CELL PHONE COMMUNICATION THROUGHOUT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Introduction

It is interesting to think about how romantic relationships have changed over the past few decades due to advances in communication devices, such as cell phones. It could be argued that technology has played a huge role in changing relationships. It is now much easier to contact a significant other by using a cell phone in comparison to thirty years ago when a landline phone or written letter was used. Because of how easy it is to communicate today, it is important to consider how technology has changed how modern romantic relationships work. The purpose of this study is to discover how the use of cell phones by individuals in romantic relationships changes during the different stages of their relationship.

Cell Phone Usage

General Information

Cell phones are used by people all around the world. According to the International Telecommunications Union, nearly 6 billion people world-wide use cell phones (“Mobile Global Statistics”, 2012). The use of cell phone technologies have been incorporated into most people’s everyday lives. Cell phones are taking the place of the standard landline phone and are used by
students and professionals alike. With new technology being invented every day, cell phones will only become easier to use and access. And because couples use phones to stay connected with each other throughout the day, it is fair to say that phones can have a large impact on relationships (‘Married Couples’, n.d.).

**Communication Phenomenon**

This study will focus on the use of cell phones, both talking and text messaging in romantic relationships. My research is grounded on why and how people use this communication medium, the outcomes of these uses, and how the uses of this medium correlate with the likeliness they are uncertain about their relationships. Because so many people use cell phones to communicate, it is important to understand why people use this form of communication and what using it causes, specifically in romantic relationships. People use this form of communication differently based on their meaning of their romantic relationship, which changes throughout the relationship.

Klein (2012) states that cell phones provide people a way of communicating easily, multitasking, and documenting conversations through the use of text messaging. This is important especially when considering how many people today are constantly on the move. Text messaging can also be an acceptable form of communication when talking on the phone is not an option, even when the topic is of importance (Klein, 2012).

According to Knapp (Knapp & Daly, 2013), there are 10 different stages in a relationship that include initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding. Focusing on the experimentation stage of the relationship, when people are beginning to get to know each other and seek out general information about each other, through the bonding stage, in which they
recognize themselves as an established couple, and onward until marriage, people will use their cell phones to communicate differently depending on where they see their relationship. To find out how this communication changes is the premise of my research.

**Theoretical Grounding**

**Relationship Uncertainty**

Through the different stages of a relationship, it is common for the people involved to feel different amounts of uncertainty about the relationship. This uncertainty can be reduced through communication. Berger (1986) states that relationship uncertainty is eliminated by communication in the relationship and there are eight axioms that explain what types of communication correlate with different levels of uncertainty. The different axioms are verbal communication, nonverbal communication, self-disclosure, information seeking, reciprocity, liking, similarity, and shared networks. I will be using the axiom of verbal communication and the axiom of self-disclose in my research.

The verbal communication axiom asserts that more verbal communication within a relationship decreases the level of relationship uncertainty (Berger, 1986). The self-disclosure axiom states the higher the level of uncertainty in a relationship, the less amount of intimacy is communicated and vice versa (Berger, 1986). Understanding why couples may feel uncertainty in their relationship may be a predictor as to why they use cell phones. The amount of uncertainty about the relationship generally changes as the relationship progresses through the different relationship stages.
Relational Dialectics

In a relationship, the partners involved will have different needs. Some of these needs may be conflicting. In the Relational Dialectics Theory, Griffin (2009, p.157) states there are certain contradictions in a relationship where each individual will have certain needs or wants that might go against the other person’s needs or wants. I will be concentrating on the need for both integration and separation in a relationship. While a couple need not be constantly communicating with each other, both partners will have a need for a certain amount of communication to be happy within the relationship. The use of cell phones provides individuals with a steady, easily readied means of keeping integrated while maintaining separation.

Supporting Research

The Reasons People Use Cell Phones

There are several different reasons how and why couples in romantic relationships use cell phones. How people see the use of cell phones with regard to their relationships is important. Miller-Ott, Kelly, & Duran (2012, p.27) conducted a survey among 277 people involved in romantic relationships to find how the use of cell phones impacted their relationship. Their findings indicated cell phones are an integral facet of communication within romantic relationships. On a 5-point scale with 1 being “not important” and 5 being “very important”, the average response was a 4.39. Also, there was positive correlation between the satisfaction of cell phone usage, meaning how well the person can use their cell phone, and satisfaction within the relationship, or happy the person was with the relationship. Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, & Grant (2011) studied couples involved in romantic relationships by means of a survey. They concluded
75% of the time, cell phones were used to communicate affection between partners (p. 156). This can directly relate back to Berger’s Relationship Uncertainty Theory.

The use of text messaging is a form of communication people can use via their cell phones. Drouin and Landgraff (2011) found that of the 744 college students surveyed, all which had been in a committed romantic relationship, 98% had reported using text messaging to contact their partners (p. 466). Pettigrew (2009) conducted research to show how people in close interpersonal relationships regard text messaging. It was found that couples involved in romantic relationships used text messaging when it might not be appropriate or convenient to conduct verbal conversations so they could alert the other about what they were doing. (p.708). Others found that text messaging enhanced their relationships by allowing them to communicate little phrases of affection and to stay easily connected throughout the day (p. 710). Pettigrew stated that “several romantically involved participants explained that just receiving short notes throughout the day was sufficient to maintain and enhance their relationship” (2009, p. 710). This is statistical evidence that communicating through text messaging is prevalent in many romantic relationships and is supported by the Relational Dialectics Theory.

Overall, cell phones play a major role in communication between romantically involved partners. Though there are several different reasons people use this technology to communicate, there is much evidence that supports the use of cell phones in romantic relationships.

**Feelings Created by Cell Phone Use**

The different uses of cell phones can create different emotional feelings in a relationship. More voice call time and the more frequent voice calls were made using cell phones was positively associated with feelings of love and commitment to the relationship (Jin & Pina,
2010). Jin and Pina also found that voice calls indicated a higher level of love and commitment than text messaging. Couples who use cell phones often create a stronger sense of togetherness, awareness, and support between one another. Finally, Jin & Pina (2012) found that text messaging did not have a positive correlation to relationship length, meaning the longer the relationship the less they used text messages to communicate.

Rules romantic couples established concerning how they use cell phones to communicate had a strong effect on their relationships. Partners were more happy within their relationships if there were no rules keeping them from communicating whenever they liked, but if there were rules about not arguing over the phone or not discussing important issues by using their cell phones, partners were more happy within their relationships (Miller-Ott, Kelly, & Duran, 2012). Also, Miller-Ott, Kelly, & Duran (2012) found the more satisfied a person was using their cell phone to communicate within a romantic relationship, the more satisfaction they gained from their relationship.

The studies show a positive correlation between cell phone usage and positive feelings in a relationship, meaning that the more use of cell phones, the more positive the feelings felt in the relationship. It was also found that rules about cell phone usage could also be beneficial to relationships.

**Relationship Uncertainty**

The use of cell phones by couples in a romantic relationship can reduce uncertainty they may have about the relationship. Jin & Pina (2010) focused much of their research on relationship uncertainty. In their studies, they found the more voice call time and frequency used in a relationship, the less the partners felt uncertain about their relationship (p. 45). By contrast,
this means partners felt strong, positive emotions and commitment when there was more frequent and longer phone call conversations. This is very beneficial to my research because it also directly deals with the Relational Uncertainty Theory.

There has been much research conducted as to why people use cell phones to communicate with their partners. There has also been much research explaining what outcomes this communication has on the relationship and how it can reduce relationship uncertainty. However, there is not much research that explains this data in terms of relationship length. My research will examine how this communication differs depending on the amount of time that the relationship partners have been involved. It will determine whether or not these trends stay the same throughout the relationship or change based on the stage in the relationship the partners are in.

Methodology

The amount and type of communication changes throughout any type of relationship. In romantic relationships, the needs of the partners are different during the initial stages of the relationships and the needs of the partners after the relationships have been well-established. Uncertainty about relationships and the need to maintain both integration and separation during relationships is how I am explaining these changes in communication. To further research about how the use of cell phones in romantic relationships may change throughout the different stages of relationships, I will use a quantitative approach. By using this type of approach, I will be provided with numerical statistics that will be easy to analyze. The following are my hypotheses for my research:
**H1: As couples progress through the stages of a relationship, they will use cell phones to talk more to their partner, especially to affirm their relationship.**

I hope to find how people using cell phones to talk to their partners differs from when the relationship starts through the different stages of a relationship. This will provide me with data concerning talking on cell phones rather than text messaging.

**H2: As couples progress through the stages of a relationship, they will use text messaging through cell phones more to affirm their relationship.**

I hope to find how people using cell phones to text message their partners differs from when the relationship starts through the different stages of a relationship. This will provide me with data concerning text messaging using cell phones rather than talking on cell phones.

**Participants**

The target for my research will be students, faculty, and staff at Longwood University. To qualify for the survey, participants must at least be in the initial stages of a romantic relationship or must have been in a romantic relationship at some point. I have selected this demographic because there are many students, faculty, and staff living in my community and they are more likely to participate in a research than other community members.

**Procedure**

My research will consist of a survey distributed to my target audience. A survey is literate, which can be digital, distributed to a target audience in hopes of obtaining information (Keyton, p.161, 2010). By answering the questions proposed, the participants will give statistical
information that will be easily analyzed and comparable. The website Surveymonkey.com automatically converts completed surveys to statistical data, which will be very helpful during my research.

To analyze my survey, I will be using correlation, which identifies a relationship associated with two different variables (Keyton, p.223, 2010). The two variables I will be testing for each hypothesis are the stage of the relationship and what is being communicated using cell phones (either talking or through text messaging). This is the best fit test because it will identify a relationship between the length or stage of relationship and how the individuals used cell phones during that particular time.

**Conclusion**

The use of cell phones in romantic relationships has been studied by many researchers for a number of reasons. However, there has not been much research as to how communication using cell phones changes throughout the relationship. How couples first start using cell phones to communicate during the initial stages of their relationship will no doubt be different from how married couples use cell phones to communicate. By the end of my research, I hope to identify certain trends that occur in romantic relationship communication and how the people involved use cell phones to communicate.
References


