Reducing Uncertainty Of Potential Romantic Partners In Media

The amount of time a person spends information-seeking a potential romantic partner digitally is positively associated with their self-disclosure via social media.

Today's society is driven by technology. Electronic devices and the internet are present in the actions and decisions made by individuals daily. Americans view time as something tangible; a thing to be saved, wasted, and spent. When people spend time together, it seems that there are selfish motives at play. The continuous interactions people have with each other are motivated by wanting to reduce the uncertainty, be able to predict the actions, of the person they choose to spend their time with (Gibbs, Ellison, & Chih-Hui, 2011). The motivation is to reduce the uncertainty they have about someone so that they can decide whether to engage in a lasting relationship. People in relationships communicate to satisfy individual goals (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). In order to reduce the uncertainty that they might have, strategies to find out more information are used prior to meeting physically, in person. Thus, the process of uncertainty reduction can begin well before words are exchanged in encounters between strangers (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Social media users share personal content with the public in order to express tastes and manage their impression of others (Johnson & Van Der Heide, 2015).

There is the motivation for users to post social media content with the intention of getting attention. With the inactive use of social media, people feel happier because they feel they are building social capital or social connectedness (Chae, 2018). Posing photos and status updates with the hope that they will be seen in a certain, positive way provide satisfaction. However, many media users passively consume what they see on social media by scrolling past and not interacting (Orben & Dunbar, 2017). The satisfaction when notified of activity creates happiness even if it's only for a moment. What responses are people looking for when they post a photo or comment on their personal social networking site? When the number of viewers of the content increases, the desire to post more increases. Being able to see what others are doing can have a positive or negative effect on those viewing it. Seeing something that sparks interest causes communication to start. Alternatively, if a viewer is dissatisfied with a post or photo, they will cease communication. With the use of social media, relationships can begin and end without there ever being a face-to-face interaction. In the development of modern romantic relationships, social media play a distinct role and a growing number of long-term relationships are initiated on SNSs (Fox & Anderegg, 2014). Someone who is potentially interested in pursuing a romantic relationship with someone can change their mind before communicating with that person, based on what is displayed on their social media pages (Orben & Dunbar, 2017). It is through information-seeking via social media that romantic relationships are forming in this culture dominated by technology which dictates what users decide to self-disclose on these digital outlets.

The purpose of this paper is to study the digital interaction between potential romantic partners and self-disclosure via social media content. This paper will begin with a review of current

literature to explain the uncertainty reduction theory. It will then describe how information-seeking strategies relate to self-disclosure in social media.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

The uncertainty reduction theory was developed to explain how communication is used to reduce uncertainties between strangers engaging in their first conversation together (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). It seeks to explain and predict human interaction and communication. Communication plays a key role in this process as it is through communication that uncertainty is reduced (Gibbs et al., 2011). With the technology implemented into culture today, it is possible to communicate with someone instantly, even if they are on the other side of the world. When communicating digitally, however, important nonverbal cues are unable to be read. A reduction in uncertainty in face-to-face communication will lead to an increase in nonverbal affiliative expressiveness, which in turn is positively related to interpersonal attraction (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). With the lack of nonverbals such as facial expressions, body language, and gestures, it is easy for messages to be misinterpreted. However, experimental research has repeatedly found that text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) results in similar or higher levels of interpersonal attraction than face-to-face communication (Antheunis, Schouten, Valkenburg & Peter, 2012).

Because of this possibility of instant communication but without the aid of nonverbals, social networking sites (SNSs) have become a popular format for people to interact in many ways with each other. Through posts, pictures, and relationship status changes, SNSs give users the ability to broadcast every detail of their lives to a vast audience (Fox & Anderegg, 2014). It is through these sites that romantic relationships are forming. More than 10 million Americans participate in online dating by maintaining memberships or profiles on at least one dating website (Gibbs et al., 2011).

With so many people relying on the internet to begin their relationship, it is more difficult to maintain because it is almost effortless to monitor the other person’s whereabouts and internet activity. Relational uncertainty stems from ambiguity regarding the nature of the relationship, such as not knowing if the partner is serious about the relationship or if the relationship has a future (Fox & Anderegg, 2014). The interactions between people on SNSs are displayed to the public and can be interpreted by the viewer in a way other than it was intended. Because of this, individuals may question whether their partners wish to maintain, escalate, or de-escalate the relationship based on those interactions (Fox & Anderegg, 2014). With time spent analyzing interactions of others on social media, uncertainty can be reduced, or it could cause more uncertainty to arise. People generally have more trust in visual modalities than text (Chae, 2018).

Because of the emotional investment made in developing and maintaining a romantic relationship, uncertainty may emerge at any point during the relationship. (Fox & Anderegg, 2014). In order to reduce these uncertainties, more time is spent more intensely viewing, or electronically surveilling, a potential romantic partner’s SNSs and their public internet interactions. Persistent online monitoring through SNSs is often perceived negatively.

The word surveillance has a negative connotation attached to it. The thought is associated with the uncomfortable feeling of being watched. It is considered ‘stalking’ if someone looks to get

to know someone more by passively looking at their social media page and users consider the behavior of viewing their site for the purpose of gaining information about them as socially inappropriate, or at least inappropriate to admit (Fox & Anderegg, 2014). But that is how uncertainty about a potential partner begins to decrease. Gaining knowledge based on the amount of self-disclosure provided on their social media page. At the beginning of any relationship, the level of uncertainty about the other person is high. High levels of uncertainty cause an increase in information-seeking behavior. As uncertainty levels decline, information-seeking behavior decreases. (Berger & Calabrese, 1975)

Information Seeking Strategies

Traditionally at an introduction of people meeting face-to-face, there is a high level of uncertainty. Social media is changing that norm. In the physical state, information-seeking strategies, asking questions with reciprocity, to gain more information about someone and therefore reducing the uncertainty they have. Information seeking is a purposeful act of seeking information that needs to happen in order to satisfy a goal (Asghar, 2015). With technology and social media today, these traditional strategies have been integrated into the digital world. It is now easier to gain basic information about a person and be more confident with predicting their behavior without actually meeting them face-to-face.

Berger and Calabrese theorized that there are three types of strategies one can engage in when seeking information about another. These are passive, active, and interactive (Berger, 1975). Each of these strategies can be performed in person or via SNSs. When one passively seeks information about another person, they observe their interested party from a distance. Seeking actively is asking a third party, such as a mutual friend for more information about the person they want more information on. Lastly, there is the interactive strategy. Here, the seeker makes direct, face-to-face contact with the person they are interested in. In this strategy, specific questions are asked, similar to the third degree (Berger, 1975). In order to reduce the uncertainty one has about another, they engage in actions to learn more about that other person. If that other person could potentially be a romantic partner, these strategies and this non-chronological process can be done digitally.

These strategies can be translated to seeking information on social media. Passively seeking more information about someone by looking at their social media content, without interacting, browsing their profile page. This is becoming more common in people’s online presence (Orben & Dunbar, 2017). While the most frequently used strategy in the digital world is the passive information-seeking strategy (Fox & Anderegg, 2014), Facebook is used as a tool for resource discovery and the articulation of one’s information need (Asghar, 2015).

An active strategy in the digital world would be finding and contacting mutual friends. On SNSs, this could be identifying who the target is linked to on the site and using those ‘‘friends’’ for information (Fox & Anderegg, 2014). On multiple SNSs, it is easy to find who friends interact with. This can be seen through pictures and activities posted by others. In online contexts, a shared social network such as those found in SNSs might provide additional identity verification (Gibbs et al., 2011). There are different channels to verify and re-check what is found that might be hard for the viewer to believe. Another way to practice an active information-seeking strategy would be to interact with their personal SNS. The interactive strategy would be communicating directly with the person of interest. Sending a direct message on a social media platform

connects two parties unambiguously.

There is a stigma that is attached to a couple getting involved romantically by having met through social media. This is changing rapidly with multiple tools and media applications available for finding partners. When a significant amount of time is spent seeking information on a particular person, and for a purpose, the idea of how the relationship should develop is influenced (Gibbs et al., 2011). Individuals develop norms and expectations for romantic behaviors based on observation, social experiences, and media consumption (Fox & Anderegg, 2014). The milestones and how the relationship should progress are influenced by comparing to others who self-disclose about their relationship on social media. Passive social media use (i.e., monitoring others) may make us unhappy through social comparison (Chae, 2018).

When it is easy to compare to others, social media users compare many aspects of their lives. The amount of more personal information that is disclosed on their SNS may increase based on the amount that their friends and social contacts share.

Self-Disclosure

After information-seeking strategies have helped determine that the person they are interested in is worth taking more time to get to know better, a relationship may be initiated. When this occurs, individuals inevitably consider various risks involved, some of which are directly related to self-disclosure (Gibbs et al., 2011). Previous research suggested that having the veil of the internet as anonymity meant that individuals would alter their personalities. More recent studies indicate that the identities that people produce online were found to be more realistic and honest (Chen & Marcus, 2012) the reason for this is because it is more possible that false information can be contradicted and disproven easily by other forms of media. However, it has been found that individuals tend to stretch the truth in their online self-presentation (Chen & Marcus, 2012).

Self-disclosure is defined as the revealing of personal information to another person (Utz, 2015). There are many reasons why individuals disclose personal information on social media such as anonymity, shared interests, and lack of physical presence (Gibbs et al., 2011) and individuals tend to highlight one’s positive attributes for self-enhancement (Chen & Marcus, 2012). When the opportunity to attract the interest of a romantic partner arises, the amount of information an individual discloses is noticed. Previous qualitative research has found that online dating participants engage in a dynamic process of rewriting their profiles to better appeal to desired potential partners (Gibbs et al., 2011) Self-presentation based on photos and videos on Instagram may be perceived as more realistic (Chae, 2018). This may lead to the development of liking and intimacy among online interactants (Gibbs et al., 2011). However, the need for self-presentation on Facebook has been found to be related to personality traits such as neuroticism, narcissism, shyness, self-esteem, and self-worth. (Bareket-Bojmel, Moran & Shahar, 2015). But as a more personal relationship develops, individuals tend to present their true and authentic self to the other, ranging from superficial factual to personal, private, or intimate details about oneself (Chen & Marcus, 2012). Getting to a high level of self-disclosure is an indicator that a relationship is progressing. As potential partners share more information about themselves than what they disclose on social media, feelings of trust increase (Orben & Dunbar, 2017).

In offline communication, a conversation continues due to personal reciprocation (Orben & Dunbar, 2017). When one person shares information, the other person encodes the message and responds appropriately. At the beginning of an intimate relationship, this circuit of conversation aids the participants in deciding whether to continue seeing each other. Question asking and self-disclosure are quite often employed in initial communication because, in the first phases of acquaintanceship, people disclose nonintimate information about a broad range of topics (Antheunis et al., 2012)

Previous research assumed that self-disclosures are reciprocal. The receivers match their self-disclosure intimacy to their partner's previous self-disclosure intimacy. However, due to the channel of social media, this is not the case (Orben & Dunbar, 2017). As users, when one person posts, the content is seen by many. Recent research supports the notion that self-idealization or self-promotional content is more prevalent online than in face-to-face interactions (Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2015). There is no expectation that others should reciprocate how much they disclose about themselves. They may use self-disclosure as an uncertainty reduction strategy because self-disclosure of one’s self elicits self-disclosure from the target person, due to the norm of reciprocity (Antheunis et al., 2012)

Without the physical response of another person, while communicating, users rely on activity on their SNS. When a picture is posted, other people are able to see it and interact. Users look forward to that positive interaction. With an increase in positive interaction and a high number of viewers, users with more selfies taken have some dimension of narcissism (Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2015). When users are interested in a potential romantic partner, they spend more time seeking more information about them using the three different strategies. This process then causes the user to change their personal SNS to appeal to the interested party a sort of digital reciprocation. This study will show how spending more time seeking information about a potential romantic partner causes social media users to self-disclose more personal information on their SNSs.