

Mobile Communication in Couple Relationships

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Abstract

This paper examines how forms of mobile communication are used in couple relationships. It identifies the interrelations between mobile communication, the characteristics of the partners as individuals, the dyadic nature of the couple relationship, and the demands of partners' everyday lives. The results were achieved by adapting three theoretical approaches and applying them in questionnaire-based studies and an interview study in Germany.

1. Introduction

Mobile communication has established itself as an element of humans' personal and working lives, and has thus become significant for the most intimate form of interpersonal relationships: the couple relationship. The possibilities of mobile communication are well-suited to the specific needs of couples. They can communicate general and personal information, exchange thoughts and feelings, or simply organize their daily needs – and all this from any location.

Mobile services also offer the possibility of asynchronous communication. This means one person can send his/her partner a text message (SMS) or leave a voice message on a mobile mailbox. In addition to physical flexibility, these methods of communication also feature the additional aspect of temporal flexibility, which can simplify communication in couple relationships, and hence their organization. It is evident that mobile communication can enable couples to successfully communicate with one another. To what extent this is actually achieved and the key elements for the success of and satisfaction with mobile communication will be investigated.

2. Theoretical Background

Based on three different theoretical approaches the objective is to investigate how mobile communication is integrated into couples' everyday lives:

1. Theory of interpersonal media selection,
2. Exchange theory / Equity theory, and
3. Attachment theory.

By applying three different approaches, it is possible to comprehensively take into consideration the specifics of technologically mediated interpersonal communication, as well as precisely examine the couple relationship as a complex interpersonal relationship.

2.1 Theory of interpersonal media selection

In investigating mobile communication in interpersonal relationships, it is important to remember that mobile communication is most often merely one of several forms of technologically mediated communication used by the partners. For empirical data collection, it is thus important to ensure that mobile communication is clearly distinguished from other forms of communication. This means that the use of other forms must also be recorded; in the analysis of mobile telephone calls for instance, the use of the conventional telephone must also be recorded in order to ascertain common characteristics as well as strengths, weaknesses and special features of the two forms of communication and their usage. This must be sufficiently accounted for in the theoretical survey of mobile communication, and is made possible by applying the theory of interpersonal media selection.

This theory is especially suited to evaluating communication in couple relationships and postulates the mutual coordination of the communication partners as an important criterion of media selection¹. In the course of a couple relationship, processes of informing and negotiating make possible (or necessitate) a broad institutionalization of the day-to-day relationship; this also applies to media usage². Accordingly, couples can coordinate at what times, on what occasions, and in what form they communicate with each other, in a kind of meta-communicative negotiation process. Decisions about media selection are related to both the availability of a communication medium and the costs of its use. It must first be fundamentally ascertained how couples use mobile communication embedded in their overall scheme of media usage, and what specific patterns can be recognized.

2.2 Exchange theory / Equity theory

Just as an intimate interpersonal relationship can be modeled as an interpersonal exchange of actions, so can communication in couple relationships be understood as an exchange of resources. This approach makes it possible to apply exchange theory, or its derivative, equity theory. According to the fundamental concept of exchange theory, a relationship is more stable the greater the benefit is relative to the costs incurred, and the less attractive alternative partners are. The equity theory further assumes that the partners in a couple relationship

¹ Döring, Nicola (2003) Sozialpsychologie des Internet. Die Bedeutung des Internet für Kommunikationsprozesse, Identitäten, soziale Beziehungen und Gruppen. Göttingen: Hogrefe.; Höflich, Joachim R. (1996). Technisch vermittelte Kommunikation. Grundlagen, organisatorische Medienverwendung, Konstitution „Elektronischer Gemeinschaften“. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.; Krotz, Friedrich (1998). Digitalisierte Medienkommunikation: Veränderungen interpersonaler und öffentlicher Kommunikation. In Irene Neverla (Hrsg.), Das Netz-Medium (S.113-136). Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

² Lenz, Karl (1998). Soziologie der Zweierbeziehung. Eine Einführung. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

pursue a balance in benefit³. In terms of mobile communication in couple relationships, it must first be determined whether a balancing of the exchange of media-based messages and contacts takes place, and how such a balance occurs. Interesting questions also arise with respect to the consequences of an exchange perceived as unbalanced and therefore unfair.

2.3 Attachment theory

A couple relationship is significantly influenced by the nature of the attachment between the two partners; the “attachment style” of the two partners and its combination play a decisive role. According to Bartholomew⁴ and following the concept of the internal working model of close attachments⁵, four adult attachment styles can be distinguished (secure, fearful, possessive, dismissing), depending on how positive or negative one’s image of oneself and of the partner are. A person with a secure attachment style has a positive self-image as well as a positive image of the partner, so that a stable and trustful relationship can ensue. The other three attachment styles can be characterized as insecure types, in which the degree of insecurity reaches different magnitudes. A fearfully attached person for instance has both a negative self-image and a negative image of the partner, so that the relationship is plagued by constant insecurity. The possessive type is distinguished by a negative self-image but a positive image of the partner, leading to great fear of loss. The dismissing type on the other hand has a positive self-image and a negative image of the partner, leading to great emphasis on independence and distance.

The influence of attachment style can be postulated in all areas of the relationship and thus exerts a significant influence on the communication between the partners. For instance, it has been empirically demonstrated that securely attached persons relate more frequently and intimately with their partners than dismissing attachment types⁶. It is assumed that attachment style also influences mobile communication in couple relationships. Being reachable independent of time and location for instance is an inherent technical feature of mobile communication. But it must be implemented with respect to the partner (partner taking the cell phone with him/her, turning it on, answering calls, etc.). For this reason, it must be determined what differences in using mobile communication can be identified on the basis of partners’ attachment style.

Attachment theory can be used to explain the behavior of adults in many of life’s situations. Attachment situations are often characterized by long separation, lack of proximity, stress, and fear. In these situations, adults display attachment behavior; they seek support and intimacy. How is attachment behavior expressed via the media of mobile communication? What is the significance especially of mobile communication via mobile telephone, which allows nearly unlimited reachability? What media do partners use to seek this intimacy and support, and why? The manner of achieving this presumably depends on the person’s

³ Mikula, Gerold (1992). Austausch und Gerechtigkeit in Freundschaft, Partnerschaft und Ehe: Ein Überblick über den aktuellen Forschungsstand. *Psychologische Rundschau*, 43, 69-82.; Walster, Elaine, Walster, G. William. & Berscheid, Ellen (1978). *Equity: Theory and research*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

⁴ Bartholomew, Kim (1990). Avoidance of intimacy: An attachment perspective. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationship*, 7, 147-178.

⁵ Bowlby, John (1982). *Attachment and loss: Volume 1 Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.

⁶ Feeney, Judith A., Noller, Patricia & Callan, Victor J. (1994). Attachment Style, Communication and Satisfaction in the early years of Marriage. In Kim Bartholomew & Daniel Perlman (Ed.), *Attachment processes in adulthood*. *Advances in Personal Relationship*. Volume 5 (S.355-377). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

attachment style and the representation of the relationship and the partner; in other words, it is likely to depend on the internal working model based on self-image and image of the partner⁷.

2.4 Requirements of Mobility

The analysis also takes into consideration a societal development exerting enormous influence on the structures of interpersonal social relationships: the significantly increasing demands on occupational mobility in Germany also impact the private sphere⁸. It must be ascertained whether differences in mobile communication between partners depend on the living situation of the couples. Are there differences in this respect between couples who live together and those who carry on a long-distance relationship? Another question is whether, and in what manner, this trend leads to increasing use of technical media to communicate within couples. Of special interest is the issue of how forms of mobile communication are used by couples with a mobile lifestyle (whether work-related or private) and how the time- and location-independent possibilities of mobile communication can promote satisfaction with the couple relationship.

3. Method

As part of an ongoing research project at the Ilmenau Technical University, Germany, questionnaire-based studies on mobile and media-based communication were conducted. The primary participants were students. The survey was carried out with a standardized paper-based questionnaire (N = 460) and a standardized online questionnaire (N = 111)⁹. Furthermore, qualitative statements regarding communication in five couple relationships were acquired in an interview study. Both partners were interviewed in this study, meaning that persons with a range of characteristics (age, gender, educational level, etc.), living situations (occupation, marital status, children), and extremely different media usage behaviors were surveyed.

4. Results

4.1 Findings related to the Theory of interpersonal media selection

The results relative to the research questions regarding the theory of interpersonal media selection were gained through qualitative analysis of interview data with five couples. In this process, completely different media usage behaviors were ascertained for a broad range of couples' living situations. Mobility processes in the daily routine, cost considerations, and individual media preferences (e.g. the preferred use of asynchronous communication vs. synchronous forms) were identified as the most important factors in selecting a medium to communicate with the partner. The couple who used the broadest range of communication media and who in fine detail reflected the strengths and weaknesses of the communication

⁷ Bowlby, John (1982). Attachment and loss: Volume 1 Attachment. New York: Basic Books.; Bartholomew, Kim (1990). Avoidance of intimacy: An attachment perspective. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationship*, 7, 147-178.

⁸ Schneider, Norbert F., Hartmann, Kerstin & Limmer, Ruth (2001). Berufsmobilität und Lebensform – Sind berufliche Mobilitätsanforderungen in Zeiten der Globalisierung noch mit Familie vereinbar? Schriftenreihe des BMFSFJ Band 208.

⁹ The online survey was carried out at the Ilmenau Technical University, Germany in early 2004 by Diana Baumbach, Susanne Friedemann, and Susanne Riedel.

forms (especially mobile telephone, SMS, conventional telephone, email, and chat) was also the couple who best coordinated communication with each other. The partners' statements were nearly identical, whereas significant discrepancies were observed with other couples. This couple was also technologically well-equipped as part of their professions. This makes it clear that in addition to availability, media expertise plays a great role (i.e. knowledge of functionality, as well as familiarity with and application of media-specific communication rules). In analyzing the statements of this "media-savvy" couple, it was observed that they rate forms of mobile communication as very valuable. Especially in situations perceived by couples as particularly difficult and stressful (six-month separation in different time zones), successful and continuous communication within the relationship was only possible through temporally flexible (SMS) and physically flexible (mobile telephone) contact.¹⁰

4.2 Findings related to the Exchange theory / Equity theory

The application of equity theory proved useful. The results of the questionnaire studies indicate that media-based messages and contact can be viewed as resources exchanged between partners; the majority of those surveyed considered these communication forms "pleasant" (94%) and "not a bothersome task" (93%).

The qualitative results of the interview study indicate that many couples very deliberately balance out their media-based contacts. This takes place by comparing the number of SMS messages sent and received, or analyzing both partners' monthly mobile telephone bills. The goal here appears to be less a formal settling of accounts, more a general balance as part of the desire to maintain a fair overall relationship. The statistical analysis of the questionnaire study confirms this interpretation. It was observed that persons who perceive the communication with their partners as unbalanced and unfair are less satisfied with both the overall relationship and the communication within it. Survey participants who perceive themselves as disadvantaged communication partners are more likely to desire "more media-based messages" and "more emotional media-based messages" from their partners. (Analysis of variances between groups e.g.: variable "overall relationship": partners with fair communication: $M=3,79$ ($SD=,559$); disadvantaged partners: $M=4,8$ ($SD=1,304$); $F(df=6)=5,098$, $p<.001$).

4.3 Findings related to the Attachment theory

The attachment style of partners is reflected in the communication within their couple relationships. The questionnaire-based survey provided significant initial evidence of this. Apparently securely attached persons telephone more often (via both mobile and conventional telephones) and are more satisfied with both their SMS communication and their conventional telephone communication, in comparison to insecure attachment types. Possessive attachment types use communication media more often than all other types, in order to monitor the partner and for reasons of jealousy. Persons with this attachment style most often reported attachment situations in which they had media-based contact with their partner, but in which they remained unsatisfied with the situation. Table 1 gives an overview of the results.

¹⁰ Q.v.: Döring, Nicola & Dietmar, Christine (2004, May). Mediated Communication in Couple Relationships: Approaches for Theoretical Modelling and Initial Qualitative Findings [35 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* [On-line Journal], 4(3), Art. 2. Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-03/3-03doeringdietmar-e.htm> [20.06.2004].

Table 1. Attachment style and mobile communication in couple relationships (scale 1 – 4). Analysis of variances between groups.

		Secure	Fearful	Possessive	Dismissing
<i>Frequency of telephone calls (mobile and conventional)</i>	N	140	32	43	58
	M	4,24	3,88	3,81	3,74
	SD	1,099	1,289	1,239	1,052
	F(df=3)=3,605; p<.05				
<i>Satisfaction with SMS communication</i>	N	127	29	37	49
	M	3,29	3,17	2,78	3,14
	SD	,798	,820	,917	,764
	F(df=3)=3,809; p<.05				
<i>Satisfaction with conventional telephone communication</i>	N	129	29	39	52
	M	3,33	3,03	3,05	3,21
	SD	,641	,566	,759	,572
	F(df=3)=3,056; p<.05				
<i>Use of communication media in order to monitor the partner</i>	N	139	32	23	54
	M	1,55	1,31	1,91	1,42
	SD	,651	,471	1,125	,838
	F(df=3)=4,337; p<.01				
<i>Use of communication media for reasons of jealousy</i>	N	139	32	43	58
	M	1,91	1,91	2,30	1,83
	SD	,737	,466	,887	,679
	F(df=3)=4,081; p=.01				
<i>Disappointed with a mediated contact in an attachment situation</i>	N	54	16	23	19
	M	1,28	1,31	1,91	1,42
	SD	,656	,602	1,125	,838
	F(df=3)=3,580; p<.05				

In the online survey, it was observed that securely attached persons speak more openly on the telephone (coefficient of correlation $r=.277$, probability of error $p<.01$), express feelings more often via SMS ($r=.236$, $p<.05$), and more often have no qualms about discussing “important issues” on the telephone ($r=-.220$, $p<.05$). They are also more completely focused on the partner during telephone calls ($r=.292$, $p<.05$) than persons with insecure attachment styles. It was also observed that the behavior of dismissing attachment types in using mobile communication corresponds to the documented behavior of this attachment type in other relationship areas. These survey participants were more likely to “discuss only practical issues on the telephone,” ($r=.216$, $p<.05$) “not like when a partner constantly calls” ($r=-.240$, $p<.01$), and “sometimes not answer a partner’s calls” ($r=.299$, $p<.001$).

One interesting result is that all three insecure attachment types (fearful: $r=.320$, $p<.001$; possessive: $r=.253$, $p<.01$; dismissing: $r=.202$, $p<.05$) reported being better able to express themselves via SMS (i.e. via a written, asynchronous communication medium). This may indicate a potential advantage of this communication form: through its written form and its greater distance due to the delayed communication process, SMS may make it easier for insecure relationship types to communicate. However, this can possibly have a negative effect on communication within the relationship by promoting superficial communication. More extensive analyses are necessary to answer this question.

4.4 Findings related to the Requirements of Mobility

The partners' living situation (especially the physical distance between the partners) is just as related to mobile communication as the overall technologically-mediated communication within couple relationships. The results of the questionnaire study indicate that the farther apart partners live from one another, the more important the reachability of the partner and the constant media-based contact with him/her is perceived. Survey participants likewise indicated more frequently that media-based messages were "pleasant" and "perceived as reminders of the partner" when living relatively far apart. Table 2 shows the findings. The frequency of use also increases with distance. The data on frequency of usage also make clear however that even couples sharing a joint household or living in the same city often take advantage of forms of mobile communication, despite having regular personal contact with one another. This again reiterates the great importance of this form of communication in the everyday course of relationships.

Table 2. Physical distance and mediated contact in couple relationships (scale 1 – 4). Analysis of variances between groups.

		Sharing a joint household	Living in the same city	Living apart (up to 50 km)	Living apart (more than 50 km)	Living in different countries
<i>Importance of reachability</i>	N	65	81	59	80	5
	M	2,91	2,70	3,02	3,01	3,60
	SD	,765	,872	,731	,803	,548
F(df=4)=2,881; p<.05						
<i>Importance of constant contact</i>	N	64	80	59	80	5
	M	3,09	2,84	3,15	3,20	3,40
	SD	,771	,770	,738	,786	,548
F(df=4)=2,839; p<.05						
<i>Messages are pleasant</i>	N	65	80	59	79	5
	M	3,31	3,53	3,63	3,62	3,80
	SD	,809	,551	,554	,584	,447
F(df=4)=3,045; p<.05						
<i>Messages are perceived as reminders of the partner</i>	N	65	81	58	78	4
	M	3,17	3,30	3,71	3,58	3,50
	SD	,827	,766	,530	,655	,655
F(df=4)=5,845; p<.001						
<i>Frequency of telephone calls (mobile and conventional)</i>	N	65	80	59	80	5
	M	3,34	4,06	4,12	4,46	4,20
	SD	1,266	1,173	,984	,967	,447
F(df=4)=9,699; p<.001						

5. Discussion

This article provides a theoretical examination of mobile communication in couple relationships and presents initial qualitative and quantitative results. The adaptation of the three theoretical approaches (theory of interpersonal media selection, exchange theory/equity theory, and attachment theory) proved useful, and qualitative results were achieved. Through

the evaluation of quantitative data, it was also possible to identify interrelations between mobile communication and characteristics of the individuals, the relationship, and the couples' living situation. However, it must be emphasized that the magnitudes of the observed effects are for the most part relatively small. The structure of the samples does not allow any kind of generalization. The results should be considered instead as indicative of trends and as an impetus for further research in interesting topics of relevance. Future work would necessitate additional theoretical development, in which both the individual theories are adapted in more detail and the approaches more strongly integrated with one another.