

Navigating Uncertainty in Contemporary Romantic Relationships: A Systematic Review Based on Uncertainty Reduction Theory (2011-2023)

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Abstract

Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) explains how individuals experience and manage uncertainty in interpersonal interactions, particularly during the early stages of relationship development. However, uncertainty is not limited to initial encounters and can persist throughout ongoing relationships, including romantic relationships. This article aims to systematically review how Uncertainty Reduction Theory has been applied in the context of romantic relationships and to identify the types of uncertainty experienced by couples across different relational stages. Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method guided by the PRISMA framework, this study analyzes seven national and international journal articles published between 2011 and 2023. The findings show that uncertainty in romantic relationships emerges not only during relationship initiation but also during maintenance, conflict, transitions, and dissolution. Couples experience uncertainty related to themselves, their partners, and the future of the relationship, which can influence emotional responses, communication patterns, and relational stability. The reviewed studies highlight the importance of communication strategies such as information seeking, self-disclosure, nonverbal cues, and digital communication behaviors in reducing uncertainty. Additionally, technological developments, including online dating and social media, introduce new forms of uncertainty while also offering alternative strategies for uncertainty reduction. This review demonstrates that URT remains a relevant and adaptable framework for understanding contemporary romantic relationships. The article also identifies gaps in existing research, particularly regarding long-term relationships and non-Western cultural contexts, and suggests directions for future studies.

Keywords: Romantic Relationship, Uncertainty Reduction Theory

INTRODUCTION

Uncertainty Reduction Theory was initially proposed by Charles Berger in 1975 to explain how a person, when meeting new people, would feel uncomfortable because of the uncertainty about the interlocutors. This theory aims to elaborate how people look for information in order to understand other people in a new situation and how those informations can reduce uncertainty in an interaction (Griffin et al., 2023).

In the era of contemporary digital communication, managing uncertainty has become increasingly complex due to the emergence of trends such as ghosting—the sudden termination of communication without explanation (LeFebvre & Fan, 2019)—and

orbiting, defined as passive surveillance on social media without direct interaction (Blight et al., 2019). These phenomena, prevalent on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, have transformed uncertainty reduction strategies from face-to-face interactions into passive digital surveillance, which in turn accelerates relational turbulence (Knobloch-Fedders et al., 2024). Consequently, this systematic literature review is essential to synthesize the application of Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) within modern romantic dynamics (2011-2023), filling the gap in understanding how technology introduces new dimensions of uncertainty alongside its corresponding adaptive strategies. In a relationship, whether interpersonal or romantic, uncertainty will always be there and be taken into consideration. Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) has been widely used to understand how people manage uncertainty in interpersonal relationships, including romantic relationships. This theory focuses on how communication and interaction can reduce uncertainty, strengthen relationships, and increase stability in relationships (Parks & Adelman, 1983). The axiom of this theory states that there is a connection between information seeking and uncertainty, so couples are utilizing communicative behavior as an effort to reduce this uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). But before diving deeper into relationships, nonverbal cues play an important role in making first impressions in an interaction, especially in a romantic relationship context (Croes et al., 2020).

Uncertainty reduction theory posits that individuals experience uncertainty when they cannot predict or explain someone's behavior, which creates discomfort and motivates uncertainty-reducing behaviors (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Berger (1979) identified some strategies to reduce uncertainty. The relevant strategies to this study are passive strategies, which involve unobtrusive observation, and interactive strategies, which involve direct interaction with the person in question. Research shows that uncertainty is a strong predictor of prosocial relational maintenance behaviors in romantic relationships (Dainton, 2003).

Whether proactive, reactive, or interactive, information-seeking behaviors are essential to the initiation of partnerships or building a relationship. Reducing ambiguity about possible partners requires certain activities, especially online platforms. Additionally, they aid in reducing unfavorable effects, as was previously mentioned. When establishing a connection, the data acquired can be used to determine if the relationship should advance to a more serious stage by utilizing the Uncertainty Reduction Theory. In the absence of confidence in the information gathered, a deeper relationship is unlikely to blossom. Interpersonal contact used to happen face-to-face between two people close to each other and eye-contact. But nowadays, people also grow more interactions via the internet so they cannot see face-to-face interactions (Gibbs et al., 2011).

Previous research on Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) within romantic contexts has been predominantly Western-centric, with 86% of studies originating from the United States—focusing on constructs such as dyadic uncertainty (Karlsen et al., 2020)—and 14% from the Netherlands, which examined variables like eye contact in speed-dating scenarios (Croes et al., 2020). These studies primarily concentrate on the initiation and maintenance phases of relationships. Consequently, several critical research gaps remain: (1) a dearth of empirical studies within the Asian and Indonesian contexts, where collectivist norms prioritize high-context communication over direct self-disclosure (Hofstede, 2011); (2) a lack of longitudinal analysis regarding 'on-again-off-again' relationships in the digital era; and (3) the absence of URT integration with localized cyber behaviors, such as the dynamics of Long-Distance Relationships (LDR) via WhatsApp. Western-based findings may not fully elucidate Indonesian relational dynamics due to distinct cultural nuances—specifically, the principle of 'face-saving' which often inhibits direct confrontation (Sari & Mutiara, 2021). This Systematic

Literature Review (SLR) seeks to address these gaps through a contemporary empirical synthesis.

Therefore, to investigate this topic, this study asks two main questions: (a) How can Uncertainty Reduction Theory be applied? And (b) how does the study of romantic relationships inform these theoretical concepts?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

The uncertainty reduction theory first proposed by Charles Berger is used as a theoretical framework to explain why the basis of attention when meeting strangers is to reduce uncertainty or their behavior and interactions with other people's behavior. Therefore, Berger identified three conditions for how new knowledge reduces uncertainty. (1) prediction of future interactions, (2) incentive value, and (3) rejection. To reduce uncertainty, Berger proposed axioms to explain the relationship between eight key variables in the main concept of uncertainty and relationship development. Namely verbal communication, non-verbal warmth, information seeking, self-disclosure, reciprocity, similarity, pleasure and shared networks (Griffin et al., 2023).

Table 1. URT Theorems Diagram

Axiom	Concept	Relationship with Uncertainty
1	Verbal Communication	↑ Talking → ↓ Uncertainty → ↑ Talking (reciprocal)
2	Non-Verbal Warmth	↑ Friendliness (eye contact, lean forward, tone) → ↓ Uncertainty → ↑ Warmth
3	Information Seeking	↑ Uncertainty → ↑ Info seeking → ↓ Uncertainty → ↓ Info seeking
4	Self-Disclosure	↓ Uncertainty → ↑ Intimacy of shared content
5	Reciprocity	↑ Uncertainty → ↑ Feedback exchange → ↓ Uncertainty → ↓ Reciprocity
6	Similarity	↑ Similarity → ↓ Uncertainty; ↓ Similarity → ↑ Uncertainty
7	Liking	↑ Uncertainty → ↓ Liking; ↓ Uncertainty → ↑ Liking
8	Shared Network	↑ Mutual connections → ↓ Uncertainty

Source:Griffin et al., 2023

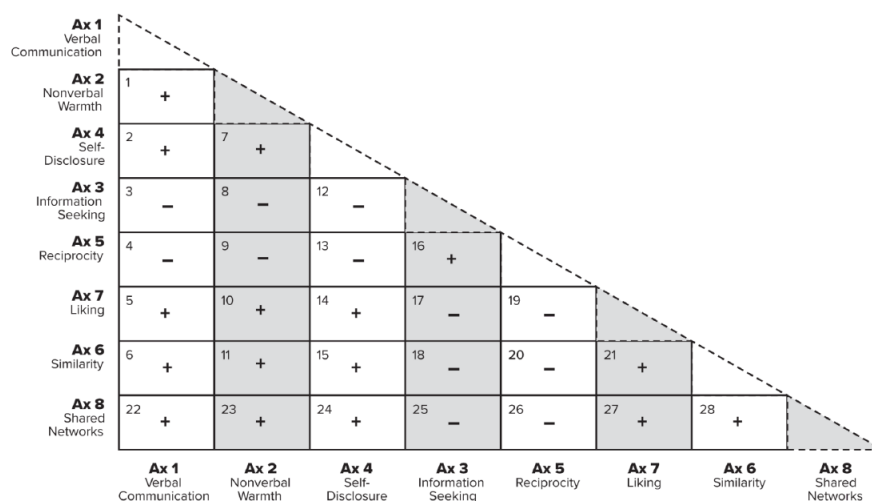


Figure 1. Theorems of Uncertainty Reduction Theory
Source. Griffin et al., 2023

Uncertainty Reduction Theory and Romantic Relationship

Uncertainty reduction theory is a framework that explores how individuals seek to minimize uncertainty in their interactions, particularly in the context of romantic relationships (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). According to this theory, when people meet someone new, they experience uncertainty about the other person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. To reduce this uncertainty, individuals engage in various strategies such as seeking information through communication, self-disclosure, and observation. This process is crucial in developing intimacy and trust in romantic relationships. As partners share personal information and experiences, they create a deeper understanding of each other, which fosters emotional closeness and strengthens their bond (Holmes, 2000).

Berger's theory was later expanded by Leanne Knobloch, a researcher at the University of Illinois, to explain how uncertainty affects existing relationships. While early interactions can create uncertainty about basic things like age or hobbies, uncertainty in established relationships is more complex. It's doubts about our desires, our partner's feelings, and doubts about the future of the relationship. This uncertainty can lead to what Knobloch called "relational turbulence", which elicit strong emotional reactions (Griffin et al., 2023).

The development of romantic relationships can be understood through two primary approaches: the experiential approach and the economic model. The experiential approach, rooted in humanistic psychology as proposed by Carl Rogers (1951), emphasizes the importance of genuine communication, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding between partners. These elements are vital for relationship growth and intimacy. On the other hand, the economic model, exemplified by Social Exchange Theory, posits that individuals evaluate their relationships based on perceived rewards and costs (Levinger, 1974). This model suggests that people strive to maximize benefits such as companionship and emotional support while minimizing drawbacks like conflict or stress. Both approaches highlight that communication plays a central role in relationship development. However, they differ significantly in their underlying principles—one focusing on emotional connection and the other on transactional dynamics. Ultimately, understanding these theories helps explain why some romantic relationships flourish while others falter, as they navigate the complexities of intimacy and interpersonal exchange (Fox, 2015).

Research Question

To investigate this topic, this study asks two main questions:

Research Question 1: How can Uncertainty Reduction Theory be applied?

Research Question 2: How does the study of romantic relationships inform these theoretical concepts?

METODE

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) guided by the PRISMA framework to provide a rigorous, transparent, and unbiased synthesis of Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) within romantic contexts. Distinguishing itself from traditional reviews through its exhaustive search for all relevant studies (Nightingale, 2009), the SLR method ensures a comprehensive evaluation of the research landscape. By adhering to the four-phase PRISMA protocol—identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion—this research enhances academic credibility and minimizes selection bias (Page et al., 2021). Furthermore, this systematic approach facilitates a deep understanding of the field's progression, allowing for the identification of critical research gaps and the justification of future academic inquiry (Lim et al., 2022). Following Snyder (2019) four-stage

methodology—design, performance, analysis, and writing—this review establishes a structured foundation for exploring the complexities of modern romantic dynamics. While doing the Systematic Literature Review, the first step is to find articles in Google Scholar with specific keywords such as “uncertainty reduction theory”, “*pengurangan ketidakpastian*”, “*hubungan romantis*”, “romantic relationships”, “relationships”, “husband and wife”, “husband”, “wife”, “marriage”, “interpersonal communication”, and “dating”. From Google Scholar, Sagepub, Springer Link, and Scopus, researchers found about 30 articles to be reviewed from national and international articles. But there are only 7 articles that are eligible. In accordance with the principles of Systematic Literature Review (SLR) which prioritize rigorous selection over sheer quantity (Page et al., 2021), a comprehensive search was conducted across multiple databases: Scopus (initial results n=128), Web of Science (n=92), and ProQuest (n=156). The search utilized a combination of keywords, specifically 'uncertainty reduction theory' AND 'romantic relationship' OR 'pengurangan ketidakpastian' AND 'hubungan romantis', with filters restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2011 and 2023 in either English or Indonesian. A total of 476 initial records were identified, which were subsequently reduced to 312 after deduplication. Despite the substantial initial volume, only seven articles met the stringent inclusion criteria: (1) explicit application of URT within romantic contexts rather than general interpersonal interactions; (2) analysis of specific uncertainty reduction strategies, such as self-disclosure and information seeking; (3) samples involving romantic adults as opposed to platonic or familial subjects; (4) utilization of empirical methods, whether quantitative or qualitative; and (5) relevance to relational stages including initiation, maintenance, and dissolution. Conversely, specific exclusion criteria resulted in the rejection of 215 records during title and abstract screening (primarily due to non-romantic themes, such as workplace URT), 78 ineligible full-text articles (comprising review papers, non-empirical studies, or adolescent samples), and 12 remaining duplicates. This limited number of eligible studies reflects the niche nature of the topic—given that URT is more predominantly applied to initial interactions rather than contemporary romantic dynamics (Griffin et al., 2023)—and underscores the significant research gaps in non-Western contexts, which constitutes the unique contribution of this review.

Next, studies were filtered based on their relevance to the steps of relationships and Uncertainty Reduction Theory and the quality. Information was then recorded and analyzed to synthesize broader findings. This approach highlighted the importance of systematically selecting and analyzing previous research to form a comprehensive understanding of uncertainty reduction theory’s application in forming a romantic relationship, whether it is dating or even a marriage.

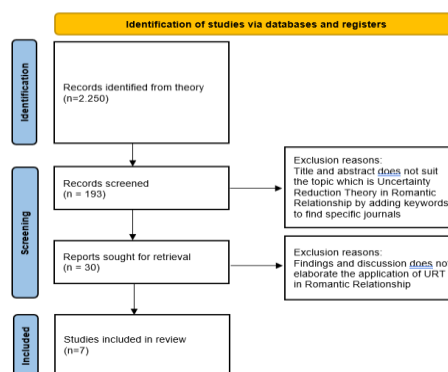


Figure 2. PRISMA Statement

Source: <https://www.prisma-statement.org/> which has been processed by researchers

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

From identifying and screening the journal articles, there are seven journal articles that are eligible to be included in the Systematic Literature Review. The results of SLR's journal articles are organized based on several factors, such as the publication year, where the research took place, the academic field, the method used in the studies, and the findings themselves. This organized approach helps us better understand different aspects of Uncertainty Reduction Theory in romantic relationships. By sorting data from seven carefully selected academic articles into clear categories, we can see patterns that reveal the application of Uncertainty Reduction Theory into interpersonal relationships, specifically romantic relationships. The following data includes journal articles based on the year of publication, research method, and field of study.

Table 2. The Eligible Journal Article for Systematic Literature Review

No.	Journal Article Title	Year	Author(s)	Research Method	Findings	URT Concepts Used
1	First Come Love, The Comes Google? An Investigation of Uncertainty Reduction Strategies and Self-Disclosure in Online Dating	2011	Jennifer L. Gibbs, Nicole B. Ellison, Chih-Hui Lai	Quantitative	Warranting via Google checks self-disclosure online dating	Info seeking, Self-disclosure (Axioms 3,4)
2	Financial Uncertainty Management	2015	Lynsey K. Romo	Qualitative	Collaborative negotiation kurangi financial stress	Info seeking, Reciprocity (Axioms 3,5)
3	Ghosted? Navigating Ambiguous Loss	2019	Leah E. LeFebvre, Xiaoti Fan	Quantitative	Ghosting increase cognitive uncertainty	Passive/Active strategies (Berger 1979)
4	Facebook in On-again/Off-again	2019	Michael G. Blight, Erin K. Ruppel, Kristy Jagiello	Quantitative	Facebook's passive surveillance reduces relational uncertainty	Info seeking digital (Axiom 3)
5	Dyadic Effects of Relational Uncertainty	2020	Annika S. Karlesn, Ted G. Futris, Evin W. Richardson	Quantitative	Actor/partner effects on maintenance behaviors	Relational uncertainty (Knobloch)
6	Eye-Contact in Speed-Dating	2020	Emmelyn A.J. Croes, Marjolijn L. Antheunis, Alexander P. Schouten, Emiel J. Kraemer	Quantitative	Eye-contact interaction self-disclosure	Nonverbal warmth (Axiom 2)
7	Relational Uncertainty & Dyadic Synchrony	2023	Lynne M. Knobloch-Fedders, Kelley Quirk, Leanne K. Knobloch	Quantitative	Self/partner/relationship uncertainty triggers turbulence	Expanded URT (Knobloch model)

Article publication year category

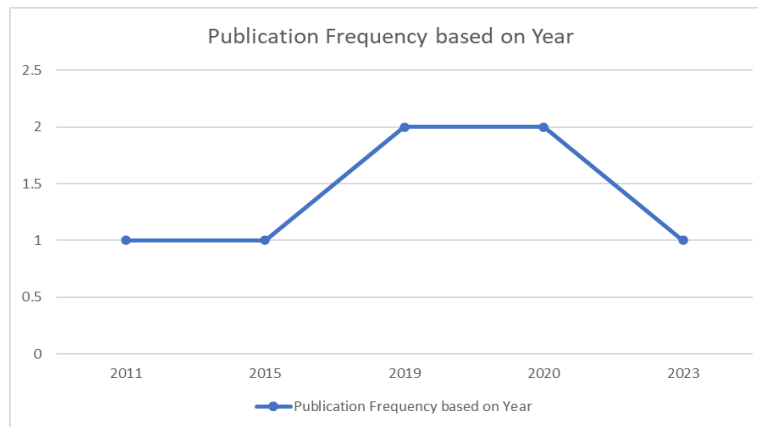


Figure 2. Publication Frequency based on Year
Source. Researchers finding

Looking at the years when the selected journal articles were published reveals some interesting trends. Between 2019 and 2020 was the most active period, with four published articles, making up about 57% of the total. Meanwhile in 2011, 2015, and 2023 also had similar contributions, with one published article each year. On the other hand, from 2012 until 2014 and 2015 until 2019 there's no related article published. Analyzing these publication years helped us understand how research on Uncertainty Reduction Theory related to romantic relationships has developed over time and shows the changing landscape of academic contributions to this topic.

Research country location category

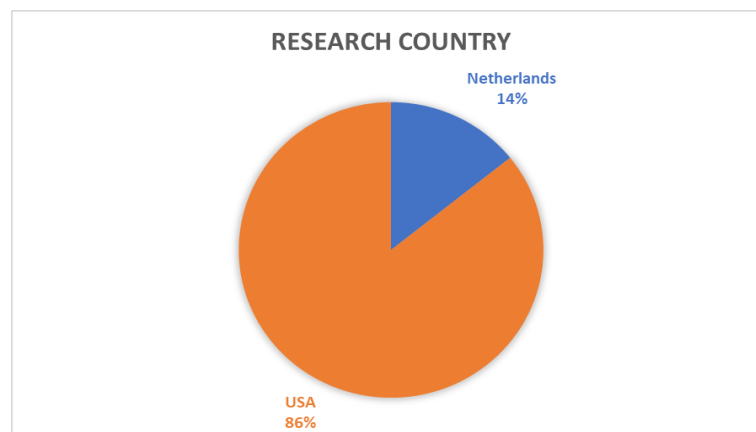


Figure 3. Research country location diagram

When examining where the research in the chosen publications come from, it's interesting that most study was conducted in the USA. Where it contributed to 86% and is the most common source. Additionally, only 14% of the total was conducted in the Netherlands. This result shows that most studies on uncertainty reduction theory related to romantic relationships are being conducted in the USA and Europe, where it offers perspectives from different cultures and backgrounds from diverse samples used.

Disciplines category

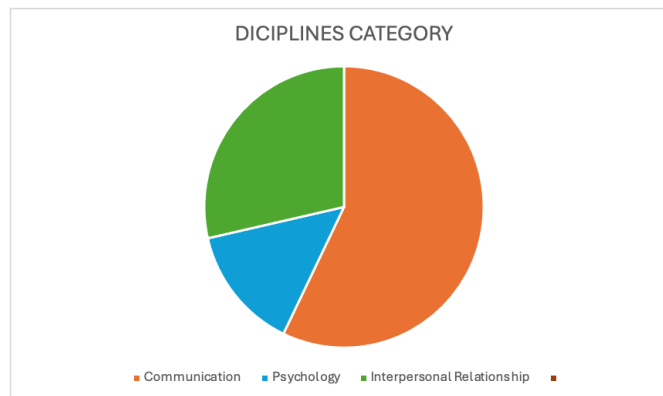


Figure 4. Disciplines category diagram

Based on the findings, discipline in psychology makes up 14.29% of the articles, interpersonal interactions come in second at 28.57%, and discipline of communication makes up the majority of the total at 57.14%. This indicates a larger yet discernible presence of psychological viewpoints throughout the investigation, with a strong focus on interpersonal dynamics and communication. These results also show that URT theory can be interpreted multidisciplinary.

Research methods category



Figure 5. Research methods category diagram

In terms of research methodologies, the dominant trend observed across the analyzed articles reveals a clear preference for quantitative research techniques. Specifically, quantitative research methods are employed in approximately 85.71% of all studied cases, indicating a robust reliance on statistical and numerical approaches within these investigations. Conversely, qualitative research methods are utilized significantly less frequently, appearing in just 14.29% of the examined literature.

Discussion

URT assumes that when people meet there's always uncertainty and people would at least have two kinds of uncertainty, which are behavioral questions and cognitive questions. Therefore, Berger has created eight axioms that are traditionally considered as truth regardless of the scientific proof. After accepting the validity of eight axioms, it is logical

to combine them to gain more insight into the dynamics of the relationship. This raises the question of whether uncertainty could have a detrimental effect on ongoing relationships, in this case romantic relationships (Griffin et al., 2023).

Based on the findings on the role of eye-contact in development of romantic attractions, that conduct experiments on several conditions which are face-to-face, video-mediated communication without eye-contact, and video-mediated communication with eye-contact. This research has shown that when direct eye contact is available, there is a positive correlation between initial eye-contact and increased self-disclosure. Contrary, communication in the context where eye-contact is not possible (e.g., video calls or online dating platforms) generated more uncertainty compared to direct or face-to-face communication (Croes et al., 2020). This finding is consistent with Axiom 2 of Berger's URT, which states that increasing nonverbal warmth helps reduce uncertainty. Nonverbal warmth relies on direct or personal interactions, which promotes more effective communication and reduces uncertainty in relationships (Griffin et al., 2023).

It leads to how does direct eye-contact leads to romantic feelings. Contrary to the hypothesis, eye-contact does not have a positive effect on the first impression of romance; nor does it on self-disclosure. However, eye-contact interacts with self-disclosure and initial interactions allowing uncertainty level to be reduced. This suggests that even though technology makes it easier to communicate, face-to-face conversations would allow people to show natural nonverbal cues like sustained gaze (Croes et al., 2020).

URT provided axioms of how people reduce uncertainty in initial development of interpersonal communication, however this is related to a question about ongoing relationships especially in romantic relationships. Although Berger's theory explains how people reduce uncertainty on first-time encounters, Knobloch (In Griffin et al., 2023) believes that uncertainty is still available in close relationships including romantic ones. This is what she called the relational turbulence or uncertainty which refers to negative emotions arising from perceived problems in a close relationship.

A study from University of Illinois tried to explain relational turbulence in couples' interactions, specifically examining the order in which one partner shows hostility toward the other partner, indicating a lack of synchrony. The study suggested that men may respond to conflicting relationships with uncertainty around self-expression. Meanwhile, men and women showed a pattern of confirmation with hospitality they felt insecure about the relationship. The relational uncertainties that emerged in the study were self-uncertainty, partner uncertainty, and relationship uncertainty. Self-uncertainty occurs when someone questions their commitment and feelings in a relationship. Partner uncertainty refers to uncertainty regarding the partner's feelings and commitment. Relationship uncertainty implies doubts about the overall structure and future of relationships, whether doubts that if the relationship is healthy, stable, or lasting (Knobloch-Fedders et al., 2024).

Another concern that couples may perceive in their relationship is financial stress. Talking about finances is an important thing to share in romantic relationships, especially in marital and cohabiting relationships. A shared understanding of financial planning is important because it can affect stability and quality of life (Wilcox and Marquadt in Romo (2015)). However, talking about money with friends and family is considered unusual, making many couples unprepared to have good financial conversations. A study from North Carolina State University tried to explore how people in romantic relationships deal with financial uncertainty through communication. Therefore, this study suggests that

couples use several strategies to reduce, maintain, and adapt to stress in different ways to reduce financial stress. Most participants are actively seeking and sharing information with their partners to reduce fears related to finance. While some other subjects managed uncertainty individually, by negotiating financial issues collaboratively with their partners (Romo, 2015).

Karlsen et al. (2020) study makes a significant contribution to understanding conservation URT. The researchers used data from prospective couples to examine the impact of relationship doubt on relationship maintenance and relationship-damaging behaviors. The results showed that six months after the program (actor effects), women reported higher levels of suspicion relative to before participating in the Marriage Preparation or Preparation program due to more frequent and harmful behaviors in the relationship. In addition, women with higher relationship scores were also more suspicious of their partners, reported less frequent relationship-maintaining activities, and more relationship-damaging behaviors within six months after the program ended (participant effects).

According to URT, individuals in relationships will experience three types of uncertainty that they must reduce: uncertainty about self, partner, and relationship (Berger & Calabrese, 1975); Knobloch-Fedders et al., 2024). These uncertainties can cause some negative impacts to the balance of the relationship, such as increasing the likelihood of divorce or breakdown in communication (Knobloch-Fedders et al., 2024). Therefore, it is important for couples to clarify relationship status and goals to develop effective communication strategies to reduce uncertainty and increase relationship stability. Effective communication strategies involve, among others, open discussion of expectations and concerns, use of affirmative language, and healthy conflict management (Canary & Stafford, 1992). Marital preparation programs such as PREPARE can help couples identify relationship strengths and growth areas and develop the communication skills necessary to maintain stable relationships. Thus, URT provides an important basis for designing relationship education programs to support couples in building strong and enduring relationships.

Research by Blight et al. (2019) provides important insights into the application of URT in the context of online dating. In this study, the researchers found that relationship uncertainty is particularly relevant for individuals involved in “on-again/off-again” relationships. They reported that uncertainty reduction behaviors, both active and passive, are often performed through social media such as Facebook. For example, Facebook users tend to passively observe their partner’s profile to gain information without being directly involved. This research suggests that higher uncertainty reduction strategies are important in helping individuals navigate the complexities of unstable relationships and improve their understanding of each other (Blight et al., 2019).

Another research by Gibbs et al. (2011) made a significant contribution to understanding URT in the context of online dating. They found that relationship uncertainty is highly relevant for individuals involved in online relationships, especially in terms of privacy and identity verification of potential partners. Based on uncertainty reduction theory and the granitization principle, the authors investigated the uncertainty reduction strategies used by online dating participants to reduce doubts and ensure the credibility of others. Along with online dating self-efficacy, three sets of online concerns—personal safety, misconceptions, and recognitions—were expected to have an impact on these techniques. The association between these characteristics and the quantity of personal data disclosed to possible online partners was mediated by the frequency of application of these

uncertainty reduction techniques. This study confirms that the use of uncertainty reduction strategies is an important step in the formation of online romantic relationships, allowing individuals to reduce hesitation and increase understanding of each other. Individuals' commitment to reducing relationship uncertainty is also reflected in how they use digital technology to communicate. In the context of online dating, internet-based communication allows individuals to engage in selective self-presentation, but it also increases concerns about misunderstanding and deconstruction (Walther & Burgoon, 1992 in Gibbs et al. 2011). Individuals involved in online dating typically face the challenge of maintaining self-integrity while remaining transparent in communication. This is reflected in the dynamics of profile writing and interactions with others online, where individuals must face a continuous reflective cycle in the process of conveying personal information and evaluating others' identity claims.

In order to alleviate these doubts, online dating individuals often employ information-seeking strategies to ensure the accuracy of others' identity claims. These strategies include covert observation, questioning, and communication to encourage others to volunteer more about themselves (Berger, 1979). Due to the increased privacy risks and asymmetric interactive affordance in online context, online dating individuals tend to be more contentious in choosing the time and methods to revoke their personal information. Thus, uncertainty reduction theory provides an important foundation for understanding the process of online romantic relationships formation and the strategies used to reduce doubts and increase trust between individuals.

In the context of breakups and ghosting, research suggests that relationship uncertainty plays a key role in the breakup process. Blight et al. (2019) noted that when couples decide to separate, there is often ambiguity regarding the status of the relationship which can lead to confusion and uncertainty between both parties. Behaviors such as avoiding communication or ghosting can exacerbate this uncertainty, as one party may be unclear about their partner's feelings or intentions. When couples attempt to reduce this uncertainty, they may seek information through mutual friends or monitor their partner's activity on social media. This research highlights the importance of understanding how uncertainty can influence the decision to separate and how individuals can use various strategies to cope with the feelings of uncertainty that arise after breakup (Blight et al., 2019).

In research related to uncertainty reduction theory in relationship dissolution and replacement, LeFebvre & Fan (2019) used the theoretical framework of uncertainty reduction and ambiguous loss to investigate the loss of romantic relationships through the phenomenon of ghosting. Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) is a basic framework for exploring uncertainty in interpersonal interactions or the beginning of interpersonal interactions, stating that uncertainty shapes human behavior (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). According to URT, uncertainty in interpersonal relationships indicates a lack of confidence about how an interaction will develop (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). People who experience indeterminacy often face difficulties in deciding how to act, foreseeing the other person's response, and predicting what will happen next.

To reduce this uncertainty, individuals tend to seek information sequentially or simultaneously to increase predictability in interactions. The three main strategies to reduce uncertainty are passive, active, and interactive strategies. Passive strategies involve uninterrupted observation, while active strategies involve seeking information (Berger & Kellerman, 1983). In addition, extractive strategies are used as an alternative to

active strategies, where individuals use non-physical mediation channels such as internet search engines to obtain information about the target (Ramirez Jr et al., 2002). This research found that individuals experiencing relationship loss may utilize varying degrees of indeterminacy leading to various information seeking strategies to process the situation (Powell & Afifi, 2005).

In the context of ghosting, non-causers of relationship loss often deal with uncertainty due to limited information and the end of the relationship. They may wonder “What is happening?”, “Why is this happening?”, “Is something wrong with me?” and “Why can’t I read this situation?” in order to reduce uncertainty and seek answers about both (LeFebvre & Fan, 2019). Thus, this study provides insights into how non-causers of relationship loss navigate indeterminacy and the existential implications of the absence of finality of relationship loss.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this systematic literature review highlights the significance of Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) in understanding romantic relationships. The analysis reveals that URT effectively explains how individuals manage uncertainty during initial interactions and throughout the development of their relationships. Key strategies such as information seeking, self-disclosure, and non-verbal cues play critical roles in reducing uncertainty and fostering intimacy between partners. Additionally, the review indicates that while URT has been widely applied in various contexts, there is a need for more research on its application across diverse cultures and digital platforms. The findings suggest that as relationships evolve, uncertainties can lead to complex emotional responses, emphasizing the importance of communication in mitigating these challenges. Overall, this study underscores the relevance of URT in contemporary relationship dynamics and calls for further exploration of its implications in diverse relational contexts. However, this paper still has limitations regarding the geographic scopes of previous studies which were conducted mostly in the USA and Netherlands, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, limited research on ongoing relationships that happen due to applicability of Uncertainty Reduction Theory on initial relationships. Therefore, future research can fill the gaps that may include the focus on long-term relationships and explore the role of non-verbal communication of URT in digital communication settings.

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