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## The use of TikTok for relationship maintenance: An exploratory study

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The Use of TikTok for Relationship Maintenance: An Exploratory Study

by

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Thesis

Submitted to the School of Communication, Media, and Theatre Arts

Eastern Michigan University

in partial fulfillment for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Communication

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June 16, 2022

Ypsilanti, Michigan

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my grandfather, whose love, spirit, and mischievous smile guides me every day.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to acknowledge my thesis chair for her endless support over the last year, and my thesis committee, whose helpful guidance led me to this point. I would also like to thank my research participants; I could not have achieved this thesis without you! Lastly, I would like to thank my mother, who participated in every step of this journey with me. Your pride and faith in me are what continues to push me on to new adventures.

## **Abstract**

The recent boom in popularity of the social media app TikTok has provided more opportunities for users in a committed relationship to express their love to their partner through features such as video sharing, tagging, or creating content together. The purpose of this study is to learn how romantic partners use TikTok to support relationship maintenance; in addition, this study draws on research related to the five love languages to gauge how romantic partners express their love for each other using TikTok. Interviews with eight individuals involved in long-term romantic relationships revealed how TikTok assists with relationship maintenance. Six themes emerged from the interview data showing that romantic partners use TikTok for self-disclosure, meta communication, activity planning, connection, convenience, and humor. In addition, respondents explained in detail how four of the five love languages are satisfied and expressed via TikTok.

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## **The Use of TikTok for Relationship Maintenance: An Exploratory Study**

Relationship maintenance is defined as the various behaviors that romantic partners actively engage in to maintain the desired characteristics of a romantic relationship (Stafford & Canary, 1991). These behaviors are often seen as part of the routine that a couple shares within the relationship as the relationship progresses (Ogolsky & Gray, 2015). Examples of behaviors that could be established within a romantic relationship include spending time with a romantic partner, communicating with each other when there are problems in the relationship, and communicating whether the relationship is strong enough to move forward. While relational maintenance is typically practiced offline by relational partners, communication using social media is beginning to reduce the popularity of face-to-face interactions, for the convenience of social media communication (Orben & Dunbar, 2017).

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat allow users to create content which consists of their own interests that can be shared with other users on the platform, who have the option to respond in the form of a comment, liking the post, sharing it, or messaging the original post of the creator (Abassi, 2019). Social media has a role in most of the communication that happens between romantic partners during their day-to-day routine, some which could include expressing affection for their partner, discussing serious issues, and apologizing to each other (Coyne et al., 2011). Not only this, but social media platforms give couples the opportunity to make specific elements of their relationship open to the public (Halpern & Drobny, 2020). This includes a couple's relationship status, important events within



the relationship, and activities that the couple may participate in together. Once relationship information is made public, it can have a direct impact on the relationship through the judgement of family and friends, the strength of which depends on if the information is positive or negative (Sprecher, 2011).

Couples also use social media as a form of communication; this can include exchanging messages through Facebook messenger, commenting on each other's tweets, or sending each other snap messages on Snapchat. The use of these platforms on mobile devices gives romantic partners the ability to be connected continuously throughout the day, creating an increase in communication when a couple is separated (Coyne et al., 2011).

One social media platform has become a popular form of communication between not only romantic partners, but also with friends and family members with 2 billion downloads across the globe: the social media app TikTok (Henneman, 2020). TikTok is a video sharing and content creating platform where users can either watch videos created by other users or create their own content, most common of which are responses to video challenges created by other users of the app (Serrano et al., 2020). TikTok users can share videos created on the platform with friends and family through the app's messenger feature, can tag friends and family in the comments of a video, or can share TikTok videos to other social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter for family or friends that may not use the app. These features that are included in the TikTok app have the potential to develop a new way of maintaining the relationships in our lives through a variety of options such as creating content together to maintain a bond, sharing a video that will make a friend laugh, letting a parent know they're loved, or reminding a romantic partner that they are valued.

This increase in communication via various forms of social media can not only improve attempts at relationship maintenance but also has the potential to sustain the needs of a partner's love language (Chapman, 2015). The five love languages (words of affirmation, quality time, physical touch, acts of service, and receiving gifts) help couples communicate and bond with each other in hopes of maintaining a stable relationship (Chapman, 2015). Therefore, each love language could possibly be communicated through social media to express the needs of each partner within the relationship through, for example, words of affirmation that can be sent via text to encourage one's partner that they are doing well or to tell them a compliment that will make them feel loved and appreciated by their spouse (Bunt & Hazelwood, 2017).

Investigating the possible connections between relationship maintenance, the five love languages, and the social media app TikTok will contribute to the literature on social media and communication in romantic relationships. As TikTok grows, it will continue to impact romantic relationships in a positive or negative manner, therefore making additional study increasingly important. Creating and maintaining romantic connections through this app and other social media platforms is not a new occurrence, but requires consistent observation, as social media changes from day to day, therefore making subtle changes in relationships and relationship maintenance.

As social media platforms and the technology needed to access it grows, users who are in romantic relationships that they wish to maintain will have to adapt and grow with it. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to learn how romantic partners use Tiktok to support relationship maintenance; in addition, this study draws on research related to the five love languages (Chapman, 2015) to gauge how romantic partners express their love for each other using Tiktok. The research gathered from this study will contribute to interpersonal communication and social

media communication research while also providing relatable insight for romantic couples that frequently use social media apps to bond.

## **Literature Review**

The following section gives a brief overview of the topics studied in this research in three parts: the first being relationship maintenance, second being the five love languages, and last being a description of the social media app TikTok. The first part of this section discusses how past research has found that relationship maintenance can be improved or harmed by the use of social media in romantic relationships. Specifically, what behaviors can emerge within the relationship because of social media and if the needs of each partner within the relationship can be met due to those behaviors. The second part of this section gives a brief overview of the five love languages, explaining how they were developed, why they are important in maintaining a romantic relationship, and the meaning behind each of the five languages. The final part of this section provides a brief explanation of the social media app TikTok; the history of the app's development, how it operates, and how the app can be used by romantic partners to continue relationship maintenance practices.

### **Relationship Maintenance and Social Media**

Relationship maintenance is most defined as the various behaviors that romantic partners actively engage in to maintain the desired characteristics of a romantic relationship (Stafford & Canary, 1991). These behaviors are performed throughout the course of the relationship through strategic planning or a simple routine established within the relationship (Ogolsky & Gray, 2015). When these behaviors are practiced, partners maintain a sense of trust, love, and appreciation for each partner that allows the relationship to function positively. Other strategies that assist in positive relationship functioning include positivity, openness, assurances, shared social networks, and sharing tasks within the relationship (Stafford & Canary, 1991). In simpler terms, relationship maintenance occurs when a couple participates in a consistent routine that has

been established within the relationship to keep it flowing smoothly. When these strategies are initiated in a relationship, they can not only make the relationship stronger, but also provide a measure of the adaptability and response to changes within the relationship (Ogolsky & Gray, 2015). It is when one or both partners step outside of the established routine in their relationship that negative relationship maintenance behaviors begin to surface.

Social media communication allows couples to communicate their needs within the relationship and anticipation for affection without having to be in the same room as their spouse, opening communication channels and allowing for personal growth that can be a benefit to the relationship (Bland & McQueen, 2018). For example, the social media apps that encourage video content creation support couples that create content related to their relationship, how it has improved, and how other users can improve their own romantic relationship. Video content like this can easily be sent from one partner to another to help facilitate conversation about the relationship and how it can be improved overtime.

Recent research has shown that the introduction of technology in relationships can drastically impact relationship maintenance in both a positive and negative way. For example, social media and technology use allows couples to express their love for each other publicly and whenever they please via messaging apps or posts on someone's profile, creating the potential for positive relationship maintenance through strategies such as openness within the relationship and assuring that the relationship is stable (Arikewuyo, Efe-Ozad et al., 2020). Alternatively, this ability to stay in constant contact with one's partner is a tool that can backfire when trust, an important element of relationship maintenance, begins to waver in a relationship. For example, someone may feel the need to look through their partner's phone and social media accounts if they feel that something is amiss. Looking through the phone of one's partner can lead to

negative relationship maintenance behaviors such as jealousy and monitoring. Monitoring, or the action of overseeing a partner's activities online could create a lack of privacy and autonomy amongst romantic partners, which can then lead to conflict within the relationship (Arikewuyo, Eluwole, Ozad et al., 2021).

Another example is the amount of relational information found on social media networks that is not found in the real world. Facebook has a relationship status feature as part of the profile set up for their users, where a couple can announce that they are dating, married, sharing an anniversary, if the relationship is complicated, or if the couple has decided to separate (Fox et al., 2014). Social media networks give friends, family, and other users connected to the profiles of romantic partners an exclusive view of their relationship maintenance process that otherwise would not be seen and can therefore be judged by friends and family of the couple. While these judgments can be positive, if they are negative, it is possible that negative opinions of the relationship can cause a rift in it and upset the relational maintenance routine already established by the couple (Sprecher, 2010). The potential relationship between social media and relational maintenance is still relatively unexplored to researchers however, indicating that future inquiry is required.

### **The Five Love Languages and Relationship Maintenance**

The five love languages are a concept that was developed by marriage counselor Gary Chapman to help couples understand each other and maintain a strong romantic relationship through different forms of communication. According to Chapman (2015), everyone expresses each of the five love languages, but have a specific language that provides them with the most satisfaction, which can sometimes be difficult for their romantic partner to understand if they do not share the same love language (p. 15). The five love languages include words of affirmation,

quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service, and physical touch. The research in this study will use the love language model and add to the research that has already been compiled on the subject. According to Chapman's book *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts*, people in romantic relationships tend to only speak their primary love language when the key to a successful relationship is being able to communicate using your partner's love language, in addition to your own (p. 16). When the love language of one's spouse is spoken, relational satisfaction, or the extent to which an individual is willing to address the needs of their spouse and address them correctly, has the potential to be established (Bohlander, 1999). Due to the willingness shown by the couple to address each other's needs, they also may be meeting the needs of each partner's love language (Ince & Isik, 2021). Recent research has also addressed the similarities between Chapman's five love languages and the strategies associated with relational maintenance. For example, as previously discussed, one of the relationship maintenance behaviors, *assurances*, is seen when one partner emphasizes the importance of the other (Egbert & Polk, 2006). The love language *words of affirmation* has a similar goal, where one communicates compliments and words of encouragement to their partner to meet their needs (Chapman, 2015). Another example is the relationship maintenance behavior *shared tasks*, where couples perform basic tasks together such as household chores (Egbert & Polk, 2006). Similar to this relational behavior is the love language *acts of service*, in which one partner may perform an act or service for their partner to make their life easier (Bunt & Hazelwood, 2017).

Chapman's book goes on to explain each of the love languages in detail, using the stories of past patients as examples. The love language model is popular today and used frequently in couples' programs across the country to maintain or improve relationships (Ince & Isik, 2021). However, it is important to note that even though the five love languages are widely known,

many researchers continue to have doubts about the concept and continue to encourage psychological and clinical observation (Bunt & Hazelwood, 2017). A popular reason for the suggestion of continued examination is that Chapman has done little to no research to support this model, resulting in little evidence to support it (Bland & McQueen, 2018). While there are studies that support Chapman's framework, not enough research has been done for the love language model to be fully supported. Researchers also claim that the variables related to the five love languages should continue to be examined thoroughly (Ince & Isik, 2021). A brief description of each of the five love languages can be found in Appendix A.

### **TikTok and Relationship Maintenance**

TikTok is a video sharing and creating platform that was created by the tech company ByteDance in 2016, and later merged in 2018 with another video app called Musical.ly (Serrano et al., 2020). Not long after this merge the app quickly became popular, becoming the most downloaded app of 2020 with 100 million users by the middle of that year (Henneman, 2020). The app is well known for becoming a place where users create content, and challenge other users to duplicate what they did in the video, with dance challenges being the most popular. Primarily used as a phone app, users can comment on videos, share them through the messaging feature on the app as well as to other platforms, and "like" videos they enjoy by pushing a heart button on their screen, which then saves the video to their profile. While users can choose to only interact with videos on what is called their "for you page" or what is considered the home page of the app, they can also follow content creators they enjoy, and watch their videos on the "following" page of the app. The third page offered by the platform is the "discover page," where users can search sounds, hashtags, and the title of videos to find similar content on the platform (Serrano et al., 2020). If users choose to make their own content, they have the option



of using different filters, speed of the video, sounds, and effects for their video, which includes closed captions. Sounds can also be created by a creator and used by other users of the platform for their content (Serrano et al., 2020). TikTok originally only allowed users to film 15 second to one-minute videos, but earlier this year gave users the option to make three-minute video content. Once a video is finished, the creator can add a bio to the video in addition to popular hashtags to make the video go viral.

Three of the most popular features of the app give user's the opportunity to duet, stitch, and reply to other videos on the platform. Duets are common when a user wants to respond to a challenge or theme in a video created or performed by a different user; the duet shows both the video of the user and the creator that they wish to duplicate or respond to (Serrano et al., 2020). Dance challenge videos are the most popular challenges to accomplish on the app, but other challenges can include food or action challenges, where the user will have to recreate a stunt performed by the original content creator. Videos that are "stitched" first display the video that a user would like to respond to for an amount of time specified by the user, and then switches to the original video content of the user themselves. This feature is often used to respond to another creator's video content without having to use TikTok's duet feature, so the sole focus of the video is either on the creator of the video, or a clip from the TikTok video that they wish to address. These features of the app have the capability to not only connect users to people around the world but give them the ability to create their own videos and share videos with friends and family.

As TikTok increases in popularity, it could also become a way for not only friends and family to maintain bonds, but for romantic partners to bond as well. Whether together on the couch or miles apart, TikTok gives couples the ability to share content that they may find funny,

relatable, or a reminder of why the relationship began in the first place. Not only can this be a new way to practice relationship maintenance, but it could also create another form of communication in which romantic partners can express love through their preferred love language and respond to their partner's love language as well. This could mean spending quality time together on the couch while watching TikTok videos together, sending a TikTok to your partner that communicates affection and encouragement, or buying your partner a product that you saw in a TikTok video as a gift. The idea that relationship maintenance has the potential to be practiced using TikTok to express one's love language, is a phenomenon that needs to be studied as the app continues to grow and connect users worldwide.

### **Conclusion and Research Questions**

Communication research is lacking in current studies that argue for a connection between relationship maintenance and the social media platform TikTok, current studies of which mostly focus on video challenges common to the app (Henneman, 2020). This is not surprising, as the platform is still relatively new in the world of social media, but for this reason, it is evident that additional study is required. As a form of social media, TikTok can impact a relationship negatively due to the addicting presence of the platform. For example, someone may feel that their needs, wants, and desires are not being met by a romantic partner, because the partner is too invested in the app, thereby causing a rift in the relational maintenance routine that may have been established by the couple (Arikewuyo, Lasisi et. al., 2020). TikTok also has the capacity to bring couples together; for example, when romantic partners watch TikTok videos together that cause a positive reaction between the couple, such as laughing at a funny video, they are maintaining their bond in a positive manner by spending time together, thereby increasing

relational intimacy (Orben & Dunbar, 2017). However, any potential link that could be established between relationship maintenance and TikTok requires further research.

As research develops about relationship maintenance, social media technology, the five love languages, and TikTok, there is a possibility that each of these four topics could be related to the other, thereby making the idea of them working together to decide the positive or negative direction of a relationship an important area for further investigation. The following two exploratory research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What is the role of the social media platform TikTok in the relationship maintenance of romantic partners?

RQ2: How does the use of TikTok demonstrate a romantic partner's own love language as well as the love language of their partner?

## Method

### Participant Selection

The eligibility requirements for this study included that each participant had to be married or in a long-term romantic relationship (of at least one year). Participants also had to have a TikTok account that they have been actively using for over a year on a day-to-day basis and they also needed to report using this account to send TikTok content to their spouse or partner on a regular basis. The Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee (UHSRC) reviewed and approved this study on January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2022 (see Appendix B).

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling because of the eligibility requirements for the study. A recruitment post was developed and distributed using Facebook, Twitter, and the Eastern Michigan University (EMU) Engage app. A recruitment email message was also distributed to coworkers and friends who knew of people that might have shown interest in the study, but no participants were recruited using this method. The most success was found in recruiting participants through Facebook, specifically when the post was shared by others on the platform. However, posting the recruitment advertisement on Facebook did not yield enough participant; therefore, Twitter and the EMU Engage app were then used to gain additional participants. Choosing to advertise the study on the EMU Engage app assisted in the recruitment of the final participants needed for the study. Once participants expressed interest in the study, they were asked to send an email message indicating their interest and requesting further instructions. Once an email message was received, participants were provided with more information about the study, given a consent form, the weblink to the love language quiz, and an interview was scheduled via Zoom. Participants were also informed that their consent form must

be signed and sent by email message back to the researcher along with the results of their love language quiz prior to their interview date.

Eight participants were recruited for this study ranging in age from 22 to 40. Of those participants, four identified as male, three identified as female, and one identified as non-binary. Seven out of eight participants identified as Caucasian, and one participant identified as Native American. In addition to this, four out of eight participants were married to their partner, two were engaged to their partner, and two were in a dating relationship with their partner. The amount of time that participants had been in a romantic relationship with their partners ranged from four to ten years. Lastly, all participants had an active TikTok account for a period of time ranging from two to four years.

### **Research Procedures**

Semi-structured interview methodology was employed, and the questions focused specifically on how each participant practices relationship maintenance using TikTok and how they express love to their partner through TikTok via one or more of the five love languages. Interviews ranged in length from 20 to 30 minutes; see Appendix C for the interview protocol. All participants were asked to take the love language quiz available on Gary Chapman's website (<https://www.5lovelanguages.com/quizzes/love-language>) before participating in the interview. Participants were then asked to share these results with me before the interview process began.

Interviews were scheduled and conducted using the virtual meeting platform, Zoom. Participants signed the consent form before the interviews began. Each interview was recorded with the consent of participants, and the name of each participant has been changed to a number to ensure anonymity. The results of the love language quiz taken by each participant was

introduced during the interview and provided the basis to discuss how love is expressed via TikTok.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each interview lasted from 20 to 40 minutes. Transcripts were 11 to 20 pages depending on the amount of detail given by the participant. Thematic analysis was employed. The constant comparative method was used to distinguish any similarities or common themes in the data (including the results of the love language quiz; Kolb, 2012; Nowell et al., 2017). Themes were identified when reviewing the transcripts of each participant; when multiple participants had similar responses to an interview question, those similarities developed into a theme. Similar research has used this method with small sample sizes to gather patterns and themes (Arikewuyo, Lasisi et al., 2020). Social media and relationships have been successfully studied using qualitative methods; for example, Fox et al. (2014) interviewed couples about the role that Facebook played in their relationship maintenance. The constant comparative method was used to distinguish any similarities or common themes found through document collecting (including the results of the love language quiz) and interviews (Kolb, 2012).

## Results

Relationship maintenance is an important part of all romantic relationships, and the social media app TikTok only adds to the multitude of ways in which relationship maintenance can be practiced, thereby attending to the needs of each romantic partner. For example, TikTok can assist romantic couples by providing an additional option for communication between partners, no matter how far away they are from each other. In addition to this, TikTok can also help romantic partners meet the needs of their love language, as well as their partner's by sharing videos and discussing videos with each other. The following sections will address the results of the two research questions used to study how relationship maintenance is affected by TikTok, and if the five love languages can be expressed using the TikTok app.

### **RQ1: What is the Role of the Social Media Platform TikTok in the Relationship Maintenance of Romantic Partners?**

Participants discussed several ways that they use TikTok for relationship maintenance and six themes emerged from the data. These themes include self-disclosure, meta communication, activity planning, maintaining a connection, humor, and the convenience of TikTok in a romantic relationship. The theme that was found in most interviews, convenience, is the main theme of this study. Participants conveyed that TikTok became an easy way to communicate with their partner, even if they were together. Several participants stated that sending TikTok videos during the day was easier than having a text conversation with their partner, especially during work hours. In addition to this, participants explained that being able to send TikTok videos that their partner would like assisted in easing the tension after a fight, or helped their partner feel better if they were in a bad mood. Participant two described how, due to

her work hours conflicting with her partner's, TikTok made it easy to have conversations with her partner, even if they were serious:

We aren't able to spend a whole lot of face-to-face time together because I work first shift, and he works second. So even though we live together, we get about an hour and a half a day that we're both in the same place. So, it's nice throughout the day to be able to be like "Hey, I saw this thing, and I thought you would like it, here you go." Also, if one of us is in a particularly bad mood or if we've had an argument, we know what each other likes, so we'll send those videos to each other.

As previously discussed, TikTok helps couples' bond and maintain their relationship via sharing video content on the platform for their partner to watch. Participants explained that one of the reasons they use the TikTok app is for this convenience, specifically how easy the app makes it for couples to communicate in a multitude of ways. For example, unlike social media apps such as Snapchat, TikTok users can send videos to each other through the messaging tool in the TikTok app, and the video will stay there even after the receiver has watched and reacted to it. Each participant also expressed that it felt good to not only receive video content from their partner, but to send it as well, because it meant that they were thinking about each other. According to some participants, it was even common to share a video with their partner, and have that same video appear on their TikTok for you page sometime later due to their algorithm. Participant five discussed how sharing TikTok videos maintains the connection within his relationship:

Because we are currently long distance from each other, it is a way to connect and still send amusing things to each other. I feel pleased that I was sent a video



because it means they were thinking of me and sent me something they thought would be relevant to my interests. I also like it because, if I send them a story on Instagram, it'll go away within a day, where if I send them a TikTok, it will stay there until the content is consumed.

Participant two explained how, in her relationship, TikTok content sent to her by her partner and vice versa was an excellent tool to use when words could not express her feelings, in addition to video content being easier to decipher than messages because a video can be watched and heard, making it more convenient, than texting:

With texting, it's a lot of like, okay, I have a thing that I want to say, while TikTok, it's pretty utilitarian. And it's also nice because we don't have to worry about like, did the way that I said that over text read the way that it's intended?

Self-disclosure was an evident theme in several interviews. Several participants expressed that they enjoyed sharing TikTok videos that focused on a specific interest or hobby of theirs so their partner could learn more about them, and vice versa. Even when casually exchanging video content with one another, self-disclosure about one's hobbies or interests communicates to their romantic partner a broader range of TikTok content that they can share to bond with their romantic partner or make them happy. Participant eight's partner, who has a passion for animals, explained a process in a video to him from a content creator that she enjoyed watching, so he could gain insight into why she liked to learn about the maintenance of different animals:

There's this couple that she likes to watch, they are professional sheep, llama, and alpaca shavers. When she first started showing them to me, the technique that they have to use to shave them worried me; I didn't want the animals to get hurt.

So, she talked to me and taught me a little bit of the process of how, like it's not painful, it's just necessary so the animals don't end up getting hurt and stuff. Then she went back and showed some past videos so that I got a better idea and would enjoy the videos more.

Meta-communication, or discussing the relationship, was also a popular theme discovered while gathering data. Numerous participants described using the TikTok app to give examples or explanations to their partner when their own words did not feel like enough during a serious conversation. This not only resulted in clearer communication between partners, but also assisted in maintaining the connection between romantic partners. For example, when entering a new stage of the relationship, such as marriage or the birth of a child, a few participants agreed that TikTok content was helpful in guiding important conversations. Participant three conveyed how sharing TikTok content made it easier to discuss various issues with her partner:

We share videos because it allows to communicate what we want to say without always having to find our own words. If it's a relationship or a parenting video, we will talk about it. Sometimes we don't agree on parenting styles, but then we talk about it and come to a compromise, or he understands my point.

Sustaining a connection within the relationship was another theme that was found. Most participants agreed that sharing TikTok content with their romantic partner throughout the day when at work or school helped maintain a strong connection between partners. Many also agreed that receiving a TikTok video from their partner that made them laugh or was about one of their interests helped strengthen the existing connection within the relationship. This was especially important to participants in a long-distance relationship, many of which expressed that exchanging TikTok content with their partner while they lived far away from each other became

a vital form of communication and bonding. Participant one explained that, due to their long-distance relationship, TikTok helps her maintain a connection with her partner when they are apart:

We send TikTok's to each other multiple times a day. It connects us because we are fourteen hours apart when it comes to time difference. So, many times, he will wake up to tons and tons of TikTok's, and then I'll wake up or get out of work to tons of TikTok's. It's nice being able to come home or wake up to that because even though we can't physically come home to each other, I can still wake up and know that they were thinking of me, because they took the time to send me videos.

The TikTok platform caters to a plethora of subjects, hobbies, and interest groups, leading to the next theme: planning activities. Several participant interviews revealed that the Tiktok app was great for planning activities that could be done with one's romantic partner, such as cooking new recipes and travelling to new places together. Participants explained that planning these activities together and then pursuing them was a great way to spend time together while creating new traditions within the relationship. For example, participant one agreed that TikTok has helped her plan activities, such as cooking a new recipe, with her partner:

We have tried a lot of recipes, especially during the beginning of Covid, when everyone was home. We actually found and developed a lot of recipes that we really like, so we would cook them together. It was a fun way to spend time together.

Lastly, humor was an obvious theme found when gathering data. Participants often expressed that their main goal was to send a TikTok video to their romantic partner that would

find funny, and ultimately make them laugh. Participants explained that sending TikTok videos to their partner that they found humorous was not only for their partner, but for the participant as well, meaning that when a participant sent a TikTok video to their partner that made them laugh, they also benefited from the satisfaction of entertaining their partner. Participant eight explained how he felt witnessing his partner laugh at a video he had sent to her:

When she's watching videos and she laughs or has a reaction, it makes me feel good because it's a validation of like, okay, so this was funny. I thought this was funny and I thought you would enjoy it, and you did! So, I was correct.

All participants in this research indicated that the TikTok app has become a way for couples to bond with each other, especially if they are a long-distance couple. This specific connection was found in most of the interviews conducted for this study, indicating that romantic partners could use the TikTok app as another form of shared activity. Participant one, who is in a long-distance relationship, explained how she and her partner used TikTok when they were together, and now that they must live apart:

When we were living together, being able to watch TikTok together was a great bonding moment for us. There were many occasions where we would just be scrolling on TikTok in our own, like still in the same room but on our own, and we would just end up scrolling onto the same video at the same time. And that was always just really funny because it just kind of showed like how connected we were. Now when it comes to sending TikTok's to each other, we send them to each other for a multitude of reasons, whether it's just we think the other person would find this funny, we think the other person would find this relatable. It really

is just another way for us to talk to each other, and then also to show each other that we do think about each other.

Some participants also agreed that sharing TikTok content allowed them to express feelings or discuss topics with their partner that they may not be able to put into words, or that they can't discuss with their partner because they are, for example, at work. Participants then explained that when they shared these types of videos with their partner, they would also leave a little message stating that this video expressed their current feelings within the relationship, what could be improved upon, what they should try to do together as a couple (such as a recipe or activity), or how the video reminded them of their own relationship. Common examples used by participants ranged from political topics, relationship advice, hobbies shared by the couple, and parenting tips. Participant four confirmed this point:

I can't always say to my partner look at this, this is funny, you should watch this right now. I have to send it to her when I'm at work or something and I want her to watch it immediately. I think that the app has impacted our relationship positively because it allows us to open up about conversations that we may have thought of, but never initiated a conversation on it.

Participant three agreed that TikTok can help couples discuss difficult topics, comparing the platform to other social media sites:

If you're having a hard time explaining something you've been wanting to talk about? Um, find a video. Yeah, sometimes I use TikTok as Google. I feel like 90% of the time now there's already a video on that content; it's like the new YouTube of this era.

**RQ2: How Does the use of TikTok Demonstrate a Romantic Partner's own Love Language as well as the Love Language of Their Partner?**

Satisfaction and expression emerged as two common themes when discussing each participant's love language. For example, in addition to creating a space for relationship maintenance, TikTok has become a place where one can express their love language to their partner, while also satisfying the needs of their partner's own love language, whether living together or apart. Information gathered from participants also indicated that TikTok has made it possible to establish a connection specific to the platform that can be easily maintained amongst relational partners through four of the five love languages, thereby providing a form of convenience for practicing relationship maintenance and a shared theme with the first research question. Romantic partners can use TikTok to satisfy their love language in multiple ways, whether they just want to laugh with their partner, watch videos with them, or remind their partner that they are thinking of them. Furthermore, many participants stated that they wanted to send videos to their romantic partner that would make them laugh, leading to the identification of humor as another theme.

The love language quiz taken by each participant identified their primary and secondary love languages; for primary love languages, three participants identified physical touch, three participants identified words of affirmation, and two participants identified acts of service. Even though no participants identified quality time as their primary love language, five out of eight participants identified quality time as their second love language. Of the remaining participants two identified words of affirmation as their secondary love language, one identified acts of service as their secondary, and no participants identified physical touch as their secondary love language.

Participants were able to easily discuss examples of quality time, words of affirmation, acts of service, and physical touch. Receiving gifts was the only love language not mentioned by the interviewees. Interestingly, similarities were identified between the love languages quality time and physical touch, as well as words of affirmation and acts of service. Patterns were identified between these two groupings illustrating that multiple love languages can be satisfied at the same time over TikTok. Due to this discovery, instead of discussing the love languages singularly, the results of each love language will be discussed with the language that it shares the most similarities with, beginning with quality time and physical touch, and then ending with words of affirmation and acts of service.

### **Quality Time and Physical Touch**

Even though quality time was not identified as a primary love language by any of the participants, all but three participants had quality time as their secondary love language. Interestingly, the information gathered from interviews indicated that those who identify with quality time may do so for reasons similar to those who identify with physical touch. For example, participants who have quality time as their love language appreciate the TikTok app because, like physical touch, it gives them the opportunity to relax with their partner by watching TikTok content together and discussing the videos after. Most participants agreed that most of their quality time is spent watching TikTok videos together or at least next to each other, either on the couch after work or when in bed settling down for the night. Participant five confirmed this by adding:

Before being long distance, it was good to like videos and just watch them before bed, showing each other videos that we like or thought the other person would

like. We would save them throughout the day and scroll through our likes in bed, showing each other about which ones we found amusing and relevant to the other.

Participant seven explained that they watch TikTok videos with their partner as a way to laugh:

Most of the time we share a video or something like if we're watching TV or whatever, we just laugh and it's just this funny. It just kind of breaks up the seriousness of things at times.

Physical touch was identified by three of the eight participants in this study as their primary love language. However, the interviews conducted for this study found that physical touch shares similarities to quality time. For example, like quality time, partners with the love language physical touch appreciate the TikTok app because it grants them an opportunity to touch their partner when watching TikTok videos in a shared setting such as the couch in a living room or the bed in a bedroom. An additional similarity was established through a common trend amongst participants, saving videos throughout the day to watch with their partner later at home.

Participant five explains this practice:

We would save videos throughout the day and scroll through our likes in bed while showing them to each other and talking to each other about the ones that we found amusing or relevant to each other. We would get snuggled up next to each other so we could both look through the phone and go through videos with each other.

Participant eight expressed similar views:

I think that something I found is that, when it comes to touching, is that it's not always a really physical thing, it's like a reactionary thing. I'm like, "I'm getting



this,” even though I’m using a sense of touch I’m also using one of the five senses as a reaction from the stuff I’ve shown her. Sometimes I just like being able to hear the reaction like laughter, or if it’s a dumb joke like being pushed a little bit and stuff, playfully. It’s the reactions from those videos that really makes me enjoy it.

### **Words of Affirmation and Acts of Service**

Similar themes emerged when participants talked about words of affirmation and acts of service. In fact, when discussing each love language, participants said relatively the same thing about each; that when they are sent a video by their romantic partner, the participant feels that the needs of their love language (words of affirmation or acts of service) was met because their partner was thinking of them in some capacity. However, there were minor differences. For example, even though words of affirmation was not the primary or secondary love language of some of the participants, all participants agreed that when they received a video from their partner, it felt like an affirmation for them that their partner was thinking of them, even if there was no explicit message of affirmation. Partners that had words of affirmation as their love language also appreciated the TikTok app because their partner can send them videos with sweet messages, words of encouragement, or content that confirmed their partner is not only thinking of them, but also cares about them. Participant two discussed how they view words of affirmation in her TikTok exchanges with her partner:

Over the course of the pandemic, we’ve both changed jobs a few times, and a lot of the time we’re not working the same schedule, so we don’t get to spend a lot of time together. Once we had TikTok, even if one of us was working and the other wasn’t, it was easy to be like “Okay, I’m taking a five-minute break. I was

looking at this, and I saw this, and I thought of you.” It’s just been really nice to have that little thing that we can send each other.

Participant eight explained that the reaction he gets from a video that he sent to his partner satisfies his need for affirmation:

The affirmation within our relationship is really important to me, and so even little things, like “oh this video made me think of you” or “oh, there’s a really cute cat in this video and I knew you would love it,” it’s just positive affirmation that my partner does think about me and everything.

The love language acts of service was not as popular as words of affirmation, with only two out of eight participants identifying this as their primary love language, and one participant identifying it as their secondary. However, like words of affirmation, partners with this love language as their primary language appreciate the TikTok app because when their partner sends them videos, it means they’re thinking of them and took the time to send them a video they may enjoy. Participants with this as their love language emphasized that there was strong meaning behind the act of their partner sending videos to them because it reminded their partner of them, or something having to do with their life together. Therefore, while acts of service is like words of affirmation in the sense that the participants like that their partner is thinking of them, it is unique due to the appreciation for the action being taken by one’s romantic partner to send the video versus the message behind the video being sent. These participants associated positive feelings with the exchanging of TikTok videos, and how it made them feel knowing that their partner sent these videos to them as a way of making them laugh or feel good about themselves. Participant one expanded on this by describing how acts of service is used as her primary love language:

When it comes to acts of service, I get really happy when I go to look at my messages and I see that I have TikTok's that he's sent me because it reminds me that he's thinking of me, and this TikTok specifically reminded him of me, so he thought to send it to me. A lot of acts of service is knowing that they thought of you, and they did something for you, just because they were thinking of you, and know that it makes you happy.

Participant four said something similar about his partner, whose primary love language is acts of service. He explained that she uses TikTok content to satisfy her love language, while also satisfying his (words of affirmation):

When she sends me things, like another person giving me words of affirmations, it's not like I'm receiving it from the person that made the video. I know that she is sending me that because she cares about me and that's what she wants to communicate sometimes. Maybe she didn't know how to communicate it or maybe she did, but she wanted to use a video to say it.

## Discussion

The practice of relationship maintenance is successful when a romantic couple establishes a routine together and maintains it (Stafford & Canary, 1991). This study has shown that the social media platform TikTok is becoming an important addition in the routine of romantic partners to maintain their bond as a couple. Additionally, TikTok has made it possible to create an attachment specific to the platform that can be easily maintained amongst relational partners through four of the five love languages. However, the results previously discussed are not consistent with research conducted by Orben and Dunbar (2017), whose data show a decreasing desire for face-to-face interaction due to a growing preference for social media technology. According to the data collected from participant interviews, watching TikTok videos with one's romantic partner has become a popular way to spend time together as a couple, requiring face to face communication for reactions to video content and discussion.

TikTok has also become a successful channel for expressing love to one's partner through video content, and having that love reciprocated by one's partner in the same way. Due specifically to TikTok's video content feature, it is evolving into a tool that couples, whether together or long distance, can use to express a clear message to their partner that they have thought of them at some point during the day, even if that is not communicated verbally or face to face. TikTok has become an important asset for many, especially those whose love language is words of affirmation, quality time, physical touch, or acts of service. According to a study by Ince and Isik (2021), each love language represents a need that each partner has in a romantic relationship, and the TikTok platform has created a direct and easy path to satisfying these needs, of which can be shown in a multitude of ways. For example, when someone sends a video to their partner because it reminds them of that person, when they send a video that explicitly

conveys a message of encouragement, love, or reassurance, or when a couple is simply watching videos with each other while cuddled up together.

This study expands research in the field of social media communication and interpersonal communication by analyzing how the social media app TikTok is used amongst romantic partners to practice relationship maintenance while also satisfying their primary love language, and the love language of their partner. This study gives insight into how TikTok users, specifically those in romantic relationships, use the app independently, or with someone else. Therefore, scholars studying the TikTok app and how it affects communication between users can benefit from this research. Those studying interpersonal relationships, specifically that of romantic partners, can use this study to expand their knowledge of how romantic partners use social media to maintain communication with each other while also using social media as a bonding experience. Specifically, this research gives unique insight into how TikTok is slowly becoming a form of relational bonding and communication. For example, the information provided here may assist those studying proxemic relationships by describing how TikTok has helped long-distance couples still feel connected to one another.

This study has also shown that romantic partners can use TikTok to practice relationship maintenance with their partner through the exchange of video content on the TikTok app. Whether together or apart, the ability to share content with each other and discuss it with one's partner allows romantic partners to maintain the bond they already share. For example, as previously discussed, TikTok provides an option for romantic couples to expand on tough discussions using video content produced by other couples that have navigated similar issues. In addition to this, communication tactics used in romantic partnerships are expanding using TikTok's sharing, tagging, and messaging system. Several participants in this study agreed that a

large portion of communication with their partner occurs on the TikTok app, including responding to a message, reacting to video content, or sharing video content with their partner.

Lastly, this research adds to existing research about the five love languages, and how social media can impact how romantic couples satisfy their own love language, as well as the love language of their partner. This study indicates that more than one love language can be satisfied at one time by using the TikTok app with a romantic partner. For example, participants with the love languages quality time and/or physical touch shared similarities in how they liked to express their love language, and therefore would in a sense hit two birds with one stone when, for example, they cuddle on the couch with their romantic partner while watching TikTok videos together. This result was also seen with the love languages words of affirmation and acts of service; both love languages had similar results that signify they can be satisfied on their own as well as at the same time. The love language receiving gifts was not identified during the interview process. This could have occurred for two reasons, the first being that there were no participants with receiving gifts as their primary or secondary love language. Another possibility is that no participants view content by TikTok creators that sell some sort of product that may interest them or their romantic partner, meaning the content algorithm that TikTok has designed based on the participant's current interests may not include a TikTok account that sells products, thereby preventing the user from purchasing any products that may have been advertised through the TikTok app.

### **Conclusions, Limitations, and Suggestions for Future Research**

Due to its specific nature, the eligibility requirements for this study caused some difficulty during the recruitment process. For example, recruiting participants through Facebook posts was useful, but it was expressed by several individuals that they could not participate in the study because either they or their partner did not have a TikTok account, or they did not share content with their partner regularly. It was also discovered that some participants did not see the initial Facebook recruitment message due to the Facebook algorithm, which prevents the Facebook user from viewing posts on their Facebook wall that do not meet their initial interests. The sample size was small, leading to seven out of eight participants identifying as Caucasian, and resulting in a lack of diversity in the participant pool.

Future research could benefit from a more diverse participant pool and broadening the eligibility requirements of this study should it be duplicated. One suggestion would be to include participants who have been in a romantic relationship for a little less than a year, possibly 8 to 10 months at least. Researchers could also recruit participants through the TikTok app by creating video content advertising their study with hashtags that are popular when the video is published. TikTok was not considered as a recruitment tool for this study because the researcher was concerned with the length of time it would take to gather a response from interested individuals. Additionally, further research could study how romantic partners in a face-to-face relationship use the TikTok app to communicate versus how romantic partners in a long-distance relationship use TikTok. Future research could study the differences in communication practices on TikTok amongst partners within the same location versus romantic partners that live far away from each other.

Another suggestion would be to adjust the interview questions for this study to incorporate more discussion about the five love languages. Additionally, based on evidence previously explained, the love languages are continuously expressed on the TikTok app, and further research could have the potential to discover new information about how the five love languages can be applied to various social media platforms. Future research could also benefit from learning how TikTok represents some love languages better than others, and if a user's TikTok algorithm plays a role in love language representation. Lastly, because my research found no evidence of receiving gifts on TikTok, I would also encourage future research to explore how products viewed on TikTok that were then purchased and given to a romantic partner might provide the necessary satisfaction of the love language receiving gifts.

Due to TikTok being a relatively new form of social media, there is little research that currently exists about the app and how it is used in the daily lives of those that operate it. The findings in this study revealed that as the TikTok platform continues to evolve, users in romantic relationships can use it to create discussion between themselves and their partner as well as make their partner smile, laugh, or alter a bad mood. It was also found that TikTok has the capability to satisfy the needs of each partner, including their love language, by granting them access to video content that they will enjoy, and then share with their partner so they can view the video together. These features can help people in romantic relationships maintain their relationship from wherever they are, whether it be at work or in another country, through constant communication and connection. As the TikTok app gains more users and the variety of communities within the app continue to grow, romantic relationships will continue to grow with it due to its convenience as a tool for not only communication, but also for expression of oneself to one's romantic partner through new and shared interests.



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## **Appendix A: A Description of Each of the Five Love Languages**

### **Words of Affirmation**

According to Chapman's (2015) book, words of affirmation are verbal compliments or words of appreciation that encourage one's partner (p. 38). This love language encourages the user to say comforting or encouraging words to their partner such as "thank you for doing the dishes tonight; I know you're tired from work today, and I really appreciate it" or even something as simple as "you look beautiful this morning!" Words of affirmation can be simple, if they express the love, kindness, and appreciation necessary for adult interactions (Bland & McQueen, 2018).

### **Quality Time**

One of the most popular love languages is quality time. For this love language, romantic partners need to give each other their complete attention; this means that no music is playing, the television is turned off, and the couple is focused solely on each other. According to Chapman (2015), this does not mean sitting with each other in silence and simply existing; instead, it means that a couple is initiating in an activity, while being completely concentrated on one another (pg. 60). If the activity that the couple engages in brings them together and allows them to establish an emotional connection, it can be considered quality time.

### **Receiving Gifts**

Those whose primary love language is receiving gifts rely more on the thought behind the gift than the object itself. According to Chapman (2015), it does not matter how much the gift cost or if it cost anything at all, just that your significant other thought of you when they saw it

and obtained it for you as a sign of affection, in the hopes that you would enjoy it (p. 77). Gifts can also come from anywhere whether that's the store or your backyard, the symbolism behind it is what truly matters. However, there is a distinct gift that is more important than something bought in a store or found on a walk, and that is the gift of presence. This gift can be of the utmost importance, especially when your partner is experiencing a crisis (Bland & McQueen, 2018). Being there for a romantic partner when they need it the most symbolizes the same form of affection and thoughtfulness that any object could, maybe even more so.

### **Acts of Service**

This love language brings the idea that actions speak louder than words to life; when a partner participates in actions that assist their partner, it becomes a symbol of love and thought for the other person (Bunt & Hazelwood, 2017). An act of service tends to require prior thought, planning, time, effort, and energy (p. 92). This can include basic tasks your partner performs such as, walking the dog, putting dishes away, raking leaves, or even putting the kids to bed. If the task was completed out of love and appreciation for the other person, it is considered an act of service.

### **Physical Touch**

Finally, there is physical touch. From the moment we are born, physical touch becomes an important aspect of development; it's how we experience and express love with our family, friends, and romantic partners. Physical touch can include kissing, hugging, sexual intercourse; any kind of touch that leaves your partner feeling loved (Chapman, p. 108). However, it is important to remember that everyone's version of physical touch is different, and your romantic partner will need to establish where and how much of that touch they require from you.

### **Appendix B: IRB Approval**

The Eastern Michigan University Human Subjects Review Committee (UHSRC) reviewed and approved this thesis study on January 27<sup>th</sup>, 2022. This study was under limited review and was approved for exempt status. There were no drugs, biological products, or medical devices used in this study. There was no face-to-face contact with participants, as each interview was conducted via Zoom. The data for this study will be kept in a password protected file on a password protected computer for the duration of five years, after which all files will be deleted, and the trash emptied on my computer. As previously stated, each participant has had their name changed to an assigned number to protect their anonymity.

## Appendix C: Interview Questions

### Part 1: Demographic Information and Overview Questions

1. How long have you been in a relationship with your significant other?
2. How old are you?
3. What is your race?
4. What is your gender identification?
5. How long have you had a TikTok account, and how do you primarily use it? (To create content, to watch content, or both? What types of content do you create or watch?)
6. What prompted you to get a TikTok account? What do you like most about it?

### Part 2: TikTok for Relationship Maintenance

7. Tell me why you and your partner share and watch TikTok videos with each other.
8. How often do you share TikTok videos with your partner?
9. What kind of TikTok videos do you share with your partner?
10. What happens as a result of sharing videos? (e.g., how do you feel when receiving a video from your partner? How do you feel about your partner's reaction to a video you sent them? Do you discuss videos that you send each other? Do you purchase products, cook recipes, or try hacks from the videos, for example?)
11. Do you watch TikTok videos together with your partner, in a face-to-face setting?  
Describe the kinds of videos you watch together and what happens as a result (e.g., do you talk about the videos? Who initiates watching the videos together? How do you feel about watching the videos together?)

12. When was a time that you and your partner discussed a TikTok video that you did not agree with?
13. Have you and your partner ever created a TikTok video together?
  - a. If yes, explain a time or two when you made a video together. What was the experience like?
  - b. If not, why not and would you ever consider making a video together?
14. How has having a TikTok account impacted your relationship with your partner overall? (e.g., in a positive way? In a negative way?)
15. If you could give other couples one piece of advice about using TikTok in a relationship, what would it be?
16. The Love Language quiz that you took revealed that your primary love languages are X and Y. How do you think this might connect to your use of TikTok with your partner (that we discussed earlier)? In other words, is your use of TikTok in any way an expression of yours and your partner's love language?
17. Talk about your use of TikTok vs. other types of social media (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, etc.) - how do you use them similarly or differently with your partner?