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I just text to say I love you: Partner similarity in texting and relationship satisfaction



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ABSTRACT

Young adults increasingly rely on text messaging in the ongoing maintenance of romantic relationships. However, results have been mixed regarding the implications of text messaging for relationship satisfaction. Thus, in a sample of 205 young adults (ages 18 to 29) in romantic relationships, this study examined the role of perceived texting similarity between romantic partners in predicting relationship satisfaction. Controlling for gender, length of relationship, and attachment anxiety and avoidance, regression analyses found that greater perceived similarity between self and partner in overall text messaging use, as well as greater perceived similarity in frequency of initiating and saying hello via text messaging specifically, were associated with greater relationship satisfaction. Findings highlight the importance of perceived similarity between romantic partners regarding texting behaviors for their level of satisfaction, even when taking into account the robust predictors of attachment anxiety and avoidance. Results suggest that concordance in use of text messaging can be a point of intervention in romantic relationships, and future research should continue to explore the role of similarity in texting in romantic as well as other relationships.

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1. Introduction

Text messaging is ubiquitous in today's society. With 98% of young adults in the U.S. ages 18 to 29 owning a cell phone, and 79% of cell phone owners using text messaging, texting has become a pervasive form of communication (Pew Research Center, 2015). Texting has long surpassed phone calls in this age group (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010; Nielsen Online, 2008), who represent the largest users of text messaging by age group (Smith, 2011). A recent study found that undergraduate students spend an average of over 90 min per day texting (Roberts, Yaya, & Manolis, 2014). Text messaging plays a major role in the daily management of relationships among young adults (Brody & Peña, 2015), such as communicating urgent information inconspicuously (Pettigrew, 2009).

Given the focus during this developmental stage on romantic relationships (Erikson & Erikson, 1998), it follows that texting plays a prominent role specifically in communication in romantic relationships as well. For example, 42% of young adults have used text

messaging to communicate sexual intent (Harrison, Bealing, & Salley, 2015) and 31% of teens reported having been broken up with by a partner over text message (Lenhart, Anderson, & Smith, 2015). Past research on the connection between text messaging and relationship satisfaction has yielded mixed results (e.g. Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, & Grant, 2011; Hall & Baym, 2012; Schade, Sandberg, Bean, Busby, & Coyne, 2013), suggesting the need for more research on the nuances of the role of text messaging behavior in romantic relationships. Thus, in a sample of young adults in committed romantic relationships, the current investigation explored for the first time the associations of relationship satisfaction with perceived similarity between oneself and one's partner in frequency of initiating text messages, and in the content included in text message conversations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Romantic relationships and relationship satisfaction

A key feature of development during emerging adulthood is the formation of romantic relationships (Erikson & Erikson, 1998). Relationship satisfaction is particularly important, as relationship satisfaction for both members of a romantic couple is associated

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with lower odds of breaking up over time (Hendrick, Hendrick, & Adler, 1988) as well as with greater individual well-being, such as happiness in young adults (Diener & Seligman, 2002). Decreases in relationship satisfaction over time have also been associated with increased psychological distress and decreased life satisfaction over time for both men and women (Whitton, Rhoades, & Whisman, 2014), as well as with greater severity of depressive symptoms in women (Whitton & Whisman, 2010).

Given the importance of relationship satisfaction for relationship outcomes and individual well-being, much research has aimed to identify factors that affect relationship satisfaction, including different forms of communication. For example, showing physical affection (Gulledge, Gulledge, & Stahmann, 2003), using humor positively (Butzer & Kuiper, 2008), having positive conflict styles (Cann, Norman, Welbourne, & Calhoun, 2008), and engaging in verbal comforting (Burlison, Kunkel, & Birch, 1994) have all been associated with greater relationship satisfaction. These findings suggest that positive forms of in-person communication between partners can contribute to greater relationship satisfaction. Given that young adults are conducting a large portion of their romantic communication over text messaging (see Brody & Peña, 2015; Pettigrew, 2009), it is critical currently to understand the connection between text-messaging based communication and relationship satisfaction, which may have long-term impact on the life satisfaction of both parties (Gustavson, Røysamb, Borren, Torvik, & Karevold, 2016), and which the current investigation aimed to explore.

2.2. Text messaging and romantic relationships

Research on text messaging in romantic relationships has found different reasons or uses of text messaging. For example, Coyne et al. (2011) found that the most common reasons young adults used electronic communication (including text messaging as a close second to cell phone calls) in their romantic relationships were to express affection (75%), to discuss serious issues that they felt could be confrontational (25%), and to apologize (12%). Further, younger participants (17–25 years old) were more likely to bring up these topics over text than older participants were (Coyne et al., 2011). In a qualitative study that involved pairs of romantic couples, friends, and family members, individuals were found to use text messaging to disguise their feelings or to broach potentially uncomfortable topics and hide emotions (Pettigrew, 2009). Another qualitative study found that young adults find text messaging to help reduce the potential awkwardness of certain interactions and to offer less impeded communication with others (Kelly et al., 2012). Similarly, another study of young adults found that participants reported honestly expressing themselves to others over text message more often than in person (Crosswhite, Rice, & Asay, 2014).

Research also suggests that different uses of text messaging can have different consequences for relationship functioning and outcomes. In a sample of young adults, Brody and Peña (2015) found that particular language, specifically positive emotional words used in text messaging were associated with greater relationship satisfaction, while negative emotional words were associated with lower satisfaction in both friendships and romantic relationships. In multiple studies, discussing the nature of the relationship (Brody & Peña, 2015), broaching difficult topics, and saying something hurtful to a partner (Coyne et al., 2011; Schade et al., 2013) over text message have been associated with lower relationship satisfaction. A recent experimental study conducted with undergraduates manipulated the content of text messages sent to participants' romantic partners; findings indicated that initiating texting, regardless of content, had a positive effect on relationship

satisfaction of the participant sending the texts, but not on the satisfaction of the recipient of the texts (Luo & Tuney, 2015).

Research on relationship outcomes associated with text messaging frequency between romantic partners has had mixed results. One study of young adults in romantic relationships found no association between text messaging frequency and relationship satisfaction (e.g., Luo, 2014). Another study with pairs of young adults in romantic relationships or close friendships found that text messaging was negatively associated with satisfaction due to creating increased relationship expectations, which in turn leads to overdependence (Hall & Baym, 2012). Taken together, research highlights that text messaging behaviors can play an important role in relationship satisfaction, and that the specific content discussed over text messages varies. Yet, research in this area is limited and has found mixed results. Thus, the current investigation aimed to further explore the consequences of text messaging behaviors for romantic relationships.

2.3. The role of similarity

Much research suggests that similarity of values or attitudes about communication plays an important role in attraction and relationship satisfaction. For example, individuals are found to be more attracted to peers who possess similar communication skills as them (Burlison & Samter, 1996). Young adult couples who similarly value affectively oriented forms of communication, such as ego support (the ability to make others feel good about themselves), comforting, and conflict management, have been found to be more attracted to their partners and to report greater relationship satisfaction (Burlison et al., 1994). Also, couples who have similar levels of emotional intelligence tend to be more satisfied in their relationships than those who do not (Smith, Heaven, & Ciarrochi, 2008).

Limited research has explored the role of similarity in text messaging specifically. Some research suggests that similarity in values about text messaging can be more important than commonly accepted norms, as participants reported wanting their romantic partner's text messaging norms/etiquette to reflect their own behaviors rather than commonly accepted norms (e.g., not to use a phone when out at dinner, to speak quietly on the phone when in public; Hall, Baym, & Miltner, 2014). However, past work has not explored the association between perceived similarity of text-based communication between partners and relationship satisfaction, which the current investigation aimed to do.

2.4. The current investigation

The current investigation aimed to build on and extend the past research reviewed above in order to contribute to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the role of text messaging behaviors in the romantic relationships of young adults. Specifically, we aimed to test the hypothesis that greater perceived similarity between oneself and one's partner in frequency of initiating text messages and in the content included in text messages would be associated with greater relationship satisfaction among a sample of young adults in committed romantic relationships. To explore a range of uses of text messages in romantic relationships, we assessed perceived similarity between oneself and one's partner in multiple text messaging behaviors, including frequency of initiating text message conversations with one's partner, as well as the frequency of using text messages to show affection, bring up an issue one does not want to discuss in person, say hello or start a casual conversation, and express anger toward one's partner. To isolate the unique consequences of similarity in text messaging behaviors, in multivariate analyses, we controlled for potentially

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