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Texting During the COVID-19 Pandemic:
College Students' Use of Relational Maintenance Strategies

Madeline Jupina

Introduction

The COVID-19 Pandemic

COVID-19, also known coronavirus, was first identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019 (CDC, 2020). On January 24, 2020, the first coronavirus cases were confirmed in Europe, and on March 13, 2020, Europe became the epicenter of the pandemic (WHO, 2020). Simultaneously, the United States reported its first cases of the coronavirus on January 21, 2020 (WHO, 2020). At time of writing, almost 450,000 Americans have died of COVID-19 (NYT, 2021). Some of the major mitigation strategies throughout the COVID-19 pandemic have been social distancing, or staying home and away from others, as well as government-mandated stay-at-home orders (Maragakis, 2020). However devastating the impacts of the actual disease, mental health outcomes due to anxiety and isolation have been considerably worse since mid-March, when the COVID-19 pandemic began to spiral out of control in the United States.

The pandemic has seen increasing risks and rates of suicide among low-income Americans and overall in lower-income nations (Graham, 2020). Across the board, Americans have reported higher levels of negative emotions since the beginning of the pandemic (Graham, 2020). Many Research has also noted the particular impact on children and young people, such as the college students surveyed, who have experienced disproportionately negative mental health outcomes (John, 2020). Social isolation has likely changed the way many people kept in touch and maintained their relationships, with stock in Zoom, a video-conferencing service, increasing 425% in 2020 (Bylund, 2020). La Salle University, the university at which this study was conducted, sent home any on-campus residential student who did not have an extenuating circumstance on March 13th, 2020. Its on-campus residences remained closed for the remainder of the spring semester, the summer, and the fall 2020 semester, with all classes virtual. Campus

reopened in January 2021. Many of the study participants therefore experienced new living situations and navigated relationships and classes fully virtually.

Relational Maintenance

Relational maintenance functions under two basic assumptions. The first is that a relationship will deteriorate if certain relational maintenance behaviors are not carried out (Dindia & Canary, 1993). The second assumption expands on this, stating that these behaviors also help a relationship remain satisfactory, further preventing termination (Dindia & Canary, 1993). Canary and Stafford (1991) were the first to create the five categories of relational maintenance behaviors used in this study: positivity, assurances, openness, social networks, and sharing tasks. Canary and Stafford (1991) created these relational maintenance strategies through study of romantic partners. However, they have since been applied to studies on friendship (Johnson, 2001), and family relationships (Vogl-Bauer, Kalbfleisch, & Beatty, 1999). Canary and Stafford (1992) created measures of the communication of these five behaviors. First, positivity refers to cheerfulness, even when a person does not want to be cheerful, and refraining from criticism (Canary & Yum, 2015). Positivity also refers to making an effort to be fun and spontaneous. Assurances refer to communication that reaffirms and reinforces commitment and a future to the relationship (Canary & Yum, 2015). Openness involves honesty about goals and future directions for the relationship; importantly, openness involves communication about the relationship itself, not personal feelings of one member of the relationship (Canary & Yum, 2015). Shared social networks are other relationships that members of one relationship use to stabilize and create patterns of social interaction with others (Canary & Yum, 2015). Finally, sharing tasks refers to doing one's equitable share of the work (Canary & Yum, 2015).

Texting and Relational Maintenance

Texting is often a particularly useful tool for relational maintenance in long-distance relationships. Although texting is often characterized as lazy, long-distance couples prioritize its ease and convenience. Janning, Gao, and Snyder (2017), found that long-distance romantic couples take advantage of the frequency with which they can text one another. Interestingly, ease and thoughtfulness were found to go hand-in-hand, as long-distance couples find that the ease and frequency that texting provides allows them to communicate thoughtfully throughout their day (Janning et al., 2017). Research finds texting beneficial in relationships that are not specifically long-distance as well. In a study controlling for proclivity, or the inclination to send text messages, research found that this inclination can indirectly lead to positive relational maintenance outcomes (McEwan & Horn, 2016). The reasoning is that couples that text more frequently are bound to use more relational maintenance strategies overall (McEwan & Horn, 2016).

However, ease of communication has drawbacks as well, especially for those people that both text and see one another regularly. In a study of friendship maintenance, Hall and Baym (2011), found that too much contact via texting is detrimental to relationships. Survey participants stated that they felt pressure or guilt surrounding responding to text messages in a timely manner, even as far as feeling surveilled in their relationships. McEwan & Horn also found that too much texting proclivity can be negatively correlated with satisfaction for many of the same reasons (McEwan & Horn, 2016). Texting in relationships often brings up the dialectic of dependence-independence, as well as autonomy-connection (Hall & Baym, 2011; Duran, Kelly, & Rotaru, 2011). Constant and rapid availability comes with its own benefits and

drawbacks and each relationship has its own perspective on it. The use of text messages to perform relationship maintenance

As for the use of specific maintenance behaviors via texting, prior research finds that subjects' use of assurances and positivity are closely correlated, and that couples that use more assurances also use more positivity (Baber, 2012). They also use text messages to replace face-to-face communication about task sharing (Baber, 2012). While subjects communicated about their social networks in order to practice openness with one another, sending text messages about social networks just for the sake of discussing the network was not found to be important (Baber, 2012). Moreover, it is not the number of text messages one sends that correlate with the likelihood of using relational maintenance behaviors, but rather the tendency to use text messages as a synchronous medium (Brody, Mooney, Westerman, & McDonald, 2009). Synchronicity seems to be the most important factor in the ability to use computer-mediated communication to create and maintain relationships (Brody et al., 2009), likely because it is a factor in face-to-face communication as well. Therefore, it is an important factor in maintaining relationships via text message as well.

Text messaging has chiefly been studied in romantic relationships, but texting impacts friendships and family relationships as well. One study on friendship found that the media niche of phone calls and texting was more closely related with friendship maintenance than Internet-based communication services (Liu & Yang, 2016). However, this study examined the two together and did not control for them separately. The study posits that, while phone calls contain more cues and synchronicity, text messages are quicker and easier and can be used to fill in the gaps (Liu & Yang, 2016). In families, research shows that adolescents talk face to face with their parents most often, followed by phone calls and texts (Rudi, Walker, & Dworkin, 2014).

However, this family study was conducted with people younger than the age group involved in the current study. Depending on where the participants in this study lived for the majority of the COVID-19 pandemic, they may have spent far less time in-person with their parents than the adolescents in the Rudi, Walkner, and Dworkin study did.

Given our knowledge on relational maintenance, texting during “normal” times, and the crossover between the two, the question arises of how people have used texting to maintain their relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. Texting is generally useful for the maintenance of long-distance relationships (Janning et al., 2017), and relationships in which the members regularly see one another (McEwan & Horn, 2016). However, since pandemic restrictions likely significantly altered the variety of people that participants were able to see on a regular basis, I propose two hypotheses:

H1: The pandemic has overall increased the frequency with which students use texting to maintain their relationships.

H2: Participants will have used texting the most to maintain relationships with those outside their home.

Based on an understanding of COVID-19 restrictions and the strains they placed on relationships, I propose this research question:

RQ1: How have family, friendship, and romantic relationships been differently affected by the pandemic?

Methods

The goal of this study was to survey college students about their family, friendship, and romantic relationships during the pandemic. Any student who owns a device that sends and receives text messages was eligible to participate. Students reported on how their relational maintenance behaviors with friends, family, and romantic partners changed due to the pandemic. Those who did not have a romantic relationship over the course of the coronavirus pandemic were instructed to skip that portion of the survey.

Sample

69 college students completed the online survey. The author of the survey solicited responses through electronic announcements and their own network. Professors also informed students they could participate in the survey. The researcher did not offer any incentives to completing the survey; some professors offered extra credit to students who participated. Survey results were anonymous.

The sample consisted of 23 men and 46 women. The average age of respondents was 20.61 years old ($sd=1.3$). 10% of the participants self-described as Black or African American ($N=7$), 72% self-described as White, not Hispanic ($N=50$), 7% self-described as Hispanic or Latino ($N=5$), 7% self-described as Asian ($N=5$), and 1 declined to answer. The survey also asked about living situation for the majority of the COVID-19 pandemic. None of the participants lived alone, 86% lived with immediate family ($N=59$), 9% lived with a friend or roommate ($N=6$), 3% lived with a romantic partner ($N=2$), and 3% chose “other, please describe” ($N=2$). Of those two, one described their living situation as living with cousins, and one described it as living with a sister.

Instrumentation

To evaluate their texted maintenance before versus during the pandemic, respondents were asked to use a 5-point Likert format. The scale ranged from 1= much less than before the pandemic to 5= much more than before the pandemic. Respondents were asked to respond to the same 12 items for their family relationships, their friendships, and their romantic relationships if they had one. The maintenance strategies for the survey questions come from the Canary & Stafford (1991) relational maintenance strategies: positivity, openness, assurances, shared tasks, and shared networks. They were instructed to leave the romantic relationship section blank if it was not applicable. We adapted our scale from the McEwan and Horn (2016) relational maintenance survey, altering some of the questions to better apply to texting during the pandemic.

	Family	Friendship	Romantic Relationship
Positivity	<i>M</i> =3.4 <i>sd</i> =.08	<i>M</i> =3.6 <i>sd</i> =.13	<i>M</i> =3.5 <i>sd</i> =.03
Openness	<i>M</i> = 3.2 <i>sd</i> =.15	<i>M</i> =3.4 <i>sd</i> =.24	<i>M</i> =3.7 <i>sd</i> =.12
Assurances	<i>M</i> =3.5 <i>sd</i> =.19	<i>M</i> =3.6 <i>sd</i> =.20	<i>M</i> =3.6 <i>sd</i> =.08
Shared Network	<i>M</i> =3.4 <i>sd</i> =.06	<i>M</i> =3.4 <i>sd</i> =.15	<i>M</i> =3.4 <i>sd</i> = .08
Shared Tasks	<i>M</i> =3.2 <i>sd</i> =.06	<i>M</i> =3.1 <i>sd</i> =.05	<i>M</i> =3.4 <i>sd</i> =.00

Results

Before testing the hypotheses or answering the research question, we ran Cronbach's alpha to test for consistency in all our scales. The scale for shared networks was unreliable for family, friends, and romantic partners. Two items measured for shared networks: "I have texted about family members that we both know" and "I have texted about spending time with friends

we have in common.” Because the majority of respondents were living with either immediate family or friends, their responses varied.

The first hypothesis predicted that the pandemic overall increased the frequency with which college students used texting to maintain their relationships. We found that college students engaged in this somewhat more than before the pandemic, especially with friends and romantic partners. The mean for every scale was consistently above 3, which read “about the same as before the pandemic.” These results support the first hypothesis indicating that texting to maintain relationships somewhat increased.

The second hypothesis predicted that respondents would use texting more with people they did not live with for most of the pandemic. To test this hypothesis, we performed a MANOVA test for family, friend, and romantic partner maintenance. For family maintenance, the results were not statistically significant (*Wilks' Lambda* =.840). In romantic relationships, the results were also not statistically significant due to a small sample size. Only 44 of the 69 respondents had romantic relationships during the pandemic, and therefore were able to complete this portion of the survey. For friendship maintenance, this hypothesis is approaching significance (*Wilks' Lambda* =.164). In testing for friendship maintenance, we found that people living with friends or roommates participated in more texted openness than people living with romantic partners. Results also showed that people living in “other” situations texted about shared networks more than those living with romantic partners.

The research question asked how texted maintenance in family, friendship, and romantic relationships was differently affected by the pandemic. To get these results, we used a one-sample T-Test, which delivered statistically significant results ($p=.000$) for families, friendship, and romantic relationships across all five maintenance strategies. Respondents used texted

positivity most among friends ($M=10.66$, $sd=2.09$), then romantic partners ($M=10.35$, $sd=2.15$), and least of all family ($M=10.04$, $sd=1.83$). Results showed that respondents used the most texted openness with romantic partners ($M=11.12$, $sd=2.34$), then friends ($M=10.21$, $sd=2.04$), then family ($M=9.60$, $sd=2.11$). In texted assurances, people engaged in the same amount with friends ($M=7.25$, $sd=1.62$) and romantic partners ($M=7.23$, $sd=1.57$), but less with family ($M=6.91$, $sd=1.50$). The scale for shared networks was found unreliable across family, friendship, and romantic relationships by Cronbach's alpha. Finally, respondents texted about shared tasks with romantic partners ($M=6.77$, $sd=1.43$) more often than with family ($M=6.30$, $sd=1.49$) and friends ($M=6.30$, $sd=1.49$). We found that the texted maintenance in family, friendship, and romantic relationships did change due to the pandemic, and how they changed varied by relational maintenance strategy.

	Family	Friendship	Romantic Relationship
Positivity	$M=10.04$ $sd=1.83$	$M=10.66$ $sd=2.09$	$M=10.35$ $sd=2.15$
Openness	$M=9.60$ $sd=2.11$	$M=10.21$ $sd=2.04$	$M=11.12$ $sd=2.34$
Assurances	$M=6.91$ $sd=1.50$	$M=7.25$ $sd=1.62$	$M=7.23$ $sd=1.57$
Shared Tasks	$M=6.30$ $sd=1.49$	$M=6.30$ $sd=1.49$	$M=6.77$ $sd=1.43$

Discussion

The goal of this study was to build on previous scholarship regarding texting and relational maintenance, but with the added element of the coronavirus pandemic. The participants in this survey experienced stay-at-home orders, social distancing measures, quarantine and isolation, and the closure of university housing over the course of the pandemic.

For this reason, we hypothesized that respondents would use texting to maintain their relationships more than they did before the pandemic. This hypothesis was supported; respondents overall used texting somewhat more to maintain relationships during the pandemic. In all five strategies, and for all three relationship types, the mean is above 3, which represented “the same amount as before the pandemic.” When respondents could not see their loved ones, they may have turned to texting to create the shared space that Janning, Gao, & Snyder (2017) suggest in their study of long-distance couples.

We also found, however, that living situation was not significantly correlated with use of texting to maintain relationships. We hypothesized that respondents would use texting more often with people they did not live with. This, however, did not provide significant results. With a larger sample size, living away from friends would have likely had a significant impact on amount of texting used to maintain friendships. This result was approaching significance with our current sample size of 69 people.

Finally, we investigated how family, friendship, and romantic relationships were differently impacted by the pandemic. Some relational maintenance strategies were used via text more often with friends, and others with romantic partners. No relational maintenance strategy was used most with family members. This is likely because the majority of survey respondents lived with immediate family for most of the pandemic. Although family relationships often saw the least texted relational maintenance, the means for all five relational maintenance strategies were above 3 for family relationships. This suggests that even though texted maintenance with family was least common among respondents, it still occurred more so than it did before the pandemic began.

Of the five relational maintenance strategies, some appeared more often depending on the relationship type. Assurances measured consistently high across all three relationship types. This is not unique to this study, as Smith & Konda (2013) finds that assurances are most common in both newly established and long-term romantic relationships. Smith & Konda speculated that assurances are widely applicable because any type of romantic relationship can benefit from expressing love and affection (2013). Although this study examines non-romantic relationships as well, friendships and family relationships also benefit from expressions of love, so assurances are applicable to the relationship types in this study as well. Assurances also encompass statements of commitment to a relationship. Because COVID-19 precautions often impacted the frequency with which one could see their loved ones, statements of commitment reassure loved ones that the relationship will survive adversity.

Other relational maintenance strategies were far more common in one relationship type than another. Openness was high among romantic relationships ($M=11.12$) in this study. Uncertainty reduction through openness has a positive impact on romantic relationships, as it increases intimacy and can make communication between partners less complicated (Theiss & Solomon, 2008). As the respondents in this study had an average age of 20.61, this is likely the first large-scale, highly uncertain event that they have been old enough to fully understand. People experiencing the coronavirus pandemic, plus its impacts on romantic relationships, were likely more open with their partners to reduce uncertainty during an already uncertain time. Because openness implies a deeper type of communication, often rooted in personal feelings, it is often used among romantic partners who have these types of deep conversations.

On the other hand, positivity usage among friends was highest during the pandemic ($M=10.66$). A romantic couple becoming unexpectedly long-distance was likely more jarring

than moving away from friends, as college-aged students regularly move away from friends for the summer or other semester breaks. In as difficult a time as the pandemic, respondents likely turned to their friends for a break from daily stressors. Although respondents utilized openness with their friends as well, it appears that friends may have served more as an outlet for texted positivity and lightheartedness than romantic partners did. Because moving away from friends, as the overwhelming majority of respondents did, was likely less stressful than moving away from romantic partners, it may have felt more natural for respondents to be lighthearted among friends, whereas there were more serious issues of uncertainty among romantic partners.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not yet ended, and scholarship about its effects on interpersonal relationships is in early stages. However, this study builds on literature about how texting was used before the pandemic for relational maintenance and applies it to this specific moment in time. Future research should investigate other forms of computer-mediated communication, as well as psychological impacts of losing in-person contact with loved ones due to coronavirus restrictions.

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