

The Effects of Text Messaging on Relational Intimacy

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Abstract

This case study examines the contemporary issue of relationship maintenance among young adults as it is regulated through a computer-mediated text messaging service by performing a case study analyzing relational maintenance techniques and breaches of expectancy between a subject and three correspondents. The researcher hypothesizes that,

1) as individual's relationships converge towards intimacy, dependence on computer-mediated communication would increase. 2) As dependence on computer-mediated communication increases, relational maintenance techniques will increase, improving relational satisfaction, and 3) when the desired intimacy is achieved, relational maintenance techniques drop while expectancy breaches increase, creating relational dissatisfaction. The researcher found that while H1 was incorrect, but H2 and H3 were, in that as dependence on computer-mediated communication increased, so did relational maintenance, which improved satisfaction. However, after participants reached their desired level of intimacy, relational maintenance techniques dropped while expectancy breaches increased, creating dissatisfaction and ultimately forcing individuals to outgrow the medium of SMS if sustained intimacy and closeness was desired.

Keywords: Relational Intimacy, Computer-mediated Communication, Relational Maintenance Techniques, SMS, MMS, Texting, Young Adults, Case Study, Brody and Peña, Stafford & Canary, Qualitative Research

“Texting has added a new dimension to language use, but its long-term impact is negligible. It is not a disaster” (Crystal, n.d).

“Texting is apocalyptic on some level. It's a reduction of things” (Cave. N.d).

Introduction

Short Message Services (SMS) and Multimedia Messaging Services (MMS), commonly known as text messages, are popular forms of Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) that involves sending short messages and media to and from individual's cell phones through a cellular connection to converse with others at any place and time in the world wherever cellular service is available. Created in 1992 for the cell phone company Vodaphone, the first text messages were simply intended to be a more advanced form of paging; the first SMS ever sent was to an executive of the company attending a Christmas party in a separate building, and simply read, “Merry Christmas”. It wouldn't be until the next year that texting would be available to the general public (Peritz, 2012), and years later, in the early 2000's that it would become a mainstream utility (Brown, Shipman, and Vetter 2007). Texting is one of the youngest mediums of communication, yet despite its adolescence, is one of the most popular forms: especially among young adults aged 18 - 24 who send an average of 109.5 texts a day (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2011). SMS and MMS share a rich history of communication technology and the evolution of mediated communication. In 1837, with the invention of the telegraph, Morse code quickly became a way for businesses and families to communicate important messages with others across the United States, replacing its predecessor the slow-and-steady handwritten letter (Goldman. 1997). Decades later, in 1876, Alexander Graham Bell uttered the famous lines, "Mr. Watson -- come here -- I want you." into his brand

new invention for transmitting sound over a wire, and invented an unprecedented form of immediate, mediated, interpersonal communication called the telephone. (Krasner 2012). With the discovery of radio waves by several scientists in the late 19th century and the first Trans-Atlantic communicative broadcast by Marconi in 1901, radio broadcasting quickly became the dominant form of communication between cargo ships at sea and radio stations on both sides of the Atlantic (Radio, 2015). Today, in this media-saturated culture, texting has shouldered the burden of not only transferring impersonal details between individuals but also playing an important part of creating and sustaining personal relationships, particularly among young adults (Spagnolli & Gamberini 2007). A study by Horstmanshof and Power (2005) depict adolescents' dependence on text messaging for relationship maintenance and connection with their friends: reaching out for friendship, comfort, and boredom relief. A study by Gonzales (2014) exhibits that text-based communication has a greater effect on self-esteem than face-to-face or voicemail communication; because text messaging has become such an integrated form of communication in modern life, it's important to analyze and accurately exhibit how texting affects relationships and communication among young adults (aged 18-25) as they utilize text messages to create and sustain interpersonal relationships with their peers. In this research project, a case study will be conducted on the text messages between an individual and three others of varying levels of intimacy, to discover how text messaging affects the growth of relationships and how computer-mediated relational maintenance techniques change, in concordance to perceived levels of intimacy.

Literature Review

This portion reviews significant literature pertaining to the evolution and utilization of CMC between young adults and how it affects their relationships.

Computer-mediated Communication

Text messaging (SMS and MMS) is a unique interpolation of the oldest basis of communication in the world, Interpersonal Communication, with arguably one of the newest theories of communication, the Computer-mediated Communication model (CMC). CMC is an umbrella term for any form of communication that is negotiated through a digital signal. While mediated communication is not a new phenomenon, (one only needs to recall the telegraph, radio, or the handwritten letter) CMC is particular in that it allows individuals to communicate in diverse, digital environments that mimic communicative environments found in real life (Holmes 2005), while granting control over the flow of communication and transcribing semi-permanent logs of the interactions for later reflection and review (Holmes 2009). Additionally, CMC is singular in that conversations may be initiated in one form of media, such as an online forum, and be carried over and continued in another form, such as email or text messaging. This continued form of communication across different platforms can create a series of unintelligible fragments that are only recognizable when viewed as a whole.

Text Messaging as Means of Communication

Text Messaging is by far the most popular format of mediated, interpersonal communication, far outstripping other mediated forms such as email, instant messaging, or even mobile voice messaging (“Long Live SMS” 2015). The reason for SMS’ mass popularity stems

from its unique combination of ease, privacy, unobtrusiveness, and versatility. The same utility that a parent may use to check up on their child is the same utility that a rebel may use to rally troops; the same utility a company may use to send a receipt is the same utility college students may use to plan a class project. SMS is used for emergencies, business, coordination, intimate communication, and casual conversation. The unobtrusive nature of SMS allows individuals to monitor incoming and outgoing messages, and the ease in which a participant can carry on a conversation, even among the hustle of activities, creates an attractive platform for communication.

The effects of positive messaging in a romantic relationship

In Luo and Tuney's study (2015), the researchers analyzed how constant, positive communication affected romantic relationships. The researchers analyzed whether the use of daily positive messaging could be used to improve romantic relationships between college students, and hypothesized that a couple's satisfaction with their relationship with their partner would increase when one of the partners sent a daily positive text to the other. Furthermore, the pair hypothesized that the closer the text related to a couple's specific relationship, the more satisfied, or happy, the couples would become. Contrary to the researcher's expectations, they found that participants showed a significant decrease in satisfaction with their relationship, not an improvement. When researchers adjusted the study and ran it a second time, they removed the negative effects that haunted the first study; however, they discovered their hypotheses had been only partially correct as participants felt an increase in personal satisfaction but their partner did not; the exchange of positivity was crippled by the medium of SMS messaging.

Equity, relational maintenance, and linguistic features of text messaging

Another study, performed by Brody and Peña (2015) explored how text messaging is used to maintain close friendships and romantic relationships. To do this, they utilized the definition of the term “maintenance” according to a previous study by Stafford & Canary (1991) and applied it to computer-mediated relationships by using a linguistic analysis tool to categorize language into the different categories. Stafford & Canary and broke maintenance down into five actions that assisted with the total upkeep of a relationship; they assert that relationship maintenance is divided into equal parts of positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, and shared tasks. The researchers hypothesized that:

1. Those in equitable, or fair, relationships would spend more time maintaining their relationship than those in inequitable, or unfair, relationships.
2. Increased maintenance in a relationship would improve satisfaction, and
3. Positive affect words such as nice, happy, glad, etc., would affect the relationship positively while negative affect words such as sad, angry, wrong, stupid, etc., would have negative effects on the relationship.

The procedure entailed having the participants complete an online survey detailing their relationship and what forms of maintenance they most often employ, perceived relational equity, and relationship satisfaction. Finally, the participants were instructed to share the last ten text messages they had taken part in, and the text messages were then analyzed by the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Program (LIWC), which analyzed their messages for the cognitive, emotional,

and structural elements within. The researchers discovered that on average, more maintenance strategies were used for friendship relationships as opposed to romantic relationships, and that, in unison with their hypothesis, an increase in maintenance coincided with an increase in relationship satisfaction; except, interestingly, for the trait of openness in romantic couples. Additionally, the researchers discovered that, for romantic relationships, negative affect words had a significant negative impact on a couple's relationship satisfaction, while positive impact words were shown to have little positive impact; depicting that, at least for couples in a romantic relationship, negative words had significantly more impact than positive ones.

Methods

Research Question and Hypotheses

RQ: How does text messaging affect individual's relationships as they converge towards and reach maturity?

H1: As individual's relationships converge towards intimacy, dependence on computer-mediated communication will increase.

H2: As dependence on computer-mediated communication increases, relational maintenance techniques will increase, improving relational satisfaction.

H3: When the desired intimacy is achieved, relational maintenance techniques drop while expectancy breaches increase, creating relational dissatisfaction.

Case Study

According to Yin, the definition of a case study is twofold. Yin asserts that a case study is:

1. An empirical examination that investigates a contemporary issue in detail and within the context of its occurrence in the real world; particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context may not be readily distinguishable.
 2. An inquiry about a unique circumstance with many variables where the correlation between it and similar events may be impossible, or builds on the propositions of a previous study to help guide the collection and analysis of data.
- (2014)

This case study examines the contemporary issue of relationship maintenance among young adults as it is mediated through a text messaging application; using documentation, interviewing, and physical artifacts to triangulate results. In this case study, three real world, unplanned and unedited records of text messages between the subject and a classmate, best friend, and spouse, are analyzed using an adapted version of Brody and Peña's study of relational maintenance strategies, utilizing a modulated form of Stafford & Canary components of relational maintenance with an additionally created set of components pertaining to breaches of expectation. These sets were used to categorize various forms of maintenance and non-maintenance in a mediated conversation in the context of the conversation and level of intimacy between the subject and their correspondent, in combination with a personal interview completed using both face-to-face and SMS methods, and artifacts of the text messages.

Subjects

The subjects of this study include the participant (aged 21), a classmate of three years, the subject's best friend of sixteen years, and the subject's spouse (known 9 years, married 6 months). In an interview, the subject defined their relationships with the other participants in these terms.

- **The Subject:** The subject is a 21 year old college student, studying at a university, which is where they met their classmate. They met their best friend and spouse through family, and high school.
- **The classmate:** The subject defines their relationship as that of a close friend. The subject said they enjoy being involved in each other's life and that she often receives encouragement from the other.
- **The best friend:** The subject refers to their best friend as their "Ride or Die", and that they're on "a different level" than other friends. They've known each other since early childhood and share the most history together; the best friend has since moved away and they use texting to keep in touch and updated on each other's lives.
- **The spouse:** The subject and their spouse have known each other for 9 years, and recently got married in June of 2015. The subject noted that since marriage, they primarily use text messaging to reach each other while at they are at work, and to update the other on events happening to them throughout the day.

Methodology

Due to the specific nature of the case study, admissible participants were stringently confined to young adult aged subjects who were 18-25, married or in a committed relationship of

several years, and would allow access to the unedited records of their text messages with several people. After several failed attempts to locating willing participants, or having participants initially confirm but then back out before data collection could begin, a subject appeared that was 21 years of age, married within the year, and allowed the researcher complete access to their text messaging records with other people.

The subject was asked to select three contacts that represented differing levels of intimacy; a classmate or coworker, their best friend, and their significant other. The subject chose a collegiate classmate of several years, their best friend since childhood, and their spouse of 6 months; access was granted to the subject's laptop, which archived the subject's SMS/MMS records through a cloud-based application that synced with their cell phone. After a precursory review of the text messages, initial plans were made to analyze the subject's texts between Jan. 1st 2015, and the last sync date, Oct. 30th, 2015. However, this plan was abandoned after a second review, and the mass amount of texts was deemed too large to be feasibly analyzed in a timely and efficient manner; particularly in the case of the subject and their spouse, which far outstripped the other interactions. Ultimately, 722 individual messages were taken for analysis between the subject and their classmate, spanning a period of 6 months and 28 days, 503 and messages were taken between the subject and their best friend, spanning 6 months and 26 days, and 732 messages were taken between the subject and their spouse spanning an incredibly short time of a mere 10 days, lasting from Oct 20, - Oct 30, 2015. Altogether, a total of 1,957 individual messages recorded between April 4th, 2015 and Oct 30. 2015. In addition to accessing their laptop, the subject agreed to a short interview where they identified a few of their habits, and main purposes for texting the other participants in question.

Components of Relational Maintenance and Expectancy Breach

To determine which maintenance techniques were utilized or ignored the most often in any given relationship, a modulated form of Stafford & Canary's components of relational maintenance was used to gauge how much effort was exercised when interacting with the other participants. Canary & Stafford (1992) assert that there are five separate components of relational maintenance; positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, and shared tasks. They define them as such:

- **Positivity** refers to language that clearly would be interpreted as uplifting, encouraging, or lighthearted (e.g. good, love, sweet).
- **Openness** refers to conversation candidly discussing the relationship itself (e.g. their history together, problems, and their future).
- **Assurance** refers to affirmation about their happiness with the state of relationship with the other person.
- **Social networks** refer to common affiliations (i.e. talking about people they both know) and planning events with one another.
- **Share tasks** refer to communication oriented towards a shared goal (e.g. completing a group project, or running an errand).

In addition to Canary and Stafford's definitions, components were added that helped define markers of relational intimacy that could not be defined by the components above; disclosure and conversational depth.

- **Disclosure** refers to sharing intimate details that may open up the sender to embarrassment or betrayal, therefore displaying trust that the recipient will protect them and their information.
- **Conversational Depth** refers to subjects where both participants are required to actively use empathy to understand and interact with the other, thereby demonstrating attentiveness and care for the other.

Additionally, components of expectancy breaches were created to explain action (or inaction) that broke the established patterns of relational intimacy, creating discord between the participants; they are labeled negativity, inattentiveness, dissonance, and triviality.

- **Negativity** is the antithesis of positivity as defined by Canary and Stafford. (e.g. bad, stupid, stop)
- **Inattentiveness** refers to ignoring an attempt at, or continuation of, a conversation. (e.g. When a message is sent asking a question and the other ignores it without an excuse)
- **Dissonance** refers to messages that exhibit stress, confusion, or disagreement with the other participant's message.
- **Triviality** is the opposite of conversational depth; it refers to conversations that require little or no empathy or diligence to carry on the conversation.

The difference between this study and Brody and Peña's is that Brody and Peña attempted to quantify relational maintenance techniques through linguistic parity while this study endeavors to explore the qualitative aspects of relational maintenance, as meaning is often relative, and must be observed within the context of its creation for the clearest understanding.

For instance, in this particular study, the subject articulated in an interview that the word “dummy” was a pet term between them and their spouse, thereby interpreted as a positive interaction; whereas the term dummy may be considered negative to another individual.

Qualitative Details

Classmate : The texts between the subject and their classmate mainly focused on sharing tasks and social networking; planning study sessions and getting job applications together, and sharing experiences of class work, jobs, pets, and their significant others. Instances of conversational depth occurred several times when the subject’s classmate approached them and disclosed information pertaining to relational difficulty with their significant other, and the subject responded with encouragement and advice, relating their own experiences and the steps they took to overcome similar obstacles. They also periodically assured one another of their friendship amidst conversation, and regularly used positive language with one another (fig.1). There was very little dissonance, and when the subject informed their classmate that their grandmother was in the hospital, their friend asked for updates after a gap of inattentiveness for several hours (fig. 2). There was a nominal amount of negative language, but it was usually directed towards a shared task or personal experience, not the subject (fig. 3), and the majority of their messages used complete sentences to finish out a thought in a single message.

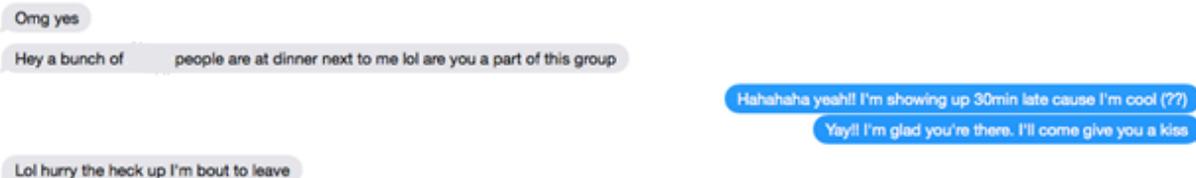


Figure 1: An artifact exemplifying assurances interjected into conversation

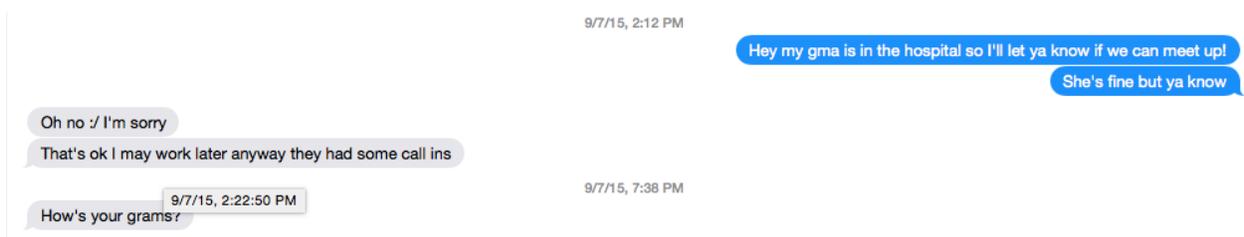


Figure 2: A display of empathy after a period of inattentiveness.

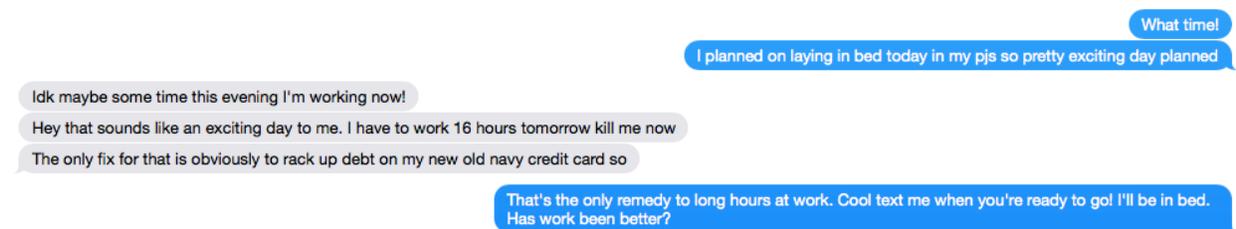


Figure 3: An artifact exemplifying negative language used towards shared tasks.

Best Friend: The subject and their best friend share the least amount of texts, but out of all three conversations, disclose the most to one another. The majority of their texts revolved around disclosing embarrassing photographs, intimate stories, openly discussing their relationship history, and social networking. When conversing, a large amount of positive language and assurances was used with one another, as well as a fair amount of negative language and dissonance (fig. 4). Usually, the phenomenon was paired, with one of the two first stating the negative or dissonant comment, and then assuring the other with affirmations of friendship and using positive language. The depth and triviality of their messages were essentially even. The pair often interjected humor and moved from in-depth subjects to trivial ones, before returning to the original topic at hand. It should also be noted that for particular situations, the pair opted to call one another instead of having an in-depth conversation over

SMS (fig. 5).



Figure 4: An artifact exemplifying dissonance.

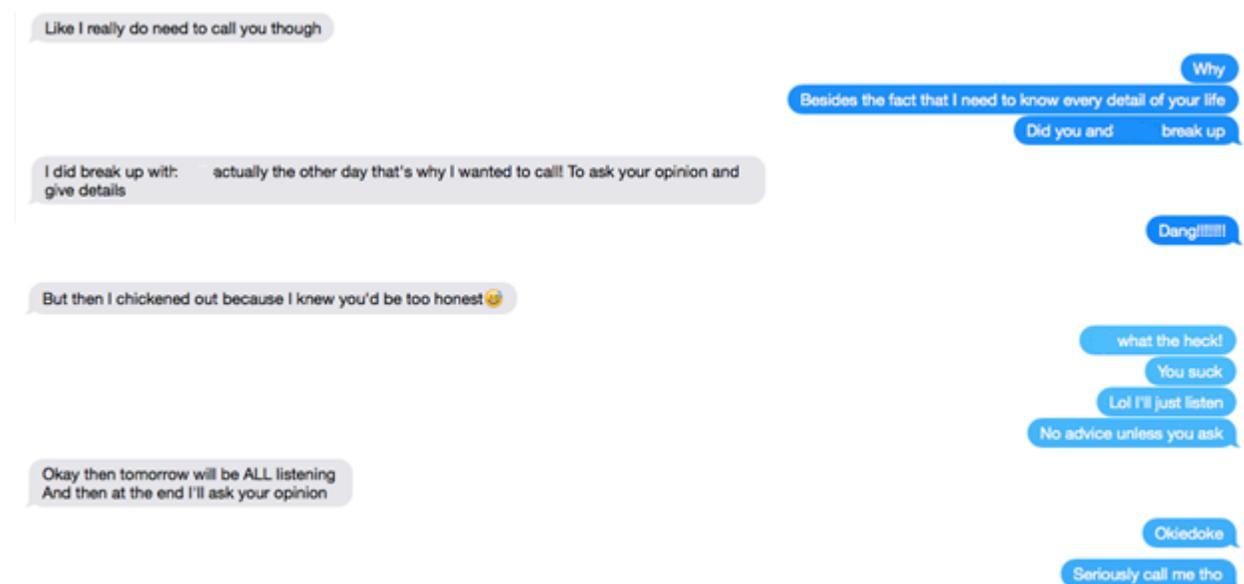


Figure 5: An artifact exemplifying the interjection of humor, and reaching CMC limits of depth.

Spouse: The subject and their spouse had the most densely packed amount of messages per conversation. In a span of ten days, the subject and their spouse sent to one another more than half a year's worth of text messages when compared to the subject's classmate and best friend. However, there were virtually no instances of depth displayed in the conversation besides discussing shared tasks, which were often paired with a fair amount of dissonance (fig. 6).

Meanwhile, shared tasks and assurances made up the majority of the texts between the two, (fig.

7). Interestingly, the pair echoed the results of Brody and Peña's study, and exhibited a higher sensitivity to negative language and expectancy breaches, experiencing dissonance if inattentiveness occurred or if assurances were not returned in kind (fig. 8). Finally, the pair developed a stylistic design for the majority of their messages that involved sending short, grammatically incorrect messages equivalent to using cutesy, kiddy talk with one another in real life as an expression of care (fig. 9)

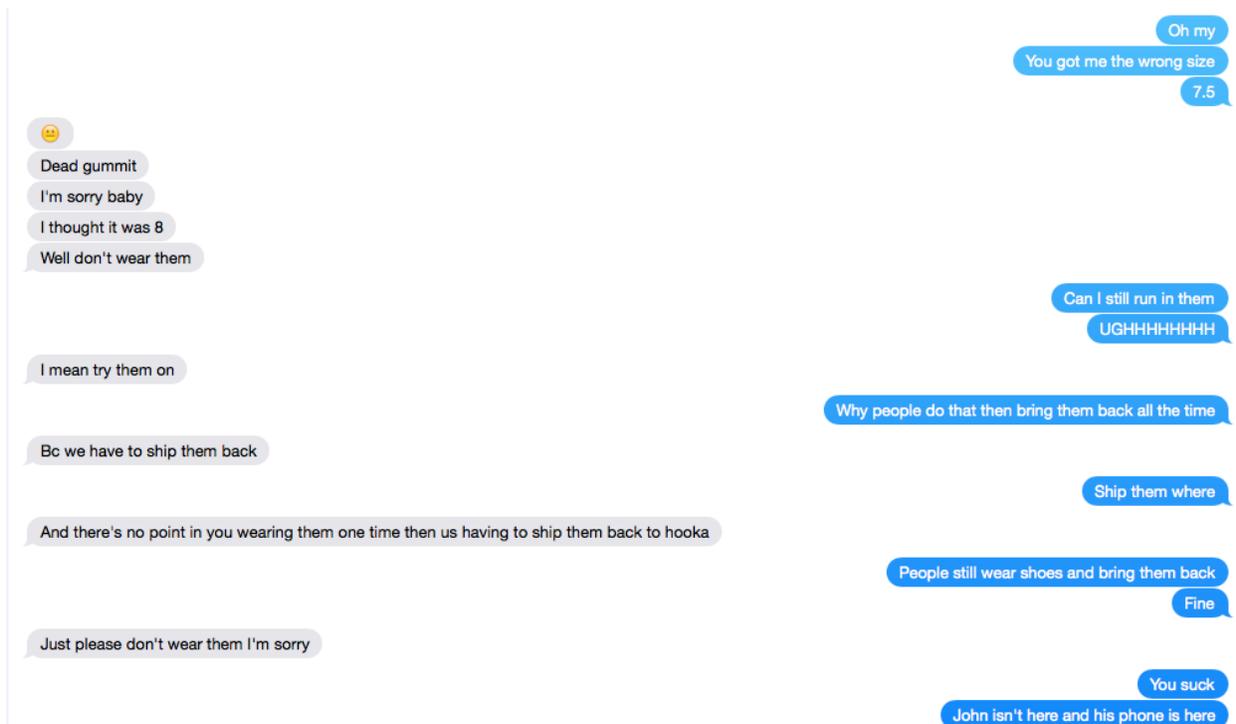


Figure 6: An artifact exemplifying moderate conversational depth accompanied by dissonance.

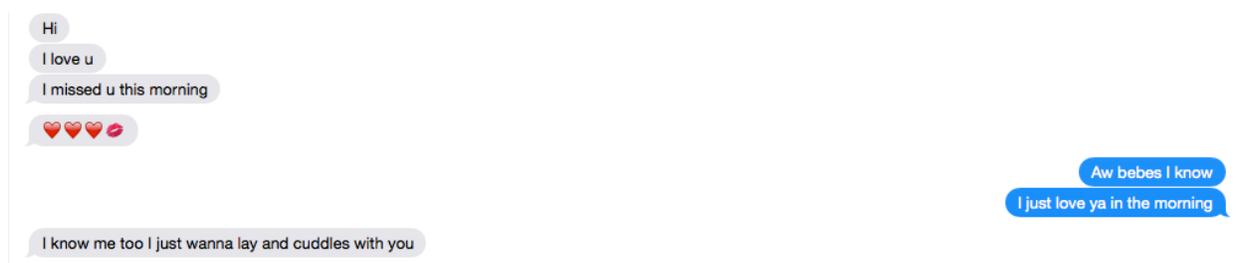


Figure 7: An artifact exemplifying shared assurances.

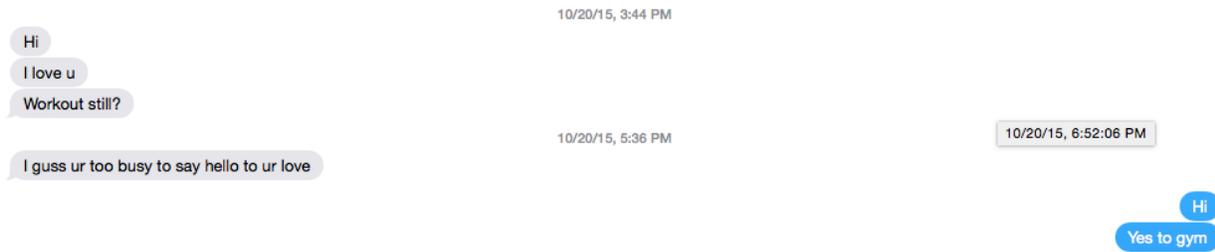


Figure 8: An artifact exemplifying higher sensitivity to expectation breaches.



Figure 9: An artifact exemplifying stylistic kiddy talk as an expression of love.

Results

The results of this study confirm H2 and H3, but not H1.

H1 stated an individual's dependence on computer-mediated communication would increase as relationships converge towards intimacy. It was clear that the subject and their best friend were more intimate than the subject and their classmate, yet they exchanged fewer text messages.

However, the messages they did exchange displayed massive amounts of trust with one another, thus proving this hypothesis false.

H2 stated that as computer-mediated communication increased, so would relational maintenance; improving satisfaction. This was the case as the subject and their classmate used more components of relational maintenance while avoiding expectancy breaches where they could,

while the subject and their best friend had a balanced amount of both maintenance techniques and breaches of expectancy, proving this hypothesis true.

H3 stated that when desired intimacy is achieved, relational maintenance techniques would taper off and expectancy breaches would rise. The subject and their best friend had a higher rate of expectancy breaches than the subject and their classmate, and the subject and their spouse had the most expectancy breaches of them all; as well as displaying a higher sensitivity to the breaches as they appeared. The subject and their spouse shared the largest amount of trivial conversation and depicted little depth despite the amount of texts sent to one another, depicting that less care was needed as both parties already felt secure due to their achieved level of intimacy.

Discussion

The question of how text messages affect relational intimacy hinges on how individuals interpret and respond to the other's messages. In face to face interpersonal communication, information is transferred from one person to another using conceptual language, body language, and tonal inflection to assist the intended message; an SMS is sent in a written format to be interpreted through linguistic qualities alone. To counterbalance the lack of information ordinarily received through face to face communication, individuals and messaging services have created techniques to help assist the message's intended purpose. On the technological end of the spectrum, the utilization of MMS allows individuals to insert emojis, pictures, and video to represent their emotions, thereby acting as a replacement for body language. On the humanistic end of the spectrum, individuals have created a series of techniques that they implement when engaging in CMC. As intimacy grows between individuals, rhythms of communication form and evolve, creating unique communication patterns specific to individual relationships. However,

analysis shows that as some point intimacy levels transcends the medium of SMS/MMS. This is depicted by the lack of in-depth in the conversations between the subject and their spouse, which is probably the result of their in-depth conversations happening face to face, and the agreed decision between the subject their best friend to disclose especially personal information over the phone; suggesting that at some point SMS/MMS CMC reaches an “empathetic limit” where efficient communication through CMC become “too deep” for participants and they naturally converge towards richer forms of media to disclose information and share empathy. This suggests that while less intimate relationships benefit from maintenance techniques over SMS, more intimate relationships desire the ability to empathize to deeper degree, and the techniques used slowly lose their meaning as intimacy is reached.

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