Revisiting the Languages of Love: An Empirical Test of the Validity Assumptions Underlying Chapman's (2015) Five Love Languages Typology

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Revisiting the Languages of Love: An Empirical Test of the Validity Assumptions Underlying Chapman's (2015) Five Love Languages Typology

Rudy C. Pett ⓘ, Priscilla A. Lozano & Sarah Varga

Chapman's (2015) Five Love Languages remain prevalent within popular press publications coaching individuals toward more satisfying relationships. However, the absence of empirical evidence validating the love language concept remains concerning. Using a qualitative analysis of 648 open-ended responses from 324 college-aged participants, the following study investigates the current assumptions regarding the love language concept by inductively testing the accuracy of the existing love languages typology. The results demonstrate substantial support for Chapman's (2015) Five Love Languages, as well as evidence for a novel, sixth love language.

Keywords: Gary Chapman; love languages; relational maintenance; romantic communication

Relational maintenance remains a prominent area of interpersonal communication research (e.g., Ogolsky & Monk, 2018) and serves as a central focus within undergraduate communication textbooks (e.g., Floyd, 2021). The popularity of relationship maintenance topics, however, has not only emerged within academic contexts, but also in popular press publications. Although some popular texts produce

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relational maintenance recommendations based on data-driven research (e.g., Finkel, 2019), others do not (e.g., Strayed, 2013). The merging of unvalidated popular press recommendations alongside data-driven communication research presents a problem for communication scholars attempting to center student learning on empirically validated knowledge.

Our study casts attention to Chapman's (2015) popular publication on the Five Love Languages. This text exists as a central focus of this study not only due to its status as a *New York Times* best-seller, but also its notable incorporation in communication textbooks (e.g., Guerrero et al., 2020; Wood, 2020). Most importantly though, Chapman's (2015) five love language (LL) categories stand as untested and unvalidated reflections of the ways in which romantic partners communicate love to each other, thus opening the door for a problematic emergence of unvalidated popular press concepts within communication textbooks. As such, we sought to test Chapman's (2015) LL typology by providing an inductive, qualitative examination of how romantic partners communicate love to each other.

Love Languages in Existing Research

Definitions of relational maintenance traditionally describe, in varying degrees, "the cognitive and behavioral efforts that partners use to preserve the preferred level of interdependence" within a relationship (Ogolsky & Monk, 2018, p. 524). Stafford and Canary's (1991) five-part typology of relational maintenance behaviors serves as a foundational conceptualization of the ways in which individuals attempt to maintain rewarding relationships. Stafford et al. (2000) more recently advanced the original typology to include seven types of behaviors individuals may use to maintain their current relationship: positivity, openness, assurances, social networking, task sharing, conflict management, and advice. Similarly, Chapman (2015) claimed that individuals can develop more satisfying relationships by better understanding and intentionally speaking the primary LL of a romantic partner. The original version of the LL concept proposed that romantic partners communicate and understand love in five primary ways, which Chapman (2015) framed as "love languages." The five LLs include words of affirmation, quality time, gift-giving, acts of service, and physical touch.

Egbert and Polk's (2006) early work revealed correlations between Chapman's (1992) LLs and traditional relational maintenance behaviors (e.g., Stafford et al., 2000). Further research, however, questioned the relational quality improvements achieved by individuals more intentionally employing the primary LL of their romantic partner (Polk & Egbert, 2013). Bunt and Hazelwood (2017) later tempered this skepticism by demonstrating that such goals for relational quality improvements co-depend on the enactment of both self-regulation behaviors and "LL alignment" between partners. In turn, existing research (i.e., Bunt & Hazelwood, 2017; Egbert & Polk, 2006) suggested a notable relevance between

Chapman's (2015) LL typology and individuals' pursuit of more satisfying relationships.

Validity Concerns for Love Language Research

Although some scholars suggest that the aforementioned research confirms the validity of the LL typology (e.g., Guerrero et al., 2020), this suggestion remains misguided. Previous research unanimously relies on Egbert and Polk's (2006) measurement of LL behaviors (Love Language Scale; LLS), which was deductively derived from the original five LL typology (Chapman, 1992). The LLS employs 20 Likert-type items to assess the five LL behaviors described by Chapman (1992, 2015), with four items reflecting each LL. Although their measure is not problematic, it is important to note that Egbert and Polk (2006) specifically sought to "test the factor structure and construct validity *of a scale* [italics added] measuring Chapman's (1992) LLs," but not the conceptual accuracy of the LL typology itself (p. 22). Thus, results from previous research employing the LLS remain rooted in the untested assumption that Chapman's (2015) LL typology, and consequently the LLS, accurately describe the ways individuals communicate love to each other. As such, it remains unclear whether or not Chapman's (2015) five LLs accurately represent the primary ways individuals communicate love to each other.

To address this issue, we conducted an inductive, qualitative test of Chapman's (2015) LL typology to verify its accuracy. The benefit of using an inductive approach rests in its ability to allow underlying patterns and themes to naturally emerge from the data (see Braun & Clarke, 2006; Scharp & Sanders, 2019; Tracy, 2013), which contrasts with deductive approaches where existing theory guides a priori predictions about what trends should emerge within the data (Tracy, 2013). Thus, an inductive, qualitative approach was necessary to address our central research question:

> RQ1: How does Chapman's (2015) LL typology align with the ways romantic partners communicate love to each other?

Method

Participants

A total of 347 undergraduate students were recruited from a large Southwestern university. The study required participants to be at least 18 years of age and currently involved in a romantic relationship. Extra credit was offered in exchange for study participation. After removing individuals with missing responses ($n = 23$), the final sample consisted of 324 participants. Participants' demographics and relationship characteristics are reported in Table 1.

Table 1   Sample Demographics

Participant sex, ethnicity, age, and relationship characteristics

	n	%
Biological sex		
Female	257	79.3
Male	55	17.0
Not indicated	12	3.7
Ethnic identification*		
American	142	43.8
Hispanic/Latinx	90	27.8
Asian	51	15.7
European	19	5.9
African	6	1.9
Middle Eastern	3	0.9
Multiple ethnicities (e.g., Indian, Black)	13	4.0
Relationship type		
Long-term, committed	127	39.2
Seriously dating	117	36.1
Casually dating	65	20.1
Married	4	1.2
Engaged	1	0.3
Domestic partnership	1	0.3
Not indicated	9	2.8
	Mean	*SD*
Age (years)	20.17	2.58
Relationship duration (months)	17.40	19.69

Note: Participants were asked to indicate the ethnicity with which they *most* identify. Ethnicity was defined for participants as "a group with whom you share a common culture (e.g., language, religion, manners, or the like)."

The original LL typology addressed marital contexts (Chapman, 1992), but we suggest that college-aged relationships remain relevant for several reasons. First, the LL concept remains relevant across various relationship contexts (e.g., Chapman, 2017). Second, the LL concept suggests that humans contain a fundamental need for love and affection (Chapman, 2015), thus suggesting that the motivations to employ LL behaviors remain unconstrained by relationship type. Third, communication theory (Affection Exchange Theory; AET) similarly suggests that the capacity for giving and receiving expressions of love is innate to humans and relevant across relationships regardless of type or duration (Floyd, 2006, 2018). Fourth, although the *forms* of LL behavior may differ, the LL *categories* describing these behaviors remain relevant across relationship types. For example, the "acts of service" LL would still

accurately encompass both opting to help a spouse prepare children's lunches (marriage context) and helping a partner with homework (dating context).

Procedures

All participants reviewed the IRB-approved consent form before providing their consent. Data were collected through a Qualtrics-based online survey. Participants were asked to respond to four open-ended prompts: a) how *they* communicate love to their *partner*, b) a recent example of how they did this, c) how their *partner* communicates love to *them*, and d) a recent example of how their partner did this.

Data Analysis

The initial analyses used the original definitions for the five LL themes (Chapman, 2015). The authors discussed all definitions prior to coding to ensure a shared understanding of each definition, as well as how each definition was distinct. A collaborative coding session using 10 responses was conducted to establish a unified approach toward the interpretation and coding of participant responses. A codebook was then created as a standardized "definition source" for all authors.

Participant responses to the two primary open-ended questions (a and c above) were considered in conjunction with the examples provided. For example, to code the themes present in responses to "how you communicate love to your partner," the authors examined both the direct answer and the example provided. The authors examined each response to detect the presence of each love language theme, using "1" to indicate a theme being present and "0" to indicate a theme being absent in the response. Themes were not mutually exclusive and responses could be coded for more than one theme being present. Additionally, the authors noted other emergent themes not captured by the original LL categories. In total, each of the 324 participants provided a response to the two primary open-ended questions, producing 648 total units of analysis.

After the initial coding session, all authors independently coded 62 responses (9.6% of the data) to verify initial reliability. Although the existing LL themes acted as the primary foci and thus as sensitizing concepts (Bowen, 2006), the authors employed constant-comparative processes (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to remain sensitive toward other emergent themes within the data. Because all three authors were involved in the coding, an alternative reliability method involving the arithmetic mean for kappa reliability estimates across all coding pairs was used to provide an overall index of agreement (Hallgren, 2012; Light, 1971). Mean kappa reliability estimates showed substantial agreement across the five initial coding themes (k_{Mean} = .79; SD = .11; $Range$ = .66 to .94). Data trends illuminated by the authors' constant-comparative considerations (Charmaz, 2006) presented an additional, emergent theme within the first 62 responses. Substantial discussion occurred to determine the validity of the sixth observed theme. The discussion amongst the

three authors involved using constant-comparative processes to more closely exam-ine data points aligning with Chapman's (2015) typology, as well as outlying data points that did not clearly align with the existing typology. The authors then collectively conducted a "negative case analysis" (see Tracy, 2018) to better deter-mine how the outlying data points most clearly compared and contrasted with the original LL themes. Through these processes, the authors determined the initial 62 responses provided sufficient evidence suggesting a distinctive sixth theme, which was labeled as "check-ins." Thus, the sixth theme was defined and incorporated into the codebook.

A second reliability check was then conducted to gauge coding reliability speci-fically for the sixth theme. All three authors coded an additional 82 responses (approximately 12.7%). Using the same reliability calculations, the mean kappa reliability estimate showed substantial agreement across the authors' coding for the sixth theme (k_{Mean} = .68; SD = .10; $Range$ = .59 to .79). After establishing reliability for the original five themes and the additional sixth theme, the authors resolved any remaining coding discrepancies by collectively engaging in constant-comparative processes to determine the most appropriate theme for responses where uncertainty existed for one or more authors. The authors then divided the remaining responses in thirds, with each author independently coding one-third of the remaining responses.

Results

The primary objective of this study was to test the accuracy of Chapman's (2015) existing LL typology. To do so, we necessarily imposed the five original LL themes on the data to determine the "goodness of fit" and, in turn, the accuracy of Chapman's

Table 2 Coding Frequencies, Interrater Reliability (K_{mean}), and Themes by Sex

	n	%	k_{Mean}	Frequency within sex (%)	
				Female	Male
Original Five Love Languages					
Words of affirmation	296	45.7	.74	58.9	49.1
Quality time	215	33.2	.66	45.5	45.5
Acts of service	164	25.3	.76	33.9	32.7
Gifts	106	16.4	.84	25.0	21.8
Physical touch	106	16.4	.94	21.9	27.3
Proposed Sixth Love Language					
Check-ins	100	15.4	.68	14.1	25.5

Notes: Percentages do not sum to 100% because each response was allowed to be coded into one or more themes. The frequencies within sex should be interpreted as the percentage of individuals *within each sex* whose responses indicate the use of each love language. The frequencies within sex only reflect a) the reported sex of the participant (not the partner) and b) the ways in which *participants* communicated love to their *partner*.

(2015) LL typology. A secondary objective was to identify any additional LLs in the data, which required the simultaneous use of more inductive methods that allowed such themes to naturally emerge. The primary themes are discussed in the following paragraphs, with theme frequencies and coding reliabilities reported in Table 2.

Thematic Analysis Findings

Words of Affirmation
Words of affirmation emerged as the theme individuals most often identified as a method by which they or their partner communicated love to each other. Participants characterized this method of communicating love as a verbal expression of thoughts or feelings that made, or were intended to make, the recipient feel loved. For example, one participant stated, "My partner always tells me he loves me and how pretty I am." Another participant explained that they communicate love to their partner by "letting him know how great he is, how appreciative I am of him, and how much he means to me." One participant also noted their efforts to explicitly communicate "validation" and "appreciation for small tasks."

Quality Time
Providing quality time surfaced as a way participants communicated love within their relationships. Various behaviors comprised this theme, but participants consistently linked these behaviors to an intentional investment in each other, specifically in terms of time, attention, and meaningful conversation. For instance, one participant said, "My partner has a busy schedule, but last night he allocated five minutes of his time to simply lie down with me and enjoy silence." Other participants also referenced time as an often-scarce commodity that, when allocated to the relationship, was perceived as an indicator of love" (p. 7). For example, a second participant stated, "He also spends his time driving to come see me and makes an effort to make time for me even when he is really busy." Another participant recalled, "On a day that I had a fully packed schedule without a single break I made a point to find 45 minutes to stop and have lunch with him." Quality time was also reflected in romantic partners' efforts to dedicate time for focused listening and conversation. For example, one participant said, "I listened to him talk about his workout that day and asked questions to stay engaged." Another participant explained their attempt to show love by "making sure to ensure that my partner knows that I am paying attention to them."

Gifts
Receiving or giving visual symbols of love also represented a method by which love was communicated in participants' relationships. For example, one participant stated, "My partner had a really rough week last week, so I sent him Tiff's Treats to show him that he was loved." Another participant said, "My partner recently

brought me a bag of white strawberry-banana gummy bears because he know[s] that I love those, and I hardly ever see them." Even receiving simple, costless artifacts, such as texts or memes, were seen as meaningful symbols of love (e.g., "My boyfriend sent me the meme this morning that said, 'Are you today's date? Because you're 10/10.' Note: Today is October 10th.").

Acts of Service

Participants also recalled giving or receiving love through acts of service. Despite conceptual similarities with gifts, acts of service remained distinct in that the actions performed were ones that the recipient would have had to otherwise perform on their own (e.g., "Cooking dinner for my boyfriend"). While gifts may often involve actions (e.g., "She brought over a box of cookies"), the actions would likely not have otherwise been performed by the recipient. For example, one participant described performing an act of service by saying, "My boyfriend got sick all last week so I made sure to be extra caring by cooking for him last week." Another participant commented, "The other day we were watching a movie and when he noticed my feet were cold, he got up to get me a blanket."

Physical Touch

Engaging in physical contact also constituted a communication of love for many participants. Physical contact was described by participants in terms of holding hands, hugging, kissing, and sex. For example, one participant explicitly stated that their partner often communicated love through "kissing, holding hands, hugging, cuddling, and sex." Another participant said, "He hugs me, and it is in that moment of embrace, I know he loves me." Other examples included participants attempting to communicate love to their partners by "rub[bing] his back and hug[ging] him," as well as "holding his hand or put[ting] my hand on his knee to show him love."

Check-Ins

The final theme unique to this study comprised individuals' brief, momentary efforts to inquire about their partner's well-being or day-to-day events. For example, one participant reported making an effort to communicate love to their partner by " … check[ing] up on them regularly, such as sending a good morning text and others in between here and there." Another participant said that their partner "always texts me to make sure that I am awake, eating, getting home safe, etc." Other exemplar responses included participant reports of feeling loved when their partner "check[ed] in on me," "texted me after my test to see how it went," and "check[ed] in on me when we're not able to talk." In turn, this final emergent theme was characterized by individuals' efforts to "check in" about the status of a partner's well-being or life events. Furthermore, participants often indicated these check-ins occurred asynchronously. For example, although some participants referenced asking about their

partner's day or well-being while in-person or on the phone, the majority of these inquiries occurred within the context of text messaging.

Discussion

The primary objective of our study was to assess the extent to which Chapman's (2015) LL typology aligns with the ways romantic partners communicate love to each other. The results of this assessment provided empirical evidence confirming the validity of Chapman's (2015) LL typology. Furthermore, our findings illuminated emergent evidence for a sixth, additional LL labeled "check-ins."

A likely challenge to accepting "check-ins" as a new LL lies in the question of whether or not this theme stands distinct from the other established categories. For example, one likely argument is that "check-ins" exist as a form of "quality time." However, we argue the two are distinct for three specific reasons. First, our findings suggest that check-ins are momentary in nature and do not encompass the deep quality or focus characterizing the quality time theme. Second, participant reports categorized as check-ins consistently specify asking questions or trying to obtain information from a partner, most commonly about their day, well-being, or to simply "check up on them." These check-in behaviors are distinct in that behaviors comprising quality time do not inherently involve information-seeking goals. Third, check-ins characterize fully partner-centered behaviors. In other words, participants consistently describe the communication exhibited by check-ins as unidirectional. For example, participants often reported that when check-in texts are *received*, it often made them feel loved (e.g., "He will send me texts if it has been a long day."). Similarly, other participants felt they communicated love by *sending* texts (e.g., "I shower him with sweet text messages."). In both cases, participants did not describe the communication of love as embedded within the *interaction*, but rather in simply the sending or receiving of messages. Again, these characteristics remain distinct from quality time, in which concepts of dialog, conversation, and "togetherness" exhibit more dyadic, interactive effects.

In addition to extending Chapman's (2015) LL typology through the novel check-ins language, the study offers several contributions to the existing literature. As noted above, our study validates and advances a six-part typology of behaviors used to communicate love. These behaviors are further theorized to aid in maintaining or achieving satisfying relationships (Chapman, 2015). We suggest that this six-part LL typology offers two primary contributions toward a more nuanced perspective of how individuals give and receive love, as well as seek to maintain satisfying romantic relationships.

First, our findings illuminate how the evolution of technologically-mediated communication has implications for the ways in which individuals can, and at times prefer, to engage in relational maintenance. Giving and receiving love remains a central behavior for maintaining and strengthening relational ties, as well as fulfilling a fundamental human need (Chapman, 2015; Floyd, 2018). Research

exploring how relational partners give and receive love illustrates relevant face-to-face behaviors (Floyd & Morman, 1998; Marston et al., 1987). However, our findings–specifically the novel check-ins LL–suggest that technologically-mediated communication provides additional avenues through which love can be given and received, which are not entirely accounted for by previous research. For instance, although participant reports of check-ins were not solely defined by the use of technologically-mediated communication, many participants cited the use of this modality (specifically text messaging) as a common avenue by which check-ins occurred. This is not surprising considering the preference for text messaging as a day-to-day communication strategy for maintaining proximal relationships (Eden & Veksler, 2016). This preference, as well as the association between check-ins and text messaging, may further emphasize the additional method of relational connection and communication offered by text messaging. For example, as Pettigrew (2009) demonstrated, text messaging not only provides relational partners a more instant method of connecting, but also offers additional avenues through which they can engage in relational maintenance and manage dialectical tensions. Whereas Canary et al. (1993) indicated possible maintenance functions of mediated communication (i.e., cards, letters, calls), the emergence of instantaneous, momentary check-ins as a novel LL category underlines the growing emergence and use of technologically-mediated communication for relational maintenance purposes (e.g., Tong & Walther, 2011), particularly since the LL concept was first published (Chapman, 1992).

Second, our findings also contribute to a broader understanding of how individuals give and receive love, which maintains and strengthens relational ties (Chapman, 2015; Floyd, 2018). For instance, Stafford's (2011) advancement of traditional relational maintenance typologies presented a holistic understanding of the ways in which individuals attempt to maintain a desired relational status, with many similarities to the LL typology (i.e., assurances/words of affirmation, tasks/acts of service, etc.). One notable distinction, though, between our extended LL typology and existing typologies of relational maintenance behaviors involves gift-giving. Nearly 17% of our sample cited gift-giving as a way in which love was communicated in their relationship. However, giving gifts (i.e., a visual symbol of one's love) remains relatively absent from research examining relational maintenance behaviors (e.g., Canary et al., 1993; Stafford, 2011; Stafford et al., 2000), as well as behaviors that communicate love (Marston et al., 1987). This is surprising when considering that reasons for gift-giving within close relationships often reflect goals for maintaining or improving the relationship (Jonason et al., 2012). Further research substantiates the logic behind such reasons for gift-giving, as giving gifts has been shown to promote relational closeness (Aknin & Human, 2015). Thus, based on Chapman's (2015) theorizing, our findings demonstrate an unexplored method by which individuals may attempt to maintain or improve their relationships. However, it is important to note that findings from previous research, which did not address gift-giving, emerged from inductive analyses. That is to say,

participants themselves did not cite gift-giving as a way in which they attempted (or not) to communicate affection (Floyd et al., 2021) or "keep a relationship the way they like" (Stafford, 2011, p. 286). Although outside the scope of the current study, an interesting question for future research is why "communicating love" may prompt individuals to recall gift-giving as an associated behavior, but not when prompted with "communicating affection" or "keeping a relationship the way they like."

Limitations and Future Directions

The study contributions are accompanied by three notable limitations. First, the sample from which our data emerged was homogenous, specifically in terms of participant age, sex, and relationship status. In short, our data primarily conveyed the experiences of college-aged individuals identifying as American and female. Furthermore, this predominant representation of female experiences (i.e., 79.3% of our sample) may have produced more skewed findings for the coded frequencies of the LL behaviors, particularly "words of affirmation." This concern becomes more relevant considering common sex differences in relational maintenance behaviors, specifically openness (i.e., explicit discussion of feelings about the relationship; Aylor & Dainton, 2004). A more diverse sample may be able to draw from a broader range of experiences in communicating love with a romantic partner. It is, however, important to note that even within the current college student sample, the LL typology was still supported by our data. Regardless, replicating these results within a broader population would offer benefits in continued assessments of the LL typology, as the current data can only generalize the validity of the LL concept to college-aged romantic relationships. Second, the coding procedures employed in this study relied on modified estimates of inter-coder reliability (i.e., arithmetic mean across all coding pairs). Although support exists for the use of this method, more accurate estimates of intercoder reliability would enhance confidence in the coding procedures. Future iterations of this research should consider coding procedures that allow for the use of only two primary coders, which would fit the requirements for traditional Cohen's kappa reliability estimates. Third, the current study imposed Chapman's (2015) existing LL typology onto the data in order to perform the required empirical validation. This, in itself, is not a limitation. However, a more purely inductive approach may increase researcher sensitivity to more nuanced themes in how individuals communicate love, which could improve sensitivities to how such communication varies by culture, gender, or generation.

Conclusion

Chapman's (2015) five LLs have remained a prominent fixture within the popular press and undergraduate communication textbooks. However, no known research

provided empirical validation of Chapman's (2015) LL typology. The current study addressed this gap and offered support for the existence of the five original LL categories. Furthermore, the findings revealed evidence of a novel sixth LL (i.e., check-ins). Future education and counseling programs, as well as academic research, will benefit from having data-based evidence confirming the accuracy and validity of Chapman's (2015) original LL typology, as well as the presence of a sixth, novel method by which romantic partners commonly communicate love to each other.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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