



What Are College Students Talking About When They Say They're "Just Talking?"

Melissa Hardesty¹ , Sayre E. Wilson², Leora Wasserman³, Sarah Young⁴ , Sean Massey⁵, and Ann Merriwether⁶

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Abstract

The phrase “just talking” is ubiquitously used by emerging adults to describe amorous interactions. Despite the prevalence of this phrase in public discourse, little is known about what *just talking* means and whether it is simply popular slang for longstanding relationship patterns or marks a shift in romantic and sexual norms and behavior. We surveyed undergraduate students at a mid-sized university about *just talking*, then conducted focus groups to better contextualize the phenomenon. Participant responses were coded inductively and interpreted in the historical context of American courtship, contemporary social norms on campus, the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood, and shifting patterns of everyday interaction brought about by smartphone technology. We propose that *just talking* is a veiled courtship behavior that denies the intimacy it builds thereby meeting emerging adults’ needs for emotional intimacy in a social environment where speaking frankly about emotional connections and seeking stable romantic partnerships are stigmatized.

Keywords

romantic relationships, intimate relationships, emerging adulthood, hookup culture, emerging adulthood, courtship, dating

Introduction

The history of sex and romance in the United States shows that sexual norms are co-constitutive with social environments (Bogle, 2007; Garcia et al., 2012) and that people align the words they use to describe romantic or sexual interactions with current trends. Recent research on relationships has uncovered the colloquialism “just talking” when adolescents and emerging adults are describing amorous interactions and relationships with others (Powell et al., 2021; Redmond, 2018). On the surface, this phrase tracks contemporary research regarding the non-committal nature of sexual and romantic intimacy among emerging adults. For several decades, researchers have characterized sexual behavior on college campuses as a manifestation of hookup culture, wherein students say that they prefer casual, non-committed sexual relationships to exclusive and emotionally-intimate romantic partnerships (Garcia et al., 2012; Hollis et al., 2022; Paul et al., 2000). Studies consistently show that most college students engage in casual sexual encounters with and without penetration during their college careers with repeat partners, acquaintances, and unknown individuals (Blayney et al., 2018; Hollis et al., 2022; Thorpe et al., 2021). Taken together, quantitative measurements of student sexual behavior and qualitative assessments of their perspectives on sex and romance suggest that many college students prioritize casual sexual interactions over committed romantic partnerships (Redmond, 2018).

In a subculture that shirks commitment and emotions, *just talking* seems like an apt way to describe a sincerely casual interaction; the phrase pithily deflects accusations that one is emotionally invested in another or that one is headed down a path to commitment (Berntson et al., 2014; Garcia et al., 2012; Thorpe & Kuperberg, 2021). However, much like the term “hookup,” the ambiguity of *just talking* prompted us to ask what this phrase means, how it is implemented, and why someone would say they are just talking to someone instead of using more familiar words like, “hookup,” “casual dating partner,” or “friends with benefits.”

¹Department of Social Work, Binghamton University, Binghamton, NY, USA

²Bouvé College of Health Sciences, Northeastern University, Boston, MA, USA

³Hillel at Drexel, Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA, USA

⁴Weill Department of Medicine, Division of General Internal Medicine, Cornell University, New York, NY USA

⁵Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Binghamton University, Binghamton, NY, USA

⁶Department of Psychology, Binghamton University, Binghamton, NY, USA

Corresponding Author:

Melissa Hardesty, Department of Social Work, Binghamton University, 67 Washington St, Binghamton, NY 13902, USA.

Email: hardesty@binghamton.edu

When this research project began, we could not identify a single peer-reviewed study about *just talking*. In 2021, Powell and colleagues published a survey study about *just talking* and found that a considerable proportion of their respondents had heard of the phrase; many regarded it as a subset of *friends with benefits*, and most considered it to be less physically and emotionally intimate than *dating*. Our own two-phase study of *just talking*, which was conducted at the same time as the Powell et al. study, echoes many of their findings while drawing on the capacities of interpretive qualitative research to articulate more fully how emerging adults make sense of *just talking* in context. As we will show, a deeper dive into how today's college students navigate and develop interpersonal relationships through the practice of *just talking* tells a different story of college culture than that described by the commonly used adage, "no strings attached."

Background

The Rise and Reign of Sexual Intimacy

Fifteen years have now elapsed since academics first began documenting hooking up as the dominant mode of sexual interaction on college campuses. However, the slang use of the phrase "hooking up" can be traced as far back as the 1980s, suggesting that the phenomenon was in the making long before it was operationalized by social scientists (Bogle, 2007; Eble, 1996). Like the rituals of romantic and sexual interaction that preceded it—*going steady*, *dating*, and *calling* (Bailey, 1989)—hooking up is a product of the historical-cultural context in which it is enacted. Hookup culture is thought to have emerged due to a confluence of factors—increased social acceptance of non-marital sexual activity, a campus party culture characterized by alcohol-infused, mixed-sex socialization, and delayed marriage and childbearing among college-going and educated young adults (Bogle, 2007; Garcia et al., 2012).

The impetus to experience college as it is depicted in popular culture is strong. Proximal observations of peers at fraternities, house parties, and bars may lead young adults to conclude that traditional monogamous relationships hinder one's participation in college culture (Berntson et al., 2014). In fact, the average college student overestimates the frequency of hooking up among their peers (Testa et al., 2020), and students who forgo the behavior altogether, even if voluntarily, report feeling lonely, isolated, and "weird" (Wade, 2017, Chapter 6). Many students report having fear of missing out, or FOMO, when it comes to engaging in party and hookup culture (Przybylski et al., 2013; Riordan et al., 2015; Rozgonjuk et al., 2020). FOMO is perpetuated by social media posts from peers publicizing their experiences, enhancing normative beliefs that college students just aren't supposed to be getting romantically involved with anyone. Therefore, hooking up is not a mere descriptor of what many people do; it infuses the social scene, structuring

conversations and interactions beyond parties and leisure activities, telling people what they ought to be doing and feeling. On the college campus of recent decades, casual sex is conventional (Freitas, 2013).

Placed in historical context, hooking up codifies a normative pattern of interaction between unattached, would-be lovers and has generated intergenerational angst due to its ruptures with prior social etiquette (Armstrong et al., 2010). The most jarring of these breaks is the expectation that sexual intimacy ought to take place in the absence of emotional intimacy (Bogle, 2007). While Baby Boomers changed the landscape of intimacy in the 1960s and 1970s by embracing premarital sex, most did not abide by the hippie ethic of free love and instead used emotional intimacy to gauge the appropriate degree of sexual intimacy in a given relationship. Sociologist Ira Reiss, reporting on data from a 1967 study of young adults, described widespread condemnation of promiscuity and acceptance of premarital sex when it occurred within a loving, monogamous relationship—a phenomenon he dubbed "premarital sex with affection" (Allyn, 2016, p. 99). Similarly, Martin Whyte's survey of brides in three successive cohorts found that rates of premarital sex were twice as high among women who married between 1965 and 1984 than among the prewar brides; however, premarital sexual activity in the postwar cohort occurred almost exclusively with eventual husbands in the context of a steady relationship. Whyte dubbed this shift "the intimacy revolution" (Bogle, 2007, p. 19). In contrast, commitment and emotional connection are anathema in hookup culture. The popular euphemism "catching feelings" likens emotional connection to being infected by an invisible, undesirable virus (LeFebvre & Carmack, 2022; Wade, 2017). According to its critics, hookup culture is not simply a move in the liberalization of sex, a morphing of prior mating rituals to fit the moment; it marks the very termination of those rituals (Freitas, 2013).

To fully understand this shift, one must understand it in its historical and cultural context. As early as 1989, Beth Bailey described courtship as an old-fashioned word typically used to retrospectively characterize any sequence of ritualized behavior patterns that culminate in a marriage proposal (pg. 6). Sociologist Willard Waller agreed with this restricted definition of courtship when he dubbed dating at Penn State University in the 1920s and 1930s—an emergent phenomenon at the time—a "dalliance relationship" because it rarely led to marriage (Bogle, 2008, p. 14). Bailey expanded the definition of courtship in her own study of 21st century practices to include all forms of *wooing* regardless of whether they end in marriage; her justification was that temporary dalliances, relationships, and interactions had become a commonplace precursor to marriage, inevitably shaping those interactions that did end in matrimony (Bailey, 1989, pg. 6). Sure enough, the failure to participate in dalliance relationships or hookup culture in the 21st century is now stigmatized among young adults, many of whom will go on to get married. Though Bailey's conceptualization of courtship as *wooing* was

informed by the rise of dating in the mid 20th century, social practices that preceded dating and that had marriage as their ultimate end goal often did not culminate in a marriage between the parties involved.

For example, from the late 19th to early 20th centuries, *calling* was the predominant mode of socialization between young men and women, and marriage was the desired outcome. Calling was usually initiated by a young woman's older female relatives, who would invite an eligible man to visit the woman in her house. If she accepted his call (she might pretend to be unavailable) the two would talk in a parlor or other private space in the house, albeit under the supervision of relatives (Bogle, 2008). Notably, calling was an activity, not a relationship status, as young people could get to know several people before finding a suitable marriage partner. Nevertheless, marriage was calling's implicit end goal.

As we noted above, dating marked such a profound break with prior rituals of mixed-sex interaction that Waller did not consider it to be true courtship. Like contemporary critics of hookup culture, Waller condemned dating as an exploitative mode of thrill-seeking that sullied the serious business of finding a mate; he viewed dating as a means for men to gratify their sexual needs and women to procure money and gifts (Bogle, 2007). The *rating and dating* system first described by Waller, and later by Bailey was oriented towards attaining popularity among peers rather than finding a marriage partner, or even a companionable date. Unlike the supervised, private ritual of *calling*, dating took place in public, where one was sure to be seen and judged by peers. Rating and dating was followed by *going steady* in the wake of World War II, when men were scarce on college campuses and those returning from war found the popularity-seeking ritual of dating frivolous (Bogle, 2008). Though none of these historical configurations of courtship were sure to lead to marriage, dating was disruptive because it explicitly decoupled marriage and wooing. Several decades later, premarital sex marked a second decoupling—this time between sexual intimacy and marriage. All of these constellations of interaction still fit Bailey's definition of courtship. The third rupture marked by hooking up is more difficult to square because many who engage in it deny the importance of emotions. One is faced with the philosophical question of whether apathetic sexual intimacy counts as a form of wooing, is a permutation of wooing, or constitutes its termination.

Of course, dominant modes of courtship detailed in research literature may not apply to subgroups and subcultures within a population. For example, *calling* was not a feasible courtship activity for people without a parlor or front porch, and *dating* was not a widespread phenomenon among African Americans even while it was widely practiced among middle-class white adolescents in the 1920s and 1930s (Jackson et al., 2011). Dickinson found that courtship differences between black and white adolescents decreased with desegregation (1975). More recently, Jackson et al. found greater gender differences among African Americans than among white

respondents in perceptions of courtship behaviors (2011). In addition, research on queer courtship suggests that some members of the LGBTQ community consciously disrupt normative, gendered courtship behaviors (Lamont, 2017). Notably, the end goal of traditional courtship, marriage, was not legally available to same-sex couples in the United States until 2015; the ramifications of this momentous policy change have yet to be fully apprehended. Participation in hookup culture during college is also impacted by student residential status—commuter students who live with family members are less likely to enact normative hookup behaviors—and race and social class (Allison & Risman, 2014). These findings suggest differences in the uptake of dominant cultural norms across subgroups during the same historical period and over time as macro-level social structures and local social practices change in tandem with one another.

Literature detailing shifts in the forms and norms of sex and romance is relatively sparse between the sexual revolution and the ascendance of hookup culture in the 2000s (Bogle, 2007). Presumably, dating or going steady was slowly eclipsed by hookup culture in the course of this forty-year span. Whyte identified a change in sexual behaviors among young adults in 1965 (1990), and several scholars observed that formal dating had been replaced by informal partying at houses and bars by the 1970s and 1980s (Horowitz, 1987; Murstein, 1980; Strouse, 1987). But as Bogle observed, scholars continued to study “dating” until the turn of the century and seemed to have missed the normative shift in college romantic and sexual practices, aberrantly writing research questions that asked students about *dating* while assuming that the customs of dating were still relevant on campus for several decades after traditional dating declined. The term “dating” endures in academic writing even today; a database search for journal articles using the phrase “dating college” restricted to recent years yields literature about “dating violence” and “online dating,” but these studies do not define the word dating, implying that its meaning is stable; in effect, they use the term as a stand-in for “romantic” or “sexual” relationship. This tracks with research showing that students still use the term “dating” but not to describe a dominant pattern of partnership formation. Instead “dating” is usually used to refer to an existing, exclusive relationship or to describe the person one brings to a formal occasion, such as a dance (Bogle, 2007). In other words, dating went from being a social practice meant to woo or gain popularity to describing a social role or status with little emphasis on how one comes to occupy that role. Changes in the use of a familiar term, accompanied by the appearance of new terms, such as “hooking up” or “just talking” complicate efforts to study and understand romance and sexuality; new language may indicate a new constellation of behavior and meaning, or may simply be a novel way of talking about long-standing practices.

Moreover, scholarship on hookup culture tends to focus on embodied social practices on campus without accounting for the major technological shifts that have taken place between 1960, when the birth control pill was introduced, and now. Instead scholars describing romantic/sexual practices on

college campuses tend to cite economic forces as the impetus for downplaying commitment. For instance, hookup culture has been theorized as an offshoot of the historically-recent developmental stage dubbed emerging adulthood (Garcia et al., 2012). Psychologist Jeffery Arnett identified emerging adulthood at the turn of the 21st century and viewed it as a product of economic constraints that require young adults to undergo nearly a decade of education and job training in order to acquire the economic and social independence emblematic of full adulthood in Western culture (Arnett, 2000). Absent the economic stability to build an independent family life, the reasoning goes, sexually mature young adults are suspended in a prolonged phase of social adolescence during which they engage in casual sex to meet sexual needs while forestalling the obligations that come with committed partnerships. Shulman and Connolly proposed adding an additional stage of romantic development to capture the competing tasks twenty-something adults have to manage before they feel comfortable settling into a stable romantic relationship (2013). While Arnett's theory of emerging adulthood helps contextualize delays in economic independence and long-term relationship formation among young adults, it does not address the most profound technological shifts during the first decades of the twenty-first century—the rise of the internet, smartphone technology, and constant global connectivity—all of which impact the form and content of interpersonal communications. If changing gender norms, the automobile, and the birth control pill ushered the shift from a private, marriage-centered culture to a public, no-strings-attached hookup culture, what are the ramifications of a technology that allows people to be public in private and private in public?

Electronic Communication and Connection

Electronic communication and social media have become a daily and primary method of interaction and connectedness for most of the United States population, a trend that began with the manufacture of cell phones in the 1970s and exploded with increased internet access at the turn of the 20th century, followed by the introduction of smartphone technology and high-speed networks to support the rapid transmission of pictures, videos, and location data. In 2011, only 35% of Americans owned a smartphone. By 2021, that proportion rose to 85% (Pew Research Center, 2021). By 2013, a majority of heterosexual adults reported meeting their romantic partner online, and such online meetings displaced modes of couple formation that relied on family and friends as intermediaries (Rosenfeld et al., 2019). Reliance on the internet for meeting partners occurred earlier for same-sex couples, perhaps because they have a less saturated pool of potential partners available in embodied, everyday life. A 2009 survey found that gay and lesbian adults were more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to use social network sites (Wayback Machine, 2010). LGBTQ youth also use social media apps to identify mutual friends, which also allows them to assess the safety of potential “matches” (Byron et al., 2021).

The mass use of smartphones grants us access to hundreds of thousands of individuals at any given moment throughout the day, expanding our social networks and cultivating a sense of belonging on a grander scale, while simultaneously granting a sense of privacy and intimacy. One remarkable aspect of this communicative shift is a partial re-privatization of romantic and sexual interaction; social media can bring the world, or a single virtual person in the world, into one's bedroom and vice versa. With this has come the rise in popularity of dating and hookup apps, such as Tinder and Bumble, as well as variations of electronic communication platforms beyond that of text messaging and emails, such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram (Boyle & O'Sullivan, 2016; Gioia & Boursier, 2021; Phua et al., 2017; Vaterlaus et al., 2016). Social media apps have become a mainstream part of hookup culture, allowing people to access potential partners in their area quickly and effortlessly from the comfort of their homes until they decide if and when to meet in person (Hanson, 2021; Schreurs et al., 2020; Sumter et al., 2017). Conversely, social media apps can act as a standalone mode of interaction, in which case intimate relationships develop and remain exclusively online.

Despite its affordances, social media communication is connected to diminished satisfaction and increased loneliness (de Lenne et al., 2018; Luo & Hancock, 2020; Pittman & Reich, 2016). Developing relationships online can reduce feelings of vulnerability by allowing the user to hide behind a mask of a persona they cultivate digitally, portraying themselves to be whatever and whomever they wish (Hanson, 2021; Sveningsson, 2002). While this text-based approach to communication may temporarily satisfy a daily high-responsive need for intimacy, without assurance of vulnerable and authentic self-disclosure, it ultimately leaves parties not reciprocally understanding or connecting, which is a crucial component of emotional intimacy (Reis et al., 2000). Subsequently, as aligned with hookup culture as we know it, emerging adults have expressed that they are more likely to have sexually intimate conversations online with unknown individuals than with a person they know well, possibly due to the perceived anonymity of a stranger (Schreurs et al., 2020). This suggests that for some emerging adults, different types of intimacy—sexual, emotional, physical—may be distributed across several distinct social settings and people, rather than concentrated within the same individual or relationship.

Emerging adults as of late have identified a preference for picture and video-based apps (e.g., Snapchat, Instagram) as the primary communication method over text-based apps, such as Twitter, allowing users a more authentic and intimate approach to communication, often seeming to be a more personal and direct method of social media usage (Pittman & Reich, 2016). These image-based social media methods have been linked to increased breadth of self-disclosure, emotional connectedness, happiness, and life satisfaction relative to other electronic communication methods (Pittman & Reich, 2016).

Interpersonal Process Model and Intimacy

Despite the prevailing social norms of hookup culture, which emphasize emotional detachment and casual sex, emotional intimacy and meaningful intimate and romantic relationships are essential components of a person's overall well-being and health (Gómez-López et al., 2019; Reis, 2018). This intimacy is an instinctual part of human motivation, defined by Reis and Shaver (1988) in the Interpersonal Process Model (IPM) as being understood, validated, and cared for on a mutually reciprocal and daily basis. However, daily responsiveness, while a crucial component of this theory, is not enough to sustain emotional intimacy. Over time, a continuous level of mutual vulnerability and self-disclosure is required to achieve emotional intimacy successfully (Reis & Shaver, 1988; Manbeck et al., 2020; Laurenceau et al., 2005).

In a systematic review of the effect of interpersonal and romantic relationships on emerging adult well-being, Gómez-López et al. (2019) synthesized that these types of responsive and disclosing relationships were a crucial part of the development of positive self-concept, including autonomy and competency as well as social integration. Young adults were more likely to report high life satisfaction, feelings of self-worth, competency, and social connectedness when they had fostered deeper levels of emotional attachment with others. Therefore, the natural progression and documented trend in early adult development is to seek out some daily level of intimacy and a sense of belonging (Gómez-López et al., 2019; Reis et al., 2000). This poses the question of whether such intimacy needs can be adequately met in a normative environment that stigmatizes the desire for romantic attachment.

Though emotional vulnerability and intimate connections may not be seen as trendy to emerging adults, the pressure to appear detached could explain why emerging adults struggle to distinctly classify their quasi-intimate relationships using concise language. Aligning with IPM, emerging adults have reported that *just talking* is not only intimate and personal, but is a daily recurring process, which is another contrast to the short-term nature of hookup culture (Powell et al., 2021; Redmond, 2018). However, with the current mode of communication in *just talking* seeming to be almost exclusively through social media, young adults have the option of keeping their interactions close to the chest. By keeping their interactions private, they are free to start and stop communication with others seamlessly without outside judgment, and those that “catch feelings” or are afraid of catching feelings have the option to stop the interactions abruptly, or “ghost” a just talking partner, without having to deal with any of the consequences of dissolution (LeFebvre et al., 2019).

Methods

This inductive exploratory study asks what college students on one college campus mean when they use a relatively recent slang phrase, “just talking,” to describe their romantic/sexual

interactions. The data analyzed here were collected as part of an ongoing exploratory study of *just talking* conducted by a multidisciplinary team of psychologists, social workers, and undergraduate students completing an independent study with the Binghamton University Human Sexualities Research Laboratory. The first phase of data collection (preliminary study) grew out of in-class discussions with students who identified *just talking* as a distinct phenomenon but were unable to clearly articulate its definition and features, or to find published literature on the topic. We incorporated open-ended questions about just talking in the Spring 2020 version of an omnibus hookup survey administered each semester via the psychology subject pool at a mid-sized public university. Questions were as follows: 1. “Some people have described their interactions with others with the phrase ‘We’re just talking.’ What does the phrase “just talking” mean in this context?” 2. “What might the purpose be of saying you’re just talking?” and, 3. “What are some of the ways people who are “just talking” communicate with each other?” The survey had 403 total respondents, but several responses were excluded from this analysis due to missing data ($n = 69$ missing for Questions 1 and 2; $n = 71$ missing for Question 3). While analyzing data, the research team read widely in an attempt to contextualize findings with relevant academic and popular literature. Given uncertainty about the phrase “just talking” and the absence of clearly relevant literature, the team hewed closely to the data and coded responses inductively. Student researchers worked together as a group to develop a codebook, then split into teams of two researchers who each individually assigned codes to responses. These two researchers then worked alongside a third student researcher to resolve discrepancies in coding by adapting the coding itself and the codebook as necessary. Nonsensical responses and responses that did not answer the specific question were not coded but appear in Figures 1–3 alongside the coded responses (far left bar in each histogram). Additionally, a single response could be coded under multiple themes. Our results helped us identify broad themes associated with *just talking*, yet many responses contradict one another, and the relationships among the themes was unclear. This prompted the research team to conduct focus groups. For clarity and transparency, we will briefly discuss the findings of this preliminary survey phase in the results section. However, this paper focuses primarily on the focus group data.

To better understand how students use the descriptor “just talking” in context, student researchers developed an eleven-question semi-structured interview guide informed by the data collected in phase 1, and conducted focus groups between May 2021 and March 2022. Participants were recruited through the psychology subject pool. Due to the gendered nature of romance and sexuality, we surmised that some participants may feel more comfortable in same-gender focus groups, while others may feel more comfortable in a mixed-gender setting. After reading a brief description of the study, potential participants indicated their gender and their preferred focus group composition (same, mixed gender, or no preference); research assistants confirmed participant gender identities before assigning them to focus groups on a rolling

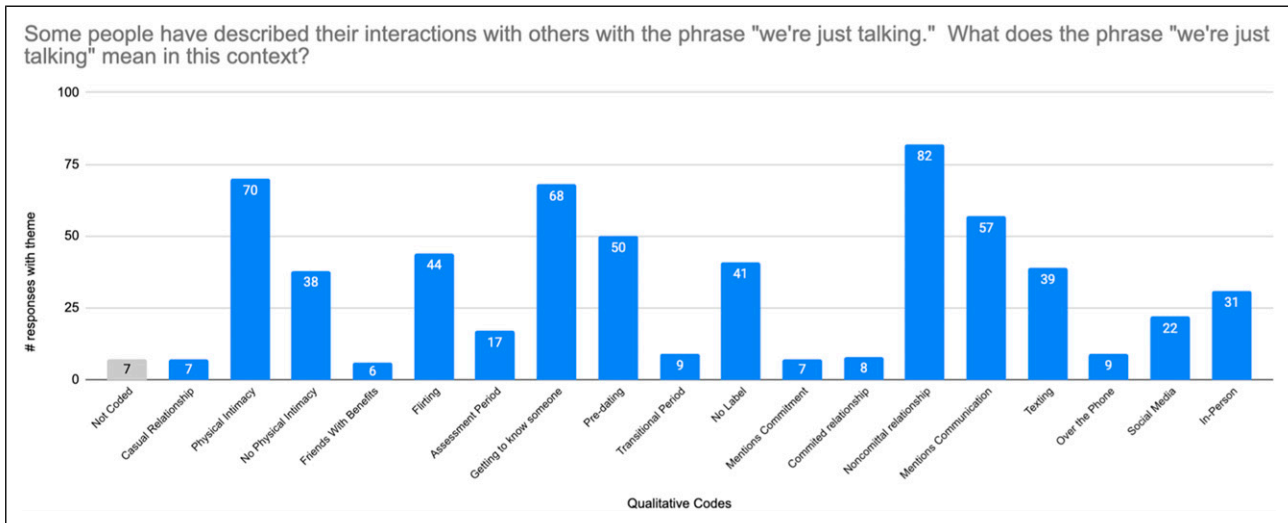


Figure 1. Histogram representing responses to open-ended survey question 1.

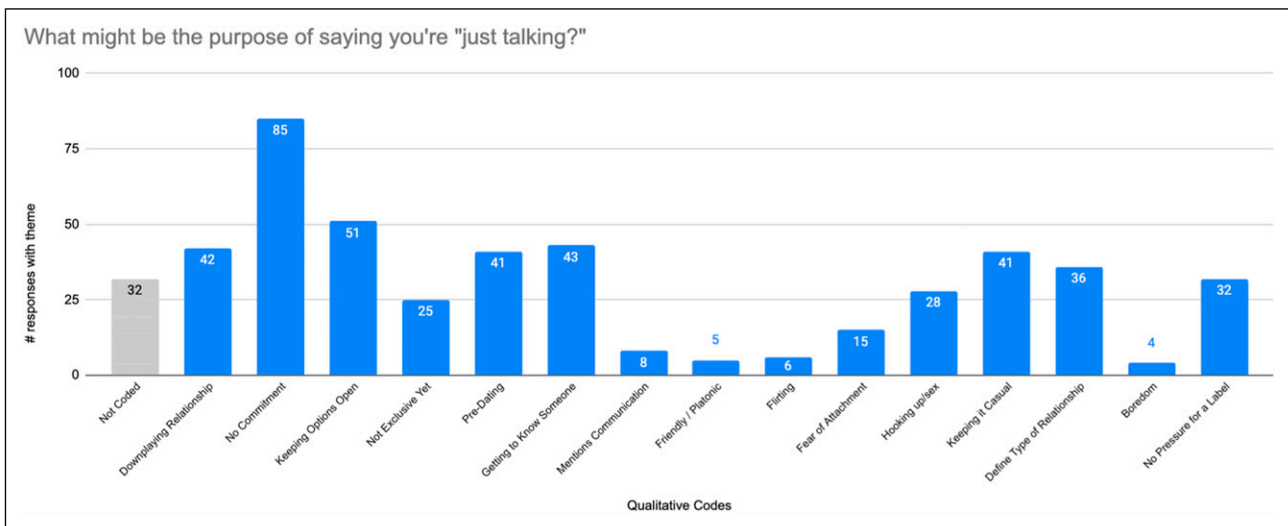


Figure 2. Histogram representing responses to open-ended survey question 2.

basis. A total of 22 women, 13 men, and 2 undergraduate students with nonbinary gender identities at a mid-sized public university self-selected into either mix-gendered or same-gendered groups ($n = 37$). Aside from gender self-identification, we did not collect demographic information from participants. Though demographic characteristics such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender are likely to be associated with differences in social practices and norms, this study was designed to capture students' perceptions of *just talking* as it understood by them and their peers; participant perceptions of a phenomenon are distinct from, but likely related to, quantifiable differences in perceptions or behavior that can be detected via variable-centered research. We included a focus group question about the impact of culture, defined broadly to include factors such as gender, race, religion, and sexuality, on *just talking*.

Zoom transcripts were reviewed to identify errors in auto transcription before being coded using a descriptive, interpretive approach (Elliott & Timulak, 2021). Members of the research team first coded transcripts individually, then met to identify common themes, revise themes, and discuss discrepancies to reach consensus. Through this process, the team generated a final codebook. All components of this study were submitted to and approved by the Binghamton University Institutional Review Board.

Results

Survey Results

Figure 1 shows that *just talking* describes an amorous activity; more than 100 responses mentioned physical intimacy, but responses were divided on whether *just talking* does or does

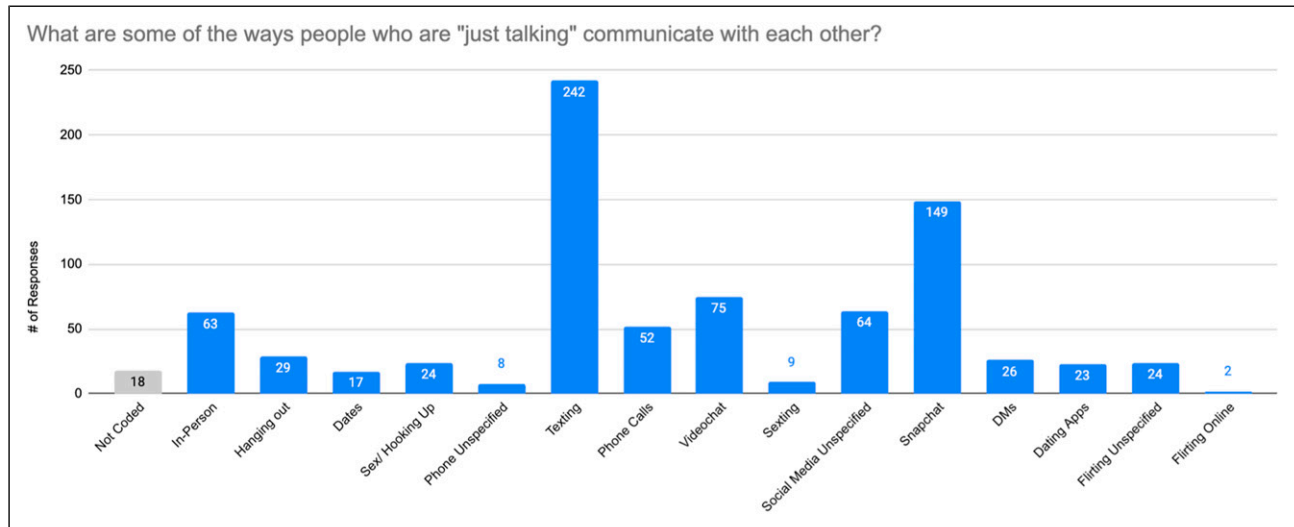


Figure 3. Histogram representing responses to open-ended survey question 3.

not include physical intimacy. Other themes included flirting, getting to know somebody, commitment, and modes of communication. Figure 2 shows greater agreement about the purpose of just talking. A handful of codes indicate that it is a way to describe noncommittal relationships or relationships that have a potential to lead to commitment but do not yet include this expectation (e.g., no commitment, keeping options open, and not exclusive yet). The latter code, along with getting to know someone indicate that just talking is a phase or step in a temporal process. A substantial minority of respondents considered *just talking* to be similar in purpose to hooking up. Finally, a few themes relate to how people represent relationships—downplaying the relationship, defining the type of relationship, and no pressure for a label. Respondents had the highest agreement on question 3, with the vast majority of responses indicating that people who are just talking use smartphones and social media to communicate. Though open-ended survey responses helped the research team identify broad themes related to *just talking*, many responses contradict one another. This prompted the research team to move onto the focus group portion of the study.

Focus Group Results

Getting to Know Each Other and Building Intimacy. Eight of the nine focus groups included a permutation of the phrase “getting to know each other.” Kylie, a participant from a women’s-only focus group even used the phrase to define *just talking*, “It’s kind of like a stage just where you’re getting to know somebody.” Andrew, who participated in a men’s-only focus group said nearly the exact same thing, “I guess it could mean that you’re, like, getting to know someone.” The phrase suggests that *just talking* is a dynamic process that changes over time. In fact, participants described a typical trajectory of

communication that becomes increasingly private and intimate if the parties involved like one another. *Just talking* commonly begins in the online sphere, on social media applications such as Snapchat and Instagram DM, or on dating apps such as Tinder. If communication goes well on these platforms, participants transition to more personal forms of communication, such as texting, FaceTime, or seeing one another in person. “There’s almost like an order as to like [...] what stages there are,” explained Drew (men’s focus group),

like, talking will be that first order - the, like, the introduction phase almost, and then, like, you’ll gradually, like, go out with them, maybe, but like, you could also just stay in the talking stage. [...] That’s what will signify how serious you want to be.

Kevin, a participant in a different men’s focus group, detailed a typical progression of just talking as it goes from social media to text messaging,

I think, more often than not, people will start texting on like Instagram or Snapchat, or like, maybe Tinder and then later move on to, like, phone texting because that’s, like, a little bit more formal. That’s, like, when you’re a little bit closer to the person.

The notion that texting is more intimate than app-based communication was common. As Arianna said in an all-women’s group, “If it’s, like, more serious, it goes to texting, but if it’s more lighthearted, it’s, like, on Snapchat.”

It’s Not a Hookup. Though hooking up has long been viewed as the dominant mode of wooing on college campuses, our participants were clear that *just talking*, however murky its meaning and purpose may be, is not hooking up. According to Lindsey, a participant in a women’s focus group, “A hookup is, like, more upfront. Talking is more like, you guys, like, get

to know each other (...) a hookup then, maybe they don't even, like, get to know you." Aida, agreed,

-with like a hookup, like, you, you could hook up with someone and maybe not even ever find out their name. Like, if it's in, like, a crowded place or a bar or something, but like, if you were talking to someone, it would be more, like, of a connection. You would, like, get to know that person better.

Participants describe just talking as more personal and considered than hooking up. According to Sasha, who participated in a women's focus group, one is not likely to *talk* to a hookup partner, "-a hookup partner [is] probably a stranger that I never want to see again so it's not going to be (...) me, like, talking to them." Daniel made a similar distinction between hooking up and talking in a men's focus group,

I feel like hookups are definitely a little bit more superficial like, like he said. You find out a little bit of information, you might think they're good looking, and you know it happens, whereas a committed relationship, you really want to see if you two are compatible, like, long-term.

Daniel's response was idiosyncratic because he likened just talking to a committed relationship, but the idea that just talking includes a compatibility check, beyond an assessment of sexual attractiveness, was widely shared in the focus groups. This is reflected in participants' assertions that shared interests and values, including religion, are salient in just talking.

Compatibility Checks. Finding someone with a similar ideology or cultural background seems to be a significant consideration in just talking. "I do think about religion in a part of it, [like] to how religious he is as opposed to how non-religious I am," stated Ameena, who described herself as a Muslim of South Asian descent. Rebecca similarly noted the importance of religious upbringing,

The way I grew up really really influences my relationships, how I go about, like, just talking because, for example, [...] I went to an all-girls school most of my life until high school [...] it was super religious, like I grew up pretty Orthodox [Jewish,] and [...] talking to the opposite sex [...] was really, like, scandalous.

The two quotes indicate that religion influences one's approach to just talking and the potential compatibility of a just talking partner. The same was true of political ideology, "I'm not a very political person," explained Emma, "but I do feel as though, like, if the person is very opposite to me, then I will not, like, [...] end [up] talking to someone for long." Such compatibility considerations stand in contrast to the evaluative criteria used for hookup partners and bolster the assertion that *just talking* is distinctly different to hooking up.

Sublimated Desire for an Intimate Relationship? Taken together, the aforementioned themes suggest that *just talking* is a practice, linguistic device, or label that allows young adults to develop emotionally intimate relationships while denying that any such relationship exists. For example, numerous respondents described just talking paradoxically as a label to evade labels. As Kaylee explained in her mixed-gender focus group,

It's just a very, like, loose term for people who don't want to exactly, like, put a label on things. People can be talking already for, like, an extensive amount of time and still consider themselves, like, just kind of talking.

In this way, saying that one is just talking is a device for avoiding weightier labels such as "exclusive" or "dating." The latter term, "dating," was frequently used in the focus groups to describe a committed relationship between two people rather than the act of going on dates with one or more people. Devon, another participant in an all-male focus group explained *just talking* similarly,

You don't want to necessarily put, like, a label on anything, especially because, like, a lot of the labels we have are either 'in a relationship' or 'friends with benefits' so there's not a lot of labels [...] to necessarily use [...] it's a kind of a label without a label.

The desire to avoid labels—and more specifically, the literal use of the term "label" as something to be avoided in romantic/sexual interactions—was pervasive in the focus groups and the open-ended survey data (Figures 1 and 2).

For some, label avoidance is temporary; they view *just talking* as a thoroughfare on the way to a committed relationship, a pre-dating phase. Michael explained a typical relationship trajectory as follows, "So, like, in the stages of relationships, talking [is], like, the second one, I guess. Going from casual, and [then] you talk. And then you're going to have a relationship. You're going to date." Oliva agreed, "I'd say, nine times out of ten, when I hear someone say that they're talking to another person, it's leading to a relationship."

Despite public acknowledgement in the focus groups that *just talking* is frequently a path to committed relationships, other participant comments suggest that one is not supposed to talk about the desire for commitment or engage in any behaviors historically associated with relationships. Markus tried his best to explain this ethic in a men's focus group,

Going on a date has, like, I don't know if stigma's the right word, but it has this sort of a presence to it, so I think a lot of time or even most of the time, like, the just talking stage happens before where you talk, [...] you figure out whether you want to actually meet-meet each other or, like, [...] go out and do something official together.

In this case, "meet-meet" means interacting in person after having made prior plans to do so. The seriousness associated

with making in-person plans—an activity that would have been referred to as a “date” until the past 1–2 decades—is remarkable given the casualness with which young adults dated in the mid to late 20th century.

Several participants invoked well-worn tropes, such as “fear of commitment” to explain the normative aversion to labeling intimate relationships. Maya’s response encapsulated this line of thinking, “A lot of people don’t want to be in a relationship ‘cause they’re, like, scared of commitment, or, like, scared of getting involved in a relationship they don’t know what it means.” However, fear of commitment is not an apt phrase for what participants are actually describing because so many simultaneously acknowledge a widespread desire for committed relationships blunted by a normative understanding that such desires are overly burdensome and emotionally excessive to others. “I feel like a lot of times, people say they’re just talking because they don’t know what the other person wants,” said Priya, “so they just say they’re just talking. Because, it’s like, there’s no communication, because if you say you want a relationship and they don’t, then you seem like you’re too much or something.” Note the descriptor, “too much.” This quote suggests that an unrequited desire for commitment is a pathological emotional encroachment on one’s just talking partner. Yet, the desire for commitment is often present, and just talking allows young adults to linguistically tip-toe around it. As Katie explained,

People, you know, kind of wait some time before actually, like, letting (...) people they care about know that, like, there’s somebody they’re interested in. Like, personally, I don’t for a while because I hate, like, jinxing it, and then getting my own hopes up.

In short, while many of the focus group respondents echoed long standing tropes about relationship formation in America, including fear of commitment and fear of rejection, the connotation of commitment phobia is inverted within the normative framework of these young adults. Whereas fear of commitment used to be aberrant, the desire to remain untethered and autonomous is now the default setting for young adults engaged in just talking. Anna’s perspective is illustrative.

I feel like in the talking stage, you can never assume that something’s exclusive unless you’ve had that conversation, and, like, for me, like, I always assume, if I’m just talking to someone, I’m assuming that they’re probably talking to other people unless they explicitly tell me that they’re not.

Given prior themes showing that *just talking* often follows an arc of ever greater intimacy and reflects, for many, an unarticulated desire to form a committed relationship, Anna’s quote is curious because it suggests that the presumption of exclusivity must be explicitly spoken in words. As a “label without labels,” just talking is thought to safeguard freedom,

even while the behaviors involved in just talking—regular conversations growing increasingly intimate over time—threaten the autonomy it promises. As Kevin explained,

I also feel like people just say just talking in order to, like, not be tied down, so they want to seem, like, free-spirited and open to anything that comes their way, (...) I guess that’s why some people say [they’re] just talking.

Though Kevin’s word choice was not explored by the focus group facilitator, his use of hedging language indicates a possible slippage between what people actually want and how they want to be seen by others. In his quote, people use just talking language to avoid commitment, but they also do so to “seem” free-spirited.

Discussion

Like Powell et al. (2021), our findings suggest considerable disagreement about the definition of just talking. However, ambiguity is a normative aspect of romantic/sexual communication among emerging adults on college campuses and is sometimes strategic in hookup culture (Currier, 2013; Hardesty et al., 2022). We suspect but cannot confirm that ambiguity plays a similar strategic role in just talking because it allows young people to balance conflicting needs for intimacy during young adulthood with perceived cultural prescriptions on the desire for commitment. While Powell and colleagues are likely correct that there is no shared definition of just talking, their quantitative approach to data collection required them to constrain their study of the phenomenon to pre-formed categories thereby precluding other ways of conceptualizing just talking; in their case, just talking was implicitly understood as a relationship-building phase. On the surface, our focus group data comport with this understanding, as participants often frame the phenomenon as the “just talking stage” and assert that just talking is a path to commitment. Nevertheless, participants also agreed that individuals may engage in just talking precisely because they want to avoid commitment. The common but paradoxical description of just talking as “a label without a label” is telling, as it suggests a desire to avoid categorization, which in turn suggests tacit pressure to do precisely this—categorize.

If one considers *dating* in historical context, it is clear that dating was a mode of interaction, not a status attached to particular romantic pairings. Dating had the potential to lead to a committed relationship but often did not. It was something people did rather than a label for what they were or a signpost on the pathway to a status. Though our participants describe *just talking* in terms of labels, categories, and attempts to avoid them, their descriptions of what behaviors *just talking* encompasses are much more consistent and agreed-upon than their attempts to define the phenomenon in a categorical sense.

Like dating in the 20th century, *just talking* is more legible as a practice than a status, and in practice, just talking usually

involves regular conversations via social media apps and smartphone technology with escalating levels of intimacy marked by removing technological intermediaries. App-mediated exchange turns into smartphone-to-smartphone exchanges, in-person meet-ups, and sometimes physical intimacy. Popular culture and our conversations with college students indicate that, if *just talking* continues for a sufficient time period, emerging adults will attach the label “situationship” (Mejia et al., 2021). New labels thereby proliferate despite the express desire to avoid them.

Even though young people approach *just talking* with divergent motives and desires, the tapestry of themes identified in our focus groups depict a normative sphere in which young people are simultaneously seeking out and establishing intimacy with others while denying the desire for romantic attachments because this widely-acknowledged desire is stigmatized. In this sense, *just talking* may be understood as a sublimated commitment-formation strategy. *Just talking* linguistically preserves the appearance of relative detachment even as its enactors undermine this purported emotional distance through repeated, one-on-one social interactions with the same person or people. Consistent with Reis and Shaver’s IPM model of intimacy (1988), our participants describe *just talking* as a period of regular communication—in this case, the communication occurs primarily through smartphone technology—that grows increasingly serious and intimate as the parties move from app-mediated communication to texting and other more direct modes of contact. Indeed, several participants assert that *just talking* is a path to commitment, though a curious one because those engaged in *just talking* believe that wanting commitment is off-putting or pathological. The ethos of detachment is encapsulated by the euphemistic descriptor “too much,” which the most recent urban dictionary definitions define as, “not being able to ‘tone down’ one’s personality,” and, “not being able to chill the fuck out” (Urban dictionary, 2008). Hookup culture’s ethic of emotional detachment is thus mirrored in *just talking*, even though most of our participants insist that the two phenomena are distinct. This suggests that detachment is part of the larger romantic/sexual, social milieu on campus and not simply a facet of hooking up.

Understood as a social practice that sublimates commitment-formation by denying the salience of the emotional and ethical attachments it creates, *just talking* becomes legible as courtship. Quite simply, it is a process through which potential romantic or sexual partners get to know and attempt to woo one another. We suspect that our participants have difficulty defining *just talking* for two related reasons. First, it is more of a practice/interaction than a status, and our participants think about sexual/romantic interactions in categorical rather than process-based terms. Second, mixed-sex socialization and hookup culture created an atmosphere antithetical to romantic courtship causing the concept of courtship to fall by the wayside for several decades. Smartphone technology changed this by introducing a form of non-

physical intimacy that allows parties to suss one another out and develop trust without the expectation of sex.

To explain, mixed-sex socialization made it easy for young adults, most of whom are heterosexual, to find potential partners and build romantic/sexual relationships within a friendship circle or study/club context without delineated courtship rituals; unlike the era of sex-segregated socialization, one no longer needs to go on a date to meet potential partners when one is already surrounded by them in day-to-day and leisure activities. Additionally, the splicing of romantic and sexual intimacy evident in the gradual rise of hookup culture pushed dating to the margins of college social life. In the words of a research participant from England et al., 2007 study on hooking up and relationships on college campuses, “So there’s no such thing as casually going out to...gauge the other person...I mean you can hang out...But we’re only dating once we’ve decided we like each other...and want to be in a relationship” (pg. 566). Another participant in the same study pined for casual dating and remarked that the college environment was no longer conducive to this practice (ibid).

Because romantic intimacy and love are downplayed in hooking up, some argue that hookup culture amounts to skipping courtship entirely. Our take is somewhat different. We propose that mixed-sex socialization, an ethic of casual sex, and the extended adolescence of emerging adulthood created a context in which romantic and sexual courtship split apart, and where sexual courtship (hooking up) pushed romantic courtship to the margins, at least temporarily. Young adults were still forging committed romantic relationships in tandem with or outside of hooking up, but these pathways were not predictable enough to identify as a normative mode of romantic courtship.

At the same time, the very same mixed-sex socialization atmosphere that renders going on a date unnecessary also muddies the water, making it difficult to discern friendships and even collegial relationships from romantic and sexual relationships. This may explain why our participants focus so heavily on categories and labels; the ubiquity of dual relationships requires one to accurately understand the type of interaction within which they are involved because the stakes of getting it wrong are so high. Gaffes could spoil a friendship, make a study group uncomfortable, or be prohibited—in an academic or work setting. Of course, many of the role and relationship status uncertainties that accompany mixed-sex socialization today were relevant to same-sex-attracted individuals in the era of sex-segregated socialization. As recently as 2002, “friendship” scripts were the most widely-used courtship strategies among lesbian women studied by Rose and Zand (2002), though many remarked that it was a confusing script precisely because friendship makes it difficult to discern platonic and romantic/sexual overtures. Our focus groups were divided according to gender, and we did not collect information about sexual orientation. Groups very likely included participants who identify as something other

than exclusively heterosexual. Though we did not collect sexual orientation data from focus group participants, Binghamton University Human Sexualities Laboratory previously published a trend study on sexual orientation among emerging adults using data from 2011–2019. We found that students were moving away from exclusively heterosexual identification during this time period at a rate of about 6% per year. This trend was more pronounced among women and black respondents and was reversed for Asian respondents (Massey et al., 2021). However, nobody explicitly addressed potential differences between heterosexual courtship and courtship practices within the LGBTQ community in these focus groups; most gendered language in the groups implied heterosexual interactions. That said, same-sex and other-sex-attracted students in college are likely to face similar dilemmas with dual relationships.

Uncertainty about the connotation of particular interactions complicates sexual communication and consent (Hardesty et al., 2022), but there are recognizable sexual scripts within hookup culture that help young adults interpret the meaning of interactions. For example, leaving a party to establish privacy with another person is widely understood to signal a desire for sex, despite falling short of many sexual consent standards (Hardesty et al., 2022). But if young adults usually socialize in groups, and leaving such situations to be alone with somebody is understood as an invitation to hook up, it becomes difficult to break apart from the group to establish nonphysical intimacy and screen potential romantic partners.

Dating apps and smartphone technology offered a solution to this problem by creating disembodied privacy, and with it, a new mode of romantic courtship. As Pittman and Reich explained, picture and video-based apps enable self-disclosure and emotional intimacy and tend to be better for mental health and happiness than text-based communication (2016). Such disembodied embodiment (Hardesty et al., 2019) allows young people to maintain physical distance without sacrificing, entirely, the subtleties of body language, voice, and even the intimacy and familiarity that comes with entering another's home or bedroom albeit virtually. Simultaneously, the linguistic trick of calling the phenomenon "just talking" maintains a casual facade despite whatever emotional closeness is actually established through ongoing communication. This gradually-emerging but now recognizable form of courtship, just talking, is well-suited to a college culture that encourages exploration, keeping options open, and holding one's emotional cards close to the chest. Theoretically, a college student can now meet sexual needs through hooking up and romantic needs by *just talking*. This two-track courtship system thus enables multiple modes of intimacy and potential mate screening without pigeonholing young adults into either serious relationships or casual sex. Surely some college students continue to combine romantic and sexual intimacy, facing the commitment and overt emotional intensity it entails, but for many of today's emerging adults, this is "too much."

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

Non-random sampling in the survey dataset and self-selection into the focus group portion of the study limit the external validity of our results. All participants were enrolled at a single mid-sized public university in the Northeast at the time of data collection. Though our findings may be applicable to college students at other public and private universities, facets of social norms and relationship dynamics are likely to be impacted by demographics and local context. Future research conducted on random or stratified samples of college students would help to disambiguate *just talking* across diverse contexts and with varied subgroups of college students. Multivariate research on courtship practices and targeted, in-depth qualitative studies designed to recruit specific subgroups of the student population would also allow us to discern the extent to which factors such as race, religion, immigration status, sexual orientation, and gender identity impact if and how emerging adults engage in *just talking*. Similarly, research conducted on young adults not enrolled in college would broaden scholarly understanding of emerging courtship dynamics outside of university culture.

Despite limitations to external validity, several aspects of our research design contribute to internal validity. First, the study was truly inductive, as the topic was introduced by student researchers trying to make sense of their own amorous interactions in college by deciphering what they and their peers meant when they said they were "just talking." Therefore, we have sound reasons for believing that *just talking* is a meaningful topic for at least a subset of students. Second, our approach to data collection—identifying and using locally-resonant slang rather than outdated or ambiguous terms to understand relationship dynamics, and relying on open-ended questions—allowed us to hew closely to the phenomenon and trace its contours without aberrantly imposing the concepts and constraints of closely-related but distinct relationship phenomena, dating or hooking up for example. Thirdly, the multi-generational composition of the research team meant that data were analyzed by people with inside knowledge (students) and those with insider/outsider status (faculty and doctoral students from at least three US generations with culturally-distinct understandings of relationships and substantial experience working with Generation Z college students). These multiple perspectives allowed us to discern old themes and novel aspects of relationship formation. Lastly, our embeddedness in the institution where our participants socialize and often live offered extensive opportunities to triangulate our findings with our extant knowledge of local college culture, including numerous extemporaneous discussions with undergraduate and graduate students about *just talking*.

Conclusion

Contrary to predictions that hookup culture portended the death of relationships and romance on college campuses, our findings suggest the continued existence or re-emergence of

courtship as a normative part of college life. Even though our focus group discussions elicited norms endemic to hookup culture, including an ethic of emotional detachment and the stigmatization of commitment-seeking, participants' descriptions of *just talking* and its purpose show that many young people actively seek and build emotional and romantic intimacy with would-be partners, often using a series of social media apps and smartphone-based communication strategies in an escalating pattern of closeness achieved by removing technological intermediaries. Whereas hookup culture is an embodied phenomenon that unfolds when college students drink and party together, *just talking* incorporates mediated embodiment allowing young adults to build emotional intimacy through repeat interactions with the same person—including paraverbal communication via pictures, emojis, and video-based apps—before sexual intimacy takes place, if it occurs at all. That is, the physical separation offered by smartphone technology enables relationship-building in a way that hookup culture does not because the latter milieu associates physical privacy with sexual intimacy. If mixed-sex socialization initially made courtship rituals redundant for most young adults by offering abundant opportunities to meet romantic partners in day-to-day life, the impetus to have casual sex introduced novel conundrums for relationship building. Smartphones and social media offered a solution to the casual sex problem by allowing people to attain privacy without the expectation of sex. Finally, by a linguistic sleight of hand, “just talking” opens up a world of wooing, extended romance, and potentially a committed relationship, all the while denying that any of this is desirable or a big deal.

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Transparency and Open Science Statement

The raw data used in the research cannot be publicly shared with any person because doing so may compromise participant confidentiality. The semi-structured interview guide and the codebook used to analyze open-ended survey questions are available by contacting the corresponding author. All focus group codes appear in the manuscript. This research was not pre-registered.

ORCID iDs

Melissa Hardesty  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7518-4276>

Sarah Young  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1721-4801>

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Author Biographies

Melissa Hardesty, PhD, BSW, is an Associate Professor and BSW Program Director in the Department of Social Work at Binghamton University. She received her MSW from Indiana University Northwest and her PhD in Social Welfare from The University of Chicago. She is a co-PI for the Human Sexuality

Research Laboratory at Binghamton University. Her research focuses on gender and sexuality in intimate and familial relationships and epistemological questions related to qualitative research and social work practice.

Sayre E. Wilson, PhD, is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. She holds a doctorate in Community Research and Action, specializing in Public Health, from Binghamton University. As an early-career researcher, Sayre focuses on substance use and misuse, sexual health, and adverse and traumatic experiences of young adults and sexual minority populations. She assists with developing and testing interventions that help individuals regain and maintain control over their behaviors, enabling them to lead happier and healthier lives.

Leora Wasserman, BSW, is the current Springboard Fellow at Hillel at Drexel University. Prior to this position, Leora worked as a student research manager for the “Just Talking” project in the Binghamton University Human Sexuality Research Laboratory. Her senior thesis focused on the linguistic theoretical aspect of the “Just Talking” phenomenon.

Sarah Young, PhD, MSW, is an Associate Professor of Social Work Research in Medicine at Weill Cornell Medicine. She is

a co-PI for the Human Sexuality Research Laboratory at Binghamton University, and her research focuses broadly on human sexuality, and on LGBTQ + people’s experiences in families.

Dr. Sean G. Massey is Associate Professor in Women’s, Gender, & Sexuality Studies and the Department of Psychology at Binghamton University. He received his PhD in Social Personality Psychology from the CUNY Graduate Center. His research utilizes interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks and social personality psychological concepts to answer questions about sexuality, gender, anti-LGBTQ prejudice, racial bias, and the relationship between social science and social change.

Ann Merriwether is a developmental psychologist at Binghamton University with the department of Psychology. Dr. Merriwether earned her BA, MA and PhD from Penn State, all in psychology. Dr. Merriwether does research in adolescent and emergent adult development with research interests in sexual socialization and reproductively health attitudes. She is also interested in the impact of media discourse messages on body image development in adolescents and emergent adults.