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A Critical Analysis of Mobile Interpersonal Relationships through Uncertainty Reduction Theory

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Abstract

Through the use of online dating apps, individuals are having the chance to begin, develop, and end interpersonal relationships without ever even meeting the partner in person. It is assumed that this is happening due to the lack of primary tension in initial contact, as uncertainty reduction can take place from behind a screen. This study sought to connect the theories between Uncertainty Reduction Theory and mobile interpersonal relationships. The axioms of Charles Berger’s theory come into play during online dating as the eight key variables of relationship development are utilized in most successful interpersonal relationships to further intimacy, in an attempt to reduce primary tension. To further connect, four information-seeking strategies can be utilized during the online dating experience as people have the ability to observe online interaction, seek information from a third party online source, talk directly to the person of interest, and browse the internet for information about them as well. Through these primary connections between URT and mobile interpersonal relationships, areas of interest for further research can be actions towards comparing those who reduce uncertainty in an online platform versus those who do in-person in a longitudinal study.

Keywords: interpersonal relationships, mobile, online-dating, primary tension, uncertainty reduction theory
A Critical Analysis of Mobile Interpersonal Relationships through Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Over the last few decades, technology has taken a tremendous growth trajectory which has intensely changed the way in which humans communicate. People are working primarily from home, scholars are receiving degrees without ever stepping foot on campus, and global friendships are being made through silly games online. Internet use has penetrated the majority of our lives as a valuable tool for online expression, peer-to-peer socialization, and as a resource for products, services, and brands. Considering statistics from a decade ago, the internet found its way into the lives of 80% of the population, which resulted from a dramatic 40% increase in use in just five years (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). Considering the development of the internet including examples of high-use social media platforms and more efficient online gaming, it is evident that this growth trajectory of technology has only heightened between 2010-2011 and present day (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). One highly notable way in which technology has changed human communication and interaction is with the development of online dating. Through this online platform, individuals are having the chance to begin, develop, and even end interpersonal relationships without ever meeting the partner in person. This is happening due to the lack of primary tension in initial contact, as uncertainty reduction can take place from behind a screen. Uncertainty reduction theory plays a large role in the way humans interact through media, especially on online dating apps. By having the ability to gain information about others quickly without in-person threat, a whole new world of romance has evolved.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory
Charles Berger, professor of communication at the University of California, Davis, originated what is now known as Uncertainty Reduction Theory. The basic premise of Berger’s theory is the idea that when strangers meet, their initial concern is to reduce the uncertainty about the other or to increase predictability about the behavior of both themselves and the other involved in the interaction (Booth-Butterfield et al., 1998; Griffin et al., 2019; Gudykunst et al., 1985; Kramer, 1993). This motivation during human communication allows for the understanding of communicative actions and the promoting of relationship development between those involved (Emmers & Canary, 1996; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988). Uncertainty reduction theory also focuses on how people gain knowledge about one another and the creation of proactive and retroactive predictions about others’ attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors (Griffin et al., 2019; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988).

**Axioms**

Inside of Berger’s uncertainty reduction theory, a series of axioms were implemented to explain the relationship between the presence of uncertainty and eight critical variables of relationship development (Griffin et al., 2019; Gudykunst et al., 1985). These key variables include that of verbal communication, nonverbal warmth, information seeking, self-disclosure, reciprocity, similarity, liking, and shared networks (Griffin et al., 2019; Gudykunst et al., 1985). These axioms help communication professionals interpret what makes up the uncertainty reduction process during a human interaction. To briefly expand on the first axiom for a more profound understanding, it is assumed that as the amount of verbal communication increases,
uncertainty will be reduced, leading to even more verbal communication (Booth-Butterfield et al., 1998; Yifeng, 2015).

*Information Seeking*

As humans encounter uncertainty in interactions, four strategies have been developed in which communication researchers believe to represent the way in which people attempt to reduce uncertainty. These include passive, active, interactive, and extractive strategies (Emmers & Canary, 1996; Griffin et al., 2019; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988). Passive strategies are described as impression formation by unobtrusively observing a person interacting with others, whereas active strategies consist of forming an opinion about someone by gaining information without directly contacting them, such as from a third party (Antheunis et al., 2012; Emmers & Canary, 1996; Griffin et al., 2019; Sharabi, 2020). Interactive uncertainty reduction strategies involve face-to-face, direct interaction with the person of interest in an attempt to gain information (Antheunis et al., 2012; Emmers & Canary, 1996; Griffin et al., 2019; Sharabi, 2020). Finally, extractive strategies are conducted by searching the internet for information about a person (Griffin et al., 2019). These four strategies are utilized in human interaction daily to reduce the initial uncertainty felt in primary interactions through tactics of self-disclosure, asking questions, and the intimacy in which fills the interaction (Antheunis et al., 2012). An example of where these strategies come into play is expressed by Emmers & Canary (1996) where multiple relationship dyads expressed that they idealized interactive communication strategies such as relationship talk and apologies, which in turn helped to increase the intimacy held within the relationships.
Primary Tension

As it is known that uncertainty reduction theory is utilized in human communication, it is important to note when this is most often occurring. What is known as primary tension characterizes the highest uncertainty-filled time in an average interpersonal relationship (Booth-Butterfield et al., 1998). Primary tension includes the social unease and stiffness which is experienced while getting acquainted with a new person of interest (Booth-Butterfield et al., 1998). Both the nonverbal and verbal expressions of disinterest, tiredness, and physical withdrawal seen within a communicative setting can be identified as signs of primary tension taking place (Booth-Butterfield et al., 1998). As though most individuals encounter these feelings while meeting others, it is noted that people tend to feel this is an individual response rather than a tension felt by all parties (Booth-Butterfield et al., 1998). Uncertainty and tension reduction tactics come into play here, as light topics or polite conversations often fill the air in most initial human interactions (Booth-Butterfield et al., 1998).

Mobile Interpersonal Relationships

The communicative social interaction between two or more people defines interpersonal communication. Through this, relationship development, maintenance, and the creations of teams or communities occurs (Valo, 2011). The sharing of thoughts and ideas, meanings and beliefs, and the new creation of the latter, all is what makes interpersonal communication so incredible. As humans take part in these relationships, intimacy between individuals sparks and develops. To clarify, intimacy is expressed as the idea of how close one feels to another as well as the perceived closeness and interdependence between those involved (Emmers & Canary, 1996). Previous research
has shown that the varying levels of uncertainty can highly impact the increase or decrease in intimacy within interpersonal relationships (Theiss & Solomon, 2008). Not only this, but the decrease in uncertainty is actually recognized as a significant predictor of higher levels of intimacy between two individuals (Theiss & Solomon, 2008). These levels of intimacy and the development of interpersonal relationships has been recently impacted by the technological growth seen in the world. Communication, alone, has allowed humans to connect to others on a greater scale, but also lets people be more present in social networks regardless of time or place (Valo, 2011). It has only been recently recognized that people can now engage in what is known as mobile interpersonal communication, where interpersonal relationships are actively developing while not in the same proximity (Valo, 2011). Technology has truly established a new way of human interaction and relationship development over the last two decades.

**Mobile Uncertainty Reduction of Primary Tension**

Multiple studies have shown that uncertainty reduction theory has been affected by online platforms, especially during primary tension. Yifeng (2015) expresses how online classes have led to a heavy lack of nonverbal cues from face-to-face communication in which makes it more difficult to establish bonds between students and teachers. In a similar, but more intimate relational development program, online dating allows for an informal advantage over those who meet face-to-face due to the access to personal information of individuals of interest (Sharabi, 2020). It has been noted that those who have access to background information before actually meeting express less tense behavior during primary tension, and therefore hold less uncertainty about the other individual in the encounter (Booth-Butterfield et al., 1998; Sharabi, 2020).
Antheunis et al. (2012) also supports this claim, as they looked at how computer-mediated communication affected uncertainty reduction strategies due to the lack of nonverbal behavior. It was found that those who utilized this technological advantage held more intimate self-disclosure than those in face-to-face interactions, and initial interactions were less uncomfortable (Antheunis et al., 2012). This heightened self-disclosure was also supported in a study by Gibbs et al. (2011), where it was found that those who participated in online dating allowed for the proactive engagement of uncertainty reduction activities, in which led to further self-disclosure.

By looking at these studies, it seems as if the use of mobile technology to prompt initial interactions can have a positive impact on reducing primary tension and the uncertainty held within. Research by Ruben et al. (2021) suggests that the passive information-seeking through online platforms may allow users to learn skills to later enhance their face-to-face communication. By allowing for information-seeking and uncertainty reduction strategies before primary meetings, those involved may be able to decrease the tension and stress felt in initial encounters, all while developing a relationship with the other before actually meeting.

Observations

One of the most commonly used contexts in which mobile interpersonal relationships are developed is the world of online dating. Before social media and utilizing apps like Tinder or Bumble, people used to have to meet face-to-face after having an initial in-person encounter. Now, as technology has developed and media has become almost more commonly used to connect compared to in person interactions,
relationship development is heavily impacted by the uncertainty reduction strategies utilized online.

When one begins using online dating apps, they are initiating a phase of primary tension, as described by Booth-Butterfield et al. (1998). This initial introduction and relationship analysis begins with an interpersonal interaction and the utilization of uncertainty reduction strategies (Emmers & Canary, 1996; Griffin et al., 2019; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988; Valo, 2011). As one utilizes the passive, active, interactive, or extractive methods as described above, they are attempting to reduce uncertainty which allows for the growth of intimacy between those involved (Emmers & Canary, 1996; Griffin et al., 2019; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988; Theiss & Solomon, 2008).

Some argue that this can be used as an advantage in comparison to those who only meet face-to-face, as the individuals involved will have a chance to build certainty of the person of interest prior to actually interacting with them in person (Antheunis et al., 2012; Booth-Butterfield et al., 1998; Sharabi, 2020). This can be done by browsing online dating profiles and gaining extractive information about the online date through self-disclosure on social media, such as Instagram or Snapchat (Griffin et al., 2019). Once the two involved in this online dating process get the chance to interact behind screens instead of tables, they have an option to initiate more intimate discussions without the immediate response or nonverbal feedback which many people are intimidated by on first dates. Uncertainty reduction theory can be highly utilized during this entire online process before even making the decision to meet the date in person and experience primary tension, in which can lead to more forward and confident
expressions of self and interest and a preestablished sense of intimacy (Booth-Butterfield et al., 1998; Emmers & Canary, 1996; Theiss & Solomon, 2008).

**Analysis**

To critically analyze how exactly uncertainty reduction theory takes place in online dating, and the impacts of this, we must start at the beginning of the theory and online dating experience, together. Uncertainty reduction theory, as defined by Booth-Butterfield (1998), Griffin et al. (2019), Gudykunst et al. (1985), and Kramer (1993), is the attempt to lessen uncertainty about another by seeking information about them. The whole concept of online dating is surrounded by the idea of learning about the person of interest by gaining information about them prior to actually meeting, in which argues the relevance of this theory to the online dating context in general. The axioms of Berger’s theory come into play during online dating as the eight key variables of relationship development are utilized in most successful interpersonal relationships to further intimacy (Emmers & Canary, 1996; Griffin et al., 2019; Gudykunst & Hammer, 1988). To further connect, all four information-seeking strategies can be utilized during the online dating experience as people have the ability to observe online interaction, seek information from a third party online source, talk directly to the person of interest, and browse the internet for information about them as well (Antheunis et al., 2012; Emmers & Canary, 1996; Griffin et al., 2019; Sharabi, 2020).

Primary tension is heavily felt in in-person interaction, and less experienced in online settings (Antheunis et al., 2012; Booth-Butterfield et al.’s, 1998). This is where online dating can utilize the positive effect, as more confidence and initiation can occur by “swiping right” or messaging first without the experience of primary tension. The
digital media puts a barrier between the individuals, all while building a bridge, which can help influence initiation of relationship development. Further, analyzing, it is clear that online dating is a prime example of mobile interpersonal communication. As this is described as the development of interpersonal relationships while not in the same proximity through media, online dating allows for just this by being in the back pocket of anyone, anytime (Valo, 2011). Finally, the combination of all concepts discussed above is truly encompassed by the essence of online dating. As uncertainty is reduced through the use of digital information-seeking, primary tension is depleted and intimacy between two individuals in an interpersonal relationship can flourish. Online dating is the most perfect example of where Berger’s uncertainty reduction theory can fit into a mobile interpersonal relationship context.

**Implications**

The theory discussed in this paper has allowed for a new light to be lit on the online dating experience. As this media has gotten some negative feedback from those who observe and do not partake and participate, others can see such light with the knowledge gained from this paper. It was argued that online dating utilizes information-seeking strategies relevant to Berger’s axioms, which allows for less awkward initial encounters with those involved in interpersonal relationship development. A new way of certainty increase has been revealed, allowing for quicker growth of intimacy between individuals through this online platform. This study utilized Berger’s theory, along with multiple previous literature, to argue the effectiveness of uncertainty reduction in media. Limitations of this study include a real-time observation of one utilizing an online dating app and taking note of which information-seeking strategies were used. Not only this,
but more literature could have been reviewed regarding specific online dating apps and the effectiveness of such on relationship development.

From here, areas of interest for further research can be comparing those who reduce uncertainty in an online platform versus those who do in-person in a longitudinal study. By observing the intimacy levels over time, it could be interesting to find whether the information-seeking strategies used online were better or worse than in-person for a long-term relationship. Essentially, this study allowed for a connection between uncertainty reduction theory and mobile interpersonal relationship development, which can be a fascinating topic of interest for future communication researchers.
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