Now Here or Nowhere : Conflict Resolution Strategies for Intimate Relationship in Diverse Geographical Contexts

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Figure 1. Four categories of various distance settings between couples

Abstract

This research explores the uses of communication channels that couples adopt in varied geographical distance settings. We also characterize their conflict patterns and strategies for resolving the conflicts. We found that the distances between couples have a strong influence on their communication patterns. The distance is associated with typical conflicts pattern that couples confronted as well as the relationship maintenance strategies. In this research, we classify distance settings into four categories. Then, we perform semi-structured interviews with 20 couples in various distance settings. The analysis allows us to develop design guidelines for mitigating conflicts associated with the four distance categories.

Author Keywords

Intimate communication; Long-Distance Relationship; couple-centered design; CMC;

ACM Classification Keywords

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

Introduction & Motivation

The ubiquity and low cost of mediated communication channels enables couples to facilitate and maintain their relationship effectively regardless of their geographical constraints between them [1]. For example, instant messenger (IM), video call, and social network are actively appropriated for use within intimate relationships.

Many researchers have focused on the communication methods and the need of people in long distance romantic relationship (LDRR) [3, 6]. Marianne et al. studied the communication channel uses in LDRR [6]. Carman et al. researched how people make use of video chat systems to maintain LDRR [1]. Also, several interactive systems like Cubble [5], and Feelynean [4]
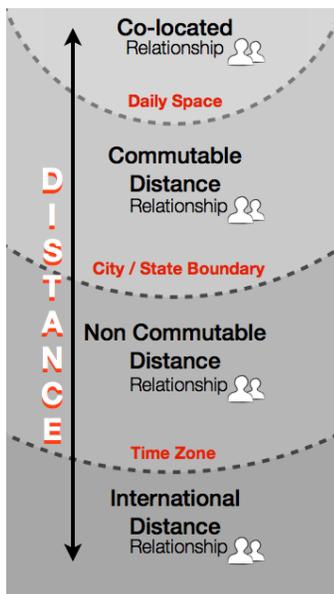
have been designed to mimic physical touch behaviors and support the delivery of emotions for non co-located couples. The technologies for couples are largely designed for a narrow subset of couple configurations and interactions [1] especially for non co-located relationship settings.

In this paper, we aim to widen up our attention to various distance settings of couples to develop design guidelines to satisfy their specific needs. To address this challenge, we first 1) classify geographical contexts into four categories and conduct semi-structured interviews with 20 participants. We 2) examine their uses of mediated communication channels and their conflicts patterns that are induced by distance issues. Also, we 3) characterize their relationship maintenance strategies through Canary and Stafford's typology of 'maintenance strategies used in romantic dyads' [2] **(Table 3)**. This typology proposed ten major relational maintenance strategies. Through the analysis, we 4) develop several design guidelines which could mitigate their conflicts and improve their relationships.

Studying Couples
We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 participants from 16 couples (Avg. age: 24.1 / M: 8, F: 12 / Co-located: 3, Commutable: 6, Non-commutable: 5, International: 6). To measure the influence of each distance setting in intimate relationships, we classify them into four categories **(Figure 1)** to the exclusion of the couples who live together, considering the physical distances between them, shared daily space and time zone as follows;

▪ **Co-located Relationship (*Co-located*)**: the couples who share most of their daily life within the same location. In this case, they mostly attend the same school or same workspace.

▪ **Commutable Distance Relationship (*Commutable*)**: the couples who lives in the same metropolitan area, but does not share the daily space.

▪ **Non-commutable Distance Relationship (*Non-Commutable*)**: the couples who lives in different city or state, but shares the same time zone. The main difference between *Commutable* and *Non-Commutable* relationship is that the availability of face-to-face date before or after their daily works especially on weekdays.

▪ **International Relationship (*International*)**: the couples who lives in the other countries. They often could not share the same time zone.

Our interviews were carried in three parts **(Table 1)**. Firstly, we asked the basic information including demographic and relationship information. Secondly, we inquired how they utilize each communication channel. Lastly, we focused on their conflict patterns and conflict-resolving strategies that they employ.

Early Findings & Design Guidelines
Through interviews, we could find that the distances between couples have a strong influence on their uses of mediated channels and conflict patterns. In addition, we examine and interpreted the relationship maintenance strategies using Canary et al.'s typology [2] **(Table 3)** and suggest design guidelines.
The uses of mediated communication channels
The distance settings showed strong influences on the use of mediated communication channels. The frequency in use of mediated communication channels varied depending on each distance setting **(*Frequency in Table 2*)**. *Co-located* couples reported that they do not need to use extra channels often because they already spend most of their daily life together with their *partner. In contrast, International couples are unable to*

Interview Guideline
Basic Questions
- General demographics - Relationship information (Relationship duration, distances between them, etc)
The use of Mediated Communication Channel
- The frequency in use of mediated communication channels - The communication channels that they use - How they utilize each communication channel
Conflicts & Solution
- the frequently confronted conflicts - the conflicts-solving strategies

Table 1. Interview Guideline

Table 2. The use of mediated communication channels

Distance	Category	Frequency	Communication Channel	Synchronous	Media Richness
Close	**Co-located**	Less Frequently	IM, SNS	Very High	Very Low
↕	**Commutable**	Frequently	IM, SNS, Phone call	Restrictively High	Relatively Low
Long	**Non-commutable**	Frequently	IM, Phone call, SNS, Video call	Restrictively High	Relatively Rich
	International	Less Frequently	IM, E-mail, Snail mail, SNS, Video Call	Very Low	Very Rich

utilize mediated communication channels as much as other couples do. The difference of time-zone and daily space brings the lack of available time slots for communicating simultaneously through synchronous channels. *Commutable* and *Non-commutable* couples were found to utilize mediated communication channels more actively than other groups.

The variety of communication channels was getting bigger as the distances between couples are longer and vice versa (*Communication Channel* **in Table 2)**. *International* couple adopts the largest variety of channels by including asynchronous channels like e-mail, snail mail and parcel. Also, the longer the distances between couples, the richer communication channels with multimodality were preferred (*Media Richness* **in Table 2)**. The use of video call started to appear from the *Non-commutable* groups. *International* group reported that they tried to communicate each other through video call since it enables them to share non verbal communication, which creates a sense of presence [4].

The conflicts patterns and the relationship maintenance strategies

The distance settings also showed strong influences on the conflict patterns and the couples' relationship maintenance strategies. As mentioned above, we employed Canary & Stafford's typology of 'maintenance strategies used in romantic dyads' **(Table 3)** to interpret and characterize their relationship

maintenance strategies. The analysis of the interviews allowed us to develop design guidelines for mitigating conflicts associated with the four distance categories. ***Co-located*** couples reported that they had conflicts mostly because of tedious dating routines. Since they already share most of their daily and social life, their dates usually end up routines and there is no exact distinction between the date and the casual encounter. Also, as their relationships are exposed to peers in the same school or workspace, they sometimes become very self-conscious. To resolve those problems, they often try to do something unusual like traveling or special dining-out (*6. Joint Activities; Anti-Ritual*) and to get social supports from their friends or co-workers (*5. Social Networks*). For *Co-located* couples, a recommendation system for non-daily activities would be desired.

Commutable couples tend to have conflicts because of the feelings of obligations. These couples have their own daily lives separately, so they usually date in their free time. We observed that there is an 'implicit obligation'. A few participants said, "*Every free time is implicitly appointed to dates.*" The opportunities for making new friends and participating new activities were often constrained because of these 'implicit obligations'. For addressing this issue, they attempted to allow each other's independences and give themselves some free time (*8. Avoidance; Negotiated Autonomy*). Also, they tried to seek a new activity or

Canary & Stafford's   ***Relational Maintenance***   ***Strategies Framework***
1. Positivity
Nice and Cheerful / Favors/ Prosocial Behaviors/ Show Affection
2. Openess
Self-disclosure/ Meta-Relational Communication/ Advice/ Conflict engagement and etc
3. Assurance
Supportiveness/ Comfort/ Need Satisfaction/ Overt Expression
4. Social Networks
5. Sharing Tasks
6. Joint Activities
Share time together/ Rituals/ Anti-Rituals/ Talk Time and etc
7. Cards, Letters and Calls
Card and Letters/ Phone Calls/ Combination
8. Avoidance
Topic Avoidance/ Alternate Association/ Negotiated Autonomy
9. Anti-Social
Indirect/ Direct
10. Humor
Postive/ Negative
11. Miscellaneous

Table 3. Canary & Stafford's typology of 'maintenance strategies used in romantic dyads [2]

hobby which they can spend time together (*6. Joint Activities; Share time together*). For *them*, systems for helping them to coordinate when to meet and what to do would be needed. These capabilities could allow each of them to maintain their independency while setting up more satisfying date plans.

Non-Commutable couples often have hard times because they think they cannot control and involve in each other's life as much as they wish. Thus, they tend to feel insecure and worry about partner's affair and weakened emotional ties, which results in damaging mutual trust. To resolve the conflicts, they often tried to set up their own ritual; informing everyday life to their partner including their schedules and locations timely (*6.Joint Activities; Ritual*). For them, a system that ensures the sense of control on each other could be proposed for supporting to enhance the mutual trust.

International couples showed similar conflicts patterns to the *Non-commutable* settings such as lack of control and diminishing mutual trust. Moreover, they have little chance to meet F2F to resolve conflicts, so indirect strategies were inevitably used. They often kept trying to stay positive and future-oriented in their conversations (*1.Positivity*) and assuring themselves of the importance of their relationships (3.Assurance). In addition, they kept reminding themselves with the records of past activities and special moments through photos, chat logs and letters. For them, mutually shared space for reminding themselves with past memories would be helpful to make convince themselves with their relationships. Also, a coordinating system for planning the available time slot for video call or phone call could be proposed.

Discussion & Conclusion
In designing a system for intimate relationship, we should consider their geographical contexts.

Furthermore, we need to understand their contradicting needs. For example, 1) *Autonomy vs. Control*: while *Commutable* couples want to be independent, *Non-Commutable* couples want to have the sense of control on each other. 2) *Ritual vs. Out of Routine*: *Non-Commutable* couples would like to set up their own ritual, but *Co-located* couples aspire to break from their routines. Lastly 3) *the present vs. the past*: *Co-located* and *Commutable* couples seek to have special joint activities for enjoying the present. Conversely, *International* couples cannot help but reflecting and being dependant on the past memories repetitively. This study attempts to examine the influence of diverse geographical contexts in intimate relationships. We could find that the distances between couples have a strong influence on their communication patterns. Also, by understanding their conflicts and resolution strategies, we could develop design guidelines for mitigating their conflicts. Future work is required to validate our findings and design guidelines.

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