

Journal of
Communication
(JCOMM)

**Interpersonal Communication and Relationship
Satisfaction in the Era of Instant Messaging**



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Interpersonal Communication and Relationship Satisfaction in the Era of Instant Messaging

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Accepted: 23rd Mar 2024 Received in Revised Form: 21st May, 2024 Published: 6th June, 2024

Abstract

Purpose: The general objective of this study was to examine the impact of instant messaging apps on interpersonal communication and relationship dynamics.

Methodology: The study adopted a desktop research methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

Findings: The findings reveal that there exists a contextual and methodological gap relating to instant messaging apps on interpersonal communication and relationship dynamics. Preliminary empirical review revealed that while instant messaging increased connectivity and immediacy between couples, it also led to blurred boundaries and potential stress due to expectations for immediate responses. Frequent communication via IM enhanced relationship bonds but also introduced miscommunications due to the lack of non-verbal cues. The impact varied based on individual differences and relationship contexts, with younger and long-distance couples benefiting more. The study concluded that balancing IM with face-to-face communication was essential for maintaining high relationship satisfaction.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The Social Presence Theory, Media Richness Theory and Uses and Gratification Theory may be used to anchor future studies on the impact of instant messaging on interpersonal communication. The study recommended expanding traditional communication theories to incorporate digital nuances, developing practical strategies for relationship counselors to navigate instant messaging challenges, and implementing policy changes to support healthy digital communication practices. It also suggested educational programs to enhance digital literacy, encouraged further research on demographic variations in IM use, and integrating findings into relationship intervention programs. These recommendations aimed to improve theoretical understanding, practical application, and policy development to foster healthier and more satisfying relationships in the digital era.

Keywords: *Interpersonal Communication, Relationship Satisfaction, Instant Messaging, Digital Communication, Theoretical Adaptation*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Relationship satisfaction in the USA has been extensively studied, revealing both positive and negative trends. Recent research indicates that while overall satisfaction levels remain relatively stable, there are significant demographic and social factors influencing these trends. For example, the American Psychological Association (APA) reports that married couples generally report higher levels of satisfaction compared to cohabiting couples (Smith, Baker & Washburn, 2019). However, the rise of dual-income households and the increasing pressures of balancing work and family life have introduced new stressors that can negatively impact relationship satisfaction. Studies have shown that couples who engage in regular communication and share household responsibilities tend to report higher satisfaction levels (Pew Research Center, 2018). Furthermore, the role of technology in relationships has been a double-edged sword; while it facilitates communication, it can also lead to conflicts related to excessive screen time and social media use (Lenhart & Duggan, 2014). Twenge, Martin & Spitzberg (2019) highlighted that increased smartphone use is correlated with lower relationship satisfaction, emphasizing the importance of managing technology use within romantic relationships.

In the United Kingdom, economic stability and employment status play crucial roles in relationship satisfaction. The Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) found that couples experiencing financial strain report lower levels of satisfaction compared to those with stable incomes (Knies, Nandi, & Platt, 2016). The economic recession of the late 2000s and subsequent austerity measures have had lingering effects on household finances, influencing the dynamics within relationships. Additionally, the UK's Office for National Statistics (ONS) indicates that relationship satisfaction tends to be higher among married couples compared to cohabiting or single individuals (ONS, 2019). Cultural shifts, such as the increasing acceptance of diverse family structures and same-sex marriages, have also contributed to changing patterns of relationship satisfaction. McNulty & Fincham (2012) suggested that relationship satisfaction is positively associated with mutual support and shared activities, which are more prevalent in stable, committed relationships. The emphasis on work-life balance and the provision of parental leave policies in the UK further support relationship stability and satisfaction.

In Japan, traditional social norms and an aging population significantly impact relationship satisfaction. Japanese culture places a strong emphasis on marital roles and responsibilities, which can affect individual satisfaction levels within relationships. Tsuya, Bumpass, Choe & Rindfuss (2015) found that Japanese couples who adhere to traditional gender roles often experience lower satisfaction due to imbalances in household labor and childcare responsibilities. Additionally, Japan's aging population poses unique challenges for relationship satisfaction. Older couples often face increased caregiving responsibilities for elderly parents, which can strain marital relationships (Ogawa & Retherford, 2018). Furthermore, Japan's declining birthrate and increasing number of single-person households reflect broader societal changes that influence relationship dynamics. The importance of maintaining harmonious relationships and the cultural stigma associated with divorce contribute to the complexities of relationship satisfaction in Japan (Suzuki, 2017). Despite these challenges, couples who engage in open communication and mutual support tend to report higher levels of satisfaction (Sugimura & Mizoguchi, 2018).

In Brazil, socioeconomic disparities play a critical role in shaping relationship satisfaction. A study by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) indicates that couples from lower socioeconomic backgrounds often face greater stress and lower satisfaction levels due to financial instability and limited access to resources (IBGE, 2016). Additionally, cultural factors such as machismo and traditional gender roles can negatively impact relationship dynamics and satisfaction.

Souza & Hutz (2016) highlights that couples who challenge traditional gender norms and engage in equitable partnerships tend to report higher satisfaction. Brazil's diverse cultural landscape also influences relationship satisfaction, with regional variations in social norms and family structures contributing to different experiences of satisfaction. The rise of digital communication and social media has further impacted relationship dynamics in Brazil, with both positive and negative effects. While digital platforms facilitate connection and communication, they also introduce potential conflicts related to privacy and trust (Castro & Santos, 2017). Overall, relationship satisfaction in Brazil is closely tied to socioeconomic status, cultural norms, and the ability to navigate modern communication challenges.

In many African countries, cultural traditions and economic conditions play significant roles in determining relationship satisfaction. Research conducted by the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) shows that couples in economically stable households report higher levels of satisfaction compared to those facing financial hardship (APHRC, 2018). Additionally, cultural practices such as polygamy and extended family living arrangements can influence relationship dynamics and satisfaction levels. For example, a study in Nigeria found that polygamous households often experience higher levels of conflict and lower relationship satisfaction due to competition and jealousy among co-wives (Oladokun, Lawoyin & Asekun-Olarinmoye, 2016). Conversely, the support provided by extended family networks can enhance relationship satisfaction by distributing caregiving responsibilities and providing social support. In many African cultures, marriage is highly valued, and the social stigma associated with divorce can impact individual satisfaction within relationships. However, couples who prioritize open communication and mutual respect tend to report higher levels of satisfaction, regardless of their economic or cultural context (Amato & Beattie, 2011).

Educational attainment has been identified as a significant factor influencing relationship satisfaction in the USA. Higher levels of education are generally associated with greater relationship satisfaction, as educated individuals tend to have better communication skills, more stable incomes, and greater emotional intelligence (Karney & Bradbury, 2012). A longitudinal study by the National Marriage Project found that college-educated couples report higher satisfaction and lower divorce rates compared to those with lower educational attainment (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016). This trend is attributed to the increased financial stability, shared values, and effective problem-solving skills that often accompany higher education. Furthermore, educated couples are more likely to seek out and utilize relationship counseling services, which can further enhance satisfaction levels (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, 2016). The positive correlation between education and relationship satisfaction underscores the importance of socio-economic factors and access to resources in maintaining healthy, fulfilling relationships.

Gender equality plays a crucial role in relationship satisfaction in the United Kingdom. Studies have shown that couples who share household responsibilities and support each other's career aspirations report higher levels of satisfaction (Baxter, Hewitt & Haynes, 2012). The UK has made significant strides in promoting gender equality, with policies such as shared parental leave and flexible working arrangements contributing to more balanced relationships (ONS, 2019). However, traditional gender roles and expectations still persist in some households, leading to conflicts and lower satisfaction levels. Van Hooff (2015) indicated that couples who negotiate and adapt their roles to ensure fairness and mutual support tend to experience greater satisfaction. The emphasis on gender equality in the UK reflects broader societal changes and the increasing recognition of the importance of equitable partnerships in maintaining healthy relationships. Work-life balance is a critical factor influencing relationship satisfaction in Japan. The demanding work culture and long working hours prevalent in Japan can strain marital relationships and reduce satisfaction levels (Kawaguchi, 2015). A study by

the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JILPT) found that employees who work excessive hours report lower relationship satisfaction and higher levels of stress and conflict at home (JILPT, 2018). Efforts to improve work-life balance, such as the implementation of "Premium Friday" initiatives and increased parental leave policies, aim to alleviate these pressures and enhance relationship satisfaction. Additionally, couples who actively prioritize family time and engage in joint leisure activities tend to report higher satisfaction levels (Yamamoto & Nakagawa, 2016). The ongoing efforts to address work-life balance issues in Japan highlight the importance of managing professional and personal responsibilities to maintain healthy, satisfying relationships.

Religion and spirituality significantly influence relationship satisfaction in Brazil. The strong presence of Catholicism and growing Evangelical movements shape the values and practices of many Brazilian couples (IBGE, 2016). Research indicates that couples who share religious beliefs and participate in religious activities together report higher levels of satisfaction (Souza & Hutz, 2016). Religion often provides a framework for addressing conflicts, fostering communication, and promoting mutual respect and understanding within relationships. However, differences in religious beliefs or practices can lead to conflicts and reduced satisfaction levels. The role of religion in Brazilian relationships underscores the importance of shared values and the impact of cultural and spiritual factors on relationship dynamics and satisfaction. Effective communication is a critical determinant of relationship satisfaction in African countries. Research by the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) highlights that couples who engage in open, honest communication and address conflicts constructively report higher levels of satisfaction (APHRC, 2018). Traditional communication patterns, which may emphasize indirect communication and respect for elders, can sometimes hinder open dialogue and lead to misunderstandings. However, couples who adapt these patterns to include more direct and egalitarian communication styles tend to experience greater satisfaction. Additionally, the influence of extended family and community members on relationship dynamics can both support and challenge relationship satisfaction. The emphasis on effective communication and mutual respect in African relationships reflects the importance of adapting cultural practices to maintain healthy, fulfilling partnerships.

Interpersonal communication, the process of exchanging information, feelings, and meanings between people through verbal and non-verbal methods, is fundamental in shaping relationships. With the advent of digital technology, especially instant messaging (IM) platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and WeChat, the landscape of interpersonal communication has transformed dramatically. Instant messaging allows for real-time text-based communication, often enhanced with multimedia elements like emojis, GIFs, and voice notes. This immediacy and multimodality make IM a preferred medium for many, facilitating constant connectivity and frequent interaction (Baym, 2015). However, while IM can enhance the ease and frequency of communication, it also introduces unique challenges and dynamics that impact relationship satisfaction. One of the most significant impacts of instant messaging on interpersonal communication is the increased frequency of interactions. IM platforms enable individuals to stay in touch effortlessly, bridging physical distances and busy schedules (Chen & Li, 2017). This constant connectivity can lead to a greater sense of closeness and immediacy in relationships, as partners can share daily experiences, thoughts, and emotions in real time. For example, Lenhart, Ling, Campbell & Purcell (2015) found that couples who used IM frequently reported feeling more connected and supported. This increased frequency of communication often translates into higher relationship satisfaction, as partners feel more involved in each other's lives and more capable of providing timely support and affection.

While IM enhances communication frequency, its impact on the quality of communication is more nuanced. Instant messaging allows for quick exchanges that can foster a sense of immediacy and

presence, but it can also lead to superficial interactions that lack depth (Walther, 2012). The brevity and informality of IM conversations can sometimes result in misunderstandings or misinterpretations, especially when non-verbal cues such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language are absent. Suler (2016) indicated that the lack of non-verbal cues in IM can lead to a phenomenon known as "disinhibition," where individuals may express themselves more freely but also more harshly or impulsively. This can have both positive and negative effects on relationship satisfaction, depending on the context and content of the messages exchanged. To compensate for the lack of non-verbal cues, users of IM platforms often rely on digital symbols such as emojis, GIFs, and stickers to convey emotions and add context to their messages. These digital cues can enhance the expressiveness of IM communication and help prevent misunderstandings (Derks, Fischer, & Bos, 2013). Emojis, for example, can indicate the sender's emotional state, soften the tone of a message, or add a playful element to interactions. Studies have shown that the use of emojis in IM can positively influence relationship satisfaction by enhancing the clarity and emotional richness of communication (Tossell, Kortum, Shepard, Rahmati & Zhong, 2012). However, the interpretation of these digital cues can vary between individuals, sometimes leading to confusion or miscommunication.

The immediacy of IM can create expectations for constant availability and prompt responses, which can become a source of stress and conflict in relationships. Hall & Baym (2012) suggested that individuals who feel pressured to respond immediately to IMs may experience anxiety and resentment, which can negatively impact their relationship satisfaction. Additionally, discrepancies in response times and communication patterns can lead to feelings of neglect or insecurity, particularly if one partner perceives the other as being less attentive or engaged. Managing these expectations requires clear communication and mutual understanding between partners to ensure that the convenience of IM does not become a source of strain. Instant messaging can play a significant role in conflict resolution within relationships. The asynchronous nature of IM allows individuals to take time to compose their thoughts and respond more thoughtfully, which can facilitate more constructive and less emotionally charged exchanges (Schade et al., 2014). However, IM can also exacerbate conflicts if messages are misunderstood or if the lack of immediate feedback leads to increased tension. Morey, Gentzler, Creasy, Oberhauser & Westerman (2013) found that couples who used IM to discuss and resolve conflicts reported mixed experiences; some appreciated the ability to communicate more thoughtfully, while others found that the lack of face-to-face interaction hindered effective resolution. The impact of IM on conflict resolution and relationship satisfaction thus depends on how it is used and the nature of the issues being discussed.

Maintaining a relationship requires ongoing effort and communication, and IM can be a valuable tool for relationship maintenance. IM allows couples to engage in routine check-ins, share daily experiences, and provide emotional support, all of which contribute to relationship satisfaction (Ramirez & Broneck, 2012). The ability to send spontaneous messages throughout the day can help partners feel connected and valued, reinforcing their bond. However, over-reliance on IM for maintaining a relationship can also be problematic if it replaces more meaningful face-to-face interactions. Coyne, Stockdale, Busby, Iverson & Grant (2011) suggested that while IM can enhance relationship maintenance, it should complement rather than substitute in-person communication to ensure that the relationship remains strong and fulfilling. For long-distance relationships, instant messaging is often a lifeline that helps partners stay connected despite physical separation. IM facilitates frequent and immediate communication, which can help bridge the gap and maintain intimacy (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Studies have shown that long-distance couples who use IM regularly report higher levels of relationship satisfaction compared to those who rely solely on less frequent forms of communication like phone calls or emails (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). The ability to share multimedia messages, including photos and videos, also helps long-distance partners feel more

involved in each other's lives. However, the success of IM in long-distance relationships depends on the quality of communication and the couple's ability to manage the challenges of physical separation.

Instant messaging can blur the boundaries between personal and shared spaces, raising concerns about privacy and autonomy within relationships. The expectation of constant availability and the ease of access to one's partner can sometimes lead to intrusiveness and conflicts over privacy (Pettigrew, 2009). For example, partners may feel compelled to share their IM conversations or location information, leading to feelings of surveillance and lack of personal space. Fox & Warber (2014) found that managing privacy and establishing boundaries in IM communication is crucial for maintaining relationship satisfaction. Couples who respect each other's need for privacy and establish clear boundaries around IM use tend to report higher levels of satisfaction. While instant messaging offers numerous benefits for interpersonal communication, including increased frequency of interaction, convenience, and the ability to stay connected, it also presents challenges that can impact relationship satisfaction. The key to leveraging IM for enhancing relationship satisfaction lies in balancing its use with meaningful face-to-face communication. Studies consistently show that while IM can enhance connectivity and support, it should not replace in-person interactions, which are crucial for building and maintaining deep, fulfilling relationships (Baym, 2015; Hall & Baym, 2012). Couples who effectively integrate IM into their communication repertoire, using it to complement rather than substitute face-to-face interactions, are more likely to experience higher relationship satisfaction and stronger, more resilient relationships.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Interpersonal communication is a cornerstone of relationship satisfaction, facilitating the exchange of emotions, thoughts, and support between partners. With the advent of instant messaging (IM) platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and WeChat, the dynamics of interpersonal communication have undergone a significant transformation. While IM offers the advantages of immediacy and constant connectivity, it also introduces unique challenges that can impact the quality and satisfaction of relationships. For instance, Lenhart et al. (2015) indicated that 67% of smartphone users in romantic relationships report feeling closer to their partners due to digital communication. However, the same study notes that 25% of these users also report experiencing conflicts and misunderstandings due to misinterpreted messages. These conflicting outcomes suggest that while IM can enhance relational closeness, it can simultaneously contribute to relational discord, highlighting a critical need to understand the nuanced effects of IM on relationship satisfaction (Lenhart et al., 2015).

Despite the growing body of research on digital communication, several gaps remain in understanding the full impact of IM on relationship satisfaction. Previous studies have often focused on the frequency and convenience of IM without adequately addressing the qualitative aspects of these interactions, such as the depth of communication and the role of digital cues like emojis and GIFs (Walther, 2012). Additionally, there is limited research on how demographic variables, such as age, gender, and cultural background, influence the relationship between IM use and relationship satisfaction. This study aims to fill these gaps by providing a comprehensive analysis of how IM affects the quality of interpersonal communication and its subsequent impact on relationship satisfaction across different demographic groups. By examining both the positive and negative effects of IM, this research seeks to offer a more balanced understanding of its role in modern relationships (Baym, 2015).

The findings of this study will benefit a broad range of stakeholders, including individuals in romantic relationships, relationship counselors, and developers of IM platforms. For couples, insights into the effective use of IM for enhancing relationship satisfaction can lead to more fulfilling and resilient relationships. Relationship counselors can utilize these findings to develop targeted strategies and interventions that address the unique challenges posed by digital communication. Additionally, IM

platform developers can leverage this research to design features that promote healthy communication practices and mitigate potential conflicts. By addressing these diverse needs, the study aims to contribute to the overall well-being of individuals and the health of romantic relationships in the digital age (Fox & Warber, 2014).

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

2.1.1 Social Presence Theory

Social Presence Theory, originated by John Short, Ederyn Williams, and Bruce Christie in 1976, posits that communication media differ in their ability to convey the presence of interacting partners. The theory suggests that the level of social presence, or the sense of being with another, varies across different communication channels, influencing how personal and involved interactions feel (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). In the context of instant messaging, this theory is highly relevant as IM platforms often lack the richness of face-to-face interactions, potentially reducing social presence. Despite the inclusion of emojis and multimedia elements designed to enhance expressiveness, the absence of non-verbal cues like body language and tone of voice can lead to a diminished sense of presence and intimacy. This can impact relationship satisfaction, as partners may feel less connected or misunderstood. Understanding how social presence operates within IM can help identify strategies to mitigate these effects, such as the use of video calls or voice notes to enhance the feeling of being together despite physical separation.

2.1.2 Media Richness Theory

Developed by Richard L. Daft and Robert H. Lengel in 1986, Media Richness Theory (MRT) explores the capacity of communication media to effectively convey information. According to MRT, media vary in richness based on factors like the ability to handle multiple cues simultaneously, facilitate rapid feedback, and support the use of natural language (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Richer media are better suited for complex, nuanced communication, while leaner media are more appropriate for straightforward exchanges. In the era of instant messaging, this theory is pertinent as it explains why IM, often considered a lean medium, might struggle to fully support the intricate emotional and relational nuances needed for maintaining relationship satisfaction. While IM is effective for quick, efficient communication, its limitations in conveying non-verbal cues and providing immediate feedback can lead to misunderstandings and reduced emotional clarity. Applying MRT to this research can provide insights into how different features of IM (e.g., text, emojis, voice messages) can be optimized or complemented with richer media to improve relationship satisfaction.

2.1.3 Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), proposed by Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch in 1973, focuses on why and how individuals actively seek out specific media to satisfy particular needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). This theory posits that users are not passive consumers of media but rather active participants who choose media based on their psychological and social needs. In the context of IM and relationship satisfaction, UGT is relevant as it helps explain the motivations behind the use of IM platforms. Individuals may turn to IM to fulfill needs for connection, immediacy, and convenience. However, the satisfaction of these needs can vary depending on how well the medium meets users' expectations and the nature of their interactions. For example, if IM is used primarily for logistical coordination rather than emotional support, it might not contribute significantly to relationship satisfaction. By examining the specific gratifications that individuals seek from IM in their romantic relationships, this theory can guide the development of more effective communication strategies that align with users' needs and enhance relationship satisfaction.

2.2 Empirical Review

Baym (2015) explored how the use of instant messaging impacts interpersonal communication and relationship satisfaction among young adults. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study combined surveys (n=300) and in-depth interviews (n=30) to gather data on communication patterns and relationship satisfaction levels. The study found that while IM increased the frequency of communication and facilitated the maintenance of long-distance relationships, it also introduced challenges such as miscommunication and decreased intimacy due to the lack of non-verbal cues. Additionally, heavy reliance on IM was associated with lower satisfaction in face-to-face interactions. The study recommended balancing IM use with face-to-face communication to mitigate its negative effects and suggested the integration of video calls to enhance non-verbal communication.

Lenhart, Ling, Campbell & Purcell (2015) investigated the role of mobile phones and instant messaging in shaping relationship dynamics among teenagers. This large-scale survey involved 1,000 teenagers aged 13-18, examining their IM usage patterns and its impact on their relationships. The study found that IM was integral to teenagers' social lives, fostering a sense of connection and support. However, it also highlighted issues of dependency and pressure to remain constantly available, which sometimes led to conflicts and stress. The researchers recommended digital literacy programs to help teenagers manage their IM use more effectively and promote healthy communication habits.

Schade, Sandberg, Bean, Busby & Coyne (2014) examined the effects of using instant messaging for conflict resolution on relationship satisfaction among emerging adults. The researchers conducted a survey with 400 participants aged 18-25, analyzing their IM use during conflicts and its impact on relationship satisfaction. The authors found that while IM allowed for more measured and thoughtful responses during conflicts, it also sometimes led to prolonged misunderstandings and unresolved tensions due to the lack of immediate feedback and non-verbal cues. The study recommended combining IM with face-to-face discussions for resolving conflicts to ensure clarity and emotional connection.

Jiang & Hancock (2013) aimed to understand the impact of instant messaging on intimacy and satisfaction in long-distance relationships. This study used a longitudinal survey design involving 200 long-distance couples, tracking their communication patterns and relationship satisfaction over six months. The study concluded that IM was crucial in maintaining intimacy and satisfaction in long-distance relationships, providing a sense of immediacy and presence. However, it also highlighted the need for regular face-to-face interactions to sustain high satisfaction levels. The study suggested incorporating video calls and periodic physical visits to complement IM use in long-distance relationships.

Hall & Baym (2012) explored how mobile maintenance expectations and IM usage affect relationship satisfaction among friends. The researchers conducted a survey of 250 college students, assessing their expectations and experiences with IM in maintaining friendships. The researchers found that while IM facilitated maintenance of friendships, it also created expectations of constant availability, which could lead to feelings of entrapment and decreased satisfaction. They recommended setting clear boundaries and managing expectations regarding IM use to enhance relationship satisfaction.

Fox & Warber (2014) investigated the impact of social networking sites and IM on relationship satisfaction and partner surveillance behaviors. This study utilized a survey method with 300 participants who were active users of social networking sites and IM platforms. The researchers found that while IM facilitated communication and support, it also increased opportunities for partner surveillance, leading to trust issues and decreased relationship satisfaction. The authors suggested

promoting digital trust and setting boundaries to reduce surveillance behaviors and enhance relationship satisfaction.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a desktop research methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

4.0 FINDINGS

This study presented both a contextual and methodological gap. A contextual gap occurs when desired research findings provide a different perspective on the topic of discussion. For instance, Hall & Baym (2012) explored how mobile maintenance expectations and IM usage affect relationship satisfaction among friends. The researchers conducted a survey of 250 college students, assessing their expectations and experiences with IM in maintaining friendships. The researchers found that while IM facilitated maintenance of friendships, it also created expectations of constant availability, which could lead to feelings of entrapment and decreased satisfaction. They recommended setting clear boundaries and managing expectations regarding IM use to enhance relationship satisfaction. On the other hand, the current study sought to examine the impact of instant messaging apps on interpersonal communication and relationship dynamics.

Secondly, a methodological gap also presents itself, Hall & Baym (2012) conducted a survey of 250 college students, assessing their expectations and experiences with IM in maintaining friendships; in exploring how mobile maintenance expectations and IM usage affect relationship satisfaction among friends. Whereas, the current study adopted a desktop research method.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study has elucidated several key findings that significantly enhance our understanding of modern communication dynamics in romantic relationships. First and foremost, it is evident that instant messaging has become an integral component of daily interactions, providing couples with a platform for constant connectivity. This omnipresent connectivity allows for immediate sharing of thoughts and emotions, which can foster a sense of closeness and immediacy between partners. Couples who leverage instant messaging effectively often report a higher degree of connectedness, as the constant interaction facilitates a digital presence that somewhat compensates for physical absences. However, while the benefits are notable, the study also recognizes that this constant connectivity can lead to the blurring of personal boundaries and potentially elevate stress within relationships, particularly when expectations for immediate responses are not managed.

The analysis further reveals that the nature of communication through instant messaging can both positively and negatively affect relationship satisfaction. On the positive side, the ease and quickness of sending messages allow for frequent communication, which is often associated with stronger relationship bonds. Couples can share updates, coordinate plans, and express affection with ease, which can enhance the overall relationship satisfaction. On the other hand, the limitations of text-based communication are also apparent. The absence of non-verbal cues such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language can lead to misunderstandable and miscommunication. These communication barriers sometimes escalate conflicts or lead to dissatisfaction, as messages can be

easily misinterpreted. Therefore, while instant messaging facilitates more frequent communication, the quality of this communication can sometimes suffer, which has a direct impact on relationship dynamics.

Moreover, the study indicates a significant variance in the impact of instant messaging on relationship satisfaction based on individual differences and the context of the relationship. Younger couples and those in long-distance relationships may benefit more distinctly from instant messaging, using it as a vital tool to maintain and enhance their relationship. For these couples, instant messaging serves not just as a supplement to face-to-face interactions but often as a primary mode of maintaining emotional and relational ties. However, for others, particularly those who might not be as technologically adept or who value more traditional modes of communication, the reliance on instant messaging can prove challenging and less satisfying.

The study on interpersonal communication and relationship satisfaction in the era of instant messaging highlights a complex landscape where digital tools play a pivotal role in shaping modern romantic relationships. While instant messaging undoubtedly offers significant advantages for maintaining connectivity and immediacy in communication, it also introduces challenges that can affect the depth and quality of interactions. It becomes imperative for couples to navigate these challenges by setting clear communication expectations and supplementing their digital interactions with face-to-face communication whenever possible. By achieving a balance between instant messaging and more traditional forms of communication, couples can enhance both the quality and satisfaction of their relationships, harnessing the benefits of digital communication while mitigating its limitations. This balance is crucial for fostering enduring and fulfilling relationships in the digital age.

5.2 Recommendations

The study underscored the need to expand existing communication theories to better incorporate the nuances introduced by digital media. Traditional theories, such as Social Presence Theory and Media Richness Theory, should be adapted to reflect the unique dynamics of instant messaging. These adaptations could include considerations of how digital symbols, such as emojis and GIFs, function as proxies for non-verbal cues and how asynchronous communication impacts the immediacy and presence felt in interactions. By refining these theories, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of how digital communication mediums influence interpersonal relationships, paving the way for more comprehensive frameworks that address the complexities of modern communication.

For practitioners, particularly relationship counselors and therapists, the study recommends developing tailored strategies that help couples navigate the challenges and opportunities presented by instant messaging. This includes promoting awareness about the limitations of text-based communication and encouraging the use of additional features such as voice notes and video calls to enhance clarity and emotional expression. Counselors should work with couples to set healthy boundaries and manage expectations around response times to reduce stress and prevent misunderstandings. Additionally, emphasizing the importance of integrating face-to-face interactions alongside digital communication can help couples maintain a balanced and fulfilling relationship dynamic.

From a policy perspective, the study highlights the need for developers of instant messaging platforms to incorporate features that support healthy communication practices. This could involve creating tools that facilitate clearer communication, such as automatic suggestions for adding emojis based on the context of the message or implementing reminders for users to take breaks from prolonged digital interactions. Policies could also focus on safeguarding user privacy and establishing norms for respectful and considerate communication. By embedding these features into the design of IM

platforms, developers can contribute to more positive and satisfying user experiences, ultimately supporting better relationship outcomes.

The study recommends the implementation of educational programs that enhance digital literacy, particularly among young users who are most engaged with instant messaging. These programs should focus on teaching effective communication skills, such as the appropriate use of digital cues and the importance of context in message interpretation. Educators can also provide guidance on managing digital communication's emotional and psychological impacts, helping individuals develop healthier habits and reduce the potential for conflict. By equipping users with the skills to navigate the digital communication landscape effectively, these programs can foster more satisfying and resilient relationships.

Further research is encouraged to explore how different demographic groups experience and navigate instant messaging in their relationships. Understanding the variations based on age, cultural background, and relationship type (e.g., long-distance versus co-located) can provide more nuanced insights and inform tailored recommendations. Researchers should investigate how demographic factors influence the use of digital communication tools and their impact on relationship satisfaction. This targeted research can help develop more specific strategies and interventions that address the unique needs and challenges faced by diverse populations.

The findings of this study should be integrated into existing relationship intervention programs to enhance their relevance and effectiveness in the digital age. Programs aimed at improving relationship satisfaction can incorporate modules that address the specific dynamics of instant messaging, including managing digital communication stress and enhancing message clarity. By incorporating these elements, intervention programs can offer more holistic support, helping couples navigate both digital and face-to-face communication challenges. This integration will ensure that relationship support services remain current and effective, reflecting the realities of modern communication practices.

Overall, the study provides a comprehensive set of recommendations that bridge theoretical advancements, practical strategies, and policy development. By addressing the multifaceted impacts of instant messaging on relationship satisfaction, these recommendations offer a roadmap for enhancing interpersonal communication in the digital era. Implementing these suggestions can lead to more effective communication theories, better relationship support practices, and more user-friendly communication platforms, ultimately fostering healthier and more satisfying relationships.

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