Smartphone, Relational Uncertainty and Monitoring in Romantic Relationships

Sumi Rani Saha, Tareq Mahamud Abir

Department of Sociology, University of Barishal, Barishal, Bangladesh
Email: Sumidu21@gmail.com

Abstract

Smartphone has not only reduced time and spatial restrictions but also become a source of tension between romantic partners. The objective of the study is to explore how smartphone creates relational uncertainty and diminishes trust between romantic partners. Using a self-administered questionnaire from a sample survey of 120 respondents, it is found that smartphone is more likely to create relational uncertainty and mistrust in romantic relationships and out of this mistrust they engage in different types of surveillance activities to monitor their partner's activities on smartphone.

Keywords

Smartphone, Romantic Partner, Trust, Relational Uncertainty, Surveillance

1. Introduction

The nature of romantic relationships has changed quite dramatically with the invention of the smartphone. It has freed us from the constraints of space and has commonly been used to mediate intimate relationships which were once mediated through symbols of affection such as flowers, missives and love letters. New and emerging technologies, especially smartphones, have also been appropriated to mediate close personal relationships. Sending a text message via mobile phone is increasingly being used to forge new romantic relationships (Byrne & Findlay, 2004). Smartphone enables partners to keep up constant connection with each other without time and space restrictions, thus has become "a source of information as well as a source of tension between romantic partners" (Fox & Warber, 2013). The constant connection afforded by smartphone may also accelerate relational uncertainty. In this study, the term relational uncertainty is used to mean "doubt about a partner's involvement in the relationship" (Muise et al.,

2009). Smartphone makes today's romantic couples more suspicious about their partner's activities and gives their users so many chances to get involved in flirting (Cizemci, 2017). The smartphone makes it possible to stay always in touch with our friends and loved ones, but at the same time it brings doubt in our minds about our partners' activities on smartphones. One may check the call list and message box of his/her partner's smartphone to know with whom he or she talks or texts. Partners may often secretly read the SMS message on each other's smartphone. Finding partner in call waiting creates suspension in one's mind that he/she could engage in a secret relationship.

For Cizemci (2017), "Old-style mobile phones were only about texting and calling, so, words were enough to maintain trust. However, smartphones create more obsessive relationships in which trust issues are at the front". Therefore, it is worth exploring how smartphone is creating new types of relational uncertainty and mistrust in romantic relationships and evoke people to be engaged in monitoring activities.

2. Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study is to shed light on how smartphone creates relational uncertainty in romantic relationships. The specific objectives are:

1) To explore how smartphone promotes relational uncertainty in romantic relationships;

2) To find out how smartphone creates mistrust in romantic relationships;

3) To investigate whether romantic couples monitor their partner's activities on smartphone.

3. Mobile Phone, Romantic Relationships, Trust and Monitoring

The mobile phone has become as easy way to initiate and explore relationships. Young people use their mobile phones as a way to send flirty or romantic text messages or to send messages to strange numbers asking to be a "textmate" (Ellwood-Clayton, 2003) and romantic relationships between teens frequently begin through messaging (Oksman & Turtiainen, 2004). Adolescent girls use their mobile phones mostly for social networking and, to make new friends (Bosch, 2008). Pertierra (2005) found that a significant number of young respondents use the mobile phone to expand their circle of relationships by mis-sent messages. At least 39% of respondents have utilized mobile phones to make new friends and obtain the numbers of virtual friends through other friends or relatives. Men are more likely than women to use the mobile phone to explore new relationships.

Research on young people's mobile phone use from Asia suggests that it presents opportunities for young people in conservative societies to facilitate premarital romance, intimacy and sexual relationships and networks and negotiate traditional values (Humphreys & Barker, 2007). Mobile phones, thus, have become

the ideal tool for the management of countless loose, close or intimate relations (Ling, 2004). Ellwood-Clayton (2006) revealed that married men by telling a lie that they are single often engaged in a relationship with the unmarried women by text messaging. She also explored mobile phone's use to find out partner's involvement in secret love relationships. During fieldwork one young couple exchanged their mobile phones for a week in order to establish their faithfulness to one another. Hijazi-Omari and Ribak (2008) found that without knowing their parents, Palestinian Israeli girls used mobile phones that are given to them by their illegitimate boyfriends who monitored incoming and outgoing calls on their mobile phones. Their boyfriends requested them for using the mobile phone only for the nightly call to talk with them and insisted them to turn off the phone or keep in silent mode during the day. Some teenage girls obeyed these rules and others arranged a second SIM card to talk with other boys and develop new secret love relationships. As one respondent, Miyada pointed out: "I did not escape prison only to find myself another prison."

In December 2006, Ganesh (cited in Ganesh, 2009) conducted a study on how three young people in Mumbai use their mobile phones. One of them, a young woman who worked as cabin crew for an international airline, used the mobile phone to manage multiple sexual relationships. She reported being able to project "different identities" with each of her partners because of her constant mobility for her work, and because of her mobile phone. She said that she felt no risk of being caught and found out. Interestingly, she chose to take lovers who also led similarly mobile lives, and they were all White Europeans or Americans. Matanhelia (2010) explored that young people make friends through mobile phone via dialing random numbers with whom they have never met but they talk on the phone, they call them "telefriends". One male respondent said that he already had a girlfriend, and he made another one from a different city via mobile phone. Jin and Pena (2010) in their study used the concept relational uncertainty as demonstrated by Knobloch & Solomon (2002) who proposes that relational uncertainty originates from three sources: 1) the self, 2) the partner and 3) the relationship.

When an individual becomes suspicious of his/her involvement in the relationship, it is called self-uncertainty, and an individual's suspension of his/her partner's involvement in the relationship is partner uncertainty. Concerning about the relationship itself is called relationship uncertainty. They found that individuals who make more frequent voice calls to their romantic partners are less likely to have lower relational uncertainty in terms of self, partner and relationship uncertainty.

Duran et al. (2011) explored that the use of mobile phone creates "autonomy–connection" conflict in romantic partnerships which triggers over frequency of calling and texting as well as use of mobile phone with other of the opposite sex and often this conflict leads them to set standards of calling and texting time and controlling of each others' behavior. Further, individuals' endeavor to fulfill

others' expectation of accessibility in the presence of their romantic partners may give rise to tension in their relationships (Miller-Ott & Kelly, 2015). In a recent Pew report, many romantic partners reported that their partners' use of mobile phone while spending time together makes them annoyed (Lenhart & Duggan, 2014). Cizemci's (2017) study found that Turkish couples prove their loyalty to each other by checking their smartphone while they meet. One of the respondents said that when he met with his partner they exchanged their smartphone to know if they did anything dishonest and this was the only way of trusting each other. Another male respondent also reported checking each other's smartphone because they did not trust each other and he caught his girlfriend's disloyalty by seeing messages on Whatsapp and Facebook. One female respondent reported that if her partner saw others to message her and to follow her on social media, he becomes angry at those people and it was the main source of quarrel between them. The study also revealed that not replying to the partner's message in spite of being online also creates suspension about partner's activities on smartphone. According to one participant, when his partner did not reply to her message on Whatsapp though she was online made him jealous and bought suspension to his mind that "who is she texting?".

4. Anthony Giddens: Modernity, Globalization and Uncertainty

In pre-modern societies, time and space as well as space and place coexisted and the aspects of social life were dominated by the local events. Modernity separates time from space and space from place by developing relations with distant others who are away from face-to-face interaction. Direct relationships, in pre-modern settings, exist with people with whom we have regular face-to-face interaction and trust relationships exist between individuals who are well-known to each other. With the advent of modernity, information communication technology has transformed the trust relationship into abstract systems. Smartphone, Internet, Facebook, Whatsapp, etc. enable people to extend their social relations across time-space distance that tend to break traditional habits and practices and foster multiple possibilities of change. Electronic communication has detraditionalized romantic relationships. Now it is not governed by the traditional beliefs about rules of combination, behavior, temporality, and duration that such relationships should ideally follow (Gross & Simmons, 2002). In pre-mobile period, it was not easy to maintain contact with romantic partners in conservative societies like Bangladesh where premarital relationships were always discouraged. Face-to-face communication and writing letter were the main modes of communication between romantic partners, but now smartphone has become the main mode of communication. Communication technology makes people's life to be dominated by those who are away from face-to-face interaction. Expert system operates with trust which is imposed upon abstract capacities, not on individuals. When people use smartphone to express their feelings and to maintain

contact with their romantic partners who are not present in front of them, they not only trust the persons with whom they are communicating, but they also keep trust in expert system that their messages will reach their partners.

The era of electronic communication gives rise to new types of strangeness and intimacy (Ray, 2007) and a new kind of virtual relationships has emerged such as virtual romantic relationships, "virtual friendships" or "telefriendships" (Matanhelia, 2010), where people have never met each other, but they talk or text on the phone. Giddens portrays the conditions of modernity as a "double-edged phenomenon" with specific focus on "security versus danger and of trust versus risk" (Giddens, 1990: 7). Globalization enhances sense of risk, dominance of experts and abstract systems. Trust and risk are interrelated to each other.

In pre-mobile period, people's ability to communicate with distant others were limited; therefore, fidelity between romantic partners was strong. Smartphone has eliminated the boundaries of time-space and people of all over the world have become connected. Smartphone enables people continuous accessibility and it doesn't seem that we are far away from our intimate partners when a smartphone is in our hand. People can communicate with their loved ones at any time and from any places, whenever they want. It facilitates young people in conservative societies like Bangladesh to form and maintain premarital romantic relationships that come into conflict with traditional values. As smartphone facilitates maintaining romantic relationships, it also creates relational uncertainty as well by enabling individuals to communicate with an infinite number of people that may threaten their relationships. It makes doubt in people's minds for its very nature of continuous accessibility. Romantic partners may always worry if their partner gets involved in secret love relationships through smartphone and therefore monitor their partner's smartphone activities to know about their infidelity.

5. Methodology

The study adopts quantitative methodology to investigate how smartphone creates relational uncertainty in romantic relationships. Survey is used as a data collection technique for the study. A total of 120 samples, which have smartphones and are engaged in a romantic relationship, were selected by using purposive sampling technique. Using a self-administered questionnaire, data were collected from University of Barishal, Barishal and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the data.

6. Smartphone, Relational Uncertainty and Monitoring in Romantic Relationship

The following Table 1 represents the demographic details of the respondents. Participants consisted of 51.67% males and 48.33% females whose ages ranged from 20 - 25 years old. In terms of education, 35% of the respondents are graduates while 65% of the respondents are undergraduates.

Table 1. Demographic details of the romantic partners, N = 120.

Demography	Percentage (%)
Age	
20	21.67
21	19.17
22	26.67
23	17.5
24	8.33
25	6.67
Gender	
Male	51.67
Female	48.33
Educational qualifications	
Graduate	35
Undergraduate	65

Table 2. Smartphone, relational uncertainty and mistrust between romantic partners, N = 120.

Smartphone, relational uncertainty and mistrust	Percentage (%)
Making suspension while finding partner busy/waiting on smartphone	62.2
Partner distrusting while finding busy/waiting on smartphone	70.1
Thinking the partner secretly maintain contact with others of the opposite sex through smartphone	78.4
Partner thinking secretly maintaining contact with others of the opposite sex through smartphone	86.5
Secretly maintain contact with others of the opposite sex through smartphone	56.8
Using smartphone while spending time together	100.0
Using smartphone while spending time together making conflict	89.2

Table 2 shows how smartphone creates relational uncertainty and mistrust between romantic partners. It is found that 62.2% of the respondents make a suspension if they find their partners busy/waiting on smartphone and 70.1% of the respondents report that their partners distrust them because of finding them busy/waiting on smartphone. On the other hand, 78.4% of the respondents think that their partners secretly maintain contact with others of the opposite sex through smartphone, whereas 86.5% of the respondents report that their partners believe that they secretly maintain contact with others of the opposite sex

through smartphone.

A significant number of respondents (56.8%) say that they maintain contact with others of the opposite sex through smartphone and they keep it secret to their partners. In the above table, all of the respondents use smartphone while they spend time with their partners and 89.2% of the respondents report that it makes conflict between them.

In the following Table 3, it is reported by 78.4% of the respondents that their partners monitor their smartphone activities when they meet. A significant number of respondents (93.1%) say that their partners read the SMS and check their call history to monitor their smartphone activities. On the other hand, 62.1% of the respondents report that their partners cease the smartphone for monitoring incoming calls. On the other hand, 83.8% of the respondents monitor their partners' smartphone activities when they meet. The majority of the respondents (87.1%) report that they read the SMS and check the call history of their partners' smartphone and 74.2% of the respondents cease the smartphone of their partners to monitor incoming calls.

In Table 4, 35.2% of the respondents say that their partners trust them, whereas only 27.0% of the respondents trust their partners. All of the respondents report that Smartphone is creating mistrust between romantic partners.

Table 3. Smartphone monitoring activities of the romantic partners.

Monitoring activities	Percentage (%)	N
Partner monitoring smartphone activities while meeting	78.4	37
Types of monitoring activities		
Reading the SMS	93.1	29
Checking call history	93.1	29
Ceasing smartphone for monitoring incoming call	62.1	29
Monitoring partner's smartphone activities while meeting	83.8	37
Type of monitoring activities		
Reading the SMS	87.1	31
Checking call history	87.1	31
Ceasing Smartphone for monitoring incoming call	74.2	31

Table 4. Trust relationship between romantic partners, N = 120.

Trust	Percentage (%)
Partner trusting me	35.2
Trusting partner	27.0
Smartphone creating mistrust between romantic partners	100.0

7. Discussion and Conclusion

The study reveals that smartphone not only diminishes time-space constraints between partners and enables partners to make constant connection with each other but also creates relational uncertainty and destroys trust between romantic partners. A significant number of respondents, surveyed in this study, use their smartphone while spending time with their partners which makes conflict between them. Most of the respondents think that their partners secretly maintain contact with others of the opposite sex through smartphone and their partners also think the same about them, while 56.8% of the respondents actually maintain contact with others of the opposite sex through smartphone. They become suspicious while finding each other busy/waiting on smartphone and it creates distrust between them. Out of this distrust, they are likely to monitor their partners' activities on smartphone. They read the SMS, check call history and often cease the smartphone of their partners for monitoring incoming call. Most of the respondents reported that their partners also do the same monitoring activities. They do not trust each other and they are likely to be responsible for using smartphone for that.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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