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## Imagining Communicative Success: How Imagined Interactions Affect Conflict Management in Romantic Relationships

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Imagining Communicative Success: How Imagined Interactions Affect Conflict Management in Romantic Relationships

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Communication

by

Melinda Shaw  
University of Arkansas  
Bachelor of Arts in Communication, 2020

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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## **Abstract**

Currently, there are no bodies of research that examine the relationship between imagined interactions, relational maintenance, conflict management, and gender identity. Previous research has primarily relied on quantitatively measuring the functionality of imagined interactions and generating an understanding as to why individuals use them. However, this study qualitatively examined the connection between these concepts, specifically how gender identity affects how individuals use imagined interactions to manage conflict with their partner and maintain their relationship. Fifteen participants who are currently in long-term relationships were interviewed and then required to complete the Thomas-Kilmann (1974) conflict management mode survey. Afterward, the responses were coded, thematically analyzed, and scored per the Thomas-Kilmann (1974) scoring instrument and compared to one another. The results indicated individuals use imagined interactions to prepare for conflicts with their partners by allowing them to rehearse what they want to say, manage their emotions, and craft a communication plan that helps resolve the issue and satisfies both parties. Additionally, it was found that gender identity has an impact on the way an individual implements imagined interactions to effectively manage conflict with their partners. This research is an introduction to the thematical and qualitative analysis of imagined interactions and how they are used to manage conflict and maintain relationships. As more researchers focus on how helpful imagined interactions can be for relational longevity, additional techniques that encourage healthier and productive communication practices can then be recognized and employed.

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Additionally, I would like to thank my sweet boyfriend, Alex, who has been my number one fan and supporter the last two years. Your light and love motivated me to always strive to be better. Without you, I would not be here today with my master's degree. Thank you all for your patience, encouragement, and support. Finally, I want to pat myself on the back for remaining strong and powering through the last two years. I did not foresee myself ever reaching this milestone, but by working hard, staying determined, and having a great support system, I was able to. You go, girl!

## **Dedication**

This is dedicated to my mother who taught me if I believed, I would achieve. Without you I would not be the woman I am today; I feel so lucky to be your daughter. Additionally, this is dedicated to God, who has continuously blessed me with opportunities to better myself. Lastly, this is for all the daydreamers, don't ever stop.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### **Introduction**

People daydream, it is a common occurrence within the human experience. They like to think about their interactions, whether they are future or past ones. Additionally, people like to analyze their previous interactions and anticipate future ones based on what has happened in the past. For example, when individuals must manage a difficult set of circumstances or engage in conflict with a close partner, they tend to prepare for this interaction by daydreaming about what could occur. Replaying these interactions or rehearsing new ones allows individuals to structure their approach in certain conversations or reflect on previous approaches and learn from what went wrong. Daydreaming allows people to play through the scenarios in which a potential conversation can go, while also permitting people to replay their previous conversations. This provides them the opportunity to learn from their mistakes and improve their communication outcomes.

Given this commonly shared experience, I will be looking at how people communicatively use daydreams as a way of managing their close personal relationships. This study reviews literature that has previously focused on relationship satisfaction, conflict management, imagined interactions, and the way one's gender identity potentially influences the way individuals communicate and manage their relationships. Followed by the presentation of the rationale of the study, the research questions and methodological explanations will be revealed. Lastly, the appendices included in this document contain the interview protocol, data collection instruments, and the codebook.

Although some previous research has examined imagined interactions, there remains a gap in research showing how individuals use this form of daydreaming to manage and maintain

their relationship when conflict is present. Therefore, this document outlines the information that is already known, the information I am seeking out, and how I am going to identify and collect information surrounding this topic.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### **Intimate Relations**

Intimacy is an intricate mixture of loyalty, friendship, passion, commitment, and love in which two people feel a captivating desire for ongoing close interaction with each other. These interactions can span across the full range of human activity, meaning that intimate relationships can be physical, spiritual, social, and intellectual. Intimate relationships can support work, learning, and leisure when effectively maintained. They provide mutual support and fulfillment and promote growth and development for everyone involved (Howe, 2002). In terms of mutual support, individuals involved in significant intimate relationships provide each other with a sense of concern and compassion during times of difficulty and stress. This readiness to be supportive gives evidence of an emotional bond that leads each individual to care about the other's concerns and values (Howe, 2002). Individuals involved in significant intimate relationships provide each other with a sense of wholeness. This is because we are social beings with resilient emotional and physical instincts for intimate bonding. One's well-being is significantly impacted by meaningful companionship; therefore, individuals must work to sustain intimacy to maintain their relationship.

Moreover, the mutual awareness that partners hold each other to in high regard and actively work for provides both of them with a sense of security (Howe, 2002). This security brings confidence in their ability to successfully satisfy the needs of their significant other and discover life's joys together as partners. Promoting growth and development includes having the individuals involved in significant intimate relationships continuously encourage the mutual development of interpersonal skills and knowledge of one another. Through their ongoing interactions, each seeks and facilitates opportunities for improvement, gain, and growth for

themselves and the other (Howe, 2002). Lastly, growth and development within intimate relationships promote interdependence. The nature of intimate relationships promotes a mutual reliance on each other as a source of strength, support, and fulfillment, but does not demand or expect that either or both become dependent on the other for positive feelings or experiences (Howe, 2002). Lack of interdependence could create an unhealthy attachment or relationship where conflict can arise more frequently because of insecurity-based concerns. Each partner in a quality intimate relationship will be competent, capable, supportive, encouraging, loving, and understanding within their relationship. Understanding intimate relationships is critical for comprehending the way individuals maintain relationships, therefore the next section will discuss how partners work to maintain positivity in their relationships.

### **Relational Maintenance**

Maintenance plays a vital role in sustaining relationships, whether it is with a friend, coworker, family member, or romantic partner, it is necessary to communicate and behave in ways that will nurture the relationship. Not only is it important for maintaining a relationship, but also for developing a bond and deepening a connection, hence fostering a better sense of security in any given relationship. Therefore, relational maintenance is defined as the actions or behaviors individuals engage in to sustain a specified relational state (Anderegg, Dale & Fox, 2014). Different relationships require unique relationship maintenance strategies; for example, strategies an individual uses with a family member will differ significantly from the ones an individual uses with a romantic partner. Maintenance behaviors can vary by the relationship type, the stage of the relationship, and individual differences (Anderegg et al., 2014). Without maintenance, relationships naturally will deteriorate, which is why this is an ongoing process that both individuals must participate in for the relationship to be successful.

Maintenance involves keeping a relationship in a suitable state. Because of this, the maintenance behaviors enacted will help sustain or increase desired relationship characteristics such as commitment, satisfaction, liking, and loving the partner (Canary & Yum, 2015). But these desired relationship characteristics are not the only reason individuals enact maintenance behaviors. Other research shows that there may be more general goals that individuals want to achieve in a relationship. The most common conceptualization of maintenance is identified as keeping a relationship in existence, in a specified state or stable condition, and keeping it satisfying and in repair (Guerrero & Chavez, 2005). Maintaining a relationship requires the utilization of certain strategies, specifically, positivity (e.g., acting polite or cheerful), openness (e.g., disclosing needs or discussing the quality of the relationship), assurances (e.g., stressing commitment to the relationship or showing love for partner), sharing tasks (e.g., sharing joint responsibilities), and including the partner in one's social networks (e.g., spending time with the partner while with friends and families) (Dailey, Hampel & Roberts, 2010). Some of these strategies may come naturally to individuals, while others may consciously have to engage in these behaviors to remain close to their partner.

Scholars have acknowledged that relationship maintenance can be performed consciously or subconsciously through strategic and routine maintenance behaviors. Aylor and Dainton (2004) define strategic behaviors as ones that are chosen intentionally and enacted for sustaining the relationship (e.g., individuals consciously deciding to talk with their partners about the relationship or complimenting their partner). While in contrast, routine behaviors are performed at a lower level of consciousness and not used intentionally for maintenance purposes. Therefore, routinized behavior occurs as a by-product of everyday activities and interactions (e.g., preparing dinner for a partner, taking out the garbage, offering partner advice about a work-related

problem), and not with the intent of maintaining the relationship, but as a natural part of everyday routine (Aylor & Dainton, 2004). It should be noted that the enactment of day-to-day relational maintenance activities may have existing obstacles. For example, fatigue, job stress, financial stress, waning attraction, etc., are a few that can negatively affect an individual's desire to engage in daily maintenance behaviors (Merolla, 2014). Therefore, individuals must set aside the daily stresses of life and remember to engage in these behaviors to maintain a healthy and happy relationship with their partner, especially when their partner may expect these behaviors.

### ***Gender and Relationship Maintenance***

Gender commonly is examined in interpersonal communication research. Within the last twenty years, there has been an increase in the research on sex, gender identities, and their differences. Before discussing how gender identity relates to relational maintenance, it is important to have a firm understanding of the difference between gender and biological sex. Pelletier and colleagues (2016) state that gender reflects the social norms, roles, and personality traits that are ascribed to females and males, in contrast to biological characteristics that are captured by sex. Additionally, femininity and masculinity have been defined as gender-typed personality characteristics that are consistent with socially endorsed traits that are stereotypical for females (feminine traits) and males (masculine traits) (Mehta & Dementieva, 2017). Socially constructed gender categories, like male or female, are typically avoided within demographic surveys because it does not accurately reflect the way individuals identify themselves. Instead, most surveys now require individuals to identify if they are more feminine, masculine, or both.

Femininity and feminine traits include expressiveness, understanding, communality, and caring for others' well-being, while masculinity and masculine traits have been associated with competitiveness, dominance, assertiveness, and focus on 'getting the job done' (Mehta &

Dementieva, 2017). Contrary to most gender research suggesting that women are more feminine than men and that men are more masculine than women, feminine and masculine traits are exhibited to different extents by both women and men regardless of biological sex (Mehta & Dementieva, 2017). Hence, femininity and masculinity can be conceptualized as states that may vary according to the demands of the immediate context. Research that focuses on gender-typed personality traits uses measures that ask participants to endorse traits they identify with from a list of stereotypically masculine (e.g., competitive, aggressive) or stereotypical feminine (e.g., caring, passive) attributes (Mehta, 2015). Thus, sex differences are very limiting in the comparison of individual differences in relational maintenance, and therefore the focus shall be placed on gender identity and not biological sex.

Research examining relational maintenance and gender identity is limited, especially when compared to the research that examines sex roles. However, that does not mean there is no evidence to support a connection between relational maintenance and gender identities. For instance, Aylor and Dainton (2004) found that feminine individuals (or individuals who identify as feminine) routinely use maintenance behaviors more often than masculine individuals, but that masculine individuals are more likely to use behaviors for the specific purpose of maintaining the relationship. The conclusion is that feminine individuals more frequently utilize maintenance behaviors, whereas masculine individuals only do so to keep their relationship in a specified state. Additionally, Aylor and Dainton found that the routinized behavior of feminine individuals was associated with an expressive view of communication, compared to the strategic use of maintenance reported by masculine individuals, which was consistent with a 'fix it' attitude. Thereby reflecting the stereotypical feminine and masculine traits that are ascribed to exhibiting femininity and masculinity within the context of maintaining a relationship.

Further reifying the idea that feminine individuals utilize maintenance strategies to communicatively grow with their partner, femininity was the strongest predictor (stronger than masculinity or biological sex) of all seven maintenance behaviors (Aylor & Dainton, 2004). Moreover, feminine individuals are more likely to focus on relational issues (Aylor & Dainton) thereby routinely utilizing more maintenance strategies than masculine individuals. Although these findings are important and relevant to the current study, more research should be done to better identify a connection between gender identity and relational maintenance. Overall, this section reviewed what is considered relational maintenance, the strategies that are associated with it, and how gender identity affects relational maintenance strategy usage. The following section will provide insight into conflict and its subsequent management.

### **Interpersonal Conflict**

Conflict can occur within any interpersonal relationship and depending on how it is managed, it can either foster relational growth or damage/end a relationship. Furthermore, conflict management can help individuals mature communicatively/emotionally and help maintain a positive relationship if done correctly. But to understand conflict, especially interpersonal conflict, the definition and what it consists of must be discussed. Fisher (2000) defined conflict as an incompatibility of needs, goals, values, or approaches between two or more parties in a relationship. These relationships can include ones involving intimate partners, friends, family, coworkers, and peers, but the most researched and common conflict found is within romantic relationships. Moreover, conflict researchers Courtain and Glowacz (2019) identified four elements that conflict consists of: behaviors starting the conflict (oppositions), behaviors perpetuating it (tactics), behaviors concluding it (conflict resolutions), and the outcome of the conflict. In addition to the four elements that make up the conflict process are the



two components that must be present in conflict: the subject and motive. The subject of the conflict is what the conflict is about; for example, couples often fight about sharing chores and responsibilities, while the motive for conflict may reflect the need of one or both parties to influence, determine, or control the couple's reality (Winstok, 2006). Depending on the importance of the subject and the motives of each party, the actions and reactions intended to resolve conflict can be dramatically influenced.

Furthermore, previous research has focused on certain characteristics of conflict and their effect on conflict management tactics. For instance, Dinçyürek, Akintuğ, and Beidoğlu (2013) suggest that the duration, content, intensity, and the number of people involved, have a determining effect on conflict resolution strategies implemented by individuals. When conflict management strategies are destructive, they can disrupt relationship functioning or trigger breakups, while positive management strategies provide opportunities to improve communication and deepen intimacy (Feiring, Simon & Markus, 2018). Therefore, both parties involved in the issue will have to assess the importance of the conflict subject and gauge their motives within the situation to understand and employ certain conflict resolution strategies.

Now that I have discussed what interpersonal conflict is, what it consists of, and what must be present to consider it a conflict, let's discuss the sources of conflict. Howe (2002) identified the failure to communicate expectations or needs, legitimize another's expectations or needs, and to meet those expectations or needs, as the three sources of conflict. Failure to communicate expectations or needs translates to when one or both individuals are unable to successfully express what they want from the other partner. Whereas failure to legitimize another's expectations or needs occurs when an individual ceases to perceive the relationship as a combination of mutual expectations but attempts to define the relationship based solely on one

own's needs or expectations (Howe, 2002). Lastly, failure to meet the other's needs or expectations occurs when one or both parties are unable or unwilling to meet significant expectations of the other, which is a result of a lack of understanding, interest, or skill, and can lead to serious conflict. Every relationship will be faced with setting expectations, voicing those expectations, and fulfilling them, and if they are unable to do so, conflict may arise. Now that I have explained the sources of conflict, let's discuss conflict progression.

### ***Conflict Progression***

Conflict can be perceived as an enduring element of interaction, meaning that it can change and develop in form over time. Therefore, it could be understood as a process. Cahn (1992) presented a model describing conflict progression in three stages. Stage one proposes that a potential conflict is experienced within a partner when they are faced with a choice between two or more incompatible options or goals. Cahn (1992) states that stage two is where the conflict becomes an actuality when the interactions reveal that the partners have different goals, but they think the differences can be resolved. Lastly, stage three consists of the conflict threatening the relationship when partners perceive that there is no mutually acceptable outcome and unwanted sacrifices must be made to resolve their differences. Cahn argues that in the third stage, self-interests replace mutual ones; there are winners and losers, and exercises of power dominate the process. Therefore, for some relationships, this stage of the conflict process may bring an end to intimacy and the relationship, especially if individuals are unable to put their differences aside and come to a mutual agreement. With this information in mind, the next section will discuss what constructive and destructive conflicts look like and how they operate within interpersonal relationships.

### *Constructive & Destructive Conflict*

Past scholars like Deutsch (1973) examined the distinction between positive and negative functions of conflict, in addition to identifying and outlining the two types of conflict: constructive and destructive. Constructive conflicts are those that remained within the initial issue domain and utilized tactics such as negotiation and problem-solving. Destructive conflicts are those escalating beyond the issues and the interactants used tactics such as threats and coercion (Jensen-Campbell, Gleason, Adams & Malcom, 2003). Additionally, a connection was established between constructive and destructive tactics and the quality and state of a relationship. For example, the use of a constructive strategy promotes positive and satisfying relationships generating more open discussions and compromise, compared to destructive tactics predicting poor satisfaction and subjective well-being in couples. Furthermore, the likelihood of conflict escalating increases when destructive strategies are employed (Bonache, Gonzalez-Mendez & Krahé, 2019).

Moreover, constructive, and destructive patterns play a role in the longevity and satisfaction of a relationship because of their effects on the way individuals manage conflict and treat each other during the conflict. Specifically, the constructive or destructive patterns of partners' cognitive activity (e.g., thought patterns, expectations, and attributions), behavioral exchanges, and negative emotional reactivity surrounding the management of their conflict play crucial roles in the prediction of relationship distress versus success over time (Ogolsky & Gray, 2016). Overall, both constructive and destructive styles of conflict communication can have a significant impact on relationship maintenance, quality, and sustainability. The following section discusses the most recognized conflict management modes that are utilized within interpersonal relationships.

### *Conflict Management Modes*

Throughout conflict and conflict management research scholars have identified the many modes individuals use to find a resolution when an issue arises. Scholars Thomas and Kilmann (1974) presented one of the most widely known and used models of conflict management modes. They presented five different management modes: competing, collaborating, compromising, accommodating, and avoiding. Competing is defined as trying to achieve a goal at the other person's expense in a manner that is both assertive and uncooperative (Altmäe, Turk & Toomet, 2013). Collaborating means confronting a conflict by considering every solution possible; therefore, an outcome that satisfies both parties will be found. In this mode, partners focus on their similar interests instead of their different opinions. Compromising is seen as a win-win solution because both parties are willing to give up something to get at least partially what they want. The objective of compromising is to find mutually acceptable solutions that partially satisfy both parties (Altmäe, Turk & Toomet, 2013).

Accommodating is the mode in which both parties believe that their differences in perception and values are not impossible to overcome, meaning that one party is ready to neglect their own needs and prioritizes the interests and perception of the other party. Lastly, avoiding is when both parties put the conflict aside, ignore it, and actively do not look for a solution (Altmäe, Turk & Toomet, 2013). The conflict may cease to exist because of active avoidance, or the need for an eventual solution may arise later down the line. Either way, both individuals are apathetic about the problem at hand. It should be noted that not every scholar uses the Thomas-Kilmann (1974) conflict management modes, and that these approaches may vary between different studies. But for the sake of the current study, I will focus on these five modes. Considering the five established conflict management modes highlighted in this section, it is

important to examine why and how gender identity affects the conflict resolution tactics individuals use. Therefore, the next section will discuss gender identity and conflict management.

### ***Gender Identity and Conflict***

Conflict, sex roles, and gender have been examined vastly by previous scholars, but gender identity and conflict and its management have yet to be studied extensively. Although there is a lack of research on these topics, that does not mean there is no significant information on the subject. Mukundan and Zakkariya (2018) found that people with masculine gender role identities use the dominating or competing conflict management style. In contrast, feminine gender role identity was associated with the avoiding style and androgynous persons used the integrating or compromising styles. Additionally, Mukundan and Zakkariya found a significant relationship between avoiding and dominating/competing styles with respect to masculine and feminine gender role identity.

Moreover, gender role identity had a significant impact on the use of compromising and collaborating styles, while there was no significant impact observed in the use of avoiding, dominating, and obliging styles of conflict management (Mukundan & Zakkariya, 2018). Despite some discrepancies with the modes of conflict they used within their studies, these findings still reflect a connection between feminine and masculine-identifying individuals and the typical conflict management tactics they utilize in their intimate relationships. Next, I will discuss how emotions affect the way conflict occurs and the way individuals manage it.

### ***Emotions and Conflict***

Anger, guilt, sadness, disappointment, fear, and other emotions all are associated with experiencing conflict, especially with an intimate partner. These emotions can affect individuals

so much that they prevent people from solving the conflict effectively. Ogolsky and Gray (2016) found that the way conflict is managed, particularly the communication behaviors that partners exchange, is linked to the experienced emotion surrounding conflict itself. Emotions are crucial elements of conflict that influence an individual's subjective experience and response to the situation at hand; and most importantly they impact the conflict resolution strategy that is utilized by motivating a person towards specific behaviors (Bell & Song, 2005). Positive emotions and feelings emerging during conflict have been associated with increased concession making, stimulated innovative problem solving, enlarged joint gains, enhanced self-confidence, and impacted self-ratings of performance (Montes, Rodriguez, and Serrano, 2012).

In contrast, negative feelings or emotions have been shown to promote the rejection of ultimatum offers, augment the use of competitive negotiation strategies, decrease joint gains, and reduce the desire for future interactions (Montes et al., 2012). Overall, positive emotions can help while negative emotions can harm the processes involved in conflict resolution. Lastly, conflict is a relational process. This means that when conflict occurs, an individual's sequence of behavior is interrupted by a partner and expectations may be violated, thus triggering physiological arousal and a variety of negative emotions (Ogolsky & Gray, 2016). Therefore, the emotions experienced by individuals involved in conflict can vary, but still have an immense effect on the resolution strategies that are employed. Now that it has been established how emotions affect conflict and its management, I will discuss intimate conflict communication.

### ***Intimate Conflict Communication***

The previous sections discussed what conflict is, how it's managed, and how it affects relationships. What has not been discussed is intimate relationship conflict and what intimate conflict communication entails. To review, a conflict occurs within a relationship when there is a

disagreement or incompatibility, or perceived incompatibility. Cahn (1992) identified three distinct types of communication that accounted for a great deal of research on conflict in intimate relationships: specific disagreements, problem-solving discussions, and unhappy/dissolving relationships.

Specific disagreements refer to the specific communication interaction, especially an argument over a particular issue. This disagreement is a difference of opinion or view, a complaint, criticism, hostile/coercive response, defensive behavior, or unpleasant action (Cahn, 1992). Problem-solving discussions are known as negotiation or bargaining sessions that may deal with an ongoing problem consisting of more than one conflicting issue (Cahn, 1992). Compared to the other types of intimate conflict communication discussed, this one is the most likely to utilize the Thomas and Kilmann (1974) conflict management styles.

Unhappy/dissolving relationships are studied because of the wide range of conflicts they experience. Specifically, researchers have focused on communication patterns in dysfunctional couples, stormy marriages, and couples who report they are unhappy, dissatisfied, maladjusted, or seeking counseling (Cahn, 1992). Conflicts at this stage could involve reoccurring/unresolved issues or general dissatisfaction with the relationship, which could lead to a breakup. Lastly, another finding that reifies Cahn's assumptions is that dissatisfied couples exhibit greater disagreement, hostility, and criticism compared to satisfied couples who express greater agreement, affection, and humor (Overall and McNulty, 2017). Therefore, it may be argued that individuals in unsatisfying relationships will face more conflict and potentially utilize dissolving relationship communication.

It is important to recognize intimate conflict communication because of the effect it has on the way intimate relationship's function when faced with conflict, and how it can subsequently influence an individual's imagined interactions. To better understand the connection between imagined interactions, intimate conflict communication, and relational maintenance, the following section will discuss what imagined interactions are and how these concepts are related.

### **Imagined Interactions**

Everyone at one point in their life has caught themselves daydreaming. Thinking about the future in general or specifically thinking about future interactions they will have with a potential romantic partner, friend, or professor. Visualizing these future interactions, whether they eventually occur or not, is therapeutic. This process of imagining future interactions has been described by communication scholars through imagined interactions theory. Underrated and understudied, imagined interactions (IIs) are highly intriguing and relevant within interpersonal communication. To understand this theory, let's define imagined interactions and describe their functions and characteristics. Honeycutt, Vickery, and Hatcher (2015) defined imagined interactions as a form of social cognition in which actors imagine conversations with others using verbal and visual imagery. Additionally, they are described as mindful daydreams in which an individual imagines talking with real-life significant others such as relational partners, family members, roommates, ex-relational partners, coworkers, and friends (Honeycutt, 2003). People can experience IIs before going to sleep, while walking around, driving to work or school, listening to music, or anywhere an individual can daydream. These narratives can be shared or recalled through diary entries, interviews, and other descriptive accounts.



Internal dialogues, imagined interactions, are used to mentally evaluate the many possible scenarios of an event in advance of the act occurring. In terms of romantic relationships, relational scripts are formed through the process of mental imagery in which individuals think about past or future conversations with significant others. This theory rests on the assumption that intrapersonal communication, or internal talk, is the foundation on which other types of communication rest (Honeycutt et al., 2015). Therefore, it is critical to understand how people utilize imagined interactions because they are the basis upon which individuals operate in communication interactions. Now that there is a general understanding of what IIs are, let's discuss their functions and characteristics.

## ***II Functions***

The functions of imagined interactions were studied in the past because they helped identify the motivations for their usage. This desire to understand why individuals use IIs led Honeycutt and colleagues (2015) to outline six functions: catharsis, compensation, conflict-linkage, rehearsal, relational maintenance, and self-understanding. Catharsis refers to individuals using IIs to relieve tension and reduce uncertainty; for example, individuals imagining the interaction that will play out during an upcoming job interview. They would imagine themselves going in confidently, answering all the questions perfectly, and leaving the hiring manager with a positive impression; the effect of which could help relieve some anxiety regarding the actual upcoming interview.

Compensation occurs when individuals substitute IIs for real interactions, meaning that individuals use IIs to satisfy any desires or concerns that will not be fulfilled within real interactions. Conflict-linkage occurs when individuals use IIs between arguments and thereby create or continue an ongoing conflict (Honeycutt et al., 2015). Rehearsal, which is the most

common, refers to mentally preparing for interactions before participating in them. Relational maintenance occurs when individuals utilize IIs psychologically to sustain a relationship by thinking and daydreaming about a partner and their interactions. For example, a person who is in a long-distance relationship may use IIs to think about the next time they reunite with their partner, making them feel close to them even though they are geographically far away from one another. Lastly, self-understanding refers to when individuals use IIs to gain a deeper understanding of their attitudes, values, and beliefs. Understanding the functions of IIs is equally as important as understanding their attributes, therefore, the following section will discuss the eight attributes that are associated with IIs.

### ***II Attributes***

When I mention attributes, I am referring to the characteristics of IIs and what they look like. Honeycutt and colleagues outlined the eight attributes as such: frequency, proactivity and retroactivity, discrepancy, self-dominance, variety, valence, and specificity. Frequency represents the differences in how often individuals experience IIs. Proactivity and retroactivity are concerned with the timing of the IIs in relation to actual conversations. Proactive IIs occur before an anticipated encounter, whereas retroactive ones occur after the encounter (Honeycutt et al., 2015). An example of retroactivity would be when movies or tv shows have characters that experience flashbacks. Proactivity could be described as a tv character that daydreams about an interaction and then snaps back to reality. The discrepancy occurs when what is imagined differs from what occurs in the actual conversation.

The self-dominance attribute refers to the tendency for most of the imagined talk to originate from the self, rather than the emphasis being on what the interaction partner says. Variety reflects the individual differences in the number of topics that are discussed within the

IIs and with whom they happen. For example, IIs tend to occur with significant others rather than with strangers. The seventh attribute, valence, refers to the intensity of emotions and the amount people are experiencing them while visualizing a future or past conversation. Lastly, the specificity of IIs will vary and pertains to how vague the imagined conversation lines of dialogue are, as well as the setting where the imaginary encounter occurs (Honeycutt et al., 2015). The attributes and functions of IIs are valuable for determining how and why individuals utilize IIs, whether that is consciously or subconsciously. Now that I have established a basic understanding of II functions, the relationship between relational maintenance and imagined interactions will be discussed.

### ***Relational Maintenance and IIs***

As discussed before, relational maintenance is necessary for keeping a relationship fun, lively, intimate, and satisfying. Individuals can maintain relationships in many ways, whether it is through routine or strategic behaviors. Additionally, they can maintain their relationship through imagined interactions, whether it is used routinely or strategically. Specifically, Bodie, Honeycutt, and Vickery (2015) stated that although relational partners can use IIs for any purpose, the relational maintenance function describes how partners can keep a relationship alive by using IIs to aid the development of close relational partners. Not only are they used to keep a relationship in existence and good condition, but they also are used just as frequently to keep the conflict within those relationships active, and therefore, have a reverse effect on the relational maintenance function of IIs. Essentially, imagined interactions can cause individuals to rehash past conflicts and therefore can escalate the current issue. Individuals who are in nonmarital relationships, who have less frequent interactions (e.g., long-distance relationships), use IIs to maintain a relationship (Bodie et al., 2013). Regardless of maintenance purposes and the

continuation of conflict, individuals may use IIs to manage and resolve conflict with a significant relational partner. The following section discusses the connection between conflict and imagined interactions.

### ***Conflict and IIs***

Visualizing interactions, whether they are past or future ones, is a common occurrence especially when conflict is involved. People often think about interpersonal conflict in the absence of their relational partners, and one way that people work through interpersonal conflict is via imagined interactions (Wallenfelsz & Hample, 2010). The relationship between conflict and IIs has been explained by conflict-linkage theory. Conflict-linkage refers to how arguments are contemplated in the mind, whether it is positive, negative, or both. Essentially, people often remember episodes of disagreement or arguing and dwell on them (Honeycutt, 2003). For example, individuals sometimes think about including prior conversations in the current interaction. Having thought about a prior conflict, they may engage the partner with the intent of retaliating (Honeycutt, 2003). Constantly bringing up past issues while discussing the current one can damage the relationship and recalling prior arguments can create expectancies for similar future interactions.

Mulling has been recognized as the process of reliving an argument over and over, and this occurs very often for individuals in intimate relationships. Retroactive IIs, as I have discussed before, allow individuals to revisit an episode once it has taken place. Revisiting conflict may be accompanied by the reformulation of points and counterpoints of future interactions, thereby linking unresolved serial conflict episodes together through IIs (Honeycutt, 2003). Additionally, replaying a conflict encounter can lead to regrets about what was said or not said, which could not be beneficial for either individual when future interactions occur. Proactive

IIs can be used to rehearse for future encounters with their relational partners, so much so that conflict can pick up where it was left off, which can be dangerous in maintaining a relationship. Moreover, Honeycutt, Choi, and DeBerry (2009) state that IIs involving conflict increase self-understanding as individuals reflect on their post-conflict positions. In addition to mulling, the idea of ruminating on a conflict also has been presented within II research.

Rumination was introduced to explain how thinking about a conflict too much can serve as a source of escalation and can make an issue more severe and intense. Wallenfelsz and Hample (2010) determined that the more a person thinks about a problem, the more serious the problem appears and the more likely they will blame their relational partner. This repetitive thought process about conflict is known as rumination, which occurs when people repetitively focus on themselves and the effects of their negative feelings. In addition to rumination, linked IIs concerning one's conflicts may result in a self-fulfilling prophecy, where you imagine something so much (negative or positive) it comes into fruition. More specifically, if an individual imagines that a conflict will be unpleasant and unproductive, the actual interaction may turn out that way (Wallenfelsz & Hample, 2010). Overall, there is a significant connection between the way individuals implement IIs and the way conflicts occur as a result, but there is a lack of literature involving IIs and the way they affect how individuals manage conflict and find a resolution. In the next section, I will discuss how emotions can affect IIs and subsequent interactions.

### ***Emotions and IIs***

Relational development and conflict both are affected by imagined interactions, but what affects IIs is emotions. Berkos, Allen, Kearney, and Plax (2001) found that IIs indeed are linked to the emotions and messages that are used in actual conversations. Additionally, IIs can be used

to cope with emotionally charged issues, and function as a substitute for actual interactions (Berkos et al., 2001). Moreover, research has linked emotions as being a vital feature of imagined interactions, where IIs serve as a means of emotional catharsis during therapy sessions. Specifically, IIs serve to create a sense of catharsis for an individual in a relationship by allowing one to relieve tension as well as to reduce uncertainty concerning another's actions (Honeycutt, 2003). For example, once an interaction has taken place, an individual may feel better after reflecting on the encounter.

Although IIs can be used before an encounter to relieve tension, reduce uncertainty, or as a means of rehearsal, there are some situations in which IIs negatively affect emotions and vice versa. For example, IIs may magnify negative moods and create a closed-loop where bad moods lead to negative IIs, and in turn, make current moods worse, resulting in more negative IIs. Therefore, the person is caught in a closed, absorbing state of emotional transference and self-fulfilling prophecies (Honeycutt & Ford, 2001). Conversely, imagined interactions provide essential functions such as catharsis and self-understanding that allow an individual to better cope with emotions. For instance, individuals use IIs to 'get things off their chest' when they are aware that certain behaviors are considered inappropriate in actual interactions (Allen & Berkos, 2006). Overall, emotions can help garner effective IIs or help individuals process interactions after they occur. Emotions help formulate imagined interactions while also giving an outlet for individuals to express emotions that may be inappropriate for in-person interactions.

In this section, I discussed what IIs are, what their functions and attributes are, how relationships can be maintained through them, how conflict is affected by IIs, and the relationship that emotions and IIs share. It is important to understand these elements to explore them further in addition to investigating any gaps previous researchers may have missed.

Overall, imagined interactions have many different uses and outcomes depending on the way an individual engages in them, and most importantly, there is a need to create a better understanding of this theory because of how frequently individuals daydream without realizing they are engaging in imagined interactions.

## **Summary**

Throughout the literature review, I have explored relational maintenance, gender identity, conflict, conflict management, and imagined interactions. To summarize, individuals utilize relational maintenance strategies to preserve a relationship and keep it in a satisfactory state. Conflict management serves to resolve issues within a relationship, help build trust, and promote growth, but when left unresolved, a relationship is at serious risk of dissolving. Imagined interactions are a form of daydreaming that can help with rehearsing such strategies for maintaining relationships, dealing with conflict, and managing or relieving emotions.

Previous research regarding gender identity and relational maintenance, conflict management, and imagined interactions is very scarce. This is due to most researchers only studying gender or sex, where gender is the stereotypical roles that society assigns to males and females and sex is who you are biologically, a man or a woman. But, within the last ten years or so, gender identity has become the normative term used as a more accurate depiction of how individuals perceive and identify themselves. There are several different definitions of gender identity, but I define it as how a person feels inside about their gender (which may or may not coincide with their biological sex), or how feminine or masculine a person feels (Mehta, 2015). Lastly, individuals may feel differently about their gender identity according to the context in which interactions occur. Therefore, it is important to investigate and get a firmer understanding

of how individuals in intimate relationships identify themselves, especially when facing conflict and maintaining their relationship.

In addition to gender identity, three distinct types of communication were discussed that accounted for a great deal of research on conflict in intimate relationships: specific disagreements, problem-solving discussions, and unhappy/dissolving relationships. Relationship dissatisfaction and satisfaction were addressed by Cahn's (1992) assumption that dissatisfied couples exhibit greater disagreement, hostility, and criticism compared to satisfied couples who express greater agreement, affection, and humor (Overall and McNulty, 2017). Therefore, it may be that individuals in unsatisfying relationships will face more conflict and potentially utilize dissolving relationship communication.

Additionally, the six main functions of imagined interactions were identified that Honeycutt and his colleagues (2015) outlined. These are known as catharsis, compensation, conflict-linkage, rehearsal, relational maintenance, and self-understanding. The attributes of imagined interactions, also known as the characteristics and what they look like, were also identified. A total of eight are discussed: frequency, proactivity and retroactivity, discrepancy, self-dominance, variety, valence, and specificity. The attributes and functions of IIs are efficacious for determining how and why individuals employ imagined interactions, whether it is subconsciously or consciously.

Revisiting conflict can occur frequently when using IIs because individuals can replay and reflect on past issues, which can subsequently affect current conflicts. This is known as retroactive imagined interactions because the reflection occurs after an interaction has taken place. Additionally, it can be accompanied by the reformulation of points and counterpoints of



future interactions. Thus, retroactive IIs can link unresolved serial conflict episodes together (Honeycutt, 2003). Replaying interactions also can lead to regrets about what was said, creating a sense of hyper-fixation on an issue, and therefore potentially sabotaging future interactions. Conversely, proactive IIs take place before an interaction and can be used to rehearse for future encounters with their relational partners. Frequent usage of proactive IIs can cause conflict to pick up where it was left off last, therefore posing a threat for maintaining a relationship. Overall, IIs involving conflict increase self-understanding as individuals reflect on their positions post-interaction. Besides proactive and retroactive IIs, another important aspect of conflict and imagined interactions is rumination.

When individuals repetitively think about a conflict, focus on themselves, and think about the effects of their negative feelings, it is known as ruminating. It was determined that the more a person thinks about a problem, the more serious the problem appears and the more likely they will blame their relational partner (Wallenfelsz and Hample, 2010). Ruminating may result in a self-fulfilling prophecy, where you imagine something so much (negative or positive) that it comes into fruition. For example, if an individual imagines that a conflict will be unpleasant and unsuccessful, the actual interaction may turn out that way.

In addition to rumination, I discussed how emotions can be affected by or affect IIs. For example, IIs can serve to create a sense of catharsis for an individual in a relationship by allowing them to relieve tension and reduce uncertainty regarding another's actions. Reflecting on an encounter can allow individuals to feel better and alleviate any anxiety they may have had regarding the interaction. Catharsis is the process where an individual's emotions, like uncertainty, ambivalence, or anxiety, are affected by IIs. On the other hand, emotions can affect IIs and potentially set up individuals for failure, especially when those emotions are negatively

focused. For instance, IIs may magnify negative moods and create a closed-loop where bad moods lead to negative IIs, and in turn, make current moods worse and result in more negative imagined interactions. Therefore, the person is caught in a closed, absorbing state of emotional transference and self-fulfilling prophecies (Honeycutt & Ford, 2001). Emotions can help create imagined interactions while also providing an outlet for individuals to express emotions that may be inappropriate for in-person interactions.

All these elements either individually have been examined or studied relationally, but there is a lack of literature that considers these factors working together. For example, there is a general gap in research on gender identity and its relationship with conflict management and imagined interactions. It is valuable to study this relationship to get a better grasp on how individuals of different gender identities can manage conflict and maintain their relationships through imagined interactions because of how often individuals find themselves utilizing IIs to prepare for or reflect on interactions. Such research would be a means to gain insight as to how this relationship creates better self-understanding and better or worse outcomes within intimate relationships. Therefore, my study explored these elements to see if there was a valid connection that could fill this research gap and extend the imagined interactions theory as a means of managing intimate relationships. The following section describes the rationale and outlines the research questions proposed for this study.

### **Rationale of Study**

The purpose of the present study was to examine the types of communication presented in persons' imagined interactions with intimate partners about conflict, the functions of the imagined interactions, as well as the outcomes of these interactions. The study also investigated how imagined interactions are used to manage emotions resulting from conflict and the

indicators of relationship satisfaction/dissatisfaction, as well as the similarities and differences in how persons with feminine gender identities are compared to those with masculine gender identities engage in imagined interactions. Although the attributes of imagined interactions were discussed in the literature review, this study concentrated on measuring the functions of IIs because they are more closely related to relational maintenance and conflict management strategies. Lastly, because of this close relationship, a better understanding resulted in the actual communication functions of imagined interactions versus their characteristics. The following section will address the methodology, procedures, and data analysis tactics that will be utilized within this study to investigate the subsequent research questions:

RQ1: What types of communication are present (specific disagreements, problem-solving discussions, unhappy/dissolving relationships) in persons' imagined interactions about conflict with their intimate partners in their attempts to engage in relationship maintenance?

RQ2: Which of the six functions (catharsis, compensation, conflict-linkage, rehearsal, relationship maintenance, self-understanding) do the imagined interactions serve for persons engaged in the interactions with their intimate partners in their attempts to engage in relationship maintenance?

RQ3: What are the positive and negative outcomes of revisiting conflicts for persons engaged in imagined interactions with intimate partners in their attempts to engage in relationship maintenance?

RQ4: How are imagined interactions used to manage the emotions of persons experiencing conflict with their intimate partners in their attempts to engage in relationship maintenance?

RQ5: How do persons engaged in imagined interactions with intimate partners about conflict describe their relationship as satisfying (using greater agreement, affection, humor) or as dissatisfying (using greater disagreement, hostility, criticism)?

RQ6: How do persons' gender identities affect their imagined interactions about conflict with their intimate partners in their attempts to engage in relationship maintenance?

## CHAPTER THREE

### **Methodology**

This section outlines the methodology used to answer the proposed research questions, including descriptions of the participants, procedures for seeking participants and data collection, and plans for data analysis. It should be noted that this study was conducted and analyzed through qualitative measures.

#### **Participant Sample**

I attempted to seek out participants for one-on-one interviews, specifically those that were in upper-level communication classes and in an intimate relationship for at least six months or longer. Additionally, there was no participant preference regarding a specific race, ethnicity, gender identity, or socioeconomic status, but the participant demographic reflected white college-aged straight feminine and masculine-identifying individuals from the south since that is the general demographic present on campus. I solicited the participants with the help of communication professors that are teaching upper-level classes, and with their permission, advertise my research participation as an extra credit opportunity. Afterward, a snowball sample was conducted by asking students to tell others about the study. It should be acknowledged that I was not targeting individuals and their partners to participate; rather, I required at least one partner to be a part of the study. Ultimately, my goal was to conduct at least fifteen interviews.

#### **Procedures**

Upon receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (See appendix A) and before data collection, participants signed an informed consent form indicating their permission to be included (See appendix B). Data was collected through one-on-one interview sessions that formally asked participants questions concerning the proposed research questions, specifically that reflect and gauge relational maintenance strategies (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Dainton &

Stafford, 1993) (See appendix C) and the use of imagined interactions within conflict episodes (See appendix D). After the interview session was completed, the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Management Mode survey (1974) (See appendix E), was administered and scored to identify the participants' predominant styles of managing interpersonal conflict.

### **Data Analysis**

After gathering the data, I analyzed the responses from the interviews that reflected the themes that answered my research questions including conflict management strategies, II functions, relational maintenance strategies, and gender identities (See appendix F). I coded a percentage of the data, along with another coder, and we utilized inter-coder reliability using Scott's Pi. Once an acceptable level of reliability was reached, I completed the data coding independently. Afterward, I scored the TKI surveys (1974) using the provided scoring instrument (See appendix E) and thematically analyzed the connections between individuals' conflict management style and the indicated relationship maintenance strategies described in their IIs and subsequent real-life interactions. Lastly, I linked the coding's to one another per the research questions and see if any new themes appeared. The following section will detail the results acquired from this study and explain its implications, weaknesses, and strengths.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

As previously discussed, the purpose of this study was to examine the types of communication presented in persons' imagined interactions with their intimate partners about conflict, the functions of these IIs, as well as the outcomes of these interactions. Additionally, investigating how IIs are used to manage emotions resulting from conflict, determining indicators of relationship satisfaction/dissatisfaction, and identifying how gender identities affect engagement with imagined interactions were the other major focuses of this study. This section will discuss the demographic data, the coding process, and reveal the themes that were discovered through the data collection process as they relate to the research questions.

#### Demographics

Fifteen interviews were conducted for this study, all of which had participants who were in a relationship of six months or longer and currently enrolled in an upper-level communication class at the University of Arkansas. Additionally, the ages of the participants ranged from 20-26 years old. All the participants are native to the south, most being from Arkansas. Out of the fifteen participants, eight of them identified as feminine, four identified as masculine, and three of them identified as both feminine and masculine. The longest relationship a participant identified being in was eight years and the shortest being ten months. In terms of relationship status, just one participant indicated they are married, and the rest indicated they are in regular romantic relationships. Lastly, five participants revealed they were in a long-distance relationship, the rest currently either live with their partner or at least live in the same town. I have discussed the demographic information of the study; the next section will recap the coding process.

## **Coding Process**

As mentioned previously, I analyzed the data from the interviews and coded for themes that answered the research questions regarding conflict management strategies, II functions, relational maintenance strategies, and gender identities. A percentage of the data was then coded by another coder and me, employing inter-coder reliability using Scott's Pi. Once the acceptable level of reliability was reached, I completed the coding independently. Afterward, I scored the TKI surveys (1974) using the provided scoring instrument (See appendix E) and thematically analyzed the connections between individuals' conflict management style and the indicated relationship maintenance strategies described in their IIs and subsequent real-life interactions. Doing this ensured that I would be able to identify their conflict management style and compare it to their description of their IIs and real-life interactions involving conflict and see if there were any similarities or differences.

I started by reading each transcript twice before going back a third time and highlighting and marking the identifiable themes as they related to the research questions. After going through it a third time and marking the data up, I went back two more times to determine the general theme of the relationship, recognize the reasons to address relationship conflict, and distinguish the discrepancies between conflict management utilized in an II and the conflict management style employed in the actual interaction. Then my advisor repeated this process on her own and reported back the data she found from the transcripts that she had coded back to me. Lastly, I compared our coded data and went back to analyze the transcripts one last time to see if there was anything I missed, before proceeding.

Following this process, I took the identified themes from the transcripts and connected and organized them into their designated research question sections. Given this thorough process,



I was successfully able to identify significant information that would add to previous imagined interaction research. The next section will go into detail about the data analyses from the interviews that were conducted and outline what themes were discovered for each research question.

### **Data Analyses**

This qualitative study addressed six major research questions. The following section breaks down each research question and the subsequent findings.

RQ1: What types of communication are present (specific disagreements, problem-solving discussions, unhappy/dissolving relationships) in persons' imagined interactions about conflict with their intimate partners in their attempts to engage in relationship maintenance?

The type of communication utilized when confronting conflict within a romantic relationship is important to understand because of the way it can hurt or help relational longevity. More specifically, the way they intimately manage conflict within their imagined interactions could help individuals prepare for a certain outcome to conflict management, or at least help them learn better conflict management practices through this experience as identified in the overall themes found in the data. First, it was discovered that when specific disagreements arose in a relationship, partners utilized a collaborative conflict management strategy, whereas problem-solving discussions involved compromising. This was because the specific disagreements present within these relationships were simple differences in perceptions or opinions, concerns that can be fixed with a single conversation.

Moreover, because these disagreements were small and not as harmful to their relational growth, participants were motivated to want to collaborate with their partner to find a reasonable solution satisfying both of their concerns or feelings. When individuals could foresee or imagine a viable resolution, they were then more motivated to enact a collaborative conflict management style. More complex issues presented difficulty in foreseeing a reasonable solution, thereby affecting the conflict management tactic individuals employed in their II and real-life interaction. For example, a difference in opinion on where a couple should travel for spring break was identified as a specific disagreement. By employing a collaborative conflict management style in the II to approach this disagreement, it then translated over into the real-life interaction, and they came to a consensus and found a place they both wanted to visit. Essentially, because these disagreements are small and not as vital to their relational growth, imagining how they were going to confront the conflict led to executing the imagined strategies in the real-life interaction.

Neither specific disagreements nor problem-solving discussions were more present than the other, they were both equally prevalent, but communication about an unhappy/dissolving relationship was not present at all. In contrast to specific disagreements, problem-solving discussions were more complicated because they involved intense feelings, strong opinions, and issues that affected the overall functioning of the relationship. For example, issues such as a partner continuously avoiding conflict, unequal effort when it comes to household chores, or maintaining a long-distance relationship by dictating who visits whom.

To be more specific, several participants indicated that they currently live with their partner, discussed how one of their reoccurring conflicts is over household chores. They originally set the expectation that it would be a 50/50 effort, but as responsibilities outside the house and schedules no longer aligned, one partner always ended up doing more work than the

other. Therefore, they utilized a collaborative conflict resolution style in their IIs, but when it came time for the actual interaction, they agreed to collaborate by dividing up the chores. Ultimately, they compromise later on because schedules and other responsibilities outside the relationship change, and life happens. Since this does not end in a sustainable equal resolution, this issue continues to come up within their relationship.

Overall, this information concluded that partners encountering smaller specific disagreements tend to work together and collaborate to equally satisfy each other's concerns or needs to grow their relationship on a smaller scale. Whereas problem-solving discussions are reoccurring conflicts that require more effort and time and typically are resolved by compromise. This does not mean every relationship will experience it this way, it just shows that out of the relationships that were discussed and analyzed that this was the pattern that was identified. The second research question and the subsequent findings are discussed below.

RQ2: Which of the six functions (catharsis, compensation, conflict-linkage, rehearsal, relationship maintenance, self-understanding) do the imagined interactions serve for persons with their intimate partners in their attempts to engage in relationship maintenance?

Five out of the six functions of imagined interactions were found to aid persons engaged in IIs with their romantic partners in their relational maintenance attempts. The overarching theme identified for using imagined interactions was to relieve anxiety. Many participants expressed that when they are anticipating an interaction with an intimate partner, or a professor, doctor, friend, or family member, they tend to rehearse what they want to discuss to relieve some anxiety. Therefore, the rehearsal and catharsis functions were the most prevalent with II usage because of the anxiety they experienced before an interaction. Another way individuals used IIs

to reduce anxiety or uncertainty was by replaying an interaction. This brought participants comfort, relief, or in the worst case, more anxiety, to replay a conversation. It also served to further develop individual self-understanding by learning from the mistakes that were made in the real-life interaction. Thus, preventing them from making those same mistakes again by preparing for the II and the following real-life interaction, and subsequently reducing their anxiety.

Relational maintenance was another function that was significant for participants using IIs to sustain their relationship. Specifically, it was utilized for upcoming unique events like date nights, anniversaries, trips, or holidays. Participants imagined how it would play out or what they would say or do to make that moment more special for them. Additionally, out of all the participants, the five that indicated they were in long-distance relationships used the relationship maintenance function the most. Because of the lack of quality time together, individuals in these long-distance relationships must compensate for the time they are apart by imagining past interactions or future interactions with their partner to remain positive and happy within their relationships.

Therefore, the relationship maintenance and compensation functions work together in that way, by imagining interactions with your partner you are compensating for the lack of real-life interaction with each other, whether that is planning future interactions or reflecting on a fond memory. That is the only time the compensation function came into play. As discussed earlier, the self-understanding function worked best when replaying an interaction and individuals learned from it, it helped them realize they said something wrong or used an inappropriate tone. Lastly, conflict-linkage was the only function that was not present in any of the data. This is because participants never allowed previous conflicts to affect current conflicts,

therefore there was no conflict-linkage. It should be noted that the information presented in appendices C & D are important to this research because it demonstrates participants feel more comfortable describing aspects of their romantic relationship that did not explicitly include conflict. Additionally, the information provided me insights for analyzing and identifying the connections between relational maintenance strategies and conflict management. The following section reviews the third research question presented and discusses the relevant findings.

RQ3: What are the positive and negative outcomes of revisiting conflicts for persons engaged in imagined interactions with intimate partners in their attempts to engage in relationship maintenance?

Revisiting conflict is prevalent within long-term relationships because even though there was a discussion to resolve the conflict, other issues or concerns may arise later to where it needs to be revisited again. Depending on how the conflict is managed, there can be positive or negative outcomes of revisiting an issue within a romantic relationship. The positive outcomes of revisiting conflict identified from the interviews were developing the relationship's mutual understanding and expectations, expanding the responsibility in the relationship, and being more aware and considerate of each other's feelings.

When participants identified that they had to revisit a specific conflict again, it was because there was a misunderstanding or miscommunication whenever the original conversation occurred. It is possible that their partner did not comprehend what the participant was wanting to accomplish with that conversation resulting in their bringing it up later. Developing the relationship's mutual understanding and expectations was a positive outcome of revisiting conflict because the II and conversation the participant engaged in were both well prepared,

positive, and not aggressive. They accomplished this by being empathetic to their partner's feelings and opinions and patient in resolving the issue. Managing the conflict this way by utilizing the II from the previous conversation about the conflict and learning from their mistakes, enabled them to formulate a new and better II to positively engage with their partner about the conflict. This then translated into the real-life interaction and created a positive outcome of revisiting the conflict.

For example, one participant mentioned that her partner is practicing sobriety. While the participant is not practicing sobriety herself, she felt uneasy not knowing the boundaries or expectations of when it was appropriate to drink around her partner. She did not want to upset her partner or potentially affect her partner's sobriety, and although it was briefly discussed before, she thought her partner was compromising to appease her. After some time, she decided to prepare for another conversation with him about what he expects in terms of drinking around him through an II and planned on being very compromising or accommodating for the sake of her boyfriend's sobriety. To her surprise, he was very understanding and expressed his feelings on the matter, and they collaborated to set better boundaries and expectations for each other.

Additionally, another theme that relates to the positive outcomes of revisiting conflict is increasing the responsibility in the relationship. As discussed earlier, many couples face the issue of who is doing more housework than the other, and although a temporary solution is achieved, this conflict is eventually revisited. This aligns with developing mutual understanding and re-establishing those expectations, but specifically relates to the amount of effort each partner is putting in and the responsibilities they are fulfilling. Whether that is with household chores or relational maintenance, individuals expect their partners to contribute just as much to the relationship as they do.

Therefore, when individuals are not met with the same effort or responsibility taken by their partner, a conflict can be revisited. By revisiting a conflict that ends up producing positive outcomes, responsibility is then further developed and re-established. For example, the lack of responsibility in household chores can be corrected and improved if the conflict conversation is positive and productive. Thus, this theme goes hand in hand with developing a relationship's mutual understanding and expectations as positive outcomes of revisiting conflict.

Another theme that was identified from this research was that individuals were more cognizant of their partners' feelings because they revisited a conflict. Occasionally, partners unintentionally (or intentionally) hurt their partners' feelings in the heat of a conflict. Their goal was not to damage the relationship nor end it, but to express their emotions and unfortunately miscommunicated them in a time of tension. Additionally, a partner may not understand why the other is hurt or upset, but after revisiting the conflict and communicating about it, they finally understand their partner's perception and make sure not to make that mistake in the future.

For example, one participant mentioned to her partner that his family was not very welcoming or warm towards her anymore, which made her upset and concerned. She utilized an I before voicing this to her partner, but when discussing the issue together, her partner disagreed with her, and she ended up tabling the discussion. After spending a day with his family, he realized that he could see why she felt that way and they had another discussion about it that ended more positively that time. Hence, the outcome of being more aware of a partner's feelings is extremely important for the growth and maintenance of a relationship. Lastly, this research question did not elicit any data regarding negative outcomes of revisiting conflict. This is because no relationships were described as unhappy or dissolving, and as a result, they did not discuss having continuous negative conflict nor the subsequent negative outcomes. This also

demonstrates that the participants were in well-established long-term relationships that can maintain equilibrium when dealing with conflict. Next, research question four and the analysis of its results will be outlined.

RQ4: How are imagined interactions used to manage the emotions of persons experiencing conflict with their intimate partners in their attempts to engage in relationship maintenance?

Conflict situations can be escalated or deescalated when emotions get involved, especially when these emotions influence an imagined interaction that is preparing an individual for a future conflict management situation with their partner. These emotions also can escalate or deescalate a conflict after it has occurred, by continuing a conflict interaction through an II. This can cause an individual to get worked up while reflecting on what was said or how the issue was managed, thereby motivating them to revisit the issue.

Data from this study pointed to anxiety being the leading factor to escalate conflict within IIs and real-life interactions. For example, participants revealed that when imagining conflict-based interactions involving their partner, they experienced major anxiety, which resulted in the II being negative. Sometimes this negativity then translated into the actual interaction and subsequently intensified the issue. When this occurred, participants admitted to needing to table the conflict and take a breather before circling back to solve it with their partner. Crying would typically be present in the real-life interaction but not planned for in the IIs. This anxiety encouraged negative thoughts that snowballed into a worst-case scenario mindset; therefore, the participants would assume that their partner would break up with them if they mentioned the issue. Contrary to what participants imagined, the real-life interaction would play out to where



their partner always would respond positively and be very receptive and willing to solve the problem. Not one participant indicated their partner threatened to end the relationship because of a conflict.

Feelings regarding an interaction that were worked through an II were found to deescalate conflict when individuals did not have anxiety surrounding a conflict, or when the issue was on a smaller scale. When individuals had more self-awareness and better tools to manage their emotions, they deescalated the conflict through the II then applied that to the actual follow-up interaction. The II allowed them the space to talk themselves down off the ledge and work through their emotions surrounding the conflict. If they are the partner at fault, then the II would prepare them on what to say and how to apologize to their partner and resolve the issue, thereby deescalating the conflict. Given this analysis, research question five and the following results will be discussed next.

RQ5: How do persons engaged in imagined interactions with intimate partners about conflict describe their relationship as satisfying (using greater agreement, affection, humor) or as dissatisfying (using greater disagreement, hostility, criticism)?

Relationships can either be deemed satisfying or dissatisfying by the way individuals talk about their partners and their relationships. Not only does the discussion of their relationships determine satisfaction or dissatisfaction, but so do the imagined interactions they have with their partner. For this study, it was found that when persons engaged in IIs with their partner, not about conflict, the IIs were considered positive. Specifically, there was an abundance of greater agreement, affection, and humor that were incorporated into their discussion of how they maintain their intimate partnership. In terms of engaging in IIs with their partners about conflict,

the relationships were described as more satisfying because the issues examined were resolved eventually, if not immediately.

For example, greater agreement was experienced by participants who employed IIs to help them effectively share their perception of an issue for their partner to understand and agree with. They indicated that once they shared this perception and their feelings regarding the subject, their partner then agreed with them, and the issue was put to rest. A greater agreement was also experienced by participants when engaging in relational maintenance behaviors, such as talking about the future, where they would mutually agree on where the relationship was going, and on what kind of timeline. Humor was experienced by participants who incorporated it in their IIs to shed positivity on a negative situation or a conflict they encountered. This use of humor in the II usually translated into the real-life interaction and helped couples make light of a situation or minimize the severity of the conflict. Specifically, it helped show their partner that the issue was not going to be detrimental to their relationship, thereby bringing comfort to the partner and allowing them to work through the conflict calmly and positively. It helped alleviate the pressure on who was right and who was wrong, and instead allowed them to see each other as equals and work through the problem together.

Affection was employed during and after the conflict, allowing participants to reassure their partners that they recognize their feelings and want to continue their relationship regardless of the conflict. Comforting their partner while discussing conflict, such as holding their hands, sitting close to each other, rubbing their partner's back, etc., helped re-establish the goal of discussing a conflict: to find resolution. The use of affection also helped their partner respond more calmly and positively, rather than escalate the situation and cause the partner to become more standoffish about the conflict. Additionally, utilizing affection post-conflict was common.

When individuals settled a dispute, they would then hug it out and say, “I love you,” to each other. Therefore, reassuring each other of their satisfaction with what transpired and their desire to continue their relationship. Lastly, affection within the IIs translated over into the real interaction, especially once the conflict was resolved.

Dissatisfying relationship concepts like greater disagreement, hostility, and criticism, were not as present when individuals engaged in IIs involving conflict. Greater disagreement only occurred when initial opinions regarding the conflict differed. For example, one participant wanted to go to a different school than her partner but wanted her to go to the same one as him. The participant imagined the conversation prior to the real interaction and saw it going positively and her partner being understanding of where she was coming from. When the interaction occurred, greater disagreement occurred, and her partner was adamant about her coming to the school in which he was currently enrolled. This was a negative response that she had not anticipated, and emotions ran high during the interaction, resulting in a greater disagreement about the issue. Eventually, after revisiting the conflict a couple more times, she compromised by enrolling in the college he currently was attending.

Hostility was not prominent in the discussion of IIs and conflict, most participants admitted to needing to take breathers from their partners to deescalate the conflict before revisiting it again. This would help prevent hostility from occurring during the resolution of the conflict. Additionally, the fact that participants indicated how anxious they were in their IIs and prior to addressing the conflict, caused them to be more passive in both interactions, in fear of upsetting their partner.

Criticism was common in this study, especially when it came to how the participant managed the conflict. Some would be hard on themselves for not being vocal enough of their feelings, others would be upset for conceding to their partner's wishes so easily. More specifically, they would prepare to make certain points and portray themselves as strong in the II, but when it came time for the real interaction it would not go that way. Then afterwards they would reflect on the interaction and criticize what they should or should not have done in that situation. Lastly, they would criticize their partner for not being more understanding or considerate of their feelings surrounding a conflict, which led to more compromise than collaboration, because of their partner being more competitive or selfish during the conflict. Following the examination of RQ5, a discussion of the final research question and an analysis of its results will be presented.

RQ6: How do persons' gender identities affect their imagined interactions about conflict with their intimate partners in their attempts to engage in relationship maintenance?

The lack of gender identity research as it relates to IIs, and relational maintenance was very prevalent. This motivated the creation of the final research question to see if there were any connections between a person's gender identity and the way they maintain their relationship and manage conflict through IIs and real-life interaction. This study showed that participants identifying as both feminine and masculine utilized both collaboration and compromise conflict management styles the most. Additionally, feminine and feminine/masculine-identifying individuals indicated that they liked to talk about conflict and their feelings immediately and try to find resolve with their partner as soon as possible. In contrast, feminine-identifying individuals admitted to needing to take a breather before discussing conflict with their partners.

It was an even split between avoiding the conflict initially and wanting to talk about it immediately for feminine-identifying individuals.

Masculine-identifying participants employed a collaborative conflict management style, which was in line with the “fix it” attitude that is attributed to masculine individuals (Aylor & Dainton, 2004) but were not as aggressive in resolving the issue. They wanted to appease yet satisfy both parties' feelings and needs. No masculine-identifying individuals that were interviewed indicated they were competitive in resolving a conflict with their partner; they always wanted equal resolve to the matter. Moreover, feminine-identifying participants utilized the compromising conflict management strategy the most, succumbing to their partners' wishes while partially satisfying their own.

This confirms previous research establishing that feminine-identifying individuals are mostly cooperative in conflict and have a strong preference for accommodation and compromise, whereas masculine individuals tend to be more competitive and have a strong preference for domination (Gbadamosi, Ghanbari & Al-Mabrouk, 2014). Occasionally, there would be collaboration between the feminine-identifying participants and their partners, but it was in circumstances where a clearer resolution was available, and the partners were not as competitive with their conflict management style. Lastly, feminine-identifying individuals indicated sometimes using avoidance until the issue became big enough to discuss it, then they would compromise. They thought that the issue was insignificant and irresolvable without voicing it, but after time they would muster the courage to address it, usually resulting in compromise. Now that I have discussed analyses of the data, the following section will discuss the summary of findings, implications, weaknesses, and strengths before concluding.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Discussion

#### Summary of Findings

The aim of the study was to examine the kinds of communication present in persons' IIs about conflict with their intimate partners. Along with this, examining how gender identity plays a role in managing conflict in IIs and real interactions, and identifying the functions of IIs to relationally maintain partnerships were the foci of this study. Overall, most individuals who imagined managing a conflict utilizing a specific conflict management style in their II had success translating that to their real-life interaction with their partners. Specifically, when most participants imagined implementing a collaborative management style in their II, they reported that they effectively collaborated in the real interaction. Out of the fifteen people interviewed nine reported success in doing this.

As for the others, when they imagined competing in their IIs, they reported they were unsuccessful in the real interaction. In fact, they would end up collaborating with their partner in the real interaction, conceding to finding a more mutually beneficial and satisfying solution for them both. Lastly, only one participant identified attempting to collaborate with their partner in an II about conflict but failed to translate this over to the real interaction. Instead, compromise was the sole conflict management style utilized in the real interaction. In terms of IIs involving conflict prior to the real interaction, participants who imagined a negative outcome typically experienced a positive one because they were engaged in overthinking that was influenced by general anxiety.

Additionally, it was found that the rehearsal function of IIs was the most effective in cultivating success for participants. The more participants rehearsed and planned, the more structured the conflict resolution was and the less the issue escalated in the real interaction.

Moreover, the intention of rehearsing before interacting with their partner allowed them to engage in the function of catharsis. Working through their emotions through an II helped encourage the adoption of a more positive mindset when managing conflict in the real interaction. It created a space where the anger could be performed and not have repercussions. Which eventually led them to realize a more positive approach to the conflict would be more beneficial for the outcome they want.

In terms of gender identity, masculine-identifying individuals were more collaborative when it came to conflict management. Moreover, feminine-identifying individuals were more compromising in conflict situations with their partner, and sometimes avoidant before compromising. Feminine/masculine-identifying individuals utilized the compromise and collaborative styles of conflict management the most. Given the information that is outlined, the next sections will provide a more in-depth analysis of the implications, weaknesses, and strengths of the study.

## **Implications**

Previous studies examining imagined interactions, conflict management, relational maintenance, and gender identity either were done so separately or in conjunction with one another, but never all within the same study. The present study examined the connection among these concepts by qualitatively gathering data through interviews and thematically analyzing the findings. The identified results reinforce the already established themes, identify new ones, and highlight the connections between IIs, conflict management, relational maintenance, and gender identity. The following section discusses those connections as well as how and why they are important.

Primarily, conflict management as it relates to imagined interactions validates many previous findings established by other researchers. For example, the data indicated that individuals do in fact prepare for conflict interactions with their partner because it reassures them of their feelings and validates their perception of the issue. Additionally, participants were successful in translating their positive II into the real interaction because they prepared a mental script of what they wanted to say. Having a script or a list of the points to follow permits them to feel calmer about the issue and helps reduce the intensity of their feelings surrounding the conflict. In fact, having prepared so much for an interaction involving conflict with their partner through an II proved to be beneficial for how the actual interaction played out. This supports the previously established finding by Berkos et al. (2001) that IIs are linked to the emotions and messages used in actual conversations and can be used to cope with emotionally charged issues and function as a substitute for actual interactions.

The more positively an individual thought about the conflict, the more positive the actual interaction translated to be. Even when participants suggested they imagined the worst-case scenario, it did not translate over to the actual interaction, and typically went more positively than they expected. This does not coincide with the earlier reported finding that if an individual imagines a conflict being unpleasant and unproductive, the actual interaction may, in fact, turn out that way (Wallenfelsz & Hample, 2010). Although this previous finding does not concretely state that this always happens, it still is an interesting result that provides another viewpoint on how a positive or negative mindset can affect IIs and the subsequent real-life interactions.

Moreover, the more an individual suggested they consistently thought about an II involving conflict with their partner, they were then able to work through their negative feelings and transform into something more positive. Persons who reported being anxious by nature



suggested the more they thought about the conflict in an II, the more stressed they became. However, this stress would never cause them to become more angry, resentful, or encourage them to place blame on their partner for the issue. Instead, the stress and anxiety caused them to doubt their feelings and perception, and almost convinced them to avoid the conflict altogether to maintain the peace within the relationship. These findings contradict what Wallenfelsz and Hample (2010) established about rumination, specifically, that the more a person thinks about a problem, the more serious the problem appears and the more likely they will blame their relational partner. Rather, the more an individual ruminates on a conflict with their partner, the more cathartic the II process was for them. Even if the II originally was negative, working through it and preparing for the real interaction allowed participants to process their emotions and imagine their partners' point of view, thereby helping them create stronger and more effective points to use within the actual interaction. I attribute this finding to individuals using IIs as a mini therapy session to see a clearer picture of the conflict, their feelings, and their partner's feelings. Therefore, preventing them from blaming their relational partner for the issue.

In contrast to IIs being cathartic for individuals who incorporate them prior to a real interaction, individuals who reflected on a conflict after it occurred allowed them to learn from their mistakes and analyze their partners' thoughts and feelings. It allowed them to fully process why they acted a certain way in the initial conversation about the conflict, thereby producing a better self-understanding of themselves. This conclusion supports the previously established finding that IIs involving conflict increase self-understanding as individuals reflect on their positions post-conflict (Honeycutt et al., 2009). As previously discussed, the IIs allowed participants to cope with their conflicts and created a therapeutic space for emotions to be worked through. This reifies the finding that IIs serve to create a sense of catharsis for an

individual in a relationship by allowing one to relieve tension as well as reduce uncertainty concerning another's actions (Honeycutt, 2003). Overall, the functions of catharsis, rehearsal, and self-understanding in IIs were the most prevalent within conflict episodes between intimate partners because of the support they offered to successfully work through conflict.

In terms of conflict-linkage through IIs, the participants never indicated this occurrence. They only discussed conflicts solved during the initial conversation or the second one, depending on the seriousness of the issue. The reflection of a separate conflict during an II never affected the current conflict at hand. Participants indicated that they did not dwell on a separate conflict during the discussion of the current issue, every conflict discussed was resolved separately. This contradicts earlier findings of conflict-linkage, which suggested that people sometimes think about mentioning prior conversations in the current interaction, thereby encouraging them to engage their partner about that conflict with the intent of retaliating (Honeycutt, 2003). Given this finding did not reinforce the idea of conflict-linkage, that does not mean that it does not exist. It just means, for this participant sample, there were satisfying relationships that engaged in healthy relational maintenance and conflict management strategies.

Outside of conflict-linkage, participants identified using IIs to relationally maintain their intimate partnership. Specifically, I found that participants in long-distance relationships utilize the relational maintenance function more than couples who live together or in the same town. For example, they would imagine the next time they saw their partner, a trip they were taking together, an anniversary they were celebrating in the future, etc., to still feel relationally close to their partner when they are not geographically close. They admitted how much this process brought them comfort and kept their romantic feelings surrounding their partner and the relationship alive. This reifies the previous finding that individuals who are in nonmarital

relationships, who have less frequent interactions (e.g., long-distance relationships), use IIs to maintain a relationship (Bodie et al., 2013). Whereas relationships where interactions are more frequent there are less imagined interactions surrounding relational maintenance, and more on conflict and its management.

In terms of the way persons managed conflict through IIs and translated into the real-life interaction, gender identity played a significant role. This study found that individuals identified as both feminine and masculine implemented both collaboration and compromising management styles the most. It supports the findings of Mukundan and Zakkariya (2018), which argued that androgynous persons use the collaborating or compromising styles of conflict management the most. Additionally, feminine/masculine, and feminine-identifying individuals indicated a preference for talking about conflict immediately and like to be straightforward when communicating about their thoughts and feelings. This corroborates previous findings on relational maintenance and gender identity. Specifically, feminine individuals are more likely to focus on relational issues (Aylor & Dainton, 2004) thereby routinely implementing more maintenance strategies, like remaining open within a relationship, than masculine-identifying individuals. It is important because it connects the idea that gender identity influences the way individuals communicate within their intimate relationships and how it subsequently affects their conflict management styles.

Masculine-identifying individuals revealed that they are more collaborative when it comes to managing conflict with their partner. They want to find equal resolve in the conflict so that they can keep moving forward in the relationship. This supports the finding that masculine-identifying individuals utilize strategic relational maintenance behaviors consistent with a ‘fix it’ attitude (Aylor & Dainton, 2004). Thus, although they want to grow the relationship, the way

they interact, communicate, and most importantly, manage conflict to find resolution, further supports this finding. In contrast, this finding goes against results from previous studies reporting that people with masculine gender role identities use the dominating or competing style of conflict management (Mukundan and Zakkariya, 2018). In fact, in the present study the only individuals who identified using the competing style of conflict management, were feminine-identifying individuals in long-distance relationships. This may be because of their expectation of their partners coming to visit them and perception of their masculine-identifying partners as a provider or caretaker, a person that should cater to their wishes.

Feminine-identifying individuals implemented a compromising style of conflict management the most. This was in part to them being empathetic to their partners' thoughts and feelings and thereby succumbing to their wishes while partially satisfying their own. This result further supports previous research establishing that feminine-identifying individuals traditionally are taught to define themselves within their relationship and are socialized to abandon personal goals for the benefit of the other person (Gbadamosi et al., 2014). Occasionally, there were instances where feminine-identifying individuals utilized a more collaborative conflict management style for smaller conflicts offering a clearer and equally fair resolution for both parties, and their partner was not as competitive. This reifies the previous finding that gender role identity has a significant impact on the use of compromising and collaborating styles in conflict (Mukundan & Zakkariya, 2018). Therefore, in the present case, masculinity is linked to collaboration while femininity is linked to compromise. Lastly, although previous studies have not indicated that persons with one gender identity tend to avoid conflict more than others, this study determined that feminine-identifying individuals with a surplus of anxiety tend to avoid conflict initially before eventually compromising with their partner.

Overall, gender identity did have a major effect on the way participants engaged in relational maintenance and IIs as it relates to conflict management. Additionally, the use of imagined interactions prior to managing conflict was cathartic for the participants and allowed them to be more effective communicators in the real-life interaction. Most participants were successful in translating the conflict management utilized in the II into the real-life interaction, except for when an overload of anxiety was present. Lastly, there was no clear connection between gender identity and the emotions experienced when preparing for resolving a conflict with a partner. Given the information discussed in this section, it is clear there are findings that add to the current literature and research of these topics. The next section will identify the weaknesses of this study and then highlight the strengths.

### **Weaknesses**

The weaknesses identified in this study are in relation to data collection, current literature, and the demographics of the participants. First, the participant sample was small. There were only fifteen participants, and out of those there were only four masculine-identifying individuals, three feminine/masculine identifying individuals, and eight feminine-identifying individuals. This could be deemed a weakness because it may not be enough to show a reliable picture of the way imagined interactions are utilized within intimate partnerships when conflict is experienced. Ideally, each of those groups should have had an equal number of participants to generate deeper insight into the variety of perceptions and experiences.

However, the findings did reach saturation after completing ten interviews, as participants' answers started to repeat and no longer provided new and insightful information. The sample was homogenous, meaning that all the participants were between the ages of 20-25, currently enrolled at the University of Arkansas, and all born and raised in the same geographic

region. Given this was a regional sample and not a national one, it is a disadvantage to the study because there was a lack of diversity in the participant sample and their responses and experiences. Researchers in the future potentially should examine a national sample with participants from different regions to see if there is any more variability within their responses. Another weakness could be the fact there is no previous research on these concepts in conjunction with each other, only research on them separately, which did present difficulty when preparing for and organizing this study.

Preventing researcher bias could be considered a weakness in this study because of the difficulty I experienced when interviewing participants. They were unfamiliar with the concept of imagined interactions and relational maintenance strategies and would ask for examples. These examples could have influenced the responses they gave and prevented them from being honest about any turbulence they have experienced within their relationships. Future scholars will need to determine how they can prevent researcher bias through a better formulation of interview questions. Additionally, they could somehow provide thorough definitions and examples prior to the study so that when they conduct the interview the participants already have a firm understanding of the concepts. Hopefully, this would prevent them from making up answers on the spot and allow them to be more truthful and vulnerable in their responses.

Lastly, the topic of discussing intimate information regarding relationships and the conflict experienced within them I think limited the amount of detail that participants were comfortable with providing. Most participants were very upfront and honest, but few appeared timid in revealing their personal thoughts, feelings, and issues as they pertained to their relationship, which was a weakness of this study. Future studies should try and find a way to meet with participants prior to the actual interview to gauge their comfortability with discussing

intimate information as it relates to their romantic relationship. Additionally, future researchers should consider interviewing both partners to further clarify the success rate of individuals who utilize positive IIs that effectively translate over into real life interactions. By doing so, researchers may determine how the IIs of both partners are similar. This would enable researchers to predict the degree to which partners' IIs positively affect the outcomes of the real interactions more accurately. Researchers also could rely on diary entries about IIs and outcomes of subsequent real interactions to see how they are similar. Overall, even with these limitations, the strengths and implications of this study create a clearer insight into how IIs function in conflict management within intimate relationships and help relationally maintain the success of partnerships.

### **Strengths**

Despite its inherent weaknesses, this study made significant contributions to extant research and the imagined interactions framework. First, most findings are consistent with previous literature and findings, contributing to the research of imagined interactions, conflict management, relational maintenance, and gender identity. Additionally, it addressed the qualitative standpoint of these concepts, which has not been done concurrently. Specifically, current literature does not offer findings reflecting the comparison between an individual's descriptions of their IIs and how their actual interactions played out regarding conflict management within their intimate partnerships. Most importantly, the current study offers greater theoretical support for current literature on IIs as it correlates to relationally maintaining partnerships when conflict is experienced.

Another strong point of my research is the methodology. I implemented different qualitative methods to cross-examine how conflict management styles translate into IIs and

subsequent real-life interactions. Previous studies only quantitatively measured how much an individual experiences IIs, and the range of emotions experienced during them. Whereas this study gained interpersonal insight into real-life examples of individual's IIs within their romantic relationships, which are not presently published. Investigating how individuals score on the Thomas-Kilmann (1979) conflict management mode survey and comparing it to the thematic analysis of IIs and subsequent real-life interactions, is a strength because it highlights how important the connections between IIs, and conflict management are for maintaining interpersonal relationships.

Additionally, there are no established conflict management surveys or analysis tools set in place for cross-examining IIs and conflict management styles. This study and future studies would aid in the establishment of a specific measurement technique or tool that helps analyze IIs involving conflict resolution and how it corresponds to real-life resolution styles, further developing the understanding of this connection. Lastly, this study reveals how helpful productive IIs can be for managing conflict, while also improving the current conflict management literature and techniques available for individuals to utilize when attempting to confront conflict.

The present study identifies how individuals prepare for managing conflict with their partner and how much success they achieved when doing so. Moreover, it highlights how the perception of conflict influences the way persons manage it in their IIs and how they attempt to reinforce this perception within the real-life interaction. Overall, this study provides an array of strengths contributing to the current literature and findings regarding these concepts. The following section concludes this study with some final thoughts and reinforces the importance of the findings.



## **Conclusion**

This study examined the connections among the types of communication presented in individuals' imagined interactions with intimate partners about conflict in their relationships, the functions of the IIs, as well as the outcomes of these interactions. It investigated how IIs are used to manage emotions during conflict and subsequently how they can affect relationship satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Moreover, it explored how IIs and conflict management within intimate relationships are similar or different according to persons' gender identities. My hope is that this research encourages further use of qualitative methods in studying IIs in relation to other topics like conflict management, relational maintenance, and gender identity.

Through examining how individuals use IIs to manage conflict with their romantic partner as a means of relational maintenance, it was discovered that there are three general themes of relationships. First, couples who experience adversity within their relationship use it to grow together by focusing on putting forth equal effort, communication, and affection. Secondly, hardships were used to help establish a greater commitment to each other by communicating more about the future and maintaining set responsibilities. The last general theme identified was that difficulty in relationships motivated individuals to maintain a strong partnership despite the geographical distance by effectively communicating, equally contributing to the relationship, and cultivating a deeper connection. General themes of relationships give reasoning to the conflicts that were experienced and the subsequent motivation to manage these issues through IIs to further develop the intimate partnership.

How individuals manage conflict in their IIs and how it translated over to their real-life interactions proved to be successful in this study. Specifically, when participants implemented a collaboration management style into their II, they then were successful in collaborating with their

partner in the real interaction. Those who initially were pushing to get their way and utilized a competing style of conflict management in their II, ended up collaborating with their partner in the real interaction. Demonstrating that if individuals positively imagine a productive and fair management of conflict within their II, it will convert into the real interaction. Conversely, it is hard for individuals to account for their partners' reactions when imagining an interaction, causing some discrepancies to occur within the actual result of these interactions. Essentially, if individuals utilize constructive IIs to manage conflict, they then can find success in actualizing it within the real interaction. Future studies should continue to examine this connection to better understand how beneficial productive II can be for intimate relationships that are experiencing conflict.

Identifying the reasons to address conflict is important because it is what influences the perception and implementation of an II and affects the way an individual ultimately behaves in the actual interaction. Participants expressed wanting to address conflict with their partner for five identified reasons: to gain reassurance of the relationship, re-establish expectations and mutual responsibility, develop better communication practices, build/grow trust, and enhance mutual support and appreciation for one another (see table 1). Without a reason to address conflict, there is no implementation of IIs to find the best way to manage it. Researchers in the future should continue to investigate this connection to further develop the conceptual framework of IIs within romantic relationships.

The present study laid the groundwork for advancing the research of how imagined interactions affect conflict management in different relational contexts. Specifically, future researchers should investigate how IIs are used in conflict management within the home and the workplace to further expand the understanding of IIs in different relational contexts. Including

the analysis of relational maintenance strategies is helpful in this context because it allows participants to reframe the descriptions of their relationship so that researchers can compare subsequent conflict management styles. Not all conflict management is explicitly done or stated. Individuals will actively engage in behaviors or actions that help prevent conflict within the relationship and simultaneously help maintain the partnership. In this study, Appendices C and D were important because the discussion of relationship maintenance strategies helped identify conflict management strategies that are used outside of conflict situations. Therefore, future studies need to consider this connection when examining IIs and conflict management because of the unique perspectives it can uncover.

Overall, the influence that IIs can have on an individual's conflict management style in terms of relationally maintaining a partnership is important to examine because IIs can help individuals better process their thoughts and feelings. Moreover, having IIs fosters the development of habits encouraging healthier conflict resolution strategies, thereby increasing the longevity of a romantic relationship. Research regularly explored the functionality of IIs but never investigated individuals' personal experiences with implementing IIs to combat conflict with their romantic partners. Therefore, this study shows that qualitatively examining these conceptual connections can be beneficial for identifying and enhancing constructive communication and conflict management within romantic relationships.

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## Appendix A



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**To:** Trish Amason

**From:** Douglas J Adams,  
Justin R Chimka, Chair  
IRB Expedited Review

**Date:** 01/12/2022

**Action:** Expedited Approval

**Action Date:** 01/12/2022

**Protocol #:** 2110364387

**Study Title:** Imagined Interactions and Conflict Management in Intimate Relationships

**Expiration Date:** 11/04/2022

**Last Approval Date:**

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution, then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

**Adverse Events:** Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Melinda Shaw, Investigator

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## **Appendix B**

### Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Principal Researcher: Melinda Shaw

Faculty Supervisor: Patricia Amason

#### **INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE**

You are invited to participate in a research study about how you communicate with your intimate partner during conflict.

#### **WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RESEARCH STUDY**

Who is the Principal Researcher?

Melinda Shaw

GA Student

[Mgs012@uark.edu](mailto:Mgs012@uark.edu)

*What is the purpose of this research study?*

The purpose of this study is to determine how individuals utilize imagined interactions to manage conflict within their intimate relationships.

*Who will participate in this study?*

Undergraduate students enrolled in upper-level communication classes, between the ages of 20-25.

*What am I being asked to do?*

Your participation will require the following:

Complete a one-on-one interview session discussing how you communicate with your partner about conflict and complete one survey post-interview.

*What are the possible risks or discomforts?*

The possible risks or discomforts would be potential fatigue associated with providing interview responses or answering the questions, and the potential to become emotional or agitated when discussing conflict resolution issues involving your partner.

*What are the possible benefits of this study?*

Receiving extra credit from the professor who referred you and adding to the literature of how partners engage in relational maintenance.

*How long will the study last?*

Interviews and survey completion should take 30-45 minutes and should not exceed 1 hour.

*Will I receive compensation for my time and inconvenience if I choose to participate in this study?*

There will be no monetary compensation for participating.

*Will I have to pay for anything?*

No, there will be no cost associated with your participation.

*What are the options if I do not want to be in the study?*

There will not be any penalties if you decide to not participate.

*How will my confidentiality be protected?*

All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law and University Policy. The researcher is legally required to report specific incidents which include, but may not be limited to, incidents of abuse and risk of suicide. Pseudonyms will be used if any quotations appear in any resulting publications or reports. Responses are aggregated with those of all persons who complete the interview to identify common themes across all responses. Demographic data will be used to describe the total population of participants rather than to identify characteristics of a particular participant. Audio recordings will be transcribed by the researcher and stored in Kimpel Hall 517, and there will be no video recordings of the interviews.

*Will I know the results of the study?*

No, but if you wanted to read the thesis once it is approved you can email the researcher ([mgs012@uark.edu](mailto:mgs012@uark.edu)) to receive a copy of the thesis.

*What do I do if I have questions about the research study?*

You have the right to contact the Principal Researcher or Faculty Supervisor as listed below for any concerns that you may have.

Melinda Shaw, Graduate Assistant. [Mgs012@uark.edu](mailto:Mgs012@uark.edu)

Patricia Amason, Faculty Supervisor, Department of Communication. [Pamason@uark.edu](mailto:Pamason@uark.edu)

You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office listed below if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

Ro Windwalker, CIP  
Institutional Review Board Coordinator  
Research Integrity & Compliance  
University of Arkansas  
109 MLKG Building  
Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201  
479-575-2208 irb@uark.edu

I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research may be shared with the participant. By signing this consent form and completing the interview, you are agreeing your responses to be used in this research.

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Below list the Professor from which you are requesting extra credit from for participating in this study:

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## Appendix C

At beginning of interview these introductory questions will be asked:

- What is your name?
- Do you identify as more masculine or feminine?
- What is your birthday?
- What is your hometown?
- How long have you been in your relationship?

Now we will discuss a bit more about your relationship. Answer the following questions with as much detail as possible and ask questions if you need any clarification.

**Assurances:** statements that imply a future. Ex: I am so excited for our anniversary and look forward to celebrating many more, I look forward to moving in together, I can see myself with you long term, etc.

- How do you reassure your partner? In what ways do you let them know that you want to continue your relationship with them?

**Openness:** Direct discussion and disclosure.

- In what ways are you open with your partner in your relationship? Give me an example of how you engage in openness with your partner.

**Conflict Management:** How issues are managed when they arise in a relationship.

- How do you typically manage conflict with your partner? What do you do to make sure an issue is resolved?

**Shared tasks:** Fulfilling one's chores or responsibilities.

- What tasks or responsibilities do you and your partner have to keep the peace within your relationship?

**Positivity:** Remaining cheerful or optimistic.

- How do you try to maintain positivity within your relationship? What do you do when your partner is in a bad mood?

**Social Network**

- How often do you spend time with your significant other and your friends/family? How often do you spend time with their family/friends? How would you describe your emotions when you spend time together with these social networks while with your significant other?

## Appendix D

Imagined Interactions are “mental” interactions we have with others who are not physically present. People may have imagined conversations that occur in self-controlled daydreams or while the mind wanders. Sometimes they may occur after a real interaction has taken place. Imagined interactions may be brief or long. They may be ambiguous or detailed. They may address several topics or examine one topic exclusively. The interactions may be one-sided where the person imagining the discussion does most of the talking, or they may be more interactive where both persons take an active part in the conversation.

The following questions will involve IIs, please give as much detail possible in your responses.

- Describe a situation where you engaged in an imagined interaction with your partner about a conflict you were having with him/her/them.
  - Describe if this was an II that occurred before or after a real-life interaction.
  - How did it make you feel after imagining that interaction?
  - Describe who did the most talking in the II.
  - Describe how positive or negative the II was.
- Describe how you managed the conflict in the II and describe how you managed the conflict in the real-life interaction.
  - How did the outcome of the II look?
  - How did the outcome of the actual interaction look?
  - Describe how the real-life interaction made you feel after already experiencing this scenario within your imagined interaction.
  - How did the actual interaction make you adjust your imagined interactions surrounding this conflict?
- Describe a situation where you engaged in an imagined interaction that did not involve a conflict but involved your partner.
  - How did that interaction play out in real life? What similarities or differences were there?

## Appendix E

*The individuals will indicate which answer best fits the way they manage conflict for each question. Afterwards, the results will be scored and interpreted as it relates to the Thomas-Kilmann model (1974), and it will reveal which conflict mode they relate to the most, whether that is competing, collaborating, compromising, accommodating, or avoiding.*

### **Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (1974)**

1.
  - a. There are times when I let others take responsibility for solving the problem.
  - b. Rather than negotiate the things on which we disagree, I try to stress those things upon which we both agree.
2.
  - a. I try to find a compromise solution
  - b. I attempt to deal with his/her/their and my concerns.
3.
  - a. I am usually firm in pursuing my goals.
  - b. I might try to soothe the other's feelings and preserve our relationship
4.
  - a. I try to find a compromise solution.
  - b. I sometimes sacrifice my own wishes for the wishes of the other person.
5.
  - a. I consistently seek the other's help in working out a solution.
  - b. I try to do what is necessary to avoid useless tensions.
6.
  - a. I try to avoid creating unpleasantness for myself.
  - b. I try to win my position.
7.
  - a. I try to postpone the issue until I have had some time to think it over.
  - b. I give up some points in exchange for others.
8.
  - a. I am usually firm in pursuing my goals.
  - b. I attempt to get all concerns and issues immediately out in the open.
9.
  - a. I feel that differences are not always worth worrying about
  - b. I make some effort to get my way
10.
  - a. I am firm in pursuing my goals.
  - b. I try to find a compromise solution.
11.
  - a. I attempt to get all concerns and issues immediately out in the open.

- b. I might try to soothe the other's feelings and preserve our relationship.
12.
  - a. I sometimes avoid taking positions which would create controversy.
  - b. I will let the other person have some of his/her positions if he/she lets me have some of mine.
13.
  - a. I propose a middle ground.
  - b. I press to get my points made.
14.
  - a. I tell the other person my ideas and ask for theirs.
  - b. I try to show the other person the logic and benefits of my position.
15.
  - a. I might try to soothe the other's feelings and preserve our relationship.
  - b. I try to do what is necessary to avoid tensions.
16.
  - a. I try not to hurt the other's feelings.
  - b. I try to convince the other person of the merits of my position.
17.
  - a. I am usually firm in pursuing my goals.
  - b. I try to do what is necessary to avoid useless tensions.
18.
  - a. If it makes other people happy, I might let them maintain their views.
  - b. I will let other people have some of their positions if they let me have some of mine.
19.
  - a. I attempt to get all concerns and issues immediately out in the open.
  - b. I try to postpone the issue until I have had some time to think it over.
20.
  - a. I attempt to immediately work through our differences.
  - b. I try to find a fair combination of gains and losses for us both.
21.
  - a. In approaching negotiations, I try to be considerate of the other person's wishes.
  - b. I always lean toward a direct discussion of the problem.
22.
  - a. I try to find a position that is intermediate between their position and mine.
  - b. I assert my wishes.
23.
  - a. I am very often concerned with satisfying all our wishes.
  - b. There are times when I let others take responsibility for solving the problem.
24.
  - a. If the other's position seems especially important to them, I would try to meet their wishes.
  - b. I try to get the other person to settle for a compromise.



25.
  - a. I try to show the other person the logic and benefits of my position.
  - b. In approaching negotiations, I try to be considerate of the other person's wishes.
26.
  - a. I propose a middle ground.
  - b. I am always concerned with satisfying all our wishes.
27.
  - a. I sometimes avoid taking positions that would create controversy.
  - b. If it makes other people happy, I might let them maintain their views.
28.
  - a. I am usually firm in pursuing my goals.
  - b. I usually seek the other's help in working out a solution.
29.
  - a. I propose a middle ground.
  - b. I feel that differences are not always worth worrying about.
30.
  - a. I try not to hurt other's feelings.
  - b. I always share the problem with the other person so that we can work it out.

The scores from the survey indicate a participant's repertoire of conflict-handling skills, which as an individual, they use in the kinds of conflict situations they face. The five modes represented by the five columns labelled competing, collaborating and so on. In the column under each model is the range of scores on that mode- from 0 (for very low use) to 12 (very high use). I will circle the participants scores on each of the five modes. The double lines (at the 25<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> percentiles) separate the middle 50% of the scores on each mode from the top 25% to the bottom 25%. In general, if their score falls somewhere within the middle 50% on a given mode, they are close to the average in your use of that mode. If their score falls outside that range, then their use of that mode is higher or lower than most of the people who have taken this survey. It should be noted that extreme scores are not necessarily bad, however, since their situation may require high or low use of a given conflict-handling mode. Below is the scoring sheet utilized in this data collection method of the study.

**SCORING THE THOMAS-KILMANN CONFLICT MODE INSTRUMENT**

Circle the letter below, which you have circled on each of the questionnaire

Sr No	Competing (Forcing)	Collaborating (Problem Solving)	Compromising (Sharing)	Avoiding (Withdrawal)	Accommodating (Smoothing)
1				A	B
2		B	A		
3	A				B
4			A		B
5		A		B	
6	B			A	
7			B	A	
8	A	B			
9	B			A	
10	A		B		
11		A			B
12			B	A	
13	B		A		
14	B	A			
15				B	A
16	B				A
17	A			B	
18			B		A
19		A		B	
20		A	B		
21		B			A
22	B		A		
23		A		B	
24			B		A
25	A				B
26		B	A		
27				A	B
28	A	B			
29			A	B	
30		B			A

\_\_\_\_\_

Total numbers of times circled in each column

## **Appendix F**

### **The Codebook**

The following themes will be coded from the formal interview data, in addition to any new ones that arise during data analysis.

- Specific disagreements: refer to a specific communication interaction, more specifically, an argument over a particular issue where there is a difference of opinion/view, hostile/coercive response, defensive behavior, or unpleasant action. (Intimate conflict communication)
- Problem-solving discussions: a negotiation or bargaining session that may deal with an on-going problem consisting of more than one conflicting issue. (Intimate conflict communication)
- Unhappy/ dissolving relationships: relationship's stage where conflicts could involve reoccurring/unresolved issues or general dissatisfaction with the relationship, which could lead to a breakup. (Intimate conflict communication)
- Catharsis: when individuals use IIs to relieve tension and reduce uncertainty. (II function)
- Compensation: when individuals substitute IIs for real interactions, meaning that individuals use IIs to satisfy any desires or concerns that will not be fulfilled within real interactions. (II function)
- Conflict-linkage: when individuals use IIs between arguments and thereby create an ongoing conflict. (II function)
- Rehearsal: mentally preparing for interactions prior to participating in them. (II function)
- Relational maintenance: when individuals utilize IIs psychologically to sustain a relationship by thinking and daydreaming about a partner (II function)
- Self-understanding: When individuals use IIs to gain a deeper understanding of their own attitudes, values, and beliefs. (II function)
- Positive outcome of revisiting conflict: The issue is eventually worked out and resolved through multiple conversations, mentally or physically, and a compromise is met, and the relationship grows from the issue. (Conflict and IIs)
- Negative outcome of revisiting conflict: the issue continues to be brought up, neither party needs are met, and a compromise is not reached. Often resulting in an eventual break up. (Conflict and IIs)
- Emotion management: feelings regarding an interaction are worked through in an imagined interaction and can either escalate or deescalate a conflict, depending on the mindset of an individual.
- Satisfying relationship: an interpersonal evaluation of the positivity of feelings for one's partner and attraction to the relationship, and mutual agreeance on the continuation of the relationship. (Intimate conflict communication)
- Greater agreement: When two individuals in a relationship experience mutual understanding with any conflicts that arise or just general decisions. (Intimate conflict communication)
- Affection: feeling fond of someone or having a greater liking toward them. Expressing attempts of physical or emotional closeness with partner. Can also be described as how you show someone you like them, whether that is verbally or physically. (Intimate conflict communication)

- Humor: being amusing with your partner or being amusing while discussing their partner or thinking of their partner. (Intimate conflict communication)
- Dissatisfying relationship: when conflict is consistently present and mishandled, partners are not treating each other with respect, and feelings of resentment slowly become present. Typically leads to a breakup, if both parties do not actively work together to improve the relationship. (Intimate conflict communication)
- Greater disagreement: When two individuals experience significant differences of opinion/views on an issue, which causes a disconnect in the relationship and typically results in more conflict. (Intimate conflict communication)
- Hostility: feelings of aggressiveness towards partner or relationship, typically involves negative behaviors like name calling, passive-aggressiveness, yelling, etc. (Intimate conflict communication)
- Criticism: disapproval of their own actions or their partners. Finds faults in their relationship, conflicts, their partner, and themselves. (Intimate conflict communication)
- Frequency: how often they do or say something within an imagined interaction or real-life interaction. (II attribute)
- Proactivity: the implementation of imagined interactions prior to an interaction. (II attribute)
- Retroactivity: reflection of an interaction after its occurrence through imagined interactions. (II attribute)
- Gender identities: how masculine or feminine an individual identify themselves as.
- Anxiety: hesitant to address issues with partner, worried other conflicts will arise.
- Dominance: displaying or discussing controlling behavior on their part or their partners.
- Aggression: individuals expressing violent behavior, offensive language, name-calling, etc.
- Sadness: disappointment in themselves, their partner, or their relationship.
- Confusion: participant does not understand the concept that was explained

**Table 1**

<b>Reason to Address Conflict</b>	<b>Example</b>
To gain reassurance of the relationship	<p>Participant felt as though their partner is pulling away from them and their relationship or is bored of them and their relationship. They then address this to receive reassurance from their partner.</p> <p>“My boyfriend has a difficult school schedule this semester and so we do not have as much quality time together that I am used to. When he has time and comes over to hang out, he usually is on his phone or just wants to nap. It started making me anxious and upset and I started to overthink our relationship... I started to worry that he wanted to break up with me or was not happy in the relationship. I ended up mentioning it a few weeks later about how his lack of motivation to have quality time together makes me think we are growing apart, which I do not want to happen. He was very understanding about it and reassured me that he is happy in our relationship, but he is just so exhausted from school. We agreed that he would try harder to carve us out some quality time together by going on one date a week, and that I would not be so hard on him when he has had a difficult week.”</p>
To re-establish expectations and mutual responsibility within the relationship	<p>Participant felt as though their partner does not pull their weight when it comes to sharing household responsibilities. They address this conflict to re-establish the expectations and mutual responsibility within their relationship.</p> <p>“I am very OCD and like to keep my boyfriend and I’s house clean and neat, but my boyfriend is not neat and clean. I found myself picking up after him a lot and it became frustrating... When talking about it I told him how exhausting it is to clean up after two people and a dog all by myself and how I am just as busy as he is but still find the time to do it. We agreed to have a chore chart,</p>

	<p>where we must complete at least 3 house cleaning chores each, every Sunday. He agreed to it, and it has been going well so far.”</p>
<p>To develop better communication practices</p>	<p>Participant forgets to text partner throughout the day, causing proper communication issue. They address this to find a way to better communicate with each other even when life gets in the way.</p> <p>“My girlfriend lives about 30 minutes away from me and we both work and are currently in school. There have been a few occasions when work or school gets too busy, and I forget to text her back or even text her at all. After one day when I forgot to text her until 3 pm I felt awful, called her, and apologized. We met up that night and we discussed a better plan for us to communicate better. I told her to not shy away from reaching out to me more so that I remember to reply, or to give me a call. So far it has worked well for us, and I have not forgotten to talk to her throughout the day since then.”</p>
<p>To build and grow trust</p>	<p>Participant does not hear from their partner when they are out of town for a weekend and is with people the participant does not like or trust. They address this conflict to build and grow their relational trust.</p> <p>“When I saw social media posts from the friends my partner was with that weekend, I began to feel very uneasy. He was not communicating with me much that weekend, so I had no idea what he was doing, and I started to worry. He ended up crashing on a girl’s couch that he is friends with, which really upset me because that was not a part of the original plan...I felt like our trust was strained because of his decisions that weekend... When we discussed it, it became a little heated because I let my emotions get the best of me, but he recognized my feelings and his behavior and apologized. We agreed that</p>

	<p>whenever we are away from each other for a weekend to communicate more frequently and to make each other aware of our plans.”</p>
<p>Enhance mutual support/appreciation</p>	<p>Participant felt as though they are doing more favors for their partner to help make their life easier but does not receive the same support or appreciation from their partner in return. The conflict needs to be addressed to enhance their mutual support and appreciation through equally showing each other.</p> <p>“My partner currently has a full-time job while I am finishing school, so our schedules are a bit different. Whenever he gets home from work, I will cook him dinner and clean up after him because I know he is exhausted. But lately, I have not been feeling appreciated for my efforts and the favors I do for him to make his life easier...I decided to discuss this with him and talked about how I do not receive the same energy or effort in return. He recognized this and apologized. Now he helps me cook dinner or cleans up if I cook. He also has started to leave me sticky notes around our apartment for me to find while he is at work, they are all sweet and state how much he loves me. I am feeling more appreciated now, so I am glad we had that conversation.”</p>