
Making the Switch: Channel Switching in Romantic Couple Conflict

Lauren Scissors

Northwestern University
2240 Campus Drive
Evanston, IL 60208 USA
l-scissors@northwestern.edu

Abstract

This work explores the role of channel switching, or switching between forms of face-to-face and mediated communication (e.g., text messaging, instant messaging) in romantic couple conflict. Exploratory interviews were conducted with 24 individuals currently involved in a romantic relationship of at least 3 months. Initial results indicate that many patterns of channel switching are used during conflict and that participants have a number of motivations for initiating a channel switch. Implications for the design of communication technologies for romantic couples are discussed.

Keywords

Channel switching; conflict; romantic relationships; computer-mediated communication (CMC)

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. [Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI)]: Miscellaneous.

Introduction

As more types of communication technologies become available, interpersonal relationships have become increasingly multi-modal [1]. However, studies of communication technologies tend to examine one communication channel at a time, and not how

different channels might be used in succession within the context of one communication topic. Though work has been done on media or channel choice for a given task, little attention has been given to the act of switching between different modes of communication or "channel switching" [6].

Channel switching has been studied briefly in the context of instant messaging (IM) in the workplace, and the main finding from this work was that individuals engage in media switching when a discussion becomes too complicated for IM [4],[3]. This work, however, did not explore interpersonal or socially motivated reasons for channel switching. The current work takes an exploratory approach to understanding channel switching in romantic couple conflict.

Couple conflict is a useful context for studying channel switching since interpersonal issues like face threat (threat to one's public self-image) [2], avoidance, and communication styles are particularly salient and may help to explain switching motivations. Though there is a vast literature on couple conflict (see [5] for a review), little work has focused on how computer-mediated communication (CMC) might impact important aspects of a conflict, such as conflict initiation, emotion management, or conflict resolution. Accordingly, this work aims to address two general research questions: (1) What patterns of channel switching do individuals exhibit during a conflict? and (2) What motivations drive channel switching? By identifying these patterns and motivations, we can eventually explore which patterns may be more or less successful for certain types of couples, or for conflict resolution.

Method

Participants. Participants ($N=24$) were undergraduate and graduate students at a mid-sized Midwestern University who were currently involved in a heterosexual romantic relationship (self-defined). Only one individual from a couple was allowed to participate. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 30 years ($M=21$). Ten men (42%) and 14 women (58%) participated and 46% were Caucasian (25% Asian, 13% African-American, 8% Hispanic, 8% Mixed Race). Half of participants were in long-distance relationships, and half were in proxemic relationships. Gender was distributed equally across relationship type. 88.5% of participants reported that they were seriously dating (12.5% were casually dating). Participants' relationship length ranged from 3 to 48 months ($M=17.8$).

Procedure. Participants engaged in semi-structured interviews with the researcher, which allowed for novel topics to emerge. Participants were asked to discuss all of the ways in which they communicate with their partner and how often they use each type of communication channel. Participants were then asked to discuss a recent conflict they had with their partner, and detailed questions about specific conflicts were asked. Questions focused on participants' current relational partners but participants could also discuss past relationships. All interviews were audio recorded.

Analysis. Three research assistants transcribed the interviews to prepare them for qualitative analysis in HyperResearch. The coding process was iterative; interviews were read through several times and initial codes were reevaluated to reflect a deeper knowledge of the data. 91 codes were generated and then sorted into concepts, and concepts were categorized into

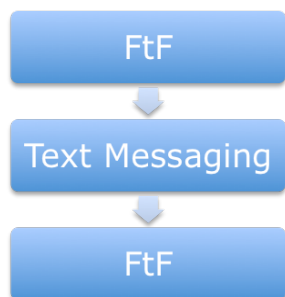


Figure 1. Participant 1 explained how she and her partner began a fight FtF. Then, after her partner stormed out, p1 sent a text message and they began texting back and forth. Ultimately, they met again FtF to resolve the conflict.

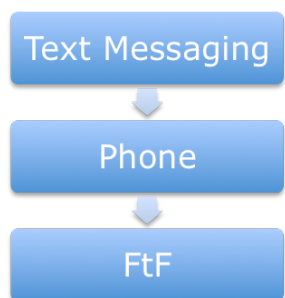


Figure 2. Participant 26 described a common pattern in which his partner would indicate she was upset via text message, which was then followed by phone communication and ultimately a FtF discussion.

themes. Though many themes emerged related to the use of communication technologies during conflict, the main focus of the current work is on channel switching.

Preliminary Findings

Patterns of Channel Switching

Initial results revealed that participants use a variety of channels during a conflict, including IM, text messaging, email and face-to-face (FtF) communication, and that the evolution of a conflict could follow a number of different patterns involving forms of mediated and FtF communication. Participants reported instances of conflicts being discussed only FtF or only through one form of CMC. In other cases, a conflict was initiated FtF and then continued and resolved/terminated in some form of CMC. The opposite was also observed; participants described conflicts that were initiated in CMC but were then discussed and resolved/terminated FtF. Participants also reported cases where an argument started in one form of CMC and ended in another form of CMC. In all three of these patterns, one channel switch occurred.

Participants also reported instances of two channel switches during a conflict. In other words, the conflict was initiated in one channel, discussed in a second channel, and then resolved/terminated after a third channel switch (either back to the previous channel or to a new channel). Figures 1 and 2 illustrate some of these observed patterns. Both FtF and mediated forms of communication served as the initial, secondary, and final communication medium. Participants explained that channel switches could be initiated by themselves, their partners, or by both partners in a couple. Participants also described conflicts with three or more

channel switches, suggesting a vast number of possible communication patterns during one conflict event.

Participants noted many reasons for channel switching, including overcoming technical constraints (e.g., switching from texting to talking due to the cumbersome nature of typing) and dealing with logistical issues (e.g., continuing a FtF discussion over text or IM when someone has to physically leave). However, many additional reasons emerged that were interpersonally motivated, as described below.

Avoiding Conflict Escalation

Some participants initiated conflict in CMC as a way to manage the nature of a future FtF discussion. For instance, p9 introduced the idea to his partner that something might be wrong via IM:

"Just to let the other know that something's going on before you get into the conversation in person helps the situation itself develop later in person. ... I myself think it's a good thing that you can ease into a conversation not being in person and get to communicate a little bit rather than being exiled of each other." – p9

This tactic was seen as a way to ease one's partner into the conflict, as opposed to catching one's partner off guard by bringing it up for the first time FtF and launching into a full discussion. Individuals also switched channels to avoid problematic communication. For instance, p4 explained that when an issue comes up while he is texting or IMing with his partner, he typically tries to move the conversation to FtF ...

"... 'cause it will probably only get worse, ... what they type might get misinterpreted than what they actually

meant, so it might get worse. So, that's why we usually leave something that just came up in conversation 'til later." – p4

While some participants explained how using CMC could lead to conflict escalation, others felt that CMC could actually help to minimize a conflict. For example:

"You just don't wanna start an argument or debate in person about something that probably doesn't have that much of importance ... It would escalate more in person than over text. Whereas in a text [it] would be a short-lived conversation, in person it could be carried on into many other conversations that really had nothing to do with where you started at." – p9

Here it seems that the constraints of text messaging might actually aid in preventing conflicts from escalating past their initial stages.

Managing Emotions

In addition to trying to avoid conflict escalation, many participants chose to switch channels in order to better manage their emotions. Most participants felt that it was easier to bring up an issue with their partners via CMC than FtF, and these sentiments were often the reason for a channel switch. Not only did participants explain that it was easier to express their emotions but that it was easier to control them. For instance:

"I waited until he was out of my room to text him ... And then he actually came back and tried to talk to me in person and I locked my door and wouldn't talk to him and started doing homework ... 'cause that was a fight I couldn't handle in person 'cause I couldn't even handle looking at him. ... [Then] over a text, I just told

him I need my space and that I didn't want to be with him." – p25

Here, p25 switched to a medium with fewer nonverbal cues in order to be able to communicate without losing control of her emotions, suggesting that use of CMC might support communication that is too hard to conduct FtF. Though participants generally felt more comfortable expressing themselves through mediated communication, findings were mixed on whether using CMC made participants feel more or less upset during a conflict. On the one hand, certain aspects of CMC were related to increased negative affect. For instance:

"I know when you send an angry text message, waiting for someone to respond, I'll just get angrier in that time that I'm waiting for the response and then...when I finally do get it, even if it's a nice message I'm still ready to keep fighting." – p1

These response latencies were one of the reasons that participants reported feeling angrier or more anxious when arguing via text message, email, or even IM. On the other hand, some participants used the time between responses to reflect on the problem and come up with a better solution. For instance:

"I replay it, sort think about it more in depth, probably come up with a better solution, maybe it wasn't that big a problem. ... [you] lose that urge, like, if you're really upset at somebody, kinda calm down." – p5

Another participant explained that, when using CMC:

"... you stay cooler. The voices aren't raised and you don't feel the tension. You still feel angry but it's not

like you say, 'No it was this way,' and he cuts you off and doesn't even listen to what you were saying before. You have time to say what you wanted to say." – p18

Adjusting to Partner Preferences

Preferences or behaviors of participants' partners were also a factor influencing channel switching. For instance, p5's partner preferred to email back and forth, whereas p5 preferred to chat on the phone:

"You just can't have a conflict right away, she wants to write it, read it, take time. I just automatically want a comeback. She likes a dialog: email, email, email, email. ... She writes me a letter and I'd probably call her at that time. It's like a dialog right away. I think she likes our arguments better when she says what she needs to say and then I say it, and then she says, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth." – p5

In another case, a participant explained how, after a fight over the phone, her partner expressed his feelings in an email, and she emailed him back. Then:

"He didn't respond. So it was up to me to call him. That's how it usually goes. Like if he's upset about something and doesn't email back I'm like, 'I'm sorry' and then I'm supposed to call." – p6

Here, a channel switch occurred because p6's partner refused to continue the conversation via the current channel that p6 was using. This example also illustrates the tendency for couples to enact similar patterns of channel switching across conflict events.

Conflict Resolution

The majority of participants explained that, to attain closure or resolution to a conflict, they needed to communicate FtF with their partners. For instance, after fighting with her partner via text messaging, p25 explained that a FtF apology was effective because:

"... he knows that a good way, a big way to show you're apologizing is to be ... really be repentful (sic), to apologize and give me a hug. ... So I think he wants to meet up in person so he can show that he's truly sorry and give me a hug ... I feel like hugs resolve the conflict, that's when the conflict is truly over, when you hug someone and accept them into your life." – p25

Many participants felt that some sort of visual or physical contact was required to help them truly feel better and attain closure on a conflict. However, some participants explained that using CMC after a FtF argument was a useful way to add additional closure. For instance, p11 explained that she and her partner reiterate apologies via text message after a FtF fight:

"I'll send him a text just before we go to bed saying I'm sorry that I got upset and had the argument. ... [In FtF] we resolve things but I feel like it's harder to admit in that moment, 'Oh, you know, I'm sorry that I caused that and got upset.' So we resolve it, like 'OK, I understand', but we won't give out that formal apology. ... Then afterwards ... it's easier to send that over a text then to sit there ... and admit that in that moment when we're resolving things." – p11

In this sense, CMC seems to be a useful tool for providing closure to a FtF argument, but not for providing closure during a CMC-only argument.

Conclusion & Implications for Design

This work demonstrated that couples use CMC in a variety of ways during a conflict and have a number of motivations for switching between channels. While most studies of CMC focus on one type of technology at a time, this study reveals that channel switching, at least during a conflict, is common among romantic couples. Individuals seem to be interpersonally motivated in their channel switching, whether it be to initiate, manage, or resolve a conflict. Furthermore, initial findings seem to suggest that successful conflict resolution often involves the use of multiple channels.

Identifying these patterns of and motivations for channel switching is the first step in understanding what patterns might be more successful for positive outcomes like conflict resolution and relationship satisfaction. Then we can make recommendations on how to productively use CMC during an argument. Findings also suggest that studies of a single channel may be neglecting an important part of how certain channels of communication are used in conjunction with others during the discussion of a single topic.

Insights from this work may help inform the design of technology for couples. While several mobile applications for couples focus on tracking each other's whereabouts or determining whether one's partner is cheating, a new class of applications could focus instead on relationship maintenance and improvement, leveraging findings from this work. For instance, the Ice Break app offers relationship tips and conversation starters to help couples reconnect. By identifying which aspects of CMC are conducive for positive outcomes after a conflict discussion, we can begin to build some of these features into Ice Break and similar applications

or even use tools like IM or texting in couples' therapy. Furthermore, since channel switching often occurs in an attempt to avoid or solve problems within a conflict discussion, we could build tools that, after detecting problematic language via an email or IM, could suggest that a couple switch channels. Or, we could build features into existing technologies that mitigate the need for a channel switch. Overall, recognizing how and why individuals "make the switch" from one channel to another can help us understand how individuals manage their multi-modal relationships.

Acknowledgements

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