

2013

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### Recommended Citation

Palka, Katelyn (2013) "'It's Not As Easy As It Looks': College Students' Experiences With Romantic Relationship Development and Decline," *Proceedings of GREAT Day*: Vol. 2012, Article 9.  
Available at: <https://knight scholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day/vol2012/iss1/9>

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## **“It’s Not As Easy As It Looks”: College Students’ Experiences With Romantic Relationship Development and Decline**

Katelyn Palka

### ABSTRACT

As the number of young adults enrolled in colleges and universities increases, so too does the need to study and understand the communicative processes through which young adults engage in romantic relationship development and decline. Grounded in the model of interaction stages in relationships (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009), the researcher conducted eight interviews with college women to investigate how young adult women use interpersonal communication in order to develop, maintain, and ultimately terminate their romantic relationships with those of the opposite sex. The researcher describes the ten stages of coming together and coming apart using the language of the model. Implications of these findings are discussed to provide insight to researchers and individuals who are looking to understand how we can effectively learn more about the ways in which young adult women experience relational development and decline.

*Keywords:* interpersonal relationships, dating, coming together, coming apart

### **“It’s Not As Easy As It Looks”: College Students’ Experiences With Romantic Relationship Development and Decline**

The study of interpersonal communication, in any context or focus, can serve as quite useful in explaining the ways in which humans develop relationships with one another, especially with those of the opposite sex. Since interpersonal communication is so unique and special, it is important that we understand how to use it, in order to have healthy interpersonal relationships. The dynamics of relationships can be rather complex and they continuously change as relationships develop. Parks (2012) found that the building and maintaining of these interpersonal relationships are crucial to the health of individuals as one’s interpersonal relationships serve as grounds on which to increase or decrease one’s social skills, overall health and well-being, and that poor interpersonal relationships can have a negative impact on future relationships. His findings suggest that inadequate interpersonal relationships can lead to health

and wellness complications such as mental illnesses, violence and suicide, stress-induced illness in the cardiovascular system, a poorer immune system, or risky health practices (Parks, 2012). In turn, it can be argued that understanding the dynamics of interpersonal communication can help one build and maintain stronger relationships and, in turn, impact their health physically, emotionally, and psychologically (Parks 2012).

For the purposes of this study, interpersonal communication will be defined as “the kind of communication that happens when the people involved talk and listen in ways that maximize the presence of the personal” (Stewart 33). In the present study, I will use Knapp and Vangelisti’s (2009) stage model as a lens to understand the ways in which young adult women use interpersonal communication in order to develop, maintain, and potentially terminate their romantic relationships with those of the opposite sex.

### **A Model of Interaction Stages in Relationships**

Knapp and Vangelisti (2009) described common stages experienced during the development and decline of romantic relationships. This model was designed to explain the stages and communication experienced by committed romantic partners. However, it should not be forgotten that romantic relationships are complex and take various forms. The model has two sections, five stages that describe the process of coming together and five stages that describe the process of coming apart. Each process will be discussed in turn.

#### **Coming Together**

The model opens with the stage labeled *initiating*, in which we “scan the other person” (Knapp & Vangelisti 37). The stage is characterized by communication that makes the person appear to be likable or pleasant. It is essentially a time to make yourself known the person of your desire and to express your interest in them (Knapp & Vangelisti 2009).

Following the *initiating* phase is that of *experimenting*. Moving past simply expressing interest in another person, in this stage two people work to find a common ground, an integrating topic that they both share. In this stage people engage in phatic communication, commonly referred to as small talk, in which they discover more about one another. Many relationships never move past this stage as commitment is limited, and if there is a lack of integrating information, two people may not find a use in furthering a relationship past this stage (Knapp & Vangelisti).

If two people have engaged in the *experimenting* stage and are able to achieve an increased level of closeness, Knapp and Vangelisti (2009) argue that these two people have left the *experimenting* stage and enter into the *intensifying* stage. It is in this stage that two people are infatuated with one another and begin expressing direct commitment to one another. The two people are maintaining independence while concurrently fusing their personalities. They feel more comfortable with one another and are able to increase personal disclosure, sharing previously withheld information that would make them vulnerable (Knapp & Vangelisti).

If the partners move to the next stage of closeness, then they proceed to the *integrating* stage, in which two people develop a greater sense of interdependence. In this stage, two people's social circles merge and they are treated as a package deal. They are publically committed to one another, have heightened synchrony, and use phrases such as "we" and "our" in place of "I" or "my." Couples also develop personal idioms such as inside jokes that are private between the two of them. As a result, it should be clarified that achievement of this stage does not mean each person has lost their individuality or that they engage in complete togetherness; it simply means that their interdependence is more heightened than in previous stages (Knapp & Vangelisti).

Institutionalization of the relationship happens in the stage following Integrating. In the *bonding* stage, couples perform a public ritual such as marriage, in which they use a formal agreement to announce their commitment to the world. This stage can act as a "powerful force in changing the nature of the relationship 'for better or for worse'" (Knapp & Vangelisti 42). This is because when a couple engages in Bonding, they create a more concrete relationship that is harder to break free from.

### **Coming Apart**

Knapp and Vangelisti label the first stage of coming apart as *differentiation*. In this stage couples no longer use "we" or "our" and instead use "I" or "my" as they regain a greater sense of independence from the other person. Typically communication during *differentiating* is focused around what differences people have in regards to areas such as interests or friends. It is possible for couples to move in and out of this stage of their relationship, and after a while they begin to develop expectations for how to deal with the conflict experienced in this stage. In this stage, couples have a tendency to experience a great deal of conflict or fighting, though it is entirely possible to have peaceful differentiating (Knapp & Vangelisti).

If a relationship continues to come apart, couples then enter the *circumscribing* phase of the relationship, in which communication qualitatively and quantitatively decreases. Here, couples communicate less than they used to and when they communicate it tends to be very restricted, only covering superficial topics. Couples discover more and more topics that cause conflict, and find that they bicker about even the littlest of things. This then causes more topics to become restricted, further hindering the breadth of topics covered between the two (Knapp & Vangelisti).

Following *circumscribing*, couple then find themselves in the *stagnating* stage, in which couples barely communicate, because they know how interactions will go and know they won't be particularly pleasant. There is a loss of an emotional connection between the two people and even the subject of their relationship becomes taboo. When couples find themselves stuck in this stage, it is generally because they are avoiding the pain of a break-up or still hold hope to revive the relationship to its former, happier state (Knapp & Vangelisti).

While they are *stagnant*, couples may not talk as much or as effectively. Should their relationship continue to deteriorate, couples will then begin partaking in activities characteristic of the *avoiding* stage. In this stage, couples literally make a sense of physical distance; their communication is actually designed to avoid any face-to-face or voice-to-voice interactions. One person or both will feel a lack of desire to spend any time or energy with the other and in cases where only one feels this way they may drop subtle hints or be quite blunt in communicating that they do not wish to be around the other person. Three forms of distancing may occur in this stage: avoidance, disengagement, and cognitive dissociation (Knapp & Vangelisti). In avoidance, couples may try to prevent interaction or reduce interaction should they have to be around one another. In disengagement they may actually hide information about themselves or what they are doing and communicate less personally. Cognitive dissociation can be found when one person or both disregard the other's messages or show that they do not value the other as highly. Typically cognitive dissociation happens when physical separation is unattainable, and in that case a couple could be in the same location but act as though the other doesn't even exist (Knapp & Vangelisti).

In the final stage of the model, *terminating*, couples literally end their romantic relationship. This can happen for multiple reasons; however regardless of the reason, it is the communication to the other partner that they no longer wish to continue the relationship. This

stage generally has a summary statement in which one partner provides rationale for the other as to why they wish for the relationship to end, a “decreased-access message” clarifying that the relationship is terminating, and addressing future friendships or enemies to avoid awkward interactions later on (Knapp & Vangelisti).

### **Dynamic Nature of Romantic Relationships**

It can be argued that communication and relationships between romantic partners is complex, taking various forms. Afifi and Faulkner (2000) studied individuals who engage in friends with benefits type relationships, or cross-sex relationships that involve sexual activity. They discovered that about one-third of their participants experienced a friends-with-benefits type relationship and “they have important implications for our understanding of the way these relationships are experienced (Afifi & Faulkner 218).” The Institute for American Values (2001) found that “college women say it is rare for college men to ask them on dates” (5) and “‘hooking up,’ a distinctive sex-without-commitment interaction between college men and women, is widespread on-campus and profoundly influences campus culture” (4).

In addition to changes in relationship types, technology has played a role in changing the way that men and women engage in romantic relationships. Another study revealed, “texting and sexting are relatively common in young adult romantic relationships” (Drouin & Landgraff 1). Furthermore, texting is becoming the dominant medium for interpersonal communication amongst teenagers and young adults (Drouin & Landgraff). It is important to apply Knapp and Vangelisti’s Model of Interaction Stages in Relationships to new research, as communication is dynamic and always changing.

As a result of this changing nature of relationships, researching romantic relationships among college students could prove to be both eye opening and informative, as college acts as a unique time in one’s life. The U.S. Department of Education (2010) reported that undergraduate enrollment has increased by 34% from the year 2000 to 2009, and they project that it will continue to increase through the years. With such an increase in enrollment, it can be argued that college is and will continue to be a shared experience by many. Learning from a popular demographic could provide as an informative reference for others who are or plan on attending college and engaging in romantic relationships while there.

The following research questions will guide the present study:

RQ1: How do young adult women communicatively engage in the development of relationships with romantic partners?

RQ2: How do young adult women communicatively engage in the decline of those relationships?

## **Method**

### **Data Collection**

Recruitment of participants was done through purposive sampling in which participants were chosen because they had experiences relevant to the phenomenon of interest (Baxter & Babbie). In order to participate, individuals had to (a) be at least 18 years of age and (b) have had a significant adult (i.e., after turning 18), heterosexual romantic relationship that lasted at least six months and had since ended. Participants were asked to engage in face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, each lasted approximately one hour. Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility of follow up questions while still providing structure in that each interview was directed by the order of questions. Each of the eight interviews was transcribed, yielding 260 single-spaced pages of data.

Questions in the interview focused on the communicative processes characteristic of each stage of the model. The model provided framework for the structure of the questions as they were intentionally asked in an order that coincided with the order of the coming together stages followed by the coming apart stages. For example, one question asked during the Integrating stage of the interview was, “Did you and your romantic partner use any nicknames or have any inside jokes with one another? What are some examples of these?” This question was framed using the notion that during the integrating stage couples develop personal idioms with one another. The interview protocol that guided this research appears in the Appendix.

### **Participants**

Participants’ ages at the time of their romantic relationship ranged from 18 years to 20 years. Their romantic partner’s age at the time of the romantic relationship ranged from 18 years to 20 years. At the time of the interview, participants’ ages ranged from 20 years to 21 years. Of the 8 participants, 7 described themselves as currently single and 1 described themselves as being in an open relationship with an opposite sex partner for the past 18 months. Since turning 18, participants’ had had between 1 and 3 romantic relationships. Their most significant romantic relationship, the relationship in question, lasted between 7 months and 26 months and had ended

between 2 weeks ago and 19 months ago in relation to the time of the interview. All participants were female and, of the 8 participants, 7 self-identified as Caucasian and 1 self-identified as Asian. In regards to personality, 2 of the 8 participants identified themselves as introverted and 6 identified themselves as extroverted. As far as sexual orientation is concerned, 7 participants self-identified as heterosexual and one self-identified as bisexual. All participants were college students and were either in their junior or senior year.

### **Data Analysis**

After collecting the data, a qualitative thematic analysis was performed using Knapp and Vangelisti's model as a framework. Using Smith's (1995) guidelines for qualitative analysis, I first thoroughly reviewed a single transcript and inductively analyzed the transcript for evidence of all stages in the model, creating themes that emerged in the data regarding each step. Next, I analyzed the remaining seven transcripts. After completing this process, I organized the themes relevant to each stage. Finally, I implemented exemplars to support each of them. Exemplars, or ideal representations found in the data, were used to establish credibility as well as increase understanding of the themes discovered in each stage.

### **Findings**

In the following text, the themes that emerged in each stage of model are presented. Themes are then supported and explained through exemplars from interviews with participants.

### **Coming Together**

**Initiating.** In the initiating stage, participants engaged in flirtatious interactions in which they expressed initial interest in their romantic partner or vice versa. The flirting took place through two methods: physical engagement and non-physical engagement.

Regarding physical engagement, participants nonverbally expressed interest in the other person. One participant explained how she and her romantic partner met at a fraternity party. "We just kind of bumped into each other, like physically bumped into each other and started talking that way (1: 27–28, Note: parenthetical citations include the interview number followed by line numbers from the transcript). This couple's physical encounter is what initiated their communication with one another, eventually blossoming into a relationship.

On a deeper level of physical engagement, a different participant actually engaged in sexually physical activity as a way of initiating their relationship. When asked who initiated the



relationship and how they initiated the relationship, the participant responded with, “I don’t remember because we drunk hooked up...but I guess afterwards would probably be him to like continue it” (5: 16–18). In the physical cases, participants used physical contact, be it sexual or non-sexual, in order to express their attraction to the other person.

Regarding non-physical initiation, some participants were often asked for their numbers by the other person or in other cases, their romantic partner disclosed to a third party that they liked the participant (and that third party informed the participant). In one scenario of non-physical initiation, the participant and her romantic partner were attending a hat making activity in their college union, she explained:

“We were making the hats and he was like, I was like ‘oh, I don’t know what to put on my hat,’ and he was like, “you should make a hat that says I heart...’ and then like his name and I was like ‘aw, I don’t know, maybe,’ and then I ended up making it”. (2: 42–49)

Her partner was indirectly expressing interest by suggesting she put “I heart” with his name on her hat. She then reciprocated that interest by writing it on her hat and wearing it.

**Experimenting.** After initiation, participants encountered the experimenting phase. Experimenting is characterized by phatic communication, or small talk among participants with the goal of establishing common ground. Participants voiced that they were “just trying to get to know one another just like basic information about like ourselves” (7:46–47). That phatic communication used in getting to know one another focused on three themes: personal relationship, activities, and interests. These themes were all ways participants got to know their romantic partners and assessed how much they had in common with them.

In terms of personal relationships, participants revealed that they talked about family and friends with their romantic partner as a way to get to know more about one another. When asked what she talked about on her first “date” with her romantic partner, one participant explained, “we just talked about...just like stupid stories about my friends and his friends” (6: 56–58). She disclosed funny stories about her friends, he did the same, and in doing so, they each learned a little more about the personal relationships that they had with other people.

In addition to the personal relationships, participants also explained that they discussed activities, or things they were doing or involved in with their romantic partner as a way to get to know one another and establish common ground. One participant found common ground with

her partner regarding school work and explained, "We were both in the same major...we could have conversations about that and about the classes we were in" (4: 76–78). Another participant, when asked what topics they talked about during this time in their relationship described that she and her partner discussed "just kind of what happened during the day like what class he had come from, plans for later that night" (8: 93–94). These were simple topics in order to understand what the other did during the day, "nothing really heavy" as one participant called it.

Regarding interests, participants and their romantic partner discussed things that they enjoyed doing or subjects that they found particularly appealing. One participant said she and her romantic partner would talk about "music, what we like to do..." (3: 47–48). Another participant found a lack of common ground in the area of interests, and actually questioned how much she wanted the relationship to progress because of it:

"He said he did not like sports and that kind of bothered me a little bit just because I know I was a big sports person and I was kind of second guessing if some of our interests were too different" (1: 78–80).

This participant showed that during the experimenting phase, it is possible that couples may not continue to progress in their relationship for fear of too many differences regarding interests or other areas. However, she decided that their lack of common ground regarding sports was not enough to justify a decision to end the progression of the relationship.

**Intensifying.** Following experiment, participants experienced the intensifying stage, or in other words, the "love-dovey" time in a relationship. During the intensifying stage it was evident that participants and their romantic partners were infatuated with one another and began to increase spending their time together. A summary of what all participants experienced was perfectly expressed when one participant said, "Every spare moment I had I would spend with him" (8: 157). In this stage it was found that participants and their partners engaged in establishing relational identity and testing.

In order to establish relational identity, it was found that participants asked one another exactly "what they were doing" in the relationship and created rules about not seeing other people. One participant explained:

"We had been seeing each other for a few weeks and when we were hanging out one day he just kind of asked 'like what exactly are we doing?'...we both kind of agreed it was more; like, he initiated the talk about becoming, like dating, but it was a mutual thing and

then we kind of discussed like what he meant and like not seeing other people and things like that” (1: 16–18, 35–37).

At this point, couples began to define the relationship. For example, they agreed to commit to one another and to not see other people.

While engaging in testing, participants purposefully did things to see if their partner felt the same way by expressing their feelings or emotions to the other person or through disclosing previously withheld information that would make them vulnerable. One participant decided to disclose information regarding her relationship with her father and her experience with her ex-boyfriend:

“After a couple of months I brought up like...I told him about my most recent ex-boyfriend like before I met him was like, um, how it ended really badly and stuff and like, and then I, like I don’t have a good relationship with my father and I told him about that and how I haven’t like seen him or anything in like, I think it is been like 13 years or so” (2: 96–97, 104–107).

Another participant displayed testing when she expressed her feelings for her romantic partner to see how he would react:

“Just like saying like ‘I love you’ when I left the room and like stuff or like left and he was with a group of his friends and like just seeing his reaction to that and seeing if he responded and but like reacted the same way as he would if we were alone, which he did” (5: 170–173).

Her expression of “I love you” could have gone unreciprocated, hence she was vulnerable, and in her mind she was testing his true feelings for her and felt he might not respond as honestly or as openly in front of his friends as he did when the two of them were alone.

**Integrating.** Following their “love-dovey” time, couple proceeded to the integrating stage. In the integrating stage it was found that participants and their romantic partners displayed commitment to one another both within their relationship and to people outside of their relationship. They shared these displays privately between themselves but they also publicly showed their commitment to one another as a couple.

The display of commitment between participants and their partners occurred internally through the establishment of rituals, personal idioms, and the display of emotion. One participant disclosed how she and her romantic partner would talk before bed on a nightly basis:

"We would say goodnight to each other in a special way, we would always say goodnight to each other, and um, so that was always nice for both of us to just get to talk to the person one more time before we went to sleep" (7: 252–254).

This display was private between the two of them and not shared with other people, making it internal. It was something that was special between the two of them and made them feel reassured and connected to one another.

External displays of commitment included showing affection in public, displaying commitment using technology, and partners giving jewelry to other participants. One participant discussed how she and her boyfriend used technology to outwardly display their commitment to one another. She explained, "We were in a like relationship on Facebook...we like really like Facebook I guess, um we like wrote things to each other like publically just like made references to like stupid things on our walls and stuff" (5: 313–316). Technology, specifically social media, was a major way in which participants and their romantic partners made their relationships public to others.

**Bonding.** The act of bonding, in which couples make their relationships more permanent through institutionalizing the relationship, was not seen in any of the participants' relationships. Since all participants were college students, they and their romantic partner may not have yet reached that level of seriousness in their relationship.

Thus far, findings have detailed the ways in which participants developed their romantic relationships. Next, I will discuss findings detailing how participants experienced the decline of their romantic relationships.

### **Coming Apart**

**Differentiating.** In the differentiating stage, participants and their romantic partners engaged in establishing independence from one another. They did so through either positive individualism or negative individualism. As a result, participants perceived differentiating as either helpful or hurtful to their relationships.

Those participants that experienced positive individualism explained that this separate time away from their partner helped them to not feel smothered or suffocated by the relationship. It also helped them not get sick of one another. One participant explained that a way she would assert her independence from her partner was by spending time with her own friends. She described:

“Well we like you, spend our separate time from each other like personally with just my friends and just his friends. Having space from each other was good because I feel like if we’re together like 24/7 I wouldn’t have my independence and like my alone time that’s like needed” (6: 359–362).

Through having her separate time, she was able to maintain a sense of independence, which was important to her. Another participant who also experienced positive individualism said that her independent time was good for her relationship because “being with someone all of the time is just a lot to handle” (3: 228–229).

Those participants who felt they experienced negative individualism expressed that doing so made them and their partners realize different viewpoints or interests they had regarding what was important to them. This created small conflict, very characteristic of the differentiating phase. In one interview, the participant described how her joining an activity that her partner was not a part of created issues:

“I decided to join another activity on campus knowing full well how he felt about it and that he did not approve...it was something that was important to me and it was something that I needed and wanted as part of my college career...me joining the organization became a point of contention between the two of us...he claimed that I wasn’t as committed to him as I was to the activity” (4: 348–351, 359–361).

**Circumscribing.** If the relationship continued to head south, the couple then proceeded to the circumscribing stage. In the circumscribing stage, couples experienced a decrease in the quality and quantity of their communication. Findings suggest this occurred through restricted communication and an argumentative inclination.

Participants and their romantic partners engaged in restricted communication with one another by avoiding certain topics and simply talking less to one another. One participant explained the kinds of discussions, or lack thereof, that she and her romantic partner would have:

“Literally the communication would just be about like us arguing and the problems we had like between us it was never about like what we like anymore or what our days were going like and topic wise I don’t think we talked about anything...we literally avoided talking about anything else besides the two of us” (1: 421–426).

She and her partner no longer covered all of the topics they used to and communication was limited to talking about the two of them rather than what they did that day or how their lives outside of the relationship were.

Participants also expressed experiencing an argumentative inclination, in which they and their partners fought or bickered over insignificant matters, decreasing the quality of their communication. For example, in one interview the participant explained that she would get mad at her partner for almost everything he did. "I would get mad if he was late to work and was just being lazy about it or something like that. And then, but actually in reality I was angry about something else" (7: 444–446). She fought him over everything, even if what he was doing, like not going to work, had nothing to do with the relationship. This argumentative inclination also dealt with the tone in which participants and their partners used when they spoke to one another. One participant expressed that her partner would send her "catty" texts such as "Can you actually let me in and pick up my phone calls?" (5: 589), whereas before in the relationship he would have never sent her a message of that nature.

**Stagnating.** Following the circumscribing stage is the stagnating stage, in which couples lose any kind of emotional investment. In the stagnating stage, data supports that participants were stuck in a relationship that wasn't getting any better. They were not emotionally involved, yet they were not quite ready to let go. Findings suggest participants engaged in relational detachment and relational preservation.

While engaging in relational detachment, participants were essentially going through the motions of the relationship, and one participant described her communication with her partner as "task based instead of like emotion based" (5: 717–718). Another participant explained that she and her partner weren't "in it" like they used to be. "I think unintentionally we avoided like regular conversations. I'm not sure why, it could just be because we just weren't in the relationship anymore...our heart wasn't in it anymore" (7: 516–518). The emotional detachment they were experiencing made it very difficult for her and her partner to mend the relationship as they were still helplessly trying to do.

Furthermore, participants also expressed that they and their partners engaged in relational preservation, in that they were holding onto the last bit of life that their relationship had, or were simply prolonging the inevitableness of a break-up by convincing themselves that it would get better. One hopeful participant explained, "I knew it was in a bad place, I kind of looked at it as

like I know it is in a bad place but we can fix it...I think I was in a lot of denial” (8: 627–629). She recognized that the relationship was going south quite steeply but still kept herself “convinced” that it would get better and she and her partner could fix their relational issues.

**Avoiding.** In each case, the stagnating stage was followed by the avoiding stage. In the avoiding stage, it was discovered that participants created a sense of physical distance between them and their partners through restricted togetherness and technology to make it so that they were away from their partner more than they were together.

While practicing restricted togetherness, participants made conscious efforts to limit the amount of time that they spent with their partner. They did this by only hanging out for a short period of time, making other plans, or lying about what they were doing. In one case, the participant admitted to making up lies about what they were doing so that they did not have to be around their romantic partner. “I would try and like say like I’m going to go take a shower, but really like I would just go to my room and just be alone and just be by myself,” (2:612–614) she explained. She would purposefully tell her partner she was doing something for the sole intent of being away from him because she wanted to be. Another participant explained, “I would go over there and like tell myself to leave in an hour,” (1:380–381) making sure she did not spend any more time than necessary with her partner.

In order to physically distance themselves from their partner using technology, participants admitted to either themselves or their partner ignoring the other’s text messages or phone calls, or lying to the other and responding that they were too busy to talk at that moment. One participant described how her romantic partner would make excuses as to why he couldn’t talk to her:

“I just remember like getting a lot of messages like ‘can’t talk right now, in lab’ or like ‘can’t talk now, I’ll call you later’...I think he almost used it as an excuse sometimes...it was easier to just blame it on the lab than it was to just say that he was avoiding it” (4: 663–669).

Other participants recall purposefully ignoring messages received from their romantic partner and were able to physically distance themselves by not answering any technological form of communication.

**Terminating.** In the final stage of the relationship, terminating, participants and their romantic partners ended the relationship. The manner in which this communicative stage occurred was either destructive or constructive.

Those participants who terminated their relationships using destructive communication described a lot of yelling, screaming, and negative put downs towards the other person. One participant even disclosed physical abuse during termination. The following is a description of one participant's experience after she disclosed to her boyfriend that she had cheated on him. "He said he did not wanna be with me anymore but it was not like a calm manner it was yelling and screaming and 'I hate you, don't ever talk to me again'" (1: 531–532).

Other participants expressed that the termination of their relationship with their romantic partner was done through rational explanations and mutual understanding of the issues of the relationship. One participant described, "I just remember him saying that we needed to figure out who we were and um, he thought that we could only do that by breaking up...we just kind of logically talked about it" (8: 777–778, 802). Here, participants used more positive communication during termination, rather than simply tearing the other down by saying or doing something harmful.

### Discussion

The present study sought to apply Knapp and Vangelisti's (2009) model of relationship development to current college-aged relational experiences. Knapp and Vangelisti (2009) argued "students of human communication find concepts and principles easier to learn when they can analyze and test them in the context of common experiences" (p. ix). This study helps research regarding how college students engage in relational development and decline. As a result, it provides a deeper understanding of how young adults communicatively navigate their way through the development of their romantic relationships. With the existing research regarding various forms of relationship (i.e., Bogle, 2008; Afifi & Faulkner, 2000), looking at the model now that we know such relationships exist can help those studying communication understand how the model functions with the emergence of changing technologies and relationship types as mentioned earlier.

This study offers important implications for the study of interpersonal relationships in that it brought up a point that not all couples engage in relational development as traditionally expected. One participant experienced a "hook up" during the initiating stage of her relationship,



and according to the model, physical expressions of interest is characteristic of the intensifying stage (Knapp & Vangelisti). This finding supports existing research regarding the reality and frequency of hooking up among college students. Bogle (2008) found that “the dominant culture/sexual script for most of the twentieth century (i.e., asking someone out for a date as the first stage toward finding an intimate partner) is no longer being used by most college students” (p. 44). It was also found that “hooking up is an outgrowth of how college students socialize today” (Bogle 29), meaning that more college students engage in hooking up as a way of having relations with those of the opposite sex. Such findings could support an expansion of the initiating stage to include these sorts of displays of attraction.

This study also showcases the complex nature of the coming apart stages of relationships (i.e., differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating). When one looks at the coming apart stages individually, they seem quite clear and unique; however, when applying those stages to data its distinguishing stages can be tricky. The lines between the coming apart stages are not always clear. Activity in each stage appeared to be very similar, in that you could find participants discussing how they or their romantic partner would choose to hang out with their own friends in both the differentiating and avoiding stage. The only distinction was that in differentiating, participants and their partners were hanging out with their own friends for positive reasons, such as needed individual time and in avoiding, participants and their partners were hanging out with their own friends for negative reasons, such as they were sick of being around the other person. It was enlightening to see this complexity of coming apart in that it is important to understand the reasoning behind why couples communicate certain things and not just what they are communicating.

Furthermore, post-relational dissolution appeared to play a significant role in experiences had by participants. There exists research regarding how couples continue to communicate post-termination (i.e., Koenig Kellas, Bean, Cunningham, & Cheng). Such findings suggest that Knapp and Vangelisti’s Model and other models regarding relationship stages could improve by adding a stage to bring attention to communication that may occur post-termination. Such examples of this would include still being friends, having to share custody of children, or having to communicate at work (Koenig Kellas et al.). Many participants of this study explained that they experienced at least some kind of interaction with their romantic partner after breaking up, simply because they had class together or decided to still be friends. However, much of the

literature in existence deals with the ways that partners communicate post-divorce, failing to address that communication post-termination could arguably exist in relationships that never made it to marriage, such as college relationships. From some of the findings of this study, it could be interesting for future researchers to look at ways in which college students engage in post-relational dissolution.

While this study provides important new insight about interpersonal relationships, it was not without limitations. For example, only one member of the relationship was interviewed. As a result, only one perspective of the communication was taken into account. It could be helpful to engage in dyadic interviews, in which both the male and female of the same relationship share their perspective on the coming together and coming apart of the relationship through communicative processes.

Second, participants were all women. Because of this, only a female perspective was taken into account. In the future, it could be useful to engage in interviews with both men and women in order to compare and contrast how men and women communicatively engage in relationship development and decline. Having a male perspective could increase the breadth and depth of a future study, as it has the potential to add other viewpoints or understanding.

Lastly, the present study only interviewed students of one university. It could be beneficial in future research of this nature to look at students from various colleges or universities in various parts of the country as different universities may have different relational cultures. This could broaden the demographic spectrum of a study and potentially open eyes to any contrastable data from different universities or areas of the country.

In addition to other propositions of future research, it could be beneficial for researchers to look at the ways in which technology, specifically Facebook and other social media, affect how college students engage in relational development and decline. Many participants of this study voiced that they were "Facebook official," or publically in a relationship on Facebook. It could prove interesting to research how this specifically affects coming together and coming apart, especially since Facebook did not exist in 1996 when this model was first introduced.

### **Conclusion**

The present study helps to illustrate the importance of studying the dynamics of interpersonal communication. The maintenance of romantic relationships is not simple, and can be important to the health of those partaking in the relationship to engage in healthy

communication patterns. As Parks (2012) found, maintaining healthy relationships may be associated with one's overall health and well-being. It can be strongly argued that it is still important for future researchers to continuing looking at the dynamics of relationship as they are ever changing. Such research can prove to benefit everyone, as interpersonal relationships are unique and special due to their complex nature.

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## Appendix

### Interview Protocol

Please make note that during this interview you will be asked questions based only on what you consider to be the most significant heterosexual, adult, romantic relationship that has lasted at least 6 months and has since ended. Please do not discuss any other romantic relationship besides this one during the interview.

#### INITIATION

1. Who initiated the relationship? How did they/you initiate the relationship?
2. If your ex initiated the relationship, did you also express or interest in that person? How so? Or vice versa, if you initiated the relationship, did your ex express interest in you as well? How so?
3. In what ways did you communicate with this person as you or he/she was initiating the relationship?

#### EXPERIMENTING

1. Describe your first “date,” or when you first started hanging out with this person on a romantic level.
2. What topics did you discuss?
  - a. What topics did you avoid?
  - b. Why did you avoid them?
3. Did your partner ever bring up anything at this beginning stage of your relationship that made you second-guess your feelings about them?
  - a. If so, what was it that they brought up and why do you think it made you feel that way?
4. Were there things your partner brought up that made you decide to want the relationship to progress?
  - a. If so, what were these topics?
5. Were there instances in this early stage of your relationship that you brought up something you wish you hadn’t?
  - a. If so, what was it that you brought up and why do you wish you hadn’t?

#### INTENSIFYING

1. Now, think back to the time when you started to have “serious” feelings for this person – what we sometimes call the “love y dovey” time in a relationship, what was your communication like?
  - a. What new topics did you discuss?
  - b. What new topics did you avoid?
2. During this time, did you do anything to see if that person felt the same way about you as you did for him or her?
  - a. Describe what you did.

3. Do you remember your partner ever doing anything to try to determine if you felt the same way about him or her and as he or she did about you?
  - a. Describe what they did.
  - b. How did you respond?

### INTEGRATING

1. Now, think back to the time when your relationship became evident to others. In other words, when people saw the two of you as a couple. Characterize your communication at this time.
  - a. What new topics did you discuss?
  - b. What other changes did you make to the way you communicated?
  - c. Were there topics you avoided at this time? If so, what were they? Why did you avoid them?
  - d. How did you communicate your commitment to one another?
2. What sort of things did you do to let other people know the two of you were a couple?
3. Did you and your romantic partner use any nicknames or have any inside jokes with one another? What are some examples of them?
  - a. Were these nicknames or jokes private between the two of you, or did other people know about them as well?
    - i. If there were cases of both, what kinds of jokes/nicknames were public and which were private?
4. Were there certain routines you and your partner practiced on a regular basis that were special between the two of you?
  - a. What sort of things were they, and why were they special?
5. What made you feel closest to your romantic partner during this time?

### BONDING

1. Have you or your partner made any sort of public display of commitment?
  - a. If so, what did you do and why was this important to you?
  - b. How did your relationship change after that time?
  - c. What new challenges did your relationship face following that display of commitment?

### DIFFERENTIATING

1. In what ways did you separate yourself or assert your independence from your romantic partner? Has this been helpful or hurtful to your relationship?
  - a. In what ways did your partner separate himself or herself or assert their independence from you? Did you find this helpful or hurtful to your relationship?
  - b. Did the separation ever result in conflict?
    - i. If so, how did you address that conflict?
    - ii. How did you partner address that conflict?

### CIRCUMSCRIBING

1. Think back to the time in your relationship when it first started to go “downhill” or fall apart. Did you experience a lot of conflict during this time?
  - a. What were the conflicts about?
  - b. What was your communication like during this time?
  - c. Were there any topics you began to avoid that you did not use to? If so what were those topics and why did you begin to avoid them?
  - d. What did you do to express your dissatisfaction or unhappiness to your partner?
  - e. What did your partner do to express their dissatisfaction or unhappiness to you?
2. Did you take any steps to repair the relationship at this point?
  - a. Did your partner take any steps to repair the relationship at this point?

## STAGNATING

1. Assuming the last part of your relationship did not go very well and it continued to fall apart. How did you feel about your partner at this point? How did you feel about your relationship at this point?
  - a. Think of the top three words you could use to describe the relationship at this point.
  - b. Why did you list each term you listed?
2. What was your communication like at this point?
  - a. What topics did you discuss in your relationship at this point?
    - i. Were there any topics you began to avoid at this point? Why did you avoid these topics?
3. Did you take any steps to repair the relationship at this point?
  - a. Did your partner take any steps to repair the relationship at this point?

## AVOIDING

1. During this turbulent time in your relationship, did you ever try to create distance between the two of you?
  - a. What did you do to create the sense of distance?
  - b. How did your partner react to this distance you were creating?
  - c. How did your partner create distance between the two of you?
    - i. How did you react to your partner creating distance?
2. What made you feel farthest from your romantic partner?
  - a. Did you take any steps to repair that distant feeling?

## TERMINATING

1. Did you or your partner end the relationship?
2. How did you or your partner end the relationship?
  - a. What did you/they say in ending the relationship?
  - b. Did you/they end the relationship in person? If not, what channel did they use?
  - c. How did the other communicatively respond when they ended the relationship?
3. If you could go back, would you make any changes to the way the relationship ended?
  - a. Why, and what changes would you make?

## POST-RELATIONAL DISSOLUTION

1. Since you and your ex broke up, have you talked to each other?
  - a. If so, why?
  - b. Who initiated the communication?
  - c. How did you communicate (face-to-face, phone, etc.)?
  - d. What were the topics you discussed?
  - e. Do you still talk?
  - f. What were your feelings on the continued communication after ending the relationship?
  - g. How is your communication with that person now different from when you were together?
2. Did any communication after breaking up make you change your mind about the break up?

## OTHER QUESTIONS

1. What would you do differently in your next romantic relationship based on the events of this one?
2. Was there anything in this romantic relationship that you regretted and wish you could take back or do over?
3. What changes would you make to the way you communicate in your romantic relationships, if any?
4. Relationships, especially in college, tend to be learning experiences, what would you say was the biggest thing you learned from this romantic relationship that you had?