

Technology-Based Communication and Relationship Satisfaction in College Student Romantic
Relationships

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Introduction

According to a 2011 study by the Pew Research Center, 82% of undergraduate students use social media (Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011). In a more recent 2015 report, the Pew Research Center found that 56% of teens in relationships said that social media makes them feel more connected to their partner (Lenhart, Anderson, & Smith, 2015). In addition, Drouin and Landgraff (2012) found that 98% of college students had texted their romantic partner at some point, suggesting that communication via technology is not just an occasional supplement to other communication, but a vital means of connection.

However, there may be a dark side to this heavy technology use. According to the 2015 Pew Research study mentioned above, 27% of teen daters reported feeling jealous or insecure about their relationship as a result of a social media post (Lenhart et al., 2015). As online communication becomes increasingly common among dating couples, especially college students, it is important to stay informed about technology's effects on relationships. Social media and texting have changed the landscape of romantic relationships, and since relationships are a fundamental unit of human connection, this has the potential to affect the larger social structure. The more we know about technology's effects on relationships, the better we can educate college students about forming healthy, lasting relationships that use technology in an informed way. The goal of the current study is to study specifically the effects of communication frequency across different media and their correlation with relationship satisfaction.

Literature Review

College students are becoming increasingly fluent in technological communication. Research suggests that the majority of undergraduate students use social media with their friends and family, as well as in their romantic relationships (Lenhart et al., 2015). An even bigger

majority uses text messaging to communicate with their partners (Lenhart et al., 2015). This can have many positive effects, such as increased intimacy and closeness, as well as ease of coordinating meetings or tasks between partners (Laliker & Lannutti, 2014). However, this constantly-available technology may also have negative effects, including increased jealousy, too much communication, and attempts to micro-manage a partner by monitoring their social media posts (Dainton & Stokes, 2015).

Relationship Maintenance Online

Relationship maintenance behaviors are the strategies used to continue romantic relationships after they begin, especially regarding communication strategies used to maintain connection between relationship partners (Stafford & Canary, 1991). Stafford and Canary (1991) stated that “it is naïve to assume that relationships simply stay together until they fall apart or that relationships fall apart unless they happen to stay together; instead, partners engage in routines and enact strategies to preserve their relationships” (p. 220). Relationships require effort to maintain, and people continue relationships that they find satisfying and rewarding. In addition, Sideliner, Ayash, Godorhazy, and Tibbles (2011) noted that the higher levels of commitment that exist in a relationship, the more likely the partners will want to continue the relationship. Relationship satisfaction, in this study, refers to the quality of a relationship based on factors that include closeness, happiness, and a sense of teamwork (Nazarinia, Schumm, & White, 2009).

Traditionally, relationship maintenance takes place face-to-face (FtF), which requires that both partners are physically present in the same location while communicating. Given the rise of internet and social media, relational maintenance behaviors can now also take place virtually. These maintenance behaviors often include online communication, which is defined as the use of

email, social media, or other Internet and computer-based technology to communicate.

Technology-based communication, then, is the use of both online communication and non-Internet communication technologies such as text messaging.

Various studies have investigated the frequency with which relationship partners use technology-based communication. Dainton and Stokes (2015) found that 24% of surveyed college students are “almost always” logged on to Facebook, with 57% checking the site several times per day. Almost all (98%) 18- to 36-year-olds have texted a romantic partner, while 56% of teens regularly use social media to communicate with a partner (Drouin & Landgraff, 2015; Lenhart et al., 2015). In Drouin and Landgraff’s (2015) survey of partners in the 18-36 age group, participants sent an average of 2298 text messages per month, and 67% have “sexted,” or used text messaging to send messages or photos with sexually explicit content (Drouin & Landgraff, 2015). Couples in long distance relationships spend an average of 127.44 minutes communicating with their partner online, while geographically close couples spend 71.41 minutes (the study did not specify the time frame for these amounts; Sideline et al., 2011). This is likely because geographically close couples have more opportunities for FtF communication.

Online communication is associated with various relationship maintenance factors and behaviors. Ledbetter (2014) found that a couple’s measured relationship closeness (feelings of intimacy and connection) is positively associated with frequency of text messaging. The research study measured partners’ similarity in attitudes about online communication and found that couples with more positive feelings toward disclosing personal information online use instant messaging more often as a communication tool, but use email less frequently (Ledbetter, 2014). The topics discussed in these communication methods vary, but they follow the same relationship maintenance patterns seen in FtF relationship maintenance conversations (Laliker &

Lannutti, 2014). In other words, technology-based communication does not change the type of messages exchanged between partners, but rather provides different channels for this communication. In some cases, it might make certain types of self-disclosure easier, since many people find it easier to discuss certain topics through a computer than FtF (Sideliner et al. 2011, Pauley & Emmers-Sommer, 2007).

Romantic couples use social media to communicate less frequently than friends or relatives, and non-cohabitating dating couples use online communication more often than married or cohabitating couples (Hales, 2011; Houser, Fleuriet, & Estrada, 2012). This is again likely due to the amount of time spent in FtF communication, but it is important to note that technology-based communication is not used to replace FtF interaction. Instead, it is a supplement, allowing opportunities for communication that would not occur otherwise (Hales, 2011). While Houser et al. (2012) found that women use instant messages for relationship maintenance more often than men, various other studies have showed few, if any, differences in the online communication behaviors of men and women in the context of romantic relationships (Baym, Zhang, Kunkel, Ledbetter, & Lin, 2007; Sideliner et al., 2011; Stafford & Canary, 1991). Older couples send fewer electronic messages to their partners, as well as partners who have been in their relationships longer (Drouin & Landgraff, 2015). Overall, while specific methods and frequencies of technology-based communication vary from couple to couple, it is clear that these communication methods are widely prevalent and quickly becoming an essential aspect of relationships.

Impacts of Online Relational Maintenance

Technology-based communication has been shown to have varied positive effects on relationship satisfaction, closeness, and other factors. For example, one survey of couples

reported that 63-73% of respondents feel that online communication has a positive impact on relationship quality, and that of all relationship attributes studied, overall quality is most positively impacted by online communication (Hales, 2011). Technology-based communication supports and enables connection between two partners, encouraging a close relationship (Drouin & Landgraff, 2015). It enables relational intimacy (Hales, 2011), spanning from full conversations to simple coordination between partners (for example, “Let’s meet at 6”). Technology-based communication allows partners to share information instantaneously, both major and mundane, allowing for a level of self-disclosure that might not have been present in the past.

However, technology has also produced negative effects on romantic relationships. Partners may use social media or text messaging to micro-manage their significant other’s life, send unwanted sexual messages, cheat on their partner with someone online, promote jealousy, and other negative behaviors (Dainton & Stokes, 2015; Drouin & Landgraff, 2015; Hales, 2011; Pauley et al., 2007). Facebook use, especially, has been linked to romantic jealousy, since it allows couples to see how often their partner communicates with other potential partners (Dainton et al., 2015). In fact, Dainton and Stokes (2015) found that the more time a partner spends using Facebook, the more jealousy they will experience in their relationship. Over a quarter of teenage daters reported feeling jealous or insecure in their relationship after seeing something posted on social media (Lenhart et al., 2015). Partners who cheat on their significant other frequently use email to communicate with their target, as opening a new email account is simple, making communication easy to conceal (Pauley et al., 2007). Technology-based communication, especially texting, instant messaging, and email, allow only text to be transmitted, cutting partners off from body language cues that are important in verbal

conversations. This might result in more frequent misunderstandings, and makes it easier for insecure partners to avoid having difficult conversations FtF (Drouin & Landgraff, 2015). In addition, Baym et al. (2007) found no significant differences between the effects of FtF communication, telephone communication, or online communication and relationship quality, which further suggests that technology is not a wholly positive influence on relationships. Overall, these results indicate that the benefits of technology-based communication in relationships are not without cost.

Technology is also often used to communicate between partners in long-distance relationships. Jiang and Hancock (2013) found that at least 75% of college students have been in a long-distance romantic relationship at some point. In their study, they also found that long-distance couples had, on average, been in relationships longer than geographically close couples (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Contrary to popular belief, long-distance couples have been shown to have higher levels of relationship satisfaction, intimacy, and trust (Jiang & Hancock, 2013; Stafford, 2005). Because of their lack of FtF communication opportunities, long-distance couples tend to use more technology-based communication, and to use communication methods that emphasize trust in the relationship (Stafford, 2005). However, long-distance couples may also suffer unique disadvantages compared to geographically close couples, and were shown to have higher levels of conflict avoidance, as well as to be more selective about presenting themselves in a positive manner when communicating (Stafford, 2005).

Based on the review of the literature, it is important to further research the connection between technology-based communication and relationship quality to explore the positive and negative effects, especially among college students, who tend to be heavy users of technology-based communication. Past studies have generally analyzed either text messaging or online

communication, but have not directly compared the effects of each. Also, past research has studied social media use in relationships as a whole, but few studies have differentiated between specific social networking sites, which might vary in their impact. Jiang and Hancock (2013) did find that levels of self-disclosure and intimacy between partners differed on various communication platforms, which suggests that media type has an influence on communication style. For this reason, the current study will delve into the use of specific methods of online communication, which include Facebook, email, instant messaging, Twitter, Instagram, Skype (or similar video chat services), multiplayer online gaming services (such as Steam or Xbox Live), Snapchat and others, in addition to text messaging. Based on previous research, the following hypotheses are advanced:

H1: There is a positive relationship between college students' overall frequency of technology-based communication and their romantic relationship satisfaction.

H2: Couples who differ in their primary mode of technology-based communication with report differences in relationship satisfaction.

Method

Participants

A total of 141 undergraduate students were surveyed; however, 31 participants were removed from the sample, since they either did not fully complete the survey, or indicated that they were not currently in a romantic relationship, for a final total of 110 surveys that were analyzed. Only current romantic relationships were studied, since participants may be unable (or unwilling) to accurately report on the satisfaction of a relationship that has ended. Only one member of each romantic pair was surveyed in order to eliminate issues arising from conflicting responses for frequency of communication (though this would be an interesting study for future

research). The average age of participants was 20.42 years ($SD = 1.18$), ranging from 18 to 28, with 67.3% juniors, 16.4% seniors, 14.5% sophomores, and 1.7% freshmen. Of the group, 78.18% were female and 21.82% of participants were male. The sample was predominantly white, with 93.6% of students reporting their race/ethnicity as Caucasian, 1.8% each for the Asian/Pacific Islander and Other options, and 0.9% each reporting as Hispanic/Latino, Black/African-American, and Multiracial. The average amount of time students had been in their current relationship was 19.44 months ($SD = 17.45$), ranging from 1 month to 5.5 years. Almost all participants were involved in heterosexual relationships (98.2%), with only 2 participants reporting homosexual relationships (1.8%). Thirty-seven or 33.6% participants reported that they considered their relationship a long-distance relationship, while 73 or 66.4% participants did not.

Procedure

Participants were asked to complete the survey via a link posted on various University of St. Thomas student Facebook groups, as well as the researcher's personal Facebook profile. Other participants were contacted and asked to take the survey via email. Before taking the survey, participants were given a consent form which described the procedure of the study, the possible risks and benefits, and the confidentiality of their responses. Participants were not compensated monetarily for completing the survey.

After signing the consent form, participants were directed to the survey itself. A screening question asked students to confirm that they were currently involved in a romantic relationship; participants who indicated that they were single did not complete the survey. First, participants were asked to report the average number of hours per day which they used various technology-based communication platforms to interact with their romantic partner. They were also asked to rank the list of communication platforms in order of most used to least used. Next,

participants were asked to what extent they agree or disagree with statements regarding the satisfaction level of their relationship. Lastly, participants answered demographic questions, including age, gender, race, length of relationship, whether they consider the relationship as long-distance or not, etc.

Variables

Frequency of Online Communication. The frequency of online communication with romantic partners was measured on a sliding scale where participants reported how many hours, in an average day, they use each method of communication, including texting ($M = 5.51$, $SD = 4.79$), Snapchat ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 2.98$), Instagram ($M = 1.13$, $SD = 3.57$), Facebook ($M = 1.07$, $SD = 1.44$), Skype or other video chat services ($M = 1.06$, $SD = 1.45$), Twitter ($M = 0.41$, $SD = 0.68$), Other ($M = 0.45$, $SD = 1.48$), and Steam or other online gaming services ($M = 0.23$, $SD = 0.71$). No participants reported any instant messaging use with a romantic partner. The mean score of total hours spent using technology-based communication to interact with a romantic partner was 9.18 ($SD = 7.34$). Participants also ranked these communication methods on an ordinal scale, with 1 being the most used and 10 being the least used. These specific communication platforms were chosen for their popularity among current college students.

Relationship Satisfaction. Romantic relationship satisfaction, was measured using a revised version of the Norton Quality Marriage Index. The measure was revised by Nazarinia, et al. (2009) to a 6-point Likert scale instead of the original 10-point scale, but it was revised to a 5-point scale (1= *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*) for this study in order to give participants a neutral option. The scale asked six questions about various aspects of relationship quality. Since the measure was originally developed to measure marital satisfaction, any questions using the term “marriage” have been changed to “relationship” for this study. For

example, participants were asked to agree or disagree with statements like “Our relationship is very stable,” and “I really feel like a team with my partner.” The result is a total score from 5 to 30, with 5 being the least satisfactory relationship and 30 being the most satisfactory relationship. The mean score of relationship satisfaction was 27.12 ($SD = 4.38$) out of a possible 30. The measure of satisfaction was found to be highly reliable, Cronbach’s $\alpha = .92$.

Results

Online Communication and Relationship Satisfaction

H1 predicted a positive correlation between total amount of communication and relationship satisfaction. A Pearson Correlation test resulted in $r(108) = .12, p = .10$. Thus, H1 was not supported.

H2 predicted that participants with different preferred online communication methods would have differing levels of relationship satisfaction. Out of the 10 options given, 91 or 82.73% of participants indicated that texting was their preferred technology-based communication method, and 19 or 17.27% indicated that they primarily used other methods. Because texting was so overwhelmingly preferred, all other methods were grouped together for analysis. An independent-samples t -test showed no significant difference between the satisfaction levels of those who preferred texting and those who preferred other methods, $t(108) = 1.23, p = .22$. Thus, H2 was not supported.

Additional Findings

An independent-samples t -test showed a significant difference between the amount of total communication reported by long-distance couples ($M = 12.57, SD = 7.84$) versus geographically close couples ($M = 7.47, SD = 6.48$), $t(108) = 3.63, p < .001$. However, another independent-samples t -test showed no significant differences between total satisfaction scores for

long-distance ($M = 26.46$, $SD = 5.33$) and geographically close couples ($M = 27.45$, $SD = 3.81$), $t(108) = 1.13$, $p = .32$. There was a nonsignificant correlation between relationship length and relationship satisfaction, $r(108) = .12$, $p = .23$.

Discussion

The goal of the study was to explore the relationships between technology-based communication use and relationship satisfaction in college students' romantic relationships. H1 predicted that relationship satisfaction would increase as the amount of technology-based communication increased and H2 predicted that participants who use different primary methods of technology-based communication would have differing scores of relationship satisfaction. Neither hypotheses were supported.

The nonsignificant findings for H1 suggests that factors besides communication frequency influence a couple's relationship satisfaction. It is also possible that couples communicate more frequently because they are satisfied with their relationship, instead of being more satisfied because they communicate more often. Since technology-based communication is seen as a supplement to rather than a replacement for traditional FtF communication (Hales, 2011), it is possible that couples with greater satisfaction simply have stronger communication skills, regardless of communication method.

Considering the benefits of technology-based communication, it is surprising that there was not a stronger correlation between technology-based communication frequency and relationship satisfaction. This is where some of the negative effects of technology-based communication discussed earlier might come in, such as increased jealousy and excessive partner monitoring. Each channel of communication has its benefits and drawbacks, and technology-based communication is no exception. For example, FtF communication allows for

the reading of body language as well as verbal interaction, but it also requires physical proximity and time. Technology-based communication can happen instantaneously, anywhere, but blocks many of the body language signals that are part of FtF conversations. Therefore, it might not be realistic to assume that any single communication method alone will have wholly positive or wholly negative effects on relationships, and more research must be done to determine what specific technology-based communication factors influence satisfaction. In addition, this study did not measure frequency of FtF communication, which would also affect satisfaction.

It is also surprising that H2, which stated that that different platforms of technology-based communication would result in significantly different levels of relationship satisfaction, was not supported. The findings might indicate that communication media might not matter as much as specific communication strategies used during communication or the specific relationship maintenance patterns used. It is also possible that this study is limited in including more variance among couples' technology preferences, as only 17.27% of the sample indicated a preferred communication method other than texting.

While no hypothesis was presented about long-distance relationships, the finding that there is no significant difference between the relationship satisfaction levels of long-distance and geographically close couples supports previous research (Roberts & Pistole, 2009; Stafford & Reske, 1990). It is unsurprising that there were significant differences between the frequency of technology-based communication in long-distance couples compared to geographically close couples. Since geographically close couples have more opportunity for FtF communication, they rely less on technology-based communication (Sideliner et al., 2011). Also, since long-distance relationships require high levels of commitment, they might be more likely to describe their relationship as satisfied in order to maintain the relationship (Stafford, 2010).

Limitations

One major limitation of this study is its sample size, which is not only small, but not representative of the college student population. The sample was not racially or ethnically diverse and was mostly female. Also, the sample consisted of an unusually high proportion of juniors, likely because the survey was posted on the junior class Facebook group, but no other groups, since the researcher did not have access to these. Future studies should make an effort to gather more diverse participants in order to ensure a sample that is representative of college students.

Another limitation of the study is the fact that the average relationship satisfaction score was relatively high ($M = 27.12$, $SD = 4.38$), which leaves little opportunity to study the frequency of technology-based communication in unhappy couples. This might be expected in surveys of dating couples, since partners are more likely to end an unsatisfying relationship rather than continue it. Alternately, since participants were self-selected, it is possible that unhappy partners would choose not to participate in a study about relationships. Future studies should consider studying married couples, who are likely to have more moderate satisfaction scores since it is easier to leave an unhappy dating relationship than to leave an unhappy marriage (Nazarinia et al., 2009).

It is also noteworthy that this study recruited participants using Facebook and email, thus biasing the sample toward heavy users of these technology-based communication methods. Participants in this study were generally frequent users of these communication methods, indicating that they spent just over nine hours a day using these platforms with their romantic partner. This study was not able to reach lighter users of these technologies, which might skew

the data in favor of heavy users simply because of their greater numbers. Future studies should consider not only recruiting on multiple online platforms, but also perhaps through physical pencil-and-paper surveys to ensure a more balanced sample.

Conclusion

While this study found no significant correlation between the frequency or type of technology-based communication and college student relationship satisfaction, the literature indicates that technology does influence relationships. Still, the current study supports previous research indicating the satisfaction of long-distance relationships, who reap numerous benefits from the availability of technology-based communication. Since this research showed that communication frequency is not the only defining factor in relationship satisfaction, future studies should focus not only on frequency, but also specific words, messages, and methods that couples use to maintain their relationships using technology. Future research should investigate the quality of communication between partners, not just quantity. Since social media and text messaging are a relatively recent phenomenon, research on this topic has only just begun.

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Appendix

Measure of Communication Frequency

For each method of communication listed, please indicate how many hours per day, in an average day, you use it to communicate with your relationship partner. If you do not use a method of communication, indicate “0”. The amount you use a type of online communication in general might differ from your use with your partner; please think **ONLY** of how often you use it to interact with your romantic partner.



Please rank the following methods of online communication from most frequently used to least frequently used, with 1 being your primary or most frequent method, and 10 being the last. For example, if you use email most frequently, rank this 1, and if Facebook is second most frequently used, rank this 2, and so on. You can re-order your answers by clicking and dragging.

Text message	1
Facebook	2
Snapchat	3
Skype (or other video chat services)	4
Twitter	5
Instagram	6
Online gaming services (Steam, Xbox Live, etc.)	7
Email	8
Instant Messaging (AIM, Windows Live Messenger, etc.)	9
Other (please specify)	10

Measure of Relationship Satisfaction

Now, I would like to ask you some questions about your romantic relationship. Please answer the following questions about your relationship with your current partner. For each statement, please indicate how much you agree or disagree.

1. We have a good relationship.

Strongly disagree – Somewhat disagree – Neither agree nor disagree – Somewhat agree – Strongly agree

2. Our relationship is very stable.

Strongly disagree – Somewhat disagree – Neither agree nor disagree – Somewhat agree – Strongly agree

3. Our relationship is strong.

Strongly disagree – Somewhat disagree – Neither agree nor disagree – Somewhat agree – Strongly agree

4. This relationship makes me happy.

Strongly disagree – Somewhat disagree – Neither agree nor disagree – Somewhat agree – Strongly agree

5. I really feel like part of a team with my partner.

Strongly disagree – Somewhat disagree – Neither agree nor disagree – Somewhat agree – Strongly agree

6. All things considered, I would say I am satisfied with my relationship with my partner.

Strongly disagree – Somewhat disagree – Neither agree nor disagree – Somewhat agree – Strongly agree

Demographic Questions

Finally, I would like to ask some basic questions about you and your current relationship.

What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Other/prefer not to answer

How old are you? _____

What is your year in college?

- ☐ First-year/freshman
- ☐ Sophomore
- ☐ Junior
- ☐ Senior

Which racial or ethnic group do you most identify with?

- ☐ White/Caucasian
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino
- ☐ Black or African-American
- ☐ Asian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ Native American
- ☐ Multiracial
- ☐ Other/Prefer not to answer

How many months have you been in your current relationship? _____

Do you consider this a long-distance relationship?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Is this a heterosexual or homosexual relationship?

- ☐ Heterosexual
- ☐ Homosexual
- ☐ Prefer not to answer