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Never Ever Getting Back Together?: Post-Relational Dissolution Communication

Emily C. Wagner

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the communication of ex-relational partners, known as post-relational dissolution communication, in college-aged dating experiences. Interviews were conducted with participants who had recently experienced break-ups and post-relational dissolution communication. Employing facework (see Brown & Levinson, 1987; Cupach & Metts, 1994; Goffman, 1959) as a lens, the research reflects the face-threatening situations of ex-relational partners. Through a qualitative analysis, the face-

work strategies of avoidance, politeness, apologies, negative identity management, de-escalation, and disclosure are identified in the study. Ex-relational partners apply these forms of facework in communication with one another and others following the termination of their romantic relationship. A possible supplement to the existing Knapp and Vangelisti (2000) relational stages model is also introduced, with the goal of outlining post-relational stages of communication.

FACE MANAGEMENT IN POST-RELATIONAL DISSOLUTION COMMUNICATION

Throughout a college career, undergraduate and graduate students will experience and develop a wide variety of interpersonal relationships, ranging from platonic, professional, academic, online, and romantic relationships (O'Hair & Weinman, 2009). Existing research shows that these relationships provide individuals with companionship, communication, and the opportunity to achieve goals that are either personally and/or mutually beneficial. While each interpersonal relationship is distinctive, the relational stage model created by Knapp and Vangelisti (2000) outlines the basic, common pattern that most romantic relationships follow. This "dual staircase" model, as it is also known, organizes how relationships escalate, stabilize, and descend over time through communication processes. Initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding are "coming together" communication processes that typically occur during the escalating side of a relationship. A relationship can remain stable, but if and when it declines, it is expected to follow the steps of differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and termination (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2000). Johnson et al. (2004) asserts that much of the research about relationships focuses more on the

development, escalating side of the model, leaving a great deal to still be learned about the declining and disengaging of specific relationships. The final step of the relational stage model is "termination" or the ending of the relationship. In the case of a romantic or intimate relationship, this termination is often known as a "break-up." Relationships terminate for a variety of reasons, including, "competing relationships, sexual behavior, betraying confidence, unexplained loss of contact or closeness, change in personality/value, and deception" (Jang, Smith, & Levine, 2010, p. 236). This relational stage appears to overlook any post-relationship steps or details of these particular communicative processes; therefore there is limited existing research on post-relational dissolution communication.

Accompanying the lack of research on this post-relational dissolution communication, the finding of concrete statistics regarding dating and break-up frequency is also challenging. Currently, between 40 and 50% of new marriages are ending in divorce (American Psychology Association, 2013). Research concerning married couples and the communication of marriages/divorces is dominant in the field (Amato, 2000; Hopp-Nagao & Ting-Toomey,

2002). Emmers and Canary (1996) argue that communication in romantic, interpersonal relationships is under-researched. Included in this study, research showed that “42% of romantic relationships disengage within a year...and 50% of dating relationships disengage within two years” (p. 167). An average college student will spend at least four years completing his/her degree, meaning there is ample time for them to engage in one or more romantic relationships and possible resulting break-ups. And with ever-changing social and dating norms, not all of these relationships are titled or labeled in the same way. While some partners subscribe to the traditional *boyfriend* and *girlfriend* roles, terms such as *dating*, *re-*

lationship, *long distance relationship*, *open relationship*, *friends with benefits*, *online relationship*, and *intimate relationship* can be used to describe the close communicative relationships that are the focus of this study (Pearson, Hest, & Burnett, 2005). Gleaning from this variety of interpretations and relationship discourses as well as complimenting studies (Finn & Powers, 2002; Hubbard, 2010; Jang, Smith, & Levine, 2010; Pearson, Hest, & Burnett, 2005), the concept of a relationship for the purpose of this study will be broad; defining it as a consistent, communicative, and intimate conjunction between two partners who consider themselves involved with one another.

VARIATIONS IN COMMUNICATION

This study seeks to understand the communication that ex-partners engage in following the termination of their break-up. As the perspectives of both men and women will be studied, the distinctions between communication styles in interpersonal relationships is expected to be a factor that will need to be taken into consideration, especially when concerning heterosexual relationships. Canary, Emmers-Sommer, and Faulkner's (1997) book, *Sex and Gender Differences in Personal Relationships* identified the commonalities in communication that both men and women share, moving beyond the traditional gender stereotypes in communication. They argued,

The research on men, women, and emotion suggests that, although sex similarities far outweigh differences in the experience of emotions, women appear to have a wider latitude of emotion than do men. (p. 46)

This is shown in statements that women tend to form bonds through verbal communication and sharing information while men opt to build relationships through shared activities (Aries, 1996). According to Aries,

Communication for women is a way to establish and maintain relationships. Women work to sustain conversation, are responsive and supportive, and value equality. Their talk is personal. Talk for men is oriented toward solving problems

and maintaining dominance and assertiveness. Men are less responsive; their talk is more abstract and less personal. (1996, p. 4)

This statement calls to question how ex-partners view their post-termination relationship and if they consider the communication to be more personal or about solving problems. The answer may relate to the gender of the perspective, and thus, it is important to consider the typical differences that men and women have in communicating in order to predict and compare their post-relational communication styles. In addition to understanding gender differences in communication, the means of communication will be taken into account, especially in regards to technology in an ever-advancing world.

Partners involved in any form of relationship, including those that are the focus of this study, are communicating with each other and others in a variety of ways beyond traditional face-to-face (FTF) communication. Online social networking sites (SNSs) have become significant platforms for communicators to discover, manage, and maintain potential relational partners (Cronin, 2007; Fox, Warber, & Makstaller, 2013; Wright, 2004). These sites provide users the options of creating an online identity, sharing photos and documents, and connecting with friends, family, dating partners, and new acquaintances (Sponcil & Gitumi, 2013). For long-distance relationships, online relational maintenance is often the most readily available form of communication since partners do

not have to be available at the same times or in the same place but can still share text, photos, and other media with one another (Wright, 2004). These same benefits may make online and SNSs communication ideal for a wider variety of college student relationships, as the tools offer them more flexibility that can accommodate conflicting schedules. Because of this,

college students form a large proportion of users on social media networks...72% of all college students have a social media profile with 45% of college students using a social media site at least once a day. (Sponcil & Gitumi, 2013, p. 2)

With such frequency of use, it is expected that the communicators use SNSs to achieve communication goals, including relational and/or post-relational goals.

Fox et al. (2013) credited Facebook as the most well-known and used SNS. As of June 2013, Facebook had 1.15 billion users, of that 669 million are daily active users (Facebook, 2013). Due to the accessibility, global presence, and popularity among college students, Facebook, “may shape how a couple communicates with each other as well as how the couple communicates the relationship to their social network” (Fox et al., 2013, p. 774). Facebook users can choose to display their relationship status on their public profile, identifying if they are single, married, engaged, divorced, or in a relationship. Fox et al. (2013) explained that this public declaration of being “In a Relationship” is commonly referred

to Facebook users as “going Facebook official” or “FBO.” In the case of a termination of a relationship, ex-partners can choose to publicly or privately remove this label. The process of publicly terminating a relationship on SNSs could potentially challenge and cause turbulence in the post-relational dissolution communication of ex-partners.

Other popular SNSs include Twitter, LinkedIn, MySpace, Google+, and Instagram (Statistic Brain, 2013). Similar to Facebook, these sites give users the opportunity to construct an online-identity and engage in communication, including post-relational dissolution communication, with other users (Sponcil & Gitumi, 2013). The concept of “social grooming” is an SNS-specific communication strategy, identified by Sponcil and Gitumi as, “expressive activities of social interaction, communication, gossip, and entertainment. Users have expressed enjoyment from keeping track of their friends’ lives and activities, but non-users were less interested in these activities” (p. 5). Specifically for college-age students who are active users of SNSs, the amount of attention received for their own posts, comments, photos, and activities as well as the strength of romantic relationships through use of SNSs communication relates to and impacts their self-concept (Cronin, 2007; Fox et al., 2013; Sponcil & Gitumi, 2013; Wright, 2004). This interest in projecting a positive self-image relates to Goffman’s (1959) theatrical analogy used to understand social interactions. Although, in this modern day situation, the stage is instead a virtual “wall” or “feed” where users can select what parts of themselves to share.

FACEWORK THEORY

Goffman’s (1959) writings and theories from *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* were adapted to understand the care and communicative actions people take to preserve their own image and the images of others, known as *face management* (Cupach & Metts, 1994). The use of SNSs in order to construct and improve one’s self-concept is an example of face management (Cahn & Abigail, 2014). Face management occurs in interpersonal interactions that are FTF as well as online. It is expected that ex-relational partners engage in face maintenance strategies in

FTF communication and through social grooming in SNSs usage.

It is expected that ex-partners will seek the use of SNSs to promote a positive self-image. It is also anticipated that the communication of post-relational partners could post self-image-harming threats in FTF situations. Therefore, facework theory (Cupach & Metts, 1994) will be applied as a framework for this study.

The foundational ideas of face and its importance in communication began in the 1950s and 1960s with

the work of Erving Goffman. Brown and Levinson (1987) expanded these concepts, and later Cupach and Metts (1994) developed Goffman's concepts into the *facework theory*, which aims to identify and explain the communication techniques used to address perceived face threats to the self and/or others. The term "face" refers to "the conception of self that each person displays in particular interactions with others" (p. 3). Cupach and Metts differentiated between *positive face*, which is the want to be respected and liked, and *negative face*, which is the want to remain uncontrolled and free of burden. Face threats are impositions to either the positive or negative face and can be presented by partners in communication as well as the communicator to his or her own face. Cupach and Metts argued, "facework is communication designed to counteract face threats to self and others" (p. 6). Facework is an interactive, communicative process and, therefore, "the management of face is particularly relevant to the formation and erosion of interpersonal relationships" (p. 15). This study will be focusing on the ending and aftermath of relationships, and it is probable that ex-relational partners are met with face threats during these processes as they negatively impact one's self-image.

It is also likely that situations in which ex-partners communicate or interact with one another in public could be embarrassing for one or both partners. These embarrassing interactions can include accidents, mistakes, tactlessness, and awkwardness and are "a type of problematic social situation in which facework is critical" (p. 18). Facework that is performed in anticipation of or to avoid a potential face threat is *preventative facework*. This is usually executed by communicating a *disclaimer*, or a statement that recognizes the possibility of embarrassment for one's self. Cupach and Metts (1994) identified five specific forms of disclaimers: *hedging*, *credentialing*, *sin license*, *cognitive disclaimer*, and *appeal for suspended judgment*. Politeness strategies are performed in order to protect the face(s) of other(s). Conversely,

corrective facework addresses and attempts to repair face threats that have already occurred. These corrections can be either defensive for the self or protective for the other(s) and include *humor*, *apologies*, *avoidance*, *nonverbal displays of anxiety*, *account*, and *physical remedy*, as well as *empathy* and *support*, which are exclusively to protect the face of others.

Facework theory has been applied as a lens for numerous other studies that examine complicated and possibly controversial communication interactions (e.g., Harrigan, Palka, Priore, & Wagner, 2013; Sabee & Wilson, 2002; Valde & Finch, 2004). Sabee and Wilson showed that face threats can often be perceived in different ways, sometimes threatening the positive or negative of both partners involved. Furthermore, facework strategies used with the intent to alleviate embarrassment can sometimes unintentionally threaten the face of the other partner (Sabee & Wilson, 2002; Valde & Finch, 2004). It is therefore important for us to identify and understand the face threats presented in post-relational dissolution communication. The first research question (RQ1) asks:

How do ex-partners address face threats in their post-relational communication?

It is expected that ex-partners will feel required to use facework strategies when communicating with one another and potentially with others about their break-up. For ex-partners who attend the same college, work at a common employer, or participate in a mutual activity, the opportunity to see one another in public could also result in face threats.

In considering the current importance of SNSs, a second research question concerns the practice of positive facework, specifically through online social networking:

RQ2: How, if at all, do ex-partners use social media and/or social networking to strategically construct and communicate a positive face to their ex-partners and others?

METHOD

DATA COLLECTION

Previous interpersonal communication studies of relationships that also used facework as a framework have employed the use of interviews to collect data (e.g., Harrigan, Palka, Priore, & Wagner, 2013; Sabee & Wilson, 2002; Valde & Finch, 2004). Participants for this study's interviews were self-selected volunteers who were required to meet the following criteria in order to participate in the study: (a) be between the ages of 18 and 24 years old, and (b) had been in a relationship that lasted at least three months and that was terminated more than one but less than twelve months ago. A total of five participants were interviewed for this study, although the data set was a portion of a larger whole of a course in interpersonal communication theories (a total of 24 interviews were conducted by the class). Participants lived in the Northeastern United States and were primarily recruited in a mid-sized liberal arts college. Prior to being interviewed, participants completed a brief demographic survey.

The interview with the participants took place in public settings during October 2013. Interviews were semi-structured and on average lasted 60 min-

utes. The interview questions were open-ended and asked participants to discuss their former relationship, why it ended, and the current "relationship" (or lack thereof) that they had with their ex-partner. More specific questions were asked about the communication frequency, style, and medium used to communicate with ex-partners. In addition to the interview protocol, follow-up questions were asked of participants when appropriate, in order to have complete understanding of their experiences. The interview was transcribed by the researcher and then shared with the rest of the class.

DATA ANALYSIS

A specific set of five interviews were personally read and analyzed for this study. After performing a careful reading of the five transcripts, prominent face-related examples were highlighted and used to create the categories: positive face threats, negative face threats, facework, and SNSs-related. The transcripts were then re-read and analyzed for a second time. All examples of face threats and resulting facework had to be found common among all five transcripts in order to be considered for the results. These exemplars were used to create and support each finding.

RESULTS

The present study utilized qualitative data collection methods in order to examine and understand the facework involved in post-relational dissolution communication. Prior to data collection, two research questions were asked: (a) How do ex-partners address face threats in their post-relational communication? And (b) How, if at all, do ex-partners use social media and/or social networking to strategically construct and communicate a positive face to their ex-partners and others? These questions assume that ex-partners are met with face threats as a result of ending their relationships. In the data collected, the termination of a relationship was initiated by one partner, and then agreed and/or accepted by the other partner. As Cupach and Metts (1994) explain, "Although it may seem that only the person who is being left behind suffers face threat, in reality, the person who initiates the disengagement also feels face threat" (p. 81). As

a result of this, both partners were expected to seek to prevent and/or repair their face loss, and after performing the data collection, this desire was expressed by participants.

Data was collected from a series of face-to-face interviews with five participants. Two of the participants were broken up with and the other three participants initiated their breakups. All five participants had ended a relationship within the past year, and most importantly, all had engaged in post-relational communication to some extent. Further supporting Cupach and Metts' (1994) concept, whether the participants were the initiator or receiver of a break up, all were met with face threats. Prominent in the data set were the juxtaposed positive and negative face threats for a set of ex-partners as one often inflicts an adverse face threat on the other. These face threats

were brought upon in a variety of circumstances. The most common facework strategies used in preparation or response to these face threats are identified as *avoidance*, *politeness*, *apologies*, *negative identity management*, *de-escalation*, and *disclosure*. The following provide detail of the face threats and resulting facework found in the data set.

FACE THREATS

All participants spoke to various face threats throughout the termination of their relationships and the following communication. The positive face of participants and their ex-partners was commonly threatened when the break-up itself occurred. Typically, the partner who was “broken up with” or “dumped” was left relatively surprised and hurt, especially in a situation such as:

I got a phone call saying he didn't know if like he still wanted to be in a relationship. So, then I was like, “alright we'll sleep on it,” like obviously I was upset or whatever and then he calls me the next day and tells me no he wants to break up and three days later I see that he's in a relationship on Facebook with somebody else and he calls me and tells me that he cheated on me and wants to start dating this person. (5: 19-23)

In this case, both relational partners could have been met with positive face threats. Clearly, the interviewee was surprised, hurt, and felt inferior by being cheated on and broken up with, threatening her positive face. However, it can be interpreted that the partner in the situation could also feel positive face threats as he could feel guilt and the negative label of being a “cheater.” While not all relationships discussed ended in this same way, all participants attested that either they and/or their partner were surprised, hurt, or confused when their break-up happened.

A common negative face threat was seeing an ex-relational partner in a public setting, particularly a social setting; participants spoke of parties, clubs, and bars being a common location for these sorts of situations. As this participant explained, “now, he works at [bar] and I feel like I can't do what I want to do when I'm there, I just don't want him around and looking at

me” (1: 639-641). Seeing an ex in a social and intentionally fun location where alcohol was involved was described as an unwanted imposition. Another participant voiced that “the [bar], like, it's kind of small. It's kind of hard to avoid people” (3: 649-650). Participants frequently were unable to avoid “running into” ex-partners in these or other public settings, resulting in embarrassment and loss of face. Positive face was threatened as participants expressed feeling disliked by their ex-partner, or feelings of jealousy seeing them with someone else. Participants also described negative face threats because seeing their partners in public could be embarrassing and made them feel as if they should behave differently or even leave. In such situations, it was not uncommon for both partners involved to have positive or negative face threats. Often, these face threats would actually interact and could lead to conflict. Participants shared incidents of friction, including: “she was drunk and she, just like, told me to ‘F’ off” (3: 604); “if he was drunk he would be mean to me and yell at me so it was just, like, not good” (4: 210-211).

Participants shared numerous occurrences when the positive and negative face threats experienced by partners were interlinked with one another. This overlapping of face threats is common across a variety of relationship types, and was found in all five interviews. A universal dilemma experienced by participants was one ex-partner becoming engaged with a new partner as seen by their ex-partner. This situation caused a threat to the positive face of the ex-partner who sees their ex-partner with someone new as they feel inferior and alone; the ex-partner involved with a new partner can have their negative face threatened as they typically felt guilt that their ex-partner was upset or jealous by their actions. As this participant explained:

I went home with a different girl—Like obviously, like we, we weren't together so like—I went home with a different girl and...the girl gave me a bunch of hickeys, (sigh) which I wasn't too happy about. And, uh, my ex happened to see them on my neck the next night at the bar. So that wasn't too good. She wasn't too happy about that. (3: 602-606)

In this participant's case, his ex had a visual representation of what happened. Other participants voiced that an ex-partner confronted them after the ex heard that they were becoming involved with a new partner. A participant described this experience as:

And then he like approached me at the bar one night out of nowhere...he asked me a question about the fact of how his [friend] had given me his phone number earlier that night, and I hadn't talked to him in a while and he was like, "I hear you're talking to my [friend]." (1: 314-318)

This participant's experience similarly and inversely threatened the positive face of her ex-partner, and the actions and public confrontation and accusation by the ex-partner affected the participant's negative face.

Informing an ex-partner of a new partner could also threaten the faces of both ex-partners if one partner voiced remaining or lingering feelings as a result:

I told him that I met someone else and um that's kinda messed up, because he thought that we...I don't really know what he was thinking...when I told him that I met someone else; he suddenly said that he wanted me back. He was very, he was like hurt, cause he thought that we could, like, be together again. (2: 269-276)

This participant describes a similar situation from the opposing perspective:

He called me when he posted that him and that girl were in a relationship...and, like, I was crying for him to come back to me. So, I begged for him to come back to me, but then he said no and then like that was the last. (5: 125-128)

Ex-partners commonly perceive face threats in post-relational dissolution communication. It is more common that positive and negative face threats are simultaneously involved, often one or both of each ex-partner. All participants and their ex-partners felt these situations of face threats and loss throughout their break-ups and following communication.

Participants also described face threats posed by others outside of the relationship. The involvement of family and friends of the participant and their ex-partner typically contributed to both positive and negative face loss.

FACEWORK STRATEGIES

Participants described a myriad of strategies used in order to address the face threats they experienced. These strategies applied across categories provided by Cupach and Metts (1994) were found as either preventative or corrective. Facework was used most often in communication with the ex-partners, but was also utilized in circumstances with those outside the relationship, frequently friends and family of the ex-partners.

All participants used avoidance as both a preventative and corrective strategy. They described that they worked to avoid seeing their ex-partners in public and also avoided communicating with them to an extent. Participants also voiced that if and when they did see an ex-partner, they would often attempt to avoid speaking with them, especially in public settings. While all participants avoided seeing their ex-partners and some communication with them, the amount of avoidance somewhat varied. One participant explained that she and her ex-partner attempted to remain friends, but ultimately chose to not communicate regularly: "He told me that I'm not allowed to talk to him unless it's really important" (4: 106-107). This participant goes on to explain that she avoided the ex-partner even if they were in the same location, "he doesn't talk to me at parties and I don't really see him on campus ever" (4: 203-204). In this case, the avoidance was a formal rule set by the ex-partners.

Avoidance was also used to correct face threats, particularly when ex-partners would see each other in a public location and wish not to communicate. Participants selected avoidance as a corrective facework technique as it would allow them to continue their routine or activities without facing additional threats. The participant recounts:

I was at [restaurant] with the current guy I'm currently talking to and of course we were seated right next to him, just be-

cause it was the only one open, and just because this is my life, and it was just uncomfortable because I had to tell the guy I'm currently seeing, "can you, like, let me sit here so my back is facing this way?" And that's just unfortunate. So, I'd rather just not talk than have to deal with whatever. (1: 500-505)

For another participant, her ex-partner requested that she avoid communicating with him too often or during certain times in order to not make a new partner insecure or worried about their communication:

I was like yeah we can still be friends, but he was saying how I like can't text every-day but I can text a couple times a week or if I needed to call to call during the day not at night cause that would be suspicious. (5: 195-197)

The above also serves as an example of politeness as a form of preventative facework performed to protect another person's face, specifically known as negative politeness. This facework technique attempts to preserve the negative face of another by trying not to burden them. Positive politeness was also commonly practiced in showing courtesy or being "kind" and "civil" with ex-partners and/or friends of ex the partners in public settings: "just to be polite and to talk with mutual, casual friends...very general and like courteous" (1: 666-676). Practicing avoidance and politeness in this way can protect the positive and negative face of the communicator by preventing an embarrassing occurrence and limiting the potential to feel burdened or troubled. A participant spoke of a specific situation when her ex used avoidance to evade seeing her:

I ended up finding his ID in the pocket of my shorts, so we kind of had to figure out how I could give him back that. And, he was kind of being a coward about it, and he made his housemate come get it from me, which I didn't understand because to me it just made it seem like he had some unfinished, like situation, like there was something that he just wasn't set in or comfortable with. (1: 90-94)

For the ex-partner, he chose avoidance in order to protect his negative face and feel free of the imposition of seeing an ex-partner. But this also impacted her view of his positive face as his avoidance was interpreted as cowardice. Even with the use of facework by a communicator, an additional face threat is brought about, further complicating the post-relational communication.

As explained by participants, many of the break-ups experienced needed further communication and closure. The use of *apologies* as a form of facework was common in order to correct face loss by admitting blame. Some apologies were offered for single instances that hurt the feelings and thus threatened the face of one partner. For instance, a participant spoke of being seen with another girl by an ex-partner, "I mean, there really wasn't much to be said—I mean, I—I kind of apologized for having, for like letting her see that" (3: 647-648). Other apologies pertained to regretful behaviors or decisions that led to the break-up. A participant explained:

He had a fight with my mom the last weekend I was home. Well, he texted her like a week ago that he was sorry about what happened and that he felt that he crossed the line. And that he hoped that my mom was doing fine and if there is something wrong that we could always come over. So, that's the only thing he did. (2: 696-701)

Commonly among the partners who had been broken up with, cheated on, or otherwise hurt or wronged in the break-up was the desire for an official apology. This was often a specific goal in post-relational communication. For this participant, the goal-related communication used in order to receive an apology possibly prevented important ideas being shared by the ex-partner:

I realize now that when we went to talk I wasn't really concerned with how he wanted to communicate things. I was more concerned with the fact that I felt that I wanted an apology and an explanation. And in hindsight, I wish I had just taken into consideration what was going

through his head. But I was too upset to consider that. (1: 543-547)

The participant here still achieved her goal, but possibly at the cost of building the relationship. Lasting results of apologies varied, but all five participants gave value to and recognized the use of apologies in their post-relational dissolution communication.

While apologies served as a corrective form of facework by admitting and accepting blame, negative identity management was used to excuse behaviors that were expected to be acceptable to both partners such as dating or “hooking up” with new partners. Negative identity management is a category of relationship disengagement strategies proposed by Michael Cody (1982), as told by Cupach and Metts (1994). Commonly, participants explained that one or both partners would assume that “moving on” or “seeing other people” had indeterminate and varying amounts of time after the termination of the relationship. A participant voiced this desire to distance herself from the ex-partner:

I don't want to [talk] anymore. And not only because of my new boyfriend, but also, well after a few days without even meeting my new boyfriend, I was like, I don't want to talk to my ex a lot anymore. I need to let him get over me. So, no, I don't want to communicate that much anymore. (2: 449-452)

As shown here, negative identity management is a form of justification, which seeks to give reasoning for a face threat that has occurred.

The communication of ex-relational partners changed over the span of time. For the five participants, at one point or another, their relationships all experienced de-escalation. This term also derives from Cody's (1982) categories, and refers to ending or “breaking off” communication with an ex-partner. De-escalation is not always a permanent, lasting strategy, but all participants voiced the use of this facework technique during the course of their post-relational communication. One participant experienced de-escalation directly following his break-up, “well, when we immediately broke up, we had zero communication for 7, 8 weeks, however long it was until the email” (3: 407-408). For another participant, she and her ex-

partner initially communicated a few times a week, but later established, “informal rules that that we're not going to communicate. That we're just going to ignore each other's existence, and that's just how it is” (1: 516-517). In all cases, de-escalation was a mutually known facework strategy, whether implicitly or explicitly stated by the partners. At the time of the interview, three of the five participants were currently practicing de-escalation with their ex-partner.

COMMUNICATION WITH OTHERS

While most facework strategies were primarily applied to occurrences between post-relational partners, strategies were also used in communication with outside persons, namely friends and family. The practice of disclosure was most common with these connections in communicating details of the break-up and post-relational dissolution communication. Disclosure has been introduced and applied as a facework strategy by Harrigan, Palka, Priore, and Wagner (2013) in situations of sharing private information. Ex-partners used this strategy in order to share information regarding new partners with their ex-partners in order to prevent face threats. All participants disclosed the private information regarding their break-ups and following communication with their ex-partners to their close families and friends. For some participants, this was simply a natural decision, “everyone knew about the break up and the aftermath, and there really wasn't anyone I didn't tell... I like sharing things with people around me” (1: 566-572). Another participant explained that their disclosure was more selective in whom she told about her continuing communication with an ex-partner: “my closest friends know...I told my mom too” (2: 477-478). All participants explained that certain details were exclusively and only shared with certain family members or friends, usually filtered and determined by their opinions of a particular relationship. This thoughtful and strategic disclosure was typically tailored to each of the individual's confidants:

Family would get less, just to be more conservative and traditional. I wouldn't share the same intimate details that I would share with my friends. But only certain people would get all of the nitty-gritty details. And then there were people

who would only get what they needed to understand the situation. (1: 576-57)

While the level of details disclosed varied, all participants disclosed personal information to at least inform key persons in their life of the termination and communication. Disclosing information personally to family and friends worked to protect the positive and negative face of ex-relational partners communicating with one another and their personal relationships.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

While participants spoke of the use of some form of social media and/or social networking sites in their post-relational communication, there was not a significant finding of commonalities in the data set regarding this perspective. The use of social media and new technology—specifically texting—was expressed in the five interviews. All participants said that texting was their main form of communication with an ex-partner, and all admitted to the same challenges and weaknesses of the technology: “the problem with

texting is you lose a lot of interpretation” (3: 426-427). Participants casually mentioned social networking sites as they discussed their communication with ex-partners, but only one participant provided substantial information in relation to the research question posed. This participant attested:

The big problem with these days is like Facebook. Like if you're friends with your parents, and you have a picture taken at, wherever like, with like her, she's gon—your mom's gonna see it and then like ask you like, “Oh, what's happening?” ‘Cause obviously your parents are pretty nosy in that regard. (3: 431-435)

The viewing of the participant's Facebook profile by parents and friends was a threat to his positive and negative face, but he did not explain any possible facework strategies. This example shows the importance of social networking sites as a communication platform and a potentially complicating addition to post-relational dissolution communication; however, it alone is not enough data to draw any substantial analysis or communication.

DISCUSSION

Findings demonstrate that ex-partners perceive face threats for themselves and their ex-partners in their post-relational dissolution communication. The data set recognizes avoidance, politeness, apologies, negative identity management, de-escalation, and disclosure as facework strategies used to address potential or actual face loss. The strategies are used by ex-partners in ways that align with facework theory (Cupach & Metts, 1994). Furthermore, the data shows the variety of ways that each facework strategy can be applied in their communication depending on the person(s) and situation.

Avoidance stands out as the most prominent and most versatile of the facework strategies. Cupach and Metts (1994) categorize it as both a preventative and corrective form of facework, and participants' experiences showed that it is utilized in both ways. This begs the question, why is avoidance so common and quintessential in communicating with an ex-partner? Jang, Smith, and Levine (2002) found that avoidance was a common strategy in the decision-making of ro-

mantic partners who had been deceived in their relationship. Upon discovering deception, it was found that:

they avoid communication that is linked with negative relational outcomes with their partners following the deception incident. Thus, they are most likely to terminate their romantic relationships, as was found here. (p. 12)

This evidence shows that avoidance is practiced before *and* during the termination process when deception was involved for romantic partners. For ex-partners with such an experience, it would be expected for them to carry on with their practiced communication styles after ending a relationship, especially in the case that one partner was deceived by the other. Furthermore, “avoiding” is one of the stages of Knapp and Vangelisti's model (2000). If we expect romantic relationships to follow the current model, then it again makes logical sense that ex-partners continue

to behave in similar ways that led to the termination of their break-up.

Although avoidance is commonly used, ex-relational partners do not completely cease communication with one another immediately following the relationship's termination. Ex-partners have developed facework strategies and regulations with one another to guide and correct the voluntary or sometimes involuntary communication that occurs after a break-up. Importantly, each participant spoke of these experiences, but none in the same order or framework. Every set of ex-relational partners navigated their post-relational dissolution communication differently. This may in fact be a telling reason why there has yet to be a post-relational model. However, from this study, we can see that ex-partners typically follow the termination of their relationship with *de-escalation*, *avoidance*, *necessary/functional communication* (in order to establish rules or new relationship), and seem to "end" in either a state *acceptance* (to remain distant) or in a "friendship" or at least a civil *coexistence* (see Figure 1). This is not to say that all ex-partners follow this order, or do not skip or repeat steps in the proposed process, but that these terms could allow for an extension to the existing Knapp and Vangelisti model. The proposed steps also relate to the facework in relationship disengagement dimensions suggested by Cupach and Metts (1994), but as these scholars importantly explain, "the model fails to give much attention to the responses of the person who is broken up within the unilateral situation" (p. 93). Perhaps after the termination of a relationship, the model needs to split into the two individuals' communication styles and strategies, in order to illustrate that after the relationship has ended they are considered independent of one another. It is likely that the split partners would be shown coming together for the previously mentioned communication techniques, but that ex-partners will also experience individual communication processes or communicate with others outside of the initial relationship.

While this study is able to propose ideas and perspectives on reevaluating existing relationship models, further understanding of the complete termination and post-relational communication processes would be necessary as well. Disclosure is an important and effective facework strategy in preventing and managing face threats in post-relational dissolution commu-

nication. All interviewees participated in disclosing the information of their break-ups with friends and families, but there were a variety of boundaries applied in disclosure across the data set. Future research regarding the face threats and resulting facework in communication with others outside of the terminated relationship could augment these findings.

Although the present study was unable to determine a significant use of social media or social networking sites as a means to promote positive face, there are further possibilities to consider. As this study's primary focus was post-relational dissolution communication, choosing a particular channel or method of communication, such as SNSs, was not desirable. The questions used to interview participants did not specify any particular means of communication, so any mention of SNSs was from the participants' decision. Notably, all five participants named Facebook among other SNSs either when describing the break up or communication following the break-up. Therefore, it is suggested that future research pose questions directly related to the use of Facebook and other popular SNSs when studying post-relational dissolution communication. It is also recommended that future research further the questioning of the presence of SNSs (Cronin, 2007; Fox, Warber, & Makstaller, 2013; Wright, 2004). Fox, Warber, and Makstaller (2013) used Facebook to apply Knapp and Vangelisti's (2000) relationship stages model to modern relationships, and found that the process of becoming "Facebook Official" and publicly labeling "In a Relationship" were important processes of meaning-making. It would be beneficial to the understanding of relationship terminations to understand the de-escalation and process of ending the relationship on the same public platform. As social media and social networking sites continue to grow in users and popularity, these communication methods have and will continue to become crucial in studying relationships.

As preliminary research, the present study reveals the face threats and facework strategies experienced by ex-partners in their post-relational dissolution communication. It establishes key preventative and corrective techniques used by partners throughout their experiences of terminating a relationship and communicating in its aftermath. The data set analysis and conclusions found commonalities in facework strategies and patterns, but also substantiate that experi-

ences in communication are unique to individuals, and that there is not one model or time frame that can be assigned to all communication in post-relational dissolution.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1

Proposed Post-Relational Stages Model

