

Mediated Communication in Couple Relationships: Approaches for Theoretical Modelling and Initial Qualitative Findings

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couple relationships, romantic relationships, interpersonal communication, mobile communication, theory of interpersonal media choice, exchange theory, attachment theory, qualitative content analysis, semi-structured interview

Abstract: A growing part of communication in couple relationships involves technical means such as the conventional telephone, the cell phone and the Internet. This study examines how telecommunication media are integrated in the couples' everyday life based on three theoretical approaches: 1. Using the Theory of Interpersonal Media Choice, different profiles of couple's media use were analyzed. 2. By adopting the Social Exchange Theory it was investigated to what extent couples regard their telecommunication messages (i.e. letters, e-mails, SMS) as emotional resources and if and how they strive to achieve equity regarding this message exchange. 3. Attachment theory was adopted to find out how attachment styles affect media use within couple relationships and which role telecommunication media play in attachment situations (i.e. distressing situations in which the partner's support is strongly sought). Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with N=10 respondents (5 couples). A qualitative content analysis of the interview data revealed that couples develop very different patterns of media use, that they indeed see telecommunication messages as emotional resources and that they are able to cope with attachment situations successfully, especially via mobile communication. But sometimes telecommunication media also seem to generate new communication problems. Further research is needed to better understand how telecommunication is embedded in couple relationships and how it transforms couple communication.

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1. Introduction

Interpersonal communication is a central factor in romantic relationships. In the more technically advanced regions of the world, this mediated communication is increasingly taking place through such media tools as e-mails, SMS's (Short Messaging Service = text messaging), answering machine messages, and conventional or cell phone conversations. Reasons for this vary from the wider availability of telecommunications media to an increasing amount of leisure time and job mobility, separate living spaces, and different forms of long distance relationships (SCHNEIDER, 2002; SCHNEIDER, HARTMANN & LIMMER, 2001). In this sense, we shouldn't be surprised when the cell phone company 02 has special prices for couples ("02 GENION DUO"; see also ONE, 2001). A successful relationship is based on good communication, and today that means increasing availability of good telecommunication; a lesson to be learned by users and communication services alike. The goal of the present investigation is to explore the mediated communication of five couples through the use of semi-structured interviews. [1]

2. Theoretical Background

Three theoretical modeling approaches have been chosen, adapted, and jointly implemented: The Theory of Interpersonal Media Choice (2.1), the Social Exchange Theory (2.2), and the Attachment Theory (2.3) form the theoretical background of this investigation. Through the implementation of these three distinct approaches, the factor of technically mediated interpersonal communication can be comprehensively incorporated, and couple relationships can be observed as a complex interpersonal relationship. [2]

2.1 The theory of interpersonal media choice

The model of media choice indicates which criteria are used when choosing telecommunication media (i.e. media characteristics, social norms, etc.). One criterion is the partners' coordination of interpersonal media choice (see also DÖRING, 2003a, S.146f.; HÖFLICH, 1996, S.81ff; KROTZ, 1998, S.130). In the course of a couple's relationship, comprehension and negotiation facilitate and demand an extensive process of institutionalization of daily life, which is also the case in terms of media usage. Thus, couples agree upon whether or not they take their cell phones with them, what conditions are required for a confirmation per SMS, or when a longer discussion should be carried out using conventional telephones. Likewise, certain media must be avoided (for the time being at least), which only one partner possesses. This leads us to one of the fundamental inquiries of this investigation: *How are couple-specific media ensembles and usage patterns developed?* [3]

2.2 The social exchange theory

The everyday life of a couple can be described as an exchange of activities and traits that are weighed out in terms of a cost-benefit balance. People strive to

achieve a positive cost-benefit ratio, but they also keep in mind the cost-benefit balance of their partners. According to the Equity Theory (as part of a theoretical exchange approach), partners strive to obtain profit maximization as well as justice and stability (equity; WALSTER, WALSTER & BERSCHEID, 1978; MIKULA, 1992). Thus, a relationship is more stable and satisfying when the persons involved have the impression that their cost-benefit balance is similar to that of their partner, whereby a positive cost-benefit balance is obviously optimal for both parties. Equity can therefore be regarded globally, but it can also be seen as differentiated according to the various living spheres of the couple (i.e. social support, head of household, sexuality, etc.). [4]

In a relationship, mediated communication can be considered as a living sphere, which is balanced by both parties in terms of an Exchange Theory. Finally, mediated messages (especially when they are written down or digitalized) can be saved and archived. In fact, many youth take the number of SMS's they have received as an indication of their popularity, or lack thereof. Many online-couples interpret the number of exchanged e-mails as an indicator for the quality of their relationship (DÖRING, 2003b, p.553). As long as couples place importance in their mediated communication (which is typically the case in long-distance relationships), an imbalanced exchange can lead to discontent and conflict, and how the problems are resolved can affect the quality of the relationship. These phenomena can be better underscored through our second inquiry of the investigation: *Do couples take their mediated communication as a resource exchange seriously? Are these exchanges balanced by questions of equity? How do they deal with imbalance in their mediated communication?* [5]

2.3 The attachment theory

The configuration of social relationships is jointly decided according to the respective attachment styles of each partner. According to BARTHOLOMEW (1990)—expanding upon the concept of internal working models for close attachments (BOWLBY, 1982)—four different *attachment styles* (secure, fearful, preoccupied, dismissing) exist for adults that permit the differentiation to what extent self-portrayal and one's perception of the partner are interpreted as positive or negative: A person with a secure attachment style has a positive image of him or herself as well as a positive image of his or her partner, allowing for the development of a stable and trusting attachment. A fearful person, on the other hand, maintains a negative self-portrayal as well as a negative image of his or her partner, which as a consequence leads to a relationship of permanent insecurity. A preoccupied person has a negative self-image but a positive image of his or her partner, which explains his or her fears of loss. For their part, dismissing persons have a positive self-image and a negative image of their partners, therefore placing much importance in independence and distance. [6]

Attachment styles determine how partners relate to each other, especially in terms of communication. For example, people with secure attachment styles communicate with one another much more frequently and on a much more intimate level, while detached persons maintain a level of communication that is

both quantitatively and qualitatively poor. The attachment style also influences how people deal with mediated communication. In this sense, a person's availability—independent of place or time—is initially a technical option of mobile communication. They must, however, be socially implemented (taking the cell phone along, turning it on, receiving a call, etc.), whereby attachment styles can intervene, such as the case of anxious-ambivalent persons in the context of jealousy and control, for whom the availability of the partner is important, whereas detached persons find niches where they can protect their non-availability. [7]

Besides the attachment style, the attachment situation is a central element of the Attachment Theory. *Attachment situations* are situations in which the support of the partner and re-affirmation of the relationship are especially sought, such as in moments of stress, conflicts in the relationship, fear, or loneliness (BIERHOFF & GRAU, 1999, pp.156; FEENEY, 1999, p.371). Attachment situations are characterized by emotional urgency, which makes the relationship to telecommunications explicit: Mobile communication can especially facilitate that a partner, in spite of special distance, is able to offer media transmitted support in unexpected, acute attachment situations. This provides us with a third question of our investigation: *What role does the attachment style play in mediated couple communication, and how do couples use telecommunication tools in attachment situations?* [8]

3. Methods

This study is based on semi-structured interviews (3.1) that are analyzed by using Qualitative Content Analysis (3.2). The Sample includes five couples (3.3). [9]

3.1 Oral semi-structured interviews

On the basis of theoretical deliberations, a semi-structured interview was arranged using questions from four related fields:

1. Living situation and a couple's relationship in general
2. Mediated couple communication: Media choice, usage patterns
3. Exchange and equity in mediated couple communication
4. Description of media usage in attachment situations [10]

Following the interview, the study is complemented by: a) a questionnaire for partners regarding five dimensions of relationships (conflict, love, altruism, security, and investment; see BIERHOFF & GRAU, 1999, pp.70); and, b) the self-classification of attachment styles (DOLL; MENZ & WHITE, 1995). [11]

The people interviewed were recruited by using a snowball sampling, and variations in the living conditions (age, occupation, form of living together, etc.) were also taken into account. Furthermore, only couples were interviewed that marked in their questionnaires that they were willing to provide information regarding the very intimate theme of "couple communication." An interview with

one couple was not realized due to their unwillingness to provide information on the topic. The partners were separated from one another and interviewed in their homes. The interviews lasted between 40-60 minutes, and were recorded with a tape recorder and fully transcribed. All participants were given pseudonyms. [12]

3.2 Qualitative content analysis

The interview material was analyzed using the qualitative content analysis developed by MAYRING (1997, 2000). The single interview served as unit of analysis and therefore the study focuses on the individual views of the partners. Only some categories that addressed the couples' interaction were analyzed using the combined text material of both partners. For example, this was the case with equity-related categories. The coding units were the single propositions. A deductive, theoretical-based procedure was combined with an inductive, material-based procedure for the formulation of the categories of analysis. Ten main categories were then developed, which were encoded according to the transcripts: (1) Media usage, (2) Communication habits, (3) Coordination of media usage and communication behavior, (4) Assessment of mediated communication, (5) Equity, (6) Inequity, (7) Personal availability through communication media, (8) Experiences of media-transmitted control behavior, (9) Experiences of media-transmitted jealousy, (10) Experiences of attachment situations. One month later, the ten transcripts were once again encoded in order to secure the intra-coder reliability. No major differences could be reported. The obtained characteristics of the categories were accordingly analyzed in terms of the theoretical questions and their corresponding effects. [13]

3.3 Sample description

Five couples (N=10 people) took part in the interviews. On average, the participants were 23 years old (standard deviation: 5 years). The average length of the relationships was two years. Among the participants, there were five students, two wage earners, two high school students (with one year left to finish), and one in an apprenticeship. According to the distinction made by LEVINGER (1980) regarding relationship phases, the partners in two relationships both agreed that they were in a maintenance phase. The partners from the other three relationships provided divergent accounts, claiming that their relationships were currently in phases of formation, maintenance or crisis. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants and the couples are sorted according to the length of their relationship, with the longest relationship at the top of the table.

Couple	Length of Relationship	Age	Occupation	Relationship Phase	Spatial Distance	Face-to-Face Encounters
Maria & Michael	3 years	21 23	Student Trainee	Maintenance Formation	450 km	Every 2nd to 3rd weekend
Katharina & Olaf	2.5 years	23 27	Student Student	Maintenance	Living together	Daily
Agnes & Erik	2 years	20 23	Student Student	Maintenance	70 km	Every weekend
Christina & Andreas	1 year	33 28	Employed Employed	Formation Maintenance	Living together	Daily
Nicole & Fabian	1 year	18 17	High School Student High School Student	Maintenance Crisis	10 km	Daily

Table 1: Sample description [14]

Two pairs shared a living space, one couple lived about 10 kilometers apart with almost daily face-to-face encounters, and one couple lived 70 kilometers apart and maintained a weekend relationship. In the investigation, one couple (Maria & Michael) represents a pronounced long-distance relationship. Furthermore, not only current situation of the couples could be gathered, but past experiences as well. For example, two couples (Katharina & Olaf, Anges & Erik) experienced long-distance relationships due to stays abroad. One couple, Nicole & Fabian, experienced a phase of separation, following which they once again took up the relationship. All participants were owners of cell phones, everyone but Michael had a conventional phone, and seven of the people interviewed used the Internet for private communication. [15]

4. Results

In the following section, the exploratory findings for the Theory of Interpersonal Media Choice (4.1), the Social Exchange Theory (4.2), and the Attachment Theory (4.3) are presented. [16]

4.1 Findings related to the theory of interpersonal media choice

The five interviewed couples demonstrated very differentiated media usage patterns in their respective relationship phases as well as their reported past phases (see Table 2). The couples mostly employ SMS's and cell and conventional phones for their communication methods; communication through notes was directly associated with shared living spaces (for coordination

purposes or on weekends). A couple's usage of Internet tools such as e-mails or chats was linked to more intense Internet usage of the participants.

Interviewed Couples and Spacial Distances	Cell phone calls	Conventional Telephone Calls	SMS	E-Mail	Letter	Chats	Notes
450 km Maria & Michael	At least twice daily	Seldom	5 times a week	Seldom	Seldom	/	/
Living together Katharina & Olaf	Seldom	Seldom	Seldom	Daily	Seldom	/	Yes
Stay abroad Katharina & Olaf	Often	Once a week	Daily	Once a week	Seldom	Seldom	/
70 km Agnes & Erik	Seldom	Twice a week	5 times a week	Seldom	Seldom	Daily	Yes
Stay abroad Agnes & Erik	Seldom	Daily	Daily	5 times a week	Seldom	Often	/
Living together Christina & Andreas	Up to 15 times a day	Up to 5 times a day	Up to 15 times a day	/	/	/	Yes
10 km Nicole & Fabian	Seldom	Twice a week	Twice a day	Seldom	Seldom	Seldom	/
Separation phase Nicole & Fabian	/	/	Often	Often	Often	/	/

Table 2: Interpersonal media choice and usage patterns of the five couples in their current and past relationship phases (principal media in bold type) [17]

At the time of the interview, Katharina (23) and Olaf (27), both students, spent a lot of time in their apartment and exchanged daily e-mails (through their internal network when both were working on their respective computers). Another couple who also lives together, Christina and Andreas, who are both insurance agents whose daily life is characterized by work mobility, exchanged about 15 cell phone calls and an equal number of SMS messages on a daily basis. The interviews showed that both partners adapted their interpersonal media choice to, among other things, the mobility required in their daily routines, possible costs, and media preferences. With each couple it was possible to ascertain anywhere from one to two dominant communication methods according to the frequency of their use and the meaning they gave to them. [18]

Both of the couples that live together and that have high degrees of mobility, such as the interviewed insurance agents as well as the couples with a long-distance relationship, maintained regular communication on a daily basis. Here is an example from the long-distance relationship (450 km) of Maria (21) and Michael (23):

"I usually call and wake him up around 6 or 7, because he is always afraid he will oversleep. I then go to university where I stay until the evening, then we usually send each other an SMS. We normally talk again in the evening, and both tell about our day. Before going to bed we call each other again to say goodnight." (22-28) [19]

The media-transmitted "good morning" and "good night" have an especially ritualizing character. The two couples with long-distance relationships had established respective primary contacts (in terms of media choice and time for longer social exchanges) as a result of a coordination process, which also includes considerations regarding media usage preferences. In the case of Agnes (20) and Erik (23), both of them are intense Internet users and have a weekend relationship, chats took place almost every night. At the beginning, Agnes preferred conventional telephone conversations, but she began to enjoy her instant messenger chats with Erik and found it to be a valuable medium for relationship communication. She made this adjustment taking into account Erik's communication and media behavior. "*Talking on the telephone with Erik doesn't really work, because Erik doesn't like to talk so much on the telephone. [...] I think Erik can express himself better in writing. I think he is able to say certain things better in writing.*" (84, 167). Erik, on the other hand, knows that Agnes enjoys talking with him on the telephone. Thus this can be interpreted as a compromise in interpersonal media choice, the couple telephoned at least once a week (see Table 2 above). [20]

4.2 Findings related to the social exchange theory

Of the five interviewed couples, four explained that they try to balance their media contact and that equity is an important factor in doing so. According to the Investment-Scale (see 3.1), telecommunication equity did not play a role for Agnes and Erik (Agnes: "*I don't see it in that way.*" [333] "*I hate things like that [balancing]*" [340]) at the same time demonstrated a very low level of engagement in the relationship. When very little is given and very little taken, then balancing obviously is not so important. In part, the participants that invest more in their relationships also deal with media-transmitted messages very explicitly as resources: They collect each others letters and notes, they archive the e-mails, print them out, or even write down SMS messages into a notebook. Mediated messages are especially considered to be emotional resources (an expression of devotion and affection to the partner).

Interviewed Couple	Balance of Media Contacts	Media of Balanced Communication	Importance of Equity	Experienced Equity	Relationship Investment
Maria	+	SMS, cell phone calls,	++	+	6.6
Michael	+	letters	++	+	7.0
Katharina	+	SMS, cell and	++	+	5.6
Olaf	+	conv. phone calls, E-Mail	++	-	5.2
Agnes	-	/	-	-	3.4
Erik	-		-	-	1.6
Christina	+	SMS, cell and	++	-	8.6
Andreas	+	conv. phone calls	+	+	7.7
Nicole	+	SMS,	+	-	2.4
Fabian	+	conv. phone calls	+	-	3.0

Table 3: Mediated couple communication as resource exchanges (balance of media contacts: yes +/no -; media of balanced communication, importance of equity: important + /less important +/irrelevant -; experienced inequity: yes +/no -; investment in relationship: Min=1, Max=9) [21]

Even though six of the interviewed participants said they had no experience with inequity in mediated couple communication (Fabian: "*I find it very well-balanced*" [218]), four couples described their experiences of inequitable exchanges. The interviewed couples each handled the inequity experienced in their mediated communication differently. Thus, imbalances in a telephone conversation can be psychologically problematic as an indicator of asymmetric engagement or of a current crisis (Katharina and Olaf). But they can also become a topic of discussion in terms of inequitable cost burdens, which in the case of Maria and Michael could be resolved by taking turns who calls whom. Inequity can develop as a result of different media preferences. In this sense, almost all of the women complained about an imbalance in the exchange of letters with their partners, because they themselves deem postal letters to be a very valuable resource. In order to eliminate the resulting inequity in letter communication due to the "laziness" of her partner, Maria (21) reduced her own production of letters somewhat. She carried this behavior out as described below:

"Because it is so irregular [letter writing]. If he would always write it would be great, everything would be fine. [...] But for me it's not so cool when nothing comes back. [...] I don't really get mad, but I loose my desire to write, because I know that I am not going to get anything in return." (138-144) [22]

It could be observed that the satisfaction and fairness in terms of the partner's use of the main medium has an influence on the equity felt within media communication. How sensible a partner reacts to equity, or if they discover a level of inequity at all, should generally be assessed in a differentiated manner. For example, Nicole (18) indicated that she overlooks small differences that exist between SMS messages and telephone calls:

"Let's put it this way, when it would be like that during a long period of time, then I think one would probably miss it. But one just thinks that the other person is very busy at the moment or just doesn't have any time." (236) [23]

However, a long-lasting imbalance in the couple's communication and contact attempts is something that she would not accept: "*I don't think that this would have, let's say, much of a future, because it is so one-sided*" (242). It appears worthwhile to investigate the relationship between media equity and the handling of media inequity on the one hand, and satisfaction in the relationship on the other. [24]

4.3 Findings related to the attachment theory

The interviewed persons were ranked according to their attachment styles (see 3.1). Furthermore, the subjective importance of mediated personal availability, the occurrence of control and jealousy in the relationship, as well as the frequency of face-to-face and mediated communication of the couple (see Table 4) was gathered. Interestingly, irregardless of a person's attachment style, an important variance could be seen in terms of a partner's continuous personal availability. Of the interviewed couples in steady relationships, the importance of personal availability was ranked as follows:

- low (Quote: "... *That I am often available has less to do with Agnes and more with other things.*")
- medium ("*I think that if you really want to reach somebody, it is pretty much sucks when they are not available.*") and
- high ("*For me, or maybe for both of us, I think that being able to be reached by telephone was very important.*") [25]

In spite of their different attachment styles, three couples concur in their expectations regarding personal availability. In the case of two of the couples, the expectations of personal availability were distinct, and for one partner they were especially ambivalent (Quote: "*It's really something with a cell phone: On the one hand, I wouldn't want to be without it, but on the other hand it can really be bothersome.*")

Inter-viewed Couple	Attachment Style	Importance of Availability	Control	Jealousy	Face-to-face Contact	Mediated Contact
Maria Michael	Secure Secure	High High	+	+	Every 2 nd to 3 rd weekend	Several times daily
Katharina Olaf	Fearful Secure	Medium Medium	+	+	Daily	Daily
Agnes Erik	Fearful Secure	Low Low	-	-	Every weekend	Daily
Christina Andreas	Preoccupied Fearful	High Ambivalent	+	+	Daily	Several times daily
Nicole Fabian	Dismissing Secure	Medium Ambivalent	-	+	Daily	Daily

Table 4: Couple communication and attachment styles (importance of personal availability, control (present +; absent -), jealousy (present +; absent -), frequency of mediated contact [26]

Both the connection between attachment styles (in other words, the combination of attachment styles of both partners) and the characteristics of couple communication are obviously very complex issues. The form of living together and, as a consequence thereof, the frequency of personal contact clearly affects the subsequent methods of mediated communication. Thus, in the relationship of Maria and Michael—the only couple to have a "secure-secure" attachment—the negative experiences of jealousy and alternating attempts at control through telecommunication emerged primarily due to circumstances of a long-distance relationship. [27]

On the other hand, the case of Christina (33) and Andreas (28) permitted the investigation of a relationship with a "preoccupied-fearful" attachment style. This could be seen in the notably strong communicational behavior, which was especially imposed by Christina. Andreas, whose fearful attachment style should be seen in conjunction with an ambivalent attitude toward personal availability, couldn't really comprehend Christina's constant telephone calls: "*I always think twice before calling. [...] I'm pretty rigorous about it too. She doesn't do that. She just picks up the phone and calls ...*" (190-192). In comparison with Andreas, Christina made it very clear that the importance she places on personal availability and frequent contact is radically different than the importance Andreas places on telephone communication. Christina felt good about the extreme frequent contact and didn't even really know that Andreas found it to be exaggerated: "*Whenever there is something that we need to talk about, then we immediately pick up the phone and call. [...] It only takes me a second to pick up the phone. [...] And that's just how contact is. As a consequence, our telephone bill is very high*" (38-42). To what extent diverse perceptions of couple communication are determined by different constellations of attachment styles, a

possibly insufficient process of coordination of media usage and communication behavior (see 4.3) and/or other factors, must be further investigated. [28]

Of the ten people interviewed, seven spoke of experienced attachment situations, and two of them spoke of the attachment behavior of their partners. From the ten interviews, twelve different attachment situations could be extracted and analyzed (see Table 5). The most important finding is that mobile communication is especially used in attachment situations. Cell phone calls or SMS's were used in all attachment situations in which an immediate attachment behavior followed. Likewise, it could be seen that the level of stress accompanies an initial demonstration of the attachment behavior. The number of different types of attachment situations is rather large and a coherent classification system is still lacking.

Person	Medium	Contact Latency	Reason/Quote
Maria	Cell phone call	Immediate	Nightmare "I often dream for example that he cheats on me. I dream this quite often. I think it probably has to do with the distance [...] And when I dream something like that, then I call him immediately. He listens to me and then, 'ah, don't worry, just go back to sleep.'" (237)
Michael	Cell phone call	As soon as possible	Work conflict "Well, there was a situation or two when I had a conflict with my boss, where I was confused and thought it wasn't fair, so I called her and asked her what she thought about it." (170)
Michael	Cell phone call	Immediate	Homesickness "I was really homesick and I wanted to hear her voice. I also wanted to be comforted." (170)
Katharina	Cell phone call	Immediate	Concern about partner, Mountain Bike Tour "Because I wanted to know what was happening. He called me with his cell phone and I knew he was on a bike tour. I thought something had happened." (275)
Katharina	Cell phone call	Immediate	Letters from his ex-girlfriend "I was quite agitated, because of what I found under the bed. There was a box with pictures from his ex-girlfriend." (127)
Olaf	E-Mail	?	Fear of cheating (explained by Katharina) "Olaf once wrote me an e-mail. He was quite upset, because he had somehow got it into his head that I was going to cheat on him." (127)

Erik	Telephone call	Ritualized	Spatial separation "Back then, as she was still studying in Stuttgart, we were often times separated for two to three weeks at a time. We called each other quite often." (99)
Christina	Cell phone call	As soon as possible	Work conflict "Some times you just have to get things out. A client badmouths like "you stupid bitch" or something like that. It does happen. And then it's very pleasant to just let it out... 'Just imagine! You just have to tell someone." (275-277)
Christina	Telephone call	As soon as possible	Concern about the well-being of the daughter "The last time was when I found out that my daughter no longer had health insurance. [...] For me, that was an especially stressful situation. I called immediately. [...] I just had to get it out of me." (281-287)
Nicole	SMS	Requested by partner	Didn't pass driver's exam (explained by Fabian) "She had her driver's test, the theoretical part, and she didn't pass. Then she told me that it didn't work out, but I first had to ask her about it." (168)
Nicole	SMS + Cell phone call	Immediate	Partner's meeting with ex-girlfriend (explained by Fabian) "I met with her and then first she called and then she wrote, wanting to know what we were doing." (226)
Fabian	Telephone call	As soon as possible	Own sickness "I called her and told her I wasn't feeling very well, and she comforted me and just kind of talked." (162)

Table 5: Media-influenced attachment behavior (medium, response to occurrence, and reason/quote) [29]

As it can be seen, media-influenced behavior can often times have a positive effect on certain situations. What is important here is that the problem can be communicated in spite of spatial distance, and that the corresponding partner reacts in a comprehending and attentive manner, as was the case for Michael:

"Well, there was a situation or two when I had a conflict with my boss, where I was confused and thought it wasn't fair, so I called her and asked her what she thought about it. After telling her about it, I felt better, probably because I had someone to let it out to. [...] Naturally, she listened to me and understood, and maybe she can't always give me good advice. But for me it is above all important that I could express myself, and that the person that I love know how I feel and can deal with it." (172-176) [30]

Of the attachment situations described in Table 5, the majority of them (ten of twelve) could be successfully handled with communication media, and the experience was felt to have strengthened the relationship. In addition, the specific traits of the media also played a role. Thus, independent of place and location, cell phones especially facilitate immediate communication with the possibility of direct feedback from the partner. Moreover, mobile communication can not only help in resolving certain attachment situations, it can also help to *create* them: When the normally provided personal availability is suddenly no longer possible (i.e. due to technical problems like dead batteries, no reception, or if the cell phone has been left at home), concern, fear, and stress can arise, because the partner trying to communicate with the other doesn't know what to make of the situation. Katharina (23) and Olaf (27) describe such an experience: Olaf went on a mountain-bike tour in the forest, but didn't come back at the agreed upon time. Katharina then received a cell phone call from him:

"I could barely understand that something was being said, as if someone doesn't have a good reception. Then the telephone rang again. I answered again and just said, 'Olaf, I can't understand you, I can't understand you.' Then there was silence. I then tried about 25 times, it was on the bill later, I think I tried 25 times to reach him, and each time I just got his mailbox. I just wanted to know what had happened. He called me on his cell phone, and I knew that he was on his bike tour. I thought something had happened. The worst thoughts ran through my mind. He is lying somewhere on the ground and only has enough strength to use his cell phone. Then I thought to myself, 'O.K., he is somewhere in the forest where he has no reception', and at some point he is going to arrive somewhere where he has reception again. But it seemed like forever. Then it was four, then five, then five-thirty. I just sat there without really knowing what to do. Just before six, I thought to myself, 'call the police so that the can send out a rescue team'..." (275). [31]

Meanwhile, Olaf experienced a different situation. In the interview, he described what happened from his point of view:

"I really only wanted to tell her that it was going to take a little longer. I miscalculated how much time I was going to take. But because the reception from E-Plus is so terrible in the forest, everything went wrong when there was no reception" (46). [32]

In attachment situations where the possibilities of mediated or personal communication emerges or is strengthened, it seems to depend on the attachment style in terms of how crisis of personal availability—as dramatically described in the interviews—are dealt with: A fearful or preoccupied personality would probably assume some kind of threat much more so than a secure attachment personality would. [33]

5. Conclusion

Couple communication is increasingly a mediated form of communication. This is especially true of mobile communication (see KATZ & AAKHUS, 2002). Thus, couples are required to develop an interpersonal media choice in accordance with collective media choices and usage patterns. This includes the establishment of regular or even ritualized contacts. According to the Social Exchange and Equity Theories and the confirmed statements made by the interviewed persons, mediated messages are indeed handled as resources that are archived and balanced out. Postal letters are regarded as an especially valuable resource. Imbalances in mediated couple communication are perceived as critical to the relationship and handled in different manners. The connection between attachment styles, the importance of mediated personal availability, as well as phenomena such as media-articulated attempts at control and jealousy appear to be very complex. Nevertheless, the importance of telecommunications in distinct attachment situations is clear. Also clear is the fact that technically provoked disturbances in personal availability create new attachment situations in mobile communication. [34]

This investigation explores telecommunications in the context of romantic relationships—an integrative approach that has been neglected in both communication studies and relationship research (see HIRTE, 2000). The qualitative methods permit an in-depth data collection and analysis of different individual cases in a research field that to date has been scarcely investigated. A systematic examination of other cases (older couples, couples in a long-term relationship, etc.) is desirable. Other areas of investigation for the qualitative and quantitative studies are also necessary. Thus, a classification of attachment situations must be developed so that the significance of mediated communication as well as the resolution and creation of subsequent situations becomes more transparent. Likewise, the cross-references between the individual approaches need to be elaborated: The treatment of mediated message as resources, which for example are actively archived (printing out e-mails, writing down SMS messages, etc.) makes communicative equity or inequity more transparent. At the same time, the subsequent resources are also used in attachment situations (reception of archived messages in situations of separation, emotional distress or loneliness, etc.). Finally, apart from the fundamental scientific importance, the subject also has practical relevance: Successful mediated couple communication can be conceived as a special instance of media competence. Moreover, it is advantageous for media services providers to recognize usage patterns in relation to product development and marketing. [35]

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