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**Romantic Relationship Formation Continuum: An Exploration  
of Steps and Stages Leading to a Committed Relationship**

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# **Introduction**

# Romance During Emerging Adulthood



- Emerging adulthood is a time of life characterized by decision making in romantic relationships (e.g., Arnett, 2015; Olmstead, 2020). 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 & James 2017).
- Scholars have argued that **the pathway to marriage has become increasingly ambiguous** (Stanley et al., 2016) **with fewer clear markers of relationship progression and commitment** (Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010).
- 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).



# Marriage

- Although many emerging adults (18-29 years old) have experienced instability in their caregivers' relationships, **there is substantial evidence that emerging adults continue to have a strong desire to marry, and that marriage remains an important life goal** (e.g., Willoughby & James, 2017; Willoughby, 2021).
- However, instead of marriage acting as a cornerstone in the lives of emerging adults, some scholars believe that many are now treating marriage as a capstone (Hawkins et al., 2022).



# Sliding versus Deciding

“People slide into having sex. People slide into having children. People slide into dangerous relationships. In contrast to sliding, there are strong conceptual reasons to suggest that **clear decisions generally build the most resilient intentions.**” (Stanley, Rhoades, and Whitton, 2010, p. 253).



# The Rise in Cohabitation

- Complicating matters, however, is the recent surge of couples that are cohabitating which frequently does not lead to marriage (e.g., Guzzo, 2014). **In fact, one researcher has often referred to this trend of cohabitation that does not lead to the marriage alter but is instead part of the dating process as “cohabidating” (Stanley, 2010).**
- One of the main reasons that the uptick in cohabitation is concerning is that research has continually shown that cohabitation is much more connected to family instability compared marriage (e.g., Hymowitz et al., 2013).
- This is especially important to consider since family instability can have a detrimental impact on children and their healthy development and well-being (e.g., Manning, 2015).



# 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, Conrad, & Anders, 2018) 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).





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**Method**



# Participants



- The current study included 33 emerging adults (28 women, 5 men) who were broken up into focus groups (one men's focus group and two women's focus groups) conducted in-person at Northern Illinois University (1 men's group and 2 women's focus group), as well as over zoom (2 women's focus groups) .
- The sample was mostly Caucasian (78%), with smaller percentages of African American (9%), Latino (7%), and other ethnicities (6%). All the participants were within the emerging adult age range (18-29 years old).
- Data from **additional men's focus groups will be gathered soon.**

# Research Questions



**RQ1:** What do emerging adults believe is the purpose of romantic relationships?

**RQ2:** What are the steps and stages in a romantic relationship and how do they progress to a committed relationship?

**RQ3:** How do emerging adults feel about marriage and their personal preparation for this committed relationship?

**RQ4:** How do the steps and stages that lead to a committed relationship differ compared to previous

# Analysis



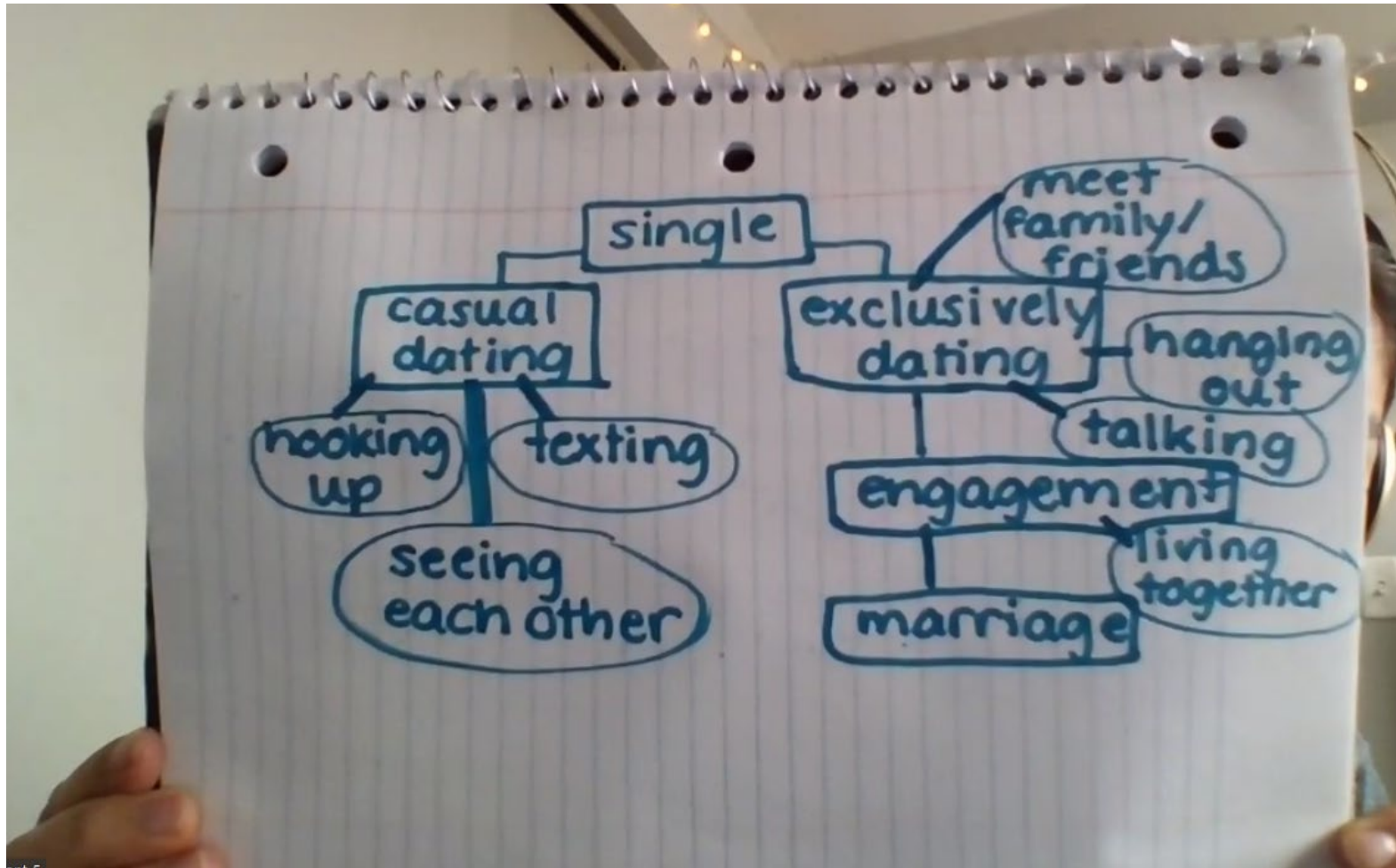
- Data was analyzed using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) of initial coding and focused coding. This approach enabled the researchers to more fully understand and document the pathway to a committed relationship. **This approach fit well with our goals of understanding this potential aspect of emerging adult romantic relationship formation among the specific social cohort of emerging adults.**
- The researchers were trained in initial and focused coding techniques (Charmaz 2006; 2014) and worked together to code the data according to our specific research questions. After individual coders had performed initial coding, the researchers met together to verify initial codes and construct focused codes.
- Through the steps of qualitative analysis eight unique themes were generated about committed relationships



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**Results**

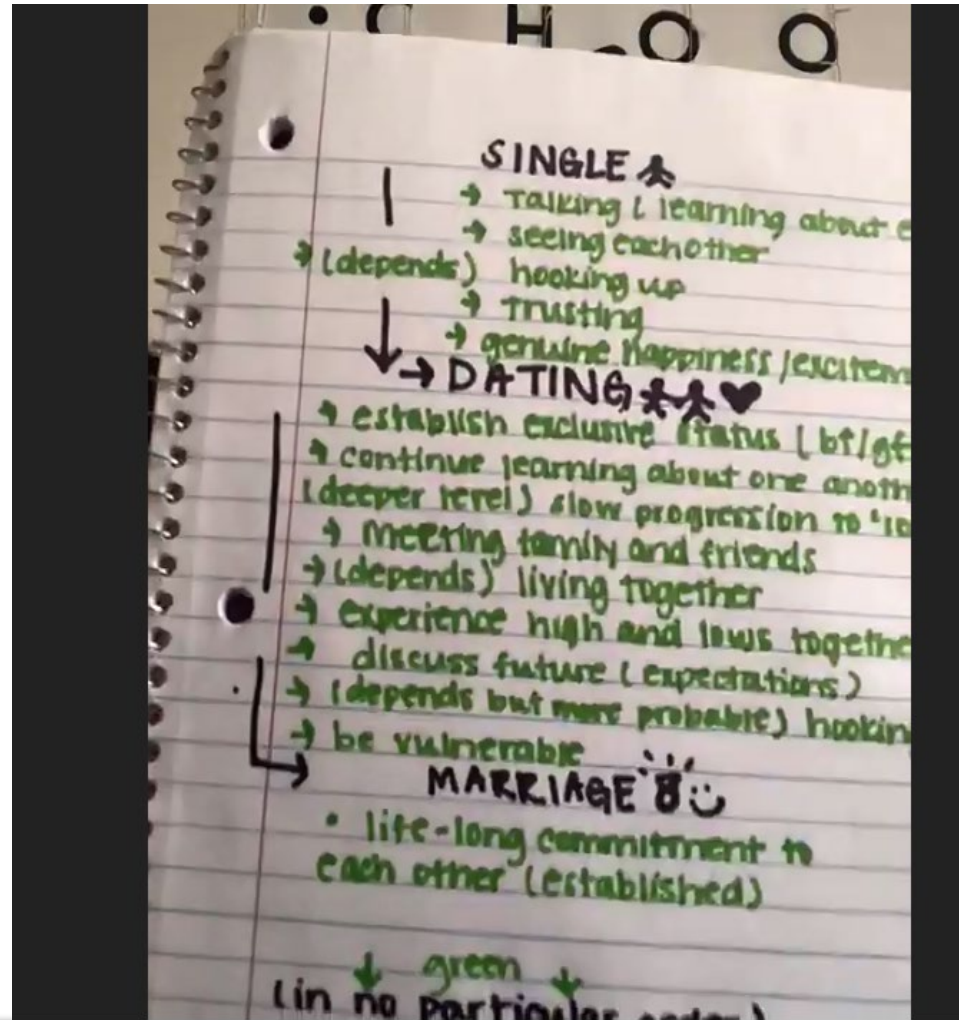
# Paths to Commitment Drawings



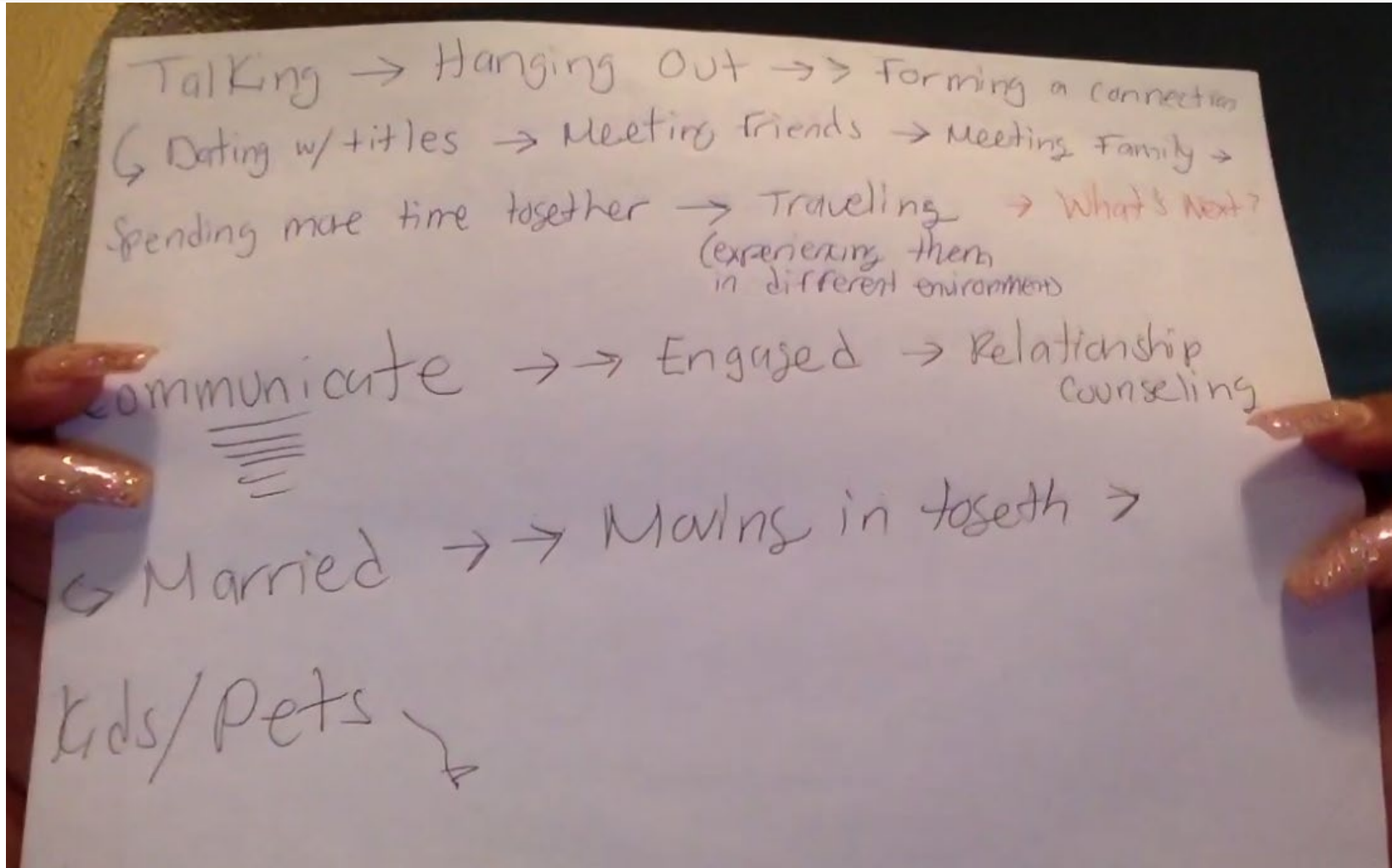
# Paths to Commitment Drawings



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# Paths to Commitment Drawings







# Sense of Security and Support

“It provides some security and it also provides some nice resources. It is also someone that you are probably intimate with and you share a lot of things with, so, it’s a way of having this foundation.”





# Provides Purpose and Meaning

“The purpose of a relationship is to create a bond with someone that you want to carry the rest of your life with because people, we are social animals, we thrive when we are among other people and having that one person that you know you can rely on, you know, that you can trust, you know that you can build a future family with and see an overall future with...and you know that you can rely on and you can share everything about yourself and grow together as a group instead of an individual self.”





# Investing In The Future

“I do feel that you shouldn’t rush into something as big as marriage because it is a commitment, like a huge commitment, and I don’t think that is something that should just be, like, “Oh, let’s just get married.” I feel like you should really get to know the person and it takes a long time to get to know someone fully.”





# Building a Foundation

“I feel, like, if you don’t have that time to just kind of be by yourself and get to know yourself, then you’ll just reflect other people who have influenced your life. You do what they’ve done because that’s what you are used to.”





# Clarifying the Commitment

“I think, I have a lot of friends who have rushed into things in their relationships where like they just kind of like fall into really heavy commitment stuff like they'll have dated for like a year or so and move into an apartment together, or like share a bank account and I think it's really valuable when we find people that we date who are willing to like take the time to get to know us and like thoughtfully like go through those decisions of like heavy commitment levels instead of just kind of falling into it...”





# Apprehensive about Committed Relationships

“I think they’re just scared of, like, being tied down to someone for the rest of their lives. They’re just so used to dating other people and having different relationships with other people that, like, the thought of being with one person is kind of scary.”





# Personal Growth

“I want to go to college, get my degree, and enjoy my life with someone before I get married to them, you know? Plus, I think I have more time on my hands and I want to make sure I am financially stable on my own before I marry someone.”





# Marriage is Not Always the End Goal

“I don’t think you need to get married, like, it’s not something everybody has to do, but what kind of draws the line from, ‘Oh, I’m going to be with this person forever, but I don’t necessarily need to or want to get married.’

Maybe it’s just, like, the legal aspect of it and you don’t need to have proof of it to know that you’re committed to this person, and they know it, too.”







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**Discussion**

# Discussion



- From the themes that have appeared throughout our data, we have found that apprehension about commitment has been a recurring theme for many emerging adults.
- Consistent with previous research studies, individuals expressed that fear of rejection can present a real challenge and clarifying the commitment can take a lot of courage if you don't know if your partner is on the same page.
- Our results also show the ever-changing outlook on what the end-goal of committed relationships look like for emerging adults.
- Marriage may no longer be on the horizon for some, but many emerging adults still see marriage as an essential aspect of their committed relationship.

# Discussion



- Clinicians and educators **can encourage emerging adults should be intentional and thoughtful in their decision making within romantic relationships,** including when it comes to **pre-dating** behavior.
- The data we have collected is also quite consistent with the theory of Sliding versus Deciding (Stanley et. al., 2006).
- It is important to keep in mind when conducting research with emerging adults that **romantic relationship formation has become for many a complex and confusing process** (Brown, 2020).
- This may be in part due to the new steps and stages leading to committed relationships that continue to evolve within emerging adulthood.

# Contact the Presenters



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