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**Proceed With Caution: How Emerging Adults Are Testing
The Water In Just Talking Romantic Relationships**

Pelin Keceli • Jordyn Saddler • D. Scott Sibley, Ph.D., LMFT, CFLE



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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, 2024). **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 quasimantic relationships in popular press outlets, such as *Bustle*, *Buzzfeed*, *Odyssey*, and *Vice*. Additionally, Jean Twenge’s (2017) book *Gen Z* references a “talking” phase, or an initial stage of romantic relationship development preceding or replacing dating.
- Urban Dictionary (2017), a popular crowdsourced 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

Previous Just Talking Study



- In a previous study, constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) was used to explore an emergent phenomenon in modern romantic relationship formation called *just talking* employing nine emerging adult focus groups ($N = 52$) from two large Midwestern universities.
- Eleven unique themes were generated to identify how emerging adults conceptualize just talking (pre-dating, confusion about commitment, unofficial romantic label), reasons for just talking (pressure to keep options open, protection from rejection, testing the waters, avoiding defining the relationship), and how technology may facilitate the just talking process (increases pool of potential partners, comfortable frequent contact, image crafting, less effort required).

Participants



- The current study included 655 participants from a large, midwestern university, who responded to an anonymous online Qualtrics survey that included **both qualitative and quantitative questions**
- Participants were
 - 75% Female
 - 25% Male
 - Caucasian (84%)
 - African American (6%)
 - Latino (5%)
 - Other ethnicities (5%)

Participants



- 43% of the total sample reported that they were in some form of a romantic relationship (e.g. dating, engaged, or married).
- We focused our analysis on the survey responses of participants in the emerging adult age range (18-29 years old).

Research Questions



RQ1:How do emerging adults define just talking and distinguish it from other types of intimate relationships?

RQ2:How do men and women differ in their beliefs about just talking relationships?

RQ3:What are emerging adults' reasons for just talking?

RQ4:What role does technology play in just talking relationships?

Qualitative Analysis



- Data was analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) of initial coding and focused coding.
- This approach enabled the researchers to form a better understanding and document the change within social groups (Morse et al., 2009).
- This approach fit well with our goals of understanding this potential aspect of emerging adult romantic relationship formation—*just talking*—among the specific social cohort of emerging adults.

Qualitative Analysis



- Researchers were trained in initial and focused coding techniques (Charmaz 2014)
- We worked in four teams to code the data according to our specific research questions.
- 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.

Quantitative Analysis



- Frequencies and ANOVAs were run in SPSS (IBM Corp., 2016) using listwise deletion (<1% missing data). Because group sizes were unequal when comparing men and women and emerging adults who had and had not been in a just talking relationship, Welch's statistic was requested for the ANOVAs. Welch's F is an alternative F ratio that adjusts F and residual degrees of freedom to be robust when homogeneity of variances is violated (Field, 2005).



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Results



The Characteristics of “Just Talking”

Ambiguous Definition



“To some, I think it implies two people are sleeping together casually and to others, it literally means just talking. It could even be a case of texting for a couple weeks. I have even found myself using it in all of the above different meanings.”



Pre-Dating

“Just talking means that the couple is in the beginning stages before dating. They have feelings towards each other and are getting to know one another more. There is flirting and hanging out, but they are not quite ready for dating.”





The Purpose of “Just Talking”



Screening Process

"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 someone to talk to multiple men and women and sort of compare."



Keeping Options Open



"Most people just talk because they still want to associate themselves with other people and not feel guilty for it since they don't have a title. They also get involved in talking because they may like one another, but one may be moving away soon, or the timing is wrong and instead of getting into a short-lived relationship, they just talk. This lets the two people get closer, but also allows freedom for both partners to do as they please and avoid early attachment."

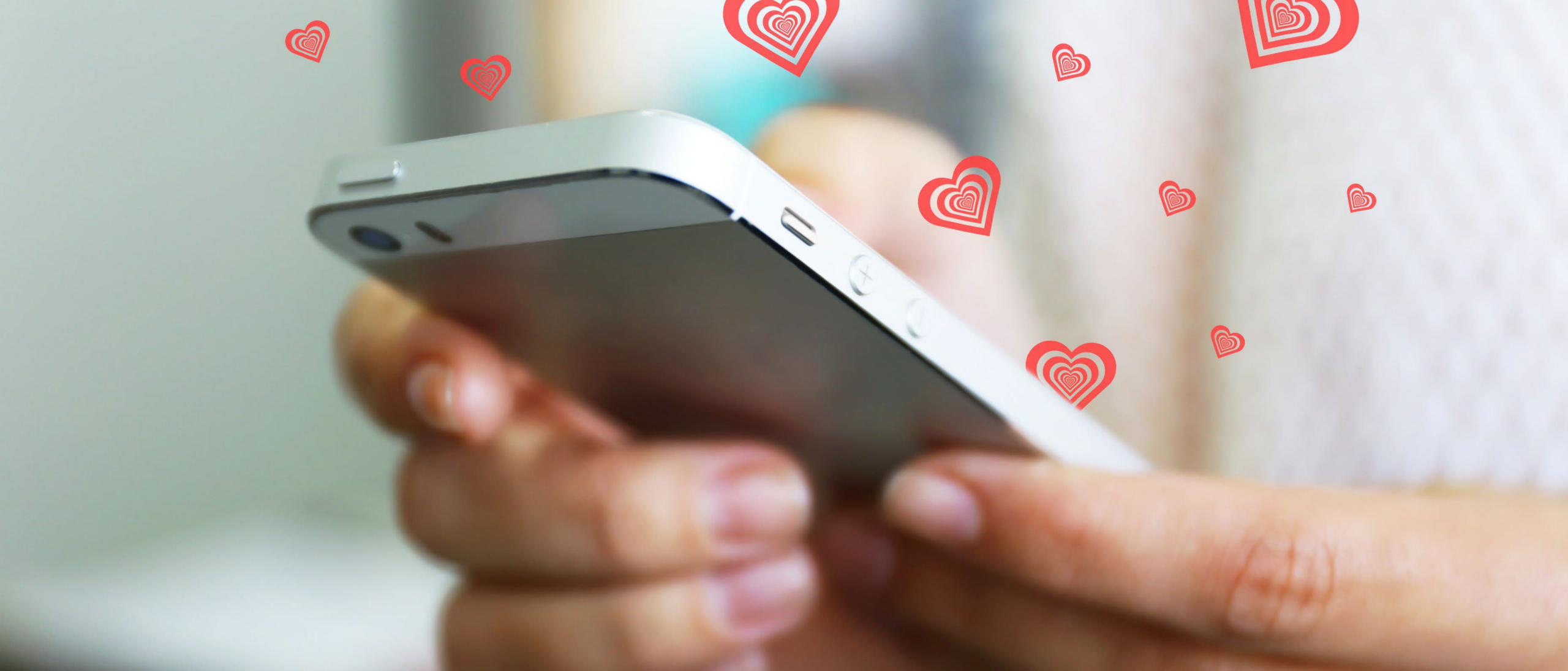




Lessen the Blow

"Just talking is just a way people don't have to commit, but still enjoy the good parts of a relationship. I think some people could see it as a safe alternative, but I don't. I think you are just as likely to get hurt talking as if you were dating. It just depends on how easy you develop feelings."





The Role of Technology in “Just Talking”

Technology Facilitates Just Talking

- “Technology plays a gigantic role...With texting or messengers of sorts, you can talk to almost any person you want as long as you have phone service or Wi-Fi at any time of the day. You can talk to someone who is on the other side of the world, or you can talk to random people in your community that you connect with online. It makes it so just talking isn't a conversation over coffee or over the phone, it makes it so you can speak your mind to the other person anytime you feel at any time of the day, and they can do the same. ”



Constant Communication

"People use the ease in communication through cell phones to text and establish the just talking phase. This technology has become so abundant that people can be in communication virtually 100% of the time. The only time you can't talk to someone is when you are sleeping."



Image Crafting



"People can love a person's texting personality and not actually know a person in real life. I also feel Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and any other social media plays a significant role because people expect the person they are 'talking' to, to post pictures or status of them together or about them. I think that overall trying to put up an image on social media plays a huge role in just talking."



Quantitative Results



Refer to Handout

Highlights from the Quantitative Results



- I would rather be *just talking* to someone than be asked/ ask them on a date.
 - **Disagree: 75.4%**
 - Neutral: 17.0%
 - Agree: 7.6%
- Just *talking* offers a safe alternative to a committed relationship
 - **Disagree: 43.6%**
 - Neutral: 26.1%
 - Agree: 30.2%
- Just *talking* is not dating
 - Disagree: 4.1%
 - Neutral: 15.4%
 - **Agree: 80.5%**



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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, 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 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



- Recent studies suggest that just talking has emerged as a prevalent pre-dating relationship experience that is viewed as distinct from FWBRs, hooking up, casual sex, and formal dating.
- Further research on the prevalence, correlates, and outcomes of just talking relationships in diverse populations of emerging adults is critical for understanding current relationship development diversity and points of intervention to improve mental, physical, and relational health with this population.

Contact the Presenters



D. Scott Sibley: dscottsibley@niu.edu
Website: DecideToCommit.com