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"Oh, We're Just Talking": Operationalizing a Contemporary Dating Phenomenon

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Research Aim:
 College students increasingly use the phrase "Just Talking" to describe interactions with potential romantic and sexual partners; this project aims to operationalize "Just Talking."

Study Design:
 We conducted nine semi-structured focus group interviews (N=37) to gain a better understanding of "just talking." A total of 22 women, 13 men, and 2 gender non-conforming undergraduate students at Binghamton University self-selected into either mix-gendered or same-gendered groups. Questions asked consisted of: "how do you know you are 'just talking'?", "how do you meet this person?", "does sex and/or emotions play a role?", and "how does your identity or culture impact the way you engage in 'just talking'?"

References:
 Bailey, B. L. (1989). *From front porch to back seat: courtship in twentieth-century America*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
 Taylor, D. A., & Altman, I. (1968). *The Development of Interpersonal Relationships: Social Penetration Processes*. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, 75(1), 79–90.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.1968.9712476>

Themes and Quotes

Method of Communication

I feel like people usually start like Snapchatting and then like you get someone's number and then maybe like FaceTime or something there's like steps I guess.

More Than a Hookup

When you're looking for a hookup I guess you're just you're finding baseline stuff about them and forming a little bit of a connection when you're just after like a sexual thing I guess versus a relationship you're looking for indicators that will be long term.

Pre-Dating Stage

You're not going to just jump into a relationship but like you talk and then it like escalates and it progress and it turns into something more than that.

Label to Not Have a Label

I feel like if you're with someone and you're exclusive with someone but you just don't call each other boyfriend and girlfriend but you do all the same things as a boyfriend and girlfriend would do I feel like it's the same thing you're just not labeling it.

Getting to Know Each Other

Two people are just interested in each other but they're just like seeing where things are going.

Theoretical Basis:
 Our data analysis and interpretations are informed by scholarship on the history of courtship (Bailey, 1989) and Social Penetration Theory (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Social Penetration Theory proposes that interpersonal communication and emotional disclosure enables relationship progression from shallow, non-intimate levels to deeper, more intimate ones.

Discussion:
 All of our major themes suggest that "Just Talking" is a stage of courtship that uses the exchange of messages to promote intimacy. Bailey defines courtship as "a wide variety of conditions, intentions, and actions, for men and women to woo each other in many ways, not all of which lead to marriage" (1989). Participant responses suggest that the use of the classification "just talking" emerged based on the desire to avoid a label and is a pre-dating stage utilized as a method of getting to know another person. Responses also suggest that there was an overall theme in the method of communication and progression (e.g. "talking" on Snapchat and eventually moving to text). The development of this modern phase of courtship indicates a desire to acquaint oneself with a potential relationship partner prior to entering a relationship. This phenomenon differs from college student hookup culture and is not centered around casual sexual interactions. While some students do utilize the talking stage as a means of hooking up, the vast majority seem to believe "just talking" implies the possibility of a serious emotional, committed relationship.