

Proceed with Caution: How Emerging Adults are Testing
the Water in Just Talking Romantic Relationships

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Emerging adulthood is a time of life characterized by decision making in romantic relationships (e.g., Arnett, 2014; Fincham, & Cui, 2011; Rogers, Willoughby, & Nelson, 2016). Research has indicated that couples who develop and maintain a mutual understanding of their courtship are more likely to flourish in long-term romantic relationships (Wilson & Huston, 2013). In recent years, there has been an increase in ambiguity regarding romantic relationship formation (Stanley, Rhoades, & Fincham, 2011), and a decrease in clear signals to clarify intentions of commitment in couple relationships (Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010).

Method

The current study included 1,224 participants from a large, mid-western university, who responded to a non-identifiable online survey that included both qualitative and quantitative questions. The sample was mostly Caucasian (86%), with smaller percentages of African American (5%), Latino (5%), and other ethnicities (4%). Participants were 72% female and 28% male, and 48% of the total sample reporting that they were in some form of a romantic relationship (e.g. dating, engaged, or married). We focused our analysis to the written responses of participants in the emerging adult age range (18-29 years old).

New questions were explored building from the work of Sibley et al. (2015) and the recent trend of “just talking” in romantic relationships: (1) How does “just talking” delay commitment in romantic relationships during emerging adulthood? (2) What are the relationship expectations when emerging adults engage in “just talking”? (3) How does “just talking serve as a potential screening process for romantic partners? (4) How does fear of rejection play a role in “just talking”?

Data was analyzed using the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014), which is powerful method for researching change within social groups (Morse et al., 2009). This approach fit well with our goals of understanding this new aspect of emerging adult romantic relationship formation “just talking” among the specific social cohort of emerging adults.

Researchers were trained in initial and focused coding techniques (Charmaz 2006; 2014) worked in four teams to code the data according to our specific research questions. After individual coders had performed initial coding, they met together in specified teams to verify initial codes and construct focused codes. Once the team had reached consensus, all teams met together to discuss their research questions and assemble a cohesive body of themes.

Results

Through the steps of qualitative analysis 13 unique themes (prior relationship experiences, personal insecurity, avoidance of emotional pain, proceed with caution, formation of a safe zone, provides time to build confidence, afraid of losing options, experimenting romantic compatibility, freedom to compare potential partners, comfort in not committing, differing degrees of investment, unable to reciprocate expectations, and expectations can change over time) were identified regarding the relationship concept of “just talking” and are highlighted in Table 1. For additional understanding, we also asked the participants Likert scaled questions represented in Table 2.

Discussion

Through the themes that emerged, we found that the colloquial “just talking” pathway to relationship formation in emerging adults is heavily rooted in the use of technology. Research has focused on hooking up and “friends with benefits” without examining the process facilitating these interactions. This study has important implications for educators, researchers and clinicians that work with the emerging adult population.

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Table 1.

Participant perspectives of “just talking” in emerging adult romantic relationships.

Themes	Supporting Quotes
Prior Relationship Experience	"People have been hurt in the past by former relationships so “just talking” lets them have someone, but not worry about being rejected.”
Personal Insecurity and Avoidance of Emotional Pain	“Fear of rejection can relate to emotions and bad situations from past relationships. Emotions can create low self-esteem problems and a lack of confidence for progression in the relationships.”
Proceed with Caution	“I think ‘just talking’ is the comfort zone to many people. You are not single anymore, but you do not have to do everything that people have to do in an exclusive relationship. If you have not been in a relationship for a while or if you have just recently gotten out of a relationship, ‘just talking’ is the time to ease back into the relationship. It is telling the other person "I like you, but I want to take things slow and see if I can see a relationship forming anytime soon.”
Provides Time to Build Confidence	“I feel as though people use just talking as a safe alternative to rejection. People are scared of jumping into things and feeling hurt which can help self-confidence. This just talking alternative to dating does however promote poor communication skills and personal connection. I'm not a fan of just talking because it is very impersonal.”
Afraid of Losing Options	“I think fear of rejection can be a big factor in ‘just talking.’ If you're only texting and talking through social media or short glimpses of face to face contact, then you don't have to fear rejection in person and you are able to be much less reliant on other people. I think it provides a short term positive alternative to dating, but a long term negative alternative to dating. If you just talk and never define the relationship, then you are susceptible to emotional damage. If you ‘just talk’ for a short amount of time to get a feel for someone and see if you want to date or not, you are leaving your options open and making sure that you're making the right choice.”
Experimenting Romantic Compatibility	“It makes it easy to have a romantic partner without the commitment. It is usually teens and young adults who get involved, and they do it so they can have their freedom and experiment with what they want in a relationship.”

Freedom to Compare Potential Partners	“People get involved in "just talking" because it gives them a chance to test the waters with that person. They can find out who this person really is before they decide to be committed to them. "Just talking" is an easy way to make sure that the person you are committing to is a good, honest person. It also allows girls and boys to talk to multiple men and women and sort of compare.”
Comfort in Not Committing	“I think people get involved because it's an easier way to get to know someone without the pressure of dating. Also, if it doesn't work out, it seems to be less intense of a "breakup" than if they were actually dating.”
Differing Degrees of Investment	“I think "just talking" can be just as much as hurtful as actually dating. If the relationship is not being defined, you might get your hopes up that it is something more when the person you are talking to is not on the same page. Dating provides both partners with a clear idea on where you stand.”
Expectations Can Change Over Time	“Just talking to me means that it is very clear that there are mutual romantic feelings on both ends but they haven't been established yet. It is usually a step towards a committed relationship, but not always. Sometimes it is just a way to keep things casual and not be committed to just one person.”

Table 2.		
<i>Percentages of participants reporting agreement with statements concerning the phenomenon of just talking.</i>		
Question	Disagree	Agree
“Just talking” is difficult to explain.	22.4	53.8
Everyone has a different definition of “just talking.”	5.1	82.1
“Just talking” is a step in entering a committed relationship.	11.7	60.4
“Just talking” involves hooking up.	33.7	31.5
“Just talking” involves casual sex.	46.8	20.8
“Just talking” can lead to a committed relationship.	2.6	85.8
“Just talking” is not appropriate after a certain age.	42.4	25.2
Commitment is a part of “just talking.”	45.2	20.0
“Just talking” is a necessary stage in entering a committed relationship.	33.5	37.3
“Just talking” is not related to committed relationships.	54.1	14.5
“Just talking” serves as a necessary screening process for potential romantic partners.	14.1	54.7
“Just talking” means you are just friends.	49.7	22.7
Men initiate “just talking.”	14.2	31.3
Women initiate “just talking.”	16.4	26.6
It does not matter who initiates “just talking.”	4.2	81.6
Technology is important with “just talking.”	5.4	79.2
It is acceptable for someone to be “just talking” to multiple people at the same time.	43.0	28.6
“Just talking” is not dating.	5.0	79.4
“Just talking” offers a safe alternative to a committed relationship.	43.1	29.7
I would rather be “just talking” to someone than be asked/ask them on a date.	73.4	8.6
“Just talking” serves as a gateway to determining what kind of relationship you want to have with a person.	10.5	68.5
“Just talking” favors the less interested person.	19.9	47.5

Note: % Disagree = Disagree and Strongly Disagree; % Agree = Agree and Strongly Agree