Relational and Masspersonal Maintenance: Romantic Partners’ Use of Social Network Websites

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Abstract
As social network websites (SNSs) occupy the intersection of both interpersonal and mass media communication, the current research examined how public, private, and “masspersonal” features of SNSs affect relational maintenance between romantic couples. In Study 1, a survey of 309 Facebook users revealed that increases in dyadic public and private maintenance, and network maintenance communication were associated with greater feelings of presence and satisfaction. However, public and private dyadic maintenance had opposite relationships with partner uncertainty. To further examine these patterns, Study 2 employed an in-depth content analysis of maintenance messages. Results from a sample of 94 Facebook users’ maintenance messages indicated that selection of public and private SNS channels varied with respect to the valence and intimacy of the message.

1. Introduction
With improvements in the quality and availability of Internet technology, the struggle to maintain interpersonal relationships across the geo-temporal divide has decreased. One relatively recent social computing system that has become popular for relational maintenance communication is social network websites (SNSs). The current research examines maintenance communication in SNS between close, romantic partners. Study 1 explores how couples use SNSs to sustain relationships, and also examines the role of couples’ mutual social networks in maintenance processes. Study 2 provides a content analysis of couples’ SNS messages to understand how partners select communication channels when performing maintenance in SNS.

2. Relational Maintenance in Facebook
In this study, relational maintenance is defined as the performance of behaviors that sustain both the existence of the relationship and satisfaction of each partner [27]. As mediated channels have become more popular for the performance of maintenance, many communication researchers have applied offline behavioral typologies [3] to describe online behavior. The most popular typology is Canary and Stafford’s [3] which includes: openness (self-disclosures), assurances, positivity, sharing tasks, and social networks (i.e., spending time with mutual friends and family). Studies using this typological approach to examine online maintenance between friends, family, and romantic partners have found that the most frequently used behaviors are assurances, positivity, openness, and social networks [12, 13].

The earlier scholarship on mediated relational maintenance focused on systems like email or instant message (IM), but more recent scholarship has begun to investigate how SNSs are being used for maintenance as well. Since SNSs display users’ relational ties and connections, it seems logical that users would find them appropriate for maintenance tasks. As “persistently present lightweight tools” [31], SNSs can increase the speed, convenience, and access of communication because they require very little effort to use and little to no technological expertise to operate. Secondly, SNSs reduce the “transaction costs” (e.g., time, attention, effort) associated with more traditional mediated forms of maintenance communication such as a phone call. A Facebook status update or comment takes relatively little time out of one’s day, but can fulfill a variety of maintenance functions quickly and efficiently.

Although these reasons may explain why individuals use Facebook to maintain romantic relationships, they do explain not how partners’ SNS communication is related to the quality of their relationships. Investigation of maintenance between close romantic partners has found positive effects such as increased satisfaction and intimacy [22], while others suggest that increased SNS communication is associated with negative effects such as romantic jealousy and increased conflict [20].

While it is clear that romantic couples are using SNS for maintenance purposes, we know less about the detailed nature of this use, and which features couples’ exploit for such purposes. In the studies below, we examine the varying nature of Facebook’s...
private and public communication channels, and the effects that individuals’ channel selection may have on feelings of social presence, uncertainty, and satisfaction within their romantic relationships.

2.1. Maintenance through private channels

The Facebook system contains several different channels that users may use to communicate with others. If conceptualized along a continuum, these different channels may range from one-on-one private messaging to completely public broadcasts, or “posts” to one’s entire social network, or even the entire web. Interestingly, both public and private channels can be appropriated for dyadic maintenance.

At one end are completely private Facebook messages sent between users. Private messaging in Facebook reflects the most personal, individualized form of interpersonal communication available on this SNS. Past research has shown that mediated messaging systems can be used to achieve a feeling of social presence, or “being with another person”, even when interactants are physically separated. Furthermore, these “leaner” mediated systems sometimes elevate presence to levels higher than “richer” channels [11]. Thus private messaging options would allow couples to construct messages that facilitate feelings of closeness or presence, which can contribute to the satisfaction of both partners.

2.2. Maintenance through public channels

On the other end of the continuum are more public channels such as Facebook posts, status updates, “likes” and comments. Messages sent through these channels are viewable by one’s entire social network. These public messages are also expected to fulfill maintenance functions, although maybe in different ways than private messages.

2.2.1. Mundane maintenance. Facebook is perhaps most well-known for users’ frequent post of ordinary, everyday events and behaviors. Users often complain about these “boring” updates crowding their Facebook newsfeeds. However, information-sharing about mundane events such as “check-ins” to various locations, and status updates, has enjoyed continued frequency and popularity, so it is clear that this “banality” must be serving some kind of purpose, even if these messages are not as individualized as those likely being sent through private channels. In this case, we suggest that such messages may function as a form of mundane maintenance.

Dainton and Stafford [6] distinguish strategic from mundane maintenance by suggesting that the latter behaviors are often performed with less conscious intention. As a result, such behaviors become “routinized” within a couples’ existing patterns over time. In their study, common mundane maintenance behaviors were things such as proactive prosocial messages (e.g., asking about partner’s day), spending time together, and self-disclosures.

Prior to SNSs, geographically separated partners would have to spend time on the phone with a romantic partner, or write letters or emails to execute mundane maintenance, which might have been time-consuming and inefficient. However, the communicative costs of mundane maintenance with a romantic partner in SNSs are much lower, and can still provide virtual reminders of the relationship.

Such behaviors have been theorized as an online form of “social grooming” whereby individuals maintain bonds with others through these publicly communicated mundane messages [7, 28]. While social grooming has been explored in an SNS context, most investigations have explored how people build “bridging” social capital with peripheral social ties rather than in close relationships [9]. But some research has also demonstrated the presence of mundane maintenance behaviors exchanged between romantic partners. For example, Radovanovic and Ragenedda [24] found that mundane messages can serve as “phatic posts”, or communication that fulfills individuals’ needs for “social upkeep.” Other research has demonstrated that couples who used Facebook for public displays of affection or commitment also tended to have higher amounts of relational satisfaction [19, 32]. Thus one reason for the frequency and popularity of mundane maintenance messages on Facebook may be for reinforcing the connection that one has to their significant other.

2.2.2. Publicly presented virtual tie signs.

Another way SNSs may be particularly well-suited for maintenance is due to their ability to showcase virtual tie signs. Tie signs refer to artifacts, behaviors, or adornments that signify mutual belonging (i.e., wedding bands). SNSs like Facebook allow the display of virtual tie signs that provide “visible clues about sociometric and relational links” in a public space [27].

For example, Saslow and colleagues [26] found that posting a profile picture depicting the profile-owner together with his or her spouse is related to greater levels of relational satisfaction and closeness. As a virtual tie sign, this kind of profile photo may serve a self-reflective function that reifies the relationship’s existence, which is a key component of maintenance. Other tie signs may include tagging each other in status updates and comments, being
“Facebook official” in one’s relationship status [22], or tagging the romantic partner in Facebook content.

2.3 “Masspersonal” Maintenance: Convergence of Interpersonal and Mass Media Channels

Facebook’s combined private/dyadic and public/social environments suggest that it may also facilitate a form of masspersonal maintenance. The masspersonal convergence [21, 31] describes how new media facilitate the production of interpersonal maintenance messages that can be displayed as mass communications disseminated to an entire network of family, friends, and acquaintances. One of the hallmarks of SNSs like Facebook is the “public visibility of otherwise private conversations” [27].

For example, when performed publicly an “I love you!” message fulfills two functions. First, it functions as an assurance that contributes to relational maintenance between romantic partners. Secondly, it fulfills a “self-presentational” function by publicly displaying a person’s happiness, commitment, or connectedness to their romantic partner to other members of their shared social networks [29]. In this way, both interpersonal and social functions are fulfilled by the unique masspersonal nature of SNS. When combined with high levels of interactivity, Facebook’s masspersonal environment gives third parties (e.g., mutual friends/family) in a couple’s shared social network an opportunity to comment on the couple’s relationship, or to communicate (in)directly with the couple. This is a relatively new possibility for maintenance communication. How these network communications affect the romantic relationship has not yet been investigated with regard to social media, although previous research suggests that offline network communication is extremely important within romantic relationships [23].

In the next section, we examine how private, public, and masspersonal maintenance communications within Facebook may affect how individuals feel about their romantic partners and their relationships.

3. Presence/Propinquity, Satisfaction, & Uncertainty

One outcome that SNS maintenance behaviors may be associated with is partners’ feelings of social presence. Social presence is a psychological state that varies for people at different times. Lee [16] defined social presence as “a psychological state in which virtual social actors are experienced as actual social actors” (p. 45), focusing attention on the “realness” of the online interaction. A related concept (which the current study adopts) is that of electronic propinquity or “electronic presence” [15] and is defined as “the psychological feeling of nearness that communicators experience using different communication channels” [30]. Both social presence and electronic propinquity focus on people feeling close or connected to others when using technology to interact. When romantic partners see virtual reminders of a loved one pop up on Facebook, it may help them “be with” each other emotionally or psychologically, even if they are not with each other physically.

An additional relational outcome of interest often assessed in maintenance research is relational satisfaction. Maintenance communication with one’s romantic partner through multiple channels (e.g., oral, written) has been shown to be positively related to satisfaction [5, 17]. Both private and public messages can signal that one partner is thinking about the other, even when separated.

The final relational outcome that may be related to SNS maintenance is uncertainty. Partner uncertainty deals with the level of confidence people place in their own judgments of their partners’ involvement in a relationship [14]. Uncertainty is considered to be a key aspect of relational continuation [2] and studies have routinely found that reductions in this type of uncertainty are linked to greater feelings of closeness, commitment, and satisfaction [14]. Therefore, it is plausible that maintenance messages may be associated with greater certainty about one’s partner. Although this feeling is sustained virtually, feeling that one’s partner is “with” you, and not “away” doing unknown things, seems like an important effect brought about by couples’ mutual SNS use.

3.1. The importance of social networks. In their investigation of couples’ social networks, Parks and Adelman [23] found that individuals who had increased communication with their partner’s social network showed a decrease in partner uncertainty and a decrease in the likelihood of terminating the relationship. Additionally, when an individual received more support from his or her partner’s network, uncertainty was reduced. The authors explained that the increase in network communication allowed partners to reduce uncertainty by providing direct information from third parties, as well as opportunities to observe a partner’s behavior in different types of environments. The associations between network communication, uncertainty, and satisfaction may
make the social network’s role in romantic relationships especially salient in Facebook where network ties are immediately obvious and network communication so visible. However, it is difficult to know exactly how the masspersonal nature of Facebook may affect the network’s role. If a person’s network supports his/her relationship and relational partner, then Facebook can increase inter-network communication, providing reduced uncertainty, and greater relational satisfaction overall. However, the opposite may be true: If one’s network does not like a romantic partner (or, if the partner dislikes the network), seeing virtual reminders of the disliked other routinely via Facebook may be related to negative relational outcomes such as avoidance, jealousy, or increased uncertainty.

Because it is unclear exactly what kind of network communication occurs in Facebook in relation to the dyad or couple, the impact of overall amount of network communication and network’s support of the relationship is difficult to predict. Therefore, Study 1 investigates how public and private dyadic maintenance messages and network SNS communications impact romantic partners’ feelings of social presence (RQ1), relational satisfaction (RQ2) and uncertainty (RQ3)?

4. Study 1: Method

A sample of 309 Facebook users (214 female, 62 male, 33 undisclosed) was recruited from a large university and directly from messages posted to Facebook that advertised the study. After participants indicated their consent, they were directed to the online survey. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 68 ($M = 23.51$, $SD = 6.06$). Participants had to be active members of Facebook and had to be currently involved with a romantic partner who was also an active member of Facebook. There was considerable variation in the length of respondents’ relationships (in months, $M = 39.21$, $SD = 113.83$), number of face-to-face meetings with their partner in a given week ($M = 63.6$, $SD = 622.56$), and hours spent on Facebook daily ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 1.89$).

4.1. Measures

The online survey contained six items measuring relationship satisfaction [25], and six items measuring presence/propinquity [30]. Two original items were developed to assess the amounts of private communication, and six items measured public communication participants have with their romantic partners on Facebook. Using items adapted from Parks and Adelman [23], participants also answered eight items regarding their feelings of partner uncertainty, and estimated the amount of Facebook communication they have with their partner’s network, and the amount of support they receive from partner’s network. Lastly, participants responded to items from the Facebook Intensity Scale [8] as a control variable. All items were coded so that higher scores reflected greater amounts of all variables. Reliabilities were sufficient, ranging $\alpha = .72$ to .95.

5. Study 1: Results

Research questions 1, 2, and 3 asked about how the various types of Facebook communications (public, private, network, network support) comparatively impacted social presence, relational satisfaction, and uncertainty. In order to address these questions, three separate regression analyses were conducted (see Table 1 for correlations). Before the regression analyses were executed, all variables were mean-centered to aid in interpretation. Facebook intensity was entered into the first block as a control variable (see Table 2).

For RQ1, the regression analysis for social presence was significant, $F(5, 303) = 18.41, p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .22$. The only variable that was statistically significant was public Facebook communication. Private and network communication, and perceived network support were not.

The analysis for relational satisfaction in RQ2 was also significant, $F(5, 303) = 14.44, p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .20$. Analyses indicated that both public Facebook communication and perceived network

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*p < .05, **p < .01
support, were statistically significant predictors of relational satisfaction. The results for uncertainty were more surprising. The overall model was significant, $F(5, 303) = 12.93$, $p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .18$. After controlling for Facebook intensity, public maintenance, network communication, and network support variables were negatively associated with uncertainty, but private communication between partners on Facebook was positively associated with uncertainty. Thus it was concluded that public and private maintenance exhibit different associations with partner uncertainty.

6. Study 1: Discussion

Results of Study 1 suggested that individuals’ various types of SNS maintenance communication impacted their feelings of presence, relationship satisfaction, and uncertainty about their partners. Of note is the difference in public and private Facebook maintenance with regard to partner uncertainty. Increased public Facebook communication was related to reduced uncertainty, whereas increased private communication was related to increased uncertainty. However, based on Study 1, we can only speculate as to how public and private maintenance differ. We suspect that these different patterns are due to how partners use each channel, rather than a direct result of the channel itself.

One explanation is that couples may be using public and private channels to communicate different kinds of information. Many users try to refrain from displaying negative content in public spaces like newsfeeds and profile walls [18]. Because public communication is unlikely to be negative on Facebook there may be a “positivity bias” operating publicly, which may account for its stronger positive associations with presence and satisfaction, and negative relationship to uncertainty.

7. Study 2

Study 1 suggested that there might be distinct differences in the content of couples’ public and private SNS maintenance messages which are in turn associated with singular relational outcomes. To better understand the specific patterns of public and private message content and how individuals select channels during SNS maintenance, we conducted a content analysis in Study 2. Given the masspersonal environment of Facebook, individuals have important decisions to make about how to communicate and present information about their relationship to others in their network. Different factors, both social and technological, may affect their decision-making process.

7.1. Implicit norms of use

Although relational maintenance can consist of both positive (e.g., assurances, positivity) and negative (e.g., conflict, insults) content, it seems unlikely that couples would post negative or anti-social comments in spaces that are viewable by the rest of their Facebook network. Most Facebook users are aware of implicit norms regarding publicly-viewable content. McLaughlin and Vitak [18] found that many of their focus group participants followed these norms of use, trying “to keep private feuds and discussions out of the public eye” and avoided sharing content that would reflect badly on another person.

In line with this previous research, we predict that romantic partners select Facebook’s private channels for the disclosure of more negative relational maintenance messages (H1a), but are more likely to select public channels for the display of positive relational maintenance (H1b).

7.1.2. Anticipation of social judgment. If couples are aware of the implicit social norms described above, they might also be aware of how others may judge them when they violate such norms in their self-presentational behavior. Bazarova [1]
examined how individuals evaluated self-disclosure messages that were communicated via public and private Facebook channels, and found that Facebook users judged high-intimacy self-disclosures made publicly as less appropriate than similar high-intimacy disclosures communicated privately. However, low-intimacy disclosures were judged equally appropriate when made in both public and private channels. Thus users judge the appropriateness of Facebook posts not only on the valence of the content, but also on the intimacy of the disclosure and the channel in which it is communicated.

These findings have important implications for channel selection in SNS maintenance communication. Couples who cross the normative boundaries regarding “online public displays of affection” may be judged by members of their network as inappropriate, or overly-disclosive, which may then actually result in negative social judgment. If this is true, we predict that romantic partners choose public channels for more “mundane” maintenance messages (H2), and reserve private channels for more intimate information (H3).

8. Study 2: Method

A separate sample of 99 Facebook users (24 males; 65 females; 10 undisclosed) was recruited using the same methods as Study 1. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 57 \( (M = 22.97, SD = 6.83) \), and spent an average of, \( M = 1.64, SD = 1.36 \), of hours on Facebook per day. In the online survey, participants were prompted to open their Facebook account, and locate the most recent instance of positive and most recent instance of negative communication that they had with their romantic partner on Facebook. Distinctions between positive and negative communication were derived from previous maintenance literature \([3, 12, 13]\). Positive communication was defined as “messages that are primarily used to do the following: reassure, agree with, compliment, or encourage your partner, keep-in-touch when apart, share positive updates, thoughts, or feelings”. Negative communication was described as “messages such as: criticisms, conflict, insults, accusations, or statements of displeasure or disagreement that you have with your partner”. Participants were told they could select examples that occurred in any Facebook space (public or private), and could have been initiated by either themselves or their partner.

Participants were then asked to provide actual communication content by cutting-and-pasting the messages from their selected maintenance examples. They were also asked to anonymize their messages by removing their own and their partner’s names. This procedure resulted in 97 unique messages (65 positive, 32 negative) usable for analysis. This discrepancy was due to what participants provided. Some indicated that they did not have any negative instances to share; others simply left the negative message field blank.

In addition, participants were asked to report the specific Facebook channel in which these messages were communicated (private asynchronous message, private synchronous message/direct chat, post on Facebook wall, status update, other).

8.1. Content analysis

The content analysis was executed in a two-step procedure. First, to assess and aggregate the types of maintenance messages in the data, two coders (blind to hypotheses) evaluated each message in random order and categorized them according to the coding protocol in Table 3. These categories were derived in part from previous literature; however a “mundane” maintenance category which included content such as jokes, greetings, happy birthday messages, and links to shared web content was also added. Intercoder reliability for this coding procedure was sufficient (Cohen’s Kappa = .83). Disagreements were resolved via discussion.

Second, two additional (blind) coders rated each message on six different semantic differential items for the dimensions of intimacy (e.g., not intimate/intimate) and mundaneness (e.g., mundane/exciting; typical/unique). This procedure yielded sufficient intercoder reliability (intimacy, \( \alpha = .83 \); mundaneness, \( \alpha = .81 \)). After coding, each rater’s score was averaged across all items to form a single composite score for each dimension. Then, the two composite scores for each rater were averaged to create a single “grand index” score for each message.

9. Study 2: Results

The results of the content analysis showed that there were more assurances and positivity exchanged between romantic partners than any other message type, consistent with previous research about online romantic relationship maintenance \([12, 13]\). The third most common category was “mundane maintenance” which represented almost 20% of the messages that participants provided.

We predicted that people would engage in strategic channel selection, such that positive relational maintenance messages would be more likely to be communicated via public SNS channels.
(H1a) and negative messages via private channels (H1b). To test these predictions, we assessed participants’ responses regarding the specific channel they used to communicate in the examples of positive and negative maintenance that they reported on.

A total of 83 participants were able to report on a specific instance of positive maintenance communication and the channel used during the situation. A chi-square test indicated a statistically significant difference between observed and expected frequencies, $\chi^2 (3, N = 83) = 9.68, p < .022$. Closer examination of categories showed private synchronous chat ($N = 32$) and public comments/posts ($N = 21$) exceeded the expected count of 20.8, while private asynchronous messaging ($N = 17$) and public status updates ($N = 13$) fell below. Therefore, data were not consistent with H1a.

Regarding negative messages, 54 participants reported a specific instance of negative maintenance and the channel used on Facebook. The chi-square analysis was statistically significant, $\chi^2 (3, N = 54) = 32.96, p < .001$. Private synchronous ($N = 25$) and private asynchronous messaging ($N = 23$) exceeded the expected frequency of 13.5, whereas public posts ($N = 4$) and status updates ($N = 2$) did not. Data were consistent with H1b.

To test H2, the coders’ ratings of message intimacy were used as the dependent variable. The independent variable of channel was collapsed into two groups to allow comparison between public (messages viewable by the couple and network members) and private (messages seen only by the couple). Analyses indicated a significant difference between public, $M = 3.40$, $SD = .79$, and private messages, $M = 3.80$, $SD = .70$, $t (95) = 2.57, p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .07$. It appears that messages communicated through private channels contain more intimate information than those communicated publicly.

Lastly, H3 predicted that publicly communicated messages would contain more mundane content than privately communicated messages. Analysis of outside raters’ judgments of mundaneness did not yield significant differences, $t (95) = 1.08, p = .28$.

10. **Study 2: Discussion**

The results of the content analysis in Study 2 revealed a pattern in which romantic partners select private channels to communicate more negative and more intimate messages compared to public channels. We speculate that channel selection behavior is motivated in part by the masspersonal nature of Facebook: Specifically, when romantic partners try to present their united “relational” image to their online network, they simultaneously adhere to the implicit norms of Facebook use regarding appropriate content in an effort to avoid negative social judgment. This pattern did not appear for mundane messages, however, which suggests that partners use both public and private channels to perform mundane maintenance.

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These results suggest that future studies might treat public and private SNSs maintenance separately to determine the specific effects that each form of communication has on relationships. Future research should examine mundane maintenance more closely to see if there are specific types of mundane messages, and how SNSs facilitate such content—not just between romantic partners, but friends, and family members as well.

11. General Discussion

The current research examined couple’s SNS maintenance communication with one another, as well as communication within their network. Study 1 found that partners’ dyadic SNS maintenance is clearly associated with feelings of social presence, satisfaction and uncertainty, but that these relationships may be different with respect to public and private maintenance. Study 2 examined these patterns in public and private channels between couples, and found that private channels were more likely to contain intimate or negative information.


In general, amount of communication people have with their romantic partner’s network and the amount of support the network provides for the relationship were positively related to feelings of social presence with their partners, increased relational satisfaction, and reduced uncertainty. These findings parallel previous work in interpersonal communication [23] that suggests that receiving support from one’s social network is extremely important for the overall satisfaction and longevity of a relationship. The impact of one’s network may be even greater in a virtual space like Facebook where sociometric ties are salient and messages can be made more publicly visible.

The masspersonal environment of SNSs also allows social networks to provide information that reduces partner uncertainty and increases feelings of partner presence. For example, although one’s partner may be out of town visiting friends, his or her friends may post photos of events, status updates, or “check-ins” which allow an individual to feel “present” and more certain about all the activities going on with the partner. Thus, the network can provide uncertainty-reducing information even when one’s partner does not.

However, given the affordances of Facebook, it may also be the case that individuals “hide” certain members of a partner’s network that they do not like, or deliberately want to avoid. Such options are not available face-to-face—one cannot “hide” from one’s in-laws. Future research may want to examine how people actively avoid certain members of a partner’s social networks online whom they do not like or who are unsupportive while seeking out communication with others who are supportive of the relationship.


The content analysis in Study 2 found that couples frequently engage in the exchange of mundane maintenance content such as shared links to videos, webpages, or inside jokes. Partners shared this content both privately and publicly, which suggests that (at least in SNS systems), mundane messages are an important part of dyadic maintenance. Although not the main focus of this study, the content analysis revealed that the communication of mundane maintenance is a frequent practice among romantic couples, and warrants more careful examination in future research.

Regarding more direct forms of maintenance messages, Study 2 found that romantic partners were more likely to use private channels for intimate or negative information. We speculated that there were two factors influencing this channel selection behavior: First, couples wanted to self-present a positive or unified “relational image” to members of their social networks. But to do so required that they follow SNS norms of use regarding the level of intimacy and positivity/negativity in their publicly-viewable messages to avoid negative social judgment from members of their networks.

11.3 Future Research

While the current research added to our understanding of mediated maintenance, future research should expand upon the findings presented here. Notably, there are other variables that may be related to the nature of maintenance communication, presence, satisfaction, and uncertainty between couples. For example, individuals’ attachment style has been shown to be an important factor that affects the SNS behavior of romantic partners. Specifically those with fearful attachment styles have been shown to have higher levels of uncertainty, which prompts them not only to engage in electronic surveillance of their partners’ activities through SNSs [10], but may also prompt them to perform in (and expect) greater amounts of maintenance behavior from their partners.

Attachment has also been found to play a role in the ways in which an individual presents his or her
relationship to specific audiences. Vanderdrift and colleagues [29] tested whether or not people would change the self-presentation of their own romantic relationships depending on the audience. Participants were told they would be engaging in a brief interaction about romantic relationships in today’s society. They were told that they would converse with either (a) another romantic couple, (b) a pair of strangers, or (c) an anonymous individual. To facilitate interaction, they were then asked to rate their own romantic relationship on a questionnaire that would be exchanged with their conversation partners. Results indicated that compared to individuals with low attachment anxiety, those people higher in attachment anxiety portrayed their relationship as being more intimate when they thought they would be interacting with another couple. Conversely, there was no appreciable difference in presentation of intimacy across the paired strangers or anonymous individual interaction partner conditions. These results have interesting implications for the current findings. Since public messages also fulfill self-presentation functions, couples may want to present a “confident” image of their relationship to mutual friends, and therefore post only positive messages in the presence of their social networks. Furthermore, it may be that individuals high in attachment anxiety may engage in masspersonal maintenance on SNSs not only to meet their relational needs, but also to present their relationship to others in their social networks. In such cases, SNS maintenance may help individuals fulfill multiple goals simultaneously. Future research should explore how individuals’ attachment relates to these kinds of SNS maintenance communications, and what goals they strive to fulfill.

11.4 Limitations

Our samples overrepresented females (69% in Study 1; 65% in Study 2); although analyses revealed no sex differences regarding the primary maintenance communication variables, there is the possibility of bias. The correlational nature of these results also makes causality difficult to decipher. It may be that couples who use SNS for maintenance generate greater feelings of satisfaction and closeness; it is also plausible that couples who feel of close and satisfied with each other use SNS to maintain those feelings. Future research should employ longitudinal data collection to answer questions of causality. Additionally, while these results do shed light on interesting patterns within SNS maintenance, the results should be interpreted with caution. While the current sample suggests that positive messages are more frequent, no base rates have been established between negative versus positive message frequency for larger samples. Furthermore, the self-report nature of data collection means participants directly chose which maintenance messages to report on for Study 2. Future research may employ a more systematic form of sampling, rather than rely on participants’ self-report.

Overall, the current research did show that the use of SNS for romantic relational maintenance is associated with outcomes of presence, satisfaction, and uncertainty. Findings also revealed that private and public communication channels function differently in the maintenance process. Importantly, the masspersonal nature of Facebook means that a couple’s social network can play a significant role in online maintenance.

References


