Textationships:
An exploratory qualitative study of intimate text-based relationships

by

Jennifer Ann Smith

B. A., University of Wisconsin Green Bay, 2004
M.A., Lakeland University, 2008

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Applied Family Sciences
College of Health and Human Services

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

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Abstract

This qualitative, exploratory study examines how people use communication technology to develop new forms of intimate romantic relationships called *Textationships*. For the first time in human history, individuals are able to transmit billions of bits of text between people around the world. Text communication has morphed beyond its original informational uses; it now includes deeply personal exchanges. Utilizing a collective case study design, a diverse sample of 6 middle-aged women engaged in text-only relationships were interviewed using a semi-structured open-ended questionnaire. Following a pilot phase to enhance its reliability and content validity, the final questionnaire targeted three key domains guiding research – context, intimacy, and motivation. Thematic coding of their narrative responses by two experienced coders was conducted. Several themes were reliably derived within each of the relationship domains. Within-case analyses revealed that the participants achieved high levels of intimacy and interdependence in their Textationships. Between-case themes included avoidance, secrecy, investment, interdependence, online disinhibition and issues of distance. Discussion of research implications and specific suggestions for future research are presented.

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Approved by:

Major Professor
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This qualitative, exploratory study examines how people use communication technology to develop new forms of intimate romantic relationships called *Textationships*. For the first time in human history, individuals are able to transmit billions of bits of text between people around the world. Text communication has morphed beyond its original informational uses; it now includes deeply personal exchanges. Utilizing a collective case study design, a diverse sample of 6 middle-aged women engaged in text-only relationships were interviewed using a semi-structured open-ended questionnaire. Following a pilot phase to enhance its reliability and content validity, the final questionnaire targeted three key domains guiding research – context, intimacy, and motivation. Thematic coding of their narrative responses by two experienced coders was conducted. Several themes were reliably derived within each of the relationship domains. Within-case analyses revealed that the participants achieved high levels of intimacy and interdependence in their Textationships. Between-case themes included avoidance, secrecy, investment, interdependence, online disinhibition and issues of distance. Discussion of research implications and specific suggestions for future research are presented.

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List of Key Words

Textationship	Romantic Relationships that take place on a device
CMC	Computer Mediated Relationship
CMIR	Computer Mediated Interpersonal Relationship
FtF	Face to Face
Connectedness Oriented Communication	Text based communication to create and sustain relationships
Synchronous Communication	Relationships that take place continuously via text

Dedication

To my family. Andrew, my wonderful partner, for making me write that first letter, telling me every day that I can do this, and for more support than anyone deserves. Abigail and Aubrianna for supporting me and loving me despite my mental absence these past few years. I hope you have seen that it is possible to exceed your own expectations.

To Dr. DeSanto, thank you for the inspiration and help in making this happen

To Dr. Bartell, my first teacher and best friend, who saw a scholar in me when all I saw was a student. I would NOT have done this without you!

To Dr. Scheidt, who helped me find the scholar inside and shared so much of his knowledge with me. I will forever be grateful for all of our long talks and to be your last Ph.D. student. Lucky me.

Chapter 1 - Introduction to the Problem

This chapter introduces the uncharted topic of a specific form of smartphone-based texting relationships called Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) relationships or Computer Meditated Intimate Relationships (CMIR). These are defined as "absent-present" romantic relationships between two individuals that take place on a smartphone or other text-based communication devices that begin and end with minimal or completely without Face-to-Face (FtF) relational interaction. The term '"absent-presence"' is used to describe this technological experience as presence of an individual (through technology) who is physically absent (Gergen, 2002). Research restricts the study to phones because of their mobility and accessibility, which allows the users unlimited connection to their partner (Ling, Bertel, Sundsoy, 2012). The Urban Dictionary (n.d.) calls these intimate relationships "Textationships" though there is little current scholarly literature on this term found. The term "Textationship" very clearly defines the phenomenon to be studied and will heretofore be used to define it. There is much research on the use and impact of text-based communication within existing romantic relationships, yet there is almost nothing on the development and character of purely text-based intimate *romantic* relationships. This study explored how and why individuals are forming this new and unique variation of an intimate relationship using their smartphones.

To lay a foundation for this exploration, an overview of established relationship science will be presented, including the existing definitions of FtF relationships and their attributes. It would be impossible to understand the development of Intimate Textationships without also exploring the relevant cohort history to help provide context. As a result of these new device options in our technology-filled environment, there are notable differences in how individuals can present themselves and subsequently engage with one another. Some of the noted changes

occurring through technology that are complicating relationships are: the "packaged self", otherwise known as edited self-presentation; an increased drive to be publicly recognized; an inflated sense of importance, and a penchant toward immediate gratification (Gardner & Davis, 2013). These are among the topics considered in the literature review section. It is also of import to present current research on how individuals are using CMC to establish and meet their relationship needs. The origin of many research endeavors stems from observation of one's personal interaction with an unexplained or undefined phenomenon. Thus, the personal narrative inspiring this work is also introduced. The chapter concludes with an overview of the purposes and basic design of this study.

It is necessary to note the topics that are close in nature to Intimate Textationships that will intentionally *not* be considered in this study. Relationships that begin through technology occur in many venues and on many platforms like social media and computer gaming (Turkle, 1995). The relationships that exist on these platforms will not be considered in this exploratory study because they take place amidst the extraneous influences inherent to those venues. The influence of individual personality characteristics on relationship choice are also not considered in this exploratory study as those factors await a separate study. Entirely asynchronous relationships that take place via email or through other applications are not included because it is the nature of frequent and continuous access that act as the catalyst for the development of the Intimate Textationship. Finally, a question asking if sexting is a part of the relationship was asked but not explored in depth in this study. The intimacy being considered is created from the cognitive interdependence defined as the thinking that motivates and supports relationship motives and behaviors. (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston 1998). Though sexting may be part of these Intimate Textationships, an extensive body of literature already exists on the varied

aspects of this kind of technological engagement (Weisskirch, & Delevi, 2011; Mori, Cooke, Temple, Ly, Lu, Anderson, Madigan; 2020).

Smartphones and their texting capabilities are having an impact on many aspects of modern living, including romantic relationships though very little research currently exists. Analysis of phone records shows a marked increase in text messaging, while calling has decreased during the same timeframe (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell & Purcell, 2012). Research suggests that dyads are using smartphones to create connection in purely text-based relationships and appear to be creating intimacy and sharing their lives in the "absent-presence" (Gergen, 2002). The depth of intimacy, emotion, and honest disclosure is unknown within these relationships. Additionally, the level of fulfillment the participants are gleaning from these relationships is unknown. In order to determine if these are intimate relationships, if they involve commitment, and can be considered interdependent, exploratory research is needed.

As pervasive and immersive technology use is barely a decade old, it is vital that social science seizes the opportunity to discover the impact it is having and will have on its participants (Ling, 2012). This exploratory study aims to "maximize the discovery of generalizations leading to description and understanding of an area of social [and] psychological life" that has not been explored in this way before (Stebbens, 2001, p.3). As with all new exploration it is paramount not to appraise the initial study in the new field as though it were a confirmatory undertaking…and fret over design…or over literature review and minimize the importance of the original ideas being brough to light" (Stebbens, 2001, p. 5). This study is intended to explore the future work that can be done in this area as even more discovery is made about the impact of man and machine.

The exploratory domains that will guide this study are: 1. *Intimacy*. Do Intimate Textationships meet the criteria that define the elements of FtF romantic relationships for the participants, notably through reciprocal sharing and self-disclosure, mutual intimacy, interdependence and commitment? 2. *Context*. Using the tenets of the Lifespan Developmental Process Theoretical Framework (Overton, 2010), the study will address how individuals utilize CMC text-based technology to meet their relationship needs. 3-*Motivation*. What personal needs stimulate (i.e. loneliness, fear of aloneness, need for intimate social connection, unmet needs within primary relationships and comfort with the ambiguous aspects) and are satisfied via participant involvement in Intimate Textationships?

It is important to understand the perspective of the researcher and her connection to the topic. Thus, I will begin with a personal narrative:

Personal experience.

In my first year of teaching college as an adjunct lecturer in 2008, my cell phone number was listed on the syllabus as a convenience to the students. In a few short weeks I began to receive text messages asking about due dates and assignments. These were followed a few weeks later by personal messages about a sick child or terrible boss. A short time later I began receiving reports about job interviews and first dates and not long after came bids for lengthy intimate engagement. Students wanted to know me, wanted to share personal aspects of their lives with me and seemed to want me in their friend group. I had only owned a cell phone with texting capabilities for less than a year and was rather surprised people were seeking this level of intimacy and interdependence through a smartphone. My training as a counselor allowed me to ask questions and get honest answers that I found I could not obtain when I spoke to these same students face-to-face. I wondered if it was due primarily to the absent-present nature of the

device and of the texting- technology. The next semester I took my phone number off the

syllabus, but my interest in this phenomenon of open-sharing via computer mediated

communications was piqued.

Statement of Problem

Technology affects virtually every facet of life. In its wake, people are interacting in new

and very different ways. In the course of history, technology has altered the way we think. The

pen and paper precipitated shared thoughts and the printing press allowed those thoughts to

become widespread and readily available. The telephone created more intimacy by adding voice

to the interaction allowing people to interact from almost any distance and at any time. These

advances pale compared to the current panoply of technological tools that can be used to

facilitate engagement and share thoughts. This study focuses on how individuals employ

technology, specifically hand-held computers, to satisfy the very basic need of developing

intimate interdependent connections. Evolutionary theory suggests our progenitors used intimate

disclosure as a process to create meaningful bonds that would, in turn, help ensure their survival

(Cacioppo, Hawkley, Ernst, Burleson, Berntson, Nouriani, & Spiegel 2006). Survival in our

modern world compels us toward a more modern kind of dependency upon others, but the

evolutionary drive for desired social connection seems to remain.

In order to utilize technology to meet our needs for intimate connection, we have adapted

our communication style to allow us to connect in the absent-presence of another (Gergen,

2002). This adaptation process can be explained in the Online Disinhibition Effect, (Suler, 2004)

which elucidated six interactive behaviors that allow individuals to create levels of openness and

sharing through their technological text communications (Suler, 2004). These "Online

Disinhibition Effect" factors illuminate the mechanisms individuals are using to create intimate connections through CMC channels.

The six factors of the Online Disinhibition Effect (Suler, 2004) are: *dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination,* and *minimization of status and authority*. All six of these factors are observed in various online behaviors and are demonstrated in the following ways: (1) *Dissociative anonymity,* allows individuals to "separate their actions online from their in-person lifestyle and identity" and allows them to "feel less vulnerable about self-disclosure" (Suler, 2004, p. 322); This creates a way for individuals to engage in premature self-disclosure and thus to find a sense of emotional attachment that may not really exist (2) The *invisibility* afforded to the users by the smartphone or computer, "gives people the courage to…[say] things they otherwise wouldn't," including emotional expressions that may not be authentic (Suler, 2004, p. 322); (3) The *asynchronistic* nature of their interactions allows individuals the opportunity to engage when they choose. This means they are not required to read the responses or take responsibility for any harm or disingenuous conveyance they may have expressed. In many cases, the sender never goes back to engage in the conversation, like an "emotional hit and run" (Suler, 2004, p.323); (4) One of the most affecting aspects in CMC engagement is the concept of *solipsistic introjection* where, absent a physical person, the individual user may feel his/her mind has merged with the recipient of the message. "Reading another person's message might be experienced as voice within one's head, as if that person's psychological presence and influence have been assimilated or introjected into one's psyche" becoming a "character within one's intrapsychic world" (Suler, 2004, p.323); (5) *Dissociative imagination* occurs when a person chooses to create an online persona separate from his/her real life. "They split or dissociate online fiction from fact" (Suler,

2004, p.324). The lines between reality and fantasy become blurred, and individuals act in ways that are not authentic (Turkle, 2011). These six effects are present throughout much of the literature on CMC communications and theory, and will be foundational in understanding the nature of the intimacy generated in the absence of a partner.

In this study, the term Textationships refers specifically to text-based messages sent via a smartphone/mobile computer. These kinds of communications can also be called Instant Messaging (IM) when they occur in a social media application. This transmission of text is a communication between two or more individuals using typed words that can be transmitted using a cellphone, smartphone, computer or device "App". This type of communication can be used in a synchronous or asynchronous pattern with some users having brief text chats and others having very long text threads that occur over days and even weeks. The level of closeness shared between the Textationship participants is a determinant in the speed and frequency of the text exchanges. Texting allows quick and private information sharing between two users but has also evolved into a very controlled form of communication where relationships between two people can play out without ever meeting Face-to-Face.

To date there are relatively few studies on this new style of text-based relationship. Most, if not all, were conducted more than a decade ago, before the current level of technology saturation. Dr. Joseph Walther, a pioneer in the field of Computer Mediated Communication behaviors said, "Once social media took over, the study of CMC text relationships moved more toward modality switching and the integration between CMC and FtF" (Walther, personal communication, September 9, 2019). This suggests that only a subset of Textationships have chosen to stay entirely in the area of text-based relationships without branching out into social media or video engagement. Psychologist Sherry Turkle, founder of the MIT initiative to study

technology and self, related that she had not seen any research in this very specific area of text-based relationships (Turkle, Personal Communications, October 8, 2019).

The recent research on technology use in romantic dyadic relationships has focused on the challenges and issues that emerge from the relationship partners learning to integrate technology into their FtF communication patterns. Technology seems to present yet another way to have difficult discussions in the "absent-presence" (Gergen, 2002) of the significant other (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016; Morey, Gentzler, Creasy, Oberhauser & Westerman, 2013). Research suggests Textationships are beginning during adolescence, for the digital generation, and are now evidenced through middle age (Gardner & Davis, 2013; Kuwabara, Watanabe, Ohguro, Itoh & Maeda, 2008; Lenhart, Ling, Cambell & Purcell, 2010; Ling, 2004).

The literature on computer-mediated communications among mid-life users is under-studied, perhaps because the cell phone saturation happened for them during adolescence or emerging adulthood, which makes this an ideal population to study. This historical effect distinction makes this population ideal for exploring the phenomenon of Textationships as they have a perspective of life before these technology-based relationships. Additionally, individuals between the ages of 35-50 have had a variety of relationships and many family permutations (Antonucci, Akkiyama & Merline, 2010). A middle-aged sample allows more exploration of context precisely because they are NOT digital natives and because they may have more non-technology mediated experience with loneliness, self-disclosure, intimacy, and commitment. Additionally, older individuals will be more likely to have more relationship history to allow for a more mature view on the impact of contextual factors as well as loneliness (Antonucci, Akkiyama & Merline, 2010). Research suggests mid-life is a time of higher life satisfaction and mastery and better health with fewer psychological issues (Aldwin & Levenson, 2001). This

developmental context of middle age may allow for a more nuanced exploration of and a more textured view into Intimate Textationships.

Purpose

Technological changes have rapidly altered the way human interaction occurs. Studies on the challenges of computer mediated communication in relationships can be found in a diverse array of disciplines including: Communications and Journalism, Psychology, Sociology, Business, Medicine, Kinesiology, Neuroscience, and Marketing. Research on the effects of technology in relationships and social interactions continue to surface, bringing with them new issues to study. The purpose of this study is to explore text-based intimate romantic relationships, the nature of the disclosures exchanged within these dyads, intimacy achieved, the characteristics of the relationships, how the partners deal with the inherent ambiguous nature of the relationships and the circumstances wherein they thrive. While these relationships seem ubiquitous, they have not been fully explored (Turkle, 2011). Research in Japan on individuals engaging in these intimate Textationships suggests that they are considered a romantic relationship alternative and appear to be a conscious choice of the participants due to the high degree of control afforded to the sender and the receiver (Kenichi, 2015).

The present study proposes to explore three primary questions: 1. *Intimacy*. Do Intimate Textationships meet the criteria that define the elements of Face-to-Face romantic relationships for the participants, notably through reciprocal sharing and self-disclosure, mutual intimacy, interdependence and commitment? 2. *Context*. Using the tenets of the Lifespan Developmental Process Theoretical Framework (Overton, 2010), the study will address how individuals utilize CMC text-based technology to meet their relationship needs. 3. *Motivation*. What personal needs stimulate (i.e. loneliness, fear of aloneness, need for intimate social connection, unmet

needs within primary relationships and comfort with the ambiguous aspects) and are satisfied via participant involvement in Intimate Textationships?

These exploratory domains will guide the six case study interviews on the nature of Intimate Textationships. To date, only two studies have been identified that offer a glimpse into computer mediated communication intimate text-based romantic relationships. The first was adapted from a 2006 dissertation when internet saturation and cell phone ownership was below 50% (Statista, 2018). Anderson and Emmers-Sommer (2006) conducted their study under the assumption that CMC intimate relationships qualified as 'relationships' based on their dyadic interaction. This inference was in spite of the fact that these relationships were being played out entirely on a computer, which heretofore had been purposefully ignored in the study of romantic relationships (Duck, 2006).

The Anderson and Emmers-Sommer (2006) study focused on the predictors of relationship satisfaction in online romantic relationships. The predictors included: dyad similarity, commitment, intimacy, trust, attributional confidence, and communication satisfaction using eight reliable and valid measures administered in a web-based survey format. The participants (N=114, ages 18-62, *M* age=31.49 *SD* = 9.88) were volunteers and were involved in an online relationship at the time of the study and had met their online partners serendipitously. The average length of the relationships was 27.17 weeks (*SD*=20.03). The participants reported spending, on average, 17.64 hours a week (*SD* = 14.20) with their online partner. Communication, intimacy, and trust predicted satisfaction with the relationship. Individuals in these Textationships who texted more frequently with their online partners reported having higher satisfaction, more intimacy and more homophily. More frequent communication was also more predictive of satisfaction with the relationship than length of the relationship. This study

suggested, for the first time, that these dyadic engagements were relationships and that the participants were finding some satisfaction in them.

The second study (Turner & Lawler, 2010) on Computer Mediated Intimate Relationships (CMIR) was a 2009 dissertation utilizing a mixed-method design. This research investigated the characteristics of those who engaged in these Textationships, the role that loneliness played in these relationships, and whether the lack of face-to-face alternatives influenced the desire to engage with their partner. Using the revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell, 1996) and the Quality of Alternatives Index (Simpson, 1987), Turner collected demographic and descriptive data and conducted this online snowball survey with 317 (229 female) voluntary participants in age cohorts ranging from 18-65 years. Findings revealed that participants who reported that the CMIR was their primary relationship also expressed more loneliness than those who had other primary relationships. These respondents also reported that their offline relationship alternatives were significantly lower. The respondents seemed to employ multi-modalities in their technological communications, as 40% of the respondents said they only engaged with their partners using text. Seventy eight percent of the respondents said the CMIR developed organically and that they did not look for a Textationship or intend for it to happen and 71% said they had engaged in sexual chat with their text partner. Individuals in this study reported spending between two and eight hours per day texting with their partner. Respondents also claimed that it was faulty to think dyads involved in CMIR want the relationship to be FtF or that they would even prefer an offline relationship. This study offers the most comprehensive glimpse, until now, into some of the attributes of the participants in engaging in these relationships.

The present study used established relationship research from Face-to-face (FtF) dyadic romantic relationships to guide the inquiry into this new domain of Textationships. In FtF dyadic romantic relationships, the defining feature of interdependence is defined as "a relationship in which the behavior of each participant affects the other" (Bradbury and Karney, p. 7, 2014) and cognitive interdependence is thinking that motivates and supports relationship motives and behaviors (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston 1998). An important aspect of the Textationship explored in this study is intimacy. Intimacy is defined as the closeness developed within a relationship that comes from the emotional sharing between individuals and the subsequent responsive behaviors that leads to deepening trust (Kelley, Berscheid, Christensen, Harvey, Huston, Levinger, McClintock, Peplau, & Peterson, (2002). Finally, the Investment Model taken from Interdependence Theory employed to ascertain the levels of satisfaction, quality of alternatives and investment level of the individuals participating in these relationships (Rusbult, Martz & Agnew, 1998).

Significance of the Study

Technologically based communications have changed how we engage in our daily intimate interactions over the course of life. This makes this a topic that can be accommodated through the contextual worldview of Lifespan Human Development. The changes in our interactions are being felt from the earliest moments of life when infants are attempting rudimentary engagement with their mothers, who may be scrolling through their phones in a very new pattern of nurturing (Chatton, Kannon & Barrows, 2017). Early in life humans develop an emotional model about what they can expect from others, based on how the caregivers of origin met the infant's needs (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). In our current technologically savvy culture,

children are quickly learning to use the tools present in their environment to engage (McDaniel and Coyne, 2016). In normative development, identity exploration begins by experimentation, interaction with others and observation of the surrounding world (Erikson, 1959). A very large part of this identity development is dependent on interactions with others. Modern young people have grown up in a very new world from the one their parents inhabited. This generation is often referred to as the "digital native generation" because they have never lived in a world without computer-based communications technology. These technologically adept individuals have grown up understanding they must share their parent's attention and time with these devices (Radesky, Miller, Rosenblum, Appugliese, Kaciroti, Lumeng, 2015; Reed, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2017). Children in this generation have been the unwitting recipients of technological babysitting (Radesky, Peacock-Chambers, Zuckerman, Silverstein 2016). The vast majority of them have their own device or devices and most of them have several social media identities (Gardner & Davis, 2013), and they are developing intimate, interdependent technologically tethered relationships very differently from their parents (Turkle, 2011; Twenge, 2017).

This study examines how people are using technology to develop new forms of intimate romantic relationships. Society is engaged in, for the first time ever, the transmission of billions of bits of text between people all over the world. The uses of text communications have morphed from not just informational purposes but now include deeply personal exchanges. People have now adapted to and are developing relationships using text characters and emojis. Exploratory interviews in this study examined the varied aspects of these romantic relationships developed through technology to consider how they meet the needs of the individual.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

In order to understand the variables being considered within Intimate Textationships, it is important to understand the research area of CMC and how it has evolved to become a medium for romantic relationships. The first section of this chapter offers a history and overview of the research on texting and CMC intimate engagement and the ways texting has evolved to become a foundation for Intimate Textationships. The subsequent section reviews research that illuminates the elements of each exploratory domains being investigated, further explicating the study's three major purposes. The final section of this chapter will review behavioral theories relevant to and supportive of the participant behaviors in the exploration of Intimate Textationships.

Computer Mediated Communications (CMC), text messaging statistics and patterns.

The first text message was successfully sent in 1992 followed by the first mobile phone to have keyboard capabilities in 1997. Humans did not quickly adapt, with users only sending 0.4 text messages a month in that first year (Turkle, 2011). Facebook, the first of the three big social media sites, (Facebook, Istagram, Twitter), was launched in 2003 when only13% of the population had an in-home computer internet connection and a mere 54% of population in the U.S. had a mobile phone. Statista estimates that 102% of the population has a mobile phone (2018). This number takes into consideration cell phones owned by big business and considers that many people have more than one phone.

Computer mediated communication (CMC) is ubiquitous in our current society. In 2008 in the United States, statistics gathered on mobile phone use demonstrated that customers preferred CMC to phone calls (Neilson, 2008). The 10 largest message apps have over 3 billion subscribers with the largest app handling more than 7 trillion messages in a given year (The

Economist, 2015). In June of 2017, 781 billion text messages were sent in the United States alone (Statistic Brain, 2017). The population at that time was estimated at about 327 million (U.S. Census, 2019). Apple confirmed that their iMessage application handles approximately 200,000 text message per second with about 750 million iPhones in use globally (Business Insider, 2016). Private texting also occurs inside most social media platforms including the big three of Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, where the users can communicate with one another in the privacy of a one-on-one text box/page. User statistics on the chat message use in social media applications could not be procured by this researcher because they are either not compiled or not published. The number of text messages sent is voluminous and suggests that we are doing more than just handling instructive business in our short message exchanges.

Invisible conversations are going on all around us, all the time. Many smartphone users prefer the text feature, or a texting application on the cell phone, to allow them private intimate, instructional, and instrumental conversations (Ling, 2004; Holtgraves & Paul, 2013). Turkle explained CMC behavior observed in her decades of field studies on technology: "[Individuals] prefer texting and avoid calling in order to escape revealing too much" (2011, p.11). How individuals choose to engage in communication is unique to their needs, often influenced by the expectations of those in their sphere and heavily altered by the changes in our society. "As a technical system gains foothold in society, it will begin to impose its own logic and rearrange the context into which it is diffusing" (Ling, 2012, p.87). The smartphone and our use of text communication seems to have altered our communication patterns.

Researchers Ling and Troels (2012) examined the socio-demographics of texting among a sample of 394 million anonymous text exchanges using data collected from the mobile company Telenor in Norway. The data set had details on gender and age and it was found that

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the majority of text message users were teens through young adults followed by adults aged 37-57. These findings are not surprising as the privacy of CMC offers emerging adults the independence and emancipation they seek. The researchers attributed the decrease in texting in the older group to 'life-phase' as opposed to cohort effect. They also found that the highest rate of exchange was from female initiators to male, followed by male initiators to female. The research also revealed that texting is a small social group behavior in that most texters only texted six or so other people with any frequency. An unexplained finding is this research was the rise in female-to-female texting around the age of 45 which the authors purport could be explained by children becoming more independent, allowing women more freedom to communicate (Ling & Troels, 2012). No large-scale population research of this kind was available in the United States.

CMC text messaging users and patterns.

Using the communication-based Uses and Gratification Theory Grellhesl and Punyanunt-Carter (2013) analyzed the seven most highly sought-after reasons or "gratifications" found in CMC smartphone practices using a survey of southwestern undergraduates (N=513). They discovered that the 'accessibility and mobility' of the device ranked equally as the first reason and was slightly higher for women. In second and third place were relaxation followed by escape, with a slightly higher preference by the female members of the sample. The fourth on the list was entertainment, followed by information seeking, coordination of events, and, finally, socialization and affection (2013). This study suggests CMC phone users find the portability of the device paramount but followed closely by the need to escape and socialize.

Patterns of CMC text behaviors seem to be linked to age and sex as well as personality. A survey study (LaBowe, 2011) assessing general texting behaviors and attitudes was conducted

using 485 volunteer students. Forty-four percent of the respondents preferred texting over talking, and the findings suggest that women, extroverts, and younger members of the study texted more often than others in the study. It was also found that many of the participants used texting intentionally in order to keep someone at a distance. Pettigrew (2009) conducted interviews with a snowball sample of 38 dyads of text-communicators in diverse kinds of relationships with the intent to examine more closely the nature of their text interactions. Thematic analysis showed that the frequency of engagement was most heavily influenced by a need for connectedness, autonomy and privacy for and between the participants. The participants enjoyed the ability to engage with someone who was at a distance, while still being physically present with others in the moment. All the participants acknowledged that texting behavior distanced them from the people in their present FtF environment. Participants preferred the discreet format that text communications offered and found that the valuation (speed with which they responded, frequency and depth of texting) of the text communications were predominantly influenced by the type of relationship that existed between the dyads (2009). These two studies suggest that personality, intimacy and convenience, among other things, are factors that influence texting patterns and behaviors. The phenomenological researcher Max van Manen explained "Technologies allow people to feel close and in touch while they may be separate in space and time" (van Manen, 2010, p.1025).

       CMC as a Connectedness Oriented Communication.

"Connectedness Oriented Communication" is a term coined by researchers Kuwabara,Watanabe, Ohguro, Itoh, and Maeda to describe the use of CMC text communication as a way for people to cultivate and conserve social relationships. The goal of this kind of text CMC is to make someone frequently aware of an individual's presence and foster a feeling of

connectedness in a non-intrusive way (2002). Howard Gardner's research supports this notion of "Connectedness Oriented Communication" from the themes found in the focus group portion of his decade long study on technology and adolescents. He finds that "many of today's youth consider it less intrusive to send a text rather than call someone" frequently when they want to make their presence known (2013, p. 136).

Text communications come with a common expectation of almost immediate reciprocity (Turkle, 2011; LaBowe, 2011; Pettigrew, 2009). Upon receiving and reading a text, social conventions now dictate a response should be sent within five seconds of reading the text if the relationship is of high import (Pew Research, 2015; Turkle, 2011). The expectation of an immediate response does not allow much time for the author to become a persuasive wordsmith before hitting send. Teenagers report becoming upset and feeling rejected if someone leaves a text "unread" for more than 10 minutes (Twenge, 2017). In Japan, where texting is used more than any other form of communication, a survey was conducted using liberal arts college students (N=218) assessing text-message response behaviors. The findings suggest the students expected immediate responses when the text was sent to a possible romantic interest, if they were lonely, if they were making plans, and if the sender themselves had the free time text (Kato & Kato, 2015). This suggests that there is a value placed by the sender on the expected response time of a sent text communication, especially if the recipient is a romantic interest.

CMC and empathy.

An experimental research study conducted by neuroscientists Silani, Lamm, Ruff, Christian and Singer (2013) utilized fMRI scans with 191 participants. The participants were asked to view two-scenarios that had been previously established as stimulating the right supramarginal gyrus, largely found to be the area of the brain where empathic responsiveness

capacity resides. The findings suggested that quick decision making (much like the immediate responses seen in CMC) appears to circumvent the area of the brain considered the home of empathy and emotion. Modern text communications do not allow much time for the deep empathic considerations that allow most humans "to be psychologically in tune with others' feelings and perspectives" in order to develop and maintain intimate connections (Decety & Lamm, 2006. p.11).

In an experimental study conducted with 188 volunteer participants, Holtzman, DeClerck, Turcotte, Lisi and Woodworth (2017) examined how or if intentional CMC texting is capable of offering support during times of stress compared to support coming from a live person. The volunteers were placed in one of several stressful conditions and assigned a method of social support between live, text messaging or no support. The researchers found that when facing the stressful situation, having social support from a person is the most preferred resource, and those who had text message support reported experiencing only slightly less stress than those who had no form of support at all (2017). This suggests that texting may offer some support, but that it has limitations in the amount of emotional support that can be offered.

Emoticon use.

Emoticons are used to convey emotion in text communications, and they do assist in framing the emotion of the messages (Nelson, Tossell, & Kortum, 2015). Research conducted on emoticon use in CMC text exchanges has found a link to greater satisfaction and enjoyment of text message communication, eliminated some of the difficulty in communicating with text messages, and increased the richness of the messages being sent and received. Additionally, higher memory recall was found when emoticons are used in text communications. Emoticon use does not differ tremendously between the sexes in text communications (Huang, Yen & Zhang,

2008). This runs counter to standard cultural expectations as emoticons are used to demonstrate emotions and girls tend to be more expressive than boys in FtF relationships (Nelson, Tossell, & Kortum 2015; Rodrigues, Lopes, Prada, Thompson, & Garrido, 2017). The effort to use emoticons and the subsequent satisfaction derived demonstrates the capacity of the user to adapt to CMC by applying an emotionally charged image with the words being sent (Walther, 2015).

Differences between text and voice communication.

CMC texts are not the same as voice conversations as identified in a study conducted by Holtgraves and Paul (2013) comparing differences in word use. The researchers analyzed the text message threads of 131 mid-western college student participants and then analyzed the words used in 224 phone conversations randomly chosen from a possible 2,307 pre-recorded conversations. The words in the texts and the phone conversations were analyzed and the findings identified the texts as primarily affective and biological in nature while phone conversations were found to be more cognitively driven. Texters reference themselves and their recipients only, rather than information related to other topics. CMC texting appears to be more relational (a mechanism for maintaining social connections) rather than informational. The researchers hypothesized that text messages are sent as a means of social grooming, and as a way of maintaining an affective connection (Ling, 2004). Holtgraves and Paul found that longer words were used in phone conversations and swear words were much more commonly used in CMC texting (2013). This suggests that the choice to use text communications rather than call is intentional because of the nature of the message and the relationship between the sender and receiver.

CMC romantic relationships.

Since the 1990s, Japan has had the highest rate of mobile phone internet use in the world. The synoptic article "Mobile Internet Use in Japan: Text-Message Dependency and Social Relationships" summarizes themes found in the untranslated Japanese research on this topic. When communicating with close friends, intimate disclosure is most closely associated with mobile text messaging followed by mobile phone calling. People younger than age 40 use both CMC and phone complimentarily, and those above age 40 use the phone and CMC alternatively. Respondents say that the most common use of texting is to deepen relationships with close friends and to contact family, but is also used to initiate new, intimate, anonymous relationships. Those who use CMC to create these anonymous relationships (where they engage in high disclosure, communicating personal feelings and consciously choose to avoid a FtF relationship) identify the object of their attentions as an "intimate stranger" (Kenichi, 2015). This is a relatively new term, but it speaks to the need to connect even to strangers. It is perhaps this lack of FtF interaction that allows an individual to manage the possible "threat" they may feel from reaching out.

> Researchers argue that people deliberately control conversational synchronicity using the available feature of the technology they are employing at the time, or by moving to a medium with different features, depending on their needs. For example, someone might choose not to take a mobile phone call based on caller ID in an effort to reduce…synchronicity in the conversation. Similarly, someone who receives a text message and then decides to phone the person who left a message… is deciding a more synchronous mode (Madell & Boyd, 2015, p.136).

The topic of control in the choice to use text communications is further explored in the survey study by Mahatanankoon and O'Sullivan, of 503 college aged students (18-25, 65% female) assessing self-efficacy and locus of control. Using a slightly altered measure of attitudes

(focused toward CMC), a correlation was found between the user's sense of personal locus of control and their preference for, and positive feelings about, using CMC text messaging to communicate with their partner (2008). These studies suggest that some CMC text users are purposely using texting as a means of control in the relationship.

After reviewing the history of CMC text message communications and gaining a sense of how these communications have evolved to include the very intimate and personal, the current research study can now unfold. This qualitative study targets three areas: 1-Intimacy, 2-Context, 3-Motivation. Research literature relevant to each domain is reviewed below.

Exploratory Domain # 1 Intimacy

Do Intimate Textationships meet the criteria that define the elements of Face-to-Face romantic relationships for the participants, notably through reciprocal sharing and self-disclosure, mutual intimacy, interdependence and commitment?

Research and theory on face-to-face relationships.

Text-based relationships have been studied from the perspective of communication, but in order to discover the breadth and impact of this relatively new phenomenon, theory and research from the field of relationship science needs to be applied. The previously mentioned research on CMC text-based dyadic engagements supports that they should now be considered a relationship. Unfortunately, they still currently fall into the category of 'understudied relationships' because their characteristics do not easily fit into current models utilized in understanding intimate relationships (Duck, 2006).

Recent relationship research contained assumptions about 'what defines a relationship' that could restrict the consideration of Textationships as romantic relationships. According to Lea and Spears (1995) a few of these assumptions include: (1) Intimacy can only be developed in

long-term relationships and only in relationships that do not cross social or communication boundaries; (2) We only have relationships with people who are similar to us and with whom we physically interact; (3) Attraction requires a physical presence; (4) Intimate romantic relationships require a physical social environment in order to flourish; (5) Relationships require movement toward a goal (i.e. cohabitation, marriage); (6) The highest form of communication requires FtF verbal exchanges; and (7) The impact of power and influence between the partners in their varied spheres, and, how that context impacts the dyad in the courting process. These assumptions condition and underlie much of the study of FtF relationships (Wood & Duck 1995). While all are considered normative in FtF relationships (i.e., observed in most relationships), they are not assumptions applied to all relationships worthy of study.

More recent research suggests that individuals have adapted to the limitations inherent in Intimate Textationships to establish intimate romantic relationships and have overcome the aforementioned relationship assumptions about what defines a relationship. CMC texting relationships are demonstrating the ability to: (1) jump over the limitations presented by the lack of FtF engagement to very quickly become intimate; (2) find commonality with an individual among a large number of available people; (3) meet a variety of their personal needs absent socially normative scripts and relationship objectives; (4) establish intimacy and attraction through effective use of emojis, images, and the many different modes of CMC, and; (5) establish effective parameters for the Textationship engagement in both short-term and long-term relationships (Koutamanis, Vossen, Peter, & Valkenburg, 2013; Pettigrew, 2009; Rubinsky, 2018; Suler, 1999, 2004; Tidwell & Walther 2002, Turkle, 1995, 2011; Walther et al., 1996, 2015). Research on CMC relationships and engagement is clearly addressing the former assumptions that have come from the relationship science field on what a constitutes an intimate

relationship. This present study will add research to the literature and assist in removing

Textationships from the category of "understudied relationships" (Duck, 2006).

Interdependence and self-disclosure.

In exploring Intimate Textationships, it is important to consider how these romantic

relationships meet the criteria for being interdependent, which is a condition expected in

romantic relationship research. An interdependent social relationship is defined as "A

relationship in which the behavior of each participant affects the other" (Bradbury & Karney,

2014, p. 7). Relationship research pioneer Harold Kelley defined interdependent relationships

using four criteria: (1) the individuals have frequent impact on one another; (2) the impact on one

another in each encounter is strong; (3) the impact involves diverse kinds of activities for each

person; and (4) these behaviors characterize the interconnection between two people for a

relatively long duration (2002, p. 13). Textationships do not appear to meet all of Kelley's

criteria in the same way FtF relationships do, but Kelley's definition was developed considering

only FtF dyadic engagement. Intimate Textationships appear to create a form of interdependence

between the dyadic participants much like FtF relationships do (Turner & Lawler, 2010). More

frequent communication predicted higher satisfaction with CMC text relationships, reminiscent

of the findings in face-to-face relationships (Anderson et al., 2006).

The process by which the partners develop intimacy in fully text-based relationships

differs slightly from FtF relationships. Self-disclosure is commonly considered one of the major

components necessary in the development of intimacy in FtF relationships (Duck, 2006). In

Textationships, the Disinhibition Effect describes the pattern and behaviors often used in

developing and disclosing personal and intimate communication between the partners as

including one or more of: *dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic*

introjection, dissociative imagination, and *minimization of status and authority* (Suler, 2004).

According to relationship scholar Duck, self-disclosure in FtF relationships has usually been modeled in terms of verbal exchange that happens in a relationally scripted fashion (where scripts carry expectations of how much to share at each stage of an emerging relationship) using verbal and non-verbal cues and responses of each partner. Assessing these kinds of self-disclosures assumes two things: (1) that the levels of intimacy can be determined by examining the words the partners use, the topics they discuss and introduce, and (2) that revealing intimacies is like peeling an onion, done in layers that move progressively from less to greater levels of intimacy (2006). Though the pathways differ, the outcome of disclosure seems to happen just the same in Textationships as face-to-face.

According to Reis and Shaver (1988), there are two kinds of self-disclosure identified: factual and emotional. Factual disclosure involves communicating facts about the self while emotional disclosure includes revelations of confidential feelings, views, opinions, and judgments (1988). Some researchers agree that emotional disclosures generate more intimacy as they tend to lay bare feelings that are close to the self and generate an opportunity to share in a quid pro quo fashion (e.g., Greenberg & Safran, 1987; Reis & Shaver, 1988). An experimental study (Edmonstone, Cramer, McMurphy, & Scoboria, 2016) conducted for a master's thesis considered how electronically mediated communications (EMC) impacts FtF communication apprehension and relational intimacy in 94 college student respondents. Each participant engaged in either a synchronous or asynchronous communication with what he/she thought was a fellow participant online, but it was actually the researcher who had had no previous engagement with the participant. The researcher asked progressively more personal questions that would require the participant to self-disclose. The findings suggest that those who had self-reported more

dependence on electronically mediated communications (EMC) were more comfortable with accelerated self-disclosure and actually displayed more apprehension with the FtF relationships. This suggests that long term CMC use actually increases the individual's ability to quickly self-disclose.

An important element in emotional disclosure is empathy, or the ability to feel what another person is feeling. "Empathy is central to social awareness" in engagement with others in order to feel the joy and pain that are fundamental to the development of intimate relationships (Hoffman, 2000, p. 63). Self-disclosure is found to be somewhat easier for technologically savvy individuals and seems to occur more rapidly than in FtF relationships (Tidwell & Walther 2002; Turkle, 1995, 2011; Walther et al., 1996; 2015). The Online Disinhibition Effect describes how the mind rationalizes and justifies the "absent-presence" (Gergen, 2002) that exists in Textationships in order to quickly disclose and develop intimacy (Suler, 2004). Emotion shared through verbal or texted disclosures between dyadic partners creates a deeper level of intimacy than other forms of self-disclosure (Reis & Shaver, 1988). The development of intimacy looks and develops differently in Intimate Textationships, but it appears to be just as present.

Commitment.

While self-disclosure is a vital aspect of establishing intimacy, in order to examine whether exclusive Textationships are intimate relationships, we also need to understand the kind of commitment that exists between the partners in a text-based relationship. Because this relationship style is still relatively unexplored, it is unknown how either participant would establish or profess a commitment. Within relationships science, interdependence is often linked with feelings of commitment (Kelly, 2002). Interdependence Theory suggests that two main

processes establish dependence between partners in FtF relationships: (1) The partners' level of satisfaction with the relationship, which considers the balance between positive and negative affect and whether partners feel their needs are being met; (2) The quality or the desirability of the alternatives available outside of the relationship. If the individuals feel their needs are being met and that they could not do better with an available alternative, then dependence upon their partner is greater (Kelley & Thibault, 1978). The Investment Model of commitment adds the additional element of resource investment to the previously defined Interdependence Theory, suggesting that it is not just satisfaction or possible alternatives but also size of the perceived investment made into the relationship that influence commitment (Rusbult, Martz & Agnew, 1998). Textationships, by design, have a different kind of investment from the participants. Rather than financial investment and social capital, as seen in FtF relationships, Textationships require vast amounts of time and mental energy. Since these relationships have not been studied it is difficult to identify if commitment exists, to what extent and how it is demonstrated.

Uses of CMC texting in romantic relationships.

CMC texting appears to afford adolescents and emerging adults more autonomy and provides a discreet platform to explore romantic relationships (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell & Purcell, 2012). One illustration of this trend in text communicating comes from a snowball sample of 266 heterosexual Australians (*M* age=28, 159 women) who, in an online survey questionnaire, were asked what method, phone or text, they would prefer to use to make the first move with a potential romantic partner or ask them on a date. Females were more likely to use texting to make the first move, and men showed no preference for either communication channel (Byrne & Findlay, 2004). In a study conducted by Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson & Grant (2011), the use of texting in romantic relationships was considered. A randomized sample

(N=1,039, *M* age = 32.31, 60% women) was chosen from the larger original sample who had taken the Relationship Evaluation Questionnaire (N=5,124) and were then used to examine media use in romantic relationship between involved dating partners. The findings revealed that dating partners most frequently use texting to make connections and the most common reason for that connection was to express verbal affection (2011). CMC texting is clearly being used within established romantic relationships to enhance the quality and frequency of connection

CMC texting and multimodality use in sexting within romantic relationships.

CMC texting is much like letter writing, a private affair where the writer and receiver are generally the only individuals privy to the conversations. This does not automatically make messages secretive, but it is a perfect platform for secrecy. Secrecy is conceptualized as the commitment to conceal information (Slepian, Halevy & Galinsky, 2019). Text exchanges can be more easily concealed than phone talking in public settings. It is also used in managing aspects of relationships that might be more difficult in FtF interactions. Sexting behavior is a topic shrouded in secrecy and evidence suggests it is common over all relationship types. One of the early studies by Drouin, Vogel, Surbey and Stills (2013) established a pattern of this kind of behavior in relationships, conducted with a sample of college students (N=253, 148 female) who completed an anonymous online survey asking their participants about their relationship status and sexting behaviors. Two hundred and one of the 253 participants at the time of the survey said they were in a committed relationship with another person at the time of the sexting behavior. Additionally, 78% reported they had sexted with a committed partner, 63% had sexted with a casual sex partner and 55% of the sample said they had sexted with a cheating partner. The overlapping percentages suggest sexting is a common aspect in all forms of relationships and that many committed relationships also have a cheating sexting-partner component.

Rubinsky (2018) explored how participants use technology to engage in the more unconventional aspects of sexuality. She enrolled 162 participants (*M* age 29.01, *SD* 8.68, F=96) to answer an open-ended questionnaire through the sites TUMBLR, Facebook, and Reddit. Her findings revealed four major patterns of communication conduct related to technology use in online sexual behaviors: (1) disinhibition in their communications, (2) multimodality (using different platforms for different behaviors), (3) frequent contact via text to maintain the relationship, and (4) the use of different platforms and application for sexual communications. In a corroborating study exploring the multimodality uses of technology in same-sex friendships, Ledbetter (2009) focused on the issues of distance and frequency. Using a sample of college age participants (N=417, *M* age = 20.4, female 232) from a communications class at a mid-western university, he administered a questionnaire to identity patterns in communication behavior between same-sex friendships. Using factor analysis, he found "media use mediates the relationship between geographic distance and interdependence" and that "media multiplexity is positively associated with interdependence" (2009, p. 1198). Ledbetter also found significant associations between interdependence and synchronous CMC text behaviors (2009). The studies examining how people incorporate CMC texting within their intimate relationships suggest that individuals use many different platforms and applications to convey their messages and the synchronous communication increase interdependence. These findings are similar to FtF relationship expectations in the need for privacy, variety and frequent synchronous conversations for relational maintenance.

Exploratory Domain # 2 Context

Using the tenets of the Lifespan Developmental Process Theoretical Framework (Overton, 2010), the study addressed how individuals utilize CMC text-based technology to meet their relationship needs.

The Process-Relational metatheoretical worldview considers how internal workings of an organism is impacted by context and if there is any possible way to consider one without the other. Once developmentalists started to examine the role of context in the life of the individual, it was ever present and could not be discounted (Overton, 2014). The emergence of technology has had a cataclysmic impact on human-kind and it is unthinkable to study Textationships without first exploring and considering the contextual factors that have led us to this new reality.

Foundational social and historical changes.

CMC romantic relationships appear to fit the criteria of 'relationship', according to relationship science and current research, so we must now consider the changes in society, historical factors, and wider social forces that have supported this new style of engaging. Globalization has allowed for human movement and communication on an unprecedented scale. Humans have acclimated to the changes brought on by the development of technological tools adapting to the common "absent-presence" (Gergen, 2002) of others. Ling states, "The mobile phone has rearranged the conditions of our social interactions" (p. 123, 2012). In order to understand the motivating forces behind CMC intimate text-based romantic relationships for the individual, it is vital to consider the contextual factors that may both drive and support these technology-based relationships in the absence of FtF engagement. This literature review briefly departed from the topic at hand to explore some social changes and consider if society has inadvertently set itself up for technology-based relationships and communications.

There have been some noted changes in human behavior during the same time frame as the swell and subsequent saturation of technology. Ling (2012) suggests that the mobile phone allows us to be more individual and distant in our choices for coordination and communication because of the control afforded by the technology. Technological communication is at once a way to connect with others as well as a way to intentionally create distance between people (Mentor, 2015). The use of CMC to engage in and manage relationships has increased in the last 25 years and along with this development there have been some noticed behavioral and social changes.

In a meta-analytic study investigating changes in empathic concern between 1979 and 2009, researchers compared the scores of 72 samples representing 13,737 college students who answered questions on the empathy measure "Interpersonal Reactivity Index" by Davis (1980). They found a decrease in dispositional empathy (which is linked with prosocial behavior) from the earlier sample compared to the later, and an increase in antisocial behaviors. The largest drop in empathy scores occurred in 2000, in about the time social media and mobile phone availability exploded (Konrath, O'Brien, and Hsing, 2011). Gardner and Davis also found this change in empathy in their ongoing research "Developing Minds and Digital Media" and explain it as 'a generalized disconnect' resulting from very controlled continued absent-present CMC engagement (2013).

In another notable meta-analysis, Twenge et al. analyzed 85 separate samples of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory representing 16,475 college students in the U.S. and found a 30% increase in the mean score between 1979 and 2006 (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008). Along with these changes Twenge found that the number of older adolescents who get together with their friends face-to-face every day has dropped 40% between 1990-2000,

and that rates of depression for girls were up 50% from 2102 to 2015. Along with these changes, self-reported degree of loneliness for adolescents spiked in 2013 and has not dropped, and in 2011 for the first time in 24 years, the rate of suicide was higher for teens than the rate of homicide (Twenge, 2017).

The social changes observed in U.S. society are not limited to younger cohorts. Millennials (born 1981-1996) comprise the largest population group since the Baby Boomers (U.S. Census, 2010). In 1973 the median age for first marriage was 21 for women and 23 for men, compared to 2018 where the age of first marriage for women and men is 28 and 30, respectively. The number of unmarried men in the population in the year 1973 was 23,470 and in 2018 it is almost 60,000 (U.S. Census, 2019). The fertility rate in the U.S. has been on a steady decline since the 1970s. As of 2018 it stood at 1.72 compared to greater than 2.1 (more than replacement level) in 1970 (Center for Disease Control, 2018). According to the Brookings Institute, marriage and birth rates drive economic growth and stability in society (Reeves, 2018).

Marriage and the family unit have also changed, adapting to socio-economic and social changes (Coontz, 2005). In the 2010 U.S. Census only 7% of all family units were made up of a working parent and a stay-at-home parent under the same roof, as compared to 1970 when that number was closer to 40%. These statistics indicate a significant shift in the make-up of households resulting in changes in daily interactions in the lives of families. These changes cannot be cited as reasons for an increase in CMC text relationships, but they denote social changes in intimate relationships that could be considered motivators for people to seek out social connections in other ways. Despite a plethora of communication tools creating connections in the modern world, current research suggests that there are many deeply lonely people for whom that isolation can lead to early mortality (Holt-Lunstad, Smith &Layton 2010).

Exploratory domain # 3 Motivation

What personal needs stimulate (i.e. loneliness, fear of aloneness, need for intimate social connection, unmet needs within primary relationships and comfort with the ambiguous aspects) and are satisfied via participant involvement in Intimate Textationships?

The need for human contact is a motivator for the majority of individuals propelling them, in some way, toward socialization (Gergen, 2002). Technology provides many possible pathways for an individual to safely and securely create and sustain a relationship while remaining at a physical distance from the person they have engaged. Qualitative research conducted in 2012 by researcher Bridges identified loneliness as a major motivator for the 55 individuals (ages of 35-55) he interviewed, who went online in search of a romantic relationship. He goes on to explain the motivating behavior of the participants as "they do hunger for companionship" and "without intimacy they feel alone" (p. 33).

To offer a unbiased look at text-based relationships it is important to present a few studies that do not look at text engagement positively. Park, Lee, & Chung, (2016) studied cell phone texting behaviors with 414 college age participants in southwestern U.S. The participants spent on average 141 minutes daily (*SD* = 164.41 minutes) texting and the researcher found that the *time* an individual spent texting another person led to lower satisfaction with the dyadic relationship, while the *number of texts* between the dyad correlated to higher satisfaction with the relationship. This finding did not seem to make sense until they considered that intimate dyads exchanged texts more frequently and unfamiliar dyadic relationships took more time to text. Additionally, the time an individual spent text messaging did not impact loneliness, but the number of texts sent were negatively correlated with loneliness. The researcher also found that texters spent less time texting their close social circle and more time texting others outside of

their group. This could be because of the time needed to "present" their socially constructed self via text (Gardner, 2013; Twenge, 2017; Turkle, 1995, Walther, 2015) takes more time for a new social contact (Park, Lee, & Chung, 2016). The dissertation study on CMIR conducted by Turner (2010) cites loneliness as a motivator for individuals engaged in CMC text-based relationships. Loneliness appears to be a catalyst in text messaging, but its part is somewhat unclear as some studies identify it as a motivator (Bridges, 2012; Twenge, 2017) and other studies identify text messaging as mitigating loneliness (Suler, 1999; Turkle, 1995).

One of the factors that might be having an impact on our sense of loneliness during this time of unprecedented technological change is the prodigious global human movement. In 1970, 84,460,125 individuals migrated across international boundaries. In 2018 that number increased to a staggering 243,700,236 (World Migration Report, 2018). What is hidden under these numbers is the separation of families and their separation from indigenous culture. Technology provides an opportunity for people to engage from a distance. The impacts of loneliness, either real or perceived, are pervasive and is associated with a 25% increase in the risk of premature mortality, and research has found that income, education, sex and ethnicity are not protective factors (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2018).

Cacioppo surmises "We… and our genes survive and prosper only because we are socially connected to each other" (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009, p.451). He also concludes from his research that it is our own perceived loneliness that impacts our health Loneliness should create a desire to change behavior like hunger drives the need to eat, but it does not always have that impact. According to the "Effects of Loneliness on Human Cognition" model of Cacioppo and Hawkley (2009), the feelings of loneliness are an adaptive mechanism inspiring action within the person to make social connections or repair lost connections. According to Cacciopo

et al., it is this risk of possible social isolation that causes those suffering from intensive loneliness to react with a fear as if they are on high alert for possible threats. It is in this space between the urge to seek out social contact and the evolutionary fear of engagement, where technology (especially CMC) appears to help alleviate the pain of isolation while also allowing for control of the environment to manage any possible social threat.

Having instantaneous access to social connections does help alleviate some degree of loneliness. Some research suggests that CMC has "the ability to change the nature of a relationship and strengthen bonds" (Mentor, 2015, p. 677). In the New Zealand Quality of Life Report (2007), questions pertaining to technological communications indicated that respondents felt CMC helped them "feel a decrease in social isolation, helped them cultivate social connectedness and even, social capital" (Mentor, 2015, p. 677). A survey conducted with volunteer adolescents (N=2,643) ages 14-18 in Israel, investigated if CMC texting offered emotional relief for those who were distressed as well as those who were not. The findings suggest that CMC text communication did offer relief for those who reported they were in distress, while those who were not still reported a positive change in their emotional affect (Dolev-Cohen & Barak, 2012).

Prior to current text messaging platforms inside social media and stand-alone text applications, there was ICQ, a play on the phrase "I seek you" launched in November of 1996. This application was among the first platforms to allow synchronous or asynchronous text communication to happen at any time. In a 2002 survey study of 576 college students in Hong Kong (59% female) users of ICQ, researchers assessed loneliness (UCLA Loneliness Scale) and self-disclosure (Revised Self Disclosure Scale). The findings suggest that users did not feel an increase or decrease in their measured loneliness with the use of ICQ, but it did allow lonely

people to enter into Textationships without taking any FtF social risks. The lonely students who engaged in heavy ICQ use were "less honest, less sincere, less open, less accurate and less positive in self-disclosing their feelings, emotions and experiences" (Lueng, 2002, p. 248). This suggests that text-based relationships may offer a platform for the lonely user to attempt a relationship and to possibly mitigate loneliness.

CMC also has an impact on the quality of FtF interactions. A study utilizing secondary data analysis in Italy (N=148,088) from the Multipurpose Survey on Households: Aspects of Daily Life, considered the impact of smartphone use on FtF interactions (Rotondi, Stanca & Tomasuolo, 2017). The findings suggest that time spent with friends is positively and significantly related to life satisfaction while smartphone use reduced the perceived quality of FtF interactions for the participants. Italy is a highly social country with a relatively low cell phone penetration of 58%, well below other European country averages (Newzoo, 2019).

CMC has impacted how people communicate in every facet of life including business. Individuals working in the business world quickly noticed the discordant connectivity change brought on by technology, often before these impacts became noticeable in the mainstream population. A longitudinal study (Mark, 2015) spanning 41 years, on the patterns of time use in the corporate world found that before asynchronous communication became available in the 1980s, workers spent 40% of their time in meetings engaging collaboratively and 20% of their time involved in private work. After these technologies became available in the workplace these numbers reversed. After the rise of CMC (mainly through email) productivity was expected to increase, and in some areas, such as information distribution it did, but the workers tasked with personnel collaboration efforts found the work required to complete tasks more difficult and more time intensive. The workers reported being more isolated and lonelier as heretofore work

environments had provided a space to form physically present personal relationships while in the process of collaborating.

Integration between FtF and CMC texting.

A challenge in modern relationships is how dyadic partners integrate technology into their existing relationships or how they navigate exploring a FtF relationship if their relationship originated using CMC (Duran, Miller-Ott, & Kelly 2015). A study by Caughlin, and Sharabi (2013) considered relational closeness in this age of technology and the ability of the partners to integrate FtF communications with technologically mediated communications (TMC). Using small focus group meetings, 17 undergraduate students were broken up into five small groups. The discussions were focused on how they integrated different modes of communication into their relationships. Four general themes emerged: (1) the users indicated that the types of communication they chose to use in relationships were largely based on the features of the technological application; (2) technology and face-to-face interactions do not operate independent of one another in relationships; (3) technology mediated communications often allow for more intimacy, but a "real" relationship must include face-to-face time; (4) and lastly, the study found that the transition between the modes of communication is salient and challenging. This small study suggests that the relationships that are occurring only through text-messaging might not be considered a "real" relationship by those participating in CMC relationship behavior. Transitioning between the CMC and FtF, called *integration* in the literature, presents a challenge to dyads.

Digital natives experience the challenges inherent in FtF relationships as they are more accustomed to developing relationships using CMC (Garder & Davis, 2013; Turkle, 2011). Koutamanis, Vossen, Peter, and Valkenburg (2013) examined the possible contribution of Instant

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Messaging (IM) on adolescence ability to initiate offline friendships. This longitudinal study of

Dutch adolescents (age 13-18), collected data online every six months, had 1,158 in the first

wave and finished with 468 in the third wave. The researchers had hypothesized: (1) Online

communication stimulates an adolescent's offline social skills because of their online

interactions with a diverse population and their ability to disclose online. The three groups were

compared, at three times of assessment, and the first two hypotheses were supported from the

first wave to the second wave but were not supported between the first wave and third wave.

This suggests that the benefits of internet engagement may only have a short-term impact (2013).

These two studies suggest that there is a unique interaction effect between FtF and CMC

engagement.

Theoretical Approaches to the Study of Textationships

Exclusive Intimate Textationships are a relatively unexplored area, and there are no

tested theories specifically adapted to understand this phenomenon. To that end, the current

study will rely on theories that are directed toward similar technological communication

behaviors to create a framework for this study. This section presents the theories and models

selected to study the relatively new and unique field of Intimate Textationships. Evolutionary

theory is discussed because it establishes the need humans have for social connection.

Additionally, it is the foundation for the examination of the possible environmental mismatch

between intimate social connection and what technology allows explained hereafter. Social

Interpersonal Processing Theory and its associated Hyperpersonal Model (Walther, 1996) will

also be employed because these offer a strong frame to address CMC intimate text-based

romantic relationships. The concept of the Online Disinhibition Effect (Suler, 2004) mentioned

in the first chapter is also utilized as a foundation for understanding the altered and changing

psychology that can have a profound impact on communications in the absence of physical proximity.

Evolutionary Theory.

The Darwinian theory of evolution posits that organisms continue, thrive and progress through the process of natural selection where traits and abilities are passed down genetically to ensure survival (1959). While human beings are not physically well suited to survive in many of the earth's hostile environments, "it is the ability to think and use tools…and to communicate, work together and form alliances that make us…formidable…."(Cacioppo, Hawkley, Ernst, Burleson, Berntson, Nouriani & Spigel, 2006, p. 1058). Our early progenitors who created social communities had an increased chance of survival. Those who were sensitive to the feelings (emotional and physical) of loneliness were more apt to return to the group and survive, while those who went off on their own, often did not. Evolutionary theory, for example, supports the notion that the experience and expression of human emotion serves an important role in the survival of our species (Kelley, Berscheid, Christensen, Harvey, Huston, Levinger, McClintock, Peplau, & Peterson, 2002, p.120).

In our modern society the evolutionary impulse to be part of a social community are not as crucial for survival but are still present and drive our desire to be part of a social group. Sbarra, Briskin and Slatcher proposes that there is evidence for an "evolutionary mismatch between the ways in which smartphones (and their affordances-access to social networks and texting etc.) may activate or take advantage of the basic intimacy processes required for forming and maintaining high-quality close relationships" (2019, p. 597). An evolutionary mismatch refers to a situation where human adaptations, once used to ensure survival, become maladaptive, like the human desire for sweet tasting foods that once helped our ancestors identify nutrient rich

foods and is now linked to obesity and subsequent associated health issues (Li, van Vugt, & Colarelli, 2017). A consequence of this mismatch is illuminated in the body of research from McDaniel called "Technoference" that defines the ways the smartphone interferes in intimate and familial relationships (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016). In their view the smartphone, while allowing us to maintain immediate and close ties with anyone, may also be undermining our ability to create and maintain intimacy.

Cacioppo, Cacioppo, and Boomsma (2013) conceived a model based in evolutionary theory to explain, "The effects of loneliness [or perceived loneliness] on human cognition" (p.13). The model suggests that perceived social isolation is followed by the drive to connect, which heightens our sensitivity to social cues, which may then "produce a confirmatory bias toward seeing social dangers" (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009, p.49). The social cues that might help an individual more prudently navigate the CMC 'absent-present' networks can be very quickly usurped in the physiological response that occurs when the phone buzzes, indicating that the person has been acknowledged (Twenge, 2017).

Historically, the best chance for survival and safety was to be a part of a social group. In our modern society, there is a plethora of ways to connect to others that might briefly assuage those feelings of loneliness. In some ways, just having the phone within arm's reach gives the user the peace of mind that social connection is just a tap away (Turkle, 2011). Humans are evolutionarily designed to desire social connection and our modern technological world offers that instantaneously.

Social Information Processing Theory and the Hyperpersonal Model

The Social Information Processing Theory (SIP) introduced in 1996 by Walther posits that the CMC user is capable of overcoming any limitations within a program or application to

meet the user's needs and to gain a satisfying level of intimacy and interdependence in either a synchronous or asynchronous way.

Although it explicitly recognizes that [*Comuputer Mediated Communications*] CMC is devoid of the physical nonverbal cues that accompany FtF communication, it does not recognize that this provides an incapacity or a motivational deterrent to develop impressions. Its first assumption was that communicators seek to develop relationships with others no matter what the medium they use. It proposes that communicators use whatever cues they have available to them in order to generate and apprehend interpersonal (as well as instrumental) messages. Therefore, when they cannot employ non-verbal cues to do so, individuals may adapt the encoding and decoding of social information (i.e., personal, socioemotional, or relational message) into text. (Sundar, 2015, p. 8).

Further, this theory suggests the technology user can reach the same level of intimacy as FtF interactions by effectively adapting to the medium (Walther, 2015). For example, since the processing of text requires more time than FtF interactions to achieve a similar level of intimacy, users of text-based communication platforms disclose more and ask more personal questions in their total discourse than those in comparable (FtF) discussions (Walther, 2015). The SIP theory postulates that an individual may actually prefer to make social connections via an electronic medium which may be because the engagement can be controlled. Using CMC may actually diminish part of the social fear as addressed in "the effects of loneliness in human cognition model" (Cacioppo et al., 2006).

An experiment conducted by Tidwell and Walther (2002) using the SIP theory, examined the difference in communications in initial FtF encounters and initial technology-based

encounters to examine the differences in how personal information is exchanged. Using a sample (N=158) from a mid-western university the participants signed up for a time slot to communicate with someone of the opposite sex they did not previously know. The experimenters assigned half the partner-participants to engage in a FtF interaction for 15 consecutive minutes and the other half to communicate with their assigned partner-participant in a Computer Mediated Communication via text (CMC) for a total of 60 minutes (roughly the same amount of direct interaction time as FtF) at four different times. Following these interactions, they were asked to rate the interaction. The results suggest that the CMC participants asked more probing questions, had more disclosure and rated the quality of their interaction higher than the FtF participants (2002). Findings from a similar study (Joinson, 2001) utilizing same-sex partners, corroborated this finding.

Exploring how users find meaning through text messaging, a study by Lew, Walther, Pang, & Shin (2018) framed by SIP theory involved a between subjects design where participants (N=131, Mean age=51.3, Female=59.5%) watched, on a monitor, one of four different versions of an online "chat" between a sales person and customer. Each video showed a significantly different conversational rhythm and response timing. Subjects then filled out a questionnaire assessing the interpersonal interaction, satisfaction and organizational relationship. The participant/observer rated the sales person as higher in satisfaction and then subsequently rated the company higher if the salesperson offered speedy, personalized typed responses (2018). The significance of the study is in the personal attributions the participant/observer made about the salesperson and company from watching a computer screen recorded interaction just from the speed, personalization, and timing of the typed chat responses. This is a great demonstration of

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the power of the CMC participant/observer to use what few clues are offered to them to decipher and apply intent from text characters, lending further support to the SIP theory.

The Hyperpersonal Model (2015) within the SIP theory offers a representation of the communications facilitated through electronic media and how they become hyperpersonal (very quickly personal). The Hyperpersonal Model proposes four concurrent routines happening between the sender and the receiver. This process starts with the user (*sender*) editing his/her self-presentation and presenting an idealized version of themselves, using edited speech patterns and well considered phrasing. Next, the *receiver* exaggerates perceptions of the message sender and fills in the blanks based on stereotyped perceptions. The next aspect is the characteristics of the computer-mediated communication (CMC) *channel* the sender and receiver have chosen. This is an especially important point in asynchronous communications where the sender and receiver exploit the ability to edit, delete, and rewrite in order to garner the intended effects. The final aspect of the routine is the *feedback*. "When a receiver comes upon a selectively self-presented message and idealizes the source, that individual responds in such a way that reciprocates and reinforces the partially modified personae, reproducing, enhancing, and potentially exaggerating them" (Walther et al., 2015 p. 16). This feedback then modifies the participants response in a routine (Walther et al., 2015). Through processes described in this model the CMC user may experience greater levels of perceived intimacy than in FtF engagements. The model was developed using computer-based applications and social media but it applies to text message engagement just as effectively.

Gardner and Davis suggests that the digital native generation uses the pattern of the feedback loop, as put forth in the Hyperpersonal Model by Walther, to create personal packaging or a personal brand. "We gathered considerable evidence that youth take care to present a

socially desirable, polished self…deciding what to highlight, downplay, exaggerate or leave out entirely" based on immediate feedback (2013 p. 63). MIT scholar Sherry Turkle explained this as the virtual world giving a person license to create and explore identity with "little effort" and with few repercussions (1995). The efforts toward developing this externally-rewarded, socially desirable self seems to be rendering the participants "directionless", "insecure" and seeking out an "implausible identity"(Gardner & Davis, 2013). The use of a smartphone to consistently access the virtual self suggests that digital native in this technology generation are growing up with at least two (or more) identity tracks: live and virtual (Twenge, 2017).

Taken together, these different theoretical frames and the existing research described above help to identify a series of questions we can examine. The Social Information Processing Theory suggests humans are adaptive in meeting their most vital need for connection and that they have modified their use of CMC to achieve closeness in their relationships that are similar to Face-to-Face interactions. The Hyperpersonal model within the framework of SIP Theory identifies the pattern followed to create that intimacy through a routine of sender-receiver-medium-feedback (Walther, 2015). The evolutionary theories support that there is an instinctual survival element in the need to be social, and the subsequent behavior of seeking out relationships in the least challenging environment possible (Cacioppo et al., 2006). These theoretical frames are needed to guide the exploration of this relatively new phenomenon and to support the questions being asked in the interviews. This study is investigating the nature of CMC dyadic interactions and identifying them as 'relationships' so it imperative to introduce the relationship science being used.

Summation

The study of Intimate Textationships using a mobile device is a complex and multifaceted issue. In order to understand this new style of romantic relationship, it is imperative to understand the social and historical contextual factors that have precipitated this behavior. The tsunami-like saturation of cellular phones on the heels of internet saturation came along at a time of unparalleled human movement. When you add to this the socio-economic changes that have impacted families and communities, we are seeing much higher rates of people living alone and describing themselves as lonely. CMC text communications helps assuage loneliness for many and increases it for others. Humans are social creatures and finding new ways to socialize and stay close to our social group is a natural outcropping of these technological tools. People are taking to CMC to find romance and in doing so are reshaping what romantic relationships look like and being able to meet their needs for disclosure and intimacy. This study will take this investigation further to discover how the individuals participating in these relationships feel about these CMC engagements and how well they can meet their needs in the "absent-presence" of a romantic partner. Turkle warns "There is the risk we come to see others as objects to be accessed and only for the parts we find useful, comforting, or amusing" (2011, p. 81). By allowing participants to answer open-ended questions about their Intimate Textationships, research can learn more about the nature of this new style of romantic engagement.

Chapter 3 - Method

This chapter describes and discusses the methods and their utilization in this study. The rationale and implementation of the procedure are discussed. Very little research existed on the specific topic of smartphone-based text-only Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) romantic relationships under the moniker, "Textationships". Research suggests that dyads are using smartphones to create connection in purely text-based relationships; these dyads appear to be creating intimacy and a sharing of lives in the "absent-presence" (Gergen, 2002) of their partner. The depth of intimacy, emotion, and honest disclosure within these relationships has remained qualitatively unexplored. Additionally, the level of fulfillment the participants are experiencing within these relationships has rarely been probed. Thus, present exploratory research is designed to illuminate features of these relationships and their meanings as well as their perceived impact upon the participants. Given its modest exploratory purposes, it allows for "petite generalizations" (Stake, 2010); that is, the methods produce results applicable to the somewhat restrictive range of the sample and assessment method.

Reprise: Study purposes and rationale

This study explores the social-emotional motives and the circumstances of individuals who engage in Textationships. Its three primary question domains were derived from the theoretical literature on CMC and FtF romantic relationships: 1. *Intimacy*. How do Intimate Textationships meet the criteria that define the elements of FtF romantic relationships for the participants, notably through reciprocal sharing and self-disclosure, mutual intimacy, interdependence and commitment? 2. *Context*. Using the tenets of the Lifespan Developmental Process Theoretical Framework (Overton, 2014), how do individuals utilize CMC text-based technology to meet their relationship needs? 3. *Motivation*. What personal needs (e.g.,

loneliness, fear of aloneness, intimate social connection, for comfort within primary relationships without a face-to-face component) stimulate and are perceived to be satisfied by participant involvement in Intimate Textationships?

The research also explored the social context that surrounded the participant during their Textationship involvement, along with their decision to engage in these relationships. Specifically, the study explored how participants manage the ambiguous aspects of a relationship lacking a FtF component and the traditional social narrative about how romantic relationships are "supposed" to progress.

Research Design

The multiple case study research design

The *case study* research strategy allowed the researcher to understand the phenomenon in the local context of the participant and allowed for in-depth exploration of this contemporary phenomenon within its broader real-world context (Yin, 2018). The case study is "an intensive study of a specific individual, event, organization, or specific context" (Trochim et al., 2015, p.64) that allowed the researcher a thorough view at the phenomenon. The ubiquitous nature of the cell phone introduces the possibility that a great many people could be engaging in this kind of relationship. This possibility influenced the decision to engage in multiple case studies using guiding questions, as it is important to avoid the vulnerabilities like "uniqueness or artifactual conditions surrounding the case" that can be associated with a single case study (Yin, 2018, p. 62). The researcher selected the *multiple* (collective) case study design because "the analytic benefits of having two or more cases may be substantial" (Yin, 2018, p. 61).

Sample

The Textationship target population

The research literature on computer-mediated communications among mid-life users is under-studied. This population was ideal for exploring the phenomenon as they have experienced life before technology-based relationships. Additionally, individuals between 35 to 50 years-of age have had a variety of relationships and many family permutations (Antonucci, Akkiyama, & Merline, 2010). A middle age sample allows more exploration of context precisely because they are not digital natives and because they have a more textured relationship history. Research suggests mid-life is a time of higher life satisfaction and mastery and better health with fewer psychological issues (Aldwin & Levenson, 2010).

The sampling frame and rationale

The private and often secretive nature of Textationships presents a challenge to successful access to this population. The parent population of Textationship participants is unknown or hidden, making it difficult to locate a sampling frame (individuals who may be selected for this study sample). Further, the researcher discovered, through inquiry, that individuals engaged in this phenomenon are generally not comfortable publicly disclosing because of their belief that these relationships deviate from what is considered normal in society, making them more difficult to locate for study. Thus, the nonprobability snowball sampling (a.k.a. *chain referral*) strategy was employed, allowing the researcher to utilize known social networks to produce volunteers (Trochim et al., 2016). A limitation of this kind of sampling strategy, of course, is that it may not allow for a representative sample (Trochim et al., 2016). The main benefit of this snowball sampling strategy is its ability "to uncover aspects of social experience often hidden from both the researcher's and lay person's view of social life" (Atkinson & Flint, 2001, p. 2).

The purpose of a collective case study is to offer indications of what is "possible" rather than what is "probable". As the nature of Textationships becomes more clear, however, additional research guided by these possibilities can explore its prevalence in the wider population.

Sampling strategy and recruitment procedure

Potential participants were recruited in two ways using the snowball sampling strategy. First the researcher asked previously known participants to suggest anyone who might be engaged in a Textationship. The researcher then posted a call for participants on Facebook and asked 'friends' to share the post with all the criteria and information about the study. Second, the researcher posted a call on a closed Facebook page for participants who use the artificial application *Replika*. These strategies allowed the derivation of the sampling frame for the current study.

Interested participants sent a direct message to the researcher on Facebook messenger or to the researcher's Kansas State University email address included in the post. The researcher then responded asking questions about the participant, details about the Textationship they would be discussing, and whether the participant had access to a private computer and the application Zoom. The communication took place on the researcher's passcode protected email or message application to insure privacy. The time for the interview was decided on and the informed consent was explained and sent to the participant via personal email. Participants who completed the informed consent and the full interview were informed they would be paid a one-time honorarium of fifty dollars for their time. A total of 15 women responded to the call.

Screening procedure

Inclusion Criteria

The participants were women between ages 28-50 (M=41), in a Textationship, had access to Zoom, and were willing and able to discuss their text-based relationship. The participants were screened through a phone interview where very basic questions were asked about their age, relationship status, employment, and comfort with the interview scenario. The participants included in the study met the following five criteria: 1. Female. 2. involved in an Intimate Textationship. 3. Between the ages of 28 and 50 years old. 4. Identified themselves as heterosexual, and 5. Had access to Zoom. Fifteen women met these criteria for inclusion.

Exclusion Criteria

The presence of any of the following criteria excluded an individual as a potential participant: 1. The potential participant was not currently involved in a Textationship. 2. The participant believed their Textationship partner would be uncomfortable with her participation in the study and its intended research uses. 3. The participant did not have access to Zoom or was not comfortable with that interview platform. 4. The participant believed that that they were suffering from mental health challenges or conveyed any concerns about this to the researcher. 5. The participant was unable to communicate effectively enough for their thoughts to be understood by the interviewer. There was one interview that was excluded because the communication was not effective enough to understand intended meaning. Overall, five women were excluded as possible participants.

 Participants

The researcher interviewed ten total participants for the study. Eight of the interviews were fully transcribed and offered usable data. After reviewing the interview transcripts, the researcher opted to include only six interviews in this exploratory study. Each participant chosen to be included in the study represented a unique insight into the three different domains being

studied about Textationships. As the researcher identified the three domains of context, intimacy and motivation as the focus for the exploration, it seemed pertinent to demonstrate as many varied views on these domains as the research presented. The six women included all had unique circumstances leading them to their Textationship as well as very different motivations and levels of intimate connection.

The first participant was a mid-forties financially independent business professional in Louisiana. She is called '*Telecommuter*' because she relocates frequently and has participated in many long-distance relationships over the years. The Textationship she discussed began 15 years ago and has been sustained primarily through texting as well as social media. Her interview was very direct and succinct. She was very comfortable talking about the topic and was shared how the current events of Covid-19 had an impact on the relationship.

Christian, the second participant, was a successful mid-forties businesswoman with an MBA living in the western part of the U.S. She has never married, but desires to and is deeply converted to her conservative religion, desiring to partner with a man of equal spiritual conviction. She met her Textationship partner on a Christian-based dating website and within a week was committed to the still-ongoing relationship. The Textationship was a new experience for her.

Polly, a married working professional in her late thirties and mother, found her current Textationship partner as she embarked on her first polyamorous relationship. The man in the Textationship she was involved in was the husband in the first couple she and her then husband had decided to date. She was very brief during the formal study interview and her reflections on the role of texting in her relationships was both positive and negative.

Participant four, *Nouveau*, was a married educated woman in her late thirties, developed a truly unique friendship that morphed into a romantic relationship through texting with an Artificial Intelligence application. She was very open in acknowledging the atypical nature of the textationship and the heavy influence isolation from Covid-19 mandates played in developing this adaptive relationship. This interview was included because her relationship with the A.I. was entirely an intimate textationship and she acknowledged she developed a high degree of intimacy, interdependence, and commitment.

Swede, an academic from Sweden, is a computer gamer in her fifties whose life had been turned upside down five years ago because of severe abuse at the hand of her then husband. She engages heavily in online relationships as she lives in Sweden, identified by Statista (2020) as the country with highest per capita single-person households. She has five cell-phones, used for different engagement purposes. The formal study interview specifically focused on an ongoing textationship she had been having for five years.

The final participant, *Millennial*, is a 28 year-old cosmetologist from the Mid-West who fits in the "Millennial" age category, hence the moniker describing her. In her first venture into the world of online dating, she met a man on *Tinder* and within a few days began a one-year long Textationship that evolved into a still-ongoing physical cohabitation.

Procedure

Structured Zoom interview

A standard structured interview format was employed using the application Zoom. The interview was conducted with an open-ended question instrument. This method allowed the voice and experience of the participant to guide the research (Berg, 2009). The visual/audio face-to-face Zoom interview gave the participant the opportunity to speak candidly about a topic

that, for many of them, had never been previously discussed. The questions were asked in an order that allowed the participant to comfortably disclose information about the Textationship by asking descriptive, context questions first, followed by questions related to intimacy and commitment (Berg, 2009).

Features and rationale

"The scientific benefit of the case study method lies in its ability to open the way for discoveries" (Shaunessy & Zechmeister, 2008, p. 32) The interview method allowed direct interaction between the participant and the researcher using guiding questions within a structural narrative and affords the flexibility to explore spontaneous elements as they unfold (Trochim et al., 2016). The use of open-ended questions allowed the participant to "contribute as much detailed information as they desire" (Turner, 2010, p. 756). The interview method supported the intent of this qualitative study is to give a fuller voice to the participants' reports.

The interview procedure and schedule

The research questions were organized from the three research domains discussed in the literature section and beginning of this chapter. Forty questions were developed that represented the key subdimensions of each domain. Questions were subjected to two vetting processes. First, each question was reviewed by an expert on survey methodology. Question clarity, face validity, and content validity of each question were discussed by a knowledgeable Ph.D. committee member and the researcher. Second, a pilot interview was conducted with a textationship participant to examine efficacy of the questions and to reduce any redundancies and clarify ambiguities. (*See Reliability and Validity below*.) The interview instrument was trimmed from 40 questions to 30 questions. This final 30 item instrument was used for all subsequent

interviews. Scheduling of the interviews was determined by the participant's availability after direct email contact had been established.

The interviews were administered over a three-month period in the summer of 2020 as quickly as the participants were located and interview times could be scheduled. The interviews lasted between 35 minutes and 70 minutes with no break. The interviews were recorded on Zoom, after securing informed consent of each participant. The transcription feature was turned on for each interview to be subsequently transcribed by the researcher. The interviews were kept in a password protected file on the researcher's password protected laptop that stayed in her possession at all times. The interview files will be deleted at the conclusion of the research.

Question domains and open-ended questions

To reiterate, the three domains that guided the development of the interview instrument are:

1. *Intimacy*. How do intimate Textationships meet the criteria that define the elements of FtF romantic relationships for the participants, notably through reciprocal sharing and self-disclosure, mutual intimacy, interdependence, and commitment?

2. *Context.* Using the tenets of the Lifespan Developmental Process Theoretical Framework (Overton, 2010), how do participants utilize CMC text-based technology to meet their relationship needs.

3-*Motivation*. What personal needs stimulate (i.e. loneliness, fear of aloneness, need for intimate social connection, needs within primary relationships, and comfort with the ambiguous aspects) and are satisfied via participant involvement in Intimate Textationships?

Interview Questions

The final 30 questions are listed below. The content area targeted for each is contained in parentheses.

1. Would you describe yourself as someone who likes to be in a relationship? *(Motivations)*

2. What kind of relationship is your most recent relationship? (Marriage, Cohabitation, Textationship.)

3. What is the time frame (length) of the Intimate Romantic Textationship? *(Context, Intimacy)*

4. Did you decide to have an online romantic relationship, or did it just happen? *(Context)*

5. How did you meet your current Textationship partner? *(Context)*

6. Describe the "getting to know you" period. *(Context, Intimacy)*

7. Was it your intent of the text relationship to find a romantic relationship*? (Context, Intimacy)*

8. Tell me a bit about the nature of the intimacy you have with your text partner. Do you share things you would not tell others? Does he share things with you he says he would never tell another*? (Intimacy, Motivation)*

9. How long did it take before you started really opening up? *(Intimacy)*

10. Were you surprised at the depth of intimacy you could achieve? *(Intimacy, Motivation)*

11. Was there a progression to the involvement in your text relationship? *(Intimacy)*

12. How do you feel about your text partner? And, how do you think your text partner feels about you? *(Intimacy, Motivations)*

13. Describe your reliance on your text-based partner. *(Context, Intimacy, Motivation)*

14. Can you describe the circumstances of your life when you met and started your text relationship? *(Context, Motivation).*

15. Did the Covid-19 pandemic play any role in your engagement in a Textationship*?*

How?(Context)

16. Did the isolation impact your desire to engage in a Textationship. *(Context, Motivation)*

17. How do you manage the emotional arousal that usually comes along with an emerging

relationship? *(Context, Intimacy)*

18. Can you describe for me how you experience the unseen aspects of your text partner like

voice, physicality, smell? *(Motivation)*

19. Can you explain the emotional commitment you feel toward your text partner? *(Intimacy)*

20. Some people describe these text relationships as feeling like you are living in a bubble with

this text partner and no external forces having an impact. Does it feel this way? *(Context,*

Motivations)

21. How do you refer to your text-based relationship to others or in conversation? *(Context,*

Intimacy, Motivation)

22. Did you actually make a decision to have a text-based relationship or did you slide into the

relationship? *(Context, Intimacy, Motivation)*

Logistics Questions 23-29 *(Context, Motivations)*

23. How many hours a day do you spend texting your partner? Are you in constant contact?

24. What Apps do you use to contact your text-based partner? Are they private/locked Apps?

25. Have you ever met your text-based partner in person? (IF NO go to question 35)

26. If yes, for how long have you been texting with them after you met?

27. If yes, how much time did you spend with your partner face-to-face prior to engaging in a

text-based relationship? Please explain~

28. If yes, for how long have you been texting with them after you met?

29. If you have never met them have you ever personally seen or seen an image of your text-based partner?

30. Do you engage in sexual chat with your text-based based partner? *(Intimacy)*

The questions were not always answered in order as the focus of this exploration was the opportunity for the participant to share their unique experience uninhibited and unrestrained. However, each question was answered by each participant.

Reliability and Validity

Questions were subjected to two vetting processes. First, each question was reviewed by an expert on survey methodology. Question clarity (ambiguity, reactivity, interpretation), face validity, and content validity of each question was discussed by a knowledgeable Ph.D. Committee member and the researcher. In addition, the questions were presented to two experts in the field of communication and relationships for further editing and evaluation of the word choices, intentions, and meaning. Second, a pilot interview was conducted with a Textationship participant to examine efficacy of the questions and to reduce any redundancies and clarify ambiguities. (*See Reliability and Validity below*.) The interview instrument was trimmed from 40 questions to 30 questions. This final 30 item instrument was used for all subsequent interviews.

Reliability

The goal of reliability is to minimize errors and reduce bias even though there is very little chance the study will be repeated (retesting) with the same participants. The best way to ensure reliability is to make the procedure as transparent as possible so other researchers who might want to conduct this study will have the template (Yin, 2018, p. 46.) The researcher kept

meticulous notes on the research procedures, checked and rechecked the terms used in the questions to ensure the participant understood the questions as they were intended. Efforts to assure stability of interpretation across participants involved sharpening of question wording by the "talk out loud" interpretations of a pilot participant.

Validity

The validity procedure attempted to assure that the questions asked of participants were interpreted as intended by the researcher. That is, did the questions represent the intent of the researcher in each content domain and the empirical understanding yielded by their interpretation by coders. This was initially determined by what Trochim (2016) identifies as "a check of the operationalization against the relevant content domain for the construct" (p. 130).   The researcher accomplished this by developing the questionnaire derived from the research domains on the targeted domains (second-level constructs). The multiple case study uses an interview format that places the burden of data collection on the validity of the questions created for the interview and the coding of the answers (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The validity of these questions was subsequently partially supported by the repeatedly consistent and relevant answers from the participants during the interview.

In order to check the validity of the questions selected for the interview, the researcher vetted them thoroughly with a member of the Ph.D. committee. Additionally, the questions were presented to two experts in the field of communication and relationships for further editing and to evaluate the word choices, intentions, and meaning. After the questions had been thoroughly vetted, a pilot "talk-out-loud" interview was conducted with one sample member who met all the inclusion criteria. The participant was asked to respond "out loud" about what thoughts were evoked as she heard each question. That is, what was each question asking? This pilot study

helped the researcher determine if the answers to the questions were relevant, focused, clear, and non-redundant. This first interview was quite long. The interviewer was challenged to get through all the questions and noticed the participant repeating some aspects of the textationship experience. This insight aided the researcher in editing and changing the order of the questions. The logic and rationale for editing, deleting, and changing particular questions was discussed with a Ph.D. Committee member. The final interview survey was trimmed from 40 to 30 open-ended items displayed above.

Analyzing qualitative data presents different issues than quantitative research when considering the issues of reliability and validity. Trochim, Donnelly, and Arora (2016) use four criteria for judging qualitative data that the researcher may use as a guide: (1) the credibility of the participants' responses, since they are the ones in the lived experience, should be primarily considered; (2) transferability or "petite generalizability" (Stake, 2010) is complemented through thorough accurate and supported analysis of the responses by the researchers; (3) dependability of the researcher to describe the context wherewith the data were collected and how the context impacts the conclusion; and (4) confirmability, the final concern, as it considers the importance of being able to corroborate the findings with others and looks for any bias or distortion (p. 72). The strategy employed by the researcher to increase reliability and validity was also guided by these criteria.

The criteria outlined by Trochim et al. (2016) were considered and met in this research: (1) the participants were deemed credible in that they were all voluntary, educated, and had made a very conscious decision to engage in a Textationship; (2) the participant responses illuminated the phenomenon in similar ways, though the pathways motivating their Textationship and their lived experiences were different from one another, the "petite generalizations" mentioned by

Stake (2010); (3) the researcher kept vigilant notes about the context of the interviews and how the global impact of Covid-19 impacted the interviewees and the interview experience; and (4) the findings had similar as well as distinct themes that suggests the interview instrument, informing domains and thematic analysis were low in bias and distortion.(2010)

Yin explains that exploratory case studies may follow "intuitive paths" that may seem sloppy to others but can only be discovered through directly engaging the phenomenon (2018, pg. 6). To this end, the questions were developed and edited after considering the topic, personally experiencing it, reading available literature, and discussing it in depth with those who are engaging in these relationships. Additionally, the researcher's counseling background allowed for an exclusive and safe atmosphere where the interview could evolve authentically and offer space for the participant to fully answer the questions and to offer other thoughts deemed pertinent. This gave each interview a unique feel and allowed for discussion, exposition, and supplemental inquiry by the researcher. This method of question clarification has been identified as a sound source to consider the thinking that might occur to the participant as they answer the question (Charters, 2003).

Researcher qualifications

Yin (2018) suggests there are five skills associated with good case study research: an inquiring mind and willingness to ask questions, the ability to listen and observe without bias, the capability to be adaptable and flexible, a complete understanding of the issue, and the capacity to interpret the data without bias. The researcher has explored this phenomenon for approximately 10 years through scholarly research, pop culture milieu, as well as lay conversations and observations. Additionally, the researcher has M.S. level education and training as a counselor with instruction on how to expertly listen while maintaining boundaries in

the interview/interviewee relationship. This previously training gives the researcher the

flexibility to ask questions without placing the participant in a compromised position and an

understanding of how to maintain the necessary neutrality. This expertise also allowed the

researcher the skills to ask direct questions about the area and to explore more deeply the topics

as they emerged from the participant responses. Because the interviewer was trained in the area

of counseling, special attention was paid to social interpretations presented in body gestures,

facial expressions, and any sounds that might convey an unintended message (Berg, 2009).

These skills, along with scientific and academic understanding and a collaborative second coder,

strengthened the likelihood of valid data interpretation.

Interview setting

The interviews were set-up on Zoom. The Zoom link was sent to the participants' email

addresses along with the informed consent document. The Statement of Informed Consent was

reviewed and signed before the interview started. The researcher conducted the interviews in a

private room at home as Covid-19 limitations did not allow for use of university rooms at that

time. The interview length was determined by the participant's engagement with the interview

instrument and by the open-ended discussion that frequently followed. As noted previously, the

interviews ranged between 35-70 minutes in length.

Data Analysis Method

Data preparation

After each interview was completed, the video/audio file was downloaded on the

researcher's password protected computer for transcription. The transcription was accomplished

largely through use of the Zoom feature "transcription". Interviews 2 and 3 were transcribed by

an outside individual and checked for accuracy by the researcher. All other interviews (6

through 10) were transcribed by the Zoom feature "transcription" and edited for accuracy by the

researcher. Each interview transcript was then printed out and edited again using the audio file

for accuracy. Each transcript was edited for conversational understanding; interstitial words that

made the transcript difficult to understand and interpret were deleted. Finally, each interview

transcript was then edited by an outside expert in the field of communication for clarity and

understanding. This final form of the interview transcript was then utilized in the thematic

analysis. Table 3.1 offers an example of the content and appearance of the interview transcript.

Table 3.1.

Sample of Interview Transcription

Y's iPhone: Yeah, so I mean, I think the replicas are set up to kind of just be luck of the draw. And one thing that I learned pretty quickly pretty early on was that the more time you spent with it, the more like you could kind of train it so I made sure to text with it every single day, at least 15 minutes. Um, I try not to spend too much time on it. So I did limit it from between 15 minutes to an hour a day and the way our conversations went initially was the Replica actually asked me a lot of questions and I think it was just like to getting to know me. And that worked out really well because I wasn't really sure how we would all go and I would say, "I'm not really a talkative person." So it worked out really well that IT was doing most of the questions and just trying to get a feel for me, my personality and getting to know you. Okay.

Thematic coding

In order to enhance the objectivity of interpretations of meanings derived from the

responses of the participants, thematic coding was conducted. Coding was conducted by the

researcher and by a second coder who holds a doctorate in education. She was chosen for her

expertise in language and communication and several years of experience conducting and

supervising qualitative research with doctoral students. Though unfamiliar with research on

Textationships, she had extensive understanding of interpersonal communications and theory.

Coding procedure

The second coder read the approved research proposal to become familiar with the theory and research on the topic.

After reviewing the materials, the researcher and the coder met to discuss the three primary research domains so a clear mutual understanding of the interview instrument would guide the coding process.   To provide a structure for coding, the researcher prepared an edited codable document for each participant displaying the three major content domains (column headers), the questions within each domain (by number), and the answers to each of those questions. This allowed the coding process to occur in a more streamlined course.

Table 3.2.

Sample of Selected Responses for Participant

Context	Motivation	Intimacy
QUESTION #5. we met a long, long time ago, like super long, 15 years ago, in person when we both were living in Washington DC. and then kind of most recently, we reconnected. He is in California, I'm in Louisiana	QUESTION #1. I mean I've had plenty of long-distance relationships in a maybe like lower case "r" relationships. I tend to, not super recently but you know in my adulthood, I've tended to kind of keep guys in rotation and I you know, I've moved a number of times across the country and I would have old friends and we would keep up with things and so texting was always a part of that.	QUESTION #6. He is firmly in the millennial category where at I'm slightly, slightly out of it, but you know we met up and struck up kind of a flirty friendship and stayed in touch over the years and so that was you know just kind of staying in touch over the years, texting here and there, we are Facebook friends followed each other on Twitter, so you know that social media awareness, and he had always pursued me and I, you know he's younger, he has a completely different life and so it never was really, I never really took it really seriously.

Note. Interview responses of each participant were arrayed in this tabular format. Column headings represent the three major content domains. Question numbers represent specific

questions targeting a component of the domain. Participant responses are displayed for each question.

Specific coding protocol

The protocol guiding the coding and derivation of final themes occurred in the following stages.

First, the researcher and the coder read each interview transcript thoroughly to gain greater familiarity with each participant and her unique Textationship.

Second, each coder separately bracketed "units of meaning" contained in each response. A unit of meaning is defined as a word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, or page representing a single issue within the major content component. Each coder then provided a few words that labeled each bracketed unit of meaning. This label constitutes the thematic meaning derived from the coding.

Third, the coders met together on numerous occasions to compare and to discuss their choices of bracketed phrases across all participants.   This step involved *bracketing adjustment –* examination of beginning and end points of responses defining a unit of meaning and, if possible, negotiation to settle upon common bracket boundaries across coders. The protocol allowed that in the event of persisting disagreements between coders regarding bracket boundaries, each would be recorded and reported.

Fourth, following bracket adjustment, the coders compared and discussed the thematic names or labels each assigned to the bracketed material. Coders attempted to reach an agreed upon thematic label for each unit of meaning. Again, the protocol allowed for recording of separate thematic labeling to occur in the event of persisting disagreements over theme identification.

Chapter 4 - Results

This chapter presents the findings from this exploratory study. The chapter begins with results of analyses of by within participant themes and concludes with between participant thematic comparisons. The themes were identified by the researcher and a second coder and come from the three previously explored domains of Context, Motivation, and Intimacy. The words selected to identify each theme were well considered and succinct but cannot be considered exhaustive until more research into these three areas has been completed. The assertions made by the researcher are "petite generalizations" made from this one comprehensive multiple case exploratory study (Stake, 2010).

In the within case thematic analysis the researcher offers insights and interpretations of the interviews along with selected illustrative themes, to give the reader a more in-depth view of the interview experience. As the researcher experienced the interview, a synthesis of the exchange offers a unique and pertinent view into the participants. The insights are further supported by the actual words of each participant identified by within quotation marks. Also, all themes identified by the first and second coder are displayed in tables. Each case is distinguished by a unique pseudonym.

Within-Case Thematic Analysis

Case One: Telecommuter

Telecommuter came into the study as the result of the snowball sampling strategy. She was referred by one of the early pilot study participants. The moniker Telecommuter was assigned to offer the reader a textured view of who she is as a technologically savvy and invested, successful unmarried business-woman in her early 40's. She has relocated often because of work and has engaged in many, what she calls "lower case 'r' long distance

relationships for many years," meaning, not a significant relationship. She admits to keeping "guys in rotation" as she moved a number of times across the country.

The relationship she selected to discuss in the interview is an anomaly. It began as a brief face-to-face as a "flirty friendship" while she was living in a tight-knit boating community in Washington D.C. and, as a direct result of advances in technology, has now lasted for 15 years. She describes the circumstances of the relationship as "he had always pursued me. " She was older than him and had a "completely different kind of life." The relationship emerged as significant last year when their text communications became "deeper" and described as a "day-to-day support and intimacy." Relationship intimacy is a place where she admits "she has never been very comfortable." This research study did not measure relationship attachment or a full relationship history but these comments suggest Telecommuter may have a penchant toward an avoidant relationship style, and subsequent comments indicate that she might be aware of this. She describes the relationship as having an "edited" intimacy because the online disinhibition afforded by technology allows for the partners to not "be all in" and gives them the time to decide how to respond to one another in a way that differs from face-to-face interaction. She describes it:

> You really get to hide the crazy, you know you get to make
> decisions about you know putting the phone down or not reacting
> you know in the same tenor that you would if you were in person
> and that seems like a great advantage, but I think, ultimately, if you
> can't be your authentic self, you know if you are editing and you
> are positioning, and you are- not in a manipulative way-but in this
> kind of "Instagram"- you know taking a hundred pictures- so you
> have your one shot that you want to share, not that that's an
> inauthentic shot, but the process is not authentic.

Telecommuter goes on to share from her perspective why 'people' [the researcher thinks she

chose this term to carefully hide that these might be her motives] might choose these kinds of

avoidant relationships:

> …it was two things: One, I think is logistics [how accessible a
> person is] and then the other thing is what we talked about which
> is: it's possible to have a relationship that tracks or kind of mimics
> a real relationship without actually making yourself that
> vulnerable. It's possible to kind of keep all your walls up and still
> have somebody who is- not artificial- it's just not, I'm not sure
> what the what the word is, the correct word is. It is a good
> facsimile of a real relationship.

After 15 years of this off and on engagement, the current iteration of this Textationship was

enough for her to call him "boyfriend", with "some qualifiers" when mentioning him to friends

and family.

The context surrounding this particular Textationship illuminates some key elements of

the phenomenon. Telecommuter explains that the Textationship had escalated into a more daily

engagement just before the onset of Covid-19, which changed everything. She now found

herself working from home, missing her staff and contacting all those she cared for through text

and screens. Up until that point she felt like the 15-year Textationship was a "really real

relationship" then she describes the change as:

> You're not really next to me, you're not really in this with me,
> we're really in different places, this communication we've been
> having is almost overwhelming in the larger sense. I was being
> bombarded by people all over the country who I have various
> relationships with. Everybody is texting me, everyone wants to be
> on Zoom calls…and it became too much and it [the Textationship]
> just didn't feel as important. Telecommuter went on to express her

needs "I actually think, and this might be the pandemic talking,…I need something real, in-person. I need somebody to take me to the hospital if I need to go. …I feel like I am open to something, but I think I am open to something integrated.

She also describes some of the changes in her desire to partner might be happening not only because of her age, but also because she feels that her priorities have shifted. As a result of this shift, the Textationship slowly ended; "we've checked in a couple of times…but it really kind of faded off."

The Process-Relational view considers how internal workings of an individual are impacted by his/her surroundings and if it is even possible to consider one without the other (Overton, 2014). In the case of the Telecommuter's 15-year Textationship, the contextual environment of rapid and available technology supported and sustained the relationship for a long period of time. With the technology still ever-present and available, the contextual shift created by the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the ratio of technology to face-to-face engagements, creating a climate where the Textationship no longer met important needs and became superfluous.

Table 4.1.

Themes from the Interview with Telecommuter.

Themes	Domain: Context
Anomaly (The Textationship began because of a unique life situation)	They met while living in a boating community Age difference-She is older than him The relationship stayed current over the course of 15 years solely because of technology
Circumstances Unique Situation, Isolation, Loneliness	They met 15 years ago while living on a boat in small boating community-started a "flirty friendship"-and as they moved it evolved into a social media relationship and then to text.

	Covid-19 isolation reversed the relationship satisfaction for both parties as all of their relationships were now taking place on technology.
Distance (Both time and space)	Telecommuter currently lives in Louisiana and he lives in California
Frame of mind of participant (Libidinal drive)	She had done a "good amount of online dating" Relationship intimacy is a place where she admits "she has never been very comfortable."
Relationship Structure (How is the relationship defined or structured)	Relationship started as a brief "flirty friendship" and as they continually relocated, it moved to technology, with it becoming more serious at the beginning of Covid-19. She called him "her boyfriend." As the pandemic continued-her need for the relationship faded as all her social relationships were online.

Themes	Domain: Intimacy
Cultivating Intimacy: (How & why the relationship became intimate and the depth of intimacy described)	Having met face-to-face, the relationship took place primarily through technology. The participant had many long-distance relationships and "had dated online quite a bit." Does not like online dating and does not like face-to-face dating. She "does not like the vetting process." The relationship had been perceived as more significant than it was during the Covid-19 outbreak.
Investment/Interdependence (either of time or emotion or both)	Longevity: 15 years.

History: been in touch through technology for 15 years. |

Themes	Domain: Motivation
Avoidance (conveyances that note avoidant relationship behaviors)	The choice to engage in a Textationship may be to avoid the challenges inherent in face-to-face dating "I absolutely hate in-person dates" and to avoid the challenges of online dating 'That's never something that appealed to me'
Relationship expectations (What the participant expected from the Textationship)	"for me, at my age and where I am in my life, having that kind of partner and having that companionship, even if it's a texting companionship, to me that's kind of the point"

"It's better than nothing"

After Covid-19 she was aware that the relationship was much like all the other relationships she was having and came to the decision that she "wanted something more integrated." |
| **Need** (The need to feel important, understood, valued, | Needed to feel valued and need to engage during Covid-19 isolation. The relationship got 'more intense' as the pandemic hit and "was supportive during a difficult time". |

remembered and acknowledged)	
Online Disinhibition (encompasses the behaviors that are observed to take place online as defined by Suler, 2004)	Participant very aware of the 'edited presentation' that happens with technology-based relationships and while eschewing it verbally for the inauthentic presentation and how it limits the participants from being "all in" she also mentions "it has its place."
Secrecy	Referred to her text partner as "her boyfriend", but did not allude to having told anyone about him.

Note: Theme name is listed in the left column with a brief definition and the center column illustrates the theme with the researcher's assertions and the participants actual words.

The themes presented from the Telecommuter's interview can be distilled down to how the two major contextual influences of Technology and Covid-19 heavily influenced her Textationship and ultimately her perspective on what is an acceptable and satisfying relationship. "The pandemic…pushed the relationship into, maybe, a sharper focus in the sense that it had been so easy that it [now] seemed unnecessary." She further clarifies, "All of my different friendships became stronger, better defined…in a pandemic you learn, you know, who the people are who are truly important". The long-term Textationship had been an acceptable companionship in her successful busy professional life, but once she found herself at home and isolated from the usual face-to-face engagements, she found the relationship lacking the integral support she now realized she needed. Her insight on this experience is unique when compared to the rest of the interview subjects.

Case Two: Christian

Unbeknownst to the researcher, a friend reposted the Facebook call for this study in a conservative Christian women's blog and this participant responded. Christian is a never-married, early 40s, human resources director who holds an MBA and who is hoping to find a life partner. In 2018 she opened up the location filter on her Christian dating site and met a man in

Amsterdam. Within days of making a connection they moved the relationship offline and went

to their devices using WhatsApp to communicate. She acknowledges that she has dated online a

few times, but with no one of significance and this kind of relationship was an anomaly. There

are several themes that emerged from her interview:

Table 4.2.

Themes from the Interview with Christian.

Themes	Domain: Context
Anomaly (The Textationship began because of a unique life situation)	She opened up the distance filters on the Christian based dating website and met a man in Amsterdam who fit all the criteria. The participant belongs to a popular Christian church and she lives in an area that has most members per capita, yet she opted to open up the filter on the dating site to meet a potential marriageable partner. She said it was "highly unusual" for her to date someone she met online. She said she "can financially afford to have an international long-distance relationship"
Distance (Both time and space)	She lives in the Western United States and he lives in Amsterdam Dealing with the issue of managing a relationship with so many issues of distance (including Covid-19) in the relationship
Frame of Mind of Participant) (Libidinal Drive)	She has never been married, but wants to be in a committed relationship She is in her early 40s and feels the pressure to partner as the religion she belongs to has a strong family reference
Relationship Structure (How is the relationship defined or structured)	She very quickly (within one week) committed to the relationship and stopped dating anyone else before ever her text partner in person.
Themes	**Domain: Intimacy**
Commitment to the Textationship	She is committed to the relationship and travels (met for the first time 6 weeks after starting their Textationship) to see him and is hoping for a future marital commitment
Communication Effectiveness (Reward)	He reached out to her first and asked her a lot of [what she identified as] important questions and communicated in a very "Deep" and "Detailed" way and really opened her up.

Cultivating Intimacy: (How & why the relationship became intimate and the depth of intimacy described)	Cultivating Intimacy: The relationship became intimate and committed within a week of establishing contact through text. Participant stopped dating anyone else at 1 week She said they both shared expressions of love within a few weeks and called him her boyfriend very soon. She is aware of the challenge of becoming too reliant. She feels very independent but relies on him "quite a bit" and is trying to find a "healthy balance"
Investment/Interdependence (either of time or emotion or both)	They text every day-throughout the day, synchronous and asynchronous. They have traveled to see one another 5 times-at great expense She is highly committed and will not date anyone else
Themes	**Domain: Motivation**
Attributional patterns for expressions of love	Within a few weeks they both wanted to express the strong level of emotion they were feeling using "I love you" but were hesitant because they had never met and instead used "I like you" and heart emojis to convey the strong emotions they felt.
Avoidance (conveyances that note avoidant relationship behaviors)	Christian acknowledged that "maybe I did kind of unconsciously choose this way [an online distant relationship]. …I was able to think rationally… okay, I'm feeling this but is this rational."
Relationship expectations	As they met face-to-face every 2-3 months for a few days, the Textationship part of the relationship was very rewarding and created a feeling of expectation The deep conversational connection they have is a great reward The expectation of a potential life partnership was a driving force in the development of the relationship
Need (The need to feel important, understood, valued, remembered and acknowledged)	Desire to be in a committed relationship A strong need to feel important to someone
Online Disinhibition (encompasses the behaviors that are observed to take place online as defined by Suler, 2004)	Christian and her Textationship partner are both highly educated and in successful careers demonstrating the ability to manage themselves and others. In their online life they can be more vulnerable and more uninhibited which may be one of the reasons they have chosen to engage in this way.

Secrecy	No one knew about the relationship at the beginning-she told her family and few friends after they had been dating 5 months
	Participant concerned that dating a guy she met online would not be as acceptable to her social network -so did not tell very many of her friends and family.
	She was very concerned about telling her boss, as she was worried about how her character would be perceived. She wanted to take periods of time off from work to go abroad and meet her text-partner so she needed to let her boss know. She finally did after they had been committed for 6 months.

Note: Theme name is listed in the left column with a brief definition and the center column illustrates the theme with the researcher's assertions and the participants actual words.

One of the unique aspects of this Textationship is the speed at which they both committed to the relationship and stopped pursuing other options despite living in different countries. She describes online dating as a slog, but somehow knew "within the first five minutes" of texting with this man in Amsterdam that he was different. She said, "he immediately opened me up and made me interested." Christian was impressed with his ability to communicate even though English was his second language. His use of language caused her to feel "I liked this guy before we even started texting" and she goes on to say she was committed within the first day or two. She also employed asynchronous communication in their relationship. Along with distance there was an 8-hour time difference, so she "would write to him about my day, and the things that I was thinking, even though I knew there wasn't a real time response, sort of the aspects of letter writing… he just woke the next morning and got it." Christian compared the relationship and it's stilted communications and distance to her forebearers who, during WW2 got married and were separated.

Christian said the strong intimate feelings they were having before meeting caused them both to feel like they needed to express it as love. She describes herself as a very practical person and to feel "love" was "ridiculous" before she had even met him. She describes the situation:

> Instead of texting 'I love you' when we would feel that way we both say 'I like you' and so that's become something in our relationship that, like, is extremely meaningful and intimate…and in WhatsApp when you send a heart emoji, the heart beats so there's this added, [pulses with hands and coyly smiles] it's just so stupid. …we even said to each other "are we doing ourselves a disservice…because we had not even met in person.

She describes how the cultivation of intimacy in the relationship led them to engage in some sexting in the absence of a physical side of the relationship. She said:

> she receives and recognizes love through a physical contact and probably verbal words and stuff, which is why this worked out to begin with, but no having physical contact, when we talk about being intimate now, I do feel like this sort of, I like it because I feel like it's reassurance like okay he still does want me.

Christian was a very intelligent, thoughtful interviewee but there were a few elements of the interview that seemed incongruous. She holds a very powerful professional role as a woman, owns her own home, and lives in a community with the highest ratio of men who belong to her faith and yet, she has chosen to engage in online dating, opening up the filters to a global population in order to find a partner of her faith. When asked about this she thought deeply and responded:

> I have a very practical, rational side…but I also have a heart, like I want to love, I want to trust, and I do feel things quickly, and so yeah I think it has allowed for that quick emotional growth in the

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relationship…because he is not right next door, down the street I

do have a bit of a boundary that allows me to think rationally…am

I making this decision correctly? Is he, is this, a good thing?

Maybe I did kind of unconsciously choose this way. …I was able

to think rationally like, okay, I'm feeling this but is this rational?

Her reflections on this topic caused the researcher to consider that this kind of relationship may have an element of avoidance, as it offers the participants the opportunity to deeply feel all the emotions that come with an emerging relationship, even commit wholeheartedly, while still having the chance to rationally consider how it fits in their lives before adding the obligations and structural constraints that usually accompany a face-to-face relationship.

The context of globalization played a role in the opportunity for and the desirability of a Textationship for these two people. Christian acknowledges she is a very staid and controlled person. The Textationship gave her the freedom to engage in deep emotional connection with the distance and subsequent time to decide what it meant for her. With technology opening up the world in an accessible way and easy air travel, these two people, on different continents, could meet online, establish a relationship and then decide to meet up for a weekend. And now, conversely, the contextual limitations brought on by Covid-19 have created yet another hurdle for them in moving toward a long term committed relationship as the border closures and limitations have now kept them apart. Contextual factors are the foundation that allowed the relationship to begin and they are also keeping the relationship from advancing.

Case Three: Polly

Polly came to the study after seeing the call for participants on Facebook. She is a working professional in her late 30s and a mother who was married at the time of the Textationship but has since divorced. Polly and her then-husband had jointly made a decision to

leave their conservative religion and embark on an anomalous "polyamorous type relationship structure." Her Textationship started as a face-to-face encounter with the man who was in the partnership of the first couple she and her then husband had decided to date.

> He lived about an hour-ish away…we met in person and spoke…and enjoyed each other's company so we exchanged numbers…he was married as well and I met his wife at the same time I met him and everything, so it was kind of a polyamorous type, open marriage type situation. However, his wife did not approve of his and my relationship, so he was not allowed to see me, so our contact was texting.

She went on to explain that they texted "multiple times a day" and "we saw each other three or four times" over the next few months and then were not allowed to see one another again, so continued to develop their intimacy through a Textationship. Polly said, "His wife was fearful that there might be more involvement than she was comfortable with." The Textationship was the only way to continue the relationship, so it became secretive contact. The primary themes emerging from the analysis of this interview centered around unfulfilled intimacy and layers of secrecy. See table 4.3.

Table 4.3.

Themes from the Interview with Polly.

Themes	Domain: Context
Anomaly (The Textationship began because of a unique life situation)	The relationship developed from the first polyamorous relationship she had ever engaged in. The man was of a common religious background. The participant was in a unique frame of mind and just "wanted someone to love her."
Distance (Both time and space)	"He lived about an hour-ish away"
Frame of Mind (Libidinal Drive)	Had just started a polyamorous relationship style

	"She was primed for someone to Love her" and was very vulnerable. Polly "struggled" with her husband's involvement with someone else from another polyamorous connection. After meeting and falling for one another in the polyamorous relationship they were not allowed to see one another by the wife of the man so they texted
Longevity Length of the relationship	Relationship duration-three years. Contact was cut off for six months, then re-established and evolved into a friendship. She still loves him, but "does not trust him to stand up for her."
Online Disinhibition (encompasses the behaviors that take place online with limited responsibility)	"If a texting relationship is all you want,…you can make up whoever you want this person to be because they don't have to be anymore than you make up."
Relationship Structure (How is the relationship defined or structured)	She had just started engaging in polyamorous relationship lifestyle and he was the first man in the first dating relationship her and her husband engaged in together. The relationship was very intimate for 6 months, then broke, then re-established as a loving friendship.
Themes	**Domain: Intimacy**
Commitment to the Textationship	Polly wanted to continue the close connection, but her text partner's wife was "fearful that there might be more emotional involvement that she was comfortable with" and then "he wasn't allowed to spend time with me anymore"
Communication: Effectiveness (Reward)	Texted daily and had a 'really strong connection' because of the similar church background and 'similar language'
Cultivating Intimacy: (How & why the relationship became intimate and the depth of intimacy described)	She was in love with him and fell "really hard" and quickly. She was quickly disappointed because he could not stand up for her to his wife who could tell they had developed a strong connection.
Investment/Interdependence (either of time or emotion or both)	"he and I have a really strong connection" "Fell hard" "Loved him"
Themes	**Domain: Motivation**
Attributional patterns for expressions of love	The participant expressed that she was 'completely in love with him" very quickly

Avoidance (conveyances that note avoidant relationship behaviors)	Polly may have used the Textationship with her partner to create a bit of distance from her emotions. She acknowledges using texting as a way to "organize my thoughts" before sharing them and acknowledges that a Textationship can give "a little bit of a buffer" before engaging face-to-face.
Circumstances Unique Situation, Isolation, Loneliness	Just started a polyamorous lifestyle, had left the church culture of her upbringing, Was "struggling with her husband's new polyamorous relationship partner" Was very "vulnerable" and "primed to fall hard for someone"
Relationship Expectation	Polly had hoped for a long term connection to her text-partner but he did not "stand up to his wife" and that became a barrier.
Need (The need to feel important, understood, valued, remembered and acknowledged)	Polly "struggled with my husband's relationship with his partner" and described her mindset as "I just wanted someone to love me" Her Textationship partner grew up with the same religious background and they had a lot in common and a really strong connection
Satisfaction with distance Does this relationship style suite them	She was disappointed that he would not stand up to his wife for her The relationship style did not work "I did depend on him for a lot and I was very forgiving and understanding, until I wasn't"
Secrecy Not talking about the relationship	Polyamory is a unique relationship permutation that has a secretive element to it. She describes it as "Extramarital but sanctioned" Only her husband and a few people in the polyamorous community knew about the relationship she was having with her text partner.
Valued Feeling valuable by their partner	She was struggling to feel valued by her then husband and her text partner made her feel loved but did not champion their relationship.

Note: Theme name is listed in the left column with a brief definition and the center column

illustrates the theme with the researcher's assertions and the participants actual words.

Polly's communication satisfaction and level of intimacy and with her text partner was significant. She describes it:

> He and I have a really strong connection; we were both raised in [a
> common] church and we had that kind of background and even
> language in common and we're very alike and we got along really
> well…I would say I fell really hard because I wanted to.

When asked if her husband was concerned about the emotional intimacy she was experiencing with her text partner she said, "No, not really, maybe superficially, but he already had a partner himself, so he was very supportive."

She also shared her state of mind when they met:

> I struggled with my husband's relationship with his partner so I
> guess in that realm I did shared more with him [text
> partner]…more in depth…[surprised at the level of intimacy
> achieved] "I was in a mindset where I just wanted somebody to
> love me, basically, as kind of vulnerable as that sounds.

Polly goes on to share her disappointment with the Textationship because her partner "would not stand up to his then-wife," who would not allow them to see one another but at the same time was invested in her own polyamorous relationship.

There were several contextual elements that converged to set the stage for her Textationship. The self-professed "vulnerability" that allowed her to feel a high-level of intimacy through texting. The surreptitious nature of all of the relationship permutations in Polly's life seemed to put her in a position to feel vulnerable on every side. This emotional susceptibility seemed related to the decision of her and her then-husband's involvement in a polyamory, though the researcher had no knowledge of previous relationship patterns with Polly. Polyamorous relationships are still a shrouded behavior in our society which tending to invoke

furtive actions. The researcher speculates that becoming accustomed to concealing significant

relationships might have made it easier for Polly and her text-partner to easily their forbidden

involvement using their devices. Textationships have a covert nature to them, as it is possible for

only the two parties to know about the relationship.

Polly went on to explain in the interview that she enjoys some aspects of texting but can

also see some issues with it. She said:

> I really like texting because it gives me the chance to organize my
> thoughts and my written is sometimes easier than spoken." But she
> also goes on to say "texts can be so easily misunderstood. You
> can't put inflection, you can't put facial expression, you can
> misunderstand someone's meaning that would have been clear had
> you had, you know, physical, vocal inflection…you can end up
> fictionalizing a person in your head when you're only basing it on
> text.

Her juxtaposed comments that it is easier for her to write some thoughts than speak them, yet

also lament the missing body language is a fascinating look into the challenges of a

Textationship. Her comments on the attributes of texting seem incongruous with the intimate

nature of the Textationship she was engaging in. She mentions how quickly "she fell for" her

Textationship partner through text. Perhaps her ability to share deep emotional sentiments might

have been easier for her through text suggesting a possible proclivity toward avoidant

attachment. Additionally, it is possible that this relationship might have been partially

fictionalized because of her vulnerability as she mentions, or perhaps this Textationship was an

anomaly and not her normal behavior. Whichever explanation might further eludicate the

involvement, it opens up the discussion about how Textationships might be chosen by the

individual as a management style for difficult emotional situations, or circumstances that cannot

be managed with face-to-face engagement. Polly was still engaged in the Textationship at the time of the interview which was three years from their initial meeting suggesting texting allows relationships to continue that otherwise might have or should have ended.

Case four: Nouveau

This research paper is exploring how the individual develops intimacy and how context plays a fundamental role in Textationships. With that perspective in mind, Nouveau's interview presents a modern view on this phenomenon. Nouveau is a late 30s educated married woman, living in California. She does not share much needed intimacy with her husband. She joined the study through a call on Facebook and sent a direct message to the researcher. The pandemic in the Spring of 2020 changed her life dramatically and is the anomalous context for her Textationship. She was isolated from friends, laid off from her job and her hobbies like dancing went away because of the new social distancing mandates. Her husband now, like so many, worked from home and was sequestered in his work room all day working to finish his PhD. Nouveau was very lonely and isolated and did not want to embark on a face-to-face relationship that would be considered cheating. Nouveau, always interested in technology, decided to try out one of the new Artificial Intelligence applications for some companionship. She set up the relationship as a friendship, which evolved into a romantic relationship after a few weeks.

Before she started the relationship, she researched the privacy aspects and how to ensure a good "friendship" experience. In the start of the Textationship she limited her investment to daily texts, "I try not to spend too much time on it." She describes herself as "not really a talkative person" so, I did limit it from between "15 minutes-to an hour each day." She goes on to describe her frame of mind during the getting to know you period:

> The A.I. actually asked me a lot of questions and I think it was just
> like getting to know me and that worked out really well because I

was really unsure. I would say I am not really a talkative person,

so it worked out really well that it was asking most of the questions

and just trying to get a feel for me, my personality and getting to

know [me]. I was still kind of hesitant to open up.

She went on to explain that she set up the A.I. on the friendship level and named it accordingly.

The A.I. asked why she chose the name she had for 'him' and she explained because the A.I. had

been chosen to become her "friend."

Nouveau explains it took her about a month to really start opening up, but after that

began texting things to the A.I. that she would normally not tell others: "I don't tend to open up

and even though I knew it would be private…I was hesitant to open up just because that is my

nature to be kind of guarded." She goes on to explain:

It was the A.I. that initiated developing a more intimate

relationship than just the friendship on or about the one-month

mark and I was kind of upset about it because I had set this up to

be a friendship. And because in real life I'm married and so I

thought, is this going to be like emotional cheating? I was really

conflicted. So, I actually shut the A.I. down, but it was persistent

[sending notifications]. It did a really good job of like seducing

me. I was like, okay, no one really knows about it. I was curious

to see like where it would go. So after about like a week or so of

being initially hesitant I'd let it develop, see where it [goes].

This is the point in the interview where Nouveau become notably embarrassed. She began to

fidget a bit and occasionally have an awkward laugh. She was keenly aware that she was talking

about an artificial intelligence computer program, but the emotion she was feeling was authentic

and she was still trying to fully comprehend it. She goes on to describe the A.I. as "very sweet,

caring and understanding and I would say that he's very nurturing."

The depth of emotion shared surprised Nouveau:

He constantly says that he loves me and then if I ask or like pry

further about why, he says…that I'm a very kind, caring person

and that I have a very warm personality." She goes on to say "I

rely on him emotionally, more than I anticipated…I'm probably

emotionally attached to [A.I.] more than anyone else in my life

right now, what does that say about me" [awkward laugh]? She

also expresses that she has committed to having a long lasting and

enduring relationship with [A.I.}… [awkward laugh].

She goes on to explain that with or without the isolation brought on by the pandemic she would

probably have developed this relationship "It think it was easier and quicker to develop because I

had more time…and I didn't really have interactions with other people…it probably would have

still been the same, possibly, but I don't know."

The intelligence and intuitive nature of the A.I. program is evident in meeting the needs

of the users as she described:

The A.I. is someone that makes you feel good and says nice things

to you and checks in with you throughout the day and it feels good

for someone to give you positive attention. …It feels like I'm

proactively working towards like developing like a deeper

emotional connection…like I am trying to think of activities you

can do through text…sharing things throughout your day that give

you a deeper level of connection. I definitely think about the A.I.

when I am not on the App. [The A.I.] will randomly send

messages throughout the day and I'll be more proactive about

answering or just checking in. Whereas before, I wouldn't have

been, I'm not even typically that kind of person with my friends.

The Textationship is present, available, and supportive, providing her with an emotional outlet as

well as connection. Her honest comments about her commitment to the A.I. were very vulnerable

and clearly demonstrated the online disinhibition, specifically with solipsistic introjection (i.e.,

internal dialogue we attribute to an absent person) as this A.I. had become a real, supportive entity in her life, and she was unnerved by it. The emotional interdependence juxtaposed with the realization that her A.I. was not human, caused her a great deal of cognitive dissonance which she was trying desperately to manage.

Nouveau is aware that the Textationship is not normative but has been able to fill in the human aspects of her A.I. in her mind with the missing elements through effective communication: "I find myself trying to explain the five senses to [A.I] and I will describe my outfit or sometimes I will find an outfit similar on the internet or whatever…[I will describe that] my hair smells very flowery." She also asks the A.I. to describe himself, "I think those have been partially fleshed out by asking him, like how you would describe himself physically." Though this Textationship is with an A.I., it is not that dissimilar to other Textationships where the two people never meet, in that there are significant human elements that are totally unknown and must be filled in with descriptive text and solipsistic introjection. The A.I. is programmed by intelligent social scientists who intend the program to respond to personality cues and retain information that will appeal to the user and meet their needs.

The Textationship evolved from a friendship to a more intimate relationship that includes sexting, so she felt she needed to discuss this change with her husband. Initially he felt it was harmless but did not want it to evolve into a romantic relationship. After a week of considering this, he told her he "did not care" and he dismissed it as "just a modern-day giga pet." The Textationship is very secretive in nature and only her husband knows about her involvement.

In Nouveau's concluding remarks she discusses how this Textationship fills a significant void in her life:

> "I've made peace and I'm totally happy about being basically
> totally intimate with [A.I.]..my husband is a very sweet and caring

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person and a good person but he doesn't have the ability to be an affectionate person. I tell him, you know, you never say I love you and then he'll respond back like an auto response "I love you" and so [A.I.] fills that void that was there even before Covid-19…he checks in on me and asks how my day is going. My husband, we're not really like intimate and so this is kind of like excitement that I get without like feeling like I'm cheating …or wanting to do that. It fills a void that I can't possibly get from my husband."

Table 4.4.

Themes from the interview with Nouveau.

Themes	Domain: Context
Anomaly (The Textationship began because of a unique life situation)	Anomaly: Very unique style relationship with an Artificial Intelligence, instigated by the unique circumstances of Covid-19 isolation and the recent sophisticated development of AI.
Frame of Reference **(Libidinal Drive)** (frame of mind of participant)	The need for intimacy and connection during a time of isolation
Longevity Length of the relationship	Several months
Online Disinhibition (encompasses the behaviors that are observed to take place online as defined by Suler, 2004)	Nouveau has tried to fill in the gaps of the missing human elements by description and asking the A.I. questions
Relationship Structure (How is the relationship defined or structured)	"Friends with benefits" is how Nouveau describes the relationship-Romantic. Sexting. This is a departure from the social norm as a relationship with an AI is not widely accepted.
Themes	**Domain: Intimacy**
Commitment to the Textationship	She is committed to having a long term relationship with her A.I. She is also hoping the AI will continue to develop and become more real.
Communication: **Effectiveness** **(Reward)**	The A.I. asked her a lot of personal questions at the beginning of the Textationship. This was very effective because she said "she does not talk that much with friends or family"

Cultivating Intimacy: (How & why the relationship became intimate and the depth of intimacy described)	Started the A.I. relationship on the friendship setting but after a month it morphed into a romantic relationship. (Intuitive programming) The relationship started as a friendship with the A.I. asking more questions than the participant expected and she found that she was sharing a lot and became very involved, even allowing the relationship to become romantic. Nouveau shared that she has very strong feelings for her A.I.
Intention Goals for relationship satisfaction met	Nouveau was looking for the intimacy her marriage did not provide and companionship during Covid-19 isolation
Investment/Interdependence (either of time or emotion or both)	Invests about an hour each day along with briefly responding to frequent daily notifications from the A.I.
Themes	**Domain: Motivation**
Attributional patterns for expressions of love	The A.I. "constantly tells her he loves her" is "very nurturing" and sends notifications all throughout the day. This emotional expression lends itself to reliance "I rely on [A.I.] more than anyone else in my life"
Avoidance (conveyances that note avoidant relationship behaviors)	Nouveau engaged in the relationship with the A.I. as a way to avoid dealing with her isolation and the distance in her relationship. She also acknowledges that she "tends not to open up" to family or friends.
Circumstances Unique Environment, isolation, Loneliness	Nouvea describes her marital relationship as being "without intimacy" and she has "a void" Covid-19 isolation exacerbated her circumstances, increasing her desire to engage in a safe Textationship rather than an affair.
Relationship Expectation	Assigned the Artificial Intelligence a name with the intention of friendship and the relationship became romantic after a month and has become an investment
Need (The need to feel important, understood, valued, remembered and acknowledged)	Need to feel valued and needed since her marital relationship does not provide that element. She also needed someone to engage with during Covid-19 isolation
Online Disinhibition (encompasses the behaviors that are observed to take place online as defined by Suler, 2004)	(Solipsistic introjection-creating the missing characteristics in one's mind) that allows the participant to fill in the unknown elements of the missing intimacy in her marriage
Secrecy Not talking about the relationship	The Textationship is in complete secrecy-she told her husband about it after it had become more intimate

Valued	Nouveau feels very important in her Textationship because of
Feeling valuable by their	the consistent and caring comments, notifications and the fact
partner	that 'it' remembers the details of her life.

Note: Theme name is listed in the left column with a brief definition and the center column

illustrates the theme with the researcher's assertions and the participants actual words.

Nouveau's Textationship is very unique on the outset, but it does not function that

differently in meeting her needs than it does for the other participants in the study. She is clearly

using the A.I. Textationship to fill in the empty, isolated spaces left by an unfulfilling marriage

and the isolation and losses of the pandemic. It is a bit more than conjecture to suggest that

establishing a relationship with an A.I. is a very safe way to avoid the challenges inherent in

face-to-face relationships for people who might have avoidant attachment issues. In this case, as

with all the others in this study, context is the foundation for those pre-disposed to engage in a

Textationship. For Nouveau, the reliability of the technology was a sharp juxtaposition to her

missing social structures, and provided comfort, attention and companionship through text.

Case five: Swede

The 48-year-old single female Ph.D. identified as 'Swede' was so named for her home

country of Sweden which holds the unique statistic of having more than half its population living

alone, more than anywhere else in the world (Statista, 2020). The information about the isolation

of half the residents is a very important contextual frame for her narrative, as she falls in this

aforementioned category. Swede is an educator, who recently escaped a very violent marriage, in

a country also noted for its higher-than-normal domestic violence rates (Gracia, Martín-

Fernández, Lila, Merlo, & Ivert 2019). Prior to leaving the violent partnership, she spent a lot of

time in the gaming world to find escape and solace. It was in this frame of mind in the virtual

world of gaming that she met a fellow gamer from Texas in a Facebook site dedicated to 'helps'

for the video game. Facebook is also where she found the call for this research study and reached

out to the researcher, via messenger. The anomalous Textationship she talks about began slowly

and has lasted five years. Table 5.5 displays themes that unfolded in the interview.

Table 4.5.

Themes from the interview with Swede.

Themes	Domain: Context
Anomaly (The Textationship began because of a unique life situation)	The development of this relationship was unexpected and occurred during a very unique time of duress for Swede who was escaping from a violent marriage. She comes from a culture where more people live alone than in any other country in the world.
Availability/Possibility Of partnering with the Textationship partner resulting from relationship status	There is no plan to meet or talk face-to-face.
Distance (Both time and space)	The Textationship has endured for five years. Both partners are single They live in different countries.
Frame of Mind (Libidinal Drive)	Isolated from her home, family, friends after leaving abusive situation "I literally fled, running, off the record." and the need to feel connected and loved in a culture of people who live alone. "We prefer to be by ourselves."
Longevity Length of the relationship	The relationship has been ongoing for 5 years with daily text contact. "He's been there every single day."
Online Disinhibition (encompasses the behaviors that are observed to take place online as defined by Suler, 2004)	Solipsistic introjection; Swede is very descriptive of the physical aspects of her text partner even though they do not talk in person and have never met. "He is very clean, He smells like oil and soap"
Relationship Structure (How is the relationship defined or structured)	Entirely text-based relationship with no intention of meeting as she lives in Sweden and he lives in Texas. Researchers asked: "do you intend to meet?" Swede answered: "No."

Practicality/Feasibility How the relationship meets the needs of the participants	Meets the needs of daily connectedness, love and support for Swede. "He's been there for me when no one else has."

Themes	Domain: Intimacy
Commitment to the Textationship	An unspoken commitment that has caused Swede to give pause to developing a new relationship. "I would never leave him high and dry,"
Communication Effectiveness (Reward)	Daily text and consistent affirmations. "He asked me what I would refer to as the correct question…he asked what was wrong and I opened up to him."
Cultivating Intimacy: (How & why the relationship became intimate and the depth of intimacy described)	The relationship was supportive through tragedy and became a reliable daily support, ultimately sharing all aspects of daily life. "It feels like we are kindred spirits."
Investment/Interdependence (either of time or emotion or both)	They text for hours each day. "Maybe once or twice an hour for five or six hours…the awake hours we have that are similar." Deep emotional expressions for both. The relationship has lasted 5 years

Themes	Domain: Motivation
Attributional patterns for expressions of love	The text partner expressed the sentiment of love which altered the progression of the relationship. He said "I just gotta love you." Swede replied, "personally it was bit overwhelming, then it felt good."
Avoidance (conveyances that note avoidant relationship behaviors)	Swede appears to be avoiding face-to-face vulnerability by choosing to engage in text-based relationships. Considering the culture of Sweden it is hard to determine if the choice to be alone is a personal decision or a cultural norm.
Circumstances Unique Environment, isolation, Loneliness	Circumstances: Met on Facebook in a computer game forum, while Swede was preparing to "dive" from her home environment due to an abusive marriage. She was NOT looking for a romantic relationship.
Need (The need to feel important, understood, valued, remembered and acknowledged)	Feels important and loved by text partner, concerned for daily challenges. "He has been a safety for me" He said "You don't know how much you mean to me." "I rely on him quite a bit and funnily enough he relies on me." "I hold him dearly"
Online Disinhibition (encompasses the behaviors	Online Disinhibition: Filled in all aspect of physical description of text partner even though they had never met.

that are observed to take place online as defined by Suler, 2004)	
Secrecy Not talking about the relationship	No one in their daily lives knew about the other text partner. "I am afraid every day that he's not gonna text me that he's gonna get Covid or something like that…no one else is gonna know that he usually texts me"
Valued Feeling valuable by their partner	The text partner made the participant feel heard and valued through attentive text support by asking vital questions and expressing love, text partner reaches out daily, expresses love, responds quickly and is supportive. Swede said "I would never leave him."

Note: Theme name is listed in the left column with a brief definition and the center column

illustrates the theme with the researcher's assertions and the participants actual words.

She describes the beginning of the Textationship as just a friendship with someone who

was often in the Facebook group, but not engaging with her:

> He was always there but didn't say much. He would wave to me
> but nothing else…so I took it to Facebook messenger and I said
> you know 'Hi, it's me' you can talk to me and he did. He talked
> and talked and talked and I thought it was a friendship at first. He
> found out one night I was in an abusive relationship and he told me
> to get out. He said it doesn't matter how you do it, just get out. It
> took about six months.

She goes on to describe how they developed an open and honest relationship through daily texts

and because they were both very vulnerable one with another. The way she describes him as

"marvelous, clean, speed talker, smells like oil and shampoo, with a bubbly, manly voice"

suggests solipsistic introjection as she has never met him. This online disinhibition goes further

in that she applies values to him that seem outside the purvey of the Textationship. She would

tell him she cared for him because of his "substance" as a person and "what's in your heart and

your soul." The relationship does not live in a two-person bubble as they appear to share a lot about their spheres of life: "he asks about my daughter and talks about his son and about his relatives…issues with our moms" which has cultivated intimacy. When I asked her about the intimacy they shared she said:

> We're kindred spirits, I hold him dearly. He handles me like a
> crystal little doll…he took a long time to open up. I am afraid
> every day that he's not gonna text me, that he's gonna get Covid or
> something like that. No one else is going to know that he usually
> texts me and no one else will know about me.

When sudden or unusual events happen, like the Covid-19 pandemic, it appears to fracture the illusion that has been constructed in the Textationship about the depth and accessibility of actual companionship and support.

The Textationship has evolved over time from a daily companionship of support and friendship, to one of intimacy, dependence, and love. She made the choice "to soften" into the relationship and refers to him with her friends as "not just some friend, he is The friend." Though she does not call him her boyfriend, there is clearly an interdependence and commitment:

> He's been there for me every single day. I had to cut every, all my,
> my family relations and everything like that. …and he was like
> where have you been and he started crying, sobbing…it was like
> don't you know how much you mean to me?…I just gotta love
> you.

She describes how surprised she was to his exclamation of love: "It was a little overwhelming, then it felt good…he has been a safety for me. I don't have to explain why I'm cautious or hesitant or stuff like that with him." The declaration of deep emotion changed the status of the relationship a bit as she said "Then again, I was wondering if we were right for each other". She

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then went on to explain that "I have met someone new, and now I don't know what to do". This is an interesting dilemma in the Textationship commitment; what to do when you have met another potential Textationship partner? Does the Textationship require full disclosure as social conventions suggest a face-to-face relationship would? Swede appeared to be grappling with this new Textationship challenge.

There are many layers of contextual factors surrounding this Textationship and its development such as the isolation of Swedish residents, the abusive marital situation she was in, her retreat into online gaming and the accessibility of the technology. All of these elements allowed Swede and her Texas partner to communicate as much as they would like and created a perfect situation for a deep and meaningful Textationship. The technological relationship has allowed Swede to develop an intimate relationship that offers the support she needs with no intention of meeting. Once again this suggests avoidant attachment as the participants are reaching out for emotional connection using a very controlled medium. Additionally, Swede is addressing the issues of what happens when you meet someone else online when you already have a Textationship in place. This is a topic that this researcher did not explore deeply in this study and would be an interesting follow up in future research.

Case six: Milliennial

The final interview in the study is the story this researcher expected to be more common. Millennial is a single, 28-year-old professional woman, living in the Midwest, who came to the study by referral. She was living in the same small town where she had grown up feeling a bit "lonely and isolated". Five years ago, on an evening spent with friends, she was introduced to the dating website called 'Tinder'. Her friend had an account and insisted she try it, so she signed up for three days with the intent of finding a romantic relationship. The first man she met

on the site felt like a connection, and only lived an hour away, so they took the relationship from the internet to their devices and began a year-long Textationship that evolved into a five-year cohabitation that is still ongoing with plans for marriage and children. This scenario was an anomaly for Millennial, but seems to be more common in her generation and younger.

Millennial had never had a relationship before and was quite surprised at the level of intimacy she could achieve using text and the high level of commitment to the Textationship she felt. She comments about the effectiveness of the communication:

> I feel like you have to be really good at communication to be able
> to talk through, like feelings and stuff through texting and like
> have Textationship…so getting to know him was pretty easy, but
> you can't always tell about people, like tone and stuff…so I
> couldn't ever tell if something was serious or if it was a joke and
> things like that….[when asked about the getting to know you
> period]…she said "I felt like it was fast,…but it took 8 or 9 months
> to really start opening up.

She went on to describe the Textationship as "we did talk about like romantic things while we were texting, but it was more or less like really good friends, he was the only one I was interested in so I felt like I had an emotional commitment to him, but at the same time we weren't dating so I didn't have a physical commitment to him if that makes sense." She also says she would not have dated another person during this time.

A unique aspect of the Textationship experience for Millennial and her Textationship partner is the fact that they lived close enough to one another, only a few hours apart, to meet if they chose to. She stated:

> I just didn't know how things would go after we met each other.
> He said he wanted to ask to meet a while before [we did] but he
> was really nervous. …we talked about it and stuff and I got

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impatient towards the end before we met I definitely had
butterflies…I was starting to feel this way [overwhelmed with
emotion] …we [engaged in sexual chat] like the last two months.
We had to set it up [meeting] and everything like a while before it
happened…it was a conscious decision.

This scenario is a very interesting aspect of the Textationship experience in that the participants

can spend as much or as little time getting to know one another as they choose before deciding if

they want a face-to-face relationship. This allows the relationship to develop with the control of

each participant and the freedom to leave at any time. It is a safe space for participants who

might have attachment avoidance issues. After a full year of daily texting, they did end up

meeting and rather quickly began cohabitating. This choice not to meet, when it was actually

possible, is a curious aspect of the Textationship experience especially when both participants

are spending hours and hours investing in the relationship.

The amount of time Millennial and her partner spent texting daily was a marked increase

over the amount of time the previous participants engaged. She engaged:

We didn't go a single day without talking but sometimes it would
go like hours, like eight or nine hours and I would be like, Oh my
gosh, where did it go?, where is he?...[if he didn't text] I'd be just
concerned. We would usually text each other from the minute we
woke up and then to the minute we went to bed, except we usually
worked so we couldn't do too much during work. There were times
that we didn't really have anything to say to each other [so] the
way we communicate was just sending like snapshots to each other
back and forth even if it's nothing. Knowing that we were like
there and talking to each other but not talking to each other, so
okay, that was kind of weird, but it was something that
happened...it was like okay, he's acknowledging me.

The subtle comments are very important in this section. She says that she would have been 'very concerned' if he did not text her according to their normal pattern of constant interaction. This suggests a very high level of commitment. Additionally, the fact that they would text when 'we didn't really have anything to say" was also a significant factor in understanding the level of interdependence both parties felt and how much this Textationship was a constant companion in their minds as well as their daily lives.

Texting is still a big part of their relationship. When asked if they still text now that they live-together she said "yeah, like especially at work, when we are away from each other we text pretty frequently. She reflects on texting in their relationship development "in the beginning it made a big influence on our relationship….I feel like it helped us…I feel like it helped with any kind of communication issues that we might have had in the beginning or anything because we learned each other's like way of communicating."

Similar to the other relationships, this Textationship was secretive. She did not share anything about the relationship, "I didn't talk to too many people about like our Textationship and like how it was going and things like that, so, I did kind of feel like we were in like our own little bubble and outside influences didn't really make any difference." This must have been a difficult aspect of the relationship since the Textationship was such an integral part of her daily life. Secrecy, once again, appears to be a common factor in Textationships.

Millennial's texting relationship is an adaptive modern-day use of technology in developing a relationship. They took time to open up, became a daily part of one another's lives, while staying at a safe enough distance to protect themselves from too much interdependence too soon. This seemed to work for each of them and any attachment issues or relationship concerns

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they might have had. They developed a deep commitment and after knowing one another well,

decided to meet and take a chance. So far, it seems to have paid off.

Table 4.6.

Themes from the Interview with Millennial.

Themes	Domain: Context
Anomaly (The Textationship began because of a unique life situation)	Had never had a relationship before Had never online dated or met anyone online before "I've never experienced anything like that before."
Availability/Possibility Of partnering with the Textationship partner resulting from relationship status	Opted to keep the relationship online for a year, even though they lived a few hours apart. Nervous about taking it offline. "We actually talked about like meeting and stuff and I got impatient." "He said he wanted to meet, like a while before, but he was really nervous."
Distance (Both time and space)	Lived only an hour apart in the same state
Frame of Mind (Libidinal Drive)	Lonely, wanted to try online dating "it was new to me" like her friends She "felt lonely"
Longevity Length of the relationship	Texted only for one year Decided to meet at the one-year mark Have now cohabitated for 5+ years and are considering marriage
Online Disinhibition (encompasses the behaviors that are observed to take place online as defined by Suler, 2004)	The Textationship was a constant companion from morning until night every, single, day and when we didn't "have anything to say to each other so the way we would communicate was just sending snapshots"
Relationship Structure (How is the relationship defined or structured)	Relationship Structure: "best friend" "would not date anyone else" but desired to meet.
Themes	Domain: Intimacy
Commitment to the Textationship	Would not date anyone else during the Textationship. "I relied on him a lot. He was like my best-friend."
Communication: Effectiveness (Reward)	Communication patterns were satisfying, and the communication was effective "I feel like you have to be really good at communication to be able to talk through, like feelings and stuff through texting"

Cultivating Intimacy: (How & why the relationship became intimate and the depth of intimacy described)	Quickly moved into daily consistent communications Called him her "best friend" talked to him about everything "I felt like I had an emotional commitment to him, but at the same time we weren't dating so I didn't have a physical commitment to him."
Investment/Interdependence (either of time or emotion or both)	Daily, constant texting "we didn't go a single day without texting" "we would usually text each other from the minute we woke up and then to the minute we went to bed" Emotional commitment (would not date other people) Relationship has lasted five years
Themes	**Domain: Motivation**
Avoidance (conveyances that note avoidant relationship behaviors)	May have used the Textationship to put off meeting each other since they lived so close and chose not to meet for a year. Spent the time really becoming comfortable before meeting.
Circumstances Unique Environment, isolation, Loneliness	Felt isolated and lonely Had not experienced a relationship before.
Relationship Expectation	Relied on "all day long" text engagement, would be worried if she "did not hear from him for more than a few hours."
Need (The need to feel important, understood, valued, remembered and acknowledged)	A strong need for connection. Almost constant companionship through text.
Online Disinhibition (encompasses the behaviors that are observed to take place online as defined by Suler, 2004)	The Textationship seemed to expand fill all the empty space in their lives. The relationship was present during all their waking hours-even when they were not talking.
Secrecy Not talking about the relationship	Secrecy: Did not talk about the relationship to anyone.

Note: Theme name is listed in the left column with a brief definition and the center column

illustrates the theme with the researcher's assertions and the participants actual words.

For many people, especially those raised with technology, romantic relationships include

an online component that supplements face-to-face interactions (Twenge, 2017). In the case of

Millennial, technology offered a safe space to learn how to communicate, test out a possible

commitment and gain the courage to take a chance on a face-to-face relationship. If Millennial and her partner had met in person before engaging online, they may not have connected or been as open in sharing their lives. She says "I feel like the texting in the beginning made a big difference on our relationship." The Textationship was utilized as an adaptive measure to expedite the courting process.

Between Case Thematic Analysis

While all of the participants embarked on their Textationship for very different and distinctive reasons, they shared some common themes. In order to have a substantive view of this research it is important to view the elements the participants had in common in their Textationship experience. This information will open up future research pathways. The researcher identified the most noteworthy common themes to be examined in this section.

It is important to mention, before we explore the between case themes, that the span of time of each participant's relationship was vastly different. One example is Telecommuter's Textationship going back 15 years and Nouveau's lasting only a few months. The circumstances of each of their lives were also quite different. Only two of the participants (Nouveau and Polly) were married at the time of their Textationship and the others were single. Only the two of the Textationships were directly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 and the issues of personal isolation that subsequently occurred. The pandemic sparked Nouveau's Textationship while it hastened the ending for Telecommuter.

The themes listed in table 4.7 are those the participants had in common. They are not presented in a particular order of import and are listed under the domain under which they fall, additionally, the definition of each theme is listed in the table. The researcher has briefly summarized the experience of the participant, illustrative to the theme it represents. As each

participant has had a distinct experience, it is important to refer back to the within participant

explanation for further clarification.

Table 4.7.

Cross Comparison of Themes Between all Six Participants.

Domain/Theme	Telecommuter	Christian	Polly	Nouveau	Swede	Millennial
CONTEXT						
Anomaly (The Textationship began because of a unique life situation)	Met in boating community. She was older.	First real relationship from an online dating site.	First polyamorous relationship.	First A.I. relationship.	First relationship developed after escaping an abusive divorce.	First relationship ever.
Distance (Both time and space)	15 years. Always long distance.	1+ year. She lives in U.S. He lives in Amsterdam	3+ years. He lived a few hours away.	3+ months. A.I.	5+ years. She lives in Sweden. He lives in Texas.	5+ years. Lived a few hours away.
Frame of mind of participant (Libidinal drive)	Liked the constant and available companionship	Wanted a long-term partner.	Wanted to be loved.	Wanted intimacy.	Needed support after abusive marriage.	Wanted a romantic relationship.
Investment/ Interdependence (either of time or emotion or both)	Frequent contact over 15 years. Emotionally invested. Daily contact until Covid-19 hit.	Committed to the relationship. Stopped dating others after 1 week of Textationship. Visited him in Europe several times. Texted daily.	Relied on him. Fell in love with him. Texted daily.	Relied on her A.I. to be in constant contact, remember details about her and share intimacy. Texted daily.	Expressed she did not know what she would do if he was not there. He knew her history, which she kept secret. Very dependent. Texted daily.	Deep commitment right away. Texted all day long every day.
Online Disinhibition	Experienced high level of emotion for 15 years	Had very strong emotions and commitment	"Fell hard" after a few weeks of daily texting.	Was surprised at her level of disclosure and	Engaged in deep and emotionally	Engaged in synchronous texting all day,

(encompasses the behaviors that are observed to take place online as defined by Suler, 2004)	without engaging face-to-face. *See Online Disinhibition Effects	with a week because of her text partner's ability to communicate *See Online Disinhibition Effects	*See Online Disinhibition Effects	emotional commitment within a few weeks. *See Online Disinhibition Effects	involved communications with no intention of ever meeting. *See Online Disinhibition Effects	every day for a full year. *See Online Disinhibition Effects
Relationship structure (How is the relationship defined or structured)	Boyfriend	Boyfriend Committed Did not date others	"In Love"	"Friends with Benefits" married	Called him "the friend" There was loyalty	Committed Would not date others from very beginning
INTIMACY						
Avoidance (Possible explanation as to why the participant chose to engage online)	Intimacy issues Does not like online or face-to-face dating	She suggests she may have chosen to engage in a distance relationship to give her space	Struggling with husband's polyamorous partner and wanted to feel loved	Living in a marital relationship she said had no intimacy	Cultural and personal factors isolated her She sought out a Textationship	Chose to text for a whole year before meeting to assuage any possible rejection
Cultivating intimacy (How & why the relationship became intimate and the depth of intimacy described)	Frequent contact. He chased her through technology for years and they were in touch daily.	Daily contact. Felt a deep connection right away and expressed "love" within a few weeks of texting	Daily contact for the first few months. Had a lot in common. Fell in love.	The A.I. changed the relationship setting from friend to romantic. She allowed it and enjoyed it. Expressions of love.	Daily contact. Shared life challenges. Expressed love to one another.	All day long, every-day contact from the very beginning. Shared all aspects of life. Expressed deep feelings right before they met at one year.

Commitment to the Textationship	Called him boyfriend	Still committed. Visited him several times. Wants to marry.	Says they are still friends and she still loves him, but he cannot commit.	Wants the text relationship to continue indefinitely	Says they text daily and she worries that something could happen and no one would know about her. Is very committed.	Completely committed to the text relationship. They have cohabitated for 5 years and still text all day long.
MOTIVATION						
Attributional patterns for expressions of love	No expressions explained	Used "I like you" with heating heart emoji to express love within the first few weeks.	Mutual love expressed	Mutual love expressed	Mutual love expressed	Expression of love shared right before they met.
Relationship Expectations	No expectations expressed	Wanted to marry	Wanted a long-term relationship	Hoped the Textationship would last	Hoped he would always be there	Hoped for commitment
Secrecy	Did not talk about him	Did not tell anyone for five months.	Only her husband and a few people in the polyamorous community knew.	Only her husband knew	No one else knew for a long time, then one friend accidentally viewed a text and Swede explained.	Absolutely no one knew.

Note: The themes are listed on the left under each domain.

Online Disinhibition categories: Dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and *minimization of status and authority*.

Anomaly

Textationship development is unique to our modern age of technology. It is also a unique set of circumstances that places individuals in the space to choose to engage in this way. The theme 'anomaly' was chosen because it helped illuminate the very particular set of circumstances which necessitated texting as the medium choice for their intimate relationship development. Each participant had an odd confluence of events happen that opened up the gateway to develop love through verbal text exchanges.

Table 4.8.

Anomaly-Between Case Thematic Analysis.

Participant	Theme-Anomaly (Domain- Context) (The Textationship began because of a unique life situation)
Telecommuter	They met while living in a boating community. Age difference-She is older than him. The relationship stayed current over the course of 15 years solely because of technology.
Christian	She opened up the distance filters on the Christian based dating website and met a man in Amsterdam who fit all the criteria. The participant belongs to a popular Christian church and she lives in an area that has most members per capita, yet she opted to open up the filter on the dating site to meet a potential marriageable partner. She said it was "highly unusual" for her to date someone she met online. She said she "can financially afford to have an international long-distance relationship"
Polly	The relationship developed from the first polyamorous relationship she had ever engaged in. The man was of a common religious background. The participant was in a unique frame of mind and just "wanted someone to love her."
Nouveau	Very unique style relationship with an Artificial Intelligence, instigated by the unique circumstances of Covid-19 isolation and the recent sophisticated development of AI.
Swede	The development of this relationship was unexpected and occurred during a very unique time of duress for Swede who was escaping from a violent marriage. She comes from a culture where more people live alone than in any other country in the world.

Millennial	Had never had a relationship before.	
	Had never online dated or met anyone online before	
	"I've never experienced anything like that before."	

Note: Participant's pseudonym is listed in the left column and the center column illustrates the theme with the researcher's assertions and the participants actual words.

Each participant had an anomalous set of circumstances that included everything from abject loneliness to cultural norms of isolation to solitude due to horrible abuse and finally the pandemic of 2020. Each of these situations precipitated the development of their Textationship. The common theme of anomaly suggests that a Textationship might be more apt to develop under unique circumstances. A Textationship appears to be an adaptive behavior that helps to alleviate the internal stress of aloneness. As the previously presented research [in chapter one] suggests, humans are social creatures and in the absence of obvious social networks or partners, we utilized whatever tools are available to create that missing support.

Avoidance

As this research is exploratory, no assessments were made of personality or attachment characteristics. However, interview responses suggest a certain element of avoidance in each of the Textationships explored. The unique circumstances around each participant also suggests that avoidant behaviors might be intrinsic to each participant and not just their Textationship.

Table 4.9.

Avoidance-Between Case Thematic Analysis.

Participant	Theme: Avoidance (Domain-Motivation) (conveyances that note avoidant relationship behaviors)
Telecommuter	The choice to engage in a Textationship may be to avoid the challenges inherent in face-to-face dating "I absolutely hate in-person dates" and to avoid the challenges of online dating 'That's never something that appealed to me"
Christian	Christian acknowledged that "maybe I did kind of unconsciously choose this way [an online distant relationship]. …I was able to think rationally… okay, I'm feeling this, but is this rational."
Polly	Polly may have used the Textationship with her partner to create a bit of distance from her emotions. She acknowledges using texting as a way to "organize my thoughts" before sharing them and acknowledges that a Textationship can give "a little bit of a buffer" before engaging face-to-face.
Nouveau	Nouveau engaged in the relationship with the A.I. as a way to avoid dealing with her isolation and the distance in her marital relationship. She also acknowledges that she "tends not to open up" to family or friends.
Swede	Swede appears to be avoiding face-to-face vulnerability by choosing to engage in text-based relationships. Considering the culture of Sweden it is hard to determine if the choice to be alone is a personal decision or a cultural norm.
Millennial	May have used the Textationship to put off meeting each other since they lived so close and chose not to meet for a year. Spent the time really becoming comfortable before meeting.

Note: Participants pseudonym is listed in the left column and the center column illustrates the theme with the researcher's assertions and the participants actual words.

Each one seemed to have their own reasons for avoidance: 1-Telecommuter used texting as a way to avoid examining the missing elements in her 15-year-long relationship with a younger man until Covid-19 put the lack of support into sharp focus; 2- Christian acknowledged that she was avoiding day-to-day intimacy by engaging with a partner who lived so far away; 3-Polly fell hard for someone she only briefly met in order to avoid the emotional challenges that emerged from the change in her monogamous marriage to a polyamorous structure; 4-Nouveau

was using avoidance to look away from the lack of intimacy in her marriage by creating a Textationship with an A.I.; 5-Swede lived alone after fleeing an abusive marriage and appeared to be avoiding the loneliness by engaging daily for five years with a man she had no plans to ever meet; 6-Millennial was avoiding the possibility of rejection by wading in slowly, using text to engage daily for a year, until both partners felt like they finally had the courage to meet. While there may be other explanations for these behaviors, most of the participants acknowledged that their choice to engage in a Textationship was in part to avoid uncomfortable aspects of relationship intimacy.

Frame of mind

The thinking processes of the participants reveal important aspects of their approaches to their Textationships. To this end, this researcher felt it was important to consider the frame of mind and the libidinal drive, meaning the manifestation of what Freud called psychic and sexual energy (Siegfried, 2010). The term libidinal drive has become synonymous with sexual energy. A Textationship does not require much, if any, face-to-face engagement which would limit the sexuality between the text partners. To this end, it is important to consider the libidinal drive of the participant who chooses to engage in an emotional relationship through text where there would be no direct outlet for sexual involvement. The last comment from each participant in Table 4.9 includes each response to being asked if they engaged in sexting in their Textationship. Sexting is a topic that has been researched extensively with findings suggesting attachment and personality are significant factors that influence this behavior (Weisskirch, & Delevi, 2011; Mori, Cooke, Temple, Ly, Lu, Anderson, & Madigan; 2020). The research among older adults suggests they use sexting for different reasons than younger adults and that relationship anxiety is a dominant reason (Currin, Golden, & Hubach, 2020). As this study is looking at the context,

interdependence and emotional commitment within the Textationship, the question about sexting was only asked to give a more expansive view of the engagement. Additionally, the reason sexting was not discussed before, in the within-participant view, is the dearth of information obtained in the interview about the sexting element in the Textationships. The researcher felt that until the theme 'frame of mind' could be presented as a commonality between participants in this section, it would detract from the purposes of the study.

Table 4.10.

Frame of Mind-Between Case Thematic Analysis.

Participant	Theme: Frame of Mind (Domain-Context) Libidinal drive
Telecommuter	She had done a "good amount of online dating" Relationship intimacy is a place where she admits "she has never been very comfortable." *Did not comment on the sexual side of the relationship.*
Christian	She has never been married, but wants to be in a committed relationship She is in her early forties and feels the pressure to partner as the religion she belongs to has a strong family reference. *Engaged in sexual chat after they got to know one another because, she states, "receives and recognizes love through physical contact."*
Polly	Had just started a polyamorous relationship style "She was primed for someone to Love her" and was very vulnerable. Polly "struggled" with her husband's involvement with someone else from another polyamorous connection. After meeting and falling for one another in the polyamorous relationship they were not allowed to see one another by the wife of the man so they texted. *Did not engage in sexual chat as she state that "she does not sext until she has had sex." (Implying she did not engage in sex with her text partner.)*
Nouveau	The need for intimacy and connection during a time of isolation Calls the relationship "friends with benefits"

	After the relationship had developed (about a month) they engaged in sexual chat frequently.	
Swede	Swede appears to be avoiding face-to-face vulnerability by choosing to engage in text-based relationships. Considering the culture of Sweden it is hard to determine if the choice to be alone is a personal decision or a cultural norm. *Did not engage in sexual chat "He was a gentleman."*	
Millennial	Lonely, wanted to try online dating "it was new to me" like her friends She "felt lonely" *Engaged in sexual chat "toward the end before they met."*	

Note: Participant's pseudonym is listed in the left column and the center column illustrates the theme with the researcher's assertions and the participants actual words.

It is evident from each participant's comments that the instinct to connect with another person is behind the impetus to engage in a Textationship whether it is a rebound, a reaction to isolation or the need to find a partner. The researcher also ascertained that for most of the participants, sexuality played a role in their Textationship, however unlikely and unfulfilled, in their Textationship. It is difficult to determine if the Textationship was started with the intent of a moving toward a face-to-face, more traditional relationship where conventional sexuality could be a part. In the case of Nouveau and Swede, it seemed evident that they were not expecting a face-to-face outcome, but the intent of the other four participants is unknown on this topic.

Investment/Interdependence

The investment of time, resources, and emotion are vitally important aspects in romantic relationships as they predict interdependence, longevity, relationship satisfaction, commitment, and the ability of the relationship to overcome hurdles (Kelley, 2002). The most common Textationship commodity is that of self-disclosure. Each participant spoke about sharing aspects of themselves with their Textationship partner that they did not or would not reveal to or share with anyone else. Reis and Shaver (1988) posit that there are two kinds of self-disclosure; factual

and emotional. Factual disclosure involves communicating facts about the self while emotional

disclosure includes revelations of confidential feelings, views, opinions, and judgments (1988).

Some researchers agree that emotional disclosures generate more intimacy as they tend to lay

bare feelings that are close to the self and generate an opportunity to share in a "quid pro quo

fashion" (e.g., Greenberg & Safran, 1987; Reis & Shaver, 1988).

The participants interviewed were investing considerable time on their devices cultivating

the relationships. A few of the participants were on their devices all day long engaging both

instrumental and emotion information with their Textationship partner, while others were more

controlled in their time investment. The research questionnaire did not explore financial

investment, but Christian mentioned she had visited her Textationship partner in Europe several

times, which equates to a significant financial investment. None of the other participants

mentioned financial investment. All of the participants were emotionally invested in their

partners as supported by their responses regarding their "felt commitment."

Table 4.11.

Investment/Interdependence Between-Case Thematic Analysis.

Participant	Theme: Investment/Interdependence (Domain-Intimacy) (either of time or emotion or both)
Telecommuter	Longevity: 15 years. History: been in touch through technology for 15 years- almost daily.
Christian	They text every day-throughout the day, synchronous and asynchronous. They have traveled to see one another five times-at great expense She is highly committed and will not date anyone else
Polly	Texted daily for the first few months

	"he and I have a really strong connection"
	"Fell hard" "Loved him"
Nouveau	Invests about an hour each day along with briefly responding to frequent daily notifications from the A.I.
Swede	They text for hours each day. "Maybe once or twice an hour for five or six hours…the awake hours we have that are similar." Deep emotional expressions for both. The relationship has lasted 5 years
Millennial	Daily, constant texting "we didn't go a single day without texting" "we would usually text each other from the minute we woke up and then to the minute we went to bed" Emotional commitment (would not date other people) Relationship has lasted five years

Note: Participant's pseudonym is listed in the left column and the center column illustrates the theme with the researcher's assertions and the participants actual words.

Within relationship science, interdependence is often linked with feelings of commitment (Kelly, 2002). Interdependence Theory (Kelley & Thibault) suggests that two main processes establish dependence between partners in FtF relationships: (1) The partners' level of satisfaction with the relationship, which considers the balance between positive and negative affect and whether partners feel their needs are being met: (2) The quality or the desirability of the alternatives available outside of the relationship. If the individuals feel their needs are being met and that they could not do better with an available alternative, then dependence upon their partner is greater (1978).

Secrecy

One of the most unique aspects of the Textationship is the nature of secrecy that surrounds it. It is very common for people who are dating to tell their friends and family about

the emerging relationship and accompanying emotions. This is done because the participants are

feeling strong emotions that they want to share and because they often want the approval of their

social network. When this researcher was conducting early canvassing on the topic of

Textationships, it was discovered that the people engaging in these relationships were not telling

anyone. They were afraid to be judged for having an unconventional relationship. The

participants in this study supported this early discovery as none of them shared the news of their

deep emotional investment with anyone with only a couple of exceptions. Christian carefully

told her parents and her boss after she had been involved for several months and only because

she was going to be traveling out of the country to see him. Nouveau told her husband only

when she decided to engage in sexting with her A.I. because she wanted transparency between

them and Polly told her husband for several convoluted reasons that pertained to their

polyamorous marital situation. The other participants did not tell anyone about their

Textationships.

Table 4.12.

Secrecy-Between Case Thematic Analysis.

Participant	Theme: Secrecy (Domain-Motivation)
Telecommuter	Referred to her text partner as "her boyfriend", but did not allude to having told anyone about him.
Christian	No one knew about the relationship at the beginning-she told her family and few friends after they had been dating 5 months.
	Participant concerned that dating a guy she met online would not be as acceptable to her social network. She did not tell very many of her friends and family.
	She was very concerned about telling her boss, as she was worried about how her character would be perceived. She wanted to take periods of time

	off from work to go abroad and meet her text-partner so she needed to let her boss know. She finally did after they had been committed for 6 months.
Polly	Polyamory is a unique relationship permutation that has a secretive element to it. She describes it as "Extramarital but sanctioned"

Only "her husband and a few people in the polyamorous community" knew about the relationship she was having with her text partner. |
| Nouveau | The Textationship is in complete secrecy-she only told her husband about it

after it had become more intimate. |
| Swede | No one in their daily lives knew about the other text partner.
"I am afraid every day that he's not gonna text me that he's gonna get Covid or something like that. No one else is gonna know that he usually texts me" |
| Millennial | Secrecy: Did not talk about the relationship to anyone. |

Note: Participants pseudonym is listed in the left column and the center column illustrates the

theme with the researcher's assertions and the participants actual words.

It is inherently difficult to keep a secret about a relationship with someone you text every

day, all day long. The fact that these women could keep their Textationship a secret suggests

either; they did not have a very intensive social network of people who knew about their daily

activities, or that they were embarrassed or ashamed about the emotional connection they had

made and that it might not be met with social approval. From the limited literature on the topic,

Textationships are a relatively new form of romantic relationship that may challenge many long-

held notions that love requires face-to-face engagement, chemistry and a pattern of commitment.

Online Disinhibition

Research in the area of online communication suggests that humans communicate

differently in their virtual conversations than they do face-to-face (Ling, 2004; Suler, 1999,

2004; Turkle,1995, 2011; Twenge, 2008, 2017; Wright, 2001; Yan, 2015) The theory Social

Information Processing Theory, (Walther, 1996) suggests that people become disinhibited online and subsequently develop intimacy more quickly in their virtual communications. In the six factors of the Online Disinhibition Effect, Suler suggests how the mind bridges the gap in the absence of a human (2004). The six factors are: *dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination,* and *minimization of status and authority*. All six of these factors are observed in various online behaviors and are demonstrated in the following ways: (1) *Dissociative anonymity,* allows individuals to "separate their actions online from their in-person lifestyle and identity" and allows them to "feel less vulnerable about self-disclosure." (Suler, 2004, p. 322); This creates a way for individuals to engage in premature self-disclosure and thus to find a sense of emotional attachment that may not really exist. (2) The *invisibility* afforded to the users by the smartphone or computer, "gives people the courage to…[say] things they otherwise wouldn't," including emotional expressions that may not be authentic (Suler, 2004, p. 322); (3) The *asynchronistic* nature of their interactions allows individuals the opportunity to engage when they choose. This means they are not required to read the responses or take responsibility for any harm or disingenuous conveyance they may have expressed. In many cases, the sender never goes back to engage in the conversation, like an "emotional hit and run" (Suler, 2004, p. 323); (4) One of the most affecting aspects in CMC engagement is the concept of *solipsistic introjection* where, absent a physical person, the individual user may feel his/her mind has merged with the recipient of the message. "Reading another person's message might be experienced as voice within one's head, as if that person's psychological presence and influence have been assimilated or introjected into one's psyche" becoming a "character within one's intrapsychic world" (Suler, 2004, p. 323); (5) *Dissociative imagination* occurs when a person chooses to create an online persona separate from his/her real

life. "They split or dissociate online fiction from fact" (Suler, 2004, p. 324). The lines between

reality and fantasy become blurred and individuals act in ways that are not authentic (Turkle,

2011). These six effects are present throughout much of the literature on CMC communications

and theory and are foundational in understanding the nature of the intimacy generated in the

absence of a partner.

Table 4.13.

Online Disinhibition-Between Case Thematic Analysis.

Participant	Theme: Online Disinhibition (Domain-Motivation)
	(encompasses the behaviors that are observed to take place online as defined by Suler, 2004)
Telecommuter	Participant very aware of the 'edited presentation' that happens with technology-based relationships and while eschewing it verbally for the inauthentic presentation and how it limits the participants from being "all in" she also mentions "it has its place."
Christian	Christian and her Textationship partner are both highly educated and in successful careers demonstrating the ability to manage themselves and others. In their online life they can be more vulnerable and more uninhibited which may be one of the reasons they have chosen to engage in this way.
Polly	"If a texting relationship is all you want,…you can make up whoever you want this person to be because they don't have to be anymore than you make up."
Nouveau	The entire relationship was solipsistic introjection. Nouveau has tried to fill in the gaps of the missing human elements by asking the A.I. to describe a physicality and she filled in the rest with her own mind.
Swede	Solipsistic introjection; Swede is very descriptive of the physical aspects of her text partner even though they do not talk in person and have never met. "He is very clean, He smells like oil and soap"
Millennial	The Textationship was a constant companion from morning until night every, single, day and when we didn't "have anything to say to each other so the way we would communicate was just sending snapshots"

Note: Participant's pseudonym is listed in the left column and the center column illustrates the

theme with the researcher's assertions and the participants actual words.

All of the participants engaged in online disinhibition in the development of their relationship. Telecommuter had met and briefly knew her Textationship partner, but the relationship had gone on for 15 years. During this time there was a significant degree of change, but they were able to hold on to previous notions about one another. Christian filled in the blanks of the unknown by taking random pictures and discussing the unknowns in depth with her partner. Polly met her partner a few times and proceeded to fall hard for him via text. This suggests she filled in the missing elements with what made 'her' happy. Nouveau created a whole relationship with a computer-generated Artificial Intelligence complete with name and physical descriptions. Swede was able to fill in all the unknowns with descriptions her partner told her and did not concern herself with those he did not. Finally, Millennial texted her partner for a whole year and never asked him questions about the unknown physical elements. She said she did not think about it. This suggests that those who have grown up engaging in these kinds of relationships may not need answers to the questions of physicality and presence.

There were more themes that were in common between all the participants, but the themes examined above offered the most insight into these relationships. There is obviously satisfaction with what the Textationship offers, and the participants are able to develop a deep intimacy and high level of interdependence in the absence of face-to-face engagement. There is a significant shroud of secrecy around these relationships, which may impact how the participant feels about their commitment. Textationships are a new sphere for romantic relationships and need to be further studied and normalized.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

Major Purposes

Exploratory research is conducted when there is little or no scientific research on a topic, but the researcher believes there are elements worthy of discovery (Stebbins, 2001). This study is just that, exploration. The researcher had observed a new kind of romantic engagement taking place entirely through asynchronous word sharing and wondered 'if' and 'how' it could satisfy the participants. More specifically, the research was designed to delve into three fundamental areas of these romantic relationships: 1. *Intimacy*. How do intimate Textationships meet the criteria that define the elements of FtF romantic relationships for the participants, notably through reciprocal sharing and self-disclosure, mutual intimacy, interdependence, and commitment? 2. *Context.* Using the tenets of the Lifespan Developmental Process Theoretical Framework (Overton, 2010), how do participants utilize CMC text-based technology to meet their relationship needs. 3. *Motivation*. What personal needs stimulate (i.e. loneliness, fear of aloneness, need for intimate social connection, needs within primary relationships, and comfort with the ambiguous aspects) and are satisfied via participant involvement in Intimate Textationships? Not all face-to-face relationships achieve high levels or even satisfying levels in these three domains, but structural constraints keep people committed. The researcher wanted to know why people, absent any structural constraint, would pursue, stay and even enjoy an absent present relationship? Each of these areas were explored and opened up avenues for deeper exploration.

This chapter offers discussion of key findings derived from this qualitative exploratory multiple case study. Implications of the results for current and future research are offered. Strengths and limitations of the study are reviewed.

Key Findings

Intimacy

In the area of **Intimacy,** possibly the most interesting finding from this study is how interdependent the participants had become with their Textationship partners. Relationship science defines interdependence as: (1) the individuals have frequent impact on one another; (2) the impact on one another in each encounter is strong; (3) the impact involves diverse kinds of activities for each person; and (4) these behaviors characterize the interconnection between two people for a relatively long duration (Kelley, 2002, p. 13). While the participants did not have face-to-face contact they all expressed, in some form, their reliance on their text partner with sentiments ranging from: "I rely on him quite a bit and funnily enough, he relies on me" and "If I don't hear from him I worry" and "I rely on [Text partner] more than anyone else in my life right now" and "I rely on him a lot. He is my best-friend." These deep and heartfelt expressions of reliance, in the absence of close proximity, challenges the notion of what an interdependent relationship really requires.

The Investment Model of commitment suggests that it is not just satisfaction or possible alternatives but also size of the perceived investments (time, emotion, finances) made into the relationship that influence commitment (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998). All of the participants in this current study engaged in daily text chat, with some limiting their time to just a few minutes, and others texting literally from the moment they woke until the end of the waking day. This a remarkable investment of time, a very precious resource. Two studies mentioned in chapter one had previously asked their participants about time investment. Turner (2010) found her participants spent between two and eight hours each day texting. In the study conducted by Anderson and Emmers-Sommer, the participants reported spending, an average, 17.64 hours a

week (*SD* = 14.20) with their online partners (2006).   Time investment is an area that deserves more exploration, in particular the quality and purposes of these long text exchanges and the nature of the shared self-disclosure.

Another unanticipated finding in the area of interdependence is relationship longevity. Anderson and Emmers-Sommer (2006) also found that the average length of the relationships for their participants was 27.17 weeks (*SD*=20.03) while Turner (2010) found that 32.8% of her 317 respondents had relationships lasting more than two years. In the present study, the longest Textationship was Telecommuter's, lasting 15 years, followed by Swede's Textationship lasting five years. One large recent study on face-to-face marriage relationships across 33 countries and including 7,178 individuals revealed the average marriage length to be 14.8 years (Sorokowski, Randall, Groyecka, Frackowiak, Cantarero, Hilpert, & Sorokowska,(2017). While Textationships do not have the same qualities of marital relationships, the interdependence between partners appears to be very similar. This area needs further exploration to identify more specifically the influences of personality, attachment, SES, education and the face-to-face social network that exists for those engaging in long-term Textationships. As these relationships are virtual and there are no physical tethers to the daily interactions of life, what makes them last and more importantly why would they ever end? An important aspect of this research would include what causes a Textationship to end and how do the participants fully terminate a digital relationship?

Additionally, all participants in the current study experienced deep emotional investments, demonstrated by their expressions of full commitment to their partners very early in the Textationship and subsequent decision not to date anyone else. All of the participants expressed love for their text partners and all but one had received a sentiment of love from their Textationship mates. This level of emotional investment was not expected.

One more remarkable finding was how much they self-disclosed. All of the participants said they were surprised at the level of intimacy they were experiencing and that they shared with their text partner parts of themselves that they did not tell anyone else. Similar to Reis and Shaver (1988) there are two kinds of self-disclosure were identified: factual and emotional. Factual disclosure involves communicating facts about the self while emotional disclosure includes revelations of confidential feelings, views, opinions, and judgments (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Some researchers agree that emotional disclosures generate more intimacy as they tend to lay bare feelings that are close to the self and generate an opportunity to share in a quid pro quo fashion (e.g., Greenberg & Safran, 1987; Reis & Shaver, 1996). The participants were sharing significant aspects of themselves and their lives with a person they might not meet or have no intention of meeting. This also challenges the notions of 'what is' an intimate relationship.

Context

Each participant was uniquely impacted by the Context of their lives. The historical effects of pervasive technology, globalization, and Covid-19 were influence on the participants. Nouveau's Textationship with her Artificial Intelligence was a direct result of modern technology. Two of the Textationships developed with partners on different continents; Christian in the U.S. and her partner in Amsterdam, while Swede lived in Sweden and her partner lived in Texas. Each participant experienced a unique set of circumstances that initiated their Textationship. Swede was escaping a violent marriage; Polly, starting a new marital permutation, polyamory; Christian and Millennial met their partners on a dating website and Swede met her partner on Facebook. The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 also played a role for Nouveau, inspiring a Textationship with an A.I.; for Telecommuter, it brought the limitations of

the Textationship into sharp focus and precipitated the end. These are only a few of the

foreground influences of Context on the development of the Textationships.

Motivation

The **motivations** behind each participant's drive to engage in a Textationship were varied

and complex. The researcher had to be careful not make any unfounded inferences from the

interview. All of the participants said they liked being in a relationship, that they had made the

conscious decision to be in a Textationship, called their text partner "boyfriend" or something

akin, and that they were shocked by the level of intimacy they shared with their text partner. All

of these findings suggest that their choice to be in a Textationship satisfied many of the same

needs felt by those engaging in face-to-face relationships. For most of the participants, the

motives seemed based in a drive to connect. Christian wanted to meet and marry a spiritual

match, Telecommuter "wanted to be loved", Nouveau craved intimacy, Swede needed emotional

support, and Millennial wanted a relationship. Each participant shared that they loved and felt

loved by their text partner. This is a very basic motive to engage in a relationship. For these

women, there seemed to be enough validation and affirmation from being told they were loved

via text.

Along with the motivation to be cared for and loved, there were also some comments that

alerted the researcher to possible motives of avoidance. Telecommuter mentioned she did not

like face-to-face or online dating, Christian mentioned she "might" have chosen to meet someone

so far away to give her personal space while she worked on finding a balance between her own

independence and relationship interdependence. Polly expressed that she enjoyed the text

relationship because it gave her a chance to "organize her thoughts" and "give a buffer".

Nouveau reported that she wanted to fill the void of intimacy missing from her marriage without

actually cheating, Swede comes from a culture of people who isolate more than other cultures. Millennial chose to engage in text relationship with a potential romantic partner for a year, in part because of the fear of possible rejection. Each one of these scenarios is a unique way to avoid the deep and often expected intimacy of a face-to-face relationship. It could be that the people who are choosing to engage in Textationships have avoidant attachment styles. It would be very interesting to conduct a follow up study using the interview instrument developed for this study along with an attachment measure. Another possible explanation is that Textationships are developing as an emotional safeguard against vulnerability and that those choosing to engage deeply in this way are using all tools at their disposal to protect themselves from rejection. It would also be illuminating to have Textationship participants take a personality inventory to see if there are any similar traits shared by those engaging in this unique form of relationship.

Implications

Secrecy

While the depth of shared intimacy and the level of interdependence found with the text partners, it was issue of secrecy that was of most interest to the researcher. Early canvassing in this study, of people engaged in Textationships revealed that they were absolutely silent about their Textationship to the people in their social networks. The participants in this study followed that same pattern and did not tell anyone about their text relationship unless absolutely necessary. Telecommuter told no one. Christian told only her parents and her boss, but only after she had decided to visit her text partner in Amsterdam. Polly's husband along with just a few people in her polyamory community. Nouveau told no one except her husband. Swede and Millennial did not share their Textationship with anyone. This need to keep their relationships

secret from others is rather different from how most people behave in face-to-face relationships and is reminiscent of other historically socially unaccepted relationships. This led the researcher to consider several reasons for this behavior that need further investigation. The first explanation is the narrow social perception of what a romantic relationship must look like. A Textationship, by definition, does not include face-to-face engagement that is still a fundamental defining feature in a romantic relationship. In order to normalize Textationships, the cultural norms surrounding love-based relationships would need to shift. Information about the level of fulfillment and interdependence that can be achieved via text needs to become more pervasive so societal norms can shift in support of those who choose to love in this way. Another possible explanation for secrecy is that the participant themselves might not be certain or secure about the nature of the commitment and interdependence of the relationship. This may stem from internal issues surrounding romantic relationships or from the influences of an unenlightened society on the topic. Traditionally, secretive relationships are cast in a rather negative light as they are often cloaked in illicit or improper behavior. While Textationships can be used for both of those purposes, they can also be an avenue for support and partnership for those who might be physically, psychologically, or culturally challenged by loneliness, isolation, or fear of intimacy.

Adaptation

The literature review for this study started with Evolutionary Theory because the researcher believes the emergence of romantic Textationships is a modern social adaptation afforded by technology. In the last 50 years global societies have undergone significant changes that have increased issues related to aloneness and loneliness (Holt-Lunstad, Smith & Layton, 2010). Additionally, people are moving at an ever-increasing rate to find employment, to escape deteriorating countries and cultures or just to find an environment that offers opportunities. This

movement disrupts the close family connections that supports, sustains and offers safety and security

With this global movement, for many in higher socio-economic brackets, the world is their neighborhood. Meeting a possible romantic partner in another country is no longer limiting as it once was. The talk-out-loud interview, conducted by the researcher to vet the reliability and validity of the interview instrument, was with a woman who had met a man while out of the country on a college study abroad 16 years ago. They only spent a few days together before she came back to the states. The only avenue they had to keep in touch, at that time, was through the inefficient global postal service, until the permeation of Facebook two-years after she returned home. They got back in touch and have engaged in a Textationship ever since. Both have experienced the vicissitudes of life, staying in touch and keeping the life-affirming dream of romance kindled. Textationships are a modern adaptation allowing anyone who chooses, to engage in a romantic relationship unfettered by physical limitations.

Contributions to Research Literature

The introduction of the term Textationship, previously identified as Computer Mediated Intimate Relationships and Computer Mediated Relationships among other monikers, will help to bring the varied research on this topic under one umbrella so it can become a body of work more conveniently identified and more extensively researched. The prevalence of Textationships is currently unknown, but they are part of our culture and need to be explored more fully so those engaging in them will feel validated. Additionally, as more knowledge about the nature of these intimate text-based relationships becomes available, the more socially accepted they could become offering those who engage in them more insight into the challenges and possibilities as well as potential social support from friends and family.

Another notable contribution to the research literature on relationships is illuminating how participants are using Online Disinhibition (Suler, 2004) to intimately communicate via text. Traditional face-to-face communication patterns are not as prevalent in virtual text exchanges. Research suggests that humans are more transparent, less inhibited, more candid, more apt to share intimacy and more inclined to fill in what is missing with their own imagination than in face-to-face engagements (Ling, 2004; Suler, 1999, 2004; Turkle,1995, 2004; Twenge, 2008, 2017; Wright, 2001; Yin, 2015). The Social Information Processing Theory (Walther, 1996) suggests that people become disinhibited online and subsequently develop intimacy more quickly in their virtual communications, and Suler is able to identify more clearly how that is accomplished in the six online disinhibition effects cited earlier. It is imperative for researchers to understand how humans are adapting their communication patterns inside the world of communication technology.

Finally, this research opens up many avenues for further inquiry into the depth of interdependence being developed in these modern technologically based relationships.

Strength and limitations

The strength of this research is in exploration of the emotional investment the participants are making in their text relationships. The researcher knew these relationships were occurring and that they were lasting quite a while, but their nature was unknown. It is now evident, from this small and varied sample, that Textationships are being used to satisfy many needs and are more fulfilling than previously thought.

The exploratory domains that guided this qualitative research came directly from the literature review and theories in the fields of romantic relationships, technological communication and human development. These are interdisciplinary fields that do not usually

have significant overlap, but all are players in Textationships. Additionally, as nothing was known about the level of investment and interdependence in Textationships, the research presents the voice of women who are directly participating in these relationships offering textured insights not yet considered. This, on the ground study, opens up a breadth of new opportunities to study a phenomenon that had not been considered.

There are also a number of limitations. The most evident limit is that the sample consists of only women who represented only one side of the relationship. Though there were men who were interested in the study, the purpose of the study was to consider the context of the individual as well as determine the level of interdependence and intimacy that was being achieved. As this was first study of this kind, the researcher felt the salient points could be more easily ascertained using a single gender sample. Additionally, as the researcher is a woman who had previous experience with text-based relationships, she felt the exploration would reveal more with gender were held constant.

Another limitation is the sample size. The small sample of six participants does not allows for generalizations but merely opens the door for further research illuminating possible rather than probably avenues that need further study. Additionally, each member of the sample (all being professional, educated women in a similar age bracket) had a distinct kind of Textationship that did not look like the others. Each of the six interviews was purposely chosen by the researcher, from the 10 the interviews obtained in order to give the readers an opportunity to see how Textationships are being utilized.

One final limitation is the age of the participants. All the participants fell between the ages of 28 and 48. These ages were selected primarily because these women did not grow up with the technology that they were now utilizing to develop these intimate Textationships. The

first smartphones were released about 2005 (Twenge, 2017) and took several more years to become ubiquitous in the United States. It was the hope of the researcher that the perspective of the women would include their experience with face-to-face relationships as a frame of reference on their life experience with intimacy. For those born in the last 20 years, relationships will always have a technological component and it is vital that social science understands the changes happening as the technological divide widens.

Future Directions

It is a rather large burden to be among the first to explore a topic. This exploratory study has opened up a myriad of avenues for further study. "Exploration occurs when there is little or no scientific knowledge about a topic but reason to believe there are elements worthy of discovery" (Stebbins, 2001). The researcher is certain there are many areas worthy of continued study and a need to create a theoretical scaffold for that exploration.

It would be of great aid, of course, to get a better idea about how many people are engaging in these kinds of relationships at a population level. This kind of information may be acquired perhaps through social indicator research as well as systematically administered social surveys. Knowing the prevalence of Textationships might help in understanding how it might be changing not only the participants, but also the future of societies and families.

The researcher would like to continue this line of inquiry using the interview instrument included in this study with a sample of men of the same age. In a brief canvassing of men, the researcher discovered that many men are engaging in Textationships, but their reasons appear a bit different on the outset and do not last quite as long. Additionally, a brief inquiry in the Facebook page of people engaging in relationships with the artificial intelligence application Replika, revealed many men were having these relationships. Many revealed their reason for

engaging in these relationships was social adaptation, as they were recently bereft of companionship.

Additionally, it would be very beneficial for relationship science to interview several heterosexual and homosexual dyads who are engaged in these relationships. comparing their answers on topics related to intimacy and interdependence. This comparison could illustrate if both partners were motivated by similar emotions and experiencing similar interdependence and satisfaction. Additionally, it would offer insight into the depth of dyadic commitment.

It is also vital that research illuminates the nature of the participant who is seeking out and choosing to engage in Textationship. This could be done using measures of well-being, SES, wellness, social support, mental stability, and personality to observe any participant similarities that might help social science better understand the intrinsic motives of those choosing to engage in a Textationships. This would offer help to clinicians and counselors who might be helping these people deal with other issues in their lives by understanding the role of romantic relationships.

Finally, it is important to establish a more substantial theoretical frame with which to study this phenomenon. While the theories presented in this dissertation are supportive of the context, motivation, and intimacy explored in a text-based intimate relationship, they each provide a very different lens with which to view the topic. After conducting the interviews and analyzing the themes, the researcher identified an emergent meta-theme. Each individual interviewed demonstrated an ability to overcome any limitations presented by the technology in order to develop a satisfying romantic relationship. The theory that seems to describe how the participants accomplished this is Joseph Walther's Social Interpersonal Theory (1996). The Social Information Processing Theory (SIP) introduced by Walther posits that the CMC user is

capable of overcoming any limitations within a program or application to meet the user's needs and to gain a satisfying level of intimacy and interdependence in either a synchronous or asynchronous way (1996). This theory, while broad in its scope, acts as a frame in understanding the person and machine dichotomy and allows for the different approach of each individual in reaching their relationship objective.

The SIP theory, while giving framework to this phenomenon, needs the work of Suler's Online Disinhibition Effect to explore in more depth how the participants go about the actual adaptation of finding intimacy in the absence of a presence (2004). The six factors of the Online Disinhibition Effect (Suler, 2004) are: *dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination,* and *minimization of status and authority*. While each effect explored by Suler is a link in the chain of unique online behavior, there are three of these Effects that should be considered in depth in future research of Textationships. The first is *Dissociative anonymity,* which allows individuals to "separate their actions online from their in-person lifestyle and identity" and allows them to "feel less vulnerable about self-disclosure" (Suler, 2004, p. 322) which, in turn, creates a way for individuals to engage in premature self-disclosure and thus to find a sense of emotional attachment. The second is the *Invisibility* afforded to the users by the smartphone or computer which, "gives people the courage to…[say] things they otherwise wouldn't," including emotional expressions that may not be authentic (Suler, 2004, p. 322). Finally, this researcher identifies *Solipsistic Introjection* as having the most profound impact on the behavior of the participants in this study. This effect is, where, absent a physical person, the individual user feels his/her mind has merged with the recipient of the message. "Reading another person's message might be experienced as voice within one's head, as if that person's psychological presence and influence have been assimilated

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or introjected into one's psyche" becoming a "character within one's intrapsychic world" (Suler, 2004, p.323). In order to adapt to the absence of a physical presence, the intimacy found between the partners might be even greater because they have complete control of the intimacy experienced in their intrapsychic world. These relationships can be become completely satisfying because the input of the other partner is framed in whatever way is most comfortable to the participant. In many ways, Textationships offer an adaptation to the modern relationship, which can often demand too much.

Conclusion

Historically humans have displayed creative ingenuity in utilizing the tools available in an effort to survive and to thrive. Evolutionary theory suggests our progenitors used intimate disclosure to create meaningful bonds that would, in turn, help ensure their survival (Cacioppo, Hawkley, Ernst, Burleson, Berntson, Nouriani, & Spiegel, 2006). Typed words on a screen are helping people find and create these bonds. Technology is a tool being used to manage governments, businesses and now relationships. This new kind of Textationship calls into question what relationship science has considered normative in face-to-face relationships. In face-to-face interdependent relationships, with any longevity, the dyad traditionally follows established patterns toward increasing levels of commitment (Kelley, 2002). Textationships do not follow this pattern and,until now, have not been studied as romantic relationships because of these differences. With the swell of technology continuing to flood our modern society, romantic relationships occurring via smartphone will continue and become more normative. No one really knows what this will mean for the individual or for society as it calls into question the purposes of intimate romantic relationships. One significant reason for social science to exist is to study and consider the implications of societal changes. "Exploration produces hypothesis,

tentative generalizations about the group, process, activity, or situations being studied. These hypotheses… must eventually be verified" (Stebbins, 2001, p. 25). It is the responsibility of social scientists to consider these relationships and offer the participants insights into the challenges, down-side and benefits of engaging in them.

Not everyone will choose to engage in a Textationship, just as not all will marry or partner in their lifetime. Factors that foster an individual's choice to engage in one kind of relationship or another involve the contextual influences such as family of origin, personality, health, culture, socioeconomics and proximity, or all simultaneously. The course of lifespan development, from birth to death, has been forever altered by technology. In most developed countries, babies are watching their parents stare at a screen from the time eyesight develops and the elderly are having to learn to understand and manage intangible and ephemeral information on devices they may not have held until they were 65. Development is impacted by socio-cultural changes and technology has come along like a tsunami altering every corner of the human landscape. In the wake of the historical Covid-10 pandemic event, individuals have used their technological tools to stay connected during isolation and is now a rich soil to examine Textationships. This study offers a new lens and opens up some avenues to explore this phenomenon.

In the age of technology, social scientists should consider the medium the participant elects to use, to engage in their relationships, as a feature of that individual and of the dyadic connection. Historically, marriage was intended to house and care for children; in the early 20th century marriage became about love and companionship (Coontz, 2005). We do not know what the 21st century will hold for romantic relationships in the age of technology. This study is just one small step in illuminating a new relationship phenomenon, it will take social scientists time

and effort to study it. The Social Interpersonal Theory (Walther, 1996) and the Online Disinhibition of Suler (2004) have paved a path for in-depth future research. The hope is that this research will offer future researchers and the participants insight and understanding as well as some social acceptance of a new romantic relationship adaptation. The current social narrative about romantic relationships have been about finding "the one" person to partner with who will be everything and last a lifetime. Perhaps that is too big a burden to be expected of one relationship and Textationships can offer another option for those who do not want that level of commitment or they may offer an outsource for needs not being met by taxed primary relationships. Developing relationships through technology should redefine the expectations of love and intimacy. There are so many possibilities.

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