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Defining the DTR: What it is, What it isn't, and How it Functions in Romantic Relationship Development

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Josef and the DTR that started it all.

This degree is dedicated to Charlotte, Landon, Philippa, & Brighton; Mommy did this for you.

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Abstract

Defining the DTR: What it is, What it isn't, and How it Functions in Romantic Relationship Development

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The DTR, or define the relationship, conversation is a commonly understood scenario that has yet to be fully explicated by communication scholars. While it is widely acknowledged in the field of communication that all communication has the potential to signal the nature of the relationship between communicators (Watzlawick et al., 1967), researchers have yet to agree on a universal understanding of conversations in which the state of the relationship is both the topic and the outcome. With romantic partners now communicating via multiple channels (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013), the complexities of relationship talk have never been greater. In order to form a foundation for future studies in this line of research, the current study takes an inductive, qualitative approach to defining the DTR and understand the DTR process. Forty semi-structured interviews

were conducted to answer nine research questions about what is occurring before, during, and after the DTR. Findings are discussed in terms of emergent themes and thematic co-occurrences, corresponding exemplars, a definition of the DTR, and an emergent model of the DTR process for future research.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The define-the-relationship talk (DTR) is viewed by popular culture as a defining moment in a romantic relationship. With today's early romantic partners communicating simultaneously across multiple channels, now more than ever there is a need to understand how two individuals communicate their way into a committed relationship. Within academic literature, relationship talk exists at the intersection of relationship development and interpersonal communication. Within relationship research, relationship talk can take place within specific relationship stages (Avtgis et al., 1998; Knapp, 1978) or function as a turning point in relationship development (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). Other communication scholarship has connected relationship talk to larger topics such as uncertainty and topic avoidance (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). These and other related studies have consequently provided a general understanding of how relationship talk may function in relationship development and highlighted the negative perception often associated with these conversations. To further complicate this line of inquiry, at any given time today's romantic partners are monitoring both mediated and face-to-face communication within their relationships (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013). It would thus be helpful to both relationship and communication researchers to gain a more nuanced understanding of how romantic partners are communicating and defining their relationships in the modern communicative landscape. The primary goal of this research project is to gain an in-depth

understanding of the DTR, specifically what prompts the conversation, how relationships are discussed and defined, and the immediate and relational outcomes.

Conducting an in-depth qualitative study to explicate the DTR has theoretical, practical, and methodological significance. First, a more nuanced understanding of what is happening in DTR conversations would help pull together several related terms used in previous studies and lay the foundation for more programmatic research on this topic. Previous research highlights the importance of perceived efficacy of both oneself to seek information and the target to provide the information (Afifi et al., 2004). Additionally, decreased uncertainty is a significant predictor of intimacy (Theiss & Solomon, 2008). An understanding of individuals' perceptions and enactment of relationship talk would provide information necessary to develop a theoretical model of the DTR specifically, and relationship talk more generally, and how it functions in relationships. Second, if we as communication scholars can hold a more comprehensive understanding of the DTR, we can then have ownership over the ongoing practical conversation about the role of communication in relationship development. Additionally, connections can then be made to larger relational outcomes and materials can be developed to support couples in the early dating stages. Lastly, there are obvious ethical and bias issues embedded in the study of relationship talk; it is problematic to either ask couples to discuss their relationship or conduct studies that only include couples willing to discuss their relationship in front of a research team. The insights gained from the current qualitative study obtaining retrospective data can be a first step in developing a quantitative measure

of relationship talk that could be used in future studies. In summary, relationship talk research serves as a connection point between interpersonal communication and relationship development research and therefore warrants thorough investigation.

While communication is important in maintaining relationships of all types, the trajectory of romantic relationships often relies heavily on communication (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). Changes in the relationship might occur indirectly through maintenance behaviors such as assurances and positivity about the relationship (Guerrero et al., 1993), be initiated by nonverbal cues such as eye behaviors and touch (Docan-Morgan et al., 2013), or be negotiated through direct discussion between partners (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). Romantic partners can further rely on communication to reinforce their relationships by communicating about changes in their relationship after-the-fact (Baxter & Pittman, 2001). Taken together, scholars of both the past and present continue to reinforce the notion that relationships are developed through communication; it is now necessary to determine how previous findings inform romantic relationship development of today.

How a romantic relationship develops, and how partners appraise their relationship development in hindsight, together can influence both the long-term satisfaction and success of the relationship (Flora & Segrin, 2000). It is therefore important for scholars to have an up-to-date understanding of communication within and about the relationship from the perspective of today's romantic partners. An early study by Parks and Adelman (1983) highlighted how partners' communication with each other

about their relationship and family and friends' support of the relationship influenced the success of the relationship. In the last decade and a half, the increased use of mediated communication and social networking sites has added another dimension to relationship development. Romantic partners now communicate across multiple channels (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013) and have multiple outlets to define their relationship to the public which can both prompt a conversation about the nature of the relationship and define the relationship publicly and privately (Fox et al., 2013). A recent study revisited previous findings about self-disclosure and found a negative association between text-based communication, such as text messages and email, and the breadth and depth of self-disclosure (Ruppel, 2015). This study effectively incorporated previous literature on self-disclosure into the contemporary communication setting.

To follow suit, the current study will draw on elements from Tolhuizen's (1989) study examining how romantic partners intensify their relationships, with the present goal of exploring the DTR in romantic relationships over 30 years later. In this previous study, Tolhuizen collected participant accounts as initiators and non-initiators of the transition to a more serious and exclusive dating relationship. Participants wrote detailed accounts of what they said or did to change their relationship from casually dating to a more serious dating relationship, and Tolhuizen in turn identified 15 different strategies. Specifically, the current study will mirror his inductive approach to examine how both initiators and non-initiators of the DTR navigate these conversations with their romantic partners. With the addition of multiple mediated channels of communication in recent

decades, the current study will also explore how what is happening before, during, and after the DTR influence these interactions. Ideally, this will extend our current understanding of how communication, and the DTR specifically, influence modern relationship development.

Since the notion that communication consists of both content and relational messages was first introduced (Watzlawick et al., 1967), researchers have widely acknowledged almost any conversation can influence the nature of the relationship between communicators. Relational communication asserts the very act of communicating places individuals in relationship with each other (Duck, 2002). Still, there are situations in which interlocutors make a conscious choice to discuss (or avoid discussing) the relationship between them directly and explicitly, and this should be of much interest to communication and relationship researchers. Early research shows relationship development can occur indirectly through repeated patterns of relational maintenance behaviors; for example, being proactive in fostering openness, giving assurances, and perceptions of positivity can be the difference between escalating and de-escalating relationships (Guerrero et al., 1993). Explicit relationship metacommunication, on the other hand, is when individuals directly define the relationship between them (Wilmot, 1980). Wilmot argues that this definition, while it can take a variety of forms from literal to metaphorical, frames future interactions and is reinforced as the relationship develops over time.

In light of societal shifts in how couples communicate in and about their relationships, contemporary relationship talk research may serve to inform past findings. Several terms are used throughout the literature to describe this direct communication about the relationship, but the term *relationship talk* is most often used by contemporary communication scholars (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). Given the variation in how relationship talk is defined, and the several related terms that overlap in conceptual definitions, it can be challenging to articulate a comprehensive yet concise definition of the DTR. At first mention, the DTR seems to have a clear, shared understanding socially. The challenge for researchers, however, comes in determining what "counts" and what does not when it comes to a conceptual and ultimately operational definition. A unifying construct would allow for comparison across studies that would result in a greater understanding of how communication factors into relationship development.

Existing research on relationship talk seems to indicate a negative connotation (Theiss & Nagy, 2013), yet these conversations can certainly function to escalate or deescalate a relationship (Avtgis et al., 1998). The current study will explore general perceptions of relationship talk as well as the details of DTR conversations. This will allow us to understand perceptions and realities of before, during, and after the DTR. As such, the goal of this study is to explicate the DTR as a distinct construct within the area of interpersonal communication by consolidating previous research on relationship talk and related terms. This will provide clarity in future studies and further position

communication as central in relationship development research. Additionally, interview data will explore the nuances of how romantic partners communicate to define their relationships. Overall, this qualitative approach will help in understanding these unique interactions, and it will serve as a first step in a line of research that aspires to form a comprehensive understanding of the role explicit relational metacommunication plays in modern romantic relationship development.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Rationale

The status of a relationship can both determine and be determined by communication. For example, in a study examining the distinct behaviors in the stages of Knapp's stage model, focus groups identified specific conversations that would occur in each stage (Avtgis et al., 1998). Among other behaviors, participants distinguished the integrating and bonding stages by describing a similar temporal type of relationship talk. During the integrating stage, participants indicated partners "talk about the future together," whereas in the bonding stage they "make plans for the future" and "make agreements about the future" (Avtgis et al., 1998, p. 284). Additionally, participants partially differentiated the avoiding stage of coming apart as "no talk about the relationship" (Avtgis et al., 1998, p. 285). It is interesting to note the presence or absence of relationship talk were considered key elements during both the most intense stages of coming together and coming apart. In a later study Welch and Rubin (2002) described similar findings about talk when they included, "We say 'we,' and express our commitment directly" in their definition of the intensifying stage based on participant descriptions (p. 34). Both studies demonstrate that, while every relationship is unique to the people involved, there are similarities in how DTR conversations function in relationship development.

To understand the DTR specifically, it is important to review literature that relates to communication and relationship definition. Research questions are interspersed throughout the review according to the corresponding literature. First, similarities and

differences in how relationship talk has been defined in previous communication research are identified. Next is a review of related terms that conceptually resemble relationship talk; some allude to defining or developing the relationship indirectly (e.g., we-talk, making plans, and secret tests) and others are more direct (e.g., relationship focused disclosure and intensification strategies). The remaining sections review literature on individual and situational factors before the DTR (e.g., goals, perceptions of the DTR, and uncertainty) and the minimal literature on potential immediate outcomes of the DTR. Overall, this review is aimed at consolidating communication scholarship related to the DTR to inform the research questions and corresponding interview questions detailed in the method section that follows.

RELATIONSHIP TALK

Over the past several decades there have been some similarities in how relationship talk is conceptualized, with noticeable variety in how each operational definition emphasizes slightly different elements. For example, early work by Acitelli (1988) examined relationship talk as a relational maintenance strategy in the context of marriage. While not presented as an official definition, she referenced relationship talk as "talking about one's own relationship" (Acitelli, 1988, p. 197). In a later study on married couples, the definition of relationship talk was expanded to, "talking about one's relationship as an entity, talking in relational terms, or talking about specific aspects of a relationship" (Badr & Acitelli, 2005, p. 465). In contrast to the first definition, the second

acknowledges different ways to talk about one's relationship though the three descriptions are still somewhat vague.

Around the same time, relationship talk received research attention in other contexts. In the workplace, state-of-the-relationship talk was defined as "explicit discussion of problems and desire to transform the relationship" (Sias, 2004, p. 592). This definition was in reference to relationship disengagement strategies in the workplace, and thus emphasized problems and transformation goals. In the context of cross-sex friendship, Guerrero and Chavez (2005) stated relationship talk "focuses on discussing feelings about the friendship" (p. 351). In the context of dating partners, the definitions used were also less specific and returned to the earlier convention of a more general perspective. Knobloch and Solomon (2005) conceptualized relationship talk as, "those content messages that reference the state of the relationship between partners" (p. 354) and Knobloch et al. (2006) similarly articulated relationship talk as "content messages that reference the nature of the relationship between people" (p. 211).

In the last decade there has been a similar divide between generalized and specific definitions of relationship talk. In a study comparing long distance and geographically close dating relationships, Stafford (2010) stays with a more general description in measuring relationship talk, "talking about the nature and state of the relationship" (p. 284). In contrast, Knobloch and Theiss (2011) measure three different components of relationship talk and define each accordingly: appraisals of threat are "perceptions of how risky it would be to engage in relationship talk," avoidance of relationship talk is

"purposely refraining from talking with a partner about the relationship," and enacted relationship talk is "discussing the relationship with a partner" (p. 6). Theiss and Nagy (2013) just focused on the perceived threat of relationship talk and modified the definition slightly as follows: "appraisals of how risky it would be to engage in explicit talk about the nature or status of a relationship" (p. 187). Lastly, an article on relationship talk in romantic relationships offered a slightly new perspective by focusing on the content of the messages, "a discussion whereby both parties reveal their feelings about each other and their commitment to the future together" (Nelms et al., 2012, p. 178).

Taken together, previous definitions of relationship talk both converge and diverge on what counts as relationship talk. Most obvious is the consensus that relationship talk is communication about the relationship that exists between the two individuals communicating. Relationship talk is not simply expressing one's feelings in isolation or one-sided declarations, nor is it a discussion about a relationship outside of the one that exists between the interlocutors present. Additionally, nearly all include how relationship talk is explicit and direct; inferences about the relationship drawn from communication about other topics is not included. The definitions seem to deviate slightly from each other when it comes to the exact topics included in relationship talk, and these seem connected to assumed goals of the interaction. For example, if the goal is relational improvement as in the Sias (2004) study, relationship talk may focus more on relationship problems and proposed solutions. However, most other definitions seem to assume relationship talk exists to provide clarity for one or both partners about

relationship status and the future of the relationship. This might include discussing feelings about the other person or the relationship, commitment, the nature or status of the current relationship, or the future of the relationship.

Related Terms

The criteria for the broader category of relationship talk drawn from previous definitions are capable of being consolidated in and of themselves, but also begin to resemble additional terms used throughout literature for related concepts. It is therefore necessary to next briefly survey these related terms to form a comprehensive picture of how individuals communicate about their relationship together. While the definitions in the previous section were specifically for the term relationship talk, this section will review additional terms in the literature with definitions that overlap with those given for relationship talk. These terms highlight how communication about the relationship can be both indirect and direct.

At a foundational level, relationship talk references specific messages that signal the nature of the relationship. While relationship talk narrows to direct talk about the relationship, there is potential to consider a gray area of indirect communication about the relationship. A first related concept in the literature is *we-talk*, or the use of first-person plural pronouns in reference to oneself and his/her romantic partner. Compared to relationship talk, we-talk is an indirect reference rather than a direct conversation about the current state or future of the relationship. In a recent meta-analysis of 30 studies on we-talk between romantic couples and relationship or personal functioning, all included

studies measured we-talk by dividing the number of first-person plural pronouns by the total number of words in an interaction (Karan et al., 2019). Analyses found the strongest association between we-talk and relationship functioning; specifically, partner effects (i.e., when my partner uses "we") were stronger than actor effects (i.e., when I use "we") on relationship functioning. This supports we-talk between romantic partners as an indicator of interdependence in the relationship. Rather than just expressing one's own feelings, how one's partner communicates about the relationship affected the relationship more. Further, relationship-orientation served as a moderator thus highlighting how relational messages evidence a shift from a self-orientation to a relationship-orientation that is characteristic of satisfying and better functioning relationships.

A majority of communication within close relationships, including communication between romantic partners, consists of the informal and superficial; some studies have shown that few interactions are more serious in nature and address the relationship in depth (Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996). Yet, interestingly, in Goldsmith and Baxter's study, *making plans* ranked as the second most frequent topic in relationships. The authors state how planning serves to carry a relationship from the present into the future. In a sense, planning resembles relationship talk in that it signals the current state of the relationship and how it relates to the future. With the increased ability to collaborate via technology, this is relevant now more than ever. While instances of direct relationship talk may be fewer and farther between, relational development seems to hinge on communication about the relationship's present and future.

Relationship talk may be more camouflaged still with *secret tests* that one individual may use to better understand the relationship with his/her [potential] romantic partner. Though not often referenced in association with relationship talk, secret tests are "social strategies that people employ to acquire information about the state of their interpersonal relationships" (Baxter & Wilmot, 1984, p. 172). Baxter and Wilmot's study looked at platonic cross-sex friendships, romantic cross-sex relationships, and cross-sex relationships with romantic potential that were transitioning from platonic to romantic. Data collected from interviews and interview response categories sorted by participants supported previous literature on information seeking strategies as being either direct interactive strategies, indirect active strategies, or passive strategies (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Most related to relationship talk are the direct interactive strategies of direct questioning and self-disclosures, and indirect tests include joking, hinting, and escalating touch. While these certainly count as communication about the relationship, secret tests are one-sided in nature as the concept rests on the notion of one individual seeking information about the relationship from the partner. Interestingly, in a later study on secret tests, Bell and Buerkel-Rothfuss (1990) reported that secret tests were more appropriately understood as *relationship tests* in which 30% were direct questions about the relationship. In nearly half of the reported circumstances, tests of any strategy initiated direct relationship talk. While a two-sided interaction might have resulted from these testing strategies, the tests themselves differ from relationship talk in that they are initiated by one partner.

In contrast to the indirect nature of the terms above, other terms in literature more closely resemble the directness of relationship talk. *Relationship-focused disclosure "*reveals the individual's thoughts and feelings about the nature and status of the relationship as well as thoughts and feelings about relationship events and experiences" (Tan et al., 2012, p. 522). In this previous study, researchers found relationship-focused disclosure to be positively associated with positive evaluation of the relationship over one year. The more couples engaged in relationship-focused disclosure in everyday conversations the more positively they felt about the relationship. Similarly, *date request messages* "function as bids to initiate, intensify, or maintain romantic relationships" (Knobloch, 2006, p. 245). In this study participants were asked to roleplay leaving a voicemail for their romantic partner with the goal of making plans to spend time together. Date request messages directly ask to spend time with the (potential) partner, which in turn can signal the status of the relationship.

Most similar to relationship talk are *intensification strategies* that can include relational negotiation or direct definitional bids (Tolhuizen, 1989). In this study, Tolhuizen identified 15 strategies that were then sorted into four clusters; the fourth cluster called *Verbal Directness and Intimacy* in which an individual directly discloses "information and feelings about the self and the relationship" most closely resemble the DTR. This includes both relational negotiation and direct definitional bids. Relational negotiation consists of direct engagement in a two-sided discussion about where the

relationship is going; direct definitional bids occur when one partner directly asks the other to increase involvement.

In order to form the most comprehensive understanding of communication in relationship development, this study focuses on the foundational DTR conversations and aims to combine previous research on relationship talk and related terms with participant accounts to form a nuanced understanding of the concept. Previous definitions either reference direct communication about the status of the relationship (Knobloch, 2006; Nelms et al., 2012), or communication through which the status can be inferred (Goldsmith & Baxter, 1996; Karan et al., 2019). Direct communication might consist of a variety of topics about the relationship including the state or nature, specific aspects, thoughts and feelings, events and experiences, problems, commitment, or relational terms. Indirect communication might consist of language that implies a relationship or talk about plans or feelings that are affected by the state of the relationship. In either case, the time period referenced is also unclear; relationship talk might consist of talk about the past, present, or future of the relationship. The following research question will guide inquiry into the elements of the DTR:

RQ1: Based on individuals' reports, what are prominent characteristics of DTR conversations?

Individual Characteristics Prior to the DTR

The previous section focused on what is occurring during the DTR; specifically, what are partners saying to each other to define their relationships. As is the case with

communication across contexts, there is more to consider than just what is being said in the moment. Researchers have identified a number of factors related to relationship talk such as media portrayals (Anderegg et al., 2014), relational and communicative history (Duck, 2002), geographic distance (Stafford, 2010), attachment (Tan et al., 2012), romantic intent (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005), attraction (Malachowski & Dillow, 2011), partner interference (Theiss & Nagy, 2013), intimacy (Knobloch et al., 2006; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004), and uncertainty (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011; Theiss & Nagy, 2013). As such, this study will also focus on the perceptions and circumstances that exist prior to a DTR interaction; identifying these features will ultimately help in predicting characteristics of the DTR.

Arguably the most influential element included in some of the previous definitions and terms is the motivation or goal of relationship talk. For example, individual contributions and the content of relationship talk conversations might vary depending on whether the goal is to initiate, intensify, maintain, transform, or acquire information about the relationship. This would likely influence appraisals of the DTR before, during, and after the interaction. Interestingly, much communication research on relationship talk is framed in terms of avoidance rather than disclosure; the state of the relationship is understood to be among the most avoided topics among new romantic partners and cross-sex friends (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). In Knobloch and Carpenter-Theune's (2004) study, the most reported reason for avoiding was that respondents felt talking about the relationship would result in

relationship destruction. Participants also reported that relationship talk would make them vulnerable to having their feelings hurt and that relationship talk was not as effective in learning about the relationship as more implicit perceptions and understandings obtained naturally. Interestingly, participants reported avoiding several other topics such as extra-relationship activity, relationship norms, and prior relationships because they too would indirectly communicate about the state of the relationship.

Previous research suggests individual perceptions of the DTR may influence if and how these conversations occur. In a study on the perceived outcomes of talking about commonly avoided topics such as the state of the relationship, participants scored evaluations across four categories of self-threat, relationship importance, relationship threat, and relationship benefit (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). Both relationship threat and relationship benefit were associated with reported relationship importance; also, relationship uncertainty was positively associated with the number of avoided topics, self-threat, relationship threat, and relationship importance. Evaluations of relationship talk trace back to uncertainty; the more uncertainty in the relationship, the more a conversation about the relationship is perceived as threatening.

Uncertainty thus surfaces as a common factor in studies looking at relationship talk as an avoided topic. In an early study on topic avoidance in cross-sex friendships and dating relationships, Afifi and Burgoon (1998) found a positive association between the level of uncertainty and avoidance of uncertainty reducing topics. This somewhat counterintuitive finding points to literature in uncertainty management and the notion that the goal is not

always to obtain more information to reduce uncertainty (Brashers, 2001). They also found cross-sex friends reported greater uncertainty than dating partners, and cross-sex friends avoided relationship talk more than dating partners. In a more recent study on cross-sex friendships, social attraction, or how enjoyable it is to be around a person, decreased topic avoidance and increased relationship talk, whereas relational uncertainty predicted a decrease in relationship talk (Malachowski & Dillow, 2011).

The link between uncertainty and perceived risk of directly discussing the relationship is well supported in relationship talk literature. Knobloch and Theiss (2011) found individuals who reported greater relational uncertainty perceived greater self and relationship threat of relationship talk, and also avoided relationship talk more and enacted relationship talk less. This then became a cycle as individuals who reported enacting less or avoiding relationship talk one week reported more relational uncertainty the next week. Additionally, this study examined both actor and partner effects. Partners' relational uncertainty was positively associated with actors' reports of self threat and relationship threat of relationship talk. Also, they found a positive association between partners' reports of avoided relationship talk and actor reports of partner and relationship uncertainty in the next week. Similarly, Theiss and Nagy (2013) examined relationship talk in South Korea and the U.S. and found a positive association between relational uncertainty and perceived threat of relationship talk. They also found a negative association between relational uncertainty and enacted relationship talk, and a positive association between enacted relationship talk and partner interference. The researchers

explain that in the case of partner interference, individuals are more motivated to resolve the interference through relationship talk, but avoid relationship talk when uncertainty makes the outcome of such an interaction unpredictable. In comparing the two samples, partner interference predicted enacted relationship talk in American sample and perceived threat of relationship talk in South Korean sample. There was not a significant difference in reported relationship talk, but the effect size of the association between uncertainty and perceived threat of relationship talk was twice as large for the American sample.

Perhaps an individual's decision to engage in or avoid relationship talk can be connected to the larger notion that goals influence communication (Dillard et al., 1989). In a study on uncertainty and information seeking on the mobile application Grindr, researchers found a positive relationship between users' casual sex goals and a desire for uncertainty (Corriero & Tong, 2016). If individuals have the goal of pursuing casual sex rather than a romantic relationship, they are less inclined to seek information in order to maintain an ideal level of uncertainty. Individual goals for the relationship might thus determine the desired level of uncertainty and in turn influence relationship talk.

In considering how uncertainty and goals might influence relationship talk, the following research questions are put forth:

RQ2: What goals do initiators have prior to, and non-initiators have during, a DTR discussion?

RQ3: What factors make individuals perceive the DTR as threatening?

RQ4: How do individuals perceive relational uncertainty as impacting the initiation and response to the DTR conversation?

Situational Characteristics Prior to the DTR

In addition to perceptions and goals, certain events may directly or indirectly prompt a DTR. A descriptive study examining *the talk* between romantic partners provides insight into factors such as timing and initiation strategy (Nelms et al., 2012). In this study, 30% of participants initiated the conversation during a meal, 16% after sex, 11% before sex, and 10% while traveling with the partner. Of the 17 different initiation strategies reported, the most frequent strategy reported by 30% of respondents was direct questions addressed to the partner such as, "What do you see as far as the future of this relationship?" The next most common at 15% was questioning motives such as "What do you want out of this relationship," and the third most common at 8% was a direct question about marriage such as, "I asked if he ever saw a future in us and if he ever thought we would get married?" While these examples are more direct in nature, other verbal and nonverbal communicative acts can also serve to indirectly prompt a direct conversation about the relationship. Self-disclosure and the use of idioms, or communication unique to the relationship, can function as relational messages to escalate and de-escalate relationships (Dunleavy & Booth-Butterfield, 2009). Nonverbal communication, specifically touch and touch avoidance, can serve as indicators of intimacy and what stage a relationship is at (Guerrero & Andersen, 1991). Because indirect relational messages and relational events can prompt direct conversations about

the relationship (Fox et al., 2013), it is important to understand what is occurring prior to DTR conversations. This prompts the following research question:

RQ5: What strategies do individuals use to initiate or respond to a DTR conversation and why?

RQ6: What indicators of relationship status existed prior to the DTR discussion?

RQ7: What positive and negative relational events precede the DTR, and which is more prevalent?

THE RELATIONSHIP AFTER THE DTR

Little research seems to address the immediate outcomes of relationship talk. While some studies report a connection between relationship talk and reduced uncertainty over time, it is unclear what makes relationship talk successful or unsuccessful in the immediate aftermath of the interaction. For example, we know the decision to engage in or avoid relationship talk becomes more complicated when uncertainty is at its highest, but this can also have implications for the long-term quality of the relationship (Clifford et al., 2017). In this longitudinal study on sliding vs. deciding in cyclical and non-cyclical relationships, researchers found a negative association between satisfaction and both uncertainty and avoidance of relationship talk. This suggests that over the course of the relationship, reducing uncertainty and enacting relationship talk would increase satisfaction.

While the ultimate goal of this line of inquiry might clarify the long-term outcomes and relational implications of relationship talk, and the DTR specifically, the

goal of the current study is to first identify the immediate outcomes of the DTR. Uncertainty has been found to not only influence the amount of relationship talk but also an individual's ability to perceive relationship talk as it is happening. In a study on interactions between couples in which at least one person was romantically interested in his/her partner, Knobloch and Solomon (2005) found a negative association between relational uncertainty and the capacity to perceive relationship talk. Interestingly, this association was not the same for third party coders' perceptions of relationship talk; this implies that uncertainty may hinder an individual's ability to identify and respond to relationship talk in the moment. Questions also surround an individual's response to his/her partner's initiation of a DTR. In a study on *the talk* in romantic relationships, researchers collected data on partner responses to the talk and found more than half (50.5%) of partners responded by stating their commitment to a future with the participant (Nelms et al., 2012). The next most common response by 32% of participants' partners was to indicate feelings of uncertainty about the future of the relationship. In order to best understand immediate outcomes of the DTR, and more than merely relational uncertainty, it is necessary to examine both initiator and non-initiator perspectives thus prompting the following research questions:

RQ8: What is considered a successful DTR from an initiator and non-initiator perspective?

RQ9: What changes in the relationship do individuals report after a DTR conversation?

The current study will collect in-depth accounts of what is occurring before, during, and after DTR conversations to address nine research questions. This approach will result in two contributions to a line of research in how communication, specifically the DTR, functions to develop romantic relationships. First, interview data will produce a more nuanced understanding of the characteristics of the DTR that will result in a well-defined construct for future studies. Second, collecting participant accounts of before, during, and after the DTR, will translate into an initial model with potential variables of interest that can be tested in future studies.

Chapter 3: Method

The current study draws on elements from Tolhuizen's (1989) study examining how romantic partners intensify their relationships, with the present goal of exploring the DTR in romantic relationships over 30 years later. In this previous study, Tolhuizen collected participant accounts as initiators and non-initiators of the transition to a more serious and exclusive dating relationship. Participants wrote detailed accounts of what they said or did to change their relationship from casually dating to a more serious dating relationship, and Tolhuizen in turn identified 15 different strategies. Specifically, the current study will mirror his inductive approach to examine how both initiators and non-initiators of the DTR navigate these conversations with their romantic partners. With the addition of multiple mediated channels of communication in recent decades, the current study will also explore how what is happening before, during, and after the DTR influence these interactions. Ideally, this will extend our current understanding of how communication, and the DTR specifically, influence modern relationship development.

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were recruited through communication courses at two universities in the southern United States; one was a large public university and the other a medium-sized private university. Students were given the option to participate themselves or refer a participant to the study to receive extra course credit. To be eligible for the study, participants needed be 18 years of age or older and in a current romantic relationship

lasting no longer than six months. Of the 40 participants, 80% were undergraduate students and 20% were non-undergraduate students; 75% of participants identified as female and 25% identified as male. Participants ranged in age from 18-28 years old, with an average age of 20.83 years (*SD* = 2.10) and one participant did not report age. Most (72.5%) were Caucasian (including Middle Eastern), 22.5% were Asian, 5% American Indian or Alaska Native, and of all participants 27.5% were of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin. Approximately a quarter (27.5%) of participants reported they do not have a religious affiliation, 17.5% selected Catholic, 52.5% selected other Christian religion (e.g., Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, Non-Denominational, Presbyterian, etc.) and 2.5% selected other world religion (e.g., Buddhist, Islam, Judaism, Sikh, etc.). In reporting sexual orientation 87,5% identified as heterosexual, 7.5% bisexual, 2.5% lesbian, and 2.5% other. Participants had been dating their partners between one month and six months (*M* = 3.65 months, *SD* = 1.44). Fifteen participants reported meeting through a mutual friend, nine participants met through an online dating app, seven reported being longtime friends or in the same friend circle, five met through a more professional context (e.g., work, student organization, or class), and five met through a chance meeting (e.g., customer at work, party, or concert). When asked how they would describe the relationship now, 22 referenced being serious/seriously dating, 13 used the term exclusive without the term serious in their responses, three described the relationship as official/boyfriend-girlfriend, one reported casually dating, and one reported as long distance.

PROCEDURES

After the study was approved by the IRB at both universities (see Appendix A), the study was posted to the communication studies department research participant website and announced in introductory and upper-level communication courses (see Appendix B). Upon expressing interest in participation, participants were sent a link to an online scheduling website to select an interview time. After scheduling an interview time, participants were emailed a unique online meeting link which they could access at the time of the interview. After the nature of the study was explained to participants, they were given the opportunity to ask any questions about the study; participants were then directed to an online form in which they signed the consent form (see Appendix C) and completed a short demographic questionnaire. The interviews began by asking the individuals basic information about their relationship such as how they met their romantic partner and the length and current status of the relationship. The interview then consisted of three main sections: first, participants responded to questions about the individual's relationship goals and general perceptions of how relationships are defined. Second, participants shared about a particularly important conversation with their partners about the relationship, and third participants were asked about the immediate and relational outcomes of the conversation. After the eighth interview, three minor adjustments were made to the interview protocol to further explore emergent themes (Tracy, 2020). For example, it became clear that participants were not necessarily familiar with the term "DTR." An additional question was added to inquire about participants' familiarity with the term and any other terms they use for this conversation. For the full interview

protocol, see Appendix D. To encourage more detailed responses, participants were asked clarifying or follow-up questions throughout the interview. After being given an opportunity to provide any additional information participants were thanked for their time and the virtual meeting concluded.

Once data were collected, the video recording of the meeting was deleted and only the audio recording file and transcript were retained for the study. Participants were assigned pseudonyms, and any other identifying information was removed from the transcripts. The audio files, transcripts, consent forms, and any other study documents will be stored in secure cloud storage until the completion of any papers or publications.

Data Analysis

A total of 40 interviews were conducted resulting in 18.5 hours (1,112 minutes) of recorded interviews and 724 pages of transcriptions. Interviews ranged from 16 - 51 minutes with the average interview lasting 28 minutes. Rather than analyzing the data using a preexisting framework, I conducted a thematic analysis to allow the content of the interviews to determine emergent themes. This best maintained the integrity of the interviews and allowed for the widest possible scope in answering the guiding research questions as addressed in the three sections exploring before, during, and after the DTR. After the first eight interviews, three minor adjustments were made to the interview protocol to better explore emergent themes or provide more clarity to participants. After the first twelve interviews, an initial round of analysis was conducted to form initial themes and confirm analyses for each question type (number of participants vs. thematic

units). No further adjustments were made to the interview protocol and, due to scheduling, all remaining analyses were conducted after the final interview of 40 was completed.

Data analysis followed an inductive approach in which themes emerged from the data. As outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), this consists of six key phases that allow the researcher to identify meaningful patterned responses throughout the data that best address the research questions. In following this process, the first two steps are to become familiar with the data and create categories. I did this by first reading through the printed transcriptions and highlighting where each research question was located. This gave an initial opportunity to make connections within each participant's interview. For example, the interview protocol provided two separate opportunities for participants to describe how their relationship was defined. The first opportunity was more open-ended and, in most cases, prompted a bigger-picture response. After explaining the concept of the DTR, a second opportunity guided participants through aspects of the DTR associated with the research questions. This allowed me to piece together participant accounts for a fuller picture of their experiences, and simultaneously create categories in the data organized by specific research questions. At this point, I created an excel document to organize participant demographic information, categories, and themes. Based on the research questions, some categories included the entire data set of 40 interviews, and others were separated by subset of initiators and non-initiators.

The next two steps in Braun and Clarke's (2006) process focus on searching for and reviewing semantic or latent themes. Within each research question category, participant responses were grouped by similar recurring patterns. Two units of analysis were used depending on the nature of participant responses. The first was by participant in which each participant had one response that could be calculated with percentages out of the whole data set or subset of initiators and non-initiators; this was the case for research question categories like uncertainty and initiation strategies. The second unit of analysis, thematic units, was best for instances in which participants gave multiple answers within one research question category; thematic units are based on a single idea rather than complete response (Krippendorff, 2018). Thematic units were used for categories such as indicators of relationship status prior to the DTR and indicators of DTR success. The unit of analysis used for each research question is noted in each section of the findings. To generate and review themes, I completed a first and second round of coding. The first round of open-coding allowed for emergent categories to be formed from the data, and the second round of axial-coding organized these codes across participants into larger themes that were then revisited and refined (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), in organizing and collapsing themes, I analyzed participants' underlying ideas in addition to the explicit descriptions provided. This resulted in themes that captured intention and broader assumptions that better made sense of the data and were more useful for visualizing the full DTR process.

The last two steps in Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process are to define and name themes and produce a report that includes "vivid and compelling" exemplars (p.87). This was first done by creating a master document of all instances of each theme with exemplars. The next chapter detailing findings from this study contains both descriptions of generated themes and select participant quotes as compelling examples of each. The largest theme in each category is reported, or in other words, each theme is collapsed to the highest level to provide a snapshot of the DTR process. Because the goal of this project is to ultimately produce variables that can be used in a future scale of relationship definition and testable model of the DTR process, themes are based on concepts and not different perceptions. For example, in themes of DTR success, participant reports of unsuccessful and successful DTRs are within the same themes of the larger success variable. Where necessary, exemplars have been modified slightly to remove distractions (e.g., "like" and "um") and allow for the concepts to be best highlighted.

In addition to conducting a thematic analysis, I also conducted a thematic co-occurrence analysis (Scharp, 2021). This analysis highlighted initial relationships between themes within and across research question categories. According to Scharp (2021), the first step is to conduct a thematic analysis as detailed above. The second step is to create a co-occurrence matrix. Using excel, I manually created a matrix that illustrated occurrences of themes in each category. In this method each row is a participant and each column is a theme. Occurrences of each theme are noted, then co-

occurrences are labeled with letters and numbers. For example, for initiator goals the notations “IG1” “IG2” and “IG3” were used and self/partner certainty and uncertainty were noted using the letter “U” with numbers one through four. When a relationship emerged between themes this was noted with a combination of the symbols for the theme (e.g., IG1/U1). The third and final step is to analyze patterns in the co-occurrence matrix. Some themes had a sporadic co-occurrence in which they were sometimes related and sometimes not. Others had a unilateral co-occurrence, only occurring with one theme within a category, or absence of co-occurrence in which they did not occur together at all. As Scharp suggests, the presence of a co-occurrence is not necessarily meaningful, and the burden is on the researcher to analyze the forcefulness of the co-occurrence and balance between co-occurrences. In line with this final point only co-occurrences, or lack of co-occurrence, that are meaningful for the questions in the current study are noted in the findings and potential explanations detailed in the discussion.

Chapter 4: Findings

The value of the current study and the larger dissertation project is the reinforcement of communication as central in defining and developing relationships. While previous studies have assessed if, when, and why romantic partners define their relationships with each other, we have yet to know the details of these conversations. After analyzing the data, it became clear the findings were best explained chronologically to follow the process of the DTR. As such, the nine research questions are arranged within larger categories of before, during, and after the DTR. In addition to defining emergent themes with descriptions and exemplars, thematic co-occurrences are included that offer greater insight into themes and how they connect to each other.

To start, information about participants as initiators and non-initiators is explained. Next, the first set of five research questions addressed individual, relationship, and situational factors leading up to the DTR. First, four themes explain factors that influence individual perceptions of the DTR as a threatening or non-threatening topic *(RQ3)*. Next, participant's [un]certainty about their own feelings and their partner's feelings are tallied *(RQ4)*. Third, relationship indicators are grouped into five categories that explain how participants had an idea of relationship status prior to the DTR *(RQ6).* Fourth are situational factors immediately before the DTR; this includes the length of the relationship prior to the DTR and four categories of events internal and external to the relationship that prompted the DTR *(RQ7).* Lastly, three themes of initiator goals prior to

the DTR and three themes of non-initiator goals once the partner initiated the DTR are detailed *(RQ2)*.

In the second set, two research questions explored details of what is occurring during the DTR. Characteristics of the DTR (i.e., episodic or continuous, length, and locations of the DTR) are followed by three themes that summarize the strategies initiators used to start the DTR *(RQ5)*. This is followed by three related themes in the content of DTR conversations for both initiators and non-initiators *(RQ1)*, and three categories of non-initiator responses to the DTR *(RQ5).* The last set includes two research questions that addressed evaluations and outcomes of the DTR. Participant evaluations of the DTR as successful or unsuccessful are organized into four themes that correspond to four factors of successful DTR conversations *(RQ8).* Finally, changes that resulted from the DTR are organized into five themes that shed light on DTR outcomes *(RQ9).*

To best capture participant voices, exemplars of emergent themes are incorporated throughout the description of findings. Participant quotes have been modified slightly for clarity; namely, repeated text hesitations and verbal disfluencies such as “like” and “um.” Block quotes may contain quoted text when participants are detailing what they or their partners said. In addition to pseudonyms, brackets are used in participant quotes to indicate identifying information has been removed.

INITIATORS AND NON-INITIATORS

To provide context for interpreting the themes, basic information on the initiation of the DTR is outlined here first. In the current study, 17 (42.5%) participants initiated

the DTR and 23 (57.5%) participants' partners initiated the DTR. Several participants made comments that, in a heterosexual relationship, the male is expected to ask the female to be his girlfriend. In the current study, the sample was only 25% male, but interestingly all except one male were initiators. This does also mean that eight of the 17 initiators were female. Possibly this is evidence of a shift in traditional views of dating and courtship. It could also reinforce the notion that not all initiation strategies are equal, but instead they are strategically selected as is detailed further in the initiation strategies explained later in the findings. Moving forward, when relevant to understanding themes, participants are identified as initiators and non-initiators to give context to the findings.

BEFORE THE DTR

Perceptions of the DTR as [Non]Threatening (RQ3)

The third research question asked what makes individuals perceive a DTR conversation as threatening. Participants were asked, "To what degree did you feel comfortable talking about your relationship with your partner? Did anything seem threatening about the topic? If so, what?" Of the 40 participants, 31 participants responded that no, talking about the relationship was not an uncomfortable or threatening topic and nine reported it was an uncomfortable topic. Seven participants reported the topic of the relationship was not uncomfortable or was non-threatening but did not provide a reason. This resulted in 35 thematic units regarding descriptions of (dis)comfort that were coded into themes; themes sometimes included those who reported being

comfortable as well as those who were uncomfortable if the reasons pertained to the same concept. A total of four themes were identified and each is explained below.

Anticipated Outcome of the Interaction. Participants in this category (n = 17) felt the DTR was comfortable or uncomfortable based on their feelings about the outcome of the conversation. Five participants responded "yes" the topic of the relationship was uncomfortable because they were concerned about the outcome and how that would affect them personally or the relationship as a whole. For example, non-initiator Anna shared how the topic was uncomfortable because she was concerned she might move into a relationship too quickly:

> I went into panic mode a couple of times like even when he was like, "Oh, so do you go on walks with people?" I was like no, no, no, not right now. And I had a prior experience where I had DTR'd way too fast, and so, I was very much on the side of like it's okay to take it slow and I need to take it slow because I know my tendency to be like, "Let's just get this on the road, and like do all the things and be really emotionally entangled from the get-go." So that was just me being, I was definitely more reserved initially because of like I know how I tend to be.

In Hillary's case, she had already experienced a negative outcome when her partner temporarily ended the relationship after the relationship started to intensify. Hillary wanted to progress the relationship, but was concerned her partner might respond in a similar way as before.

> I mean, there were times when I was wanting to bring it up but decided not to because I was just, like I don't want to push too much…Before we were even in an official relationship, yet we had been talking maybe two or three weeks, I feel like we were both on the same page sort of starting to really like each other. And she made some comments about how she really liked me. She gave me her apartment key, like all this stuff. Then I was like, okay, this is great, we're both really invested, we're both on the same page, like super excited. Then the next day after that she was like, "I don't think we should see each other anymore." She was like, "I just don't know if I'm ready to be in a relationship," kind of like getting cold feet after realizing this is a mutual connection. So I was like, "I think you're making a mistake. I'm going to give you some time to reflect on this." And then, like two or three days later, she was like, "Yeah, you're right. I just got really nervous about it." So then, after that we were still not official, but we were back to dating and I was like, okay, I don't know if I want to bring this up again because I don't want that to happen.

Eight participants responded that the topic was not threatening. Four of these participants responded "no," but followed with a contradicting statement indicating they were concerned about the outcome or the content was awkward in some way. For example, non-initiator Gabby talked about how it was not uncomfortable to discuss the relationship, but contradicted herself by describing how nervous she was:

> On the first date I was very nervous, um, about bringing it up and that's why I did bring it up on the first date because I was really concerned just in our current dating culture, that me saying I would be going to Texas in two months would be an automatic red flag this would be casual, like I just assumed, because that's what a lot of things are now, but I'm not really interested in that. So that's why I just made that super clear on the first date. Just so we're both on the same page. Just obviously like well, how prevalent hookup culture is now, I just wanted to be very clear that I wasn't really into that, I wanted to actually be in a relationship. And I shared that. And he basically said like, "Yeah, I'm like past that stage of my life. I'm on the same page." And I didn't think it was uncomfortable, but I was nervous. And I really wasn't expecting his response. But it wasn't like an uncomfortable thing to bring up. I just was nervous about the response.

The other four participants who responded that the topic of the relationship was not an uncomfortable topic explained they were certain about the relationship, and therefore not concerned about the outcome. For example, initiator Chloe shared how meeting through an online dating app with a reputation for serving individuals seeking a long-term relationship contributed to her certainty and feeling of comfort discussing the relationship:

> I mean, because both of us were already on that app we, you know, we weren't just casually looking around or like yeah I'm kind of interested in spending my time with somebody. And our conversations, for five of our conversations, we

were definitely connecting well enough to where it's like, "Okay let's, let's actually look into a real relationship connection."

The last four participants in this category responded the topic of the relationship was not uncomfortable because of the clarity such a conversation would bring. For example, non-initiator Michelle said,

> It didn't seem threatening at all, I mean I was like yeah I definitely want to pursue a relationship, but I didn't know if he did himself. I would rather him reach out first and be like yeah I'm, I'm really interested in this. So I was very comfortable when he mentioned the topic.

For these participants, it seemed the resulting clarity the DTR would bring overrode any feelings of discomfort.

Communication in the Relationship. Ten participants referenced the nature of their relationship with their romantic partners as the determining factor in whether or not the topic of the relationship was uncomfortable. One participant, initiator Jane, said the topic was uncomfortable based on the relationship, "It was kind of uncomfortable for both of us cause we don't really talk about our feelings." The remaining nine participants in this category responded they were comfortable discussing the relationship because they were comfortable discussing things or being open in general with their romantic partner. This is best captured in non-initiator Nicole's experience:

> No, yeah we've, even just as friends like such an open communication with each other, we were very comfortable around each other. We never really had that

awkward phase of what's going on, who's doing, like we just talk and it's, it's really convenient.

Frequency of Topic. Five participants referenced how often the topic of the relationship was discussed as the reason for it being a comfortable or uncomfortable topic. These responses were different from the previous theme in that these participants didn't reference the relationship, but solely the frequency of discussion about the relationship. Interestingly, all five reported the topic of the relationship was not an uncomfortable topic. Two participants said this was because the topic was discussed often, as in non-initiator Danielle's case: "We're really comfortable, I'd say if you want to like scale like 1 to 10, we have a lot of conversations about status and stuff like that." On the other hand, three participants said the topic was not uncomfortable because it was not frequently talked about. This was initiator David's experience:

> Not uncomfortable I'll say just, just some regular "I love you" or something like that before I go to bed or something. But I don't, I don't express that like that often, you know in our daily life, just talking like friends.

The latter example, and those related, seem counter-intuitive, but there seem to be two possible explanations. First, it seems the relationship was seen as a comfortable topic in the absence of an uncomfortable experience; because they never talked about it, they did not have a threatening or uncomfortable experience to reference. Another alternative hinted in their responses is that they may have seen the lack of talk about the relationship

as a sign the relationship was going well. If the relationship was never addressed, then there was no threat to the relationship.

Communication Efficacy. The final theme of communication efficacy is comprised of responses ($n = 4$) referencing participants feelings about how ready they were to have a conversation about the relationship. Three included the term confrontational or nonconfrontational as in initiator Vivian's case, "Um, I'm pretty confrontational…I think it's more of an internal battle, not with him and I never felt like I couldn't tell him things." One participant, Beth, had a slightly different response as a non-initiator; she reported the topic was uncomfortable because she didn't know how to have the conversation.

> It was a little uncomfortable for me because I felt like I had not been like being a good girlfriend or doing it the correct way, and that was the first kind of serious conversation we had at that point. And I think it was a little uncomfortable for me, but it made me feel better after because we kind of understood where both of us were at, and it wasn't like I was just being mean or something, but like I just didn't really know how to handle the situation.

In summary, a majority of participants felt comfortable discussing the relationship with their partners and did not perceive the DTR as a threatening topic. If the DTR was perceived as threatening, it was largely because of the anticipated outcome of the conversation and perceptions of one's own ability to engage in the DTR. Participants who did not have concerns about the anticipated outcome or who felt they could generally

communicate openly with their partner prior to the DTR were most likely to see the DTR as a non-threatening topic.

Self and Perceived Partner Uncertainty (RQ4)

The fourth research question explored how uncertainty factored into initiation and response to the DTR. Both initiators and non-initiators were asked, "Were you unsure of your own feelings about the relationship and your partner? Were you unsure how your partner felt?" For clarity, percentages of self and partner certainty and uncertainty are reported first individually, then co-occurrences within RQ4 and between other RQs are explained. When asked whether they were unsure of their own feelings about the partner and the relationship, 68% (n = 27) reported feeling certain and 32% (n = 13) reported feeling uncertain. Similarly, 63% (n = 25) of participants reported certainty in their perceptions of their partner's feelings about the participant and the relationship and 37% (n = 15) were uncertain. Of the 27 who reported certainty of their own feelings, 67% (n = 18) were female. In comparison, 92% (n = 12) of the 13 participants who reported self-uncertainty were female. When comparing males and females' partner uncertainty, results mirrored the breakdown of sex in the sample (i.e., 25% males and 75% females). Nearly three-quarters of the participants who reported feeling certain of their partner's feelings were female (76%; n =19) and one-quarter were male (24%; n = 6). Likewise, 73% (n = 11) of those who responded they were uncertain of their partner's feelings at the time of the DTR were female and 27% (n = 4) were male.

RQ 4 Theme Co-occurrence. First, comparing how certainty and uncertainty vary for initiators and non-initiators, a general trend of certainty is true for both. 71% (*n* =12) of initiators and 65% (*n* = 15) of non-initiators were certain of their own feelings about their partners and the relationship. Similarly, 65% (*n* = 11) of initiators and 61% (*n* =14) of non-initiators were sure of their partner's feelings about the participant and the relationship. Examining the four self/partner and certainty/uncertainty combinations, the pattern for responses was similar for both initiators and non-initiators. Unilateral certainty, or certainty of both the participants' own feelings and their partners' feelings, was the most frequent response; specifically, eight initiators (47%) and 10 non-initiators (43%) reported certainty in both. For these participants, they went into the DTR completely sure of both partners' feelings about each other and the relationship. The other three combinations of responses were consistently lower in frequency and were similar across initiators and non-initiators. Four initiators (29%) and five non-initiators (22%) answered they were sure of their own feelings about the partner and relationship, but unsure of their partners' feelings. In the remaining two combinations, participants reported their own feelings of uncertainty at the time of the DTR. Three initiators (18%) and four non-initiators (17%) reported being unsure of their own feelings, but sure of their partner's feelings. Lastly, two initiators (12%) and four non-initiators (17%) responded they were unsure of both their own feelings and their partners' feelings. These findings suggest little difference between initiators and non-initiators in the amount and patterns of self and partner uncertainty. Two participant responses provided a more in-

depth look at uncertainty. In Cecile's case, as a non-initiator she was sure of her feelings about her partner and his feelings for her, but was uncertain of her own feelings about starting a relationship at the time, "I wasn't unsure of how I felt about him, I was just, I think I was unsure if my feelings for him overrode my fears...I knew exactly how he felt, he's a very open person, he'll tell me." Isabella, another non-initiator, had a similar response about her own feelings of uncertainty, "I know that I liked him, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to have a relationship with him at that time." For the individuals who were uncertain of their own feelings or their partners' feelings, there appear to be two levels of uncertainty. One might be certain of romantic feelings in both cases, but uncertain if the relationship should happen at that time or at all.

Pre-DTR Indicators of Relationship Status (RQ6)

The sixth research question addressed indicators of relationship status prior to the DTR. Participants were asked, "What was happening in your relationship before deciding to officially date – did you have any indication of your relationship status?" All except one participant responded to this question, and two participants indicated they did not have an indicator of the relationship as, prior to the DTR, they were uncertain if their partners were exclusively seeing them. While it can be argued these were in fact indicators of relationship status, it is interesting that in the absence of exclusivity some participants did not see their relationship as having a status. The remaining 36 participants' responses resulted in 71 thematic units. Five distinct themes emerged, and each is detailed in the following paragraphs.

Communication. Interestingly, though participants were asked about indicators of the relationship prior to the DTR, 23 responses referenced communication. This theme included jokes, sexual health conversations, notes, and affection. Several responses referenced the depth and frequency of conversations. When it came to deeper conversations, non-initiator Anna described it well when she said, "He was like really intentional about asking me about myself, and the things that I enjoyed, and my convictions and stuff. And I thought, then I was like, oh this guy actually likes me." Cecile's response captures both depth and frequency, "We had a three hour facetime call…we were texting every single day for hours. Like he was sending me voice memos like telling me about his childhood." Hence, frequent and in-depth communication gave participants more definitive evidence that they were becoming more involved in the relationship.

Acting like a couple. Behaving as a romantic couple was almost even with the communication theme, referenced in the previous paragraph, as an indicator of relationship status prior to the DTR. The 22 responses within this category included examples of acting like a couple both publicly and privately. For example, non-initiator Sophie said, "Whenever we were in group settings like would single each other out kind of and find each other and like, oh, sit next to each other." Emma, a non-initiator, demonstrates how a network member's understanding of the relationship informed her own at the time:

> He introduced me to two of his close friends and, um, I was hanging out with his close friend just, just him and I. And he was like, he mentioned [Partner] being my boyfriend and I was like, "Oh, I guess he's my boyfriend. He hasn't specifically asked me to be his girlfriend."

Sixteen responses alluded to acting like a couple when in private through behaviors like exchanging things, prioritizing each other, connecting physically, travelling to see each other, or, in one participant's case, sharing pets. Two referenced staying at each other's place frequently like in initiator Aaron's case, "Yeah, probably, just because we were like hanging out so much it was kind of obvious that there was nobody else, you know. Like she was like staying at my place a lot." Isabella similarly referenced how small-scale actions signaled the relationship status before her partner initiated the DTR, "It was just something like small things and then he would help me with little things." Eight participants referenced being exclusive but not yet "official." For example, non-initiator Gabby shared:

> We were basically acting like boyfriend and girlfriend texting all the time, going on dates two, three times a week. After we had the exclusive talk which was very early on. So yeah, like that part happened pretty quick. It basically felt like we were dating um but it wasn't like you had the label on it yet.

Participant responses showed that they know how a romantic couple typically behaves in public or in private, and they are very aware of cues that their own relationships have crossed-over from friendship to romantic relationship.

Time Together. The next largest theme included 19 references to time spent together. Ben talked about time together relative to time with others as an indicator before his partner initiated the DTR, "It was kind of like we started spending more time with each other rather than other people so then it sort of ended up being like oh, we're exclusive now." Henry, an initiator, referenced the routine of time spent together as an indicator, "Like we were just like going on walks like every night." Lastly, initiator Greg shared how it became more unusual to *not* be with his partner:

> I'd say it's definitely more the interactions we were having and the level of, like the amount of time we're spending together… I don't think there was anything that we were doing that we weren't ever like really apart.

This theme is distinct in that the nature of the activity (i.e., couple activities) was not referenced. Rather, participants seemed to have an awareness of how the ratio of time spent with this one person compared to all other network members increased to a point that signaled a romantic relationship was developing.

Personal and Partner Feelings. Four responses formed the fourth theme of personal and partner feelings because they specifically referenced how one or both partners was feeling at the time served as an indicator that a relationship was forming. For example, non-initiator Olivia said, "Also like, 'Oh I miss him, I want to be with him, where he is.' Like it's a different feeling that you have with that person." Lexi responded that a more positive emotion signaled a relationship before her partner initiated the DTR, "We were always super excited to talk to each other." Participants were aware of how

their growing emotional connection to their partners, and the emotional expressions from their partners, indicated a greater affinity for this person over others.

Family Involvement. The remaining three responses clearly formed a fifth theme of family involvement, specifically interacting with parents. For example, initiator Alison said:

> My parents just happened to be in town and they wanted to meet him. And so it just kind of happened. And then I met his parents a week later and like, it was just all of those kinds of things happened very quickly.

Brittany, another initiator, shared a similar experience of early interactions with parents:

> It was, I think, a week after we met and he's very close with his family, so he said "Oh yeah I, you know, facetimed my parents and I said, 'Oh, I met a girl.'" And yeah, so we went on a second date I think, and his parents asked for like a selfie of us. And so that kind of prompted yeah, so I think like the second date it kind of just you prompted things because you know they kept asking about me while we were together, it was kind of funny.

Meeting and interacting with each other's parents prior to the DTR transferred their relationship into a closer family circle context and signaled to participants that the relationship with their partners was progressing.

RQ 6 Summary and Theme Co-occurrence. These five themes demonstrate that, prior to the DTR, participants had other cues that there was a romantic relationship forming. A few relationships emerged between relationship indicators, perceptions of the

DTR, and uncertainty. Pre-DTR relationship indicators coincided with perceptions of the DTR as non-threatening. Specifically, seven of the nine participants who referenced communication in the relationship as a reason for why the DTR was not a threatening topic also noted communication as an indicator of their pre-DTR relationship status. This suggests that a general atmosphere of open communication in the relationship signals a deeper relationship, and extends to the topic of the DTR. Another connection to perceptions of the DTR exists with the three participants who did not have any indicators of relationship status prior to the DTR. All referenced the anticipated outcome, and only this theme; two responded the DTR was not a threatening topic based on the anticipated outcome. Possibly for these participants a lack of pre-DTR indicators of the relationship lowered the stakes and made the DTR less threatening. One participant who had previously dated and broken up with her partner responded that it was an uncomfortable topic due to the potential for being hurt again. As a safeguard, she and her partner were intentionally not defining the relationship when they first starting dating again, but this may have raised the stakes and made the DTR a more threatening topic.

Certainty also connects to relationship indicators prior to the DTR. First, acting like a couple in public coincided with self-certainty; those who were open about their developing relationship around friends were sure of their own feelings about the partner and relationship. This stems from the larger connection between acting like a couple and self-certainty; this was the highest certainty percentage (67%) of any relationship indicator. Acting like a couple in public or in private might make the relationship more

"real" to an individual and assure them of their own feelings about the partner and relationship. Second, family involvement may not only be an indicator of relationship status, but may also aid in certainty about the partner. Participants who interacted with their partners' parents prior to the DTR reported feeling certain about their partners' feelings about the relationship and about them. This suggests the more an individual is integrated into their partner's life, the more assured they feel that their partner wants to continue developing the relationship. Lastly, relationship indicators of time together and acting like a couple connected more to unilateral certainty than unilateral uncertainty. Eleven of the 19 participants who referenced time together and 12 of the 22 who referenced acting like a couple reported self and partner certainty compared to three in each category who reported self and partner uncertainty. This demonstrates that, while not in every case, spending time together or acting like a couple is more likely to result in feeling completely sure of both partners' feelings than completely unsure. In summary, relationship indicators prior to the DTR help participants get an idea of where they stand with their partner before explicitly deciding to become an official couple.

Situational Factors Preceding the DTR (RQ7)

The seventh research question examined the situational factors leading up to the DTR. These interview questions addressed the timing of the DTR in the larger relationship timeline and the events that prompted the conversation. Participants were asked, "How long into your relationship did the DTR conversation happen?" Participant responses (n = 33) ranged from 1 week to 20 weeks, or 5 months, with an average of 6.3

weeks (*Mdn* = 4 weeks, *SD* = 4.3); seven participants were unsure. For those participants who had been friends with their partner prior to dating, they started counting from when the relationship first shifted from platonic to romantic interest. Participants were also asked, "Was there an event, or maybe more than one event, that prompted a specific conversation about your relationship? This can be anything within your relationship or something involving other people." Every participant provided a substantive response resulting in 40 responses coded into four main themes detailed below.

Prompting from Other People. Responses in this category (*n* = 12) referenced other people as the impetus for the DTR conversation. Others in the social network either directly said something that prompted the DTR, or indirectly influenced the timing of the DTR. In Aaron's case, friends were directly encouraging him to make the relationship official:

> My friends back home, I would, I tell them a lot, and I was like, "No I haven't asked her to be my girlfriend or anything," and they were kind of getting on me about it…like, "What's taking you so long?"

Aaron expressed that he didn't feel the DTR was necessary, but he felt pressured from his friends to make his relationship official. For other participants it was a more indirect influence from friends or family members as in Cameron's experience, "She wanted to wait 'til she went home and talked to her family, because her family is very protective and so she didn't want to just be like, 'Surprise, I have a boyfriend'." Cameron was anxiously awaiting his partner's family's response to the relationship, and as soon as his

partner told him they approved, he asked her to officially be his girlfriend. In both indirect and direct ways, the timing of the DTR was prompted by people outside of the relationship.

Change in Geographic Distance. In the second theme, eight participants noted a geographic change prompted the conversation. Of these, five participants reported an increase in distance via a trip or moving and three reported being geographically closer to their partner prompted the conversation. Only one initiator reported this event, all seven others were non-initiators. In Gabby's case, preparing to leave town prompted her partner to initiate the conversation:

> Well, I had made it clear that I wasn't going to do long distance with him unless he was going to put a label on it. I thought that made no sense. So I made it really clear. So I think that's why it definitely happened before I left.

Gabby's partner was aware of her need for an official title prior to becoming a long-distance relationship and was sure to initiate the DTR before she left town. For Rachel it was the opposite in that being reunited prompted her partner to initiate the conversation, "He asked me on a date like the day he came into [town]. Like he wasn't wasting any time, he had hardly moved into his house." Rachel's partner had been waiting to have a DTR in-person and made plans to take her on a date to progress the relationship. Whether moving closer or farther from their partners, a change external to the relationship like transitioning into or away from a long-distance situation can prompt a DTR conversation.

Relationship Event. This theme included responses (n = 11) that referenced some sort of milestone in the relationship (e.g., deleting dating apps, increasing sexual intimacy, or an anniversary) or a memorable event (e.g., a special date or meaningful conversation). In non-initiator Hillary's case:

> It was on our, like the two month anniversary since our first date…she was like, "Yeah I was just like waiting for this day so that it would be special." And so I think just the date coming back up prompted her being like, "Okay, this is the time that I need to ask."

For Kara, she was prompted by a romantic date to initiate the DTR:

> We went for dinner at this little Italian restaurant just casually. It was kind of a spur of the moment type thing…it was just this cute little moment, yummy food, nice environment, and then we went for a drive after and it was just me thinking in my head, 'Oh, I would really like to be with this person,' you know what I mean? So it wasn't a massive event that happened it was just something cute and small and that made me realize kind of okay, actually like this is maybe somebody I would want to be with completely.

In contrast to the two previous themes, these events are internal to the relationship and can signal a shift in the relationship that should be acknowledged with a DTR.

Individual Reasons. Some participants (n = 9) mentioned they or their partners either wanted to advance the relationship or wanted clarity about the relationship. For example, Eric explained his desire to initiate the DTR to pursue the next step in his

relationship, “So I just wanted my relationship to go further and so, I don’t know, in my culture like we always ask girls, or girls ask you, to have a relationship like boyfriend and girlfriend.” Additionally, Ian shared what prompted him to initiate a DTR with his girlfriend, “I’m really busy, like all the time, and I wanted to know she’s also on the same page that I am and, if not, figure it out.” In this theme, the timing of the DTR was dependent on one partner reaching a critical point at which they felt defining their relationship was necessary.

In summary, participant responses formed four different types of situational factors that prompted the timing of the DTR. Two were events external to the relationship, one was an event internal to the relationship, and the last category included reasons unique to the individual and not the couple. Co-occurrences between these precipitating factors with initiator and non-initiator goals, initiator’s initiation strategies, and non-initiator responses are explained in the following corresponding sections.

Initiator Goals (RQ2)

The first part of the second research question addressed the goals of those who initiate the DTR prior to the conversation. The 17 participants who initiated the DTR were asked, “Why did you want to initiate a talk about your relationship?” Their responses were coded into three categories that are explained in the following paragraphs.

Clarification. Out of the 17 initiators, 8 responded they wanted to have the DTR conversation because they didn’t want confusion or needed clarification. For example, Brittany responded, “I think it’s just my personality. I’ve always been the one to ask

'How serious is this?' You know I don't want to cause any confusion or anything so I just like to lay it out there." Felicia was seeking clarification so she knew how to respond to other potential romantic partners:

> I brought it up because I was like, "These other people they've been kind of bugging me for the past week about hanging out again and I don't know if I want to…" I think it was kind of my way, because I was pretty sure he wasn't seeing anyone else, but it was kind of my way of being like, "Do you want to be exclusive because there are other people who do."

In this theme, participants are motivated to initiate a DTR to meet their own need for clarity about the relationship status, or to more clearly communicate their relationship status to network members including potential alternative partners.

Official Titles. Six participants reported wanting official titles of boyfriend or girlfriend. In Chloe's case, she initiated the DTR to signal to her partner she was ready to use official titles, "Because he said, you know from the beginning it was my decision, it was, I would be the one to basically label it and make it official." In Alison's case, she wanted the titles so she could officially refer to her partner as her boyfriend:

> I think I just was kind of tired of being like, "this person that I've been going on dates with." It was just one of those things where I'm just like, so I didn't know how to describe him to my friends, and I didn't know what to refer to him as. And especially because at that point I liked him, I liked him enough to be like, "Yeah, he's my boyfriend."

For these six participants, the title itself was a milestone in the relationship that needed to be reached in order to feel legitimate in the relationship.

Titles for Others. The third theme that emerged was different from the previous in that these three participants initiated the DTR to please someone else. In Aaron's case, he didn't feel titles were necessary, but was receiving pressure from friends and assumed his partner expected him to ask, "I just don't want to deal with that, so I thought that was just the quickest way to get it over with…because I feel like, in my opinion, it's almost kind of unnecessary to me." In Iris's case, after beginning to date her long-time friend, she too didn't feel titles were necessary but initiated a DTR anyway:

> I know it's more like societal pressure to put that label on it. I didn't really care…like, I know that was also going to make him really happy because he had been kind of pursuing me for a year and that, I don't know, it definitely was like partially for him.

These three participants could have gone without the titles, but felt inclined to officially label the relationship by initiating the DTR or order to please their partner or do what "should be done" in a dating relationship.

Initiator Goals Summary and Theme Co-occurrence. In summary, 17 initiators shared their goals when initiating the DTR and these goals formed three themes. Two of the three themes were focused on official relationship titles; one centered on the initiator's desire to make the relationship official and the other sought to label the relationship for the sake of the partner or social norms of dating. Analysis showed a

connection, or lack of connection in some cases, between events that prompted the DTR and initiator goals. Half of the initiators who wanted a title themselves were prompted by other people to initiate the DTR and half were prompted by a relationship event. The latter seems intuitive as the those who reported wanting to be official might be moved to do so by something internal to the relationship. The relationship between wanting a title and being prompted by others either implies participants might be reframing their desire for a title in hindsight, or they might have wanted the title but the timing was prompted by others. The latter implies an internal desire for relationship titles, but the former hints that individuals who were not wanting a title can reframe it positively if they are in a satisfying relationship. Neither a change in geographic distance nor individual reasons were related to the goal of wanting a title for initiators. While they may have other goals (e.g. clarification), participants separating, reuniting, or experiencing strong feelings may not feel a title along will be helpful. The initiator goal of wanting a title for others was related to events involving other people or individual reasons; no participants in this goal category reported changes in geographic distance or a relationship event as prompting the DTR. In this case, individuals who want to please a partner or others outside of the relationship may be most prompted by the opportunity to please others or resolve their own feelings. The final goal of clarification was noted by several people in all four event themes. This indicates that, while no one event in particular is most linked to the clarification goal, the goal in itself persists across every situation reported that might prompt the DTR.

Non-initiator Goals (RQ2)

The second part of RQ2 addressed participants and their goals once their partners initiated the DTR. Participants who did not initiate the DTR were asked, "What did you want to happen once your partner initiated the conversation?" Each of the 23 non-initiators' responses were coded into three themes that are explained below.

Official Titles. Ten participants reported that they were hoping their partner would ask, or that they would start dating, once the DTR started. In Sophie's case the experience was surreal. She and her partner had gone on their first date in the morning and gone to a dance hall with friends in the evening. Sophie referenced how she and her partner had previously discussed they were not interested in "play dating" and saw officially dating as a distinct phase in the relationship. When they were driving alone in the car afterward, without warning he asked her to be his girlfriend.

> It was exciting. I kind of just, in my mind I was like, oh he has to be joking, which I knew he wasn't, but it was like there's no way that actually happened. So, yeah, good, I was like oh my gosh. It was exciting.

In Emily's case, she knew her partner was going to ask her, but in the interview speculated that it was pretty informal, and he was just waiting for the time to be right. When her partner directly asked her to be is girlfriend, she was ready:

> I was very excited. Um, and yeah, it was just kind of, it was cool because everyone kind of knew we were a thing, but we weren't exclusive yet. And so going back to all my friends the next day, it was just exciting that I could say we were a thing like officially now. And I don't know, it just made me feel good

> knowing we're going to make that commitment to each other…I was hoping he was going to ask me. Yeah I was hoping for it, I didn't, there's no doubt in my mind I didn't want to be with him.

For these ten participants they were eager to have the title, so when their partners initiated the DTR they were hopeful it would result in titles that signaled they were officially in a relationship with their partners.

Clarification. Seven participants went beyond just wanting a title, they specifically wanted the clarification they felt would result from the DTR. After meeting through an online dating app, Michelle was not interested in seeing anyone else. When her partner brought up the topic of being exclusive while taking a break from dancing at a dancehall, she was eager to clarify expectations. "What I wanted out of that conversation was just a clear, clear guidelines as to like okay, yeah, we're definitely going to be exclusive and then you know kind of understanding the expectations for the relationship." In Lexi's case, she and her partner had ended their relationship and gotten back together. When it came time for Lexi to leave town and return to school, her partner reassured her they were going to make the relationship work. Facing the uncertainty of attempting a long-distance relationship for the second time, she hoped for clarity about the future of the relationship. "Yeah, so I felt really good that he was saying, like this is going to work because, in my head, I had my own doubts…I mean, really, I just wanted peace of mind." Altogether, these seven non-initiators viewed the DTR as a welcome opportunity to clarify the relationship with their partners.

Initial Avoidance. The remaining six responses ranged from mixed feelings of hesitation, excitement, or fear to stronger reactions of anger. In each case, participants ultimately defined their relationships after initial feelings of hesitation or wanting to avoid the conversation. Cecile did not want a proposal-like event, but wanted a full conversation about the relationship. Following a negative relationship experience, she was nervous to enter into another relationship. When her partner brought up his desire to not just have a physical relationship but to date her and be her boyfriend, she was initially conflicted:

> Initially, panicky. Honestly, I was like oh my gosh, I didn't expect this to happen so fast. I told myself after the last relationship ended poorly that I would be slow and deliberate and choose wisely and um I met this guy a month and a half ago and he's visiting [town] and now he's asked me to be his girlfriend, like this feels fast. But, it also made sense and I wanted to date him. I wanted to date him but I was afraid of repeating past mistakes if that makes sense? So my initial reaction was hold your horses, let's talk. That's why it wasn't some romantic date with flowers, like will you be my girlfriend. It's like none of that, no, I want to sit and talk through absolutely every single possibility.

Deidra's response moved toward fear. When she first met her partner, they had a strong start to the relationship but he suddenly broke up with her. Two weeks later he wanted to get back together, but she insisted they remain friends. After continuing to spend time

together and rebuilding trust, after a nice dinner her partner asked her to be his girlfriend. She was ultimately excited, but initially wanted to avoid the topic until a later time:

> Honestly, I was pretty surprised because we had talked about maybe waiting a little bit longer, until we knew each other a little bit better…I was like, oh, that fear came back up again, because I was like, oh, what if you hurt me again, this could go poorly.

Danielle's partner made it clear she needed to make a decision to be in the relationship or they needed to go their separate ways. Initially, she was angry and wanted to avoid the topic, but continued with the conversation.

> I was really angry. I don't like being told what to do so it was a little off-putting to me and I was a little angry about it…I wanted to drop it. I didn't want to have the conversation at first.

All six participants ultimately had a DTR conversation with their partners, but their initial goal was to avoid defining the relationship at the time or indefinitely.

Non-Initiator Goals Summary and Co-Occurrences. All except one non-initiator were female and, once their partners initiated the DTR, they had three different themes in goals for the interaction. Non-initiator goals were similar to initiators in that they both referenced titles and clarification. The third theme of initial avoidance was unique to non-initiators and hinted at the sometimes unexpected nature of the DTR. While the other two goals aim to engage in the DTR to get a desired end goal, the initial avoidance goal aims to end the DTR before it starts. Examining the connection to events

prompting the DTR, both the titles and clarification themes coincided with all four event themes almost evenly. The initial avoidance goal was related to other people prompting, geographic change, and individual reason event themes. It was not, however, related to the relationship event theme. This hints at the link between initial avoidance and a more unexpected DTR. If, from a non-initiator perspective, nothing has occurred within the relationship that sparks a change they might question if the DTR is necessary.

DURING THE DTR

Characteristics of the DTR (RQ1)

RQ1 asked about prominent characteristics of DTR conversations, and this was addressed with several interview questions exploring the DTR as episodic or continuous, the length, and location of the DTR.

Episodic or Continuous. Participants were asked if they felt there was one conversation that defined their relationships, or if there were multiple conversations. Eight participants reported they defined their relationships in one conversation. The remaining majority of participants (n = 32) reported they had multiple conversations about their relationships in order to progress it forward. Three participants specifically stated they had multiple conversations, but it was just one conversation to "make it official." Within those who reported multiple conversations, participants reported separate conversations for topics like expressing feelings, past relationships, values, relationship boundaries and rules, and sexual health conversations.

Location and Length of the DTR. Participants were asked where they were when they had the DTR and how long the conversation lasted. Most participants did not provide information about how long the DTR lasted, but those that did gave a range from 5 minutes to several hours. Participant responses about the location of the DTR were first grouped into two even categories of private (n = 20) and public (n = 20) settings. Private locations included residences and vehicles in which the couple was alone; this also includes computer mediated communication (CMC) with only one participant responding that the DTR took place over a video phone call. Public locations included restaurants, coffee shops, public parks, parties, and a dance hall. Within this category, 17 participants alluded to a private conversation in these public locations, whereas three participants specifically said friends were present and included in the conversation.

Initiation Strategies (RQ5)

RQ5 addressed the strategies that individuals use to initiate the DTR. Seventeen participants initiated the DTR. Each was asked "How did you go about bringing up the topic of your relationship? What made you choose that approach?" Responses were sorted into three initiation strategy types that are explained below.

Direct Question. Seven participants used a direct question to define their relationship with their partners. These were straightforward requests or clarifying questions regarding the titles of boyfriend or girlfriend. In Ian's case, he was seeking official titles and asked his partner the question without much planning, "I was just like, 'Will you be my girlfriend?' because it was just kind of, it was a spur of the moment

thing." In Kyle's case, the question was more to gain clarification about the relationship, "Are we dating? Are we not? Are we just, you know, fooling around?" David tried to transition into the question in a creative way:

> Because we're just, we exchanged our, I actually exchanged my bracelet with her ring the last day, and then I just used that as a prompt. You know, it's like, "We exchanged our stuff already, then why don't we exchange our, you know, relationship?" I know, it's kind of weird, but I just used that as a prompt, then just asked her the question, "Do you want to be my girlfriend?"

In each case, the question was straightforward in asking the partner to provide a clear label for the relationship.

Related Question to Prompt. Five participants asked questions about something related to the relationship in order to prompt the DTR. These participants were less direct in their approach like in Brittany's case, "I think we were joking about, you know, dating apps, and just kind of how we met, and I was saying, "Oh well, you know we don't have dating apps anymore, so what does that mean?" This ultimately resulted in the couple clearly articulating their exclusivity. In Alison's story, she wanted to signal to her partner she was ready to make the relationship official, but she wanted her partner to ask.

> I think at one point in order to get him to get to the point of DTR, I think I was like, "So like, when you're talking about me with your friends, like what do you refer to me as?"…Yeah, throwing these around the bush questions. The "Who am

> I to you? Like what, like what are we doing?'…I thought if I just asked him a bunch of questions, he would get to it on his own.

Participants did not directly ask the partner to define the relationship, at least at first, but instead opted to ease into the DTR through a more indirect question.

Statement About the Relationship. The remaining five initiators of the DTR made a statement about the relationship that either labeled the relationship or started a conversation about the relationship. In Iris's case, her partner had attempted to make the relationship official on more than one occasion before, so she was communicating her readiness:

> And then I just kind of brought it up, and was like, "I know that you want to do this, you've like, you've obviously voiced it to me," but I was like, "I think that now I'm more ready for that."

Vivian, on the other hand, was seeking clarification and wanted to initiate a conversation about the status of the relationship:

> I would bring it up to him a lot when his friends would ask me like, "Oh, so-and-so asked me again"…and that's kind of how I brought it up. I was like, "Well, so-and-so brought it up again, and I'm kind of over saying the same thing."

In this theme, participants made statements about the relationship that either directly defined the relationship or indirectly alluded to the relationship status resulting in a DTR conversation.

RQ 5 Summary and Thematic Co-Occurrences. Participants used three types of strategies to initiate the DTR: direct questions about the relationship, related questions, and statements about the relationship. Given the present sample reported more certainty than uncertainty across each individual category and self/partner certainty/uncertainty combination referenced in RQ4 above, it is not surprising that this was related to the choice in initiation strategies. The most noticeable connection is between self-certainty and the direct question strategy; all seven initiators who directly asked their partners about the relationship status reported being certain of their own feelings about the relationship. Five also reported feeling certain about their partner's feelings. While initiators might directly ask to advance the relationship if they aren't certain of their partner's feelings, they are more likely to ask a more direct and face-threatening question when certain of their partner's feelings and their own feelings. Each of the four certainty/uncertainty responses were nearly equal in occurrence in both the related question and statement about the relationship initiation strategies. This suggests certainty is a bigger factor in the direct question initiation strategy, possibly because it is the most threatening to the initiator.

In examining the relationship between initiator goals and initiation strategies, all three themes in initiator goals (title, title for others, and clarification) were similarly related to all three initiation strategies with the exception of one. The initiators who used a related question to prompt the DTR were motivated to have relationship titles for themselves or others, but none had a goal of clarification. Possibly for those needing

clarification, indirectly initiating the DTR has the potential to be misunderstood which would take them further from their the goal. Similarly, connecting initiation strategies to events that prompted the DTR, the absence of co-occurrences was again noteworthy. The direct question strategy was related to all four event themes of other people prompting, geographic change, relationship event and individual reason. Initiators who used the related question strategy, however, only reported being prompted by other people or a relationship event. Neither geographic changes nor individual reasons were associated with the related question strategy. Possibly the time-sensitivity of a geographic change or the internal motivation of an individual reason may render the related question strategy counterproductive. Lastly, none of the initiators who used a statement to initiate the DTR reported a geographic change as prompting the DTR. Geographic changes, therefore, may be associated with a more direct question strategy because they directly request an understanding of status due to an obvious increase or decrease in the extent to which partners' daily lives include each other.

DTR Content (RQ1)

RQ1 addressed the characteristics of DTR conversations. Participants were first asked a general question at the beginning of the interview, "Thinking back, can you share how you and your partner communicated the status/nature of your relationship?" Later, they were asked, "It can be tough to remember exact wording, but can you replay the conversation for me? How did the subject of your relationship come up? What was discussed?" This resulted in more detailed responses and gave an insight into the nuances

of the DTR. Emergent themes were similar to initiation strategies in that the DTR was either a one-sided question, a one-sided statement, or a two-sided conversation. Each is detailed in the following paragraphs.

One-Sided Question. This was the most common theme with 23 participants reporting they defined their relationship when either they or their partner asked a question and the other responded. A distinction that unexpectedly emerged within this theme was the notion of the DTR as an informal passing question or a more formal, grand gesture. Ben's experience exemplifies the informal type of question, "Out of nowhere she's just like, 'Oh, we're exclusive right?' I kind of had to respond, I was on the spot…I said 'Yes'… and she said, 'Okay, good,' and then we kept watching the movie." His partner unexpectedly asked a DTR question, he responded, and they moved on. The more formal questions ranged from fairly simple to elaborate, though each had an element of planning. Priscilla shared:

> We were at the state fair…he said, he's like we have to save enough tickets to go on the Ferris wheel. And I'm like, I think, you know, it might happen. And we get put with this random couple and he's like "Oh no." And so we got to the top and he kind of just leans to my ear and he's like, "So, well I was hoping we would be alone, but I was gonna ask you to be my girlfriend." So I was like, "Yes."

In Hillary's experience, her partner had been out of town and was set to return:

> We both had this mutual understanding that we would eventually be in a relationship, it was just going to be more so on her timeline…So I walk into the

> apartment and she has the whole setup of our first date recreated. And so, she had these balloons that said, "G-F" with a question mark and all my favorite foods and stuff. And she was just like, "Yeah, do you want to be my girlfriend?" and I said, "Yes," and then that was kind of just, it was settled after that.

Rather than recreating a memorable relationship event, Hannah's partner planned a new experience for the DTR by taking her to a vineyard:

> We already knew why we were going there…because I was like "Well, you have to officially ask me," and then so a week later…He said a bunch of nice things about my qualities or whatever that he liked first, and then he said, "and then therefore, I think you make me a better person," and that kind of thing. Which I'm like cute, but for me this is awkward and just being complemented and I have to sit here like, "Mm hmm."… He asked me to be his girlfriend and I was like, "Yes, that would be nice."… That was it for the conversation, and then I was like, "Anyway, the view is nice."

Whether formal or informal, these 23 DTR conversations were characterized by one partner asking the other to be their girlfriend. The three more grand gestures referenced here all reported acting like a couple as a relationship indicator prior the DTR and all had a non-initiator goal of wanting official titles. It was still, however, not apparent through the thematic analysis or co-occurrence analysis what differentiated the grand gesture DTRs.

One-Sided Statement. Six participants reported the DTR consisted of a statement made by one partner that signaled their feelings about, or the status of, the relationship. In Emma's case, her partner was leaving for a trip with a cross-sex friend and told her "I just want to let you know it's completely platonic between her and I. Like I'm exclusively seeing you, you don't have anything to worry about." In Chloe's experience, she made a statement about the status of the relationship to her partner:

> After, I don't know, maybe a week, I was like, I like spending time with this guy. It just feels right. Then I said, "Hey, I think we're going to be a thing now. You're my boyfriend. If you don't like it, just let me know."…That was pretty much it. It was just straightforward, he, you know he didn't ask about anything. He was like, "Okay, sounds good."

As shown some statements were more bold than others, but all differed from the previous theme in that they did not ask the partner to define the relationship but instead expressed one partner's feelings about exclusivity.

Two-Sided Conversation. Eleven participants described a DTR experience in which they discussed the relationship with their partner that resulted in defining the relationship. In Michelle's case, her partner pulled her aside while they were out with friends and initiated a conversation about the relationship:

> We were just talking about how much fun we were having at the place and how much we liked going there, and then he just kind of awkwardly mentioned, "Oh well, you know I'd like to talk about, you know, about kind of our relationship

> status." And you know he's like "Have you been seeing anyone else?'… He told me, "I really haven't been seeing anyone and I really want to try and pursue something with you, and how do you feel about that?" I was just like, oh yeah, yeah sure let's talk…yeah, how what our communication style was going to be, whether texts, phone calls. You know what we were going to do when finals were going to hit and then also kind of like, oh yeah, are we gonna go see each other over the break, the winter break, things like that.

In Jane's case, she first gave a general description of the conversation, "We had a conversation about the relationship and how it could be better. We went back and forth about what the other wants then decided to make it official." Later in the interview, she provided more details:

> I just basically said we need to talk about our relationship. Like what we want, like what do you want. And it took awhile, because it was like really back and forth. We would just sit there and I would be like, "What do you want?" Not like that, but something like that, and then he'd be like, "Mmm well, what do you want?" So it was really back and forth…until both of us got frustrated and we're like, "Okay well this is what I want," and we would say, "I think we should date" or, "Maybe we should make it more or something."

This theme was differentiated by the two-sided nature of the DTR and the extended time spent discussing the relationship.

RQ1 Summary and Thematic Co-Occurrences. Because this research question addressed general characteristics of the DTR, it did not differentiate between participants as initiators and non-initiators. Three types of DTR interactions emerged from the data. Out of the 40 participants, a majority (56%) reported DTRs in which one partner asked the other to be their girlfriend. (No participants reported on a scenario in which someone asked a male to be their boyfriend). The next largest category was the two-sided DTR conversation (28%) in which participants discussed the relationship together. The smallest category (16%) was the one-sided statement DTR in which one partner made a statement about the relationship status.

The connections between the nature of the DTR and both relationship indicators prior to the DTR and uncertainty are noteworthy. First, the pre-DTR indicator of relationship status co-occurring most with the 23 one-sided question DTRs was acting like a couple (66%). Given that the one-sided question was the most direct and often the most concise DTR, partners who already felt like a couple just needed a quick question to make the relationship official. This is echoed in the connection to certainty. Sixty-one percent of the one-sided question DTRs were characterized by unilateral self and partner certainty; additionally, 78% reported feeling certain of their own feelings about the relationship and 74% reported feeling certain about the partner's feelings. Such high percentages of certainty across all direct question DTRs reinforces the notion that individuals often seem to only ask a question about the relationship when they are certain of the answer. Both the one-sided statement and two-sided conversation DTRs had nearly

equal amounts of certainty and uncertainty, and related to all four pre-DTR event types and with two exceptions. None of the participants who reported one-sided statement DTR conversations reported family involvement as a pre-DTR relationship indicator. Those who had a two-sided DTR conversations reported all pre-DTR relationship indicators except for the personal and partner feelings theme. Possibly a longer DTR discussion provided an opportunity to express feelings not previously shared. No further insights are offered in regards to uncertainty as all four uncertainty themes were nearly equal in their connection to both one-sided statement and two-sided conversation DTRs.

Non-Initiator Responses (RQ5)

RQ5 addressed how individuals respond to the DTR. Participants were asked, "How did you feel when your partner brought up the topic of your relationship? What was your response? Why do you think you responded the way you did?" Participants who were non-initiators (n = 23) provided their responses to their partners initiating the DTR. Responses were sorted into positive, neutral, or negative categories.

Positive. A majority of non-initiators (n = 18; 78%) reported responding positively to their partners when they initiated the DTR. Within this category, 15 simply replied, "yes" to their partners. Interestingly, a positive response did not necessarily mean the DTR resulted in official titles. As in Nicole's case, she responded positively because her partner made it clear he was not pressuring her to make the relationship official and public, but wanted to discuss the relationship:

> Well, I think that if he started with, "Okay, yes, let's tell everyone everything" I would have said like, "Okay well let's put a little bit of brakes on this, it's still really new, we're still figuring out a lot." Granted, I think we were at a different point in our relationship then, so it was a lot, not a secret, but it was a lot more something I wasn't really ready to share…I think it's good that we both had the same reservations, we were both able to figure out how we're going to get to the next part of that.

In this theme, a positive response meant aligning with the partner in a shared understanding of the relationship status.

Neutral. While there was only one participant in the current study who had what can be considered a neutral response, it proves useful for future studies to acknowledge participants might respond to a DTR in a way that is neither positive nor negative. In Emma's case, she did not feel the need to elaborate on her response at the time:

> I just said, "Okay, thanks for letting me know." Um, I probably could have been like, "Okay, thanks for letting me know, and also I'm only seeing you," but prior to that conversation when he told me that, "Oh, you can hookup with your ex-girlfriend," I had told him, "No, I don't want to do that. You're the only person I want to see in that way." I felt like it was me kind of being like, "No, I only want to see you."

This theme, while only reported by one participant, notes an alternative that is neither positive or negative; a neutral response was a way to acknowledge what was said but not offer one's own view of the relationship or not continue the conversation.

Negative. Four participants responded in a way that was negative, which may or may not have been discernible to the partner. In Cecile's experience, she explained how she internally panicked when her partner first asked her and took time to sort through her feelings:

> And I was like, "Okay, let me think about it," and then we went to dinner…So we were in the parking garage and I just basically I looked at him, I was like, "Hey, ask me again. Like to be your girlfriend, ask me again,"…so he did and so I said "Yes."

In Tara's case, her frustration at her partner wanting to be fully committed was converted into a feeling of relief after the conversation:

> He brought it up in the sense of okay, like we're doing it for real or not at all. And then I was a little frustrated because I was like oh, not at all? That's annoying that there's an ultimatum with it. Which is selfish of me now looking back, but I was, so it didn't get like we were arguing, but we weren't necessarily on the same page at first. Because I was like that's stupid, if we can't be 100% invested, why can't you be like 50%, which was, I was just being immature.

From Tara's perspective, her partner was pressuring her to be fully committed to the relationship for the long-term. At first it seems she felt partial commitment was

acceptable, blamed herself for having an immature view of relationships, and for better or worse adjusted to match her partner's perspective. She reported feeling more at ease after the DTR discussion and at the time of the interview reported she was happy with the current, more serious status of the relationship.

In another example, Danielle's initial response of anger sparked a one-hour discussion with her partner that ultimately led to the decision to be officially in a relationship:

> I was like, "Okay, well then, I guess I'm just not that important to you because you should just want me in your life, no matter how it is." So I was a little aggressive about it probably…and then I listened to his points about why he thought that was a good idea, and I was like, "Okay, I can see that you're right," and then I didn't really have any reason to not want to be in a relationship.

In Danielle's case, the DTR resembled a negotiation or debate in which she and her partner discussed being in a relationship and she ended up deciding to make the relationship official.

RQ5 Summary and Co-Occurrence of Themes. Non-initiators had varying responses to their partners initiating the DTR, but they can be sorted into three themes of positive, neutral, and negative responses. Positive responses tended to be shorter, a majority were one word "yes" responses, and negative responses tended to be longer and lead into a discussion about the relationship. Examining the relationship between certainty and non-initiator goals, generally all participants reported more certainty than uncertainty across each category and combination referenced in RQ4. As was the case for

initiation strategies, this certainty was related to non-initiator responses. Specifically, positive responses coincided with both self and partner certainty and uncertainty, but certainty was slightly higher across both. Prior to the DTR 61% of those who responded positively were certain of their own feelings and 56% were certain of their partner's feelings. While not overwhelming, these findings subtly suggest that certainty is associated with a more favorable non-initiator response to the DTR. If an individual is certain of their own and their partner's feelings, it can be reasoned they would be less inclined to respond negatively to a conversation about the relationship.

Just over half of the non-initiators (56%) who responded positively to their partners initiating the DTR reported the goal of wanting official relationship titles. If an individual wants the title, they might expect the DTR and thus respond positively when it happens. Only 28% wanted clarification and 17% wanted to initially avoid the DTR. This shows that a neutral goal of clarification or negative framed goal of avoidance can still result in a positive response. Those wanting clarification might be relieved and those who want to avoid may be convinced otherwise through the course of the DTR. The neutral response was associated with the non-initiator goal of clarification, which explains why this participant neither confirmed nor rejected their romantic partner. Rather than the clarification goal link to a positive response above, the participant's partner not labeling the relationship during the DTR kept her from having a more positive response. Lastly, those participants with a negative response primarily had a goal of initial avoidance with the exception of one who wanted clarification. None of the participants who responded

negatively to the DTR had a goal of official relationship titles, which might explain the negative response to a conversation aimed at labeling the relationship. This did not, however, prevent some from walking away from the DTR with official titles.

Two additional connections between non-initiator response and pre-DTR relationship events are noteworthy. The DTR that resulted in a neutral response from the non-initiator was prompted by a geographic change. Connecting this to the previous note that this participant had a goal of clarification alludes to a formula of sorts: in response to an external logistic event like increasing geographic distance, one or both partners might feel the need to clarify the exclusivity of the relationship. From the non-initiator perspective, it might be unclear if the initiator is being practical or seizing the opportunity to make the relationship official resulting in a neutral response. Second, the relationship between negative responses and internal relationship events prompting the DTR was non-existent. Because relationship events are the most connected to both partners, non-initiators might be most surprised by the DTR that seems unprompted within the relationship, less inclined to view the desire to advance the relationship as mutual, and thus respond negatively.

AFTER THE DTR

Evaluations of the DTR as Successful or Unsuccessful (RQ8)

RQ8 explored participant perceptions of what makes a DTR successful or unsuccessful. Participants were asked “How did you feel right after the conversation?” and “At the point of transitioning away from the topic/ending the conversation, to what

degree did you feel the DTR was a success? What made it more or less successful?" Participant responses resulted in 57 thematic units that were coded into four themes. A majority of participants reported successful DTR experiences, only four gave reasons the DTR was unsuccessful. Both successful and unsuccessful responses are grouped together within the same themes.

Perceptions of Communication. This category includes 17 responses that referenced communication during the DTR itself. Participants referenced both their perceptions of how they were able to communicate and how they were received. Whitney described the former, "I thought it was straight to the point and clear, so I thought, I would say it was successful, yeah." Tara described the latter, "I felt like anything I had to say was heard and acknowledged, which I think is important." Rachel shared how the fact that the partner initiated the conversation and both individuals were actively involved signaled success:

> I wasn't pulling teeth to have a conversation with him, and for me that's like super important, just because, you know if I'm the only one starting a conversation and initiating it, like do you even want to know me? You know what I mean? It should go both ways.

While the relationship outcome of all the DTRs in this study is positive (i.e., all participants were currently still in the relationship), these 17 participants specifically noted the actual communication during the DTR as reasoning for why the DTR was successful.

Agreement. Eighteen participants referenced their partner's response or their mutual agreement as a reason why the DTR was a success. Six participants used the phrase "on the same page" and four others similarly described having the same feelings or coming to a shared decision. Seven participants simply noted they got the answer they wanted which was, "Yes." Ian went into slightly more detail, "Then she said yes, and I was just really happy and I was like, okay sweet, that's good." In Hannah's case, she responded yes to her partner's request for her to be his girlfriend, but in hindsight wondered if they were actually in agreement about the relationship. Hannah explained how the lack of spontaneity called her partner's actual feelings into question and potentially made the DTR less successful:

> What could have made it more successful maybe was if I stopped dropping hints. So, then it would be like, I don't know, I was just always dropping hints, so then I don't know if he actually felt that way or if he was just taking my hints and being like, okay, this is what she wants.

Relationship Outcome. This theme, comprised of fifteen responses total, was different from the previous in that participants referenced something about the relationship that happened or was realized as a result of the DTR was what made it successful. In Florence's case, the DTR was successful because she and her partner had sex for the first time afterward, "I guess when we sealed the deal…That was very intimate and I don't just go to bed with anybody, so I just, I felt real comfortable with him." For Jake, the DTR made him feel reassured in the relationship, "And so just it

happening officially just made everything just feel really just like steady and secure." In Emma's case, even though she and her partner gained clarity on the exclusivity of their relationship, the lack of official boyfriend and girlfriend titles made it less successful:

> I still feel like it's not as defined as I would like it to be. I feel pretty confident that he's just seeing me, and I think he feels confident that I'm just seeing him, but the fact that he doesn't call me his girlfriend or hasn't asked me officially to be his girlfriend.

Lastly, two participants said the DTR was successful because it signaled both partners were taking the relationship seriously. This can be seen in Gretchen's response, "So I felt like he was a little nervous about talking about that too, so it made me think, kind of, okay I'm not the only one who takes the relationship pretty seriously." While the responses varied, this theme captures indicators of relationship status and assurance, or lack of assurance, in the relationship as indicating DTR success.

Personal Feelings. Seven participants based the success of the DTR on their personal feelings during or after the DTR. More positive feelings like happiness and excitement were linked with success. This was true for Emily:

> I think just seeing his face afterwards and seeing that he was happy with the conversation, he's happy with what was about to happen in my response, and I was happy with the way he was happy in my response, and I was just excited to see where this would go.

A lack of positive feelings signaled an unsuccessful DTR like in Vivian's, "I don't know, it wasn't as relieving as I thought it would be in the moment, because I think after he left, I started rethinking, and I was like, oh wait, did you want that?" Different from relationship outcomes, this theme specifically focused on individual feelings of happiness and excitement as markers of DTR success.

RQ8 Summary and Theme Co-Occurrence. Participants reported that they knew the DTR was successful or unsuccessful based on perceptions of communication, agreement, relationship outcome, and personal feelings. The two categories of perceptions of communication and agreement had an interesting relationship to uncertainty. Success based on the perception of communication was connected to self and partner certainty and uncertainty, however a majority (72%) reported feeling certain of their own feelings. This makes sense in that part of the perceptions of communication theme was feeling able to express one's own feelings, which is most possible when an individual knows how they feel. Partner certainty and uncertainty were much closer at 44% and 56% respectively; additionally, five participants in the perceptions of communication theme reported unilateral self and partner certainty, and none reported unilateral uncertainty. Taken together, it seems being able to express one's own feelings of certainty might be one of the greatest predictors of successful communication during the DTR.

Co-occurrence analysis also showed a noteworthy relationship, or lack of relationship, between the type of DTR and perceived DTR success based on perceptions

of communication and agreement. Neither success theme was present in one-sided statement DTRs which provides further insight into perceptions of communication and agreement as indicators of DTR success. Both themes might share an underlying assumption that success is based on *both* partners having the opportunity to express their feelings or agree. We cannot know whether participants consciously perceived the communication as unsuccessful or felt they did not have the opportunity or necessity to express mutual agreement. It is possible, however, that the one-sided statement DTR might be seen as less communicatively successful while still resulting in relationship development outcomes and feelings of excitement.

Change After the DTR (RQ9)

RQ9 addressed what, if any, changes result from the DTR. Participants were asked, "What happened in your relationship as a result of this DTR conversation? Any changes to your relationship in the short-term? Changes in the long-term?" All but one participant reported at least one change that resulted from the DTR. Responses from 39 participants resulted in 52 thematic units that formed five emergent themes detailed below.

Change in Title. Ten participants referenced official relationship titles of boyfriend or girlfriend resulted from the DTR. Two participants included other changes in addition to official titles, but eight said the only thing that changed was labeling the relationship and making it official. For example, non-initiator Rachel said, "I think the only big thing is now in front of others, in front of friends, it's like okay we're dating

now." Similarly, initiator Jake described it as, "We spent all of our time together and we did the same things that we do now before we had the labels, so I feel like nothing really changed except the label."

Change in Relationship Dynamics. The largest theme consisted of 25 responses that referenced some sort of shift in the nature of the relationship. This could be something more concrete like getting more serious or becoming exclusive. This was true for initiator Felicia's relationship:

> For me, I just told everyone else that I was, I think was seeing two other people, or I had been going on dates with two other people, and I told them, "Hey, I have a boyfriend now, you know we could just be friends, that's kind of it."

Similarly, some reported feeling more solidified or certain as a couple, like in non-initiator Whitney's case, "Maybe, I guess, in the long-term, I think it was just a lot more clear what intentions were on both sides." For Henry, this certainty resulted in a lack of tension that had existed prior to him initiating the DTR:

> Then there was just like a big moment of like release of tension…had the freedom to express affection and be truly intentional…like okay, we have this thing now, so we can be free to support each other and to treat each other like two people that are looking into marriage together probably at some point.

Others, like non-initiator Beth, referenced this shift as it applied to their view of their relationship as being more serious than it was prior to the DTR:

> It helps me to just realize it was more serious…not necessarily think that this is just someone fun to hang out with, but more like do I see this as a partner or someone I want to invest my time in?

Change in Time Spent Together. Eight participants referenced a change in how they spent time with their partners as a result of the DTR. A majority referenced feeling more comfortable or free to see each other like in non-initiator Sophie's response, "Now it's like okay, I can kind of call you whenever or text you whenever. I can see you more often." David reported making sacrifices almost immediately to spend time with his partner, "Yes, we spend more time together, because right after the day I told her about it, like I asked her to be my girlfriend, I asked for a day off of my work." Interestingly, Vivian referenced the inverse in that she felt secure to be apart after she initiated the DTR, "That was when I really realized that you don't have to be together all the time and you'll be fine, and that's, we are finding the balance in like friendships and keeping those separate."

Change in Communication Depth. Five responses referenced being able to communicate more openly in the relationship. In non-initiator Emily's case, she and her partner were able to communicate their feelings:

> Yeah, we just kind of talked out some things that we both want from this relationship and some things that are a must in this relationship, some things that are important to both of us in how we can make this work…like simply being truthful how we feel towards each other.

Gabby was similar in her description of feeling free to share negative feelings once her boyfriend asked her to officially be his girlfriend:

> Like, once I had the girlfriend title, then it's like okay, I could be crazy if I need to. Sometimes if I want to cry or something like that, or if I really have an issue with something. I remember before we were official, he would show up about five to ten minutes late to every single date to pick me up. And I got super upset about it. And after it happened about three, four times, I was like, okay, you know how long it takes to get to my house. So you are purposely making a decision every time. And I think it's disrespectful to me and my time. And if this happens again, I'm not going to go out with you anymore. And that was a conversation that I was kind of nervous having. It sounds a little demanding, like blah, blah. But I also would need to respect myself. So that's where boundaries were confusing. So I was like, okay, we're exclusive. We're basically dating but not dating yet. So the exclusive did not have the same label on it as the girlfriend did, for sure. Yeah. Not the same comfortability.

Change in Network Involvement. The final four responses referenced being more involved with each other's friends and family. Brittany described a change in friend involvement after she initiated the DTR, "We made plans to meet each other's friends and do all these things together, so I think that opened up a lot more experiences for us." Lexi describes how she spent an extended period of time with her partner's mom after her boyfriend made it official:

> And then his mom and I drove to [the city] to see him for his birthday and we just all stayed in [the city]. His mom and I obviously know each other because I had been around them for so long, but we'd never spent three hours together both ways. You know that was a long time for just me and his mom to talk.

RQ8 Summary and Theme Co-Occurrence. With the exception of one participant, all others reported at least one change in the relationship within the five themes of title, relationship dynamics, time spent together, network involvement, and communication depth. Additionally, a few noteworthy connections emerged in the thematic co-occurrence analysis. Approximately half of the participants in each change category reported similar amounts of unilateral certainty; 60% of title, 52% of relationship dynamics, 44% of time and 40% network involvement were connected to self and partner certainty. The change in communication depth theme was the only exception in that all five were related to unilateral certainty. Those who noted an increase in how openly they could communicate with their partners were certain of their own feelings and their partner's feelings prior to the DTR. No other patterns among themes could shed light on this finding, but possibly participants who were certain of their relationships felt more comfortable talking about the relationship after the DTR.

The connection to initiator and non-initiator goals showed 30% of non-initiators and 30% of initiators who reported a change in title also stated the title was their goal going into the DTR. A slightly smaller amount of initiators and non-initiators who reported a change in relationship dynamics (16% of non-initiators and 20% of initiators)

also reported official relationship titles as their DTR goal. Within the large category of post-DTR changes, only 3 participants reported both a change in title and a change in relationship dynamics. These findings demonstrate a change in title does not mean a change in the dynamics of the relationship, and a change in title can result without it being the initial goal. On the other hand, no one who reported changes in network involvement had a goal of wanting titles. There was also a one-directional unilateral co-occurrence between the themes of changes in network involvement and initiator/non-initiator goals of clarification; all who reported changes in network involvement after the DTR had a goal of clarification, but not all who reported clarification goals reported changes in network involvement. These findings point to a connection between post-DTR changes and pre-DTR goals. Specifically, titles do not necessarily result in any change in the relationship, but they might result in a change to the relationship with others in the social network.

Lastly, an interesting connection emerged between the content of the DTR and changes reported after the DTR. Of the five DTRs that resulted in changes in communication depth, none were two-sided conversations. This implies that a longer DTR conversation that includes both partners is not related to noticeably deeper communication in the relationship after the DTR ends. Conversely, all except one of the 11 participants who had a two-sided DTR experience also noted a change in relationship dynamics. While the two-sided DTR might not lead to more open communication in the

post-DTR relationship, it does seem to foster more communication in the moment and affect the relationship more than just giving it an official title.

In summary, a thematic analysis and thematic co-occurrence analysis were well suited to allow participant responses to form an initial picture of the DTR process. This is the first study that has examined participant accounts of the DTR from pre-DTR relationship to immediate outcomes. The featured participant quotes throughout this chapter were selected for their rich detail and strength in illustrating the corresponding theme. Looking ahead, emergent themes and potential connections between them as referenced here can be tested in future studies. Themes organized by before, during, and after the DTR, along with potential relationships between themes, are visually depicted in a preliminary DTR process model (See Appendix E) and further discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study aimed to understand the define-the-relationship talk (DTR), specifically what it is and the details of how it occurs. Nine research questions exploring before, during, and after the DTR were addressed through 40 individual interviews. All participants were currently in the romantic relationship they were reporting on, so it can be assumed these DTR conversations successfully resulted in continuing the relationship. This study provides a foundation for future research on the role of communication in romantic relationship development. Theoretically, findings hint at an emergent model of the DTR process that can be tested in future studies to possibly predict what makes a DTR successful and understand the implications for the relationship. Methodologically, participant responses and emergent themes lay the groundwork for a multidimensional romantic relationship definition scale. Findings and implications from the current study are explained in the following sections. First, participant definitions and experiences shed light on the DTR as a unique construct in interpersonal communication. Next, a detailed explanation of what is occurring before, during, and after the DTR is given using data from the current study and previous research. Lastly, future directions are proposed and strengths and limitations are acknowledged.

DEFINING THE DTR

Previous research has used several different terms in referencing the concept of the DTR such as *relationship focused disclosure* (Tan et al., 2012) and *date request messages* (Knobloch, 2006). In the current study, participants were asked whether the

DTR was a term they were familiar with and if not, what they would call these conversations. Interestingly, participant responses mirrored trends in existing research in that there was not just one term that was known to all participants. In total, 14 participants were familiar with the term "DTR" and one was not familiar with the acronym but knew of the concept of the define-the-relationship talk. Of the remaining participants who were unfamiliar, six provided different terms they would use: "the conversation," two said, "the what are we conversation," "the relationship talk," "the where is this going talk," and "the talk." The only term referenced in previous literature was *the talk* (Nelms et al., 2012), though the general term *relationship talk* (Acitelli, 1988) was very similar. Based on this information, I feel confident in moving forward with the term DTR as the unifying construct for all the various terms in the literature.

While there was not a complete consensus on terminology, participants agreed on their understanding of what happens in a DTR conversation. For example, participants generally agreed there was one conversation that makes a relationship "official," but there might be multiple conversations prior that signal romantic interest and the mutual commitment to exclusivity. Participants' DTR accounts all described defining the relationship in a way that made the relationship more exclusive or official than it had been prior to the conversation. Participant reports of the length of DTR conversations varied widely but demonstrated that the DTR might be completed in a quick exchange, or it might be a longer discussion of the relationship lasting several hours. Possibly the

number of conversations about the relationship partners have had previously might influence how much they need to discuss in a given DTR.

Whether official relationship titles or an understanding of exclusivity result from the DTR, the DTR makes an impression on those involved. Every participant was clearly able to identify a single conversation, rather than a relationship event, that defined the current status of their relationship beyond assumptions or implicit status.

One of the goals of the current project was to provide a definition of the DTR to be used in future studies. While no one format or outcome of the DTR was the exact same for all participants, it was clear that each participant knew the status of the relationship based on these conversations. Whether a question or conversation, both romantic partners were involved in shaping the relationship, even if just through agreement with the partner. It was also clear that, even if it was just a label or title, the DTR resulted in some sort of relational shift or milestone. In those cases where partners decided not to label the relationship, it still provided a clarity and reassurance that they both understood the status of the relationship. With all of this in mind, the following definition of the DTR is proposed based on the data in the current study: *An interaction in which both [potential] romantic partners come to an agreement on the status of the relationship between them in a way not previously clarified.*

UNDERSTANDING THE DTR PROCESS

The approach used in the current study made it possible to understand the DTR through participants' perceptions and experiences. Participants reported they either

initiated the DTR (43%) or their partners initiated the DTR (57%). This contradicts recent findings that found a majority of participants (62%) reported mutually initiating the DTR, 26% of participants initiated and 13% were partner initiated (Knopp et al., 2020). In the current study, all participants responded that either themselves or their partners brought up the topic of the relationship. After analyzing the details of these 40 real life DTR experiences, I identified themes and co-occurrences of themes across participant accounts. Based on this data and analysis, a preliminary model emerged that visually demonstrates the DTR process (see Appendix E). Arrows are included to provide examples of co-occurrences between the themes, but all notable co-occurrences are explained in both the findings and discussion. Together this offers a comprehensive understanding of what is occurring before, during, and after the DTR. Future research can then test relationships among variables of interest to further refine a model. Factors of interest in the DTR process identified in the data and existing research, and potential future research directions are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Before the DTR

Relationships can look any number of different ways prior to a DTR. As such, individuals may experience uncertainty about the relationship and the topic of the relationship may seem uncomfortable to discuss. It's logical then that goals for a DTR interaction may depend on things like uncertainty and how threatening the topic seems (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004; Knobloch & Theiss, 201). Additionally, individuals may have expectations for what a DTR should look like and how necessary it

is in the development of the relationship. This was certainly true for the participants in the current study.

Some participants met in-person for the first time on their first date, others had an existing relationship of some kind with their romantic partner prior to beginning a romantic relationship. While these relationship details can vary, there were noticeable similarities in the indicators of relationship status (RQ6) participants had prior to the DTR. Five themes emerged from the data; *communication, acting like a couple, time together, personal and partner feelings,* and *family involvement*. Family involvement, specifically meeting parents, and personal and partner feelings were the least occurring in the data. It is possible some participants had met parents but did not consider it an indication that the relationship was progressing. It is also possible that parents are less involved as children develop romantic relationships into adulthood (Golish, 2000). Likewise, participants might not have considered personal feelings a sign of relationship status, or they may not have yet been identified (self) or communicated (partner) prior to the DTR. The most referenced indicators were the nature of the communication between the partners, acting like a couple publicly or privately, and the amount of time spent together. These might thus be the strongest predictors of the DTR being initiated. Previous research on Knapp's relational stage model has positioned relationship talk within the integrating and bonding stages (Avtgis et al., 1998). Avtgis et al. specifically referenced planning for the future as a distinguishing factor in these most intense stages of relationship development. Findings from the current study provide additional insights

by demonstrating that the DTR does not function in a linear progression within a larger model of relationship development. Rather, relationship indicators such as increasingly open communication, spending more time together, and acting like a romantic couple in private and when around other network members can signal a relationship is in the making. Still, in each participant's relationship, there came a point, or more than one point, when discussing the relationship was necessary for one or both partners to move forward.

Relationship length might also be a subconscious indicator of relationship status. The median relationship length prior to the DTR was four weeks. Every relationship is different, but there might be an anticipated relationship timeline. During most interviews participants alluded to a scripted timeline or series of conversations that progressed the relationship. First, was a conversation in which they initially signaled romantic interest, and for some this meant explicitly expressing an interest in dating. Dating, however, was not always synonymous with exclusivity, which was often another conversation. Possibly most interesting was the distinction between being *exclusive* and being *official*; couples could be exclusive but not official. Nearly every participant, unless they had not reached this point in the relationship at the time of the interview, reported the DTR was when they moved to using official titles of boyfriend or girlfriend. This was almost universally seen as the benchmark DTR after which participants could fully settle into the relationship (see more on post-DTR changes below). Eighty percent of participants reported some version of a progression from expressing interest, to clarifying exclusivity,

to making the relationship official. Future research might use Knapp's (1978) relationship stage model as a framework to explore this relationship talk timeline. Additionally, 93% of participants in the current study reported at least one indicator of their relationship status prior to the official DTR. Future research might examine how indicators of relationship status (e.g., spending time together, open communication) are related to conversations in this relationship talk timeline. Possibly, certain relationship indicators coincide with the outcome of the conversation at each stage of development (e.g., romantic interest, exclusivity, and official).

While participants had plenty of indicators of relationship status prior to the DTR (RQ6), not all participants had complete certainty in their own or their partner's feelings about each other and the relationship (RQ4). Although participants echoed each other in identifying the five pre-DTR relationship indicators, this does not imply romantic partners echo each other in their perceptions of relationship status. What might be a clear indication of relationship status for one partner might lead to confusion about the status of the relationship for the other partner. Previous research points out the significant role uncertainty plays in relationship development (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011), but what about the role indicators of relationship development play in uncertainty? In the current study, acting like a couple had the highest reported self-certainty of any of the five pre-DTR relationship indicators; further, all participants who reported acting like a couple in public reported self-certainty. Additionally, all participants who reported family (i.e., parent) involvement as a pre-DTR relationship indicator also reported partner-certainty. Taken

together, these findings suggest a connection between relationship indicators and uncertainty. Individuals might feel especially certain of their own feelings the more they act like a couple with their partners. Also, being introduced to a partner's parents might be a major indicator of the partner's feelings that leads to partner-certainty (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). Future research might look to the theory of motivated information management (TMIM; Afifi & Weiner, 2004), and specifically individual awareness of uncertainty discrepancy, as a potential explanation for the relationship between certainty and the DTR. Additionally, future work should examine the proposed relationship between the five indicator-types of relationship status and relational and partner uncertainty.

Whether or not the DTR was seen as an uncomfortable or threatening topic was the focus of RQ3. As indicators of the relationship might inform uncertainty about the partner and relationship, uncertainty might influence whether the topic of the relationship is seen as comfortable or not. Four distinct factors in [dis]comfort with the DTR emerged from the data, the most common being the *anticipated outcome of the interaction*. This was expected as the DTR often requires a response from one partner to the other's question or statement about the relationship. Even some participants who reported complete certainty in their own and their partner's feelings about the relationship still experienced a nervous response at the time of the DTR (e.g., what if the partner rejected them?). Previous research has examined how the fear of rejection, or rejection sensitivity, can influence the interaction (Romero-Canyas et al., 2010). Future research might explore

how the fear of rejection factors into perceptions of the DTR. With that said, several participants referenced certainty as being the reason they were comfortable talking about the relationship. Either they were certain about the relationship so they were certain about the outcome of any relationship conversation, or they knew the conversation would result in certainty. This is in line with previous research on the other side of this coin regarding relationship threat and the relationship benefit of avoided topics (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004). So, do individuals engage in a DTR to confirm what they already know, or to clarify confusion about the relationship? The answer is yes. The current study found both to be true; initiators and non-initiators reported high self and partner certainty and similar, lower amounts and patterns of self and partner uncertainty. Future research should explore the ramifications this has as the relationship progresses in terms of relational satisfaction and security and how these might influence DTR initiation strategies and responses.

The remaining three themes in whether the DTR is uncomfortable or comfortable all center on communication variables. The next most recurring in the current data was the *relationship*, how open or closed the communication has been, prior to the DTR. Participants were comfortable discussing the relationship because they were generally comfortable discussing things with their partners. Interestingly, seven of the nine participants who referenced communication in the relationship as making the DTR a comfortable topic also reported communication in the relationship as a pre-DTR indicator of relationship status. Given that we know a positive communication climate promotes

relationship development (Burleson & Denton, 1992), it follows that participants who feel they can talk to their partners are more comfortable with the DTR. The similar but related theme of *topic frequency* had a somewhat less intuitive finding. Participants who talked about the relationship often said the DTR was a comfortable topic. The participants who said they hardly ever talked about the relationship, however, also said they were comfortable with the DTR. If the DTR is a comfortable topic for both instances, what does this mean? In an experimental study on topic avoidance and motivations, Palomares and Derman (2019) found avoiding relationship issues for to protect the relationship resulted in higher satisfaction and lower hurt than if avoidance was perceived to be out of self-protection. Possibly participants felt the avoidance was helping the relationship and in turn, felt more comfortable. Lastly, one's own *communication efficacy* when it comes to their ability to engage in a DTR conversation was a factor in whether or not it was an uncomfortable topic. Seeing oneself as confrontational equaled comfort with the DTR, while nonconfrontational or feeling ill-equipped to have the conversation equaled discomfort. Previous research found communication efficacy is positively associated with frequency and comfort of discussing religion in romantic relationships (McCurry et al., 2012). Future research might again look to TMIM (Afifi & Weiner, 2004) to understand how uncertainty, efficacy, and anticipated outcomes relate to engaging in the DTR.

While the previous three factors of 1) indicators of relationship status prior to the DTR, 2) uncertainty, and 3) discomfort with the DTR center on individual and relational

factors that don't have a specific time frame, the remaining three pre-DTR factors of 4) events prompting the conversation (RQ7), 5) initiator goals (RQ2), and 6) non-initiator goals (RQ2) reference the situation surrounding this particular DTR. Exactly half of all participants referenced an external event as the impetus for the DTR. Of these, twelve reported *other people* prompted the DTR. This consisted of either direct prompting from others to DTR, or the DTR preceded or followed meeting family members for the first time. This makes sense given previous findings that network involvement at early stages of the relationship is often perceived as helpful (Knobloch & Donovan-Kicken, 2006). Participants seemed glad, in hindsight at least, that others' involvement brought them to a place of certainty in their relationships. Future research should examine how family and friends influence the timing of the DTR. The remaining eight participants reporting an external event referenced a *change in geographic distance* between the partners prompted the DTR. Existing research in long-distance relationships shows an avoidance of talk about the relationship when reunited (Stafford, 2010). This is likely to prevent a potentially difficult topic from ruining a visit. Possibly, as in the case of some participants in the current study, having the DTR before separating brings added security to the relationship or having the DTR upon reuniting makes it more special.

Participants were asked what prompted the DTR to occur when it did, but they were also asked about their goals as either initiators and non-initiators going into the conversation (RQ2). It was interesting that the two were similar in their goals; both had the goals of *wanting official relationship titles* of boyfriend or girlfriend, and both

referenced *wanting clarification* that would result from the DTR. These two categories had a unique inverse in the data; 47% of initiators were seeking clarification while 43% of non-initiators wanted official relationship titles, and 35% of initiators wanted official titles and 31% of non-initiators wanted clarification. With such a small number in each group it is difficult to make inferences, but it is interesting to note how non-initiators seemed to be awaiting the formality of official titles while initiators were seemingly less certain where the relationship stood. They differed in that three of the 17 initiators referenced initiating the DTR to *please others* like friends or the romantic partner. Six of the 23 non-initiators shared some degree of *initial avoidance* when their partner initiated the DTR. For some, this was a momentary surprise or hesitation, for others this was a stronger fear or expressed frustration. Interestingly, all six ultimately had the conversation and defined the relationship anyway. Possibly the third theme for both initiators (title for others) and non-initiators (initial avoidance) are related in that the three initiators and six non-initiators initially engaged in a DTR for someone else.

Connecting prompting events and pre-DTR goals, half of the initiators who wanted a title for themselves were prompted by *other people* to DTR and half were prompted by a *relationship event*; no initiators who wanted a title were prompted by a *change in geographic distance* or *individual reason*. This implies that if an individual is wanting to use boyfriend/girlfriend terms in the relationship, prompting from other people or a milestone in the relationship is more likely to result in that individual initiating a DTR than if the couple is facing a geographic separation or reunion or if the

individual simply wants more reassurance. Interestingly, this did not hold true for non-initiators. It is possible, then, that individuals' perceptions of how goals relate to events that prompt the DTR might vary based on initiator or non-initiator role. Future research might examine whether network members or relationship events prompting the DTR affects either an individual's desire for an official relationship title or the timing of officially labeling the relationship.

The other half of all participants in this study referenced a *relationship event* such as deleting dating apps, an anniversary, or an increase in physical intimacy, or an *individual reason* like wanting clarity or to progress the relationship prompted the DTR. As explained above, those participants who initiated the DTR with the goal of wanting relationship titles were prompted to do so at the time by other people or a relationship event. In comparison, initiators who had the goal of titles for someone else (e.g., the partner or societal expectations) were prompted by other people or individual reasons. Other people prompting the DTR can encourage those who want titles for themselves or others to initiate. However, a relationship event seems to prompt only those want a title for themselves and individual reasons only prompt those who want titles for the partner or to meet outside expectations. Taken together, it seems initiators who wanted a title for themselves might have a slightly more *traditional* view of relationships in that they wanted titles but were waiting for the right moment (Fitzpatrick, 1988). Those initiators who wanted the title for others might hold a *separate* view of relationships; rather than being motivated to initiate the DTR for the sake of the couple unit, they adopt a more

individual orientation that responds to the prompting of others outside the relationship or themselves. Future research might explore how relationship views influence who initiates the DTR and when.

These findings on goals hint at an additional factor that surfaced in several interviews. Though participants were not specifically asked their beliefs about or expectations of the DTR, throughout the interviews participants mentioned seemingly fixed personal and/or societal views on the significance and function of the DTR in relationships. For example, participants seemed to either feel the DTR was silly and unnecessary, or unquestionably critical to the development of the relationship. One participant shared of a friend who rejected a partner's request to be his girlfriend and told him he needed to ask her in a "cute way." According to the participant, he failed to do so and the relationship dissolved. Something to explore in future studies is how DTR beliefs and expectations might influence other variables like goals and comfort with the DTR. In the current study, the DTRs that were the grandest gestures were connected to the pre-DTR relationship indicator theme of acting like a couple, and the non-initiator goal of wanting official titles. Additionally, when it came to changes after these elaborate DTRs, the participants who reported unilateral certainty only reported a change in title. Future research should further explore these interesting, yet preliminary connections. Possibly if a couple has complete certainty, is already acting like a couple, and wants official titles, the only way to distinguish this non-shift in the relationship is to make the DTR itself a memorable event.

During the DTR

Three strategies were used by initiators to start the DTR: *direct questions, statements about the relationship*, or *related questions*. This alone was interesting as even those in the related questions group still considered themselves initiators. Connecting back to uncertainty, all seven initiators who directly asked their partners about the relationship status were certain of their own feelings; five of the seven also felt certain of their partner's feelings at the time of the DTR. This suggests certainty might increase one's boldness to ask to intensify the relationship outright. Additionally, the prompting event of change in geographic distance only connected to the direct question strategy. Possibly this event either demands a more efficient, straightforward strategy or provides an excuse to directly ask. For those five participants who indirectly initiated by asking a related question, none reported the goal of clarification; additionally, they only reported being prompted by other people or a relationship event, not geographic changes or individual reasons. These initiators wanted the title for themselves or others, and a relationship event or other people created the opportunity to bring it up in an indirect way. We can't know if this was an intentional strategy as in Tolhuizen's (1989) study or an unintentional start to the resulting DTR. Future research could address the notion of accidental intensification in romantic relationships, a concept that while somewhat humorous undoubtedly occurs in real life. According to politeness theory, direct questions would be the most straightforward and potentially face-threatening of all initiation strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1978). While the direct question approach could be enough to define the relationship, asking a related question about the state of the

relationship or making a statement might have a greater likelihood of prompting a conversation about the relationship. This wasn't always the case, as in the participant who simply stated she and her partner were official unless he objected, but often related questions and statements about the relationship were a way to more subtly initiate a DTR conversation.

Across all 40 participants' accounts of how they defined their relationships with their current romantic partners, there were clear emergent themes and connections in the content of the DTR. Similar to initiation strategies, the DTR was either a one-sided question and response, a one-sided statement and response, or a two-sided conversation. While both the statement and two-sided conversation categories were more informal in nature, the 22 accounts of DTRs that were one-sided questions could be divided into more informal, clarifying questions, and more formal requests to be a girlfriend/boyfriend. This could tie into the DTR expectations and beliefs mentioned above, but there was a clear split between participants who saw the DTR as a grand gesture marking the shift to official relationship titles and those who saw it as a necessary but insignificant labeling of the relationship. This is because there almost seem to be two types of DTR experiences, the lowercase-dtr and the all-caps-DTR. Comments, conversations, events throughout the beginning of a relationship seem to define-the-relationship in small ways just as a sculpture takes shape through modest adjustments over time. Then there seems to be an inevitable DTR in which the relationship crosses over somehow to be an official, public, and complete relationship. No participants

mentioned a DTR that occurred after official relationship titles were in place. This is critical for the current study in that it gives a clear endpoint or boundary to the scope of what is included when studying the DTR. Whether participants had been dating their partner weeks or months, once they reached the point of using "boyfriend" or "girlfriend" to describe each other, any future conversations about the relationship are considered qualitatively different from the DTR.

In examining what is occurring during the DTR, it is helpful to discuss the initiation strategies (RQ5), the content of the DTR (RQ1), and the responses (RQ5) together. Within the "capital" DTR, there is again an apparent split between informal, casual interaction and formal, grand gesture. One participant, for example, expressed slight disappointment when her partner spontaneously asked her to be his girlfriend while at a party surrounded by others. She reasoned it ultimately made no difference, but her response signals a difference in DTR expectations. While the casual DTR could be any of the three initiation strategies or content types, the grand gesture was always a one-sided question. These proposal-type scenarios were planned and expected by both partners. Some were accompanied by extravagant or sentimental elements in terms of location, props, or planned remarks. All, however, included a much-anticipated moment in which one partner asked, "Will you be my girlfriend?" No participants in the current study asked a boyfriend. This supports the recurring notion that there are scripted expectations for the DTR that modern shifts in gender norms and dating have yet to influence at the same level.

Looking at all 40 DTR experiences, 65% of the 23 one-sided question DTRs were characterized by acting like a couple as a pre-DTR indicator of relationship status. These were also characterized by high certainty; 61% had unilateral uncertainty, 78% self-certainty, and 74% partner certainty. It is not surprising, then, that when considering just the 23 non-initiator participant responses, all except five had a *positive* response to the DTR. For many, this meant a "yes" response, but generally it meant a positive reaction to the way the DTR was approached as well as the outcome. Not every DTR was posed as a question needing an answer, so a positive response just meant the couple was in agreement and had positive feelings transitioning out of the conversation. Connecting to non-initiator goals, 56% of those non-initiators who responded positively to their partners reported a goal of wanting official relationship titles. It seems a positive response is significantly more likely when partners have been acting like a couple, are certain of the relationship, and want official relationship titles.

A *neutral* response, though uncommon, remains in the DTR process for the same reason we include a neutral option in survey measures; there is always the possibility someone will not know how to respond to the DTR, or not be able to identify their response as being positive or negative. In the case of the one participant in this study, a neutral response acknowledged the partner's statement of exclusivity without expressing agreement or disagreement. This particular DTR was prompted by a change in geographic distance and the non-initiator participant had the goal of clarification. Possibly this particular combination can leave the non-initiator not knowing how to

respond. If they feel the partner is initiating a lowercase-dtr to simply discuss logistics for a coming geographic separation and is not having the all-caps-DTR to make the relationship official, and they as the non-initiator only seek clarification, then a neutral response seems less out of place.

Lastly, those few participants who had a *negative* response did so only initially; they ultimately reached an agreement with their partners and were still in the relationship to qualify as a participant. None of the 23 non-initiator participants who responded negatively reported a DTR goal of official relationship titles. It can be reasoned that if they did not want the DTR to result in making the relationship official, they might feel pressure from their partner. As another point of connection, none of the negative-response DTRs were prompted by internal relationship events. Possibly if they had, the response would have been different. Participants might have felt surprised or even ambushed by their partners since, from their perspective, nothing had happened between them to spark a DTR at that time. For the participants in the current study, it is interesting to note that initial negative responses were converted into positive responses. Possibly the DTR resembles a persuasive, negotiation-type event when a non-initiator responds negatively. The current data is unable to address true negative responses as this might disqualify the interaction as a DTR or result in the dissolution of the relationship. Unsuccessful DTR conversations would be the focus of a different study but a good comparison point for the current data.

After the DTR

The current study focused on the immediate outcomes of the DTR, first being what made it [un]successful (RQ8). Participant perceptions of the DTR as successful or unsuccessful produced four emergent themes. *Personal feelings* and *relationship outcome* were most connected to how participants felt about the relationship, whereas *agreement* and *perceptions of communication* during the interaction were evaluations of the DTR interaction itself. As noted previously, it is not surprising that only four participants reported anything was unsuccessful about their DTR experiences since all participants were still currently in the romantic relationship at the time of the interviews. Regardless, the four themes captured well the potential variables that determine DTR success. Agreement and perceptions of communication nearly tied as the two largest themes. The fact that participants noted agreement and perceptions of communication as the biggest indicators of success is interesting given both focus on an evaluation of the DTR itself, and not the individuals or relationships. Perceptions of communication included being clear and straight to the point, and also feeling heard and acknowledged. Seventy-two percent of the participants whose responses fit in this theme reported feeling certain of their own feelings about the partner and relationship. Possibly participants felt the DTR was successful if they could express their own feelings of certainty about the relationship. This is in line with previous research linking communication satisfaction with the ability to express one's own thoughts and feelings (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). The perceptions of communication theme also suggests clarity and initiative from both partners may signal success in that it indicates the partners' investment in the relationship.

When it comes to agreement, if the point of the DTR is to confirm both partners see the relationship the same way, it makes sense that an almost equal number of participants also noted agreement as signaling success. This could have been the way the interview question was worded, but it could also be that individuals see the DTR as the checkpoint before the next phase of the relationship (Avtgis, 1998). Several participants referenced how they or their partner were waiting for the other to define the relationship when they were ready. They described how one partner wanted to intensify the relationship, and the one who was hesitating was to be the partner who initiated the DTR when they felt comfortable making the relationship official. Just as interpersonal conflict stems from competing goals (Hocker & Wilmot, 2017), agreement and an absence of conflict might signal communicative success that both partners have the same goals for the relationship. As social exchange theory suggests, being "on the same page" might make individuals feel more freedom to invest in the relationship; they know their partner is putting forth the same effort in the relationship, and they can expect a fair exchange of rewards (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

The remaining two categories of relationship outcome and personal feelings focus less on the interaction itself and more on the relationship. Personal feelings mainly referred to their own or their partners' feelings of happiness or relief after the DTR. This could stem from comfort with the DTR topic and goals. Possibly just completing the DTR and having nothing go wrong can be a sigh of relief and happiness for couples. Relationship outcomes were either events such as first sex or dynamics such as having a

more secure relationship. Some participants alluded to the DTR serving as a test of the communication in the relationship. An effective interaction that ends in agreement could reassure participants they will be able to successfully discuss relationship issues and any challenges that might come up. This might explain why none of the one-sided statement DTRs was seen as successful due to agreement or perceptions of communication. Participants may have seen these as closing off communication and not providing an opportunity to discuss or come to an agreement as a couple. The notion of DTR success is a compelling area for future study, especially whether these indicators of success are pre-meditated goals or are only considered after-the-fact. Ideally a future model could be used to ultimately predict DTR success, a task that would certainly help make sense of a topic many find anxiety-inducing.

The final research question and factor in the DTR process addresses the changes in the relationship as a result of the DTR (RQ9). The initial goal of looking at immediate changes to the relationship was to understand if a key element of the DTR is some sort of resulting change. With one exception, all participants reported changes in the relationship, even if it was just a *change in title* when talking about the partner to others. This further supports the proposed definition of the DTR that states the relationship is clarified in a new way after a DTR, even it is just a new label. Over half of all participants reported there was a *change in relationship dynamics* after the DTR. Connecting this to the content of the DTR, all except one of the 11 two-sided DTR conversations resulted in a change in relationship dynamics. These changes could be that

both partners took the relationship more seriously or they were more secure in the relationship following the DTR. Possibly the nature of the two-sided DTR showcased partner feelings more and consequently highlighted these dynamics. Interestingly, only three participants reported both a change in title and in relationship dynamics. This offers a preliminary insight into how individuals do not always view official relationship titles as synonymous with an actual change in the relationship dynamics. Future research could assess partner agreement on what a DTR means for the relationship and see how this affects the DTR process for that relationship.

Three other categories referenced more measurable changes in behavior like changes in *time spent together*, *communication depth*, and *network involvement*. Each consisted of a smaller number of responses, but they raise an interesting question about the significance of the DTR in promoting more relational maintenance behaviors. Change in the depth of communication was the only theme in which all responses related to unilateral certainty (i.e., both self and partner certainty). At first this seems counterintuitive since it seems fully certain individuals would have less to talk about in the DTR, but this theme is about changes after the DTR not communication during the DTR. Possibly those who reported so much certainty were less focused on clarification leading up to the DTR and were more aware of a shift in how openly each partner could communicate in the now more-defined relationship. Another point of interest is the unilateral co-occurence between a change in network involvement and the initiator/non-initiator goal of clarification. It is unclear whether these participants wanted network

involvement so they sought clarity, or gaining clarity about the relationship prompted more network involvement. Future research might further explore the direction of this relationship and its implications.

The post-DTR factors in the larger DTR process spark a number of other questions for future research. First, a lack of consensus on whether the relationship changes after the DTR could be an explanation for why some individuals feel it is an unnecessary and even juvenile formality, and for others it is necessary to progress the relationship. If one partner feels nothing will change, they might think the other ridiculous for wanting to be asked and vice versa. Second, is there a shift in mindset that accompanies official relationship titles? Is this only the case for some based on factors like indicators of relationship status prior to the DTR and uncertainty? While factors like relationship length and external events might certainly affect whether a DTR changes anything between romantic partners other than what they call each other, future research might examine the influence of relationship definition on relationship satisfaction and closeness. If a more defined relationship is also a more satisfied and interdependent relationship, the DTR could also change the relationship in the long-term.

Contributions and Future Directions

This project resulted in three key contributions to the subdisciplines of romantic relationship development and interpersonal communication, specifically between romantic partners. First, the goal of explicating the DTR was achieved by combining an exhaustive literature review and a multifaceted analysis. While others have recently put

forth a definition of the DTR (Knopp et al., 2020), the current study provides a robust definition formed from a rich qualitative analysis that unifies multiple other related terms in the literature. This definition can serve as a launch point for future research on the DTR. Second, through this project we now have a greater understanding of the nature of communication during the DTR. Prior to this study, we did not know how the DTR actually occurred between romantic partners. Through participants' replaying of their DTR conversations, we have a first glimpse of what the DTR looks like from start to finish. This is captured in the third contribution of this study which is an initial model of the DTR process. Previous research has resulted in models of relationship development (Knapp, 1978) and explanations of communicative turning points in romantic relationships (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). The DTR process model that emerged from the data in the current study is an initial step in explaining how romantic partners define their relationships before, during, and after the DTR.

Future research can use the findings in the current study to advance a line of research aimed at identifying predictors and outcomes of the DTR in romantic relationships specifically, and relationship definition more generally. Specifically, several planned follow-up studies will draw from the data in the current study. First, the emergent themes of before, during, and after the DTR can be used to create and validate a multidimensional scale of romantic relationship definition. Prior to the current study, it was unclear which dimensions and items would be included to develop a quantitative measure of the DTR. Armed with themes and corresponding exemplars produced in the

current study, this scale development task is now possible. While this study used the term *success*, the scale will measure participant *satisfaction* with the various elements of the DTR. Success looks backward to how well goals were achieved, but future research will benefit more from shifting this perspective to look forward in the relationship after the DTR. Items will draw from themes and participant responses to provide a comprehensive measure of each factor in the DTR. For example, the measure will assess participants' satisfaction with the timing of the DTR, the presentation of the DTR, and the content of the DTR. This will allow future research to bypass the interview stage and more efficiently measure participants' DTR experiences.

The most apparent next step will be to test the themes and noteworthy co-occurrences in the current data using a new data set. This will further refine the model of the DTR process. This can be done by conducting quantitative analyses of the relationships and differences between factors and potentially begin to predict how variables like uncertainty determine DTR content and post DTR satisfaction. This would extend the findings in the current study to produce a more generalizable understanding of the DTR. As the model of relationship definition takes shape, connections can be made to other relationship variables such as relationship satisfaction and relational closeness. This will benefit both communication and relationship researchers' understanding of the role of the DTR in the larger relationship.

As is the case with most research projects, the current study sparks just as many, if not more, questions as answers. There were several emergent themes of interest that

were alluded to in the interviews that were not explored in the current study. These themes prompted more questions that could not be answered with the current data. For example, a future study will explore unsuccessful DTRs that either did not result in official relationship titles or resulted in relationship dissolution not development. Only three of the 40 DTR experiences shared in the current study did not result in official relationship titles, and all participants were currently still in the relationship. Some participants did not want official titles but were persuaded through the DTR. A future study might specifically recruit individuals that can share about failed DTR experiences or experiences in which persuasion and possibly negotiation characterized the DTR.

Another area for future exploration is DTR beliefs and expectations, and partner agreement on these rules. Similar to Roggensack and Sillars's (2014) study on partner agreement and understanding about obligatory honesty rules, it became apparent in the current study that individuals have very clear perceptions of how a DTR should be. A future study should explore individual expectations for informal or grand gesture DTRs, and couple understanding and agreement on these expectations. In the current study, DTR experiences were on a continuum from casual question to proposal-like gestures, but it was unclear how participants knew which one was appropriate. Similarly, future research should seek to understand individual importance placed on relationship titles and romantic partners' understanding and agreement of the implications of the official titles. In the current study, some participants felt the title was a relationship milestone that resulted in relationship change, and others felt it was an unnecessary social norm. The

current study gives an initial glimpse into identifying these questions for which future research can produce answers.

Strengths and Limitations

This study provides communication researchers with a deeper insight into individuals' real-life DTR experiences. This was achieved through a qualitative approach, specifically a semi-structured interview format. The interview data provided detailed information about what is occurring before, during, and after the DTR. Additionally, this format afforded an opportunity to delve further into participant responses using follow-up questions. A second strength of this study is in the use of both undergraduate and young professional participants. Because there were not noticeable differences in the data collected from each group, future research on the DTR might be able to use participants aged 18-30 as convenient. The third strength of this study is the contribution to future research directions. This study provides the most comprehensive understanding and definition of the DTR to date, and it can now be built upon in future studies. Moving forward the DTR definition can be used and refined. Participant responses and emergent themes might be used to develop a multidimensional scale of relationship definition. Additionally, the initial model of the DTR that emerged in the current study opens opportunities for future testing and refinement.

The first limitation of this study is in the sample of participants used. While the sample was not completely homogenous, ideally the sample would have been more diverse in terms of participant sex, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Future studies

might continue to test if the themes found in the current study hold across different samples and refine as needed. A second limitation of a study using semi-structured interviews is that interviews will vary in the amount of details provided. Somewhat surprisingly, it was the participants who were very open to sharing that were the biggest challenge to interview. They would sometimes get ahead of the interview questions or share details out of order that required more inferences when it came time to analyze the data. The third limitation was in the discrepancy between planning and actual data collection. Initially, I had planned to write a formal memo and adjust the interview protocol as needed after every five interviews. Due to scheduling, I was unable to review the data as I would have liked after the 13th interview. After completing the analysis of all 40 interviews, I do not believe I would have made any additional adjustments; yet, I would have liked to have had more opportunity to conduct analyses during data collection.

CONCLUSION

This study is the necessary first step in producing an in-depth understanding of the DTR through both a thorough review of literature on relationship talk, survey of related terms, and qualitative analysis of interview data detailing participant accounts of DTR conversations in their current romantic relationships. Given what we know about the negative relationship between uncertainty and relationship satisfaction (Malachowski & Dillow, 2011), and the ability of relationship talk to reduce uncertainty (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011), the current study focuses on understanding what is occurring in the DTR

and how this shapes the relationship immediately afterward. Semi-structured interviews detailing 40 DTR experiences were analyzed through thematic analysis and thematic co-occurrence analysis. This resulted in achieving both goals of the study to create a robust understanding and definition of the DTR and produce an initial visual picture of the DTR process. Future studies can refine a DTR process model and build upon the findings in the current study to provide researchers in interpersonal communication and romantic relationship development with a comprehensive understanding of how communication functions to define and develop romantic relationships.

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

The University of Texas at Austin

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EXEMPT DETERMINATION

July 15, 2021

FWA # 00002030

Rene Dailey
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Dear Rene Dailey:

On 7/15/2021, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Special Determinations:	Students / Employees
Title:	Defining the DTR: What it is, what it isn't, and how it functions in romantic relationship development
Investigator:	Rene Dailey
IRB ID:	STUDY00001481
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None
Approval Date:	7/15/2021
Documents Reviewed:	• Consent Form, Category: Consent Form; • Exempt Application, Category: IRB Protocol; • Interview Protocol, Category: Other; • Participant Recruitment Information, Category: Recruitment Materials;

The IRB determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104 (2)(ii) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation (low risk).

In conducting this protocol you are required to follow the requirements listed in HRP-103 - INVESTIGATOR MANUAL.

The University of Texas at Austin

Office of Research Support & Compliance
Institutional Review Board
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Austin, Texas 78713
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Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. Modifications that involve a change in PI, increase risk, or otherwise affect the exempt category or the criteria for exempt determination must be submitted as a modification. Investigators are strongly encouraged to contact the IRB staff to describe any changes prior to submitting an amendment.

If you have any questions, contact the RSC by phone at 512 -232-1543 or via e-mail at irb@austin.utexas.edu.

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board

University of Texas at Austin

cc:
Rene Dailey (PI), Sarah Varga (Primary Contact), Sarah Varga (Proxy)

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

The University of Texas at Austin

Consent to Participate in Research

Basic Study Information

Title of the Project: Defining the DTR: What it is, what it isn't, and how it functions in romantic relationship development
Principal Investigator: Sarah Varga, M.A., The University of Texas at Austin
Faculty Advisor: Renè Dailey, PhD, The University of Texas at Austin

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to be part of a research study. This consent form will help you choose whether or not to participate in the study. Feel free to ask if anything is not clear in this consent form.

Important Information about this Research Study

Things you should know:

- The purpose of the study is to gain an in-depth understanding of how romantic partners define and develop their relationship.
- In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and be in a current romantic relationship with a new partner not lasting longer than 6 months.
- If you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in a virtual interview with the researcher to discuss your experiences in your current romantic relationship. The interview should last no longer than 30 minutes.
- The risks involved in this study are not greater than everyday life.
- There is no direct benefit for participating in this study.
- Taking part in this research study is voluntary. You do not have to participate, and you can stop at any time.

More detailed information may be described later in this form.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research study.

What is the study about and why are we doing it?

The purpose of the study is to gain an in-depth understanding of how relationships are discussed and/or defined, and the immediate and relational outcomes of these interactions. The define-the-relationship talk (DTR) is viewed by popular culture as a defining moment in a romantic relationship. With today's early romantic partners communicating simultaneously across multiple channels, now more than ever there is a need to understand how two individuals communicate their way into a committed relationship. It would thus be helpful to both relationship and communication researchers to gain a more complete understanding of how romantic partners are communicating and defining their relationships in the modern communicative landscape.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher to discuss your experiences in your current romantic relationship. After signing the consent form, the interview will take place using video conferencing software. The researcher will ask a series of questions and follow-up questions about critical conversations and/or events that were significant in the development of your romantic relationship with your current partner.

How long will you be in this study and how many people will be in the study?

Participation in this study will last approximately 30 minutes and 50 people will be enrolled in the study.

What risks and discomforts might you experience from being in this study?

There is a risk that you might experience a breach of confidentiality from being in this study. The results of this study may be published or presented at a scientific meeting, and identifying information will be removed.

The researchers will let you know about any significant new findings (such as additional risks or discomforts) that might make you change your mind about participating in this study.

How could you benefit from this study?

Although you will not directly benefit from being in this study, others might benefit from a greater understanding of how today's romantic partners develop their relationships.

What will happen to the samples and/or data we collect from you?

As part of this study we will collect interview data that will be transcribed.

How will we protect your information?

We will protect your information by deleting the video recording immediately following the interview. The audio file will be transcribed and then deleted, and pseudonyms will be used in all transcription files. Your name and any other information that can directly identify you will be stored separately from the data collected as part of the project.

We may share your data with other researchers for future research studies that may be similar to this study or may be very different. The data shared with other researchers will not include information that can directly identify you.

We plan to publish the results of this study. To protect your privacy, we will/will not include any information that could directly identify you.

What will happen to the information we collect about you after the study is over?

We will keep your research data to use for future presentation and publication. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted from the research data collected as part of the project.

How will we compensate you for being part of the study?

You or the student who referred you will participation credit. You will not receive any type of payment for your participation.

What other choices do you have if you do not take part in this study?

If you are a student and choose not to participate in this study, you may alternatively refer an eligible non-student participant.

Your Participation in this Study is Voluntary

It is totally up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. Your decision to participate will not affect your relationship with The University of

Texas at Austin. You will not lose any benefits or rights you already had if you decide not to participate. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

If you decide to withdraw before this study is completed, any communication, forms, recordings, or transcripts will be deleted.

Contact Information for the Study Team

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact:

Sarah Varga
Phone: 512-471-5251
Email: svarga@utexas.edu

Or

Rene Dailey
Phone: 512-471-5251
Email: rdailey@austin.utexas.edu

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the following:

The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board
Phone: 512-232-1543
Email: irb@austin.utexas.edu

Please reference the protocol number found at the top of this document.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. We will give you a copy of this document for your records. We will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature Date

Appendix C: Participant Recruitment

Abstract	Are you currently in a romantic relationship that started less than 6 months ago? Then this study is for you! If not, do you know of a non-student age 23-40 who started a new romantic relationship less than 6 months ago? Refer them and you get credit!
Description	This study aims to understand how romantic partners determine they are in a romantic relationship with each other. There are 2 options to participate. Both require you to 1) sign-up for the default time-slot in SONA, 2) schedule using the link below/have your referral schedule using the link below, 3) and attend a 30-minute interview using the zoom link emailed to you/your referral. 1) Participate in the study yourself if you have been dating your romantic partner for less than 6 months: Individuals in this study will participate in a 30-minute zoom interview in which they will be asked to share their experiences defining the status of their relationships with their current romantic partner. Please schedule an interview time using this link: https://calendly.com/svarga/researchinterview Note: Only the participant will be interviewed, not the romantic partner. Participants will receive extra credit for participation at their instructor's discretion. 2) Refer a non-student participant age 23-40 who has been dating their partner for less than 6 months: If you are not eligible for this study, or choose not to participate, as an alternative you may refer a non-student adult age 23-40 who is currently in a romantic relationship lasting 6 months or less. Please have this individual sign up using this link: https://calendly.com/svarga/researchinterview Note: Only the person you refer will be interviewed, not the romantic partner. Upon your referred participant's completion of the 30-minute interview, you will receive extra credit (they will be asked for your name). To receive credit, the participant (you or your referral) must be eligible for the study and attend the interview. Participants who have been in a relationship with their romantic partner longer than 6 months are not eligible.

Eligibility Requirements	To be eligible for this study, student participants need to be 18 years of age or older (Non-student referrals need to be age 23-40 as noted in description), and in a current romantic relationship lasting less than 6 months.

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

I. Intro:

A. Thanks for taking the time to talk with me! I'm interested in learning about how romantic partners communicate to determine they are in a romantic relationship with each other.

B. First things first, I'm going to drop a link into the chat and it will take you to the consent form and short demographic questionnaire. While you're opening it I'll give an overview.

-Your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time.

-This call is being recorded. Immediately following this interview, the video file will be deleted and only the audio file and transcription will be used in this study. Your name and any identifying information will be removed for data analysis and any future publication using this data.

Do you have any questions about the study?

Please click yes and then answer a few demographic questions and then we'll get started!

C. Intro: I'll be asking questions about how you and your current romantic partner started and progressed your relationship to where it is now. I am a researcher in interpersonal communication looking to understand today's dating couples. There are no right or wrong answers, and any and all details are welcome and helpful!

D. Basic information about the relationship

1. How did you meet your partner?
2. How would you describe your relationship now? (Casually dating, exclusively dating, seriously dating, something else?)
3. I know you just answered this, but you've been dating how long?

II. Thinking back, can you share how you and your partner communicated the status/nature of your relationship?

A. To what degree did you feel comfortable talking about your relationship with your partner? Did anything seem threatening about the topic? If so, what?

B. This conversation is sometimes referred to as the "DTR" (define the relationship talk) Are you familiar with this term?

C. Is there one (*DTR)* conversation that you feel defined your relationship? Or were there multiple conversations?

II. *[Before the DTR]* Let's go back to what was happening before you decided to officially date

A. What was happening in your relationship at the time – did you have any indication of your relationship status?

B. Was there an event, or maybe more than one event, that prompted a specific conversation about your relationship? This can be anything within your relationship or something involving other people. Was this something you saw as good or bad for your relationship?

III. *[During the DTR]* Think back to a DTR that stands out as particularly significant in your relationship.

A. How long into your relationship did this conversation happen?

B. Where were you when the conversation took place?

C. Who initiated the conversation?

D. How long did the conversation last?

E. It can be tough to remember exact wording, but can you replay the conversation for me? How did the subject of your relationship come up? What was discussed?

A. [Initiator – Skip if participant did not initiate the conversation]

1. How did you go about bringing up the topic of your relationship? What made you choose that approach?

2. Why did you want to initiate a talk about your relationship?

3. Were you unsure of your own feelings about the relationship and your partner? Were you unsure how your partner felt? Do you think this affected how you initiated the conversation?

D. *[Non-Initiator – Skip if participant answered the previous section as the initiator]*

1. How did you feel when your partner brought up the topic of your relationship? What was your response? Why do you think you responded the way you did?

2. What did you want to happen once your partner initiated the conversation?

3. Were you unsure of your feelings about the relationship and your partner? Were you unsure how your partner felt? Do you think this affected how you responded to this conversation?

V. *[After the DTR] [*This last set of questions will ask you about the outcome of this conversation.]

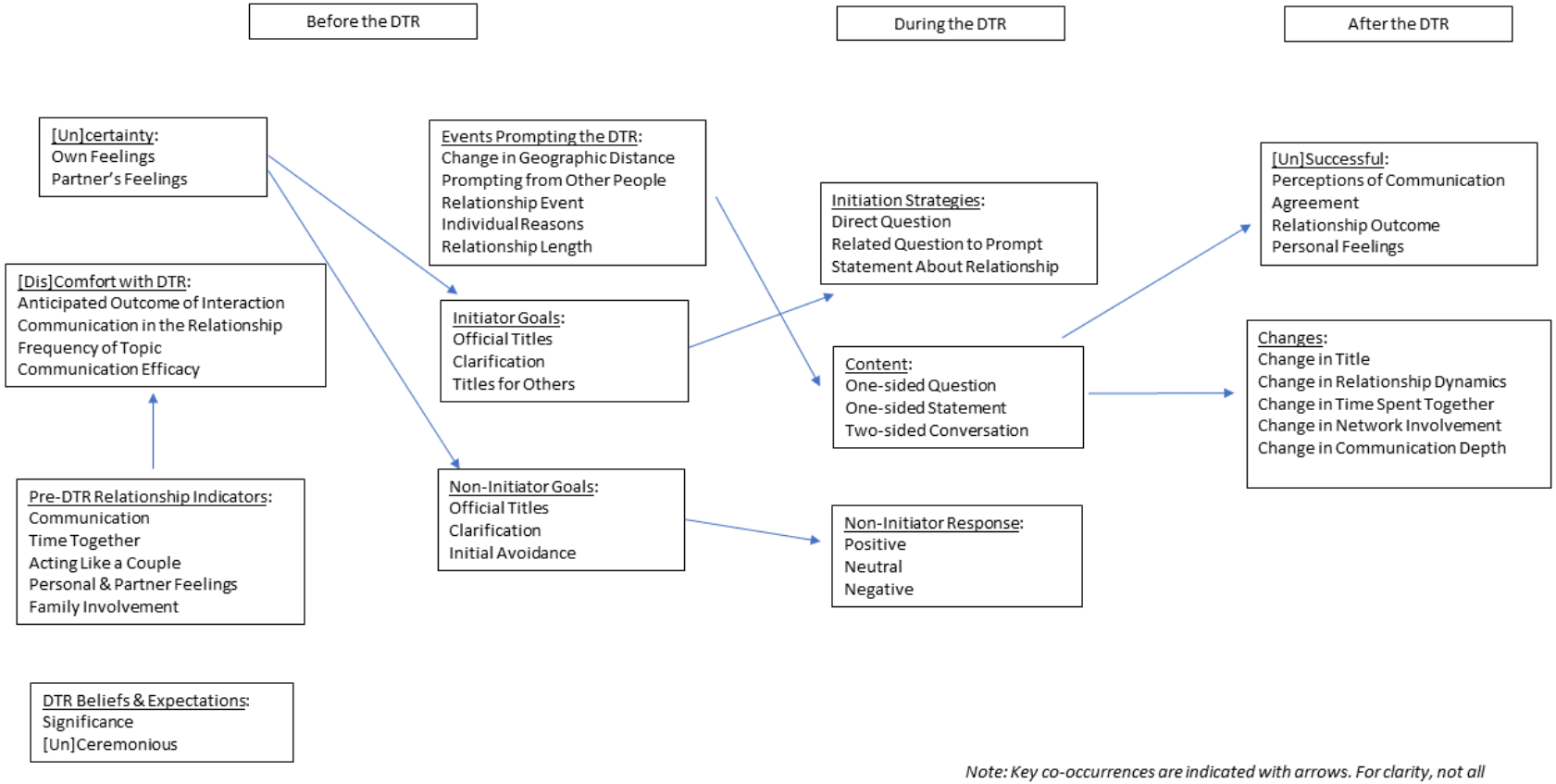
1. How did the DTR end?
2. How did you feel right after the conversation?
3. At the point of transitioning away from the topic/ending the conversation, to what degree did you feel the DTR was a success? What made it more or less successful?
4. What happened in your relationship as a result of this DTR conversation? Any changes to your relationship in the short-term? Changes in the long-term?

VI. How did this experience compare to your own experiences defining your previous relationships?

VII. Is there anything else you would like to share that you think would help in understanding the DTR in today's dating relationships? How today's

VIII. Thank for participating and confirm information to award extra credit as applicable.

Appendix E: Emergent Model of the DTR Process



Note: Key co-occurrences are indicated with arrows. For clarity, not all co-occurrences referenced in-text are shown.

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