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Information and Communication Technologies and you: Multi-media Relationship Maintenance

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ABSTRACT

The way we think about relationships today has evolved significantly from the way we thought about relationships many years ago. Relationships that were once maintained primarily via face-to-face interactions have become maintainable through information and communication technologies (ICTs) like instant messenger, text messaging, email, social networking sites, video conferencing and the like. As ICTs continue to develop and relational maintenance behaviors and processes shift, it becomes increasingly important that the impact of ICTs on maintaining relationships be explored. Yes, computer-mediated communication has transformed the dynamic of interpersonal relationships and the way they are maintained - but why? and to what degree? How does the way an individual uses ICTs influence the path his/her relationship travels? These are a few questions this study aims to address through interview and survey data analysis. Ultimately, this study will provide a deeper understanding of how ICTs are being utilized to achieve relational maintenance goals.

Keywords

Attachment Style, Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), Individual Differences, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), Interpersonal Communication, Interpersonal Relationships, Love Languages (LLs), Love Style, Maintenance Behaviors, Relational Maintenance, Relational Features.

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal relationships are one of the most essential elements of life. Once established, it is necessary that they be maintained. With the advent of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), a new communication culture has emerged. This communication method (Computer-Mediated Communication - CMC), like Face-to-Face (FtF) interaction, supports the maintenance of relationships. As CMC has become more prevalent, it is increasingly important that we study its influence on sustaining interpersonal relationships. A notable amount of literature regarding use of technologies in interpersonal relationships has a focus on platonic relationships (i.e. friendships, kinships, co-workers, etc.). It is important that this literature be matched with studies investigating non-platonic (i.e. dating, marital) relationships as well.

Although ICTs have led to the re-conceptualization of relationships, scholars tend to view FtF interactions as the privileged medium. However, these two media are synergetic and work in concert to maintain relationships. The majority of relationships utilize both FtF interaction *and* CMC. These relationships are referred to as mixed-media (or multi-media) relationships (Dietrich, 2004). Unlike strictly FtF relationships, mixed-media relationships add an additional dimension to relational maintenance that has not been thoroughly explored - communication technologies. Table 1 and Figure 1 illustrate the currently framework (developed in 1991 by Stafford and Canary) which speaks to the different behaviors used to maintain relationships. Although revised once before, the only electronic media this framework discusses being used for maintenance purposes is the telephone. Being that this single technology is auditory in nature and there are numerous technologies available that allow text as well as a visual image, the maintenance typology may need to be modified, expanded, or a new typology may need to be developed.

It is naïve to believe that CMC is identical to FtF communication in regard to maintaining relationships, as it has already been shown to be different in a number of other ways (e.g. richness of the media; with FtF having the highest richness and CMC being considered a lean medium due to its reduced nonverbal cues). Therefore, although there is a framework that discusses relational maintenance behaviors (RMBs) enacted in FtF interactions, it is unwise to assume that the same is true for CMC interactions. While CMC may simply be another vehicle that allows individuals to maintain their relationship (i.e. use of

CMC as a maintenance behavior), it may also promote the use of different behaviors (i.e. CMC as a context in which different behaviors are enacted). Whether or not this is an accurate claim is what this research aims to established.

Behaviors	Description/Examples
Antisocial Behavior**	Unfriendly or coercive behavior (e.g. jealousy or deception)
Assurance*	Confirming that the relationship is important, reducing uncertainty of the relationships future, and expressing love (e.g. demonstrating love and faithfulness)
Avoidance**	Evasive behavior (e.g. ignoring another’s attempts at interaction)
Humor**	Telling jokes, teasing, or being sarcastic
Joint Activities**	Quality time or bonding activities
Mediated Communication**	Writing cards, traditional letters, telephone calls
Openness*	Directness and disclosures (i.e. meta-communication) that assists participants in knowing the nature of the relationship and its status.
Positivity*	Having an optimistic attitude and behaving cheerfully with one’s partner (e.g. being pleasant, courteous, or uncritical)
Social Network*	Using third party interactions to maintain the relationship (e.g. a unified social support system of friends and family).
Task Sharing*	Willingness to fairly assist a partner with duties to be completed (e.g. household chores and responsibilities).
*These five items come from Stafford and Canary's original 1991 typology.	
**These five items were obtained from Canary, et al.'s 1993 extension of Stafford and Canary’s 1991 typology.	

Table 1. Relational Maintenance Typology

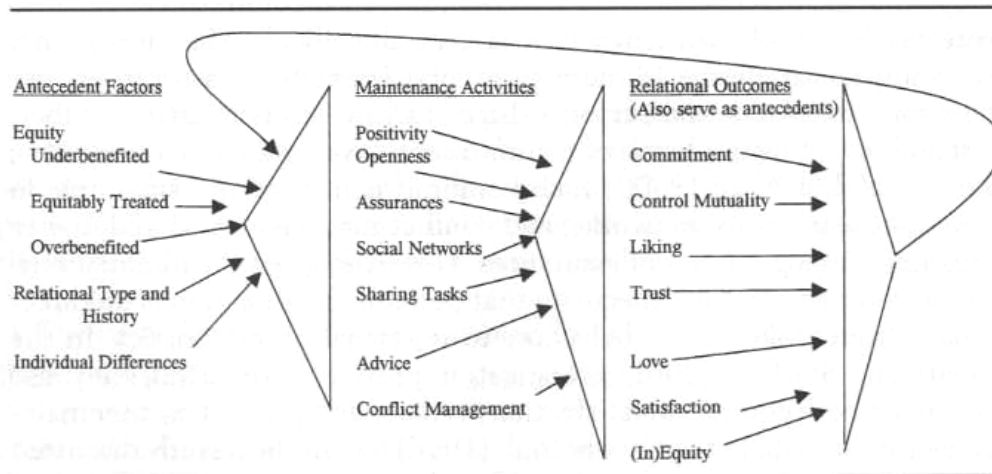


Figure 1. Relational Maintenance Model

Source: Stafford, 2003; p.70

Currently, there are many unexamined factors concerning CMC use in relationships. This usage could influence relationship characteristics and behaviors, which in turn might influence the progression and future of a relationship. This present study, in an exploratory and interpretive manner, will investigate how CMC works in concert with FtF interactions for relational

maintenance purposes. The specific relationship type to be examined will be non-platonic (i.e. pre-marital and marital) relationships. The purpose of this study is to explore the use of CMC and ICTs for the maintenance of relationships established in physical reality. It will do so through an exploration of current literature as well as the analysis of interview and survey data.

The upcoming sections will provide a synopsis and synthesis of current literature in the CMC and relational maintenance domains, detail the guiding research questions, explain how the research questions will be addressed through the research design as well as discuss the research importance and contributions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

“Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) is the process by which people create, exchange, and perceive information using networked telecommunications systems (or non-networked computers) that facilitate encoding, transmitting, and decoding messages” (December, n.d.). Oversimplified, CMC is an electronic process of communication that occurs between individuals through ICTs. The primary problem with the way CMC has been theorized to date is evident in the following quote: “substituting technology-mediated for face-to-face communication will result in predictable changes in intrapersonal and interpersonal variables” (Culnan & Markus, 1987, p.423). The word ‘substituting’ encompasses this problematic conceptualization of CMC research and theory. It has been indicated in various studies that CMC is not used to substitute FtF interactions, but that it is often used in a *supplementary* manner (Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001). Yet, the bulk of CMC research tends to dichotomize and juxtapose CMC with FtF interactions, when they are not completely separate dimensions (Mantovani, 2001). Therefore, the mixed-media relationship is often overlooked.

Earlier views of CMC have indicated that CMC is most effectively used for information exchanges and is ineffective for social interactions. Supporters of this perspective tend to compare CMC to FtF communication and believe that the ‘limitations’ of CMC prevents valuable social information from being transmitted. They believe that “When these social cues transmitted nonverbally are filtered out of messages, the emotional content is also stripped” (O’Sullivan, et al. 2004, p.466), causing CMC to be impersonal and lead to an increase in ambiguity and uncertainty. However, in the case of relational maintenance, this stripping of cues may not be dire in all cases. Hu et al. (2004) conducted a study on instant messenger (IM) use in relationships. Their findings indicated that use of IM positively correlated with intimacy. Similarly, Hian et al. (2004) investigated relational intimacy comparing CMC with FtF. They found that it is possible for CMC relationships to develop stronger than FtF relationships. This supports Scott et al.’s (2006) finding that CMC is an alternative for individuals who struggle with FtF intimacy. In addition, Walther’s (1995) research findings indicated that strangers were able to achieve a greater level of intimacy in CMC than could be achieved in FtF. Furthermore, he found that relational intimacy increases faster in CMC than it does in FtF interactions. This could be because, in some cases, the non-verbal cues permitted in FtF interactions are detrimental to the development of the relationship.

Taking these studies into account, the impact of CMC use in relationships has still been insufficiently explored. Current CMC research focuses on health (e.g. Davis, Hart, Bolding, Sherr, & Elford, 2006), education (e.g. Bush, 2006; Colley & Comber, 2003; John & Sutherland, 2005), and gender differences (e.g. Boneva, 2001; Broos, 2005; Herring, 1993, 1994; Jaffe, Lee, Huang, & Oshagan, 1995). With this bias toward use and affordances, the relational impacts of CMC are still quite ambiguous. When it comes to interpersonal relationships, there is a notable amount of CMC research that focuses on the formation of online relationships and electronic dating (e-dating; e.g. Donn and Sherman, 2002; Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Hardey, 2004; Merkle, 2000) as well as the similarities and differences between CMC and FtF interactions (e.g. Anderson & Wang, 2005; Walther & Parks, 2002). In doing so, many research studies view FtF interaction and CMC as being mutually exclusive (e.g. the numerous comparative studies; Anderson & Wang, 2005; Walther & Parks, 2002). However, there is a middle ground present that is also important to relational maintenance studies; mixed-media relationships (Dietrich, 2004). These mixed-media relationships are how the majority of relationships can be classified, and like all relationships, go through a maintenance process. Relational maintenance scholars tend to focus their efforts on platonic relationships, with the exploration of non-platonic relationships generally consisting of marital couples (cf. Stafford & Canary, 1991 and Hughes, 2005 for exceptions). For these reasons, there are many areas that remain unexplored and underexplored regarding CMC and relational maintenance.

Relational maintenance has been described in a number of different ways in the literature. These definitions have ranged from (1) keeping an active link between individuals (i.e. maintaining the existence of the relationship so that it does not terminate), to (2) sustaining the desired status of a relationship (i.e. maintaining relational definitions and relationship quality), to (3) staying above a desired level of satisfaction within the relationship (i.e. participants are at least content with the relationship), to (4) preventing and fixing issues in the relationship (i.e. avoiding deterioration and termination; Dindia, 2003; Dindia & Canary, 1993). Relational maintenance, however, encompasses all of these behaviors. It is about keeping an

active link between individuals, but it is also about sustaining a relationship the individuals are satisfied with, regardless of what that fulfillment entails. Therefore, while it is apparent that scholars have made no strong attempt to combine these definitions, doing so could eliminate important and necessary distinctions (see Dindia, 2003 or Dindia & Canary, 1993 for a detailed account).

Previous relational maintenance literature has found mediated communication (e.g. telephone calls) to be a maintenance behavior (Canary, Stafford, Hause, & Wallace, 1993; Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Rabby, 2007; Stafford & Merolla, 2007). However, no literature has been found that examines how maintenance behaviors are enacted via CMC. In other words, current relational maintenance literature focuses on maintenance behaviors enacted in non-electronic spaces. The studies that do explore electronic environments do so with individuals involved in exclusively online relationships, or relationships that transition from online to physical spaces (e.g. Ramirez Jr., 2007). Since most individuals who utilize CMC are those who have initiated and established their relationship in physical spaces (Dietrich 2004), or those who use mixed-media methods of communication (Pew, 2000a; Pew 2000b; UCLA, 2000; UCLA, 2001, UCLA, 2003), this oversight and gap in the scholarly literature is astounding. The proposed research study aims to fill this gap.

RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

As previously indicated, this research topic is fairly novel. Rather than beginning with the end in mind (i.e. hypothesis testing), it is important to be open to what the data will uncover. Therefore, it is essential that this research be conducted in an exploratory and interpretive manner. As displayed in the Relational Maintenance Model, previously illustrated in Figure 1, researchers believe that individual differences and relational features (i.e. characteristics of a relationship that reveal its condition or quality; Canary & Stafford, 1994) play a noteworthy role in the type of maintenance behaviors enacted in a relationship. Therefore, this notion will be used as a sensitizing concept to guide data collection, analysis, and selecting theoretical frameworks. As such, the following research questions will be explored:

RQ1: How and why is CMC used to maintain non-platonic relationships?

RQ1a: What maintenance behaviors do individuals enact via CMC?

RQ1b: What factors influence the decision to use CMC to maintain one's relationship and the manner in which it is used?

RQ1c: To what extent will individuals report using different types and frequencies of relational maintenance with their partner via CMC?

RQ2: What are the benefits and disadvantages of using CMC for relational maintenance?

RQ3: What impact does the use of CMC, for relational maintenance purposes, have on the relational features present?

RQ4: How does the current FtF relational maintenance typology compare with CMC enacted RMBs?

This study will be conducted from the perspective of individuals in exclusive (e.g. monogamous) non-platonic relationships established in physical reality. The participant sample will range from college students to the elderly with the age requirement being 18 years or older. Participants will be recruited through snowball sampling, starting with the researcher's network. This recruitment will utilize email blasts (to college listservs, professional organization listservs, and alumni association listservs), social networking discussion forums (e.g. LinkedIn), church bulletins, as well as college classes.

The proposed research is designed to be completed in two phases. The first phase entails the interviewing of approximately 12 to 24 individuals of a diverse nature. These participants will be individuals of all ages (above 18), races, backgrounds, and status (i.e. single, dating, married, monogamous, undergraduate, graduate, professional, academic, etc.). Participants will be asked questions regarding their experience with, knowledge of, opinion about, and desires for CMC usage for relational maintenance purposes. This semi-structured interview process will address RQ₁ and RQ₂ by asking participants questions such as "Why do you use electronic communication or communication technologies to maintain your relationship?", "What are the benefits and disadvantages of using CMC for relational maintenance?", "What factors do you believe influence your desire to use (or not to use) CMC in your relationship?". The data collected from these interviews will be analyzed, keeping the sensitizing concept in mind, and will feed into phase 2 of the study. Phase 2 will be to develop and distribute a survey that will confirm the results of RQ₁ and RQ₂ and also provide insight into RQ₃ and RQ₄.

The data collection part of phase 1 has already been completed. Although the data has not been analyzed in full the researcher noticed some recurring themes during the interviewing and transcription process. Preliminary review of the interview data showed that themes revolved around the question of why individuals have chosen to use particular communication technologies to engage with their partner. What it seems to boil down to is the notion of individual differences in the category of (1) the way individuals express and receive love/liking, (2) acceptance and liking of communication technologies, (3) level of proficiency, as well as (4) level and type of attachment. These factors may shape a recipient's perception and evaluation of maintenance behaviors, his/her enactment of these behaviors, as well as partner expectations and relational features (i.e. love,

liking, trust, and commitment). Therefore, these are likely to be a few of the areas explored in Phase 2. It is the author's belief that there are five primary factors to take into account regarding RMB enactments: cause, intent, focus (self vs. other), impact, and expectations (see Table 2). Therefore, she hopes to be able to capture some of these factors through the selected theories.

Behaviors	Category	Description
Strategic	Intention	Enacted with the conscious or intentional goal of maintaining the relationships
Routine	Intention	Enacted habitually, regardless of whether maintenance is an outcome (i.e. 'byproduct' maintenance)
Prosocial	Focus	Actions oriented toward benefiting another
Antisocial	Focus	Actions oriented toward benefiting the self
Constructive	Effect	Positive or helpful
Destructive	Effect	Negative or harmful
Proactive	Stimulus	Self-Motivated, preventive, future-based behaviors
Reactive	Stimulus	Provoked, corrective, remedial, or damage control behaviors

Table 2: Relational Maintenance Behavior Categorization

The concept of *love languages* (see Table 3) speaks to how one identifies, understands, and appreciates love. This is important to relational maintenance as one's preference for personal displays of affection will influence the way one demonstrates and responds to this expression. *Attachment style* (see Figure 2) speaks to the nature of one's connection to another. It has important implications for relational maintenance as it may speak to the frequency with which an individual may enact RMBs. The same logic applies to *love styles* (see Table 4), which addresses the way an individual feels and demonstrates love. All of these individual psychological factors may address an individual's comfort level with enacting behaviors as well as his/her perception of other's enacted behaviors and its impact on the relationship. As noted by Bell and colleagues (1987) "individuals' decisions on [behavior] selection are influenced by their personalities and by situational constraints" (p.446).

Language	Description/Dialects
Words of Affirmation	Verbal appreciation/compliments and encouraging messages
Quality Time	Having another's undivided attention; Engaging in quality shared activities or in a quality conversation
Receiving Gifts	Visual tokens of affection and appreciation, or the gift of 'self'
Acts of Service	Selfless deeds/acts of thoughtfulness or domestic service
Physical Touch	Having another individual engage in loving physical contact with you

Table 3. Love Language Typology

Source: Chapman (2004)

		MODEL OF SELF (Dependence)	
		Positive (Low)	Negative (High)
MODEL OF OTHER (Avoidance)	Positive (Low)	SECURE Comfortable with intimacy and autonomy	PREOCCUPIED Preoccupied with relationships
	Negative (High)	DISMISSING Dismissing of intimacy Counter-dependent	FEARFUL Fearful of intimacy Socially avoidant

Figure 2. Adult Attachment Style Dimensions

Source: Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991, p.227)

Style	Description/Characteristics
Primary Types	
Eros	Romantic, passionate, committed love for an ideal partner
Ludus	Game-playing, manipulative, permissive, uncommitted love
Storge	Enduring, friendship love
Secondary Types	
Pragma (Ludus + Storage)	Realistic, practical, calculated love
Mania (Eros + Ludus)	Possessive, dependent, emotionally intense love
Agape (Storge + Eros)	Selfless, altruistic love

Table 4. Love Styles Typology

Source: Hendrick & Hendrick (1986)

Phase 2 of this study will employ a web-based survey that will be made available for an eight to twelve week period (or until saturation is reached). The survey hosting site that will be used to administer this survey will be Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com). In order for individuals to be eligible to complete the survey they must be currently in a dating or marital relationship and 18 years of age or older. It is essential that data be collected from a large and diversified sample size in order to aid in the development of an inclusive relational maintenance model. The survey will be composed of seven sections. The *first section* will determine the participants' eligibility for the study (i.e. 'Are you currently in a dating or marital relationship?'). *Section two* will consist of the Relationship Background Inventory and will collect data on the relationship's history (e.g. length, seriousness, types of interactions, cohabitation, long distance nature). *Section three* will be the Partner Inventory, which will be composed of measures of relational features (i.e. scales for satisfaction, trust, commitment, love, liking, and control mutuality) in order to determine if there is a relationship with CMC usage. *Section four* will focus on the theoretical frameworks and will collect data regarding maintenance behaviors enacted, love language, love style, and attachment style. *Section five* will collect information regarding attitudes/beliefs and familiarity with CMC and communication technologies. *Section six* concerns RMBs and CMC usage. The *final section* will be the Background Inventory section to collect information like demographics. This final section will also ask the participant to refer additional eligible participants with their partner as a priority (therefore, continuing the snowball recruitment and enabling the collection of paired data). The survey will be composed primarily of Likert scale items. The two sections with open-ended questions will be section five (CMC and ICTs) and section seven (demographics). The dependent variable will be the RMBs while the

independent variables will consist of demographic information, relationship history, CMC/ICT knowledge (e.g. familiarity/frequency of use), and individual differences. Table 5 illustrates some of the scales that will be used in the survey portion of this research. The majority of the survey instrument for phase 2 has been proven to be both valid and reliable due to the scales being pre-established. The survey will also undergo a rigorous assessment in a pilot study. This pilot study will allow the researcher to evaluate the validity and appropriateness of the questions being asked on the survey instrument, the survey length, and the survey interface.

Variable	Measure	Items	Type of Variable
CMC Inventory	Self developed		Categorical/Nominal
ICT Use Knowledge Attitude	Unidentified/Self developed		Continuous/Interval (Likert Scale)
Maintenance Behaviors	Stafford & Canary (1991)	29	Continuous/Interval (Likert Scale)
Individual Differences			
Attachment Style	Bartholomew & Horowitz (1991) Relationship Questionnaire	04	Continuous/Interval (Likert Scale)
Love Styles	Henderick & Henderick (1986)	42	Continuous/Interval (Likert Scale)
Love Language	Goff (2007) Love Languages Scale (Modified)	30	Categorical/Nominal
Relational Features			
Commitment	Lund (1985) Commitment Scale	09	Continuous/Interval (Likert Scale)
Control Mutuality	Canary, et al. (1991) Control Mutuality Scale	06	Continuous/Interval (Likert Scale)
Liking	Rubin (1970) Liking Scale	13	Continuous/Interval (Likert Scale)
Love	Rubin (1970) Romantic Love Scale	13	Continuous/Interval (Likert Scale)
Dating Satisfaction	Hendrick (1988) Relationship Assessment Scale	07	Continuous/Interval (Likert Scale)
Marital Satisfaction	Hunsley et al. (2001) Dyadic Adjustment Scale	07	Continuous/Interval (Likert Scale)
Trust	Larzelere (1980) Dyadic Trust Scale	08	Continuous/Interval (Likert Scale)

Table 5. Variables and Measures

EXPECTED CONTRIBUTION

The primary purpose of this study is to explore how and why CMC is used to support the maintenance of dating and marital relationships that have been initiated in physical reality. One of the primary benefits of studying this phenomenon is a deeper understanding of CMC/ICT usage as it relates to interpersonal relationship maintenance. With this understanding the ability to make technical advances that can enhance benefits and reduce negativities of CMC use on interpersonal relationships will be provided. Understanding the motives and logic behind CMC use also means understanding users. Therefore, relational

partners will better understand their CMC usage behavior and how their use of CMC can (and does) impact their relationships both positively and negatively. Hence, there will be increased knowledge to assist relational partners in achieving their desired relational outcomes. As a result, the ability to maintain relationships utilizing mixed-media (i.e. FtF and CMC) may be increased, thus having the potential to positively influence outcomes like marital and divorce rates. In essence, studying this phenomenon will help explain technical and behavioral changes that could be made to enhance benefits and reduce negative impacts on interpersonal relationships and related phenomena for interested individuals.

A significant portion of relational maintenance research focuses on what individuals can do to maintain their relationships, without exploring the actual process of maintenance (Dindia & Baxter, 1987). "However, the presence of a strategy repertoire does not assure a partner's ability to select a situationally appropriate strategy nor a partner's ability to enact the strategy [effectively] once selected" (Dindia & Baxter, 1987, p.145). Therefore, this research has significant practical implications for behavioral sciences, communications, counseling psychology, family studies, and social psychology. Furthermore, on an individual level, research has demonstrated the influential association of successful non-platonic relationships with "health, lowered stress, longevity and overall increased life satisfaction" (Stafford & Canary, 1991, p.221).

Ultimately, the achievement of the research goals of this study will contribute in the following ways:

1. Providing novel information to advance understanding about how CMC is used in interpersonal relationships as well as the intent and relational impacts of that use.
2. Exploring the influences of individual differences (i.e. attachment style, love style, love language) on relational maintenance via CMC.
3. Bridging the gap in the CMC and relational maintenance research through the exploration of non-platonic relationships established in physical reality.
4. Integrating the concepts present in popular press and academia through the exploration of love languages and relational maintenance behaviors.
5. Assisting in the development of a unified model of relational maintenance.

CONCLUSION

Communication is an essential process for sustaining relational attributes. This sustainment can occur vocally, non-verbally, or through an exchange of writing in an electronic or physical environment. Due to the increase in electronically-mediated interactions and Internet usage, CMC is an area of particular interest to scholars. Most of the current research is limited to specific aspects of CMC, leaving other important matters underexplored. Scholars need to investigate how members of society use CMC to maintain relationships, as well as when and why they choose to use CMC in this manner. In addition, the *impacts* of this use must be explored as well as the influence individual differences have on these behavioral enactments. It is important to note that this exploration should be done with the understanding that these relationships often utilize mixed-media. This study takes a step in the direction of adding to this important body of literature through its examination of relational maintenance in non-platonic relationships. It is the goals of this research not only to advance relational maintenance research, but to also provide societal members with novel information of practical importance.

The researcher would like to aid individuals in not only understanding, but also appreciating the individual differences between themselves and their partners. This will encourage their relationship to be maintained or grow in a healthy and satisfying fashion. It is anticipated that this study will uncover the ways in which couples utilize CMC within their relationships, and their reasons for doing so. As a result, this information may be used to 'coach' or counsel couples on constructive ways to use CMC to support and maintain their relationships based on the individual characteristics of the individuals involved. In other words, the results of this research will provide a basis for assisting individuals in maintaining and improving the quality, stability, and satisfaction they experience in their relationships.

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