

Romance in the cloud: Interpersonal communication analysis on relationship stages of online dating

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ABSTRACT

Finding love in the digital age can be seen easier than ever. With a simple app, an individual and millions of others can come together and meet from everywhere. The researchers aim to analyze the relationship development in online dating matches through multiple interpersonal communication perspectives. It includes how an individual chooses their potential partner, their initial involvement, self-disclosure, and whether they decide to continue a serious relationship. The research methodology used is qualitative method with in depth interview, using Devito's Relationship Stages as the theoretical framework. The result shows that compared to traditional dating, online dating couples took extra security precautions in early contact. It is also found that the strength of social bonding, especially with close friends and family members, significantly influences the relationship. There are three main stages of relationships that are experienced in this research; (1) Contact, in line with the Uncertainty Reduction Theory and Communication Privacy Management, (2) Involvement that corresponds with the Social Exchange Theory, and (3) Intimacy, that aligns with Social Penetration Theory.

Keywords:

online dating; relationship development; devito relationship stages

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INTRODUCTION

The rise of the internet and shifts in societal dynamics have led to the emergence of online platforms as a way to support personal connections, including romantic relationships. Online dating has become increasingly popular among individuals of all age groups due to factors such as busy schedules, greater mobility, and declining traditional socializing methods (Ediati, 2020; Noorikhshan et al., 2023). In response to long work hours and

changing lifestyles, people are turning to chat rooms and professional dating services to seek out potential partners (Henry-Waring & Barraket, 2008; Stephure et al., 2009).

Despite extensive research on matchmaking facilitated by media, online dating services distinguish themselves from previous methods due to their broad accessibility, real-time interactions, and distinctive features, particularly in terms of communication and self-representation (Pidoux et al., 2021). These services typically employ various metrics, such as education, professional background, personal interests and hobbies, values, and life aspirations, to match users (Potarca, 2020). With varying subscription costs, individuals seeking romance are increasingly shifting from conventional approaches to the practically offered by online dating services (Bruch & Newman, 2018; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012).

Online dating has changed the process by which interpersonal relationships begin, develop, and end (Donn & Sherman, 2004; Sharabi & Caughlin, 2017; Whitty, 2010). Unlike any popular online platforms, online dating websites and applications frequently connect individuals who have no pre-existing relationship, which introduces a higher level of unfamiliarity (Harrison et al., 2023). The absence of physical context and non-verbal cues in online dating can intensify uncertainty and add complexity to the process of forming relationships (Klein, 2007).

The online dating industry experiences steady growth annually, as indicated by Smith (2018) data showing that 34% of Indonesians have utilized the internet and online dating apps for this purpose. Among millennials, the percentage increases to 36%, whereas among baby boomers, it decreases to 19%. Furthermore, nearly half of Indonesians (49%) are acquainted with at least one couple who met through online platforms.

Particularly since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, online dating apps have become increasingly popular as an alternative platform for socializing and seeking romantic partners. In 2021, the global number of users of online dating applications reached 323,9 million, indicating a 10,3% increase compared to the previous year's 293,7 million users. Notably, the majority of this growth occurred in applications such as Tinder, Bumble, and Hinge. During the second quarter of 2021 alone, Tinder boasted 9.6 million subscribers worldwide. The revenue generated by dating applications also witnessed a substantial surge, with a 46,85% increase from US\$3,82 billion in 2020 to US\$5,61 billion in 2021 (Rizaty, 2022). The consistent rise in dating app revenue can be attributed to the sustained growth of Tinder and Bumble, which have notably dominated the lucrative North American market, the most profitable region for dating apps globally (Rizaty, 2022).

Online dating platforms provide a place for users to forge romantic connections with individuals whom they may not have met previously. Consequently, the most significant challenge in engaging with others on these platforms lies in establishing trust, enabling effective and secure communication (Azzizah, 2020). Building this trust is crucial to ensure that users can communicate adequately and safely within the online dating environment.

Therefore, understanding the complete process of how individuals choose prospective partners, beginning the initial stages of a relationship, and gradually deepening their connection to a more serious level becomes essential. The writers express a keen interest in examining the dynamic of interpersonal communication within the context of developing relationships in online dating, taking into account the stages of partner selection, relationship initiation, and the progression towards a more committed level.

Building upon Devito's theory of Relationship Stages, this study aimed to investigate the dynamics of online dating. Devito outlines a six-stage model for relationships, including contact, involvement, intimacy, deterioration, repair, and dissolution (DeVito, 2016). However, this research will only focus on the initial three stages, as the main objective is to examine the progression towards commitment. The stages examined in this study are as

follows: **Contact**, individuals will make observations that include the senses as seeing, hearing, and smelling someone. **Engagement**, individuals will bind themselves to others to do self disclosure. **Intimacy**, the individual will tie himself further to the other people and produce close relationships such as friendship or romantic relationship.

METHOD

The method used in this research is descriptive qualitative which involves studying phenomena in their natural settings. Qualitative research emphasizes detailed descriptions and understanding, relying on data in the form of words or images rather than emphasizing numerical data. Descriptive is defined as a problem-solving procedure by describing the state of the object of research based on visible facts (Sugiyono, 2015). The study employed in-depth interviews as the primary method of data collection. The informants for this research consisted of a total 10 individuals, including 5 couples who had connected through online dating apps. The couples were selected from both those who are still in courtship and those who are married prior to the study. The data analysis technique utilized was the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which involves various stages such as data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions followed by verification (Sugiyono, 2015). The objective of this research is to offer an authentic depiction and provide a comprehensive and fact-based analysis in the domain of interpersonal communication within the context of developing online dating relationships.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Contact-Initial Assessment

The first phase of the six-stage relationship model is known as "Contact." It comprises two formal steps, namely perceptual contact and interactional contact. Perceptual contact involves using your senses-you see, hear, read a message from, view a photo or video, or perhaps smell the person (DeVito, 2016). Perceptual contact assists in forming a tangible image of an individual.

The majority of users swipe right on potential partners based on their attraction to the photos and persona presented in their profile. Both couples 1 and 4 were initially drawn to their partners due to the impression of being cool, pop culture enthusiasts (and vice versa). Couple 2 and 3 formed an impression of their partners as calm, polite, and financially stable individuals. Couple 5 shared a mutual attraction based on perceiving each other as mysterious personalities, which they found intriguing and viewed as an exciting challenge.

Following perceptual contact, the next phase is interactional contact. During this phase, individuals begin to interact and primarily engage in superficial communication. Both verbal and nonverbal behaviors are employed at this stage. It is the point where basic information is exchanged, laying the groundwork for any further profound involvement. Here, interaction is initiated, and invitational communication takes place.

During the interactional contact phase, the majority of couples took precautions to ensure their interactions remain secure. Some couples only transition to private platforms, such as exchanging phone numbers and communicating via WhatsApp, after meeting their match in person. They feel that sharing private contact information should only occur once they are certain of the other person's existence.

Couple 1 utilized various forms of communication within the in-app chatroom, including text, audio, and audiovisual features. They found that this allowed for a clearer understanding of each other, as they were not solely relying on text messages and could also observe nonverbal cues. On the other hand, Couple 2 swiftly moved to private platforms because one of them had intentionally provided their contact information on their profile.

Interestingly, Couple 5 exchanged social media accounts (specifically Instagram) even before exchanging phone numbers or meeting face to face. Similar to Couple 1, this enabled them to learn about each other's nonverbal communication and observe their daily activities and hobbies.

Involvement-Testing and Intensifying

In this stage, individuals start to disclose their feelings and emotions to the other person, sharing more detailed information about their lives. At the involvement stage of a relationship, a sense of mutuality, of being connected, develops (DeVito, 2016). During this stage, couples discover a sense of mutual connection primarily through their personalities and shared interests. Performing common hobbies and activities becomes a means for expressing their interest and emotions to their match. For instance, Couple 1 identified similarities in their carefree and lively dispositions. Both individuals are extroverted and have a passion for music and outdoor activities. On the other hand, the remaining four couples leaned towards introversion. Couple 2 and 3 found that spending quality time together, particularly through culinary explorations, served as their primary bonding experience. Couple 4 shared a common interest in nature, which became a focal point for their connection. Lastly, Couple 5 viewed each other as companions in watching movies and playing online games, strengthening their bond.

A significant aspect of this stage involves continuous testing between partners. Each person seeks to assess the progress of the relationship and determine if the other person desires it to evolve further. This is achieved by attentively observing both verbal and nonverbal cues and analyzing them. All couples took steps to deepen their connection by intensifying their interactions. In Couple 1 and 2, both women were newcomers to the city, and their partners expressed interest in offering them city tour guides, demonstrating their care and support. In Couple 3, the man worked out of town but made an effort to spend time with his partner every weekend in his hometown, displaying his strong emotions and commitment. Couple 4 strengthened their relationship by immersing themselves in nature and exchanging gestures of affection, such as baking cakes and buying gifts. Lastly, Couple 5 prioritized building trust and creating a safe environment for each other, particularly because both individuals were private and had trust issues.

Intimacy-Interpersonal Commitment and Social Bonding

The third relationship stage, intimacy, is when an individual is probably the closest to the other person. The communication is honest and open. There are two phases in the intimacy stage-interpersonal commitment and social bonding. The first is when both individuals commit themselves to each other in a private way. The latter is when that commitment is made public, for example revealing it to family and friends. A natural part of intimacy is also increasing affiliative cues, which are signs that show your love for the other person.

At the intimacy stage, an individual commits himself further to the other person and establishes a relationship in which this individual becomes your best or closest friend, lover, or companion. There are many different types of commitment. Some of which are traditional, such as engagement, marriage, living together, and some of which are less traditional such as agreeing to be lovers, friends with benefits, etc).

All the couples in this study reached the stage of intimacy, even though with different levels of depth. Couple 1, a couple who value their families greatly, receive a warm welcome from both sides as they introduce each other. This heartfelt acceptance deeply impacts their loving relationship and smooths their path to marriage. Couple 2, after deciding to enter

courtship, promptly introduced their friends and family to each other, and within approximately six months, took the step of getting married. Couple 3 approached their relationship with a strong sense of commitment towards marriage. They introduced their respective family members just two months after their initial contact and tied the knot within less than six months from their first meeting. Couple 4, who share a love for nature, establish intimacy by creating a comfortable and secure shared space. They frequently indulge in weekend camping getaways outside of town and introduce their friends and family to each other at a later stage. Finally, Couple 5 built intimacy through open and sincere communication, delving into their personal histories, fears, life goals, and future plans. While they introduce each other to their families, they chose to keep their relationship private among friends and colleagues and refraining from publicizing it on social media.

Interpersonal Communication Theories Perspective

The behaviors observed in the stages of Contacts, Involvement, and Intimacy can be analyzed through various interpersonal communication theories. In the Contact stage, the act of taking security precautions aligns with the theory of Communication Privacy Management. This includes the act of withholding private information about their contacts, which corresponds to the concept of Management Dialectics within the theory. Additionally, the practice of sharing social media accounts and seeking information about their match relates to Uncertainty Reduction Theory, as it stems from the individuals' need to reduce uncertainty and facilitate communication and relationship development.

During the Involvement stage, the efforts made by couples to intensify their connection can be viewed not only as an attempt to intensify their connection, but also as a calculation of costs and rewards. These exchanges can be understood within the framework of cost-reward analysis, where the more rewards received from their match, the more positive the outcome. This can involve both direct exchanges, where reciprocation occurs between the two actors, and productive exchanges, where both parties contribute for mutual benefit. Examples of such exchanges from the study include tokens of affection and offering companionship, which contribute to the closeness of both individuals.

Lastly, in the Intimacy stage, the principles of Social Penetration Theory become evident during the phase of interpersonal commitment and social bonding. As the relationship progresses towards intimacy, a wider range of topics, particularly deeper and more personal ones, are discussed. Sharing intimate subjects such as personal histories, fears, life goals, and future plans signifies a deepening of the relationship, approaching the core level of the Onion Analogy. According to Lawrence Rosenfeld and Gary Bowen, relationship satisfaction is highest when both individuals reach mutual levels of self-disclosure (West & Turner, 2010). Following that phase, the act of introducing one's partner to close friends and family aligns with one of the assumptions of the Social Penetration Theory, which posits that relational development is generally systematic and predictable.

CONCLUSION

Couples who meet through online dating apps follow a similar path towards commitment compared to the traditional dating methods. However, due to the nature of online interactions with someone they have never met before, these couples take extra precautions to ensure their safety before meeting in person. These couples heavily rely on finding common interest and shared values as a way to enhance their communication and progress their relationship. It be inferred that the strength of social bonding, particularly with family members, significantly influences the progress and growth of a relationship.

The authors propose the need for future research to explore the resilience of the relationships formed through online dating, specifically studying the later stages of Devito's Relationship Stages, such as Deterioration, Repair, and Dissolution, within the context of online dating couples. The research could focus on examining the relationship resilience in these couples.

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