

Friendships After Break-Ups: Relational Maintenance Strategies in Cross-Gender Post-Dating Relationships in Taiwan¹

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News reports of tragic endings (such as assaults on former romantic partners) of heterosexual romantic relationships are often seen in Taiwan. Unfortunately, research concerned with relational communication between men and women has received little attention from Taiwanese or Chinese communication scholars. The goal of this study is to examine the communication process of relational maintenance in cross-gender, post-dating friendships in Taiwan. The study intends to understand how members in post-dating relationships transition from being romantic partners to cross-gender friends, and to identify the communicative strategies they employ to maintain such friendships. A total of 26 individual interviews were conducted. The results indicate that participants transitioned their romantic relationships to post-dating friendships via *indirect strategy*, *direct strategy*, *third parties*, and *coincidence*, and that such friendships were primarily maintained through the communicative strategies of *sharing/providing support*, *topic avoidance*, *communicating with third parties*, and *contact frequency*. This study concludes by suggesting three communication aspects that previous research in cross-gender friendships has overlooked.

Friendships, across the life span, provide us with contexts for socialization and the fulfillment of our psychological and communal needs (Burleson & Samter, 1994). Research on emerging adult friendship indicates that, outside the family setting, individuals commonly meet their intimacy needs through interactions with friends (Johnson et al., 2007). Among the various forms of friendship, cross-gender friendships are becoming increasingly prevalent and significant within our social networks (Fehr, 1996; Monsour, 2002).

Even so, post-dissolution relationships developed by cross-gender former unmarried lovers are still perceived as unconventional and are rarely studied because such friendships are discordant with people's general beliefs concerning personal relationships (Masuda, 2000). Although cross-gender post-dissolution friendships are a special class, they are not necessarily uncommon among individuals' interpersonal relationships. Sheehan and Dillman (1998) state that 50% of their research participants claimed that they were friends, close friends, or best friends with their former lovers. In Taiwan, a survey published in a psychology journal in 1998 suggests that only 7.7% of individuals being surveyed reported to be close friends with their former romantic partners (*Teacher Chang Monthly Journal*, 1998). However, 10 years later, in 2008, an online poll conducted by *Yahoo News*² in Taiwan reported that 26.8% of the 43,602 respondents claimed that they would want to be "close friends" with their ex-lovers after break-ups, and another 23% of them would want to be "friends who keep a certain distance" with their former romantic partners ("Research on break-ups between men and women," 2008). The aforementioned statistics suggest that individuals in Taiwan might have changed their beliefs with regards to post-dating friendships and might be becoming more willing to maintain friendships with their ex-lovers.

Although cross-gender post-dating friendships are becoming ever more pervasive, some do not know how to constructively manage their break-ups. In fact, news reports of tragic dissolutions of heterosexual romantic relationships are commonplace in Taiwan. According to the *Modern Women's Foundation* in Taiwan, between January 2007 and June 2008, there were 264 news reports of physical assaults as consequence of unpleasant break-ups. In other words, in the past two years, on average, one violent attack occurred every other day as the result of

an unsuccessful romantic dissolution (Ho, 2008).

In light of these startling statistics, it is important for scholars to seriously consider this social phenomenon and examine the communication behaviors of individuals after they have decided to terminate their romantic relationships. The purpose of this research is to explore how members in post-dating friendships successfully transition from being romantic partners to cross-gender friends, and to identify the communicative strategies they employ to maintain such friendships. The results of this research are expected to help individuals effectively communicate after break-ups and possibly assist them to transform the nature of their relationships from romantic to friendly.

Review of Literature

Cross-Gender Friendship Research

Cross-gender friendships, often described as ambiguous and unpredictable relationships (Shih, 1997), are mostly developed during early adulthood when people begin to focus on relationship closeness and intimacy as important relationship components (Johnson et al., 2007). Research findings reveal that men and women hold quite different views concerning their same-gender and cross-gender friendships. For example, Blyth, Hill, and Thiel (1982) maintain that women consider cross-gender friendships to be more important during emerging adulthood than do men. Studies done by Bukowski and Kramer (1986) and Johnson (2004) indicate that women report experiencing higher levels of closeness in their cross-gender friendships than do men.

Previous research on cross-gender friendships has focused on topics such as emotional closeness (e.g., Johnson et al., 2007), relational satisfaction and decision-making styles (e.g., Ramirez, Jr., 2002), jealousy expression (e.g., Bevan & Hale, 2006; Bevan & Samter, 2004), relational maintenance (e.g., Guerrero & Chavez, 2005; Johnson, 2001), self-disclosure (e.g., Dolgin, Meyer, & Schwartz, 1991; Enomoto, 1987; Kito, 2005; Ting-Toomey, 1991), and topic avoidance (e.g., Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Afifi & Guerrero, 1998), and these friendships are often compared with same-gender friendships and/or romantic relationships (e.g., Afifi & Burgoon, 1998; Afifi & Guerrero, 1998; Bevan & Hale, 2006; Johnson et al., 2007; Kito, 2005; Ramirez, Jr., 2002; Rawlins, 1982).

In Taiwan, cross-gender friendships as a research subject attracts significantly more attention from psychology and education scholars than it does from those in the field of communication. Shi (2003), a psychology scholar and educator, contends that cross-gender friendships help reflect individuals' personal needs, values, and attitudes toward life. People who have more same-gender and cross-gender friends tend to live longer and be happier. However, cross-gender friendships experience more social pressure in Taiwan, as Taiwanese society still deems such friendships to be unconventional and Taiwanese people tend to judge the behavior of men and women according to socially defined roles (Shi, 2003).

As far as cross-gender post-dating relationships are concerned, previous research has focused mainly on ex-spouses' co-parenting styles (Ahrons, 2007) and has largely neglected the issues of unmarried post-dating relationships. Communication research on either cross-gender or post-dating friendships in a non-Western society, such as Taiwan, is equally limited (Shih, 1997). It is also important to review the research on relational maintenance in cross-gender friendships as it might provide a preliminary understanding of how individuals maintain their cross-gender post-dating friendships.

Relational Maintenance in Cross-Gender Friendships

Research on relational maintenance has increased in popularity over the past two decades; however, it has focused almost exclusively on romantic relationships, primarily dating and marital relationships (Dainton, Zelle, & Langan, 2003; Goodboy & Myers, 2008). There is still a paucity of relational maintenance research on friendships (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005), and relational maintenance in cross-gender post-dating friendships, in particular, has been mostly overlooked by communication scholars.

Available studies on cross-gender friendships suggest that relational partners' selection of activities to engage in depends on their goals for the relationship. For example, Afifi and Burgoon (1998), Guerrero and Chavez (2005), and Messman, Canary, and Hause (2000) find that cross-gender friends in platonic relationships are likely to avoid flirtatious or sensitive topics—such as the state of their relationship—as a way to prevent the relationship from terminating or turning romantic. Enacting appropriate and effective maintenance behaviors could be challenging when cross-gender friends have different relational goals in minds—for example, if one party desires romance and the other hopes to maintain the status quo.

According to Shih's (1997) research, Taiwanese young adults tended to avoid explicit conflicts by not discussing certain taboo topics, such as sexuality and relationships. Shih's study implies that Taiwanese young adults are more likely to adopt a passive attitude with regards to relational maintenance and conflict situations in cross-gender friendships. Furthermore, Shih's research reveals that in Taiwan, cross-gender friends often address each other in kinship terms—such as god brother and sister—while "yuan" beliefs (that human beings have no control in deciding interpersonal relationships) are pervasive, strongly affecting the development and maintenance of cross-gender friendships. By and large, Taiwanese families tend to support their children in forming friendships with someone of the opposite gender. It is rather the jealous romantic partner who often opposes such relationships (Shih, 1997).

Topic avoidance. Existent research clearly suggests that to maintain cross-gender friendships, individuals have an inclination to avoid conflict by not discussing "taboo topics" with their partners. Communication scholars examine a number of taboo topics and have identified certain ones which cross-gender friends commonly avoid: (1) "relationship intimacy (romantic/sexual tensions), friendships rule violations, communication problems, and annoying behaviors" (Samter & Cupach, 1998, p. 121); (2) "feelings about the friend, politics, religion, personal flaws, or family problems" (Werking, 1997, pp. 83); and (3) "the current and/or future state of the relationship, extra-relationship activity, relationship norms, prior relationships with opposite-sex parties, conflict-inducing topics, and negatively-valenced self-disclosures" (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985, p. 253). Among these topics, members in cross-gender friendships are most unwilling to touch on issues involving "the state of their close relationships" or "their feelings and attractions to their partners." Baxter and Wilmot (1985) report that most of their participants viewed the explicit relational talk as "a destructive relational force" because they were unsure if their perceptions were reciprocated by the other party (p. 265).

In summary, researchers studying cross-gender friendship maintenance have mainly paid their attention to taboo topics. Unfortunately, they have failed to explore the ways in which relational partners in cross-gender friendships avoid certain topics and apply additional communication strategies for maintaining such friendships. As the focus of this research on cross-gender post-dating friendships is derived from unsuccessful romantic relationships, it is necessary to review the existing research discussing the dissolution of romantic relationships.

The Dissolution of Romantic Relationships

People terminate romantic relationships for a variety of reasons, such as differences in values, cultural differences, communication problems, or the stress of long-distance relationships (Gottman, 1994a; *Teacher Chang Monthly Journal*, 1985, 1998). Researchers have developed linear models to conceptualize the process of romantic dissolution (Baxter, 1984; Cheng & Wang, 2008; Duck, 1982; Gottman, 1994b; Gottman & Levenson, 1992). Duck (1982) proposes a model which explains the stages individuals go through when terminating their romantic relationships. During the *intra-psychic phase*, one person is aware that the relationship is falling apart. The *dyadic phase* consists of confronting the partner and expressing the desire to end the relationship. Individuals then inform their networks (family members and friends) of the deterioration in the *social phase*. Finally, during the *grave dressing phase*, the dyad seeks to make sense of the dissolution and shares with others their own version of it.

Similarly, in Taiwan, Cheng and Wang (2008) argue that relationship disintegration can be considered as occurring in three phases. During the *dissatisfaction phase*, relational partners begin to notice the differences between the two of them. The *drifting apart phase* is the stage in which the relational intimacy decreases and the dyad has little interest in interacting with each other. Finally, individuals decide to terminate the relationship during the *ending phase*.

In addition to understanding relational dissolution in terms of phases that individuals experience, previous research also suggests various strategies or typologies of relational dissolution (Baxter, 1982; Cody, 1982; *Teacher Chang Monthly Journal*, 1998). Cody (1982) determines five disengagement strategies: (1) *avoidance* (e.g., avoiding contact), (2) *negative identity management* (e.g., telling the other party that s/he is interested in dating someone else), (3) *justification* (e.g., expressing dissatisfaction), (4) *de-escalation* (e.g., suggesting short-term separation prior to complete disintegration), and (5) *positive tone* (e.g., showing regret and sadness at the end of the relationship).

Baxter's (1982) research also reports four types of strategies for accomplishing romantic disengagement: (1) *manipulative strategies* are used when people force their relational partners to end the relationship by performing unacceptable behaviors; (2) individuals employ *withdrawal avoidance strategies* to avoid solving relational problems so that eventually the relationship falls apart; (3) *positive tone strategies* refer to expressing the individual's desire to end the relationship in an honest and respectful manner; and (4) *open confrontation strategies* can also be deployed to confront relational problems with the other party, but doing so does not necessarily lead to relationship termination.

Likewise, *Teacher Chang Monthly Journal* (1998), a psychology journal published in Taiwan, categorizes five typologies of romantic dissolution—namely, *purposely avoiding contact*, *finding an excuse*, *revealing one's dissatisfaction*, *negotiating*, and lastly, *discussing thoughts openly* in order to reach a *consensus* on a peaceful break-up. Although the last method, *open discussion*, may take a longer time, it is believed to be most constructive because it acknowledges both relational parties' voices. *Purposely avoiding contact* was reported as being the most frequently used method for break-ups in Taiwan (Bai & Ker, 2006).

Other research has considered the dissolution of romantic relationships in terms of rituals and scripts (Battaglia, Richard, Datteri, & Lord, 1998; Emmers & Hart, 1996), coping strategies (Barbara & Dion, 2000; Emmers & Hart, 1996), explaining coping or disengagement strategy choice with attachment theory (Barbara & Dion, 2000; Krahll & Wheelless, 1997), the comparison of disengagement between marital and non-marital couples (Cupach & Metts, 1986), and computer-mediated contexts within which break-ups take place

(Starks, 2007). In short, previous research on relational dissolution has focused primarily on the disengagement phases and relational dissolution strategies. Consequently, little is known regarding communication behaviors between unmarried romantic partners after they decide to break up.

Research Questions

Having reviewed the existing research related to cross-gender friendships, it is clear that while cross-gender post-dating friendships have been increasingly formed and accepted, such friendships have still received scant attention from communication scholars. Specifically, researchers have largely ignored communication between cross-gender unmarried romantic partners after they have terminated their relationships. With the aim of helping individuals constructively manage their relational break-ups and further understand the communicative strategies for maintaining cross-gender post-dating friendships, the present research seeks to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How do participants transition from being romantic partners to being cross-gender post-dating friends after break-ups? How do they communicate with regards to this relational change during the process?

RQ2: What communicative management strategies do those in cross-gender post-dating friendships employ to maintain their friendships? How are these strategies employed?

Methodology

The qualitative interview technique is appropriate for the present study because this method not only captures the significant events in participants' cross-gender friendships, but also provides participants with an opportunity to reflect on their relationships and increase their awareness of the ways in which they communicate in their friendships (Bogdan & Bilken, 1998; Charmaz, 2000).

Participant Recruitment

Three groups of participants were recruited. The first group of participants was recruited from the campus of a university in Taipei, Taiwan. A university campus serves as an appropriate site for this study because cross-gender friendships among Taiwanese young adults are mostly formed at colleges (Shih, 1997). The second group of participants was obtained through a snowballing method by networking with individuals outside the college campus who are interested in interpersonal relationship issues. The third group of participants was recruited via a free online Taiwanese advertising website which normally publicizes information regarding temporary job opportunities and volunteer work.

Participants needed to possess at least one current cross-gender friend who had been involved with them in a premarital romantic relationship before. Also, participants had to have been in the selected cross-gender post-dating friendship for at least six months in order to be able to provide thick descriptions about communication events occurring in their friendships. Informants each received a set of stationery as an inducement.

Description of Participants

A total of 26 individuals participated in this research. Among them, 16 were females and 10 were males. Interviewees' ages at the time of participation ranged from 21 to 42 years of age. Fifteen informants were in their early 20s, 5 in their late 20s, 2 in their early 30s, 2 in their late 30s, and 2 in their early 40s. Nine participants were undergraduate students; 3 were graduate students; 12 were professionals; 2 were unemployed. All participants were single, except one female interviewee who was married and another who was divorced. Eleven participants were recruited via online advertisements, 9 by the snowballing method, and 6 through fliers distributed on a university campus. Most informants reported having more than one cross-gender post-dating friend. Seven participants had been in the selected post-dating friendship for one year, 6 for two years, 2 for three years, 4 for four years, 2 for six years, 2 for seven years, 2 for eight years, and 1 for nine years. Only one male informant participated with his post-dating friend; they were interviewed individually.

Interview Procedures

The interviews were conducted in an in-depth, semi-structured, and open-ended fashion, and took place in locations chosen by the participants, usually in a coffee shop near a subway station in Taipei. Among these 26 people, only 1 person's interview was obtained in an e-mail format; the rest of the interviews were conducted in a face-to-face manner. On average, each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to an hour. The informants were encouraged to tell stories as they wished and the researcher asked probing questions with the aim of obtaining information concerning: (1) the history of the selected (previous) romantic relationship and post-dating friendship; (2) the process through which they terminated the romantic relationship and transitioned to the friendship; (3) communication activities they engaged in with their cross-gender post-dating friends; (4) conflicts/conflict management; (5) taboo topics; (6) tips to maintain such a friendship; and (7) the influence of third parties/social networks on their friendships. The interviews were then analyzed thematically into categories describing recurring patterns in participants' experiences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Results

The first research question seeks to find out how participants transitioned from being romantic partners to being cross-gender friends and how they communicated with regards to this relational change. Interestingly, most informants reported that following break-ups, they stopped contact with their former romantic partners for a period of time—for some, a couple of weeks, and for others, a few years. It is possible that participants needed some time without any communication with their former romantic partners in order to ease the negative feelings caused by break-ups. In some cases, the relationship resumed after the interviewees or their former romantic partners moved away from Taipei due to job relocation or studying abroad. Four themes, those of *indirect strategy*, *direct strategy*, *through third parties*, and *coincidence*, emerged from the interview data and help explain this relationship transitional process. These four themes are presented below. The interview conversations were translated from Chinese to English by the researcher.

Indirect Strategy

After some time apart, most participants revealed that they or their cross-gender post-dating friends made the move to contact the other party. Mr. A recalled how he and his

post-dating friend became friends again:

She . . . last year, she suddenly wrote me an email asking me if I was playing this online video game. Then, I replied, “Yes.” And, I asked her, “How did you know?” She told me that she had gone to the blog of that game and she had found a name exactly the same as mine . . . and she had found my information on that blog, the game I played, and so on. That’s why she wrote me that e-mail, and after that first e-mail, we started to e-mail each other again, or leave messages on each others’ blogs.

Similarly, Ms. B expressed:

A few months after we broke up, he all of the sudden talked to me on MSN [instant messaging] and asked me about my life. That’s how we began to be in contact again. From our chats on MSN, I thought that the way he talked was not as emotional or controlling as before. So, I thought maybe we could be friends.

Ms. C was glad that her former romantic partner gave her a call after they had broken up:

After the break-up, we lost contact. A few months later, I tried to call him but I found out that he had changed his number. But, one day when I was at work, he called and asked if I was doing all right. I was so surprised and happy. Then we began to talk to each other again.

Whether it is through leaving messages via computer-mediated tools (i.e., instant messengers, e-mails, or personal blogs), sending text messages, postcards, gifts, or making phone calls, participants or their former romantic partners sent out *indirect* messages in those chats/greetings to show that they still cared about the other party and that they would like to continue to develop the friendship.

Direct Strategy

However, some participants stated that they *directly* expressed their desire to be friends with their previous romantic partners, through face-to-face, e-mailing, or text messaging methods. And their former romantic partners agreed. After the break-up, Ms. D wrote an email to her ex-boyfriend:

It was a few months after—oh, now I remember! I think I wrote [my ex-boyfriend] an e-mail saying that I was completely over the whole thing, and that he was still very important to me. I told him we could still be friends. Yeah, I wrote him an e-mail like that. And he replied to my e-mail, saying “Yeah, we are still friends.”

In Mr. E’s interview, he talked about why and how he became friends with his ex-girlfriend:

I kept wondering how to be good friends with her, because I believed that our relationship had escalated from being friends to being lovers, and then from being lovers to being friends again. The relationship should not be de-escalated. So, she had to be a close friend to me. I told her my thoughts, and then she gradually accepted my idea. I told her that we were not romantic partners anymore, but that our relationship should go beyond that. After all, we were together before, and I know

her better than anyone else does. So, she should come to me if she needs help.

Through Third Parties

What also emerged from the interviews is that some informants reconnected to their previous romantic partners via activities arranged by third parties, such as shared friends, family members, or teachers. The third parties created opportunities for the relational partners so that they felt comfortable to begin contacting each other again. Ms. F reported:

After a while . . . I think after we finished the college entrance exam, some of my friends invited people to a barbeque party. [My ex-boyfriend] was also a good friend to my friends, so he was invited as well. After that party, we started to contact each other quite frequently.

Interestingly, Mr. G's high school counselor was "the middle person" who reconnected him and his previous romantic partner. Mr. G described it as follows:

My high school counselor/teacher was also [my ex-girlfriend's] Chinese teacher. I don't know how my counselor knew that we had dated before. One day, my counselor asked me if I had ever dated my ex-girlfriend. I told my counselor that we were not talking to each other anymore. After that, I heard that my counselor tried to talk to my ex-girlfriend . . . and then my counselor purposely asked me to bring teaching materials to [my ex-girlfriend's] class. I didn't know anyone from her class, except her. That's how we began to speak to each other again.

Coincidence

Interestingly, a few participants indicated that they got in touch with their previous romantic partners again because they ran into each other when using public transportation or in work-related contexts. The coincidences motivated them to consider keeping a friendship with their former romantic partners. Mr. H provided an example:

About a year ago, I was on my way to the cram school and I bumped into [my ex-girlfriend] on the subway. We chatted a bit and we tried to find out how each other was doing at that time. She was also planning to go to a graduate school, like myself. So she had been going to a cram school, too. That's why we had a lot to talk about.

In the interviews, participants also described the significant events, positive and negative memories, and relational maintenance tips with respect to their cross-gender post-dating friendships. Four communicative maintenance strategies emerged from their descriptions, answering the second research question. The emergent strategies are discussed below.

Sharing/Providing Support

Many informants indicated that they kept in touch with their cross-gender post-dating friends by engaging in conversation via instant messaging, e-mails, text messaging, and phone calls. A few participants reported that they regularly met their post-dating friends in person. That being said, computer-mediated tools and cell phones may allow post-dating friends to communicate with each other in a rather easy, convenient, and less intrusive manner.

Furthermore, participants revealed that they defined their post-dating friends as “close friends,” “old friends,” or “family members” because they felt that they could share with the other party about everything and that, most importantly, their friends could understand them very well as a result of their relationship history. Ms. I explained her interaction with her post-dating friend:

He is a very close friend to me. I have a blog on which I post my journal entries and I only share it with two or three people. He is one of those who can log into that site. He can read my personal writing . . . sometimes I will write him an e-mail and share information with him, like about film festivals. I will talk to him about movies, about my personal life. The more I wrote to him, the more he replied. I am quite happy to read about his life.

Additionally, many informants pointed out that their post-dating friends played an important role in providing them with emotional support when they encountered obstacles. Participants further reported that their post-dating friends often encouraged them and reminded them of their positive characteristics and strengths when they were frustrated. Ms. J said that her post-dating friend gave her a lot of support when she divorced:

When I divorced, he helped me a lot in terms of calming my emotions. After all, we were together before. I could say he knows me quite well. He told me that as long as I need him, he would be there for me. I was so moved when he said that. But, of course I didn't call him for any particular help afterwards. I believe our relationship can only last if we keep it like a regular friendship.

Topic Avoidance

Even though most interviewees expressed that they could basically discuss any topic with their post-dating friends, many participants admitted that they avoided topics related to their shared romantic history. Ms. K told me:

We don't talk about our past relationship. We may talk about our old friends, but we don't talk about what happened in the past between him and me . . . Anyway, we don't talk about love life. Also, we don't talk about his mom because that's related to how we broke up. We never mentioned his mom ever again. His mom is a taboo person.

If a taboo topic is brought up, participants reported that the other party would usually purposely ignore it or joke about it in order to change the topic. Ms. L described how she and her post-dating friend dealt with a taboo topic related to their past romantic relationship:

Our previous romantic relationship . . . we don't talk about it. If he mentioned it, I would go, “What are you talking about?” I just joked about it and he would know I really didn't feel like discussing it. Or, sometimes I accidentally brought it up, like the last time I mentioned a gift he had bought me when we were dating. He went, “What? I don't know what you mean?” You know, he would purposely avoid the topic and not respond to it.

While many participants and their post-dating friends did not mind talking about the respective romantic relationships they were involved in, several of them disclosed to me that

they did not feel entirely comfortable discussing any romance-related topics with their post-dating friends. Ms. M said:

I don't share anything with [my ex-boyfriend] about my romantic relationship. I don't talk to him about that . . . I don't know, I don't think that's an appropriate topic to discuss with him. Well, he will share his love life with me, but to be honest, I don't really like to listen to it. It's not about jealousy. I just feel it's too complicated to listen to his love stories, being his ex-girlfriend.

As previous research suggests, participants believe that to maintain such friendships, it is important for them to not cross the "border line" between friends and romantic partners and to avoid topics that are flirtatious or topics that imply any romantic feelings. Ms. N stressed this point at the end of her interview:

You know what's important is to not make the friendship "ambiguous"! Do not complain about your current romantic partner to your post-dating friend. That's a taboo. Because after your complaint, you would want him or her to comfort you. Then, it's so easy to cross that line.

Communicating with Third Parties

To maintain such friendships, participants had to be careful when communicating with their romantic partners about their post-dating friends. Many participants reported that they did not like to talk about their post-dating friends with their romantic partners. If their romantic partners knew about their post-dating friends or they had to talk about them, they usually downplayed the closeness of such friendships so as to avoid jealousy or fights. Mr. O explained that:

My girlfriend knows about me and my post-dating friend. She [his girlfriend] told me not to be "excessive." She used to oppose my post-dating friendship, but I told her, "Come on! I am not gonna go back to her again." So, now she [his girlfriend] doesn't really care. I try to be normal about it and I try to avoid my girlfriend's taboos. I don't go out with my ex-girlfriend if it's just the two of us.

Furthermore, in Taiwanese society, a lot of people still do not believe in platonic cross-gender friendships. As a result, some participants reported that, while maintaining their post-dating friendships, they often had to face negative questioning from their friends. This pressure caused by participants' friends hindered, to a certain extent, the development of their post-dating friendships. Mr. P explained his experience to me:

If my friends saw me hanging out with my ex-girlfriend, they would ask me, "Aren't you guys finished? Why do you still go out with her?" Usually I just told them that we were only friends and changed the topic. Some of my friends questioned me about our friendship. I said to them, "We just hung out and had lunch together." My friends don't really support me, which kind of makes me feel pressured and think that maybe I should not be friends with my ex-girlfriend anymore.

Some interviewees chose to stay away from this topic with their friends; others chose to tell a lie if they had met with their post-dating friends. As Mr. Q reported, "I don't tell my friends that I am still hang out with my ex-girlfriend. I would say 'friend' instead, just to avoid

trouble.”

Contact Frequency

Another relational maintenance tip emphasized by participants is “keeping an appropriate distance” from post-dating friends. As many of them explained in the interviews, it is not necessary to contact post-dating friends too frequently. Rather, it is better for them to keep in touch only once in a while to catch up with important events in their respective lives. Such friendships, according to interviewees, last longer if both of them only show up at the right moment, when the other party needs them to. Mr. R asserted that:

We [he and his post-dating friend] get along quite well now. We used to fight about everything and we fought all the time. But now, it’s different. I called her when I felt down or frustrated and she always showed up at the right moment.

Mr. S similarly explained:

What you have to control in this sort of friendship is its “nature.” To maintain such friendships, you cannot contact the other person too often . . . unless both of you have unique personalities to keep the nature of the relationship from changing back into a romantic one.

Discussion

The results of the present research confirm previous findings concerning cross-gender friendships in terms of identifying “topic avoidance” as a communicative strategy for relational maintenance. As existing studies suggest, members in cross-gender friendships are most unwilling to touch on issues involving the state of their relationships or their feelings/attractions to their partners. Similarly, in this research, participants revealed that they purposely avoid topics that may change the nature of their post-dating friendships; hence, they avoid talking about their shared romantic relationships in the past or any topics (e.g., their current romantic relationships) that may provoke romantic feelings, jealousy, or awkwardness. In other words, participants employed topic avoidance as a maintenance strategy so as to avoid relational changes, potential conflicts, or losing face.

However, previous relational maintenance research on cross-gender friendships has failed to identify three crucial communication aspects. First, the present research indicates that participants rely largely on non-face-to-face means, such as computer-mediated tools (e.g., instant messaging, e-mails, blogs) or cell phones (e.g., phone e-mails, phone calls, text messaging), to communicate with their post-dating friends. The reason is not only because technology has become an important medium for human communication, but also because such means allow individuals to keep in contact with their relational partners without having to meet each other in person, possibly reducing the chances for awkwardness or embarrassment. This research finding, to a certain extent, implies that many cross-gender post-dating friendships are maintained through technological methods in order for their members to maintain a certain distance and to prevent the creation of unnecessary problems that face-to-face meetings might cause.

Second, available studies on cross-gender friendships by and large neglect the impact of communication between members in such friendships and third parties. As the results show, cross-gender post-dating friends’ social networks (friends and family members) have an important effect on the development of their friendships. On the one hand, third parties may

purposely or accidentally create social contexts/activities in which cross-gender post-dating friendships can take place. As Ms. T disclosed:

We [Ms. T and her post-dating friend] talked on the phone once. It's because of his sister. It was before New Year's Eve. I went out with his sister. His sister called him and suddenly passed the phone to me. I felt so embarrassed and didn't know what to do. When I picked up the phone, I heard him say, "Hello, how are you?" I replied, "Hello!" Then he said, "Happy New Year!" He was very friendly. So we chatted for a bit on the phone.

On the other hand, social networks (significant others or friends) who oppose such friendships may create impediments if communication between them and members in post-dating friendships is ineffective. For example, some participants revealed that if their significant others found out about their post-dating friendships, they would try to explain to them the nonromantic nature of the friendships. But if their partners still strongly opposed such friendships, they would probably have to end them or lower contact frequency. Mr. U explained his thoughts:

I will explain to her [his future romantic partner] about the friendship. If it still doesn't work, I will probably hide it or avoid frequent contact. Or, maybe I will introduce them [his future romantic partner and his ex-girlfriend] to each other. If she's [his future girlfriend] still against it, I guess I will have to give up my post-dating friendship.

In other words, cross-gender post-dating friendships can hardly be sustained if members in them fail to use appropriate communication to gain support from their significant others and friends. Unfortunately, little regarding communication with third parties has been discussed in previous literature on cross-gender friendship maintenance.

Third, scholars have emphasized that communication serves as a central means to facilitate relationship maintenance, and that through talking, individuals are allowed to co-create a shared reality with their relational partners, and to understand each other's vision of the relationship (Duck, 1994). Nevertheless, what scholars have overlooked is the positive influences that "non-communication" and "implicit communication" have on relational maintenance. The present study suggests that after a period of time without any communication, participants were able to recover from break-ups and resume a relationship with their former romantic partners. In most cases, participants did not explicitly express their desire for developing friendships. Rather, they communicated this idea implicitly by doing favors and showing concern. Mr. V recalled:

We [he and his post-dating friend] usually interacted online. A few weeks ago, [my ex-girlfriend] was working on a project. She mentioned it on her blog and I happened to drop a line to her on her blog. So, I asked her if everything was going all right with her project. Then she e-mailed me for help. So I did some research for her until three a.m. that day.

In Taiwanese culture, people predominantly adopt a collectivistic and high-context communication style; they are used to communicating implicitly, indirectly, nonverbally, and contextually (Hofstede, 2001). Thus, unlike Western cultures, "implicit communication" and "non-communication" are often seen as constructive relational maintenance strategies.

On the whole, this study provides a more complete view to understanding communicative

strategies employed in relational transition and maintenance in cross-gender post-dating friendships in an Asian culture. Future research on post-dating friendships might consider conducting comparative studies by interviewing individuals from Asian and Western cultures (or other cultures) or people who are same-gender post-dating friends (i.e., homosexual couples who remain friends after break-ups). Researchers could consider adopting different research methods, such as ethnography, conjoint interviews, and journal keeping in order to generate richer data for studying relational maintenance in cross-gender friendships. Also, as the present research suggests, third parties (i.e., current romantic partners and shared friends) and contact frequency play significant roles in determining whether post-dating friendships can last or not; future research might consider studying other reasons that cause failed post-dating friendships or factors that prevent ex-romantic relationships from surviving into post-dating friendships.

As a female participant suggested at the end of her interview, “An unsuccessful/unpleasant break-up will negatively affect relational partners’ future romantic relationships.” The termination of a relationship should be considered as equally important as the formation of a relationship. This study aims to raise researchers’ awareness of the increasing pervasiveness of cross-gender post-dating friendships and, most importantly, to invite more research on relationship maintenance from communication scholars.

Notes

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2. This online survey is cited here as a last resort because updated literature on statistics regarding post-dating relationships in Taiwan cannot be found.

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