Equity, relational maintenance, and linguistic features of text messaging

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed relational communication via text-messaging in both romantic relationships and close friendships. Research on relational maintenance suggests that relational equality predicts the enactment of maintenance behaviors. The findings supported the predictions of equity theory in a text-messaging context – equity predicted relational maintenance use in friendships. However, openness was inversely related to satisfaction in romantic relationships, implying that discussing the nature of the relationship via text messaging decreases relational satisfaction. Furthermore, the linguistic style of messages was associated with relational satisfaction in romantic relationships and close friendships. Use of negative emotional words hindered relational satisfaction in both romantic relationships and friendships, and use of positive emotional words was associated with increased satisfaction in friendships. These results indicate the centrality of relationally-oriented communication in text messaging, and provide further support for research highlighting the explanatory power of language use in mediated communication.

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1. Introduction

They do it late at night when their parents are asleep. They do it in restaurants and while crossing busy streets. They do it in the classroom with their hands behind their back. They do it so much their thumbs hurt.

[(Hafner, 2009, para 1)]

Despite the continued predictions that individuals will choose "richer" media for relational contexts (e.g., Cummings, Lee, & Kraut, 2006), text-centric technologies, such as instant messaging (IM), email, and text messaging (i.e., the sending of textual messages via mobile phones) are still used more frequently, even with the increasing access to more visually and auditory rich technology, such as social networking sites, virtual environments, and video conferencing (Walther & Ramirez, 2009). Indeed, text messaging is far and away the most frequently reported behavior of mobile phone users, and appears to fulfill an integral niche in communication behavior (Duggan, 2013). Text messaging has several affordances that may explain its persistent popularity. For example, texting provides the opportunity for "perpetual contact" (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). As opposed to other forms of mediated communication, which rely on an Internet connection and larger hardware, such as a laptop or desktop computer, mobile phones allow individuals to be contacted at any time and in any place as

long as their phone is on and has a signal. Text messaging is also asynchronous and allows users to answer on their own time schedule (Katz & Aakhus, 2002).

An investigation of relational communication and maintenance behavior within text messaging is important for several reasons. Traditionally, research on relational maintenance assumed that the behavior must occur in face-to-face contexts, without the aid of technology (Stafford, Kline, & Dimmick, 1999). Accumulated research suggests that relational maintenance behaviors are the key reason for online interaction (e.g., Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Research has also found that individuals use computer-mediated communication to sustain their romantic relationships and friendships (Johnson, Haigh, Becker, Craig, & Wigley, 2008; Rabby & Walther, 2003; Ramirez & Broneck, 2009), and the relational outcomes may depend on the availability of cues, synchronicity, and the mobility of the communication medium (Jiang & Hancock, 2013).

Although recent studies have investigated the connection between attachment and use of text messaging in romantic relationships (Morey, Gentzler, Creasy, Oberhauser, & Westerman, 2013) and the sending of hurtful text messages in friendships (Hall & Baym, 2012; Jin, 2013), few studies have analyzed the use of text messaging to maintain romantic relationships and friendships. In one exception, the degree of synchronicity, or how quickly individuals responded to text messages, was found to relate to the social orientation of messages more than the frequency of text messaging (Brody, Mooney, Westerman, & McDonald, 2009). Furthermore, participants reported frequent use of text messaging

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for strategic relational maintenance purposes (Brody et al., 2009). This finding is consistent with the assumption that computer-mediated communication offers individuals the ability to communicate more strategically than they might in other contexts (Walther & Parks, 2002). However, another study found that while more mobile phone calls was positively related to relational outcomes such as uncertainty, love, or commitment, no such association was found between text messaging use and relational outcomes (Jin & Peña, 2010). Overall, though there are documented exceptions (e.g., Jin & Peña, 2010), it appears that strategically frequent texting and quicker replies may serve relational maintenance purposes among stable romantic partners.

The present study attempts to reconcile these findings. For the purposes of this study, maintenance is defined as strategic communication behaviors used by individuals to ensure the continued existence and desired level of closeness of their relationship (Canary & Stafford, 1994). Much previous research has found a strong link between the use of maintenance strategies and relational characteristics, such as perceived equity, satisfaction, and closeness (Baxter & Dindia, 1990; Canary & Stafford, 1992; Dindia & Canary, 1993; Oswald, Clark, & Kelly, 2004; Stafford & Canary, 2006). This study extends these findings to investigate the theoretical basis for relational maintenance via text messaging. Moreover, the extant research contends that the equity – or fairness of input/outcome ratios – of romantic relationships and friendships is the fundamental theoretical mechanism which predicts maintenance behavior (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Stafford & Canary, 2006). The present study extends this work by investigating the function of equity in the maintenance of relationships via text messaging.

Researchers have called for extending traditional computer-mediated communication research to explain communicative behavior in relational settings (see Stafford, 2005). Early studies looking at relational dynamics in computer-mediated communication preferred short-term over long-term research designs, which made it more difficult to tap into relational building and maintenance in ongoing relationships in which people could communicate at will (Walther, 1992). The present study addresses the concern about longitudinal dynamics by examining the relational outcomes of texting within preexisting relationships. In addition we can learn much about online relationships by examining language use in mediated interactions. For example, Walther (2004) calls for linguistic analyses of relational behavior within mediated settings and, thus, the present study investigates the relationships between word choice in text messages and relational quality.

In sum, the present study tests whether the use of maintenance strategies over text messaging is predicted by equity theory, and also examines whether the linguistic features of text messages predict relational outcomes. The following section reviews the relevant literature regarding relational maintenance behavior, computer-mediated communication, and how relational features may affect the linguistic features of text messages.

1.1. Relational maintenance and equity theory

Four functions of relational maintenance behaviors have been advanced: to keep a relationship in existence, to keep a relationship in a specific state or condition, to keep a relationship in satisfactory condition, and to repair a relationship (Dindia & Canary, 1993). Significant overlap may occur between each of the functions because these behaviors are all expected to sustain ongoing relationships.

In addition, Canary and Stafford (1994) assert that relational maintenance behaviors are necessary for the success of any relationship, and derived an exhaustive typology of the behaviors. Five maintenance strategies have generally emerged: *positivity, openness, assurances, social networks,* and *sharing tasks* (Stafford &

Canary, 1991). *Positivity* implies cheerful, enjoyable, and optimistic messages. *Openness* entails directly discussing the nature of the relationship (relational meta-communication), as well as talking about the future direction of the relationship. *Assurances* concern messages that convey commitment and an appreciation for the relationship, such as telling another partner that you love or appreciate them. *Social networks* imply mutual reliance on common affiliations, as well as talking about or making plans to spend time with mutual friends and family members. Finally, *sharing tasks* includes communication about shared activities, such as errands or chores (Canary & Stafford, 1992).

As mentioned above, equity theory is a key predictor of maintenance use in relationships (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Stafford & Canary, 2006). Specifically, equity of a relationship relates to the perceived degree of outcomes and inputs within a relationship. Based on that rationale, individuals may perceive themselves as under-benefited, equitable, or overbenefited within any given relationship (Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1973). Married couples tend to strive for equitable relationships, and put forth more effort to maintain the relationship if it is equitable (Canary & Stafford, 1992). Additionally, relationships that are equitable are more emotionally rewarding (Sprecher, 1998). Equity of a relationship has a curvilinear relationship with maintenance behavior. For instance, individuals that perceive their relationships as equitable enact more maintenance behaviors than individuals that perceive themselves as overbenefited or underbenefited in their relationships (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Stafford & Canary, 2006). In other words, relational partners who consider their relationships fair, balanced, and equal regarding the amount of effort put into the relationship use more relational maintenance strategies than individuals that think they are putting more or less effort into their relationship than their partner.

The extant research has supported this link between relational maintenance behaviors and perceived relational equity in marital relationships and other types of relationships. For instance, equity is related to more maintenance behaviors in cross-sex friendships (Messman, Canary, & Hause, 2000) and parent-adolescent relationships (Vogl-Bauer, Kalbfleisch, & Beatty, 1999). However, the connection between equity and relational maintenance has not been fully examined in mediated contexts. For example, though studies show that friends and romantic partners maintain their relationships through IM (Ramirez & Broneck, 2009), email (Johnson et al., 2008), and social networking sites (McEwan, 2013), this research has not connected online maintenance behaviors to perceived equity and relational satisfaction. In addition, the available studies have not looked at how relational maintenance strategies and perceived equity plays out when romantic partners communicate using text messaging. Assuming that the predictive power of equity theory on relational maintenance behaviors extends to text-messaging, we predict that:

H1a. Individuals in more equitable close friendships will report increased relational maintenance strategy use through texting than individuals that perceive their relationships as overbenefited or underbenefited.

H1b. Individuals in more equitable romantic relationships will report increased relational maintenance strategy use through texting than individuals that perceive their relationships as overbenefited or underbenefited.

1.2. Relational maintenance and satisfaction

Additionally, more research is needed to investigate the link between relational maintenance behaviors and relational outcomes when texting. The use of maintenance strategies is