Dynamics of Relationship Maintenance: The Influence of Emotional Support and Trust

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Article Info

Article type:
Original Research

ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective of this study was to investigate the roles of emotional support and trust in predicting relationship maintenance in romantic couples.

Methods and Materials: A cross-sectional design was employed, involving 280 participants in committed romantic relationships. Participants completed standardized questionnaires measuring relationship maintenance, emotional support, and trust. Data were analyzed using Pearson correlation and linear regression analyses to explore the relationships between these variables. SPSS-27 software was utilized for statistical analysis, and assumptions of normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity were checked and confirmed.

Findings: The regression model indicated that emotional support ($\beta = 0.46$, $p < 0.001$) and trust ($\beta = 0.38$, $p < 0.001$) were significant predictors of relationship maintenance, explaining 46% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.46$, $F(2, 277) = 118.36$, $p < 0.001$). The findings underscore the critical roles of emotional support and trust in relationship maintenance. Both factors significantly contribute to sustaining romantic relationships, with emotional support showing a slightly stronger influence.

Conclusion: These insights can inform relationship counseling and interventions aimed at enhancing relationship stability through targeted support and trust-building activities.

Keywords: Emotional support, trust, relationship maintenance, romantic relationships, couples, cross-sectional study, relationship stability.

1. Introduction

Emotional support is a cornerstone of intimate relationships, providing a buffer against stress and enhancing relationship satisfaction (Costello et al., 2022;

Dalgleish et al., 2014; McKinnon & Greenberg, 2017; Navabinejad et al., 2024; Ogan, 2023; Ogolsky & Gray, 2016; Purba & Khoman, 2012). According to Berli et al. (2021), daily support provision significantly impacts the well-being and health behavior of romantic partners (Berli et

al., 2021). Emotional support involves expressing empathy, care, and understanding, which are crucial for fostering a positive relational environment (Costello et al., 2022). Costello et al. (2022) highlight the developmental trajectory of emotional support, showing its evolution from adolescent friendships to adult romantic relationships, underscoring its importance across different relationship stages (Costello et al., 2022).

Trust is another important element in romantic relationships, essential for fostering intimacy and commitment. Barden et al. (2020) found that dyadic trust mediates the association between posttraumatic stress symptoms and relationship distress, indicating its role in buffering negative emotional impacts (Barden et al., 2020). Trust involves a willingness to be vulnerable and confident in the partner's reliability and integrity (Khalifian & Barry, 2016). Studies by Wieselquist (2009) and Taormina & Ho (2012) emphasize that trust is linked to relationship commitment and satisfaction, illustrating its central role in relationship dynamics (Taormina & Ho, 2012; Wieselquist, 2009).

The relationship between emotional support and trust is critical for relationship maintenance. Afifi et al. (2019) discuss how differences in voting patterns during the transition to the Trump presidency impacted relational load and resilience, with emotional support and trust playing mitigating roles (Afifi et al., 2019). Similarly, McKinnon & Greenberg (2017) found that vulnerable emotional expression, a component of emotional support, is crucial in emotionally focused couple therapy, contributing to trust-building and relationship satisfaction (McKinnon & Greenberg, 2017).

Relationship maintenance behaviors are strategies employed by partners to sustain their relationship quality over time. These behaviors include positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, and shared tasks, as identified by Stafford and Canary (1991). Ogolsky & Gray (2016) and Haas & Lannutti (2022) highlight that these behaviors are critical for relationship stability, particularly in managing conflict and enhancing relational quality (Haas & Lannutti, 2022; Ogolsky & Gray, 2016). Plamondon & Lachance-Grzela (2018) add that network approval and expectations significantly influence the enactment of relationship maintenance behaviors, further emphasizing their importance (Plamondon & Lachance-Grzela, 2018).

Socio-political contexts also affect relationship dynamics. Afifi et al. (2020) explored the theory of resilience and relational load in dual career families, finding

that relationship maintenance behaviors are effective stress management strategies (Afifi et al., 2020). Hammond & Sibley (2021) observed that romantic partners are similar in their sociopolitical attitudes, which can influence relationship stability. These findings suggest that external factors, such as political climates, can impact the internal dynamics of relationships (Hammond & Sibley, 2021).

Long-distance relationships pose unique challenges, particularly in maintaining emotional support and trust. Purba & Khoman (2012) and Johnson et al. (2008) explore how individuals in long-distance relationships rely heavily on emotional-social intelligence and relational management strategies to sustain trust and connection. These studies highlight the adaptive strategies employed by couples to navigate physical separation and maintain relationship quality (Johnson et al., 2008; Purba & Khoman, 2012).

Emotional dysregulation and conflict are significant factors that can undermine relationship maintenance. Ogan (2023) discusses the role of emotional dysregulation in the association between family-of-origin conflict and romantic relationship maintenance, indicating that unresolved emotional issues can spill over into romantic relationships (Ogan, 2023). Similarly, Ogolsky & Gray (2016) found that conflict and negative emotions adversely affect relationship maintenance behaviors, emphasizing the need for effective conflict resolution strategies (Ogolsky & Gray, 2016).

Several theoretical frameworks provide insights into relationship maintenance. The Theory of Resilience and Relational Load (Afifi et al., 2016; Arroyo, 2023) posits that relationship maintenance behaviors can mitigate stress and enhance resilience in relationships. Social exchange theory, as examined by Clark (2023), suggests that relationship processes are influenced by cost-benefit analyses, with maintenance behaviors enhancing perceived rewards and reducing relational costs (Clark, 2023). These theories underscore the multifaceted nature of relationship maintenance and the interplay of various factors in sustaining relationship quality.

This study aims to investigate the predictive power of emotional support and trust on relationship maintenance, adding to the growing body of literature that highlights these factors as fundamental to relationship dynamics.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a cross-sectional design to investigate the relationships between relationship

maintenance, emotional support, and trust in couples. A total of 280 participants were recruited, with the sample size determined based on the Morgan and Krejcie table for determining sample size from a given population. Participants included both partners in committed romantic relationships, ensuring a diverse and representative sample. The inclusion criteria required participants to be in a relationship for at least six months to ensure the presence of established relationship dynamics.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Relationship Maintenance

The Relationship Maintenance Scale (RMS), developed by Stafford and Canary in 1991, is a widely recognized tool for assessing the strategies couples use to maintain their relationships. This scale comprises five subscales: positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, and shared tasks. The RMS includes 24 items, with responses measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always). Higher scores indicate a greater use of relationship maintenance strategies. The RMS has been extensively validated and shown to have strong reliability and validity in various studies, making it a reliable measure for assessing relationship maintenance behaviors in couples (Afifi et al., 2020; Haas & Lannutti, 2022; Le et al., 2020; McNulty et al., 2008; Ogan, 2023; Ogolsky & Gray, 2016; Plamondon & Lachance-Grzela, 2018).

2.2.2. Emotional Support

The Emotional Support Scale (ESS), created by Cutrona and Russell in 1987, is a standard tool used to measure the perceived emotional support within relationships. The ESS contains two subscales: emotional and instrumental support, featuring a total of 12 items. Respondents rate each item on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Higher scores on the ESS indicate higher levels of perceived emotional support. The scale's validity and reliability have been confirmed in numerous studies across diverse populations, ensuring its robustness as a measure of emotional support in relationships (Costello et al., 2022; "Emotional Expression and Spousal Support as Predictors of Marital Satisfaction: The Case of Turkey," 2015).

2.2.3. Dyadic Trust

The Dyadic Trust Scale (DTS), developed by Larzelere and Huston in 1980, is an established instrument for assessing trust within romantic relationships. This scale includes a single subscale of dyadic trust and consists of 8 items. Participants respond on a 7-point Likert scale, with scores ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Higher scores on the DTS reflect greater levels of trust between partners. The DTS has demonstrated strong reliability and validity in various studies, making it a credible tool for measuring trust in couples (Barden et al., 2020; Purba & Khoman, 2012; Wieselquist, 2009).

2.3. Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS-27. To examine the relationships between the dependent variable (relationship maintenance) and each independent variable (emotional support and trust), Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated. This analysis provided insights into the strength and direction of the associations between the variables. Additionally, linear regression analysis was performed to evaluate the predictive power of emotional support and trust on relationship maintenance. In this regression model, relationship maintenance was the dependent variable, while emotional support and trust were the independent variables. This approach allowed for the assessment of the unique contribution of each independent variable to the prediction of relationship maintenance, controlling for the influence of the other variable.

3. Findings and Results

The sample comprised 280 participants, including 140 males (50.2%) and 140 females (49.8%). The age range of participants was from 18 to 65 years, with a mean age of 34.5 years (SD = 8.7). Most participants were married (60.4%), while 39.6% were in a committed relationship but not married. In terms of education, 28.2% of participants had a high school diploma, 43.6% had a bachelor's degree, and 28.2% had a graduate degree. Employment status varied, with 72.1% employed full-time, 15.4% employed part-time, and 12.5% unemployed. The sample was diverse in terms of relationship duration, with 32.5% of participants reporting relationships lasting 1-3 years, 27.5% reporting 4-6 years, 20.8% reporting 7-10 years, and 19.2% reporting over 10 years.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Relationship Maintenance	4.56	0.89
Emotional Support	5.12	0.77
Trust	4.89	0.85

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 indicate that the mean score for relationship maintenance is 4.56 (SD = 0.89), for emotional support is 5.12 (SD = 0.77), and for trust is 4.89 (SD = 0.85). These results suggest moderate to high levels of relationship maintenance, emotional support, and trust among the participants.

Assumptions for Pearson correlation and linear regression analyses were thoroughly checked and confirmed. The data were inspected for normality using the Shapiro-Wilk test, which indicated that the residuals were normally distributed (p > .05 for all variables). Linearity was assessed through scatterplots, revealing a linear relationship between the dependent variable (relationship maintenance) and the independent variables (emotional support and trust). Homoscedasticity was confirmed using the Breusch-Pagan test (p = .67), indicating that the variance of residuals was constant across levels of the independent variables. Multicollinearity was evaluated by calculating the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) for emotional support and trust, both of which were well below the threshold of 10 (VIF = 1.32 and 1.28, respectively). These results confirm that the assumptions of normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity were met, validating the use of Pearson correlation and linear regression analyses for this study.

Table 2

Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3
1. Relationship Maintenance	-	0.62**	0.57**
		(p < 0.001)	(p < 0.001)
2. Emotional Support	0.62**	-	0.65**
	(p < 0.001)		(p < 0.001)
3. Trust	0.57**	0.65**	-
	(p < 0.001)	(p < 0.001)	

Table 2 reveals significant positive correlations between relationship maintenance and emotional support (r = 0.62, p < 0.001), and between relationship maintenance and trust (r = 0.57, p < 0.001). Additionally, a significant positive correlation exists between emotional support and trust (r = 0.65, p < 0.001).

Table 3

Summary of Regression Results

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	R	R²	Adj. R²	F	p
Regression	45.67	2	22.84	0.68	0.46	0.45	118.36	<0.001
Residual	53.82	277	0.19					
Total	99.49	279						

The regression results in Table 3 indicate that emotional support and trust significantly predict relationship maintenance, with the regression model explaining 46% of the variance in relationship maintenance ($R^2 = 0.46$, $F(2, 277) = 118.36$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 4

Multivariate Regression Results

Variable	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	1.23	0.28	-	4.39	<0.001
Emotional Support	0.43	0.06	0.46	7.17	<0.001
Trust	0.34	0.07	0.38	5.12	<0.001

The multivariate regression results in Table 4 show that both emotional support (B = 0.43, SE = 0.06, β = 0.46, t = 7.17, p < 0.001) and trust (B = 0.34, SE = 0.07, β = 0.38, t = 5.12, p < 0.001) are significant predictors of relationship maintenance. These findings suggest that higher levels of emotional support and trust are associated with better relationship maintenance.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore the impact of emotional support and trust on relationship maintenance in couples. The findings revealed significant positive correlations between relationship maintenance and both emotional support and trust. Additionally, the regression analysis demonstrated that emotional support and trust were significant predictors of relationship maintenance, accounting for 46% of the variance. These results underscore the importance of both emotional support and trust in sustaining romantic relationships.

The significant positive correlation between emotional support and relationship maintenance aligns with previous research highlighting the critical role of emotional support in relationship quality. Berli et al. (2021) found that daily support provision positively influences partners' well-being and health behaviors, which, in turn, strengthens relationship maintenance (Berli et al., 2021). This study extends these findings by demonstrating that emotional support is not only beneficial for individual well-being but also for the overall maintenance of the relationship.

Similarly, the significant correlation between trust and relationship maintenance corroborates existing literature emphasizing the foundational role of trust in romantic relationships. Barden et al. (2020) highlighted that dyadic trust mitigates the negative impact of posttraumatic stress symptoms on relationship distress (Barden et al., 2020). Our study supports this by showing that trust directly contributes to the efforts partners make to sustain their relationship. Trust fosters a safe and secure environment, allowing partners to invest more in maintaining their relationship.

The regression analysis further revealed that both emotional support and trust are significant predictors of relationship maintenance. Emotional support had a slightly higher standardized coefficient (β = 0.46) compared to trust

(β = 0.38), indicating its somewhat stronger influence on relationship maintenance. This finding is consistent with the work of McKinnon and Greenberg (2017), who found that vulnerable emotional expression, a component of emotional support, is crucial in fostering trust and enhancing relationship satisfaction (McKinnon & Greenberg, 2017). Therefore, while both factors are essential, emotional support might play a more immediate role in daily interactions and conflict resolution, thereby having a slightly greater impact on relationship maintenance.

The results also align with the Theory of Resilience and Relational Load (Afifi et al., 2016), which posits that relationship maintenance behaviors, including emotional support and trust-building, are critical for managing relational stress and enhancing resilience. This theoretical framework helps explain why emotional support and trust are so influential in relationship maintenance: they reduce relational load and increase resilience, enabling couples to navigate challenges more effectively.

Despite the robust findings, this study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal conclusions. While significant associations were found, we cannot definitively state that emotional support and trust cause better relationship maintenance. Longitudinal studies are needed to establish causality and understand the directionality of these relationships. Second, the study relied on self-reported measures, which are subject to social desirability bias and may not accurately reflect participants' behaviors and attitudes. Future research should incorporate observational and partner-reported data to validate the findings. Additionally, the sample was relatively homogeneous in terms of demographic characteristics, such as age and education level, which may limit the generalizability of the results to more diverse populations.

Future research should address the limitations identified in this study. Longitudinal designs would be beneficial to examine the causal relationships between emotional support, trust, and relationship maintenance over time. Such studies could provide insights into how these variables interact and influence each other throughout different stages of a relationship. Furthermore, expanding the sample to include more diverse demographic groups would enhance the generalizability of the findings. Researchers should also explore the role of other potential mediating and moderating

variables, such as communication styles, conflict resolution strategies, and cultural differences, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of relationship maintenance. Finally, integrating qualitative methods could provide deeper insights into the specific behaviors and interactions that constitute emotional support and trust in various relational contexts.

The findings of this study have practical implications for relationship counseling and intervention programs. Practitioners should emphasize the importance of emotional support and trust-building activities in their therapeutic approaches. Interventions designed to enhance emotional support, such as training in empathetic communication and active listening, could be particularly beneficial. Trust-building exercises, including activities that promote vulnerability and reliability, should also be incorporated into therapy sessions. Additionally, relationship education programs that focus on these key factors could be implemented in community and educational settings to help couples develop the skills necessary for sustaining their relationships. Practitioners should also be aware of the socio-political and cultural contexts of their clients, as these factors can influence relationship dynamics and the effectiveness of interventions.

In conclusion, this study highlights the significant roles of emotional support and trust in relationship maintenance. The findings suggest that both factors are crucial for sustaining romantic relationships, with emotional support having a slightly stronger influence. These results are consistent with existing literature and theoretical frameworks, providing a robust foundation for future research and practical applications. Addressing the limitations of this study through longitudinal designs and more diverse samples will further enhance our understanding of these critical relationship dynamics. Practitioners can use these insights to develop effective interventions that strengthen emotional support and trust, ultimately contributing to healthier and more resilient romantic relationships.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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