Visual interpersonal communication on social network sites in romantic relationships

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Abstract

Based on a research project examining visual communication in close relationships in Switzerland, this study examines interpersonal communication between romantic partners on social network sites (SNSs). It explores (1) the role of SNSs in couples' communication repertoires and (2) the social functions accomplished in the exchange of visual elements on SNSs. Sixty-three semi-structured couple and individual in-depth interviews with romantic partners ($N = 42$) were conducted, including network drawings for visual elicitation. The results suggest that interpersonal communication on SNSs is intertwined with mass self-communication on SNSs and other channels that make up the communication repertoires of romantic partners. The partners nearly exclusively exchanged visual elements through interpersonal communication on SNSs, accomplishing four social functions: phatic communication, visual references to shared experiences and shared knowledge, functional sharing, and inspirational sharing. This study extends understanding of the importance of communicative interdependence in the field of interpersonal communication and the significance of visual communication on SNSs in maintaining romantic relationships.

Keywords: social network sites, visual communication, romantic relationships, interpersonal communication, communicative interdependence

1. Introduction

Romantic relationships are established and cultivated through social interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), and relational maintenance (Miczo et al., 2011) mainly occurs through mediated and non-mediated interpersonal communication between partners (Trenholm & Jensen, 2011) in everyday life (Duck & McMahan, 2015). Interpersonal communication between partners is actualized through a unique, co-constructed, and negotiated ensemble of media and communication channels that we refer to as a communication repertoire (Hasebrink, 2015; Linke, 2011; Wagner & Reifegerste, 2022). Due to the proliferation of networked visual technologies, communication repertoires are increasingly mediatized (Hepp & Krotz, 2014) and visualized (e.g., Lehmuskallio, 2021). Social network sites (SNSs) are frequently used and included in such repertoires but are rarely explored in terms of interpersonal communication and visual communication. Therefore, this paper examines two research questions: 1)

What role does interpersonal communication on SNSs play in couples' communication repertoires in terms of maintaining romantic relationships? 2) Which social functions are accomplished in the exchange of visual elements between romantic partners through interpersonal communication on SNSs?

Romantic partners usually seek to be in perpetual contact (Katz & Aakhus, 2002) and use a range of multimodal media (Haythornthwaite, 2005; Madianou & Miller, 2013) to perform several social functions and uses (Lobinger, 2016). SNSs are part of the communication repertoire built by partners and play a role in maintaining intimate ties (Chambers, 2013). Initially designed as platforms for conveying content to a broad audience, SNSs have evolved and are constantly transforming, integrating new forms and possibilities of interpersonal communication. They have become alternatives to other media and communication channels such as e-mail, instant messaging apps, and blogs (Livingstone, 2009), further facilitating their daily use. Previous research has shown that SNS affordances encourage the use and exchange of visual content (Serafinelli, 2018) and represent suitable platforms for exchanging mundane and everyday moments (Bayer et al., 2016) through photo-sharing practices (Murray, 2008). For instance, visual exchange can occur through direct messaging on SNSs, echoing but not substituting other communication channels such as WhatsApp (Villi, 2012).

Up to date, research on SNSs and romantic relationships has mainly focused on publishing (e.g., Fox & Warber, 2013; Robards & Lincoln, 2016), although some studies have shown that private messaging between close relationships on SNSs is associated with increased intimacy (Brown et al., 2017). Previous studies in the field of romantic relationships have examined the relations between SNSs and psychological traits, such as jealousy and satisfaction (Drouin et al., 2014; Seidman et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2017), but the communicative functions of interpersonal communication relating to SNSs have rarely been addressed. Moreover, despite the relevance of visual content on SNSs, studies on the use of visuals on SNSs and their social functions (Van House, 2011) in romantic relationships remain scarce. Finally, very few studies have investigated SNSs and romantic relationships against the backdrop of couples' entire communication repertoires. Rather than considering single platforms in isolation, contextualizing SNSs with other adopted media and channels allows for a better understanding and contextualization (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013) of couples' communication dynamics.

The present paper is based on a research project examining the interpersonal and visual communication of close social relationships in Switzerland. In this project, we investigated the construction of couples' communication repertoires based on 63 semi-structured in-depth couple and individual interviews with 42 romantic partners (21 dyads). We also examined the communicative and visual functions performed through different media and communication channels, including SNSs.

This study aims to underscore the important communicative role of SNSs in interpersonal communication in romantic relationships and the vital function of the visuals involved. Moreover, it contributes to interpersonal communication and visual communication studies by focusing on the "everyday" practices, responding to the urgent need for new research and studies addressing everyday topics and experiences (Brabham, 2015).

The following section defines fundamental concepts such as romantic relationships and relational maintenance. Subsequently, we explain how SNSs, visual communication, and photo-sharing practices are indissolubly intertwined with the maintenance of romantic relationships in everyday life. Thereafter, we contextualize romantic relationships within the frameworks of mediatization (Hepp & Krotz, 2014) and mixed-media relationships (Parks, 2017) in a visualized society. Finally, we describe the qualitative methods adopted in the study and present and discuss our findings.

2. Interpersonal communication as relational maintenance in romantic relationships

Romantic relationships are defined as "acknowledged mutual, ongoing interactions, characterized by distinctive intensity, expressions of affection, current or anticipated sexual behaviors" (Collins et al., 2009, p. 632). In the present study we address only dyadic couples, but romantic relationships can include

non-monogamous, open, or polyamorous relationships (Klesse, 2018). Partners maintain their romantic relationships through interpersonal communication, that is, communication that happens between two people. Such dyadic communication is "generally spontaneous and informal; the participants receive maximum feedback from each other; and roles are relatively flexible, as partners alternately act as sender and receivers" (Trenholm & Jensen, 2011, p. 24).

Romantic relationships are typically divided into three phases: initiation, maintenance, and deterioration. Although the maintenance phase is less commonly acknowledged than the initiation and deterioration phases, examining it is essential as people spend more time maintaining relationships than developing or dissolving them (Duck, 1988). The maintenance phase of relationships needs to be studied as an ongoing process where both parties play a crucial role (Duck, 1985) and where interpersonal communication is pivotal because interactions are interdependent and reciprocally influential (Shotter, 1993). Indeed, unless both partners are committed to actively keeping their relationship alive, it will likely deteriorate (Stafford & Canary, 1991; Walster et al., 1973). Such maintenance behaviors (Stafford, 2003), or maintenance strategies (Canary & Stafford, 1992), include both intentional actions and habits and routines established within the relationship to sustain the bond (Miczo et al., 2011). Everyday communication—that is, ordinary, mundane, and routinized interactions that happen on a frequent or "daily" basis (Duck & McMahan, 2015)—constitutes the majority of partners' interpersonal communication and is, thus, the basis for maintaining a romantic relationship. Since SNSs are usually used with great regularity (Kemp, 2023) and are expected to be included in the everyday communication of romantic partners, one of the two purposes of this research is to understand what roles SNSs play in everyday interpersonal communication repertoires for maintaining romantic relationships.

3. Social network sites and interpersonal communication

Social network sites are a subset of the ever-growing category of social media. Existing research illustrates that social media are part of an ecosystem of new platforms that are constantly evolving (van Dijck et al., 2018). The term "social media" can refer to various forms of online communication, such as blogs, user-generated content sites, message boards, and instant messaging apps. Platforms with interpersonal contact as their primary purpose (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, or Twitter) and where lists of other users are visible have been defined as SNSs (boyd & Ellison, 2007; van Dijck, 2013). Despite the lack of reliable data focusing specifically on SNSs, data about social media indicate that the number of active users worldwide reached 4.76 billion at the start of 2023. On average, users (16–64 years old) spend 151 minutes a day on social media (Kemp, 2023). Furthermore, SNS users increasingly include young children (Gray, 2018; Hartley & Potts, 2014).

These data are evidence of widespread social media use as well as the centrality of their use in everyday life. Moreover, they indicate that people mainly use social media to keep in touch with friends and maintain family ties (Kemp, 2023). This aligns with early research findings indicating that SNSs are functional for maintaining existing relationships (Ellison et al., 2014; Tufekci, 2008; Vaterlaus et al., 2016), particularly through sharing and exchanging mundane everyday moments (Bayer et al., 2016; Chambers, 2013; Iftikhar et al., 2017; Kahlow et al., 2020; Piwek & Joinson, 2016). However, studies on SNSs and the maintenance of interpersonal relationships have mainly focused on modes of mass self-communication (Castells, 2009), a form of communication according to which SNS users can self-generate content and reach a potentially large audience. These kinds of practices are favored by social media platform affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018) that ease the blurring of the boundary between the public and private (Baym & boyd, 2012; Lasén & Gómez-Cruz, 2009). Despite the proven importance of images in the context of interpersonal communication (Hunt et al., 2014; Okabe & Ito, 2006; Prieto-Blanco, 2022) and the central role of visual elements on SNSs (Kofoed & Larsen, 2016), much of the research has only marginally included visual aspects. Photo-sharing, or publishing image content, has been examined with general measures such as frequency of communication (Ledbetter et al., 2011), self-

disclosure (K.-T. Lee et al., 2013), SNS usage (Espinoza & Juvonen, 2011), and sense of belonging (Soriano & Cabañes, 2020). In other cases, visual elements have been used solely as stimulus material (e.g., Liu et al., 2016; Shin et al., 2019); however, the communicative functions of visuals have not been explored.

In addition to mass self-communication, romantic partners may choose to communicate on SNSs by adopting masspersonal communication practices (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018). Masspersonal communication refers to intentional communication meant *only* for the purpose of addressing a partner but that occurs in ways that are visible to a larger audience. Examples on SNSs are visible posts, comments, reactions, tags, and verbal and visual representations of the couple, crafted to address the partner's attention. Alternatively, romantic partners can choose to keep their conversations private through direct messages, which are a typical affordance of SNSs.

Numerous studies have investigated the uses of mass self- and masspersonal communication practices on SNSs in the maintenance of close and romantic relationships (e.g., Billedo et al., 2015; Madianou, 2016; Wang et al., 2017). However, little attention has been paid to interpersonal communication between romantic partners using SNSs. One exception is the study by Tong and Westerman (2016), which compared masspersonal and interpersonal communication in relational maintenance. They found that partners were more likely to use direct messages to discuss intimate matters or communicate negative information. Instead, masspersonal communication was used for positive relational presentations and to provide uncertainty-reducing information. However, despite their valuable role in SNS use, Tong and Westerman (2016) did not consider the communicative functions of the exchanged visual content.

4. Visual communication and social network sites

Research on SNSs and romantic relationships has almost completely neglected the role of visual communication and its visual functions. Indeed, previous studies have especially focused on evaluating jealousy or attachment style, usually in connection with "partner monitoring" (Darvell et al., 2011; Marshall et al., 2013; Muise et al., 2014; Utz & Beukeboom, 2011). Others have investigated retroactive jealousy (Fox & Frampton, 2017; Frampton & Fox, 2018), "relationship visibility" (Emery et al., 2014), disclosure practices (Robards & Lincoln, 2016), or the ways in which relational behaviors on SNSs reflect the relationship lifespan (Brody et al., 2016). However, due to the proliferation of networked photography (Rubinstein & Sluis, 2008) and social photography (Weilenmann et al., 2013), interpersonal communication in romantic relationships has also increasingly become visualized and cultivated through visual communication practices (Lobinger et al., 2020) that are central on SNSs (Leaver et al., 2020). Consequently, this lack of research on visual communication in romantic relationships should be addressed. In this study, we understand visual communication as "the circulation of non-linguistic pictorial elements that feature in cultural artifacts distributed via media technologies" (Aiello and Parry, 2020, p.4). Nowadays, visuals are taken as an everyday practice (Gye, 2007; D.-H. Lee, 2005), with subjects depicting everyday life (Murray, 2008; Van House, 2011; Van House et al., 2005), including "banal" and ordinary motifs (Koskinen, 2005; Peng, 2019). The primary use of photography and other visuals switched from immortalizing and keeping memories (Barthes, 1980; Bazin, 1967) to instantaneously sharing visuals with other people (Prieto-Blanco, 2010; 2016b).

Photo-sharing (Kray et al., 2009; Murray, 2008; Nightingale, 2007) supports relational maintenance through various social functions (Lobinger, 2016b; Van House, 2011; Van House et al., 2004). For example, exchanging visuals can play a phatic role (Kurvinen, 2003; Lobinger, 2016b, Prieto-Blanco, 2010; Villi, 2012), help in micro-coordination (Ling & Yttri, 2002), create a sense of closeness (Kofoed, 2018; Prieto-Blanco, 2016a), or be a source of memory and representation (Gye, 2007). Furthermore, mundane visual exchanges can engender visually mediated co-presence (Lasén, 2015), perpetual contact (Katz & Aakhus, 2002), or entire visual conversations made of several interactions (Katz & Crocker, 2015; Koskinen, 2005; Villi, 2012).

As photo-sharing is a communication routine in everyday life (Lobinger, 2016), it has become a typical practice on SNSs (Kofoed & Larsen, 2016). The most popular SNSs, such as Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook, are increasingly visual-based platforms (Leaver et al., 2020), and visual communication on SNSs can include a variety of visual elements, such as photographs, videos, gifs, stickers, or emojis. Studies on the role of photo-sharing on SNSs and romantic relationships have mainly focused on masspersonal communication. One example is Farci and colleagues (2017), who found that respondents posted pictures accessible to their entire contact list but expressly directed toward their partners. As such, they were conveying emotional and intimate meanings that could only be understood within their relational context (Farci et al., 2017).

By focusing on interpersonal communication rather than masspersonal or mass self-communication on SNSs, the present paper seeks to contribute to the visual communication research field by investigating why visuals are exchanged by romantic partners in their private conversations on SNSs. Motivations, rather than motifs, will be examined to understand which visual functions are involved in such photo-sharing practices, especially in comparison to similar exchanges on other channels. Therefore, SNSs are investigated with respect to the entire communication repertoire of romantic partners.

5. The communicative repertoires of romantic relationships

The emergence of ubiquitous computing (Dourish & Bell, 2011) has induced what boyd (2012) called an "always-on lifestyle." Ubiquitous technologies are embedded in everyday life, and interpersonal communication is increasingly technologically mediated and mediatized (Hepp & Krotz, 2014; Storey & McDonald, 2014). By bridging spatial and physical distance, this constant connectivity allows for micro-coordination (Ling, 2004) and fosters ambient co-presence (Madianou, 2016), thereby engendering intimacy and closeness (Gómez Cruz & Miguel, 2014; Su, 2016). Romantic relationships can be characterized as mixed-media relationships (Parks, 2017), which means that they are conducted via multiple media. Indeed, partners use various media to maintain their relationship (Haythornthwaite, 2005). The integration of multiple media has been found to nourish a strong sense of connectedness (Licoppe, 2004); however, choosing between multiple options is never an easy task (Schwartz, 2004). Romantic partners need to negotiate and decide on which media and communication technologies—and for what reason—to establish their interpersonal communication (Döring & Dietmar, 2003).

The set of multiple media functions as an integrated web where every communication channel works with all others (Madianou & Miller, 2013) as part of a complex "media manifold" (Couldry, 2011). In other words, romantic partners accomplish their interpersonal communication through a potentially vast communication repertoire of multimodal means of communication, which are used not in isolation but interdependently (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013). Additionally, communicative interdependence does not only concern partners switching their communication from one media to another (Pusateri et al., 2015); specific interactions of everyday interpersonal communication exchanges are always a segment of a larger discourse and a shared understanding that partners constantly co-build as a mutual narrative of their unique relational biography (Agha, 2006). This spatial, temporal, and multi-mediatic dyadic interconnection includes interactions that take place in present encounters but also, for example, via text messages, phone calls, video calls, postcards, and, among the others, SNSs.

To grasp this mediatized character of interpersonal relationships, we adopted the approach of repertoire-oriented, non-media-centered media research (Hepp, 2010). This approach allowed us to consider the intertwining between mediated and face-to-face communication (Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017) and the interdependence between the different media that romantic partners use for their everyday interpersonal communication (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013). Thus, we investigate the role of SNSs and the functions of the visuals exchanged through them not in isolation but against the backdrop of couples' communication repertoires. This investigation is relevant because it contributes to a better understanding of couples' interpersonal communication dynamics and explores how interpersonal communication

works in the context of platforms that are mostly perceived as suitable for mass self-communication practices.

6. Method

6.1 Data collection

The data used for the present study were collected as part of a larger research project investigating visual communication in close relationships in Switzerland. Between September 2019 and July 2021, we conducted 63 semi-structured in-depth interviews with 21 romantic couples (42 adults, 18–91 y/o, M = 36.3). The interviews were conducted in (Swiss) German, French, Italian, and English. The participants were contacted following a selective (or purposive) sampling approach (Lamnek & Krell, 2016) in order to ensure the highest level of diversity in terms of (regional) origin, age, level of education, profession, the duration and type of romantic relationship, housing and status situations, and whether the couples had children. Additionally, we ensured contrast regarding same-sex and different-sex relationships (see the Appendix and the Data Availability Statement for detailed information)[1].

We first conducted semi-structured in-depth couple interviews with each couple, followed by individual interviews with the members of the dyad after about two weeks. Therefore, each respondent was interviewed twice, allowing for both individual and couple perspectives to be captured. The interviews lasted between 50 and 163 minutes.[2] They were conducted at the respondents' homes when possible or at another location chosen by them. Upon receiving consent, the interviews were recorded using a recording audio device.

The first research question sought to investigate the role of SNSs within the broader communication repertoires of couples. Consequently, it was necessary to adopt a methodology that would explore all the communication channels used by both partners of the dyad and their respective functions and modes of use. To this end, we used visual methods and asked the participants to create a network drawing (Hepp et al., 2016; Figure 1), through which they were to create and describe their communication repertoires.
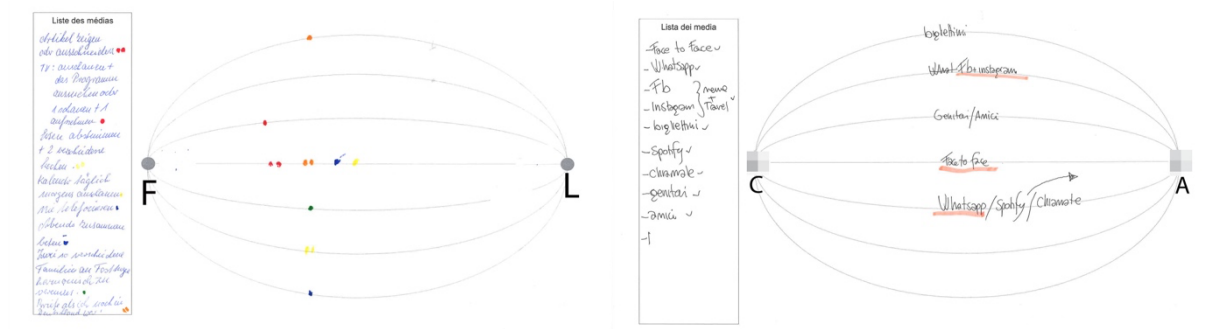

Figure 1. Examples of communication repertoires

Two communication repertoires created through network drawings by respondents.

A network drawing is a research tool that utilizes a minimal graphic structure to facilitate the creation, expression, and visualization of complex structures (Hollstein, 2011). At the beginning of the couple interviews, we asked the respondents to create their communicative repertoire by considering all the media, apps, and communication channels they used in their relationships. The channels were distributed

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[1] For further information about the overall project participants, see Lobinger et al. (2024). While in the overall project couples and close friendship dyads were examined, this article focuses exclusively on couples.
[2] Incentives were used due to extensive time investments from the participants.

vertically and horizontally according to their importance to the relationship and the individual. In the examples above, the two partners filled the left column as a brainstorming tool and later reported the items in the drawing. The channels and media in which visual communication was used were underlined (e.g., in red on the drawing on the right) at the interviewer's request.

Similar to other repertoire-based methods that grasp the use of mediated communication within larger social networks, such as 'mediagrams' (Lexander & Androutsopoulos, 2019), network drawings are a highly effective visual elicitation tool. Negotiating the placement of a single item on the graph allowed for a reflection on and comparison of the actual use of a medium and the occasions of use involved. Once created, the respondents were invited to verbally describe their communication repertoire. Their narrative helped us understand the purposes for which a specific channel was used and with what kind of (visual) content. The communicative repertoire created in the couple interviews was then used as a starting point for the individual interviews. The reintroduction of the communicative repertoire helped the interviewer to create a bridge between the two interviews and allowed the respondents to revisit and explore the use of communication channels from an individual perspective.

Among the two interviews, to investigate the social functions of visual exchanges on SNSs, we asked for which reasons partners use visual communication on SNSs, with which frequency, and in which situations they opt for the visual modality rather than text. We included questions about the typical visual content of SNS interpersonal communication, expected and actual reactions from the partner, perceived norms, and shared rules of visual communication on SNSs. We contextualized the findings by collecting additional information about general SNS use and individual publishing activities. During the entire duration of the interviews, participants were invited to show visuals while discussing their visual communication on SNSs.

6.1 Data analysis

Network drawings were used as elements of visual elicitation. The network drawings created by the participants varied significantly from each other, both in terms of content and the way they were created. Therefore, to analyze the type and functions of interpersonal communication channels used by the couples for relationship maintenance, we relied mostly on the verbal narratives by the interviewees, not on an analysis of the drawings themselves.

First, the interviews were transcribed in the language in which they had been conducted. Two researchers then coded the data using the NVivo software for qualitative coding. The coding process was accomplished through a combination of inductive and deductive categorizations and ongoing discussions between the two researchers, who collaboratively created a codebook. The interviews were initially analyzed individually and through the creation of case summaries (a case summary included one paired interview and two individual interviews). The authors employed cross-case coding and analysis to reveal similarities and differences across the cases.

This paper was not concerned with the content of the collected images but, rather, the perceived functions of these images regarding interpersonal communication on SNSs between the two partners. They were analyzed directly from the interview transcripts, with the images and network drawings used solely to support the analysis.

7. Results

Our findings suggest that SNSs played a marginal role in the respondents' interpersonal communication, despite being extremely important for mass self-communication. Many of our respondents had a profile on one or more SNSs, which they utilized daily, but not all of them used SNSs as channels for interpersonal communication. Generally, the respondents considered direct messages on SNSs as alternatives to using other messaging applications, such as WhatsApp, which was the preferred channel

overall for textual or visual exchanges. SNSs were described as the primary sites for playful interpersonal communication, which was perceived as fundamental for maintaining the relationship within everyday interaction.

When present, interpersonal communication on SNSs was intertwined with mass self-communication on SNSs and other channels of the romantic partners' communication repertoires.

The partners nearly exclusively exchanged visual elements in interpersonal communication on SNSs, confirming the central role of visual communication on SNSs. Their visual exchanges accomplished four main functions: phatic communication, visual references to shared experiences and shared knowledge, functional sharing, and inspirational sharing.

In the following paragraphs, we first contextualize our findings by describing the romantic partners' reasons for SNS use. We then discuss the relation between mass self-communication practices and interpersonal communication. Subsequently, we illustrate the ways in which interpersonal communication on SNSs is linked to that on other interpersonal communication channels, which ought to be understood in the context of couples' communication repertoires. Finally, we provide empirical examples to illustrate which functions are accomplished by exchanging visual elements in interpersonal communication on SNSs.

7.1 Romantic partners' reasons for SNS use

Two of the most frequently mentioned reasons for SNS use were keeping track of other people's lives and communicating about one's own life. These motivations were perfectly summarized by Carolina (female, 19 y/o),[3] who used Instagram "*to see what other people do and also show what I am doing (…) especially close people, those whom I know*."[4] Other motivations included keeping track of information and events, fighting boredom, disconnecting from a stressful life, or facilitating in-person meetings. For instance, Leonardo (male, 22 y/o) loved playing chess and used SNSs to find new opponents ("*I have many friends who follow me on social media who play chess. Then sometimes, I post a story (…) with the words 'today someone is playing chess?'*"). In general, our respondents mostly used SNSs for mass self-communication practices, sometimes involving their romantic relationships. As Tommaso (male, 33 y/o) described, publishing "couple pictures" on his SNS profile had become a habit because "*even if my profile is about myself, my woman, my wife, is part of my life, thus part of myself.*"

Sharing "couple pictures" was not the only method used to present the relationship online. Marianna (female, 31 y/o) explained that "*also publishing pictures about things we have done or seen together*" can play the same role. Additionally, the romantic relationship itself was sometimes the sole incentive for SNS use. Natalia (female, 40 y/o) started using Instagram when her relationship with Patricia began. "*My pictures online are mostly pictures with Patricia. I started to use Instagram when our relationship started (…) now she is part of my every day, she became part of my everyday (…), and I publish part of my every day, which can also be a holiday, a special event during my life, that is it.*"

Some couples decided not to post anything about their relationship online, either due to privacy concerns, to keep their relationship more intimate, or because they did not have SNSs profiles. Lisandra (female, 58 y/o) reflected on her decision not to present her relationship online and argued that it could be a generational characteristic. "*I think that people of our age are not used to publishing their pictures, as people do nowadays, where you publish everything that you do as a couple, even kissing or hugging. We were not that exhibitionistic, and I find that to be exhibitionism.*" Whether it is through posting couple pictures or other information that more or less explicitly confirms the existence of the partner to the SNS audience, several couples explained that they had developed particular strategies and norms for presenting their relationship on SNSs.

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[3] We shall only report a participant's age and gender upon first mention of them.
[4] All quotes have been translated from Italian, (Swiss) German, or French into English.

7.2 The relationship among interpersonal communication, mass self-communication, and communication repertoires

With respect to sharing couple pictures, partners reported the use of mass self-communication in presenting or maintaining romantic relationships. Other examples included tagging the partner in published content or exchanging comments below shared content, which would be visible to larger audiences. However, in the discussion on SNS use, it emerged that on-platform mass self-communication should not be seen as contradictory to interpersonal communication between romantic partners. Conversely, experiencing content published online by other users—that is, mass self-communication content—turned out to be the basis for interpersonal communication on SNSs. Indeed, the content accessed by partners while navigating SNSs became the inspirational thematic subject of the direct messages exchanged by couples. People typically found interesting content online and forwarded it to their partner while remaining on the platform.

Moreover, by implementing a repertoire-oriented approach, we found that interpersonal communication on SNSs was inextricably linked to other communication channels adopted by the couples. When maintaining the relationship through communication, direct messages exchanged on SNSs could be the starting point of further discussion, confrontations, or even activities that were then conducted or discussed elsewhere and that would not have occurred without the initial interpersonal contact on SNSs. People initiated conversations on SNSs and then moved to face-to-face communication, phone calls, or messaging apps. For instance, Alberto (male, 25 y/o) explained that it was typical for him and her partner to send each other promotional pictures about ongoing events via direct messages on Facebook Messenger. "*It is teamwork. She finds something on the SNSs. Then, I understand what is doable and what is not.*" In these situations, the conversation would not proceed via SNSs. "*Maybe we call each other, or we have a chat on WhatsApp, where we discuss and say, 'it could be done, let us try this.'*"

Alternatively, the respondents used direct messages on SNSs to return to issues that had previously been discussed or experienced elsewhere. Indeed, SNSs were the main channels for sharing fun and entertaining content, which was sometimes phatic but often involved references to shared knowledge and shared experiences. The partners perceived such exchanges as beneficial for maintaining the relationship because they helped lighten their daily mood while keeping in touch.

7.3 Functions of visual exchanges on SNSs

The role of visuals was found to be crucial for interpersonal communication on SNSs. All exchanges within interpersonal communication on SNSs mentioned by the participants involved visual content. Such content, which varied from pictures, videos, gifs, memes, and other visual forms, was always directly related to that *found* on platforms. The sharing of only visual content found on a platform rather than, for example, pictures taken by partners, differentiated visual exchanges on SNSs from how partners communicated on other channels. Indeed, WhatsApp was considered the default channel for sharing photography between partners, with e-mail being a rare exception when there was a need for less quality reduction caused by data compression. Once interesting visual content was found online, partners always sent it through the same SNS where it was found, avoiding channel switching. Remaining on the same platform rather than sending the content via another channel was perceived as both easier and quicker.

The exchange of found visual content through interpersonal communication on SNSs responded mainly to four communicative functions: phatic communication, visual references to shared experiences and shared knowledge, inspirational sharing, and functional sharing. In the following section, we describe these functions with the aid of empirical examples.

7.3.1 Phatic communication

Most of the visual content exchanged on SNSs by romantic partners was entertaining in nature. "*I use SNSs for entertainment. In a sense, I look at a few photos, a few videos (...), and maybe there is some funny content, and then I forward it to him.*" Marianna (female, 31 y/o) reported using SNSs as a hobby to pass the time. While scrolling home pages and navigating through posts, she would come across funny pictures, videos, or memes and would share them with her partner. Matteo (male, 19 y/o) also recounted a similar pattern. "*Instagram,*" he said, "*has become a bit like WhatsApp, that is, the mode of communication, the mode of messages*." He explained that he and his girlfriend had a preference for WhatsApp over Instagram as communication medium; however, he also added that "*when I find something funny while scrolling through the (SNSs) newsfeed, I send it to her.*"

The content of such visual elements was perceived as unimportant, rather foregrounding phatic communication, that we understand as visual sharing "where the communicative significance is more relevant than the contents of that communication" (Lobinger, 2016b, p. 482; see Malinowski, 1923/1960, for the original notion of "phatic communion").

Figure 2. The funny cats

An example of phatic fun and entertainment sharing between Diego (male, 32 y/o) and Marianna. While scrolling through Instagram stories, Diego found a random funny video of a cat and decided to share it with Marianna.

Hannah (female, 18 y/o) explained that the pictures she exchanged with her boyfriend Timo on Snapchat were "*not really important.*" She engaged in photo-sharing only to keep the conversation going.

Animals were often the subjects of this kind of phatic exchange (Figure 2)[5]. Carolina underlined that "*we exchange funny videos, that kind of stuff. Videos with animals doing things.*" Similarly, Chiara (female, 21 y/o) laughed while recounting that her boyfriend would send her tons of dog pictures: "*he sends so, so, so many puppies on Instagram!*" When asked about the reasons for such exchanges in the dyadic interview, she and her boyfriend Filiberto (male, 23 y/o) answered that they sent them "*for a laugh.*"

This example echoes the motivations of other couples for sharing fun and entertaining content. "*Facebook? Let's say purely playful—we exchange maybe some silliness that's on some cartoons; we share them if they make us laugh (...) So it is purely playful, and on the outside, not significant for real communication, let's say*" (Tommaso, male, 33 y/o). To support his statement, Tommaso showed a video he had found online, which he sent to his wife. The video introduced a child asleep on the back seat of a car. Suddenly, the driver plays the renowned children's song titled "Baby Shark"[6] and the little one suddenly wakes up and starts dancing.

In terms of the romantic partners' communication repertoires, SNSs were not the only channel used for phatic communication as partners fulfilled the same function through messaging apps such as WhatsApp. When away from each other, they tended to send each other brief texts for updates on how the other was doing. Either on SNSs or WhatsApp, such communicative exchanges hardly resulted in prolonged conversations. As Carolina explained with respect to Instagram, "*when he (the partner) sees something funny, he sends it to me, but we don't write to each other. I mean, it's not like we write 'hi how are you?'*"

Carolina distinguished between sending texts and visuals as means of phatic communication, but they can both serve the same purpose. In addition to text and audio messages, visual communication also played a role in keeping in touch throughout the day through WhatsApp. Pictures were often spontaneous mundane exchanges meant to share the moment with the partner by sending an image of, for example, food, a landscape, or a situation they were experiencing. For both SNSs and WhatsApp, it was not the content that was considered valuable but, rather, the aim of keeping in contact, which helped the respondents feel close and enter momentarily into the other's life, even without being physically together.

7.3.2 Visual references to shared experiences and shared knowledge

Other kinds of content led to fun and entertainment while conveying a specific meaning that could be understood exclusively by the two partners. We define this function *visual references to shared experiences and shared knowledge*.

In this case, the visual element served as a placeholder containing a reference to the relationship, the partner, or the experiences they shared together. On the one hand, such visuals presented a joking tone and often represented a form of fun and entertaining sharing with the partner. On the other, "*they represent our lives or situations that we both have experienced*" (Kim, female, 24 y/o). This kind of sharing showed that even individual use of a SNS, such as simply scrolling through a newsfeed, could suddenly prompt thoughts about a partner and one's relationship.

Filiberto explained that "*sometimes, we both have some behaviors, you know, and she might find a video in which she recognizes this behavior of mine, and so, she sends it to me as a joke.*" Figure 3 shows a meme in which two characters look at each other while in bed. The text reads: "*when she/he continues to touch you with cold feet.*" Chiara maintained that it represented their life as a couple. She always has cold feet, and they joke about it. Another example of this typical exchange was provided by Matteo, who would forward digital visual content to Carolina "*every time there is something that happens to us, and they do a meme about it.*"

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[5] This and all the following pictures have been collected during the interviews with prior consent and have been anonymized.
[6] The song was part of a music trend in Switzerland at the time of interviewing.
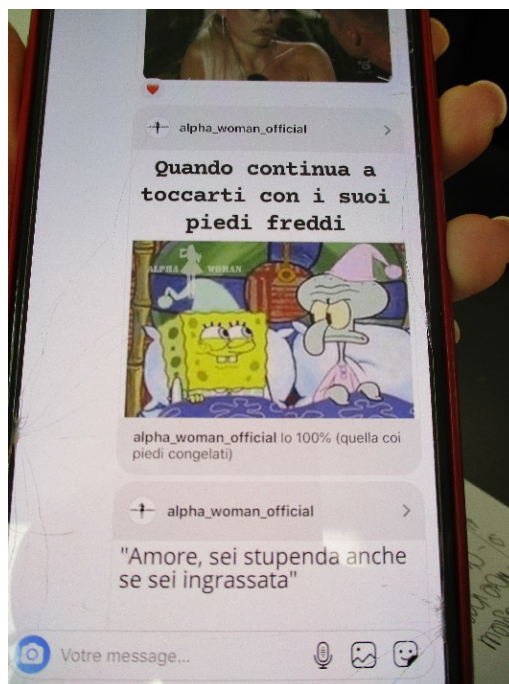
Figure 3. The cold feet

A meme sent through Instagram direct messages from Chiara to Filiberto. The image recalls a typical funny situation experienced by the couple.

Such exchanges were a placeholder that made the partners think, "Hey, it is talking about us," thus resurrecting memories about the own relationship. The references were typically some stereotypes that could apply to couples in general. However, they were perceived as personal by the romantic partners, who employed interpersonal communication on SNSs to laugh about their shared relational knowledge, thereby strengthening their relational bond.

Finally, in some situations, the exchanged content referenced previous discussions the partners had had on other communication channels. One of our respondents gave an example of what typically happened after she watched media content with her boyfriend. "*The last time we went to the cinema, we saw a trailer about the new Charlie's Angels movie,*" explained Carolina, "*then we had a discussion together. At the end, he said, 'they are cool,' and I replied, 'yes, but they are not the original ones.'*" Some days later, Carolina found an image of the original Charlie's Angels, and she sent the picture via SNSs to her partner. This example illustrates that interpersonal communication on SNSs sometimes nudges the resumption of a conversation started through other channels.

7.3.3 Functional sharing
A third communicative function of visual exchanges on SNSs is what we call *functional sharing*. Romantic partners use direct messages on SNSs to forward valuable and practical information found online about a topic of interest to the partner or the relationship. Although it is not always the case, functional sharing can involve an active search for information on SNSs. Such sharing usually serves as a starting point for future reflection or conversation, which then typically occurs off the platform. Interpersonal communication on SNSs conveys additional information that would not have otherwise been discovered, but SNSs are limited to the role of information sources.
Figure 4 shows that Marika and Tommaso used SNS private messages to exchange pictures of potential new furniture for their children's bedroom. In this case, Marika was actively looking for sales announcements on Facebook. Sending a picture through SNSs allowed her to first have feedback from

her husband before proceeding. "*I sent him some pictures of the bedroom*," said Marika (33, female), "*because as it usually happens, he is not here in person. Thus, if I have to make decisions, I share with him anyway*." Marika explained that she used Facebook Messenger only because Tommaso was away from home. Otherwise, she would have probably shown him the picture. When needed, interpersonal communication on SNSs would be used in the first instance, then the couple would move to in-person negotiation.

Figure 4. Children's bedroom

A picture of bedroom furniture that Marika sent to Tommaso through interpersonal communication on a SNS.

Functional sharing also involves informative posts or pictures of upcoming events, such as exhibitions, dinners, concerts, or public events, that a couple might be interested in joining. Partners share the first prompt via private conversations on SNSs, then the organization moves elsewhere, typically through face-to-face or phone conversations.

7.3.4 Inspirational sharing

In some cases, the visual exchanges on SNSs fulfilled the function of inspiring a partner's interest in a (hypothetical) desirable situation related to the relationship. Unlike functional sharing, the visual content in *inspirational sharing* possesses a dreamy component that unties visual communication from a practical and immediate dimension, thus depicting an ideal future situation.

In Figure 5, we see a typical exchange between Raul (male, 24 y/o) and Tobias (male, 22 y/o), who shared a mutual interest in cars and were thinking of buying a new model. As Raul scrolled through his newsfeed, he found a post depicting a picture of an expensive car that was undoubtedly unaffordable based on their finances. He forwarded it to Tobias and ironically said, "*We need that*." Tobias answered, "*Yes, totally, that is awesome*."

Another example of these visual exchanges can be in the form of content on exotic travel destinations or luxury purchases. Such inspirational exchanges can engender shared moments of fun about unrealistic goals but can also portray a more realistic, desirable situation that can be cultivated in an indefinite future.

While playing with the desires and dreams of partners, inspirational sharing can help in intensifying and strengthening the relational bond by projecting the relationship into the future, with the assumption that the two partners will stay together.

Figure 5. The dreamy goal

A picture of an expensive car exchanged on Instagram between Raul and Tobias.

Furthermore, inspirational sharing usually serves as a bridge to continue a conversation that has already been initiated through other channels (e.g., discussing the best car model to purchase) and in providing new reference points for future conversations. In fact, when the respondents resumed a conversation in person regarding purchasing a car or booking the next trip together, they would jokingly refer to the "dreamy" and "ideal" visual content exchanged on SNSs.

8. Discussion

This study explored the role of interpersonal communication on SNSs in romantic partners' communication repertoires. We also investigated the social functions accomplished by romantic partners when they exchange visuals through interpersonal communication on SNSs.

We learned that romantic partners perceived SNSs primarily as sites for mass self-communication, for example, for publishing couple pictures, rather than for interpersonal communication. The romantic partners in the study used SNSs for interpersonal communication but only when they found interesting or funny content on the platform and forwarded it to their partner.

In line with communication interdependence theory (Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013), our findings illustrate that interpersonal communication on SNSs can serve as a starting point for conversations pursued through other channels, as shown by our respondents through their examples of functional sharing. Alternatively, it can serve to continue a conversation started elsewhere, for example, when the partners shared content referring to previous shared experiences or knowledge.

According to Pusateri et al. (2015), communication interconnectedness can occur between face-to-face and mediated communication and among different mediated communication channels. These examples show that understanding interpersonal communication on SNSs can be facilitated by addressing the entire communication repertoire through a repertoire-oriented approach (Hepp, 2010).

The interdependence between interpersonal communication on SNSs and other communication channels confirmed Agha's (2006, p. 70; see also Caughlin & Sharabi, 2013) finding: a dyadic conversation is also a chain segment – a segment of larger communicative processes – in the sense that any two individuals who engage in conversation have, of course, participated in various discursive conversations before, and thus bring to the event biographically specific discursive histories.

This finding also demonstrates that SNSs constitute a specific and, at times, indispensable segment of a broader communicative process that include various communication channels. In this sense, choosing to employ SNSs as part of the mediated communication channels for interpersonal communication contributes to relational maintenance. Indeed, according to the media multiplexity theory (Haythornthwaite, 2005, 2018), close relationships benefit from the use of a diverse array of communication channels, as it fosters increased relationship closeness (e.g., Balayar & Langlais, 2021; Barakij et al., 2019), strengthens ties (Taylor & Ledbetter, 2016), and enhances partner's well-being (Chan, 2015).

Additionally, our results illustrate that interpersonal communication on SNSs is mostly initiated through visual exchanges, confirming the crucial role of visual communication on SNSs (e.g., Leaver, 2020). We found that visual exchanges on SNSs accomplished four main social functions in maintaining relationships: phatic communication, visual references to shared experiences and shared knowledge, functional sharing, and inspirational sharing.

Our findings on phatic communication confirm previous research on SNSs and visual communication, showing that pictures perceived as unimportant or banal can foster closeness (Bayer et al., 2016; Kofoed & Larsen, 2016). Mundane daily conversations help preserve the bond, contributing to relationship maintenance (Alberts et al., 2005; Guerrero et al., 2021).

Similarly, visual references to shared experiences and knowledge contributes to relational maintenance by fostering visual intimacy (Lobinger et al., 2021). This is in line with the finding of Prieto-Blanco (2022), which highlights that visuals can be perceived as extensions of intersubjective knowledge and experiences shared with close ties, contributing to creating a sense of belonging within the relationship. Additionally, our study confirms that the act itself of looking at visuals – even in the case of random visual content found on SNS – can trigger emotions and memories of shared events, serving as emotional resources that increase relationship closeness (Rose, 2010; Prieto-Blanco, 2016; Venema & Lobinger, 2020).

In line with previous research (Van House et al., 2005), the results on functional sharing show that visuals can convey complex information concisely and can be used in place of textual information. The immediacy of the visual modality can contribute to efficiently accomplishing practical needs such as micro-coordination (Ling & Yttri, 2002), helping partners maintain the relationship while navigating daily tasks and events.

Inspirational sharing plays on the desires and dreams of romantic partners, fueling visual imagination (Phillips et al., 2013) of shared passions or experiences to be cultivated together in an indefinite future. Projecting the relationship into the future contributes to relational maintenance since the relationship is assumed to continue (Lang & Carstensen, 2002) and indicates a desire for longevity that reflects relationship commitment (Stafford & Canary, 1991). When used and perceived as surrounded by such a

"dreamy" component, visuals are particularly suitable for eliciting an emotional reaction (Lapenta, 2011) and thus can strengthen and intensify the emotional bond of the partners.

The partners reported sharing only visual content that they found directly on SNSs. This is in line with Tong and Westerman (2016), who reported that partners typically exchange content such as video links, web pages, or "inside jokes" that only the couple can understand. Our participants did not report exchanging links or web pages, which could be explained by the affordances of the specific SNSs used. Sharing with a partner a post published by another user via a direct message on Instagram, for example, is not very different from sharing with the partner a link published by another user on Facebook. Indeed, it still concerns sharing a reference to content found on an SNS.

Considering that only visual content found online is exchanged through SNSs contributes to understanding why SNSs are not perceived as ideal channels for interpersonal communication.

Indeed, our respondents also took pictures with their camera phones, to share with their partners a moment they are experiencing. Sharing the moment through visual exchange has been reported in previous research on photo-sharing practices as functional for relational maintenance (Kofoed & Larsen, 2016; Kurvinen, 2003; Villi, 2015).

However, such exchanges occurred through WhatsApp, which the respondents indicated was the most commonly used messaging app for textual interpersonal communication in everyday interactions—corroborating previous research reports on Switzerland (Ueberwasser & Stark, 2017). Thus, despite perceiving SNSs as an alternative to WhatsApp, the participants adopted messaging apps and private communication on SNSs in distinct ways.

Consistent with previous research (Serafinelli, 2018), imagined platform affordances (Nagy & Neff, 2015) seemed to play a role in encouraging photo-sharing practices through interpersonal communication on SNSs. In motivating the sharing of digital content found on SNSs, the romantic partners explained that on-platform affordances made it easier and more intuitive to share the content with someone by staying on the same platform where they found the content. Such motivations are consistent with previous studies on media choice and channel switching, which claimed that individuals choose certain technologies for convenience or to adapt to technical difficulties (Pongolini et al., 2011). Moreover, when questioned about potential future uses, some of our respondents explained that the affordances offered by the camera tool of SNSs within private messages (e.g., filters and editing tools) might be the only reason to opt for SNSs for the purpose of sending pictures taken by themselves.

As reported in other studies investigating photo-sharing on SNSs (Bayer et al., 2016), interpersonal communication on SNSs is predominantly distinguished by playfulness and entertainment, two aspects that contribute to relational maintenance (Baxter, 1992; Hsieh & Tseng, 2017; Proyer, 2014). Play is a safe communication strategy that serves several social functions, such as promoting spontaneity or increasing bonding (Proyer, 2014), and playful interactions can help cultivate intimacy (Baxter, 1992). Our respondents explained that the content exchanged for the sake of phatic communication and the visual references to shared knowledge and experiences were typically "funny," helping them maintain "light" contact with their partner and strengthening the relational bond. Tong and Westerman (2016) also found that romantic partners were more likely to use SNS private channels to convey intimate or negative information while presenting a positive image of themselves as couples through their publishing activities. Contrary to suggestions by Tong and Westerman (2016), our respondents explained that private conversations on SNSs were unsuitable for negative discussions and confrontations, neither for addressing negative topics nor for particularly intimate conversations. For these kinds of issues, romantic partners avoided SNSs and messaging apps, considering face-to-face or phone confrontation more appropriate because of the more significant presence of richer cues. We argue that technological changes, such as increased use of Voice-over-Internet-Protocol apps (Fumagalli et al., 2021), could have also played a role in these different findings.

Brown and colleagues (2017), referring to interpersonal communication on SNSs between close relationships, reported that friends demonstrate their value for their close relationships by sending private,

personalized messages that require immense time investments. Our findings, in contrast, illustrate that interpersonal communication on SNSs typically ends with the first message or the first reply from the partner, with further discussion potentially continuing through other channels. Therefore, interpersonal communication on SNSs was adopted for exchanges that did not require time investments but, instead, for those that were mundane and spontaneous.

9. Conclusion

Our research illustrated that, at first glance, interpersonal communication on SNSs is perceived as marginal and not particularly important for maintaining romantic relationships. Interestingly, however, messaging apps, such as WhatsApp, with similar affordances to private conversations on SNSs, are extensively adopted and play a central role in couples' communication repertoires. Nevertheless, our study shows that adopting a communicative interdependence perspective is beneficial instead of studying interpersonal communication on SNSs per se. The importance and relevance of interpersonal communication on SNSs was revealed only when interpreted against the backdrop of couples' communication repertoires. Indeed, interpersonal communication on SNSs can serve as a prompt to begin new conversations on other channels and as a trigger to recall shared experiences and continue conversations started outside of SNSs. Moreover, interpersonal communication on SNSs presents three characteristics that distinguish it from that on other channels: the exchanged content from which a conversation starts is exclusively visual content found on the platform; most exchanges present a very light, playful, and funny tone; the conversation never goes beyond a few short exchanges.

Furthermore, we highlighted the crucial role of visual communication in romantic partners' interpersonal communication on SNSs and described four social functions accomplished through their exchange of visual content that can contribute to maintaining the bond. First, visual exchanges serve the function of phatic communication, where "irrelevant" and entertaining content is shared for the sole purpose of maintaining connection in the dyad. Second, it can help maintain the relationship by sharing the memory of shared experiences or knowledge. Third, it works as functional sharing, that is, sharing information on topics of mutual interest that may lead to new conversations or joint actions carried out outside of the platform. Fourth, it helps project the relationship into the future via inspirational exchanges about desirable or "dreamy" future experiences, maintaining the relationship by making assumptions about its longevity (Lang & Carstensen, 2002).

Finally, we clarified that visual exchanges between romantic partners on SNSs involve nearly exclusively visual content found on the platforms and then forwarded to a partner. From the partners' point of view, such content, which was initially the product of a mass-communication sharing act of another user, became an opportunity to initiate interpersonal communication. This last consideration indicates that mass self-communication and interpersonal communication on SNSs are not opposites; instead, they can be intertwined and reciprocally inspirational. Further research could then explore the interplay between mass self-, masspersonal, and interpersonal (visual) communication on SNSs and investigate the implications for SNS use by romantic partners.

Our research presents some notable limitations. First, the findings are based on a national sample and, thus, are restricted to a specific geographical area. Moreover, some age groups may be underrepresented despite our sample including people across a broad age spectrum (18–91 y/o, M = 36.3). For instance, including a higher number of elderly couples could have led to different results. Furthermore, we did not include adolescents under 18. Future research is encouraged to include adolescents because of potential dissimilarities in SNS use, and previous research has illustrated that children become social media users at a young age (Gray, 2018; Hartley & Potts, 2014). While we made concerted efforts to guarantee confidentiality and employed inclusive language during our participants' recruitment, regrettably, we could not include individuals in polyamorous or open relationships. Consequently, we acknowledge the limitation of our research in not encompassing diverse forms of romantic relationships beyond the dyadic

bond. Future research should include non-monogamous relationships when investigating romantic relationships and SNSs; or, if not possible, should investigate what factors contribute to non-monogamous participants' hesitancy in engaging with research, such as potential privacy concerns, professional apprehensions, and the fear of judgment, discrimination, or misunderstanding arising from potential perceived social stigma.

It must also be considered that this research was qualitative in scope and, thus, was based on a small sample size, and the nature of our analysis was explorative. This is not a limitation per se, as we obtained very dense data and gained in-depth insights into the communication practices of couples. The present study does not aspire to reach generalizability in terms of the results. Future research is invited to do so and apply our findings in quantitative investigations.

Additionally, our study focused on the maintenance phase of romantic relationships. However, several studies have underlined that romantic partners' SNS use changes according to the stages of relationship development (e.g., Fox & Anderegg, 2014). In our study, some respondents who no longer used SNSs for interpersonal communication reported using Snapchat during dating. Before becoming a couple, they used it to exchange pictures as phatic communication, but also for erotic exchanges. Such insight confirms that sexting may take place on platforms that provide the possibility of ephemeral communication (Poltash, 2013). Further research might investigate changes in visual sharing practices through interpersonal communication on SNSs between romantic partners in the maintenance and initiation phases.

Despite its limitations, to our knowledge, our study is one of the first to address interpersonal communication on SNSs between romantic partners and link these exchanges to communication practices involving other platforms and media. Our findings contribute to extending understanding of the importance of communicative interdependence in studying romantic relationships and highlighting the crucial role of visuals on SNSs, hopefully paving the way for further research about SNSs with a focus on visual communication.

Data availability statement

Supplemental material about the larger research project on which the article is based can be found at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10557162.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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