

Mobile communication in romantic relationships essay sample

[Life](#), [Love](#)



This study examines the association between mobile phone use and relational uncertainty, intimacy, and attachment. A survey of 197 university students currently in romantic relationships revealed that relational uncertainty was negatively associated with the amount of mobile phone use. Relational intimacy, however, was positively associated with mobile phone use. In regards to attachment styles, participants with higher levels of avoidance placed fewer calls than those with lower levels of avoidance. Anxiety levels were not significantly associated with mobile phone use. These findings indicate that a higher amount of mobile communication between partners is closely related to positive outcomes in their relationship. Specifically, mobile communication between romantic partners can reduce relational uncertainty and increase intimacy, as well as be influenced by the communicators' attachment styles.

Mobile Romantic Communication Mobile Communication in Romantic Relationships: The Relationship Between Mobile Phone Use and Relational Uncertainty, Intimacy, and Attachment

Mobile phones have become one of the most pervasive interpersonal media. Accordingly, the study of mobile communication has been burgeoning in recent years (e. g., Craig, 2007; Katz, 2003; Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Ling & Pedersen, 2005). For instance, Jin (2007) uncovered that mobile communication shares some similarities with face-to-face communication. In particular, higher amounts of both mobile and face-to-face communication were negatively associated with loneliness (Jin, 2007). Also, individuals in romantic relationships used mobile phones significantly more often than

those not romantically involved (Jin, 2007). Similarly, previous findings suggest that mobile communication tends to occur within close relationships, such as family, romantic couples, and friends (Campbell & Russo, 2003; Ishii, 2006).

It appears that by using mobile phones people can strengthen their family bonds, facilitate friendships, and build mutual support (Campbell & Kelley, 2006; Campbell & Russo, 2003; Ishii, 2006; Wei & Lo, 2006). Katz and Aakhus (2002) argue that, across cultures, people use communication tools in ways that maximize their needs and comforts, often resulting in the invention of new ways people interact. In line with this, Licoppe (2004) argued that the advent of mobile technology enabled us to develop a particular communication pattern in close relationships, which is referred to as the connected mode of communication. This mode is represented by short and frequent communicative gestures, as illustrated by young people's use of mobile phones (Licoppe, 2004). In support of mobile communication as a medium to maintain connectivity, Ling and Yttri (2002) found that young people used their mobile phones to keep checking what their friends are doing to coordinate each other's activities.

As such, a —connected mode of maintaining relationships is becoming a prominent daily practice of modern couples (Licoppe, 2004). These studies, however, have not yet fully examined how mobile communication between romantic partners is associated with relational processes and outcomes. For example, does mobile phone use in romantic couples alleviate or augment feelings of uncertainty about how the relationship will develop in the future?

To address the question, the present study investigated how relational uncertainty and intimacy are influenced by mobile phone use in romantic relationships. Also, given that a variety of personal affective processes have been linked to media use, individual characteristics were expected to influence mobile communication between partners. For example, Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) demonstrated how people's self-esteem may influence their use of social network sites.

Also, feelings of loneliness and depression might predispose some people to develop problematic Internet use behaviors (Caplan, 2003). However, we presently know little about how people with different ways of relating use mobile communication. In particular, people's attachment styles exert reliable influence over communicative behaviors, especially in close relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), and therefore attachment style was considered in this study. Relational Uncertainty One fundamental process in interpersonal relationships relates to people's motivation and strategies geared at reducing relational uncertainty. Put it differently, people establish and develop close relationships with others by increasing confidence about what each other thinks about their relationship. To this regard, uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) attempts to explain how uncertainty guides the behaviors of interactants at the initial stage of

Mobile Romantic Communication their relationship. From this perspective, at the beginning of an encounter, one is motivated to reduce his/her uncertainty about the other person. Relational uncertainty can be reduced by obtaining knowledge of the other person, which enables the interactant to make predictions and explanations about the behavior of the other person with whom he/she is interacting (Berger & Calabrese, 1975).

Uncertainty reduction theory has been extended and refined by encompassing a variety of sources of uncertainty and of relational contexts (see Knobloch, 2007; Knobloch & Solomon, 2002). For example, Knobloch and Solomon (2002) pointed out that most research on relational uncertainty still holds assumptions made on initial interactions, and they proposed a reconceptualization of relational uncertainty relevant to close relationships. They defined relational uncertainty as —the degree of confidence people have in their perceptions of involvement within interpersonal relationships|| (p. 245). Also, they demonstrated that relational uncertainty stems from three sources: the self, the partner, and the relationship.

Self uncertainty means the doubts about one' s own involvement in the relationship. Partner uncertainty implies the doubts about one' s partner' s involvement in the relationship, and relationship uncertainty concerns the doubts about the relationship itself (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999, 2002). The reduction of relational uncertainty is fundamentally beneficial to partners. It can promote feelings of closeness between partners by leading them to achieve desired outcomes such as commitment (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002). One strategy people use to cope with relational uncertainty is to increase

verbal communication with their partners (Berger & Kellermann, 1983; Kellermann & Berger, 1984). For example, partners in close relationships tend to employ interactive tactics such as talking over most often in response to uncertainty-increasing events (Emmers & Canary, 1996; Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985; Planalp, Rutherford, &

Mobile Romantic Communication Honeycutt, 1988).

In summary, previous studies have consistently shown that the more communication between relational partners, the lower their relational uncertainty. Given that interactive, verbal strategies are the most common ways couples deal with uncertainty, then we expect that these behaviors might reduce uncertainty in mediated interactions as well. In support of this view, there is evidence that repeated message exchanges over time allow people to reduce uncertainty about partners in computer-mediated settings as successfully as they do in face-to-face contexts (e. g., Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, 1992; Walther & Burgoon, 1992). Considering this, mobile phone use between partners should have a significant influence on their relational uncertainty. Since increased levels of verbal communication between partners tend to reduce relational uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), increased levels of mobile communication should also be associated with decreased levels of relational uncertainty.

Therefore, the following hypothesis is offered: H1: Higher levels of mobile phone use are associated with lower levels of relational uncertainty. Intimacy Most scholars agree that intimacy is an essential feature of close relationships and a key indicator of the quality of the relationships. Intimacy can be defined as the emotional bond between partners in a relationship (e. g., Parks & Floyd, 1996; Perlman & Fehr, 1987). Relationship scholars tend to view intimacy as a process in which partners become interdependent (e. g., Berscheid, 1983; Kelley et al., 1983; Reis & Patrick, 1996). Interdependence implies that partners within a dyad control each other' s outcomes in the

course of their interaction (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), which is fostered by interconnected daily activities for a duration of time (Kelly et al., 1983). Close relationships are built on intimate and

Mobile Romantic Communication interdependent interactions, wherein intimate feelings and disclosures occur (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Reis & Patrick, 1996).

Feelings of intimacy are influenced by both the quality (Montgomery, 1988; Prager, 2000) and the quantity of communication (Emmers-Sommer, 2004; Hays, 1988). We presently focus on the latter. Consider, for example, evidence from a recent study showing a positive association between the frequency of casual interactions and relational outcomes such as liking and satisfaction in married couples (Kline & Stafford, 2004). Also, in Emmers-Sommer's (2004) study, the quantity of interactions including face-to-face and phone calls significantly influence intimacy between partners in close relationships. These findings resonate with Duck's (1994) contention that everyday talk of relational partners serves to form connectedness between them. In particular, the meaning of the relationship is created through talk occurring in everyday interactions irrespective of the content of the talk (Duck, 1994).

Thus, we can speculate that more frequent and longer talk between partners would be critical for them to experience a sense of connectedness.

Accordingly, it is reasonable to expect that partners interacting through mobile phones more often should have more intimate feelings toward each other. H2: Higher levels of mobile phone use are associated with higher levels of intimacy. Attachment Style Last, the present study examined how the attachment styles of romantically involved participants are associated with their mobile communication. Attachment styles have been most

frequently used to understand individual differences in relational dispositions (Daly, 2002), because they can predict individuals' relational patterns with significant others (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

Mobile Romantic Communication Hazan and Shaver (1987) conceptualized romantic love as an attachment process, in which an individual becomes emotionally bonded to his/her romantic partner in a similar way that an infant becomes attached to primary caregivers. Also, they contend that individuals with different attachment styles experience romantic relationships differently (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Based on the previous evidence, Brennan, Clark, and Shaver (1998) claimed that attachment styles can be viewed as a function of two dimensions—avoidance and anxiety. Avoidance concerns the tendency to steer clear of intimate contact due to discomfort with closeness, while anxiety represents strong desire for closeness coupled with fear of abandonment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan et al., 1998).

In relation to how attachment style affects romantic relationships, extant research has found that individuals with secure attachment styles function well in their close relationships, compared to those with anxious and avoidant styles. In particular, individuals with secure attachments are more likely to engage in behaviors that promote intimacy (Grabill & Kerns, 2000). On the contrary, avoidant and anxious individuals are less likely to engage in selfdisclosure (Grabill & Kerns, 2000; Mikulincer & Nachson, 1991) and seeking and giving support (Mikulincer, Florian, & Weller, 1993) than those securely attached. Further, in Brennan and Shaver's (1995) study, the

people with secure attachment showed proximity-seeking behaviors, such as sharing ideas and talking about each other's day with a romantic partner, more than did those with avoidant and anxious-ambivalence attachments. Interestingly, Anders and Tucker (2000) found that avoidant and anxious people are not competent in interpersonal communication, as compared to securely attached people. Based on this, it can be expected that non-securely attached people are less likely to enjoy interacting with significant others over mobile phones since they engage in lower levels of self-disclosure and social support.

On the contrary, it is likely that securely attached individuals enjoy mobile communication with their partners more than non-securely attached, both avoidant and anxious, counterparts. In line with this reasoning, the following hypotheses are proposed: H3a: Higher levels of mobile phone use are associated with lower levels of avoidance. H3b: Higher levels of mobile phone use are associated with lower levels of anxiety. **Methods** **Participants** Students in introductory communication classes at a large Southwestern university received extra credit for their participation in an online survey. Although anyone could participate in the study, only data from those currently involved in romantic relationships were analyzed for the present study.

All of the participants possessed a mobile phone. Three married participants were excluded, resulting in the sample size of 197. The sample included 60 (30.4%) males and 137 females, who ranged in age from 18 to 34 ($M = 19.40$, $SD = 1.64$). More than half of the participants (53.3%) were Caucasian,

21. 3% were Hispanic, and 16. 2% were Asian. One hundred twenty-eight participants indicated their relational status as —seriously dating|| (65. 0%), 39 as —casually dating|| (19. 8%), 24 as —potentially dating|| (12. 2%), and 6 as —engaged|| (3%). The average relationship length was 15. 4 months (SD = 15. 42), ranging from less than one month to six years. Among the participants analyzed, six (3%) reported on a homosexual relationship.

Measures Mobile phone use. The online survey asked participants to estimate the amount of time they spent using calls with their romantic partner via mobile phones in a day. Participants also reported the numerical estimates of the frequency of sending and receiving calls with their romantic partner in a day. Because the frequency of making calls was highly correlated with that of receiving calls ($r = . 82$), they were summed to create the composite variable named call frequency.

The call time and call frequency variables were analyzed separately because they were relatively moderately correlated ($r = . 58$). The average time in a day participants spent calling with their romantic partner was approximately an hour and fifteen minutes ($M = 74. 59$ minutes, $SD = 105. 19$, $Mode = 60$). The average frequency with which participants used voice calls with their romantic partner was about seven times ($M = 6. 78$, $SD = 5. 21$, $Mode = 2$) in a day. As the large standard deviation value for each variable indicates, the distributions of these two variables were highly skewed. Thus, log transformations were performed on these variables, which resulted in significant improvement in the normality of the data. These transformed variables were used in the following analyses.

Relational uncertainty. Theiss and Solomon's (2006) measure on relational uncertainty was included in the online survey. This measure is a shorter version of the measure originally developed by Knobloch and Solomon (1999), which is comprised of 20 statements, preceded by a stem that reads —How certain are you about . . . ?|| Participants rated their certainty with each statement using a 6-point Likert-type scale (1 = completely or almost completely uncertain, 6 = completely or almost completely certain). Responses to all items were reverse scored so that higher scores on these scales indicate higher levels of uncertainty. The subscale measuring self uncertainty contained six items, including —whether you want the relationship to work out in the long run|| (M = 2. 20, SD = 1. 20, $\alpha = . 94$). Partner uncertainty also consisted of six items, including —whether your partner is ready to commit to you|| (M = 2. 03, SD = 1. 19, $\alpha = . 95$), and relationship uncertainty included eight items, such as —whether the relationship will work out in the long run|| (M = 2. 23, SD = 1. 10, $\alpha = . 92$). Because the subscales were highly correlated ($r_s = . 64 \sim . 83$), the composite variable of overall relational uncertainty was created. The 20 items were combined so that higher scores reflect greater uncertainty (M = 2. 13, SD = 1. 06, $\alpha = . 97$).

Intimacy. In this study, intimacy was measured using two concepts: love and commitment. Although intimacy can be assessed by a variety of ways, we chose love and commitment because they represent well the distinctive, yet related, characteristics—i. e., closeness and interdependence—of romantic relationships (Kelley, 1983). These two variables are often considered as

indicators of intimacy between romantic partners (e. g., Cole, 2001; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Rubin's (1970) Love Scale was included in the online survey. This scale consists of 13 statements with a response scale that ranges from 1 (not at all true) to 9 (definitely true). Example items include —If my partner were feeling badly, my first duty would be to cheer him/her up|| and —I feel that I can confide in my partner about virtually everything|| (M = 6. 59, SD = 1. 47, $\alpha = . 90$).

Commitment was measured with the corresponding subscale developed by Rusbult and associates (1998). The commitment subscale consists of seven items, such as —I want our relationship to last for a very long time.|| For each item, a 7-point response scale (1 = do not agree at all, 7 = agree completely) was provided (M = 5. 33, SD = 1. 64, $\alpha = . 92$). Because we operationalized intimacy as a mixture of love and commitment, the these two variables ($r = . 75$) were converted to z-scores and averaged to form a composite variable of intimacy. Attachment style. Participants' attachment styles were measured by the Multi-Item Measure of Adult Romantic Attachment Scale (Brennan et al., 1998). The online survey included two 18-item subscales: avoidance and anxiety. Example items include —I prefer not to be close to romantic partners|| (avoidance scale) and —I worry a lot about my relationships|| (anxiety scale).

For each item, a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = disagree strongly, 7 = agree strongly) was provided. The two subscales were computed so that the higher the score, the greater the presence of the characteristic referenced by the scale's name. Coefficient alphas were . 93 for avoidance scale (M = 2. 68,

SD = 1.17) and .91 for anxiety scale (M = 3.38, SD = 1.15). Results Table 1 includes the intercorrelations among study variables. H1 predicted that mobile phone use should negatively correlate with the levels of relational uncertainty. This prediction was supported. Call time was significantly, negatively related to relational uncertainty ($r = -.34, p < .001$), and also call frequency was negatively associated with relational uncertainty ($r = -.41, p < .001$). These results imply that the more the participants placed voice calls via mobile phones with their partner, the less they felt relational uncertainty.

The second hypothesis dealt with the relationship between mobile phone use and intimacy in romantic relationships. Mobile phone use was significantly, positively associated with intimacy (for call time, $r = .38, p < .001$; for call frequency, $r = .42, p < .001$). Participants using mobile phone calls more frequently and longer with their romantic partners reported the greater levels of intimacy in their relationship. Thus, H2 was supported. Recall that H3a-b were about the relationship between mobile phone use and attachment styles. H3a posited a negative relationship between mobile phone use and the level of avoidance. Participants' scores on the avoidance scale were significantly, negatively associated with the time they spent calling ($r = -.22, p = .002$) and the frequency with which they made and received calls ($r = -.33, p < .001$).

Thus, H3a was supported. H3b, however, was not supported, which expected that participants with higher anxiety scores should show decreased levels of mobile phone use. Anxiety was not significantly correlated with call time ($r =$

-. 11, ns) or call frequency ($r = -.06$, ns). In short, participants who tended to avoid intimate contact used mobile phones with their partner significantly less than those who did not, but participants' anxiety on their relationship did not significantly affect mobile phone use with their partner. Discussion This study examined couples' mobile phone use with regard to their relational and individual characteristics—relational uncertainty, intimacy, and attachment. Specifically, participants reporting greater frequency and duration of time using voice calls showed lower levels of relational uncertainty and higher levels of intimacy. In addition, participants who felt uncomfortable with closeness—avoidant individuals—tended to use voice calls less than those who did not.

The findings suggest that in the context of romantic relationships, greater use of mobile phones, particularly voice calls, is associated with more positive aspects of relationships. For example, the more the use of mobile phones, the lower the reported relational uncertainty (H1). This is consistent with uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), which predicts that higher frequency of encounters is associated to lower uncertainty in social interactions. Previous studies have demonstrated people's tendency to increase verbal interactions to deal with relational uncertainty (e. g., Emmers & Canary, 1996; Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985; Planalp et al., 1988). Likewise, as a mode of interpersonal communication, mobile communication between partners seems to contribute to reduction of their relational uncertainty. The findings also resonate with Walther's (1992) suggestion that repeated encounters and extended interaction time fosters relational

development among partners communicating through technology. The results also indicate that as the amount of mobile communication increases, the closeness between partners in a relationship increases.

The more the mobile phone use within romantic dyads, the stronger the intimacy (H2). Given that frequent interconnection is necessary to form a close relationship (Kelley et al., 1983), mobile communication seems to fulfill people's need for interconnectedness in close relationships. This process may result in greater levels of love and commitment, and overall more intimacy. The non-tethered feature of mobile phones may allow couples to communicate with each other whenever and wherever they want, and perhaps it also satisfies the needs of partners in an intimate relationship who have strong desires to communicate with each other. Apart from the technological factors, young people's patterns of mobile phone use may foster interdependence with their significant others. For example, instead of setting a fixed appointment, they arrange and rearrange it on a real-time basis thanks to mobile phones (Ling & Yttri, 2002).

Also, frequent, short calls and messages may lead communicators to continuously experience feelings of connectedness between them (Licoppe, 2004). It is possible that more frequent mobile communication helps couples coordinate their daily activities, which may lead to increased feelings of closeness. Simply speaking, the findings of this study suggest that mobile communication between partners is closely related to their intimacy.

Attachment and Mobile Communication As relational dispositions of individuals, attachment styles were associated with mobile communication in

couple relationships. Participants using lower amounts of voice calls within their dating relationships reported higher tendency of avoidance (H3a). Highly avoidant people are characterized by feeling uncomfortable with closeness, trust, and dependency (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Thus, they may feel uneasy being reachable at any time by their partner, so they may not take advantage of mobile phones, whereas non-avoidant people seem to make good use of mobile phones to contact their partner. We expected anxious individuals would make less use of mobile phones, but anxiety dimension was not significantly associated with mobile phone use (H3b). This may be because anxiety, by itself, refers to a cognitive or emotional state rather than behaviors—anxiety over relationship (abandonment).

To summarize, avoidance levels of participants affected their mobile phone use with partners, while anxiety levels did not. Limitations Some limitations of the present study include the self-report method to measure the quantity of mobile communication, which may not be reliable because participants had to recall and estimate the frequency and time of using mobile phones. Also, although it seems quite plausible that mobile communication can directly affect uncertainty and intimacy, we cannot exclude the possibility of the other way of causality. For instance, increased levels of intimacy or connectedness between partners may induce them to engage in more contact. These limitations address future research with tighter methodological control. Despite its limitations, this study sheds some light about mobile communication in the context of romantic relationships. Taken together, more use of mobile phones between romantic partners was

associated with a better quality of their relationship. This study contributes to our knowledge on the nature of romantic relationships in times when communication technology plays an increasingly vital role in creating, maintaining, and terminating personal relationships.

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Mobile Romantic Communication Table 1 Intercorrelations of Study Variables

1 1. Call time 2. Call frequency 3. Self uncertainty 4. Partner uncertainty 5.

Relationship uncertainty 6. Relational uncertainty a 7. Love 8. Commitment

9. Intimacy b 10. Avoidance – . 58** -. 35** -. 32** -. 31** -. 36** . 36** .

37** . 38** -. 22* – -. 33** -. 39** -. 39** -. 41** . 40** . 41** . 42** -. 33**

– . 64** . 83** . 90** -. 71** -. 84** -. 82** . 56** – . 76** . 87** -. 56** -.

62** -. 63** . 50** – . 96** -. 66** -. 78** -. 75** . 60** – -. 71** -. 82** -.

80** . 61** – . 75** . 94** -. 57** – . 94** -. 61** – -. 63** – – 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

9 10 11

11. Anxiety -. 11 -. 06 . 09 . 31** . 26** . 25** . 04 -. 09 -. 04 . 24** Note. a

Composite variable of self, partner, and relationship uncertainty, b

Composite variable of love and commitment N = 187~197, * p < . 01, ** p <

. 001.