



# The roles of culture and fairness in maintaining relationships: A comparison of romantic partners from Malaysia, Singapore, and the United States



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## ABSTRACT

The present study concerns how culture connects to perceptions of equity and relational maintenance behavior in the United States (US), Malaysia, and Singapore. In doing so, this study extends findings that employed *cultural modernization theory* (CMT) and *equity theory* to explain cultural and individual variations in relational maintenance behavior. Sex differences were also examined. Three countries were selected for their proximity in *Traditional* (vs. *Rational*) Values and divergence in *Survival* (vs. *Self Expression*) Values, according to the World Values Survey (WVS) cultural map. Consistent with CMT assumptions, participants in the United States and Malaysia (i.e., countries that espouse self expression values) reported greater use of relational maintenance strategies than did those in Singapore (i.e., a country endorsing survival values). As hypothesized, curvilinear associations between equity and relational maintenance strategies were found for the US participants only. This finding concurs with CMT-grounded assumptions and facts that romantic partners in Western (vs. Eastern), high-income societies (e.g., the US) seek equitable relationships. Sex differences also emerged but only for the US participants.

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## 1. Introduction

People invest resources, time, and effort to sustain their personal relationships (e.g., Rusbult, 1987; Yum & Li, 2007). More precisely, people continuously enact relational maintenance behaviors to keep their close relationships stable and satisfying (Ledbetter, 2009; Stafford & Canary, 2006). People in postindustrial societies who prize emancipative values, for instance, that emphasize individual rights, tend to exert energy to continue a fulfilling relationship (Cherlin, 2010). For instance, in terms of maintenance strategies, Yum and Canary (2009) found that equity applies to the US and other Westernized countries where individualistic beliefs rule. Partners in equitable (balanced) relationships tend to give more effort to maintaining their relationships than do people in inequitable relationships.

Our purpose concerns why people vary in different societies in their maintenance of romantic relationships. Toward this end, we investigate whether equity theory explains use of relational maintenance behaviors across national cultures, which has been supported in the West but has yet to be applied to non-Western societies (excluding those included in previous studies). We further investigate culture-relationship maintenance links, extending previous cross-cultural comparisons.

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In particular, *cultural modernization theory* (CMT) provides a highly informative and alternative basis to compare national cultures and members' communication within relationships. Cross-national comparisons regarding communication and relationships frequently rely on the individualism–collectivism dimension (IND–COL). However, the inconsistency of findings of IND–COL has been well documented (e.g., meta-analysis by Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeir, 2002). Directly relevant here, researchers have reported inconsistencies of findings using IND–COL to explain relational maintenance behaviors (e.g., Yum & Canary, 2003). Finally, we explore whether sex differences in relational maintenance behaviors found in the US also occur in cultures where selection of sex role specific behaviors is more clearly prescribed.

This study adds to intercultural as well as relational maintenance research in several ways, three of which we present here. First, examining relational maintenance strategies separates communication behaviors from other structural factors that often operate to keep relationships intact. Such factors, for example, include culture-specific norms and social values underwritten by dominant religions and ideologies. How romantic partners in different countries, embedded in a web of various layers of cultural values, norms, and practices, use relational maintenance strategies remains largely unknown.

Second, this study advances theory on two fronts: (a) this study extends CMT. We test a fundamental tenet of CMT, wherein cultural values combine to create four types of world societies (elaborated below) that suggest how people engage in interpersonal behaviors. Although people from three of the four world cultures participated in a similar study, data regarding a fourth cultural type was not collected (Yum & Canary, 2009). We thus extend CMT by investigating whether participants living in countries with *Survival/Traditional Values* (Quadrant 3) and *Self Expression/Traditional Values* (Quadrant 4) (both elaborated below) differ in their use of relational maintenance strategies. (b) We examine whether equity theory explanations of relational maintenance behaviors that have been supported in Western societies apply to other national cultures that might follow alternative rules of relational maintenance. In particular, we investigate whether equity operates as a standard of fairness in societies dissimilar to the US: Southeast Asia in this study.

Finally, we report how culture might affect sex differences in the use of relational maintenance strategies. Research shows that women in the US engage in more positive and proactive efforts to maintain their close relationships (Canary & Wahba, 2006). However, the lion's share of this research relies on participants from the US and other Western countries. Whether sex differences in the use of relational maintenance strategies exist in cultures where sex role norms operate differently regarding relational behavior remains oblique.

To accomplish the above, we first review relational maintenance strategies, cultural modernization theory, equity theory, and sex differences in maintenance behavior. Hypotheses derived from these sections are then offered. Next, we report a study designed to test the hypotheses. Finally, we interpret the findings, present limitations, and propose avenues for additional research.

### 1.1. Relational maintenance

Relational maintenance refers to actions and activities that function to keep a relationship stable and satisfying. Several studies show that the use of relational maintenance strategies strongly and positively associates with relational quality indicators, such as commitment, love, satisfaction, and stability (e.g., Canary, Stafford, & Semic, 2002; Guerrero, Eloy, & Wabnick, 1993; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 1999a,b; Yum & Canary, 2003). Conversely, relational stability and quality tend to suffer without ongoing use of maintenance behaviors (Canary et al., 2002; Guerrero et al., 1993).

The most widely accepted typology of relational maintenance behaviors Stafford and Canary's (1991). These maintenance strategies are *Positivity* (being spontaneous and optimistic), *Openness* (discussing the relationship), *Assurances* (statements that imply affection and commitment), *Social Networks* (reliance on friends and families for support and enjoyment), and *Sharing Tasks* (doing one's share of responsibilities). Partners in personal relationships rely on these maintenance strategies to sustain close relationships in various parts of the world (e.g., in Russia by Ballard-Reich, Weigel, & Zaguidouline, 1999; in South Korea by Yum & Canary, 2003; and in the Czech Republic, Spain, Japan, & China by Yum & Canary, 2009). Moreover, the most widely used measure of this typology, the Relationship Maintenance Strategy Measure (RMSM), yields excellent reliability as well as face, predictive, and construct validity (Canary, 2011).

Yet, in most of the non-Western world, premarital dating remains largely unwelcomed, and young Easterners know relatively little about the initiation and maintenance of romantic relationships. In addition, cultural differences in relational development exist. For instance, in the People's Republic of China (mainland China), university students do not date, for example, by having dinners and seeing films; instead, they "study together" at the library on a date. In a survey of high school and university students in Taiwan, apprehension and traditional gender roles typically informed people's views about dating and love: 90% of men as well as women indicated they did not know how to approach a love interest (2009, Feb 12). Eastern economic development and modernization appear to have changed more than alterations of beliefs and behaviors about personal relationships.

### 1.2. Cultural modernization theory

Cultural modernization theory (CMT) holds that people in countries with similar cultures share indicators of quality of life and wellbeing (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Economic and technological modernization, which implies urbanization and Westernization, alone does not fulfill people's basic needs and the spread of liberal ideals such as rationalism and freedom of self-expression. Exploring the manner in which nations vary according to their cultural distance and proximity, Inglehart

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