

## BOOK REVIEW

**Relating through Technology: Advances in Personal Relationships** by Jeffrey A. Hall (2020)  
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### Background

Jeffrey Hall's *Relating through Technology: Advances in Personal Relationships* is part of the series on advancing personal relationships edited by Christopher Agnew, John Caughlin, Raymond Knee and Terri Orbuch. A glance at prior volumes in the series reveals a focus on different types of relationships (e.g., close relationships, intimate relationships, marriages) or, more often, on specific psychological processes in relationships, such as power, intimacy, social influence or attribution processes. None of the books focuses on technology in general or on a specific technology. This is surprising considering that much of our daily communication these days occurs via technology – WhatsApp messages, voice calls, video chats, posts on social media platforms. A book on the role of technology in relationship maintenance is desperately needed.

### Overview

Jeffrey A. Hall is a professor of communication studies at the University of Kansas. He has been active in the field of interpersonal relationships for years, shifting his research emphasis more and more to the role of social network sites or mobile phones in relationship formation and maintenance. Hall starts the book with a metaphor, comparing his work as an author with that of a DJ, a person who is not exactly creating music but curating and reorganizing music made by others. In similar vein, Hall does not attempt a complete overview of all work on technology and relationships. Instead, he wants to present an exhibition of selected work by others and himself. He has curated and mixed prior work to stimulate the development of new thoughts – an approach I highly appreciate.

The book has an introduction and ten chapters. The first three chapters focus on fundamental theories, the next three on modality comparisons and contrasts, and the last four deal with enduring tensions of relationships and technology. In the introduction, Hall justifies why this book is needed by arguing that there are too many papers focusing on technology rather than the conversations people use technology for. Moreover, pre-existing relationships of media users are often not considered in these studies, or are, at best, treated as ancillary variables. Hall argues – and I fully agree with him – that relationships are multimodal and that the boundaries between offline and online communication need to be overcome when studying how people seamlessly switch between face-to-face communication (FTF) and various media. He limits the scope of the book to using personal media for building and maintaining personal relationships. The book is thus not on media use for other purposes, such as entertainment or information seeking. It does, however, consider deliberate choices of not using media or not being available via media.

### Fundamental theories

Hall examines media use for interpersonal relationships within a social ecology framework. He defines social ecology as:

The study of the number and nature of human relationships and the pattern and content of the social interactions that create and sustain them. This approach has origins in evolutionary theory and social network analysis, embraces a constitutive approach to interpersonal communication, and sees everyday social interactions as the key unit of analysis. (p.14)

Hall argues that social relationships are fundamentally important, but people can maintain only a limited number of relationships. He builds on social network research that distinguishes between a core network of two to six people that is relatively stable across a lifetime and the first 15 people that play an important role at any given time. Weaker ties are not considered in the book. Hall makes a very important point by arguing that the people about whom we care are not necessarily the people we talk to.

Social interactions are seen as crucial for social relationships. Hall distinguishes different types of social interactions on a continuum from social attention (people watching) to deep conversation. Mediated social interactions include phone calls, video chats or texting; when it comes to social media, Hall includes private, direct messaging and publicly visible back-and-forth text exchanges, but excludes other forms of social media use. I think this is a limitation because there is work showing that likes and other paralinguistic digital affordances can also play a relationship-strengthening role (Carr *et al.*, 2016) and should thus be included in an analysis of overall communication patterns. Lastly, Hall argues that context, like life stage, also matters. There is, for example, a peak in the number of relationships people maintain at the age of 15 to 25. This is a well-taken point; many studies on social media use focus on student samples and should thus be generalized to other age groups only with caution. Hall also points out that what is visible on social media does not necessarily mirror actual relationship strength; some close people might not be active on social media and others seem closer on social media than they actually are.

Chapter 2 focuses on the social construction of technology, which is contrasted with technological determinism. Hall rightly stresses that people ‘give meaning to technology’ (p.33) and that this meaning might change over time. He introduces the media domestication approach, in my opinion an understudied but fruitful lens for studying media use. Media domestication examines how people learn to deal with new media, how they integrate them into their media repertoire and develop habits. Hall then addresses the role of norms and the interdependent nature of media use, which makes it important to examine with whom people communicate via a specific medium. Who is using a medium is, according to Hall, more important than the technological features of the medium. The most relevant aspect in the social construction of technology is what Hall calls ‘making do’ – ‘a process of domestication through personalization’ (p.41). People make things work rather than optimizing communications, which is why young adults stay in touch with their parents with media their parents prefer. Hall also sees relationships as a social construction: conversations, and in the context of mediated communication, choices about what to send, which photo to share, which channel to use are a ‘method of relationship-making’ (p.44). He brings together these two perspectives in outlining how relationships are socially constructed through media. Thus, although single messages or communication in one channel might seem mundane, it is the ongoing communication that switches between non-mediated and mediated communication via different channels that constitutes relationships. This is often neglected, at least in empirical studies, so I really enjoyed reading this part.

Chapter 3 gives an overview of theoretical perspectives on personal media and relationships. Hall starts with a nice overview of the classical theories of computer-mediated communication (CMC). These include social presence theory, media richness theory, channel expansion theory, the hyperpersonal model, social information processing theory, media multiplexity theory and channel complementarity theory. This overview is comprehensive and could be used for teaching. In the next section, Hall turns to emergent and less well-known perspectives, more specifically the mediated maintenance expectations perspective (studied so far in the context of mobile maintenance expectations, relationally constructed expectations on sharing updates via mobile media), the communication interdependence perspective, and the social construction of technology. At the end of this chapter, he presents his own theory: communicate bond belong theory CBB (Hall and Davis, 2017). The central tenet of CBB is that people have a need for bonding with others. When this need is not fulfilled, people take action. Social interactions, mediated or non-mediated, with different people can help to fulfil this need. Not all actions are helpful; in some cases, people are still not

satisfied with their current need fulfilment state and experience reduced well-being. CBB further assumes that people, in general, try to save energy and that they will therefore invest energy in strategies that cost less energy and/or promise greater return. I like the idea that needs drive media use, which in turn influences need fulfilment. I am less convinced by the social energy conversation part of the theory. Hall presents results from an experience sampling study of the energy expenditure of various interactions. This found that phone and video chats are perceived as the most energy-consuming, whereas text and non-video chats are perceived as the least energy-consuming. However, there was a huge variance in energy expenditure for social media interactions and video chats, so that not all differences between modalities are significant. Even so, this does not prove that energy considerations play a role when deciding which medium to choose for a specific interaction; it could be that people decide with whom they want to talk and then choose the medium on which this person is most likely reached. The theory also contains a homeostatic principle, assuming that people sometimes want to be alone. This reminds me of optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991), which has similar assumptions about a need for assimilation (with similar group members) and a need for differentiation from others. It also fits nicely with some of our own in-progress work on solitude snacking via smartphones.

### **Modality comparisons and contrasts**

Hall starts chapter 4 by discussing media displacement theory and the related theory of niche. Whereas media displacement theory assumes that newer media displace older media used for similar functions (e.g., news via TV rather than newspaper), the theory of niche states that a medium must distinguish itself from others to survive. Hall then takes a step back to review the history of personal media from the pre-internet age of early CMC short-message services to instant messaging. Building on this, he describes different media patterns and how they have changed over the years. Although FTF is still dominant, voice calls, for example, have dropped, whereas SMS/text messages have become more frequent. Hall then tries to predict the future and which types of media will fill a niche and survive. He uses three dimensions (synchrony, social cues and reach) to discuss five groups of media he thinks will stay. One example would be media high in synchrony, high in social cues and low in reach, such as voice and video calls. Hall speculates whether video calls will change in nature when people get used to just keeping a video line open to be close to loved ones. These speculations have been interesting to read during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has increased the time spent in Zoom meetings.

In the next chapter, Hall connects niche theory with media multiplexity theory (MMT) and CBB. He switches from the either/or perspective from displacement theories to the both/and perspective that characterizes multimodal relationships. Whereas MMT assumes that relationship strength is positively associated with the number of media used, CBB more specifically argues that the energy level determines which medium is used. After a short excursion to channel switching in online dating, Hall reviews research that compares channels in terms of their utility and psychosocial outcomes. These studies often point to a remarkable primacy of FTF, but Hall observes that this might be because these studies usually do not consider with whom people are communicating and by what channel. He then presents two of his datasets (collected in 2015 and 2018) from experience sampling studies in which participants reported on a recent social interaction, its mode and with whom the interaction took place. Indicators of closeness and affective well-being were assessed as dependent measures. Even when controlling for interaction partner, FTF stuck out in terms of experienced closeness and well-being, arguing against the idea that an ideal combination of channel and interaction partner beats FTF. However, when controlling also for content (banter versus work/school talk), there were positive effects for banter on closeness, indicating that the greater benefits of FTF and phone calls are partly attributable to the content of the conversation. Whereas all other forms of social interactions (voice calls, video calls, texting) resulted in higher closeness and well-being than being alone, Hall found no effect of social media interaction on closeness and well-being.

Hall then introduces the concept of layers of electronic intimacy (Yang *et al.*, 2014). These layers are related to different stages of relationship formation. In the beginning, when uncertainty reduction is central, public social media profiles are used to learn about the other person. With increasing closeness, chats and texting are used. Voice and video calls are then employed for more intimate communication and further developed relationships. This pattern seems to map with personal networks. Large-scale studies have shown that most people mainly use voice calls with three or four people, but SMS with five to seven people.

When Hall turns to the role of social media, he covers quite a few concepts, starting with a definition and a differentiation of communication modes from platforms. Hall then talks about various ways the masspersonal (versus dyadic private messages) communication on social media can contribute to relationship building and maintenance. He discusses social media as self-archive or as a way to increase bridging social capital. Most interesting is the focus on social news received via masspersonal status updates and the portant role of gossip in maintaining relationships. Virtual people watching on social media helps to develop ambient awareness about what is going on in the life of others (Levordashka and Utz, 2016). Additionally, social media can be used for social snacking – using symbolic reminders of central others as little snacks when the need to belong is threatened and a full meal (i.e., a FTF conversation) is not possible.

### **Enduring tensions of relationships and technology**

Chapter 7 uses dialectical theory (Baxter and Simon, 1993) as a framework to discuss five enduring tensions in personal media: hyper-coordination versus micro-coordination, personalized messages versus generalized messages, contributing to the conversation versus virtual people watching, intentional attention versus incidental awareness, routine access offline versus limited access offline. This is my favourite chapter because it gets to the central points of multimodal relationship maintenance behaviours and addresses the advantages and downsides of being permanently online and connected. Smartphones allow for micro-coordination in daily life, making it easier to reschedule meetings and coordinate tasks. Hyper-coordination refers to increased social and emotional communication, as with sharing emotions and little moments with the partner. The advantages of permanent connection with the partner are opposed by heightened expectations on availability and feelings of entrapment. Especially in group chats, instrumental messages for coordination often trigger relational talk resulting in cascades of messages. Hall uses the brilliant metaphor of zombie groups to describe the tension between coordination and interdependence: ‘Without mindfully opting out and potentially missing out on relevant updates entirely, these zombie groups slouch along trying to eat the attention of users’ brains well past the period of functional interdependence’ (p.139).

When discussing the tension between contributing to the conversation and virtual people watching, Hall builds a model that takes into account the degree of personalization in the message and the type of attention for characterizing different situations. Hall makes the important point that attention to a message and message responsiveness do not always go hand-in-hand. I like especially the distinction between intentional attention (attention given to particular messages) and incidental awareness. Even incidental awareness from skimming social media updates can have effects on relationships, either by increasing the perceived approachability of strangers because of ambient awareness, or by increasing felt stress when learning about negative events in others’ lives (Hampton *et al.*, 2016). Intentional attention, at the other end of the continuum, refers to paying attention to particular messages or messages from particular others (p.148). We choose, for example, which phone calls to answer. Hall discusses examples of the various combinations of personalization, responsiveness and attention that can inspire future research.

Chapter 8 focuses on a different aspect: digital stress. It starts with a review of prior work that shows that negative effects of social media are at best small and depend on the type of use. So it is not the social media, but the expectations and demands connected to them that trigger stress. Hall comes back to CBB theory; in his eyes, turning to social media when the need to belong is



threatened is a low energy-consuming, but not very effective, strategy. He discusses ironic effects as when people try to use their smartphones to bond with others, but find the permanent notifications distract and create pressure to be constantly available. Hall further distinguishes five types of stress: availability stress, approval anxiety, fear of missing out, connection overload and the cost of caring. This is a major contribution because studies or reports in the popular press on the relationship between (social) media use and stress often do not differentiate between these different forms. Hall also points out that dispositional characteristics might play a moderating role. An even more important discovery that came up in some of our own research is the role of norms and guilt. Many people consider social media use a waste of time and feel guilty when using them too much. Hall argues that seemingly beneficial effects found in studies asking people to reduce their social media use could be driven rather by a sense of accomplishment rather than a direct improvement of well-being. We have first indications that feeling guilty about using smartphones while parenting hinders parents from using smartphones to cope with stress.

In chapter 9, Hall focuses on social displacement - the idea that mediated interaction replaces FTF interactions. This comes as something of a surprise considering that he has presented data earlier showing a clear dominance of FTF communication even in recent studies. Empirical support for this idea presented in this chapter is also mixed; social media use seems to displace mainly browsing the internet and working, but not so much time spent with close friends. More interesting is that people often experience ambivalence about social media use. Another important aspect is that social media are often used as a second screen while doing something else (including being with others). Being on the phone while talking to someone usually harms impressions and the relationship; Hall discusses factors that might mitigate or intensify this association, such as norms, providing an account or lower self-regulation. Most of these have at best been studied in correlational designs, so his ideas can stimulate future research. Nevertheless, Hall believes there is a kernel of truth in the social displacement hypothesis and that social media used for browsing updates of weak ties are a low energy-consuming, but inefficient way of fulfilling belongingness needs. More specifically, he assumes that turning to social media reduces people's motivation to use more appropriate, but more energy-intensive personal media.

In the last chapter, Hall addresses the question of whether connectivity begets connection (p.189). His final take-home message is again that Americans spend less time socializing FTF, displace this time dysfunctionally with social media interactions and that people need to invest in high-quality interactions with stronger ties. For a European reviewer, this chapter is quite American; statistics from the US are provided to show that people spend less time socializing. Hall then turns to the importance of routine interactions and considers talk with nearby people as central. Hall builds on results showing that people are bad at keeping in touch once friends or family members move away and that being in a romantic relationship significantly reduces peoples' network sizes. From these findings, he concludes that people do not lose contact with former friends because there is a lack of technological possibilities, but because they turn routinely to social media instead of building routines of more energy-intensive mediated interactions. I do not share this pessimistic view of social media use. It is also in conflict with one of the central assumptions of the book: that a both/and perspective is most appropriate for studying media use from a social ecology framework. Moreover, the reported data indicate as well that the time spent streaming online content is negatively associated with socializing. I am not convinced that spending time on social media goes necessarily hand-in-hand with reduced use of more personal media. The masspersonal interactions enabled by social media might help people keep a larger group of friends and family updated and might help them keep up-to-date about what happens in others' lives. There is recent work by Ellison *et al.* (2020) showing that people often use information passively, using information from Facebook, for instance, as a conversation starter in more personal settings.

Hall finally gives some recommendations on how to strengthen relationships through media: being responsive, keeping in touch with a few close friends and family members, using

appropriate messages (banter) and media (such as voice calls) to increase signal strength. He concludes by using dialectical theory to predict some cultural shifts. The increasing societal level of connectivity might result in seeking greater connection; people might aim for more freedom and independence rather than for being entrapped by social and mobile media. Until we know what the future will bring, he recommends mindfully using media with the people who matter most.

### Concluding remarks

This book is timely and much needed, considering that most of us are now permanently connected with others via mobile phones. Studying the role of technology in building and maintaining relationships is a very valuable contribution. Unfortunately, the both/and perspective gets a bit lost in the last chapter. Hall started the book with the DJ metaphor, considering his chapters as pieces on a playlist. Reading this book is indeed like listening to another person's playlist. I found some well-known classics one can hear over and over again, such as the overview of CMC theories. I detected some new favourites, such as the enduring tensions in personal media or the chapter on digital stress. But there were also songs to which I could not relate, such as the energy-part of CBB theory. Sometimes, the change between music styles was too abrupt (chapter 5) and, towards the end, I found the songs on social media a bit too depressing. But just as music tastes are different, so are readers' tastes. Some readers may resonate very well with the idea that social media are not adequate for fulfilling belongingness needs. Hall definitely succeeded in remixing some prior ideas for stimulating new thoughts and research ideas.

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