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**Couples Go Online: Relational Maintenance Behaviors and Relational Characteristics Use
in Dating Relationships**

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Couples Go Online: Relational Maintenance Behaviors and Relational Characteristics Use in Dating Relationships

The rapid advancement of technology has changed the way the world operates. Technology now allows people the opportunity to communicate from opposite ends of the globe. According to Wolak and Mitchell (2002), the Internet is now another means people can expand their social networks and form close interpersonal relationships. E-mail, one of the earlier forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC), enables people to connect with one another (Zakin, 1996), and instant messaging (IM) allows people the opportunity to communicate in real-time with one or more Internet users (Kindred & Roper, 2004). IM is a popular form of CMC. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2002), 26% of college Internet users indicated they communicate regularly through IM, and are twice more likely to use IM than the average Internet user on an everyday basis.

These Internet tools allow people to have more freedom and comfort in their interpersonal interactions. “Those who find their voices through computer-mediated communication (CMC) engage in hyperpersonal communication” (Walther, 1996, p. 4). CMC allows people to use hyperpersonal communication, this form of communication occurs when individuals find it easier to express themselves in mediated contexts than in face-to-face situations. CMC offers individuals the freedom to express themselves in positive or negative ways (Walther, 1996). With new communication technologies, people today have new strategies to develop and maintain relationships.

Researchers have found many behaviors used in relational maintenance and have created typologies of relational maintenance behaviors (Ayres, 1983; Canary & Stafford, 1992; Canary, Stafford, Hause, & Wallace, 1993; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Dindia & Baxter, 1987; Haas & Stafford, 1998; Messman, Canary, & Hause, 2000; Stafford, Dainton, & Hause, 2000). A common focus of study in relational maintenance behaviors is voluntary relationships. However, little research has concentrated on relational maintenance behaviors in computer-mediated communication between romantic partners. Understanding how romantic partners use CMC to maintain relationships can help researchers determine technology’s role in relational maintenance. The present study examines computer-mediated communication and its relationships with relational maintenance behaviors, communication satisfaction, interaction involvement, commitment, and relationship satisfaction.

Relational Maintenance

People are continuously using a variety of behaviors to effectively maintain their relationships. Stafford and Canary (1991) defined relational maintenance behaviors as “efforts expended to maintain the nature of the relationship to the actor’s satisfaction” (p. 220). Dindia (2003) offered a similar definition referring to relational maintenance behaviors as “conscious and intentional behaviors designed to maintain the relationship” (pp. 9-10). Several typologies have surfaced from previous relational maintenance research (Ayres, 1983; Dindia & Baxter, 1987).

Perhaps the most important and most common typology of relational maintenance strategies came from Canary and Stafford (1991). Canary and Stafford explored relational maintenance strategies in married and dating couples (Stafford & Canary, 1991). The researchers found several relational maintenance strategies: positivity, openness, assurances, network, and sharing tasks. Many behaviors from this typology appeared within several other broad typologies of relational maintenance behaviors, which include the Canary, Stafford, Hause, and Wallace

(1993) typology, the Dainton and Stafford typology (1993), the Haas and Stafford (1998) typology, and the Messman, Canary and Hause (2000) typology.

In 2000, Stafford, Dainton, and Haas examined routine and strategic relational maintenance behaviors. Their typology consisted of seven strategies which contained the original five from the Stafford and Canary (1991) study: positivity (making interactions cheerful and pleasant), openness (directly discussing the relationship and one's feelings), assurances (reassuring the partner about the relationship and the future), network (relying on support and love of others), and sharing tasks (performing common tasks) in addition to advice (giving the partner advice) and conflict management (Stafford et al., 2000). This typology seems to be the most complete out of the previous studies and is utilized in the present study.

Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)

With the rapid development of technology, interpersonal communication has expanded its communicative channels, changing the nature of the way humans communicate altogether. Currently 70 million Americans go online, and 58 million Americans use e-mail and the numbers are increasing (Pew Internet and American Life, 2005). The telephone and computer-mediated channels have provided a means for a variety of positive outcomes and have increased communication worldwide. Existing research pertaining to CMC has been generally inconsistent with acknowledging online relationships as either normative or non-normative forms of relations (Parks & Roberts, 1998).

The Dindia and Baxter (1987), the Canary et al. (1993), Dainton and Stafford (1993), and the Haas and Stafford (1998) typologies included using forms of mediated communication as a relational maintenance behavior. These typologies conceptualize the act of using mediated communication as the relational maintenance component rather than the content of the communication. For example, if a person calls his/her spouse from work, the mere act of calling to communicate plays the relational maintenance role, regardless of the content of the conversation.

Despite the fact that CMC has generally been classified as a relational maintenance behavior (Canary et al., 1993; Dainton & Stafford 1993; Dindia & Baxter, 1997; Haas & Stafford 1998), CMC has offered an alternate channel of communication for interactants. Whether by e-mail or IM, computer mediation allows relational development to occur in similar fashion to face-to-face communication. Moreover, current research delineates relationships within the long distance context to differ from face-to-face relationships, and because long distance relationships are bound by such computer channels, the orientation of relational maintenance may be moderated by other communicative variables.

The way in which individuals use CMC to develop and maintain relationships may vary, for example, previous research revealed sex differences with CMC. Pew Internet and American Life (2005) showed that women use the Internet more for communication than do men. Women are more likely than men use it to communicate with family and friends. For example, 73% of women who used e-mail said they had sent e-mail to friends who lived far away, compared to 65% of men who also used e-mail. According to the national online survey, more women than men liked e-mail, mostly because they find it more efficient than other forms of communication (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2005). Based on previous research, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H1: Women will report using the Internet to communicate with their romantic partners more so than men.

Previous research on relational maintenance behaviors also found sex differences in the use of relational maintenance behaviors. Dainton and Stafford (1993) examined partner perceptions, relationship type and sex differences. Results revealed men and women's reports of positivity, openness, talk, and ant-social behaviors were significantly different in marital relationships. Moreover, Aylor and Dainton (2004) reported women are more likely than men to routinely use assurances; Canary and Stafford (1992) reported women use openness, social networks, and shared tasks more so than men. Ragsdale (1996) stated women use all five relational maintenance strategies more than men. However, Stafford and Canary (1991) compared relationships types (i.e. married, engaged, seriously dating, dating), and gender and relational characteristics. Results suggested there were no significant differences between gender and relational maintenance behaviors. Existing research has failed to qualify significant sex differences in the orientation of relational maintenance strategies (Ayres, 1983; Dindia & Baxter, 1987; Stafford & Canary, 1991; Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000), but such differences may arise when face-to-face communication is eliminated.

RQ1: Do men and women differ in relational maintenance behaviors when engaged in CMC?

Commitment

Commitment is a relational characteristic defined as, "one's desire to remain indefinitely in the relationship" (Canary, & Stafford, 1992, p. 247). Rusbult, Drigotas, and Verette (1994) created an investment model of commitment. In this model, high relationship satisfaction levels, high investments into the relationships, and low quality of alternative relationships create higher amounts of commitment levels. The higher the commitment level of a person in a relationship, the more likely the person will decide to stay in the relationship, accommodate the other, sacrifice for the relationship, ignore attractive alternative relationships, and perceive the relationship as superior compared to other couples. Baxter and Bullis (1986) found commitment level in long-term relationships changed positively or negatively during relationship substantial events (e.g., moving in together, meeting family, having a conflict).

Research has shown assurances are the prime predictors of commitment (Canary & Stafford 1992; Stafford & Canary 1991; Stafford et al. 2000; Weigal & Ballard-Reisch 1999), and perceptions of partners' use of assurances increase commitment (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Stafford & Canary, 1991). While assurances are the strongest predictor of commitment, shared tasks (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Weigel and Ballard-Reisch, 1999) and social networks (Stafford & Canary, 1991; Stafford et al., 2000) rank as secondary predictors. Openness is negatively associated with commitment (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Dainton & Aylor, 2002; Stafford & Canary, 1991; Stafford et al., 2000; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 1999). This finding is likely to occur because assurance behaviors account for positive content about the relationship and openness accounts for neutral or negative content about the relationship (Stafford & Canary, 1991).

Given commitment levels fluctuate based on developments in romantic relationships (Baxter & Bullis, 1986), and because Internet use is increasing and romantic couples may talk online for almost 15 hours per week (Parks, & Roberts, 1998; Pew Internet and American Life, 2005), couples in romantic relationships may turn to the Internet to help increase commitment. Online communication may reflect individuals' level of commitment to their relationships. Therefore, combining CMC research with relational maintenance and commitment research, the following hypotheses are offered:

H2: Use of assurances, shared tasks, and social networks will positively correlate with commitment in romantic partners' online communication.

H3: Use of openness will negatively correlate with commitment in romantic partners' online communication.

Relationship Satisfaction

Satisfying relationships are significant sources of social support and well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), often contributing to a better quality of life (Arriaga, 2001). In relation to romantic relationship attachment styles, securely attached individuals in romantic relationships maintained high levels of relationship satisfaction, commitment, and trust over time (Keelan, Dion, & Dion, 1998). Self-disclosure is also related to relationship satisfaction, in that a high level of self-disclosure will often indicate high levels of commitment and relationship satisfaction (Hendrick, Hendrick, & Adler, 1988). Satisfying relationships are significant sources of social support and well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Strong social support systems lead to a better quality of life (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005). Overall, Prior research often considers relationship satisfaction as an outcome variable (Hendrick, et al., 1988). Based on previous relationship satisfaction, relational maintenance, commitment, and communication satisfaction research, the following hypothesis is offered:

H4: Relationship satisfaction will positively correlate the relationship maintenance strategies, commitment, and communication satisfaction.

Satisfaction in long-distance relationships may be difficult to maintain due to the proximity of the partners. With the lack of physical contact, long distance partners encounter unique stressors and challenges unfamiliar to geographically close couples. For example, partners in long-distance relationships reported seeing their partners less often, writing to their partner more, being less satisfied with the amount of face-to-face contact with their partners, and talking about a wider variety of topics on the telephone than geographically close partners (Gilberston, Dindia, & Allen, 2002). However, Stafford (2001) found that long-distance couples reported being more idealized, more satisfied with their relationships and with their communication, and more in love than geographically close couples. Individuals in long-distance relationships reported less interaction overall and more interactions taking place over the telephone and letters than face-to-face interactions. Based on previous research the following is proposed:

H5: Individuals in long-distance relationships will spend more time communicating with their partners online than geographically close couples.

H6: There will be no difference on reported relationship satisfaction between long-distance relationships and geographically close relationships.

Communication Satisfaction

Even though communication is the cornerstone for effective relationships, having and maintaining communication satisfaction within a relationship is a long, difficult process (Thomas, Booth-Butterfield, & Booth-Butterfield, 1995). Zakahi and Duran (1984) examined the relationship between attraction, communication competence, and communication satisfaction. They found communicative competence is a better predictor of communication satisfaction than physical attractiveness. Thomas, Booth-Butterfield, and Booth-Butterfield (1995) examined communication satisfaction and how it is influenced by perceived parental deception regarding divorce in parent-child relationships. They found as a child's perception of their mother deceiving them increased, communication satisfaction decreased. Results also revealed communication satisfaction was more prevalent with the custodial parents, meaning the child

would more than likely have a satisfying relationship with the parent they communicated with more often. Anderson and Martin (1999) examined argumentativeness and verbal aggression in group settings and discovered group members who argued issues rather than putting down others perceived the other group members as satisfied with the communication.

Several studies explored communication satisfaction in romantic relationships (e.g., Allen & Thompson, 1984; Ebesu Hubbard, 2001). These studies focused on communication satisfaction as an outcome variable to several independent variables. Allen and Thompson (1984) explored agreement, understanding, realization, and feeling understood as predictors of communication satisfaction in marital dyads. Results showed that agreement and feelings of being understood were the greatest predictors of communication satisfaction for married partners. Moreover, Ebesu Hubbard (2001) examined conflict between relationally uncertain romantic partners and the relationship between being relationally responsive and communication satisfaction. Results revealed that during a conflict, when a partner was responsive to dominance there was greater communication satisfaction. However, perceptions of relational behaviors of dominance, there was no correlation with communication satisfaction. Ebesu Hubbard also found consensus of the expectations of affiliation and perceptions of actual affiliative behaviors were positively related with communication satisfaction, but responsiveness for affiliation was not.

Communication satisfaction needs to be explored further in relational maintenance behaviors in order to determine how it can be improved. By improving communication satisfaction in romantic relationships relational satisfaction will increase. The first step in doing this is by identifying the relational maintenance behaviors which influence communication satisfaction. Positivity, openness, advice, and assurances are the most common relational maintenance behaviors completed through communication, therefore the following hypothesis is proposed:

H7: Communication satisfaction will positively relate to positivity, openness, advice and assurances.

Interaction Involvement

The Interaction Involvement Scale was initially designed to validate communicative competence constructs of perceptiveness, attentiveness, and of responsiveness (Cegala, 1981; Cegala et al., 1982). Interaction involvement refers to the degree in which individuals within an interaction are engaged both cognitively and behaviorally with one another (Cegala, Savage, Brunner, & Conrad, 1982). Cegala (1981) designed the Interaction Involvement Scale to measure the cognitive dimension of communication competence. Cegala et al. (1981) conceptualized communication competence as the ability to express appropriate verbal and nonverbal displays within a social setting. For an individual to be fully competent in communication orientation, such knowledge of how and when to encode messages properly must be directed toward achieving communicative goals between individuals engaged in interaction. Interaction involvement was recognized as a necessary antecedent to being able to appropriately communicate. Rubin, Graham, and Mignerey (1990) examined communication competence among college students in relation to interaction involvement and college success. High interaction involvement scores were positively correlated with communication competence and student GPA's. Additionally, highly involved communicators were recognized to display more immediate language, speak with greater certainty and more relational pronoun references (Cegala, 1981).

Miura (1985) found friends reported higher interaction involvement than with strangers. Interaction involvement has also been positively associated with adaptability and ability to cope

with social difficulties in respect to cross-cultural adjustment (Chen, 1992). Interaction involvement has undoubtedly positive effects with communicative outcomes in various contexts ranging from classroom communication and interpersonal dyads to adaptability in culture shock situations.

Since reports of relational maintenance strategies are based on perception, it is reasonable to believe that only highly involved partners have the capacity to acknowledge each others' proactive behaviors. If interaction involvement is low, attention is diverted away from the other and centered on the self. A possible consequence of low interaction involvement may see individuals' inability to recognize that their partner's behavior is an attempt to promote satisfaction via whatever strategy. Existing research has shown that assurances, positivity, openness, and social tasks are reported most frequently (Canary et al. 1993; Dainton & Stafford 1993, Haas & Stafford 1998; Stafford & Canary 1991). Since openness and assurances are other-oriented in nature, interaction involvement should be act as a key determinant if such behaviors are acknowledged. Therefore the following hypothesis is offered:

H8: Perceptiveness, attentiveness, and responsiveness will be positively associated with openness and assurances.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants consisted of 123 undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses at a mid-size, mid-Atlantic university. Only students currently involved in romantic relationships and interacted with their romantic partners to some degree online were asked to voluntarily fill out a series of questionnaires. We addressed limited demographic information in the packets, including participant's sex, age of participant and his or her partner, length of relationship, time spent communicating with partner online, and whether the relationship was primarily a long distance or face-to-face relationship. There were more males ($n = 72$) than females ($n = 42$), and the participants' mean age was 20.81 ($SD = 2.31$). The mean age of the participants' partners was 21.10 ($SD = 3.32$), and the mean length of the participants' relationship was 14.14 months ($SD = 15.59$). Participants reported communicating with their partner online an average of 98.47 minutes ($SD = 133.19$), and 41 participants reported having primarily long-distance relationship while 71 reported having primarily a face-to-face relationship.

The remainder of the packet included a self-report of relational maintenance, self-report of communication satisfaction, self-report of commitment, and self-report of relationship satisfaction. The participants filled out the questionnaire packets in class and received minimal course credit.

Measures

Stafford, Dainton, and Haas (2000) examined routine and strategic relational maintenance strategies. Their typology consisted of seven strategies which contained the original five from the Stafford and Canary (1991) study: positivity (making interactions cheerful and pleasant), openness (directly discussing the relationship and one's feelings), assurances (reassuring the partner about the relationship and the future), network (relying on support and love of others), and sharing tasks (performing common tasks) in addition to advice (giving the partner advice) and conflict management (Stafford et al., 2000). This typology seems to be the most complete out of the previous studies and was used to measure participants' relational maintenance behaviors online. On a 7-point, Likert-type measure (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*), participants responded to seven relational maintenance strategies as they might be used when communicating online, either by e-mail or IM. The reliabilities for the seven strategies

were reported by Stafford et al. (2000) as follows: .92 for assurances, .87 for openness, .81 for conflict management, .83 for shared tasks, .76 for positivity, .70 for advice, .72 for social networks. The alpha reliabilities for the current study were as follows: .90 for assurances ($M = 30.03$, $SD = 8.78$), .87 for openness ($M = 33.52$, $SD = 9.9$), .85 for conflict management ($M = 25.62$, $SD = 5.74$), .84 for shared tasks ($M = 24.4$, $SD = 6.27$), .71 for positivity ($M = 10.6$, $SD = 2.55$), .68 for advice ($M = 10.15$, $SD = 2.61$), and .77 for social networks ($M = 9.71$, $SD = 2.96$).

The Rusbult Commitment Scale addressed the participants' level of commitment to their romantic relationships. On a 5-item Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all likely* to 9 = *extremely likely*), participants responded to how committed they are to their relationships. The initial study measured commitment of a single party in a heterosexual relationship 13 times over the course of an academic school year (Rusbult, 1983). The initial alpha reliabilities ranged from .75 to .95, with an average alpha reliability of .88 (Rusbult, 1983). The measure's alpha reliability for this study was .70 ($M = 25.09$, $SD = 6.79$).

The Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction Scale assessed how satisfied participants were with their online communication. On a 7-point, Likert-type measure (1 = *strongly agree* to 7 = *strongly disagree*), participants were asked to respond to a 19-item version of the Hecht (1978a) scale. The items were adapted to communication satisfaction online (e.g. My romantic partner lets me know that I communicate effectively *online*). For this scale, Hecht (1978a) reported the alpha reliability at .93, and the scale's alpha reliability for this study was .89 ($M = 88.27$, $SD = 20.9$).

The Marriage Quality Index operationalized relationship satisfaction. Respondents reported their relationship satisfaction on a 7-point, Likert-type scale (1 = *very strong disagreement* to 7 = *very strong agreement*). Since participants are reporting on romantic relationships, the first item of the measure was changed from "we have a good marriage" to "we have a good relationship". The reliability for the MQI measure was previously reported at .76 (Norton, 1983), and for this study the alpha reliability was .92 ($M = 28.05$, $SD = 5.85$).

Cegala (1981) developed the Interaction Involvement scale (IIS) originally to measure factors of perceptiveness (message awareness), and attentiveness (listening skills) of Erving Goffman's communicative competence construct. Cegala's (1981) factor analysis revealed a third factor/concept, termed responsiveness, referring to the degree of certainty of how to respond to others during interaction. On a 7-point Likert-type measure (1 = *not at all like me* to 7 = *very much like me*), participants were asked to respond to 18 items that made up the three factors. Cegala et al. (1982) reported reliabilities of .81, Rubin and Graham (1988) reported .61. Alphas for the responsiveness subscale ranged from .69 (Duran & Kelley, 1988) to .86 (Cegala, 1981). Alphas for the perceptiveness subscale ranged from .63 (Rubin & Graham, 1988) to .88 (Cegala, 1981). The attentiveness subscale ranged from .64 (Duran & Kelly, 1988) to .87 (Cegala, 1981). The current study yielded reliabilities of .35 for perceptiveness ($M = 17.88$, $SD = 3.98$), .33 for attentiveness ($M = 26.15$, $SD = 5.18$), and .76 for responsiveness ($M = 37.16$, $SD = 9.05$).

Results

Hypothesis one posited women will report using the Internet to interact with their partners more so than men. It is a well known belief that women are more relational oriented than men. According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project (2000), women reported using the Internet more than men to maintain relationships. However, an independent-samples *t* test revealed no sex differences existed in the amount of time spent online to communicate with a romantic partner, $p = .440$. The mean time women spent online was 94.10 minutes ($SD = 117.28$)

and the mean time men spent online was 107.33 minutes ($SD = 147.47$). This hypothesis was not supported.

The research question asked if men and women differ in relational maintenance behaviors when engaged in computer mediated interaction. Previous relational maintenance research found no sex differences in relational maintenance behaviors (Ayres, 1983; Dindia & Baxter, 1987; Stafford & Canary, 1991; Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000). A series of t tests determined if sex differences existed when relational maintenance behaviors are used when communicating online. The analyses revealed no sex differences in all the relational maintenance categories except for the positivity category, $t(112) = -2.88, p < .05$. Women ($M = 11.4, SD = 1.91$) were more likely than men ($M = 9.99, SD = 2.84$) to offer their romantic partners positive messages when communicating online. For the other six factors, the means did not differ significantly, $p = .536$ for assurances, .124 for openness, .187 for conflict management, .382 for shared tasks, .926 for advice, and .926 for social networks.

Hypothesis two stated the use of assurances, shared tasks, and social networks will be positively correlated with commitment in romantic partners' online communication. Previous research has indicated Internet use is on the rise and couples spend time online communicating with one another (Parks, & Roberts, 1998; Pew Internet and American Life, 2005). Therefore, couples in romantic relationships may turn to the Internet to help increase commitment. A series of Pearson's correlations revealed assurances had a small but definite positive relationship with commitment, $r = .302, p < .05$, but shared tasks, $p = .463$, and social networks, $p = .918$, had no significant relationship with commitment. This hypothesis was partially supported.

Hypothesis three stated that the use of openness will be negatively correlated with commitment in romantic partners' online communication. This finding is likely to occur because openness accounts for neutral or negative content about the relationship (Stafford & Canary, 1991). However, a Pearson's correlation showed no relationship between openness and commitment when communicating online, $p = .089$. Hypothesis three was not supported.

Hypothesis four posited relationship satisfaction will be positively correlated with the relationship maintenance strategies, commitment, and communication satisfaction. A series of Pearson's correlations supported this hypothesis. There were significant relationships between relationship satisfaction and commitment, $r = .439, p < .001$, and relationship satisfaction and communication satisfaction, $r = .566, p < .001$. There were significant relationships between relationship satisfaction and all seven relational maintenance factors (see Table 1).

Table 1 - Correlations between Relationship and Communication Satisfaction and Relational Maintenance Behaviors

	Relationship Satisfaction	Communication Satisfaction
Assurances	$r = .557^*$	$r = .351^{**}$
Openness	$r = .471^*$	$r = .246$
Positivity	$r = .386^*$	$r = .379^{**}$
Advice	$r = .372^*$	$r = .379^{**}$

Conflict Management	$r = .427^*$	$r = .618^{**}$
Shared Tasks	$r = .395^*$	$r = .296$
Social Networks	$r = .227^{**}$	$r = .103$

- $p < .001$, $** p < .05$

Hypothesis five stated individuals in long-distance relationships will spend more time communicating with their partners online than geographically close couples. A t test supported this hypothesis, $t(108) = 2.487$, $p < .05$. The mean time participants in long-distance relationships spent online communicating with their partners was 127.44 minutes ($SD = 144.41$) and the mean time participants in geographically close relationships was 71.41 minutes ($SD = 91.60$).

Hypothesis six stated there will be no difference on reported relationship satisfaction between long-distance relationships and geographically close relationships. A t test supported this hypothesis, $p = .412$. The relationship satisfaction mean for individuals in long-distance relationships was 27.97 ($SD = 5.68$) and the mean for individuals in geographically close relationships was 28.25 ($SD = 6.00$).

Hypothesis seven posited communication satisfaction will be positively related to positivity, openness, advice and assurances. A series of Pearson's correlations showed this hypothesis to be partially true. Assurances, positivity, and advice had definite positive relationships with communication satisfaction (see Table 1), however, openness had no relationship with communication satisfaction, $p = .131$.

Hypothesis eight stated perceptiveness, attentiveness, and responsiveness will be positively associated with openness and assurances. Since not all the interaction involvement subscales had reliability, only responsiveness could be used for this hypothesis. This hypothesis proved not to be supported, for responsiveness and assurances, $p = .287$; for responsiveness and openness, $p = .485$.

Discussion

It is easy to notice how important mediated communication is just by observing college students right before or after class. Students walk into class text messaging and as soon as class is over they quickly flip open their mobile phones and began text messaging again. Thus, it is important to understand how influential instant messaging is to the maintenance of relationships. This study assessed how CMC affects relational maintenance behaviors, communication satisfaction, interaction involvement, commitment, and relationship satisfaction. Part of the CMC findings followed along with previous face-to-face communication research, while other findings indicated differences existed when romantic partners communicated online. Unlike some existing research, there were no sex differences, for the most part, in the orientation of relational maintenance strategies. Except for positivity, men and women did not differ in their use of relational maintenance behaviors. The results indicated women were more likely than men to offer positive communication; however, the Internet did not really prove to alter how men and women engaged in relational maintenance behaviors. Previous research also found that women were more likely than men to use the Internet to maintain relationships; however, the results of the study indicated no sex differences. Both men and women spent almost an equal amount of

time on the Internet communicating with their romantic partners. The sample consisted of relatively young adults who may be more likely to use CMC more so than older populations. Future research should examine different populations and how they use CMC to maintain relationships. For example, parents may use CMC to maintain relationships with the children who are away at school.

Not surprisingly, not all seven relational maintenance factors may translate when CMC is studied. Hypothesis two suggested commitment would be positively correlated with assurances, shared tasks, and social networks. Assurances was the only factor to positively correlate with commitment. Shared tasks and social networks proved to have no relationship with commitment. Since we only asked participants to consider their online communication when filling out the relational maintenance scale, shared tasks and social networks may not be as applicable as some of the other factors. Hypothesis three was not supported at all; it stated openness would be negatively correlated with commitment. During face-to-face interactions, openness often accounts for neutral or negative content about the relationship. Communicating online may dampen the negative aspect of the openness factor. Partners may have to compensate for the lack of nonverbal cues that are not present during online communication and become more open with their verbal communication. Future research should consider the nonverbal aspects of CMC, such as emoticons.

This study's findings with relationship satisfaction follow along with existing research. Relationship satisfaction was positively related to commitment, communication satisfaction, and all seven relational maintenance factors. There was also no difference in reports of satisfaction between participants in long-distance relationships and those in geographically close relationships. This highlights a limitation to the study as well; there was no comparison with relationship satisfaction between romantic partners who use the Internet to communicate with each other and romantic partners who never use the Internet to communicate with each other. A future study might try to determine if communication via the Internet enhances relationship satisfaction. Also following previous long-distance research, participants in long-distance relationships reported spending more time communicating with their romantic partners than participants who were in geographically close romantic relationships.

Furthermore, assurances, positivity, and advice were positively correlated with communication satisfaction; however, openness had no relationship with communication satisfaction. As stated before, openness can reflect more negative content about the relationship, therefore communication satisfaction may not relate to openness. Moreover, another limitation of this study is it did not look at the actual content of the information being exchanged between romantic partners online. A future study could analyze the actual dialogue between romantic partners as they communicate online. Openness may have no relationship with communication satisfaction if the content of online communication is superficial rather than meaningful. Moreover, interaction involvement did not correlate with assurances and openness. Since two of the subscales, perceptiveness and attentiveness, did not have reliability for this study, and responsiveness did not correlate with relational maintenance behaviors, the Interaction Involvement Scale may not be an appropriate measure for CMC research. This scale assumes the presence of another person and the Internet creates a restricted environment in which interactants rely heavily on the mediated channel. Even when people communicate simultaneously with each other by IM, they may not feel a strong presence of each other. Ultimately, CMC may not be employed effectively if individuals are not fully emerged in the communication process as they interact with one another online.

Conclusion

Our overall health and well being are substantially influenced by the existence of high quality, stable relationships (Burman & Margolin, 1992; Manzoli, Villari, Pironec, & Boccia, 2007). Identifying factors serving to maintain this beneficial social resource are of great importance to interpersonal scholars. This study explored the effects of CMC on relational maintenance behaviors, commitment, relationship satisfaction, communication satisfaction, and interaction involvement. As some of the findings suggest, CMC changes how people might use relational maintenance behaviors and determine which behaviors are relevant or not. Future research should look at the dialogue between partners as they communicate online and as they communicate face-to-face to further explore differences in the two contexts. Relational maintenance behaviors represent the actions that serve to sustain a relationship in a desired state (Dindia, 2003) and CMC offers relational partners another outlet for maintaining their relationships. For the most part CMC is relatively a new area of study and it is important to understand how the Internet may influence communication between romantic partners.

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