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“We’re Just Talking”: Constructing a Recent Trend in Emerging Adult Romantic Relationship Development

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Introduction

What is Commitment?

- “At the root, commitment means making a decision to choose one alternative over others, and that in choosing, ***one is deciding to give up the other alternatives***. Deciding is fundamental to commitment” (Stanley & Rhoades, 2009, p. 35).



Asymmetrical Commitment

- Recent research by Stanley et al. (2016) explains that commitment can be asymmetrical when there are varying levels of commitment between partners.
- Here are a few of the highlights from Stanley et al. (2016) study:
 1. The romantic partner who is the least committed in a romantic relationship has the most power.
 2. Men most often seem to be the “weak link” in their relationships, and if men are the “weak link” in their relationships women are significantly more likely to stay in the relationship.
 3. Interestingly, if women are the “weak link” in their relationships, then the relationship is more likely to end.



Romance During Emerging Adulthood



- Emerging adulthood is a time of life characterized by decision making in romantic relationships (e.g., Arnett, 2015; Fincham, & Cui, 2011). **Most emerging adults (18 to 29-year-olds), utilize this time for romantic and sexual exploration with ambitions and expectations for marriage** (e.g., Willoughby, 2021; Willoughby & James 2017).
- Scholars have argued that the pathway to marriage has become increasingly ambiguous (Knopp et al., 2020; Stanley et al., 2016) with fewer clear markers of relationship progression and commitment (Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010).



Romance During Emerging Adulthood



- Since the 1970s, the median age at first marriage has been continually increasing and is now approximately 30 for men and 28 for women in the United States (Julian, 2022), creating a time of high romantic and sexual exploration (see Olmstead, 2020 for a review) before moving into adult roles (Arnett, 2015).
- 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).
- Unfortunately, current ambiguity in emerging romantic relationship transitions may make it difficult for partners to agree on when the relationship actually began due to multiple types of soft beginnings during which commitment is not clarified (Olmstead, 2020).



What Ever Happened to Dating?

- Accordingly, the traditional progression of courtship has diversified, giving rise to additional relationship types, such as *hooking up* (e.g., Olmstead, 2020) and *friends with benefits* relationships (e.g., Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013).
- This ambiguity is complicated by emerging adults' constant access to smart phones and social media (approximately 92% of 18 to 29-year-olds own a smartphone and 86% are social media users; Smith, 2017) which has transformed the fundamental expression of relationships (Parks, 2017).



What Ever Happened to Dating?

- Recently, the relationship term, “just talking”, has emerged in reference to quasromantic relationships in popular press outlets, such as *Bustle*, *Buzzfeed*, *Odyssey*, and *Vice*. Additionally, Jean Twenge’s (2017) book *Boomer* references a “talking” phase, or an initial stage of romantic relationship development preceding or replacing dating.
- Urban Dictionary (2017), a popular crowd-sourced website, provides several definitions of just talking: “When two people are not exclusive with each other nor have established what they are as a couple, but have some sort of relationship,” “a stage between dating and friends,” and “a new term for dating.”
- Although researchers have only begun exploring just talking in romantic relationship formation, **Powell et al. (2021) found that 88% of their college student and 50% of a broader emerging adult sample knew of the term “talking”, indicating it is well-integrated into emerging adults’ social constructions of sexual and relationship experiences**



“We’re Just Talking”



- Very little academic or empirical scholarship exists on how just talking partners define their relationship and where it fits in the process of relationship development
- Accordingly, the goal of our study is to explore emerging adults’ perceptions of the definition of just talking, why emerging adults engage in just talking relationships, and how technology facilitates just talking.





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Method

Participants



- The **current study consisted of nine focus groups** (4 men focus groups, and 5 women focus groups) conducted at two different large, Midwestern universities.
- These **focus groups included 52 emerging adult participants** (29 females, 23 males). Each focus group discussed the recent trend of “just talking” and how it pertains to romantic relationship formation during emerging adulthood.
- The sample was mostly Caucasian (75%), with smaller percentages of Latino (15.4%), African American (7.7%) and Asian American (1.9%). All the participants were within the emerging adult age range (18-29 years old).

Research Questions



RQ1: How do emerging adults conceptualize just talking?

RQ2: What are emerging adults' reasons for just talking?

RQ3: How does emerging adult technology use facilitate the just talking process?

Analysis



- Focus group discussion generated a total of 542 minutes. The nine focus groups (comprising of five-to-eight participants) ranged from 57 to 76 minutes averaging 67 minutes (SD = 6.04). Upon transcription, focus group discussion generated 278 pages, or 104,058 total words.
- Data was analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) of initial coding and focused coding.
- Constructivist grounded theory approach allows researchers to begin laying the theoretical foundation for understanding the purpose of just talking in emerging adult coupling practices.

Analysis



- Researchers were trained in initial and focused coding techniques (Charmaz 2006; 2014). After the coders had performed initial coding, the researchers met together in specific teams to verify initial codes and construct focused codes.
- Once each team had reached an agreement, all teams met together to discuss themes specific to their research questions and assemble a consistent body of themes represented by the data.
- Through the steps of qualitative analysis 11 unique themes and 3 categories were generated.



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Results



How Emerging Adults Conceptualize “Just Talking”

Pre-Dating

“It’s a pre-dating stage kind of thing, you’re kind of just getting to know them on more of a friend level and then it leads them to more of an intimate level, and then after that it’s like dating.”



Confusion About Commitment

“Say if you did want to talk to somebody else and you're like, ‘But I'm talking to someone. Am I wrong for doing that?’ It's like it makes you feel like you're cheating but you're not in a relationship, which is kinda weird.”





Unofficial Romantic Label

“I think people are confused...by just talking...like someone wants more than the other, but they don't want to put a definite label and then have too much pressure...I think it's the label that means that it's not an official label.”





Reasons Emerging Adults Engage in “Just Talking”



Pressure to Keep Options Open

“I think a lot of people are scared to commit, especially early in college and stuff. They want to see what else is out there and not just settle for something, and so if they’re just talking then it’s like they still have other options that they’re not afraid to go and leave something behind.”



Protection from Rejection

“It’s a fear of rejection for a lot of people; it’s like they don’t want to just go up to that person and be like ‘hey do you want to go out on a date?’ ‘cause they’re afraid they’re going to say no. ‘I like you so can I just casually text you?’ you know, it’s a whole different ballgame.”





Testing the Waters

“... let's say you were just talking to them for like a month then you realized that your morals are completely different and that's not something that you want in your future boyfriend or potential husband down the road so ... okay, well, if we don't have the same morals then we can't agree on something then I do not want to be with you.”

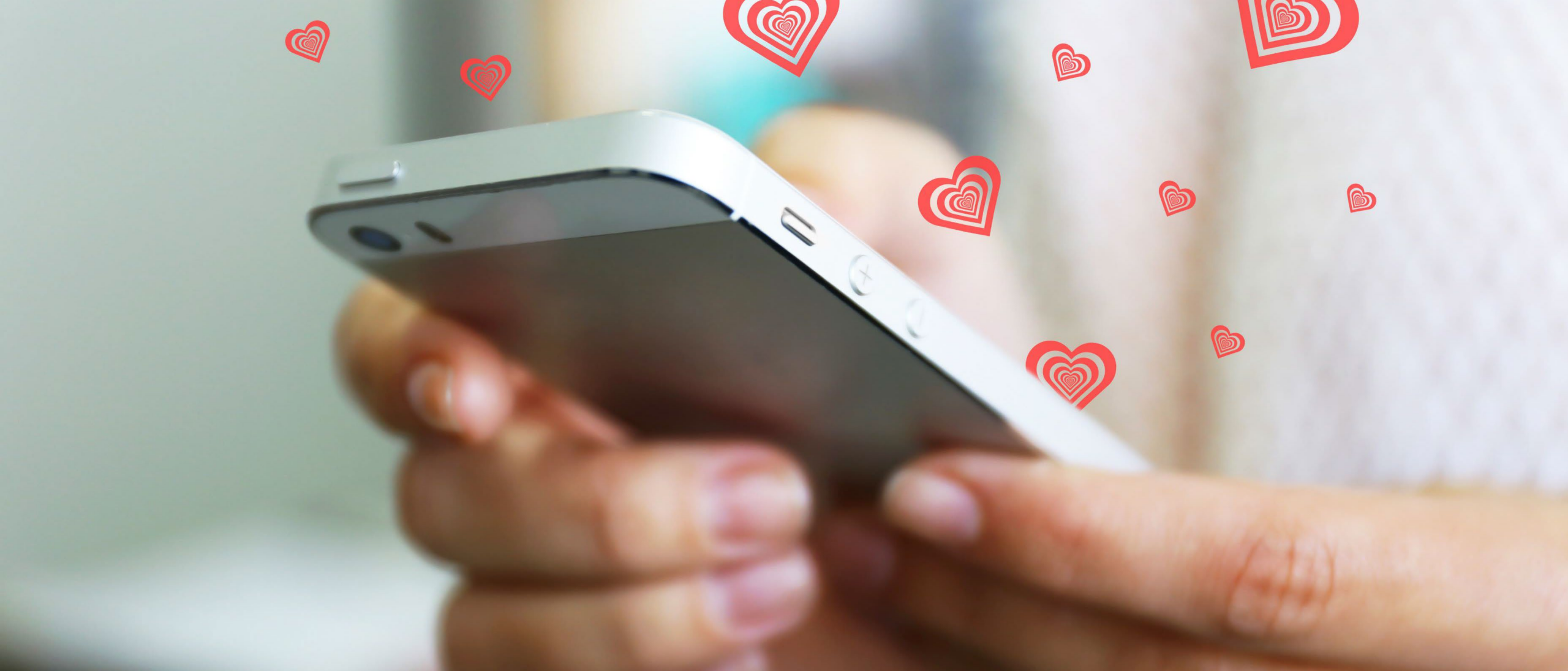




Avoiding Defining the Relationship

“... it’s like you’re stuck there; you’re talking and talking and all of a sudden you’ll realize, like, you don’t really want to be with the person, you just did it because it was easy. Like, you’re already talking to them so why not just keep talking to them and you realize that you wasted all that time when you could have been looking for someone else.”





How Technology May Facilitate the “Just Talking” Process

Role of Technology



- Current emerging adults have been technologically connected most of their lives. Particularly throughout their adolescence and early adulthood. Approximately 95% of 18 to 34-year-olds own a smartphone (Silver, 2019) and 90% of emerging adults are social media users (Pew Research Center, 2019).
- Emerging adults' avid use of smartphones and social media has transformed the fundamental expression of relationships (e.g., Hetsroni et al., 2019; Parks, 2017).
- Emerging adults use technology to initiate, maintain, and terminate romantic relationships of all types; therefore, the psychological, communicative, and relational effects of this form of communication has become important for researchers to explore (Ledbetter, 2014; LeFebvre, 2018; Olmstead, 2020)



Increases Pool of Potential Partners

“Yeah, so it’s pretty easy to be sneaky with that, and it’s like people find opportunities to kind of like okay ‘well I have somebody here but I also have someone else.’ So, you have access to a lot of people.”



Comfortable Frequent Contact

“I think maybe it’s the whole technology thing. So, we have access to texting people 24/7 basically, and that’s kind of a barrier. I guess because of not seeing them in person, it feels like you don’t have to commit if you’re not seeing them face to face. When it’s text, it’s kind of like testing the waters without looking, without talking to their face, you know stuff like that.”



Image Crafting



“Well, I feel like you want everyone to think that you’re the best, and you’re perfect, and you do all these fun things, and it’s all about how people think of you to a certain extent. You want everyone to like you. You want people to think you’re awesome. So, I think that, that’s where a lot of that comes from is just wanting other people to like you.”



Less Effort Required

“You don’t have that old-fashioned courtship anymore. And now because we have social media, because you can stalk someone six months back, see what they know, who they know, I think social media plays a huge part. I think it's almost like, the foundation, the core of just talking.”





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Discussion

Discussion



- Although the term “just talking” implies simple conversation, **emerging adults in our study suggest that this relationship phenomenon is incredibly prevalent and anything but simple.**
- Just talking may provide an opportunity to screen for potential committed partners, but the great ambiguity and mixed agendas facilitated by heavy technology-based communication (texting, Snapchat, Twitter, etc.) may make it difficult to get to know who the other person really is and clearly transition to a committed relationship.
- Additionally, conflicting motives for entering into a just talking relationship may cause pain and frustration for just talking partners who want a more concrete path forward than those whose are using just talking as a safe alternative to a more defined relationship.

Discussion



- Future research is needed to explore the just talking stage of romantic relationship formation with much larger samples of emerging adults.
- Perhaps a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods would allow for a more thorough analysis of the underlying processes that allow “just talking” to occur.

Contact the Presenters



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