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The Purpose of "Just Talking": The Role of Sex and Emotions

Background

"Just Talking" is an emerging social phenomenon that can be used to describe interactions between potential romantic and/or sexual partners to maintain casual, non-committal relationships. While the term is widely used among college students, its ambiguity warrants further investigation into what exactly characterizes this phenomenon. We are interested in exploring the purpose behind "Just Talking" given that there can be a variety of motives behind "Just Talking." In particular, we are investigating the roles that sex and emotions play in the progression of "Just Talking." Through analysis of survey and focus group responses, the research team is exploring the gender differences in the responses to see if there are any significant differences to note. Given prior data collected by this research team suggesting that males and females define "Just Talking" differently, we analyzed college students' descriptions of the purpose of "Just Talking" to see whether these gender differences in definition extend to perceptions of the function of "Just Talking."

Methods

Throughout the semesters of Spring 2020 to Spring 2022, data was collected from college students at a mid-sized university in the Northeast using the Human Sexualities Research Lab's Hookup Study, which is sent out every semester, and focus groups conducted by researchers in the lab.

1. The data collected from the Hookup Study was received in two waves: Spring 2020 before the COVID-19 pandemic started, and Spring 2020 during the pandemic. Across the two data sets, participants (N=403) filled out the survey, and a majority (n=357) answered the question of interest. The question of interest in this study was the second of four open-ended questions related to the phenomenon of "Just Talking" and asked, "What may be the purpose of saying you're 'Just Talking'?"
2. Nine same and mixed-gender, semi-structured focus groups were conducted by facilitators between April 2021 and March 2022 and collected data from participants (N=37) who were asked to discuss their experiences and opinions regarding the aforementioned phenomenon. Of interest for this study were the participants' thoughts about the roles of sex and emotions in the purpose of "Just Talking" and the gender differences in those responses.

Focus Group Quotes

What role do emotions have in talking?

"I feel like depending on your motive... if you just want to hook up or hang out with them as like more than friends but nothing serious then emotions don't really play a big part in it, you know? You're not getting too attached, it's not a big deal to you, but if you do really like them and you want to take it somewhere then obviously emotions play a big part in that."

"I think emotions are the - it's the biggest part when it comes to talking because you're, you're reading reactions of who you're talking to and that's the - you are reading their emotions as you're talking to them because that's like, those are the indicators that are telling you about them and it's giving you the information about them."

"I feel like if, like feelings are getting caught, or whatever, like that can like that, obviously, it will determine like if it turns into dating or not, so if, like mutually that's happening like then it does play a big role."

What role does sex have in talking?

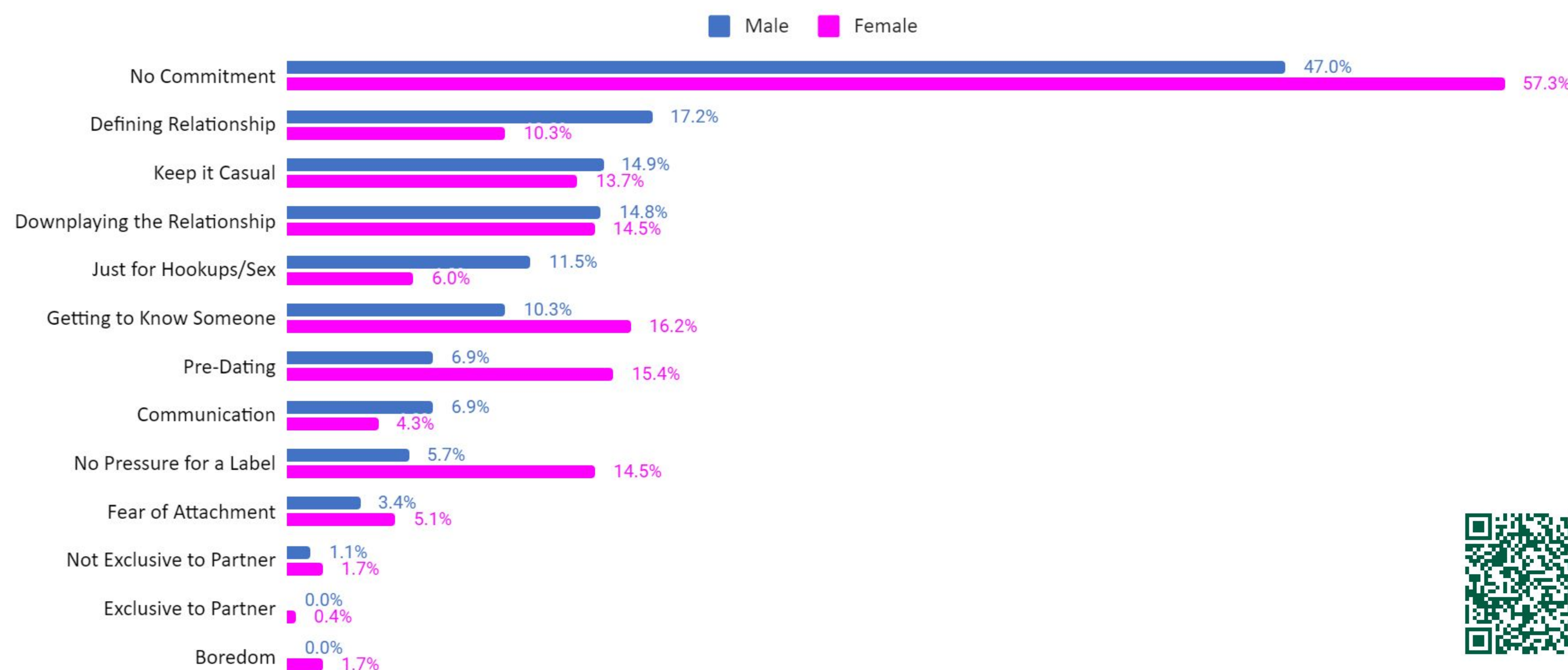
"I feel like it's a big part. Um, I don't know, it's tough it's kind of weird to talk about because you know we're all at this age where, you know, hormones are rushing and, you know, sexual desire's almost at its peak and so I think it's a big part for a lot of people."

"I think it would definitely complicate it. Um, I think it might like put more on the line for some people, and I think it would definitely change the dynamic of the relationship of the talking stage."

"I feel like it's a lot of it's based on the perception of the person that you're like hooking up with. Like if you can if it's for sometimes sometimes it's more about sex because like you don't really see like like you like continuing with the same person after and then sometimes it's not as much because you're more interested in the person than the actual idea of having sex."

Results

What Might Be the Purpose of Just Talking?



**One response was excluded from these results due to being the only response from someone who identified in a way other than male or female. For reference, this response would have fallen under the category of "Defining the Relationship."

Discussion

In examining the 357 responses to our question of interest from the Hookup Study, our data showed that there is still no consensus on what defines the purpose behind "Just Talking." However, in looking at the data categorizations based on percentages drawn from the totals of male and female responses, there are notable differences in responses based on gender. Some of the recorded categories showed similar percentages from male and female responses including the categories of "keep it casual" and "downplaying the relationship." The categories with the largest differences in responses recorded based on gender include "no commitment," "defining the relationship," "just for hookups/sex," "getting to know someone," "pre-dating," and "no pressure for a label." Of these categories, the female responses were higher than the male ones except for "defining the relationship" and "just for hookups/sex." 11.5% of males and 6% of females defined the purpose of "Just Talking" as being "just for hookups/sex," suggesting that males may perceive the role of sex in "Just Talking" to be greater than how females perceive the role of sex. In analyzing the focus groups, our data showed similar results in that there is still no consensus, but the gender of participants may influence their perception of the purpose of "Just Talking." Neither sex nor emotions have clearly defined roles within "Just Talking," and many of the participants spoke to this lack of definitional consensus in their responses and highlighted how they perceive there to be a difference in how females and males typically view the roles of sex and emotions in "Just Talking."