ASPIRATION Journal

(ASPIKOM Jabodetabek International Research
of Communication)

Journal homepage: www.aspiration.id/index.php

ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS ON INSTAGRAM: EXPLORING KNAPP'S RELATIONAL STAGE MODEL

Aqila Sheila Zhafira[1], Dindin Dimyati[2*], Aditya Kumar Shukla[3]

[1] President University, Jl. Ki Hajar Dewantara Kota Jababeka Cikarang Baru - Bekasi 17550, Indonesia
[2] Telkom University, Jl. Telekomunikasi No. 1, Terusan Buahbatu-Bojongsoang, Sukapura, Bandung, Jawa Barat 40257, Indonesia
[3] Manipal University, Jaipur, Rajasthan 303007, India
[1]nadiffamakarim@gmail.com, [2]rakeanwastu@telkomuniversity.ac.id, [3]adityakumar.shukla@jaipur.manipal.edu

ARTICLE INFO

How to cite this article: Zhafira, A.S; Dimyati, D; Shukla, A.D. (2021). Romantic Relationships on Instagram: Exploring Knapp's Relational Stage Model.. ASPIRATION Journal Vol.2(2), November 2021, p.129-154 https://doi.org/10.56353/aspiration.v2i2.29

ABSTRACT

Social media users in Indonesia are increasing today. Young adults aged 18 to 24 years old dominate around 39% of active Instagram users in Indonesia. The purpose of this study is to understand how couples use Instagram to develop their romantic relationships and reduce their uncertainty at the initiating stage of relationship development. The method used in this research was qualitative with a phenomenological research approach. The researchers interviewed two romantic couples, young adults who were active Instagram users - they log in daily and actively engage in the platform. This study has shown that Instagram has replaced Facebook as the first information-seeking tool and the main platform for making an initial approach before face-to-face interaction in young adults. The tangible difference lies in how the stranger gets acquainted on Instagram at the initiating stage and how they show off their affection of 'in relationship' at the bonding stage. Further, the result indicates that Instagram is the most common means of passive uncertainty reduction strategy at

the initiating stage of relationship strategy, and active strategy as the final development, followed by interactive stage.

INTRODUCTION

According to Solomon & Theiss (2013:5), interpersonal communication is the process of extracting meanings between two individuals in which one's actions can impact the actions of the other. DeVito (2014:197) says that the way romantic couples communicate is important because it influences the integrity of relationships, determining whether they will be well-developed, maintained, or destroyed through communication.

In today's era of globalization, social networking sites (SNS) play an important role in changing how people communicate and develop their interpersonal relationships. Sending, sharing, or posting messages online feels like a never-ending process (Baym, 2010; Farrugia, 2013). Fifty-nine percent of Internet users are reported to prefer to meet future romantic partners online. The status of a romantic relationship can be revealed in a second person screening through the couple's social media (Smith & Duggan, 2013).

In Indonesia, 56% of 268.2 million total population are actively using social media as of January 2019 (We Are Social, 2019). Instagram is the top 6 social networking site globally as of July 2019 (Statista.com, 2019). Indonesia is the fourth leading country in the world in terms of the number of Instagram users. It is recorded that, as of July 2019, Indonesia has reached around 59 million active users (Statista.com, 2019). Additionally, Instagram is dominated by Indonesian young adults aged 18 to 24 years old, over 39% of total active users (NapoleonCat, 2019); conversely, 33.6% of Facebook users consist of those aged 25 to 34 years old (NapoleonCat, 2019). Instagram was founded in 2010 as an online application allowing people to connect with pictures, videos, messages, or comments in a fascinating way. Data updated by 2019, Instagram now has 1B+ active monthly users and 500M+ daily stories worldwide (Instagram Press News, 2019).

Figure 1. The Number of Internet & Social Networking Sites Users in Indonesia as of

January 2019

Source: We Are Social (2019)

Accordingly, this study aims to understand how couples use Instagram to develop their romantic relationships and reduce their uncertainty at the initiating stage of relationship development. Referring to this, we have constructed two research questions:

1. How do couples develop their romantic relationship on Instagram?

2. How do couples reduce uncertainty at the initiating stage of a romantic relationship on Instagram?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Knapp's Relational Stage Model

For the past 50 years, Knapp's relational stage model has been testified in relationship development and dissolution; it has become the fundamental of interpersonal communication theory (Fox & Warber, 2013). In building a relationship, this theory is based on everyday human formation of new relationships that always begins with the conversation with strangers for the first time (Solomon & Theiss, 2013). Accordingly, most people would have experienced whether their relationship was developed or terminated.

As cited by Solomon & Theiss (2013:240), Knapp conceptualizes the five levels of relationship development model: first, the initiating stage refers to the first impressions when someone puts romantic interests on their potential romantic partners. This stage is critical in determining whether the relationship should be developed or ended at the basic level. Second, the experimenting stage is defined wherein people have already become good friends. They seek more detailed information to alleviate uncertainty and uneasiness; they may interact consciously but not consistently. At this point, the level of interest is also assessed. They reveal that they are already romantically engaged in each other in the third stage, the intensifying stage. Personal boundaries are dissolving, and self-disclosure is beginning to emerge; they are already comfortable to share personal information, ideas, and feelings. The next step is the integrating stage, where they typically express their interdependence by using the words "we" and "us" to demonstrate an interdependent relational. This stage is also known as the "friend zone" or "more than simply a good friend." Finally, the bonding stage is regarded as the completion of the relationship status; the couple has mutual affection on purpose.

One notable change in romantic relationships on social media is that individuals require less time to get acquainted without necessarily having met in person (Fox & Anderegg, 2014). However, individuals are suggested to put more attention to maintain their healthy online relationship in any context of relationship – personal or professional relationship (Schauer, 2015). The rise of social networking sites has altered the way couples communicate or share meanings. Thus the implementation of Knapp's relational stage model in romantic relationship development is also adjusted (Solomon & Theiss, 2013).

The researchers have reviewed two previous studies by Fox et al. (2013) and Van Ouytsel et al. (2016) that implement the theory on Facebook. The studies examine Knapp's relationship development model, which examined the whole stages of social media. The studies look at Knapp's relationship development model, which looked at all stages of relationship development on social media. Fox et al. (2013) studied a

focus group of young individuals aged 18 to 23 years old. They discovered that, at the outset, Facebook is a more convenient and easy way to interact with a potential partner than meeting face-to-face. People gently show their fondness or interest feelings to their prospective partners through likes, comments, or sending a private message on Facebook, which reduces the fear of rejection or makes the initiating stage less threatening.

Van Ouytsel et al. (2016) conducted a focus group discussion of adolescent age range between 15 and 18 years old, consistent with earlier findings. According to the researchers, Facebook is a valuable source of information about potential love partners, particularly at the beginning, such as their hobbies, previous relationships, list of friends, and past experiences. As a result, Facebook allows people to screen possible partners first, reducing the risk of rejection or other unpleasant sentiments. They also add that pictures are the primary means to determine a potential romantic partner character or personality, followed by other factors such as status updates, comments, and the list of friends. The example of quick judgments online are immature impressions portrayed by boys whose profile pages full of cars, video games, or sexy female models. When the girls keep their ex's photos on their profile pages, they are not ready for a new relationship.

The researchers also reviewed other scholars who examined double-edged swords of the use of social networking sites on the development of romantic relationships by Muise et al. (2009), Fox et al. (2013;2018), LeFebvre et al. (2015). The study by Muise et al. (2009) explored the use of Facebook by young adults, aged 17 to 24 years old who are currently in a romantic relationship and declared that Facebook plays a negative role in dissolving romantic relationships because of the increase of the level of jealousy-related feelings of each partner due to several factors. One of them was the amount of time each partner spent on Facebook; the longer they were online, the higher the level of jealousy.

According to Fox et al. (2013), Facebook may be a blessing and a curse for romantic relationships. Facebook can be a threat to a relationship, especially when

the couple is in the process of reuniting and maintaining their connection (integrating stage & bonding stage). The more time couples spend on Facebook, the more their relationship is produced by the platform's users. As a result, the couple's feelings for each other become unreal (Fox et al.,2013). Furthermore, in keeping with the initial concept, after a relationship ends, the most common actions on Facebook are to unfriend the ex-partner, delete all images and wall postings linked to the ex-partner, and continue stalking the ex-partner's page (Frampton & Fox, 2018; LeFebvre et al., 2015).

The researchers strongly agree that social networking sites have a great way to connect with a potential partner quickly rather than face to face. Consequently, people face possible challenges as they want to achieve the highest stage of romantic relationship development, that is, at the bonding stage. The main challenges are the emergence of social pressures, the feeling of jealousy, and dissatisfaction. If people fail to avoid unwanted feelings and maintain a healthy relationship, the relationship can be terminated at the integrating and bonding stage.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory at the Initiating Stage

Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) was developed by Charles Berger and Richard Calabrese in 1975. It explains how communication reduces uncertainties by applying information-seeking behavior to find out more about others. This theory is not merely applicable to romantic relationships but also family, business, or friendship levels.

The use of uncertainty reduction strategies has spread into today's online environment. In the beginning, behavioral refers to our unsure feelings about how we will act or how others will act, whereas cognitive refers to our unsure thoughts about others or what others may think of us (West & Turner, 2010:149). To reduce their discomfort feelings, Fox & Anderegg (2014) defines as follows:

Passive strategies on social networking sites

Passive strategies are *creeping* – screening through potential mates' pictures, relationship status, timeline post, or list of friends without their knowledge. According to Fox and Anderegg (2014), passive strategies are mostly used at the initiating stage when people have no idea about each other. The intimacy is typically low before individuals try to engage in casual dating. Thus, face-to-face interaction like asking direct questions to a potential partner may seem least appropriate at the early stage. Passive strategies are also considered normative when couples are exclusively dating – they tend to observe their partners' social media activities to reduce the feeling of getting jealous or the uncertain feeling that the partner is not serious about the relationship. In line with that, Antheunis et al. (2010) examined a well-known social media platform in the Netherlands found that passive strategies are used the most frequently, followed by interactive and active strategies, particularly at the initiating stage.

Active strategies on social networking sites

In the online context, active strategies are the strategies of asking a third party about the target partner's information. Such third parties include family, friends, colleagues, or business partners online. A friend request is the first step of an active strategy on social media (Fox & Anderegg, 2014). These strategies are considered positive intentions (not be seen as too attractive or clingy) when individuals are exclusively dating. Otherwise, an individual may consider the partner too obsessed if they contact the target partner's family members or friends when they are still in a casual date because active strategies require a commitment to the relationship.

Interactive strategies on social networking sites

Interactive strategies are online interactions between two individuals, such as personal chatting, posting comments or pictures on a partner's timeline, and tagging partners in an official status (Fox & Anderegg, 2014). Moreover, like active strategies, Fox and Anderegg also found that interactive strategies are well acceptable after face-to-face interaction or after the individuals are exclusively dating. Hence, they also perceive interactive strategies to achieve multiple relationship goals that are often related to public displays of affection – intentionally showing off the relationship to the public. A previous study by Sharabi & Dykstra-DeVette (2019) argued that interactive strategies could be executed at the early stage of relationship development to reduce uncertainty because most individuals on dating sites usually start personal chats by making a good impression of themselves as easy-going persons with a sense of humor like saying, *"Oh hey: P How's it going?".* In such cases, the researchers believe that applying interactive strategies between online dating sites and social networking sites might have different applications. In online dating sites, most individuals perceive that those interactive strategies are normative because people are not meant to be acquainted with strangers when they sign up. Accordingly, the researchers agreed that interactive strategies are the least normative for individuals who were never involved in face-to-face interactions or not yet into exclusively dating.

METHODOLOGY

The focus of this study is to conduct a qualitative descriptive study on Instagram using a phenomenological model, with Knapp's relationship development model serving as the grand theory and uncertainty reduction theory in the early stages serving as the topic-related theory. It considers two loving couples who are currently dating and who have an Instagram account. The informants are young adults aged 18 to 24, who account for 39% of all active Instagram users in Indonesia

(NapoleonCat, 2019). According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is an approach to examining a social or human problem by exploring individual or group situations and behavior to address a perspective on a phenomenon.

Key Informants

The researchers interviewed two romantic couples — two females and two males, aged between 18 to 25 years old who are students at the President University. The participants study different courses: Communication Study, International Relations, Business Administration, and Management. Further, all the informants are active Instagram users — they log in daily and are actively engaged on the platform for at least 3 hours a day. All the participants have spent about 7 ½ years on Instagram (N=4). Concerning privacy, the key informants have signed a letter of consent. Their participations were entirely voluntary; they were aware and consented to share photos, privacy on posts for research purposes.

Research Instrument

The study used a phenomenological research approach. Phenomenological research is a qualitative research approach that aids in the description of an individual lived experiences. The phenomenological method is concerned with investigating the phenomena that have affected an individual. This method emphasizes specifics and identifies a phenomenon as perceived by an individual in a given situation. It can also be used to investigate the similarities in a group of people's behaviors. Phenomenological research is a method for thoroughly comprehending individual situations. The theories are developed transparently, with the evidence readily available to the reader. Phenomenological research is an effective method for comprehending personal experiences (Harappa Education, 2021). The research used a semi-structured interview approach and observation. The semi-structured interview allowed the researchers the freedom and flexibility to construct the interview questions, while observation allowed the researchers to observe the couple's romantic relationship. The couples' consent was sought to analyze how the romantic couples used their Instagram handles in developing their romantic relationships. The

researchers analyzed the intensity of how often the couples posted on Instagram, utilized their liked marks and comments before and after they were officially dating.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Application of Knapps' Model Relationship Development on Instagram

At the "initiating stage," it appears that Instagram replaced Facebook among all four informants, whose first online interactions were 'follow for follow'. Similarly, two of the informants liked their partners' post, and two others used direct messages as noted below:

> I knew her the first time…[through] personal chat from a friend of mine. Then not long after, knowing she has [an] Instagram *[account]*, I immediately followed her and liked her posts. I also screenshot one photo of her from her…profile once — even though at that time, I still had a girlfriend. I love*[d]* seeing her. (DY)

At this stage, all informants also agreed that they were frequently doing profile visit on their crushes' Instagram account through Instagram posts or Instagram stories. It was concluded that they were used to looking at the basic information of their potential partners: hobbies or interests, personalities, family finances, lifestyles, friends, and their past experiences with previous romantic partners. Moreover, Instagram helps the initial approach in the initiating phase more quickly and effectively because it has not been incorporated into a serious, direct conversation. So, all individuals prefer communicating via Instagram: using fast and indirect approaches to look at the information about potential partners.

The second stage was the "experimenting stage," where they had already become good friends. All the informants acknowledged that they were balancing online with offline approach). They used an online approach to consistently visit each other's profiles, more intensely than during the initiating stage. Usually, potential partners became subjects of top research on their Instagram accounts. In addition, several other things had to do with "seeking attention" through motivations: likes, leaving

comments on their crush's posts, replying on the Instagram stories, or even sending funny memes through direct messages on Instagram (N=4).

This study also revealed that most of the informants were uncertain, uncomfortable, and felt awkward to exclusively post their crush on their personal Instagram, even though they had been dating for some time, due to several personal reasons: fear of butt hurt because they were just friends, according to two informants. At the same time, another was afraid of hurting the ex's feelings, as explicitly explained below:

> *Not yet, because we were just good friends. But I didn't hesitate to post our group friends' photos on Instagram when we had occasional events together. Well, another reason because he just broke up with his ex, so I was avoiding anyway, I was afraid—to be blamed for stealing someone's boyfriend. (EL)*

Third, at the "intensifying stage," they were already in a comfortable zone to talk about each other's private business, ideas, or feelings. All informants were audacious to show romantic interest and care at this phase without feeling awkward, especially in a private way. In order to seek potential partner attention on Instagram, most of the informants were intensely doing content-sharing through direct messages, especially sharing funny content on Instagram for creating fun chat with their crush.

Fourth, at the "integrating stage," they have shown interdependent relationship by using words like "we" and "us." This stage is also known as more than just a good friend or *friend-zone*. Posting someone's picture on personal Instagram was exclusive — the two kept on posting each other's photos even though they did not indicate in their statuses that they were dating someone special. Some users chose to upload favorable images of their partners and 'untag' him or herself from photographs. The informants had different motivations, ranging from just for having fun, one said, while another said it was just for public display of affection as shown below:

> *I dare to post a full photo of her on my personal Instagram not long after this incident. The goal was to let public and her knew that I was really romantically interested in her and happy to have her in my life. (AF)*

On the contrary, two informants chose to remain on the private channel. They did not share anything on their personal Instagram accounts about their proximity with their prospective partners because they were unclear of their statuses.

Last but not least, at "the bonding stage," all the informants revealed that in proposing to their prospective partners, Instagram was not the preferable medium: Two preferred face-to-face while the other two preferred personal chat.

> Well, two months later, when I felt like [I] knew him better and when we were able to adapt to each other's behavior as well, he proposed [to] me again via IMessage, [and] I accepted it hehe. (AZ)

Furthermore, this study found major differences in the use of Instagram in a romantic relationship. All the couples became more comfortable publishing their romantic relationship for public consumption through Instagram Post and Instagram Story. Instagram lacks various features like 'Facebook Official.' However, they believed that pictures speak louder than words when it comes to public judgment. In this case, Instagram allows its users to share videos and photos, and public members can easily judge individuals.

In addition, all the informants had specific motivations for displaying their intimacy in public: to appreciate their partners, to evade third-person interruptions (affair), and to beautify their personal Instagram feeds, as shown in one of the extracts below:

> Honestly, I'm more into appreciation for him anyway because my boyfriend is the type of person who is very active on Instagram and used to post me on his Instagram. So, {I do it] as a form of appreciation and love for him anyway. (AZ)

Uncertainty Reduction Behaviors at the Initiating Stage

The entire informants said that uncomfortable feelings at the initial stage were caused by the fear of saying the wrong thing and the fear of misbehaving, which could probably create negative impressions towards prospective partners. One said:

"I felt awkward, I was also afraid to make her illfeel to me anyway, I was afraid of misbehaving. But, on the other way, I wanted to show myself just the way I am, but I was uncertain that it just became a boomerang for me." (DY)

First, using "passive strategies," all the informants used Instagram to observe and make personal judgments about their prospective partner's pictures and videos which were uploaded. The informants noted that not all basic information could be screened through their profiles, but that pretty much helped them reducing their uncertainties toward their partners. Basic information about individuals that can be seen on Instagram includes hobbies, lifestyle, group of friends, past romantic relationship, and family closeness.

Second, this study revealed that all informants frequently used "interactive strategies" when they were not satisfied with the basic information provided on prospective partners' personal Instagram account. Thus, they all preferred to ask each other directly. However, the interactive strategies were considered more acceptable to informants when partners met in person or were engaged in direct conversation for some time. In addition, one informant revealed that Instagram made the way he communicated with his prospective partner more unique because it reduced awkwardness at the initiating stage.

Lastly, this study indicated that "active strategies" are least used by Instagram users to reduce uncertainty at the initiating stage. Asking family members was also not considered as an option. The entire informants became acquainted on Instagram with their prospective partner's family at least up to six months before they were officially in a romantic relationship. Asking friends about the prospective partners was considered well accepted because it can lead to trust issues. However, there was also the fear of getting false information and judgment even when asking very close friends.

DISCUSSION

Relationship formation

This study reveals that the proposition in Knapp's relational stage is relatable and applicable in today's modern romantic relationship. However, the basic concept of Knapp's model was confirmed 50 years ago (Fox & Warber, 2013). The tangible difference lies in how strangers communicate and bond for the first time at the initiating stage. This study agrees that although SNSs change the way people communicate, people do not necessarily get acquainted in face-to-face meetings in the very first place, according to previous research (such as Fox & Anderegg, 2014; Fox et al., 2013; Van Ouytsel et al., 2016).

However, Fox et al. (2013) concluded that most people perceived less normative action to connect on Facebook with their crush before having offline interaction even though they do not view Facebook as online dating site. Hence, this study argues that having interaction on Instagram advance is pretty normative—as simple as 'follow for follow'. We believe the main reason is that Instagram is specific for photo and video sharing apps, making it more real and credible than other SNS platforms (Yusriyah, Fatoni, & Mansyur, 2020). This might be consistent with other findings in social network marketing about the influence of Instagram content and purchase intention. A study conducted in 2016 discovered that when it comes to Instagram content, people tend to create "visibility biases" — that is, the feeling of being influenced and such a belief that is relevant to them, which significantly influences their decision to buy the product. (BBC,2019) In the case of romantic relationship development on Instagram, when people have never engaged in direct conversation, they go to Instagram to stalk and follow their crushes because seeing their crush on an Instagram post may create visibility biases. There is also a sense of being matched and relevant in life, friendship, or hobby.

Figure 2. Romantic Couple 2 (AZ and AF) First Interaction on Direct Message Instagram. AZ initiated a conversation by asking for a follow back, and the chat kept going on, though they had not engaged in face-to-face interaction yet

Figure 3. Romantic Couple 1 (DY and EL) and Romantic Couple 2 (AZ and AF) interact on Direct Message Instagram. Constantly sending funny memes by Couple 1 (left), responding crush's Instagram story by Couple 2 (right)

Furthermore, this study submits that other levels, such as experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding, are still in line with the basic concept of Knapp's model. In addition, SNSs play crucial roles in advancing the implementation of each stage.

At the bonding stage, this study found that Facebook and Instagram have the same motivation to determine official dating status or 'in relationship' with someone. Since 'Instagram official' does not exist, people tend to use Instagram content – Instagram posts and Instagram stories to claim their dating status and let the public judge.

Usually, public judgment is reinforced by how often the couples post their togetherness and sweet caption on every post or even putting their dating dates on their Instagram bio. Consistent with the findings by Fox et al. (2013), 77.1% of 55 young adults agreed that Facebook officially makes a relationship well maintained and steady. On the other hand, the public can question couples who are not brave enough to put their relationship status online. Thus, this study contradicts Van Ouytsel et al. (2016) that viewing 'relationship status' on Facebook is not necessarily an important thing to do to show affection to a loved one among adolescents.

Figure 4. Romantic Couple 1 (DY and EL). At the integrating stage, they had shown their closeness as more than just good friends. Their motivation is just to show that they are having fun together. Ridiculous pose of Spongebob on Instagram Story (Left); A casual pose during a college party on Instagram Post (Right)
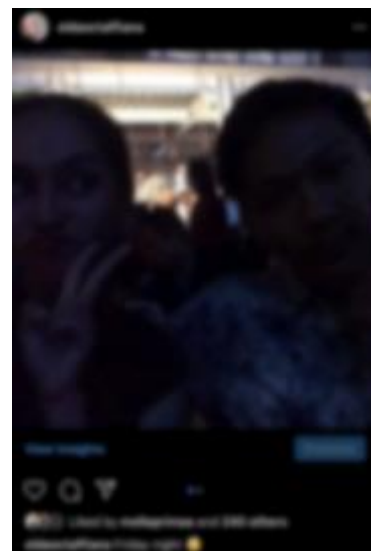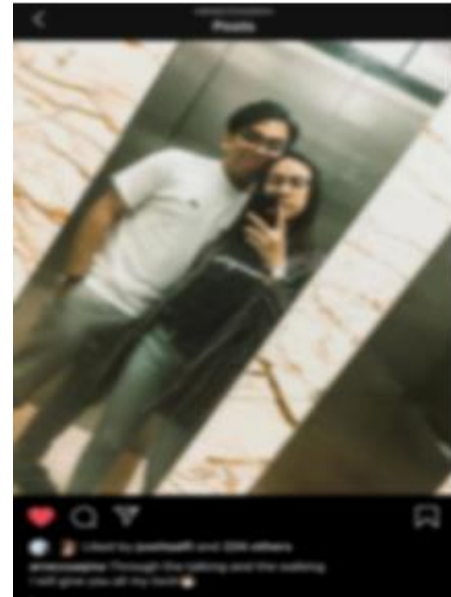
Figure 5. Romantic Couple 2 (AZ and AF). At the bonding stage, the couples show 'in a romantic relationship status' on Instagram Post, including the sweet caption thus: 'ily [I love you] three thousand' and 'Through the talking and the walking. I will give you all my lovin'

This study also reviewed the perspective of Solomon and Theiss (2013) that on forming a romantic relationship and the concept of four pathways of dating by Catherine Surra in 1995, that timing is relative. In achieving the 'commitment' in the romantic relationship, timings are vary based on individual preferences. One of the couples uses an aggressive approach or *accelerated arrested courtship*. The approach ends up slowing down any achievement at the highest level of a romantic relationship. It is portrayed by rejection at the first proposal due to the feeling of 'too soon' and not being able to adjust the behavior of their prospective partner. Another couple was in a *prolonged courtship*; the interaction was slow but consistent, which kept them in a safe zone, officially boyfriend and girlfriend.

Another discovery was that partners use alternative applications to chat and approach their prospective partners besides Instagram, especially experimenting to integrating stages (Putri, Andika, & Annisarizki, 2020). This study found that people in need of private space were more informal and social, like IMessage, WhatsApp,

and LINE. Thus, this study concluded that Instagram still cannot fully replace the functions of other messaging applications in connecting people privately.

Instagram has replaced Facebook as the first information seeking tool

This study has refuted the findings of Fox et al. (2013) that Facebook replaced phone calls — through sending friend requests. In today's context, approaching prospective romantic partners has shifted onto the screen through the Instagram profile, or simply asking for the prospective partner's Instagram username like 'What's your Instagram id?'. Young adults in Indonesia are not even aware that their crushes have a Facebook account. This phenomenon means that we are living in a fast-changing world. Thus, the way we communicate is also influenced by the advancement of technology. However, the motivation remains the same; people want to have the less direct convenient medium of interaction that eliminates the fear of rejection. This is consistent with the findings of Fox et al. (2013) that Facebook affords its users less pressure to create good impressions.

Additionally, Instagram is more loveable, especially among romantic partners between 13 and 24 years, because the platform is described as: current, friendly, trendy, useful, and exciting (Facebook Press Release, 2015). This is also relevant to the concept of personal branding on Instagram. This allows its users to frame their personal images and personal life to be shared with the public because they want the public to perceive them according to their desired branding on Instagram. Personal branding can be performed by everyone who's active social media accounts, especially urban youngsters, to make them unique among the others (Mukhlisiana, 2019). Additionally, Instagram is more loveable, especially among romantic partners between 13 and 24 years because the platform is described as current, friendly, trendy, useful, and exciting (Facebook Press Release, 2015). This is also relevant to the concept of personal branding on Instagram. This allows its users to frame their personal images and personal life to be shared with the public because they want the public to perceive them according to their desired branding

on Instagram. Personal branding can be done by everyone who has active social media accounts, especially urban youngsters, to make them unique among the others (Mukhlisiana, 2019).

Figure 6. AZ uploaded several photos with her family. At the initiating stage, AF made a personal judgment about his potential partner (AZ) as a family woman due to her consistency in uploading family photos

Passive strategies are most used at the initial approach

The application of uncertainty reduction strategies in today's online context from Fox and Anderegg (2014) revealed that Facebook users believe that passive strategies are the most common to initiate relationships, while the other uncertainty reduction strategies, interactive and active strategies, are least normative when they have not interacted face-to-face.

In addition, Instagram users are digital savvy; they know that not all information are digested at once. Thus, in order to fact-check the personal judgment of their potential partner, they prefer to ask their partners directly, which is known as "interactive reduction strategy". Another way is to crosscheck directly with friends, which is known as active strategy. The results of this study concluded that "passive strategies" are the most preferable to reduce uncertainty at the initial phase,

followed by "interactive strategies" while the last is "active strategies". This study showed similar findings with previous research that analyzed a well-known social media in the Netherlands, which found that people found passive strategies most convenient at the initiating stage, especially when they have no idea about each other (Antheunis et al. 2010).

Instagram as double-edged swords

Besides its positive role, unlike Facebook, Instagram can backfire during the development of a romantic relationship. Consistent with other studies, jealousy went way primarily high due to insecurity, as the couples spent more time online, so the users may question their relationship stability (Muise et al. 2019; Fox et al. 2013).

Further, this study found that as the couples became exclusively 'in a relationship', they mostly exchanged their Instagram password to establish trust and convenience with their romantic partner. This finding corroborated previous evidence - in a survey by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 30% of teenagers exchanged their social media passwords as a form of 'devotion' towards each other, either with a romantic partner or regular friend (The New York Times, 2012). In another research by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 67% of social media users in current romantic relationship and marriage have exchanged their personal password (Insider, 2017).

Meanwhile, even though Instagram is not a dating application, jealousy arose as partners constantly like other girls' photos, send direct messages to some beautiful girls, or are suspicious that their partners may be getting back with their ex or in past relationship. The point is that Instagram can be of benefit or cause harm to a romantic relationship simultaneously, unlike other SNSs. Thus, building a healthy relationship on Instagram can be a subject for further investigation in future research.

In view that social media and SNSs are continuously developing and have become indispensable in people's daily lives as found in this study, the following future research areas are recommended: The first involves digging more into the psychological motivations that might affect the romantic couples in using Instagram; motivated by either self-satisfaction, level of trust of their romantic partner, or self-appreciation. Second, it is essential to investigate the other side of Knapp's staircase: the dissolution of romantic relationships to compose broader perspectives of the use of Instagram for romantic couples. The users might choose to delete their ex-partner's posts, block them or untag themselves from the photo of their ex. Third, research should also analyze the differences between the behaviors of male and female Instagram users. Research indicates that there are 52% female users on Instagram, a percentage higher than male users (Statistista.com. 2019). Perhaps, female expression of affection over someone on Instagram differs from their male counterparts. Lastly, this study recommends quantitative research to determine how accurately consistent romantic partners are who often post their affection on Instagram and how that affects their insecurity.

CONCLUSION

This research focuses on conducting a qualitative descriptive study using a phenomenological model to look at Instagram, with Knapp's relationship development model as the grand theory and uncertainty reduction theory in the early stages as the topic-related theory. It considers two loving couples that are currently dating and have an Instagram account. Young adults aged 18 to 24, who account for 39% of all active Instagram users in Indonesia, are informants (NapoleonCat, 2019). in order to determine the informants' experiences, *In-Vivo* coding was used. The researchers do not detail the length of the relationship because the purpose of this study is to refer to the time they knew each other until they revealed their relationship status. Other external factors, such as family history or personal

historical experiences in building romantic relationships, are not linked to the research issues.

LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

There are three levels of contributions in this study. This study focuses on specific contributions to specific parties: (1) practical significance - romantic couples, who can use Instagram to reduce the risk of relationship dissolution, and (2) future researchers, who can look at the role of Instagram in romantic relationship development from a broader perspective. Second, this study builds on existing but recent research by Fox et al. (2013; 2014; 2018) on the impact of Facebook in the escalation and maintenance of romantic relationships. This study is ground-breaking in that it focuses on the function of Instagram, relationship growth, and uncertainty reduction behaviors. It must be challenging because no previous research on relationship escalation and maintenance on Instagram utilizing Knapp's relational stage model existed. Finally, this research contributes to a better understanding of how Knapp's model relationship development and Uncertainty Reduction Theory are used in present applications.

According to Knapp's model, Instagram has changed the way young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 build romantic relationships, from the initial phases to the bonding stages. Even though the core concept of Knapp's model has been tested for the past 50 years, this study shows that the implementation of Knapp's relational stage is still relatable and practical for today's modern romantic relationship (Fox & Warber, 2013).

To begin with, Instagram is seen as a valuable tool for speeding up and improving the initial approach process through profile views and follow for following. At this stage, the intensity of doing profile visits on their crushes' Instagram accounts was typically for looking at the basic information of their future partners, such as hobbies, lifestyles, and prior romantic partners' experiences. Second, during the

experimenting stage, all the respondents admitted to balance their online and offline approaches. They were "seeking attention" online by leaving likes on their crush's post, reacting to the Instagram story, and even sending humorous memes through Instagram direct messages. In addition, it is common for potential partners to conduct top-of-mind research on Instagram. Third, at the intensifying stage, all the respondents dared to express love interest in this phase and felt less uneasy, according to this study. People usually share stuff via direct messages, particularly entertaining content on Instagram, to have a pleasant talk with their crush.

Fourth, the integration stage, during which most people feel comfortable flaunting their proximity to the public via Instagram posts. Even though they did not have a clear dating status, posting a possible partner's photo on personal Instagram was exclusive. Finally, throughout the bonding stage, respondents felt confident and comfortable posting their 'in relationship' status on Instagram via Instagram Post, Instagram Story, or Instagram bio, according to the study. The purpose of performing public displays of affection is to show appreciation for the partner, brag to potential competitors, and even make their own Instagram feeds look nice.

Instagram is like a two-edged sword. At first, passive methods are the most employed in uncertainty reduction strategies, followed by interactive strategies, and finally, active strategies. Although Instagram is not a dating service, envy and doubt occur when their spouse regularly likes other ladies' photographs, direct messages to some attractive females, or even suspects that their partner is reuniting with an ex or in a previous relationship.

REFERENCES

Antheunis, M. L., Valkenburg, P. M., & Peter, J. (2010). Getting acquainted through social network sites: Testing a model of online uncertainty reduction and social attraction. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *26*(1), 100-109.

Baym, N. K. (2010). *Personal connections in the digital age*. Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Creswell, J.W. (2014) Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, & Mixed Methods Approaches. 4th Edition. London: Sage.

DeVito, J.A. (2014). Human Communication: The Basic Course. UK: Pearson Education

Facebook Press Release (2015). Grow Up in a Visual World. [online] Available at: https://www.facebook.com/business/news/insights/growing-up-in-a-visual-world [Accessed 12 Oct. 2019].

Farrugia, R. C. (2013). Facebook and relationships: A study of how social media use is affecting long-term relationships.

Fox, J., & Anderegg, C. (2014). Romantic relationship stages and social networking sites: Uncertainty reduction strategies and perceived relational norms on Facebook. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 17(11), 685-691.

Fox, J., & Warber, K. M. (2013). Romantic relationship development in the age of Facebook: An exploratory study of emerging adults' perceptions, motives, and behaviors. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 16(1), 3-7.

Fox, J., Warber, K. M., & Makstaller, D. C. (2013). The role of Facebook in romantic relationship development: An exploration of Knapp's relational stage model. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 30(6), 771-794.

Harappa Education (2019). Phenomenological Research: Methods and Examples September 2021. [online] Available at: https://harappa.education/harappa-diaries/phenomenological-research/ [Accessed 12 Oct. 2021].

Insider.com. (2017). Why I refuse to give my boyfriend my social media passwords. [online] Available at: https://www.insider.com/should-you-give-someone-your-social-media-passwords-2017-6 [Accessed 12 Oct. 2019].

Muise, A., Christofides, E., & Desmarais, S. (2009). More information than you ever wanted: Does Facebook bring out the green-eyed monster of jealousy? Cyberpsychology & Behavior, 12(4), 441-444.

Mukhlisiana, L. (2019). Urban Youngster Personal Branding through Instagram. International Journal of Multicultural and Multireligious Understanding, 6(7), 54-57.

NapoleonCat. (2019). *Facebook Users in Indonesia January 2019.* [online] Available at: https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-indonesia/2019/01/ [Accessed 12 Oct. 2019].

NapoleonCat. (2019). *Instagram Users in Indonesia February 2016.* [online] Available at: https://napoleoncat.com/stats/instagram-users-in-indonesia/2019/02 [Accessed 12 Oct. 2019].

New York Times.com. (2012*). Teenagers sharing password as show of affection.* [online] Available at:http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/18/us/teenagers-sharing-passwords-as-show-of-affection.html?pagewanted=all [Accessed 12 Oct. 2019].

Putri, L. D., Andika, D., & Annisarizki. (2020). The Journalists Has Built Self Meaning : Spreading Hate Speech in Presidential Election 2019 in Banten. *Aspiration Journal, 1*(2), 182–207.

Sharabi, L. L., & Dykstra-DeVette, T. A. (2019). From first email to first date: Strategies for initiating relationships in online dating. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 0265407518822780.

Smith, A., & Duggan, M. (2013). *Online Dating & Relationships*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project.

Solomon, D. & Theiss, J. (2013). Interpersonal Communication: Putting Theory Into Practice. New York: Routledge

Statista.com (2019). *Distribution of Instagram users worldwide as of July 2019, by age and gender.* [online] Available at: https://www.statista.com/statistics/248769/age-distribution-of-worldwide-instagram-users/ [Accessed 12 Oct. 2019].

Statista.com (2019). *Leading countries based on number of Instagram users as of July 2019 (in millions).* [online] Available at: https://www.statista.com/statistics/578364/countries-with-most-instagram-users/ [Accessed 12 Oct. 2019].

Van Ouytsel, J., Van Gool, E., Walrave, M., Ponnet, K., & Peeters, E. (2016). Exploring the role of social networking sites within adolescent romantic relationships and dating experiences. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *55*, 76-86.

We are Social (2019). *Digital in 2019.* [online] Available at: https://wearesocial.com/global-digital-report-2019/ [Accessed 12 Oct. 2019

West, R.L. & Turner, L.H. (2010). Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and Application 4th Edition. McGraw-Hill.

Yusriyah, K., Fatoni, A., & Mansyur, M. A. (2020). Communication Networks Analysis on Information Dissemination of the Moving of Capital City From Jakarta to East Kalimantan. *Aspiration Journal*.