

Article

“Just lmk When You Want to Have Sex”: An Exploratory–Descriptive Qualitative Analysis of Sexting in Emerging Adult Couples

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Abstract: Background: An essential component of new relationship development is sexual communication between partners. The rise of technology has allowed couples to use text messaging to facilitate these conversations. The current study examines how emerging adults (18–25 years) in new relationships communicate about sex through text messages. Methods: We conducted inductive thematic analyses of text messages between different-gender couples in the first six months of their relationship (20 couples, N = 40) in which the women were between 18 and 25 years of age. We used the Dedoose qualitative analysis software and a coding team of 16 coders. Reliability was established through the “test” function of Dedoose, with codes of Kappas less than 0.70 discussed and refined in the codebook. Results: Primary themes of how couples communicate about sex emerged, which included the use of humor, discussing previous sexual experiences and partners, and sharing interests around future sexual encounters. During thematic analyses, secondary themes of motivations for sexual communication emerged, including learning, bonding, and enhancement. Conclusions: Addressing the varied motivations emerging adult couples may use in text messages can be leveraged for improving sexual health. Theories related to relationship development may not fully capture how couples discuss sex, particularly via text messages.

Keywords: text messages; sexual communication; new romantic relationships; qualitative



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1. Introduction

Smartphone use has permeated emerging adult lives, with an estimated 96% of emerging adults (18–29 years old) owning smartphones [1]. The near-universal use of smartphones has changed how individuals communicate with their sexual and/or romantic relationship partners. Research conducted in Western societies find this form of communication has impacted relationship dynamics such as satisfaction, attachment, and maintenance and has been utilized to explore areas of conflict in relationships, maintain connectedness, assert autonomy, and interpreting “teasing” behaviors and the use of emojis in relationship communication [2–6]. For instance, expressing affection and discussing controversial topics are ways couples communicate via text messages in addition to in-person communication [7]. While previously studied relationship dynamics are more broadly related to how couples use smartphones [8] or the variability and stability of social behavior among young adults regarding texting, app use, and phone conversations [9], less is known about text messaging and sexual communication in new and emerging relationships and how this contributes to relationship development. Thus, the current study aims to fill this gap in the

literature to help clarify the role text messaging plays in sexual communication among new romantic relationships.

1.1. *Communication in Relationships*

While existing relationship research focuses on long-term committed partnerships (e.g., marriage), less is known about new relationships [10,11]. Although evidence suggests little change in emerging and young adults' family formation intentions such as getting married and having kids [12], the rate of dating relationships and cohabitation has increased [13,14]. This shift points to a need for research examining relationships at various stages, in particular within their early development. As communication technology, such as text messaging, is central to emerging and young adult relationship initiation, development, maintenance, and stability [6,15], additional research exploring communication technology in new, emerging adult relationships is necessary.

Emerging adulthood (18–25 years old) functions as a unique developmental period in which identity development in love, work, and worldview is increasingly important [16]. The psychosexual development and behaviors that occur among the developmental periods of adolescence and emerging adulthood have consequences for sexual health/well-being and relationships in later life [17]. For example, dating relationships across early-to-middle adolescence are typically more recreational, with increasing levels of commitment in emerging adulthood [18]. However, little is known about the transition from recreational relationships to more serious relationships and what role sexual activity plays in this transition [10]. Sexual initiation in early relationships has implications for later relationship development and satisfaction [19,20], and sexual communication may be a potential factor that contributes to the escalation of relationship seriousness and satisfaction [21,22]. Communication is a vital element of connection in a romantic relationship, and research shows that communication in the early stages of relationships may covary with relationship satisfaction [23,24]. Some research suggests that open sexual communication is related to sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction, particularly for relationships lasting more than a year [11,25]. Further, the quality of sexual communication may more strongly relate to satisfaction than the frequency of communication [22]. Yet, relationship and sexual communication research focuses primarily on long-term committed partnerships [20]. While some literature has examined sexual desire and sexual growth beliefs within relationships, and its influence on relationship development and well-being as it progresses [26,27], less is known about how emerging adult couples communicate about sexual activity, particularly about how this kind of communication via text messaging may impact relationship development and how sexual communication is related to sexual satisfaction or relationship satisfaction overall.

A crucial element of new relationship development and communication is understanding how partners communicate about sexual activity norms and practices; for example, understanding how interested each partner is in sexual exploration, how central sexual activity is to the relationship's development of intimacy or closeness, or how prior sexual experiences inform sex in the current relationship. Some researchers have argued that sex communication is even more significant to sexual satisfaction than sexual activity frequency [20]. Conversely, persistent difficulties in sexual communication contribute to identified risks such as sexually transmitted diseases, unplanned pregnancy, and non-consensual sexual experiences [28]. Given the nature of sexual communication, many, especially in early relationships, may find it difficult to communicate with their partners about sex [29,30]. For example, sexual communication may be challenging due to embarrassment discussing sexual desires or cultural barriers surrounding sexual communication [31,32]. The difficult nature of these conversations highlights the importance of understanding how sexual communication develops throughout a relationship to mitigate the impacts of poor sexual communication on sexual health and relationship satisfaction.

1.2. Sexual Communication in Relationships and Technology

Existing research points to technology as an increasingly important modality to communicate about sexual topics [24,33], particularly for those in late adolescence and early adulthood [34]. Technology-driven sexual communications may contain inherent differences from face-to-face communications—especially between new sexual or romantic couples [35,36]. For example, virtual communication can filter out social cues individuals rely on in face-to-face interactions [37,38], such as nonverbal cues. On the other hand, early work on the intersection of technology and sexual communication suggests that the use of technology facilitates these conversations. Technology may mitigate some of the vulnerability risks (e.g., reducing anxiety during difficult conversations) associated with these conversations and make it easier for couples to be affectionate with one another [5,7,39,40]. Importantly, sexual communication may occur via texting, as a form of communication technology, which may be a central communication avenue among emerging and young adults [6,15]. Among emerging adults, sexual communication via texting may be comparable to face-to-face communication and improve their ability to communicate with their partners, thereby improving relationship satisfaction [41–43]. By recognizing the potential benefits of technology (i.e., smartphone use) in sexual communication, it is important to examine how new emerging adult couples use text messages to engage in these conversations.

Sexual communication modalities and intent have evolved over the last two decades [44,45]. For instance, there has been a sharp rise in sexting, or “the sharing of sexually explicit images, videos, and/or messages via electronic devices” [46] (p. 1103). Sexting serves as a form of sexual communication via text messaging. Emerging adults frequently utilize sexting as a way to discuss sexual activity and negotiate sexual practices such as condom use, birth control, and STIs [47]. A study that focused on understanding the prevalence of sexting behaviors in emerging adults found that an average of 38% of participants stated they had sent a sext, and 48% reported they had received one [46]. Evidence suggests that sexting leads to sexual encounters [48] and has developed into an important initial form of sexual communication for many couples [49]. The expectation that sexting leads to sexual activity may contribute to other risks associated with misunderstood or poor sexual communication, including a lack of clarity on consent for sexual acts [50]. Some authors emphasize the negative implications of sexting are largely associated with nonconsensual sharing or coercion [51,52]. However, general communication about sexual activity via text messages, not necessarily sexting, may reduce anxiety and other negative feelings when couples have these conversations in person [43]. Yet, little is still known about the engagement of sexual communication within early relationships, namely increasing intimacy or relationship length [53].

Researchers have begun to examine the actual content of text messages [54] and their relationship to health. Innovative methods are needed to understand how emerging adults engage in sexual communication in romantic and sexual interactions. Many studies rely predominantly on self-reports [7,55]. Self-report methods have long been criticized, especially within sexual health research, given their propensity for reporting error. For example, in sexual health research, this error results from over- or underreporting sexual experiences or memory inconsistencies regarding the complexity of the scenario, frequency of the act, social desirability bias, and normative beliefs about sex [56–59]. Alternatively, analysis of text messages allows researchers to assess how sexual communication develops in early relationships of emerging adults and may alleviate the concern of participant response bias [60]. The nature and motivation of the relationship between text messages and sexual communication remain poorly understood.

1.3. Current Study

While much is known about how communication (about sexual activity or generally) contributes to relationship outcomes (relationship/sexual satisfaction, etc.), less is understood about how individuals communicate about sexual activity, particularly among

emerging adults within new romantic relationships. Given that around 47.7% of emerging adults engage in sexting [46], understanding the forms of sexual communication that happen via text messages are important. Therefore, the current study sought to answer the following research question: how do emerging adults in new relationships communicate about sexual activity through text messages? We used an exploratory–descriptive qualitative design to explore and describe sexual communication amongst a sample of 20 emerging adult couples who were in a romantic relationship for six months or less ($n = 40$). When there were inconsistencies or gaps within the existing literature, health researchers utilized this approach to examine the phenomenon of interest to understand the participants' perspective and inform future research and clinical applications. We focused on couples composed of cisgender men and women, as gender norms of communication may vary significantly in same-gender relationships. Given the exploratory nature of this study, we used an inductive approach to generate themes from the content presented within text conversations between romantic relationship partners over a six-month period. This methodology adds novelty to research on sexual communication by examining real text conversations between romantic relationship partners in emerging adulthood.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were eligible for the study if they were (1) a part of a heterosexual couple, (2) identified as a woman aged 18–25 years old or a man at least 18 years old, (3) in a relationship for six months or less, (4) engaged in sexual activity with their partner in the past six months, (5) were able to speak English, and (6) one member of the couple owned an iPhone. At least one member of the couple needed an iPhone as the text downloading software (Ecomm Phoneview v2.13) that was utilized in the current study could only be used with iPhones. Participant age eligibility requirements considered potential age differences in emerging adult relationships. Participants were recruited via a large Southeastern university, although participation was not limited to university students. There were a total of 40 participants (20 couples) with an average of 8589 texts per couple (range 183–22,878 texts). Given the exploratory nature of conducting manual qualitative analyses on text messages, our sample size was determined by the team's previous experience with in-depth qualitative studies including samples between 12–30 individuals. Participants were all emerging adults ($M = 19.27$ years, $SD = 1.52$, range = 18–25) and the sample was about half men ($n = 20$, 51.3%) and women ($n = 19$, 48.7%). One participant who endorsed female as sex at birth did not report their current gender identity.

Most participants identified as white (62.5%, $n = 25$), followed by Black/African American (17.5%, $n = 7$), Latinx/Hispanic (5.0%, $n = 2$), Asian (7.5%, $n = 3$), Biracial or Multiracial (5.0%, $n = 2$), and American Indian or Alaska Native (2.5%, $n = 1$). On average, couples had been dating 3.41 months ($SD = 1.70$; range = 1–6 months). Though all couples were in a different-gender relationship, there was some diversity in sexual orientation. Seventy percent ($n = 28$) identified as exclusively heterosexual/straight, 17.5% ($n = 7$) identified as mostly heterosexual/straight, 10% ($n = 4$) identified as equally heterosexual/straight and homosexual/gay/lesbian, and 2.5% ($n = 1$) identified as pansexual. Most couples described their relationship as exclusively dating/monogamous (92.5%, $n = 37$); however, 5.0% ($n = 2$) reported they were casually dating (non-monogamous romantic relationship), and 2.5% ($n = 1$) reported being sexually romantic and mostly monogamous with their partner but that they included other people in their relationship occasionally.

2.2. Procedure

Participants were recruited using various methods. These included the undergraduate psychology participant pool (SONA), university-wide email blasts, and announcements in undergraduate courses. Couples who met all eligibility criteria were invited into the lab space to complete an informed consent. Both members of the couple provided informed consent for all aspects of the study. Once consent was received, all text messages sent

and received by the couple in the preceding six months were downloaded using the program Ecamm Phoneview. As a company, the Ecamm Phoneview software used was never in possession of the text messages; it only helped to facilitate the exchange of data between the iPhone and the lab-owned Mac computer. The Ecamm Phoneview computer program was only compatible with Mac and iPhone platforms and facilitated backing up iPhone data. This program allowed iPhone text messages, contacts, photos, music, and apps to be saved to a Mac computer. One participant from the couple was asked to attach their iPhone to a USB cord hooked up to a lab computer. Once attached, the program displayed all iPhone messages and participants were asked which messages were between them and their partner only. Text messages included any use of emojis but did not include pictures or videos, and any messages that participants did not want to be included were able to be deleted prior to downloading (though no participants deleted messages). Participants were reminded that they could delete text messages three times throughout the study: (1) participants were given a consent quiz to ensure they understood the risks and corresponding mitigation techniques utilized and text deletion was included in this quiz; (2) immediately after text messages were downloaded, participants were asked to review their text messages for possible deletion; and (3) participants were asked a final time right before they received compensation for the study. All downloaded text messages from participants were saved to an Excel file and uploaded to a secure Google Drive folder that was shared exclusively with the study personnel. During the in-person lab session, research assistants facilitated the download of text messages while participants observed. Total lab session time for text message downloads and survey completion (outside the scope of the current study) was approximately 70 min.

Due to the impacts of the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, in-person lab procedures were halted, and procedures changed to be entirely remote. Remote procedures involved participants meeting with undergraduate research assistants virtually to complete the informed consent and text message downloads. Participants were instructed on how to download and send their text messages to the research assistant. Upon completion, each participant received a USD 20 Amazon gift card or 3 h of SONA credit as compensation depending on the method of recruitment. All study procedures and adjustments were approved by the university institutional review board during a full board review process.

2.3. Data Analysis Plan

For the purpose of the current study, only text message data and demographic data (race/ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, and relationship status) were analyzed. All information obtained was designated by a code number only. A separate master list of all identifiable information with designated code numbers was kept in a password-protected computer database stored on a university-protected Google Drive file that had been prevented from syncing with any desktop, laptop, or mobile device. Only the principal investigator and research assistants had access to this database. These code numbers were how participant text messages and demographic characteristics were linked. We used a social constructionist stance, acknowledging that meaning is constructed within social contexts [61], which, in some ways, were unavailable to us as researchers outside of the relationship. We analyzed text messages with an inductive approach, such that themes emerged from the data rather than a priori understandings or theoretical bases [62]. After preliminary analyses of text messages were conducted, a codebook was created and edited. In coding for the ways text messages were used in relation to the couple's relationship, we applied existing theories of how couples' relationships are formed. Specifically, we used experimenting (termed "exploring" in our study), negotiation, and bonding [63,64]. We first conducted open coding followed by axial coding to group common ideas together. All responses were coded by two trained coders (the full coding team included sixteen coders) using Dedoose Version 8.3.45 online software. Inter-rater reliability was confirmed using Dedoose's "test" function; we refined any codes with less than 0.70 Kappas after team discussion and the codebook was subsequently refined. The team held regular meetings to

discuss coding challenges, after which additional clarifications were added to the codebook. Secondary analyses were conducted to identify groupings of sub-themes and divergences within larger categories.

3. Results

The most common communication approach couples used in their texts was asking questions, both directly (i.e., “Do you like. . .”) and indirectly (“Would you mind. . .”), to share sexual experiences and each other’s sexual interests. Other less common modes included humor and compliments. We grouped compliments, along with iterations of the relationship as more than sex, and indirect exploration within the mode of sharing desires or interests. Compliments, specifically, were often used to convey that someone or something was desired. In addition to understanding what communication modes were used between partners, our inductive analyses revealed motivations for using these sexual communication modes. Three motivations were to bond, to learn, and to enhance. In the paragraphs that follow, we describe the motivations in relationship to the communication modes (see Figure 1).

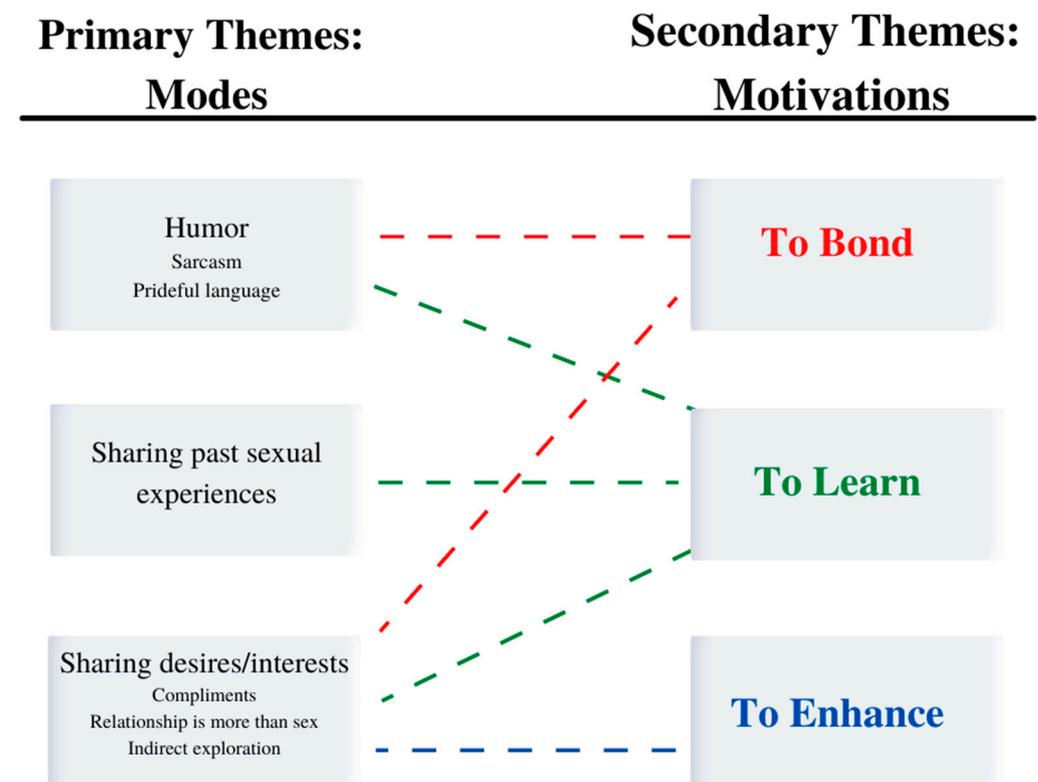


Figure 1. Sexting communication modes and motivations with suggested relationships.

3.1. To Bond

Sexual communication exchanges helped bond couples together and build intimacy. Couples bonded by using humor as a way to lighten the mood and connect with the wants and needs of each partner. Couples also expressed acceptance and compliments to one another, for instance, through body appreciation. Additionally, couples commonly expressed feeling as though sexual activity was a way to bond, while also acknowledging that sexual activity should not define their relationship. These themes exemplify how communication around sexual activity was essential to bringing the couple closer. Text exchanges have been edited for readability and clarity when needed. Figures 2–14 are depicted with the male partner as the receiver of texts for continuity.

3.1.1. Humor

Couples used humor to communicate enjoyable moments with each other or moments that brought them fulfillment in their sexual lives. Humor was sometimes demonstrated through sarcasm and prideful language. For one couple, using humor allowed them to discuss their recent experience of anal sex (see Figure 2).

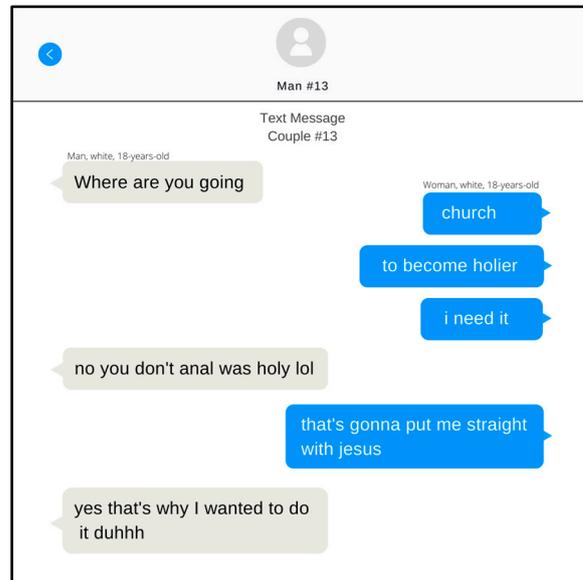


Figure 2. To bond—humor example 1.

A different couple used humor to connect daily activities to sexual experiences with their partner. In their exchange, one partner equates ejaculation to a facial moisturizer (see Figure 3).

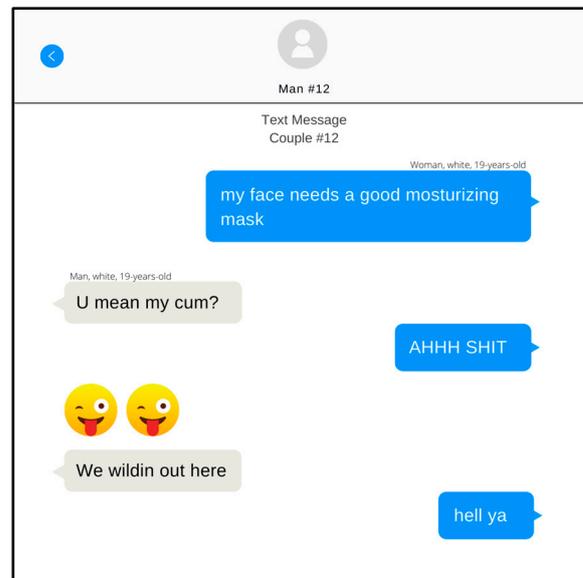


Figure 3. To bond—humor example 2.

3.1.2. Using Compliments

Additionally, couples bonded with one another by expressing appreciation for or complimenting sexual experiences they had in their relationship. These compliments appeared to functionally bring partners closer together through expressions of interest. For

example, one couple exchanged mutual compliments about each other’s genitalia and their associated feelings from sexual activity (see Figure 4).

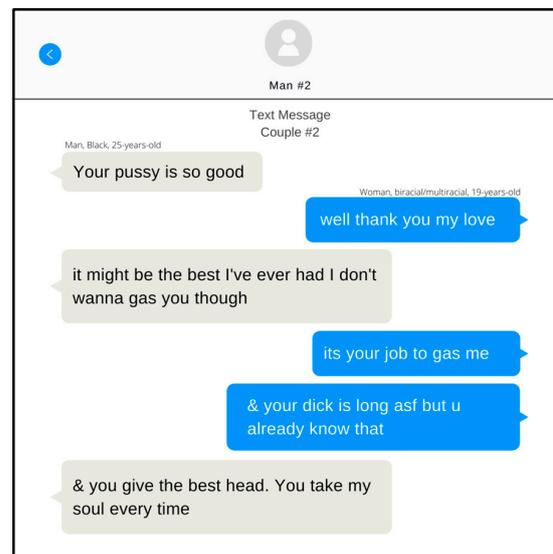


Figure 4. To bond—compliments.

3.1.3. Relationship Is More Than Just Sex

Another sexual communication mode that emerged was the importance of sexual activity to bond with their partner, but that sexual activity alone did not define their relationship. For instance, one couple explained their love moved “deeper” than the physicality of sexual intercourse, but sexual activity was one avenue by which they could strengthen their relationship (see Figure 5).

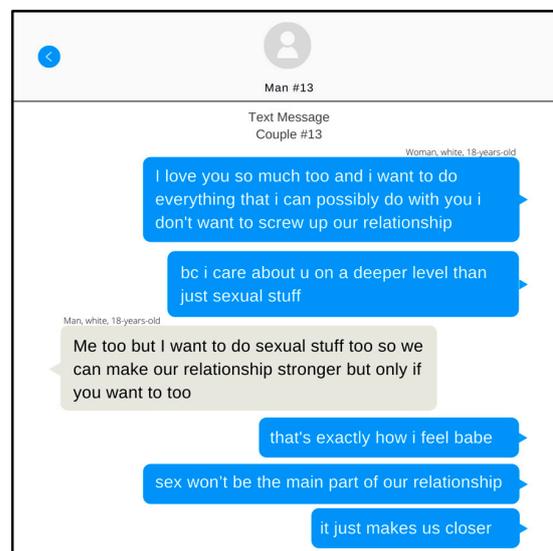


Figure 5. Relationship beyond sexual bonding.

3.2. To Learn

Many sexts included a desire to learn and understand partners’ past sexual experiences, interests, and future interests. Couples used humor, explored their past sexual experiences/partners and sexual interests, and used indirect requests to learn more about their partners.

3.2.1. Humor

Many of these discussions involved the use of humor to gauge their partner's sexual interest. In the text excerpt below, the man used humor (a pun) to suggest future sexual activity later that night. While he explicitly stated his intentions, the use of humor was common to openly explore the potential for sexual activity (see Figure 6).

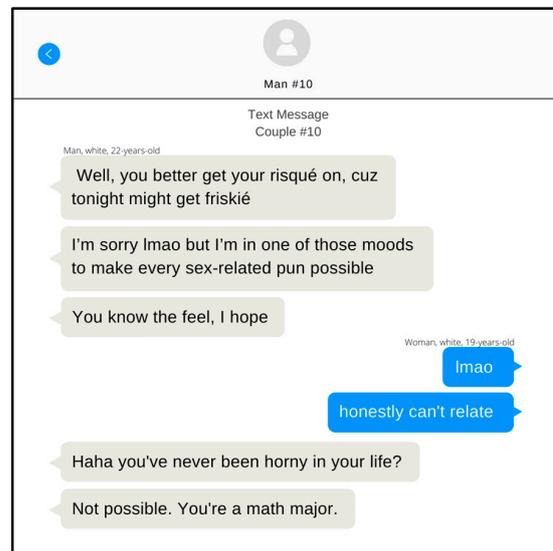


Figure 6. To learn—humor.

3.2.2. Exploring Past Sexual Experiences/Partners

Partners often learned about one another by sharing their past sexual experiences and interests. In the following excerpt, the woman asked about her partner's oral sex experiences. After learning that her partner has never been fully satisfied with oral sex performed by previous sexual partners, she made it her "goal" to satisfy him completely (see Figure 7).

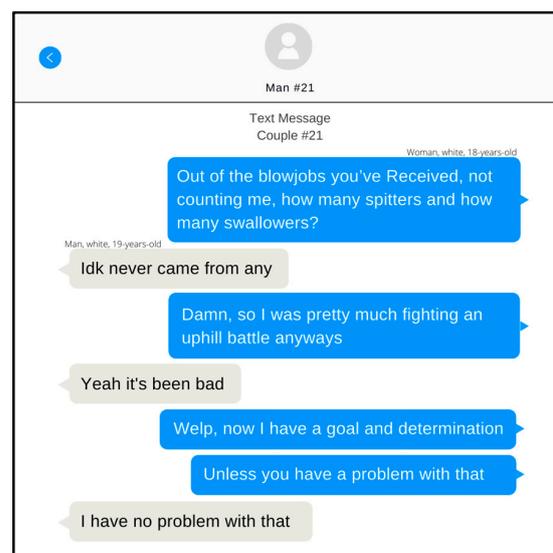


Figure 7. To learn—exploring past relationships.

3.2.3. Exploring Sexual Interests

The majority of the couples' sexts involved learning each other's sexual interests. Some of these conversations were much more direct, as in the example excerpt below. The man explicitly questioned what his partner was interested in, beyond what she had told previous sexual partners (see Figure 8).

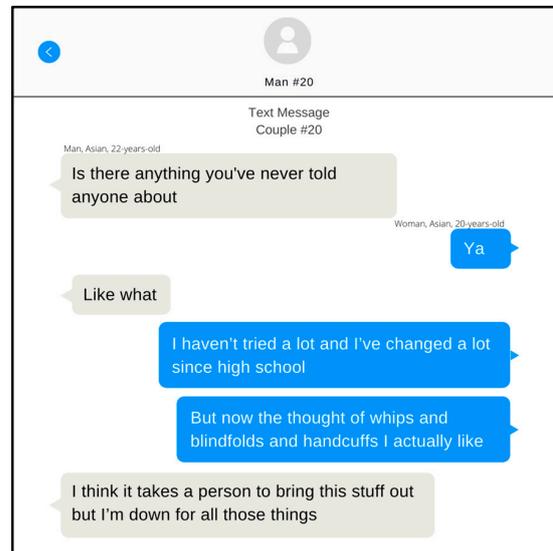


Figure 8. To learn—exploring sexual interests.

3.2.4. Indirect Sexual Exploration

While for some couples direct sexual communication was common, for others, the use of indirect exploration was more prevalent. To learn more about their partners, many made indirect requests in the form of hints or subjective comments to their partners. In the example below, the woman explained that she cannot engage in sexual activity because she still needed to shower before going to sleep. The man indirectly asked for sex in the shower by suggesting that she do so in order to go to bed sooner. In doing so, the man learned if his partner was interested in, or comfortable with, sex in the shower (see Figure 9).

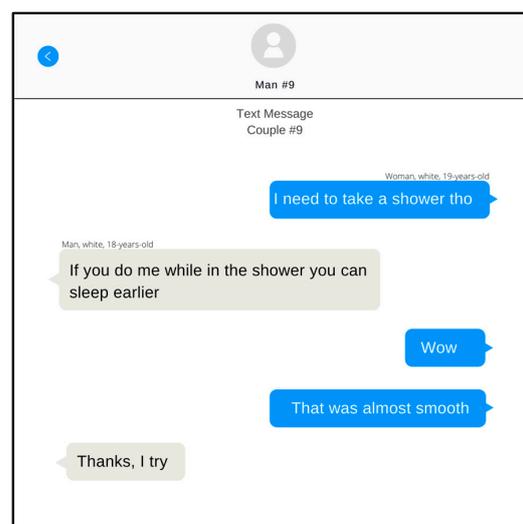


Figure 9. Indirect sexual communication.

In another example, the woman used her visit to her doctor as a way to have an indirect conversation about STI testing (see Figure 10).

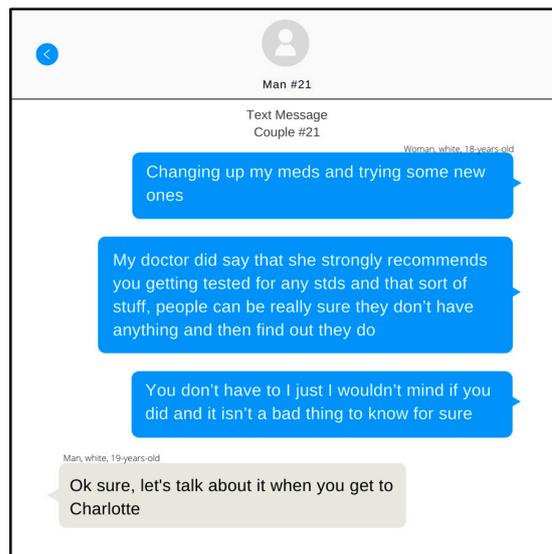


Figure 10. Indirect sexual communication, part 2.

3.3. To Enhance

Finally, couples sexted to enhance their sexual experiences. Partners often “dropped hints” or expressed interest in exploring new sexual activity together to enhance their sexual and romantic relationship. The excerpts below help illustrate how different communication practices to enhance the sexual relationship were found in the data, specifically expressing desires for future sexual activity, using compliments, and denoting sexual activity as a way to improve sexual experiences but not to define the relationship.

3.3.1. Desires for Future Sex (Quality/Quantity)

One theme that emerged in the sexts was the desire for future sex. Some couples discussed that they preferred the quality of sex, while others preferred quantity. There are many ways the couples expressed their desire for and interests in future sex. For example, one couple expressed a desire to have sex instead of simply sleeping together (see Figure 11), while another talked about integrating another person into their sex life (see Figure 12).

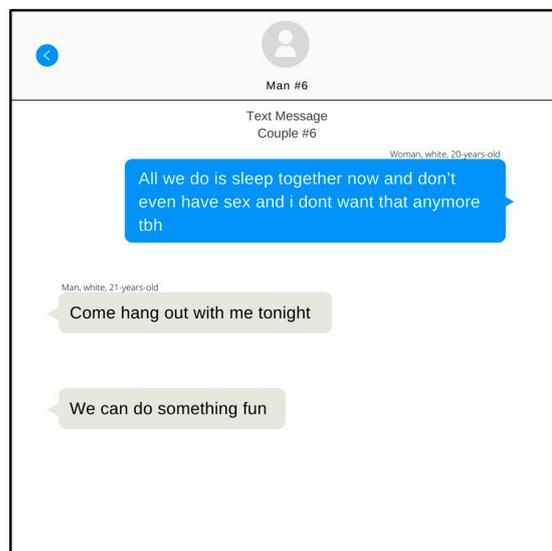


Figure 11. Desires for future sex.

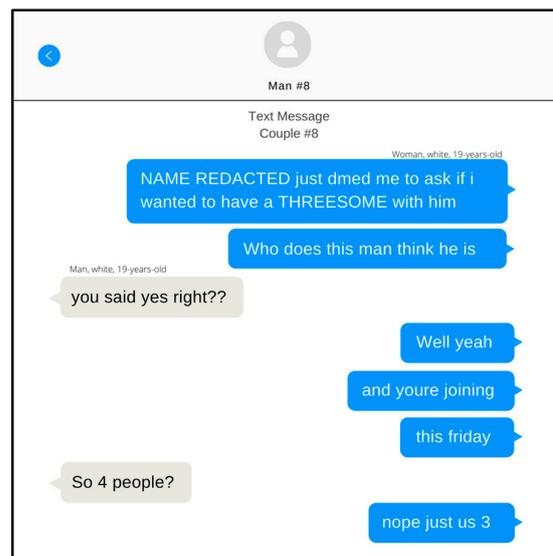


Figure 12. Desires for future sex, part 2.

3.3.2. Compliments

Compliments were also used to enhance their sexual relationship. Below, the male partner reassured his partner that sex is better with her and that she is better at “turning him on” than his previous sexual relationship (see Figure 13).

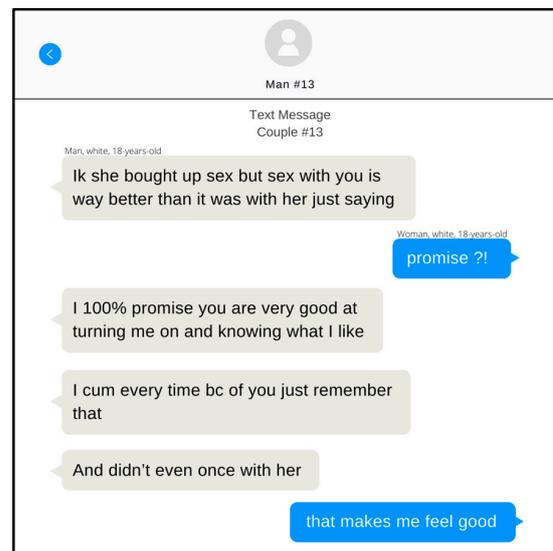


Figure 13. To enhance—compliment.

3.3.3. Relationship Is More Than Just Sex

Finally, couples recognized the importance of sex, but did not want sex alone to define their relationship. For example, one couple explained sex as a “special thing” and wanted to preserve the relationship outside sex (see Figure 14).

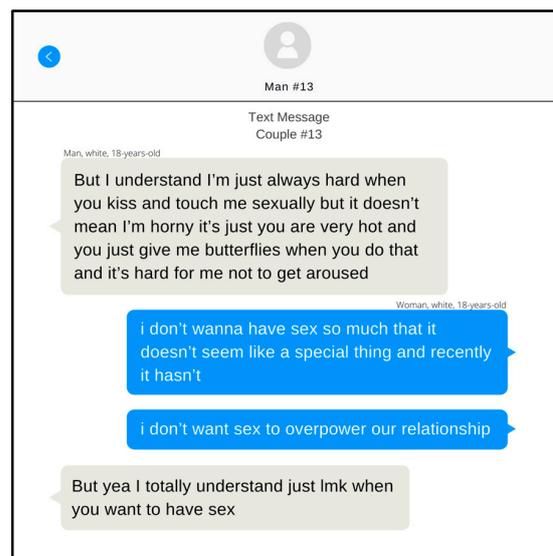


Figure 14. To enhance—relationship beyond sex.

4. Discussion

Although effective sexual communication is cited as a significant predictor of sexual and overall relationship satisfaction, less is known about what constitutes sexual communication and how it is expressed via text message, particularly in early relationships among emerging adults [21,65]. The current qualitative exploration provides valuable insight into the nuanced ways new and emerging adult couples engage in sexual communication. Our findings suggest that text messages play an important role in sexual communication and offer insight into how couples in early relationships among emerging adults communicate about sexual activity via text message and the motivations that drive the conversations.

The current study's original aim was to descriptively understand text message communication among emerging adult relationships; therefore, we did not anticipate that the results would reveal the motivations or functions of sexual communication. However, three secondary themes that identified motivations for using communication modes emerged as a result of the analytic process: to bond, to learn, to enhance. These motivations were central to sexual communication modes in this sample. Elements of these three communication modes may be reflected in Knapp's Relational Development Model [63] of five distinct developmental stages of a romantic relationship: initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding. Each stage of Knapp's five-stage model represents a new phase of a relationship, beginning with the initiating stage and ending at the bonding stage, and is defined by distinctive characteristics which help researchers distinguish between each stage [66]. The following section will examine the study's findings as they relate to what is known in the current literature.

4.1. To Bond

Couples used text message communication to connect, bond, and build intimacy. Many analyzed conversations involved couples using humor to become closer to their partners, making them feel sexually accepted and appreciated. These findings in new relationships align with prior research that suggests humor plays an essential role in relationships facilitating bonding, such as positive communication, conflict resolution, enjoyment, and coping [67–69]. More recent work finds the use of humor to be predictive of greater relationship satisfaction, especially in times of relationship uncertainty [70,71]. In addition, humor is viewed as an attractive trait since it may elicit positive emotions and can often lead to increased bonding between couples [72–74]. Individuals may even strategically use humor to facilitate romantic attraction [75]. Given that previous literature

establishes humor as an influential factor in relationship development, it is not surprising that humor emerged as a primary communication mode.

Our findings are congruent with prior literature that indicates compliments are positively related to relationship satisfaction and play an important role in developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships [76,77]. Messages of body appreciation, in particular, have even been linked to greater sexual satisfaction, including increased arousal and orgasm [78]. The functioning of romantic relationships can help to maintain a positive and/or less negative body image [79]. Therefore, compliments, particularly about a partner's body, may function as a way to make each other feel accepted and appreciated and bring them closer. However, compliments within romantic relationships may reflect the specific culture of that relationship that outside observers may misinterpret or not recognize [76]. This may have important implications for our results, such that text conversations coded as compliments by the research team could be different from what those within the relationship may see as compliments. Future research may consider incorporating a methodological approach to assess these potential differences.

Finally, some couples acknowledged that while sexual activity is necessary or helpful for bonding, it should not define their relationship. Sexual activity among partners has been demonstrated to facilitate pair-bonding [80], but it is not the sole predictor of sexual and relationship satisfaction. This phenomenon was present within the current sample, and in this way, participants may be interested in using sex as an experience to bond but want to ensure sexual activity does not become the focal point of their relationship. This may be common among new couples as they try to establish what defines their relationship and what it entails. Further, this aligns with research that suggests that sexual desire in long-term relationships declines compared to earlier stages in relationships, particularly as more novel forms of intimacy form [81]. The integrating stage of Knapp's five-stage model is also defined as a time wherein couples share intimate feelings with one another but when it has transcended the intensifying stage, i.e., a time characterized by intensified intimacy [82]. Therefore, the couples in our study who viewed sexual activity as a priority or focal to the relationship may have been in an earlier stage of their relationship (i.e., intensifying stage) compared to couples who have already passed the intensifying stage and now find sexual activity to be less central in their longer-term relationships. Thus, future research should identify how couples in emerging adulthood communicate around sex via text messages while accounting for Knapp's relational model.

4.2. To Learn

Couples in our study used text messages to learn about each other, their sexual preferences, and desires. These findings align with Knapp's experimenting stage wherein couples communicate to seek details about one another and ask questions (implicitly or explicitly) to evaluate their partner's commitment, talk about interests, and discuss past relationships and experiences [66]. Humor emerged as a prominent communication mode for couples to learn about each other. More broadly, humor may often be used as a protective communication tool individuals use to shield themselves from negative emotional consequences [83]. This was seen throughout the study as individuals suggested new sexual endeavors often couched as a humorous text exchange. This kind of positive humor allowed couples to release the tension presented by ambiguous and/or difficult topics and create a positive interaction [69,84]. Furthermore, it provided a safe space for couples to share and learn about their sexual preferences and boundaries. For example, research shows that how someone reacts to a joke might offer clarity on their beliefs and values [85]. Thus, using humor via text messages may help couples explore new topics with little judgment or shed light on value alignment with their significant others in new relationships. Our findings suggest that more work needs to be done to understand the instrumental role humor plays in sexual communication via text message and relationship development.

Couples' discussion of past sexual experiences, specifically past sexual satisfaction, was another prominent theme and demonstrated a way for couples to learn about each other.

Although discussing past sexual satisfaction experiences is considered taboo by many [86], sharing them with a new partner allows for increased intimacy between couples [87]. Furthermore, open communication about past sexual experiences may allow for the sharing of vital sexual satisfaction and sexual health information in new relationships [86,88]. This may have facilitated greater sexual satisfaction among couples who discussed past sexual experiences. Results from the current study suggest that text messages are being utilized to facilitate these conversations and perhaps increase relationship and sexual satisfaction [89].

Couples often asked each other questions to gauge their new partner's preferences and desires. Differences existed in the way partners framed their questions. For example, some indirectly asked or "probed" their partner about previous sexual encounters, which may have required the receiving partner to make inferences about intent. This type of ambiguity is commonly reported in studies exploring the drawbacks of text messages versus face-to-face communication in relationships (e.g., facial expressions) [90,91]. Indirect questions related to sexual desires in the current study were harder to determine (e.g., hints at requests for sexual activity). Instead, it was more evident when couples were transitioning from indirect to direct sexual communication. Future research should explore if this transition is linear (e.g., do couples start with indirect sexual communication and transition to direct?) and what role text messages may play in the interplay between the two.

Other partners framed their questions more directly, leaving little room for misinterpretation. These findings are congruent with previous research suggesting that clear and open communication about sexual experiences and preferences between partners is vital for maintaining healthy relationships and increasing sexual satisfaction [92,93]. Having direct conversations about sex may also indicate increased intimacy and feelings of closeness in a relationship [94]. Sexual communication via text messaging may be an avenue for clinical researchers to explore to improve couples' ability to communicate about sex.

Generally, young adults used various methods to learn about their partners. This is focal within early relationships where there is ambiguity around preferences and expectations for sexual activity in relationships. These findings are consistent with the characteristics of Knapp's five-stage model of the coming-together stages. In alignment with this model, as a relationship progresses past the intensifying phase and to the integration and bonding stages, partners exchange less information about past relationships and interests and instead reflect on events experienced together and begin planning for the future [82].

4.3. To Enhance

Most couples' sexual communication via texting moved from learning what each other liked to focusing on enhancing their sexual relationship. This transition is consistent with Knapp's model, which describes the process of a relationship moving from the experimenting to intensifying stages. As defined by this model, when a couple moves to the intensifying stage of their relationship, they may frequently hold hands, hug, and kiss, and increase other intimate displays of affection [82,95]. Although Knapp's model does not outline text message communication in the relationship process, couples in the intensifying stage are increasingly affectionate, and therefore, may be using text messages to enhance their initial sexual experiences with one another. Texting to enhance or "intensify" the relationship also aligns with the literature on sexual and interpersonal communication and is a key factor in building satisfying sexual and romantic relationships [11,88,93]. Sexual communication is inherently vulnerable for couples [65] and the positive intimacy-enhancing communication demonstrated by actively discussing ways to improve their sexual relationship suggests couples feel safe and comfortable in their romantic relationships [22,61,68,96]. Specifically, prior studies have demonstrated that although there are risks associated with sharing your sexual needs and/or suggesting ways to enhance your sexual relationship, the positive rewards of greater sexual and relationship satisfaction often far outweigh the risks [97]. These enhancement conversations are also particularly important given the early relationship nature of our couples. As developing intimacy is important within

the first few months of dating, one way to enhance intimacy is to communicate about sexual preferences [96]. The current study provides insight into how this is achieved via text messaging.

Couples expressed their desire for future sex in order to enhance their sexual relationship. A desire for sexual activity in relationships influences levels of sexual and relationship satisfaction and discrepancies between partners are associated with lower sexual and relationship satisfaction [98]. Desire discrepancies can be combated by engaging in sexual communication [99]; thus, communication around sexual desires may serve to enhance the relationship and increase overall relationship satisfaction. These are particularly novel findings as most sexual desire and desire discrepancy work focuses on married or long-term relationships [100,101] or relationships in parenthood [102].

Finally, many couples used text messaging to compliment and reassure one another of their sexual performance as a way to enhance their relationship. These findings replicate prior work that illustrates the vital role of compliments in relationships development and maintenance [76,103,104]. We have also extended prior findings by highlighting that this can be achieved via text messaging. People like those who compliment them [76] and couples' use of sexual compliments via text message serves to increase the sexual interest of their partners.

These sexual communication modes may not necessarily differ among new and long-term relationships, but sexual communication via texting may be more commonplace among new relationships in recognition of the benefits of texting versus face-to-face communication (e.g., alleviating awkwardness and anxiety) [5,7,39,89]. The majority of research on sexual communication and much of what is known is among long-term partners, marital partners, parents, and professionals [105]. Our current study adds to the literature on sexual communication among new and emerging adult relationships by identifying communication modes via a widely utilized channel, text messaging. Further, we identified potential motivations (i.e., to bond, to learn, to enhance) for the communication modality utilized that should be more thoroughly examined in future research. New, emerging adult couples communicated about sex and use humor and compliments, explore sexual desires/interests, and explore past sexual experiences/partners to do so. Further, sex was discussed within the context of bonding and enhancing the relationship, with the emphasis on sex not defining their relationships. There is still much to learn about the sexual communication among emerging adults [106], particularly in new relationships and different relationships (e.g., nonmonogamous, sexual and gender minority relationships) and how this shapes relationship development, progression, and maintenance.

While there is considerable overlap between Knapp's [63] staircase model and our results, we argue a stage model may not fully capture how relationships develop over text communication, especially regarding the topic of sexual activity. These "stages" could instead be interpreted as motivations for communication that we saw to varying degrees in our sample.

5. Limitations and Future Research

Our results should be interpreted within the context of several limitations. One limitation was our limited representation of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in the sample. BIPOC communities have unique challenges and opportunities regarding sexual communication, and therefore their representation is essential [107]. Similarly, our focus on different-gender couples (non-sexual minority couples) limited our ability to understand how sexual communication via text messaging may be similar or different in other types of romantic partnerships. Research focused on the experiences of traditionally marginalized communities (e.g., sexual and gender minorities) would add valuable nuance to the research [108]. Gender, for cisgender or gender minority individuals, may be a component in motivations or choice of modes; due to the exploratory nature of this study, we were unable to examine gender in our analyses, but future research may identify gender influences. Additionally, participants who volunteered for a study focused on sexting are

likely quite different on a number of important sexuality-related individual differences, such as sexual experience [109]. This likely limits the generalizability of our findings. Another limitation was our capturing of one form of communication (i.e., text messages) between couples. Sexual communication likely happened in several different mediums such as face-to-face or on social media platforms. Indeed, many coders reported finding it confusing or frustrating when it was clear couples had switched platforms and there were gaps in conversation because they happened elsewhere. We believe this may be especially salient for moments in which a partner refused, negotiated, or otherwise did not fully return a partner's advances. Our findings are limited by our inability to validate themes within the couples' communication or perform member checks; given the personal nature of these communications, this may have revealed additional nuances unknown to the research team. Finally, previously cited literature and findings from the current study can only be considered within the contexts of the United States and Western societies, as there are cultural differences that may exist regarding communication and relationships (e.g., cultural differences in the use of emojis among Eastern and Western societies) [110].

Future research should be conducted to further understand how texting motivation functions in new relationships. A more in-depth investigation of these motivations may prompt theoretical development in the underrepresented area of new relationships in the broader relationship literature. For instance, future research can examine sexual communication via text messages among couples utilizing Knapp's Relationship Model [63]. Since the original model outlines the process of relationships prior to the digital age, understanding if and how couples' sexual communication over text messages follows the five stages outlined in this model may be useful. While the current study sought to broadly understand how couples communicate about sex via text messaging, and then inductively generated themes based on information presented in the text messages, future research should utilize prior theory [63] to examine the progression and functions of sexual communication as relationships progress or how these stages may serve as motivations for engagement.

Additionally, future research should explore the norms surrounding sexual communication via text messages in long-distance relationships. We know from a number of studies exploring sexual communication during COVID-19, a time when many couples were forced to engage in long-distance relationships, that sexting became a frequent behavior for many [111,112]. Sexting may serve as a mechanism for satisfying sexual and intimacy needs in long-distance relationships.

6. Implications and Conclusions

This study offers insight into how emerging adults in new relationships sexually communicate via texting and points to three motivations for doing so (i.e., to bond, to learn, and to enhance the relationship). Additionally, analyses were conducted with an understudied population in relationship research (early-stage, emerging adult romantic relationships). Our results highlight the importance of considering sexual communication via text message as an important form of sexual communication among new couples and highlights the utility of analyzing real text messages among couples to inform knowledge generation and theory development. Relationship counselors and sexual health practitioners might consider incorporating sexual communication via text message into their work to promote sexual health amongst their clients.

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