

**The Positive Association between Communication and Relationship Satisfaction**

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550014-B-12: Bachelor's Thesis: Social Psychology

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June 15, 2020

### **Abstract**

In this study I looked at the relationship between communication and relationship satisfaction. With this research I wanted to build on the existing research, which focused mainly on the effects of communication skills on relationship satisfaction. I wanted to add to this by not only looking at communication skills, but also considering communication satisfaction and by considering the different aspects of communication skills. Specifically, I tried to answer the following research questions: ‘What is the relationship between communication satisfaction and relationship satisfaction?’ and ‘Which aspects of individual communication competence are associated with communication and relationship satisfaction?’ To investigate the research questions a questionnaire was administered to a sample of 137 couples ( $N = 274$ ). This questionnaire contained, among others, Dutch translations of the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI), the Couple Communication Satisfaction Scale (CCSS), and the Interpersonal Communication Competence Scale – Short Form (ICCS-SF). Results show that communication satisfaction is positively associated with relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, the results indicate that communication skills are significantly associated with communication- and relationship satisfaction. The results add to the notion that communication is important for relationship satisfaction. Additionally, the results indicate that the factor communication satisfaction also plays an important role in the relationship between communication and relationship satisfaction. Though future research is needed, the findings could allow for new paths to be explored and developed within couples therapy.

*Keywords:* communication, relationship satisfaction, communication satisfaction, communication skills, couples, romantic relationships, couples therapy

### **The Positive Association between Communication and Relationship Satisfaction**

Within the past two decades a lot has changed when it comes to communication. Modern technologies have made it possible to communicate with anyone regardless of any physical distance. As technologies have advanced, they also started to play a more prominent role within romantic relationships (Miller-Ott et al., 2012). In general, good communication is positively associated with relationship satisfaction (Eğeci & Gençöz, 2006). As there have been a lot of changes in the possible ways one can communicate, this also possibly influenced the way people communicate in relationships. In this study I will further investigate the association between communication and satisfaction in romantic relationships.

When looking at the literature on communication in relationships, quantity of communication is something that is often considered. Quantity of communication focuses on how often couples communicate with one another. Generally, past research has shown that quantity of communication is positively related to quality of the relationship. For example, research by Emmers-Sommer (2004) has shown that frequency of face to face communication is positively associated with quality of the relationship, computer mediated communication did not show a similar effect. However, face to face communication is not always possible, for example, due to the current COVID-19 crisis people are advised not to see their loved ones if they are not living within the same household. This sudden change can drastically reduce face-to-face communication within couples, making their relationship seem like a long-distance relationship. This makes it interesting to also consider some literature on long-distance relationships. Hampton et al. (2018) showed that for long-distance relationships the frequency of computer mediated communication is associated with relationship satisfaction, but only for video calling. This suggests that frequency of communication is important for relationship satisfaction but only when one is able to see their partner while communicating.

Apart from quantity of communication, quality of that communication is also related to relationship satisfaction (Emmers-Sommer, 2004). Past research has investigated whether improving quality of the communication with a communication-based therapy would improve relationship satisfaction. Sevier et al. (2008) found that couples that received communication counseling showed significant improvement in communication and in relationship satisfaction. However, Williamson et al. (2016) found that communication did not significantly improve after a communication-based intervention, although relationship satisfaction was improved. In this research, objective observers rated the couples' communicating behavior from video-taped discussions, this was done before and after the intervention. The objective observers did not find a significant difference in the couple's behavior. However, the researchers did not ask the couples how they experienced the discussion before and after the intervention. If the couples experienced the discussion as more satisfactory after the intervention compared to before the intervention, this could possibly lead to increases in relationship satisfaction, even if their objective behavior did not differ after the intervention.

Previous studies mainly focused on objective changes in communication behavior and only asked couples about their relationship satisfaction. As couples may experience communication differently than objective observers, it is likely that it is also important to consider how couples experience their own and their partner's communication. Therefore, I will further investigate a possible relationship between communication satisfaction and relationship satisfaction in this study.

Past research has mainly focused on communication as a one dimensional concept, however, interpersonal communication is a broad concept consisting of multiple aspects. As communication is such a broad concept it may be interesting to also focus on the different aspects of interpersonal communication. Rubin and Martin (1994) developed an interpersonal

communication competence scale that considers multiple dimensions of interpersonal communication competence. The different dimensions of this scale were used to decide on what aspects of communication I will consider in the present study. The dimensions I will consider in this study are: self-disclosure, empathy, social relaxation, assertiveness, interaction management, expressiveness, and immediacy.

Self-disclosure is defined as “the ability to open up or reveal to others personality elements through communication” (Rubin & Martin, 1994, p. 34). This aspect indicates the extent to which a person can show other people how he or she feels. This aspect of communication likely is important to consider as it has been shown to be positively associated with intimacy both within romantic relationships as well as within friendships (Laurenceau et al., 1998; Bauminger et al., 2008). Furthermore, sexual self-disclosure seems to be important for sexual satisfaction (MacNeil & Byers, 2009), which is a key component for relationship satisfaction (Montesi et al., 2011). The study of MacNeil and Byers (2009) also showed that self-disclosure in general is associated with relationship satisfaction.

Another dimension of interpersonal communication competence that I will consider is empathy. Empathy can be described as the ability to understand the other’s perspective (Rubin & Martin, 1994). The ability to understand one’s partner’s point of view seems to be strongly associated with relationship satisfaction (Andreychik, 2019; Perrone-McGovern et al., 2014). Andreychik (2019) showed that empathy for both positive and negative emotions is important for relationship satisfaction, however the association with empathy for positive emotions seems stronger. This research indicates that it is more important for relationship satisfaction that one’s partner is sharing one’s excitement compared to one’s partner sharing one’s sadness. Therefore, it is likely that empathy will be one of the dimensions of interpersonal communication competence that will be positively associated with relationship satisfaction.

Additionally, I will consider social relaxation, which can be described as “a lack of anxiety or apprehension in everyday social interactions” (Rubin & Martin, 1994, p. 34). This aspect indicates the extent to which a person feels comfortable in social interactions with both strangers and acquaintances. It is quite similar to social anxiety, but it differs in the sense that it does not focus on acts such as talking in front of a large audience, but solely focuses on everyday social interactions. Social relaxation is a concept that is not easily found within the existing literature, but one can use the literature on social anxiety or apprehension to help investigate this concept. The existing literature on social anxiety and relationship satisfaction is not very consistent. Some studies suggest that social anxiety is associated with lower relationship satisfaction but only for women (Porter & Chambless, 2014). A study on friendship quality and social anxiety showed that lower friendship quality predicted higher social anxiety at a later timepoint, but social anxiety did not predict lower friendship quality later on (Rodebaugh et al., 2015). I do not have any clear expectations on the association between social relaxation and relationship satisfaction, as the research on social anxiety is inconclusive and does not fully overlap with the definition of social relaxation.

The fourth aspect that I will consider is assertiveness. People that are assertive are confident enough to stand up for themselves without becoming aggressive or negative towards others (Rubin & Martin, 1994). Craddock (2008) showed that assertiveness is positively associated with relationship satisfaction for both males and females. Moreover, research by Gordon and Waldo (1984) showed that assertiveness training for one of the partners significantly increased relationship satisfaction for both partners. A more recent study showed that sexual assertiveness is associated with relationship satisfaction (Lee, 2017). Hence, I believe that assertiveness will be positively associated with relationship satisfaction.

The next dimension I will discuss is interaction management, this can be defined as “a person’s ability to handle ritualistic procedures in everyday conversation” (Rubin & Martin,

1994, p. 36). This aspect focuses on the ability to have smooth, natural conversations. For example, shifting smoothly from one topic to the next and the ability to understand what people are trying to say both verbally and non-verbally. There is no literature relating this topic to relationship satisfaction yet. Therefore, I do not have any expectations regarding this aspect.

Another aspect that I will examine is expressiveness, this aspect can be described as the ability to express thoughts and feelings through both verbal and nonverbal behaviors (Rubin & Martin, 1994). Based on past research I expect expressiveness to be positively associated with relationship satisfaction. Villa and Del Prette (2013) showed that social skills are associated with marital satisfaction, and that expressiveness was one of the strongest predictors of marital satisfaction. Furthermore, Ben and Lavee (2011) indicated that internal conflict over emotional expressiveness is associated with lower relationship quality. It showed that people that, for example, failed to express their emotions when they wanted to, or often regret expressing their emotion experience lower relationship satisfaction.

The last dimension that I will considered is immediacy, when one scores high on immediacy behavior they show approachability and availability for communication. This entails nonverbal behavior such as eye contact or stance, making the other person realize they are being heard (Rubin & Martin, 1994). There is not a lot of literature on immediacy behavior in the context of romantic relationships, however, one study showed that nonverbal immediacy behavior is associated with liking in romantic relationships (Hinkle, 1999). Additionally, there has been a variety of research on immediacy behaviors within professional settings. A recent study by Frymier et al. (2019) showed that nonverbal immediacy is associated with enhanced student-teacher relationships, and increased relatedness between them. The available studies suggest that immediacy is positively associated with relationship satisfaction.

In sum, I will investigate the relationship between communication and relationship satisfaction. This will be done by answering the following research questions: (1) What is the relationship between communication satisfaction and relationship satisfaction? And (2) Which aspects of individual communication competence are associated with communication and relationship satisfaction? I have the following expectations: (1) Communication satisfaction is positively associated with relationship satisfaction. And (2) Self-disclosure, empathy, assertiveness, expressiveness, and immediacy are positively associated with communication- and relationship satisfaction.

### **Method**

In order to test the research questions, we designed a survey measuring different relational and personal aspects. The aspects that I used in this study are relationship satisfaction, communication satisfaction, and interpersonal communication competence. My plans were pre-registered (see Appendix A) and approved by the ethical board.

### **Participants**

For the investigation I needed Dutch couples to participate in the study. Both partners had to participate and had to be over the age of 18. To get the desired sample size, participants were recruited using convenience sampling. An announcement was posted on Facebook, and the research team also recruited friends and family in romantic relationships for participation. A total of 288 participants ( $N = 288$ ) were collected for our survey. After excluding participants for whom crucial data was missing, we ended up with 274 participants ( $N = 274$ ). The reason for exclusion was one of the partners not completing the survey. Half of the participants in the remaining sample were female ( $N = 137$ ) the other half were male ( $N = 137$ ). The sample consisted of 131 heterosexual couples (96%) and 6 homosexual couples (4%). The mean age in the sample was 26 years old ( $SD = 7.6$ ), the oldest participant was 57

years old and the youngest was 19 years old. Participation was completely voluntary and there was no reward for participation.

## **Design**

This study focused on the associations between interpersonal communication competence, communication satisfaction and relationship satisfaction. To investigate these associations a correlation research design was used.

The first research question focuses on the association between communication satisfaction and relationship satisfaction. The dependent variable relationship satisfaction was measured on a continuous scale, using the Couple Satisfaction Index (CSI) (Funk & Rogge, 2007). The independent variable communication satisfaction was also measured on a continuous scale, using the Couple Communication Satisfaction Scale (CCSS) (Jones et al., 2018).

The second research question focuses on the association between the different dimensions of interpersonal communication competence and communication/relationship satisfaction. The independent variables are the differing facets of interpersonal communication competence; this includes self-disclosure, empathy, social relaxation, assertiveness, interaction management, expressiveness, and immediacy. These dimensions were also measured on a continuous scale, using the short version of the Interpersonal Communication Competence Scale (ICCS-SF) (Rubin & Martin, 1994).

## **Materials**

The first variable I measured is relationship satisfaction. This variable was measured using a Dutch translation of the short version of the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI) (see Appendix B) (Funk & Rogge, 2007). In total 3 items of the original scale were used to measure relationship satisfaction. This scale measures relationship satisfaction on a 6-point Likert scale, however, for this study I decided to use a 5-point Likert scale for consistency

with the rest of the survey. Example of items are ‘How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?’ or ‘In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?’ Participants were asked to answer on a Likert scale ranging from 1 ‘not at all’ to 5 ‘very’. As some aspects of the original scale were changed, this could have an influence on the reliability of the scale. The short version of the CSI originally reported a Cronbach’s alpha of .94 (Funk & Rogge, 2007), in this study with the adjustments that were made I found a Cronbach’s alpha of .79.

Second, I measured communication satisfaction. This was done by using a Dutch translation of the Couple Communication Satisfaction Scale (CCSS) (see Appendix C) (Jones et al., 2018). This scale focuses on satisfaction with both one’s own communication in the relationship, as well as one’s partner’s communication. Examples of items are ‘I am concentrated in conversations with my partner’ and ‘My partner initiates enough conversations’. All 11 items of the original scale were used in the present study. Participants were instructed to answer on a Likert scale ranging from 1 ‘completely disagree’ to 5 ‘completely agree’. In order to make the questions fit with the rest of the survey the questions minor modifications were made to the items from the original scale. Once again, this could have influenced the reliability of the scale. Jones et al. (2018) reported a Cronbach’s alpha of .92, with the alterations that were made I found a Cronbach’s alpha of .78.

Third, I measured interpersonal communication competence. I used a Dutch translation of the short version of the Interpersonal Communication Competence Scale (ICCS-SF) (see Appendix D) (Rubin & Martin, 1994). This scale measures interpersonal communication competence based on different dimensions. In the ICCS-SF each dimension is measured using a single question. Examples of items are ‘I can put myself in others’ shoes’ and ‘I am comfortable in social situations’. Participants had to answer on a Likert scale ranging from 1 ‘completely disagree’ to 5 ‘completely agree’. As some items of the ICCS-SF could not be translated into Dutch without loss of meaning, I decided to remove those items. After

removing those items, I ended up measuring seven dimensions of interpersonal communication competence; self-disclosure, empathy, social relaxation, assertiveness, interaction management, expressiveness, and immediacy. These alterations could once more have an influence on the reliability of the test. Rubin and Martin (1994) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .63 for the ICCS-SF, in the present study a Cronbach's alpha of .65 was found.

### **Procedure**

Once people agreed to participate, they received a personal link to the survey. This link was used to anonymously connect the data from one partner to the other partner. When participants opened the link, they first encountered a page with general information about the survey, the way their data was handled, and who they had to contact in case they had any questions. Participants were specifically asked not to discuss the survey with their partner until they both completed the survey in order to prevent them from influencing each other's responses. At the end of the page, participants were asked to confirm they read the information and agreed to participate. After giving consent, participants could start with the questionnaire. First, participants were asked demographics such as age and gender, followed by some general information about their relationship, for example, how long they have been together. Then participants were asked about the variables that I am targeting in the present study, starting with general relationship satisfaction, followed by communication satisfaction, and interpersonal communication competence. The items I used to measure these variables were part of a bigger survey. This survey contained aspects from other studies which focus on other relational or personal aspects that were not relevant to this study. The survey took approximately 30 minutes to complete. After completing the questionnaire participants were thanked for participation, debriefed, and given the option to get feedback on their relationship. The debriefing included contact details from the main researcher and a short explanation of the purpose of the study.

## Results

After data-collection, I first created the variables of interest based on the items that were used. I used the mean response of all the items of the CSI as an indicator for relationship satisfaction. Communication satisfaction is indicated by the mean response of all the items of the CCSS. The same was done for communication competence, the mean response of the items of the ICCS-SF were used as an indicator for communication competence.

After creating the variables, the data were analyzed using IBM SPSS v.25. For all the analyses I used an alpha level of .05. In order to test my main hypothesis that communication satisfaction is associated with relationship satisfaction a simple linear regression was performed to predict relationship satisfaction based on communication satisfaction. The results of the simple linear regression indicated that there is a significant positive association between communication satisfaction ( $M = 4.08, SD = 0.45$ ) and relationship satisfaction ( $M = 4.59, SD = 0.46$ ) ( $\beta = .578, t(272) = 11.692, p < .001, R^2 = .334$ ). This supports my main hypothesis that communication satisfaction is positively associated with relationship satisfaction.

Furthermore, I hypothesized that certain interpersonal communication skills would be associated with communication satisfaction. More specifically, I expected the dimensions self-disclosure, immediacy, empathy, assertiveness, and expressiveness to be associated with communication satisfaction. As I was interested in overall communication satisfaction in the relationship, communication satisfaction was calculated by taking the mean of the communication satisfaction of both partners. To see which items correlated significantly with overall communication satisfaction I first looked at the correlation matrix (see Table 1). As shown by Table 1 all dimensions correlated significantly with communication satisfaction. This supported the hypothesis and additionally showed that the dimensions social relaxation and interaction management, for which I did not have any clear expectations, were positively

correlated with communication satisfaction as well. Secondly, a simple linear regression was performed with the different dimensions of communication competence as predictors and communication satisfaction as the dependent variable. This analysis showed that when controlling for the other dimensions only empathy ( $\beta = .159, t(266) = 2.585, p = .01$ ) and interaction management ( $\beta = .195, t(266) = 3.274, p = .001$ ) are significantly associated with communication satisfaction. Controlling for the other dimensions, empathy and interaction management contribute the most unique variance. Together all the dimensions of interpersonal communication competence explain 15.2% of the variance in communication satisfaction.

Table 1  
*Correlation matrix*

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Expressiveness	<i>r</i>									
	Sig.									
2. Self-disclosure	<i>r</i>	.348**								
	Sig.	.000								
3. Immediacy	<i>r</i>	.276**	.368**							
	Sig.	.000	.000							
4. Empathy	<i>r</i>	.190**	.158**	.361**						
	Sig.	.002	.009	.000						
5. Social Relaxation	<i>r</i>	.196**	.355**	.343**	.207**					
	Sig.	.001	.000	.000	.001					
6. Assertiveness	<i>r</i>	.062	.166**	.122*	.073	.319**				
	Sig.	.308	.006	.044	.228	.000				
7. Interaction management	<i>r</i>	.122*	.242**	.187**	.207**	.205**	.117			
	Sig.	.044	.000	.002	.001	.001	.053			
8. MeanComSat	<i>r</i>	.204**	.188**	.224**	.259**	.144*	.139*	.272**		
	Sig.	.001	.002	.000	.000	.017	.021	.000		
9. MeanRelSat	<i>r</i>	.125*	.222**	.187**	.164**	.239**	.106	.184**	.631**	
	Sig.	.039	.000	.002	.006	.000	.081	.002	.000	

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Finally, I hypothesized that interpersonal communication competence would be associated with relationship satisfaction. More specifically, I expected the aspects self-

disclosure, immediacy, empathy, assertiveness, and expressiveness to be positively associated with relationship satisfaction. As I am interested in overall relationship satisfaction in the couple, overall relationship satisfaction was calculated by taking the mean of the relationship satisfaction of both partners. Again, I first looked at the correlation matrix (see Table 1), all items except for assertiveness correlated significantly with relationship satisfaction, partially supporting the hypothesis. I then performed a linear regression analysis with the different dimensions of communication competence as predictors and overall relationship satisfaction as dependent variable. The regression analysis showed that when controlling for the other dimensions only social relaxation ( $\beta = .139, t(266) = 2.066, p = .04$ ) is significantly associated with relationship satisfaction. Suggesting that social relaxation explains the most unique variance of relationship satisfaction. Together the dimensions of interpersonal communication competence explain 10.1% of the variance in relationship satisfaction.

### **Discussion**

In this study I aimed to further investigate the association between communication and relationship satisfaction by also considering communication satisfaction, as well as the different aspects of communication skills. The goal of this study was to answer the following research questions: ‘What is the relationship between communication satisfaction and relationship satisfaction?’ and ‘Which aspects of individual communication competence are associated with communication- and relationship satisfaction?’

The results showed that there is a significant positive association between communication satisfaction and relationship satisfaction, which was in line with the hypothesis. This suggests that couples that are more satisfied with the communication in their relationship also tend to be more satisfied with their relationship in general. Furthermore, the results showed that interpersonal communication competence is positively associated with relationship satisfaction and communication satisfaction, meaning that couples with better

communication skills are in general more satisfied with both the communication in their relationship, as well as their relationship in general.

When looking at the different aspects of communication competence as suggested by Rubin and Martin (1994) the results indicate that all aspects (self-disclosure, empathy, social relaxation, assertiveness, interaction management, expressiveness, and immediacy) are positively correlated with communication satisfaction. All these aspects, except for assertiveness, were also positively correlated with relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, I hypothesized that self-disclosure, empathy, assertiveness, expressiveness, and immediacy were positively associated with communication satisfaction and relationship satisfaction, this was largely supported by the results. Additionally the results showed that social relaxation and interaction management are significantly correlated with communication satisfaction, I had no clear expectations regarding these dimensions. However, the results did not show a significant correlation between assertiveness and relationship satisfaction, which was unexpected.

When comparing the results to previous studies one can see that the general conclusions are in line with previous research. Similar to Emmers-Sommer (2004), the results indicated that good communication is important for relationship satisfaction. Not only did the findings suggest communication competence to be associated with relationship satisfaction, they also suggest that communication satisfaction specifically is strongly associated with relationship satisfaction. The latter has not been covered in the existing literature yet, but it does add to the empirical evidence suggesting that communication is important for relationship satisfaction.

As I mentioned earlier, social relaxation and interaction management were not extensively researched before. However, the present study indicates that communication satisfaction and relationship satisfaction are positively correlated with both social relaxation and interaction management, these correlations could be further investigated in future

research. The correlation between social relaxation and communication- and relationship satisfaction that I found could be explained in a couple ways. One way in which this could be explained is via social relaxation; this could be relevant in relationships as it indicates the level of comfort a person may have while communicating. If one does not feel comfortable while communicating with their partner or gets nervous and quiet around their partner's friends or family for example, this could influence the relationship satisfaction. On the other hand if one is in a loving relationship, one could start to feel more comfortable communicating with their partner. The correlation between interaction management and communication and relationship satisfaction that I found could be explained in a variety of ways. Interaction management focuses more on basic communication skills, such as taking turns in a conversation, listening to the other person, not abruptly changing topics. This could influence relationships as a partner might not feel heard, or discussions cannot be finished if one does not have these skills. On the other hand, if one is in a healthy and loving relationship, one might be able to learn certain of these basic communication skills from their partner and this could potentially influence the interaction management and allow for better communication

Contradictory to previous studies by Craddock (2008), Gordon and Waldo (1984), and Lee (2017), I did not find a significant correlation between assertiveness and relationship satisfaction. This could be due to the short questionnaire that was used, as it may not have covered the full concept of assertiveness. Because I used the short version of the ICCS, the reliability of this scale was on the lower end with a Cronbach's alpha of .65. Another possibility is that the effect of assertiveness training on relationship satisfaction found by Gordon and Waldo (1984) was not caused by increased assertiveness but rather by side-effects of this training. Additionally, the effect of sexual assertiveness on relationship satisfaction found by Lee (2017), could possibly not carry-over to general assertiveness,

which could explain why I did not find a similar effect. However, the study by Craddock (2008), which was more similar to the present study as it also used self-report measures for assertiveness and relationship satisfaction, did find a significant association between assertiveness and relationship satisfaction. This significant association was not found in the present study. Other than the questionnaires that were used in this research compared to those used in the study by Craddock (2008), there were hardly any differences in procedures, suggesting the dissimilarity in questionnaires may have caused the difference in the significance of the association.

Though the present study did show us the positive association between communication satisfaction and relationship satisfaction, it did not show us the directions of these effects. My expectations are that communication satisfaction influences relationship satisfaction. When one is more satisfied with the communication in their relationship, it is likely that one understands their partner better and can communicate better about possible shortcomings leading to increased relationship satisfaction. An opposite effect could also be possible as high general relationship satisfaction could lead to a halo effect, making one see their partner as more desirable on all aspects including communication as a consequence of the high general satisfaction. Another possibility would be a bidirectional effect, where both the effect of communication satisfaction on relationship satisfaction and the effect of relationship satisfaction on communication satisfaction play a role.

A similar issue occurs for the relationship between communication competence and communication- and relationship satisfaction. The results showed a significant positive association, but one cannot conclude anything about the directions of the effect. I expect communication skills to affect communication- and relationship satisfaction. If one is better at communicating, the communication satisfaction in their relationship will be higher. Previous research showed that communication training increased relationship satisfaction (Sevier et al.,

2008). This suggests that the association I found between communication skills and relationship satisfaction could be caused by communication skills. This effect of communication skills on relationship satisfaction could be mediated by communication satisfaction. Communication skills seem to be more strongly associated with communication satisfaction than with relationship satisfaction. Communication satisfaction in turn is positively associated with relationship satisfaction, this could make it likely that a part of the association between communication skills and relationship satisfaction would be indirect through communication satisfaction. On the other hand, it is also possible that people in a satisfactory relationship learn to communicate better with one another, increasing individual communication skills. One might be able to learn from their partner's communication habits, and relationships might even force one to express themselves more.

### **Limitations**

The results must be interpreted while keeping in mind some of the limitations of the present study. First of all, this study was conducted during the COVID-19 crisis. Uncertain times like these could have an influence on romantic relationships that could not be investigated under normal circumstances. Couples may have to rely (solely) on each other more than ever. The situation is different for every couple though; some may have been quarantined together, suddenly having no time apart from one another, whereas other couples may not have been allowed to see each other unless they kept their distance. Both completely change the dynamic of a relationship, possibly influencing the data. It is difficult to predict in what way the crisis may have influenced the data. As the situation was different for every couple, the possible effects could be different for every couple. Unfortunately there are no records on whether couples were quarantined together, as this situation occurred unexpectedly after the design of the study. If couples were not quarantined together it may have been harder to communicate with each other. However, the research by Hampton et al. (2018) on long-

distance relationship showed that video calling is significantly associated with relationship satisfaction, suggesting it is not impossible to communicate in a satisfactory way when one is unable to see their partner. On the other hand, if couples were quarantined together they did have more time to communicate with one another, possibly leading to higher communication satisfaction. Nevertheless, the quarantine may have also led to irritations in a relationship, as those living together may struggle with the little to no time apart, which in turn could cause conflict between them when previously there were no issues. However, based on the data, which showed high means for relationship satisfaction, it seems unlikely that there was a large negative impact of the crisis on relationship satisfaction. The data was collected fairly early during the crisis, therefore, one is unable to rule out possible negative consequences that occurred later on in the crisis.

Additionally, one has to consider that a correlation research design was used for the present study. This limits us in interpreting the results as one cannot talk about the findings in terms of causality. However, I still decided to use a correlational design as it is difficult to manipulate communication satisfaction within relationships. It is not only difficult to manipulate, it would also be undesirable to manipulate this as I am only interested in the natural relationships. Furthermore, I also decided to use a correlational design when investigating the association between communication competence and both communication satisfaction and relationship satisfaction. This decision was made as previous research has shown that communication skills tend to be difficult to manipulate (Williamson et al., 2016), and manipulating communication skills would be too time consuming for the present study. Based on previous research I have assumed that communication satisfaction is causing relationship satisfaction. Additionally, I think that communication skills influence communication- and relationship satisfaction, with the latter effect possibly being mediated by communication satisfaction. However, I do not rule out the effects in opposite directions.

Furthermore, there may be issues when it comes to the quality of the questionnaires that were used. I used the shortest versions of existing questionnaires and translated them. For communication satisfaction and relationship satisfaction there does not appear to be a problem based on Cronbach's alphas. However, for communication skills I only found an alpha of .65 which indicates there might be some reliability issues with that construct. This could be due to the questionnaire by Rubin and Martin (1994) consisting of multiple dimensions measuring the same construct. In the short version there is only one question per dimension which could have led to a lower reliability. However, I decided to use the short version, to ensure people could stay focused during the full questionnaire. As aforementioned, the questionnaire took around 30 minutes to complete and we did not want to further increase this, which is why we chose to use shorter questionnaires where possible.

### **Future directions**

The findings of the present study allows one to explore new aspects, which were not covered in the literature before. Future research could focus more specifically on the different aspects of communication competence and their influence on relationship satisfaction. Especially on the aspects of social relaxation and interaction management. These aspects have not been investigated thoroughly before, but the present study does suggest these constructs are associated with relationship satisfaction. Future research would have to show whether these correlations hold when a more extensive questionnaire is used. A way to influence these aspects could be through communication training specifically targeting interaction management (basic conversation skills) or social relaxation (feeling comfortable communicating). If one can show that manipulation of these aspects is possible and that it enhances relationship satisfaction, this could be an effective method to increase relationship satisfaction.

Furthermore, it could be interesting to do a replication study in a couple of years to investigate whether the current COVID-19 crisis affected the results of this study. It is possible that the increased stress during a crisis situation led to lower levels of satisfaction. The additional stress caused by the crisis could have affected people's mood and they could possibly take this out on their partners. Additionally, couples that were not living together at the time of the crisis were officially not allowed to see each other, and if they did meet up, they had to keep their distance, which can be very unnatural for couples and possibly influence their relationship. The present study, however, found high levels of relationship satisfaction, indicating this was unlikely to have occurred. On the other hand, one can imagine that couples communicated more frequently if they were in lockdown together. Though couples may communicate more frequently in lockdown, the lack of time apart could lead to more irritations as one could unconsciously start focusing more on the small negative things about their partner. It is for now unclear if the current crisis had any effects on this study, and if it did affect the study, it is unclear in what way, a replication study after the crisis could give us new insights on this matter. Unfortunately, the data may miss some crucial information that would be relevant, for example whether couples were quarantined together, or how strongly the couples were affected by the crisis. Furthermore, questioning a diverse sample of couples (questionnaire or interview) could give us insights in how couples experienced this period and how they think it affected their relationship.

Additionally one could further investigate the role of communication satisfaction. The results showed that communication satisfaction is positively associated with relationship satisfaction. Williamson et al. (2016) found that communication counseling did not significantly improve communication skills, but it did significantly improve relationship satisfaction. As the present study showed that the way couples think about the communication in their relationship is associated with relationship satisfaction, communication satisfaction

seems to be a factor that should be considered in this type of research. Future research could investigate whether communication counseling for couples would increase communication satisfaction rather than improving objective communication skills. If it does improve communication satisfaction this could explain why relationship satisfaction was improved in the research by Williamson et al. (2016), while communication skills were not improved.

### **Practical implications**

Though it might need further investigation, this study suggests that communication satisfaction is important for relationship satisfaction. In practice, this could mean it would be beneficial to also focus on increasing communication satisfaction during communication training, rather than only trying to objectively increase communication skills. People may have different preferences regarding certain aspects of communication and taking this into account could possibly increase the effects of communication training. Furthermore, the present study gave an indication of what aspects of communication skills are associated with relationship satisfaction. It could be interesting to focus on these aspects more specifically during communication therapy. The results showed that when controlling for the other dimensions, interaction management and empathy are most strongly associated with communication satisfaction. Furthermore, the results showed that when controlling for the other dimensions, social relaxation is most strongly associated with relationship satisfaction. Therefore, these dimensions might be particularly important to target during communication therapy

For couples it is important to realize communication is an important aspect of their relationship. Taking the time to communicate with one's partner is important and individually increasing communication skills could also increase relationship satisfaction. Additionally, it could be relevant for one to consider their partner's communication satisfaction, as not everyone might be satisfied with the same behavior. Openly communicating within a

relationship about preferences or communication habits that one might find irritating might increase one's own communication satisfaction as well as their partner's communication satisfaction.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, the results add to the existing empirical evidence that demonstrates a positive association between communication and relationship satisfaction. Specifically, communication satisfaction as well as communication skills are positively associated with relationship satisfaction. The results add to the notion that communication is very important in relationships. Additionally the present study indicated new paths that could be explored and developed within couples therapy. Especially during this global pandemic it is now extremely important to keep the communication with one's partner strong.

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## Appendix A

### Pre-registration

#### Pre-registration: Thesis – Communication and relationship satisfaction

*Draft – Last amended 16 March 2020*

#### 1) Data collection. Have any data been collected for this study already?

No, no data has been collected for this study yet.

#### 2) Hypothesis. What's the main question being asked or hypothesis being tested in this study?

The main questions being asked are:  
What is the relationship between communication satisfaction and relationship satisfaction in romantic relationships?  
Which aspects of individual communication competence are associated with communication/relationship satisfaction?  
The hypothesis being tested are:  
Communication satisfaction is positively associated with relationship satisfaction.  
Empathy, self-disclosure, expressiveness, assertiveness, and immediacy are positively associated with communication and relationship satisfaction.

#### 3) Dependent variable. Describe the key dependent variable(s) specifying how they will be measured.

The first dependent variable is relationship satisfaction, this will be measured using the 4-item version of the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI).  
Another variable that's both an independent and a dependent variable is communication satisfaction, this variable will be measure using the Couples Communication Satisfaction Scale (CCSS).

#### 4) Conditions. How many and which conditions will participants be assigned to?

There will be no conditions, we will use a correlational research design, not an experimental research design. Every participant will fill out the same survey.

**5) Analyses. Specify exactly which analyses you will conduct to examine the main question/hypothesis.**

We will perform a regression analyses with communication satisfaction as independent variable and relationship satisfaction as dependent variable.  
 We will perform a regression analyses with the items measuring the different aspects of communication competence as independent variables and communication satisfaction as dependent variable.  
 We will perform a regression analyses with the items measuring the different aspects of communication competence as independent variables and relationship satisfaction as dependent variable.

**6) Outliers and Exclusions. Describe exactly how outliers will be defined and handled, and you precise rule(s) for excluding observations.**

We will exclude participants for whom we miss information on key variables.

**7) Sample Size. How many observations will be collected or what will determine sample size? No need to justify decision, but be precise about exactly how the number will be determined.**

We aim to collect data from 200 participants, 100 couples. If we are not able to do so before April 6th 2020 we will close data collection on that day.

**8) Anything else you would like to pre-register? (e.g., secondary analyses, variables collected for exploratory purposes, unusual analyses planned?)**

The survey we will use, will be used for multiple purposes. The survey therefore contains a lot of questions that will not be relevant for this particular study.

## **Appendix B**

### Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI)

Als je alle aspecten meeneemt hoe gelukkig ben je dan in je relatie?

1 Helemaal niet – 5 Heel erg

Ik heb een liefdevolle en fijne relatie met mijn partner

1 Helemaal niet – 5 Heel erg

Ik haal veel voldoening uit de relatie met mijn partner

1 Zeer oneens – 5 Zeer eens

## Appendix C

### Couple Communication Satisfaction Scale (CCSS)

Ik ben bereid echt te luisteren als mijn partner ergens over wil praten

1 Zeer oneens – 5 Zeer eens

In gesprekken met mijn partner ben ik geconcentreerd

1 Zeer oneens – 5 Zeer eens

Ik stel mij emotioneel open in gesprekken met mijn partner

1 Zeer oneens – 5 Zeer eens

Mijn stemming is goed na gesprekken met mijn partner

1 Zeer oneens – 5 Zeer eens

In de communicatie met mijn partner is er een goede balans tussen geven en nemen

1 Zeer oneens – 5 Zeer eens

Mijn partner stelt zich emotioneel open in gesprekken met mij

1 Zeer oneens – 5 Zeer eens

Mijn partner initieert voldoende gesprekken

1 Zeer oneens – 5 Zeer eens

Mijn partner doet moeite mij te begrijpen

1 Zeer oneens – 5 Zeer eens

Mijn partner kan een discussie met mij voeren zonder zich defensief op te stellen

1 Zeer oneens – 5 Zeer eens

Er is voldoende variatie in onze gespreksonderwerpen

1 Zeer oneens – 5 Zeer eens

Er wordt voldoende gecommuniceerd in onze relatie

1 Zeer oneens – 5 Zeer eens

## Appendix D

### Interpersonal Communication Competence Scale – Short Form (ICCS-SF)

#### Self-disclosure:

Ik laat mijn vrienden zien wie ik echt ben

1 Zeer oneens – 5 Zeer eens

#### Empathy:

Ik kan mezelf in een ander verplaatsen

1 Zeer oneens – 5 Zeer eens

#### Social Relaxation:

Ik voel me prettig in sociale situaties

1 Zeer oneens – 5 Zeer eens

#### Assertiveness:

Wanneer iemand mij iets misdaan heeft, confronteer ik diegene

1 Zeer oneens – 5 Zeer eens

#### Interaction management:

In mijn gesprekken verloopt de overgang tussen verschillende onderwerpen soepel

1 Zeer oneens – 5 Zeer eens

#### Immediacy:

Mijn vrienden merken aan mij hoe ik me voel

1 Zeer oneens – 5 Zeer eens

#### Expressiveness:

Mijn vrienden weten dat ik echt om hen geef

1 Zeer oneens – 5 Zeer eens