RELATIONSHIP WORK AMONG EMERGING ADULT COUPLES: PHYSIOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL COMPONENTS OF DISCUSSING ROMANTIC CHALLENGES WITH FRIENDS

by

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Research has established that couples experience and discuss romantic problems in their relationships. Various psychophysiological indicators have shown that when couples discuss romantic matters, they show increased levels of distress. In this study, we set out to understand the intersection between relationship work and several variables including the most frequent mode of communication, the impact of friends' approval on relationship work, and accompanying physiological processes associated with these interactions. Results revealed that emerging adults prefer to share romantic problems via face-to-face interactions. Additionally, social network approval affects the frequency of relationship work for many partners. Finally, males tend to be significantly more stressed when discussing romantic challenges than females, and partners appear more stressed when discussing challenges with friends than with one another. Clinical implications and recommendations for future research are also discussed.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The formation and maintenance of romantic relationships has been identified as a key developmental process during emerging adulthood (Erikson, 1968). Researchers have found that emerging adult partners establish and retain intimate relationships through diverse means, including various communicative strategies, problem solving behaviors, and involvement of the social network in romantic functioning (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004; Ruppel, 2015). Existing literature further suggests that emerging adults (i.e., between the ages of 18 and 25) begin looking for life long partners at this critical developmental period, and successful romantic relationships in emerging adulthood have been linked with high levels of well-being and low rates of physical and emotional distress (Schneiderman, Zagoory-Sharon, Leckman, & Feldman, 2012). Given the positive personal outcomes associated with healthy romantic functioning during this time, it is essential that researchers continue to examine how partners achieve success in romantic relationships in emerging adulthood. Researchers have established that healthy communication between partners regarding romantic challenges is a vital component of this process (Tezer, 2001). Alternatively, how a couple communicates about problems with members of their social networks may also be an important factor to consider (Huston, 2000).

Many social scientists have studied how partners discuss their romantic problems with their friends. In particular, Oliker (1989), who conceptualized marital work as the process of actively involving friends in a romantic relationship, laid the foundation for more specific examinations of the intersection of romantic and social interactions. Important to the current study, the discussion of one's romantic trials with others in non-marital relationships has come to be referred to as *relationship work* (RW) (Jensen & Rauer, 2014). Most young couples experience romantic challenges of some kind and it is normative to discuss these challenges with

both partners and friends (Helms, Crouter, & McHale, 2003). Such discussion with one's social network has the potential to either positively or negatively impact the romantic union. The current study attempted to supplement existing literature by addressing how the concept of RW varies across genders, the most frequent method of communication used by emerging adults to engage in RW, the impact of social networks on RW, and the differences in Galvanic Skin Response (GSR) as a measure of psychophysiological distress when one is engaging in RW with a partner versus a friend.

Need for the Study

Examination of psychophysiology among romantic partners. Few researchers (e.g., Levenson & Gottman, 1983) have examined romantic partners' psychophysiology when discussing romantic challenges. These findings have critically contributed to the understanding of couple dynamics during times of distress. However, to our knowledge, no previous research has considered partners' physiological reactions while discussing challenges with friends, a common social interaction. As part of the current study, we capture partners' GSR, as a measure of physiological arousal when talking with both their partners and their friends about solving a particular romantic issue. Perspiration, as captured by GSR, is also significantly linked with an individual's autonomic nervous system, as increases in stress are captured by higher GSR scores (Russoniello, Fish, Maes, Paton, & Styron, 2013). There are several benefits to understanding how partners' physiological responses are altered when engaging in RW with each other or with their friends. Clinicians may more knowledgably comment on the physiological impact of turning to a friend over a partner, or vice versa. Additionally, researchers may be able to more accurately conceptualize the personal physiological impacts of engaging in RW that relate to physical and mental health outcomes at a later stage in life (e.g., hypertension, anxiety disorders,

insomnia, etc.). Furthermore, the information gained from this study may assist researchers, clinicians, and couples in understanding which romantic problems most significantly impact physiological distress. This may be helpful as these professionals and couples will be able to create treatment plans surrounding the most distressing problems presented, as well as knowing what issues should be thoroughly evaluated to ensure individual and couple well-being.

Clinical implications. An effective couple communication pattern is critical for the development and success of a romantic relationship (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). Consistent with family systems theory, in order for clinicians to be able to effectively perform couples therapy, they need to expand their conceptualization of the couple's "system" (Broderick, 1993). Expansion of the system to include the influences that friends provide during the critical stage of emerging adulthood will enhance therapists' understanding of external factors that may impact functioning within the relationship (Huston, 2000). More specifically, clinicians may greatly benefit from understanding how discussing romantic challenges with friends potentially impacts couple dynamics. Furthermore, Bowen family systems theory holds the assumption that although a two-person system may be stable as long as it is calm, when anxiety increases, it immediately involves the most vulnerable outside person to become the third person in the relationship (Bowen, 1976). Currently, very few clinicians include friends in therapy despite the assumption that couple dysfunction is systemic and influenced by multiple external factors. Considering that the knowledge of triangulation helps provide the theoretical perspective between individual therapy, and family therapy it is a surprise that such few clinicians work to accommodate triangles in therapy, as triangulation contributes significantly to the development of clinical problems (Bowen, 1976). The current study will provide insight for clinicians who are struggling to understand how RW can impact communication between

partners, and the psychophysiological functioning of each partner. Marriage and family therapists in particular, who have extensive training in systemic processes, will likely find the conclusions drawn from this study useful in practice due to the greater frequency of relational cases that they encounter (i.e. couples and families).

The insights gained from this study may aid clinicians in the process of general decision making with special regard to different interventions that may be most helpful when treating couples (including the inclusion of friends in therapy). As a result of this study, clinicians will also be able to provide more accurate psychoeducation regarding how turning to social networks for support helps or harms romantic partners experiencing challenges. Given the existing links between communication with friends and romantic stability, it is imperative to understand how turning to one's friend when romantic problems arise may affect the short and long term successes of emerging adults' romantic relationships (Huston, 2000; Jensen & Rauer, 2015).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The current study was exploratory in nature as the researchers sought to comprehensively understand the links between romantic and social communication, technology, psychophysiology, and romantic functioning. Data was collected from emerging adults at East Carolina University as part of the larger Relationship Work in Emerging Adults Study. This initiative closely examined the process of RW in emerging adults and the physiological responses that occurred when these participants engaged in RW with partners and friends. Specifically, the following research questions that were addressed:

1) What mode of communication (e.g., in person, via text messaging, via social media) do emerging adults most frequently use to communicate with partners and friends about romantic relationship problems and are there gender differences?

2) Is approval from friends associated with RW with partners and friends among emerging adults, controlling for length of relationship and length of friendship?

3) How does skin conductance, as captured by GSR, differ while doing RW with a partner/friend, and are there gender differences?

4) Is skin conductance, as captured by GSR, related with the frequency of RW with partner/friends and are there gender differences?

Hypotheses corresponding to each of these research questions are as follows:

H1) Given that women tend to be socialized to communicate more frequently about relationships than men (Hook, Gerstein, Detterich, & Gridley, 2003), we hypothesize that women will communicate most frequently about relationship issues via face-to-face communication, while men will be more likely to use social media or text messaging to discuss their romantic trials with their partners and close friends.

H2) In light of the findings of Sinclair, Felmlee, Sprecher, and Wright (2015) we anticipate that friend's approval will be significantly and positively associated with both RW with partners and friends among emerging adults.

H3) Based on the various findings of Gottman and Levenson (2000 & 2002) that suggest skin conductance, measured by GSR, is a physiological indicator of stress, we hypothesize that, on average, there will be higher levels of skin conductance for men than women, and there will be higher levels of skin conductance when partners are discussing their romantic problems with each other compared to discussions with their friends.

H4) Gottman and Levenson (2000 & 2002) also provided evidence that leads us to predict there will be a significant and negative association between skin conductance and the frequency of RW with partners and friends, with women having lower levels of GSR than men. This suggests that the more often both male and female partners engage in RW, the lower their GSR levels will be.

Conclusion

The subsequent chapters present an extensive review of the literature on emerging adults and their romantic communication/conflict resolution, emerging adult couples and their social networks, the theoretical foundation that guided the study and the research questions, the overarching concept of RW, and RW in the context of psychophysiology. The remaining chapters include the methodology (Chapter 3), a publishable manuscript (Chapter 4) of the current RW study. Lastly, a discussion of the results, future implications, limitations, and recommendations for further research is provided (Chapter 5). The final chapter also discusses how these findings can specifically be helpful in a clinical setting for therapists working with emerging adult couples.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Emerging Adults and Their Romantic Communication/Conflict Resolution

Common couple problems. Nearly all couples experience conflict or communication challenges of some type as their relationship unfolds (Deutsch, 1994). Olarte (2012) recently examined common couple problems among 127 young adult couples. He found that poor communication (43%), closeness/independence (30.4%), responsibility and control issues (22.2%), trust/jealousy (14.8%), and sex (14.8%) were the top five issues reported by couples. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the variety of relationship problems that occur, Boisvert, Wright, Tremblay, and McDuff (2011) collected reports of common relational problems from couples receiving therapy. They examined the relationship between the type of problems reported by men versus women and the variation in the type of problems reported by couples with different therapeutic mandates. Using a coding system developed by Hsueh, Morrison, and Doss (2009), Boisvert et al., coded responses from the participants into 65 specific problem codes, and into 16 broad relationship problem codes. Some of the more prominent codes included general communication, trust/jealousy, and problems with a previous relationship.

The findings of Boisvert et al. (2011) demonstrated that, of the many relationship problems, those most frequently discussed within romantic relationships were general communication (e.g., "problematic communication in our relationship"), emotional affection or distance (e.g., "lack of intimacy and understanding"), and relationships with the social network (e.g., "tense relationship with the in-law"). Additionally, they found that when comparing men and women, women reported more problems overall in their relationship (Boisvert et al., 2011). Overall, these findings provide useful information for researchers and clinicians attempting to gain a greater understanding of overall couple functioning.

Conflict resolution styles. Conflict within a friendship and/or a romantic relationship is unavoidable (Dinçyürek, Kiralp, & Beidoglu, 2013). Just as relational distress can look different for each couple, the manner in which partners resolve that distress can also be unique to each relationship. Certain characteristics of conflict, such as duration, content, intensity and the number of people involved, influence conflict resolution strategies used by those involved (Deutsch, 1994). To build on the work of Deutsch, Dinçyürek and colleagues (2013) wanted to determine the main conflict issues that college students experience with their friends and romantic partners, as well as how students' conflict resolution strategies vary. In the study, young adult partners were asked to keep a diary for two weeks, prepared by the researchers, in which they provided a detailed account of conflicts they had with friends and romantic partners and how they managed the conflicts that were later analyzed and coded. The different types of conflict resolution strategies were separated into two categories, constructive (compromising and collaborating) and destructive (Deutsch, 1994). Destructive strategies are characterized by a lack of awareness of similarities in beliefs and attitudes, poor communication, the use of coercive tactics, decreased trust, and increased hostility between those involved (forcing and avoiding; Tezer, 2001). Results indicated that majority of the conflicts revolved around jealousy. Furthermore, of the resolution strategies, destructive strategies were used in 86.14% of conflicts with romantic partners and in 89.27% of conflicts with friends (Dinçyürek et al. 2013).

Dinçyürek et al. (2013) determined that although the type of relationship will have an impact on the conflict resolution strategy chosen, this is not the only influencing factor. Several studies have shown that attachment style will have an impact on how individuals will cope with interpersonal problems in their relationships (Creasy, Kershaw, & Boston, 1999; Sanderson & Karetsky, 2002; Jin & Peña, 2010). Securely attached individuals tend to engage in more

constructive strategies (e.g., perspective taking, empathic listening), whereas anxious/ambivalent or avoidant individuals are more likely to exhibit destructive, specifically avoiding, conflict resolution strategies (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Sanderson & Karetsky, 2002).

Conflict resolution and gender. In addition to attachment style, another factor that plays into preference for conflict resolution strategy is gender. Ome (2013) investigated gender differences across five approaches to conflict resolution – threat to the other party, accepting the situation, negotiating with the other party, seeking the assistance of a third party, and seeking the assistance of an arbitrator. He found that males and females significantly differed in their preference for negotiation, mediation, and arbitration in interpersonal conflict situations, with males showing higher preference for each of the three styles. However, men and women did not significantly differ in their preference for threat and acceptance (Ome, 2013). These findings align with those proposed by Brahnam, Margavio, Hignite, Barrier, and Chin (2005) that demonstrated when compared to males, females are more likely to utilize a collaborative conflict resolution style, and men and more likely to avoid conflict.

Furthermore, Keener, Strough, and DiDonato (2012), examined the extent to which gender differences in conflict management strategies depended on the relationship context of a same gender friendship versus a romantic relationship. The conflict resolution styles in this study were classified as either "communal" or "agentic" strategies. Communal Strategies correspond to focusing on meeting others' needs, whereas agentic strategies focus on meeting the needs of the self (Keener et al., 2012). The researchers' findings suggested that depending on the social context – whether the conflict was with a same-gender friend or romantic partner, there was in fact an association between gender and strategy endorsement for emerging adults between 19 and 25 years. They found that men were more likely to endorse communal strategies and less

likely to endorse agentic strategies when conflicts involved romantic relationships. Conversely, women were likely to endorse agentic strategies when the conflict involved a same-gender friend, and were more likely than men to endorse agentic strategies for managing conflicts with a romantic partner. The researchers postulated that this might be attributed to women's relationships being more egalitarian, and with more attention being paid to self-disclosures, attentiveness, responsiveness, and support (Keener et al, 2012; Buhrmester, 1998).

Regardless of how the conflict resolution styles are classified (constructive vs. destructive, communal vs. agentic, threatening, accepting, negotiating, etc.) there appears to be strong support for the notion that there are gender differences in how men and women manage their conflict in varying relationships. Men are more likely to avoid conflict or use more aggressive tactics to resolve their relational issues, while women are more prone to negotiation, compromise, and collaboration when engaged in conflict in relationships.

In addition to the previous studies, Gottman's (1993) landmark study classified five groups of marital relationships based on their conflict resolution styles, and how these varying resolution styles affect the stability of a marriage. Gottman identified three groups of stable couples: validators, volatiles, and avoiders, who are distinguished from each other based on problem-solving behavior, specific affects, and persuasion attempts. The other two groups, hostile and hostile-detached were identified as unstable couples, which could be distinguished from each other based on problem-solving behavior and on specific negative and positive affective behaviors. Validators are characterized by partners who may have differing opinions or points of view on a given topic, but can validate, or authenticate, each other's perspectives. Volatiles are passionate about their disagreements (often aggressively opposing one another's position), but also passionate about resolving the conflict, which is why this is considered a

stable resolution style. Avoiders are distinguished by their "agree to disagree" mentality and are typically less likely to engage in minute disagreements.

Gottman (1993) maintained that although these three groups differ substantially in their conflict resolution tactics, all three groups represent diverse approaches that often lead to successful conflict resolution. Conversely, the unstable couples, hostiles and hostiles-detached, are similar to one another in the fact that they tend to engage in Gottman's "Four Horseman of the Apocalypse" (Gottman & Levenson, 2000). However, hostiles often engage in criticism and contempt (i.e., verbal attacks through sarcasm or mocking tones), whereas hostiles-detached engage in more stonewalling (i.e., distancing or ignoring behaviors) and are far less engaged with their partners. Gottman concluded that any couple can successfully navigate conflict, however hostile/detached couples are less stable in large part due to their resolution style. These findings are quite relevant for the current study given that the type of conflict resolution style may affect the frequency with which couples discuss romantic problems with their partners and others. Moreover, there may be a variation in the physiological responses while engaged in these discussions for participants with different resolution styles.

Communicating about romantic relationships via technology. As technology continues to advance, its impact on couples and the way they communicate grows as well. Communication technology is changing the way people interact with one another, especially within romantic relationships (Morey, Gentzler, Creasy, Oberhauser, & Westerman, 2013). For example, the notion of making one's "relationship status" public knowledge via the internet was largely unheard of until the advent of Facebook (around 2006) when sharing this information became more popular. Not only has communication technology changed how people announce a relationship, but also day-to-day communication patterns have been altered. Ruppel (2015)

conducted a study examining relationship development and how communication technology relates to self-disclosures. He found that although people prefer face-to-face communication for self-disclosures in their relationships, over half of such conversations occur via communication technology (i.e. text messaging, email, etc.).

Furthermore, Jin and Peña (2010) conducted a study examining how use of communication technology, specifically via mobile phones, is linked with measures of romantic functioning. These researchers were interested in whether or not mobile communication between romantic partners was associated with relational characteristics including relational uncertainty, love and commitment, and attachment style. Relational uncertainty was operationalized as "the degree of confidence people have in their perceptions of involvement within interpersonal relationships" (Knobloch & Solomon, p. 245, 2002). When examining a sample of 197 young adults in college, results revealed that there was a positive association between greater amounts of mobile phone communication by talking on the phone and less relational uncertainty (Jin & Peña, 2010). Therefore, the more frequently or the longer the participants placed voice calls via mobile phones with their partner, the less relational uncertainty they felt. The same positive association was found for love and commitment and communication technology use, revealing that greater love and commitment was reported when there was in an increase in communication via voice call. However, there was no significant association between text messaging, love and commitment, and relational uncertainty. Researchers noted that this was a surprising finding because text messaging is one of the dominant forms of communication for college students (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, 2008; Jin & Peña, 2010). These findings were consistent with a previous study that considered the impact of using the internet to communicate in romantic relationships (Pauley & Emmers-Sommer, 2007). Individuals who

utilized communication technology to maintain their romantic relationships reported lower levels of relational uncertainty, and greater expectation for future interactions with their partners.

When looking at the attachment style in relation to mobile communication, researchers found that participants with more avoidant attachment styles (i.e., feeling more uncomfortable with closeness, trust, and dependency) reported fewer amounts of voice calls within their romantic relationships than those with less avoidance (Jin & Peña, 2010; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Taken together, these findings suggest that it may be beneficial for a relationship to have frequent communication via cell phone voice calls, whereas communicating via text message throughout the day may not have a positive or negative impact on the relationship.

Further examining the link between technology and romantic communication, Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, and Grant (2011) investigated which methods of technology (e.g. text messaging, social media, etc.) are used most frequently by romantic partners. By analyzing data from 1039 participants of varying demographic backgrounds, Coyne and colleagues found that most romantic relationships use cell phones, email, social networking sites, and instant messaging to communicate but there is a variation in frequency. Researchers assessed how often participants used each type of media [call using a cell phone, text messaging, email, instant messenger (IM), social media sites, blog, and web cam] to connect with their partner. Individuals were more likely to use cell phone conversations to communicate with their partners than any other form of media. Text messaging was the second most prevalent means of communication, followed by email, social networking sites, IM, blogs, and webcams (Coyne et al., 2011). This study also examined some of the demographic differences and found that 17-25 year olds were more likely to use text messaging to communicate than any other age group. In a similar study, researchers found that text messaging, as opposed to voice calls, was the most frequent mode of

communication among college student couples when discussing their relationship goals (Bergdall, Kraft, Andes, Carter, Hatfield-Timajchy, & Hock-Long, 2012).

The findings from these studies are helpful in understanding the most frequent modes of communication for romantic relationships. However, it should be taken into consideration that many of these results are from studies that were conducted at least five years ago. Over the last few years, social media as a method of communication has increased substantially. Media outlets including but not limited to Snapchat, Tinder, Vine, and Instagram may significantly alter the results of these studies if they were to be replicated today. Weigel (2015) noted that Tinder, which has often been identified as a social media app for "hooking up" can and has been used to also help initiate long-term relationships. Finkel (2015) suggested that one of the many reasons Tinder has been successful is because of its superficial nature. Before meeting someone in person, the anxiety associated with whether or not they find one another attractive is eliminated due to the online site or dating app interaction (Finkel, 2015; Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012). The present study will extend this research by not only looking at the most frequent mode of communication for emerging adults, but specifically what modes of communication they are using to *discuss romantic problems* with partners and close friends.

Emerging Adult Couples and Their Social Networks

Romantic couples do not exist in isolation from the outside world (Felmlee, 2001). The novelty of a romantic relationship requires getting to know each other in the context of one another's environments. The process of partners coming together and forming an identity as a couple includes combining social networks, developing communication patterns, and exchanging honest self-disclosures with one another. During emerging adulthood (ages 18-25) dating becomes a more intimate process than at earlier stages. Emerging adults become less concerned

with the recreational aspect of dating and more interested in exploring the potential for emotional and physical intimacy that one can get from a romantic relationship (Arnett, 2000). It is also during this time of emerging adulthood that romantic relationships last longer and are more likely to include cohabitation and sexual intimacy (Arnett, 2000; Micheal, Gagnon, Laumann, & Kolata, 1995). As opposed to adolescent dating, which primarily focuses upon the present and maximizing recreation, emerging adults begin to consider whether a partner may become a potential life partner (Padgham & Blyth, 1991). It is during this stage that emerging adults also establish rules about romantic intimacy, including problem solving and self-disclosure (Arnett, 2000).

Evolution of social networks and communication for emerging adult couples. Similar to the ever-evolving technological advances that drive social media, the manner in which individuals/couples develop and communicate with their social networks continues to change over time. A social network may be defined in several ways, but has historically been commonly referred to as "a network of individuals (such as friends, acquaintances, and coworkers) connected by interpersonal relationships" (Merriam-Webster, 2016). However, with the increase in communication technology and social media sites, "social network" has developed an alternative definition: "an online service or site through which people create and maintain interpersonal relationships" (Merriam-Webster, 2016). These definitions provide insight to support the idea that what a social network is, and how social networks impact romantic relationships has and will continue to vary over time.

Previous generations of romantic partners would develop relationships, romantic or not, based primarily on their location (Donn & Sherman, 2002). Those with whom they interacted most tended to become a part of their social network (Merkle & Richardson, 2000). With the

increase in communication technology online, location is no longer a deciding factor in relationships. Today, one may interact with a potential romantic partner located thousands of miles away via the internet and consider that individual to be a part of their social network. Donn and Sherman (2002) posited that graduate students expressed more positive views of using the internet to form relationships, and they are more likely to follow through on meeting people in person and with people whom they met via the internet. Researchers speculated that this population of young adults is already more accustomed to using the internet for nontraditional purposes (i.e., dating). Furthermore, because emerging adults are in the life stage of seeking a lifelong partner they may have greater empathy for the desire to meet people, but have difficulty in doing so by traditional means. One study determined that because communication via the internet is less anxiety provoking and reduces the fear of rejection, couples are more likely to share honest self-disclosures about aspects of themselves with their partner (Merkle, 1999). While some researchers will claim that technology has positively impacted romantic relationships and courtship, others dispute that such advances have negatively altered the connection that occurs with a face-to-face interaction (Neustaedter, Harrison, & Sellen, 2013).

Neustaedter et al. (2013) contended that new technologies are not necessarily replacing established means of connection among individuals, couples, and families. Instead the advancing technology adds to the variety of communicative possibilities and existing technologies often retain their relevance, sometimes evolving in response to these new advances (i.e., a phone call or personal note/letter may be more meaningful now than in previous times).

When analyzing how technological advances affect emerging adult couples, it is important to consider that the majority of these individuals today have not had a relationship in which they could not communicate via text messaging or social media. Emerging adults today

have largely learned to formulate romantic relationships in the context of cell phone use and social networking. One study found that on average college students engage in at least 30 minutes a day networking on Facebook with friends as a part of their normal routine (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert 2009). Another article stated that those in *Generation Y,* or those between the ages of 18 and 34 years are more likely than older age groups to prefer social media for interactions with acquaintances, friends and family (Bolton, Parasuraman, Hoefnagels, Migchels, Kabadayi, Gruber, & Solnet, 2013). They are also more likely to value the opinions of others in their social media networks. The ease associated with such communication can have both negative and positive repercussions that can influence an individual's or couple's relationship with their partner or their network.

A negative repercussion of the increase in social networking abilities for emerging adult couples is that each partner must balance his or her desires to stay connected with privacy issues of revealing or sharing too much information, or being "too connected" (Birnholtz et al., 2010; Judge et al., 2010; Neustaedter et al., 2013). Many have unlimited text messaging or data plans, which enable almost constant communication with a partner, if desired. Due to these technological advances, some couples, especially ones who are still experiencing the novelty of a relationship, will communicate throughout the course of the day. Nacoste (2015) claimed that such continual communication may be problematic given that couples who communicate so frequently may not have an opportunity to experience appropriate distance from one another. Nacoste argued that the constant communication many emerging adult couples engage in may result in distress for the relationship as these couples may be "too connected." Regardless of whether being continually connected with a partner brings about positive or negative romantic consequences, these technological shifts have certainly altered dating and romantic life. Social

scientists should continue examining the intersection of technology and relationships so as to obtain a more comprehensive picture of emerging adult relationships.

This literature is relevant to the current study as it educates researchers on the impact of technology on romantic partners' communication with one another and their social networks. A more complete understanding of how partners connect and share problems will aid researchers and clinicians alike as they strive to enhance romantic communication across this critical development period. Additionally, this information may help increase our understanding of why it is that emerging adults in romantic relationships communicate about their romantic problems through a variety of outlets with each other and their close friends. Moreover, this information will help provide insights into whether or not the frequency of relationship work with partners and friends is associated with readily accessible modes of communication (e.g., texting). This may be especially relevant given that the current sample of couples and their close friends were drawn from those who have lived during a time in which multiple methods of communication have existed for most, if not all, of their relationship.

Social network approval. All romantic relationships are influenced by outside parties, including family, friends, coworkers, or neighbors (Huston, 2000). The impact these outside parties may have on romantic relationship functioning is referred to as the social network effect (Felmlee, 2001). The social network effect specifically refers to how network approval for one's relationship boosts positive relationship outcomes and how social disapproval can be associated with relationship termination (Sinclair et al., 2015; Felmlee, 2001). Sinclair and colleagues (2015) aimed to further investigate how positive and negative social network reactions affect a partner's choices in the relationship and the development of love and commitment. They also sought to understand how responses to social influence attempts are altered by psychological

reactance (i.e., a negative emotional state that develops when a person believes his or her freedom is being restricted; Sinclair et al., 2015; Brehm, 1996). This reactance may arise in situations where an individual feels he or she is being controlled or negatively perceived by friends or family members. By analyzing data from 858 students at a large southeastern university, Sinclair and colleagues determined that individuals who experience more support from their social networks express higher levels of love and commitment for their partner. Interestingly, when presented with a hypothetical relationship, participants reported that in the event their friends or family disapproved of their partner, they would disregard those opinions and uphold their own assessment of the relationship. This may highlight an important difference between partners' perceptions of social influence and the actual impact they may have on one's romantic union. In sum, findings from the study suggested that social network approval of one's romantic partner was linked with more positive romantic functioning and that the social network importantly impacts couple functioning (Sinclair et al., 2015).

The findings of the Sinclair et al. (2015) study are consistent with research from Sprecher and Felmlee (2000) in which researchers investigated how partners' perceptions of social network attributes change with the passage of time and relationship transitions. Their results indicated that perception of social network approval, especially for the male partner's friends tended to increase over time for relationships that remained intact throughout the longitudinal study. Moreover, when it came to the transition phases of engagement and marriage, there was a significant association between more social approval from male partners' friends than from female partners' friends (though both males' and females' friends' approval importantly impacted couples; Sprecher & Felmlee, 2000). The findings regarding influence also align with the conclusions of Neyer and Voigt (2004) who stated that how an individual experiences his or

her partner relationship is influenced more by his or her social network than that of the partner. These findings are relevant to the current study given that social network approval may be significantly linked with a partner's willingness to disclose romantic challenges to friends.

Theoretical Foundation

Romantic relationships do not unfold in isolation, and couples are therefore impacted by a multitude of external factors that contribute to the experience, functionality, and outcome of the relationship (Felmlee, 2001). Milardo (1982) proposed that social networks are particularly impactful in newly developing romantic relationships, claiming that any romantic union both influences and is influenced by the social context in which it grows. These social networks can include anyone with whom the couple has an interpersonal relationship and these persons may act as critical sources of influence, providing feedback that shapes couple dynamics (i.e., friends parents, social media associates; Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004). As a result, Huston (2000) proposed a socioecological model titled the Three-level Model for Viewing Marriage, which asserted that those aiming to fully capture romantic functioning couldn't overlook social influences, as they could contribute both indirectly and directly to romantic relationships.

Within his theoretical model, Huston identified three levels of analysis that suggest social networks are critical in the comprehension of intimate, romantic relationships. He characterized these three levels as: "(a) the society, characterized in terms of both macrosocietal forces and the ecological niches within which particular spouses and couples function; (b) the individual partners, including their psychosocial and physical attributes, as well as the attitudes and beliefs they have about each other and their relationship; and (c) the romantic relationship, viewed as a behavioral system embedded within a larger network of close relationships" (Huston, 2000, p.).

For the purpose of this thesis, these three levels will be referred to as the macroenviornment, individual characteristics, and relationship behavior in context, respectively.

Huston developed this socioecological model (see Figure 1) to challenge researchers to build their programs around a greater appreciation for several fundamental ideas, including that marital unions are embedded in a social context. The relationship behavior in context aspect of the model demonstrates that activities and interactions in the relationship often take place in the presence of social networks. However, he pointed out that the absence of the social network could also have an important impact on the dynamics of the relationship. He asserted that the relational dyad and the interactions that they have are embedded within the larger context of the social network, thus it is virtually impossible for the dyadic relationship to not be affected by the social network, whether that be directly or indirectly. Thus, this model offers a helpful framework for the current study given that it shows that researchers must account for the influences of social networks when studying romantic relationships. Not only will the current study offer greater clarity regarding the overlap of romantic and social relationships, but it will also consider how such interactions impact physiological functioning of romantic partners while engaging in discussions about romantic challenges. Lastly, it is important to note that while Huston's theory was developed for marriages, we are able to extend the model to all romantic relationships, specifically dating couples, due to the fact that previous studies (i.e. Jensen and Rauer 2014 and 2015) have already made use of this theory with non-marital couples.

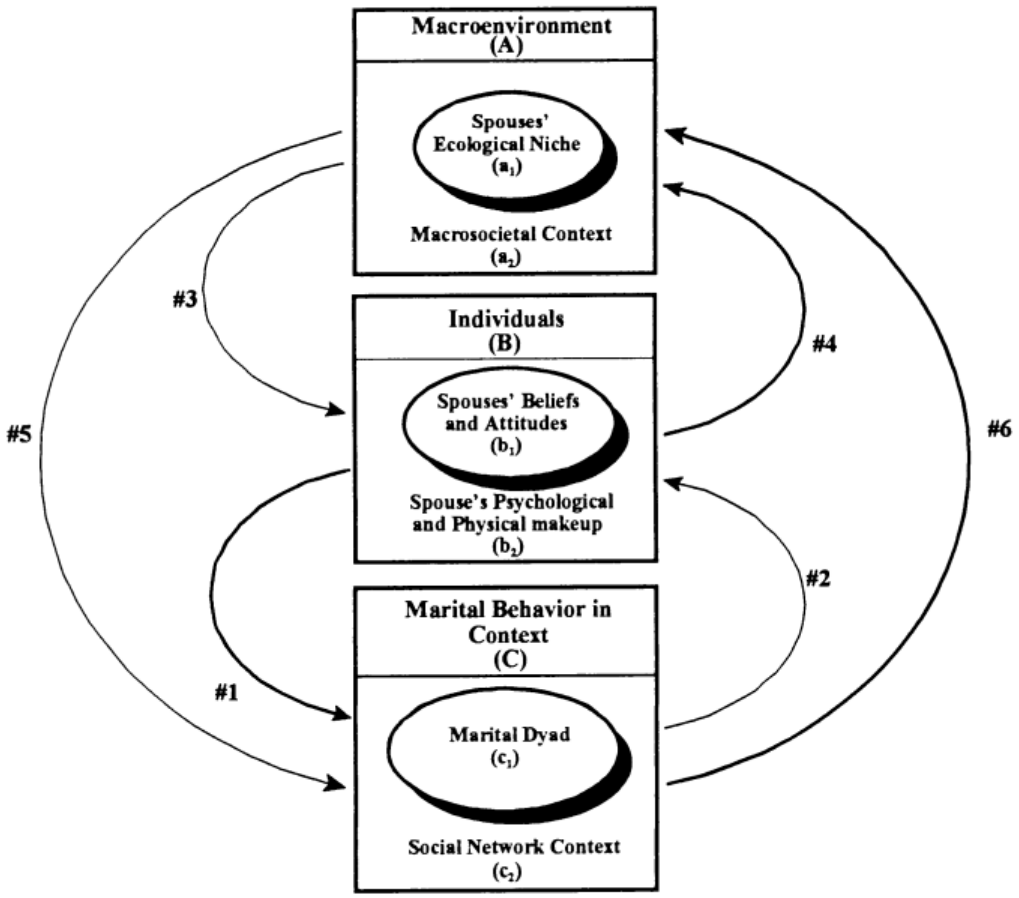

Figure 1. *Huston's* (2000) Three-level Model for Viewing Marriage

Bowen family systems and triangulation. Bowen Family Systems Theory has termed this interaction between romantic partners and friends as *triangulation*. Triangulation is a three-person relationship that can stabilize a two-person system that is experiencing anxiety or relational distress. When tension between two people develops, bringing in a third person can relieve this anxiety or distress between the dyad (Bowen, 1978; Haefner, 2014). A triangle can contain much more tension without involving another person because the tension can shift around three relationships instead of the single relationship between the romantic partners (Bowen, 1976, 1993). Dallos and Vetere (2012) noted that triangulation contains the idea that what is happening in a significant relationship between two people can have a powerful influence

on a third person. This idea reinforces Huston's (2000) theory that the relational dyads, and the social network, together, have a bi-directional relationship.

Furthermore, the process of triangulation can cause the relationship to stabilize, or lead to less stable and shifting alliances within the triangle (Dallos & Vetere, 2012; Weakland, 1976; Minuchin, 1974). Researchers have determined that while triangulation and thirds person in order to decrease anxiety and distress within the dyad, distress can be increased in the person who is triangulated. In the context of the current study, this would be the close friend that the dyad discloses their romantic problems to (Benson, Larson, Wilson, & Demo, 1993). Bowen (1978) often discussed triangulation in the context of the family, especially with children. The present study will extend this literature to examine triangulation, specifically, with close friends as romantic problems are brought up and discussed. Additionally, this information is relevant to the current study because it will help increase the understanding of how and why social network approval is associated with RW with partners and friends among emerging adults when controlling for the length of relationship and the length of friendship.

Relationship Work: Discussing Romantic Problems with Partners and Friends

Most couples experience romantic problems and tend to discuss these challenges both with one another and with members of their social network (Helms et al., 2003). Discussing one's romantic trials with others has come to be referred to as "relationship work" (RW; Jensen & Rauer, 2014). This construct was established upon the important work of others who examined the links between romantic and social functioning. Oliker (1989) originally coined the term "marriage work," a process of actively involving friends in a romantic relationship. Oliker derived marriage work from Arlie Hochschild's (1979) concept of emotion work, or emotion management, which refers to "the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or

feeling" (Oliker, p. 124, 1989). An example of this might include being saddened or angered by something that one feels is not justified. Hochschild's (1979) findings indicated that women who turned to a friend about disagreements with their husbands often had more positive attitudes or feelings about the disagreement. Thus, the groundwork laid in the study of emotion management and marriage work have paved the way to examine the processes involved in engaging in RW with partners and friends, and the consequences of doing so. Much of the existing research involving RW is centered around how it affects the romantic relationship and the friendship, including which problems are discussed most frequently, and how variations in relationship work can change across different life stages (Jensen & Rauer, 2015; Proulx, Helms, & Payne, 2004).

Relationship work differs from overall romantic communication in that it specifically refers to discussions about romantic *problems*. Empirical work suggests that it is common to share romantic problems with friends and positive or negative reactions from those closest to an individual are associated with the quality of the romantic relationship (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992). Therefore, whether or not friends approve of romantic partners may be importantly linked with the way individuals communicate about their partners with friends. Helms et al. (2003) used the term "marriage work" to represent husbands' and wives' routine disclosures with their closest friends about their marriage. They sought to examine links between friendship and marriage by examining the associations between spouses' perceptions of marital quality and husbands' and wives' reliance on marriage work with one another and their close friends. Researchers noted that communication with friends may importantly influence romantic dynamics between spouses and may have implications for the marriage (Helms et al., 2003). Helms et al. (2003) found that wives were likely to engage in more frequent marriage work with their friends than with their husbands. In addition, husbands engaged in less marriage work,

overall, than wives and spoke more to wives than they did to close friends about their marital problems. Their findings supported past research that found husbands seek emotional support from wives, whereas wives look to husbands and friends as confidants (Rubin, 1985).

Researchers attributed this difference in the frequency of marriage work as possibly being due to differing experiences for husbands' and wives' as they discuss romantic challenges. Previous literature suggests that women's friendships tend to emphasize *face-to-face* interactions and disclosures, meaning they are mutually oriented towards a personalized knowledge of and concern for one another. Conversely, men's friendships are characterized by *side by side* experiences, where the men are oriented to an external task or activity, this may account for differences in frequencies (Wright, 1982; Helms et al., 2003). An example of a *side by side* interaction would be men watching or playing sports to connect with one another, as opposed to having dinner in order to get to know one another. Other results have differed from Helms (2003) and her fellow researchers on the gender differences associated with relationship work. For example, Jensen and Rauer (2014) found that young adult males and females did not differ in overall RW done, or in RW with partner or friend. Overall, previous literature has suggested that gender differences may exist with regard to the way couples communicate with others about their desire for change in their relationship (Heyman, Hunt-Martoran, Malik, & Slep, 2009).

In addition to these findings, Helms (2003) and colleagues found that marriage work with spouse moderated the links between marriage work with one's close friend and marital quality for wives only. Thus, at low levels of marriage work with spouses, marriage work with friends was negatively linked with marital love and positively linked with ineffective arguing. Conversely, at high levels of marriage work with husbands, no significant association was found between marriage work with friends and marital quality for wives. In other words, engaging in

frequent marriage work with friends appeared detrimental if these discussions replaced such conversations between spouses. The authors reported that these results might have varied if they had used observational data on marital quality, as opposed to self-report (Helms et al., 2003).

Building upon the findings of Helms (2003) and her colleagues, Proulx et al. (2004) wanted to expand the research and investigate the friendship experiences of wives' marriage work with friends and spouses across 10 interactional domains (marital communication, husbands' support for wives' work roles, childrearing philosophies, husbands' support for wives' parenting, family decision making, social life and leisure, division of housework, division of child care, parent or in-law contact, and finances). The researchers had two goals for this study: assess and compare the extent to which women engaged in marriage work with friends versus their spouses in the domains, and to analyze the relationship between wives' perceptions of marital quality and their dependence on their spouses and close friends as sources of marriage work across the same 10 domains (Proulx et al., 2004).

The findings of the study revealed that for majority of the 10 domains, there were no significant differences for wives with regard to the frequency with which they turned to spouses versus friends. However, wives were more likely to engage in marriage work with their husbands than with their close friends concerning family finances. Conversely, when discussing their relationship with in-laws, wives more likely to speak with close friends. In reference to the researchers' second goal, they found no significant results for the relationships between nine of the domains and marital quality. The one domain that was found to have a significant interaction effect was spouses' support for wives' parenting. The more women engaged in marriage work with their spouse, the greater their marital satisfaction was when discussing spouses' support for wives' parenting (Proulx et al., 2004).

Proulx and colleagues (2004) determined that these findings are important because contrary to previous research, specifically Helms et al. (2003) and Oliker (1989), there are several topics that wives may discuss equally with both spouses and with close friends. The research conducted by Proulx et al. (2004) is critical not only because of the insight it provides into the variation, or lack thereof, in frequency of marriage work with spouses and friends, but also because of the information about topics spouses choose to disclose. This work provides helpful understanding regarding how discussing romantic problems with spouses and friends may impact marital satisfaction.

Using the work of Helms and colleagues (2003) and Proulx et al. (2004) as a foundation for understanding marriage work among married couples, Jensen and Rauer (2014) sought to extend existing knowledge of including friends in discussions of romantic problems by examining these same patterns earlier in the lifespan. . The researchers found that both sexes engaged in more RW with their partners than with friends, a finding that was somewhat contrary to the work of Helms et al. (2003) and Proulx et al. (2004). The discrepancies in these studies might be due to the life stage of the samples examined. Jensen and Rauer studied young adult couples in romantic relationships; whereas the other studies looked exclusively at couples that were middle-aged and married. As individuals age, both their romantic and social priorities shift, which may impact communication with others about romantic challenges across the lifespan.

Given the previously discussed significant findings for wives and young adults, Jensen and Rauer (2015) sought to extend further the literature on females' RW patterns and explore young adult females' relationship work, and its links to romantic functioning and stability over time. They reported that because young adult romantic relationships are dynamic, it is important to assess the frequency and impact of RW with partners and friends at more than one point in

time. They determined this would provide a greater view of the potential romantic consequences of these disclosures, and thus decided to analyze RW with partners and best friends among young adult females at two time points, one year apart. They aimed to capture change in frequency of RW with partners and friends over time, examine links between RW and romantic stability, and describe how RW with partners and friends predicts change in romantic love and conflict over time, and vice versa.

Jensen and Rauer (2015) found that young adult females engaged in RW more frequently with their partners at T2 than at T1, although their participants did not increase their frequency of RW with friends over time. Also, they discovered that RW with a friend at T1 significantly predicted RW with friend at T2, and surprisingly, young women's RW patterns did not predict change in love or conflict over time. Interestingly, they found important links suggesting that RW with partners may be linked with greater romantic stability, and RW with friends may be linked with greater likelihood of romantic break up. In other words, they found some support for the idea that frequently speaking about one's romantic problems with a partner was linked with greater likelihood of the couple staying together. Conversely, they contended that their findings offered some support for the notion that discussing romantic problems with friends was associated with increased likelihood of breaking up with one's partner. Finally, early RW patterns did not predict change in love or conflict, but RW with partner was concurrently linked with love at both time points.

Despite previous researchers collecting helpful data for understanding links between RW with the social network and romantic functioning, we still know very little about the interpersonal dynamics that occur as partners discuss romantic trials with both each other and with friends. Social scientists would benefit from gaining a more comprehensive understanding

of how each partner is affected when talking about these issues. For example, given that discussing romantic problems can be stressful (Sillars, Coletti, Parry, & Rogers, 1982), researchers may benefit from understanding individual stress response during such disclosures. Understanding the individual stress is important for researchers who are interested in romantic and social dynamics because this will give more guidance on how to reduce stress or anxiety provoking situations when it comes to romantic relationships. This will be especially important for those clinicians who specialize in couple's therapy and are attempting to develop new, and more effective interventions.

Romantic Relationships and Physiology

Limited research has been conducted analyzing emerging adult partners' physiological responses when problem solving with a spouse or partner. Gottman and his colleagues conducted several studies about couple communication and the physiological responses that occur in the midst of couple communication or distress (Levenson & Gottman, 1983; Levenson & Gottman, 1985; Levenson et al., 1994). Levenson and Gottman (1983) studied 30 married couples, to better understand the extent to which variation in marital satisfaction could be accounted for by the physiological response affective pattern behaviors between spouses. Researchers were able to derive a physiological linkage for variations of marital satisfaction for romantic couples using heart rate, skin conductance, pulse transmission time, and somatic activity from husbands and wives as outcome variables. Researchers were able to account for 60% of the variance in marital satisfaction in their sample on the basis of physiological linkage during the discussion of a problem area in the marriage. Thus, they concluded that this physiological linkage was not only significant in predicting marital satisfaction outcomes, but also reflected the fluctuation of negative affect, the escalation and de-escalation of conflict, "and the sense of being 'locked into'

the interaction and unable to 'step back' that can occur when spouses in dissatisfied marriages attempt to solve problems and when this kind of patterned conflict occurs in other dyadic interactions" (Levenson & Gottman, 1983, p. 596).

Building on their previous research, Levenson & Gottman (1985) used the data collected in 1980 for the 1983 publication, and conducted a follow-up study in which they looked at changes in marital satisfaction over time with 19 of the 30 married couples from the original study. After three years, marital satisfaction declined significantly. In 1980, the 19 couples averaged 117.1 on the satisfaction measure, and in 1983 they averaged 108.9. Researchers found that all of the physiological variables they used demonstrated significant correlations with changing levels of marital satisfaction including, heart rate, measured by the interbeat interval, pulse transmission time to the finger, GSR level, and general somatic activity, a global measure of bodily movement.

Expanding on the findings stated above, Levenson et al. (1994) explored the influence of gender on affect and physiology for couples in long-term marriages. Authors hypothesized that there would be less physiological activation during marital interaction in older couples than in middle-aged couples, and there would be significant positive correlations between negative affect and physiological arousal for men, and not for women. Researchers found overall support for their hypothesis that indicated marital interaction was less cardiovascularly arousing (in interbeat interval and in pulse transmission time) for old couples than it was for middle-aged couples. Researchers suggested that this might be due to the fact that older couples may experience a certain level of familiarity or normality when discussing certain perpetual issues. Therefore, given that they are accustomed to such talks, physiological arousal may be lower.

Levenson and colleagues (1994) additionally found that negative affect was associated with high levels of physiological arousal for men and was uncorrelated for women. For the husbands, negative affect was associated with increased heart rate and somatic activity, greater skin conductance levels, and warmer finger temperature when compared to the wives. Researchers emphasized that these gender differences in physiological responses may be due to the fact that males more often withdrawal from confrontation, which allows them to reduce physiological levels whenever they experience sustained, heightened negative affect or perceive that they are physiologically hyperaroused. Hence, when they do have these discussions they are more likely to be physiologically aroused than their wives (Levenson et al., 1994). This information is pertinent because the physiological responses that occur during the process of RW may reveal important information regarding stress levels when discussing certain topics with partners and friends, including gender differences. The current study will expand on these findings by looking at this pattern for *emerging adult* couples and their friends, as opposed to long-term marriages. Thus, this study will address a gap in the relationship/psychophysiological literature and enhance social scientists' understanding of these topics.

Galvanic skin response. Galvanic skin response (GSR) is one of the many physiological modalities of stress that researchers may collect. GSR, sometimes referred to as skin conductance, is a term used to describe the electrical changes in skin surface conductivity of the electrical resistance related to sweat gland activity. Additionally, GSR is highly associated with cognition and stimulus response. These changes in electrical activity are directly correlated with perspiration, or sweat. Perspiration is also directly related to an individual's autonomic nervous system, as stress increases so does GSR and as stress decreases (or the individual relaxes) GSR decreases (Russoniello et al., 2013; Levenson et al., 1994). In clinical settings, GSR may be used

to help clients become more aware of their physiology in relation to stress. In this way, biofeedback can provide vital information leading to better physiological control when a stressor is encountered. Importantly, GSR and other indicators of stress should be compared to a baseline reading of physiological functioning. After collecting baseline measures from participants, a stimulus may be introduced (e.g., relationship problem) and physiological reactions recorded. This is helpful for researchers to determine if subjective comments correspond with physiological outcomes (Russoniello, Fish, Maes, Paton & Stryon, 2013).

One particular study, Levenson and Gottman (2002), conducted a 14-year long longitudinal experiment in which they wanted to develop a model for predicting when couples will divorce. Using several physiological variables including GSR, they determined that high skin conductance levels were correlated with high levels of neutral affect and thus is an accurate measure in predicting the dissolution of a marriage. Studies like these support the concept that skin conductance, or GSR, is an accurate indicator of conflict and can be used to compare and discuss relationship patterns and outcomes for romantic couples.

Given the utility of collecting GSR as a measure of psychophysiological distress, its use serves the current study well as it will suggest stress levels when processing romantic challenges with partners or friends. There is a gap in the literature about the physiological outcomes in romantic relationship research and this study will help address and close that gap. Using previous work on relationships and measures of psychophysiological functioning as a foundation for the current study, we will address and examine the intersection of romantic relationships, social influence, and physiological stress as partners speak about their romantic issues.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Sample and Procedures

Data for this study was collected from emerging adults at East Carolina University as part of the larger ongoing Relationship Work in Young Adults Study, which received approval from the Institutional Review Board in May of 2015. Thus the data used for this thesis is a *secondary* data set. Only procedures and measures relevant to the current study will be presented here. A total of 60 emerging adult couples and one friend of each partner (i.e., 300 individuals total) were recruited to participate in the study. Participants were recruited from a host of undergraduate and graduate courses (i.e., Human Development, Biology, English, and Nursing), via classroom visits from research assistants, research flyers, and university email notifications. Both heterosexual and same-sex couples were recruited. Inclusion criteria was as follows: at least one participant in each group of four (two partners and two friends) must be a student at ECU, all participants must be 18 years or older, all partners needed to indicate that they were in some kind of romantic relationship, and each partner needed to identify and bring a close friend to the research lab.

To participate in the study, participants (i.e., a romantic couple and one of each of their friends–a total of four people) came to an on-campus research facility, where they spent approximately 90-minutes engaging in various tasks aimed to capture personal, romantic, and social functioning. All participants completed online questionnaires via Qualtrics about their personal characteristics (e.g., age, ethnicity, and education level), their romantic relationship (e.g., length of relationship, and relationship quality), and their friendship (e.g., length of friendship, friendship quality).

In addition to the questionnaires, participants were asked to engage in a video-recorded conversation in which they discussed—first with their partner, and then with their friend—a romantic problem that they were currently experiencing or have experienced in the past. The same romantic challenge was discussed with the partner and the friend. Prior to the video conversation, partners each received a list of common romantic relationship problems (e.g., needing to be more organized, wanting to make love more often) and were asked to independently rate what they felt were the most significant problems in their relationship on a 6-point Likert scale from zero (*not an issue*) to five (*major problem*). Completion of this form facilitated the choice of topic to discuss, as participants were encouraged to choose one of the topics for which they indicated a higher score. Each partner identified a separate issue that was a concern in the romantic relationship. After one partner discussed his or her issues with the partner and with the friend, the other partner followed the same pattern, with their issue. To account for potential gender dynamics, order of participation was counterbalanced such that for odd numbered participants the female first discussed her problem with her partner and then her friend, and for even numbered participants males went first. For same sex couples, the partner whose last name comes first alphabetically shared. To note, when discussing the issue with a partner the friend left the room, and vice versa.

While conversing about the romantic challenge, various indicators of psychophysiological stress of the partner who is leading the discussion was captured. First, an assessment of respiration as an indicator of physiological stress was captured using an elastic belt that measures breathing patterns. An additional assessment of GSR was captured using sensors that monitored changes in electrical activity that directly corresponds with perspiration of the skin (Russoniello et al., 2013). Romantic partners, but not friends, had psychophysiological data

assessed and monitored. In order to compensate participants for their time and input for the study, romantic partners received a $50 Target gift card each, and each friend received a $35 Target gift card.

Measures

Mode of communication. The frequency with which participants discussed romantic challenges with partners and friends was assessed via questionnaire by asking the following question: "What is your most frequent mode of communication for speaking with your partner (or friend) about romantic relationship problems?" Available responses include "Face-to-face," "Over the phone," "Text messaging," "Social Media" (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snap Chat), and "Other". Each participant was asked to select only one mode of communication.

Relationship work. The degree to which participants engaged in relationship work with their romantic partner and with a close friend was measured using a modified, 5-item Marriage Work Scale (Helms et al., 2003). Some items from the original scale were dropped due to not being applicable to this population's current life style (i.e., items related to childrearing and cohabitation tasks). Retained items were those that seemed most relevant to the current population, such as "How often do you bring up how well you and your partner get along with one another's families and how much and how often you see them?" Respondents were asked to select a number on a 9-point Likert scale, with one representing "Never" and nine representing "Always." Each question separately addressed relationship work in regards to the respondent's partner, friend, mother, and father. Each question separately addressed relationship work in regards to the respondent's partner and friend. The modified version of the scale demonstrated good reliability for both the partner scale (female partners: $\alpha = .72$; male partners $\alpha = .78$) and the friend scale (female partners: $\alpha = .75$; male partners $\alpha = .85$).

Social network approval. To evaluate the degree to which the close friend approved/disapproved of his or her friend's romantic relationship, we used a single-item measure developed by Sprecher and Felmlee (1992) that asked, "To what degree do you approve/disapprove of your friend's romantic relationship?" Respondents were asked to choose an answer on a 7-point Likert scale with one representing "Very much disapprove" and seven representing "Very much approve."

Galvanic skin response. GSR was measured using psychophysiological equipment, NeXus-10 MKII, which includes the use of a GSR sensor with two electrodes attached to the participant's ring and middle fingertips. These physiological sensors are especially sensitive to any change in skin conductance. Using the finger as the location for GSR electrodes is recommended because the fingertip has the greatest amount of pores/conductivity compared to other areas of the body, thus producing a more accurate reading of perspiration level (Lykken & Venables, 1971; Russoniello et al., 2013). A change in skin conductance is signified by changes in the electrical activity, which directly corresponds to perspiration of the skin (Russoniello et al., 2013). A five-minute period in which participants did not engage in conversation or activity was recorded at the start of the observation in order to establish a baseline description of their GSR levels. Increases or decreases in partners' skin perspiration is linked to physiological arousal and reactivity when the couple is engaged with RW with each other or one of their friends. This data was recorded and interpreted.

Data Analysis

In order to answer our first research question (RQ) regarding the mode of communication most frequently used to discuss romantic challenges with partners and friends, we examined descriptive statistics including the frequency of each unique mode of communication for females

and males engaging in RW with partners and friends. We subsequently examined chi-square tests to compare gender differences. Next, to answer RQ2 inquiring about the potential links between friends' approval of the relationship and RW with partners and friends, we examined bivariate correlational associations followed by hierarchical linear regression analyses, controlling for length of relationship and length of friendship. Additionally, to answer RQ3, we conducted paired *t*-tests to determine how skin conductance differs from baseline to the RW with partner task to the RW with friend task and independent samples *t*-tests to examine gender differences. To answer RQ4 to understand whether or not skin conductance was associated with the frequency of RW with partners and friends and to examine gender differences, we observed bivariate correlational associations, followed by standard regression analyses.

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CHAPTER 5: RELATIONSHIP WORK AMONG EMERGING ADULT COUPLES: PHYSIOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL COMPONENTS OF DISCUSSING ROMANTIC CHALLENGES WITH FRIENDS

The formation and maintenance of romantic relationships has been identified as a key developmental process during emerging adulthood (Erikson, 1968). Successful romantic relationships during this time are linked with high levels of well-being and lower rates of physical and emotional distress (Schneiderman, Zagoory-Sharon, Leckman, & Feldman, 2012). Given the positive personal outcomes associated with healthy romantic functioning, researchers have established that how a couple communicates about problems with members of their social networks is an important factor to consider (Huston, 2000). The discussion of one's romantic trials with others in non-marital relationships has come to be referred to as *relationship work* (RW; Jensen & Rauer, 2014). These discussions have the potential to positively or negatively impact the romantic union. The information gained from this study may assist researchers, clinicians, and couples in understanding how discussing romantic problems is linked with physiological distress.

As part of the current study, we capture partners' galvanic skin response (GSR) or peripheral sweat gland activity, as a measure of physiological arousal when discussing romantic challenges with partners and friends. GSR is significantly linked with an individual's autonomic nervous system with more stress manifesting as increased sweat gland activity (Russoniello, Fish, Maes, Paton, & Styron, 2013). Understanding the physiological processes accompanying such interpersonal interactions may be critical as researchers and clinicians work to enhance couple functioning.

Background

Emerging Adults and Their Conflict Resolution

Nearly all couples experience conflict or communication challenges of some type (Deutsch, 1994). Olarte (2012) examined common couple problems and found that poor communication and closeness/independence were especially prominent issues reported by couples. Boisvert, Wright, Tremblay, and McDuff (2011) collected reports of common relational problems from couples receiving therapy to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the variety of relationship problems that occur. Their findings suggested that, of the many relationship problems, those most frequently discussed within romantic relationships were communication and relationships with the social network. Thus, a more nuanced examination of the intersection of couple communication and social interaction is warranted.

Conflict within a friendship and/or a romantic relationship is unavoidable (Dinçyürek, Kiralp, & Beidoglu, 2013). Just as relational distress can look different for each couple, resolution of that distress is also unique to each relationship. Certain characteristics of conflict, such as duration, content, intensity and the number of people involved, influence conflict resolution strategies used by those involved (Deutsch, 1994). Dinçyürek and colleagues (2013) asked couples to provide detailed journal entries about recent romantic conflicts and their attempts to resolve them. Results indicated that destructive strategies (i.e., forcing and avoiding) were used in 86.14% of conflicts with romantic partners and in 89.27% of conflicts with friends. Accordingly, it appears that most couples have significant room for improvement when communicating and problem solving with partners and friends.

Additionally, gender likely plays an important role in how couple conflict is handled. Ome (2013) investigated gender differences across five approaches to conflict resolution

including threatening, accepting the situation, negotiation, mediation, and arbitration. He found that males showed high preference for negotiation, mediation, and arbitration in interpersonal conflict situations, although men and women did not significantly differ in their preference for threat and acceptance (Ome, 2013). These findings align with those proposed by Brahnam and colleagues (2005) that demonstrated when compared to males, females are more likely to utilize a collaborative conflict resolution style, and men were more likely to avoid conflict. Regardless of how the conflict resolution styles are classified (e.g., constructive vs. destructive, threatening, accepting, negotiating, etc.) there appears to be strong support for the notion that men are more likely to avoid conflict or use more aggressive tactics to resolve their relational issues, whereas women are more prone to compromise and collaboration.

In addition to conflict resolution style, technological advances have greatly altered day-to-day interactions among partners (Morey, Gentzler, Creasy, Oberhauser, & Westerman, 2013.) Ruppel (2015) found that although partners generally prefer face-to-face communication for self-disclosures in their relationships, surprisingly over half of such conversations occur via communication technology (e.g., text messaging). Furthermore, Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, and Grant (2011) investigated which methods of technology (e.g. text messaging, social media, etc.) are used most frequently by romantic partners and concluded that most romantic relationships use cell phones, social networking sites, and instant messaging to communicate with variations in frequency. This study also found that 17-25 year olds were more likely to use text messaging to communicate than any other age group. Moreover, Jin and Peña (2010) reported that the more frequently and the longer the participants placed voice calls with their partner, the less relational uncertainty (more secure) they felt. The same positive association was found for love and commitment and communication technology use. These findings suggest that

although technology may facilitate additional communication strategies, engaging in such activities (i.e., texting) under certain circumstances may be deleterious to the relationship. Although the findings from these studies are helpful in understanding romantic partners' most frequent modes of communication, the present study will extend this research by specifically observing what modes of communication (e.g., face-to-face, texting, social media) they are using to *discuss romantic problems* with partners and close friends.

Emerging Adult Couples and Their Social Networks

Romantic couples do not exist in isolation (Felmlee, 2001). The novelty of a romantic relationship requires getting to know each other in the context of one another's environments. During emerging adulthood dating becomes a process of establishing rules about intimacy, including problem solving and self-disclosure to others (Arnett, 2000). Couples will often look to their social networks for aid when problems arise. Previous generations of romantic partners developed relationships, romantic or not, based primarily on their location (Donn & Sherman, 2002). With increases in communication technology, physical location is less influential in the formation of romantic relationships today.

When analyzing how technological advances affect romantic unions, it is important to consider that emerging adults today have largely learned to formulate romantic relationships in the context of cell phone use and social networking. One study found that on average college students engage in *at least* 30 minutes a day networking on Facebook with friends as a part of their normal routine (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert 2009). Emerging adults are also more likely than middle-age persons to value the opinions of others in their social media networks (Bolton, Parasuraman, Hoefnagels, Migchels, Kabadayi, Gruber, & Solnet, 2013). The ease

associated with such communication can have both negative and positive effects that can influence an individual's or couple's relationship with their partner or their network.

One potential negative impact of the increase in social networking abilities for emerging adult couples is that each partner must negotiate how much information to share online about the relationship (Birnholtz et al., 2010; Neustaedter et al., 2013). Often partners have very differing preferences for how much detail is provided about their romantic affairs on social media. Additionally, Nacoste (2015) claimed that the ability to continually communicate with one another may be challenging. Indeed, for some couples, a healthy level of space or distance is also beneficial in relationships. He argued that the constant communication many emerging adult couples engage in may result in distress for the relationship and result in these couples feeling "too connected." The advent of such pervasive technological advances certainly challenges one's ability to balance connection and distance. A more complete understanding of how partners connect and share problems will aid researchers as they strive to enhance romantic communication across this critical development period. Additionally, this information will help provide insights into whether or not the frequency of RW with partners and friends is associated with readily accessible modes of communication (e.g., texting).

Social network approval. Researchers have found that social network approval for one's relationship boosts positive relationship outcomes and social disapproval can be associated with relationship termination (Sinclair, Felmlee, Sprecher & Wright, 2015; Felmlee, 2001). Sinclair and colleagues (2015) aimed to further investigate how positive and negative social network reactions affect a partner's choices in the relationship and the development of love and commitment. Findings from the study suggested that social network approval of one's romantic

partner was linked with more positive romantic functioning (e.g., higher levels of love and commitment), suggesting that the social network importantly impacts couple functioning.

The findings of the Sinclair et al. (2015) study are consistent with research from Sprecher and Felmlee (2000) in which researchers investigated how partners' perceptions of social network attributes change with the passage of time and relationship transitions. Their results indicated that perception of social network approval, especially for the male partner's friends tended to increase over time for relationships that remained intact. Moreover, when it came to the transition phases of engagement and marriage, males and females significantly differed in that males' friends tended to provide more approval of the romantic union at these transition times (though both males' and females' friends' approval importantly impacted couples; Sprecher & Felmlee, 2000). These findings establish a foundation from which to explore whether or not social approval is linked with discussing romantic challenges with partners and friends.

Romantic and Social Overlaps: A Theoretical Foundation

Romantic relationships do not unfold in isolation, and couples are therefore impacted by a multitude of external factors that contribute to the experience, functionality, and outcome of the relationship (Felmlee, 2001). These external factors, which are often other people, may act as critical sources of influence, providing feedback that shapes couple dynamics (Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004). As a result, Huston (2000) proposed a socioecological model titled the *Three-level Model for Viewing Marriage*, which asserted that those aiming to fully capture romantic functioning cannot overlook social influences, as they contribute both indirectly and directly to romantic relationships. Within this model, Huston identified the following three levels of analysis that suggest social networks are critical in the comprehension of intimate, romantic relationships: the macroenviornment, the individual characteristics, and the relationship behavior

in context. The relationship behavior in context aspect of the model demonstrates that activities and interactions in the relationship often take place in the presence of social networks. He asserted that the relational dyad and their interactions are embedded within and affected by the larger context of the social network. Thus, this model offers a helpful framework for the current study given that it shows that researchers must account for the influences of social networks when studying romantic relationships. Lastly, while Huston's theory was developed for marriages, consistent with previous studies (Jensen & Rauer, 2014; 2015), we extend this framework to all romantic relationships, specifically dating couples.

Bowen Family Systems has termed this interaction between romantic partners and friends as *triangulation* (Haefner, 2014). Triangulation is a three-person relationship that can stabilize a two-person system currently experiencing anxiety or relational distress. When tension between two people develops, bringing in a third person can relieve this anxiety or distress (Bowen, 1978). A triangle can contain much more tension because the tension can shift around three relationships instead of the single relationship between the romantic partners (Bowen, 1976, 1993). This idea reinforces Huston's (2000) theory that the relational dyads, and the social network influence one another bi-directionally. Furthermore, the process of triangulation may stabilize the relationship or lead to less stable alliances within the triangle (Dallos & Vetere, 2012; Minuchin, 1974). This information increases the understanding of how and why social network approval is associated with RW with partners and friends among emerging adults. It should be noted that triangulation is not a guiding theory in this context, but rather is a supplemental piece of Bowenian therapy that appropriately aligns with the established construct of RW.

Relationship Work: Discussing Romantic Problems with Partners and Friends

Most couples experience romantic problems and tend to discuss these challenges both with one another and with members of their social network (Helms et al., 2003). Discussing one's romantic trials with others has come to be referred to as "relationship work" (RW; Jensen & Rauer, 2014). Oliker (1989) originally coined the term "marriage work," a process of actively involving friends in a romantic relationship. Much of the existing research involving RW is centered around how it affects the romantic relationship and the friendship, including which problems are discussed most frequently, and how variations in relationship work can change across different life stages (Jensen & Rauer, 2015; Proulx, Helms, & Payne, 2004).

Relationship work differs from overall romantic communication in that it specifically refers to discussions about romantic *problems*. Empirical work suggests that it is common to share romantic problems with friends and positive or negative reactions from those closest to an individual are associated with the quality of the romantic relationship (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992). Therefore, the social network effect is vital to the process of RW. Helms et al. (2003) used the term "marriage work" to represent husbands' and wives' routine disclosures with their closest friends about their marriage. They found that wives were likely to engage in more frequent marriage work with their friends than with their husbands. In addition, husbands engaged in less marriage work, overall, than wives and spoke more to wives than to friends about marital problems. Others have contradicted Helms and colleagues' findings (2003) on the gender differences associated with RW. For example, Jensen and Rauer (2014) found that young adult males and females did not differ in overall RW done, or in RW with partner or friend. Overall, previous literature has suggested that gender differences may exist with regard to the way

couples communicate with others about their desire for change in their relationship (Heyman, Hunt-Martoran, Malik, & Slep, 2009).

Using the work of Helms and colleagues (2003) and Proulx et al. (2004) as a foundation for understanding marriage work among married couples, Jensen and Rauer (2014) sought to extend existing knowledge of including friends in discussions of romantic problems by examining these same patterns earlier in the lifespan. They found that both sexes engaged in more RW with their partners than with friends, a finding contrary to the work of Helms et al. (2003) and Proulx et al. (2004). The discrepancies in these studies might be due to the life stage and relationship stage (dating vs. married-commitment) of the samples examined. As individuals age, both their romantic and social priorities shift, which may impact communication with others about romantic challenges across the lifespan.

Given the previously discussed significant findings for wives and young adults, Jensen and Rauer (2015) sought to extend further the literature on females' RW patterns and explore its links to romantic functioning and stability over time. They found that young adult females engaged in RW more frequently with their partners at the second data collection point than at the first, one year earlier. However, their participants did not increase their frequency of RW with friends over time. Interestingly, they found that engaging in RW with a partner at Time 1 was linked with greater likelihood of couples remaining together until Time 2. Conversely, females' RW with their friends predicted greater likelihood of breakup prior to Time 2.

Romantic Relationships and Physiology

Despite previous researchers collecting helpful data for understanding links between RW with the social network and romantic functioning, we still know very little about the interpersonal dynamics that occur as partners engage in RW. Social scientists would benefit from

gaining a more comprehensive understanding of how each partner is affected when talking about these issues given that discussing romantic problems can be linked with physiological stress (Sillars, Coletti, Parry, & Rogers, 1982). Gottman and his colleagues conducted several studies to account for this gap in the literature (Levenson & Gottman, 1983; Levenson & Gottman, 1985; Levenson et al., 1994). Levenson and Gottman (1983) studied married couples, to better understand the extent to which variation in marital satisfaction could be accounted for by the physiological response between spouses' affective behaviors. Researchers were able to derive a physiological linkage for variations of marital satisfaction using several physiological indicators of stress including, heart rate and GSR levels. They concluded that this physiological linkage was not only significant in predicting marital satisfaction outcomes, but also reflected the fluctuation of negative affect, the escalation and de-escalation of conflict, "and the sense of being 'locked into' the interaction and unable to 'step back' that can occur when spouses in dissatisfied marriages attempt to solve problems" (Levenson & Gottman, 1983, p. 596).

Building on their previous research, Levenson and Gottman (1985) conducted a follow-up study in which they looked at changes in marital satisfaction over time and discovered that physiological distress (i.e., measured by heart rate and GSR) was linked with decreases in marital satisfaction. Expanding on the findings stated above, Levenson et al. (1994) explored the influence of gender on affect and physiology for couples in long-term marriages. They found that negative affect was associated with high levels of physiological arousal for men and was uncorrelated for women. For the husbands, negative affect was associated with increased heart rate and greater GSR levels, when compared to the wives. Researchers emphasized that these gender differences in physiological responses may be due to the fact that males more often withdrawal from confrontation, which allows them to reduce physiological levels whenever they

experience sustained, heightened negative affect or perceive that they are physiologically aroused. Hence, when they do have these discussions they are more likely to be physiologically aroused than their wives (Levenson et al., 1994). The current study will expand on these findings by looking at this pattern for *emerging adult* couples and their friends, as opposed to long-term marriages. Thus, this study will address a gap in the relationship/ psychophysiological literature and enhance social scientists' understanding of these topics.

Galvanic skin response. GSR, sometimes referred to as skin conductance, is a term used to describe the electrical changes in skin surface conductivity of the electrical resistance related to sweat gland activity. These changes in electrical activity are directly correlated with perspiration and linked with an individual's autonomic nervous system. As stress increases, so too does GSR; as stress decreases (or the individual relaxes), GSR decreases (Russoniello et al., 2013; Levenson et al., 1994). With this information, biofeedback training can provide vital information leading to better physiological control when a stressor is encountered. Similarly, researchers use physiological modalities (e.g., GSR) to measure changes in arousal related to psychological stress. Importantly, GSR and other indicators of stress should be compared to a baseline reading of physiological functioning. After collecting baseline measures from participants, a stimulus may be introduced (e.g., relationship problem) and physiological reactions recorded. This is helpful for researchers to determine if subjective comments correspond with physiological outcomes (Russoniello et al., 2013).

Gottman and Levenson (2002), conducted a 14-year long longitudinal experiment in which they wanted to develop a model for predicting when couples will divorce. They determined that high skin conductance levels were correlated with high levels of negative affect and thus is an accurate measure in predicting the dissolution of a marriage. Given the utility of

collecting GSR as a measure of psychophysiological distress, its use serves the current study well as it will suggest stress levels when processing romantic challenges with partners or friends. Using previous work on relationships and measures of psychophysiological functioning as a foundation for the current study, we will address and examine the intersection of romantic relationships, social influence, and physiological stress as partners speak about their romantic issues.

Purpose of Study

There are several benefits to understanding how partners' physiological responses are altered when engaging in RW with each other or with friends. Clinicians may more adeptly comment on the physiological impact of turning to a friend over a partner, or vice versa. Additionally, researchers may be able to more accurately conceptualize the personal physiological impacts of engaging in RW that relate to physical and mental health outcomes at a later stage in life (e.g., hypertension, anxiety disorders, insomnia, etc.). Furthermore, despite the notion that couple dysfunction is influenced by several external factors, few clinicians include friends in therapy (Broderick, 1993). With the insights gained from this study, clinicians may be able to provide psychoeducation regarding how turning to social networks for support is helpful or harmful relationships. Marriage and family therapists in particular, who have extensive training in systemic processes, will likely find the conclusions drawn from this study useful in practice due to the greater frequency of relational cases that they encounter.

In this study we aim to (1) understand what mode of communication emerging adults most frequently use to communicate with partners and friends about romantic problems and explore gender differences, (2) discover whether approval from friends is associated with RW with partners and friends, (3) examine how GSR levels differ while doing RW with a

partner/friend, and explore potential gender differences, and (4) discover how GSR is related with the frequency of RW with partner/friends and consider gender differences. Given that women tend to be socialized to communicate more frequently about relationships than men (Hook, Gerstein, Detterich, & Gridley, 2003), we hypothesize that women will communicate most frequently about relationship issues via face-to-face communication, while men will be more likely to use social media or text messaging with their partners and friends. In light of the findings of Sinclair and colleagues (2015) we anticipate that friend's approval will be significantly and positively associated with both RW with partners and friends among emerging adults. Based on the various findings of Gottman and Levenson (2000 & 2002) that suggest GSR, is a physiological indicator of stress, we hypothesize that, on average, there will be higher GSR levels for men than women, as well as when partners speak to one another when compared to discussions with friends. Gottman and Levenson (2000 & 2002) also provided evidence that leads us to predict there will be a significant negative association between GSR and the frequency of RW with partners and friends.

Methodology

Participants and Procedures

Data for this study were collected from emerging adults at East Carolina University as part of the larger ongoing Relationship Work in Young Adults Study. Only procedures and measures relevant to the current study will be presented here. Sixty-one emerging adult couples and one friend of each partner (i.e., 244 individuals total) participated in the study. The demographic characteristics of the sample for the partners showed that 75% of the participants identified as Caucasian, 13.1% African-American, 6.6% Hispanic, 6.6% Asian, and 1.6% identified themselves as multi-racial. Partners ranged in age from 18 to 31 years, with an average

age of 20.7 years. The average length of the relationship was 19 months, with a range of two to 84 months, and 25.4% of partners were cohabitating.

Inclusion criteria required that at least one participant in each group of four be a student at ECU, all participants be 18 years or older, and partners indicate that they were in a romantic relationship. Participants came to an on-campus research facility, where they spent 90-minutes engaging in tasks aimed to capture personal, romantic, and social functioning. All participants completed online questionnaires via Qualtrics about their personal characteristics and their romantic relationship/friendships (e.g., length of relationship/friendship). In addition to the questionnaires, each partner was asked to lead a 5-minute video-recorded conversation in which they discussed a specific romantic problem that they were currently experiencing or had experienced in the past. Prior to the video conversation, partners each received an Areas of Disagreement form and were asked to independently rate what they felt were the most significant problems in their relationship on a 6-point Likert scale from zero (*not an issue*) to five (*major problem*). Completion of this form facilitated the choice of topic to discuss, as participants were encouraged to choose one of the topics for which they indicated a higher score. The same romantic challenge was discussed first with the partner and then with the friend, and each partner selected a separate issue to discuss. While conversing about the romantic challenge, various indicators of psychophysiological stress were captured. GSR was measured using a sensor with two electrodes placed on the middle and ring fingers that monitored changes in electrical activity corresponding with perspiration (Russoniello et al., 2013). We only monitored physiological functioning on the partner who had chosen the item to discuss (i.e., GSR was not captured for partners or friends who listened and responded). Partners each received a $50 Target gift card and friends each received a $35 Target gift card.

Measures

Mode of communication. The frequency with which participants discussed romantic challenges with partners and friends was assessed via questionnaire by asking "What is your most frequent mode of communication for speaking with your partner (or friend) about romantic relationship problems?" Available responses include "Face-to-face," "Over the phone," "Text messaging," "Social Media" (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snap Chat), and "Other." Each participant was asked to select only one mode of communication.

Relationship work. The degree to which participants engaged in relationship work was measured using a modified, 5-item Marriage Work Scale (Helms et al., 2003). Some items from the original scale were dropped due to not being applicable to this population's current life style (i.e., items related to childrearing and cohabitation tasks). Retained items were those that seemed most relevant to the current population. Respondents were asked to select a number on a 9-point Likert scale, with one representing "Never" and nine representing "Always." Each question separately addressed relationship work in regards to the respondent's partner and friend. The modified version of the scale demonstrated good reliability for both the partner scale (female partners: $\alpha = .72$; male partners $\alpha = .78$) and the friend scale (female partners: $\alpha =. 75$; male partners $\alpha = .85$).

Social network approval. To evaluate the degree to which the close friend approved/disapproved of his or her friend's romantic relationship, we used a single-item measure developed by Sprecher and Felmlee (1992) that asked, "To what degree do you approve/disapprove of your friend's romantic relationship?" Respondents were asked to choose an answer on a 7-point Likert scale with one representing "Very much disapprove" and seven representing "Very much approve."

Galvanic skin response. GSR was measured using psychophysiological equipment, NeXus-10 MKII, which includes the use of a GSR sensor with two electrodes attached to the participant's ring and middle fingertips. Using the finger as the location for GSR electrodes is recommended because the fingertip has the greatest amount of pores/conductivity compared to other areas of the body, thus producing a more accurate reading of perspiration level (Lykken & Venables, 1971; Russoniello et al., 2013). A change in skin conductance is signified by changes in the electrical activity, which directly corresponds to perspiration of the skin and physiological arousal (stress) (Russoniello et al., 2013). A five-minute baseline of the participants' GSR levels was recorded prior to the beginning of the conversation. Changes in skin perspiration were linked to physiological arousal and reactivity when the couple was engaged with RW with each other or one of their friends.

Data Analysis

In order to answer our first research question (RQ) regarding the mode of communication most frequently used to discuss romantic challenges with partners and friends, we examined descriptive statistics including the frequency of each unique mode of communication for females and males engaging in RW with partners and friends. We subsequently examined chi-square tests to compare gender differences. Next, to answer RQ2 inquiring about the potential links between friends' approval of the relationship and RW with partners and friends, we examined bivariate correlational associations followed by hierarchical linear regression analyses, controlling for length of relationship and length of friendship. Additionally, to answer RQ3, we conducted paired *t*-tests to determine how skin conductance differs from baseline to the RW with partner task to the RW with friend task and independent samples *t*-tests to examine gender differences. To answer RQ4 to understand whether or not skin conductance was associated with the

frequency of RW with partners and friends and to examine gender differences, we observed bivariate correlational associations, followed by standard regression analyses.

Results

Relationship Work and Mode of Communication

In order to answer RQ1, regarding the mode of communication most frequently used to discuss romantic challenges with partners and friends, we examined the frequency with which both male and female partners communicated to partners and friends via face-to-face conversations, phone conversations, text messaging, or social media (Table 1). Results revealed that female partners overwhelmingly communicated most frequently about relationship issues with their partners via face-to-face conversations (85.2%), followed by text messaging (8.2%). Females similarly engaged friends in such conversations most frequently (73.8%), however nearly a quarter of the sample (23.0%) reported that they communicated about romantic challenges most frequently with friends via texting. Next, results revealed that male partners, similar to their female counterparts, engaged in most frequent RW with partners via face-to-face conversations (86.9%) followed by texting (8.2%). Males were also found to discuss romantic problems with their friends most frequently via face-to-face interactions (63.9%), yet also similar to females, a significant percentage of male partners (26.2%) used text messaging as their primary mode of communication with friends regarding romantic relationship challenges.

Overall, both males and females appeared to be more likely to use text messaging to discuss romantic challenges with friends than with partners. Moreover, despite emerging adults' ever-increasing use of social media, it appears that this mode of communication is not frequently used to discuss romantic challenges with either partners or friends. In order to test for further nuances, we conducted chi-square tests to determine whether males and females significantly

differed from one another in mode of communication with either partner or friend. Results revealed no significant gender differences in either most frequent mode of communication with partner or mode of communication with friend.

Table 1.
*Percentages of emerging adults who engaged most frequently in RW with partners and friends via various modes of communication. (*N=*61).*

Variables	Face-to-face	Over the Phone	Text Messaging	Social Media
Female RW with Partner	85.2%	6.6%	8.2%	0%
Female RW with Friend	73.8%	3.3%	23%	0%
Male RW with Partner	86.9%	3.3%	8.2%	1.6%
Male RW with Friend	63.9%	6.6%	26.2%	1.6%

Note. RW = Relationship Work.

The Role of Friends' Approval

In order to answer our second RQ inquiring about the potential links between friends' approval of the relationship and RW with partners and friends, we examined bivariate correlational associations (Table 2) followed by standard regression analyses (Table 3), controlling for length of relationship and length of friendship. Bivariate correlation analyses revealed that greater approval of the relationship from the female partners' friends was significantly, positively associated with greater approval of the relationship from the male partners' friends (r=.54, p <.01). Additionally, correlational analyses revealed that greater relationship approval from male partners' friends was significantly, positively linked with more frequent female RW with their partners (r=.38, p <.01). To note, we also discovered that male partners' friends' approval of the relationship was moderately, positively, associated with male partners' RW with their friends (r=.24, p <.10). Female partner's friends' approval of the romantic relationship was not significantly associated with either partners' RW with one another

or with their friends. Therefore, it appeared that approval of the male partner's friend played a more significant role than approval from the female partner's friend in influencing romantic dynamics.

Table 2.
*Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for study variables. (*N=*61).*

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. Rom Relationship Length	-								
2. Female Partners' Friendship Length	.04	-							
3. Male Partners' Friendship Length	.10	.36**	-						
4. Females' Friends Social Approval	.10	.09	-.18	-					
5. Males' Friends Social Approval	.16	.16	-.10	.54**	-				
6. Female Mean RW with Partner	.28*	.12	-.04	.18	.38**	-			
7. Female Mean RW with Friend	-.09	.23†	.04	.06	.05	.17	-		
8. Male Mean RW with Partner	.02	-.18	-.17	.16	.20	.29*	-.23†	-	
9. Male Mean RW with Friend	-.11	-.06	-.05	.19	.24†	.04	.22†	.43**	-
M	19.10	29.92	34.41	6.17	5.95	6.87	5.34	6.58	4.60
SD	17.89	41.28	51.61	1.21	1.32	1.39	1.66	1.44	1.95

Note. RW = Relationship Work; Rom = Romantic; *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation; Romantic relationship length and friendship length are in months.
†$p < .10$; *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

To further investigate the potential associations between friends' approval of the romantic relationship and partners' RW with one another and with their friends, we conducted hierarchical linear regression analyses, first examining a model, which only included the control variables of romantic relationship length and friendship length. Second, we added friends' approval variable to the model in order to examine the impact of both male and female partners' approval on partners' RW with one another and with their friends (Table 3), controlling for romantic relationship length and friendship length. Consequently, four models were fit (i.e., for the

dependent variables of females' RW with partner, females' RW with friend, males' RW with partner, males' RW with friend). Results revealed that due to poor model fit we were unable to examine and report on the associations between friends' approval and females' RW with their friends, males' RW with their partner, or males' RW with their friends. Regression analyses revealed that the only model of the four that fit the data well enough to interpret results was the model examining females RW with partner. For the model including only the control variables (Model 1), results revealed that romantic relationship length was significantly, positively, associated with females engaging in greater RW with their partners (β=.02, p <.05). Next, when friends' approval was added to the model (Model 2), consistent with correlational results, we discovered that male partners' friends' approval was significantly, positively linked with females' RW with their partners (β=.35, p <.05). Female partners' friends' approval was not significantly associated with females' RW with their partners.

Table 3.
*Summary of regression analysis for variables associated with females' RW with partners (*N= *61).*

	Model 1			Model 2		
Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*β*	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Constant	6.40	.29		4.65	.97	
Rom Relationship Length	.02*	.01	.27*	.02†	.01	.22†
Female Partners' Friendship Length	.00	.00	.10	.00	.00	.05
Female Partners' Friends' Approval				-.04	.17	-.03
Male Partners' Friends' Approval				.35*	.16	.33*
R^2		.08†			.18*	
F for change in R^2		2.46†			2.87*	

Note: RW = Relationship Work; Rom = Romantic; *B* = Unstandardized Coefficient; *β* = Standardized Coefficient; Romantic relationship length and friendship length are in months.
†$p < .10$; *$p < .05$

Psychophysiological Distress and RW with Partners and Friends

To answer our third RQ, we conducted paired *t*-tests to determine how GSR as a measure of psychophysiological distress differs from baseline while doing RW with a partner or friend. We also examined whether or not GSR significantly differed when engaging in RW with partner versus friend (Table 4). Using paired *t*-tests, results revealed an increase in GSR from baseline to both the partner RW task, $t(111) = 14.36$, $p < .01$, and friend RW task, $t(111) = 16.56$, $p < .01$. Participants also had a higher GSR average during the friend RW task compared to the partner RW task, $t(115) = 9.73$, $p < .01$. To test for gender differences, we conducted independent samples *t*-tests and found that males had a higher GSR average at baseline, $t(111) = 2.83$, $p < .01$, RW with partner, $t(115) = 2.86$, $p < .01$, and RW with friend, $t(115) = 3.13$, $p < .01$ (Table 4).

Table 4.
Means of skin conductance for females and males across RW tasks (N=61).

Variables	Overall Sample Mean	Female	Male
GSR at Baseline	1.84	1.54	2.15
GSR with Partner	2.90	2.41	3.22
GSR with Friend	3.26	2.69	3.65

Note. GSR = Galvanic Skin Response; RW = Relationship Work.

Understanding the RW Process among Emerging Adults

To answer our final RQ regarding the links between skin conductance, gender, and frequency of RW with partner and friend, we first examined bivariate correlations (Table 5). We found that females' GSR at baseline was significantly, positively correlated with males' RW with their friends ($r = .43$, $p < .01$), suggesting that when females have higher GSR scores at

baseline, males tend to discuss their relationship problems more frequently with their friends. We also discovered that males' GSR at baseline was moderately, positively associated with males RW with their partners (r = .25, p < .10), suggesting that when males have higher GSR scores at baseline they are moderately more likely to speak with their partners about relationship problems. Next, results revealed that female GSR during the partner task was moderately, positively associated with males' RW with friend (r=.24, p <.10), suggesting that when males had higher GSR scores when talking to their partners, they were moderately more likely to speak with their friends about relationship issues. Finally, we found that females' GSR with friends was moderately, positively linked with males' RW with their friends (r=.25, p <.10), suggesting that when females have higher GSR scores with their friends, males were moderately more likely to discuss relationship issues with their friends.

Table 5.
Intercorrelations for females and males skin conductance and RW variables (*N=61).*

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Female GSR Baseline	-									
2. Male GSR Baseline	.01	-								
3. Female GSR with Partner	.90**	.17	-							
4. Male GSR with Partner	.06	.84**	.23†	-						
5. Female GSR with Friend	.87**	.21	.98**	.29**	-					
6. Male GSR with Friend	.04	.84**	.20	.97**	.25†	-				
7. Female Mean RW with Partner	-.11	-.01	-.12	-.05	-.04	-.01	-			
8. Male Mean RW with Partner	.02	.25†	.03	-.21	.00	-.16	.29*	-		
9. Female Mean RW with Friend	.21	.11	.12	.09	.14	.11	.17	-.23†	-	
10. Male Mean RW with Friend	.43**	.02	.24†	.13	.25†	.15	.04	.43**	.22†	-

Note. GSR = Galvanic Skin Response; RW = Relationship Work; Rom = Romantic
†p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01.

To further investigate these associations, we also conducted regression analyses examining links between GSR and frequency of RW with partners and friends. Consistent with RQ2, we fit four regression models, one for each dependent variable (i.e., females' RW with partners, females' RW with friends', males' RW with partners', and males' RW with friends). Only for the model examining correlates of males' RW with friends did the data fit well enough to interpret. Regression analyses revealed that higher female GSR at baseline was significantly associated with males engaging in more RW with friends (β=1.79, p <.05). Thus, when females were generally more anxious or stressed, their male partners reported engaging in RW with friends more frequently (Table 6).

Table 6.
*Summary of regression analysis for variables associated with males' RW with friends (*N= *61)*

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	*β*
Constant	3.31	.73	
Female GSR Baseline	1.79*	.56	.99*
Male GSR Baseline	-.35	.36	-.23
Female GSR RW with Partner Task	-1.52†	.88	-1.08†
Male GSR RW with Partner Task	-.26	.69	-.22
Female GSR RW with Friend Task	.62	.77	.45
Male GSR RW with Friend Task	.59	.62	.53
R^2		.27*	
F for change in R^2		2.72*	

Note: RW = Relationship Work; GSR = Galvanic Skin Response.
B = Unstandardized Coefficient; *β* = Standardized Coefficient.
†p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01

Discussion

Romantic and social networks invariably overlap and influence one another continually. Consequently, social scientists have encouraged greater attention to everyday interactions that partners experience with their closest friends (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). Specifically, understanding the impact of discussing romantic problems with others is important to gain insight into the social and biological well-being of romantic partners. Previous work has shown that this communication is linked to romantic quality and stability (Caughlin & Huston, 2002; Jensen & Rauer, 2015), as well as marital satisfaction and physiology in older couples (Gottman & Levenson, 2000 & 2002). Numerous benefits emerge as a result of determining how partners' physiological responses are altered when discussing relationship issues with each other or with friends. Not the least among these is the applicability for clinicians who may be able to knowledgeably comment on the physiological impact of romantic and social communication patterns when working with couples.

To expand upon the previously outlined existing knowledge in this area, in this study we set out to understand the intersection between frequency and mode of discussing of romantic problems, the impact of friends' approval of the relationship, and accompanying physiological processes associated with these interactions. Generally, we found that there were no gender differences in the preferred mode of communication for both males and females, with face-to-face communication being the primary method. We also found that approval from the social network does impact the frequency of RW, with male partners' approval being especially linked with greater frequency of RW. Additionally, results showed that males are generally more stressed when engaging in RW compared to females and as a result are more likely to engage in RW with friends. Furthermore, our findings indicated that when females are stressed, their male

partners often turn to their social networks to discuss romantic challenges. Overall, our findings reveal how emerging adults share their romantic challenges with partners and friends and the psychophysiological responses that accompany these processes.

Most Frequent Modes of Communication for Engaging in Relationship Work

Cell phone calls, text messaging, and social media have become pervasive modes of communication for emerging adults to engage their partners and friends and maintain these relationships (Drouin & Landgraff, 2012; Morey et al., 2013). However, despite this increase in communication technology, extensive research has shown that emerging adults still prefer face-to-face discussions for self-disclosures and meaningful conversations with their social networks (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Ruppel, 2015). In our examination of the preferred communication methods of emerging adults, we found similar evidence suggesting that partners prefer to discuss their romantic challenges with each other and with friends face-to-face. Surprisingly, we found this to be true for both females and males.

It is noteworthy that there were no gender differences in mode of communication given the socialization of males and females in our society, as it is perceived to be more appropriate for females to be more emotionally expressive than males in the U.S. (Kring & Gordon, 1998; Hochschild, 2002). The lack of gender differences in our findings may be attributed to the intimacy associated with these conversations and perhaps the level of romantic quality of these relationships. Although males may not be as expressive in other, less intimate, social situations, they appear to favor discussing relationship issues with their partners face-to-face. Moreover, it is also pertinent that few emerging adults appear to use text messaging and social media as the most frequent modes of communication for engaging in RW. Despite the link between frequent technology use (i.e., social media, text messaging, instant messaging etc.) and poorer romantic

functioning (Schade, Sandberg, Bean, Busby, & Coyne, 2013), young adults continue to communicate with one another via texting and social media, perhaps with the notable exception found in the current study. Interestingly, many participants in the current study expressed major concern when partner and friends spend too much time on cell phones and were unavailable for face-to-face interaction. Given that today's adolescents are more accustomed to internet/social media use at a younger age, perhaps emerging adults today are also developing healthier social media practices than their middle-aged counterparts when it comes to sharing romantic problems online (Roberts, & Foehr, 2004). These results suggest that despite the rise in social media and mobile communication, emerging adults still prefer to discuss relationships conflicts in person. As technology continues to play a larger role in communication, researchers should aim to understand the differences in modes of communication for varying age groups and the effects that they can have on relationship outcomes.

Links Between Friends' Approval and Relationship Work

Interacting with friends in the social network outside the romantic dyad is a common and necessary action occurring in emerging adulthood (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992). Research has shown that for pre-marital couples the approval of their relationship by the social network is significantly associated with love and commitment (Can & Hovardaoglu, 2015; Sinclair et al., 2015). Due to the important influence of social networks on the romantic relationship, and in light of the findings from previous research, we hypothesized that friends' approval would be significantly and positively associated with both RW with partners and friends among emerging adults. Our results partly supported this hypothesis in that more approval from the male partners' friends' was linked with greater female RW with their partner.

This finding aligns somewhat with previous research that shows couples who experience more social approval of the relationship invest more effort into the romantic relationship (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006). It may be that a female feels more comfortable going to her partner when she knows that her partner's friends support the relationship, thus making this a less distressing situation. In such a circumstance, the female partner need not worry about negative opinions from her partner's friends altering her partner's perception of their relationship. This may be due to the fact that friends, in general, become a greater source of emotional, appraisal, and instrumental support to an individual as he or she progresses through young adulthood (Wright & Sinclair, 2012; Youniss & Smollar, 1985).

The approval of either partner's friends would seem important. However, females' friends' approval was *not* significantly linked with the frequency of RW across either task for male or female partners. Perhaps partners conceal challenges in the romantic relationship from the female partners' friends given that emerging adult females tend to be more emotionally reactive, on average, than males (Baxter & Widenmann, 1993; Felmlee, 2001; Kring & Gordon, 1998). This may be especially true for the current sample, given that majority of the females' friends also identified as female. It is possible that because females' friendships are oriented around concern for one another (Wright, 1982; Helms et al., 2003), much of the feedback regarding romantic relationships is negative. Hence, partners do not want to engage females' friends in the RW process, regardless of their approval.

Regardless, results revealed that approval from males' partners' friends was associated with greater RW with a partner for females. Essentially, the more that males' friends approve of the relationship, the more females tend to talk with their partners about romantic challenges. This may be attributed to the sense of security that females feel about the relationship as a result from

being accepted by the partner's friend group. Due to the cross-sectional nature of the study, we also cannot rule out that males' friends show greater approval when females engage in greater RW with partners. Males' friends likely take not of how females communicate and are likely to be more supportive when females appropriately turn to partners to work on their romantic relationship challenges.

Lastly, regarding RQ1 our results suggested that the more females' friends approved of the romantic relationship, the more males' friends also approved. This is logical given that as the romantic relationship grows, often dyads develop mutual friends and progressively invest in each other's extended friend networks, a process referred to as transitivity (Hallinan, 1974). According to this notion, the longer a couple remains together, the more likely both partners' friend groups interact more frequently with both partners and see the couple as a functional unit. Conversely, in the case of an unhealthy relationship, friends of both partners likely accurately perceive such dysfunction and express concerns to partners.

Psychophysiological Distress and RW with Partners and Friends

Discussing romantic challenges is stressful in general. Based upon the existing literature conducted by Gottman and several of his colleagues, we know that there are several physiological indicators (e.g., heart rate, pulse transmission time, GSR level, etc.) that are associated with, and are often predictors of, marital distress in romantic relationships (Levenson & Gottman, 1983 & 2002). We sought to extend this research by specifically considering skin conductance as an indicator of physiological stress in emerging adult couples (as opposed to Gottman's long term marriages) when discussing romantic problems. Our results showed that when individual partners, both male and female, are not engaging in the RW, their stress level, is

lower as evidenced by GSR. Therefore, it appears that talking about romantic problems is stressful for couples.

One potential explanation for the additional stress experienced when engaging in RW with partner or friend is that partners were unable to avoid discussing problems, which may be a common defense mechanism for many, especially among male partners (Laurenceau, Troy, & Carver, 2005). Furthermore, the acknowledgment and processing of such issues likely places emotional strain on the partner leading the discussion, especially given that partners were asked to pick a topic that was a problem for them recently. Emotional distress is directly linked with psychophysiological distress (Buss, Larsen, Westen, & Semmelroth, 1992); hence partners likely experienced elevated GSR when contemplating opening up about romantic challenges. More specifically, concern for a partner's reaction when having these discussions almost certainly elevated physiological stress. Individuals generally disapprove of their faults or imperfections being acknowledged and shared, and when they are, feelings of shame, doubt, and insecurity may be felt. Vulnerability is often accompanied by psychophysiological distress and physical discomfort, which is one reason many fight so hard to avoid it (Brown, 2012). Therefore, in the vulnerable state of disclosing romantic challenges to partners and friends, it seems quite reasonable that participants' GSR scores were elevated.

Gender differences and psychophysiological stress. When examining the gender differences in GSR for females and males, we found that males were significantly more stressed than their female counterparts across baseline and RW tasks. These findings align with those of Levenson et al. (1994) that suggested that husbands, compared to their wives, had greater increases in heart rate and somatic activity, and greater skin conductance levels during conflict oriented marital interactions. These physiological differences by gender might be explained by

the fact that males more often withdraw from confrontation than females because of the physical level of discomfort that they feel (i.e., men often withdraw while women pursue; Greenberg & Johnson, 1998). Therefore, when they do have these discussions they are more likely to be more physiologically aroused than female partners.

Ultimately, this harkens back to the groundbreaking work of Gottman (1991) that suggested that husbands engage more in stonewalling than wives. Furthermore, other researchers (Wright, 1982; Helms et al., 2003) have claimed that males often avoid directly discussing romantic issues as they were asked to do in this study. Males prefer to be oriented toward an external task or activity while talking, as opposed to simply having the conversation (e.g., playing a sport, driving etc.), which may be influenced by hierarchy and competition (Maltz & Borker, 1982; Wright, 1982). Given that women are more likely and willing to utilize a collaborative conflict resolution style (Brahnam, Margavio, Hignite, Barrier & Chin, 2005), our findings compliment previous work examining gender and communication. When men are not able to avoid these uncomfortable discussions or distract themselves while having them, their stress levels rise. Overall, the current study replicates and enhances existing literature on gender differences and communication (Kelley et al., 1978; Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Johnson et al., 2005; Heyman et al., 2009).

Comparing physiological stress of RW with partners and RW with friends. Contrary to our hypothesis, we found that partners indicated higher stress levels during the friend RW task than during the partner RW task. This finding may be attributed to the partner receiving affirmations from the friend when expressing frustrations in the relationship. These affirmations may reinforce the partner's thought process and provide validation of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, which in turn may amplify the partner's GSR level. Given that emerging adults have

also been found to engage in more frequent RW with partners than friends (Jensen & Rauer, 2015), the normality of engaging in such discussion with partners may serve as a buffer against stress not enjoyed in the RW with friend task. Furthermore, the sharing of intimate challenging details of one's relationship with a friend may be, at times, embarrassing or uncomfortable. In a world in which the opinions of others on relationships via social media has is shown to impact relationship satisfaction (Papp, Danielewicz, & Cayemberg, 2012), it is likely quite difficult for some to disclose genuine romantic struggles to members of the social network. Finally, certain friends may also share emotionally charged similar challenges that contribute to elevated GSR levels in partners. As friends validate and passionately share their own romantic struggles, a common observation in the current study, stress levels may rise for partners as they become more worked up over the romantic struggle. Conversely, when partners discuss romantic challenges together, they often calmly remain on task and begin working toward a reasonable solution or improvement, a process, which may be accompanied by stress reduction.

Understanding the RW Process among Emerging Adults

Although we did not find support for our hypothesis that more frequent RW with partners would be linked with lower GSR scores, our data revealed that when females were generally more stressed, males tended to do more RW with their friends. Initially, this finding seems intuitive given that discussing romantic issues with a partner who is stressed is likely quite challenging because it increases the possibility of conflict. As males especially attempt to avoid conflict (Christensen & Heavey, 1990), they may turn to a member of the social network to work on the relationship in a way that feels safer. This assertion supports the work of Ome (2013) who found that men, compared to women, are more likely to seek the assistance of a third party (i.e., the friend), or seek the assistance of an arbitrator to solve relationship problems. Furthermore,

Duane (1989) found that women were less inclined to avoid grievance-related issues, tended to be more competitive, and were less likely to accommodate their opponents' demands compared with men. These factors may also contribute to men being more inclined to talk with friends, especially if the partner is someone who is generally highly stressed.

Future Directions

A more systemic understanding of how couples engage in RW and the physiological implications that these discussions may have on couples could benefit not only the partners and friends involved but also mental health clinicians and medical providers alike. Future researchers should first look to conduct studies with a more diverse sample of emerging adults in an attempt to increase the generalizability of the findings. This increase in diversity would be an important expansion from the current study as the previous literature suggests that certain racial minorities, as well as same-sex couples, tend to rely more heavily on their social networks than their majority counterparts (Julien, Chartrand, & Begin, 1999; Shook, Jones, & Forehand, 2010). Because stress has been associated with numerous physical and mental health outcomes for individuals (DeLongis, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1988), future researchers should strive to conduct longitudinal studies of these constructs over time in order to examine possible physical and mental health outcomes that may result from prolonged physiological stress, as well as relationship outcomes (i.e., romantic stability, relationship satisfaction, relational certainty).

Researchers should also strive to consider the topic of romantic problems being discussed with partners and friends. It is highly likely that the topic chosen (e.g., relations with in-laws, finances, sexual dissatisfaction, disagreements over leisure activities) plays a significant role in the varying level of stress experienced when engaging in RW with partner and friend, with some topics being more physiologically arousing to talk about than others. This should be examined in

addition to accounting for friends' romantic relationship status and quality. Considering that positivity is related to cultural norms regarding the value of happiness (Diener, Napa-Scollon, Oishi, Dzokoto, & Suh, 2000), it is probable that a friend who is in a high-quality romantic relationship, with higher levels of overall happiness may have a different influence, and provide different feedback, than one who has never dated or has had negative dating experiences.

Future research should also attempt to examine these variables at different points in the lifespan. Research has established that older couples spend significantly less time solving relationship problems than emerging adult couples (Carstensen et al., 1999; Jensen & Rauer, 2015). Thus, differences such as these when it comes to handling relationship problems require one to consider what possible moderating variables may contribute to the differences in RW at later stages in life. Lastly, future researchers are encouraged to examine similar variables from the current study in a clinical setting. Mental health clinicians undoubtedly will encounter couples whose relationship with their social networks will have an impact on their partnership. Perhaps researchers and clinicians should begin to examine the impact of involving friends in couples' therapy, or at the least, more accurately account for their impact on the relationship.

Strengths and Limitations

There are several strengths of the current study, including its mixed method design, which included both self-report and objective psychophysiological assessments. To our knowledge, the investigation of physiological stress in the context of relationship discussions, specifically about romantic problems with partners and friends, had not been previously examined. It was also advantageous that we used multiple measures of social functioning (e.g., friend approval, RW with partners and friends) to understand the nuances of communicating about romantic problems during emerging adulthood. Furthermore, we assessed dyadic data as

opposed to others who only considered RW among one member of the couple (Jensen & Rauer, 2015, Proulx et al., 2004).

Despite these strengths, there were several limitations that merit attention and should be addressed in the future. Although the sample size was justifiable given our hypotheses, future studies examining similar constructs should aim to secure more couples. Specifically, greater diversity within the sample should be sought. Our sample contained primarily heterosexual couples and given that same-sex couples rely significantly more on their social networks than heterosexual couples, it would be beneficial to extend the research beyond male-female relationships (Shook, Jones, & Forehand, 2010). Another potential limitation of this study includes the possibility of the observer effect, which is a form of reactivity in which the influence of being observed alters the participants' behavior in an experiment (Monahan & Fisher, 2010). Despite our attempts to address this challenge through the use of a baseline assessment of physiology, some participants may have felt uncomfortable being observed and this may have altered their GSR levels. Additionally, the use of a multi-question assessment may have more thoroughly captured social network approval and provided a more comprehensive understanding of this construct, as opposed to the single-item construct we utilized. One final limitation of this study is the use of the GSR measure. Although GSR is a valid measure/indicator of stress, other emotions (i.e., excitement, shame or doubt) may also increase skin conductance. It is difficult to tease apart the emotions tied to elevated GSR levels. Thus, future studies should consider using quantitative and qualitative measures of stress to enhance internal validity.

Clinical Implications and Conclusions

The discussion of romantic problems has been long associated with the success or failure of romantic relationships. With emerging adulthood being a time when individuals explore and focus on developing healthy romantic relationships, it is critical that researchers understand the multifaceted implications and variables that can impact the formation of these intimate bonds. It is essential that researchers continue to enhance understanding of the complex relationships among these variables, especially because of their links with romantic quality and stability. Our findings point to the importance of the effect that social network approval has on discussing romantic problems with partners and friends, as well the psychophysiological response that turning to a friend over a partner can have on individual and couple well-being. This is especially important as it further clarifies the meaningful influence of the social network on romantic functioning described by Huston (2000) in his socioecological model of romantic functioning.

Researchers aspiring to gain an in-depth understanding of the implications that these variables can have on romantic relationships should closely examine the topic of choice for each partner, affective responses, the relational history of the friend, and the ability of the friends' reaction to alter the partners' physiological response. This research will begin to inform therapists regarding preferred ways of disclosing romantic problems to the social network, and productive strategies friends might use when acting as a confidant in such situations. Clinicians should strive to consider the impact of involving friends in romantic disputes and more thoroughly assess for third-party involvement when working with couples in therapy. It may be beneficial for clinicians to expand the therapeutic system to include friends more actively in therapy, given that talking with friends about relationship problems is stressful for each partner. This may prove valuable in addressing romantic communication issues in therapy. Regarding

women's stress influencing men to turn to friends, therapists may be able to make use of mindfulness meditation, acceptance and commitment techniques, and diaphragmatic breathing in order to reduce stress, which may in turn influence couples to turn more toward each other. Clinicians should also encourage couples to have these discussions face-to-face, as both men and women prefer this mode of communication than any other, and it leaves less room for misinterpretations when communicating. With researchers and clinicians alike being able to more effectively inform couples on how to engage in RW in healthy ways, we are optimistic that relationship outcomes, such as romantic quality and stability, will be improved, ultimately producing more satisfying and enduring relationships.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board Office
4N-70 Brody Medical Sciences Building· Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** · **www.ecu.edu/irb**

Notification of Continuing Review Approval: Expedited

From:	Social/Behavioral IRB
To:	Jake Jensen
CC:	Matthew Fish
Date:	3/7/2017
Re:	CR00005621 UMCIRB 15-000679 Relationship Work in Young Adults Study

The continuing review of your expedited study was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) is for the period of 3/7/2017 to 3/6/2018. This research study is eligible for review under expedited category #7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a continuing review/closure application to the UMCIRB prior to the date of study expiration. The Investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

Approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

Document	Description
Areas of Disagreement Survey(0.01)	Additional Items
Classroom Recruitment Script(0.01)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Friend Questionnnaire(0.01)	Surveys and Questionnaires
Informed Consent: No More Than Minimal Risk Research(0.01)	Consent Forms
Original Research Prospectus (0.01)	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Partner Questionnaire(0.01)	Surveys and Questionnaires
Recruitment Flyer(0.01)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Research Protocol(0.01)	Interview/Focus Group/Scripts/Questions
Revised Recruitment Flyer(0.01)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Study Protocol(0.01)	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Video/Photo Release Form(0.01)	Consent Forms

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.
