

“What does this Mean?”: Understanding how Women make Meaning of Text Messages while
Developing an Intimate Relationship

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores how women in emerging adulthood make meaning of text messaging while developing an intimate heterosexual relationship. A focus group consisting of eight women was used in order to understand the way women interpret text messages during the formation of a romantic relationship. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Four themes emerged from the data: (1) what is the landscape?, (2) how do I figure it out?, (3) red flags, and (4) a red flag means. Participants described the context in which they enter relationships, and the role texting plays. Different strategies they used to make meaning of ambiguous text messages were discussed. Participants reported behaviors that were identified as red flags and how participants made meaning of those red flags. Limitations, clinical implications, and future directions are identified and discussed.

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General Audience Abstract

Text messaging is one of the most used mediums of communication for young adults. Anything from making lunch plans with an old friend or getting to know someone new, young adults are navigating relationships by using texting messages. Despite texting’s popularity, there is little research on how young adults use text messaging and how they make meaning of text messages. This study explores how young adult women make meaning of text messages, while developing a romantic relationship. Participants of this study described the context in which they enter relationships, and the role texting plays, as well as different strategies they used to make meaning of ambiguous text messages. Participants reported behaviors that were identified as red flags and how participants made meaning of those red flags

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Table of Contents

Chapter I: INTRODUCTION	1
The Problem and its Setting	1
Significance.....	8
Rationale	9
Theoretical Framework.....	10
Purpose of the Study	11
Research Questions	12
Chapter II: LITERATURE REVIEW	13
Texting	13
History of Dating and Dating for Emerging Adults.....	18
Forming Relationships	19
Texting and Relationships.....	21
Gender and Age Differences	23
Social Norms of Texting	25
Summary of Research	27
Chapter III: METHODS	29
Design	29
Participants.....	30
Procedures.....	31
Researcher Characteristics	32
Instruments.....	33
Interview Questions	34
Validity and Reliability.....	35
Analysis	35
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS.....	37
Table 1. Themes.....	37
Demographics	38
Table 2. Demographics	38
What’s the landscape?.....	39

Automatic Mistrust	39
Experience.....	41
Restricted Options.....	41
Modern Day Crazy/Double Standard.....	43
Gray Area.....	45
Strung Along.....	46
Marketing Yourself.....	47
Continual Presence.....	48
Protecting Ourselves	48
How do I Figure it Out?	49
Sharing Screenshots	49
Fill in Gaps Based on Hopes for the Relationship.....	50
Speculating About What Men Think	52
All Text and No Follow Through	54
Red Flags	55
Too Forward.....	56
Bad Grammar.....	56
How Casual They Are.....	56
One Word Answers.....	56
Not Initiating Conversations	57
Time of Day	57
Over Texting	58
A Red Flag Means... ..	58
Feeling Cheap	58
Keeping Me In the Back Pocket	59
Just a Number	61
Summary of Results.....	61
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION.....	63
Discussion.....	63
Limitations	70
Clinical Implications.....	71

Future Directions	73
Conclusion	74
References.....	75
Appendix A.....	80
Appendix B	81
Appendix C.....	82
Appendix D.....	83
Appendix E	86
Appendix F.....	87

List of Tables

Table 1. Themes37
Table 2. Demographics38

“Texting is a brilliant way to miscommunicate how you feel, and misinterpret what other people mean.”

-Unknown

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The Problem and Its Setting

The way we communicate with one another is ever evolving, especially when advances in technology are growing at a rapid rate. Television, YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, phone calls, texting, dating websites, video chatting, and more is now all accessible from the palm of our hand from almost anywhere in the world. Being able to connect with others has never been easier. Ninety percent of American adults own a cell phone, however, among the 18-29 year old age range, the rate is even higher, reaching nearly 98% report owning a cell phone (PEW Research Center for Internet, Science, and Tech, 2014).

Previous studies have described the ways in which mobile communication has opened up the number of settings and ways in which we can connect to others, including while we are out enjoying a cup of coffee or waiting for a bus (Pettigrew, 2009; Green 2002; Rettie, 2005). While these types of communication were formerly restricted to times when people were home, most of those we know or have contact with are only a few clicks away. The phenomenon coined SMS (short message system), multimedia messaging, text messaging, or commonly known as texting is advancing quickly and becoming more relevant since its debut in 1995 (Kasesniemi & Rautiainen, 2002; Pettigrew 2009). Not only are words being exchanged via text messaging, but graphics, emoticons, and pictures are now commonly being included in the communication exchange (Ling 2004). Texting between family and friends has surpassed voice calling by more than doubling it in recent years (Crosswhite, Rice, Asay, 2014). A study conducted by Roberts,

Rideout, & Foehr (2010) concluded that the Americans between the ages of 8 and 18 are spending on average 7 hours and 28 minutes a day using different forms of technology concurrently.

In 2010, 6.1 trillion text messages were sent around the world, about 200,000 per minute (Reisinger, D. 2010, October 19). In 2010, texting was nearly universal among American young adults, sending or receiving an average of 87.7 messages a day (PEW Research Center for Internet, Science, and Tech, 2010). As technology continues to advance and become more popular, the number of text messages exchanged continues to rise. Research has shown that text messages are being used as another way to connect with others, particularly when in person conversations are not possible (Derks, Fischer, & Bos, 2008; Harrison & Gilmore, 2012; Holtgraves & Paul, 2013; Pettigrew, 2009; PEW Research Center for Internet, Science, and Tech, 2010; Reid & Reid, 2010 Sprecher, 2009).

It is not surprising that texting has had a major impact on relationships, from forming new relationships, maintaining existing relationships, and even ending relationships. Even though there is limited literature on texting's effects on maintaining committed relationships and ending relationships, there is virtually no research on texting's effect or role during the formation of new romantic relationships. The literature is clear that emerging adults are using cell phones to navigate relationships, but we need to fill the gap of how this population is using texting as a medium to create new relationships. Given the shift in communication norms, a few seemingly simple text messages can make or break a romantic relationship. There is much more to text messages than the words on screen, and this study uncovers how and what women are interpreting, or finding meaning in, while texting a romantic partner during the formation stage of the relationship. This study serves as a launching point to begin to understand the intertwined

web of dating and texting and opens the door to examine other populations, as well as new social norms our culture has created around technology.

Texting

Texting has become nearly universal in general interactions, especially among adolescents and young adults. It offers both advantages and disadvantages in relationships both in starting relationships and in maintaining ongoing ones. Despite its popularity, ambiguity remains about how we understand and make meaning from the texts we receive, as well as text messaging social etiquette.

A study conducted by Harrison and Gilmore (2012) found six categories for reasons college aged students engage in text messaging. Of those six categories, one of the uses of text messaging was for romance, more specifically to express interest or affection to a current or intended romantic partner. Sexting, messages with sexually charged content, was another category, and “social breaches” meaning sending text messages while they are expected to be engaged in another activity or conversation with someone (for example: texting another romantic interest while on a date) was another.

Among the research surrounding texting and communication, several studies reported advantages and disadvantages of texting, noting that the lack of social cues and social presence as a major disadvantage (Boase & Wellmen, 2006; Sprecher, 2009; Baker, 2007; Walther, 1996; Walther & Parks, 2002). A possible advantage of texting includes creating space and time where users can carefully craft and plot their response giving them the ability to have more control to make a potentially better impression (Reid & Reid, 2008). For some, this allows a more candid self, free from the pressure of their own insecurities of face to face interactions (Kasesniemi & Rautiainen 2002). For others, the lack of social cues can be anxiety provoking (Reid & Reid,

2008). Even though texting has positive attributes in forming relationships, drawbacks of texting may include the possibility for deception, revealing personal information too quickly, sharing something negative that one might have held to themselves in a face-to-face conversation, and lower social presence (Sprecher, 2009).

Of cell phone owners, 81% use their phone to send or receive text messages (PEW Research Center for Internet, Science, and Tech, 2014). Six in ten cell phone users ages 18-34 report having slept next to their cell phone to prevent them from missing a call, text, or any other update throughout the night (PEW Research Center for Internet, Science, and Tech, 2014). Furthermore, 75% of users within this age range state they check their phone for messages even though they did not hear the phone ring (PEW Research Center for Internet, Science, and Tech, 2014). The reality of being accessible at all times has created blurred boundaries for cell users.

Even though text messaging is a heavily relied upon use of communication, text message etiquette has yet to be established. Even though most American adults agree that using your cell phone during a group setting is harmful to the interaction, 89% admitted to using their cell phone in their most recent social setting. Of that percentage, 61% were reading either a text or an email (PEW Research Center for Internet Science, and Tech, 2015). Thirty nine percent of users say that others have complained about the user not checking their phone frequently enough and rendering a reply promptly enough. This percentage is even higher for younger adults; 47% for ages 18-24 and 44% for those who ages range from 25-34 (PEW Research Center for Internet, Science, and Tech, 2014). From these results, it's clear that response time holds some meaning to the sender, and it's possible that the sender may correlate the receiver's response time with their interest in forming a relationship.

Texting in Relationships

Text messaging has added another layer to romantic partner's ability to connect, especially when face to face interactions aren't possible. Seemingly more personal than an email or IM (instant message), but not as personal as a phone call or face to face interaction, text messaging lacks much of the contextual data face to face interactions allow, which can create complications when beginning a romantic relationship. Trying to understand mixed messages and trying to decode ambiguous text messages takes a great deal of time and energy in new relationships. The ability to edit or delete responses provides users with the ability to present themselves in a way that may be more favorable than reality.

Texting has become a way in which people navigate their social relationships (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012). Previous research has indicated that text messaging is being used predominantly in personal relationships, particularly to "commence, advance, maintain, or otherwise influence interpersonal relationships" (Pettigrew, 2009, p. 698). Current research argues that texting has created a new way for those in a committed relationship to show affection to one another even when they are not physically in the same place, thus having a universal positive association to partner attachment (Schade et. al., 2013). Romantic pairs often used text messages to encourage feelings of connection, both emotionally and relationally (Pettigrew, 2009). However, text messages have also been used to hurt a partner resulting in a negative partner attachment (Schade et. al., 2013).

Because we have a great deal of access to our phones, text messaging allows users to present themselves in the way in which they wish to be seen; texting allows the user the ability to state in a message a location that may not be factual of their surroundings (Reid and Reid 2010). For their study, Reid and Reid (2010) described the ability that text messaging permits users to edit messages before they are sent, implying that if this conversation exchange were to happen in

person, in real time, partners are not granted that same luxury. Reid and Reid also note the potential obstacles text messaging creates due to the fact its communication is in writing, which may not allow recipients of messages to understand the full range of the sender's self-expression and depletes both partners of social cues they would normally have in a face-to-face conversation. Through the use of text messages, visible and audible social cues that are afforded to us during a face to face conversation are diminished, such as social context of a conversation, tone of voice, and body language, not allowing the receiver all the data points to understand the meaning of the message in its entirety (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Reid & Reid, 2008,). Much like the internet, text messaging also permits users to not only eliminate social cues, but physical cues too (e.g. physical attractiveness) allowing them to create relationships based on shared beliefs and values (McKenna & Bargh, 2004). Additionally, because text messages do not necessarily occur in real time, users have the ability to edit and review messages before they are sent, potentially allowing greater control of self-expression (Reid & Reid, 2004).

Reid and Reid (2008) found that "young, single, and socially anxious mobile phone users are predisposed to discover and take advantage of the social functionality of SMS, enabling them to enrich their personal relationships in ways that might otherwise be denied to them" (p.18). In an earlier study conducted by Reid and Reid (2007) they found that participants identified as lonely favored and were more likely to place a phone call before using texting because they found texting to be less intimate, and therefore used it as a last resort. On the other hand, those identified as anxious, preferred text messaging to voice calling, feeling as though it enabled them to connect and achieve intimacy (Reid & Reid, 2007). The literature is clear that young people are using cell phones to navigate relationships, but the literature needs to fill the gap of how young users are using texting as a medium to create new relationships.

Demographics of Text Message Users

Gender and age differences have been noted throughout the research investigating texting among relationships. When compared to men, women use text messaging more frequently and are more attached to their cell phones. Even though text messaging is the most commonly used feature of smartphone users across the board, there is a difference in how text messages are being used across gender and age (Morrill, Jones & Vaterlaus, 2013). In the study conducted by Morrill et al., 2013, they reported that females' motives to use text messaging were to "deepen existing relationships, typically by encouraging others," (p.12) and show others that they are thinking about them and care about their feelings. On the other hand, males reported that their primary motive of texting was to create more relationships than they currently have, as opposed to deepening existing relationships.

While there are differences among gender, there are also substantial differences in age and use of text messaging/cell phone use. Even though 18-24 year olds have been the most commonly studied age group, they are also the first age group to grow up with cell phones, making them "native" cell phone users (Forgays, Hyman & Schreiber, 2013). Teens and young adults are the age group that use text messaging the most frequently, while also using voice calling the least frequently (Morrill et al., 2013).

In 2015, text messaging was not only the most widely used, but also most frequently used feature of smart phones for both genders and all ages (PEW Research Center for Internet, Science, & Tech, 2015). However, men's text messages tend to be brief, practical, and informative, where women typically use text messaging to share emotions and experiences. Compared to men, women's messages are longer and more grammatically complex.

Significance

Although we know texting is widespread across cell phone users, there is little research on how text messaging and the way we make meaning of text messages impact the formation and development of romantic relationships. The developmental stage of emerging adulthood is often when relationships begin to become more permanent and more committed, as opposed to adolescence, making the formation of romantic relationships during this time crucial (Finchman & Cui, 2010).

Even though there are several studies on the frequency of texting as a means of communication, the research surrounding how it is used to develop relationships is limited. Since technology is ever evolving and only seems to increase in use, it is imperative to understand how texting plays a role in not only the creation of relationships, but what implications it may carry for both the individuals and the future of the relationship. Most studies that have been conducted have examined texting through relationships that have been maintained for some time. There is little existing data on text messaging and its impact on the formation of romantic relationships.

By the use of qualitative interviews, more specifically, the use of focus groups, this study examined how romantic relationships are formed or not formed, by first unfolding how women make meaning of text messages in new relationships. This study serves as a launching point to further investigate how texting, and potentially technology as a whole, can contribute to the success and failure of romantic relationships.

This research becomes a necessity to understand, not only because texting and relationship formation in one way or another affects the entirety of our population, but it continues to beg the question: how does technology affect our ability to connect with one

another. Knowing that connection is a vital part of survival, and human beings are wired to connect. Therefore, understanding the process and different ways human beings are connecting is critical. This study further investigated the way that texting may contribute or interfere with our ability to connect with romantic relationships. Furthermore, these findings have implications for clinical practice. Not only do these findings have the potential to create normalization for clients' experiences, but they began to highlight the weight technology has within any relationship, especially romantic relationships. It will become imperative that clinicians incorporate technology as another major participant of any relationship throughout the therapy process.

This study attested that the first text message exchanges between potential romantic partners shapes or dissolves the development of their relationship. If we can understand what different data points hold weight to receivers, there is potential to ease relationship formation, or if nothing else, understand our new cultural norms for dating.

Rationale

Gathering in-depth group interviews of the experiences of women, and their accounts of triumphs and tribulations of past relationships while using texting, gave researchers the ability to begin to generate hypotheses of a phenomenon that touches most of our society. The focus groups shed light on the process in which women make meaning of text messages with intended romantic partners. Though the current literature does address text messaging, it rarely addresses it in the context of its role in building relationships. The current research has a stronger focus on the role text messaging plays in relationships with clear expectations. Due to the lack of research surrounding the development of romantic relationships, a focus group allowed participants the freedom to explore their ideas of how they view texting and its effects on the advancement of intimate relationships. A focus group allowed researchers to understand and explore participants'

vocabulary and terminology of how they make meaning of text messages. Focus groups enable participants to share similar examples, but they allow space and tolerance for diverse reactions. Focus groups have the ability to enable participants to ‘jog one another’s memories’ and build off each other’s ideas to create more dialogue surrounding a particular topic.

Since there is a gap in literature, focus groups were appropriate for this study due to the flexibility they allow for each participant to lend their view on a particular topic (Berg, 2007). Focus groups are intended to gather a participant’s view on a particular issue or topic; however, they can also discover the meaning the participant may carry behind such views (Bloor, Frankland, and Thomas 2001).

Theoretical Framework

This study used symbolic interactionism for its theoretical framework. Below is the description of how that theory will contribute to guiding this study.

The assumptions of symbolic interactionism spring from the idea that we understand and relate to our environment based on symbols that we know or ones that we learn (Smith, Hamon, Ingoldsby, & Miller, 2008). Symbolic interactionism assumes that the world we live in is symbolic; each individual takes meaning from every interaction and interprets it to create their own understanding (Smith et al., 2008). People interact and react to one another according to the meaning that action has for each individual. Human beings learn about and make sense of meaning through interactions with one another. Human beings are influenced by society and learn social norms and rules throughout interactions with one another.

Because symbolic interactionism focuses on how individuals make meaning from communication exchanges, it would only make sense this theory could be applied to electronic communication. However, electronic communication invites a new set of interactions to

investigate, due to the lack of human contact that create social cues. Things like response time, punctuation, initiation, frequency, and time of day the messages were sent are all different patterns this theory helped guide this study to uncover. More importantly, this theory guided the understanding of how each individual is interpreting those data points and the text message as a whole. There is also the matter of the sender's intent versus the meaning the receiver made and how those misunderstanding get resolved, if ever. Furthermore, understanding how the ambiguity of the message plays into women's meaning making.

Thus using symbolic interactionism theory as a guide for this study enabled researchers to begin to uncover and understand the meaning texting contributes to the development of romantic relationships. Due to the limited research on texting and the development of intimate relationships, symbolic interactionism allowed for much room for participants to share their experiences in a way that the meaning makes sense to the participant, therefore making symbolic interactionism an appropriate framework to use as a guide for this study.

Purpose of Study

There is a clear gap in the literature surrounding the use of text messaging and its impact on the development of intimate relationships. This study aimed to begin to fill that gap. This study hoped to understand the way in which women make meaning of text messages during the development of intimate relationships.

Of the research that has been conducted, studies have emerged that associate attachment style with cell phone use and text messaging (Morey, Gentzler, Creasy, Oberhauser, & Westerman, 2013; Wiesskirch & Delevi, 2013). Other studies aimed to correlate loneliness and anxiety to text messaging (Reid & Reid, 2007; Tan, Pamuk, Donder, 2013). However, most of these studies conducted have done so through the lens in which participants are already involved

in an established romantic relationship and looking at different effects text messaging might have on the relationship (Pettigrew, 2009; Schade, Sandberg, Bean, Busby & Coyne, 2013). There has yet to be a study associated with individuals' experiences, or how they make meaning of creating a relationship while using texting as one of the means of communication. As technology continues to emerge, it is part of our job as marriage and family therapists to help cultivate an understanding of different meanings that might arise from the use of text messaging and the development of intimate relationships. This research sought to uncover different meanings text messages may hold so that we further understand what potential implications that may have on the future of a relationship. It also aimed to understand what narratives women created about how the relationship is developing. Furthermore, this research allows clinicians to normalize and empathize with our clients' experiences of new ways of creating intimate relationships.

Research Questions

1. How do young adult women make meaning of text messages from a romantic partner while developing a relationship?
2. What text message behaviors by potential partners shape the experience of users during the development of an intimate relationship?
 - a. How do those experiences shape the development of intimate relationships?

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing research highlights both advantages and disadvantages of recent technology and how it relates to relationships and relationship formation. Through computer mediated communication, the way in which we communicate with each other has drastically changed, allowing users the ability to reach anyone at any time. Texting, in particular, has added a new layer to relationship; seemingly more personal than an instant message or email, but not as personal as a phone call or face to face conversation. However, the way in which users are navigating text messages is not universal. As technology evolves, it's not surprising the way relationships are forming is evolving, allowing users to decide if a relationship is worth pursuing without ever meeting their counterpart in person. This research will be discussed as it relates to the experiences of women and how they create meaning of text messages while developing a romantic relationship.

Texting

According to the International Telecommunication Union, in the United States in 2007, for the first time in history, the number of texts exchanged in a month surpassed the number of phone calls made. Since then, the number of texts has only increased. As time goes on, we are calling less and speaking for fewer minutes. In 2010, 6.1 trillion text messages were sent around the world, approximately 200,000 per minute.

The first text was sent on December 3, 1992, by Finnish inventor Matti Makkonen from a computer to a mobile phone (Kellon, L. 2012, December 3). The message read "Merry Christmas." Although Makkonen is clear it was a team that implemented his idea into reality, he is considered the father of SMS (short hand message). In a text message interview done by the BBC, Makkonen initially thought texting's use would be for quick business needs. Despite

Makkonen's intention, the research indicates that young adults, aged between 18 to 29, are more frequent users of cell phones, including texting, than any other age group.

Numerous studies have shown different motives for cell phone use including its aid in forming relationships. There have been positive and negative outcomes to cell phone use and its impact on relationships. According to the Pew Institute of Research, young adults use for cell phones include meeting new people, continuing relationships and contact with old friends and family members, and to meet potential romantic or sexual partners (2007). These are only a few of the several motives research has found for cell phone use among users.

Even though the cell phone provides a new way of communication, as opposed to the use of a landline or a hand written letter, its aim is to achieve some of the same classic goals as previous communication mediums: affection, inclusion, and situational control. However, even though a cell phone may achieve such goals, it can often be used as a buffer for uncomfortable face-to-face interaction (Auter, 2007). In her book *Alone Together*, social psychologist Sherry Turkle uses her 15 years of ethnographic research to understand how technology effects the formation of self, connectivity and relationships. She uses field observations and in-depth interviews with over 450 people. Turkle describes the space that texting creates between the initiator of the message and the person receiving the message, allowing users to conduct themselves differently than they might in a face-to-face interaction or even a phone call with the very same person. Not only does the space between users allow the best version of themselves to be present, but Turkle argues that it allows users to mask their true identities, which can lead to dissatisfaction when a face-to-face interaction occurs.

Social psychologist Eric Klinenberg and Aziz Ansari found a similar theme in their research project hosting focus groups around the world interviewing people of all age ranges as

well as using the website Reddit to create a massive online focus group. Klinenberg and Ansari found that texting intensifies the consequences of inappropriate text messages because the sender is not able to observe social cues from the recipient, such as their facial expression or a change in their voice. For example, sarcasm is frequently misunderstood in all forms of computer mediated communication (Filik, Thompson, Harvey, Davies, Turner, 2015).

Furthermore, both Turkle and Klinenberg and Ansari found that texting is a far less forgiving communication medium and one message can change the entire dynamic of a relationship. Simple grammar and spelling mistakes, as well as punctuation choices, can create a change in perception of the other person. Klinenberg and Ansari describe inability to read body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions allocated in face-to-face interactions that allow a person to make a recovery if they might have said something wrong or it was interpreted wrong, whereas in a text message there is a lasting impression of a person's mistake.

However, even though texting strips users of their ability to pick up on social cues, some studies argue that it creates the luxury of more self-disclosure because of the level of anonymity that texting provides (Bargh & McKenna, 2004, Reid & Reid, 2010). Not only is there an increase in self-disclosure, but potential partners become more thoughtful in their responses and create connection based on values and similar interests versus physical attraction (Bargh & McKenna, 2004).

A study conducted by Derks, Fishcer, Bos (2008) discussed the role of emotion in computer-mediated communication and found positive aspects of this particular type of communication. While some may argue that emotion is most successfully conveyed in person, this may not always be the case. The success of online therapy is an indication that emotion can be communicated over the internet. Alongside online therapy, online dating and online support

groups are further successful examples of emotion being effectively conveyed through computer-mediated communication. For those who struggle with anxiety and find face-to-face encounters to be difficult, computer mediated communication seems to be particularly helpful (Derks et al., 2008). Although computer mediated communication has a definite place in relationships, not all encounters are successful. However, Derks et al. (2008) proves that meaningful intimate relationships are possible with the aid of computer mediated conversations. “CMC seems to reinforce rather than reduce the communication of emotions” (Derks et al., 2008, p. 773).

Sprecher reported that there are many advantages and disadvantages to texting. Sprecher, as well as others (Baker, 2007; Boase & Wellmen, 2006; Walther, 1996; Walther & parks, 2002), report that the advantages to texting include but are not limited to:

- There is more time to reply or communicate to the recipient, which can lead to more thoughtful responses
- People who are more shy could write a more meticulous response without fear of being interrupted by someone of a more dominate personality
- Asynchronous communication enables those pairs who may have different schedules of availability communicate without fear or repercussion of exchanging messages at an inconvenient time, because texting is less intrusive
- Connecting with numerous people at the same time is made possible
- Short messages, or short hand messages, are tolerable and sometimes appropriate making it easier to communicate previous arrangements to meet face-to-face

Disadvantages to texting include, but are not limited to:

- Lack of social cues and social presence

- Allows space and opportunity for people to share things they might not otherwise share (i.e. over-share personal information too soon)
- Dishonesty

Turkle theorizes that because emerging adults have been native cell phone users and become so comfortable with text based communication, it has jeopardized their ability to have spontaneous exchanges. Turkle conjectures that because texting is a communication medium in which users have the capability to plan and be more thoughtful about responses before sending them, the circuits in the brain used for unprompted conversation are not getting exercised as often, therefore causing a decline in that particular skill set.

Harrison and Gilmore (2012) followed 102 college students in order to examine their social constructs about texting. Harrison and Gilmore (2012) found that students reported that even though texting provided an immediate and convenient mode of faceless communication, it also diverted users' attention from their current social surroundings. This study also concluded six categories describing why students use text messaging as a communication medium:

1. "Staying connected:" users reported an increase in ability to stay in touch with their social circle
2. "Romance:" users engaged in text messaging to express interest and/or affection to a current or potential partner
3. "Escaping the present:" using text messaging to distract themselves from the people or situations in their present surroundings
4. "Social breaches:" sending text messages while they are expected to be engaged in another activity or conversation with someone (for example: texting another romantic interest while on a date)

5. “Maleficence:” sending text messages in order to provoke or upset/hurt the recipient
6. “Sexting:” using text messages to send sexually charged content

Texting has been used to meet all different needs. Anything from confirming dinner plans with a friend to starting a new relationship with a romantic interest, texting is an appropriate form of communication. There are a number of advantages and disadvantages to texting. Texting allows users to create a more diligent response, allowing the person to edit their response. Texting also creates a space between users, so those suffering from anxiety lean toward using this less invasive form of communication. However, texting strips users of nonverbal cues that face to face conversations have, which is seemingly problematic for users and can cause miscommunication. The research has yet to fill the gap of how this miscommunication happens. Users are picking up on nonverbal cues unique to texting. Behaviors such as punctuation, response time, and emoticons are some of the cues in which users are turning to in order to understand the progression of the relationship through text messages. However, there is little understanding or research regarding how users are making meaning of text message behaviors, especially as it pertains to relationship formation.

History of Dating and Dating for Emerging Adults

In order to gain a better understanding of current dating patterns, it seems important to understand past patterns of dating and how dating has evolved over time. Time and technology are two influences that have changed several things about relationships, including age of marriage, reasons for getting married, and how we meet our mate. According to the US Census Bureau, the average age of first marriage in 1950 was around 20 years old for women and 22.5 years old for men. In 2014, that number jumped to around the age of 27 for women and 29 for

men. Several studies have investigated what factors might have influenced the astounding jump in age difference.

A number of influences have been found. A study conducted in 1932 found that one in every eight married couples lived in the same building before they got married and one third of married couples were in a 5 block radius of one another before marrying. Researchers concluded that people were not looking far for a partner, nor did they have the opportunity. The internet, telephones, cell phones, and texting have played an enormous role in allowing users to look well beyond a 5 block radius, and not only look, but maintain relationships.

As technology evolves, the way we meet potential mates has changed from an introduction from our parents or a friend in the neighborhood to a dating profile from anywhere in the world. Users must create profiles and texts that highlight their best characteristics. The research suggests little is forgiven through text based communication and relationships can be ended before they even meet face to face.

Forming Relationships

Some theories surrounding relationship formation are more complex than others, but most theories include three stages: formation, maintenance, dissolution (Bergdall, Kraft, Andes, Carter, Hatfield-Timajchy, & Hock-Long, 2012). Theories suggest in order to move from one stage to the next, changes in intimacy, trust, and commitment deemed to be determining factors (Bergdall et al, 2012, Seiffge-Krenke, 2003). Sprecher (2009) adds that interdependence, self-disclosure, investment in each other, and feeling a couple identity are also factors that allow a relationship to move from computer mediated communication to face-to-face interactions.

Bergdall, et al (2012) investigated relationships and communication technology followed a group of emerging adults for five weeks, and found that during the formation stage of a

relationship, participants used cell phones in order to “meet, screen, and get to know new partners” (Bergdall et al, 2012, p. 574). Several participants of this study stated that they would meet a potential partner in a public place, either through mutual friends or a dating site, and would then exchange numbers. Participants would then begin to screen the potential new partners to learn more about them by the use of their cell phone either texting, emailing, or phone calls. Participants of this study referred to this process of getting to know one another as “talking.” During the “talking” stage of relationship formation, this study found that users would either decide to create and deepen the relationship or go their separate ways. Some participants also reported a limbo stage, where the relationship was neither moving forward nor ending, which had the potential to last for weeks at a time. The present study aims to take these findings a step further and focus on the stage of relationship formation where partners are deciding whether to continue and deepen the relationship or to go their separate ways. The present study is determined to uncover the process of how cell phone users make this decision and particularly what role texting contributes to user’s decision to either continue the relationship or dissolve the relationship.

Since there is limited literature on texting, reviewing literature about online dating is an appropriate comparison because they have similar qualities. Baker (2007) found that couples who formed a relationship online and then continued that relationship face-to-face, mentioned response time, qualities described on their profile, and writing style all played a part in their decision to progress the relationship offline. Even though this study describes online dating, the current study aims to discover whether these factors influence another type of computer mediated communication: texting.

Technology has changed the way romantic relationships are being formed. Texting allows users to be attainable at all times, especially in between face to face interactions. Texting has aided in the formation of relationships. The research suggests that however users presents themselves over text can determine the future of the relationship. That being said, understanding how users are making meaning of text messages can be instrumentally helpful for users.

Texting and Relationships

The research that has been conducted on texting has been predominately focused on its effects of committed relationships and friendships. A study investigating university students found that 61% of text messages were relationally focused (Thurlow, 2003), echoed by Holtgraves and Paul (2013) who also found that texting was a way of maintaining an affective social relationship and a way to stay connected with others versus using texting as a means to exchange information. Texting was also used by partners as an addendum to face-to-face interaction in order to stay connected to one another causing some relationships to have an increase relationship satisfaction (Pettigrew, 2009). Reid and Reid (2004) determined that texting helps create a deeper and more meaningful social relationships.

A study conducted by Bergdall, Kraft, Andes, Carter, Hatfield-Timajchy, and Hock-Long, analyzed a 5 week diary along with debriefing interviews from 70 African American and Puerto Rican men and women. This study concluded that adults aging between 18-29 and in a committed relationship used cell phones for relationship maintenance, particularly to feel close and connected to their partners; this proved particularly important for those couples not living in the same area. Cell phones were also used to broach topics such as the quality of the relationship and difficult topics including fidelity. Participants reported that they would often use the phone to create emotional distance in order to better address difficult topics. Participants also reported a

way in which they determined exclusivity and how much their partner cares about the relationship was how often their partner initiated contact.

Schade, Sandberg, Bean, Busby, and Coyne (2013) surveyed 267 young adults ranging in age from 18-25 in committed relationships about ways in which they connect with their partner through the use of technology. Their results concluded for both men and women, texting their partner to express affection was positively associated with higher partner attachment. Schade et al. (2013) found that majority of their participants, both men (82.6%) and women (81.2%), used texting to connect with their partners more than once a day. Females who used technology in order to mediate their relationship, found a negative correlation with relationship satisfaction. Men had a negative association with relationship stability, satisfaction, and partner attachment when technology was used with the intention to hurt one's partner.

In a study conducted by Holtgraves (2010), 224 college students, ranging in age from 18 to 41, although 96% were between the ages of 18 and 21, were surveyed using a five factor model of personality measure, self-monitoring of expressive behavior measure, and an aggression measure to determine personality traits. Additionally, participants were asked to provide their last 20 text messages and to whom they were exchanged which were to be analyzed. Participants were then asked to determine the relationship, closeness, and liking of the recipient. The results of this study concluded that the use of emoticons was significantly associated with closeness in relationship, predominately being exchanged between significant others, as opposed to friends, family members, or roommates. Further results stated that texting was predominantly exchanged between individuals who liked one another and who were close.

Text messages have become a part of relationships and connection. For some relationships, texting has been a positive addition to relationship satisfaction when used to

express affection. Again, texting is not without miscommunication, even in relationship maintenance. This study will shed light on texting during the formation stage of the relationship, which might ultimately help further understand text messaging in the relationship maintenance stage.

Gender and Age Differences

A survey conducted by Match.com found that of their nation-wide survey, 32% of Americans under 30 would ask someone out on a first date by text message, compared to only 8% of Americans over 30. However, 58% of American teens ranging in age of 13-17 stated they would ask someone out on a first date via text message. These findings suggest that we are becoming more comfortable with our romantic lives intersecting with our phone world. However, this increase in comfort can also be seen in 2010 survey where only 10 percent of young adults would ask someone out via text on a first date where that percentage increased to 32 percent by 2013. However, MIT social psychologist, Sherry Turkle argues that being asked out by text message has generated a lesser feeling of flattery than a phone call for women because it has the potential to be impersonal, it generates uncertainty that they are the only woman being asked out by their potential partner.

Gender differences are prevalent in the current research findings as well. Gender differences have been noted throughout the research, not only in computer mediated communication, but as a general gender difference in all types of communication. Tannen (1990) found that women crave intimacy and connection in conversations, where men communicate with the intention to exchange information and solve problems. Women tend to use communication to build relationships and express more feelings than men (Gray, 1992; Tannen, 1990). Glass (1992) found that women talk more about relationships and are more likely to ask

for help than men, who talk more about literal details of the day. Men use less facial expressions and tone as compared to women (Glass, 1992). These gender differences may help understand gender differences of computer mediated communication.

One study conducted by Morrill et al. (2013) found that women text more frequently than men (2013); Holtgraves and Paul found this same result in their study focusing on the linguistics of telecommunications (2013). Holtgraves's (2010) study exploring text messaging, personality, and social context echoed the findings of previous studies that women text more frequently than men, but furthermore found that women use emoticons more frequently than men. These findings suggest that women, more than men, are using emoticons as a way to aid the lack of nonverbal cues a face to face conversation offers. Morrill et al. (2013) study found that women are more attached to their cell phones compared to men and they report that females' motives to use text messaging were to "deepen existing relationships, typically by encouraging others" (Morrill et al., 2013, p.12). On the other hand, males' primary motive of texting was reported to create more relationships than they currently have, as opposed to deepen them. In the same study, women reported more difficulty in having to relinquish their cell phone for the day than a telephone, computer, or the internet; more men also reported that their cell phone would be the most difficult to give up compared to the other technologies (Morrill, et al, 2013).

Schade et al. (2013) found a negative association between male texting frequency and relationship satisfaction; however, the study also found combating results for females. There was a positive association between female texting frequency and their own relationship stability. Schade et al. discussed that this could potentially be explained by female tendency to reach out and connect with partners, and texting provides a quick and easy way to do so. While men who

might feel disconnected from a partner or that their relationship is threatened, tend to create distance by using a communication medium that creates space between them and their partner.

Reid and Reid (2008) found that of the men in their study who did prefer to use text messaging as opposed to talking, reported to feel more at ease disclosing information via text message and found themselves more frequently involved in longer text conversations.

Gender and age differences are prevalent throughout the research. Research shows that women are more likely to text and are more attached to their cell phones than men. Women are more likely to reach out to connect, and texting provides an efficient way to do just that. Emerging adulthood is the second most common age group to use texting, just behind teenagers. However, with computer mediated conversation comes the potential for miscommunication.

Social Norms of Texting

Although there has been some research that has aimed to discover social norms and structure of texting in all different contexts, we have failed to completely unveil the “rules” our culture has placed on young adults, texting, and dating. Granted, there is no research that supports a universal set of rules of texting but Ansari and Klinenberg concluded there are 5 cultural consensuses forming around some standard practices of texting and forming relationships from their participants.

First, the receiver of the message must wait a length of time before texting a romantic interest back in order to remain interesting. Ansari and Klinenberg compare the notion of waiting to text back to studies examining Pavlov’s theory of reward. Robinson, Anselme, Fischer, and Berridge (2014) found in their study of animals the concept of reward uncertainty. That is, when an animal pushes a lever and is uncertain whether the lever will bring them food or not, the animal’s interest in pushing the lever drastically increases. Not only does their interest

increase, the animal gets an increase in dopamine. If a text back is considered a reward, when someone texts back immediately each time, the user on the other end becomes conditioned that each time they text, they will get a response. Therefore, the assumption that there will always be a text back lowers the value of the reward of a text back.

Ansari and Klinenberg found that user who waits to text their potential romantic partner again until they have responded to the previous message had more success in relationship formation. This social norm is based on the social psychology principal of scarcity (Whitechurch, Wilson, Gilbert, 2011). Meaning, people find things more desirable when it is unavailable to them. When that is translated to text message behavior, the more a person texts without a response, the more available they are to their intended partner, making them less attractive.

Thirdly, the length of a text message you have written and intend to send should be around the same length as the one you received (Ansari & Klinenberg, 2015). Furthermore, the fourth social norm Ansari and Klinenberg found is if you have sent more texts than you have received, then the person on the other end of the text conversation is not interested in you. Due to the lack of nonverbal cues, not responding to text messages has potentially become a way in which users show they are not interested in a relationship. Therefore, if there is not a response, or very minimal responses, these findings suggest that the person is not interested in pursuing the relationship.

Lastly, the person who receives the last message holds the most power in the relationship at that moment. This can be explained by the sociological principal of least interest, the person who is least interested in the relationship holds the most power (Homans, 1961). Therefore, the

decision to text back or not, consequently indicating the person's interest level, gives that person the most power of the relationship in that moment.

Through these five cultural norms, it appears that text message users are attempting to create and make meaning of nonverbal cues. Response time and length of messages are two of the nonverbal cues that are being used to making meaning of how the relationship is progressing. However, there has yet to be a universal agreement of such nonverbal cues. The current study will begin to uncover how women understand and make meaning of text message behavior.

Summary of Research

Texting has given users the ability to connect with anyone in the world at any time, much easier than ever. The notion of always being reachable and plugged in has created distorted boundaries for most users. Whether texting is being used for quick business needs or to develop a romantic relationship, texting has infiltrated our daily routines. While texting has both advantages and disadvantages, it is a frequently used medium of communication, particularly for emerging adults. Texting has allowed users that suffer from anxiety a forum to connect with others that is far less anxiety provoking. Texting has given users the ability to connect with romantic partners when face to face conversations are not possible. Research has shown that texting allows users to deepen their relationships and correlated a higher relationship satisfaction when texting was used to show affection for their partner.

Even though there have been several benefits, texting is not without disadvantages. The research suggests that texting's lack of nonverbal cues, including tone of voice, facial expression, environment, and body language, creates ambiguity between users. Users have used emoticons and punctuation to aid in the absence of nonverbal cues; however, mixed messages continue to be rampant.

Through all the literature and research conducted on texting, it is clear that texting is prevalent and an important part of emerging adults' communication and only becoming more widespread. Therefore, it is imperative that we continue to broaden our knowledge of texting and its effects on all different aspects of relationships. This study aims to add to the literature by understanding texting and its impact on young adult women and relationship formation.

CHAPTER III: METHODS

Design

This study used a guided focus group interview as its main procedure for data collection. Focus groups permitted the researcher to explore areas where little research has been conducted and allow a deeper understanding of such areas to emerge (Berg, 2007). Focus groups are intended to gather a participant's view on a particular issue or topic; however, they can also discover the meaning the participant may carry behind such views (Bloor, Frankland, and Thomas 2001). According to Bloor, Frankland, and Thomas (2001) "focus groups can yield data on the uncertainties, ambiguities, and group processes that lead to and underlie group assessments (p. 7)." In other words, the group discussion is less prone to be influenced by the researcher's own biases and views. Through a focus group approach, the researcher was able to facilitate a dialogue that uncovers psychological and sociocultural processes, including those that occur in our conscious, semiconscious, and unconscious mind (Berg, 2007).

Berg (2007) notes a number of other advantages of a focus group methodology. A focus group methodology allows the ability to gather large amounts of data in a relatively short time frame. Due to a group dynamic, the investigator can examine topics that may be unforeseen to the investigator, while still remaining within the bounds of the research question. Focus groups have the capability to allow each participant to continue to build off of one another's experience, while simultaneously creating a space where the participant's memory may be jogged to render their own unique experience.

For this study, focus group methodology is appropriate because there is such little research on the topic of texting and relationship formation; focus groups allowed participants the freedom to guide what is important to them within the boundaries of the research topic. Focus

groups allowed for diverse experiences, as well as allowed the researcher to understand participants' vocabulary with less of their own biases.

Participants

According to Berg (2007), an ideal focus group includes 8-12 people. This study included 8 participants. Eligibility requirements reflect the current gaps in the literature with hopes to build on existing literature. The current research shows that women in emerging adulthood frequently use text messaging to build heterosexual romantic relationships. Relationships in emerging adulthood are more permeant and committed than those formed during adolescence. Participants were heterosexual women in emerging adulthood, who ranged in age from 22 to 27 and lived in Washington DC or the surrounding metropolitan area. To be considered for participation, women self-reported that they were not currently in a committed romantic relationship. Eligibility for the present study required that potential participants own a cell phone with texting capabilities and use their phone to text others frequently. Those eligible reported that within the past year, they had regularly texted someone with whom they could have a potential romantic relationship. Frequent communication through text messaging was particularly important as the researcher wanted an extensive experience over time where frequent texting was the primary means of communication. Experiences needed to have occurred within the last year to ensure that participants were able to draw from experiences recent enough to contribute to the topic of the focus group.

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling methods. Participants were recruited by word of mouth, through academic listservs, through postings to relevant Internet sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, and through community boards (Appendix A and B). Through these postings, it was clear that the researcher was not seeking a clinical population.

Procedures

Prior to beginning recruitment, the researcher received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The researcher recruited using a snowball sample, through word of mouth, emails, flyers, and internet postings. The date of the focus group was included in the recruitment flyers, emails, and internet posting. Individuals were asked to contact the researcher by text, email, or phone call. All but two participants contacted the researcher by text message. The other two participants contacted the researcher by email. Individuals who contacted the researcher and were interested in being a participant of this study were screened via phone or email to ensure they met predetermined eligibility criteria. Participants first had to be available during the time listed on the flier and then further screening included a quick overview of the study and elicited a response from potential candidates regarding the eligibility criteria. Participants were asked their age, their relationship status, whether or not they own a cell phone, if that cell phone has text messaging capabilities, how often they text, and if within the past year they have exchanged at least one or more text messages with someone with whom they were romantically interested. Ineligible participants were given proper referrals if needed (Appendix C).

The focus group was held in a neutral setting at Virginia Tech National Region Campus in Falls Church which promoted privacy and safety for both participants and the researcher. The focus group was held in the group therapy room in the Center for Family Services located within the campus building. Before participants arrived, chairs were placed around a circular table and served as an optimal arrangement to promote a group discussion. The focus group was electronically recorded by audio recorder and video recorder for later review and analysis. During the analysis process, each participant was given a pseudonym to protect confidentiality.

Upon arrival to the focus group, each participant was asked to sign an Informed Consent Form (Appendix D) as well as a Confidentiality Agreement Form (Appendix E). At any time, participants had the option to withdraw from the study. This was made clear during the informed consent both verbally and in writing. Before getting their signature on the informed consent, participants were given time to ask questions or ask the researcher to clarify anything that seemed unclear. The researcher answered each question and addressed any concerns. Once all informed consent and confidentiality agreements were collected, the recording began.

During the focus group, the researcher asked a series of questions that were predetermined and probed when necessary. A note taker was present throughout the entirety of the focus group. The note taker took notes on major themes and nonverbal communication that arose during the discussion. Before the group interview, snacks and beverages were provided. The focus group lasted two and a half hours. Immediately upon the completion of the focus group, the note taker led a debriefing session. The debriefing process was intended to clarify any information or perceptions that the note taker noticed and recorded, as well as to record any information that was missed while the information from the interview was still fresh.

Researcher Characteristics

The first researcher identifies as a single, white, female in emerging adulthood. She has firsthand experience with dating and texting, and the struggles that come along with it. Even though she identifies with the participants of this study, she welcomed experiences and understandings different than her own.

The note taker is a Latina woman in emerging adulthood, and has been married for three and a half years. She has been involved with many research projects prior to this one. She has a master's degree in marriage and family therapy, with a wide range of clinical experience. She is

sensitive to the hardships single women face when forming relationships and the misunderstandings that accompany text messages in all relationships.

Instruments

A demographic questionnaire was used in order to find basic information from participants, such as age, length of previous relationships, how they met potential partners, (online dating sites, through mutual friends, work, etc.), how long after the initial meeting before they exchanged phone numbers and text messages, how often they use texting, and to whom do they text most frequently.

A guided interview was used in order to better understand how women make meaning of text messages while developing intimate relationships. A script of the guided interview follows:

Introduction (to be read by interviewer)

Thank you all so much for being here. Like I said earlier, but just to give you an idea of what I'm really looking for and really interested in and learning about today, I'm going to read a little blurb, then we will get started. Text messaging has enabled us to communicate electronically in ways that can substitute for face-to-face conversations. That being said, in a face to face conversation, we are able to pick up on several data points which influence the conversation. Things such as tone, body language, and environment, are all stripped away when having a conversation over text. For the purpose of today, I am interested in understanding the process in which we fill in those data points in a text conversation with a dating partner or potential dating partner. So what I am interested in is what are you guys interpreting, what is important to you, how do you make sense of text messages, what holds meaning to you in terms of text messaging, and what kinds of things do you look for to understand someone or a partner

better. I can say I am certainly guilty of misunderstandings from text messages. I can't count the number of times I've read a message and thought, "What does this mean?"

Guided Interview Questions

1. What is your primary use of texting while developing a relationship?
 - a. Probe: to make plans, get to know one another
2. How does texting help you know if someone is interested in a romantic relationship with you?
3. How does texting help you know if someone is not interested in a romantic relationship with you?
4. Share a time when you received a text that was hard to interpret; that is, it was hard to know what the other person really meant.
 - a. Describe what made the text ambiguous.
 - b. What did you do to try to better understand the text?
5. How do you typically respond when you receive a text that is ambiguous from a potential romantic partner?
 - a. In the example above, how, if at all, did this process change your viewpoint of the relationship? Did it change your viewpoint of the person?
6. As we discussed earlier, meaning sometimes gets lost because text messages are just words on a screen. When a text is ambiguous and you're trying to understand it, what do you look for to help clear up ambiguity? Keep in mind we are talking about text messages between potential romantic partners.
 - a. Probe: grammar, emoticons, several texts in a row, etc.

7. How does dealing with texting ambiguity change over the course of a romantic relationship?

Validity and Reliability

In order to gain validity, at the end of the focus group, the note taker led a debriefing period, where she offered feedback of what themes and preliminary analysis were recorded during the group interview. During this time, participants were encouraged to ensure their ideas were accurately recorded. At this time, participants added or clarified the collected data to reflect their ideas. To maintain reliability, peer review and journaling was used during the entirety of the research investigation.

Analysis

All material collected by the researcher, including journal entries, was transcribed into electronic files and was reviewed several times by the researcher. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected. According to Braun and Clarke, thematic analysis allows the researcher to categorize patterns that emerge throughout a data set (2012). Through thematic analysis, the researcher is able to identify themes that are relevant to the specific research question at hand, even though countless meanings might emerge (Braun & Clarke, 2012). An inductive approach to data coding was used. There are six phases of thematic analysis; the first is for the researcher to familiarize themselves with the data through immersion. To do this, researchers read and re-read the notes taken from the focus group, and listened to the audio recording and watched the video recording while making notes. The second phase begins the systematic analysis of the data, where each researcher created initial codes. Each coder worked independently to generate reliability throughout the study. Third, codes were grouped into themes. During the fourth phase, the themes that emerged were checked against the data set to

ensure they accurately reflected the data, as well as answer the research question. This was the phase when current themes were modified, combined, or removed if the theme did not mirror the data correctly. In the fifth phase, themes were defined, named, and given descriptions. The final phase produced a report that provided a captivating story about the data collected based on the analysis.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

For the purpose of this study, eight female participants were a part of a focus group with the aim to understand how women make meaning of text messages while developing an intimate relationship. Each participant contributed unique and individual experiences that were helpful in uncovering the way in which women make meaning of text messages in potential romantic relationships. After conducting a thematic analysis of the data as illustrated by Braun and Clarke (2006), several significant themes emerged. Themes were grouped into these four ideas: (1) What's the landscape?, (2) How do I figure it out?, (3) Red flags, and (4) A red flag means, each of which have several subthemes outlined in Table 1.

<i>Table 1. Themes</i>
What's the landscape?
Automatic Mistrust
<i>Experience</i>
Restricted Options
Modern Day Crazy: The Double Standard
Gray Area
<i>Strung Along</i>
Marketing Yourself
<i>Continual Presence</i>
Protecting Ourselves
How do I figure it out?
Sharing Screenshots
Fill in the Gaps Based on the Hopes for the Relationship
Speculating About What Men Think
All Text and No Follow Through
Red Flags
Too Forward
Bad Grammar
How Casual They Are
One Word Answers
Not Initiating Conversations
Time of Day
Over Texting
A Red Flag Means...
Feeling Cheap

Keeping Me in the Back Pocket
Just a Number

Demographics

The focus group was a lively discussion, where all participants were immediately engaged with material and expressed interested and eagerness to share their ideas. All participants expressed an excitement to share their stories, and felt connected to the research topic. Generally all participants agreed with one another, where a couple participants tended to speak more than others but everyone participated. What came out of discussion were generally agreed upon ideas and were not the result of one or two people dominating with their views.

Eight women participated in the focus group for the present study. All ages of the participants fell within the emerging adulthood range, with ages spanning from 22 to 27. All participants identified as frequent texters, reporting they text every day, and do so several times throughout the day. All participants reported texting their friends or family members most frequently. There was a lack of religious and ethnic diversity in this sample as all but two participants identified as Catholic. However, those who did not identify as Catholic, identified as Christian. All but two participants identified as Caucasian. One participant identified as Asian, and one participant identified as Asian/African American. A more detailed representation of participant demographic can be found in Table 2 below.

	<u>Age</u>	<u>Religious Affiliation</u>	<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Text Most Frequent</u>	<u>How Often</u>	<u>Length of Time after initial meeting first text*</u>
1	22	Catholicism	White/Caucasian	Sister	All the time	An hour
2	25	Catholicism	White/Caucasian	Friends/Family	Everyday	Same Day

3	26	<i>Catholicism</i>	<i>White/Caucasian</i>	<i>Friends/Family</i>	<i>Everyday</i>	<i>Immediately</i>
4	25	<i>Catholicism</i>	<i>White/Caucasian</i>	<i>Family</i>	<i>Hourly</i>	<i>A few Days</i>
5	25	<i>Christianity</i>	<i>Asian</i>	<i>Friends</i>	<i>Always</i>	<i>One hour</i>
6	23	<i>Christianity</i>	<i>White/Caucasian</i>	<i>Friends/Family</i>	<i>Everyday</i>	<i>Next Day</i>
7	27	<i>Catholicism</i>	<i>White/Caucasian</i>	<i>Friends</i>	<i>Hourly</i>	<i>Immediately</i>
8	25	<i>Catholicism</i>	<i>Asian/African</i> <i>American</i>	<i>Friends/Mom</i>	<i>Everyday</i>	<i>Same Night</i>

*Participants report the length of time they believed was appropriate between meeting in person and beginning communication via text.

What's the landscape: Even though the intent of this research is to understand how women make meaning of text messages, participants first described the context in which dating and texting occurs. Participants explained what context they begin any romantic relationship in terms of texting.

Automatic Mistrust: Participants described an immediate distrust of their potential romantic partner. Participants credited this mistrust to the notion that text messaging provides a platform where deceit can occur with ease. Participants concurred that there is no certainty with text messages to know where someone is or what someone is doing. Due to the lack of information texting provides, participants described an immediate lack of trust with the person on the other end of the text message. Two participants shared their feelings of mistrust of a potential romantic partner. They discussed that dates can be canceled with ease via text message and their doubt when a date is planned that there will be any commitment to the date.

P8: It's like, whenever you meet someone and they say, let's get drinks, I don't even carve out or change my schedule because I know, that that person won't do it. And then

you won't hear from them till the morning of and they're like are we still on for drinks and you're like, uh yeah, I mean I've always been on [group laughter] I mean I said that, I don't know why you would think I said no... but you need that second text because if you show up he may not be there...

P2: I never believe it's going to happen until I actually see that person face to face on our date... even an 'in uber' text, something can still happen and they cancel [group laughter]...

P8: There is like times when people will be like an hour or two hours before we are allegedly supposed to meet, being like, are we still on for tonight? And I'm like, I don't know, you couldn't have figured that out earlier and like now, to be perfectly honestly I made plans because you didn't say anything about it... so I don't trust you.

Participants struggled to know when to trust their potential partners, especially when it came to gauging their potential partner's interest level. Participants explain that there is a lack of commitment in today's dating world, giving them an instinctive distrust toward their partner. One participant explained this feeling as having to balance enough interest to keep the relationship possible and not coming on too strong. She expands on this and says:

No, I know. It's like hard to be like every new guy you meet and think oh this is different... even in this whole conversation, we 10, 15 minutes in it all became 'they' and 'we'. Like I feel like you just get so burnt out and exhausted and it's hard to like maintain hope, that sounds so dramatic [participant laughter] but like I guess it's hard to be hopeful and so the biggest misinterpretation I think is our commitment level.. and from probably from both sides, you don't want to come on too strong. So that's where the game comes in and then, basically it's just like a power struggle from both ends of like

who likes who more or less but can still maintain enough interest level to keep you there and it becomes a complete like goat rodeo [group laughter]

Experience. Some participants discussed the idea of mistrust in terms of the ambiguity of texting, but others who had more experience with texting and dating, described the mistrust as lesson learned from previous relationships. One participant describes how her age and previous dating experiences have allowed her to not fall into the same failed dating patterns:

I think that it's a combination of being older obviously, but also, because like we were saying before we have been doing this for a few years, where it's kind of like, so dramatic to say, but it's exhausting in a way. To be like, no I'm not going to put up with this... like I think about texts that I would have responded to a few years ago, that I would never respond to now. But it's more because if someone were to send that now I think you just have that experience from before, like someone sent me a text that now we joke about it but he sent 'tonight's the night' [group laughter] and I luckily was asleep when I got it.. clearly not I've been in bed since 9 [group laughter] but if someone were to ever send that to me now, I would like... that's just horrible. It's just like it's not appealing in anyway and it's like a combination of factors, you have other things that you could text. And like it just changes, I don't know. [group agrees]

Restricted Options. When participants described receiving ambiguous text messages, they felt as though there were limited choices to understand a message. Participants discussed feeling a lack of control, noting the only aspect they were able to control or change was themselves or their own texting behavior. Participants indicated that things they would normally do to alleviate ambiguity in person were not available to them through text. One participant shared her experience in which she felt like she was unable to gain clarity from a text message

exchange, but if the same interaction had happened when they were together face to face, things would have been different.

...He had sent me kind of a sarcastic text or something that I couldn't read or that just felt really cold and kind of out of nowhere. And I think if I was in person I would be like hey what's up, did you have a bad day at work, or like what's going on, or did I do something upset you, but I think that sounds really weird over text, to be like hey did I do something to make you upset, or like are you projecting at me? [group laughter] All these things that it could be, I think you just take it really personally and you're like oh shoot, what did I do? It must be my fault. Instead of being able to rationalize, like he had a stressful day at work, or he's driving right now. There are 101 options I think and I always go straight to, what did I do?

Participants reported an overall frustration with the felt sense of minimal options to understanding their partner's messages and feelings behind the messages. Some participants reported being able to read and feel someone's body language as an option they used to understand partner's feelings when they were in person. Because text messaging eradicates body language, participants struggled to understand partner's messages. One participant discusses the lack of body language and her attempt to understand text messages:

... I feel like it's hard to put that into words, like that whole, because it's just a feeling or a vibe, if you will. [points to cell phone] this is no vibes, my cell phone sends out no vibes, you don't know. You automatically go to what you know, which for sure, you know yourself. You know what you've contributed, you know what you've read and how you interpret it, or how everyone you know has interpreted it, so you automatically, and that's usually like the worst case scenario. And so that's why you grasp for it. But I feel

like that's the major issue, like everyone just underestimates like how important body language is in building any kind of relationship, because otherwise, you're an insecure mess and you're given absolutely no answers. And I think blaming yourself or thinking it was something you did is because that's the only thing you can control. Like I can control how many and what time I text someone, but like, and can tone it down and ramp it up accordingly, but like I can control how they respond. But if I like them, its something I can adapt I guess and figure out how to navigate.

Participants reported that whenever received messages were ambiguous, they almost automatically felt it was something they had done. Participants reported looking at their own behavior as their only option to understand what might have gone wrong. In some cases at least, the ambiguous message had nothing to do with the relationship.

Modern Day Crazy: The Double Standard. Participants discussed throughout the focus group the idea of feeling crazy or being made to look crazy. This idea of being or feeling crazy was often in comparison to their male partners. The participants expanded on this idea, stating that men can send a text, which seems appropriate in the moment, but would probably not be said in a face to face interaction. However, women felt that if they were to perpetrate the same behavior, they are labeled crazy. Participants described that, however, neither gender liked the inappropriate message or inappropriate text behavior, women were much more tolerant and forgiving of such behavior. One participant shares her experience of feeling this double standard:

I don't disagree with you, I do think women have to put up with much more, but also I think that guys are pretty undeterred by you not responding. The amount of times I get a 'hey' and don't respond or a 'what are you up to, its 3am come over,' and just completely

undeterred. And that probably is because they are probably going through their phone book and I am probably one of 15 people they sent out that hey to, which is fine, I know that, they know that. But I think that I could blow off a guy for a pretty long time and he would go pretty undeterred where if I were to say that to a guy or if I were to harass him every Friday and Saturday between the hours of 11 and 3 am, I would have a restraining order put out against me. He would tell all of his friends, and I would be a psychopath. I was sitting at a brunch recently and some guy got out their phone and was laughing at a text message they got. So he passed his phone around the table and it was a screenshot of something his friend had sent him. And he had 9 missed calls from a girl and he was like this chick is crazy. And I'm like yeah okay, but how many times have I had like 17 text messages from a dude that's like hey come over , miss you, 14 missed calls... come on.

Participants described frustration with their potential partner, stating the partner they were interested in would lead them to believe that these feelings were mutual by their text message exchanges, when that may have not been the case. One participant shares her experience of bringing up these feelings up with her partner, and then having her partner respond in a way that eluded that she was crazy.

...We get called crazy and I can't even call you a sociopath for fake liking me? [group laughter]. No, no, no, but that's just like way worse, then like pretending to be, I think that a lot of behavior that girls put up with guys, is like, they lead you to believe one thing and something is going to happen, and then all the sudden can turn it on and off like so quickly. Like that's sociopathic, weird, crazy ass behavior. But you can't be like you're sociopath and insane, it's like no, I stopped, I'm over it or whatever.

The idea of feeling crazy came up often throughout the focus group. Participants explained that they felt warranted in their behavior, and that the label of crazy was false and hurtful. One participant shares:

It's kind of like back to the like, what was it, the 19th century, where like women in hysteria were crazy with emotions and you would send them to get like lobotomies and crazy institutions, cause like, they can't deal with their emotions, they're just in hysterics, which wasn't right. A modern day version of that is calling a girl a psycho.

Gray Area. Although dating and courtship have been around for centuries, texting has added a new layer to an age old ritual. Participants commented on the gray area texting creates. Participants described a space where relationship boundaries are unclear and intentions are blurred, which creates confusion for women. One participant expanded on this describing how hard it is to know if a text is personal and sent only to you or just something cut and pasted to many people.

Or what number you are to them. Like texting makes it hard to know where you stand with someone. There is the copy and paste feature too, so um, like how do you know what number you are to them.

Participants also described this gray area in terms of not understanding what texts mean to the relationship. One participant shared a story of a partner with whom she had been on a few dates, but then it didn't work out. After a few weeks she received a text from him and was unclear what it meant in terms of their relationship. She describes this gray area it put their relationship in, where they were still in some contact, but never seeing each other in person again.

...then he fell off the face of the Earth. Well, also, I was traveling one week and he was traveling one week and we both have busy jobs or whatever, so he just like fell off the

face of the Earth. It just kind of fell out, we just kind of lost touch and couldn't find a time to meet so we just lost touch. Then he sends me a text a month later and it says hey [PARTICIPANT NAME], hope you've been well. I just want to let you know, that I've just been really busy and I just didn't want you to think I was trying to phase you out. [group laughter/shock] I know right? So I was pissed whenever I got the message, obviously, and I was like, so does this mean he wants to see me? Or is this just a don't feel bad about yourself text [group laughter]. So I was like, I'll be nice and respond. I wasn't very interested in him at this point anyway. It was just like, what do you want me to do with this text message because there is just like nothing really moving forward from this. And then I responded really nicely and was like hey no worries, hope your work is going well. And I never heard from him again. [group laughter] It was just weird, because it wasn't like hey let me make it up to you for falling off the face of the earth and take you to dinner.

Participants discussed how texting puts a large part of their relationship in a gray area, and how much confusion it then causes women. Texting allows boundaries and intentions to be unclear and easily misinterpreted. Participants discuss the gray area in which they are seemingly more than a friend, but not in a committed relationship.

Strung Along. Part of the gray area in texting is how to know the other person's intentions. Texting allows users to connect in ways where their commitment to the relationship is unclear. Participants described how their potential partner is able to hide in ambiguity of text messaging without expressing his intention for the relationship. One participant expands on this:

But, I feel like they, we kind of talked about this a little bit before, they kind of leave the door like half way open. So like, they kind of walk away, but they always want to leave it

where, just in case they kind of want to fall back [group laughter], where like a few weeks later or later on in the night, they've got you in the back pocket.

Marketing Yourself. Entire relationships are happening through text messages, as well as ending before partners have the opportunity to ever meet face to face. Therefore, participants report their confusion of what went wrong and how to manage this new way to connect to romantic partners. Participants described the pressure they feel to set themselves apart from others, while still balancing their own insecurities, as well as other's opinions. One participant describes the need to stand out from other relationships, stating she feels as though sending something mundane hurts the potential for the relationship. However, she describes sending a unique and individualized message to her partner gives the relationship a greater potential for success.

... You assume that someone is texting multiple people so you don't want to be kind of like that lame person that's only like "hey" on going out nights or like "hey" you know, you want to be like, "oh! She was the funny one that brought me something during the day or like you know, added to the relationship differently, and like seems like can be part of the routine, because everyone has like their friends, so you kind of want to text someone, that kind of seems like your texting a friend, rather than this person that you have to be like ugh, I'm going to let this sit, not because I am playing the game, but also because I have to think of something to say to this person. That like, takes a lot of energy.

Participants discussed the pressure that comes along with marketing yourself, describing the idea that they are one of many options available to a male partner. With the introduction of dating apps and social media, connecting with new potential partners comes easy. Therefore, one participant explains the need to market yourself to even have a date with a new partner.

Yeah, but that's just what it is, you're not in demand anymore. People move quickly, people are traveling more; people can connect way faster. You kind of have to market yourself a little bit and like all the sudden you've lost the power in the situation. Maybe it's just like a story that we are buying into that guys love it, because they have all the power. Maybe it's because we don't have open conversations with men about it.

Continual Presence. Participants discussed the idea that in order to help the success of their potential relationship, not only must they stand out from others, but they also reported the need to have a constant existence in their partner's life. One participant shared her felt sense to be in connection with a potential partner frequently in order to improve the success of the relationship:

I would say, that if I was honest with myself, the texting thing is to remain relevant...to be like now a part of their lives in some way, so they won't forget what a great gal I am [laughter from group].. and he will continue to text me.

Participants described needing to have a continual presence as a way to not be forgotten.

Participants felt this was even more important the more social media and dating apps gain popularity, for fear of being just another girl.

Protecting Ourselves. While participants discussed several negative aspects to dating and texting, there was a positive aspect that emerged. Participants stated texting created distance between themselves and a potential partner, and they used that distance as a way to protect themselves from getting emotionally hurt or rejection. Participants also described this positive attribute allowing them a heightened sense of courage, enabling them to say things over text that they may not have been able to face to face. One participant describes this space as allowing her to confront things she may have been too nervous to in a face to face interaction or over the

phone. She also reports that texting allows her to be more mindful of responses because the conversation is not happening in real time.

...so it's just like you have all these intentions that you want to do or ask, but you're like I can't really face the actual answer to these questions and like it's less weird if I do it over text, because you can be flirty and just not follow through, so it's like you don't lose anything either way if they don't respond or not... texting just takes away a lot of the pressure and makes you not have to face things you don't want to hear head on.

How do I figure it out? Participants discussed ways in which they attempted to understand messages they received but were unclear of the meaning. In such a confusing environment, how do participants understand or make meaning of texting?

Sharing Screenshots. Participants made several references to screenshots throughout the focus group interview. Even while the focus group was taking place, a participant informed the group she received a screenshot from a friend, asking for clarity and relationship guidance. One participant says “And I literally, right now, just got a screenshot from a friend and it says can you interpret what this situation is and I'm like, I don't know this dude.” Participants used this feature when texts were ambiguous, in order to get feedback from friends or family members. One participant states that with the use of screenshots, understanding and trying to build a relationship becomes a group effort between her and her friends. She says, “Oh it's a team effort. You're not dating me; you're dating all of us [group laughter] At least for now, till I'm comfortable.” One participant later expands on the idea of having a felt sense of community during a time of ambiguity.

I don't know, maybe this is a personal preference, but I never feel like I go through that really by myself. Like I feel like it's so quick to take a screenshot and immediately send it

to someone, I don't even register... I don't know that I have ever felt like I have ever personally gone through that alone because it's so quick, it's so instantaneous to be like shit I don't know what that is, like hey friend what do you think is going on here, is it me? Like or is this crazy? So I think that it's just like a collaborative thing.

However, participants stated that when they would share their messages for further understanding, it left them second guessing their own opinions and views of their romantic partner. Other participants shared that relying on others for interpretations of messages led to them losing the ability to trust their own judgement. One participant shares her aggravation with involving her friends in her relationship confusion with the use of screenshots:

And its also stressful because we screenshot, and you think one thing in your gut and you should go with it but then you ask everyone else's opinion and now you're second guessing. I feel like a lot of times I would have done one thing if I was just me in a room locked with only cell service to this one person. But because I asked people, I was like wait, should I be offended the way he said that? Because my friend now thinks that he should be asking about your day and he should be doing this, but like should he? Like yeah it's bad he didn't do this, but is it? I didn't think it was bad until you told me to think it was bad. So I think that that also like, it makes be like 8 people in your relationship when he only met you. [group laughter]

Fill in gaps based on hopes for the relationship. When faced with ambiguity or unclarity, another strategy participants used was to create a narrative for their partner's behavior. The narrative took shape depending on their feelings for the relationship and the belief it would move forward or end. Participants expressed the amount of effort they put into understanding the ambiguous text message, was correlated to how much interest they had in pursuing a relationship

with that person. One participant describes when men aren't forthcoming with their intentions for a relationship, she begins to question whether she wants to make the effort.

Yeah, like I guess that is the point where I'm like is this really worth it for me or not?

Like do I actually care that this makes sense or am I like wow, this guy is so dumb, or

like, I don't know, I guess its like do I care enough to try and make sense of this or do I

not, and I guess that where my door closes. [group laughter]

Because the ease of deceitfulness is a disadvantage to text messaging, participants struggled to know if their partner was being truthful. In the beginning stages of a relationship, participants expressed trying to get to know their partner. When doing this, one participant explains that when a conflict in schedule arises for her potential partner, in order to not take it personally, she tries to fill in the gaps of what could be going on for him. The more interest she had in someone, the more she was willing to tolerate excuses.

I think that if you're not saying what did I do, if you don't know them, you think, okay is this just them not being interested or do they not have game or what? Because you're trying to analyze them at the same time too. Because you're like well maybe they are stressed out or maybe this is what their like, you're like projecting almost a personality on them sometimes too I think. So then you're like pigeon-holing them, into what you're always going to expect from them. It kind goes back to what you were saying before about how like maybe, sometimes it's the girls fault, but then maybe we get this almost like if they do this once then maybe they'll do it again and you're always kind of like leading them that way and you have them pigeon holed. Like, well, you keep making up excuses for them or their job is just too much or it's always their job, or its they don't have any game... you analyze them if you are trying to not put it on yourself also.

Another participant shared that the more interest she had in a partner, the more pressure she felt to understand the ambiguous text message. One participant reports the more she is interested in the partner, the more likely she is to send screenshots to her friends to ask for help to clarify the text exchange.

But I think that's where the whole phone a friend thing came. It's like you look at it and you're like shit like this is Chinese, so like I'm going to like, can I phone a friend and like maybe someone else can like chip away at it. Like I think that's like how it started is I think you immediately look at things like that [punctuation] but then you're so insecure about it, you don't really know what to latch onto, so. And I think the greater the interest, or the more you want to see him, the more is at stake, so the more you want to make sure you're not totally misreading it. So you call for reinforcements.

Speculating about what men think. Throughout the focus group, participants described their efforts of trying to analyze or understand their romantic partner's, or men in general, texting behavior and how the men understood it. Participants made a number of hypotheses about what men intend and how men understand texting behavior without confirmation from men that these hypotheses were accurate. One participant speculates that when men don't respond, it is because they are not interested in an emotional relationship.

Whereas like, for text messaging guys can decide like how much of their emotions they want to give or hear about yours. They can decide to hear about all of your day, but like if we're in person, this can drag on forever. If I just text you and ask you how your day is and we go back and forth and I'm tired of listening to your broken record, I just stop responding and then you stop answering. Because now you feel awkward. Its like, text messaging allows people to get like only part of the experience, where they don't have to

deal with like any of the heavy lifting or any of the emotional problems that like come along with... like what they said was like these girls know, or just want your nights, but like the girls that you're dating will want your nights and your morning after and would like to sit and talk about it, but like being able to like, if she's not in person and if you're not like on a date, you can just be like okay, bye and like I don't want to do this text anymore and I can go and like hang out with my buddies.

Participants speculated that men engage in particular texting behaviors in order to avoid the blame if the relationship were to end. Their participants share experiences of making generalizations about men and how they view texting and relationships.

P8: a lot of times if things are in a weird place with guys, they hate knowing that they made you upset because of something that they did, they would kind of rather be half there, and have you get mad at them for being half there, than they can be like, whatever she got all crazy and was mad, she's angry. Not like, I was a bad person who made her sad....

P7:and then you yourself start thinking you're crazy....

P8: Yeah, like she's mad and you could be like, oh she's mad because I did this, oh that's stupid. Not like, I did something that is really fucked up and she's sad about it., but no, it's like they don't want to take responsibility, they don't want to be responsible...

P5:They just try to start conversations...

P8: [laughter] "they" [group laughter]...

P5:Yes, they just want to start conversations, [laughter] like they think that they can say one thing or send one text and think they have given you the world and you have to do the rest of the fucking work....

All text and no follow through. Participants reported their frustration and confusion with romantic partners who would attempt to make plans, but then those plans never materialized. Participants described this as one of the most confusing aspects of forming a romantic relationship and texting, which they concluded to mean that their partner did not have interest in meeting them face to face. One participant describes her struggle to understand her romantic partner's interest.

I also like, not really like how you text, but more so, if you're texting someone, whether you met them in person or online, like through an app or whatever, I think it's really telling if you're going back and forth and you've been texting for like a week, and you're like, when is this asshole going to ask me out for drinks? Or for instance, I was texting someone and I was literally like, in my head, I obviously didn't actually say this to the person, but if you don't ask me out for drinks and we've been texting for like over a week, then I am going to stop responding because I do not want a pen pal. I think that like a lot of guys, oh we talk a lot and it's like no, we should hang out and meet in person. And then back to the being forward and stuff, I think it's very telling if all of your texts are like kissy face, like flirty flirty, like we should like get a drink and cuddle later verses like, talk to me like a human and not a puppy. So, those are like two things I definitely look for.

One participant attributes plans being made over text, but never happening in real life as someone's way of telling her they are not interested in seeing her. She expands on this and says:

I think it's a culmination of a lot of things. But I mean I think they like me because they're texting me like during the day, and these are like daytime text messages, and daytime sober, let's hang out with no follow through. And then there is no follow through

and that's how I know that they don't actually like me. It's just kind of like, I mean, boys just love pen pals. And they love like just like chatting.

Red Flags: While personal safety is always a concern, these participants described red flags as behaviors that led them to question if they wanted to continue a relationship with a potential partner. Participants described using texting as a way to evaluate potential partners hoping it was a way to find mismatches before they ever met face to face. Participants noted this positive attribute as a way to not waste one another's time. One participant shares her perspective:

Right? Instead of being stuck somewhere at a bar with someone or something, and then they say something, and then you start thinking this is not going anywhere, you can kind of hint around and ask those questions, get their sense of humor, and be like, are we actually really going to fit together, and if its constantly flowing, then you know its going to be just as easy whenever you're together.

Participants explained that their use of text messaging was a way to gage whether or not there was potential for a relationship. Participants explained first text message exchanges hold a great deal of weight in the beginning of a relationship. One participant expands on that idea, saying that text messages can make or break a person's likelihood of meeting face to face.

No, I have not seen him since, and I would definitely, run in the other direction. So I think people can definitely mess up even the potential of the first date. Even if you met them in person and you want to go on a date with them, their texting can ruin it.

Participants described several different red flags they looked for and that held a lot of meaning to them during their first exchanges with a potential partner. Even though these red flags could be detrimental to the progression of the relationship, these red flags aren't automatically a sign to

end the relationship. Sometimes participants would continue to contact their potential partner based on the hopes for their relationship.

Too forward. Participants described the idea that texting has allowed users to make remarks or comments that are inappropriate and immediate indicators of dissolving the romantic relationship. One participant reports that being too forward through text messages is a turn off. She says, “Or also like, how forward they’re being too. So like, if someone is too aggressive, then you’re like relax. I’m kind of afraid to be one on one with you.”

Bad grammar. Participants describe that bad grammar is an indicator of someone with whom they don’t wish to continue a relationship. One participant credits bad grammar as someone who doesn’t have time or interest in a relationship with her. She says,

I was just going to say, bad grammar. I cannot handle the letter “u” instead of you or incomplete sentences. I just think that, that tells me you don’t have the time to actually write the full word out. So those are eliminators for me.

How casual they are. Participants state that the manner in which potential partners text them is important. Participants describe this as being made to feel like one of their guy friends and not someone they are going to take on a date later. One participant expands on this and shares:

I guess this isn’t really like grammar, but like, how they were to talk to you. Like if someone were to say like, ‘yo, what are you doing?’ I’m just like no. Like no. [group laughter and agree] So I think that like, I don’t know how to word that, but like their interaction with you, and how casual they are...

One word answers. Participants state that one word answers indicate to them that the potential partner is not interested in getting to know them. Participants describe that one word

answers makes the conversation laborious and much more straining than with someone who reciprocates the questions they ask. One participant attributes this to not caring or showing interest in the relationship.

Um, I don't like it if people are super self-centered. I'm constantly asking the questions, or having to start the conversation and then they don't return the question... and it's like one word answer, it's like, do you not care about me at all? So, yeah, that's like one of my least favorite things.

Not initiating conversation. Participants feel as though the male partner should initiate text conversations, and initiating conversations is a way to show interest. One participant states, "But we're the ones waiting for the text. Like, I'm not going to text first" Participants also noted that waiting for the man to text first is congruent with dating practices of waiting for the man to make the first move.

Time of Day. Throughout the focus group, participants discussed the time of day the text message was received as an important aspect to understand their partner's intentions. Participants also made references to texting while drinking and its negative connotations. One participant explains that a late night text is an indicator of drinking and texting, feeling as if their male partner is only interested in a sexual relationship.

I don't know that I've ever actually been confused about a text or by what someone meant by a text, but typically, what they mean and what they are saying are two different things. But I always look for the time of day. Like I feel like a lot of people here have been mentioning the, he was sober texting me at 10AM, like that means so much more than he invited me to go see the dog at like 10 PM, you I know? I think that to me, a big indicator is, is he texting me at 11 or is he texting me at 1.. is he texting me at 10 AM to

follow up or is he texting me at like 9PM. I think to me, time is such a big indicator of how committed someone is to you and how much they are committed to following up.

Over-Texting. Participants explained the idea that over-texting is an indicator that the relationship may never materialize to in person meetings. One participant explains that when you text too much with a partner, it feels like the relationship is only happening through the digital world and can confuse how well or how much you actually know them.

...It's a hard balance of like you want to get to know about the person before you go, but then you don't want the text to become the relationship. Like, you already go into the date knowing so much about them. So, because like, I'm not going to lie, I've been on a date and thought, do I know this from you or from stalking you online.

A Red Flag Means... Participants took meaning from the red flags listed above. Three subthemes emerged from how they understood those red flags. Participants made meaning of how the relationship would progress from those red flags.

Feeling Cheap. Participants explained that text messages they received, depending on the time of day and the content, potential partners were only interested in a sexual relationship and nothing more. Participants described those exchanges didn't make them feel good about themselves and led them to question what they had done or said to invite those messages. One participant shares her struggle with late night texting and blaming herself:

When you think about, in the moment, you're up at 2 AM to get that text message, or you're in bed now feeling like a loser that you're not out [group laughter]. Like, if we're honest with ourselves, like that goes through your head. It takes you like awhile to go through it, but you're like wait, this guy is such a piece of shit, like who would treat me like that? I deserve better. But in that moment, you're a human you're feeling like, okay,

so this guy thought it was okay to treat me like that... is that on me? Or at least my kind of initial response is to be like what? Did I make it evident that this kind of behavior would be okay? Because this is a line, like, no, do not cross. I don't know, I just don't want to get these text messages because it makes me feel, I don't know it just makes me feel bad about myself that someone would ever see me like that or think that it would be okay to treat me like that I guess.

Participants report the request to send pictures of themselves outside of a committed relationship made them feel cheap and that their partner was predominantly interested in a superficial relationship. One participant discussed her partner's request for pictures of her. She describes that it made her feel that she wasn't of importance to this person.

Well, I think that, from personal experience, I think, it's not if you're in a committed relationship with someone and they were like sending you selfies or asking for selfies, or you know it's like just this kind of generic line that its usually like late at night or it's over snapchat, or you feel like it's not a personal connection. It's not someone that really cares about you, it's someone that is in it for the wrong reasons and is probably sending that message out to a bunch of different people. So it doesn't feel personal.

Keeping Me in the Back Pocket. Participants describe how texting enables partners to be half-in in the relationship. This creates uncertainty for participants, and they discuss the notion that their potential partner is interested, just not interested enough for a relationship. One participant discusses this in terms of ambiguity as to where the relationship is heading.

I was going to say too, like when they like go to the mundane conversations, it's like you're almost just being their friend. It's like they're bored in their cubicle at work and they're going to text you, it's not anything substantial. Then you're like well is this really

something, are they really interested in me, or am I just filling up their time till they leave work.

Participants described feeling like they are being used in case other plans fall through or the plans they do make don't turn out to be as fun as expected. Three participants discuss feeling like their partner makes plans with them just in case their other plans fall through.

P4: Or just when you're out, and they text you, 'hey what are you doing? Want to hang out' and you respond and then two hours go by [group laughter and agrees] ...

P8: Yeah, but seriously, I think like, uh did you just die? What happened here? And then all the sudden they text you again, and I think, oh good, they are done dying [group laughter]...

P7: Yeah, it's like they want to know if you're available just in case. It's definitely like I'm on the back burner.

Participants struggled to know when they were being blown off, or when it was a real conflict.

Participants explained having a hard time deciding when to give someone the benefit of the doubt. Two participants discuss their confusion.

P2: I think it's really hard to be vulnerable and put yourself out there and also be really truthful, not knowing the other person, not knowing what's going to happen, or what's going to come back your way. You know, I wouldn't want to purposefully hurt somebody's feelings so I think it's easier to just not respond or make up all these excuses...but I also think like with the whole like standing someone up part... let's say, you know kind of before cell phones, and you went to a restaurant and someone just straight up did not show up, I feel like you are like, that feeling is so terrible that you're

like okay that's a character judgment, I'm cutting ties like I'm not going to continue this...

P8: Yeah, they're still leaving the door open when they say I can't, but maybe another time....

P2: Yeah, exactly. So with texting its like you don't have that, you still have a bad feeling but you can totally rationalize it and its not character judgment, its just like an oh yeah .. he was actually in that meeting or he got stuck on 66, like whatever that rationalization is....

P8: Or like he's half interested, so I'll give him half my attention, but you're still like keeping him in your back pocket... when he should be in the trash.

Just a number. Because texting allows users to connect to more than one person at a time, participants felt as though they were one of many, and which made it difficult to determine their partner's feeling towards them. Participants discussed feeling easily replaced. One participant shares that it's difficult to make a partner a priority when you are not sure where you are on their priority level.

Everyone is at your fingertips, like you said, so it's like I'm going to wait for this other person to come through or I guess the major issue for texting and relationships is you don't have to make anyone a priority. And so you knowing that truth is like if someone is not going to make me a priority, then, I mean I guess you just assume that someone is not going to give you the same I guess like opportunity or I don't know.

Summary of Results

The results of this study uncovered these eight participants' landscape of dating and texting. Participants described the context in which they enter relationships and how texting

plays a significant role. Participants reported having an automatic mistrust of the potential partner, some attributing that to previous experiences. Participants reported texting leaves them with restricted options when faced with ambiguity. Texting creates a gray area, where participants felt as though the relationship was more than a friendship, but didn't have the commitment of monogamy. The idea that participants must market themselves in order to stand out from others was a determining factor in the success of the relationship. Participants expressed using text messaging to protect themselves from emotional hurt, or to ease the pain of rejection.

There were numerous ways participants sought to understand ambiguous text messages. Sharing screenshots to friends and family members served as the most used and most helpful tactic. When faced with unknowns, participants often filled in the gaps themselves based on their hopes for the relationship. Participants often speculated about what the opposite gender thought, claiming they knew with certainty they were right based on men's recurring patterns of text messaging. Participants also interpreted a relationship that was heavy on text messages, but never materialized to face to face interactions, were ones where the potential partners were uninterested in a relationship.

There were several red flags identified during the focus group. Being too forward, bad grammar, how casual they converse over text messages, one word answers, not initiating conversation, time of day the messages were sent, and over texting were all identified as indicators that the relationship would be unsuccessful. Not only did women believe the relationship would be unsuccessful, they made meaning from those red flags. They made them feel cheap, like they were being kept in someone's back pocket, and like they were just a number.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

Discussion

Texting gives people the ability to connect to anyone from any part of the world at any time of day. This study focused on understanding how women make meaning of text messages while developing an intimate relationship. Participants of this study shared the context of dating and texting, how they make sense of ambiguous text messages, red flags, and how they understand red flags. The women who were a part of the focus group had several experiences with texting that left them feeling confused, frustrated, and unsuccessful. Participants concluded certain behaviors were red flags and understood those red flags to mean their potential partner is uninterested or interested in a superficial relationship. This study sought to understand how women make meaning of text messages and what aspects of text messages they used to judge the potential for an ongoing romantic relationship. Participants addressed both of these questions and provided a significant amount of data about their views on these topics.

Previous research suggests that those in emerging adulthood is the second largest population to use text messages, second only to adolescence (PEW Research Center for Internet, Science, & Tech. (2010). Participants in this study identified texting as a large part of their life, using texting daily if not hourly, and self-identified as frequent texters. Texting has been used to connect with others when face-to-face interactions are not possible, which this study supports (Derks, Fischer, & Bos, 2008; Harrison & Gilmore, 2012; Holtgraves & Paul, 2013; Pettigrew, 2009; PEW Research Center for Internet, Science, and Tech, 2010; Reid & Reid, 2010; Sprecher, 2009). Participants reported throughout the focus group that they would text a potential romantic partner while at work or engaged in a social activity. However, they also used texting as a means to schedule face to face interactions.

This study aligns with Harrison and Gilmore's (2012) study that texting is used to express interest in a potential romantic partner, send sexually charged content, and sending messages while involved in another social engagement. All eight participants articulated using text messaging to develop a romantic relationship, send or receive sexually explicit messages and text when they were supposed to be engaged in another activity, such as work or a social gathering. Participants shared distaste for uncommitted partners who asked for photos or sent sexual content through text messages.

Existing research suggests that the developmental stage of emerging adulthood is often when relationships begin to become more permanent and committed in comparison to adolescence (Finchman & Cui, 2010). Participants expressed feeling this pressure and felt as though they prioritized romantic relationships. Participants indicated dropping scheduled plans in the hopes of making a connection with a partner. Participants also indicated their age and previous experiences were helpful in determining what they desired from a romantic partner and when a romantic partner is not interested in the relationship progressing. All participants shared in a desire for a committed romantic relationship.

The findings are consistent that texting comes with disadvantages such as dishonesty, lack of social cues and social presence, and over sharing (Sprecher, 2009). Participants all shared a frustration and confusion with the ambiguity that comes with texting because of its lack of social cues and social presence. Participants agreed that texting leaves too much to the imagination because they have no nonverbal cues. When participants were unsure of the meaning of a text message, instead of asking their partner for clarity, they would fill in the gaps themselves, not knowing if their assumptions were right or not. Participants struggled to understand their partner's intentions and attributed that to the lack of nonverbal cues. Participants

expressed a discomfort in asking clarity from their potential partner, but would have not hesitated face to face.

Participants were congruent with Sprecher (2009) findings that oversharing was a disadvantage to text messaging. Participants noted this as a red flag and it had the potential to end the relationship before ever meeting face to face. Participants also took meaning from over texting to mean that the relationship is stuck in the digital world and the information they have learned about their partner, may not have been from their partner but from a social media account.

Sprecher's (2009) findings included a disadvantage to text messaging is dishonesty. The present study was congruent with this finding. However, because text messaging allows users to be dishonest more easily, participants had an automatic distrust for their partner. Participants felt as though they could never be certain if their partner was telling the truth, or using an excuse to not see them. Participants attribute this deceitfulness as a way to not hurt their feelings, yet found it more frustrating when their potential partners were not honest with them about their intentions or lack thereof, for the relationship. Some participants stated experience led to the automatic mistrust and used previous experiences as lessons learned.

Previous research indicates that because texting doesn't happen in real time, users have space and time to carefully craft their text messages in the hopes of making a better impression (Reid & Reid, 2008). Participants in this study described times when texting allowed them to be more mindful of responses because the conversation is not happening in real time. In this study, participants seem conflicted with this idea. Participants first noted that they enjoyed being able to edit their responses, and they would reread their message to ensure an appropriate response before sending it to a romantic partner. Every participant stated they use the screenshot feature to

send an ambiguous text messages they received to their friends in order to help them make meaning of the text message. Participants expressed that because of this feature, they didn't have to go through the struggle of trying to understand messages alone and quickly had the help of their friends. This also allowed them more time to understand a message and carefully craft a response. However, participants described that they had a harder time trusting their gut or their own ideas about text messages or relationships. Participants also voiced frustration that, even though their friends might be helpful in drawing conclusions of ambiguous text messages, their friends may have never met the potential partner and not have all the context of the relationship.

All participants expressed a frustration with the lack of nonverbal cues and social presence texting inhibits. Participants stated text messaging creates more ambiguity and distrust for their potential partner. This is consistent with Reid and Reid's (2008) study suggesting the lack of social cues can be anxiety provoking. Contrasting this finding from Kasesniemi and Rautiainen (2002) that texting allows a more candid self, free from the pressure of their own insecurities of face to face interactions. Participants in this study found that text messaging brought on more insecurity.

Previous research suggests text messaging can be used to buffer uncomfortable face-to-face interactions (Auter, 2007). The present study found this to be true, where participants used text messaging as a means to create space to give participants more confidence to confront things they may have been too nervous to confront in a face to face interaction or over the phone. A downfall of inflated confidence, participants reported receiving inappropriate messages that someone would have never said during a face to face interaction.

Texting allows users to stay connected and effectively maintain social relationships as opposed to exchange information (Holtgraves & Paul, 2013). Participants in this study felt pressure to constantly stay connected, and not only stay connected, but stand out from other potential partners. Participants felt the need to market themselves and stay in constant connection in order to remain relevant.

Participants in this study reported that text messages that were personal were well received. One participant gives the example of receiving a text message of an article about something they had discussed on their first date. Whereas generic messages, such as a ‘hey how is your week?’ felt impersonal and that they were one of many receiving that text message. When participants received a message that felt personal they reported feeling like their partner was thinking about them outside of their text conversation.

This study was congruent with both Turkle (2011) and Klinenberg and Ansari (2015), who found that texting is a far less forgiving communication medium. Participants in this study agreed that even simple grammar and spelling mistakes can create a change in perception of the other person. Participants in this study reported cancelling dates due to grammar mistakes and inappropriate messages, as they understood that behavior to be a red flag. However, this study expands on those findings, reporting on how these participants understood those red flags. Not only did these participants take certain behaviors to mean the relationship would be unsuccessful, the red flags also led them to consider how they saw themselves based on what they assumed the red flag behavior meant about their potential romantic partner’s view of them.

While previous research offers some understanding of the effects of texting on relationships in general, this study focused on the formation stages of relationship development and texting’s effects. Participants of this study described the general landscape in which dating

and texting occur. The landscape not only gives context to modern dating, but shapes the way in which they make meaning. The participants' views of this landscape have yet to be mentioned in the literature, but are a crucial piece of how women are making meaning and interpreting text messages with potential romantic partners.

While dishonesty has been mentioned in the literature as a disadvantage of texting (Sprecher 2009), this study finds that dishonesty impacts relationship formation. Participants of this study shared they have an automatic initial mistrust for any partner because the ability to be deceitful is so easy via text messaging. Further, the more failed experiences with texting and dating they have, the more they begin to question and mistrust partners.

This study is the beginning of understanding the intertwined web of technology and forming romantic relationships. Sharing screenshots and its impact on relationship formation has yet to be discussed in the literature. This tactic was significantly important to participants in this study when trying to understand ambiguity. Not only was it the most used strategy for participants, it came with both advantages and disadvantages. It made participants feel supported from others, but it left room for other's opinions who had never met the partner on the other end of the ambiguous text message. Furthermore, it left participants to question their instincts about the progression of a romantic relationship.

This study found that participants felt a need for continual presence through texting, and if they weren't continually present, they felt as though they would be forgotten and there would be no chance for a relationship. Even though all participants voiced a frustration with the lack of nonverbal cues, they felt that if they didn't text their partners, not only would they be forgotten, they felt as there were no alternatives to get in contact with their partner. Some participants even

expressed that they weren't even sure what it would be like to call or receive a call from a potential partner.

Participants of this study also described texting's ability to heighten existing gender differences. This study found a double standard occurs between men and women's texting behavior. Women felt they were not treated equally; when they were to do something 'crazy' it was relationship ending, but when men did the same behavior, it didn't necessarily end the relationship. Even though some behavior was frowned upon by both genders, women seemed to have much more tolerance and forgiveness for those behaviors.

This study found that participants are more and more caught in a gray area, where they are more than friends with a person, but with no commitment to a monogamous relationship. This study explored how participants navigate that gray area and found, that often times, the relationship was text message heavy, with no face to face interactions. Participants described how this made them feel as though they were someone's second option.

Participants of this study described that texting has created a new kind of relationship. Texting allows users to be 'half-in,' meaning they can do just enough to have a connection, without a commitment. The idea of being 'half-in' can cause people to lose the opportunity for a fulfilling connection with one person. This new kind of relationship texting allows for a much more ambiguous, tentative, and episodic relationship. Participants shared stories of going on a few dates with a partner, then participants wouldn't see or receive text messages from their partner for months, and then all of the sudden, they received a text out of the blue with the expectation to carry on where they left off. There seems to be the assumption that there will be an ongoing relationship when it comes to text messaging, where there is no real or clear ending. This new kind of relationship where, on the one hand, can be more intimate, participants felt as

though they can share anything because there is anonymity to texting; that is, they may never see the person face to face. On the other hand, it leaves the relationship boundaries much more gray and ambiguous.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. With focus groups, there is always the limitation that participants may be reluctant to be forthcoming about their feelings, for fear of being judged by other participants. Even though there was a confidentiality agreement in place and the researcher made it clear all responses were welcome and encouraged, there is still the possibility participants withheld information in order to be congruent with the group's ideas. However, there is still a concern of group perception and perhaps some participants were reluctant to disagree with something the rest of the group feels strongly about. People may not feel comfortable sharing experiences that were particularly difficult for them in front of a group of people they aren't familiar with, making that another potential focus group limitation. Most of the participants of this focus group alluded to being open about their experiences and wanting those experiences to help other women in the future. The majority of these women identified as being open about their experiences, which other women who might not feel as open and comfortable sharing with others, might have different ways to understand ambiguous text messages.

The sample size for this study was modest and diversity among participants was limited. Diversity was especially limited regarding religion as all participants identified as Protestant or Catholic. Furthermore, all but two participants identified as Caucasian, while the remaining two participants identified as Asian and Asian/African American. This limitation is significant because dating practices and the formation of romantic relationships varies among different

religions and cultures. Lastly, all participants identified as heterosexual and therefore only relationship development with men was discussed.

There was a limited range in age, as half of the participants reported they were 25 years old and only one participant reported being in their late 20s. This serves as a limitation because individuals may have different experiences and subsequently different ways of making meaning of text messaging depending on age, as discussed in the results section. According to Finchman and Cui (2010), the developmental stage of emerging adulthood is often when relationships begin to become more committed as opposed to adolescence, making the formation of romantic relationships crucial. Therefore, as women get older and remain single, their interpretation of text messages may change. There may also be generational issues as younger women are native cell phone users and accustomed to texting in a variety of circumstances, not only with potential romantic partners.

All participants were recruited from the Washington DC area, which is a highly populated area from people all around the world. Given its high population and urban community, there are several opportunities allotted to residents to meet people. Those who live in rural areas may have different experiences due to the fact they aren't exposed to as many people or options.

Clinical Implications

The more technology continues to infiltrate our everyday lives, the more it continues to impact our relationships. Several participants described insecurities that developed while using text messaging to develop romantic relationships. Some insecurities started while forming the relationships and others insecurities they already had were amplified due to the relationship. Texting allows users to send inappropriate text messages with little to no repercussion. In that

event, texting appeared to lead to shaming themselves for messages others sent them. Some participants asked themselves did I do something that made it seem okay for him to send me such an inappropriate message. When they felt shame because of a text, they didn't address it with their partner, for fear of being labeled "crazy". When they didn't discuss their confusion or how the text made them feel, they drove themselves crazy trying fill in the gaps of the status of the relationship.

When participants alluded to shame, it appeared to stem from the story they created that may be true or not. Due to the absence of nonverbals, we are left to "fill in the blanks" so to speak. It's more difficult to decode someone's intentions via text message because of the information that's missing (tone, inflection, gestures, etc.) Clinically, the findings of this study can normalize the frustrations experienced by women while developing a romantic relationship. These findings also have the potential to be helpful for men to better understand the concerns, frustrations, and red flags women experience in this process.

Participants expressed that texting served as a buffer in order to protect them from feeling discomfort or rejection. Clinically, texting is allowing clients to avoid feeling or sitting with discomfort. Whenever our clients avoid discomfort, they are losing the ability to learn how to tolerate discomfort, which is a necessary life skill. In addition, the fear of vulnerability has become so great that users are hiding behind text messages to confront their partners.

Texting allows users to be 'half-in,' meaning they can do just enough to have a connection, without a commitment. It allows people to defy the odds and be in two different places at once, or to have more than one conversation at the same time. Sometimes that serves as a way to connect when face-to-face connection is not possible, but it also causes people to lose a fulfilling connection with one person. Texting can cheat people out of a secure

attachment. When a secure base isn't established, texting fuels an insecure attachment. Text messaging can lead to an insecure attachment due to previous unsuccessful experiences of incorrectly decoding messages.

Texting has also lowered the ability of a user to trust their gut, or gut feelings. The potential long term consequences of not trusting one's gut that their voice gets lost and they begin to carry the assumption that their instincts are usually wrong. There is also a potential that they stop being their own advocate.

Users become dependent on friends' opinions about someone only they have met. Clinically it would be important for clinicians to understand how those outside the relationship can affect relationship formation and development. For example, a screenshot shared to a family member or friend for feedback, may leave a negative impression with the outsider that is later hard to overcome if the relationship becomes more permanent. This can lead to conflict later if the dynamic between the individual and their friend or family member shifts, tension can be created indirectly between the friend or family member and partner. Sometimes unbeknownst to the partner, the family or friend's perception of them has been negatively altered. Systemically, this may impact the partner relationship.

Future Directions

Since there has been little to no research on this particular topic, there are countless areas to be explored. The present study focused on women, however, understanding the opposite gender's interpretation of text messaging is important as well. Several participants alluded to wanting to understand men's texting experiences and even created their own hypotheses of how men interpret text messages. A component of this study focuses on forming relationships, so understanding the other partner's experiences in the relationship is necessary.

As texting continues to evolve, it is important that this research is continuously explored, as technology continues to change. Another future direction, might be to have one on one interviews as opposed to a focus group.

The sample size and diversity of this study was modest. This study should be replicated with several focus groups across the country to gather a more encompassing population. Future areas of research should aim to understand different age groups' experiences with texting and relationship formation. Undoubtedly there are different obstacles to dating in different life stages, therefore future research should look at technology, particularly texting's impact on romantic relationship development. Future studies should also include different sexual orientations. Those who belong to the LGBTQ populations may have different experiences with technology, especially dating apps. Furthermore, communication differences between gender and within relationships can determine how users understand messages, consequently understanding the LGBTQ population's experience should serve as an area of interest in future research.

Conclusion

The present study investigated how young adult women understand and make meaning of text messages while developing an intimate relationship. Eight participants shared their experiences of confusion, frustration, and failed attempts of forming a romantic relationship as it pertains to text messaging. Participants reflected on the landscape of their context of dating and texting and how they attempt to understand ambiguous text messages. Participants identified red flags and the meaning of those red flags. Participants reported the identified red flags have the potential to end the relationship before it ever materializes into a face to face meeting. Participants also explored the insecurities that were heightened when engaging in a text message exchange with a potential partner.

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Appendix A

Participant Recruitment Email**“R U free tonight?”**

Hello!

My name is Lindsay McCarthy and I am currently working toward an M.S. in human development with a concentration in Marriage and Family Therapy from Virginia Tech. For my thesis, I am examining how women interpret text messages while developing a romantic relationship with a male partner. I'm hoping you will help me with my study! The focus group will be held either Friday, March 25th at 7:00PM.

You are eligible to participate if:

- You are a female between the age of 18-29.
- You live in the DC, VA or MD
- You have a cell phone with texting capabilities.
- You are currently not in a committed relationship.
- You have exchanged text messages with a male romantic interest within the last year.

What is involved in participating in the study?

- A brief screening over the phone, email, or text
- A brief demographic questionnaire
- A face-to-face focus group lasting no more than three hours. In a group setting, the interviewer will ask questions about your experience of texting and forming romantic relationships. Interviews will occur in at Virginia Tech campus in Falls Church.

****Food and drink will be provided for participants at the conclusion of the interview process.****

If you, or anyone you know is interested in this study, please contact me by email, phone call, or text; limccart@vt.edu or (713) 515-5010. Thank you!

Lindsay McCarthy

Appendix B

Internet Posting

“R U free tonite?”

Hello,

My name is Lindsay McCarthy and I am currently working toward an M.S. in human development with a concentration in Marriage and Family Therapy from Virginia Tech. For my thesis, I am examining how women interpret text messages while developing a romantic relationship. I'm hoping you will help me with my study! The focus group will be held Friday, March 25th at 7:00PM.

You are eligible to participate if:

- You are a female between the age of 18-29.
- You live in the DC, VA or MD
- You have a cell phone with texting capabilities.
- You are currently not in a committed relationship.
- You have exchanged text messages with a romantic interest within the last year.

What is involved in participating in the study?

- A brief screening over the phone, email, or text
- A brief demographic questionnaire
- A face-to-face focus group lasting no more than three hours. In a group setting, the interview will ask questions about your experience of texting and forming romantic relationships. Interviews will occur in at Virginia Tech Campus in Falls Church.

Food and drink will be provided for participants at the conclusion of the interview process.

If you, or anyone you know is interested in this study, please contact me by email, phone call, or text; limccart@vt.edu or (713) 515-5010. Thank you!

Lindsay McCarthy

Appendix C

Resources and Referrals for Participants

Therapy and Counseling Services	
<u>Center for Family Services</u> 7054 Haycock Rd Falls Church, VA 22043 (703) 538-8470	<u>Catholic Charities (Northern VA)</u> 200 N. Glebe Rd, Suite 506 Arlington, VA 22203 (703) 841-3830
<u>Inova Behavioral Health Outpatient Center at Merrifield</u> 8221 Willow Oaks Corporate Drive Suite 425 Fairfax, VA 222031 (703)-289-7599	<u>Catholic Charities (DC & MD)</u> 924 G St NW Washington, DC 20001 (202) 772-4300

Appendix D

Research Informed Consent

Informed Consent for Participants in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects

Title of Project: “What Does this Mean?”: Understanding How Women Make Meaning of Text Messages While Developing An Intimate Relationship.

Principal Investigators:

Eric McCollum, Ph.D., Professor and Program Director/Committee Chair, Department of Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Lindsay McCarthy, M.S. Candidate, Department of Human Development, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

I. Purpose of Research

The purpose of this study is to learn more about how women make meaning of text messages while developing an intimate relationship.

II. Procedures

You will be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and an in-person focus group lasting approximately two and a half hours. In-person interviews will take place at Virginia Tech’s campus.

III. Risks

You might feel emotional discomfort when being interviewed about your personal experiences. The researcher will have mental health referrals available should you wish to further process thoughts or emotions that arise from the interview. Payment for service from any mental health providers to which you are referred shall be your responsibility, and shall not be covered by the researchers, nor Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

IV. Benefits

The answers you provide will help us learn about how women make meaning of text messages while developing an intimate relationship so that clinicians may be better able to help others with that experience in the future. Talking about your experience may provide some therapeutic benefit to you. No promise or guarantee of benefits has been made as an incentive for participation in this study.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality

- All of the information provided during the interview and over-the-phone screening is

confidential.

- At no time will the researchers release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent.
- All identifying information provided during the audio and video-recorded interview will be removed and replaced with aliases in the typed transcript and study report. Any identifiable information will be stored separately and securely from coded data.
- All data will be kept in a locked and secured location.
- If you wish to delete any information that may violate your confidentiality, you can bring that to the researcher's attention for deletion. If you do not respond by the designated date for your review, the researcher will assume that you have no changes to submit.
- The only individuals with access to the audio recording and original transcript will be the Principal Investigator and the Co-Investigator. If outside transcriber services are used, the Co-Investigator will request that the transcriber sign a confidentiality agreement.
- The audio and video tapes will be destroyed as soon as they have been transcribed and checked.
- Portions of your interview text may be used verbatim in the report of the project and/or in subsequent publications. No identifying information will be associated with any part of your interview that may be used.
- The Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view the study's data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research.

VI. Compensation

You will be given a meal for your participation prior to beginning the focus group.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw

You do not have to participate in this research study. If you agree to participate, you can decide to stop participating at any time without penalty. You may also decline to answer any question without penalty.

VIII. Participant's Responsibilities

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities:

1. I will complete a demographic questionnaire. I will complete an in-person focus group. The focus group will take place at the Virginia Tech campus in Falls Church, VA.

IX. Participant's Permission

I have read the Consent Form and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent.

Participant's Signature

Date

Participant's Name (please print)

Researcher's Signature

Date

If you have any questions about this research study or its conduct, and research subjects' rights, and whom to contact in the event of a research-related injury to the subject, you may contact:

Eric McCollum, Ph.D

Investigator

Lindsay McCarthy, M.S. Candidate

Investigator

Dr. David M. Moore

Chair, Virginia Tech Institutional Review
Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Office of Research Compliance

703-538-8460/ericmccollum@vt.edu

Telephone/e-mail

713-515-5010/limccart@vt.edu

Telephone/e-mail

540-231-4991/moored@vt.edu

Telephone/e-mail

Appendix E

Confidentiality Agreement**Confidentiality Agreement for Interview Data**

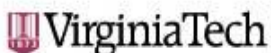
I, _____ agree to safeguard the identity of participants enrolled in the *“What does this mean?”: Understanding How Women Make Meaning of Text Messages While Developing an Intimate Relationship*. I will not disclose or discuss participant-related material outside of meetings with the research team. I will protect the confidentiality of all participants by safeguarding participant related-materials, which includes identifiable information disclosed in participants’ interviews.

Print Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix F

IRB Approval Letter



Office of Research Compliance
 Institutional Review Board
 North End Center, Suite 4120, Virginia Tech
 300 Turner Street NW
 Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
 540/231-4606 Fax 540/231-0999
 email irb@ut.edu
 website <http://www.irb.vt.edu>

MEMORANDUM

DATE: March 22, 2016
TO: Eric E McCollum, Lindsay Louise McCarthy
FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires January 29, 2021)
PROTOCOL TITLE: What Does This Mean?”: Understanding How Women Make Meaning of Text Messages While Developing An Intimate Relationship "
IRB NUMBER: 16-280

Effective March 22, 2016, the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair, David M Moore, approved the New Application request for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB-approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report within 5 business days to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

<http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm>

(Please review responsibilities before the commencement of your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Approved As: **Expedited, under 45 CFR 46.110 category(ies) 6,7**
 Protocol Approval Date: **March 22, 2016**
 Protocol Expiration Date: **March 21, 2017**
 Continuing Review Due Date*: **March 7, 2017**

*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS:

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals/work statements to the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal / work statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to Exempt and Interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required.

Invent the Future

Date*	OSP Number	Sponsor	Grant Comparison Conducted?

* Date this proposal number was compared, assessed as not requiring comparison, or comparison information was revised.

If this IRB protocol is to cover any other grant proposals, please contact the IRB office (irbadmin@vt.edu) immediately.