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

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ABSTRACT

Emerging adults’ relationship development is an increasingly multi-faceted process characterized by ambiguity. *Just talking* has emerged as a phrase to characterize early relationship formation in popular culture, yet it remains understudied in the empirical literature. Constructivist grounded theory was used to explore this phenomenon in modern romantic relationship formation employing nine focus groups ($N=52$) of emerging adult men and women from two large Midwestern universities. Eleven unique themes were generated to identify how emerging adult men and women conceptualize just talking (pre-dating, ambiguity 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 the pool of potential partners, comfortable frequent contact, image crafting, less effort required). The findings have substantial implications for educators, clinicians, and other professionals who work with emerging adults.

KEYWORDS

just talking; emerging adulthood; romantic relationships; decision-making; commitment

Introduction

Emerging adulthood is a time of life characterized by romantic relationship decision-making and increased attention toward finding a long-term partner (Arnett, 2024; Fincham & Cui, 2010). The majority of emerging adults (18–29-year-olds) use this time for romantic and sexual exploration (Olmstead, 2020), often with long-term ambitions for committed relationships or marriage (e.g., Meslay et al., 2024; Willoughby, 2021; Willoughby & James, 2017). Although research on relationship development has indicated that couples who develop and maintain a mutual understanding of their courtship are more likely to flourish long-term (Wilson & Huston, 2013), scholars note that the pathway to committed relationships has

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become increasingly ambiguous (Knopp et al., 2020; Stanley, 2016; Willoughby & Hall, 2014) with fewer clear markers of relationship progression and commitment for both different-gender (Stanley et al., 2010) and same-gender (Abimosleh & Whitton, 2020) relationships. Further, technology is now extensively used to facilitate sexual and romantic experiences (Olmstead, 2020) for people holding diverse cultural, religious, sexual, and gender identities (Rochadiat et al., 2020).

Accordingly, the pathways to sexual and romantic partnership have diversified, giving rise to several types of causal sexual relationships and experiences, such as *hooking up* (Wade, 2017, Olmstead et al., 2018) and *friends with benefits* relationships (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013; Mongeau et al., 2013). According to Google Trends (<https://www.google.com/trends>), searches involving the phrase “just talking” began in September 2008 and continued to rise until January 2016 where it has remained a consistently prevalent search term (the highest prevalence so far was in February 2024). It is unclear whether just talking is a non-committed sexual experience or part of the relationship development process. Although pre-dating behaviors to get to know someone before official courtship has been around for decades, the integration of technology into emerging adults’ lives may have fundamentally changed how people get to know potential romantic and sexual partners (Hetsroni et al., 2019; Pew Research Center, 2020; Wasserman, 2023). Throughout these changes, binary gendered scripts for men and women around sexual behavior and relationship progression may still strongly influence motivations for sexual and dating exploration during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2024). Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to use constructivist grounded theory to understand emerging adult men’s and women’s: (1) perceptions of the definition of just talking, (2) why emerging adults engage in just talking relationships, and (3) how technology facilitates just talking to inform a theoretical foundation for understanding the purpose of just talking in emerging adult men’s and women’s coupling practices.

Relationship Exploration during Emerging Adulthood

Since the 1970s the median age at first marriage has been continually increasing and is now ~30 for men and 28 for women in the United States (Julian, 2022), with same-gender couples experiencing their first marriage in their mid-to-late thirties on average (Payne & Manning, 2021). The increase in the gap between turning eighteen and first marriage creates a longer period of romantic and sexual exploration (see Olmstead, 2020 for a review) before moving into adult roles (Arnett, 2024). Many emerging adults see this as time to figure out who they are, experience the world independently, and become economically stable before establishing

committed relationships (Arnett, 2000, 2024). Not surprisingly, emerging adults who have casual sexual experiences (especially those attending college) report they are too busy for commitment and feel too young to be tied down (Lyons et al., 2014; Olmstead, 2020). Indeed, recent research findings indicate a positive association between holding a later ideal age at first marriage with collegiate emerging adults' likelihood of engaging in casual sex (Allison & Risman, 2017). Contemporary emerging adults report a high acceptability of premarital sex and cohabitation (Barraso, 2019; Horowitz et al., 2019), and an increased prevalence of casual sexual relationships and experiences (Olmstead, 2020). Accordingly, many emerging adults experience multiple relationships of varying types (Arnett, 2024) along the way to eventually finding a long-term partner (Willoughby & James, 2017).

This shift in the timing of marriage and family formation (Arnett, 2024) along with social and economic pressures to balance the desire for a long-term committed relationship and successful career (Shulman & Connolly, 2013) has led to increased diversity in casual relationship types and pathways to forming more committed relationships, increasing the potential for ambiguity and mismatched expectations (see Wentland & Reissing, 2014 for a review). Without a conscious effort to define their relationship status, the ongoing ambiguity increases the chances that one person assumes the relationship is monogamous, committed, or leading to a long-term relationship, while the other person does not (asymmetrical relationships; Stanley, 2016). This asymmetry can create greater conflict and aggression in romantic relationships (Stanley, 2016). Relatedly, the more uncertain a person is about their own or partner's participation in the relationship, the less likely they are to talk about the status of the relationship, thus increasing uncertainty, turbulence, and distress (Abimosleh & Whitton, 2020; Knobloch and Theiss, 2011). Clarifying and defining the status of a romantic relationship may be more challenging for emerging adults who often have less structured communication (Knopp et al., 2020) and for sexual and gender minorities who may face social stigma for formalizing their relationships (Abimosleh & Whitton, 2020).

Emerging Adult Casual and Sexual Relationships and Experiences

Emerging adult participation in casual sexual relationships and experiences is quite common with around 70% of college students reporting they have hooked up (e.g., Olmstead et al., 2013) or had "physically intimate encounters between two individuals who are not in a defined, committed romantic relationship" (Olmstead, 2020, p. 780). Accordingly, hooking up is currently considered a normative behavior (e.g., Holman & Sillars, 2012) and is associated with a range of feelings, including empowerment, attractiveness,

and excitement (Olmstead et al., 2013), as well as psychological distress (Napper et al., 2015). For the LGBTQ community, casual sexual behaviors have also been associated with reduced minority stress and increased connectedness to the LGBTQ community (Jaffe et al., 2021). Similarly, friends-with-benefits are defined as friends who engage in regular sexual behaviors with each other (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Lehmiller et al., 2014). These relationships are also common during emerging adulthood (e.g., Arnett, 2024) and may evolve into a romantic relationship, but this interest is rarely communicated (Owen & Fincham, 2011, 2012), which may explain why friends with benefits report worse communication about sexual activities, lower sexual satisfaction, and less satisfaction with the friendship component of their relationship than partners in committed relationships (Lehmiller et al., 2014). Hooking up and friends-with-benefits experiences may serve as a sort of try-out for partners and relationships (Jonason, 2013; Mongeau et al., 2013).

Just talking may have similarities to hooking up and friends-with-benefits, especially since all are off-the-record relationship phases where communication is considered less important or necessary (Knight, 2014). Although researchers have only begun exploring just talking in romantic relationship formation, Powell et al. (2021) found that 88% of their college students 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. In the same sample, emerging adults rated just talking as in-between a friends-with-benefits relationship and dating in terms of levels of emotional intimacy, passion, commitment, and seriousness (Powell et al., 2021).

Accordingly, the primary purpose of just talking may not be sexual exploration since Powell et al. (2021) found that emerging adults perceive there to be less physical intimacy in just talking situations than either friends-with-benefits or dating dynamics. Alternatively, emerging adults may perceive just talking as an early relationship development stage to a greater extent than hooking up and friends-with-benefits interactions. Scollo and Poutiainen (2019) found that emerging adults in Finland described the goal of “talking” as getting to know the other person to assess the potential for a romantic relationship. Additionally, Twenge’s (2017) *iGen*, references a “talking” phase, or an initial stage of romantic relationship development preceding dating. Although just talking may have a similar purpose to courtship activities from previous decades, such as “calling” on someone to get to know them before officially becoming a couple, just talking may represent a divergence from these past conceptualizations of courtship due to the intentional ambiguity around norms and definitions of just talking that is facilitated by technology (Wasserman, 2023).

Further, perceptions of the purpose and norms for just talking may be influenced by sexual and relationship scripts for people who identify as men and women (Arnett, 2024). Although there has been a movement toward more egalitarian expectations, traditional binary gendered scripts may still limit diverse expression and accurate expectations in the early stages of relationship formation for men and women in different-gender (e.g., Cameron & Curry, 2019) and same-gender relationships (e.g., Siegel & Meunier, 2019). While traditional gender scripts may also influence gender diverse emerging adults, their experiences with just talking may also be affected by stigma, trauma, and minority stress specific to sexual and relationship experiences (Dolezal et al., 2023). Although the majority of emerging adult men and women who identify as heterosexual, gay, or lesbian hold high expectations for getting married (Meslay et al., 2024; Willoughby, 2021; Willoughby & James, 2017). Meslay et al. (2024) found that this expectation was not held by the majority of youth (15–21 years old) who identified as genderqueer or other genders, not on the gender binary.

Emerging Adults' Technology Use in Relationship Development

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 become important for researchers to explore (LeFebvre, 2018; Olmstead, 2020; Rosenfeld, 2017). Approximately 95% of 18–34-year-olds own a smartphone (Silver, 2019) and 90% of emerging adults are social media users (Pew Research Center, 2019). Accordingly, emerging adults' avid use of smartphones and social media has transformed the fundamental expression of relationships (e.g., Hetsroni et al., 2019; Parks, 2017). Specifically, constant access to social media has changed the way emerging adults date (Digital Trends Staff, 2016) with adoption of online dating higher among 18–24-year-olds than any other age group (Pew Research Center, 2020). LeFebvre (2018) argued that technology-mediated communication modifies and mediates relationship development and partner interactions. Specifically, younger adults and LGB partners are more likely than other groups to use social media to demonstrate care for their partner and keep up with their partner's life (Pew Research Center, 2020). This multimodal mediated communication blurs boundaries and may minimize emerging adults' ability to navigate communication about the status of their developing romantic and intimate relationships, especially when they are just talking.

Present Study

Although just talking has received popular press coverage, this relational phenomenon has minimally transcended to interpersonal and familial

scholarship. Therefore, the goals of this study were to qualitatively explore how emerging adult men and women conceptualized the role just talking plays in their sexual and relationship exploration, and how technology-mediated communication influences the development and maintenance of just talking. In recognition of the need for specific attunement to the unique cultural stressors that influence relationship expectations for gender minority emerging adults, the scope of this paper is limited to emerging adults of any sexual orientation who identify as cisgender men and women. Exploring emerging adults' understanding of just talking from their perspective of relationship development informs theoretical conceptualizations of the purpose of just talking in emerging adult coupling practices to guide scholarship and practice. Thus, we asked the following:

RQ₁: How do emerging adult men and women conceptualize just talking?

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

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

Methods

Participants

Participants ($N=52$) were emerging adults from two large midwestern public universities (one in a small rural city and the other in a large metropolitan area) recruited through class announcements and fliers indicating that participants would be participating in a study about commitment and romantic relationship formation: "Even before entering a dating relationship many young single adults enter a pre-dating phase, which is often very ambiguous. The purpose of this study is to explore the trend of 'just talking' and how this impacts romantic relationship formation." Undergraduate emerging adults self-selected into focus groups for women ($n=29$) and men ($n=23$) to attend to potential gendered dating scripts (Lamont, 2021) and create a balance between homogeneity, heterogeneity, as well as the diversity of experience and perceptions in the groups (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Participants were not required to have engaged in just talking themselves (all participants disclosed familiarity with just talking through direct experience or witnessing close friend or sibling relationships) to reduce selection bias of people who already believed just talking was an important part of romantic relationship progression. The groups ranged from four to eight ($Mdn=6$) participants. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 28 ($M=20.81$, $SD=1.94$). About 75% of participants identified as White, 15% as Hispanic, 8% as African American, and 2% as Asian American. Relationship status

data was only available for participants at University 2, of which 3.8% were currently dating nonexclusively, 65.4% were dating exclusively, 3.8% were engaged, and the remaining were single. All participants in relationships at University 2 were currently in man/women relationships (see Table 1). Participant data on gender, sexual orientation, relationship history, and religiosity were not collected.

Procedures

To participate in the study, participants selected a focus group time in either a men's or women's focus group. The participants arrived at a conference room to complete an informed consent and short demographics survey before the focus group commenced. Focus groups were facilitated by graduate and undergraduate students with a man and woman facilitator at each focus group. Participants were provided with \$15 restaurant gift cards for their participation.

Each focus group followed a semi-structured guide. To commence the discussion, facilitators provided a brief overview about how romantic relationships form and suggested that *just talking* is a new trend among emerging adults. This prompt helped to initiate discussion and introduce the first question: "How would you personally define the term just talking as it relates to romantic relationships?" Other questions asked participants to consider "Why do you think people get involved in just talking?" and "How does technology play a role in just talking?" "In your opinion, is commitment an element of a just talking relationship?" Throughout the discussion, facilitators asked follow-up and probing

Table 1. Sample demographics.

	University 1 (n=21)		University 2 (n=31)		Total (N=52)	
	n/M	SD/%	n/M	SD/%	n/M	SD/%
Age	21.33	2.20	20.45	1.69	20.81	1.94
Sex						
Women	11	52.38	18	58.06	29	55.77
Men	10	47.62	13	41.94	23	44.23
Ethnicity						
White	16	76.19	23	74.19	39	75.00
Hispanic	3	14.29	5	16.13	8	15.38
African American	1	4.76	3	9.68	4	7.69
Asian American	1	4.76	0	0	1	1.92
Current relationship status						
In a romantic relationship with opposite sex partner	–	–	21	67.74	–	–
In a romantic relationship with same-sex partner	–	–	0	0	–	–
Not in a romantic relationship	–	–	10	32.26	–	–

Note. Relationship status data is missing for University 1 participants.

questions to seek clarity. The focus group discussions averaged 67 min ($SD = 6.04$) in length. At the discussion conclusion, member checking occurred in which the facilitator and co-facilitator asked the participants what they believed were some themes from their focus group discussion. These themes were written on a whiteboard and considered during the analysis. This member checking process occurred to help provide validity to the results.

Analysis

The audio data was transcribed, de-identified, and verified through the video data to ensure transcripts were accurate before analysis, resulting in 278 pages of data (or 104,058 total words). The transcripts were analyzed using a constructivist grounded theory approach that emphasizes individuals' definitions, meanings, and actions to highlight overall individual ideologies and beliefs (Charmaz, 2006, 2009, 2014; Creswell, 2007) to inform a theoretical foundation for understanding the purpose of just talking in emerging adult coupling practices. The secondary coders were not involved in any of the data collection processes to ensure a fresh and non-biased evaluation of the data. This was one of the steps taken to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the results.

The coders were all in their early 20s and consisted of one Latino, one Asian American, and the rest were white. All the coders knew of just talking and some experienced it themselves. Three graduate (three women) and three undergraduate (two women and one man) students were trained in initial and focused coding techniques from constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006, 2014) and analyzed each focus group transcript. The coding process of sifting, sorting, and grouping codes according to categories and themes consistent with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Codes were grouped into categories based on the research questions.

Coders independently read over all transcript responses and listened to the focus group audio through several iterations until they had become immersed in participant responses. Then they coded the data for themes whereby, a detailed word-by-word, line-by-line data evaluation of the data began (see Charmaz, 2006, 2014). The coders were asked to write memos on the side of the focus group transcripts and on separate pieces of paper in both the initial and focused coding phases. Charmaz (2006) clarified the importance of memo-writing when she said, "Memos catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions for you to pursue. Memo-writing creates an interactive space for conversing with yourself about your data, codes, ideas, and hunches" (p. 72).

Themes and substantive significance of data were determined through analyst triangulation (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2002). After coders performed initial coding, they met as a coding team to discuss and reflect on the initial codes they identified. Coders were then assigned to construct focused codes based on the discussion about initial codes. Once the coders had reached consensus, the coders met with the primary researchers who had also analyzed the transcripts to discuss the themes found across all coding teams for each research question, again using analyst triangulation to draw inductive conclusions about the emergent themes pertaining to the scope of the entire study as we examined themes across all research questions.

Positionality

As a student-led project, the focus group facilitators and six coding team members were undergraduate and graduate students from family science and couple and family therapy programs with a range of exposure to the idea of just talking to include a spectrum of insider and outsider perspectives on the phenomenon. Facilitator and coding team members represented members from both marginalized and majority racial/ethnic groups and religions (ranging from socially liberal to socially conservative). Authors on the paper include former facilitators for the project plus several additional authors who have been advisors on the project. The authors are all romantic relationship scholars and represent a range of perspectives on relationship development, several with expertise in gender and sexual minority populations. The authors of this paper are cisgender men and women in their 30s and 40s and are familiar with just talking, and one author had previously engaged in just talking.

Results

Through the grounded theory analysis, 11 themes emerged that were organized into three separate categories: the (1) conceptualization of just talking, (2) reasons for just talking, and (3) role of technology in just talking (see Table 2).

How Do Emerging Adult Men and Women Conceptualize Just Talking?

The participants explained that just talking is a (1) *pre-dating stage* that is characterized by (2) *ambiguity about commitment* and an (3) *unofficial romantic label* that allows emerging adults space for carefully wading into the dating pool.

Table 2. Inductively developed categories and themes about just talking.

Categories	Themes
Conceptualization of <i>Just Talking</i>	(1) Pre-dating
Reasons for <i>Just Talking</i>	(2) Ambiguity about commitment
	(3) Unofficial romantic label
	(4) Pressure to keep options open
The role of technology in <i>Just Talking</i>	(5) Protection from rejection
	(6) Testing the waters
	(7) Avoiding defining the relationship
	(8) Increases pool of potential partners
	(9) Comfortable frequent contact
	(10) Image crafting
	(11) Less effort required

Pre-Dating Stage

Participants described just talking as the stage of romantic relationship development right before a couple decides to become an “official” dating couple, and there seemed to be a consensus that just talking is different from casual efforts to get to know someone due to its intentional focus on exploring long-term romantic potential. For example, our participants identified just talking explicitly as “pre-dating,” “pre-relationship,” “pseudo dating” or an occurrence “before dating.” One participant reported that “just talking is to dating as courtship is to marriage.” Others described just talking as “on the verge of dating” or “basically the step before dating.” For example, one participant stated, “It’s a pre-dating stage kind of thing, you are 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.” These results conceptualize just talking as a unique relationship stage that takes place before dating. Our participants collectively indicated that just talking is an important step in the process of forming a romantic relationship and is a good way to get to know someone before committing.

Participants further distinguished just talking from hooking up and friends with benefits. For example, a participant explained that “... just talking is ‘I’m going to get to know you [and] possibly to date you’, whereas hooking up is like... ‘we’re just hooking up, we’re just having fun, there’s no potential relationship there...for me.’” Similarly, when distinguishing how just talking was different from friends with benefits, the participant explained, “I feel like friends with benefits would be like emotions removed; you’re just like having sex with someone.” Many participants agreed that hooking up and just talking relationships could transition into each other as people shifted levels of interest in something longer-term. One participant laid out potential alternatives if just talking does not lead to dating: “You usually talk to a girl, you get to know her and then either you’re going to date her, cut her off, or [be] strictly friends with benefits/hooking up.”

Unlike hooking up or friends with benefits, participants unanimously agreed that, as one participant put it, “sexual behavior isn’t necessarily part of the definition of just talking, but it can be.” Participants further discussed that whether sexual activity is involved depends on “what people are feeling,” “the level of how comfortable the person is with intimacy before they feel committed” or “the person’s morals and standards for themselves.” Overall, participants largely agreed that just talking is a stage before officially becoming a couple or “dating” that may include sex but doesn’t have to, and is for (mostly) the purpose of evaluating their potential as a romantic partner, whereas hooking up and friends with benefit interactions do not have that explicit purpose.

Ambiguity About Commitment

Based on the participants responses just talking may enable emerging adults to figure out what qualities in potential partners are most compatible with their needs and interests before getting into a committed relationship, but it can come with the challenge of navigating ambiguous and changing levels of commitment during this stage. Participants discussed how commitment during just talking changes depending on how well it is going, but that even deciding to just talk to someone in the first place requires some level of commitment. For example, a participant said, “I do think there’s got to be some sort of commitment. You have to take the time and effort to at least send them a text or, at most, schedule a date or something.” Another participant further clarified that just talking commitment is “...not commitment in the sense of, like, relationship commitment, [but it’s] like committing to [what] the just talking culture is. Like, if you’re just talking, you should be held to that.”

This sentiment that there was some level of commitment and investment needed to facilitate the just talking stage was common across focus groups, but there were varying views on whether it was acceptable to just talk to multiple people at the same time. Many participants expressed that whether someone was just talking to multiple people communicated the level of interest they had in increasing their commitment to any one person. For example, one participant said, “...if you’re talking to multiple people... then that’s kinda, you’re making it obvious that you aren’t really interested in one of these people.” Similarly, another participant expressed that because just talking can lead to dating, “you shouldn’t talk to other people... in a romantic way...because I’d feel like it’s...not necessarily cheating, but it’s wrong.”

Not knowing whether someone you’re just talking to is talking to other people was mentioned in several focus groups as a source of anxiety that wasn’t relieved unless commitment was clarified. A participant said “... you just...gotta keep your options open because you don’t know if they

have options as well, so you don't wanna get played." A participant explained that when people are just talking, they may "have exclusive interest in each other, but [are not] necessarily being obligated to each other." Another participant expanded by adding, "it can be exclusive...but it's like you still have options too." Although participants discussed how the lower level of commitment of the just talking stage is beneficial, they also discussed how ambiguity makes it difficult to know when just talking to multiple people is hurtful to the other person. For example, a participant wondered:

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.

As we expand on below, this variable commitment of just talking relationships seems to be a key feature that meets diverse needs during emerging adults' relationship development process.

Unofficial Romantic Label

Participants indicated the semi-committed nature of just talking relationships goes hand in hand with the intentional non-labeling of what they're doing as a "relationship." Because it has not been labeled as an official committed relationship, this participant explained that using the just talking label more accurately reflects the level of investment in this early relationship stage:

You have to see if you're compatible and so you have to just talk to them, simply, you have to just hang out with them in order to see if you can date and then be with them for a while. Or else, I mean, what's to say I can't walk out of the room and say do you wanna date me to a random person, see that person once in three weeks, and then we break up and it wasn't anything, just texting and hanging out once.

Participant responses suggest that just talking may provide emerging adults the opportunity to get to know potential partners without feeling bound by the social norms associated with dating. For example, a participant said:

You see someone who you're attracted to and you get a feel from them and so you try talking. Whether it's going to dinner, hanging out one on one, whether it's in a crowd, whether it's just texting each other, if you don't get a feel or a vibe from them then you stop the talking, there's no talking, but if you feel it and you see yourself wanting to be in a relationship with this person and you continue to just talk and you get to know them and then I feel like you kind of take the next step.

Participants explained that people in just talking relationships do not refer to each other in relationship terms which relieves pressure from

the behavioral expectations associated with those roles. For example, a participant said, “Because I guess boyfriend and girlfriend, like, the title comes with pressures so, just not having an official title takes off pressure.” As another participant explained this non-labeling may be related to confusion in this stage: “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.” Although participants expressed the ambiguity of this stage can be stressful, many expressed that intentionality and communication helped them navigate these pitfalls and take advantage of many of the benefits of this purposefully flexible pre-dating stage.

Reasons for Just Talking

Participants described a range of reasons they believed people engaged in just talking relationships that included both trying to avoid negative outcomes and promote positive outcomes for their personal well-being and relationships. Interestingly, some participants felt external (4) *pressure to keep their options open*, while others engaged in just talking to (5) *protect themselves from rejection* or (6) *test the waters* to assess whether the relationship was worth investing in long-term. Participants also expressed that some people get stuck in the just talking stage because they (7) *avoid defining the relationship* which can harm both partners.

Pressure to Keep Options Open

Some participants expressed that emerging adults may be keeping their options open because of messages that this is the time to explore, experiment, and simply have fun without being committed to someone. As one participant mentioned, just talking makes it easier to walk away and pursue opportunities:

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.

Participants also mentioned messages from family, friends and larger society that tell them they “shouldn’t settle down...these are their fun years.” Another participant explained:

I think society tells us what to do a lot.... And that’s why most people our age are running around, or you know, saying that ‘I’m just talking to five other people’. You know they have to keep their options open because society tells us that. technically we shouldn’t be married yet.”

Participants also mentioned that “...friends would tell you, like, ‘Hey, you know what, no, you’re too young’...” to be getting serious in relationships. Another participant said their family also expressed they should not get in serious relationships:

My family would ... be like, ‘Well, you’re so young, you don’t want to get tied down, like it’s your first year in college, you’re going to meet so many people’, so like, there was just like pressure from my family too.

Protection from Rejection

Participants also talked about using just talking as a strategy for avoiding the pain of rejection at various relationship stages. When first expressing interest in someone, participants perceived lower chances of being rejected if they ask to just talk with someone *vs.* the outright rejection that can happen if they jump right to asking someone out on a date. As a participant explained, current technology amplifies emerging adults’ perceived risk of embarrassment due to rejection:

Now with social media, if you get rejected, it could be everywhere. Like everybody could know like in 3.5 seconds that you just got rejected. You could you know, text your friends through group message, all six of them, and they all know, just like that.

Another participant expanded:

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.

Another instance where rejection is possible is when moving forward to pursue a defined relationship. Participants expressed that just talking with someone first helps reduce stress and increases their confidence that the other person will say “yes” when asked to make the relationship exclusive. As a participant explained:

Yeah, I’d say it’s easier because you don’t have that level, that fear almost...And that way you can get to know them better, you can like get to a stage where you’re more comfortable, where you know if they’ll say ‘yes’ or ‘no’, but... no one wants to be turned down, and I see just talking as like, you’re not going to get turned down for just talking.

Other participants mentioned that just talking allows them to take more time to assess a potential partner and address concerns to reduce the chances they’ll be left or betrayed once the relationship is more serious. For example, a participant touched on how emotional pain from previous relationships influenced why they use just talking:

It kind of covers your bases I guess; I've been cheated on twice now and she sunk our relationship. I'm just kinda of nervous now about trying to pursue relationships. Just talking really helps sometimes, so like I don't want to rush into this one, so it doesn't happen again or something else happens. It's just so I don't get hurt again.

Taking it slow to avoid their chances of getting hurt later in the relationship demonstrated a specific intentional use by participants to assess the potential red flags of a relationship before making it official and increasing barriers to ending it.

Testing the Waters

While some participants talked about engaging in just talking to avoid negative outcomes, others saw it as an opportunity to vet potential partners before entering a dating relationship. For example, one participant explained: "So, it's like really to protect yourself too because you're using it as a buffer between actually dating and getting to know someone." Accordingly, this pre-dating phase is used by some as a selective screening process to find compatible romantic partners by sorting through multiple potential romantic candidates. As one participant stated, "You're trying to rule out the crazy."

Other participants referred to the benefit of getting to know someone on a deeper level before dating because "you are looking for a potential partner to start the rest of your life [with]." More specifically, just talking may enable individuals to decide their level of compatibility before increasing their long-term investment. A participant explained that "if you're looking for something long-term, you're...testing the waters to see [if] this person is, like, somebody worth your time." Another participant expanded:

... 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.

Many participants indicated it was important to be cautious when determining relationship potential until they were ready to be committed to building a relationship with someone.

Avoiding Defining the Relationship

Although many participants viewed the low-level commitment of just talking as beneficial for assessing relationships to determine long-term

potential, others expressed it can lead to hurt feelings. For example, a participant explained:

I think just talking, if used correctly, is good because it is like a screening process, [but] in some people it shows great immaturity because you cannot get comfortable enough with someone to be dating them. You are just like, 'oh I am going to keep texting them for a while.'

Another participant stated that when people don't have intention to move the relationships forward, just talking becomes "having their cake and eating it too," implying getting the benefits of a committed relationship (e.g., sexual activity, someone to do things with) without feeling any obligation or commitment to that other person.

Some participants talked about how it's possible to get stuck in just talking because it's less demanding than a full relationship or it's comfortable to just keep doing things the same. For example, one participant said:

A lot of people stay there for months and months and months and then like, you finally get it together and like, 'Well, why did we take so long?' It's like, 'Well, I didn't know what, what to expect or anything.' So, you're just stuck there for a long time...I think that's one of the biggest negatives.

Another participant expanded on the negative aspect of being stuck in just talking:

... 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.

A focus group discussed how drawing out the just talking phase without clarifying what both people want early on and throughout just talking can lead to hurt feelings. One participant said, "But you get comfortable with [just talking] and you don't wanna ask like, "Is this a thing or not?" Because if they say 'no', you screwed that up. Right?" Another participant agreed and expanded:

...if you ask her that after six months it's gonna be awkward for a little bit. If you don't, like, say 'I still want to be friends', which you might not want to be, then... she's gonna feel a little betrayed because, like, she thought this was just a friend thing, and she was having a good time, and you turn it on its head. So, it's almost a little unfair to the girl actually, if you draw it out longer.

This theme highlights how participants felt that the ambiguity of just talking takes the intention to clarify and when people just slide through without communicating what they want or their own level of commitment as it changes, then people can get hurt.

Role of Technology in Just Talking

Participants repeatedly stated that technology was a primary reason and foundational aspect of just talking: As one participant explained, “I think just talking is almost here because of technology.” Another participant stated, “the foundation of just talking is social media.” Other participants explained how technology (e.g., smart phones, social media) has changed romantic relationship formation:

...before technology you didn't really talk to someone unless you took them out or you made specific plans to do something and so I think that's where the whole dating concept was...but now it's like we can do that without being right there.

Another participant said:

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.

Consistent with many other research studies (e.g., Brown, 2020), technology (8) *increases the pool of potential partners* and allows emerging adults to have (9) *comfortable frequent contact* at their fingertips (texting, social media, etc.) with potential romantic partners, which is unprecedented in the history of romantic relationship formation. Through mediated communication, participants indicated that many people in just talking relationship employed (10) *image crafting* in their social media and online dating profiles. Finally, participants expressed that (11) *less effort is required* to continue relationships that may not have continued with traditional dating due to the ease of access that technology affords.

Increases the Pool of Potential Partners

When discussing the number of potential partners available through social media, one participant mockingly stated, “there's only 4 billion of them.” With the increase in the number of potential partners, there is also a possibility to be just talking to more than one partner. One participant stated,

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

Participants noted that having this opportunity to talk to many people at one time can also lead to uncertainty about whether the person you are talking to is only talking to you or if they have other people in their

pool of partners. A participant reflected on their perspective of how this has changed over time:

I feel like you could tell better back then too. If you're talking to one person without social media, without technology and you're...they're making plans with you regularly, you can tell you're the only person that they're really, you know, partaking in conversations, hanging out. Nowadays you can text a thousand people at one time and no one knows, it's your phone, it's your privacy, and so it definitely plays a big impact in that.

Comfortable Frequent Contact

Although some *just talking* can be initiated after meeting someone in person, participants indicated many forms through social media. Various social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, Twitter, etc.) let emerging adults to send private messages, and even pictures or videos to each other, which participants said allows people to get to know each other in a way that is less pressure than face to face. One participant explained:

I think maybe it's the whole technology thing. So, we have access to- you know we can text people 24/7 basically...I guess sometimes 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...

Whether they are in class, at work, or at home, participants mentioned how technology makes the conversation less awkward and makes people more comfortable opening up to potential partners when they are unable or afraid to get to know each other in person. For example, a participant said:

When you do go face-to-face sometimes it can become awkward because you don't just talk about... like for me, I'm not antisocial but I am more flirtatious and more willing to talk about random things through text than in person.

Participants expressed some of this discomfort with face-to-face communication maybe because: "Communication skills now suck. Because of technology we don't normally talk to people face-to-face." Another participant in the same group provided an example of an interaction with a potential romantic interest who started talking to her in line at Chipotle: "Like, ...I didn't know like how to respond cause it was like so, like I wasn't prepared for it. Like over texting you have, like, time to like think about your response, but like in person you, like, panic."

Image Crafting

Participants also mentioned how using technology to communicate in just talking relationships allows for emerging adults to create a more attractive self-image or present themselves in a way they believe is more attractive.

One participant explained how individuals might want others to perceive them:

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.

Another participant stated how image-crafting using social media filters can complicate moving a just talking relationship from online to face-to-face:

People, I guess a lot of times, um, I don't know if guys do this as much as girls, but I will admit that I do, I definitely Photoshop all my pictures to make sure I look the best and have the bright filters and things like that and when you see a guy over the internet, they're obviously different in person, when a guy sees a girl over the internet and then they see them in person and they're like, 'Whoa, that's like not what I saw online.'

These quotes imply that using technology may allow emerging adults to finetune the image they present to potential partners to make a better impression than they might be able to in person, which can positively and negatively influence the process of getting to know someone.

Less Effort Required

Participants also discussed how expressing initial romantic interest in a person is easier than in the past: "Now it's just like behind your phone; people are being asked out through a text message... that just wasn't something that used to happen." Further, participants explained how technology reduces the effort required to continue just talking:

I think [technology] plays a huge role because you don't have to commit to hanging out with them, you can commit to texting them. When you're busy, you don't have to talk to them and when you want to tell them something, it's right there, in your hand. And also, it's easier to say stuff over the phone. So, if you have something serious you need to say, it's really easy to just text it rather than have to tell them in person. So, I mean, it's not ideal, but I think that's what our generation has really gone to is texting and communicating that way.

Based on the focus group discussions, the ability to connect with people so conveniently seems to be why many emerging adults use technology to facilitate their just talking relationships and learn about potential partners. One participant explained how he thinks social media and technology became the foundation of just talking:

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.

Although participants highlighted the benefits of using technology to facilitate just talking relationships, they also noted how this method of communication may not always be the best way to get to know potential partners because the content of some texts or messages may be misunderstood or misinterpreted. As explained by one of the participants:

That's the hardest part. You can misinterpret a text, see something differently, and that's where a lack of communication happens. Because you gotta have... a strong text game versus like back in the day, you just call somebody, you know, you hear their voice, you hear their tone of voice, you can really interpret how they, you know, say things.

The results of this theme suggest that without technology, just talking relationships would be harder to carry on: technology gives emerging adults the opportunity to reach out to each other whenever they want from wherever they want, as long as they have a cell phone or computer.

Discussion

Although the term “just talking” implies simple conversation, the emerging adults in our study suggest that just talking serves essential functions in their romantic lives and is anything but simple. Our findings add to the literature on the diverse relationship development pathways currently used by emerging adults. Our findings suggest that just talking is a potential relationship initiation mechanism heavily facilitated by technology use that provides a careful and protected way to get to know potential romantic partners but can be ambiguous and stressful if not navigated with intention and clear communication.

Just Talking as Pre-Dating

Although courtship behaviors designed to get to know someone before officially dating have occurred for decades, Wasserman (2023) proposed that just talking is a fundamental shift in the processes by which people get to know each other facilitated by technological advancement. Participants in our study overwhelmingly defined just talking as a pre-dating activity designed to screen potential romantic or sexual partners better before becoming more intimate or committed. Participants also noted how technology is an essential medium that facilitates the specific behaviors and ambiguity associated with just talking. Notably, many participants in our study discussed the intentionality behind just talking—it is distinct from hooking and friends with benefits with the primary goal of figuring out

what kind of relationship they want with each other. Similarly, Wasserman et al. (2022) found that emerging adults in their focus groups distinguished just talking from college hookup culture due to the potential for a serious emotional connection *vs.* hooking up, which is based on casual sexual interactions without deeper connection.

Based on participants responses, just talking appears to be the extended process that may precede defining the relationship or DTR (Knopp et al., 2020). Just talking has a lot of nuance and complexity to it that implies an ongoing screening and pre-dating process that arguably culminates in DTR. This longer process stands in contrast to descriptions of DTR as a single defining conversation. Also, unlike DTR, just talking has a fluidity where the intention to explore a potential relationship can involve sexual behaviors but is not necessary before DTR. Further research is needed to link just talking and DTR as our findings on just talking could inform understanding of the negative (i.e., more cheating in DTR relationship) and numerous positive (e.g., better relationship quality) associated with DTR conversations (Knopp et al., 2020). It could be that the dynamics during just talking have an impact on the later outcomes following a DTR conversation when emerging adults move into a more committed relationship (Busby et al., 2013).

Perhaps emerging adults use just talking as one way they safeguard themselves from the potential hurt of rejection that could result from more direct ways of initiating relationships (i.e., asking someone out, going on dates), to test the waters with potential partners, and to keep their options open as a way to avoid repeating the hurt they had experienced in past relationships. Emerging adults' motivation to just talk to avoid hurt in romantic relationships is supported by research highlighting the impact romantic relationships can have on emerging adults' well-being and mental health (Gomez-Lopez et al., 2019). Further research is needed to understand the beliefs and behaviors associated with just talking that may impact emerging adults' mental health and later romantic relationship quality and stability.

This fear of hurt from romantic relationships may stem from a history of familial divorce (Willoughby et al., 2020). Although many emerging adults strongly value and desire marriage (Willoughby, 2021), they may be hesitant to make the commitment due to exposure to their parent's relationship instability (Amato & Patterson, 2017). In this way, participant responses suggest that just talking may enable emerging adults to slow down the process of getting to know each other and provide more time to evaluate whether a potential partner is worth the risk of emotional attachment. Participants descriptions of testing the waters and keeping their options open support that emerging adults are motivated to be intentional about who they commit to, due to witnessing divorce in their

own families. It is important for future research to explore variations in definitions of, and motivations to engage in, just talking based on factors, such as age, gender, sexual orientation, and culture in larger diverse quantitative samples. For example, research has identified specific ways emerging adults' hookup motives differ based on sexual orientation and community context (Snapp et al., 2024).

Ambiguity and Commitment During Just Talking

Stanley and Rhoades (2009) proposed that commitment is an antidote to the anxiety of relationship uncertainty, and the results from our focus groups aligned with this idea. Although participants described just talking as a purposefully ambiguous stage, they did not expect that ambiguity to last and described the micro-steps toward commitment or dissolution that may occur. Participants largely agreed that just talking partners first commit to put in the effort to just talk, often beginning with texting or communicating through social media and apps followed by hanging out in person as a desire to pursue a relationship increases. Participants also reported considering how many people a person was just talking to as a reflection of whether they were seriously considering a person for a relationship or not. Participants' responses were mixed regarding whether they only ever talked to just one person at a time or whether they talked to several people before committing to exploring a relationship's potential with one person. This may reflect subjective personal ethical standards about how one should treat people, and perhaps more specifically people they are engaging with in early-stage casual romantic and sexual interactions.

Enacting these commitment steppingstones would require emerging adults to communicate their perception of the status of the relationship throughout the process of just talking or find alternative ways to evaluate the evolving commitment levels. For example, participants indicated that they kept their levels of commitment low and options open because it's possible that the other person might be just talking to other people. This aligns with recent research on heterosexual relationship development highlighting how alternative monitoring (paying attention to romantic alternatives) and asymmetrical commitment (where one partner is more committed to the relationship than the other) are associated with increases in conflict, infidelity, and breakup (Ritchie et al., 2021; Stanley et al., 2017). Participants discussed the evolution of commitment and reduction in anxiety as people spent more time together and evaluated the relationship potential, culminating the just talking phase with moving into a formal relationship with official language (e.g., dating, boyfriend, girlfriend, partner) or ending it. Further research is needed to explore heterogeneity in the indicators emerging adults use to assess whether the just talking

phase is progressing toward a romantic relationship or dissolution across demographic groups.

Just Talking as an Alternative to Dating

Counter to our expectations, participants reported messages from multiple sources that they should not be dating or engaging in committed relationships during emerging adulthood, potentially reflecting larger cultural norms for college students that this is a time for exploration and self-focused development (e.g., Konstam, 2019). Additionally, as mobility increases and young people become less tied to social support structures, the dominant cultural ideology that it is necessary to find “the one” or their “soulmate” to be happy (Arnett, 2024; Wilcox & Dew, 2010) may make the task of finding a long-term committed relationship feel daunting. Accordingly, just talking may be seen as an acceptable means of screening potential partners for soulmate material before investing in a more committed relationship stage that might end. We present these hypotheses cautiously as previous research has found cultural differences in the centering of romantic relationships and marriage in adult life by college attendance, racial-ethnic identity, religiosity, sexual orientation, and gender identity (e.g., Cherlin, 2020; Ueker, 2014). Accordingly, more research is needed to identify the diverse social messages that encourage and discourage just talking for emerging adults from diverse backgrounds.

While many emerging adults may manage the normative anxiety associated with beginning relationships by increasing efforts to carefully screen potential partners and transition into relationships with intentional evaluation, our results indicate that others may seek to perpetually stay in just talking relationships and avoid labeling these relationships indefinitely. Participants mentioned several negative impacts of this sliding instead of deciding through just talking (i.e., moving through relationship transitions without fully considering the implications *vs.* deliberative evaluation of relationship transitions for alignment with goals and values; see Stanley et al., 2006), including lost opportunity to find alternative partners who may be a better fit, feelings of betrayal if partners’ motivations for just talking were misaligned and undisclosed, and avoidance of clarifying commitment by people too afraid they will get hurt if they try.

The extent to which partners are motivated to remain in an ambiguously defined relationship may be driven, in part, by feeling less romantically attached to their partner (Stanley et al., 2010). Specifically, anxious attachment can be defined as being distrustful of a relationship while also continually yearning for further closeness with a partner, whereas people demonstrating avoidant attachment yearn for closeness with a partner but fear becoming too close and therefore do not easily express warmth,

affection, or love (Shaver et al., 1988). For example, partners who just talk to “lessen the blow” may feel insecure in their relationships and thus avoid clarifying ambiguity and transitioning to a more committed stage of the relationship to protect themselves from the heartache of a relationship ending that they have invested in and “avoid feeling vulnerable for a longer period of time.” For the anxiously attached individual, sustained relationship ambiguity may be threatening, but the fear of driving a partner away by their efforts to clarify the status of the relationship may prove a greater threat, especially if their just talking partner is avoidant (Stanley et al., 2010). More research is needed specifically exploring how attachment styles may be differentially associated with the various motivations driving just talking behaviors.

Unfortunately, based on our findings, although it may seem that a just talking has “all the perks of dating, but none of the consequences,” remaining in a just talking relationship without clear communication of intentions may leave others who yearn for more with “a broken heart” and feeling “played.” Additionally, although literature indicates that heterosexual and LGBTQ+ partners may construct and define commitment in similar ways (see Pollitt et al., 2022), displays of commitment to a developing relationship may be a protective factor for emerging adults who experience minority stress due to marginalized identities they or their partners hold (e.g., Gamarel et al., 2019). Accordingly, more research is needed to understand common positive and negative psychosocial outcomes for diverse populations of emerging adults who engage in this process and the external (e.g., parental expectations, discrimination) and internal forces (e.g., attachment) that motivate emerging adults to stay in just talking relationships perpetually.

Technology Facilitates Just Talking

It was also clear our participants felt that multiple aspects of just talking have been shaped by the ubiquitous nature of technology in the lives of recent cohorts of emerging adults, thus reducing barriers to finding just talking partners, easing their anxiety over how to communicate, and making it easier to maintain just talking relationships. This aligns with recent research outlining how couples’ relationship commitment and intimacy are affected by technology with increased relationship intimacy emerging through these mediated communicative interactions (Campbell & Murray, 2015; Hertlein & Blumer, 2014). Specifically, anxiously attached individuals may benefit from the ability to take the time to craft their reactions to potential significant others through text or email to manage conflict and the image they are presenting (e.g., Sharabi & Dykstra-DeVette, 2019). Furthermore, the increased use of technology and social media may create

an environment where screening processes for potential partners can take place more conveniently (Tokunaga, 2016).

Participants in our study also indicated that technology-mediated relationship development processes may also have some drawbacks, namely that the screening process may be based partially on superficial characteristics or an image of a person that is different from behavior partners can expect from each other face-to-face. Further, in line with the voices of our participants, some scholars have noted that having too many options for potential partners can make it more difficult to commit (Stanley, 2016) and can potentially lead individuals to feel overwhelmed, less content, and ultimately less satisfied (see Schwartz, 2016). Additionally, the ambiguity and potential for mixed agendas during just talking may require clear communication to navigate, which can be more difficult through technology-based communication (texting, Snapchat, Twitter, etc.), making it more difficult to clearly assess and communicate levels of intimacy and commitment. More research is needed on the use of mediated communication in just talking relationships and the evolution of technology use in relationships that progress to more emotionally intimate stages. Further research could identify more specifically how technology facilitates the various aspects of just talking relationships.

Strengths and Limitations

As one of the first studies to explore the role of just talking in the relationship development process of emerging adults, our qualitative approach allowed us to identify a range of characteristics and motivations for just talking from undergraduate emerging adults at a rural and urban university. Given these strengths, the results of the current study should be interpreted in the context of several limitations. First, the focus group method builds consensus which helped us arrive at a clear definition and conceptualization of why emerging adults may just talk but does not allow for in-depth exploration of diversity in individual or minority group experiences. Accordingly, since our sample is predominantly white, we focused on cis-gender emerging adults and have limited information on other aspects of participants' identities and experiences (e.g., sexual orientation, religiosity, relationship history), more research is needed to explore variability in just talking experiences and motivations for emerging adults from diverse backgrounds and identities. Additionally, although participants disclosed a wide range of relationship histories that informed their experience, more research is needed to identify how the number of past romantic partners, direct experience with just talking, and age at when they began dating influences emerging adults' perceptions of just talking and relationship progression.

Accordingly, more exploration is to capture diversity in just talking conceptualizations and experiences since communication styles and beliefs about initiating romantic and sexual relationships may vary across and within cultural groups (i.e., emerging adults who identify with marginalized sexual, gender, racial, and ethnic groups; live in rural *vs.* urban contexts; are not enrolled in college; and engage in consensual non-monogamous relationships). Additionally, as technology use patterns change across time, research will be needed to understand the presence and role of just talking across the lifespan. More research is also needed with longitudinal or retrospective data to understand the impact of prior just talking experiences on subsequent mental and relationship health outcomes.

Implications

The results of our study have substantial implications for educators, clinicians, and other helping professionals serving emerging adults. First and foremost, our results offer a starting point for common language and understanding of just talking and its many components. For example, if an emerging adult in therapy mentions a current person they are talking to, the therapist may have a general understanding that this person may not be considered an exclusive partner, could presently be within a screening period with the client, and may be using a variety of mediums for connecting. Overtly discussing motivations and rationale behind engaging in just talking patterns with others, may assist emerging adults to reduce ambiguity in their relational lives and thus provide clarity, purpose, and direction within their relational decision making. However, as indicated within the present study, with just talking being purposely ambiguous in many ways, we encourage helping professionals to assist emerging adults to clarify their purpose for just talking, expectations during just talking relationships, relationship assessment criteria, and how they can best communicate those expectations and their own levels of commitment to just talking partners.

Further, with ambiguity, frustration with desired outcomes, and other potentially troublesome dimensions of just talking, clinicians and emerging adult clients may find clarity in therapeutic modalities that promote authentic communication practices and problem solving. For example, Satir Experiential Family Therapy (SEFT; Satir & Baldwin, 1983) emphasizes effective communication practices to improve individual self-esteem while also improving connection, balance, problem solving, and trust within relationships. SEFT could be involved in helping coach an emerging adult to improve skills related to communication to assist them in more clearly offering intentions, desires, and needs within a given relationship (Ghanbari

Hashemabadi et al., 2020). Additionally, SEFT offers a lucid map for clinicians and clients to add clarity, structure, and authenticity in relationships. More specifically, clinicians may find it beneficial to explore with clients engaging just talking relationships problematic communication styles, such as placating, blaming, computing, and distracting as well as the ramifications of such approaches. Further, by clinicians promoting congruent communication, as SEFT posits, it could potentially reduce the ambiguity that is often present in these types of relationships. Reducing the ambiguity may reduce stress and frustration while improving individual self-esteem and the likelihood of connection, satisfaction, and success within the relationship (Satir, 1988).

Other clinical modalities, such as Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for Couples (Epstein & Baucom, 2000), Gottman Method Couples Therapy (Gottman Institute, 2024), and Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT; Johnson, 2004), could also be beneficial for those navigating the complexities of just talking as they emphasize unambiguous communication. Further, these approaches uniquely build individual confidence in oneself, a critical component in navigating just talking relationships. Lastly, these modalities value the individual and complex systems and relationships that the individual is a part of. This systemic understanding is important as it may help the emerging adult better explore their own unique needs and goals within a relationship and assist them in exploring and valuing others' unique needs and goals.

Additionally, as commonly found in intake assessments (McHenry et al., 2018), results of the present study posit that a simple question regarding relationship status with answers, such as single, dating, engaged, or married may not sufficiently capture an individual's present romantic relationship involvement. Many participants indicated that just talking being a place between single and in a dating relationship or "pre-dating" and can be occurring with multiple people, it may be advantageous for helping professionals to include just talking. The present study also offers expanded dimensions for helping professionals to consider when treating or serving emerging adults. For example, results indicated that many emerging adults engage in just talking behaviors to avoid commitment and/or rejection. For helping professionals treat mental or social health concerns it may be advantageous to understand how these reasons to engage in just talking are indicative of, or furthering, an individual's presenting concerns. Helping emerging adults clarify their motivations behind and expectations for engaging in just talking relationships and communicating them clearly with potential partners could go a long way in reducing adverse emotional, relational, and physical health outcomes for all involved.

Conclusion

Emerging adults navigate cultural acceptance of diverse pathways into, out of, and through romantic relationships. Our results suggest just talking has emerged as a prevalent pre-dating relationship experience that is viewed as distinct from friends with benefits, 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.

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