

# Where Have All the Good Dates Gone? Emerging Adults Beliefs and Perceptions of ‘Just Talking’ in Romantic Relationships

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## Introduction

Emerging adulthood is a time of life characterized by romantic relationship decision-making and increased attention towards finding a long-term partner (Arnett, 2024). The vast majority of emerging adults (18-to-29-year-olds) use this time for romantic and sexual exploration with long-term ambitions for committed relationships and marriage (e.g., Willoughby, 2021).

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, scholars note that the pathway to committed relationships and marriage has become increasingly ambiguous (Knopp et al., 2020; Stanley et al., 2016). Contemporary emerging adult relationships have fewer clear markers of relationship progression and commitment (Stanley et al., 2010) and extensive use of technology to facilitate sexual and romantic experiences (see Olmstead, 2020).

Unfortunately, current ambiguity in 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). This ambiguity is complicated by emerging adults' constant access to smart phones and social media.

## Previous 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).

Building on the foundation of the qualitative study, this second study further explored the emergent phenomenon in modern romantic relationship formation called *just talking*. Quantitative data was collected from 655 emerging adult (18-29 years old) participants. Men and women differed on their endorsement of just talking as distinct from dating, the level of commitment involved in just talking, and preference for just talking versus dating someone

## Method

### Participants

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

Through the steps of qualitative analysis 11 unique themes were generated and the following research questions:

### Research Questions:

RQ1: How do emerging adults conceptualize just talking?

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

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

## Results

### Pre-Dating

“I think I agree with what she said about how it's a pre-dating stage kind of thing, you're kind of just getting to know them on more of a friend level and then it leads them to more of an intimate level, and then after that it's like dating.”

### Screening Process

“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 want to 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.”

### Avoidance of Commitment

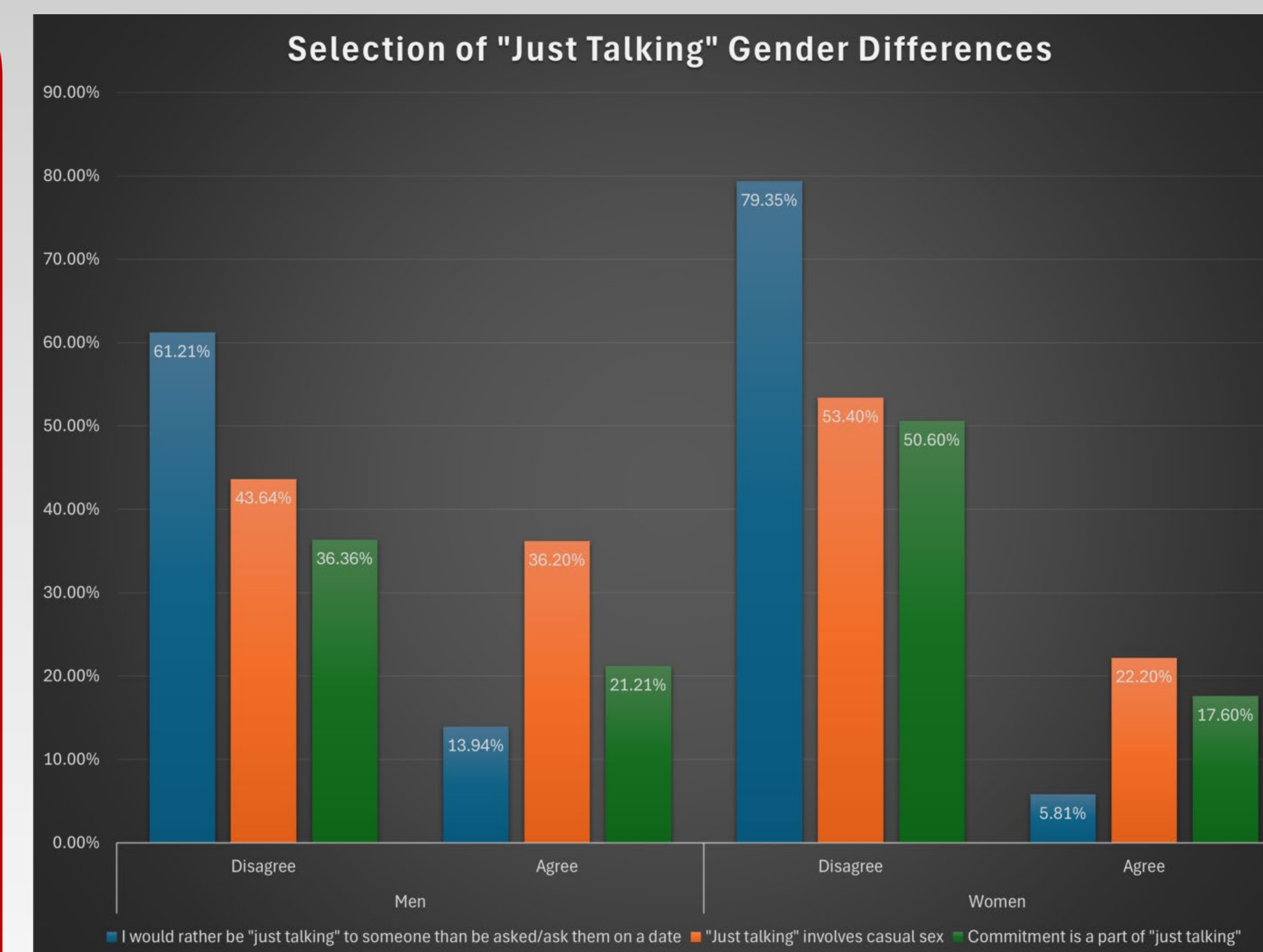
“People don't want that entire commitment so, they just talk to somebody. So many people now are like ‘oh I'm afraid to get into a relationship because I don't want to get hurt’ but they still talk to someone. You know, label it as talking but it's the same thing, like they're exclusive and can't talk to other people. People may say there dating and there like ‘no were just talking’ but it's basically the same thing.”

### Fear of Rejection

“It's a fear of rejection for a lot of people. It's like they don't want to just go up to that person and be like ‘hey do you want to go out on a date?’ 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.”

### Less Pressure

“If you have not been in a relationship for a while or if you have just recently gotten out of a relationship, ‘just talking’ is the time to ease back into the relationship. It is telling the other person “I like you, but I want to take things slow and see if I can see a relationship forming anytime soon.”



### Relationship Potential

“Just talking to me means that it is very clear that there are mutual romantic feelings on both ends but they haven't been established yet. It is usually a step towards a committed relationship, but not always. Sometimes it is just a way to keep things casual and not be committed to just one person.”

### Keeping Options Open

“I think a lot of people are scared to commit...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.”

### Constant Communication

“I think maybe it's the whole technology thing. So, we have access to you know we can text people 24/7 basically and that's kind of a barrier I guess because seeing them in person so 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, you know stuff like that.”

### Less Effort Required

“I think it 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”

### Image Crafting

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

### Increases Pool of Potential Partners

“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.”

Scan for quantitative results



## Discussion & Conclusion

Through the themes that emerged, we found that the just talking pathway to relationship formation in emerging adults is heavily rooted in the use of technology. Although just talking may provide an opportunity to screen for potential committed partners, the great ambiguity and mixed agendas facilitated by heavy technology-based communication (texting, Snapchat, Twitter, etc.) may make it difficult to get to know who the other person really is and clearly transition to a committed relationship.

Consistent with the theory of Sliding versus Deciding developed Stanley, Rhoades, Markman (2006), emerging adults should be intentional and thoughtful in their decision making within romantic relationships, especially when it comes to just talking behavior. Research has focused on hooking up and “friends with benefits” without examining the process often preceding these interactions. This study has important implications for educators, researchers and clinicians that work with the emerging adult.

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