

What to expect when you are texting: An exploration of direct mobile messaging expectations among women in developing romantic relationships

Chelsea Guest*¹ and Pamara F. Chang²

¹Her Campus Media, Boston, MA 02215

²Cullen College of Engineering Technology Division, University of Houston, Houston, TX 77204

*Corresponding Author: chelsea.a.guest@gmail.com

This study qualitatively investigates expectations of direct mobile messaging (via SMS text messaging or social media messaging) established by partners in developing romantic relationships. Findings reveal direct mobile messaging with romantic partners is expected to be continuous, fast, and transparent and partners strategically utilize features of their technologies, including read receipts and Snapchat streaks, to manage these expectations. Further, violations of expectations yield explicit conversations

and reminders among relational partners, and may be used intentionally to elicit particular relational outcomes. Together, findings demonstrate the importance of mediated communication expectations and extends work regarding mobile media affordances and expectancy violations theory.

Keywords: Mobile Messaging, Social Media, Snapchat, Relationship Development

Countless mobile platforms affording information transmission have emerged over the past several decades, but direct mobile messaging, or the exchange of dyadic, asynchronous messages via SMS text messaging or social media messaging, remains one of the most common modes of communication (Smith, 2015; Lenhart et al., 2015). Even with the invention of new platforms with a variety of advanced features and affordances, on average, young adults (18-24) send and receive 128 text messages daily, particularly exchanging messages with romantic partners (Lenhart et al. 2015; “Mobile Fact Sheet”, 2021).

Direct mobile messaging is especially important for those in romantic relationships, as it provides a way for couples to communicate with one another throughout the day, even when they are not physically co-present (Baym, 2015; Lenhart et al., 2015; McEwan & Horn, 2016). Some studies have assessed how direct mobile messaging is utilized during

relationship initiation (Sharabi & Dykstra-Devette, 2019), and some focus on its use for relationship maintenance (McEwan & Horn, 2016; Toma & Choi, 2016), but fewer studies focus on how these technologies are utilized by those in new relationships. The early stages of romantic relationships maintain unique communicative characteristics compared to more developed relationships, as people experience heightened uncertainty and are particularly selective about their self-presentation (Berg & Clark, 1986; Fletcher et al., 2000; Knapp, 1978; Reese-Weber, 2015), and it is also the time when expectations are negotiated and relational norms are established (Aune et al., 1994, 1996).

Expectancy violations theory provides a relevant perspective for understanding how communication expectations are co-constructed in relationships (Burgoon, 1978; Burgoon & Hale, 1988). Recent work extends the propositions of expectancy violations theory to mediated technologies, suggesting that people have specific expectations for mediated interactions (DelGrego & Denes, 2020; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012; Tu et al., 2018). Because people rely on instincts and expectations as they develop relationships, expectancy violations theory offers a unique lens for considering how those in new relationships develop, manage, and negotiate mobile media expectations. Examining those actively negotiating mediated communication expectations may explain how couples use mobile messaging technologies and relational motivations behind their use.

The aim of this study is to explore expectations for direct mobile messaging among women in new romantic relationships. Findings will highlight the importance of mobile media communication expectations in relationships, as well as the relational implications of adhering to mobile messaging expectations in developing relationships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relationship Development and Mobile Media

A great deal of romantic relationship research focuses on established couples, describing how they support one another (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998) and continually invest in their relationships (Afifi et al., 2016). While studying established relationships has yielded important insights, conceptualizing how relationships develop is equally important. Interpersonal models of relationship development commonly posit that in new relationships, dyads engage in low breadth and depth of disclosures to reduce uncertainty

and strategically employ impression management (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Knapp, 1978; Reese-Weber, 2015). They also attempt to learn about each other's preferences and habits to set communication expectations and determine whether to pursue a relationship further (Aune et al., 1994, 1996; Reese-Weber, 2015). As relationships develop, disclosures become more intimate and frequent, and cover a wider range of topics while feelings of closeness, intimacy, and commitment tend to increase (Knapp, 1978; Reese-Weber, 2015). Moreover, the early stages of relationships serve as the foundation for relationships and often predict future relational well-being (Berg & Clark, 1986; Fletcher et al., 2000). Those in new relationships often subtly test their partners to gauge interest and assess underlying personality characteristics (Baxter & Wilmot, 1984; Fox et al., 2013). Thus, as they try to present the best versions of themselves, appeal to partners, and decide whether to progress a relationship, those in developing relationships simultaneously manage a myriad of interpersonal challenges.

Because people navigate communication challenges in face-to-face and mediated settings, scholars have investigated how couples use technologies for relational purposes and have distinguished mobile media practices between those in new and advanced relationships. Specifically, those in new relationships carefully consider platform features and affordances when communicating with partners via mobile media, and often use their media for information-seeking and coordinating social plans (Duran & Kelly, 2017; Parks, 2017; Ruppel, 2015). Alternatively, those in advanced relationships tend to be far less concerned with platform features and affordances (Ruppel, 2015), and use mobile messaging to check-in with partners throughout the day (Duran & Kelly, 2017; Fox et al., 2013). This work verifies the importance of media use in romantic relationships, but also demonstrates differences in the ways that technologies are used at various points in relationships. Investigating the everyday use of mobile media among those in new relationships will shed more light on the relationship development process and highlight how relational expectations are managed in the technological era.

Expectancy Violations Theory

Expectancy violations theory (Burgoon 1973; Burgoon & Hale, 1988) explains how people react when the behavior of others deviates from what is expected, and violations take place when others do not adhere to these expectations. Expectancy violations theory

originally explicated violations of personal space expectations, but has since been applied to interpersonal contexts like co-present cell phone use (Kelly et al., 2017), online dating interactions (DelGreco & Denes, 2020), and conflict management in relationships (Wright & Roloff, 2015). It is important to understand expectations in close relationships because people tend to like those who do not violate behavioral expectations (Burgoon 1973; Burgoon & Hale, 1988). Expectancy violations theory has been useful in uncovering how romantic couples experience violations (Kelly et al., 2017; Wright & Roloff, 2015), but it is during the early stages of relationships that couples actively negotiate expectations for one another (Aune et al., 1994, 1996), echoing the idea that these times are particularly important for couples.

Because platforms vary in features and affordances, studies have investigated platform-specific mobile media expectations. For example, on Facebook, people generally expect that close friends consider privacy boundaries before posting content that could be considered inappropriate (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012) and couples may have dissimilar privacy expectations (e.g., becoming Facebook Official, sharing a relationship with a social network), leading to tension in new relationships (Fox et al., 2014). Direct mobile messaging is one of the most common ways that couples communicate with one another (Lenhart et al., 2015), making it an important context in which to explore mediated communication expectations. This study will expand on the utility of expectancy violations theory in mediated contexts by applying it to direct mobile messaging and will contribute to the literature by explaining why these expectations are particularly significant in developing romantic relationships.

Direct Mobile Messaging in Close Relationships

Direct mobile messaging is dyadic, asynchronous messaging via mobile media, commonly in the context of SMS text messaging or social media messaging. Couples in romantic relationships often use direct mobile messaging to communicate with one another throughout the day, as a functional mode of maintaining contact, expressing interest, and making plans (Baym, 2015; Lenhart et al., 2015; McEwan & Horn, 2016). Although other means of mediated communication have emerged, direct mobile messaging remains an important tool for couples to use as they develop relationships, as it allows them to feel connected with one another when they are not physically co-present (Baym,

2015). Even before the age of social media, direct mobile messaging afforded by instant messaging was the preferred mode of communication among those in close relationships (Lee & Perry, 2004).

Direct mobile messaging extends beyond texting and includes platforms that enable picture and video messaging. Snapchat, for example, has emerged as one of the most widely used mobile applications for young adults (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Perrin & Anderson, 2019), as it allows text/captions over pictures and videos within a single message (Vaterlaus et al., 2016). Research suggests that the ephemerality of Snapchat, where messages disappear after viewing, lowers the perceived stakes of social performance and makes people more comfortable sharing mundane parts of their everyday lives (Bayer et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2016). Moreover, photo-messaging and photo-sharing have been associated with interpersonal motivations like relationship formation, relationship maintenance, self-expression, and self-presentation (Hunt et al., 2014; Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2016). These studies demonstrate that the use of platforms affording photo-messaging, like Snapchat, have implications for relationship development.

Previous work indicates that people maintain expectations for mobile messaging. Specifically, Laursen (2005) poses that mobile messages warrant responses much in the same way that face-to-face pairs inform, acknowledge, and reply through turn-taking, implying an expectation for connection and reciprocity in messaging. Other studies corroborate this idea, suggesting that perpetual availability for contact is a meaningful affordance of mobile phones, particularly for romantic couples (Duran et al., 2011; Miller-Ott et al., 2014). However, couples must navigate the autonomy-connection tension afforded by mobile messaging, as it closely links to feelings of relational satisfaction (Duran et al., 2011). Excessive mobile communication among romantic couples can elicit a cycle of anxiety, leading to behaviors that “are meant to exert power and control over a dating partner through the use of monitoring and intrusions into privacy” (Reed et al., 2016, p. 261).

Further, delayed responses to mobile messages have been found to be critical expectation violations. The asynchronous nature of mobile messaging elongates the timeframe of communication, and “the delay between sending and receiving a message is something people have always interpreted with anxiety, hope, fear, boredom, or longing”

(Farman, 2018; p. 2). Expectation violations occur within romantic relationships when couples do not adhere to appropriate mobile messaging response times (Tu et al., 2018). Response time expectations can be exacerbated by mobile media features, like read receipts (indicators that a message has been *read*, or opened, by a receiver), as some studies find that people expect immediate responses to messages that have been read (Hoyle et al., 2017; Lynden & Rasmussen, 2017). Exploring features and affordances of mobile messaging that are relevant for new couples could meaningfully contribute to both interpersonal and media scholarship.

Gender Differences in Mobile Messaging and Media Use

Many sources note specific gender differences regarding perceptions about mobile technologies. Specifically, studies suggest that men and women interact with mobile phones differently, and may see it having distinctive purposes (Broos, 2005; Henderson et al., 2002). For example, women tend to text more than men (Henderson et al., 2002; O’Dea, 2021), prefer texting over other forms of mediated communication, like phone or videocalls (Morning Consult, 2017), and use texting more often than men to connect with romantic partners (Anderson, 2015). Moreover, men tend to view mobile devices as tools and status symbols, while women tend to view mobile devices as a means for connecting with others (Ling et al., 2014). This division in viewpoint leads to differences in mobile messaging behaviors between men and women, like average length of messages, messaging frequency, and use of specific punctuation indicators and emoticons (Ling et al., 2014). Scholars have made explicit calls for research that parses out gender differences after discovering noteworthy distinctions between men and women when studying mobile messaging use and relational variables, like satisfaction and stability (e.g., Miller-Ott et al., 2016; Ohadi et al., 2017; Schade et al., 2013). Given the calls for gender-specific research, and findings suggesting that women primarily utilize mobile messaging for the purposes of connecting with partners, women in new relationships will be a focus in this project. Thus, the goal of the present study is to explore expectations that among women in developing romantic relationships have for direct mobile messaging with romantic partners, how they communicate expectations, and how violations are managed. Therefore, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: What expectations do women in developing romantic relationships have of their romantic partners regarding mobile messaging?

RQ2: How do women in developing romantic relationships communicate expectations of mobile messaging to their romantic partners?

RQ3: How do women in developing romantic relationships manage violations of expectations that they have of their romantic partners regarding mobile messaging?

METHODS

A qualitative method using semi-structured interviews was implemented to address these research questions. After receiving approval from the University's institutional review board, the sample was recruited via convenience sampling in communication classes at a large midwestern university and participants were awarded course credit for participation. Eligibility criteria included identifying as a woman, being at least 18 years old, owning a smartphone, and being involved in a romantic relationship for six months or less. Although relationship length is not necessarily indicative of relationship development, expectations are negotiated early in relationships (Aune et al., 1994, 1996). By focusing on individuals actively involved in these negotiations, mobile messaging expectations may be captured more accurately. Moreover, the use of convenience sampling in a higher education setting resulted in a relatively young sample ($M_{Age} = 19.35$), but a sample of emerging adult women is conducive for the current project. Emerging adults characteristically tend to focus on developing serious romantic relationships as they solidify their identities simultaneously (Arnett, 2000; Barry et al., 2009) and mobile media and social media use tend to be the most prevalent among emerging adults (Auxier & Anderson, 2021; Coyne et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2014). Thus, a great deal can be learned about mobile messaging in romantic relationships from the current sample of emerging adult women in new relationships.

Pilot interviews were conducted prior to data collection, which resulted in an interview guide. All interviews took place using audio calls or videocalls and were all conducted by the first author. Participants were asked questions pertaining to their relationship (*can you tell me about how your relationship started?*), personal technology use (*how do you use your phone in a typical day?*) and use of technology to communicate

with their partner (*can you tell me about a typical day talking to your partner using technology?*). The interview guide also included questions about Snapchat, which addressed expectations for Snapchat use, types of messages exchanged, and how Snapchat differs from other mobile messaging platforms (*how do you use Snapchat differently than texting?*). Questions about Snapchat stemmed from the pilot interviews, as participants indicated it was their most utilized mobile application when communicating with their romantic partner. Interviews were audio-recorded and ranged from 31 to 57 minutes ($M=42.15$, $SD=7.89$).

Twenty participants who identified as women between the ages of 18 and 24 ($M=19.35$, $SD=1.31$) were interviewed for this project. Eleven participants identified as White, five identified as Black, two identified as Hispanic/Latino and two identified as Asian. Fifteen participants reported that they met their partner in a face-to-face setting and five met their partner in a mediated setting, like a dating website or mobile application. Nineteen participants were in opposite-sex relationships, and one participant was in a same-sex relationship. Finally, participants had varying relationship lengths between one and six months ($M=3.05$, $SD=1.67$; one month $n=6$; three months $n=7$; four months $n=3$; five months $n=2$; six months $n=2$).

Interviews were transcribed and edited to remove identifiers, producing approximately 300 pages of single-spaced text. An iterative and thematic coding approach was utilized to develop common themes noted across the interviews (Lofland & Lofland, 2006). Once themes were identified, a codebook was created that specifically defined each theme. The transcripts were imported into Dedoose, a qualitative analysis tool, to be coded appropriately. Selective coding was utilized to organize units of analysis and divide findings into meaningful units.

FINDINGS

This study aimed to investigate mobile messaging expectations among women in developing romantic relationships. Findings reveal that women in developing relationships maintain specific expectations for their mobile messaging and strategically utilize features of technologies to enforce expectations and avoid violations. Participant

quotes demonstrating findings are numbered and reported as (Pn) followed by the participant's relationship length.

Mobile Messaging Expectations

The first research question asked what mobile messaging expectations women had in their relationships. Participants indicated that they expect to maintain continuous communication with partners throughout the day, they expect fast response times from partners, and they expect open, transparent communication.

Continuous Communication. First, participants reported that they expect to maintain a perception of continuous communication with their partners throughout the day to ensure continued interest and the status quo within relationships. Specifically, they desire continuity in their mobile messaging to promote the appearance of unbroken communication, enabling a sense of stability within relationships. One participant said:

“Texting throughout the day is nice because before I’ve been with guys that don’t text me at all for like a whole day and I’m like, ‘what happened?’ So now, it’s like he wants to text me throughout the day to let me know what he’s doing and it makes me happy” (P9, 1 month).

Accordingly, these consistent messages communicate continued interest in relationships. There is also a functional reason why participants prefer continuous communication. P15 said, *“In a way, if he is texting back, I know he is okay” (P15, 1 month).* P15 elaborated that continuous messaging with her partner affects her well-being because she feels reassured that all is well with her partner and their relationship. Thus, the perception of unbroken mobile communication extends beyond its basic function of increased contact by serving as visible validation of relational stability for those in the new relationships.

Fast Response Times. Second, interview findings suggest that partners in developing relationships set response time expectations for mobile messaging. Response time expectations refer to how fast individuals expect their partners to reply to messages in normal situations. One participant explains, *“the faster he responds, it makes it feel like he’s more eager to talk to me or wants to be around me... if you’re responding every hour or if you barely respond, then you’re clearly not interested in talking to me” (P10, 6 months).* Participants further suggest that fast response times are important because, *“it’s how you’re communicating during the day... how you’re spending time with each other*

when you can't be there" (P6, 3 months). Therefore, response times serve as a proxy for continued interest. This finding closely links to continuous communication expectations; when individuals respond to messages quickly, they can exchange a greater frequency of messages in a shorter period, making communication seem even more consistent.

Despite the affordances of asynchronous communication, findings suggest that response times are important for those in close relationships. Research addresses evaluations of messaging speed in a variety of professional (Park & Sundar, 2015; Nowak et al., 2005) and personal (Brody et al., 2009; Rettie, 2009) contexts, and the reply norm (Laursen, 2005) indicates that replying in an appropriate amount of time is expected in all relationships. This study extends these findings, suggesting that fast response times are expected in new relationships because they communicate care, consideration, and interest.

Transparent Mobile Messaging. Third, participants emphasized that another important element of mobile messaging is transparency, which implies completely open communication between relational partners to prevent any kind of secret-keeping. Specifically, participants exchange information regarding messaging availability, so they can track one another throughout the day and know when to expect messages. One participant said, *"we know each other's schedules. When there's 30 minutes to an hour or more between when we know each other has classes, we will usually expect text messages from each other" (P17, 3 months).* By openly exchanging this type of information, they manage other messaging expectations, like continuous communication and response times. This finding supports previous research that perpetual availability afforded by mobile messaging is important for those in close relationships (Duran et al., 2011; Miller-Ott et al., 2014), but further suggests that there are established boundaries to this expected availability from romantic partners, which allows them to manage uncertainty they may experience from other mobile messaging expectations.

Direct Messaging Features to Manage Expectations

The second research question asked how women in developing romantic relationships communicate and monitor mobile messaging expectations with their partners. Participants reported using platform features to enforce expectations, particularly mentioning read receipts and Snapchat streaks, to keep one another accountable for mobile messaging expectations.

Read Receipts. Participants frequently mentioned using read receipts, or indicators that a message has been opened or read, to manage continuous communication and response time expectations. One of the most common themes from interviews suggests that if a message has been opened, it must be replied to immediately. One participant mentioned the discomfort delayed responses cause senders: *“it’s just awkward because you both know that you saw the message... why couldn’t you have responded to it quicker?”* (P19, 1 month). However, participants said if a read receipt is not present, they adjust their expectations; a message without a read receipt indicates that partners have not had the opportunity to view their message, and thus, a reply cannot be expected.

Further, participants suggested that read receipts can be used to gauge transparency expectations. Read receipts allow partners to keep track of messaging tendencies, and by opting out of these features, it communicates a lack of honesty: *“I was trying to figure out what kind of person he was... I thought, ‘is he keeping a secret?’ ‘Is he texting multiple people or does he just not like to text back on time?’ I couldn’t figure out what the purpose was of having them off”* (P5, 1 month). Therefore, these cues may be used to test a partner’s honesty and adherence to the expectation of open, transparent communication.

The use of read receipts to keep partners accountable for mobile messaging expectations aligns with studies indicating that read receipts without responses may lead to negative reactions and speculation regarding the lack of response (Hoyle et al., 2017; Tu et al., 2018). By extension, if delayed responses to messages with read receipts elicit feelings of discomfort and uncertainty, immediate responses to messages with read receipts may elicit feelings of comfort and certainty. Accordingly, chronemic features like read receipts may enhance the awareness of time, and thus, users may experience exacerbated mobile messaging expectations and violation consequences.

Snapchat Streaks. Participants mentioned using Snapchat streaks to monitor mobile messaging expectations. Snapchat streaks indicate how many consecutive days dyads exchange messages on Snapchat. Interviews suggest that Snapchat streaks maintain perceptions of continuous communication: *“He brought it up that we should aim for a streak on Snapchat. There was one point where our communication didn’t feel as strong, so he suggested that this is a way to make sure that we are talking to each other*

and checking in. If we lose that streak then we know we have to do a better job of staying in communication” (P4, 6 months). These features are important to those in new relationships, as many participants reported *“sending a random picture of each other or anything just to keep it going” (P7, 3 months),* even when they were physically co-present.

Enforcing communication expectations with Snapchat streaks is conducive to increasing frequency of communication in developing relationships (Knapp, 1978), as they encourage users to communicate daily. The quantification of continuous communication enables accountability, and demonstrates how Snapchat streaks afford gamification, or the integration of game-inspired elements used “to incent repeat usage, increase contributions and establish user reputations,” through the use of rewards (Thom et al. 2012, p. 1067). Gamification increases engagement with mobile applications while also helping to initiate, enhance, and maintain interpersonal relationships (Wohn et al., 2011), thereby enabling Snapchat streaks to serve as a representation of relationship development.

Violation Management.

The third research question asked how women in developing relationships manage violations of mobile messaging expectations. Participants mentioned that when expectations are violated, they often worry about their partner and their relationship. Participants also mentioned having explicit conversations with their partner following a violation and intentionally violating expectations to elicit a response from their partner.

Consequences of Violations. Participants explained emotional responses to violations of mobile messaging expectations. One participant mentioned regret and fear following violations of response time expectations because, *“it already takes a lot of courage to put your feelings out there and express yourself, so that waiting time feels like years” (P4, 6 months).* Beyond individual uncertainty, violations can provoke partner uncertainty: *“I don’t think anything of it when he takes a half hour to respond. If it’s more than an hour or two, then I figure that something is up or he is mad at me or something is going on with his family” (P2, 3 months),* insinuating that mobile messaging expectation violations can represent relational or partner well-being.

Some messaging platforms incorporate design features to alleviate uncertainty. For example, some cues assure senders that their message was received (e.g., read receipts, a

double checkmark). Additionally, some features illustrate the person responding, most notably the three dots or text marker ‘*typing*.’ These mobile messaging features allow senders to observe the beginning to end process of responding (Schrock, 2015). These cues take on additional importance in new romantic relationships, which are particularly fraught with personal vulnerability (Farman, 2018). Because response times can indicate relational stability and continued interest, extended periods of time (particularly those that lack cues of message receipt) in which response time expectations are violated can incite heightened uncertainty and concern.

Explicit Expectation Reminders. Next, participants mentioned that they explicitly reminded partners of mobile messaging expectations after violations occurred. Regarding maintaining perceptions of continuous communication via Snapchat streaks, one participant recounts an instance of a Snapchat streak violation: *“sometimes he will forget to respond and our Snapchat streak will end... I reminded him one time that he forgot and since then, it's been going, we've got a streak now. So it's fine now!” (P7, 3 months).*

Moreover, some participants use double-texting to elicit faster responses from partners after response time expectations are violated: *“The other day, we were making plans to go to the movies...So I was like, ‘Hey, look up the times’ Five minutes went by, and I was like ‘hello?’ And he responded after that” (P20, 5 months).*

Notions of double-texting and explicit expectation reminders are not novel, and present findings support previous research in these areas (Miller-Ott et al., 2012; Tu et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2016). However, interviews suggest that those in developing relationships place high value on mobile messaging, such that they are likely to enforce expectations through explicit conversations. Communication in developing relationships tends to be primarily positive and high risk (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Knapp, 1978), but current findings indicate that relational partners are willing to risk a negative conversation to manage mobile messaging expectations.

Intentional Violations. Finally, participants mentioned intentionally violating mobile messaging expectations in relationships to elicit a particular response from their partners. One participant explains how she uses intentional response time expectation violations in her relationship:

“I think my friends were like, ‘don't respond immediately because it seems like you're just staring at your phone and waiting for them to text. But if you hold off and wait five to ten minutes, then they'll be the one looking at their phone, like ‘did she text yet? did she text yet?’” It gives you a little bit more power because you're like, ‘I'm not going to respond yet. I'm going to make them wait,’ which is silly, but it adds to the fun aspect of it because you're like, ‘haha - I have more power!’” (P16, 5 months)

Other participants echoed this idea and reported using intentional expectation violations during times of conflict in their relationships. This finding suggests that those in new relationships may intentionally violate response time expectations to assert agency and enhance feelings of power. Specifically, interviews suggest that the person left waiting for a message feels less powerful and the person withholding a message feels more powerful. This finding supports mutual understanding of the response time expectation, and insinuates that expectation violations may be utilized strategically to achieve perceived relational outcomes.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to qualitatively explore expectations of mobile messaging among women in developing romantic relationships. Findings reveal that emerging adult women in new relationships expect continuous, fast, and transparent mobile messaging with romantic partners and they strategically utilize features of their technologies to communicate and manage these expectations. Moreover, violations of expectations yield explicit conversations among relational partners, and violations may be used intentionally to elicit relational outcomes. Together, findings demonstrate the importance of mediated communication expectations, especially among women in new relationships, and extend work related to mobile media communication and expectancy violations theory.

First, this study extends a line of work applying expectancy violations theory (Burgoon 1973; Burgoon & Hale, 1988) to mobile media communication, and importantly highlights specific expectations that romantic partners have for one another regarding mobile messaging. Present findings indicate that mobile messaging between partners in new relationships is expected to be continuous, fast, and transparent. Previous studies

explain why mediated communication expectations are important for romantic couples (e.g., Fox et al., 2014; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012; Tu et al., 2018), and the current study suggests that these expectations are managed, enforced, and violated using technological features. Mediated communication expectations may require more consideration than face-to-face expectations because many features of mobile messaging call attention to potential violations. For example, Snapchat streaks encourage expectations for consistent and frequent communication by visibly accentuating the expectation and clearly indicating violations. Thus, this study builds on previous work by illustrating the weight of mediated communication expectations.

Moreover, this study notably focuses on new relationships. Mediated communication is particularly beneficial for those in new relationships because partners can engage in selective self-presentation as they aim to amplify relational benefits (e.g., intimacy, liking), assess the future of a relationship, and protect themselves from potential rejection (Blackhart et al., 2014; Parks, 2017; Ruppel, 2015; Walther, 1996). Applied to current findings, specific features and affordances within direct mobile messaging enable new couples to communicate in ways that signify trust and connection, while also quantifying those interactions to provide external validation of their relationship. Thus, direct mobile messaging is simultaneously a practice for relationship maintenance, a cue for assessing interest, a signifier of relationship status, and an ongoing negotiated practice where conflict plays out via communication expectations.

Further, findings suggest that read receipts are a prominent area of negotiation in new relationships because they help manage uncertainty and encourage consistent communication. Studies have examined how read receipts increase pressure to respond to messages (Hoyle et al., 2017; Lynden & Rasmussen, 2017), such that users may intentionally avoid reading messages or turn off this feature to avoid pressures to reply (Gangneux, 2019). Present findings support the notion that read receipts provoke pressure to respond to messages immediately, but also speak to the relational implications of violating this expectation. That is, if a read receipt is present, an immediate response is necessary to avoid sending a nonverbal message that an individual, or a message sent by an individual, is not worthy of a response. Therefore, read receipts may be used to transmit and communicate relational information to partners.

However, present findings suggest that read receipts are an important feature for uncertainty reduction, expressions of interest, and conflict prevention in the context of romantic relationships. New couples may aim to keep each other accountable for perceptions of continuous communication to ensure pre-existing and potential for growth in relational interest utilizing features like read receipts. By replying immediately to messages that have been read, users reduce feelings of uncertainty that typically accompany delayed responses and receive indication of interest. Accordingly, this study highlights that respecting mobile messaging expectations serves as an indicator of respect and continued interest for romantic partners.

Lastly, findings indicate that those in new relationships may intentionally violate response time expectations to elicit relational outcomes related to feelings of power, such that the person left waiting for a message feels less powerful and the person withholding a message feels more powerful. Research regarding *the silent treatment* (intentionally signaling dissatisfaction to a partner by acting aloof) generally finds that it hinders relational communication (Williams, 2002; Wright & Roloff, 2009), but this concept has yet to be applied to mobile communication. Present findings suggest that using the silent treatment in mobile messaging, or violating the response time mobile messaging expectation, may yield some positive relational outcomes. One possible explanation for this finding relates to the principle of least interest (Waller, 1937, 1938), which suggests that the individual who appears to be more interested in a relationship holds less power within it. From this perspective, when users intentionally violate mobile messaging expectations, they may be attempting to communicate less interest in a relationship, and in line with the principle of less interest (Waller, 1937, 1938), simultaneously assert feelings of agency and power. Violating direct messaging expectations may not be severe enough to trigger lasting relational damage, but it may be strong enough to communicate lower levels of relational interest. Future studies should investigate this concept further in mediated settings.

Limitations, Future Directions, and Conclusions

As a qualitative study with a small sample size, the present findings are exploratory in nature and all claims should be tested empirically with larger, more diverse samples. Moreover, this project only focused on mobile messaging expectations of

emerging adult women in new relationships. It is unclear if these findings will translate to a sample of men, an older sample, or a sample of couples in established relationships. Although the specificity of the sample was an active choice for this project, the findings are not dyadic and do not consider the perspective of men in relationships. It would be valuable to replicate this study with men, or collect dyadic data from new romantic couples to discover gender differences in mobile messaging expectations. Finally, interviews for this project took place prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic and associated stay-home orders likely influenced media use in developing relationships while these restrictions were in place.

Despite the limitations, this study poses several opportunities for future research. It may be prudent to explore how mobile messaging expectations in relationships may be associated with emotional and behavioral characteristics like problematic smartphone use, fear of missing out, anxiety, attachment, and overall mental health. It may also be interesting to explore how different platforms impact mobile messaging expectations, and in turn, affect relationships. Some studies have found that communication expectations and norms vary by platform (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Vaterlaus et al., 2016), and thus, they may have different relational consequences. Additionally, this study speaks to the communication of power dynamics in computer-mediated spaces, which could be explored further in different relational and mediated contexts. Finally, a longitudinal study would be particularly important to discern if (and how) expectations are managed long-term, how these expectations manifest in established romantic relationships, and how the enforcement of mobile messaging expectations affect the longevity of relationships.

Overall, the aim of this project was to investigate mobile messaging expectations in new romantic relationships. Results from interviews reveal that women in new relationships expect continuous, fast, and transparent mobile messaging in their relationships and partners strategically utilize features of their technologies to communicate and manage these expectations. Moreover, violations of these expectations yield explicit conversations among relational partners, and violations may be used intentionally to elicit particular relational outcomes. Together, these findings provide insight into the nuances of developing romantic relationships and indicate the importance of mobile media communication expectations.

References

- Afifi, T. D., Merrill, A. F., & Davis, S. (2016). The theory of resilience and relational load. *Personal relationships*, 23(4), 663-683. <https://doi.org/10.1111/per.12159>
- Alhabash, S., & Ma, M. (2017). A tale of four platforms: Motivations and uses of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat among college students?. *Social Media & Society*, 3(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117691544>
- Altman, I., & Taylor, D. A. (1973). *Social penetration: The development of interpersonal relationships*. Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Anderson, M. (2015). How having smartphones (or not) shapes the way teens communicate. *Pew research center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/facttank/2015/08/20/how-having-smartphones-or-not-shapes-the-way-teens-communicate/>
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American psychologist*, 55(5), 469 - 480. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.5.469>
- Aune, K. S., Aune, R. K., & Buller, D. B. (1994). The experience, expression, and perceived appropriateness of emotions across levels of relationship development. *The Journal of social psychology*, 134(2), 141-150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.1994.9711377>
- Aune, K. S., Buller, D. B., & Aune, R. K. (1996). Display rule development in romantic relationships: Emotion management and perceived appropriateness of emotions across relationship stages. *Human Communication Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1996.tb00389.x>
- Auxier, B., & Anderson, M. (2021). Social media use in 2021. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/>
- Baxter, L. A., & Wilmot, W. W. (1984). "Secret Tests" Social Strategies for Acquiring Information About the State of the Relationship. *Human Communication Research*, 11(2), 171-201. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1984.tb00044.x>
- Bayer, J. B., Ellison, N. B., Schoenebeck, S. Y., & Falk, E. B. (2016). Sharing the small moments: ephemeral social interaction on Snapchat. *Information, communication & society*, 19(7), 956-977. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1084349>
- Baym, N. K. (2015). *Personal connections in the digital age*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Berg, J. H., & Clark, M. S. (1986). Differences in social exchange between intimate and other relationships: Gradually evolving or quickly apparent?. In *Friendship and social interaction* (pp. 101-128). Springer, New York, NY
- Blackhart, G. C., Fitzpatrick, J., & Williamson, J. (2014). Dispositional factors predicting use of online dating sites and behaviors related to online dating. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 33, 113-118. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.01.022>
- Brody, N., Mooney, C. M., Westerman, S. A., & McDonald, P. G. (2009). 1ts gt 2gthr 18r: Text Messaging as a Relational Maintenance Tool. *Kentucky Journal of Communication*, 28(2), 109 - 127. <http://kycommunication.com/jenniferpdf/Brody.pdf>
- Broos, A. (2005). Gender and information and communication technologies (ICT) anxiety: Male self-assurance and female hesitation. *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, 8(1), 21-31. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cpb.2005.8.21>
- Burgoon, J. K. (1978). A communication model of personal space violations: Explication and an initial test. *Human communication research*, 4(2), 129-142. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1978.tb00603.x>

- Burgoon, J. K., & Hale, J. L. (1988). Nonverbal expectancy violations: Model elaboration and application to immediacy behaviors. *Communications Monographs*, *55*(1), 58-79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637758809376158>
- Coyne, S. M., Padilla-Walker, L. M., & Howard, E. (2013). Emerging in a digital world: A decade review of media use, effects, and gratifications in emerging adulthood. *Emerging Adulthood*, *1*(2), 125-137. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696813479782>
- DelGreco, M., & Denes, A. (2020). You are not as cute as you think you are: Emotional responses to expectancy violations in heterosexual online dating interactions. *Sex roles*, *82*(9), 622-632. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-019-01078-0>
- Duran, R. L., & Kelly, L. (2017). Knapp's Model of Relational Development in the Digital Age. *Iowa Journal of Communication*, *49*(1), 22-45.
- Duran, R. L., Kelly, L., & Rotaru, T. (2011). Mobile phones in romantic relationships and the dialectic of autonomy versus connection. *Communication quarterly*, *59*(1), 19-36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2011.541336>
- Farman, J. (2018). *Delayed response: The art of waiting from the ancient to the instant world*. Yale University Press.
- Fletcher, G. J., Simpson, J. A., & Thomas, G. (2000). Ideals, perceptions, and evaluations in early relationship development. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, *79*(6), 933-940. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.6.933>
- Fox, J., Osborn, J. L., & Warber, K. M. (2014). Relational dialectics and social networking sites: The role of Facebook in romantic relationship escalation, maintenance, conflict, and dissolution. *Computers in human behavior*, *35*, 527-534. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.02.031>
- Fox, J., Warber, K. M., & Makstaller, D. C. (2013). The role of Facebook in romantic relationship development: An exploration of Knapp's relational stage model. *Journal of social and personal relationships*, *30*(6), 771-794. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407512468370>
- Gangneux, J. (2019). Logged in or locked in? Young adults' negotiations of social media platforms and their features. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *22*(8), 1053-1067. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2018.1562539>
- Henderson, S., Taylor, R., & Thomson, R. (2002). In touch: Young people, communication and technologies. *Information, Communication & Society*, *5*(4), 494-512. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691180208538802>
- Hoyle, R., Das, S., Kapadia, A., Lee, A. J., & Vaniea, K. (2017, May). Was my message read? Privacy and signaling on Facebook messenger. In *Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 3838-3842).
- Hunt, D. S., Lin, C. A., & Atkin, D. J. (2014). Communicating social relationships via the use of photo-messaging. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *58*(2), 234-252. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2014.906430>
- Kelly, L., Miller-Ott, A. E., & Duran, R. L. (2017). Sports scores and intimate moments: An expectancy violations theory approach to partner cell phone behaviors in adult romantic relationships. *Western Journal of Communication*, *81*(5), 619-640. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2017.1299206>
- Knapp, M. L. (1978). *Social intercourse: From greeting to goodbye*. Allyn & Bacon.

- Lapierre, M. A., & Custer, B. E. (2021). Testing relationships between smartphone engagement, romantic partner communication, and relationship satisfaction. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 9(2), 155-176. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050157920935163>
- Laursen, D. (2005). Please reply! The replying norm in adolescent SMS communication. *The inside text*, 53-73.
- Lee, K. C., & Perry, S. D. (2004). Student instant message use in a ubiquitous computing environment: Effects of deficient self-regulation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 48(3), 399-420. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem4803_4
- Lenhart, A., Anderson, M., & Smith, A. (2015). Teens, technology, and romantic relationships. *Pew research center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2015/10/01/teens-technology-and-romantic-relationships/>
- Ling, R., Baron, N. S., Lenhart, A., & Campbell, S. W. (2014). "Girls text really weird": gender, texting and identity among teens. *Journal of Children and Media*, 8(4), 423-439. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2014.931290>
- Lofland, J., & Lofland, L. H. (2006). *Analyzing social settings*. Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Lynden, J., & Rasmussen, T. (2017). Exploring the impact of 'read receipts' in Mobile Instant Messaging. *Tidsskrift for Medier, Erkendelse Og Formidling*, 5(1). <https://tidsskrift.dk/mef-journal/article/view/28781>
- McEwan, B., & Horn, D. (2016). ILY & Can U Pick up Some Milk: Effects of relational maintenance via text messaging on relational satisfaction and closeness in dating partners *Southern Communication Journal*, 81(3), 168-181. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2016.1165728>
- McLaughlin, C., & Vitak, J. (2012). Norm evolution and violation on Facebook. *New media & society*, 14(2), 299-315. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444811412712>
- Miller-Ott, A. E., Kelly, L., & Duran, R. L. (2012). The effects of cell phone usage rules on satisfaction in romantic relationships. *Communication quarterly*, 60(1), 17-34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2012.642263>
- Mobile Fact Sheet (2021). *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/>
- Morning Consult (2017). National tracking poll #170806. https://morningconsult.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/170806_crosstabs_Brands_v1_TB.pdf
- Nowak, K. L., Watt, J., & Walther, J. B. (2005). The influence of synchrony and sensory modality on the person perception process in computer-mediated groups. *Journal of computer-mediated communication*, 10(3). <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2005.tb00251.x>
- O'Dea (2021). Mobile phone usage: Frequency of sending/receiving text messages UK 2019, by gender. *Statista*. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/466217/mobile-phone-use-by-frequency-of-texting-uk-by-gender/>
- Oeldorf-Hirsch, A., & Sundar, S. S. (2016). Social and technological motivations for online photo sharing. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 60(4), 624-642. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2016.1234478>
- Ohadi, J., Brown, B., Trub, L., & Rosenthal, L. (2018). I just text to say I love you: Partner similarity in texting and relationship satisfaction. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 78, 126-132. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.08.048>

- Park, E. K., & Sundar, S. S. (2015). Can synchronicity and visual modality enhance social presence in mobile messaging?. *Computers in Human Behavior, 45*, 121-128. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.12.001>
- Parks, M. R. (2017). Embracing the challenges and opportunities of mixed-media relationships. *Human Communication Research, 43*(4), 505-517. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12125>
- Pasch, L. A., & Bradbury, T. N. (1998). Social support, conflict, and the development of marital dysfunction. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology, 66*(2), 219-230. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.66.2.219>
- Perrin, A., & Anderson, M. (2019) Share of U.S. adults using social media, including Facebook, is unchanged since 2018. *Pew research center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/10/share-of-u-s-adults-using-social-media-including-facebook-is-mostly-unchanged-since-2018/>
- Reed, L. A., Tolman, R. M., Ward, L. M., & Safyer, P. (2016). Keeping tabs: Attachment anxiety and electronic intrusion in high school dating relationships. *Computers in human behavior, 58*, 259-268. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.12.019>
- Reese-Weber, M. (2015). Intimacy, communication, and aggressive behaviors: Variations by phases of romantic relationship development. *Personal relationships, 22*(2), 204-215. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12074>
- Rettie, R. (2009). SMS: Exploiting the interactional characteristics of near-synchrony. *Information, Communication & Society, 12*(8), 1131-1148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691180902786943>
- Ruppel, E. K. (2015). The affordance utilization model: Communication technology use as relationships develop. *Marriage & family review, 51*(8), 669-686. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2015.1061628>
- Schade, L. C., Sandberg, J., Bean, R., Busby, D., & Coyne, S. (2013). Using technology to connect in romantic relationships: Effects on attachment, relationship satisfaction, and stability in emerging adults. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy, 12*(4), 314-338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332691.2013.836051>
- Schrock, A. R. (2015). Communicative affordances of mobile media: Portability, availability, locatability, and multimediality. *International Journal of Communication, 9*, 1-18. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3288>
- Sharabi, L. L., & Dykstra-DeVette, T. A. (2019). From first email to first date: Strategies for initiating relationships in online dating. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 36*(11-12), 3389-3407. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407518822780>
- Smith, A. (2015). U. S. Smartphone use in 2015. *Pew research center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2015/04/01/us-smartphone-use-in-2015/>
- Toma, C. L., & Choi, M. (2016, February). Mobile media matters: Media use and relationship satisfaction among geographically close dating couples. In *Proceedings of the 19th ACM conference on computer-supported cooperative work & social computing* (pp. 394-404).
- Thom, J., Millen, D., & DiMicco, J. (2012, February). Removing gamification from an enterprise SNS. In *Proceedings of the ACM 2012 conference on computer supported cooperative work* (pp. 1067-1070).
- Tu, P. Y., Yuan, C. W., & Wang, H. C. (2018, April). Do you think what I think: Perceptions of delayed instant messages in computer-mediated communication of

- romantic relations. In *Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 1-11).
- Vaterlaus, J. M., Barnett, K., Roche, C., & Young, J. A. (2016). "Snapchat is more personal": An exploratory study on Snapchat behaviors and young adult interpersonal relationships. *Computers in human behavior*, *62*, 594-601. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.04.029>
- Waller, W. (1937). The rating and dating complex. *American Sociological Review*, *2*(5), 727-734
- Waller, W. (1938). *The family: A dynamic interpretation*. New York: Gordon.
- Walther, J. B. (1996). Computer-mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication research*, *23*(1), 3-43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009365096023001001>
- Williams, K. D. (2002). *Ostracism: The power of silence*. Guilford Press.
- Wohn, D. Y., Lampe, C., Wash, R., Ellison, N., & Vitak, J. (2011, January). The "S" in social network games: Initiating, maintaining, and enhancing relationships. In *2011 44th Hawaii international conference on system sciences* (pp. 1-10). IEEE.
- Wright, C. N., & Roloff, M. E. (2009). Relational commitment and the silent treatment. *Communication Research Reports*, *26*(1), 12-21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824090802636967>
- Wright, C. N., & Roloff, M. E. (2015). You should just know why I'm upset: Expectancy violation theory and the influence of mind reading expectations (MRE) on responses to relational problems. *Communication Research Reports*, *32*(1), 10-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824096.2014.989969>
- Xu, B., Chang, P., Welker, C. L., Bazarova, N. N., & Cosley, D. (2016, February). Automatic archiving versus default deletion: what Snapchat tells us about ephemerality in design. In *Proceedings of the 19th ACM conference on computer-supported cooperative work & social computing* (pp. 1662-1675).
- Yang, C. C., Brown, B. B., & Braun, M. T. (2014). From Facebook to cell calls: Layers of electronic intimacy in college students' interpersonal relationships. *New Media & Society*, *16*(1), 5-23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444812472486>

Funding and Acknowledgements

The authors declare no funding sources or conflicts of interest.