"Back and Forth, Back and Forth": Channel Switching in Romantic Couple Conflict

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ABSTRACT
This work explores the act of channel switching, or switching between forms of face-to-face (FtF) and mediated communication (e.g., text messaging, instant messaging) during romantic couple conflict. Interviews were conducted with 24 individuals currently involved in a non-cohabitating romantic dating relationship of 3 months or longer. Results revealed that many patterns of channel switching are used during conflict, including switches from mediated to FtF communication and from FtF to mediated communication. In addition, participants had a number of interpersonal motivations for initiating a channel switch, including avoiding conflict escalation, managing one's emotions, and attempting to reach a resolution. Theoretical and design implications are discussed.

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

ACM Classification Keywords
H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

Every day we make use of a variety of communication technologies to interact with others, whether the interactions are related to coordination in the workplace or management of personal relationships [2]. However, while in practice we make use of several different technologies, many research studies of technology selection focus on a single communication channel at a time rather than the variety of channels that might be used in combination or succession during an extended communication episode.

The current study aims to address this gap by examining how people make use of a collection of different communication channels during a single communication episode. We examine this activity in the context of romantic couple conflict—a domain that helps to draw out a deeper theoretical understanding of the rich and varied ways in which we use communication technologies to support our relational goals.

A particularly salient behavior that we investigate is that of "channel switching" [31], or the act of shifting between different modes of communication during a single communication episode. While this process has been examined in the context of instant messaging (IM) in the workplace, the main findings from these studies are that individuals engage in media switching either to support coordination (e.g., scheduling meetings), to multitask, or to overcome instances where a discussion becomes too "complicated" for IM [18, 13]. Our research reveals, however, that there are several more social and interpersonal reasons for channel switching.

While channel switching may occur across relational contexts, couple conflict (see [24] for a review) is a particularly useful domain for studying channel switching since interpersonal issues like face threat (threat to one's public self-image) [3], emotion regulation, and relational satisfaction are prominent and may help to explain switching motivations. For instance, while individuals may prefer to argue face-to-face (FtF) because many contextual and nonverbal social cues are present, the presence of face threat may instead make the reduced-cue environment of CMC preferable. In other words, we aim to study channel switching in a context where social motivations and the affordances of a given communication channel both contribute to understanding technology use.

The goal of this paper is to answer two major research questions: (1) What patterns of channel switching do individuals exhibit during a conflict? and (2) What interpersonal motivations drive channel switching? By identifying these patterns and motivations, we can begin to understand how individuals appropriate the different affordances of text-based and FtF communication to manage their conflicts, and uncover which patterns of channel switching may be more or less successful for relational maintenance issues such as conflict resolution. This understanding will also allow us to reevaluate existing research on channel switching and related theories of media choice in light of individuals' interpersonal motivations.

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RELATED WORK

Channel Switching

Though scholars have examined media or channel choice, as well as how communication technologies may be used in parallel, one topic that has received relatively little attention is the act of media or channel *switching*. In 2004, Walther called for a greater emphasis on the study of channel switching in CMC scholarship, noting "relationships are not single-channeled, despite the tendency of much of our research to control, partial, and force these limitations for the purpose of study" [31, p. 390].

Traditionally, channel switching has been examined in workplace settings. For instance, Su and Mark [27] found that individuals are strategic in their channel switching so that they can effectively manage their multitasking behaviors. Similar to findings in other studies [18, 13], these insights focus more on logistical motivations rather than interpersonal motivations. Related to channel switching is the practice of channel blending. Isaacs and colleagues recently studied how channel blending, or the act of using multiple modes of communication at the same time, allows individuals to coordinate and share experiences [14]. While Isaacs et al.'s work did not focus on channel switching per se, the current work builds on their suggestion to "think about coherent social acts that may take place over time and across channels" (p. 626) rather than focus on acts of FtF and mediated communication in isolation.

An important aspect of channel switching is choice, since the process of switching involves a choice to move from one channel to another. A recent study of media choice in the workplace by Pongolini and colleagues concluded that individuals choose certain technologies for convenience or to adapt to technical difficulties [22]. Studies of media choice often point to media richness theory, which posits that individuals will choose technologies based on the amount of cues a given communication channel can support, and suggests that more cues are preferable, particularly when clarity and connection are important [5]. This theory, however, has been widely challenged in the literature. Scholars have argued that so called "less rich" mediums such as email or IM actually contain their own set of social cues that can support interpersonal processes such as developing intimacy and trust [32]. Despite these benefits, many may find it hard to believe that one would rather engage in conflict with a relational partner via channels like text messaging when the option for FtF communication exists.

Studies of media choice and its relationship to tie strength, or degree of closeness to one's relational partner, are mixed. For instance, van den Berg and colleagues [29] found that strong tie relations are less likely to interact by email, but more likely to interact via telephone, text messaging and IM, relative to FtF communication. Alternatively, Mesch [17] found that, for adolescents, the longer one knows someone the less likely they are to communicate online, and the more likely they are to communicate FtF. Mesch suggests that "shared history may reduce the need for a more protective environment, as good friends do not feel the need to hide emotions, and, apparently feel comfortable expressing their inner concerns unmasked in this medium" [17, p. 250]. However, as we discuss in the following section, there may be certain contexts in which even the closest of ties prefer to use mediated communication.

Romantic Couples, Conflict, and CMC

Managing conflict is an inevitable part of relational maintenance, and recent work has established that couples use text-based communication technologies to argue [9, 12, 23]. Researchers know little, however, about how communication channels might impact the nature of a conflict and know even less about how individuals use multiple channels in succession to support their individual and relational goals during conflict.

During a conflict, individuals may vary in the extent to which they reveal and manage their emotions. Early work on conflicts in CMC suggested that they were more likely to escalate in mediated settings, due to the fact that the medium's relative anonymity might lead to more uninhibited behavior [25] and because CMC was not believed to be rich enough to support conflict management [5,7]. More recent theories, such as Social Information Processing (SIP) theory, have claimed that individuals can use the cues available in CMC to have intimate communication with relational partners (e.g., [30]). In a recent study about couples' use of video chat to manage their long-distance relationships, Neustaedter and Greenberg [19] highlighted a few examples of how video chat can both aid and hinder emotion management during a conflict. It is unclear, however, how these examples might apply to text-based CMC and whether they are indicative of more common patterns of communication technology use.

A critical factor that may affect how individuals manage a conflict FtF is the presence of face threat, or a threat to one's public self-image [3, 10]. Brown and Levinson [3] identified a variety of acts that might be face-threatening, including expressions of strong negative emotions, disapproval, criticism, and accusations, all of which may come up during a conflict. In fact, previous research suggests that individuals prefer to use mediated channels of communication in face-threatening contexts [20], including conflict resolution [28]. Yet, the rationale behind these choices has either not been explored [28] or been limited to identifying practical reasons such as proximity (spatial distance preventing FtF interaction), technological advances (aspects of CMC that made it superior to FtF), and convenience or ease of use [9]. It may be that there are other reasons why individuals manage a conflict in CMC rather than FtF.

While the visual anonymity or protective environment of CMC may reduce face threat and make individuals more likely to disclose information or emotions to others [15], the lack of nonverbal cues may be detrimental to conflict resolution. For example, looking one's partner in the eye is considered to be a universal rule of conversations that occur after a partner has committed a transgression [1]. This research highlights the potential benefits and drawbacks to using CMC during interactions with one's partner. With the myriad channels individuals use to manage their relationships, individuals might not limit themselves to one channel if using a combination of channels could help to support their relational goals.

This literature raises a number of questions related to the practice of channel switching from the perspective of couples during conflict. For example, do certain channels help to minimize conflict or do they exacerbate it? Are certain channels more conducive to closure than others? And, how might the desire to minimize conflict or attain closure relate to channel switching behavior? By examining channel switching in couple conflict, we can begin to identify patterns of communication across channels and eventually explore how different patterns may be more or less successful for certain couples or for conflict resolution.

This work also addresses gaps in the literature by providing insight into a broad range of interpersonal motivations for channel switching during conflict. Prior research on conflict among romantic partners suggests that many impression management and relational issues are at play. While issues like coordination, proximity, and setting up future communication may be relevant during couple conflict, the literature suggests that interpersonal processes are salient and perhaps even paramount during this type of interaction. As we show in this work, this heightened relational context can surface additional patterns of use that were previously uncovered in the workplace-based literature. Furthermore, findings that "IM is too complicated" or that CMC is preferred during conflict for "ease of use" beg to be examined on a deeper level. What interpersonal goals make CMC complicated? What relational goals impede or support the use of CMC during conflict?

METHOD

Participants

Participants (*N*=24) were undergraduate and graduate students at a mid-sized Midwestern university who were at the time involved in a heterosexual romantic relationship (self-defined). Only one individual from a couple participated. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 30 years (*M*=21 years). Ten men (42%) and 14 women (58%) participated and 46% were Caucasian (25% Asian, 13% African-American, 8% Hispanic, 8% Mixed Race). Half of the participants considered themselves to be in a long-distance (LD) relationship, while the other half considered themselves to be in a non-long-distance (NLD) relationship. Though there is a debate over how best to conceptualize and measure LD relationships, we follow [6] by utilizing self-definition. However, we also asked participants how far apart they currently lived from their partners. Individuals in NLD relationships ranged in distance from very close (e.g., "a five minute walk away") to moderately close (e.g., "30 minutes away"). The furthest distance by miles for NLD participants was 15 miles away and the furthest distance by time was a 1-hour drive or subway ride. Participants in LD relationships also varied in how much time or distance separated them. Of participants who described distance in miles, distance ranged from 60 to 2400 miles apart. Of participants who described distance in time, distance ranged from a 5-hour drive to being separated by 12 time zones. Gender was distributed equally across relationship type. Of the participants who were in a LD relationship, all had been engaged in a NLD relationship with their current partner at some point in the past. All participants were in dating relationships; 88.5% of participants were seriously dating (self-defined) (12.5% were casually dating). Participants' relationship length ranged from 3 to 48 months (*M*=17.8 months). No participants were cohabitating with their partners, nor had they ever cohabitated with their partners.

Procedure

Participants were recruited via flyers and email listservs for a "study about communication technologies and romantic relationships." The recruitment material did not explicitly state that conflict would be the focus of the study so individuals with particular patterns of conflict in their relationships (e.g., individuals who fight a lot with their partners) were not pre-selected for the study.

Participants engaged in in-person 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 occurred in a laboratory setting, were audio recorded and lasted from 30 to 65 minutes (*M*=40 minutes).

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 evaluated to reflect a deeper knowledge of the data. We used open, axial, and selective coding [26]. Over 100 codes were generated and then sorted into concepts, and concepts were categorized into themes. Initial codes captured behaviors (e.g., "CMC then FtF"; "CMC then FtF then CMC again"; "conflict

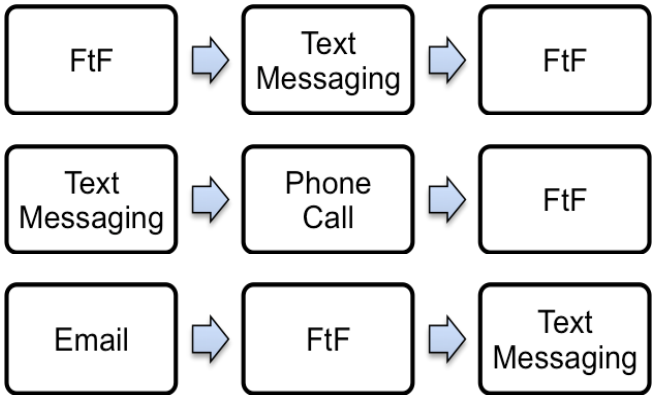


Figure 1. Examples of reported patterns of channel switching during a single communication episode.

initiated – email", "conflict initiated – FtF") while others captured the perceived pros and cons of using different mediums (e.g., "response times increase feeling upset", "CMC good for apologies"). These types of codes were later sorted into themes that reflected sets of codes. For instance, the theme of Managing Emotions included codes like "CMC get less upset", "CMC get more upset", "CMC easier to listen to partner". As themes began to emerge, the interview script was altered to reflect these discoveries. We also explicitly looked for counter examples during theme development in order to strengthen internal validity. In addition, we shared our emerging themes with participants who were interviewed later in the data collection process and asked them for feedback on our claims. This occurred after the interviews were completed. We found sufficient evidence to suggest that our themes were on the right track. This approach allowed us to use our participants to establish coding reliability as well as to test our preliminary findings. Though many themes emerged that related to the use of communication technologies during conflict in general, the current work focuses on the emergent themes related to channel switching.

Participants described a range of experiences and opinions related to using forms of technology-mediated communication during a conflict with their partners. All participants regularly used some form of mediated communication, and all reported having at least one conflict with their partner. Participants mentioned using IM, text messaging, email, and social network sites, in addition to audio calls, video chat, and FtF communication during a conflict. The frequency of reported conflicts differed; some participants rarely engaged in conflicts with their partners while other participants did so regularly. Participants engaged in conflict over a number of different topics, including issues about communication, trust, responsibilities, and scheduling.

While there are many definitions of interpersonal conflict, we utilized Hocker and Wilmot's [11] definition of conflict as "an expressed struggle between at least two independent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scare resources, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals" (p. 21). In other words, a conflict was an instance where a person's goals were incompatible or at odds with their partner's goals. During the interviews, the terms "conflict", "argument", and "disagreement" were used to reflect the varying degrees of conflict. Small tiffs or brief misunderstandings were not considered to be a conflict in our analysis. Some reported conflicts were moderate and/or resolved fairly quickly while others were more serious and/or took longer to resolve. Examples of conflicts that were reported by participants included issues about jealousy, lack of attention or responsiveness, lack of social support, and relationship status. To better understand the severity of conflict in the analysis, we examined the use of emotional language as well as descriptions of the conflict and the extent to which participants felt it had an impact on their relationships**.** As participants reported a variety of experiences with conflict across channels, we were able to investigate a number of patterns of communication and motivations for behavior.

PATTERNS OF CHANNEL SWITCHING

Initial results revealed that participants use a variety of channels during a conflict, including IM, text messaging, email, and FtF communication, and that the evolution of a conflict could follow a number of different patterns involving forms of mediated and FtF communication (see Figure 1 for examples). In some cases, 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 final channel switch (either back to the previous channel or to a new channel). 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.

For instance, in one case, an issue was first discussed FtF between p18 and her partner, but was not resolved. As time passed and resolution was needed, the participant emailed her partner. The partner emailed back but the resolution was ultimately achieved FtF. In another case:

"It started on Gchat and then we got together face-to-face and we sorta talked it out and it was OK for a while, but some tension came back throughout the week when I realized I had a little more work than I thought I had to do, or she wasn't satisfied with how clean her apartment was yet. [This] would usually come up on Gchat. And, then, get resolved face to face. Thursday was when we were both satisfied with what we had done and the stress was off and it was kinda resolved." – p4

In this case, the conflict was initiated in Gchat (a type of IM), then discussed FtF, then discussed again via Gchat, and finally resolved FtF.

Some participants noted that the same pattern of communication and channel switching would occur with their partners across conflicts. For instance, p26 explained that when his partner became upset, he would first try to solve the issue over text message. When he was unable to come to a resolution that satisfied his partner, he would use IM with his partner. If he still could not appease his partner, then he would visit his partner FtF.

Participants noted many functional 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 more interpersonally motivated, as described below.

LONG-DISTANCE VS. NON-LONG-DISTANCE

It is important to note that there are clear and significant differences between LD and NLD couples. In the current study, the main difference reported by participants and coded for in the analysis was that individuals in LD relationships used video chat much more often than did their NLD counterparts. However, in the analysis, LD participants' language surrounding video-chat use was strikingly similar to NLD participants' language regarding FtF communication. Though we do not suggest that video chat and FtF communication are the same, the similarities between the two channels (e.g., visual communication, presence of nonverbal social cues, synchronicity) suggest that for LD couples, video chat acts a proxy for FtF communication in many ways. Therefore, since the purpose of the current study is to identify motivations for channel switching between forms of text-based CMC and FtF-style communication, we do not highlight differences between participants in LD relationships and NLD relationships in the subsequent sections. Individuals in LD relationships channel switch between video chat and other forms of text-based CMC, whereas participants in NLD relationships channel switch between FtF and forms of text-based CMC.

In fact, there were many similarities between LD and NLD participants. Participants in both types of relationships reported that they communicate with their partners throughout the day via forms of text-based CMC, had similar types of conflicts both in topic and intensity, and channel switched during conflict (either between text-based CMC and video chat or text-based CMC and FtF communication). In addition, all participants in LD relationships had spent time with their partners FtF, and so could comment on times where all types of communication were viable options. Accordingly, we asked participants in LD relationships to reflect on times where they were not distant from their partners, including times where a conflict occurred, in addition to times when they were separated from their partners. Participants in LD relationships did not have trouble recalling a recent conflict with their partners that occurred when they were geographically close.

MOTIVATIONS FOR CHANNEL SWITCHING

Avoiding Conflict Escalation

Many individuals switched channels during conflict in order to avoid conflict escalation in the distant or immediate future. For instance, some participants initiated conflict in CMC as a way to manage the nature of a future FtF discussion regarding a conflict. In one case, 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. Here, p9 orchestrated a channel switch by starting the conversation in one mode with the explicit intention to continue the conversation in another mode. 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 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 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 properties of text messaging helped to streamline the conversation and helped to prevent conflicts from escalating past their initial stages.

Finally, some participants initiated a conflict in CMC so they could get it out of the way and preserve their future FtF time for happier discussions. For instance, p4 sometimes initiated the discussion of an issue via IM while he and his partner are both at work:

"While you're not face to face, staring at the computer, you might as well get all the negative things out. We're both really anxious and happy to see each other at the end of the day. Starting with a happy conversation is better." – p4

Here, p4 used CMC as way to compartmentalize his uncomfortable conversations so that the FtF relationship could be preserved. It may be that if young dating couples predict that conversations will not go smoothly, they accept this and contain their conflict-related conversations to CMC, thus avoiding a channel switch within the context of the conflict.

Managing Emotions

In addition to trying to avoid conflict escalation, many participants chose to switch channels in order to better manage their emotions. Echoing findings from previous studies (e.g., [9]), most participants felt that it was easier to express their true feelings or bring up an issue with their partners via CMC than FtF. These sentiments were often the reason for a channel switch. For instance:

"I think on Gchat … I found that I was, maybe, more comfortable speaking what was on my mind while I wasn't face-to-face. And then, [in] face-to-face I was a little more reserved, which is probably why I didn't bring it up when it was face to face. Maybe because I was behind a computer screen I was able to show that I was a little more stressed than when I was face-to-face." – p4

In addition, p22 explained:

"It's just easier for me to be honest with a text-based communication like a text message or something that isn't personal. I'm more likely to get tied up or have trouble communicating if I'm sitting face-to-face with a person. Especially if it's negative or likely to upset them." – p22

That young adults in established romantic dating relationships may have a hard time expressing their feelings to one another may have important implications for technology adoption during conflict. If disclosure is the goal, CMC might actually be a better option through which to have an argument, at least at the beginning of the argument so both parties have equal opportunity to bring up grievances.

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. Like, 'Oh, by the way you have pictures on your phone of your ex-girlfriend. Cute.' 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. It just made me feel sick to my stomach that someone I really trusted could do that. [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 from FtF communication to texting, a medium with fewer nonverbal cues, in order to be able to communicate without losing control of her emotions. This tactic suggests that for individuals in dating relationships, use of text-based CMC might support communication that is too *emotionally* 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 … by the time I get it, even if it's a nice message I'm still ready to keep fighting." – p1

Response latencies were one of the main reasons that participants reported feeling upset when arguing via text message, email, or even IM. In addition to growing angrier, some participants experienced increased anxiety while waiting for a response from their partners. For instance, p9 explained that while waiting for a text …

…"I feel … an emotion of, not anger, but frustration or … waiting. Kind of just a very awkward waiting, just wanting to know what she's gonna say. Anxious, that's what I was looking for. Very anxious. A lot of times, whatever I'm doing if it's something just like studying or doing homework my mind is doing something else." – p9

Increased anxiety during an argument may be harmful, not only to a person's mental well being but also to the likelihood that a conflict will get resolved. For instance, individuals with higher levels of attachment anxiety are typically less forgiving [4], making resolution more difficult to achieve. In order to avoid these increased feelings of anger or anxiety, participants would sometimes initiate a switch to FtF communication.

On the other hand, other participants used the time between responses to reflect on the problem and come up with alternative approaches. 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

Not only did switching from FtF to CMC allow some participants to handle their strong emotions but it also allowed them to think independently about the situation. For example:

"My girlfriend and I, we like to talk face-to-face in person about just everything. I think we enjoy being in each other's presence more than we do texting. … But I know maybe once or twice it's happened where we'll be talking about it in person and we'll say 'okay let's just forget about this for now, we'll talk about it later'. And we'll [end up] talking about it over text. … Texting after you're not together gives you more time to think alone about it, so you're each independent of each other rather than codependent. … [It's] a way to cope with situations and think about them and establish your own feelings. And then you go back to the conversation with your own thoughts." – p9

In this case, p9 was able to gain distance from his partner in order to better understand his own emotions without completely disengaging from discussing the conflict.

Adjusting to Partner Preferences

Studies of channel choice often approach this behavior as strategic but one sided. In other words, scholars assume that each individual is a rational actor in charge of a channel choice. However, what about the person on the receiving end of another's channel choice? Here, we found that 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 dialogue: 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 these couples to enact similar patterns of channel switching across conflict events. In fact, switches were sometimes initiated because participants sensed a change in their partner's behavior. For instance, p17 explained that during a conflict with his girlfriend,

"Initially we were texting back and forth and then once I could tell she was getting more upset, I ended up calling her and we talked about the rest of it on the phone. … Because she has a tendency to… she's a really long-winded texter. Her texts very rarely get short and her texts became in succession, 'yeah', 'uh huh', 'okay'. So it's things like that. And that was a first indication to me. So I called her and asked 'what's up?' and explained the whole thing. We talked the whole thing out." – p17

In addition, some participants explained how they abandoned their own preferences for channel switching in favor of their partner's preferences. In one case, p7 preferred to bring up issues over email and then transition to FtF communication, but found that this was not working with her partner:

"We don't usually talk things through emails because he would rather talk it through the phone so we can mutually respond. … I liked to write letters and emails to my boyfriend before. … But I'm kind of changing the mode a bit because he feels like we should talk face-to-face instead. [Now] we have an agreement that we should talk face-to-face instead of sending him emails and not getting any feedback. So I feel like it's kind of pointless to just shoot him emails anymore because I don't get the feedback that I want." – p7

In some cases, individuals switched channels to adjust to their partner's preferences and felt mildly inconvenienced. In other cases, however, adjusting to one's partner despite competing preferences caused participants to have a more negative experience. For instance, p18 revealed:

"I feel like I don't get as frustrated when I'm talking through Gchat and I'm more willing to discuss [a conflict]. But it doesn't seem like my current partner is on that same … he'd rather call and discuss it. But I feel like I get frustrated when we start talking face-to-face and I can't remember what I was gonna say, which is why I like using Gchat. … He always says, 'I don't wanna talk like this' and then he calls me." – p18

Here, by deferring to her partner's preferred communication channel, the participant becomes more frustrated. Yet, her partner does not like using Gchat, a channel p18 prefers. In this case, it may be that different channel preferences and resulting channel switches can actually exacerbate a

conflict, or introduce a new conflict in addition to the one already being discussed.

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, like a smile or a hug, was required to help them truly feel better and attain closure on a conflict. Accordingly, many participants switched from texting or IM to FtF communication in order to come to a resolution. However, some participants explained that using CMC after a FtF argument was a useful way to add additional closure. Even when participants would attempt to come to a resolution in CMC, many noted that it did not seem final. Participants explained they would still have unresolved feelings and uncertainty about the issue. For instance, when asked how likely it was to resolve conflicts discussed over IM with her partner, p1 replied:

"Well definitely discussing them online just leaves some lingering bad feelings whereas face-to-face I'll be ready to move on right away. … I mean, resolved to a certain degree? Probably only somewhat likely. Completely resolved like, end of discussion? I'd say never, almost never. … Having text fights is not good for your relationship." – p1

p22 also explained:

"I don't remember ever getting to the end of an IM conversation and feeling better about things or like things had been resolved. There was never that sort of reconciliatory moment at the end of it. … I do remember that we would sometimes see the solution to that as an offline communication of some sort. So, make an effort to see each other in person." – p22

Participants explained that true closure was most common at the end of FtF fights. There was some evidence, however, that CMC could provide finality to a FtF conflict. Many participants explained that, even after a resolution was achieved in a FtF argument, they or their partners would later use CMC to reiterate that they were sorry to omit any lingering doubts. For instance, p19 explained:

"Sometimes when I feel like some things are left open ended [or] I didn't express enough how I felt at the time, I send a follow-up text like, 'thanks for taking care of me last night' or 'sorry about last night', … but it's after we've discussed it. … It just maybe ties a knot at the situation. 'I'm sorry about what happened, I already expressed that.' I didn't communicate as clearly as I wanted so let me just summarize my feelings in a text message so we don't have any hard feelings at all." – p19

This tactic seemed to provide a final word on the matter in cases where a FtF or phone resolution did not seem final or in cases where the participant wanted to be explicitly clear about what they meant during the FtF conversation. P11 also 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. … 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.

DISCUSSION

Implications for Theory

Overall, this work revealed that young, non-cohabitating individuals in romantic dating relationships have a number of interpersonal motivations for choosing communication channels and initiating channel switches during a conflict. These findings contribute to both the CSCW channel switching literature, which has primarily examined logistical motivations for switching and lacks distinct theories of channel switching, and to the couple conflict literature, which has given little attention to the role of communication channel during conflict. In contrast with the notion that CMC might lead to more intense arguments due to its lack of nonverbal social cues, participants explained how CMC can both lead to conflict escalation but also help to minimize conflict. Accordingly, participants switched channels from CMC to FtF and FtF to CMC in order to avoid conflict escalation and improve their situation. It is worth noting that the latter behavior is unexpected based on most social cues theories.

In addition, the notion of reduced face threat in CMC was salient for many participants, even though these were not strangers or newly acquainted partners but rather couples who had already established some level of intimacy. Interestingly, while most participants felt that it was easier to initiate a conflict and to express their honest emotions via CMC, they also felt that conflict resolution was easier to achieve FtF. In fact, one participant expressed these "competing priorities" in this way:

"I've got competing priorities there. Because on the one hand, I am far more comfortable with text-based communication than I am with in-person. I'm better able to express myself, … and I'm better able to address a conflict productively. I'm much more able to deal with that kind of situation via text-based communication. But I sort of have this…sense or feeling that healthy conflict resolution takes place in person. I think… handling that situation correctly involves having as personal an exchange as is possible. So in terms of what my actual preference would be, … my short term preference would be text-based, my long-term preference would be face-to-face communication." – p22

While many different patterns of channel switching occurred, including switches from the "less rich" CMC to the "richer" FtF, switches from FtF to CMC were also common. Switches in either direction seemed to occur, at least in part, to address the competing priorities of wanting to communicate through a channel with less face-threat but also wanting to communicate through a channel that supports a rich personal connection with one's partner. This observation stands in contrast to previous research that suggests individuals would prefer the richest medium possible to communicate with their partners about a conflict and that close ties do not need a channel with reduced cues to shield them from face-threatening situations with each other. Individuals do not necessarily seek the richest channels but rather seek channels with different affordances for different relational goals, and combine the use of multiple channels during one conflict episode. Furthermore, these findings extend previous knowledge of channel choice in couple conflict by not only uncovering the reasons behind preferences for mediated communication during conflict but by also suggesting that preferences are not static. In certain cases, individuals may desire or choose one channel to support their relational goals but in other instances, they may choose another channel. Thinking about channel *choice* as a more dynamic process helps us to better understand channel *switching*.

In addition, most studies of communication that consider channel choice or channel switching treat the individual as the rational actor in the situation and do not consider the role of the communication partner. For instance, it may be that an individual prefers to text during a conflict but, if one knows one's partner will not respond, one may switch to another channel in order to keep open the lines of communication. Taking into account the preferences and motivations of both partners in a couple is not only important for understanding channel switching behavior but also for highlighting potentially detrimental differences in preferences that may lead to more conflict down the line.

Finally, while understanding channel switching in relation to various issues surrounding conflict communication, one of the most important may be resolution. Conflict does not always have to be negative for a couple. In fact, resolving and moving on from a conflict can actually strengthen the bond between partners [8]. And while most participants felt that FtF communication was necessary for resolving non-trivial conflicts, some participants revealed that text-based communication technologies can be effective tools in reiterating and solidifying a FtF apology or attempt at resolution that did not seem final.

Taken together, these findings suggest that text-based communication technologies like email, IM, and text messaging can be an effective part of conflict management between romantic partners and, in some cases, can provide benefits that stem from the unique affordances that each channel provides. In this way, we see the socio-technical nature of using CMC and FtF communication during conflict, whereby individuals' social motivations are entwined with the affordances of a given medium, and that channels are chosen to optimize social outcomes. While individuals may feel that FtF is the supposed ideal channel in which to discuss a conflict, the reduction in face-threat and resulting increased perceived ability to express one's self suggest that switching "back and forth" across channels may provide unique benefits above and beyond communicating through one channel alone. Furthermore, findings from the current work suggest that by not exploring interpersonal motivations, studies of channel switching are not capturing the full picture of what drives switching behavior. By taking into account both logistical and interpersonal motivations for channel switching, we can gain a much richer understanding of which motivations are more salient across a variety of contexts.

Implications for Design

Insights from this work may help inform the design of technology for young dating couples and perhaps for others in romantic relationships. 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 and incorporating theory-driven design.

This work suggests that channel switching has multiple benefits, and that individuals switch to channels with greater or fewer affordances, depending on their motivations. In recent years many platforms have incorporated multiple communication channels, possibly to encourage or support user's transitions between channel types. For instance, Facebook supports email-like direct messages, instant messaging, and video chat in addition to the ability to post public messages. Skype supports video chatting as well as instant messaging. Google Plus aims to integrate all of users' mediated communication into one portal. Yet, there may be reason to suggest that combining channels would be detrimental to the relational strategies the participants in this study utilize. For instance, our participants suggested that switching channels could help them gain a new perspective or to manage the conflict in a particular way. Our data challenge the notion that

integration of communication channels into a single platform is inherently beneficial. If all channel types were integrated into one platform, individuals might not feel as strongly that a switch has been made, and thus may not reap the potential benefits of channel switching.

It is unclear, however, whether platforms that currently integrate multiple media channels (e.g., Google Plus and Facebook) support or diminish switching behavior, since switches to FtF communication might not occur as often if there are multiple mediated channels at one's disposal. Furthermore, since tools like IM or texting seem to be helpful to one's ability to initiate a conflict, experience intense emotions while still maintaining communication with one's partner, and in some cases even calm down from a heightened emotional state, these text-based technologies may be useful in couples' therapy.

Limitations & Future Work

One limitation of this study is that we only interviewed individuals in relationships and not both members of a couple. Interviewing couples in future studies could allow us to compare each partner's experiences and preferences more directly and to explore instances where their assessments of a situation diverged. In addition, our sample indicates that our results may not be generalizable to other types of romantic couples. Our participants were in dating relationships, did not cohabitate, and were relatively young. Different patterns of channel switching or motivations for switching might emerge with a sample of cohabitating couples, married couples, or simply older couples. For instance, participants did not bring up conflicts about money or children, which are more common among older or married couples.

In addition, even though college students are quite typically used in social psychological studies of romantic relationships, caution should be exercised when generalizing to other non-student populations [21] since relationships among college students and young adults may be less serious, stable, or mature than relationships among older or married couples. For these reasons, our findings should be examined with different participant pools in order to understand how other types of arguments, living situations, and relationship statuses might impact channel switching during conflict. However, we feel that the current inquiry clearly outlines various interpersonal motivations for channel switching that can inform previous work on channel switching. In addition, we did not see any themes emerge around gender differences, though future work could explore the role of gender more explicitly.

While this study focuses on conflict, conflict is just one context in which to understand the interpersonal motivations behind channel switching. We could also look at channel switching during courtship, during acts of self-disclosure, or even during task-related events during which interpersonal issues (e.g., pride) might be salient. However, conflict is a useful testing ground on which to study the interpersonal motivations of channel switching since conflict can threaten a relationship, which in turn heightens the importance of emotions, impression management, and the ability to communicatively work toward a resolution. Similarly, we could look at channel switching among different types of relationships, including platonic friendships, family relationships, or even coworkers. For instance, how might power or signals of capability affect one's channel switching choices? Since work on channel switching stemmed from a CSCW perspective focusing on workplace communication, it would be useful to go back to a workplace context to explore whether interpersonal motivations for channel switching identified in the current work are also salient in the context of workplace communication and how these relational and instrumental motivations may be related.

Identifying patterns of and motivations for channel switching is the first step in understanding how switching influences relational outcomes. Future work can examine these patterns more systematically through surveys or diary studies in order to gain a more objective understanding of channel switching behaviors. This will help us to better understand how patterns of channel switching affect relational outcomes and make recommendations to couples on how to productively use CMC during an argument.

CONCLUSION

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 dating couples. Individuals seem to be interpersonally motivated in their channel switching, whether it be to initiate, manage, or resolve a conflict. Overall, recognizing how and why individuals move "back and forth" from one channel to another can help us to better understand and support the ways in which individuals manage their multi-modal relationships.

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