

Alma College

Computer-Mediated Communication and Young-Adult Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

Now, more than ever, relationships are experiencing constant connections online. The way modern technological forms of communication, or computer-mediated communication (CMC), affects romantic relationships is explored through the analysis of survey responses from undergraduate college students in dyadic, heterosexual romantic relationships. Closely examining previous scholarship, the gap in the literature becomes clear. Although scholarship has focused on relationships on Facebook and the appearance of maintenance and jealousy (Dainton and Stokes, 2015), cell phone usage, romantic relationships channels and intimacy (Borae and Peña, 2010; Morey et al. 2013), and the way in which social media can make romantic relationships vulnerable (Abbasi, 2018), the current investigation augments existing research by connecting different forms of CMC to several variables that constitute perceived relational satisfaction within romantic relationships.

Introduction

Technology has undoubtedly impacted the field of Communication. It has largely influenced the way people communicate both in terms of mass media and interpersonal relationships. Romantic relationships have been greatly impacted by these innovations in communication. One of the most impacted demographics has been modern college students. Therefore, it is important to understand the way computer-mediated communication influences romantic relationships among college students.

Generally, prior research has looked at one aspect of perceived relational satisfaction or one medium of computer-mediated communication. When evaluating relational satisfaction, a multitude of variables should be considered. Focusing on only one variable allows several factors to influence the ultimate satisfaction. Additionally, other research tends to look at social media or cell phones as a whole, rather than understanding differences between texting or calling or even different social media platforms.

This study is most significant to the general public as it can help facilitate understanding of interpersonal relationships and how their communication influences relational satisfaction. However, because this study focuses on a variety of media, and the differences among them, this will also be a significant contribution to scholars in the field of Communication. By expanding on the definition of perceived relational satisfaction, and evaluating relationships with this understanding, the connection between computer-mediated communication and perceived relational satisfaction should become more apparent.

Literature Review

Technology has significantly affected the way people communicate on a day to day basis. Therefore, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has caught the eye of numerous communication scholars. The term computer-mediated is extended to include social media as well as cell phone usage. College students in today's age are a specific demographic largely affected by technological advancements. Additionally, romantic relationships are an interpersonal classification particularly impacted by such technological channels. Other research in the field has generally only looked at one platform or one aspect of computer-mediated communication. Therefore, it is essential to get a holistic understanding of how computer-mediated communication affects romantic relationships among college-age students.

Tools for Evaluating Relationships

When discussing computer-mediated communications and romantic relationships, it is critical to establish a mode of evaluation. Previous research has generally relied on perceived relational satisfaction. This concept of satisfaction has been represented in multiple ways. For example, some research has explored relational commitment as a tool for evaluation (Abbasi). Scholars have examined satisfaction in quality and closeness (Baym et al.). Whether studying perceived relational satisfaction on a scale of closeness, commitment, or quality, it should be acknowledged that all are critical lenses. They are separate but related concepts and each has distinctive qualities that contribute to the study of perceived relational satisfaction. Additionally, each concept provides a set of significant variables to consider.

When examining relational satisfaction and its corresponding components, scholars often find correlations with other variables. Such “maintenance variables” include openness and monitoring (Dainton and Stokes). Relatedly, online self-disclosure (OSD) and online social connection (OSC) should be considered (Ledbetter et al.). A unique consideration in other variables is relationally-defined cell phone norms within partnerships (Miller-Ott et al.). Regardless of the medium used, these variables can be examined throughout romantic relationships. For example, it is important to look at self-disclosure and connection in both online and offline contexts. It should be noted that although openness and monitoring are concepts that occur on Facebook, they are also relevant to other channels such as cell phones and face-to-face communication. It should be emphasized that the aforementioned variables can be impacted by particular displays through channels (Seidman et al.). Most significantly, however, it is important to consider computer-mediated communication and its affordances to users in romantic relationships.

Constant Connection as an Affordance of Computer-Mediated Communication

When looking at the effect of computer-mediated communications on romantic relationships, CMC generally seems to offer several affordances. One such affordance is the ability for couples to engage in constant communication, regardless of physical proximity. Generally, this affordance leads to a shared sense of togetherness in the couple, but can come with risks involving boundaries and separation anxiety (Su). This affordance allows long-distance relationships an increased sense of success and relational maintenance (Dainton and Aylor). Additionally, this increase in communication frequency has been related to certain channels positively influencing relational satisfaction and attachment (Morey et al.). Therefore, it is

important to look at the affordances of CMC and how it promotes a sense of togetherness, success, satisfaction, and attachment—a synthesis of prior researchers' variables. Another important consideration is the extent to which the channel used shapes these perceptions.

Even within cell-phone communication, a distinction should be made between voice call and text messaging. Considered as separate entities, each has separate affordances. For example, Jin and Peña argue that voice calling positively influences love and commitment while representing less relational uncertainty, whereas text messaging does not (2010). However, text messages are generally praised for their ease of use and efficient communication. CMC also grants individuals the ability to present themselves differently and connect with people other than those they see every day. Consequently, another affordance is represented in the ability of compatible interests to be shared through social media and strengthen bonds between partners (Carpenter and Spottswood). Although CMC offers romantic relationships numerous affordances, there is, nevertheless disagreement among scholars in this area.

The Negative Potential of Computer-Mediated Communications

Jealousy is an important concept to consider when looking at young adult relationships. For the purpose of this argument, it is particularly important to explore the way jealousy is crafted online. Marianne Dainton and Alexandra Stokes acknowledge Facebook's role in relational maintenance and its correlation with jealousy (2015). Their findings cite the importance of Facebook maintenance and its role in relationship satisfaction in terms of positivity and assurance (Dainton and Stokes). Looking at openness and monitoring—two affordances found in CMC—Dainton and Stokes (2015) suggest an association with all four types of jealousy examined (trait, cognitive, emotional, and Facebook). Monitoring is another important concept to

consider in online relationships. With the ease of sharing—openness—and the availability of information online, jealousy can manifest itself quickly between partners. Additionally, romantic relationships in cyberspace have been shown generally to have less total involvement and greater misrepresentation than relationships that exist offline (Cornwell and Lundgren). Therefore, channels of computer-mediated communication, including messages not explicitly sent such as tags, likes, and comments, are easily monitored and risk jealousy if left undiscussed.

In terms of CMC, it would be reasonable to question whether channels beyond Facebook develop increased concerns of jealousy. Snapchat, an increasingly popular social media platform among young adults has shown to create higher levels of jealousy than Facebook (Halpern et al.). Snapchat capitalizes on selfies—pictures of oneself—and sharing them online. These selfies, when posted to enhance an appearance online, have shown the potential and capability to negatively affect relationships (Halpern et al.). Relatedly, research has shown a correlation between Facebook maintenance and self-reported jealousy (Dainton and Stokes). Additionally, such dyads have reduced perceived relational quality through jealousy and self-idealization (Halpern et al.). Thus, it is important to make the distinction that CMC channels support an environment that fosters jealousy, which can negatively affect romantic relationships.

Concluding Remarks

Although numerous scales and variables can be studied to better understand how computer-mediated channels affect romantic relationships, a systematic review of literature acknowledges the need for a unified framework (Rus and Tiemensma). The use of computer-mediated channels of communication within romantic relationships should be evaluated in terms of perceived relational satisfaction, which is composed of several variables. Additionally, these channels offer

numerous affordances such as constant communication and different media to share and express individual identity. However, with such affordances, there is also the risk of increasing jealousy within partnerships. Computer-mediated channels of communication have become ingrained in romantic relationships; therefore, it is important to study and begin to understand their effect.

Purposes and Objectives

To better understand the way computer-mediated channels affect romantic relationships, a connection between perceived relational satisfaction and such channels must be established. The channels explored will consist of both cellular and social media, and will be examined for differences among social media platforms and cellular communications (texting and calling). Additionally, perceived relational satisfaction will be defined in terms of closeness, commitment, and quality adapted from the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al.). The primary goal of this study is to establish and understand the connection between perceived relational satisfaction and CMC. This study is limited by the demographics of the sample—all participants selected are heterosexual dyads found at a small, Midwestern liberal arts college.

The following research questions guide this investigation:

Research Questions

Research Question 1: How does computer-mediated communication (CMC) affect perceived relational satisfaction within heterosexual college students' romantic relationships?

Research Question 2: How do different CMC channels influence relational satisfaction within heterosexual college students' romantic relationships?

Research Question 3: How do different means of CMC, such as voice calling rather than texting, influence relational satisfaction within heterosexual college students' romantic relationships?

Summary

To understand the way computer-mediated channels of communication affect perceived relational satisfaction, a connection between variables such as closeness, commitment, and quality is studied within a variety of media. This study is limited by its participants and its inability to rule out external factors influencing relational satisfaction.

Methods

Previous scholars in communication research have examined the effects of CMC on perceived relational satisfaction. Their definitions of relational satisfaction have been evaluated in terms of closeness, commitment, or quality, but it is important to examine the way these different channels of communication affect relational satisfaction among college students. Prior research has generally utilized the survey questionnaire method, and therefore this method's strengths and design are evaluated in order to understand the relationship between relational satisfaction and communication channel usage.

Description of Methodology

In order to achieve an understanding of heterosexual college students' perceived relational satisfaction, the survey questionnaire method can produce optimal results. The survey method has a high level of external validity, meaning a representative sample of the population would yield generalized results that can be applied to a greater population (Frey et al. 87). This would

be beneficial in that a smaller number of responses can be collected and analyzed to represent a larger number of college students involved in romantic relationships. Concerns about the survey method include: self-reported discrepancies, stability, honesty, and the risk of probabilities (Frey et al. 86). However, with the promise of anonymity, both concerns regarding discrepancies and honesty should be resolved. Additionally, the questions posed should be reflective of the overall nature of the relationship, accounting for the concern about stability. With the survey method's high external validity, and the use of a random sample, the risk of using probabilities should be reduced. When using a method with high external validity, the probabilities calculated from a random sample are able to be generalized to a larger population with high accuracy.

The survey interview method as well as the ethnographic interview method were also considered. These methods would allow the research to dig deeper into the participants' relationships to better understand how they operate through different media. However, neither method would allow the research to examine a larger sample and generalize to apply findings to the college-age population. Although previous research has conducted ethnographic interviews and generated successful results, the same amount of depth will not be required to understand relational satisfaction (Su). The depth of understanding participants' relationships and troubles are not necessary as this research is primarily focused on the relationship between CMC and relational satisfaction. Additionally, the survey interview method can be ruled out as this question requires a larger scale, greater anonymity, and examination of channels rather than assuming that relationships either exist primarily online or offline (Cornwell and Lundgren).

Of the multiple examples of prior research examined, almost every account utilized the survey questionnaire method. Therefore, it would be logical to at least consider the usage of this method. Additionally, this method allows participants to answer questions about channels of

communication and their relationship without an overabundance of information. The survey questionnaire method would allow the research to focus on the variables as assess the results quantitatively. One scholar employed a three-part survey as a means to establish a connection between social networking sites and relational commitment (Abbasi). To study jealousy and selfies, the survey method was used to search for correlation between the two (Halpern).

Additionally, to study a link between romantic relationship satisfaction and cell phone usage, the survey method was also utilized (Miller-Ott et al.).

Research Design

This investigation uses a random sample of one hundred and fifteen students at a small, Midwestern liberal arts college. Additionally, only heterosexual dyads are selected for analysis. This ensures that gender and sexual identities are not influencing or skewing the results. Additionally, this allows a larger, more representative random sample of the student body. The survey introduced will be composed of roughly four sections. The first consists of demographic questions and pledge anonymity. The second and third sections are composed of questions analyzing computer-mediated channels of communication and relational satisfaction. The final section analyzes overall perceived relational satisfaction. The questions used are adapted from Irum Saeed Abbasi's study "Social Media and Committed Relationships: What Factors Make Our Romantic Relationship Vulnerable?" (2018). The variables are assessed based on scale ratings to understand perceived relational satisfaction, and channels are analyzed for a correlation between the usage and satisfaction.

Summary

This investigation uses a four-part survey questionnaire in order to explore the effect CMC

channels have on heterosexual college students' romantic relationships. This survey's four sections of questions consist of demographics, cell phone usage, social media usage, and relational-satisfaction. Although all participants are drawn from a small, liberal arts college, the survey method itself has a high external validity, ensuring that its results can be used to predict the effect of CMC channels on heterosexual college students' romantic relationships beyond the sample.

Results

For research questions 1-3, "How does computer-mediated communication (CMC) affect perceived relational satisfaction within heterosexual college students' romantic relationships?," "How do different CMC channels influence relational satisfaction within heterosexual college students' romantic relationships?," and "How do different means of CMC, such as voice calling rather than texting, influence relational satisfaction within heterosexual college students' romantic relationships?," the questions were assessed on a seven-point scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. After the eliminations, there were 42 responses. Table One presents the averages and standard deviations from each response.

	Commitment (C)	Satisfaction (S)	Quality of Alternatives (Q)	Overall Satisfaction (OS)	Cell Phone Usage (CP)	Social Media Usage (SM)
Mean	6.473	6.048	4.506	5.676	4.412	4.165
Standard Deviation	.857	1.007	.773	.605	.666	.583

Table 1: Averages and Standard Deviation of Responses

To understand the Research Questions' relationship to the participant responses, each response was scored and then averages for each set of questions were drawn (Table 1). Then correlations were calculated through Microsoft Excel's function. The correlations between cell phone usage and social media usage questions and the relational satisfaction scores "r value" are depicted in Table Two.

	SM & C	SM & S	SM & Q	SM & OS	CP & C	CP & S	CP & Q	CP & OS
R-Value	-0.086	0.177	0.139	0.117	-0.018	0.057	0.034	0.037

Table 2: Correlative Values

Using traditional r-value scoring, the range of acceptable values is from -1 to positive 1. This data set presented both positive and negative correlations. These correlations, however, would be considered extremely low.

The data used were those of heterosexual dyads currently in a relationship. The participants represented a mixture of grade classification, sex, and age. The average relationship length for the study was 23.15 months, almost two years.

Discussion

The values of correlation represented an extremely low relationship between variables. This finding was unexpected, considering other research in the field has found a stronger relationship between computer-mediated channels and relational satisfaction (Abbasi, 2018; Borae and Peña, 2010; Morey et. al, 2013) Although the correlations were extremely weak, it was not surprising that both CMC channels had a negative relationship to commitment. Other studies such as "College Students' Romantic Relationships on Facebook: Linking the Gratification for

Maintenance to Facebook Maintenance Activity and the Experience of Jealousy” have examined the phenomenon in which relationship jealousy is crafted online, and this can lower feelings of commitment or relational satisfaction (Dainton and Stokes, 2015; Halpern et. al, 2017; Su, 2015).

It is surprising that the findings suggest less of a correlation between variables than expected, especially when considering the affordances that social media and cell phones offer. Ultimately, this research suggests that further instruments would be necessary in order to accurately understand the relationship between CMC and relational satisfaction. One suggestion from other scholars is that a unified framework is necessary (Rus and Tienmensma, 2017). Although this instrument framework is not the only necessary change, it would allow researchers to better understand their variables’ influences.

One of the most interesting findings of this research is that social media held a stronger relationship to the variable of satisfaction than to commitment and the quality of alternatives. In terms of the Quality of Alternatives, it was not surprising that the social media score was higher than the cell phone’s, indicating that social media allow people to meet others. The reason this is unsurprising is that the rise of social media influencers and dating sites allow people with similar interests and appearances to come together online. Essentially, it would be easier to find or view alternatives on social media, than it would be through texting or calling. One explanation for this is that people seem to use their phone to communicate with significant others, whereas social media allow people to meet others or connect with acquaintances. In general, the results suggested little-to-no correlation between CMC and relational satisfaction in heterosexual college dyads, an unexpected finding in this investigation.

Due to the low levels of correlation, it is important to examine possible causes for the results. One concern is that the majority of the questions were originally assessed on a five-point

Likert-type scale; the use of a seven-point scale could explain the low correlations. With fewer options for the participants (as a 5-point scale provides), there could have been lower standard deviation and thus a stronger correlation. Another concern was the low participant turnout. The student body of the institution targeted was small, and reaching a greater number of students was hindered by the administration's mass communication policy. Additionally, the instruments used have not been tested together before, and therefore, there could be low validity and/or reliability.

Conclusion

The results of this study are inconclusive given the unexpected, low correlations between the variables. Further research is necessary to understand more fully the perceived relationship and difference between texting and calling in romantic relationships. It may be effective to revisit the design of the research in terms of the instruments used and the use of scaled questions. Perhaps the scale would require uniformity in terms of possible responses, which could be accomplished by addressing the aforementioned Likert-type scale concern. It would also be important to consider other instruments. For example, the tool used to measure relational satisfaction is outdated; the study was conducted in 1998, and could require updating (Rusbult et. al). The other instruments were adapted with the research questions in mind, which may have rendered them ineffective at measuring the desired outcome and variables. Essentially, the instruments used were designed to answer the research questions posed in that research, so the results may not have accurately addressed the questions in the current study.

This research cannot accurately reach a conclusion on any of the questions posed, and Research Question 3 is particularly challenging. Aimee Miller-Ott, Lynne Kelly, and Robert Duran's study, "The Effects of Cell Phone Usage Rules on Satisfaction in Romantic Relationships" specifically examines cell phones and relational satisfaction, which emphasizes

the importance of distinguishing between the two media (2012). Although this study asked questions regarding both forms of media, the overall correlations represented a synthesis. The questions aimed at understanding cell phone communication looked at texting and calling as connected entities, rather than looked at texting and calling as connected rather than separate entities. Because the results of this study were inconclusive, the questions at the heart of this research remain. Clearly, there is a need for further research into CMCs and romantic relationships as technology continues to advance in ways that will frame our relational lives.

Appendix

The following instruments have been adapted from:

Elphinston, Rachel A., and Patricia Noller. "Time to Face It! Facebook Intrusion and the Implications for Romantic Jealousy and Relationship Satisfaction." *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, vol. 14, no. 11, 28 Nov. 2011, pp. 631 - 635., doi:10.1089/cyber.2010.0318.

Miller-Ott, Aimee E., et al. "The Effects of Cell Phone Usage Rules on Satisfaction in Romantic Relationships." *Communication Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 1, 30 Jan. 2012, pp. 17 - 34., doi:10.1080/01463373.2012.642263.

Rusbult, Caryl E., et al. "The Investment Model Scale: Measuring Commitment Level, Satisfaction Level, Quality of Alternatives, and Investment Size." *Personal Relationships*, vol. 5, no. 4, 1998, pp. 357 - 387., doi:10.1111/j.1475-6811.1998.tb00177.x.

1. Demographics

1.1. Grade Classification

1.2. Age

1.3. Biological Sex

1.4. Are you involved in a romantic relationship?

1.5. If so, is the dyad composed of a heterosexual couple?

1.6. Relationship Length

2. Phone Usage (Scaled Questions)

- 2.1. Limit texts to others when we are together
- 2.2. Limit calls to others when we are together
- 2.3. Don't call others when we are together
- 2.4. Don't have long phone conversations when we are together
- 2.5. Don't text others when we are at dinner together
- 2.6. Don't text others when we are together
- 2.7. Don't call others when at dinner together.
- 2.8. Before a certain time in the morning, it is not ok to text message each other.
- 2.9. After a certain time at night, it is not ok to call each other.
- 2.10. Before a certain time in the morning, it is not ok to call each other.
- 2.11. After a certain time at night, it is not ok to text message each other.
- 2.12. Respond to a text message from my partner within the hour of receiving it.
- 2.13. Have your cell phone on whenever you are not in class or at work.
- 2.14. Text message when you change locations.
- 2.15. Call when you change locations.
- 2.16. If your cell phone is turned off, give a good reason why.
- 2.17. It is ok to have a relational argument through text messages.
- 2.18. Don't start a fight through text messages.
- 2.19. Don't have a serious conversation about our relationship through text messages.
- 2.20. Don't immediately call back if the other person doesn't answer the phone.
- 2.21. Don't keep texting if the other person doesn't return a text.
- 2.22. Don't keep calling back if the other person doesn't answer the phone.

2.23. Don't check each other's text messages.

2.24. Don't check each other's phone log.

3. Social Media Usage

3.1. I often think about social media when I am not using it

3.2. I often use social media for no particular reason

3.3. Arguments have arisen with others because of my social media use

3.4. I interrupt whatever else I am doing when I need to access social media

3.5. I feel connected to others when I use my social media

3.6. I lose track of how much I am using social media

3.7. The thought of not being able to access social media makes me feel distressed

3.8. I have been unable to reduce my social media use

3.9. Limit social media use when we are together

3.10. Don't use social media when we are together

3.11. Don't use social media when at dinner together.

3.12. It is ok to have a relational argument through social media channels.

3.13. Don't start a fight through social media.

3.14. Don't have a serious conversation about our relationship through social media.

3.15. Don't check each other's social media feed.

3.16. Don't check each other's social media accounts.

4. Relational Satisfaction

4.1. Commitment Level - Global

4.1.1. I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner.

4.1.2. I want our relationship to last for a very long time.

- 4.1.3. I feel very attached to our relationship—very strongly linked to my partner
- 4.1.4. It is likely that I will date someone other than my partner within the next year.
- 4.1.5. I would not feel very upset if our relationship were to end in the near future.
- 4.1.6. I want our relationship to last forever.
- 4.1.7. I am oriented toward the long-term future of my relationship...

4.2. Satisfaction Level - Global

- 4.2.1. I feel satisfied with our relationship.
- 4.2.2. My relationship is much better than others' relationships.
- 4.2.3. My relationship is close to ideal.
- 4.2.4. Our relationship makes me very happy.
- 4.2.5. Our relationship does a good job of fulfilling my needs for intimacy...

4.3. Quality of Alternatives - Global

- 4.3.1. My alternatives are attractive to me (dating another, spending time...)
- 4.3.2. My alternatives to our relationship are close to ideal...
- 4.3.3. If I weren't dating my partner, I would do fine—I would find another appealing...
- 4.3.4. People other than my partner... are very appealing
- 4.3.5. My needs for intimacy, companionship, etc. could easily be fulfilled...

4.4. Investment Size - Global

- 4.4.1. I have put a great deal into our relationship that I would lose...
- 4.4.2. Compared to other people I know, I have invested a great deal...
- 4.4.3. I feel very involved in our relationship—Like I have put a great deal into it.
- 4.4.4. Many aspects of my life have become linked to my partner...
- 4.4.5. My relationships with friends and family members would be complicated.

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