Mobile Applications in College-Aged Romantic Relationships

Introduction

With the growth of technology and new forms of electronic communication appearing every day, one cannot deny the part they undoubtedly play in our interpersonal relationships. Mobile applications (or “apps”) are among the newest form of computer-mediated communication (or “CMC”). Mobile applications are specific software technology created for use on mobile devices with access to internet connection such as tablet computers and smartphones. Mobile apps can be used to play games, share pictures, and further communicate with others. The communication phenomenon we have noted in our observation of smartphone usage is that of the tendency to depend on mobile applications to build and maintain one’s romantic relationships and affairs. Computer-mediated communication among college-aged individuals has become a large phenomenon in our society today, with mobile applications contributing to this new way of conversing with others. According to a recent report, by the time the class of 2016 graduates, close to 90 percent of college students will own a smartphone (“College students adopt,” 2012). Given this, mobile applications downloaded have reached a skyrocketing 30 billion in the last year (“The best things,” 2012).

There has been an abundance of research on how texting and social networking sites, such as Facebook, have shaped intimate relationships but very few studies examine how the use of mobile applications affect romantic endeavors. Therefore, the purpose of this study will be to explain how college-aged individuals grow and maintain their romantic relationships via mobile applications. It is necessary to study college-aged individuals because this is the first generation
who is coming of age using mobile applications while entering a stage in life when many are
dating more seriously (N.T. Johnson, personal communication, November 2013). Through this
research we hope to enable others to make proper interpretations of the messages they receive
during romantic endeavors, become proficient communicators, and further understand the
messages they are sending as well. This research will focus on how college-aged individuals are
using mobile applications designed for interpersonal interaction to shape romantic affairs.
Relational dialectic theory, a look at recent literature, and qualitative methodology will help
explain users’ perceptions on how they believe these applications affect their romantic lives.

Background
Maintaining romantic relationships in today’s society has dramatically changed in the
past few decades. Due to technological advancements couples can now communicate with one
another in many ways rather than solely conversing face-to-face. This includes multiple
channels of computer-mediated communication (CMC) through a variety of technology available
today (for example: texting, social media sites, and email). Among the most popular are text
messaging and the social-networking site, Facebook. While the growth of “technology allows us
to be constantly connected to the world…it can also make us even more disconnected from each
other” (Kerner, 2013) in face-to-face (Ftf) situations. For example: the distracting nature of
texting an outside party during a first date (i.e. going out to dinner) may take away from the
intimate conversations one could share with their partner, thus stunting the growth of the
relationship. This communication phenomenon is important to study because “not since the dawn
of the automobile has a technology- the cell phone- so swiftly and radically changed the way
people interact, meet and move forward (or not) in a relationship” (Jayson, 2013). This
statement encompasses all that cell phones have to offer in regards to how we communicate with
one another; it is no longer simply making phone calls and sending text messages. Mobile applications that connect people are being utilized more and more to share daily moments with each other, which may ultimately help shape the relationship. Rather than compromising closeness in these romantic affairs, MacMillan (2012) addressed that the growing popularity of Smartphone applications allow couples to interact on a personal and intimate level. But some argue that CMC is a less valuable form of communication. Kluger (2012) cites research from psychologist Sherry Turkle, who discusses the emotional experiences that people don’t experience through text messaging; for example: the sympathy one might feel during a face-to-face apology. These conflicting beliefs on the benefits (or lack thereof) of computer-mediated communication in intimate relationships make it even more crucial that research is conducted on the role mobile applications take in romantic relationships. The mobile applications we are most interested in including in this study are those specifically designed for interpersonal communication and interaction, rather than those designed for self-entertainment or gaming. For example: Snapchat is a mobile application that allows an individual to send/share a picture or video with others for an allotted amount of time (1-10 seconds) before the image disappears permanently. The app is designed specifically for sharing and connecting with others, whereas a gaming application, such as Angry Birds, is designed for self-entertainment only. It is fundamental for romantic couples to understand how messages within computer-mediated communication are interpreted and perceived between the two, as this may ultimately define the strength of the relationship and clarify any relational conflicts.

**Theoretical grounding**

In Em Griffin’s *A First Look at Communication Theory* (2009), Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery explain Relational Dialectics. Baxter and Montgomery define Relational
Dialectics as, “A dynamic knot of contradictions in personal relationships; an unceasing interplay between contrary or opposing tendencies” (p. 155), meaning that without realizing it, individuals within interpersonal relationships struggle to find a balance between the needs and desires in their lives. These needs and desires (or dialectics/tensions) play a role both within individual relationships (between two individuals) and in relationships with the community around them (p. 157). For example: the need for uniqueness vs. the need for conformity; arguably, everyone needs companionship in their lives, however we must not sacrifice our individual needs, thoughts, or feelings just to be a part of a group; a balance must be struck between the two tensions. Another example is the need for openness within a relationship vs. the need for privacy within a relationship; it is important to reach a level of openness between partners, because that builds trust within the relationship; however, an individual is still entitled to keep some private thoughts and actions to themselves. Within interpersonal relationships, each partner has a need for both dialectics in order to sustain a healthy relationship.

Relational Dialectics is very applicable to our research topic because it lays out general needs and desires that individuals have about their interpersonal relationships. This will help us examine levels of happiness or dissatisfaction as a result of communication via Smartphone applications within college-age, romantic endeavors.

Baxter and Montgomery (2009) outline key concepts that make up Relational Dialectics, those dialectics being Integration vs. Separation, Stability vs. Change, and Expression vs. Nonexpression. However, for the purpose of our study, we will only be focusing on two of these dialectics. Integration and separation are described as the dialectics that challenge people in their needs or desires for autonomy and connectedness (p. 157). For example, an individual in a romantic relationship may expect their partner to respond to a text message within a few minutes,
in order to feel connected to that person. However, that same partner may feel a need for autonomy from their partner while spending time with a group of friends, and therefore not expect any form of text conversation at all. The second dialectic we will be using is expression vs. nonexpression, the dialectic that challenges individuals in their needs or desires for openness and privacy (p. 160). For example, a person may want to keep some information on their Tinder account (a Smartphone dating application) private, such as their past romantics relationships, because they feel it may affect their ability to build new romantic relationships. At the same time, they may be very open about their interests and talents in order to make connections with people.

A Review of Recent, Relevant, Research

There has already been an abundance of research provided on the effects of popular CMC on romantic relationships. Research on that topic mainly includes the social networking site Facebook and text messaging with cell phones. The research below gives insight as to how already published research on today’s popular CMC may be just as relatable to mobile application usage and how it affects and shapes romantic relationships. This section will be explained by three primary areas of research in order to better understand our communication phenomenon: “the good,” “the bad,” and differences in relationships with CMC use.

“The Good”

Computer-mediated communication may not always be the preferred form of communication, especially for meeting potential romantic partners, but it has revolutionized the way people connect and has shown several rewarding aspects for those who turn to it for romance. Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson, and Grant (2011) conducted a survey to assess how CMC helps or hinders romantic relationships. They reported that as computer-mediated
communication is becoming more popular, it has begun harboring rewards in intimate relationships (such as, feeling more connected to one’s partner because of having a quick way to stay connected) the same way other forms of communication do (i.e. Face-to-Face communication, phone calls, nonverbal cues, etc.). Along with this, a survey conducted by Houser, Fleuriet, and Estrada (2012) evaluated data on how couples sustain their different relationships via different channels of CMC, and concluded that traditional strategies used to maintain relationships, such as open communication and reliability, have remained constant even through technological advances.

Similar to the traditional maintenance strategies for relationships, Anderson and Emmers-Sommer (2006) found that similar characteristics valued in romantic face-to-face relationships were also present and valued in romantic relationships that were developed and maintained solely online, the top three being closeness, reliability (trust), and satisfaction of communication. Partners who communicated online for a lengthier period of time throughout the week felt more satisfaction with their communication, thus building trust within the relationship.

CMC has also shown to beneficially affect the younger population. By issuing a questionnaire, Blais, Connolly, Craig, and Pepler (2008) were able to report that instant messaging for adolescents, helps teens build close relationships. Blais, et al. found that the use of instant messaging in adolescents had beneficial effects when using it to communicate with peers, such as enhancing the value of the romantic relationships and best friendships. In this way, teens are given an experimental ground for communicating with peers, as they are able to edit and read over their text before sending them.
Computer-mediated communication within romantic relationships enabled people to find fulfillment with their partners in their communication levels, intimacy levels, and trustworthiness, the same as face-to-face relationships (if not more so).

The research explained in this section exemplifies how face-to-face communication is no longer the only way to form meaningful intimate relationships. Many forms of CMC are being experimented with today in regards to building any interpersonal relationship, it is inevitable that mobile applications may be included within the pool of CMC, creating a harmonious atmosphere for romance as well.

“The Bad”

While Coyne et al. (2011) found that as CMC is becoming more popular and harboring rewards, it also creates consequences (such as, creating unnecessary conflict over text message response time). For instance, researchers Duran, Kelly, and Rotaru (2011) found that cell phones used in college-age romantic relationships caused more conflict and a need for availability between partners. Their use of questionnaires revealed that significant others came to expect each other to be available via cell phone almost constantly, leading to more strain on the independence and dependence levels for each person, and causing conflict. They also found increased levels of jealousy were reported in these relationships, when one partner would contact a member of the opposite sex via cell phone.

In regards to ending the romantic relationship, Starks (2007) found through interviews that couples who experienced a break-up online typically did so via email, a one-way form of relationship termination. This is a new way to terminate relationships, which changes the nature of a break-up all together; the individual initiating the relationship termination no longer gives
the other partner the opportunity to express their grief or emotions at the moment of the break-up, making the break-up seem more callous and perhaps ruining the chance for closure.

Overall, Starks (2007) found that her research participants agreed that breaking up via the internet was very blunt, harsh, and direct compared to face-to-face break ups. Interviewees agreed that breaking up with a partner via the internet is highly inappropriate; they believe that such a personal experience should be shared in person.

As for harmful effects of CMC in adolescents, Blais et al. (2008) found that using internet while talking to unfamiliar people in chat rooms, for gaming purposes, and for general amusement lowered the potential for the close relationship found in best friendships and romantic encounters. Rather than taking the time to build meaningful relationships in person, using the web for general amusement distracts adolescents from the emotional value of a face-to-face conversation.

Through research, it is evident within this section that CMC use among adolescents, as well as the older age groups (such as college-age individuals and adults), not only poses benefits but also conflicts for relationship building and maintenance as well. It will therefore be useful to research how mobile applications may cause some conflicts in romantic affairs as a newer mode of CMC in our society today.

“Differences in Relationships”

Houser et al. (2012) found that each different type of relationship warranted different types of computer-mediated communication in order to maintain the relationship. For example, in a person’s relationship with their work supervisor, it may be expected and accepted that they only utilize email messaging, rather than text messaging or social media sites (outside of face-to-face communication).
Similarly, Coyne et al. (2011) found that age, relationship duration, and level of education had the most effect on the frequency of communication via CMC, and the number of different channels used with the relationship (i.e. texting, Facebook, smartphone applications, emails, etc.). For example, the older sample of individuals was noted as using text messaging frequently to communicate logistical information (i.e. dates, times, locations, etc.). However, usage and frequency did vary between men and women. For example, women tended to use CMC more often than men, no matter the relationship involved. And across all ages, there were very few individuals who used some form of CMC to approach confrontational conversations with people.

**Research Gap**

Researchers have examined the positive and negative effects of text messaging and social media sites (specifically Facebook) within virtually every type of interpersonal relationship (Coyne et al., 2011). There is very little research however, on mobile applications in this respect.

This research will expand on the work of Anderson and Emmers-Sommer (2006), Blais, Connolly, Craig, and Pepler (2008), Busby, Coyne, Grant, Iverson and Stockdale (2011), Duran, Kelly, and Rotaru (2011), Houser, Fleuriet, and Estrada (2012) and Starks (2007) by examining how college-age individuals grow and maintain their romantic relationships and intimate endeavors via mobile applications. Communicating via mobile applications has received very little attention thus far, since text messaging and social media/networking sites are still very popular forms of communication. However, we cannot deny the fact that these applications (or “apps”) are becoming legitimate forms of communication in many interpersonal relationships, and may heavily influence the success or failure of college-age romantic relationships.
Methodology

We plan to use a qualitative approach for collecting information about our topic. Right now we are most interested in leading focus groups. We feel that a qualitative research method, such as a focus group, would allow us to better interpret our findings. We plan to use expressive language when explaining our findings to help others better understand the communication phenomenon and meanings behind it. We are most interested in obtaining information about the expectations and unspoken “rules” that take place within different forms of electronic communication (i.e. text messaging or Facebook messaging), and how these rules and expectations transfer into communication via mobile applications. A qualitative research method, such as a focus group, will allow us to better interpret and define the expectations people develop for their romantic partners in their use of mobile apps. For example: Several different responses to a posed question within a focus group may ultimately elude to the same expectation individuals have for their romantic partners; however, all the different responses would allow us to interpret the exact expectation and severity of that expectation across our demographic.

Research Questions

RQ1: How does the use of mobile applications stimulate the need for independence and connectedness in romantic relationships in college-aged individuals?

Through research, we found that there are inherent contradictions in every romantic relationship (i.e. independence vs. connectedness). This question will identify how the use of these apps helps build the relationship and foster a better sense of connection between romantic partners.

RQ2: To what extent do mobile applications affect the need for openness and privacy in romantic relationships?
Due to the nature of interactive mobile apps this question can help identify how privacy is developed between partners. For example: a person may want to keep some information on their Tinder profile (a smartphone dating application) private, such as their past romantic relationships, because they feel it may affect their ability to build new romantic relationships. This research question can also help identify how mobile apps fuel openness in people’s lives outside of their romantic relationships.

**Participants**

We plan to examine college-aged individuals (18-22 year olds) who own and actively use mobile applications specifically designed for sharing and connecting with others. We consider active users to be individuals who use their mobile apps at least seven times a week. We will specifically be examining individuals who use or have used their mobile apps to connect or communicate with a romantic partner, and how these interactions affect the relationship involved. We will be reaching out to the Longwood community in order to attain individuals for our focus groups. We will create Facebook events that explain our research, and invite all those interested to participate. We will also be requesting that our fellow Communication Studies majors (particularly COMM 200 students) to participate as well. The goal will be to publicize our focus groups extremely well, attracting a wide variety of people from all over campus (men and women of all races, genders, backgrounds, sexual orientations, etc.).

We feel it is important to study this particular group of people because this is the first generation who is coming of age using mobile applications, while entering a stage in life when many are dating more seriously (N.T. Johnson, personal communication, November 2013). Keeping this in mind, we feel that our research could help them better
understand proper forms of interpersonal communication via mobile app, thus helping them build stronger bonds with their romantic partner(s). Furthermore, we feel that these individuals are some of the more dominant mobile app users, and would yield a wide variety of data for us to examine.

Procedure

For the purpose of our study, we have decided to conduct the qualitative method of focus groups which are, “facilitator-led group discussion[s] used for collecting data from a group of participants about a particular topic in a limited amount of time” (Keyton, 2011). We find that this is the most appropriate method because we can gain a fuller understanding of our participant’s perspective on the communication events while using mobile applications in their romantic relationships (N. T. Johnson, personal communication, October 8, 2013). Since it would be impossible to track our participant’s daily interactions with mobile applications, focus groups will provide the opportunity to ask specific questions that will help us understand how college-aged individuals use mobile applications in their romantic affairs. We will be focusing primarily on how mobile applications affect the need for openness and privacy in romantic relationships, and how the use of mobile applications stimulate the need for independence and connectedness in romantic relationships in college-aged individuals. Within our focus groups we hope to collect multiple perspectives which will help us come to some general conclusions about our research gap: how college-aged individuals use their mobile apps to develop and maintain their romantic relationships. We plan to take turns with who will be interviewing the participants in the focus group, and who will type the responses on a
laptop. To ensure we collect all spoken responses, we also plan to use a recording device within each focus group.

As we mentioned before, we feel that a focus group would allow us to gain a fuller understanding of our research phenomenon, by inviting a wide variety of answers and responses to our questions. Open-ended questions, for example, give anyone in the room the ability to use expressive language in order communicate their thoughts. In turn, we look forward to analyzing these thoughts, and coming up with expressive conclusions and answers of our own, rather than just reporting numerical data or statistics.

Conclusion

As our society grows ever more invested in advancing technology, our forms of communication are also becoming more invested in new technological advancements. It is inevitable that people use communication in order to create relationships in their lives, and we are now seeing that people value the ability to communicate with one another in more immediate ways, whether that be by texting, instant messaging, or by mobile application. It is therefore important to understand the ways in which people establish, grow, maintain, and terminate their interpersonal relationships via forms of computer-mediated communication. As there is very little research on how people are using mobile applications within their romantic relationships, we plan to research this phenomenon by applying a qualitative approach with using focus groups. By conducting focus groups, we hope to make some general conclusions as to how mobile applications affect the need for independence and connectedness, as well as the needs for openness and privacy within these romantic affairs amongst college-age individuals. We hope that our research will help college-aged individuals understand how mobile applications play a part in their romantic relationships, as they are at an age in which they are dating more seriously, and their
communication via mobile application may ultimately affect the sustainability of the relationship.
References


Appendix A
Focus Group Questions

1. How valuable do you consider your communication via mobile applications to be in your romantic relationships?

This question will allow us to understand the level of importance people place on communication via mobile application, or the different forms of communication they value over mobile app.

2. How often do you need to hear from your romantic partner via mobile applications in order to feel like you are building/have built a strong relationship?

This question allows us to assess the necessity (or lack thereof) for communication via mobile app in order to feel connected to one’s romantic partner.

3. How quickly do you expect your romantic partner to respond to a message you send via mobile application?

This question allows us to examine the Relational Dialectic of connectedness vs. autonomy; we will be able to assess the need for connectedness within a romantic relationship based on how quickly a person expects their partner to respond via mobile app.

4. Are there expectations in regards to how your romantic partner uses their mobile applications with other individuals who they could be attracted to?

This question allows us to analyze whether or not there are inherent “rules” in regards to being romantically exclusive with someone. Based on participant responses, hidden prospects may be revealed on how they expect their romantic partner to use their mobile apps with other individuals.
5. What are some indicators that a person might be romantically interested in you, when it comes to their communication via mobile applications?

This question allows us to assess some of the common ideas about modern day courting, and what separates a friendly conversation from an attempt at a romantic affair.

6. How often do you see your romantic partner in person, and how does that affect the frequency of communication via mobile app with that person?

This question allows us to assess the differences in romantic relationships, and necessity for communication via mobile app in each relationship.