). That is, saying *I love you* leads to a particular destination (a “where,” line 1) that people are rarely completely certain they wish to go with a person they have just met. Once “that [is] out of the way” (line 3) and the reader has decided that they wish to ride the escalator with their date, they can say *I love you* and may find success as MacPan20 did. Norms regarding when *I love you* should be said are outweighed in this case by an authentic desire to pursue “more” with a romantic partner by transforming the relationship into something with explicit commitment and shared goals.

Together, these examples demonstrate how *I love you* functions as an invitation to a the kind of relationship which is most highly valued by contemporary Western society: one that is long-term, monogamous, and normatively romantic. The commenters in this data rely on this shared understanding of *I love you* to negotiate commitment with their partners.

## **VI. Tensions between “sincerity” and “timing”**

The social conventions surrounding *I love you* extend beyond its meaning and into the context of its delivery. In particular, there are strong social expectations surrounding the timing of the first *I love you*, and the sincerity of the speaker’s intentions when producing the utterance. These pressures interact in particular ways, producing recurring patterns of anxiety for many commenters in this data.

### ***A. Outlining the tensions between sincerity and timing***

In Example 7, LastGalaxy outlines some of the strongest social conventions and pressures around saying *I love you* for the first time, and positions himself against them. In particular, he describes the pressures to reply to *I love you* with immediate reciprocation and highlights the tensions between this expectation and the expectation surrounding sincerity.

LastGalaxy’s resistance to these ideologies shows that while Reddit users may have different opinions of what “I love you” should mean or how it should be conveyed, they still orient to a shared system of norms.



Example 7: *r/AskMen: First vs. ongoing I love you (February 11, 2019)*

↑ **LastGalaxy** Male 41 points · 1 year ago · edited 1 year ago  
↓

1 I've always tried to contain it, so that I don't spook anyone with that 3-  
2 word-ultimatum (say it back or we're done)... Consequently, whenever  
3 I've said it, I've been really in love for a while already... and, upon  
4 reflection, I wouldn't be offended if their subject declined to respond in  
5 kind, out of a sense of integrity. I can understand how someone telling  
6 you they love you, might prompt you to parrot it back before you really  
7 mean it, (out of social convention) just for the sake of preventing strife,  
8 though. I wish our society didn't put so much pressure on people to  
9 respond to an "I love you", with an "I love you", or place social stigma on  
10 people who refuse to say it before they mean it---which I have done,  
11 honestly, by saying "I'm not there, yet (but I'm flattered)". Wouldn't  
12 everyone prefer to have those three words be heartfelt when they  
13 receive them, given the alternative?

LastGalaxy refers to the first *I love you* as an ultimatum: “say it back or we're done” (line 2). While the first *I love you* in a romantic relationship can function as an invitation to long-term commitment, this commenter notes the potential consequences of declining that invitation. Because of what LastGalaxy calls “social convention” (line 7), saying *I love you* creates a fork in the road in which the interlocutor must choose between confirming the commitment or rejecting it, potentially ending the relationship or at least generating “strife” (line 7) and “stigma” (line 9). LastGalaxy acknowledges his understanding of the normative expectation for an immediate response, as it is only “upon reflection” that he “wouldn't be offended” to receive a delayed reply if he said it first (lines 3-4). However, his typical solution is to avoid telling a partner he loves them until he has been “in love for a while already” (line 3), increasing the chances of a reciprocal response. He then expresses a desire for change: “I wish our society didn't put so much pressure on people” (line 8). This statement demonstrates the strength of the norms. Yet he does not challenge the notion that

there should be shared norms, asking rhetorically whether “everyone” would prefer to have “those three words be heartfelt” (line 12).

### **B. Assessing the sincerity of *I love you***

The sincerity of *I love you* is often assessed with scrutiny by the recipient, using timing as evidence for their assessment. Likewise, the reply *I love you too* is often examined closely with a view to measuring sincerity. More evidence that saying *I love you* is interpreted as making a commitment can be found in complaints about those who are judged to have insincerely reciprocated the first *I love you*. When someone says *I love you too* but is not willing to make a commitment to an escalating, monogamous relationship, they may be seen as “lead[ing] someone on,” a particular type of perceived insincerity that the commenters Grublove and CookingDiva evaluate negatively in Example 8. In this example, Grublove is replying to a previous commenter, who scolds those who say *I love you* insincerely.

*Example 8: r/AskMen: Unwilling to say it back (June 2, 2019)*

1      ↑ **Grublove** 72 points · 8 months ago  
2      ↓ The worst thing you can do is lead someone on. If you aren't feeling it, then tell them that.

3      ↑ **CookingDiva** 46 points · 8 months ago  
4      ↓ As a woman I was PISSED a dude said it back to me and it wasn't true. It went on for like a month before he fessed up. Would have preferred honesty as these guys are suggesting. No one is required to say it back. Not being honest made him seem like a coward; turned out he was.  
5  
6

In this exchange, Grublove states that “lead[ing] someone on” is “the worst thing you can do” (line1). In so doing, they invoke a pervasive ideology, according to which a sexual or romantic action is taken as a promise or agreement to participate in separate future acts. *I love you* is not in itself explicit and specific consent to any other. However, the examples discussed so far have established that *I love you* may be regarded as consent or an invitation to a specific kind of future relationship. The phrase “leading someone on” is typically applied to sexual contexts in which consent to one form of sexual contact is interpreted as consent to other forms of sexual contact (MacLeod 2016).<sup>4</sup> In this case, the same logic is used to characterize romantic connections. Whether applied to romantic or sexual contexts, the notion of “leading someone on” denies individuals the agency to consent to some sexual or romantic activities – including expressing love – and decline to participate in others. It is of course possible that Grublove and CookingDiva are referring to a more overt form of manipulation, in which a partner reciprocates *I love you* in an intentionally deceptive way, perhaps to achieve certain goals (such as sexual contact) that are not shared with the partner who said *I love you* first. However, the use of the language of “lead[ing] someone on” in Example 8 points to the expectation that saying *I love you* takes the relationship in a new direction – a path down which one might be led.

Whatever its implications, the concept of “leading someone on” is invoked by Grublove to characterize someone who says *I love you* without "feeling it" as lacking integrity. CookingDiva affirms this interpretation, decrying a former partner’s lack of

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<sup>4</sup> The concept of “leading someone on” is often used to blame survivors of sexual assault. In a survey of college students' attitudes, the phrase was used to “blame [...] women [...] for men's use of aggression” (Cook 1995). Cook writes that “many dating behaviours could be construed as 'leading someone on,' thereby acknowledging a tacit acceptance of aggression or coercion.”

“honesty” when he “said it back to me [when] it wasn’t true” (line 3). In the context of previous examples, one possible aspect of this dishonesty may have been giving their partner the false promise that they were on the relationship escalator.

Like easy-bob, CookingDiva also hints at awareness that her perspective runs counter to some social norms. Unlike LastGalaxy, who acknowledged and expressed understanding of the norm to immediately reciprocate *I love you*, CookingDiva disavows it: “No one is required to say it back” (line 5). However, by characterizing her ex as “a coward,” she acknowledges that courage is required to flout social conventions surrounding timing and potentially disappoint a partner in the process. Faced with a choice between sincerity and ideal timing, CookingDiva joins LastGalaxy, and indeed all commenters in this dataset who addressed the issue, in preferring the former over the latter.

The expectation of both emotional sincerity and coordinated timing in the archetypal first *I love you* scenario is something discussed by many users. Like LastGalaxy, Redditors in this dataset often assume that the utterance *I love you* corresponds to particular romantic feelings, without specifying exactly what those feelings should be. LastGalaxy refers to producing a sincere *I love you* simply as “meaning it” (line 10). Recall easy-bob’s comment in Example 3 that in platonic contexts, *I love you* means, “I generally enjoy your presence,” while in romantic contexts the phrase is a performative step onto the relationship escalator. In this context, it seems that saying *I love you* in a romantic relationship to express enjoyment of someone’s company, or appreciation of their character, or pleasure in knowing them, or simple affection, does not fulfill the sincerity condition. In fact, doing so can be interpreted as misleading regarding the speaker’s intentions. The complex interplay of

expectations can cause people to feel vulnerable and anxious when preparing to say *I love you*, as the next section demonstrates.

## VII. The challenges of saying *I love you*: Vulnerability and intentionality

Many commenters describe the vulnerability that comes with saying *I love you* first, and the courage required to make that declaration. Part of the vulnerability comes from revealing feelings that may have been hidden up until that point, and not knowing if their partner returns their feelings. As previous sections have established, *I love you* is also a potential ultimatum in which an interlocutor is invited to confirm or decline a step onto the relationship escalator. The sudden shift in power dynamics, or the expectation of that shift, can leave the initiator feeling extremely nervous.

### A. *Vulnerability and courage*

In Example 9, commenter *weirddark* describes how drinking alcohol gave them the “liquid courage” (line 2) to say *I love you* for the first time.

*Example 9: r/AskWomen: Story of first I love you (May 6, 2019)*

- ↑ **weirddark** 1.8k points · 9 months ago
- 1 ↓ Well I was drunk eating enchiladas on his bedroom floor when I paused, stared at him, and  
2 proceeded to say “I love you.” Thank the liquid courage for that.
- 3 He wasn’t as wasted as I was and smiled and said “I love you too.”
- 4 Not as romantic but he’s my fiancé now so obviously something in the enchiladas went right .

In a comment with approximately 1,800 net upvotes, *weirddark* describes being able to say *I love you* because they were “drunk” (line 1), and the alcohol gave them “liquid courage” (line 2). In emphasizing their “wasted” (line 3) state, they acknowledge the anxiety that normally accompanies saying “I love you” for the first time, which they were able to avoid by choosing a moment of lowered inhibition. *weirddark* engages intertextually with other

comments to assess the “romantic” quality of their anecdote: it is “not as romantic” (line 4) as other similar stories in the genre in which the utterance is more planned and the context is less mundane. Despite the lack of romance (“but,” line 4), alcohol helped weirddark conquer the terror of the first *I love you* and successfully move along the path of a normative romantic relationship (“he’s my fiancé now,” line 4). In the last line of Example 9, weirddark parodies the *I love you* story genre by attributing their success to “something in the enchiladas” (line 4) rather than a carefully planned first *I love you* that is more typically credited for commenters’ relationship success.

In Example 10, DaddyPutin provides another anecdote about the anxiety of the first *I love you*, this time from the recipient’s perspective—until DaddyPutin swaps roles to relieve their partner’s stress.

### ***B. Anxiety about reciprocation***

*Example 10: In response to r/AskMen: Planned or accidental (June 19, 2019)*

1           ↑ **DaddyPutin** 7 points · 9 months ago  
2           ↓ I was lying in bed with my ex and she said "Putin I have to  
3            tell you something." So I looked at her expectantly and  
4            she made one of those faces anime characters make when  
5            they are like bursting at the seams to say something but  
6            they're nervous. I kind of knew what she wanted to say so  
7            before she said anything I told her "I feel the same way."  
8            And then she said "I love you" and squealed with delight.  
9            I squeezed her so tight and told her I loved her too. We  
10           both felt a bunch of fuzzies. That was the beginning of a  
11           very confusing, exciting, loving, yet deeply painful  
              relationship :D

In this comment, DaddyPutin's partner is experiencing such a strong tension between needing to say *I love you* (“bursting at the seams to say something,” line 4) and being scared to do so that she looks like an “anime character” (line 3). In order to relieve her from the stress of making the statement without knowing what the answer will be, DaddyPutin tells her that they “feel the same way” even “before she sa[ys] anything,” line 6). They provide their partner with confirmation that they are ready to reciprocate, which appears to successfully alleviate her intense anxiety. The partner's affect transforms from “nervous” (line 5) to “squeal[ing] with delight” (line 7), confirming that fear of non-reciprocation was driving her concerns. Although they were already lying in bed together, it was this moment of exchanging *I love you*'s that DaddyPutin identifies as the beginning (line 9) of their complex relationship.

### ***C. Assessing sincerity and intentionality***

Like DaddyPutin, commenters often describe paying close attention to a partner's behaviour; one reason for this is the desire to assess the sincerity of the partner's romantic feelings. Because of the strong social conventions to reciprocate a statement of love, a partner's sincerity may be open to question when they reply *I love you* immediately. In this sense, the person who says *I love you* first has an advantage: their sincerity is less likely to be questioned. At the same time, all expressions of emotion have the potential to be insincere, since recipients cannot verify what others claim about their internal experiences. For this reason, even the person who says *I love you* first may not be exempt from suspicions of insincerity. In the next examples, several commenters question their partner's sincerity when



the first *I love you* seems accidental. However, others consider spontaneity to be evidence for genuine emotion. In Example 11, LondonAlways praises their partner for saying *I love you* in a “spontaneous and accidental” way.

*Example 11: r/AskMen: Planned or accidental (June 18, 2019)*

↑ LondonAlways 3 points · 9 months ago  
↓  
1 She said it first, it was almost like a passing sentence.  
2 Spontaneous and accidental, but all the more  
3 heartwarming to hear :)

LondonAlways is pleased because their partner seems to have said *I love you* without planning it in advance, making the scene “heartwarming” (line 3). This assessment suggests that the commenter values unplanned expressions of emotion, perhaps regarding them as more genuine than those planned in advance. However, the disjunction “but” (line 2) sets up the expectation that accidental productions of *I love you* may not be valued as highly as those that seem more premeditated. A similar pattern is illustrated by CoincidentallyAlex's comment in Example 12.

*Example 12: r/AskMen: Planned or accidental (June 18, 2019)*

↑ CoincidentallyAlex Male 9 points · 9 months ago  
↓  
1 Accidental but definitely meant it.

Like LondonAlways, CoincidentallyAlex also uses a significant “but” in his comment, implying that saying *I love you* accidentally is not ordinarily compatible with “mean[ing] it.” In his exceptional case, however, CoincidentallyAlex said *I love you* accidentally yet authentically.

#### ***D. Assessing intentionality when I love you is said during sex***

Saying *I love you* is more likely to be interpreted as accidental in certain contexts, which changes its potential meaning. One of these contexts is during sex, as illustrated by CheesePizzaPhD's comment in Example 13. In their anecdote, the fact that they said it “in the bedroom” is framed as evidence that they did not plan it out because if they had they would have selected a more appropriate context.

*Example 13: r/AskMen: Planned or accidental (June 18, 2019)*

↑ CheesePizzaPhD 3 points · 9 months ago  
1 ↓ Accidental, if I had planned it then I wouldn't have said it  
2 | in the bedroom, but I did mean it.

CheesePizzaPhD explains that the first time they said *I love you*, it was “accidental” and happened “in the bedroom” (line 2), likely a euphemism for during sexual activity. Since sex often produces a unique state of heightened emotional and physical intimacy, a first *I love you* in this context may be understood as accidental or motivated only by context-bound feelings. Like CoincidentallyAlex and LondonAlways, CheesePizzaPhD uses “but” (line 2) to signal that their situation was exceptional: though accidental, their *I love you* was sincere. Skepticism around the sincerity of *I love you* uttered in a sexual context aligns with the interpretation of *I love you* as a commitment to the future rather than a mere declaration of feeling. Presumably, someone who is engaged in sexual activity and says *I love you* accidentally does so because of a feeling they are genuinely experiencing in that moment. “Meaning it,” then, must refer to something beyond having loving feelings at the time of the utterance. If the emotion only exists in a sexual context, then *I love you* fails to function as an

invitation to an escalating romantic relationship, which may cause the utterance to be branded as “insincere.”

The normative association between saying *I love you* during sex and saying it accidentally is further confirmed by Example 14. In this comment, RonaldoB describes saying *I love you* to their partner in a graphically unromantic way, with explicit sexual details rather than the more typical romantic contextual ones, which hints at satire.

*Example 14: r/AskMen: Story of the first I love you (2020)*

↑ RonaldoB 🗨️ 11 points · 1 month ago  
↓ 1 I say it while cumming inside her for the first time...  
2 and while looking straight into her eyes.  
↑ atthesametimee 8 points · 1 month ago  
↓ 3 I want to tell my GF I love her, but I did not know  
4 how. I was looking through the comments to find  
5 the most romantic way. I think I have the winner.

Regardless of whether RonaldoB's scenario is based in their actual practices, it contains signs of irreverent parody. It mixes normatively romantic elements (“looking straight into her eyes,” line 2) with explicit descriptions of sex, which are not normally part of the construction of romance. Other commenters who said *I love you* for the first time during sex (e.g., Example 13) problematize that fact, whereas RonaldoB highlights it by positioning it before the traditionally romantic detail. While it is conceivable that RonaldoB is not attempting a parody, their comment is taken as such: commenter atthesametimee ironically describes RonaldoB's anecdote as “the most romantic way” (line 5) to say *I love you* for the first time among all the comments within that post. atthesametimee’s response is more evidence that neither comment should be taken seriously, as sincere comments are usually

received with congratulations, short replies like “aww!” or questions about the outcome of the relationship. A user has awarded RonaldoB a “Gold Award” for this comment, which appears as a gold star and shows appreciation for their irreverence.

### ***E. Emotions and intentionality***

If a speaker does not intend to say *I love you*, one may wonder how it comes to be said. An answer of sorts can be found in the way *I love you* is sometimes described as having its own agency. In Example 15, praisethieves describes racing to say it before it “slipp[ed] out” (line 3) on its own:

*Example 15: r/AskMen: Planned or accidental (June 19, 2019)*

↑ praisethieves 3 points · 9 months ago  
↓  
1 It was absolutely intentional, mostly because I was so in  
2 love with her by that point that I was worried about it  
3 slipping out before I could say it on purpose.

praisethieves describes their first *I love you* as a competition with the utterance: they are determined to say it first, before it says itself. Their romantic feelings are so intense (“I was so in love with her by that point,” lines 1-2) that the utterance could produce itself at any moment. However, praisethieves is committed to saying *I love you* “on purpose” presumably because an accidental production may be judged inauthentic, insufficiently romantic, or otherwise undesirable.

Overall, the comments in this section illustrate how perceptions of intentionality factor into the construction of sincerity behind both the first *I love you* and its response. They also provide the clearest evidence yet that saying *I love you* goes beyond expressions of

affect into the domain of the performative: it marks the beginning of an enduring relationship that is not just emotional or contextual. This interpretation is further supported by the alternative strategies that Redditors describe for dealing with those challenges, which is the subject of the next section.

## VIII. Alternatives to *I love you*

Although some commenters on Reddit find themselves speaking the words *I love you* unintentionally, others seek alternatives to the phrase.

### A. Strategies to lessen the force of *I love you*

Even if they want to express love, the emotional force of *I love you* may be so strong that it interferes with its own production. This is the case in Example 16, in which letsgogogogo describes their inability to say the words *I love you* out loud even though they “really want to tell [their partner]” (line 7).

*Example 16: r/AskWomen: Unwilling to say it back (Feb. 2, 2015)*

↑ **letsgogogogo** 1 point · 5 years ago  
↓

1 He was the one who said it first between us (at least in a mature and correct way) and I just stared  
2 into his eyes and hugged him.

3 I've never really been able to say "I love you" vocally. It's taken me over an hour to stutter "I like  
4 you" to someone before. I generally tend to avoid using those words. If I'm texting, I say "I larb  
5 you" or try to make it as childish as I can. But he gets what I mean anyways. I **know** I love him, but  
6 I just don't know how to actually say it.

7 I really want to tell him!

letsgogogogo writes that their partner said “I love you” first “in a mature and correct way” (line 1), implying that their own usage is or was immature and incorrect. The commenter elaborates that they have always had difficulty “say[ing] ‘I love you’ vocally” (line 3), suggesting that a spoken modality is part of maturity or correctness. When texting, letsgogogogo changes the standard spelling (e.g. “larb” for “love” line 4) and “make[s] it as childish as [they] can” (line 6), which appears to alleviate their anxiety. The commenter does not describe what they mean by “childish,” but the word implicitly invokes the utterances of

*I love you* that children produce, for example, to their parents or other family members. What seems to be mitigated, then, is not the love that is felt, but the more adult components of love. Certainly, an utterance of *I love you* from a child lacks the illocutionary force explored here: an invitation into the type of romantic relationship that is the purview of “mature” (line 1) adults but which remains frightening to many. The implications of *I love you* seem to generate fear for users like letsagogogogo, even when the phrase does not function as an ultimatum because their partner has already said *I love you*.

### ***B. Alternative responses to I love you***

A more frequent approach to the topic of avoiding *I love you* comes in the form of advice for people who have been confronted with a first *I love you*, but are unwilling or unable to reply with the same. Because of users’ prioritization of sincerity over the social conventions to reciprocate, strategies are needed to soften one’s refusal to say *I love you too* when it is not genuinely felt. In Example 17, a user who has since deleted their account offers a pre-packaged response to *I love you* that hints at potential future reciprocation:

*Example 17: r/AskWomen: Unwilling to say it back (Jan. 31, 2015)*

↑ [deleted] 20 points · 5 years ago  
1 ↓ "I really like you, but I'm not ready to say that yet. I can definitely see myself falling for you, but I  
2 | need more time. I really care for you."

Here, several alternative phrases are offered in place of *I love you*: “I really like you,” and “I really care for you.” Similar phrases also appeared in others’ comments to this post, along with “Aww,” “Thank you,” and “I’m not ready yet, but I do love spending time with you.” These utterances reassure the interlocutor of the speaker’s affection without committing to

anything in particular. The proposed script in Example 17 relies on several strategies that are designed to avoid hurting the recipient and to avoid consenting to a long-term relationship with them. First, it assures the listener that they are still on the prescribed path of normative romance. The speaker is not ready to say *I love you* “yet” (line 1), which emphasizes that they foresee being able to say it in the future. This is outlined explicitly in the next sentence: “I can definitely see myself falling for you, but I need more time” (lines 1-2). This strategy circumnavigates the ultimatum posed by the first *I love you*, in which the recipient must decide between stepping onto the escalator and ending the relationship. Instead, with this reply, the speaker may convince the interlocutor that they want to remain on the relationship escalator, but they need more time to reach the next milestone.

Commenters’ interest in finding ways to avoid reciprocating the first *I love you* and the ultimatum it implies further demonstrates that saying *I love you* can radically transform a relationship. Using alternatives to *I love you too* allows recipients to maintain their current relationship while mitigating the risk of offending their partner or losing the romantic relationship entirely.



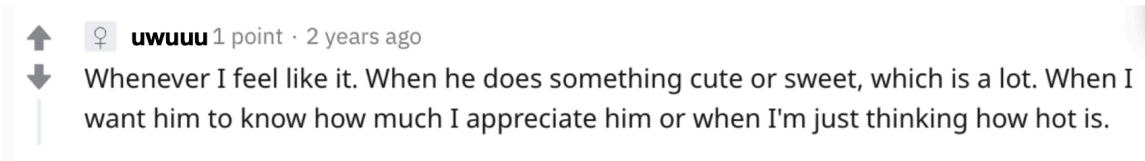
## IX. Happily ever after: Measuring the success of relationships

The utterance *I love you* continues to be meaningful in romantic relationships after it is exchanged for the first time, and it can be used to measure how fulfilled the partners are by the relationship.

### A. I love you as affirming satisfaction in a relationship

For some commenters, like uwuuu in Example 18, saying *I love you* is a common reaction to a wide range of events and behaviours.

*Example 18: r/AskWomen: First vs. ongoing I love you (Apr. 28, 2017)*



A screenshot of a Reddit comment. At the top left, there is an upward-pointing arrow icon, a female gender icon, and the text 'uwuuu 1 point · 2 years ago'. Below this, the comment text is displayed in two lines: '1 Whenever I feel like it. When he does something cute or sweet, which is a lot. When I' and '2 want him to know how much I appreciate him or when I'm just thinking how hot is.'

uwuuu reports saying *I love you* as a reaction to multiple situations: when her partner does something “cute or sweet” (line 1), when she wants to let him know how much she appreciates him, or when she’s noting how attractive he is (lines 1-2). The frequency of her statements of love might be taken as iconic: a way to measure the wonderfulness of her partner, her appreciation of his qualities, and thus their fit as a couple. Other commenters are more wary about saying *I love you* too frequently, considering it to cheapen the meaning of the utterance. However, the importance of *I love you* in negotiations of the relationship escalator allows the utterance to continue to serve as affirmation that both partners remain on the normative relationship path.

### ***B. Negotiating norms of how often to say I love you***

One way to measure normativity is by its impact on those who fail to live up to the norms. The exchange in Example 19, begun by a user who later deleted their account, exemplifies the potential negative effects of the normative standards regarding *I love you* constructed within these online communities. The original commenter writes, “this whole thread [about how often to say *I love you*] is making me feel horrible” (line 1) because they use the utterance very rarely in their own relationship. They call attention to a perceived norm: “am I supposed to be saying I love you all the time?!?” (line 2). The subcommenters attempt to reassure and validate the original commenter’s relationship and capacity for love.

Example 19: r/AskWomen: First vs. ongoing I love you (April 28, 2017)

1     ↑ [deleted] 28 points · 2 years ago  
2     ↓ This whole thread is making me feel horrible. We say it practically never. Like, maybe  
3     once every few months? Idk am I supposed to be saying I love you all the time?!? Am I a  
4     robot?

4     ↑ dotcom 16 points · 2 years ago  
5     ↓ Presumably you have non-verbal ways of saying I love you.

5     ↑ ♀ torontojasmine 10 points · 2 years ago  
6     ↓ Haha no way, not at all! It's different for different people, I think. Actions speak  
7     louder than words, anyway.

7     ↑ haroldsputtini 2 points · 2 years ago  
8     ↓ Same. I feel that saying it multiple times a day every day is a bit overkill.

8     ↑ NBeck34 2 points · 2 years ago  
9     ↓ Don't feel horrible! I was in relationships where we said it all the time and those ships  
10    had nothing on the one I'm in now where we are coming up on two years of dating  
11    and still don't say it. Different people tick in different ways and relationships are  
12    different too!

12    I bet y'all show your love in plenty of other ways. Or maybe you are a robot haha!

13    ↑ ♀ coldfly 3 points · 2 years ago  
14    ↓ The words are less important than the deeds. Saying the words "I love you" without  
15    any accompanying actions means nothing. Showing love with only the rare or never  
spoken word means everything.

In the original comment, the user who deleted their account remarks that the whole thread is making them “feel horrible” (line 1) because they say *I love you* much less frequently than other commenters report. This causes them to question if they are “a robot” (lines 3-4), suggesting that this norm might introduce doubt about the humanity of those who do not experience or express love in normative ways. This idea has been explored in depth in asexual communities (e.g., de Lappe 2016, Fine 2019), whose members frequently encounter dehumanizing discourses about those who do not have normative interest in sexual and/or romantic relationships. In this exchange, however, Redditors work to reassure the original commenter that, even if their practice surrounding saying *I love you* is non-normative, it says

nothing about the quality of their relationship or presence of romantic love. The fact that several users felt the need to reassure the original commenter demonstrates both the reality of the norm and tacit awareness that potential dehumanization for violating the norm can have important consequences for people's sense of self.

One commenter, NBeck34, provides evidence from their own relationship history as evidence that the frequency of saying *I love you* is not the best way to measure a relationship's success. They say that their past "[relation]ships" where they "said it all the time" (line 8) pale in comparison to their current partnership in which they "still don't say it" (line 10) after two years together. This mention of the duration of their relationship may also reflect the practice among many commenters of citing the length of a relationship as proof of its success (e.g., in Example 4). In questioning the link between the utterance *I love you* and the success of romantic relationships, these commenters challenge the notion that partners in a romantic relationship should say *I love you* frequently. However, they never question that normative love is necessary and must be expressed within a relationship, if not in words then in actions.

### ***C. The story of I love you as the story of the relationship***

Usually, Redditors usually only write comments in these threads about their first *I love you* if it led to a long-term relationship that is still going strong. By providing evidence that the relationship continues to be successful, commenters imply that the first *I love you* was also successful, and invite praise and celebration for their story. They implicitly encourage others to use their stories as advice for planning their own first *I love you*, as the

warning at the beginning of Example 6 makes clear. The story of the first *I love you* functions in this sense as the story of the relationship itself. In Example 20, nerdalissa’s story further illustrates this linkage. The commenter describes how they and their partner were “anxious” (i.e., eager) to exchange the utterance, but waited to do so for various reasons, until nerdalissa said it by accident.

*Example 20: in reply to r/AskWomen: Story of the first I love you. Date: May 26 2019.*

↑ **nerdalissa** 926 points · 9 months ago  
↓

1 We'd been seeing each other for about a month (we'd been friends for several years before) and  
2 were both anxious to hear it. I wanted him to say it first so I was trying to be quiet about it. But,  
3 he went to drop me off and I forgot I was waiting for him to say it and it came out of my mouth  
4 as I tried to get out of the car. He pulled me back in and asked what I'd just said. I got really red  
5 and embarrassed. It turned out, he was really anxious to say it and had been thinking about it  
6 all day, but had been advised to wait a little longer to not overwhelm me since I was younger  
7 than him and I was still recovering from a long term relationship but starting to be at the point  
8 of testing the waters again. It went wonderfully and we had our wedding basically a year later.

In this anecdote, the first *I love you* leads to a frank discussion of why each partner was waiting to say it. The reasons nerdalissa’s partner gives for waiting to say *I love you* are arguably reasons for the entire romantic relationship to move slowly: nerdalissa is younger and “still recovering from a long-term relationship” (line 7). Because exchanging the utterance for the first time invites a commitment and transforms the nature of the relationship, the story of the utterance and the story of the relationship itself are inextricable.

The pivotal nature of the first *I love you* explains why so many people devote attention and energy to planning the utterance, analyzing it, and discussing it on Reddit.

Exchanging the first *I love you* is the linguistic parallel of a first kiss: the moment when flirtation and affection crystallize into an explicit declaration of love and commitment.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The first kiss is another milestone on the escalator, which occurs earlier on in the relationship. Both *I love you* and the first kiss serve to dramatically transform the status of the new relationship, and solidify the partners' intentions towards each other.

## X. Conclusion

This thesis has analyzed discourses about the meaning of *I love you* and its structure as a speech act, the challenges involved in saying *I love you*, and strategies for dealing with those challenges. It has also examined how narratives about a relationship's first *I love you* position their narrators in relation to normative expectations of romance, in order prove the authenticity of their love and the quality of their relationships. The analysis reveals that *I love you* is not merely a statement of feeling, but a powerful speech act that sets in motion a specific relationship trajectory. The way people use and understand *I love you* tells a wider story— that of cultural norms surrounding love and romance. While often naturalized, these norms are meticulously maintained in normative public discourse about love, as seen on the subreddits analyzed here. They also interlock with other systems of power, such as capitalism, racism, and queerphobia, with far-reaching consequences for people's lives. These explore questions about love have yet to be fully considered by scholars of language.

As this thesis has shown, metalinguistic discussion of *I love you* is structured by ideologies about affect, intersubjectivity, power, and interaction. When people tell the story of *I love you*, they are telling the story of their relationship. Romantic love is often societally constructed as life's greatest satisfaction, and these stories allow authors to share their fears and joys, their delight in the authenticity of their love, and their success in forming a "life," in Berlant's terms. Discussing *I love you* in the abstract with others, meanwhile, tells another story – one about deep cultural ideologies about love and romance, authenticity and automaticity, fear and reassurance. Human intimacy, whatever its form, is universal and natural, but conceptualizations of love are highly cultural and embedded in systems of

power. The ways that people understand *I love you* in a given place and time thus reveal much about the interactions between human feeling, cultural norms, and power dynamics on both global and interpersonal scales (see )

The enormous diversity of romantic partnerships is not well-represented in the data discussed here, which reflect widely recognized norms in the hegemonic cultural context of the contemporary United States. Relationships can be secret, public, arranged, taboo, abusive, non-consensual, intentionally short-term, accidentally long-term, happy, tragic, across long-distance or in the same household. Partnerships can diverge from normative expectations in myriad ways, including the number of partners involved, the degree and type of romantic and sexual involvement, and the order in which milestones occur, if at all. Understanding how normativities about intimacy are constructed, maintained, and ultimately made invisible and thus hegemonic is a contribution to the resistance of activists who are making space for many possible forms of intimate human relationships, including “queer platonic relationships” (Decker 2015), non-monogamous networks (Haritaworn et al. 2006), neurodivergent approaches to dating (Ramey & Ramey 2008), and disabled people’s experiences of intimacy (Liddiard 2018). Human intimacy in all its forms is as varied as the human experience. Far from reflecting any natural supremacy of normative romance over other kinds of love, the way people understand romance reveals deeply entrenched cultural ideologies. Saying *I love you*, then participates in systems of hierarchically organizing relationships that are, ultimately, systems of ranking people and distributing power. This thesis contributes to the scholarship on normativity which is essential groundwork for liberation from these hierarchies.



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