Multimodal Communication, Idealization, and Relational Quality in College Students' Parental Relationships: A Model of Partner Idealization in Ongoing Relationships

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Multimodal Communication, Idealization, and Relational Quality in College Students' Parental Relationships: A Model of Partner Idealization in Ongoing Relationships *

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Abstract: This study tested the partner idealization component of the hyperpersonal perspective, and extended this perspective to the study of an ongoing relationship – college students and their parents. We proposed a model to encompass the cognitive and behavioral idealization mechanisms that past research identified as provoking positive relational outcomes. Results indicated that mediated communication frequency was positively related to both idealization and relational quality, and that idealization partially mediated the statistical relationship between mediated communication frequency and relational quality. Face-to-face communication frequency was inversely related to one indicator of idealization (positive affect thinking), but was not directly related to relational quality. That said, indirect effects were detected, such that face-to-face communication frequency was negatively and indirectly related to relational quality as a function of positive affect thinking. These results were interpreted using concepts from interpersonal, family, and computer-mediated communication, and research future directions were discussed.

The concept of idealization plays a prominent role in conceptualizations of important interpersonal communication processes. The idealization mechanism is a behavioral and cognitive process through which individuals develop overly positive perceptions regarding a partner (Stafford & Merolla, 2007). Computer-mediated communication (CMC) scholars have noted idealization's central role in successful online relating. For example, the hyperpersonal perspective (Walther, 1996) claims that people use lean-cue mediated environments to engage in strategic self-presentation, which can foster the formation of idealized relationships. Likewise, research assessing long-distance (LD) romantic relationships notes that the restriction of face-to-face (FtF) interaction and reliance on mediated channels can lead partners to forget each other's faults, and over-estimate each other's positive qualities (< a href="#staffordandmerolla2007">Stafford & Merolla, 2007). When examined in combination, these bodies of literature provide a framework for understanding the presence of partner idealization in many interpersonal contexts. The idealization mechanisms described in these lines of research, however, are rarely assessed within a unified model.

Many studies with a CMC focus (Brody, 2013; Walther, 1996) have treated partner idealization as a latent theoretical mechanism. These studies do not directly assess partner idealization, but rather, assume its presence based on the detection of hypothesized

relations between FtF and mediated communication frequencies and relational outcomes. Conversely, Stafford & Merolla's (2007) LD relationship research actually measured indicators of partner idealization, yet treated these indicators as outcomes rather than as potential mediators. Drawing upon this past research and the hyperpersonal perspective, the present study asserts that the use of mediated and FtF communication might influence relational quality outcomes (e.g., satisfaction and closeness) both directly, and via the indirect effects of partner idealization. The articulation and testing of an idealization model is therefore an important step toward filling the gaps between the hyperpersonal perspectives' theoretical claims, and the somewhat isolated nature in which these claims have been tested in past research.

While testing a model of the idealization process, the present study also extends the hyperpersonal perspective to the context of ongoing relationships, which Tong and Walther (2011) assert is an important step toward understanding the role of CMC in multimodal relationships. More specifically, the present study assesses the applicability of partner idealization and the hyperpersonal perspective to the context of college students' parental relationships. This context was selected because it is an ongoing relationship that often shifts from primarily FtF to a largely mediated nature during the college years, which may trigger idealization. As such, students' parental relationships provide an opportunity to test a model of the idealization process (see Figure 1), while extending the hyperpersonal perspective to an ongoing relational context.

Review of Literature

Positive Illusions and Partner Idealization

Positive illusions occur when a person's perceptions become inflated in ways that fail to match reality. Psychological research reveals that self-enhancing positive illusions are a pervasive, systematic, and long-term cognitive adaptive mechanism (Taylor & Brown, 1988) that enables individuals to maintain positive self-concepts when presented with potentially negative personal information (Baumeister, 1998). Positive partner illusions (i.e., partner idealization) occur when individuals "project their images of the ideal partner onto their own partners, essentially seeing the partners they wish to see" (Murray & Holmes, 1997, p. 587). Rusbult, Drigotas, and Veratte (1994) explain that these "relationship-enhancing illusions" (p. 129) contribute to a sense of relationship superiority, and therefore facilitate high levels of commitment despite partner imperfections (Rusbult, Van Lange, Wildschut, Yovetich, & Verette, 2000). Holding positive illusions helps individuals cope with stressful events, and can produce greater well-being (Murray, Bellavia, Rose & Griffin, 2003). Nobody is perfect, yet "feelings of satisfaction reflect intimates' ability to see imperfect partners in idealized ways" (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996, p. 82). Positive illusions are commonly extended to close romantic partners who are highly integrated into one's sense of self (Martz et al., 1998). Although less explored, positive illusions should be relevant within other close ties such as the parent-child relationship.

Idealization in Computer-Mediated Relationships

Computer-mediated relationships possess many characteristics that are conducive toward partner idealization (Walther, 1996); however, scholars have not always recognized this connection. Mediated communication was initially thought to filter out the nonverbal and social cues necessary to engage in successful relational communication (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). A set of theories, collectively referred to as the *cues-filtered out* (CFO) perspective (Culnan & Markus, 1987) suggest that the stripping of social cues hinders mediated communicators' ability to develop detailed partner impressions, and therefore provokes depersonalized interactions. Walther's (1992) Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT) offers a counter-argument to the CFO perspective. SIPT recognizes that mediated interaction might be impersonal when pre viously unknown partners interact for a short time period with no anticipation of future interaction (Walther, 1994). That said, mediated communicators who possess ample time and motivation can adjust their tactics to reduce uncertainty, seek information, and accomplish the same tasks as their FtF counterparts (Walther, 1992; 1994).

The *hyperpersonal perspective* (Walther, 1996), an extension of SIPT, was created to explain why mediated communicators sometimes develop exaggerated levels of intimacy. The hyperpersonal perspective posits that the characteristics of mediated communication (e.g., channel, sender, receiver, and feedback effects) sometimes provoke users to form overly positive, or idealized interpersonal perceptions. Impression management is a primary goal of most social and personal interaction (O'Sullivan, 2000; Tanis & Postmes, 2003), and CMC enables users to edit messages that maximize the use of prosocial behaviors (Walther, 2007) and minimize the presence of negative cues (Dainton & Aylor, 2002). As a result, CMC users are prone to make positive generalizations that result in idealized impressions.

Important clarifications must be made, however, regarding the hyperpersonal perspective's previous applications and potential scope. SIPT was developed and is commonly applied to the formation and development of relationships enacted exclusively via CMC (Walther, 1992). However, the majority of modern relationships cannot be easily classified as either mediated or FtF, but rather, are multimodal in nature (i.e., with communication occurring across FtF and mediated channels). Existing research has examined communication technology as a form of supplemental maintenance for primarily FtF relationships (Johnson, Haigh, Becker, Craig, & Wigley, 2008), yet as Tong and Walther (2011) point out, partner idealization is rarely interrogated within multimodal relational contexts.

The present study examines the multimodal communication patterns of college students and their parents, with particular focus on understanding whether the use of FtF and mediated communication contributes to idealized perceptions akin to those described by the hyperpersonal perspective. Limited scholarship (Human & Lane, 2008) suggests that the basic principles of SIPT and the hyperpersonal perspective should apply to multimodal relationships as they transition from a primarily FtF nature to a primarily mediated nature.

The parent-child relationship is a prevalent type of multimodal relationship, and college often marks a transition point in which the relationship shifts toward mediated forms of interaction. Even though parents and children already possess detailed impressions of each other, they might utilize the reduced social-cue environment of mediated communication to avoid the negative messages that are difficult to control when communicating FtF. The censoring of negative cues and focus on positive communication should provoke similar idealization processes as described in CMC relationships. Given that parent-child relationships are ongoing, additional insight might be gleaned from research regarding LD relationships, which are typically multimodal in nature.

Idealization in Long-Distance Relationships

Long-distance relational partners have also attracted scholarly attention due to their propensity toward partner idealization. Unlike the hyperpersonal perspective, which primarily refers to relationships of a computer-mediated nature, research regarding LD partner idealization often encompasses multimodal relationships that began offline. LD relationships facilitate high levels of idealization through both behavioral and cognitive mechanisms (Miller, Caughlin, & Huston, 2003). Brody (2013) notes that these LD relational mechanisms bear striking resemblance to the characteristics of hyperpersonal communication.

According to Jiang and Hancock (2011), "Distance may shape the communication goals LD couples want to achieve and give rise to corresponding changes in cognition and behavior" (p. 557). On a behavioral level, Johnson and colleagues (2008) explain that "by definition, an increase in distance decreases the opportunity for face-to-face contact between individuals" and therefore restricts their communication repertoire (p. 384). This restriction of FtF interaction can limit LD partners' exposure to the mundane and potentially undesirable aspects of their partner (Miller et al., 2003). Although LD partners are geographically separated, they can maintain their relationship and uphold a sense of everyday involvement using technology (Dellman-Jenkins, Berna rd-Paolucci, & Rushing, 1994). Indeed, LD partners often counteract their FtF communication deficits by engaging in increased self-disclosure, responsiveness, and intimacy (Jiang & Hancock, 2011). Hence, LD partners are prone toward idealization because they do not see each other frequently enough to become disenchanted with each other's annoying everyday behaviors, and might utilize overly positive mediated communication to make up for their physical absence.

Finally, behavioral factors such as restricted FtF interaction and reliance on mediated interaction can lead LD partners to engage in idealized cognitions such as idealistic distortion and positive affect thinking (Stafford & Merolla, 2007). *Idealistic distortion* refers to a person's tendency to view their partner in an unrealistically positive manner (Fowers, Veingrad, & Dominicis, 2002). *Positive affect thinking* is a similar concept, which refers to the combination of reminiscent relational thinking and relationship enhancing thoughts (Cate, Koval, Lloyd, & Wilson, 1995). Idealistic distortion and positive affect thinking are widespread aspects of all relationships, yet particularly prominent among LD partners due to FtF communication restrictions. Existing research supports the presence and importance of idealization in regard to L D relational quality.

Despite their limited FtF interaction, partners have been found to report similar (Van Horn et al., 1997), or even more positive outcomes (Stafford & Reske, 1999) than those in geographically close relationships. Indeed, Stafford and Reske (1999) found that LD couples report fewer interactions and a greater reliance on mediated channels, yet higher levels of idealization, communication quality, satisfaction, and love. Likewise, Stafford and Merolla (2007) found that LD couples report greater idealistic distortion, reminiscent thinking, perceived agreement, communication quality, and relational stability.

In sum, LD partners are prone to develop idealized partner perceptions and inflated relational outcomes due to both behavioral and cognitive mechanisms. However, research regarding LD relationships has almost exclusively focused on romantic partners (Dainton & Aylor, 2002; Stafford & Merolla, 2007) with a few studies assessing friendships (Brody, 2013; Human & Lane, 2008; Johnson et al., 2001). The present study addresses this gap by applying similar principles within the ongoing relational context of parent-child relationships.

The Present Study

Theorizing Idealization in Parent-Child Relationships

Emerging adulthood refers to the developmental period in between adolescence and adulthood, during which 18-25 year old children display increased autonomy despite having not yet achieved full financial and social independence (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adulthood is a particularly important transitional period in the parent-child relationship (Golish, 2000; Lefkowitz, 2005). The conflict that is a natural component of the adolescent individuation process might prevent adolescents from engaging in high levels of positive relational thinking about their parent. Upon entering college, students report increased relational satisfaction with their parents (Schulenberg, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnson, 2005). Likewise, emerging adults report increased parental closeness and decreased conflict when they exit their parents' home (Gol ish, 2000; Lefkowitz, 2005) and presumably begin using more mediated and less FtF communication.

It is noteworthy that parent-child relationships improve at the same time that FtF communication frequency tends to decrease. The increase in parent-child relational quality during college suggests that idealization and hyperpersonal communication mechanisms might contribute to the establishment of idealized parental perceptions. Within this context, mediated interaction allows individuals to send prosocial messages while minimizing each other's exposure to negative behavioral cues (Dainton & Aylor, 2002). At the same time, restricted FtF interaction might enable students to forget about their parents' flaws, and instead ruminate about positive attributes such as their parents' love and support.

As previously noted, the hyperpersonal perspective has generally been used to explain the presence of heightened impressions in relationships developed via CMC. Ongoing relational partners might also engage in idealization by drawing upon past experiences and shared memories to fill in the informational gaps of a newly reduced-cue environment. In a study of friendships that migrated online, Human and Lane (2008) noted that "[L]ingering memories of physical cues may paint a beneficial visual picture that individuals can latch onto in the CMC-only realm" (p. 10). College students likely engage in similar processes by drawing upon existing information about their parents to fill-in social cues that CMC filters out. Moreover, mediated communicators are often unable to accurately recall said information, which can provoke them to draw upon "imagined/fictive memories" that reflect positive illusions (Human & Lane, 2008, p. 13). The authors did not utilize concepts such as positive affect thinking and idealistic distortion, yet their results parallel those found in studies of LD partners (Stafford & Merolla, 2007).

Development of an Idealization Model

The behavioral mechanisms of idealization involve two behavioral components; high levels of mediated interaction and restricted levels of FtF interaction (Stafford & Merolla, 2007). As such, attempts at developing an idealization model should include both forms of communication as important behavioral mechanisms.

Mediated Communication Frequency. The hyperpersonal perspective was originally created to describe online relationships with no prior history or FtF interaction (Walther, 1996). In this case, the presence of idealization was inferred based on the relational outcomes of experimentally created groups that either met FtF, or did not meet FtF (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007). Subsequent research has looked at idealization in naturally-occurring relationships such as friendships (e.g., Brody, 2013) and online daters (Ramirez, Sumner, Fleuriet, & Cole, 2015). The results of these naturalistic studies seem to generally support the importance of idealization within the hyperpersonal perspective. Unfortunately, none of this research has included direct measures of partner idealization, but rather infers its presence as a result of inflated partner impressions (Brody, 2013; Ramirez et al., 2015; Ramirez & Zhang, 2007; Walther, 1996). Regardless, the results suggest that mediated communication frequency will be positive related to partner idealization and relational quality. The present study builds on this body of research by directly assessing the role of partner idealization.

Research regarding LD relationships also suggests that the use of mediated communication contributes to idealization and relational quality; however, this claim is slightly more contested. Stafford and Merolla (2007) did not detect significant associations between

mediated communication frequency and idealistic distortion, relational reminiscence, or communication quality. Emmers-Sommer (2004) likewise found no relationship between phone calls and satisfaction or intimacy between friends and romantic partners.

Other research has, conversely, detected relations between relational quality and certain mediated channels. For example, Gunn and Gunn (2000) found that LD partners who implemented frequent Internet communication also reported more positive outcomes than did those with less frequent use. Dainton and Aylor (2002) found that telephone use was associated with greater satisfaction, and Internet use was associated with greater trust in LD romantic relationships. Jiang and Hancock (2011) reported that LD partners who were reliant upon text-based, asynchronous, and/or mobile forms of interaction engaged in greater behavioral adaptations aimed at facilitating intimacy than did their counterpartsp which in turn provokes greater idealization. Most pertinent to the present study, Ramsey, Gentzler, Morey, Oberhasuer, & Westerman (2013) reported that telephone use positively predicted parent-student relational quality (e.g., satisfaction, intimacy, support, and instrumental aid). Hence, the following predictions are proposed in line with the hyperpersonal perspective and the bulk of research:

> **H1:** Mediated communication frequency will positively predict parental idealization.

> **H2:** Mediated communication frequency will positively predict parental relational quality.

The restriction of FtF interaction is frequently cited as the main contributor to partner idealization in both computer-mediated and LD relationships. The hyperpersonal perspective (Walther, 1996) is typically tested in the context of zero-history online only partners. As such, the development of idealized impressions is intrinsically linked to a complete absence of FtF interaction within the hyperpersonal perspective.

The restriction of FtF interaction is often thought to be the main communicative change that distinguishes LD relationships from geographically proximate ones. In this case, restriction of FtF communication differs from a complete absence of any past or current FtF interaction. Research regarding ongoing LD relationships has attempted to measure the presence of FtF interaction in different ways. Stafford and Merolla (2007) examined two indicators of FtF communication frequency; the number of days between FtF interaction, and the number of days with FtF interaction per month. The authors found that the number of FtF communication days per month did not relate to idealization or relational quality, yet the amount of days between FtF interaction was positively related to idealization and relational quality. This finding led Stafford and Merolla to conclude that the restriction of FtF interaction (as assessed by the number of days betwe en interaction) is a better predictor of idealization and inflated relational quality than is the presence of large amounts of mediated communication.

Brody's (2013) study of LD friendships took a similar ongoing relational approach, and found that while the frequency of mediated communication was a predictor of LD friendship satisfaction and closeness, this relationship was moderated by the length of time between FtF interactions; mediated communication mattered more for those with less frequent FtF interaction. In this sense, Brody conceptualized the restriction of FtF interaction as a moderator, rather than as a direct predictor of relational quality.

The present study offers predictions in line with the hyperpersonal perspective's claim that FtF communication should be negatively related to relational quality. The present study also attempts to fill a gap in the research by assessing the actual frequency of FtF communication, rather than the time between FtF interaction. Doing so should complement existing research, while providing an assessment of FtF communication that mirrors common operationalizations of mediated communication frequency. As such, the following hypotheses will be tested:

> **H3:** FtF communication frequency will negatively predict parental idealization.

> **H4:** FtF communication frequency will negatively predict parental relational quality.

The idealization mechanism described in the hyperpersonal perspective and LD research suggests that perception of relational quality become inflated when partners' behavior (i.e., high amounts of mediated interaction, low amounts of FtF interaction) leads them to engage in idealized cognition. The same literature implies that high levels of cognitive idealization are related to high levels of relational quality (e.g., Stafford & Merolla, 2007), however, this link is typically assumed rather than directly tested. For example, Stafford and Merolla (2007) revealed that LD partners were more idealized and reported increased relational well-being than geographically close partners, but did not put forth research questions or hypotheses examining the pathways between idealization constructs and relational quality. Similarly, hyperpersonal research (e.g., Brody, 2013; Ramirez et al., 2015; Ramirez & Zhang, 2007; Walther, 1996) has labeled positive relational quality or partner impressions as signs of idealization, but has not assessed partner

idealization as a unique construct. The present study follows Brody's (2013) recommendation to address this oversight by directly assessing parental idealization.

In psychological research, partner idealization measures are often conceptualized as akin to satisfaction and other indicators of relational quality and positive sentiment (Fowers & Applegate, 1995). Other researchers have assessed partner idealization and relationship satisfaction as separate yet correlated constructs (Conley, Roesch, Peplau, & Gold, 2009). Indeed, Fowers and colleagues (2002) acknowledge that "being satisfied with the relationship is partially constituted by unrealistically positive perceptions." (p. 451) As a result, the hyperpersonal perspective's claim that partner idealization can provoke increased relational quality appears to be substantiated, allowing for the following prediction:

> **H5**: Parental idealization will positively predict relational quality.

Finally, previous research suggests that restricted FtF communication and reliance on mediated communication can yield inflated perceptions of relational quality by enabling LD partners to engage in idealization (Stafford & Merolla, 2007). Similar claims are made within the hyperpersonal framework, yet research often focuses on isolated aspects of the model (Walther et. al., 2011). Impressions, for example, are often studied by setting up experimental groups based on the presence or absence of FtF communication (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007). Various elements of partner impressions (e.g., depth, breadth, liking, attraction) are typically assessed as outcomes, and the presence of inflated impressions is interpreted as support for the perspective's claims regarding partner idealization. That said, the actual mechanism through which hyperpersonal impressions occur still requires systematic examination; ideally by applying the same principles that are utilized to study idealization and positive partner illusions in offline relationships.

In sum, hyperpersonal communication and LD relationship research both allude to a similar model of partner idealization, yet this model requires empirical substantiation. The present study acknowledges the complexities of the idealization process by examining whether cognitive aspects of idealization (idealistic distortion and positive affect thinking) mediate the relationship between FtF and mediated communication frequencies and perceived relational quality (satisfaction and relational closeness). The following hypotheses will thus be tested:

> **H6**: Parental idealization will mediate the positive relationship between the frequency of mediated communication and relational quality.

> **H7**: Parental idealization will mediate the inverse relationship between the frequency of FtF communication and relational quality.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

The present study used a convenience sample of undergraduate students recruited from communication classes at a large Southwestern university, with more than two-thirds being recruited during the first weeks of an introductory course. The sample consisted of 678 students (men = 319; women = 356), with an average age of 19.85 years (SD = 1.74, Range = 18-25). The sample was primarily White/Caucasian (71%), and consisted of 40% freshmen, 23% sophomores, 24% juniors, and 13% seniors.

Students received extra credit for participating in an online survey. After providing consent, participants were provided with the following instructions: "Please take a moment to think about the parent whom you would consider to be your primary parent, meaning that this person is your main source of parental support." Given this definition, 66% (n = 444) identified their mother as the primary parent, with the remaining 34% (n = 232) identifying their father. Although not required, 97% of participants selected a biological parent. Participants were asked to complete the remainder of the questionnaire in response to their primary parent.

Instrumentation

Communication channel frequencies. A set of open-ended numerical textboxes were used to collect ratio-level data regarding parent-child communication frequencies. *FtF communication frequency* was assessed by asking participants to indicate how many times they interact with their parent in-person during a typical school week. Participants were also asked how many times they use email, instant messaging, phone calls, text messaging, social networking sites, and video conferencing to interact with their parent during a typical school week. The reported scores for the six individual mediated communication channels were then summed to

create an indicator of *total mediated communication.*[1] Log10 transformations were performed on both variables to preserve normality within subsequent analyses.

Parental idealization measures. In accordance with previous research (Stafford & Merolla, 2007; Stafford & Reske, 1990), two constructs were utilized to measure the degree to which students engaged in cognitive idealization of their primary parent. *Idealistic distortion* reflects the degree to which participants hold unrealistically positive illusions regarding a partner. The Idealistic Distortion Scale (IDS) is a five-item subscale of the Enriching and Nurturing Relationship Issues, Communication, and Happiness scale (ENRICH: Olson et al., 1985; Olson, 1999), which has been amended and utilized as a reliable indicator of idealistic distortion in romantic relationships (Fowers et al., 2002; Stafford & Merolla, 2007; Stafford & Reske, 1990). The IDS served as a conceptual basis to create a *Parental Idealistic Distortion* scale for the present study, with items representing unrealistically positive parental qualities. Wenger and Fowers (2008) successfully implemented similar adaptations for their study of parents' idealization of their young children. The *Parental Idealistic Distortion scale,* developed for the present study, consisted of six items (e.g., "I could not ask for a better parent," and "My parent possesses all the qualities of an ideal parent") assessed on a 7-point Likert-type scale (7 = strongly agree).

Positive affect thinking was assessed as a second cognitive component of parental idealization, and refers to a student's tendency to reflect upon times spent with their parent and engage in ruminations that glorify the relationship. Cate and colleagues' (1995) 5-item positive affect thinking scale was adapted by replacing the term "partner" with the term "parent." Examples included "I reflect on how much my parent loves me," and "I think about all of the fun my parent and I have had together." Consistent with Cate and colleagues, participants were directed to "indicate how characteristic you think the statement is of how you behave" (p. 79). Although originally measured on a 6-point scale, it was adapted to a 7-point scale (7 = extremely characteristic) to align with the other idealization measures (for a similar adjustment, see Stafford & Merolla, 2007).

Relational quality measures. Three indicators of relational quality were assessed. First, *relational satisfaction* was measured using Canary and Spitzberg's (1989) three-item relational satisfaction scale. Items were assessed using a 7-point Likert-type scale (7 = strongly agree), and included: "This relationship is rewarding;" "I am satisfied in this relationship;" and "I would not want to do anything that would hurt this relationship."

Second, an amended version of Hecht's (1978) 19-item Interpersonal Communication Satisfaction Inventory (Com-Sat) was utilized as a measure of *communication satisfaction*. Punyanunt-Carter (2008) translated the Com-Sat to apply to the father-daughter relationship, and reported high levels of reliability from the perspective of daughters. To avoid participant fatigue, six items were selected from Punyanunt-Carter's scale based on face validity. The selected items (e.g., "I am very satisfied with our typical conversations" and "I feel like I could talk about anything with my parent") were measured on a 7-point Likert-type scale (7 = strongly agree). One additional item was created to assess satisfaction with communication frequency: "I am very satisfied with the amount of communication between me and my parent."

Similar to other parent-child studies (Floyd & Mormon, 2000), Aron, Aron, and Smolan's (1992) Inclusion of Other in the Self (IOS) was used as an indicator of *relational closeness*. The IOS is a pictorial measure consisting of seven Venn diagrams in which two circles (one labeled "self" and a second labeled "other") display an increasing amount of overlap. Participants were asked to indicate which diagram best reflects their relationship with the selected parent, with higher scores reflecting greater closeness.

Preliminary Measure Analyses

Several measures were either created or extended to a new context, so preliminary analyses were undertaken to establish their psychometric properties within the present study.

Parental idealization measures. A principal components exploratory factor analysis with Oblimin rotation was used to explore the underlying empirical factor structure of the 11 items that assessed components of parental idealization (i.e., idealistic distortion and positive affect thinking). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's test of sphericity were significant, KMO = .90, c2 (55) = 6988.43, *p* < .001. The initial analysis suggested a 2-factor solution with eigenvalues of 1 or greater, and Cattell's scree test confirmed a "drop-off" of eigenvalues after two factors. A 60/40 selection criterion was utilized to reveal a 2-factor solution that accounted for 77.91% of the variance. The final solution (see Table 1) was identical to the proposed scales. The first factor included the six items designed to measure *idealistic distortion* (α = .92). The second factor included th e five items used to measure *positive affect thinking* (α = .95). Standardized factor scores were calculated and used for subsequent analyses.

Relational and communication satisfaction measures. A principal components exploratory factor analysis with Oblimin rotation was also used to explore the factor structure of the nine items that assessed relational and communication satisfaction. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test and Bartlett's test of sphericity were significant, KMO = .94, $c2$ (36) = 4693.64, $p < .001$. The analysis (See Table 2) revealed a single factor solution in which all items loaded at .60 or above. The resulting *satisfaction* factor (α = .94) accounted for 67.10% of the variance and represented participants' satisfaction with the communication and overall state of their parental relationship. Standardized factor scores were calculated for use in subsequent analyses.

Correlations among study variables. Existing research suggests measures of idealization and relational quality are significantly correlated, yet offer empirical distinction (Stafford & Merolla, 2007). Pearson correlations are reported in Table 3 and confirm most expected relationships, with the exception of FtF frequency, which was not significantly correlated with idealistic distortion, satisfaction, or relational closeness.

Results

The hypotheses were tested via a path model including both direct and indirect pathways. Figure 1 presents the proposed theoretical model, which incorporates the hypothesized relationships between FtF and mediated communication frequencies, parental idealization, and relational quality.[2] Path analysis conducted using Mplus revealed that the data possessed excellent fit with the proposed model (see Figure 2), $\chi2$ (1) = .51, $p = .47$, $\chi2/df = 1.09$, CFI = 1.00, RSMEA < .001 (.00-.09), SRMR = .007.

Hypotheses one and two assessed the direct effects of mediated communication on parental idealization (idealistic distortion, positive affect thinking) and relational quality (satisfaction, closeness). In support of both hypotheses, the frequency of mediated communication displayed significant direct effects on idealistic distortion and positive affect thinking (H1), as well as on satisfaction and relational closeness (H2).

Hypotheses three and four examined the direct effects of FtF communication frequency on parental idealization (idealistic distortion, positive affect thinking) and relational quality (satisfaction, closeness). H3 predicted that the frequency of FtF interaction would inversely predict parental idealization. Initial correlation analysis failed to detect a significant relationship between FtF communication frequency and idealistic distortion, so this path was set to zero to avoid model saturation. Results indicated that FtF communication frequency was significantly and inversely related to positive affect thinking. Hence, H3 was only partially supported; FtF communication frequency negatively predicted positive affect thinking, but was unrelated to idealistic distortion. H4 predicted that FtF frequency would negatively predict relational quality; this was not supported as no direct effects were detected for satisfaction or relational closeness.

Hypothesis five predicted that parental idealization would be positively related to relational quality, and this hypothesis was supported. Idealistic distortion and positive affect thinking were significant positive predictors of both satisfaction and relational closeness.

Given the presence of an overall sound model, hypotheses six and seven were tested using the PRODCLIN program (distribution of the PRODuct Confidence Limits for INdirect effects: MacKinnon, Fritz, Williams, & Lockwood, 2007). PRODCLIN examines indirect effects by computing product confidence limits based on unstandardized path coefficients and standard errors of the two paths involved in the indirect effect. Confidence limits that do not contain zero are interpreted to indicate the presence of a significant indirect effect. The distribution of the product method was selected because it provides more power, and more accurate Type I error rates than other forms of mediation analysis (MacKinnon, Fritz, Williams, & Lockwood, 2007; MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002).

Analysis revealed the presence of six significant indirect effects (see Table 4). Hypothesis six predicted that parental idealization would mediate the positive relationship between mediated communication frequency and relational quality. In light of the presence of direct effects between mediated communication frequency and relational quality, results indicated that the relationships between mediated communication frequency and both indicators of relational quality (satisfaction, relational closeness) were partially mediated by both indicators of idealization (idealistic distortion, positive affect thinking). Thus, H6 was supported.

Hypothesis seven predicted that parental idealization would mediate the inverse relationship between FtF communication frequency and relational quality. Results detected significant indirect effects, such that positive affect thinking mediated the inverse relations between FtF communication frequency and both satisfaction and relational closeness. FtF communication frequency did not display significant direct effects on either outcome, so the presence of significant indirect effects signal that positive affect thinking serves as

a full mediator. Idealistic distortion was not examined as a mediator because it lacked a significant relationship with FtF frequency and was therefore set to zero within the model. Hence, H7 was only partially supported.

Discussion

The present study sought to develop an idealization model, and determine whether the concept of partner idealization might help explain the observed trend in which college students display increased relational quality with their parents (Golish, 2000; Lefkowitz, 2005; Sullivan & Sullivan, 1980). The parent-child relationship typically shifts toward a more mediated nature during college, especially if the child moves away from home to attend school. The timing of this shift accompanies a noted increase in parent-child relational quality, which implies that idealization processes might be relevant.

Two bodies of scholarship informed the construction and test of the present study's idealization model. Research assessing idealization in LD romantic relationships indicates that "idealization stems from FtF interaction deficits" (Stafford & Merolla, 2007, p. 38). Although Stafford and Merolla found that that mediated communication is unrelated to idealization and communication quality in LD romantic relationships, other research indicates a strong connection between mediated communication and relational quality in LD friendships (Brody, 2013). To clarify this conundrum, the hyperpersonal perspective asserts that idealization occurs because both restricted FtF communication deficits and reliance on mediated communication can lead to the formation of exaggerated partner impressions (Walther, 1996). Previous research has examined components of idealization (e.g. , Dainton & Aylor, 2002; Stafford & Merolla, 2007). However, the present study is the first known research to assess a unified model including both behavioral and cognitive aspects of idealization, and identify how FtF and mediated communication distinctly influence cognitive idealization and relational quality.

The full model in the present study, including FtF and mediated communication frequency, explained 34% of the variance in relational closeness and 74% of the variance in satisfaction. It must be noted, however, that the effect size estimate for satisfaction is likely inflated due to the variable's strong conceptual overlap and empirical association with idealistic distortion. Indeed, past research suggests that satisfaction is partially constituted by an individual's ability to overlook their partners' imperfections and see that person in an idealized manner (Fowers et al., 2002; Murray et al., 1996). With this caveat acknowledged, the present study offers a useful and powerful model of the idealization process.

Implications

The present study offers several important implications regarding interpersonal relationships in both LD and mediated settings. First, the present study offers a unique contribution to CMC research by examining an ongoing relationship at a time in which partners begin to rely on mediated interaction. In doing so, the present study answers Tong and Walther's (2011) call for research examining hyperpersonal communication within on-going relationships. The idealization model developed for this study was mostly supported within the parent-child context. Future research should attempt to determine whether the present study's model is applicable to other forms of ongoing relationships that shift toward mediation communication, such as romantic relationships and friendships that become geographically distant.

Mediated communication. High levels of mediated communication emerged as more important than low amounts of FtF communication in producing parental idealization and relational quality within the present study. Indeed, mediated communication frequency was directly related to all indicators of parental idealization and relational quality. The present analysis aggregated all forms of mediated communication in order to obtain the most statistical power and achieve parsimony with the theoretical predictions of the hyperpersonal perspective, which does not offer channel-specific claims. Conversely, Ramsey and colleagues (2013) looked at independent channels (FtF, phone, texting, email, and SNS) and found that while many of these channels did not stand alone as predictors, phone calls were predictive of parent-college student relational quality. In addition, Schon (2014) reports that parent-emerging adult r elationship satisfaction benefits from a degree of media multiplexity, or the degree to which multiple communication modalities are employed to maintain the relationship. Future research should therefore build on the present study by addressing not only the frequency of mediated communication, but also the frequency and number of individual mediated channels used.

Within the present study, idealistic distortion and positive affect thinking partially mediated the relations between mediated frequency and both satisfaction and relational closeness. In other words, students reported greater quality both as a function of increased mediated contact, and also as a function of idealization that results from said contact. This finding supports the hyperpersonal framework (Walther, 1996), and suggests much can be gained by continuing to examine both behavioral (i.e., direct effects) and

cognitive (i.e., indirect effects) pathways within the idealization mechanism. Future research is necessary to determine whether similar indirect idealization effects would surface outside of the parent-child relational context.

FtF communication. The frequency of FtF communication displayed a more nuanced effect on idealization and relational quality within the present study. FtF communication frequency was directly related to positive affect thinking, yet was not directly related to idealistic distortion or either indicator of relational quality. That said, positive affect thinking fully mediated an indirect effect between FtF communication frequency and both indicators of relational quality. This finding is intriguing because it suggests that students with limited parental FtF interaction did not experience increased quality unless this restriction led them to engage in higher levels of positive affect thinking. Although they did not test for indirect effects, Stafford and Merolla (2007) hinted that FtF communication restrictions led individuals to engage in increased positive relational ruminations, which might in turn provoke greater q uality. This speculation might help explain the present study's results regarding the presence of indirect effects via positive affect thinking, and adds increased importance to the present study's decision to test for indirect effects. The adage "how can I miss you if you won't go away?" seems pertinent to this result. Students who rarely see their parents are more likely to miss them, which may provoke positive affect thinking and lead to inflated perceptions of relational quality.

The present study's findings regarding FtF communication also add to a set of conflicting scholarly reports. Stafford and Merolla (2007) found that time between FtF communication was positively related to both idealization and communication quality; partners reported more relational quality when they saw each other less frequently. It is possible, however, that idealization was a confound in their detected relationship between FtF communication frequency and communication quality. Brody's (2013) study of LD friendships contradicted Stafford and Merolla's (2007) results and indicated that less time between FtF interactions related to greater relational quality. That said, Brody (2013) treated time between FtF interaction as a moderator and ultimately concluded: "Increased mediated communication between friends had a larger i mpact on satisfaction and, to a lesser extent, commitment for individuals who had not seen each other recently when compared to those who had seen each other FtF recently" (p. 330). These divergent findings could be the result of different relational contexts (i.e., romantic versus friendship). The present study offers yet another context (i.e., parent-child relationships) to this ongoing trend of research. In doing so, it in many ways aligns extant results by revealing that mediated communication frequency holds a positive role in predicting idealization and relational quality, yet FtF limitations become important when they provoke positive affect thinking. In this way, the present analyses detected an important indirect effect that would be overlooked if FtF communication frequency and relational quality were examined independent of cognitive idealization processes. This indirect effect can be further tested in other relational contexts.

The present study's somewhat counterintuitive finding that relational/communication satisfaction was associated with a lack of FtF interaction also supports previous research (Stafford & Merolla, 2007; Stafford & Reske, 1999). Although physical proximity is often considered to be an important requirement for close relationship success, college students were most satisfied with their parental relationship when they saw their parent less frequently. Emerging adults attempt to find a balance between closeness and autonomy with their parents (Dubas & Peterson, 1996; Kenyon & Koerner, 2009), and the present study's results indicate that relational quality is maximized when students maintain a strong sense of parental connection via mediated interaction (particularly phone calls), with less frequent FtF i nteraction. Parents and children who wish to foster a sense of relational quality might benefit from this advice.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although important insight was gleaned from these analyses, several limitations must be acknowledged. Future research directions can be inferred by identifying ways to rectify the limitations and widen the scope of the present study. As such, the first limitation pertains to the generalizability of results. The present study focused exclusively on college students. This decision was made because students are a primary example of an ongoing relationship as it shifts from a primarily FtF to a largely mediated nature. It is unknown whether the parent-child relationship patterns noted in this study are applicable to other age groups, or even to emerging adults who are not college students.

Another limitation is the present study's reliance upon participants' ability to accurately recall their parental communication frequencies during a typical school week. This method made it possible to draw a large sample, but future research might ask a smaller sample to keep a detailed diary of their actual communication (see Emmers-Sommer, 2004). Similarly, while the present study used a cross-sectional design, a longitudinal approach would enable analysis of the timing in which idealization processes occur, as well as an assessment of long-term effects.

As previously mentioned, the present study mapped the cognitive and behavioral pathways identified in partner idealization research (Stafford & Merolla, 2007; Walther, 1996). The resulting model was a powerful predictor of relational quality in this study, but there

are limits to its interpretation. First, the model followed the hyperpersonal perspective's theoretically implied sense of directionality, yet the use of cross-sectional data prevents any truly causal claims from being made. Second, it is important to acknowledge that other external factors (e.g., relational, developmental, content, and environmental) are worthy of consideration within the idealization process. In particular, mediated communication is known to facilitate selective self-presentation that can further heighten partner idealization levels (Stafford & Merolla, 2007; Walther, 1996). Although it was beyond the scope of this exploratory study, self-presentation should be examined as a behavioral adaptation (Jiang & Hancock, 2013), or content adaptation that might occur between the behavioral communication frequencies and cognitive idealization aspects of the model.

Finally, the present study sought to extend the notion of partner idealization to the context of parent-child relationships during emerging adulthood. As with any study, the decision to focus on certain variables limited the present study's ability to examine other potentially intriguing variables. Left unaddressed in the present study is the underlying tension produced by, on the one hand, the individuation process that college students undergo during emerging adulthood to carve out their own unique identities and, on the other hand, the parental idealization process. It may be that reliance on mediated communication allows college students to segment their parental interactions in a manner that allows them to develop their emerging identities as independent of their families while maintaining strong bonds and parental idealization. Conversely, decreased reliance on mediated communication, thus greater FtF interaction with parents and other family members, might produce more conflict over students' attempts at distinguishing themselves and ultimately dampen idealization.

As such, future research can offer a richer understanding of college student's parental idealization and relational quality by broadening the scope to include other aspects of emerging adult development. The development of adult social roles is an important task for emerging adults, and it is vital that parents and emerging adults find a sustainable balance between autonomy and closeness (Dubas & Peterson, 1996; Kenyon & Koerner, 2009; Nydegger, 1991). Hence, relational quality is not the only important outcome to consider within the context of communication frequency and idealization. Students might be deeply satisfied with their parental relationships even if these relationships include unhealthy levels of communication; which ultimately hinder students' ability to function autonomously. The present study did not directly assess students' sense of auto nomy or identity; however, these concepts should be examined for potential relations with communication frequency, idealization, and relational quality between emerging adults and their parents.

Conclusions

The present study offers a unique contribution to CMC research by testing the concepts of idealization within an ongoing relationship that is often LD and reliant upon mediated communication, yet remains under-studied within this context. Results suggest that college students are still susceptible to idealization processes and reveal the best parental relationship outcomes when they engage in high levels of mediated interaction, and when low levels of FtF interaction provoke positive affect thinking. Parents and children can attempt to facilitate these sorts of interactions, while noting that on average, students were quite satisfied with their parental relationships.

Overall, the present study suggests that idealization is a potential important concept within ongoing relationships such as the parent-child relationship during college. The behavioral and cognitive mechanisms that facilitate idealization were aligned within a unified model that could possess immense explanatory power within ongoing relational contexts. As such, this study can serve as an important springboard for future research regarding emerging adult-parent relationships, hyperpersonal communication in ongoing relationships, and idealization in long-distance relationships.

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Appendix: Tables and Figures

Table 1

Factor Loadings for Idealization Measures

Items	Positive Affect Thinking	Idealistic Distortion
My parent completely understands me.	.29	**.62**
I could not ask for a better parent.	.02	**.91**
My parent always has my best interests at heart.	-.10	**.95**
My parent always does whatever they can to provide for me.	-.16	**.92**
My parent and I get along perfectly.	.25	**.65**
My parent possesses all the qualities of an ideal parent.	.10	**.84**
I think about all of the fun my parent and I have had together.	**.89**	.43
I think about all the memories I have of our relationship.	**.91**	.39
I reflect on how much I love my parent.	**.91**	.42
I think about all of the experiences that my parent and I have shared together.	**.93**	.43
I reflect on how much my parent loves me.	**.90**	.43

Table 2

Factor Loadings for Relational/Communication Satisfaction

Items	Relational/Communication Satisfaction
This relationship is rewarding.	.89
I am very satisfied with our typical conversations.	.91
I am very satisfied with the amount of communication between me and my parent.	.80
My parent genuinely wants to get to know me.	.87
I would not want to do anything that would hurt this relationship.	.80
My parent expresses a lot of interest in what I have to say.	.89
During our typical conversations, I am able to present myself as I want my parent to view me.	.81
I feel like I could talk about anything with my parent.	.77
I am satisfied in this relationship	.92
I am very dissatisfied with our typical conversations (Reverse)	.65

Table 3

Pearson Correlation Matrix for Parental Idealization Model Variables (N = 678)

Measure	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Face-to-Face Communication Frequency	4.61	13.47	- -					
2. Mediated Communication Frequency	18.69	24.81	.16**	- -				
3. Idealistic Distortion	5.83	1.21	-.01	.13**	- -			
4. Positive Affect Thinking	5.63	1.29	-.10*	.24**	.47**	- -		
5. Satisfaction	5.81	1.20	-.05	.19**	.87**	.56**	- -	
6. Relational Closeness	5.09	1.38	-.02	.23**	.40**	.56**	.49**	- -

Notes: M and SD are reported here in original unit of analysis.

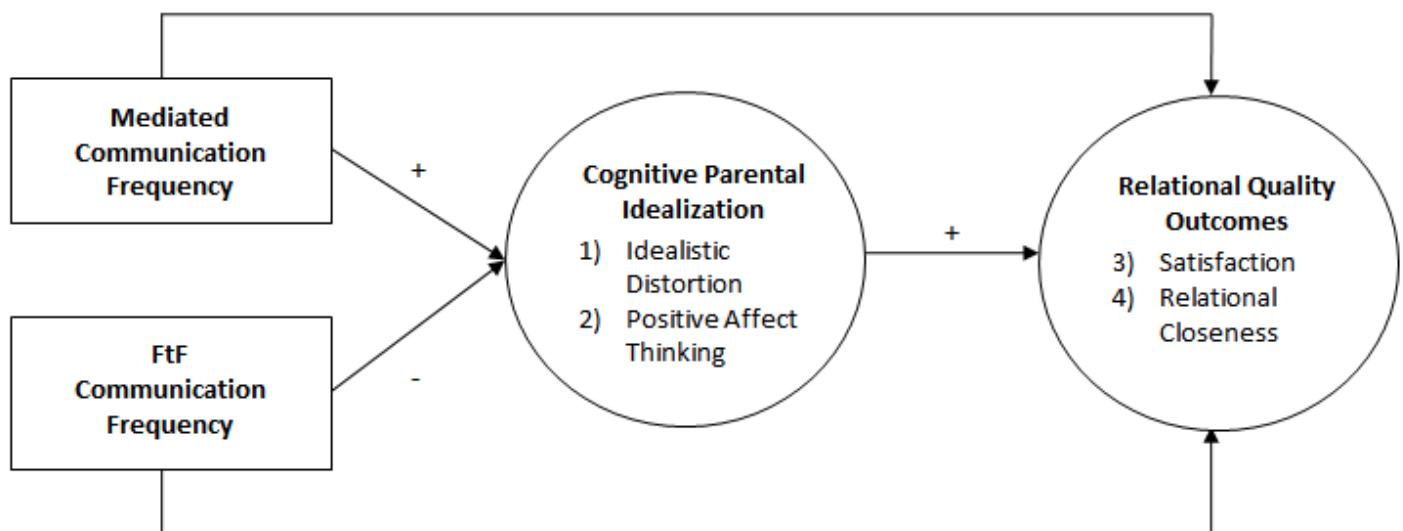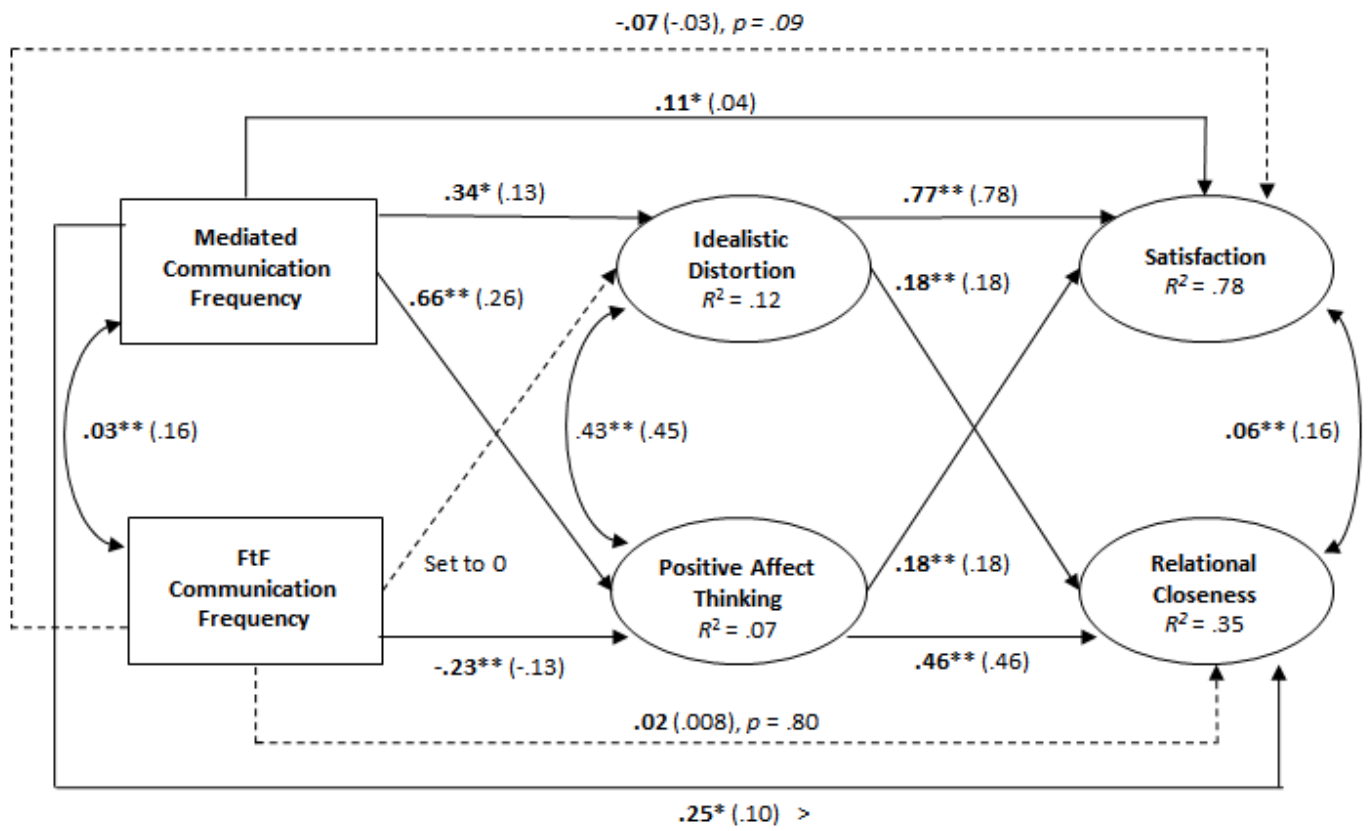* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Figure 1. Proposed Mediational Model for Parental Idealization

Notes: Unstandardized coefficients are in bold, standardized coefficients are in parentheses. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

Figure 2. Final Path Model for Parental Idealization

Table 4
Confidence Intervals for Indirect/Mediation Effects

Indirect Effects	95% Lower Confidence Interval	95% Upper Confidence Interval
Mediated Communication Frequency → Idealistic Distortion → Satisfaction	.11	.41
Mediated Communication Frequency → Positive Affect Thinking → Satisfaction	.08	.17
Mediated Communication Frequency → Idealistic Distortion → Relational Closeness	.02	.11
Mediated Communication Frequency → Positive Affect Thinking → Relational Closeness	.21	.41
FtF Communication Frequency → Positive Affect Thinking → Satisfaction	-.08	-.02
FtF Communication Frequency → Positive Affect Thinking → Relational Closeness	-.19	-.06

Notes

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[1] The decision to use an aggregate measure of total mediated communication was made because: (a) four of the six channels revealed very little variability with medians of 0 and means below 1, indicating that these channels hold little individual explanatory power; (b) past research regarding LDR idealization (Stafford & Merolla, 2007) has used similar aggregate measures; and (c) the hyperpersonal perspective does not specify individual channel effects.

[2] The hyperpersonal perspective and existing LDR research do not identify any theoretically-important covariates for this model. Despite this, exploratory correlation tests were run for variables that might serve as unanticipated confounds within the parent-child relationship context (e.g., participant's age, participant's biological sex, parent's biological sex, and geographic distance). Results revealed insignificant or trivial correlations that did not warrant model inclusion.