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# Maintaining Relationship Alternatives Electronically: Positive Relationship Maintenance in Back Burner Relationships

Jayson L. Dibble, Narissra M. Punyanunt-Carter,  
& Michelle Drouin

*Back burners are desired prospective romantic/sexual partners that people communicate with to establish a future romantic or sexual relationship. We surveyed 658 college students about the extent to which they reported using various positive relationship maintenance strategies (positivity, openness, assurances) during communication with their most important back burner. Consistent with previous research, singles did not differ from those in committed romances in the number of back burners reported; however, singles and casual daters utilized the positive maintenance strategies to a greater extent than did those in committed relationships. Men reported using more assurances than did women, but the sexes did not differ on the other strategies utilized. Implications and limitations are discussed.*

*Keywords:* Back Burners; Casual Sexual Relationships; Communication Technology; Interpersonal Communication; Positive Relationship Maintenance Behaviors

If people are to develop long-term, stable, and satisfying romantic/sexual relationships, they must first identify potential relationship partners. Hence, people continually assess relationship prospects or alternatives, even when in committed

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relationships (Fletcher, 2002; Rusbult, 1980; Simpson, Fletcher, & Campbell, 2001). This might be especially true for couples in conflict, wherein committed partners disengage and seek relationship alternatives to get physical, emotional, or sexual attention (Emmers & Canary, 1996). One form of relationship alternative is the back burner. *Back burners* are romantic and/or sexual prospects to whom people are not presently committed and with whom people communicate for the possibility of initiating a sexual and/or romantic relationship (Dibble & Drouin, 2014; Dibble, Drouin, Aune, & Boller, 2015). Notably, communication is an essential component of a back burner relationship; however, it is unknown whether these relationships are established and preserved via the same maintenance efforts as traditional relationships, such as self-disclosure, demonstrating positivity, communicating affection, and sharing tasks (e.g., Dindia & Canary, 1993; Ledbetter et al., 2010; Stafford & Canary, 1991; Stewart, Dainton, & Goodboy, 2014). Our purpose was to explore whether young adults use positive relationship maintenance behaviors to preserve their back burner relationships.

### Positive Relationship Maintenance

Relational maintenance reflects symbolic behaviors used by partners to sustain the stability and quality of their relationship (Ayres, 1983). Using Stafford and Canary's (1991) typology, individuals may use *positivity*—enjoyable, warm, and compassionate interactions; *openness*—self-disclosure, sharing secrets, and revealing personal information; and *assurances*—expressions of balance and comfort in a relationship that communicate that the relationship will persevere through time. In general, maintenance behaviors covary positively with the intimacy partners feel toward each other (Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Guerrero & Chávez, 2005; Stafford & Canary, 1991) and negatively with relational uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Moreover, maintenance strategies vary according to relationship type (Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Guerrero & Chávez, 2005; Stafford & Canary, 1991). For example, people who were only casually dating reported that their partners used relatively low levels of openness and assurances (Stafford & Canary, 1991).

Although much research has been devoted to maintenance strategies in traditional relationships (e.g., Dindia & Canary, 1993; Ledbetter et al., 2010; Stafford & Canary, 1991; Stewart et al., 2014), little attention has focused on back burners, a common type of relationship alternative, especially among young adults (e.g., Borzea & Dillow, 2017; Dibble & Drouin, 2014; Dibble et al., 2015). Thus, our main research question was: Do people report using positive maintenance communication strategies with their back burners (RQ1)?

Recent research has shown that those in committed partnerships and singles both maintain back burners (Dibble & Drouin, 2014; Dibble et al., 2015); however, there are theoretical and practical reasons to expect these groups to use different relationship maintenance strategies with their back burners. Theoretically, commitment has been linked to perceptual devaluation of relationship alternatives (e.g., Gonzaga,

Haselton, Smurda, Davies, & Poore, 2008; Maner, Gailliot, & Miller, 2009; Miller, 1997). Thus, those in committed relationships may invest relational maintenance efforts into their committed partners and invest fewer efforts into their back burners than would singles. Practically, those in committed relationships may have less time to communicate with back burners or may fear the associated digital footprints (e.g., call or text message records). For both reasons, we expected (*H1*) *those in committed relationships to use fewer relationship maintenance strategies (positivity, openness, and assurances) with their back burners than would singles or those only casually dating someone.*

Additionally, previous research has shown that women use more positivity (Dainton & Stafford, 1993) and openness (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Murstein & Adler, 1995) than men (Canary & Stafford) to maintain traditional relationships. Women also enacted more positive relationship maintenance overall ((Canary & Stafford, 1992; (Dainton & Stafford, 1993); Gilbertson, Dindia, & Allen, 1998; Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000). Consequently, we predicted that (*H2*) *young adult women would use more positivity, openness, and assurances to maintain their back burners than would men.*

## Method

### *Participants*

From an original sample of 762 young adult undergraduates from a large South-western university, we removed 25 individuals who reported ages greater than 28 and 72 cases who did not report age. We also removed six cases who reported numbers of back burners that were eight standard deviations above the mean and in multiples of 100 (e.g., 200, 300, 500, 800) and one participant who reported 196 back burners. Our final sample was  $N = 658$  (72.5% female). Participants averaged 20.70 ( $SD = 1.75$ ) years of age and were primarily Caucasian (69.7%), followed by Hispanic (17.2%), Black (7.8%), and Asian (5.3%). Meanwhile, 273 (41.6%) reported that they were single, 104 (15.8%) were casually dating, 280 (42.6%) were in committed relationships, and 1 (0.2%) failed to answer.

### *Procedure*

Participants completed an internal review board approved Internet survey. The survey took approximately 45–60 minutes to complete. Students participated for extra credit.

### *Measures*

First, participants identified the electronic communication channel they used most from a list of popular options (e.g., Facebook, text messaging). Participants were then furnished with this definition:

*Back burners* are people we are romantically and/or sexually interested in, who we're not currently committed to, and with whom we keep in contact in the possibility that we might someday connect romantically and/or sexually. People can have back burners whether or not they're already in a committed romantic relationship with someone else. Back burners can also take different forms. For example, back burners could be former romantic/sexual partners or current sexual partners, provided we're not committed to them, we still desire them romantically and/or sexually, and that this desire is one of the reasons we keep in touch with them. Finally, we may end up getting together with some of our back burners, while we may never get together with others.

#### *Number of back burners*

Participants were asked to search through the contact list for the communication channel they used most (e.g., Facebook friends list) and were instructed: "Not counting any committed romantic/sexual partner you may have, how many of your other contacts do you keep in touch with because you are interested in perhaps getting involved with them romantically and/or sexually?" Participants keyed a number into the open-ended space provided [ $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 9.61$ ,  $Md = 2.00$ ,  $Mo = 0$ , range 0–100,  $n = 616$  ( $n = 42$  failed to answer)].

#### *Positive relational maintenance behaviors*

Participants were asked to focus on their most important back burner and were asked whether they used positive maintenance behaviors with that back burner. For each subscale, respondents indicated their agreement with the relationship maintenance behavior statement using a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

#### *Positivity*

Positivity was measured with 10 items—for example, "Attempt to make our interactions very enjoyable" ( $M = 5.14$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ,  $n = 416$ ). Cronbach's (1951) alpha was .87.

#### *Openness*

The openness subscale focuses on self-disclosure. This six-item subscale includes items such as "Encourage him/her to disclose thoughts and feelings to me" ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 1.44$ ,  $n = 424$ , alpha = .88).

#### *Assurances*

The four-item assurances subscale measures behaviors communicating that the relationship will persevere through time, such as "Imply that our relationship has a future" ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ,  $n = 437$ , alpha = .87).

## Results

Text messaging was the most-used electronic channel reported (56.1%), followed by Facebook (11.8%), Instagram (10.3%), Twitter (8.4%), Snapchat (7.6%), mobile telephone calls (3.8%), e-mail (0.6%), video conferencing (e.g., Skype, 0.6%), and other (0.3%). As a preliminary analysis, we measured number of back burners across relationship type. Most participants ( $n = 449$ , 72.9%) reported having at least one back burner, (for those reporting at least one back burner:  $M = 5.70$ ,  $SD = 10.86$ ,  $Md = 3.00$ ,  $Mo = 2.00$ ,  $range = 1-100$ ,  $n = 449$ ). Singles and those in relationships did not differ in the number of back burners they reported,  $F(2, 446) = 1.17$ ,  $p = .31$ ,  $\eta^2 < .01$  (single  $M = 6.49$ ,  $SD = 12.57$ ; casual dating  $M = 5.41$ ,  $SD = 5.71$ ; committed relationship  $M = 4.73$ ,  $SD = 10.53$ ). However, more singles (83.3%,  $n = 214$ ) and casual daters (92.8%,  $n = 90$ ) reported having *at least one* back burner than did those in committed relationships (55.6%,  $n = 145$ ). Of those in committed relationships, more had back burners ( $n = 145$ , 55.6%) than did not ( $n = 116$ , 44.4%);  $\chi^2(2, n = 615) = 73.32$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = .35$ .

With regard to RQ1, participants did report using positive maintenance strategies with their back burners (see Table 1). Overall, 90.6%, 68.0%, and 64.8% agreed that they used positivity, openness, and assurances respectively. We also hypothesized that those in committed relationships would report lower levels of each maintenance strategy than would singles or casual daters (H1). MANOVA, using relational status as the independent variable and the three maintenance strategies as dependent variables, revealed a statistically significant omnibus result, Wilks's Lambda = 0.85,  $F(6, 782) = 10.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .01$ . The general trend was for more singles and casual daters to use each strategy than those in committed relationships. For example, about 50% of those in committed relationships stated that they expressed openness in their communication with their back burner, but nearly 80% of singles and 73% of casual daters reported being open with their back burners. Follow-up one-way ANOVAs with relationship status (single, casually dating, committed relationship) as the group factor and each maintenance strategy as the dependent variable showed group differences for all three maintenance strategies. Post hoc comparisons revealed that those in committed relationships used significantly less positivity, less openness, and less assurances than either singles or casual daters; and singles and casual daters did not differ from each other.

Additionally, we hypothesized that women would use more positivity, openness, and assurances than would men to maintain their most important back burner (H2). Independent samples  $t$ -tests (two-tailed) revealed that the sexes did not differ in their use of positivity or openness. However, a wrong-direction effect emerged such that men reported using more assurances than did women (see Table 2).

## Discussion

According to Pew Research Center (2017), 90% of U.S. households have at least one connected device (e.g., smartphone, computer, or tablet), and 68% of U.S. adults use at

**Table 1** Means, Standard Deviations, and Percentage<sup>a</sup> of Participants Who Reported Using Relational Maintenance Behaviors by Relationship Status for Participants Reporting at Least One Back Burner

	Total		Single		Casual Date		Committed		<i>F</i>
	Maintenance Behavior	%	<i>M (SD)</i>	%	<i>M (SD)</i>	%	<i>M (SD)</i>	%	
Maintenance Behavior									
Positivity		90.6%	5.34 (0.81)	93.5%	5.18 (0.89)	92.2%	4.85 (1.17)	85.5%	$F(2, 393) = 10.74, p < .001, \eta^2 = .05$
Openness		68.0%	4.14 (1.34)	79.9%	4.16 (1.35)	73.3%	3.26 (1.48)	50.3%	$F(2, 393) = 17.35, p < .001, \eta^2 = .08$
Assurances		64.8%	4.00 (1.32)	78.0%	3.69 (1.40)	67.8%	2.78 (1.45)	43.4%	$F(2, 393) = 30.45, p < .001, \eta^2 = .13$

<sup>a</sup>Percentage of participants with at least one back burner who scored above scale midpoint (3) for that maintenance behavior. For means, actual *n* varied by test. Singles: *n* = 200–207, casual daters: *n* = 82–87, committed: *n* = 133–142. Post hoc comparisons used Dunnett’s T3 test, which does not assume equal variances. Positivity—single/casual *p* = .53 (Cohen’s *d* = 0.19), casual/committed *p* < .001 (*d* = 0.32), single/committed *p* < .001 (*d* = 0.49); openness—single/casual *p* = .99 (*d* = 0.01), casual/committed *p* < .001 (*d* = 0.64), single/committed *p* < .001 (*d* = 0.62); assurances—single/casual *p* = .35 (*d* = 0.23), casual/committed *p* < .001 (*d* = 0.64), single/committed *p* < .001 (*d* = 0.88). For %, Singles: *n* = 214, casual daters: *n* = 90, committed: *n* = 145.



**Table 2** Means and Standard Deviations for Relational Maintenance Strategy by Sex

Maintenance Behavior	Women	Men	<i>t</i> ( <i>df</i> )	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
Positivity	5.14 (0.96)	5.14 (0.99)	−0.05 (414)	.96	<.001
Openness	3.81 (1.45)	4.01 (1.39)	1.35 (422)	.18	.07
Assurances	3.45 (1.51)	3.81 (1.39)	2.30 (435)	.02	.06

*Note.* Standard deviations appear in parentheses next to each mean. Cases with missing data were excluded pairwise; actual *n* varied by test. Women: *n* = 287–308, men: *n* = 126–129.

least one social media platform (Pew Research Center, 2016). The pervasiveness and ease of use of these Internet-based media likely facilitates communication between relationship partners. Thus, it was not surprising that two-thirds of young adults—the most prolific users of social media and devices (Pew Research Center, 2016)—maintained communication with back burners through technological mediums. However, a novel finding was that 65%–90% used *positive relationship maintenance strategies* with their back burners. Notably, the level and type of positive relational maintenance strategy employed was dependent on relationship status: Singles and casual daters showed higher levels of positivity, openness, and assurance than did those in committed relationships. Maintenance strategy did not, however, vary by the gender of participants, except in the case of assurances.

Combined, these results suggest that some men and women, in relationships and not, invest themselves in communicating—through Internet-based positive maintenance strategies—with people with whom they can see a future romantic or sexual connection. Thus, relationship maintenance models appear to apply to both face-to-face and online communication (see also Stewart et al., 2014) and to a variety of nontraditional romantic relationships (Dainton & Stafford, 1993; Guerrero & Chávez, 2005; Stafford & Canary, 1991). Notably, those in committed relationships reported using significantly fewer of these maintenance strategies with their back burners. Whether it be because they are invested in a current relationship partner (devaluing relationship alternatives; Rusbult, 1980), have more uncertainty about the future of the back burner relationship (Guerrero & Chávez, 2005), or it is simply a practical constraint (e.g., time, resources, fear of exposure), those in committed relationships are not likely to be giving assurances, positivity, or openness to their back burners. In fact, as Dibble and Drouin (2014) suggested, those in committed relationships may not be communicating with their back burners very much at all. Nonetheless, across several studies (e.g., Dibble & Drouin, 2014; Dibble et al., 2015), those in committed partnerships asserted that they have back burners (as many as singles) and that they viewed them as potential romantic connections. Practically, this means that would-be targets of another's pursuits should not discount the likelihood of being a back burner simply because of a person's relationship status (e.g., "He's not interested in me because he's already with someone else.") or because of the sparsity of communication or lack of positivity, openness, or assurances from that person. Additionally, committed relationship partners should be aware that even though their partners may not

be investing much time in the maintenance of alternative relationships, they still may have alternative partners in mind in case the current relationship fails.

Our data also suggest that men and women might maintain their back burner relationships differently than they do their primary relationships. Previous research on committed relationships suggested that women use more positive relational maintenance than do men, particularly commitment and openness (Ogolsky & Bowers, 2013; Yela, 2000). However, our back burner data diverged from this literature in two ways. First, in contrast to Canary and Stafford (1992) and others, we found no differences between men and women in their use of positivity or openness with their most important back burner. Second, in contrast to previous positive relationship maintenance research, men reported using slightly *more* assurances than did women to maintain their most important back burner. The differences were not large, but they contradicted previous findings based on other types of romantic relationships (e.g., Murstein & Adler, 1995). These findings may be attributable to the electronic medium. Recent studies have shown that commonly expected associations between relationship variables (e.g., the negative link between quality of alternatives and commitment to current partner, Rusbult, 1980) do not replicate when the communication occurs electronically (e.g., Dibble & Drouin, 2014; Drouin, Miller, & Dibble, 2015). Perhaps this is because online communication has the features of anonymity and invisibility (Suler, 2004). Thus, the pressures women may feel to be more positive and open in face-to-face communication might be reduced in the digital realm. Alternatively, perhaps because back burners are only *potential* relationship partners, men and women are not giving their back burners their full relationship attention and thus do not yet diverge substantively in their maintenance of them. Such a finding would be consistent with the concept of back burner as theorized: a low-to-moderate degree of maintenance in general but not so much as to detract from the primary relationship.

## Limitations and Conclusion

Although we observed Stafford & Canary's (1991) framework, our measures were retrospective self-reports. Future researchers should collect messages exchanged between admirers and back burner(s) to examine whether naturalistic data support these reports. Also, our data did not differentiate among different *kinds* of back burners, (e.g., ex-dating partners, current hookup partners, no prior sexual contact). It is reasonable to expect different experiences, both qualitatively and quantitatively, based on the nature of any prior history or ongoing interactions the admirer has with her or his back burner(s). We are planning a follow-up study to examine this idea. Additionally, a convenience sample was used to collect these data, which limits their applicability to the broader population. However, the similarities between these findings and previous studies with regard to the prevalence of back burners increase our confidence in the generalizability of results. That said, each of these studies has been conducted with young adult samples; thus it is unknown whether these results

would generalize to samples of older adults in more committed relationship, especially with regard to behaviors like assurances.

If people continue to engage in romantic and sexual relationships, they will always need a supply of potential partners. Back burners can serve this purpose, they are common whether one is single or not, and people use contemporary means (e.g., electronic channels) to maintain them. As with traditional relationships, individuals may use positive maintenance strategies, like positivity, openness, and assurances, to preserve back burner relationships. However, these positive relationship strategies are not necessarily markers of back burner status, especially when admirers are already in other committed relationships.

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