

Social Information Processing Theory and Mobile Communication:

Romantic Relationships

Introduction

Social Information Processing Theory analyzes the importance of the rate of information transfer not the outlet of communication, stating that if the exchange of computer mediated communication is done at a proper consistency that relationships can be developed equal to if not greater than face-to-face communication enables. The theory also suggest CMC relationships develop slowly over time relying on two factors; relational potency and the user's ability, or, the content, style, and timing of the online messages that in turn effect construction and later, interpretation of messages. SIP theory recognizes that although the exchange and relational development is slower, how you respond and at what speed determines the effectiveness of the messages in developing a relationship. This timing is called chronemic cues. The interpersonal agents of CMC is attributed to the creativity and dedication of the user, but unfortunately does not take in account the motivation of the users even though often determined on it due to the idea that CMC is effective in a slow and gradual process when developing relationships as legitimate and successful as face to face communication.

This theory can easily be applied to the effects mobile communication has on romantic relationships being that in this day and age most romantic relationships are upheld by consistent use of technology, often controlling the levels of communication partners share and how each individual within the relationship reacts/responds to mobile communication, rate of mobile communication, and the dialectics of their messages. This research article will summarize two articles that were able to tie together Social Information Processing theory and romantic

relationships via mobile communication. After the literary review, a question will be posed in determining whether there was a conclusion made on the effects of mobile communication on romantic relationships. The summarization and application of SIP theory is done through two articles/studies: “Mobile Communication in Romantic Relationships: Mobile Phone Use, Relational Uncertainty, Love Commitment, and Attachment Style” (describing mobile communications direct effect on relationships through consistency/use) by Borae Jin and Jorge F. Pena and, “The Dialectics of Mobile Communication in South African Romantic Relationships” (a study done on South African high school students overviewing usage of mobile communication and privacy management) by Mthobeli Ngcongco. Hopefully, by the end of this overview and topic discussion there will be an answer to the research question at hand.

Literary Review

The first topic in describing the connection between SIP theory and mobile communication within romantic relationships is the idea that technology has become not only, seemingly, necessary but often excessive. Within relationships, always having a phone on you to use in communicating with your partner, the ability to always be able to have a consistent flow of messages would be considered very productive and positive within SIP theory but through the articles/studies it is often shown that this excessive use may not be for the right reason, possibly alluding to the limitation of SIP, which is “motivation.” What motivates mobile phone users to communicate with their partners? How are they going about it? How often is it taking place to stimulate an actual successful relationship? The topic of motivation/creativity will be discussed later but for now we will analyze excessiveness and the wrong side of this behavior. “There is evidence that 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,” (Jin; 2010). This

quote is basically the exact definition of SIP theory but is equally refuted by the idea that; “In romantic relationships, mobiles may be used inappropriately to ‘keep tabs’ on partners,” (Ngcongong;2016). The article then labels this behavior as “lateral surveillance, or peer-to-peer monitoring.” These two quotes are so conflicting and problematic because it goes to show that yes a romantic relationship can be made stronger through CMC but the excessive nature, including the normally positive chronemic cues, constant interaction, can be detrimental to the relationship. Also mentioned in the Jin article was the idea that the quantity of face-to-face and phone interactions significantly affect the feelings of intimacy between romantic partners. A major part of SIP theory is the idea that the effort put into CMC reflects the quality of the relationship, but if the quality of the messages are misdirected and the quantity becomes over-bearing, the theory cannot be applicable. These quotes also display an aspect of SIP theory called warranting or the perceived validity of the shared information, obtaining and analyzing the information given to you by your CMC partner. “Contention that the everyday talk of relational partners serves to form connectedness between them. In particular, the meaning of the relationship is created through everyday interactions irrespective of the content of talk.” (Jin; 2010) This goes to show that connection is developed through everyday interactions despite the content of conversation, supporting SIP theory.

The next topic of discussion is the relationship between the rules of SIP theory and the rules guiding mobile communication within romantic relationships. There were two terms from both articles describing the rules guiding mobile communication and why they are so often applied: “connected mode” which is a communication pattern represented by short and frequent calls and text-messages that reaffirm the feelings of connectedness between communicators (Jin; 2010), and “perpetual contact” or the idea that the phone should always be switched on, making boundaries

often blurry (Ngcongo; 2016). It is possible when negotiating rules for mobile phone use, romantic partners can effectively negotiate the management of their privacy issues. (Ngcongo; 2016) This idea of negotiating your terms of issues in order to appease your partner creates agency in how technologies are used in shaping their relationships which directly relates to the aspect of SIP theory called the “relationship stage.” The relationship stage is determinative in how individuals communicate with each other; if they are comfortable enough to come to a set of rules for successful CMC then they will be able to uphold a strong connection through CMC based off of the stage their relationship is in. “Not only do romantic partners engage in checking each other’s phone logs and text messages, but they also have rules to help them know who is calling or where their partner is.” (Ngcongo;2016) This would normally, within most other communication theories, be considered an invasion of privacy but this dedication to furthering a CMC relationship is heading in the right relationship stage within SIP theory. The last thing found in the readings connecting the rules of SIP theory to the rules of mobile communication within a relationship is; how the partners are as individuals is determinative to how they will be within their mobile communication. People with anxiety issues, who do not have high levels of self-certainty are expected to be less likely to use mobile phones with their romantic partners in comparison to less avoidant and anxious people, they don’t feel the desire to have supportive communication with their partners. (Jin; 2010) This describes the part of SIP theory called “anticipated future interaction.” People who have issues with self-disclosure maybe less likely to anticipate a future interaction with their CMC partner and therefore not developing a strong CMC connection. The people with higher levels of self-certainty may be more likely to look forward to seeing their partner face-to-face, therefor sharing positive chronemic cues-prompt responses, and send optimistic tones.

The last findings from within this literary review analyzes the idea that mobile devices are a consistency within all romantic relationships yet social information processing theory can only be applicable based off of the individuals motivation and creativity. Besides these findings, there will be a summarization of the results of both studies in order to make a solid connection between SIP, mobile communication, and romantic relationships. To understand this phenomenon you have to dissect chronemic ques a bit more. Chronemic ques is the handling of time within CMC. If you choose not to respond to your romantic partner, according to SIP, your chronemic que is negative towards building a successful CMC relationship. In these studies two things were found in relation to consistency of mobile usage versus motivation/creativity; different perspectives and expectations of each other and of the relationship (Ngcongong;2016), and the fact that people in romantic relationships use mobile phones more frequently than those whom are not due to the idea that frequent interactions are crucial for romantic partners to experience connectedness and interdependence (Jin;2010). If the individuals have different perspectives of the relationship they are less likely to be in the same relationship stage, they would be looking for different things to warrant their relationship, and it may determine if they have a prompt or a delayed response, all in which relate directly to their chronemic ques. The idea is; no matter what, especially in this generation of romantic relationships, a mobile phone will be involved, it's practically inescapable but how they approach this usage determines their CMC. If they want to build a stronger connection then they will come up with creative ways to communicate through CMC but if they have no anticipated future interaction, if they are not motivated, or cannot be creative (seem interested), then progression will not happen and SIP theory will not apply. To summarize these ideas is this quote: "Consistent strain to manage competing needs for connection and autonomy as well as a struggle to define appropriate boundaries between public and private." (Mgcongong;2016)

Young couples use mobile communication to stay connected and feel intimacy while not being face-to-face but the desire for independence and privacy can have a negative impact on this desire for connection.

Despite all of the conflicting findings on mobile communications effect on relationships the results of both studies were almost exactly the same. The students within Ngcongos study ultimately showed that they want to work hand in hand with their partners in order to establish implicit decisions on shared mobile usage, to come to an agreement on rules and motivation, while the Jin study proved that there is a direct correlation between CMC and the strength of relationships in all aspects! The bonds are growing stronger between couples because of mobile communication even after discovering that it could often cause issues with privacy management and uncertainty reduction. The only limitation in both studies seemed to be “synchronous vs. asynchronous” communication, showing that phone call CMC was more effective in creating bonds and establishing privacy, unfortunately this refutes SIP theory which stats that you do not need a consistent flow of conversation (sipping water, not gulping) and you do not need verbal ques to develop a strong relationship.

Research Question

The question looking to be addressed throughout the literary study was: “Does mobile communication have a negative or positive effect on romantic relationships among young couples?” This question maybe exceedingly specific but was described greatly throughout the research. Within all of the descriptions of different aspects of SIP theory there were a lot of refuting answers to this question; invasions of privacy, lack of autonomy development, yet strong connectedness and intimacy, anxieties versus openness, and behavioral patterns whether negative or positive. Ultimately though the results of the literary studies both proved that mobile

communication is positive towards romantic relationships among young couples due to the findings that often couples work together to make mobile communication customized to suit their needs within the relationship if they really both have the desire to make the relationship last. It showed that CMC in relationships reduces uncertainty, establishes a sense of commitment, and directs the individual's attachment styles, all of which are positive results. The intimacy established through mobile communications seemed to be shown throughout both studies even when it came to things such as snooping, distrust, and privacy issues, because the individuals seemed to only engage in these things if they were extremely concerned with their partner.

If the question at hand was so obviously answered in the end what can be asked to further the research? Well, social information processing theory is extremely prevalent in our society especially when it comes to any sort of relationship development through mobile communication. It seems that many opinions are coming from all sides of scientific, political, and societal spectrum: Is too much mobile communication damaging our youth and how they form relationships? Clearly, with these findings, the answer is no, it is actually helping, proving the SIP theory is genuine if managed correctly, but with that, this is only two sets of academic research and there is obviously many more studies out there that can prove differently. That is important to understand because the discussion of mobile communication and relationships is so popular and prominent in our society right now because of the prominence of mobile communication itself; it is everywhere and with everyone. With that, a question that would aid in academia and further research would be: If one was to reject mobile communication, against societal norms, for a year, what would happen to their romantic relationship? Would it even be possible to uphold a romantic relationship without mobile communication? And would this now prove that synchronous, fast, and face-to-face communication to be almost obsolete? These seem to be the questions that underlie all the

commotion over the effects of mobile communication on relationships and if a researcher/scientist was able to come up with a study capable of proving/disproving those three questions then there would practically need to be no more research on the subject. Actually, if all three of those questions were answered that could possibly establish SIP theory as the legitimate, main theory of CMC or eliminate it all together!

Discussion

This section was supposed to be about connecting the literature review to the social phenomenon and real life examples. Being that the social phenomenon was already completely dissected and connected through the literature review, I will discuss what else SIP theory and mobile communication can be applied to very briefly. Without having to delve into any studies, I personally am aware of the SIP theories application to romantic relationships through mobile communication. For example, the rate of the messages between I and significant other is very determinative in how much I feel connected to him at that point in time. He does not need to come see me, he does not need to say anything in specific, and he definitely does not need to show me any kind of verbal/physical ques, but if his chronemic ques are positive and his messages are creative, I feel as though he cares about the conversation and our bond is growing stronger. When he shows a sense of privacy invasion I feel more of a sense of intimacy because he is caring about my mobile communication usages and with this we establish a set of rules which also grows us closer. On a day when I feel as though he does not want to respond to me, I feel our connection is lowered; delayed responses, no anticipated future interaction, and the relationship may be harmed. It was interesting to see that both studies proved what I already knew about SIP theory and mobile communication, but I also had lot of theories where I originally thought I would find that mobile communication, because of its over-bearing and excessive consistency in our lives, ultimately

hurts or even aids in the down fall of relationships, but if you anticipate a future, you have already warranted the relationship, mobile communication actually aids in strengthening the romantic relationship.

Conclusion

It was very pleasing to see that the initial questions that needed to be answered through research about mobile communications effect on young, romantic relationships, and its theoretical components relating to social information processing theory, were able to be answered. All of the information found was able to tie into real life situations, and I feel as though things were actually proven through this set of research and this article. To conclude this research article it is important to understand the vast majorities of different computer mediated communication theories that can just as easily be applied to mobile communication and even its effect on relationships, as SIP theory, and that there are several perspectives to study this phenomenon through. I hope to analyze the study of all types of communications and theories interaction with romantic relationships considering that it is a topic that interests me. With that being said it was very exciting to see that most aspects of SIP theory, if not all, were shown through the two studies used alone. There were several examples of the use of chronemic ques, application of the term “anticipated future interactions”, prompt responses, delayed responses, warrants, filled with answers and proof of SIP theories involvement with mobile communication and romantic relationships. Most importantly, it proved that you do not need consistent ques, face-to-face ques to develop a relationship; that relationships develop in “sips not gulps,” that it all depends on your care for the content and the amount of time you put into you CMC relationship. When dealing with mobile communication, such a worldly-studied topic, it is liberating to find hard-evidential connection to actual theory, which I believe, was able to be done through this research. ***Word Count: 2916 words**

Works Cited

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