

The function of holiday greetings in maintaining relationships

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the function of holiday greetings in maintaining relationships. Participants were asked to submit a holiday greeting they had received, their perception of why the holiday greeting was sent, whether the holiday greeting functioned to maintain the relationship, and whether and why they had sent a holiday greeting in return. The most frequent reason for sending holiday greetings was 'because we have a relationship' (the third most frequent reason was 'because we have a special relationship'). The second most frequent reason for sending and receiving holiday greetings was to maintain the relationship (to keep in touch, to maintain contact, etc.). However, when asked whether holiday greetings function to maintain relationships, the results indicated that people do not perceive holiday greetings as functioning to maintain relationships. The degree to which holiday greeting cards were perceived as functioning to maintain relationships was affected by whether the relationship was intimate or nonintimate, by the type of relationship (friendship, romantic relationship, kinship vs. colleague/co-worker), by the amount of time since the individuals had seen each other, and by whether the holiday greeting was personalized (contained a handwritten note or letter) or nonpersonalized. The degree to

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which holiday greeting cards were perceived as functioning to maintain relationships was not affected by whether the holiday greeting included a form letter that 'caught up' the recipient on the events of the past year. From the results, we speculated that holiday greeting cards are hygienic factors; their presence does not positively affect relational maintenance, but their absence may have a negative effect on relational maintenance.

KEY WORDS: holiday greetings • relational maintenance • relational maintenance strategies • routine maintenance behavior

Considerable theory and research has emerged in the personal relationships literature investigating relational maintenance, particularly relational maintenance strategies. Recently, researchers have studied rituals, routine interactions, and everyday conversations that function inadvertently to maintain relationships (cf. Canary & Dainton, 2003; Canary & Stafford, 1994).

If one were to fault the research on relationship maintenance, it would be in its emphasis on intimate relationships, ignoring the fact that most relationships are maintained at a low level of intimacy. Relationship maintenance behaviors have been studied primarily in marital relationships, nonmarital romantic relationships, and friendships (e.g., Ayers, 1983; Dindia & Baxter, 1987; Stafford & Canary, 1991). There have been a few studies on maintaining superior-subordinate dyads (e.g., Lee & Jablin, 1995; Waldron, 1991). Hess (2000) studied distancing strategies for maintaining relationships with disliked others. However, the bulk of research has been on maintaining close, personal relationships.

The emphasis on intimate relationships is not unique to relational maintenance but is true throughout the field of personal relationships (Milardo & Wellman, 1992). Although close relationships have received the bulk of scholarly attention, it is important to note that people maintain a variety of relationships, some of which are 'significant' including relationships with spouses, friends, romantic partners, and family members, and some of which are 'less significant,' such as relationships with co-workers, acquaintances, and neighbors (Burleson & Samter, 1994). Although these relationships are viewed as less significant by participants in the relationships, as well as those who study relationships, these relationships are important, because there are so many of them, and because they serve a variety of functions in people's everyday lives (Milardo & Wellman, 1992).

One communication behavior that may function to maintain both intimate and nonintimate relationships is the holiday greeting card. Holidays, such as Christmas, Hanukkah, and New Year's Day, are important times for renewing relationships (Cheal, 1986) and celebrating holidays is an important relational maintenance strategy (Davis, 1973; Dindia & Baxter, 1987). The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship

maintenance function of holiday greetings. The theoretical perspective that guided this inquiry was that of Sigman (1991).

Relationship Continuity Constructional Units

Sigman (1991) distinguished between the life history of a social relationship and the interactional co-presence of relationship members. Sigman noted that relationships are continuous despite the fact that relationship members are not continuously in each other's presence. Sigman argued that little attention has been paid to how partners enact their relationships as persisting in the face of extended periods of physical and interactional non-co-presence.

Sigman (1991) elaborated the behaviors that relationship members use to construct the continuity of their relationship during times when they are not physically co-present. Sigman called these behaviors Relational Continuity Constructional Units (RCCUs) and defined them as 'pieces of behavior that precede, occur during, and succeed moments of relationship members' interactional nonengagement and serve to define the relationship as a continuous one despite the absence of face-to-face engagement' (p. 109).

Sigman (1991) proposed three categories of RCCUs based on their temporal placement in regards to physical separation: prospective units, introspective units, and retrospective units. Prospective units include behaviors that precede physical separation of the relationship partners. These units define the meaning and duration of the impending separation and of the likely return. Farewells of varying degrees of expansiveness are examples of prospective units.

Introspective units include communication behavior, instrumental tasks, and social episodes that occur during periods of physical separation that serve the function of 'constituting the relationship's continuity' (Sigman, 1991, p. 115). There are three classes of introspective units. The first is constructional artifacts (wedding bands, other physical objects such as clothing and ornaments). Constructional artifacts enable partners to construct the continuity of their relationship by providing a set of tokens that signal to others and/or remind individuals themselves of the existence of their relationship. Second is a class of behaviors in which mediated contact between individuals occurs, such as phone calls, cards, and letters. Mediated contact enables partners to construct the continuity of their relationship by facilitating contact with others who are physically absent. Third, partners who are absent remind themselves of their relationship commitments, thereby constructing the continuity of their relationship by behaviorally and cognitively orienting to the relationship. For example, one way to maintain the importance of the relationship is to talk with others about a relationship partner during his/her absence.

Retrospective units occur when persons re-encounter each other after some period of absence. These behaviors are often embedded in greeting routines. One retrospective unit is 'catching up.' Here individuals catch up on experiences that occurred during a period of physical absence. Sigman (1991, p. 121) argued:

Catching up enables persons to acknowledge and learn about information regarding the period of non-co-presence that may become part of the background or taken-for-granted knowledge that will tacitly inform subsequent interaction. In this respect, the unit that is retrospective (in that it refers to information 'in the past') also has a prospective quality to it (in that it projects the likelihood of future interaction and the need to know what information can be taken as 'given' for subsequent interaction). Catching up thus functions as a powerful continuity constructor by converging the past with the future.

Holiday greetings

One type of introspective RCCU that may bridge physical absence, and serve to maintain relationship continuity, is the holiday greeting card and letter. Holiday greeting cards may function to maintain relationships in two ways, first, by establishing mediated contact between individuals and, second, by a physical object that exists, remains, and reminds individuals of the existence of their relationship (Sigman, 1991). Thus, we asked:

RQ1: To what extent do people perceive that holiday greeting cards (Christmas, Hanukkah, New Year's Day) function to maintain relationships?

Relational co-presence

Sigman (1991) employed three dimensions to describe the conditions under which absences occur in relationships, whether they are: (i) anticipated or not, (ii) rule governed or not, and (iii) temporary or permanent. The last category seems most relevant in analyzing the maintenance function of holiday greeting cards. The degree to which holiday greeting cards function to maintain relationships may depend on whether physical separation is temporary or permanent. We send holiday greeting cards to people with whom we have temporary and short-term absences (e.g., co-workers, spouse). Similarly, we send holiday greeting cards to people with whom we have permanent (or semi-permanent) physical separation (e.g., long-distance friends, family members). Ray and Poulsen (1994) collected 220 Christmas letters and interviewed individuals who had been regular Christmas letter writers for many years. They found that, in most cases, the only contact the individuals had with their correspondents was through holiday letters. Although not hypothesized by Sigman (1991), it seems that relationships in which there are long periods of physical separation would require more relationship continuity construction than relationships in which physical separation is temporary and of short duration. Thus, we asked:

RQ2: Does relational co-presence affect the degree to which people perceive holiday greeting cards as functioning to maintain relationships?

Strong versus weak ties

Holiday greetings are sent to a variety of people, including spouses, romantic partners, friends, co-workers, relatives, and neighbors. Some of

these relationships constitute strong ties, people who are perceived as close. Some of these relationships constitute weak ties, people who are perceived as not close.

The degree to which holiday greeting cards function to maintain strong versus weak ties may or may not be the same. There is evidence that celebrating holidays functions to maintain marital relationships (Dindia & Baxter, 1987). There is also evidence that holiday greetings function to maintain nonintimate relationships. From the analysis of their data, both textual and interview, Ray and Poulsen (1994) found that Christmas letters are a significant means by which persons maintain low intimacy, long-term relationships. Ray and Poulsen concluded that 'this form of maintenance [Christmas letters] allows the relationship to remain on a nonintimate, but stable basis. Inadequate as this maintenance may seem to others, especially in regard to intimate relationships, it still functions effectively to keep the relationship going' (p. 30).

Thus, we asked:

RQ3: Do individuals perceive holiday greeting cards as maintaining relationships to a greater or lesser degree for strong versus weak ties?

Catching up

Sigman (1991) conceived of 'catching up' as a retrospective RCCU, that is, one occurring after physical separation. Holiday greeting cards are not retrospective, in that they occur during physical separation rather than after. However, holiday greeting cards in which the individual's or family's events of the year are recorded and disseminated to 'family and friends' serve the function of catching up. Ray and Poulsen (1994) found that holiday form letters constitute the main and often only method for the writer to tell others about oneself and one's family. If catching up is an important RCCU, then holiday greeting letters that update information may function to maintain the relationship more than holiday greeting cards that do not. Thus, we asked:

RQ4: Do individuals perceive holiday greeting letters that update on the events that occurred during the year as functioning to maintain relationships more than those that do not?

Personalized versus nonpersonalized greetings

Nonpersonalized greeting cards/letters, those produced and sent to multiple people, may constitute a less personal form of holiday greeting and consequently may not function to maintain the relationship to the same degree as an individualized greeting card/letter. Researchers who study self-disclosure and liking have differentiated between personalized and nonpersonalized self-disclosure (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). A dispositional attribution is made when the behavior is seen as the result of a person's normal tendency to disclose at a particular level ('he's a high or low discloser'). A situational attribution is made when the behavior is perceived as the result of environmental cues specifying what

is expected ('she's disclosing this because that's what the situation calls for'). Finally, a personalistic attribution is made when the disclosure is seen as the result of some special quality of oneself or a special relationship ('he trusts me'). According to this perspective, the relationship between disclosure and liking is strongest when a recipient makes a personalistic attribution for the discloser's behavior. 'When our attributions lead us to believe that the discloser considers us to be special and that only we are receiving this information, we tend to increase our feelings of attraction for that individual' (Derlega et al., 1993, p. 28).

Similarly, when a holiday greeting is perceived as personal ('I am the only one who received this particular holiday greeting'), it may function to maintain the relationship more than when perceived as nonpersonalistic ('s/he sends this same holiday greeting card/form letter to everyone in his/her network'). Thus, we asked:

RQ5: Do individuals perceive personalized holiday greeting cards with a handwritten personal note as functioning to maintain relationships more than nonpersonalized greeting cards/letters (greeting card/form letter with no personal note)?

Relational maintenance strategy or routine

Research on relational maintenance has concentrated on relational maintenance strategies and less on routine interactions that function to maintain relationships. Relational maintenance strategies are conscious and intentional behaviors that people employ with the purpose of maintaining their relationship. Routine interactions refer to the practices of daily living, the routines that become part of the day (or year, in the case of holiday greetings). Routine behaviors are less mindful and more habituated than strategic behavior (Canary & Stafford, 1994). These behaviors occur without concern for maintaining the relationship. Even when people enact routines at a conscious level, they may do so without attending to the goals such routines serve (Motley, 1986). Thus, although people may be conscious of these behaviors, the behaviors are not intended to maintain their relationship. Instead, relational maintenance may be the by-product of the routine behaviors that people perform (Canary & Stafford, 1994). Recent research on relational maintenance has called for an examination of the role of rituals, routine interaction, and everyday conversations in maintaining relationships (Canary & Stafford, 1994; Duck, 1994). Holiday greetings may constitute relational maintenance strategies or they may be routine behaviors that inadvertently function to maintain the relationship. Thus, the following research question was asked:

RQ6: To what extent do individuals report that holiday greetings cards are relational maintenance strategies, that is, sent for the explicit purpose of maintaining the relationship?

Method

Participants

Participants in the study were students in two large-lecture, undergraduate, communication courses at a large, urban, state university. Three hundred and ninety-five students participated in the study, 109 men and 286 women.

Procedures

Students were given extra credit for participating in the study. The study was conducted during the months of December and January. Participants provided the researchers with a holiday greeting card/letter (e.g., Hanukkah, Christmas, New Year's Day) they had received and completed a questionnaire that asked questions about the participant, the person who sent the card/letter, the relationship between the participant and the person who sent the card/letter, and the function of the holiday greeting in maintaining the relationship. Participants were told to bring in one holiday greeting card/letter. They were asked to bring it in the original envelope. They were asked to bring in any letters/notes that were attached to the greeting card/letter or in the envelope with the greeting card/letter. They were not given any directions in how to choose the particular holiday greeting card/letter. Thus, assuming the participant had received (and retained) multiple holiday greeting cards/letters, it was up to him/her to choose which holiday greeting card/letter he/she brought in for the study.

Measures

Type of holiday greeting. Holiday greeting cards/letters were categorized as follows: (i) a holiday greeting card that contained only the signature of the person who sent the card, (ii) a card that contained a handwritten note or letter attached to it or written on it of fewer than 25 words, (iii) a card that contained a note with 25–50 words, (iv) a card that contained a note with 50–100 words, (v) a card that contained a note with more than 100 words, (vi) a holiday greeting form letter (e.g., 'Dear Family and Friends'), and (vii) a form letter and personal note.

Relational co-presence. Frequency and recency of contact between the participant and the person who sent the holiday greeting card/letter was measured by asking participants how frequently during the past year they had contact of any kind (e.g., face-to-face, phone, letter, e-mail) with the person who sent the holiday greeting and how frequently during the past year they had face-to-face contact with the person who sent the holiday greeting. Participants were also asked how recent was their last contact (of any kind) and how recent was their last face-to-face contact. Proximity was also measured. Participants were asked how far away the person who sent the holiday greeting lived.

Strong versus weak ties. Wheelless' (1978) solidarity scale was used to measure the intimacy of the relationship between the participant and the person who sent the holiday greeting card/letter. The 20-item scale included such statements as 'we are very close to each other' and 'I trust this person completely' followed by a Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). The reliability of the scale was $\alpha = .95$. Participants also completed an item that

depicted two circles, one embedded in the other. Participants were told that the inner circle represents all the people you know who are important or close to you and that the outer circle represents all the people you know but who are not important or close to you. Then they were asked whether the person who sent the card belonged in the inner or outer circle. The correlation between participants' scores on the solidarity scale and the single dichotomous item measuring relationship strength was $r(392) = .64, p < .001$.

Perceived functions of holiday greetings. A questionnaire measuring whether holiday greeting cards/letters functioned to maintain relationships was developed by adapting Bruess' (1994) questionnaire assessing the function of routines and rituals in marital relationships and friendships. Bruess asked participants to recall routines and rituals (e.g., regularly calling each other during the day, watching the same television program together, going out to dinner at a favorite restaurant, taking a walk after dinner) in their relationship and the function of these rituals/routines in their relationship and in their lives. An 82-item marriage questionnaire and an 84-item friendship questionnaire were developed from respondents' reports of the functions of routines/rituals in their marriages and friendships. Bruess found that in marriage, routines/rituals served the following functions: relational masonry, relational maintenance, life management, fun/enjoyment, togetherness, talk-time, and anti-ritualizing. Routines/rituals in adult friendships served these functions: personal and relational stimulation, personal improvement, relational affirmation, support, self-affirmation, escape, and anti-ritualizing. Bruess' questionnaires were adapted for use in this study by first incorporating items from both the marriage and the friendship questionnaire. Identical items were eliminated. Items that measured functions that were not relevant to the ritual of holiday greetings (items measuring personal improvement, escape, anti-ritualizing, etc.) were also eliminated. This resulted in 70 items with a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) designed to measure the functions of holiday greeting cards.

The measure of functions of holiday greeting cards was factor analyzed using principal components analysis followed by varimax rotation. Criteria for retaining a factor was an eigenvalue of at least 1.0, a minimum of two items per factor, primary loadings of .45 or above with no secondary loadings greater than .30, and the scree test. The ultimate criterion for the factor solution was interpretability. Nine factors were produced whose eigenvalues were greater than 1.00. However, only two factors were produced using the scree procedure. The two-factor solution accounted for 46% of the total variance; the first factor accounted for 41% of the variance and the second factor accounted for 5% of the variance. The correlation between the two factors was $r = .69$. We could discern no conceptual difference between the items loading on the first factor and the second factor. In our opinion, all the items measured relationship maintenance. Thus, the results of the factor analysis were interpreted as indicating a unidimensional relationship maintenance scale with all items measuring the degree to which the holiday greeting card functions to maintain the relationship. The reliability of the unidimensional relational maintenance scale was $\alpha = .97$. Example items include: brings us closer together, provides stability in our relationship, provides a greater appreciation of each other, builds a solid relationship, and keeps us informed of each other.

Intended functions of holiday greetings. A typology of reasons for sending holiday greeting cards was inductively derived. Participants were asked to list the reasons why they thought the person sent them a holiday greeting and to list the reasons why they did, or were going to, send this person a holiday greeting. Respondents could list multiple reasons for why the other person sent the holiday greeting and why they were going to send the person a holiday greeting.

The authors independently read approximately 25% of the reasons participants listed, deriving categories of reasons. The authors then met to discuss their categories, reaching consensus on the categories. Participants listed reasons that may or may not be similar, such as, 'because we have a relationship' and 'because we have a special relationship.' In this case, we thought that having a relationship and having a special relationship were not the same thing so we kept these categories separate. Several other categories seemed similar, but we chose to reduce the level of inference on the coders' part and coded these reasons as distinct categories. The resulting typology consisted of 13 reasons for sending and receiving holiday greetings (see Table 1).

The reasons listed for sending holiday greetings were coded using the typology. Two of the co-authors independently coded perceived reasons for why the other person sent the participant a holiday greeting ($\alpha = .85$); two other co-authors independently coded reasons why participants sent the other person a holiday greeting ($\alpha = .85$).

Results

Holiday greetings and relationship maintenance

RQ1 asked to what extent individuals perceive holiday greetings as functioning to maintain relationships. The mean score on a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) measuring the degree to which the holiday greeting functioned to maintain the relationship was 3.53 ($SD = .64$). Thus, the results do not provide evidence that individuals perceive holiday greetings cards and letters as functioning to maintain relationships.

Relationship co-presence

RQ2 asked whether different amounts of co-presence during the past year affected the degree to which holiday greeting cards were perceived to maintain the relationship. In order to analyze this effect, separate one-way ANOVAs were conducted for each independent variable on perceived relational maintenance. There were no significant effects for frequency of contact, frequency of face-to-face contact, recency of last contact, or physical proximity. However, there was a significant effect of recency of last face-to-face contact on perceived relational maintenance ($F(4,367) = 2.71, p < .05$). A post-hoc Scheffe test indicated one significant group difference between those who had face-to-face contact within the last year (but not within the last six months) ($M = 3.27, SD = .68, n = 24$) and those who had not had face-to-face contact in the last year ($M = 3.80, SD = .70, n = 33$), indicating that those who had not had any face-to-face contact in the last year perceived the holiday greeting as functioning more to maintain the relationship than those who had contact in the last year (but not in the last six months).

TABLE 1
Reasons why holiday greetings are sent

	Why Other Person Sent Holiday Greeting			Why I Sent Holiday Greeting		
	Freq	% Reasons	% Participants	Freq	% Reasons	% Participants
Because we have a relationship (family, friends, relatives, business)	51	13	23	111	25	45
To maintain relationship/to keep in touch, maintain contact	60	16	27	65	15	27
Because we have a special relationship (a close, unique, good relationship)	60	16	27	47	11	19
To express affection: To communicate love, caring, liking	38	10	17	32	7	13
Obligation to reciprocate ('because she sent me one')	46	12	20	22	5	9
Habit/ritual: I always get a card from her, I always send a card to her	18	5	8	17	4	7
Friendly gesture/nice thing to do 'the holiday spirit'	22	6	10	37	8	15
Socially proper: Socially correct to send holiday greetings	7	2	3	14	3	6
Information update	13	3	6	7	2	3
In thanks/appreciation: To thank them for their business/patronage	2	1	1	5	1	2
Because she loves me, likes me, cares about me (because I love her, like her, care about her)	24	6	11	50	11	20
Because she's a nice person	6	2	3	7	2	3
Other	34	9	15	33	7	14
TOTAL	381	100		447	100	

Note. Frequency is the number of times this reason was listed by participants. '% Reasons' refers to the percentage of reasons listed. '% Participants' refers to the percentage of participants who listed this reason. Thus, 381 reasons were listed for 'why do you think this person sent you a holiday greeting?' by 226 participants; 447 reasons were listed for 'why did you or are you going to send this person a holiday greeting?' by 244 participants.

Strong versus weak ties

RQ3 asked about the function of holiday greetings in strong versus weak ties. Separate tests were conducted using Wheelless' (1978) solidarity scale and the single item, dichotomous measure of relationship strength as measures of strong versus weak ties. The effect of the single item, dichotomous measure of relationship strength on perceived relational maintenance was significant ($F(1,372) = 26.63, p < .0001$). Ironically, holiday greetings were perceived as functioning more to maintain strong ties ($M = 3.64, SD = .60, n = 261$) than weak ties ($M = 3.28, SD = .66, n = 113$). Similarly, the correlation between the relational solidarity scale and relational maintenance was significant ($r = .39, p < .001$). Again, this means that the more solid or intimate the relationship, the more the holiday greeting was perceived to maintain the relationship.

Type of relationship

Six percent of the holiday greetings cards were from romantic partners, 60% from friends, 23% from relatives, 5% from work relationships, and 6% from other types of relationships (e.g., neighbors). Although not a research question or hypothesis, a one-way ANOVA for the effect of relationship type on perceived relational maintenance was conducted. The results of the one-way ANOVA were significant ($F(4,369) = 5.59, p < .001$). A follow-up Scheffe test indicated that holiday greetings were perceived to function to maintain relationships more for friends ($M = 3.57, SD = .64$), relatives ($M = 3.58, SD = .55$), and romantic partners ($M = 3.75, SD = .62$) than for work relationships ($M = 3.04, SD = .62$). There were no significant differences among romantic relationships, friendships, and kin relationships. Thus, holiday greetings are perceived as functioning less to maintain work relationships than other types of relationships.

Type of holiday greeting card

The most frequent type of holiday greeting was holiday greeting card and short personal note (fewer than 25 words) ($n = 117; 30\%$). The second most frequent type of holiday greeting was card with signature only ($n = 105; 27\%$). These were followed by card with 25–50-word note ($n = 761; 19\%$), card with 50–100-word note ($n = 30; 8\%$), card with more than 100-word note ($n = 26; 7\%$), form letter ($n = 19; 5\%$), and form letter with personal note ($n = 13; 3\%$). A one-way ANOVA was conducted on the effect of type of holiday greeting card on perceived relational maintenance. The results were significant ($F(7,336) = 4.806, p < .001$). The manner in which type of holiday greeting card affected relational maintenance is examined later.

Catching up. *RQ4* asked whether holiday greeting cards in which the events of the year are recorded are perceived as functioning to maintain relationships more than those that do not. An a priori contrast was specified and tested with the *t*-statistic. Holiday greeting cards (no update on events of past year) were compared with holiday form letters (update on events of past year). The result was nonsignificant, indicating that holiday letters that update on the events of the past year do not function to maintain relationships more than holiday greetings cards that just greet.

Personalized versus nonpersonalized greetings. *RQ5* asked whether personalized greetings were perceived to maintain the relationship more than

nonpersonalized greetings. A priori contrasts were specified and tested with the *t*-statistic. A holiday greeting card with no personal note was contrasted with all the categories representing holiday greeting card and personal note, regardless of length of personal note. The *t*-test indicated that holiday greetings cards with a personal note ($M = 3.64$, $SD = .54$) were perceived to maintain the relationship more than holiday greeting cards that did not include a personal note ($M = 3.32$, $SD = .80$) ($t(334) = -4.20$, $p < .001$).

To summarize, although several variables affected the degree to which holiday greetings were perceived as functioning to maintain the relationship, in no circumstances did the mean score for whether the holiday greeting was perceived as functioning to maintain the relationship reach the level of '4' (*agree*) or higher on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Thus, across levels of relational co-presence, intimacy of relationship, types of relationships, and types of holiday greetings, it cannot be said that people perceive holiday greetings as functioning to maintain relationships.

Strategic or routine behavior

RQ6 asked to what extent holiday greeting cards are considered to be relational maintenance strategies, that is, sent with the intent of maintaining relationships. As shown in Table 1, relational maintenance tied as the most frequent reason listed for receiving holiday greetings (27% of participants listed 'to keep in touch,' 'to maintain contact,' etc., as the reason for receiving a holiday greeting). Relational maintenance was the second most frequent reason participants listed for sending holiday greetings (27% of participants listed 'to keep in touch,' 'to maintain contact,' etc., as the reason for sending a holiday greeting).

The most frequent reason listed for both receiving and sending holiday greetings was 'because we have a relationship' (13% of all reasons listed for why the other person sent a greeting, 23% of all participants listed this as the reason why the other person sent a greeting; 25% of all reasons listed for why I sent a greeting, 45% of all participants listed this as the reason why I sent a holiday greeting). The third most frequent reason listed for sending holiday greetings was 'because we have a special relationship' (16% of all reasons listed for why the other person sent a greeting, 27% of all participants listed this as the reason why the other person sent a greeting; 11% of all reasons listed for why I sent a greeting, 19% of all participants listed this as the reason why I sent a holiday greeting). This may signify that sending a holiday greeting is a routine relational maintenance behavior that is performed, not with the intent of maintaining the relationship, but because it is something one is expected to do when one has a relationship (or a special relationship).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the function of holiday greeting cards in maintaining relationships. Specifically, we reasoned that holiday greetings were introspective RCCUs, or maintenance behaviors that occur during periods of interactional non-co-presence. Holiday greetings function to maintain the relationship during physical absence by sending an object that reminds the partner of the existence of the relationship

(Sigman, 1991), and in the case of more detailed letters, by 'catching up' an individual on what happened to a partner during the previous year.

The results of the study did not provide support for the hypothesis that holiday greeting cards function to maintain relationships. Bruess' (1994) questionnaire asking about the function of routines and rituals in marital relationships and friendships was adapted to measure whether holiday greetings function to maintain relationships. The mean was 3.53 on a 5-point scale, indicating that participants neither agreed nor disagreed that holiday greetings cards/letters function to maintain relationships.

Sending holiday greetings may function as a hygienic factor (Herzberg, 1987) in relationships. In other words, it is possible that sending them does not have a positive effect on relational maintenance; however, *not* sending them has a negative effect on relationship maintenance. Because holiday greetings are a relational expectation in this culture, sending one may not be a relational maintenance strategy that is performed with the intent of maintaining the relationship. Instead, sending a holiday greeting may be a routine maintenance behavior that is performed because it is expected. As a result, it may not be noticed, or if it is noticed, no relational meaning may be attributed to this behavior. When we fail to meet the expectation of sending a holiday greeting, however, this behavior may be perceived as having relational meaning.

Indeed, it may be that relational maintenance routines are hygienic factors and the absence, not the presence, of these routines affects relational maintenance. The rationale for this speculation is based on the finding that the most frequent reason listed for sending and receiving holiday greetings was 'because we have a relationship.' Almost half of the participants in the study (45%) listed this as the reason they sent (or would send) a holiday greeting to this particular person. Sending a holiday greeting may be something one does because one is expected to send a holiday greeting to someone with whom one has a relationship. Doing so does not have a positive effect on the relationship, but not doing so may have a negative effect on the relationship.

We tested whether relational co-presence had an effect on whether holiday greetings were perceived as maintaining the relationship. We found that frequency and recency of last contact and frequency of face-to-face contact, as well as physical proximity, were unrelated to perceived relational maintenance. The only significant difference was that those who had not had face-to-face contact in the last year perceived the holiday greeting to maintain the relationship more than those who had face-to-face contact in the last year (but not in the last six months). Thus, in general, holiday greetings functioned to maintain relationships to the same degree (minimally) regardless of frequency and recency of relational co-presence experienced during the previous year.

When examining strong versus weak ties, we found that holiday greetings are perceived to maintain the relationship more for strong ties than weak ties, although we had hypothesized the reverse. Our rationale was based on the assumption that holiday greeting cards constitute one of very

few (or only) instances of communication in weak ties. Ray and Poulsen (1994) found that holiday form letters are sent in relationships in which the only form of communication that takes place is the holiday greeting. Thus, we thought that such weak ties may exist only because holiday greeting letters continue to be sent.

Similarly, although not a research question or hypothesis, we found that type of relationship affects the degree to which holiday greetings are perceived as functioning to maintain the relationship. Specifically, holiday greetings were perceived to maintain friendships, kinships, and romantic relationships more than work relationships. This may be because work relationships typically experience a high degree of relational co-presence (we may see those we work with on a regular basis, four to five days a week) and, thus, holiday greeting cards may not be considered necessary to maintain the relationship.

The effect of type of holiday greeting on perceived relational maintenance was also examined. Sigman (1991) argued that one type of RCCU is 'catching up,' in which individuals learn about experiences that transpired during the period of physical absence (in the case of holiday greetings, during the preceding year). The results of the study indicate that holiday greeting cards that update with a form letter and those that only greet were perceived to function similarly with respect to maintenance. Thus, information updating, at least in the form of a 'generic' letter, does not appear to be the underlying element of holiday greetings that functions to maintain the relationship.

Based on theory and research on self-disclosure, we hypothesized that personalized holiday greetings would be perceived as maintaining the relationship more than nonpersonalized greetings. The hypothesis was supported. Holiday greeting cards that had a personal note or letter included were perceived to maintain the relationship more than those that did not. Thus, taking the time to handwrite a short note on the card, typically fewer than 25 words, was perceived as maintaining the relationship more than just a card containing only the person's signature.

Theory on personalized and nonpersonalized self-disclosure would indicate that this is because a holiday greeting containing only a signature is perceived as nonpersonal (sent to everyone), whereas the handwritten note is perceived as personal, written only to the person who received the note. Of course, it is entirely possible that the same 'personal' note is written on every card!

We were also interested in whether holiday greetings are a form of strategic or routine maintenance strategy (Canary & Stafford, 1994). Thus, we asked participants to list the reasons why the other person sent them a holiday greeting, and to list the reasons why they had sent (or were going to send) the other person a holiday greeting. Twenty-seven percent of the participants explicitly indicated that the other person sent them a holiday greeting to maintain the relationship. Similarly, 27% of the participants explicitly indicated that they had sent, or were going to send, the other person a holiday greeting to maintain the relationship. Relationship

maintenance was one of the most frequent reasons cited for sending holiday greetings. In addition, a number of the other reasons listed for sending holiday greetings implicitly dealt with relational maintenance.

The most frequent reason listed for sending a holiday greeting was, 'because we have a relationship,' and the third most frequent reason was, 'because we have a special relationship.' Thus, it is possible that sending holiday greetings is a routine maintenance behavior that is performed because we are expected to send them to people with whom we have a relationship, rather than a strategic maintenance behavior that is performed with the explicit purpose of maintaining the relationship.

In interpreting the results of this study with regard to strategic versus routine behavior, the procedures of this study should be compared with the extant maintenance literature. Research on relationship maintenance strategies typically: (i) asks participants to list the things they do to maintain their relationship (cf. Dindia & Baxter, 1987), or (ii) provides a list of behaviors and asks partners whether they engage in these behaviors to maintain the relationship (cf. Ayres, 1983; Stafford & Canary, 1991). Such research may prompt participants to the issue of relationship maintenance and cause participants to state that these are relationship maintenance behaviors. Thus, research on relationship maintenance strategies may overestimate the degree to which maintenance is strategic.

In the present study, participants were unaware that we were studying relationship maintenance. Participants were asked to list the reasons why holiday greetings were sent; they were not asked whether holiday greetings were sent to maintain relationships. Participants were not prompted to think in terms of relationship maintenance; therefore, the results of this study may be more valid in estimating the degree to which holiday greetings are relationship maintenance strategies.

It is also possible, however, that the results of this study may overestimate the degree to which holiday greetings are relationship maintenance strategies. On the one hand, being asked to list the reason for one's behavior may cause one to come up with a reason when there was not one (i.e., routine maintenance behavior). On the other hand, it is also possible that this procedure underestimates the degree to which holiday greetings are strategies to maintain relationships. The intent to maintain the relationship may underlie some of the other reasons given for sending holiday greetings (e.g., to express affection, because we have a relationship, because we have a special relationship, because I love/like him/her).

One limitation of this study is that participants were asked to submit one, rather than all, of the holiday greetings they had received. We do not know the basis on which participants chose the particular holiday greeting they submitted. Different results might have been obtained if participants had been asked to submit all their holiday greetings. This request would likely have been difficult to fulfill, however, and we would not have been able to ask as many questions about such a large number of holiday greetings per respondent. In addition, even though the sample in this study was comprised of college students at an urban university in which the mean age

of students is 26 and the majority of students are nontraditional (i.e., most are commuters, which may affect the intended and perceived functions of holiday greetings), we do not know the degree to which the results of this study generalize to the population as a whole.

Although this study included holiday greeting form letters, it did not examine some of the more recent variations of holiday greetings made possible by computer and Internet technology (e.g., computer-generated 'personalized' greetings, online holiday greetings). Neither of these types of greetings was found in this study; however, both of these types of holiday greetings are gaining in popularity. Further research on holiday greetings should include them in the operational definition of holiday greetings.

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