

Blessed are the Duos Living in Digital Culture: Mobile Phone Mediated Conciliation in Couple Relationships

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Abstract - Couple communication is one of the most basic and quintessential type of communications among all the other relational communications. This paper tries to establish that family, the most basic and vital unit of a society which is run by this couple living in the digital culture could be run more smoothly with the mediation of an assistive tool, the mobile phone and its services as well as applications. Various research articles and related corpus are collected by electronic searches using different keywords. This paper confirms that the mobile technology could be a windfall for the betterment and strengthening of couple relationship by letting them maintain their connection even online, unlike the couples before digital era. Overcoming various difficulties like distancing, direct communication disconnect and safety issues, mobile phones supports the couples through ongoing communication, emotional expressivity, mediation, connected presence and some effective as well as playful changes in their interactions.

Keywords: Couple communication, Digital culture, Mobile phone, Emotion communication, Gender differences

I. INTRODUCTION

Divorce is a mounting catastrophe in the present India (and the whole world). Men and women are getting separated as fast as they join or may be gradually getting unconnected after their vows to be together forever. "In our period of family stress and divorce, there is intense media and public interest in understanding, treating, and preventing marital discord", writes Heyman (2001). It is the same interest which awakened us and this paper is an indirect attempt to discover a way to understand, treat and prevent marital discord by understanding the effectiveness of mobile phone communication between couples for fortifying their relationship.

Couples are meant to be happy and their conflicts cannot remain unabated for the sustenance of the society as a whole. Society is built by these couples and their future generations which create families. Communication is the process that could help in achieving this goal. Couple communication is the communication between the couples which could act as a bridge connecting the sender and the receiver: the man and the woman in the relationship.

Men and women are different; visibly physiologically, and not-so-obviously psychologically and behaviourally. This difference must be patched up or at least balanced for the survival of the relationship. Blessed is the Gen Y (Born: 1977-1994) as well as Gen X (Born: 1966-1976) that they are living in digital culture.

Digital culture is a blanket concept that describes the idea that technology and the Internet significantly shape the way

we interact, behave, think, and communicate as human beings in a societal setting (d'Arnault, 2015). It is a lifestyle, and you're part of it. You're living it, he adds. "Culture is only communication", states one of the two extreme forms of radical hypothesis (Eco, 1978). And digital culture stands for the contemporary phase of communication technologies, one that follows 19th century print culture and 20th century electronic broadcast culture, and that is deeply amplified and accelerated by the popularity of networked computers, personalised technologies and digital images (Wikiversity, 2011). Mobile phone is one of the major media bestowed with digital culture which could be introduced into the couple's connection that could facilitate various provisions in their everyday communication.

Both men and women are emotional with variations in their levels of experience and expressivity. Thus, emotion communication is a vital type of communication that must happen between couples. And mobile phone could facilitate this emotion communication both explicitly and implicitly with the help of its various services and applications.

II. METHOD

The means of collecting data was the Google Search Engine. Various keywords like 'women are emotional and men are', 'men's restricted emotionality', 'emotional expressiveness', 'couple communication', 'emotion communication', 'mobile communication in couple relationships', 'couple communication research studies and articles', 'broken couple', 'how to maintain a healthy relationship' were used for the search. Research papers and

articles published online as well as offline were collected unanimously. The major focus area revolved around the keywords listed above in the paper, i. e. 'couple communication', 'mobile phone', 'emotion communication', and 'gender differences'.

III. REVIEW OF PREVIOUS STUDIES

There are many articles and researches which deal with phones and relationships, especially in a negative slant, how mobile/smart/cell phones ruin/hurt/disconnect/negatively impact relationships (Oaklander 2016, Lin 2012, Winch 2015, GoodTherapy.org 2016). On the other hand, through this paper we try to explore the interoperability of mobile phones and relationships in a healthy manner. Winch (2015) uses the term technoferece--the interference of technology in couple relationships and implications for women's personal and relational well-being because of everyday intrusions and interruptions due to technology devices (Collins Dictionary, 2015)--to explain this issue and to further resolve the same. All these studies prove that the phones can only sabotage the relationships rather than doing good to it.

One of the basic needs of humans according to Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is 'Social Belonging'. Being a social animal, man expects social acceptance making him feel more secure and safe in his social set up. According to Maslow, humans need to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance among their social groups (Cloosterman, n.d.). And this love and belongingness are something which couples too expect from each other. This need is interpersonal and for this the basic skill is communication. In conjunction with the factor communication, the following review discusses aspects like emotion, positives of mobile phone usage and the transformation which mobile phone usage has brought about in couples and their relationships. In conjunction with the factor communication, the following review discusses the aspects like emotion, positives of mobile phone usage and the transformations which mobile phone usage has brought about in couples and their relationships.

3.1 Couple communication

Marriage relies heavily on communication and transmission (Benavante, 2013). Communication being the basic use of smart phones and communication being the major work for successful relationships (Wiley, 2007), couples could depend on smart phones for their 'communication work'. And the couples include these phones as well as internet in their growing part of communication in couple relationships (Doring and Dietmar, 2004). But, Andrew K. Przybylski and Netta Weinstein of the University of Essex, through their studies, emphasised that our phones can hurt our close relationships (Lin, 2012).

Couple communication is the communication between couples even for which the need to enhance communication

skills is appreciable nowadays. Couples must know how to communicate with each other for living a healthy relationship. Communication is fundamental to intimate couple relationships that help as a tool for knowing or emotionally connecting with one another (Wiley, 2007). Counselling sessions and the like specifies a lot about the need for communication and the ways to do this while couples undergo these sessions.

Couples should communicate with each other, whether it is offline or online, to express their ideas, emotions, experiences, jokes, everyday activities, responsibilities, tensions, and more. And this is what the digital couples do too through their online communication using various mobile phone services and applications by exchanging and discussing contents of their interests: funny messages/videos/pictures, jokes, information, pictures, games, etc. Wiley (2007) mentions Driver and Gottman (2004) in her paper, "couples build intimacy through hundreds of very ordinary, mundane moments in which they attempt to make emotional connections." Thus, the communication of the couples via smart phones which "involves connecting by sharing information or resources, seeking support or comfort, forming alliances, conveying emotion, or effecting some change in their environment" (Wiley, 2007) leads to intimacy, closeness and commitment.

3.2 Emotion/al communication and couples

Social sharing is unavoidable for humans. They need to share their emotional experience. According to social sharing studies conducted by Rimé et. al. (1991 in Derks et. al. 2007), "men are much more likely to talk to women (typically their partners) about their feelings, whereas women share their emotions with a wider range of persons, both male and female". This shows that men are also 'sharing-type', though mostly we consider women to be so.

Lori CluffSchade (in Francella, 2015), a marriage and family therapist at Brigham Young University says, "The more emotionally laden a topic is, the less successful a texting conversation will be." On the other hand, mobile communication has become significant for the most intimate form of interpersonal relationships: the couple relationship, states Doring and Dietmar (2004). Emotional communication is the key to happiness between the spouses ("Emotional Communication Between Spouses – I," 2012).

Emotion communication is defined as the recognition, expression and sharing of emotions or moods between two or more individuals (Derks et. al., 2007). Emotional communication which is the creation of relationship-relevant meaning within a couple for purposes of connection is like the circulatory system of a relationship and it allows meaning and sentiment to flow between partners (Wiley, 2007).

3.2.1 Explicit emotion communication and implicit emotion communication

Emotion communication includes explicit and implicit forms. Explicit emotion communication involves references to discrete emotions, through verbal emotion labels (I am angry), appraisals (this is scary), expressions and tendencies to act (I would like to hit you) or emblems (), (Derks et. al., 2007). Implicit emotion communication includes the emotional style of the message, as can be inferred from the degree of personal involvement, self-disclosure, language use, etc., (Derks et. al., 2007).

Whether it is explicit or implicit, mobile phone is a medium endowed with various services and applications to perform these communications. Voice calls, Text messages, Instant Messaging Services, Video conferencing, Apps for daily activities, non-verbal cues such as emoticons and emojis, Chatting with or without webcams and more prolongs the list of services provided by mobile phone for couples to communicate. Irrespective of these features, Francella (2015) cautions people in relationships with few "tips to keep their relationship from going under;" not texting enough, texting too much, having a very special relationship with phone, sexting more than texting and discussing serious topics over phone.

The differences in emotional communication in CMC (Computer-mediated Communication) and F2F (Face-to-face) communication explained by Derks et. al. (2007) could be mentioned here. The absence of emotional embodiment, the greater controllability of emotional reactions and reduced spontaneity could be called as major advantages which could be taken advantage of by the couples in digital era and thus keep their relationships going without much of emotional outbursts and issues.

3.3 Mobile technology as a mediator: Turning unhappy couples happy

Mobile technology does not need a definition in this era of smart phones. It is a technology which has become like an 'organ' of human body. Men and women are so attached to this particular medium that they find it making their lives very comfortable and secure, that Lin (2012) calls the mobile phone as an indispensable lifeline to the rest of the world.

Mobile phone usage has resulted in conflicts, distraction and depression (GoodTherapy.org, 2016) and more between partners in a romantic relationship and it has introduced a process of distraction and separation in couple relationships (Hertlein, 2012 in Leggett & Rossouw, 2014). And Winch (2015) added mobile phone to the list of the three big disputes for couples' arguments; sex, money and kids. Walther (1995) while examining the effects of CMC interaction on the development of close relationships found out that CMC groups unlike the F2F groups rated as significantly more positive on several dimensions of

intimacy, as well as on social (vs. task) orientation than F2F groups.

On the other hand, mobile phone is a medium for building relationships. This helps in bringing people close. Individuals can develop strong relationships with mobile phones, which combine communication, computing abilities, and personalized applications (Lang & Jarvenpaa, 2005). Servies (2012) found that participants who used their cell phones substantively with their partners reported more love and commitment in their relationships than those who did not use their cell phones as often.

First of all, techno-compatible, borrowing from Fox's (2013) web article, is how couples should be. When a couple is techno-compatible, they have similar values, perceptions, or behaviours about the appropriate use of communication technology. They should know when and where not to use it, where and where not to use it, how and how not to use it and more. Winch (2016) suggests various steps to address this issue of technofence including the 'whens', 'wheres' and more.

3.4 The changes due to this 'anathema'

Though considered as a thing consigned to destruction of relationships, mobile phone has enforced various changes in the ordinary (Gen Y as well as Gen X) couple relationships. Couples are not anymore just two of them, but an external environment full of humans and many are connected to them through the digital world. They are always turned on, connected and available. They cycle through various online social media like blogs, social networking sites, microblogging outlets, social bookmarking outlets, video sharing outlets, photo sharing outlets and instant messaging services, and, have a lot to talk, share and discuss. This multiplicity of interactions has increased their topics of conversation. It has shaped the interactions between couples.

Legett and Roussouw (2014) explored the impact of technology use on couple relationships and thus to investigate how technology may impact on an individual's sense of attachment and control within the relationship. They found that using all forms of technology while engaging and interacting with one another is related to positive perceptions of the relationship. This study explains, "In fact, when a mobile phone was used while engaging and interacting with a partner, there was a positive link with relationship perception. Therefore, if a couple has a positive perception of their relationship, they are also likely to engage/interact positively with their partner while using mobile phones."

Campbell and Ling (2009, in Leggett & Rossouw, 2014) found that frequent mobile phone use contributes to intimacy, and that frequent connection via the mobile phone allows for the sharing of a person's activities and whereabouts to their partner, which enhances connections

between couples. Research has suggested both that problematic phone use leads to blurred boundaries within relationships, and that it can enhance connections between couples (Rossouw, 2014).

Couples living in the digital culture do use technology, especially to enhance their connections and quality of life (Campbell & Ling, 2009) by adopting it in their day-to-day lives. They use it for the easy management of their daily activities of theirs; when at office and at home. They communicate with each other over mobile phones to manage their household-related works easily. They enjoy their partner's emotional presence (Dr. Nicastro, 2012) as well as 'presence', the connected presence, even when they are physically apart (Campbell & Ling, 2009). They keep connected, share their WhatsApp messages, share their photos together, and even share their phones to share the jokes or information which they got online and engage in conversations.

'Maintaining a conversational connection', 'permitting play' and 'creating shared and secret uniqueness' are three categories of appropriation derived by Kelly and Watts (2015) while studying emojis beyond emotion in mediated close personal relationships. It could be said that it is not only emojis but also all the other features and services of mobile phones as well as other technologies used by couples in digital culture are getting benefitted by the above-mentioned three appropriations. They keep their conversation running, they engage in playful interaction and they do create their own new meanings in their conversations (Kelly & Watts, 2015).

IV. CONCLUSION

In this paper we reviewed research regarding the infusion of digital way of life in couple (emotion) communication. This thematic paper reveals that couples in digital culture involve in communication over mobile medium unlike early couples who had only offline communication, to undergo certain transformations like increased interaction and engagement which could result in the improvement of couple relationships. Whether it be emotion communication or phatic communication, the couples must attain mobile pragmatic competence (Danesi, 2017). Competence means the ability to do something successfully or efficiently (Oxford Dictionaries, 2017). Thus, mobile pragmatic competence is the ability to use mobile phones or smart phones for 'communication work' successfully or efficiently. Understanding the 'what-to' and 'what-not-to' and the like related to mobile phone use, it could help the couples in the mediation and improvement of their relationships. Based on the necessity, the couples will have to change the degree of usage of their smart phones for better communication. But there are also certain rules laid down and followed by couples too, when it comes to mobile phone usage (Fox, 2013). Getting involved in emotion talk, expressing emotion through CMC and using

both verbal and non-verbal language through a medium even when physically together as well as apart increases the chances for the 'digital couples' to support their relational maintenance and relational satisfaction.

Albeit, face-to-face communication can never be a negating factor but always the predominant one in building and maintaining relationships along with which the mediated communication could play a supporting role. Mobile phone communication could help in furthering the couple relationships by concretising and strengthening their relationships. Unlike the former times, there is this powerful and effective medium which could strengthen the relationships by letting the communication continue irrespective of the partners' distancing due to occupation, responsibilities or other situations like spouse or children being alone at home or emergency situations. Mobile phones can play the role of a mediator and can help couples to overcome all these issues because of the convenience and speed of this particular type of communication.

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