Exchange Orientation, Electronic Communication, and Satisfaction in Romantic Couples

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Introduction:

❑ Our study was focused on how individual's satisfaction with romantic relationships was affected by the exchange orientation (*see theory)* within the couple and the perceived equity of communication exchanges including electronic communications. A survey of 58 individuals was conducted and we compared couples in terms of their dyadic exchange orientation (high-high, high-low, and low-low couples) in addition to individual exchange orientations. Following previous research (Murstein et. al., 1977), we hypothesized that couples with a balanced exchange orientation would have higher satisfaction than unbalanced couples. Although there were few significant differences among individuals and couples on the variables studied, there are slight differences among the couples orientation and perceived satisfaction with communication. When individual's perceived communication as one sided they were less satisfied with communication in the relationship.

Theory:

❑ Exchange orientation refers to when an individual views exchanges in terms of cost/benefit analysis. High exchange oriented individuals are more likely to view near equal exchanges as important, low exchange oriented individuals do not. For example, when exchanging gifts if one individual purchases a gift of lesser monetary value than the other, the high exchange oriented person may be bothered by the inequality of exchange whereas the low exchange oriented individual may judge by a different standard such as "thoughtfulness". When there is an imbalance in exchange orientation in a relationship conflict can arise because of the differing perspectives of the "fairness" in the relationship.

Hypotheses:

❑ H1: Couples with balanced exchange orientation will be more satisfied with their relationship than unbalanced couples.

❑ H2:   Couples with balanced exchange orientation will be more satisfied with communication in their relationships than unbalanced couples.

❑ H3: Individuals who perceive inequality in communication in their relationship will be less satisfied with their relationship.

Methods:

❑ The survey we administered consisted of twenty seven questions aimed to determine individual exchange orientation and couple exchange orientation. The sampling frame used for survey invites was the University directory. Due to the low number of respondents through this methodology we switched to a snow ball sample. An exchange index was constructed to measure individual exchange orientation and combined to form couple exchange. Multiple linear regression was used for analysis, the independent variables used were general exchange orientation, use of technological communications, gender, age, and if couples lived together. The dependent variables in the study were relational and communication satisfaction.
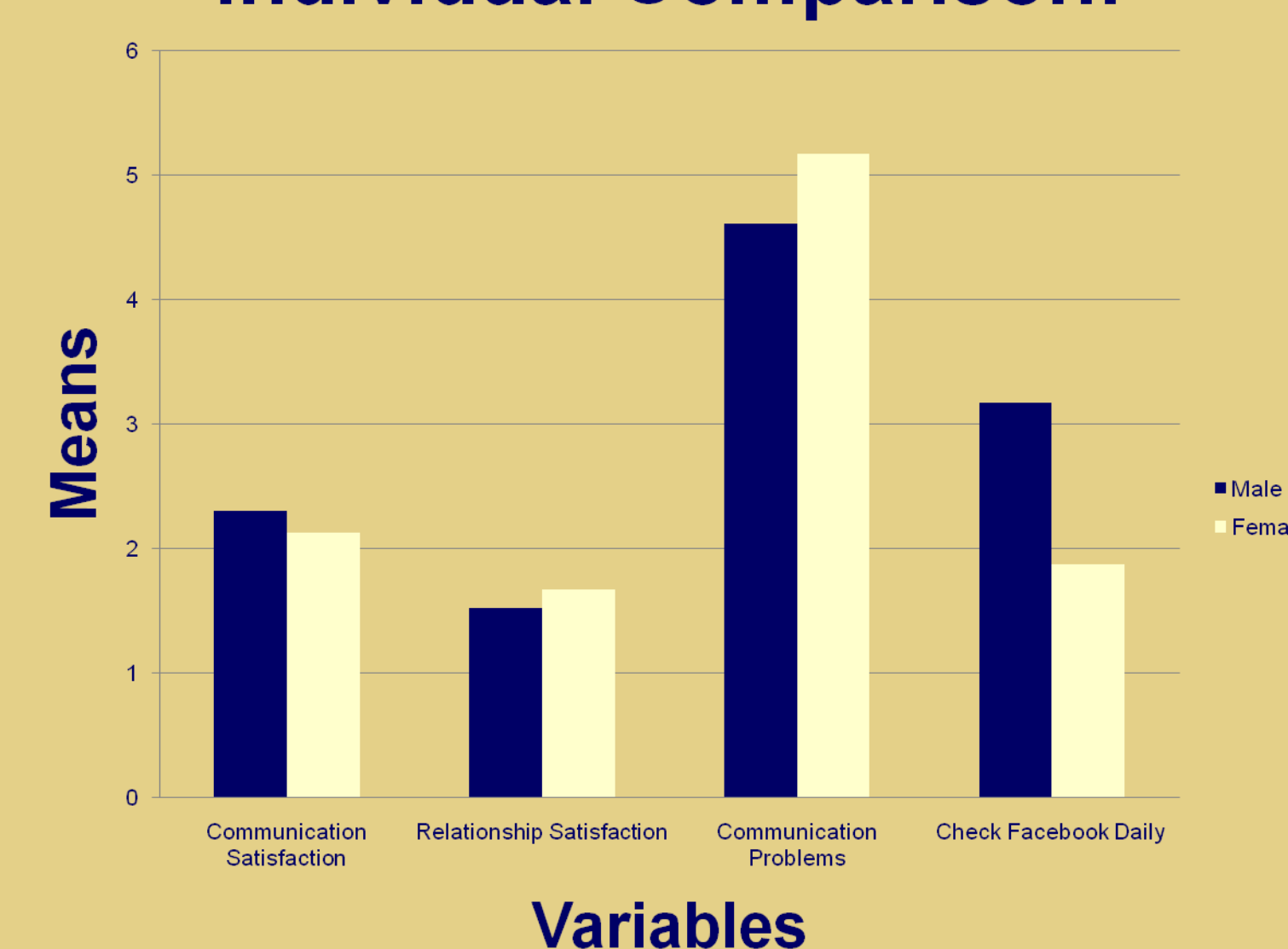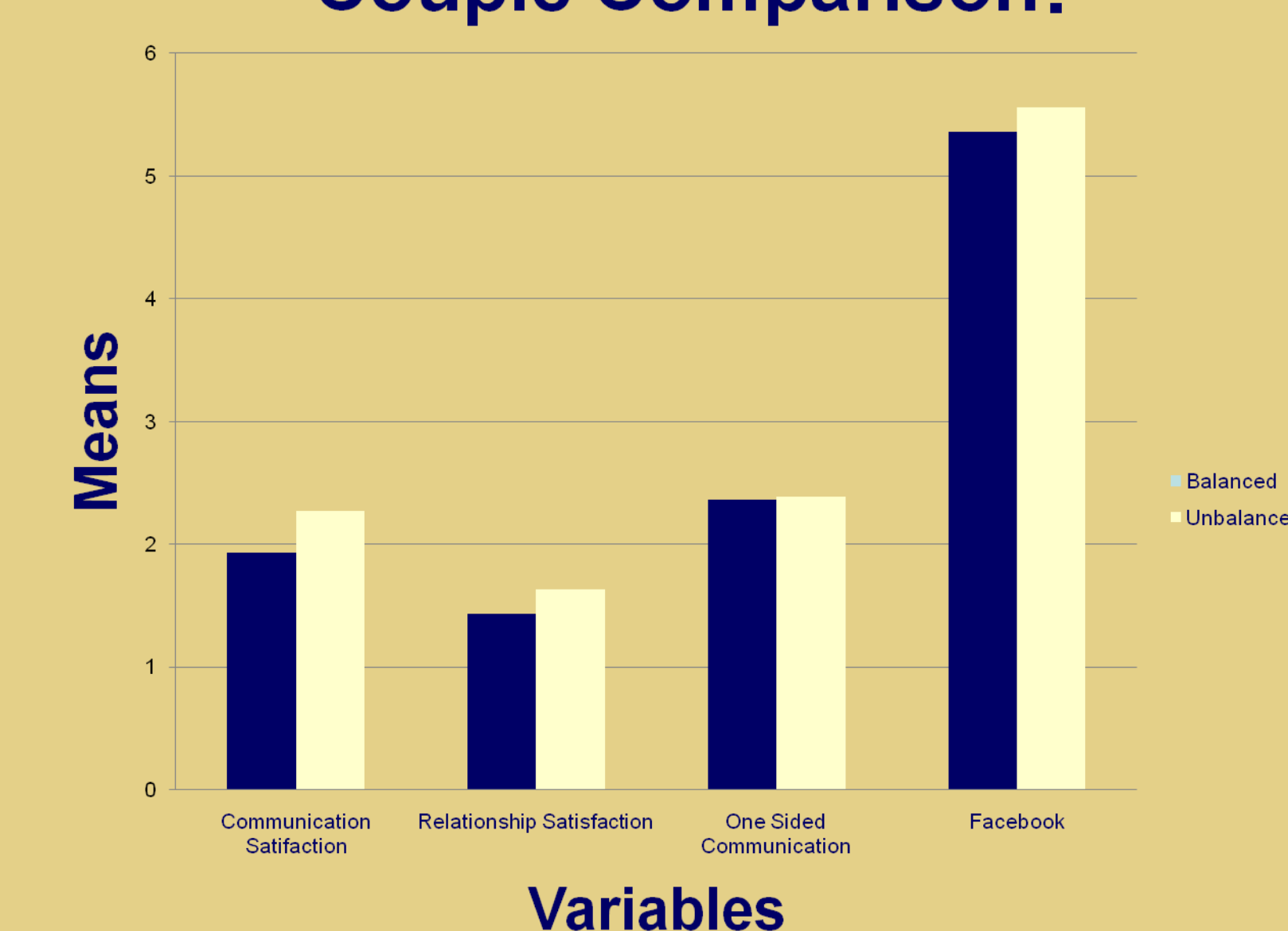
Results:

❑ We determined through our study that gender did not play a significant role in relationship satisfaction or communication satisfaction which was unexpected. We also determined there were slight differences among satisfaction and the couples exchange balance, however, not at a statistically significant level. The data collected showed that unbalanced couples had slightly lower mean communication and relational satisfaction.   We did find some interesting statistically significant relationships. The first being couples that lived together were less satisfied with their relationship and communication in their relationship than couples who did not live together (p<.05 level). We also discovered that males check their Facebook accounts more often than females (p<.05 level). Lastly, we determined that when an individual perceived communication as one sided they were less satisfied with communication in the relationship (p<.05 level).

❑ The first graph below shows comparisons between males and females regarding four different variables we considered. The second graph to the right displays the differences observed in unbalanced and balanced couples.

Discussion:

❑ Our data did not support our first two hypothesis at a statistically significant level. However, the data did show results in the direction we were expecting. Individuals with a balanced exchange did show to have higher satisfaction with their relationships and higher communication satisfaction. We were surprised by our findings that showed cohabitation had a significant impact on relational and communication satisfaction. It may be that the ubiquity of electronic communication formats used by people today lead people to have lower expectations of reciprocity in such communications. Our study led us to believe more research needs to be conducted on exchange orientation and relational and communication satisfaction with a larger sample size to determine the effects of electronic communications. Due to the limitations of our sample, further research is needed to determine the extent of effects of exchange orientation, individually or within couples, on relationship and communication satisfaction.

Reference:

Murstein, Bernard I., Mary Cerreto, and Marcia G. Mac Donald. "A Theory and Investigation of the Effect of Exchange-Orientation on Marriage and Friendship." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 39.3 (1977): 543-48.