

Heart Signals: The Change of Relationship from Virtual to Reality in China

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Abstract: Individuals who used both Chinese and Western online dating websites and apps were examined in the context of modality switching, moving from Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) to Face-to-Face (FtF). Berger and Calabrese's Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) was used to view the interaction. This study extends upon research conducted in the USA by Reints and Wickelgren (2018). Using qualitative research methods that included 12 participants, interviewees were asked about online dating platform use that moved from CMC to FtF. Results showed a change in uncertainty when the relationship moved from CMC (minimal anxiety) to FtF (increase anxiety).

Keywords: Uncertainty Reduction Theory, online dating, computer-mediated communication, face-to-face communication

1. Introduction

With the increasing popularity of dating sites and dating applications (apps), the method people utilize to seek romantic relationships has changed. Looking for romantic relationships can be fraught with uncertainty. Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) provides an interesting lens to view such interactions. When we interact with strangers, we experience uncertainty because we do not really know what to expect. However, as the interaction proceeds, we gain information that quickly reduces our uncertainties (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). This allows people to access information online first to reduce uncertainty, and then decide whether to switch the communication modality to a face-to-face form of communication.

Online dating culture is becoming increasingly welcomed around the world including China, however, compared to America, China has a very different romantic relationship culture. The romantic relationship culture may bring many different but interesting features to the Chinese online dating pattern. Data from the PEW Internet and Daily Live project shows that in America, "11% of online adults, and 74% of single adults seeking romantic relationships have used an online dating service" (Madden & Lenhart, 2006, p.ii). Online dating also has become popular among Chinese young people. Showing love directly face to face is a little difficult considering local cultural practices. Online dating is an indirect but convenient way, and it caters to the need of Chinese to build romantic relationships. Consequently, many Chinese youth participate in online dating for either romantic or sexual purposes. Chinese use social media platforms, such as QQ and WeChat, for dating purposes. China also has its own diverse

online dating mobile apps including TanTan, Soul, and Momo for heterosexual men, Blued and Aloha for gays, and Cherry, Lala, and Lespark for lesbians. In China, online dating websites are specifically used by people who want to get married. There are some online dating platforms, especially dating websites for marriage purpose such as Baihe (Nagging Parents Help China's On-Line Dating Sites Flourish, 2018). Some Chinese individuals also use Western sites (like Grindr and Tinder) for purposes of meeting others. While these sites might have originally been used in order to meet individuals outside of China (or international individuals living in China), the use of these apps has changed to include Chinese for Chinese relationships.

When using dating apps, users need to set up their personal profile. Once they have completed their online profile, they have the option to browse the profiles of other people. Some of the apps match people by their technological algorithm. The algorithm is based on personal information, uploaded posts, shared songs, and other information released on the mobile app. Users chat with people and may form relationships through the apps, and may move from CMC to FtF.

The change of relationship from CMC to FtF is considered "modality switching" by the communication research community. Researchers have focused on how modality switching affects the relationships, but primarily through quantitative studies (Ramirez, Sumner, Fleuriet, & Cole, 2015; Sprecher & Hampton, 2017). This study, in addition, involved twelve (12) online daters who experienced online dating and modality switching through qualitative interviews (see Appendix A). The interview questions focus on the individual's experiences. This paper aims to investigate the modality switching process of relationship from CMC to FtF in China.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Romantic Relationship through CMC

As online social networks rapidly develop, researchers focus on communication that happens on online social networks. A study conducted by Morris (2010) indicates people tend to communicate through social networks in lieu of communicating directly through FtF with their friends and family. The lack of FtF communication allows people to build relationships with others through computer-mediated communication (CMC) very quickly. As a result, people increasingly spend more time to build up various romantic relationships through CMC" (Yum & Hara, 2005). In romantic relationships, a key element that promotes the development of such relationships is the curiosity of both people towards each other (Kashdan, McKnight, Fincham & Rose, 2011). Highly curious people are more attuned to what they sense from another person (ibid., 2011).

2.2. Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Uncertainty reduction theory indicates that people have a desire to reduce uncertainty about their potential relationship partner(s) in order to increase the effectiveness of messaging and predicting further behavior (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Berger and Calabrese (1975) proposed three main methods people use to reduce uncertainty: passive, active, and interactive.

The passive method is “unobtrusive observation” (Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon & Sunnafrank, 2002, p. 8). Ramirez et al. (2002) indicate this unobtrusive observation is a way of indirect observation. Instead of gaining information of others from direct communication, people may obtain information through non-communicating ways, such as from viewing profiles of others, or the conversation history of the people being observed with others. The active method is seeking information from a third party such as mutual friends (Gibbs, Ellison & Lai, 2010), and this strategy is rarer in CMC than in FtF communication (Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon & Sunnafrank, 2002). The researchers explained this as the outcome of a smaller shared social network in CMC than FtF. The interactive method is directly communicating with the partner. Through the interaction, communicators may change their behaviors based on the feedback received in order to seek for different information (Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon & Sunnafrank, 2002). Uncertainty is reduced in this process. Ramirez et al. (2002) illustrate a unique method which fits CMC, labeled as the “exclusive” method. They describe this method as learning more about relational partners in a computer-mediated environment through the passive, active or interactive methods of Berger (1979). According to Antheuni, Valkenburg, and Peters (2010) there are two CMC environments: cue-poor CMC environment and cue-rich CMC environment. They explained the cue-poor CMC environment as an environment in which communicators seek information mainly through interactive communication. A cue-rich CMC environment is an environment where communicators can obtain information through both active and passive methods. They also proposed that different CMC environments significantly impact the way uncertainty reduction strategies can be applied (Antheunits, Valkenburg & Peter, 2010).

2.3. Hyperpersonal Perspective of CMC

Research conducted in the 1980s and early 1990s suggested CMC would have negative effects on the communication process. They believed it may create an “uninhibited and depersonalized” communication. This is known as the hyperpersonal perspective. This perspective was proposed by Joseph B. Walther in 1996. This perspective indicates that under some circumstances, CMC communication is better than FtF communication (Walther, 1996).

Walther (1996) stated that during the process of CMC communication, there is a social identity-deindividuation theory which should be put into consideration of interaction mode. This theory proposes that the receiver of the communication would create an idealized perception of the other communicator due to the lack of FtF cues and prior knowledge of their partner. The senders in the CMC communication would be more careful about the message they conveyed to enhance their self-presentation, which aims to improve interpersonal communication.

Different from FtF communication, without the ongoing stress, senders in CMC communication would take time to select their preferable cues (Walther, 1996). Through the interaction between senders and receivers, the idealized perception of receivers and optimized self-presentation of senders will be confirmed and enhanced, which creates an intensification loop.

Under these circumstances, CMC communication will create a better communication atmosphere than FtF communication. However, the Hyperpersonal Perspective communication may sometimes lead to unrealistic expectations when people change communication methods from CMC to FtF (Sprecher & Hampton, 2017).

2.4. Modality Switching Perspective

When changing from one modality to another, especially the very first FtF encounter after a period of CMC communication, there may be a significant impact on interpersonal relationships (Ramirez & Wang, 2008). This shifting of modality may have profound effects both in positive and negative directions (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007). As for the positive impacts, Ramirez and Zhang (2007) reported that shifting modality from CMC to FtF will facilitate completion of the task and also strengthen the relationship at the same time. However, when it comes to the negative effect, Ramirez and Wang (2008) proposed an expectation violation theory. In this theory, they believe that the substantial variation exists between the expectations of each partner and the reality when they shift modality from CMC to FtF. This theory actually associated with Walther's idealized perception theory (Walther, 1996) in hyperpersonal perspective. The present research aimed to analyze if there is an expectation violation after modality switching and the most common aspects of expectation violation.

2.5. Research Questions

RQ 1: What is the change in the perception of their partner after moving from CMC to FtF?

Online dating sites or apps mostly facilitate preliminary communication for the communicators. Once the relationship between the partners is determined, partners need to determine how to conduct further communication outside dating sites or apps (Ramirez, Sumner, Fleuriet & Cole, 2015). Sixty-five percent of online daters shifted modality from CMC to FtF and had their initial face-to-face meeting (Whitty & Carr, 2006, cited in Ramirez, Sumner, Fleuriet & Lole, 2015). Some online daters opted not to move from CMC to FtF after they established the relationship. For instance, they may change from online dating apps to texting or calling. The present study aimed to analyze online daters' further choices after they established their relationship.

RQ 2: What is the next step after individuals confirmed the relationship?

Research has been conducted to investigate the effects of modality switching on dating relationships. Most of the research is targeted at western society (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007; Ramirez & Wang, 2008; Ramirez, Sumner, Fleuriet & Cole, 2015). The present research is targeted at a particular area of China. This research aimed to extend the research scope from solely western society to the eastern and western society.

3. Method

3.1. Data Collection

The research was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in Kean University, and all the procedures adopted by this research followed rules established by the institution's IRB and research ethics.

This qualitative study consists of twelve (12) one-on-one interviews. All interviewees are

Chinese who have utilized at least one online dating platform or a general social media site, such as WeChat and Weibo, for dating purpose. Participants were recruited via posters posted throughout campus. The posters contained a QR code which interested participants scanned and scheduled an appointment to meet with a student researcher. Researchers also asked individuals they know personally, and participants that were interviewed for others who may be interested in talking to researches. Granovetter (1976) identified this participant recruiting device as a “snowballing effect” and concluded it was a good way to recruit individuals.

Interviews were conducted either FtF in a safe and comfortable space for the interviewees like an empty classroom, or through an online channel, such as WeChat voice call. The interviews were recorded with participant permission and were conducted either in Chinese or English, based on the participants’ preference. The interview was semi-structured, with some structured questions asked for basic information. Most questions were open-ended, which allowed participants to share more information, such as: feelings, attitudes and understanding of the subject. Questions focused on the following: modality switching process from CMC to FtF and the change in the perception of their partner after meeting, how they confirmed their romantic relationship, what did they do after they confirmed the relationship and met FtF, and how did the change of perception during FtF meeting influence their relationship. In this study, the participants were the main narrators and shared their experience of online dating and moving from CMC to FtF. Some of the interviews lasted from 15 to 20 minutes in length, with most lasting around 30 minutes.

Once the interviews concluded, the researchers collected the audio recordings and informed consent forms, and then transcribed the interviews. Participants’ information remained confidential during the whole process. Interviews conducted in English (some of them were done in a mix of Chinese and English) were transcribed word-for-word. We decided to preserve the participants’ voice, recognizing that all of these participants were speaking in their second or third language. We made no effort to correct grammar and chose not to “(sic)” their ideas other than to clarify specific information. For the interviews conducted in Chinese, the researchers translated the interviews to English. Analysis of the transcriptions were drawn based on the participants’ experiences, so as to investigate commonalities and differences between the participants.

3.2. Participants

A convenient sample of twelve (12) participants volunteered to be interviewed for this study: seven females who claimed to have dated men, one female claimed to have dated females, two men claimed to have dated men, and two men claimed to have dated females. The average age is approximately twenty-one (21), with the range from twenty (20) to twenty-two (22) years old. All of the participants are Chinese. However, during the data analysis, only eleven (11) interviews were selected because they were valid for this research because they experienced modality switching from CMC to FtF. The excluded interviewee did not experience modality switch from CMC to FtF. All participants stated they had used or were using online dating platforms to meet potential partners for romantic relationships.

As previously stated, all participants used an online dating platform and met FtF with someone

from that platform. More information on each of the participants can be found in Appendix A.

4. Data

4.1. Change of Perception from CMC to FtF

In RQ1, the change in perceptions of their partners was investigated when they moved from CMC to FtF. Generally, the majority of the interviewees thought their expectations during CMC match the FtF, but still there are reports that there exists a mismatch between the CMC and FtF expectations. Two aspects of the expectations are constantly referred to. One is the expectation about the physical appearance and the other is the expectation towards personalities and characters of their partners.

4.1.1. Physical Appearance

Xiaozhou, 22, female. She met her boyfriend through Weibo (a Chinese social media platform similar to Twitter in the US). She said that her partner met her expectations of appearance since they had already sent photos to each other prior to meeting FtF.

Wang Peng, 20, male, stated that: "I feel she is cheating on her picture" about the first time they met FtF. Another participant shared similar feelings.

Daisy, 21, female. She met her partner through WeChat (a Chinese instant message App similar to WhatsApp). Although they did video chat before meeting, she learned that her partner's FtF appearance was very different from the CMC. She said, "(online) He looks like a very a movie star called Ou hao (a Chinese singer). But actually, when I saw him (FtF) I said he is like Bi Fujian (a Chinese comedian), I used to think he will be very tall, but he was shorter than I expect when I first met him." For Daisy, she felt she was deceived by the online profile photos, and even the video chatting deceived her as well.

Lorrita, 20, female, used the online dating platform - Tan Tan, and met her boyfriend (now ex-boyfriend) via that platform. She thought that her perceptions of the appearance of her partner are the same because she had seen her partner's photos before meeting, and she believed that "He is not that person who can make up and use beauty camera."

4.1.2. Personality/Characteristics

David, 20, male, was chatting with a girl who was about to be his girlfriend, online via QQ (A Chinese instant message App similar to Facebook Messages). "I'm very concerned about the private, so I do not share the real information. Yeah, except that I know this person, who he or she is." He had already known the girl since she was in the same university he attended; aside from her physical appearance, he had no idea about her personality. He confirmed the relationship online and decided to move to FtF. When they finally met, he felt "sensational differences," as he explained: "because you knew this person online, but in real world, you will hear the voice, touch her and look at her. These are very different." However, for the personality part, he thought it was still the same as he considered her online.

4.2. Initial Encounters

RQ2 asks how individuals establish online relationships. According to the interviews, most people confirmed their relationship during the CMC and what the next steps are stage. Although most CMC led to FtF meeting, before moving to FtF, they engaged in different varieties of activities to extend their knowledge about their partner and cultivate their relationships. There are three main actions after people confirm the relationship: asking for meeting offline, CMC modality switching from texting to video-chatting, or moving from one internet platform to another one.

4.2.1. CMC from Texting to Video-chatting

Liu Lu, 20, female, met her boyfriend through Baidu Tieba (A Chinese online Forum, similar to Reddit in the US), and confirmed the relationship on another online platform WeChat. She posted a question on Baidu Tieba and received a response and then they decided to switch to WeChat for more frequent communication, which was more “convenient” in her mind. They found they fit each other’s expectation, so their relationship progressed rapidly. After they confirmed the romantic relationship on WeChat platform, they wanted to meet FtF, so they exchanged photos and engaged in video-chatting.

Later, the boy asked for an offline meeting soon after they confirmed the relationship, but Liu Lu turned down the invitation several times before they actually met, since she said: “I wanted to lose my weight to leave a good impression but, in the end, I found it was impossible, so I accepted.” After their first meeting, Liu Lu realized, compared to the FtF meeting, using CMC was a more convenient and intimate way to communicate and allowed them the opportunity to learn more about each other, but still she articulated: “...I was a little envy lovers who can attend class together. Due to the long-distance relationship, I wanted to break up with him because he cannot accompany with me physically every day.”

4.2.2. Move from One Platform to Another One

Xiao Meng, 20, female. She used an anonymous social media app named Play More to express her sentiments online. She shared her personal feelings and picture on the app, and a boy, who later became her partner, came to chat with her. When they discovered the spark between them, they confirmed their relationship on Play More, and added WeChat contacts with each other “for further communication”. During the WeChat texting, Xiao Meng thought: “It just feels good. Nice talking. I didn’t feel anything at first, and then I gradually thought he was a good guy. It’s just one, uh... It just feels good...I am really really glad that he asked me out, although I am a little bit hesitate.” Finally, Xiao Meng decided to ask the boy out for dinner.

4.2.3. Move to FtF

Lorrita, 20, female, met her boyfriend through Weibo. They communicated with each other about two months and then decided to meet face to face. Prior to that, they saw each other’s

photos from their profile pages. Lorrita thought that their relationship was “in a very unstable and illusory state,” but when they meet FtF, it felt “more real.”

Davi, 20, male, met several people via Aloha (an online gay dating platform similar to Grindr in the US). He ended up meeting face to face with some of them. He usually communicated with the people he met around 15 days - to one month. Once the relationships were established online, he would propose to meet each other offline. He said: “Generally, we will have the meal and watch the movie. But we don’t decide which restaurant to eat and which movie to watch. My favorite scene was when we walked and talked on a quiet road.” He mentioned in the beginning of the interview, that his current stable relationship with his partner started from this particular platform as well. During the memorable moments with his current partner when they met FtF, he told the interviewer that: “I even didn’t want to go home.” He thinks that FtF experience is much more tangible for him.

Mike, 21, female, declared that she was female, and she used to be on the dating platform Tan Tan. She disguised herself as a male, using male profile photos she downloaded from the internet. She spoke with multiple female users on Tan Tan. After talking for two months online with a girl, they decided to meet FtF. “It was not going on well,” Mike explained the girl was terrified and agitated when she discovered that Mike was a girl as well. “She felt being cheated and lied and left immediately.” Mike further added.

5. Findings

5.1. Theory

One complaint about Uncertainty Reduction Theory comes from the fact that while Berger and Calabrese (1975, 1979) introduced the theory to cover a short period of time when strangers first meet, many theorists have taken the theory to cover much longer periods of time. This research shows a newer look at an extended time period of uncertainty reduction due to the act of modality switching. Interviews conducted for this research suggest that individuals experience uncertainty at the initial meeting, and as they switch modality from computer mediated communication to a face to face style of communicating, uncertainty returns, and the participants work to reduce that uncertainty. It also appears that the Chinese individuals who we spoke to also had additional moments of uncertainty/reduction as they switched modalities within platforms online. Further research is needed to verify this assumption.

5.2. Modality Switching

Previous studies looked at how individuals talked about how they moved from CMC to FtF forms of communication. Participants in this study needed to make this switch as well, but the interviews revealed more examples of modality switching from CMC to CMC channels. Other research has failed to recognize the move from one site to another. It is not apparent from the data shown in other studies whether participants did switch modalities within CMC contexts or if the researchers were only concerned with switches from CMC to FtF forms of communication. Regardless of the reasons why these switches were not discussed, it was

apparent from this research that switching from one CMC venue to another created additional uncertainty. Many participants moved from a specific dating site to a more commonly used social interaction venue. Mike, for instance, moved from a dating site to WeChat. The change in venue seemed to bring new uncertainties to the discussion and is worthy of future research.

5.3. Chinese Use of Social Media for Romantic Encounters

While only twelve individuals were interviewed, it does appear that the way Chinese individuals use social media for romantic encounters differs from previously reported populations. One specific way that these media were used seemed to be the establishment of a romantic relationship during CMC encounters (before FtF meetings) and the FtF meetings helped to cement the romantic relationship. David talked about agreeing to become boyfriend/girlfriend while they were interacting online and stated that once they did meet face to face, it became a different form of reality. He reported that he felt they were dating even before they met in person. Data that had individuals using sites in the US seemed to indicate that individuals became romantic/sexual after they met face to face. It is important to note that major differences between the data set for this research and research shared with the lead author of this work (see Reints & Wickelgren, 2018) make drawing conclusions about similar data sets difficult. While this project can make conclusions about Chinese participants, in Reints and Wickelgren's study (2018), and other quantitative work (see Ramirez & Wang, 2008; Ramirez & Zhang, 2007; Ramirez, Sumner, Fluriet & Cole, 2015, as examples), participants were recruited in US venues, but little information was provided about nationalities. Reints and Wickelgren (2018) did report that some participants identified as individuals from outside the US.

6. Limitations

Only twelve (12) individuals participated in the interviews. The limitation of this research is that the sample size is too narrow. Although many Chinese youth utilize online dating platforms, they appeared to have ashamed or avoidant attitudes to talking about it, a quality not apparent in the American venues. The interview involves some sensitive and intimate questions, therefore, even though individuals are interested in this research, a limited number of people are willing to voluntarily come and participate. Participants also came from a limited area in China, and all of them were university-related individuals.

7. Call for Future Research

More evidence is needed from Chinese sources of online romantic interactions. These individuals need to come from a wider scope of experience. There also needs to be greater attention paid to modality switching within CMC venues. These ideas may be more significant in China due to the desire for Chinese individuals to protect privacy, but this issue can arise in other cultures as well.

This research also suggests that research should study cultures outside of US/Western worlds and China. Understanding a wider scope of concepts is not limited to the major

populated areas of the planet.

8. Conclusion

As China opens its world to the outside world, the chance to look at a different way of understanding provides unique messages that can show Western assumptions of a way of interacting as incomplete. Online dating is one way that we can begin to see how we meet and communicate.

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Author Note

The first and second author of this research, Bruce Wickelgren and Raquel Stuart, were both professors at Wenzhou Kean University in Wenzhou, China during the 2018-19 school year when the project was conducted. Wickelgren taught communication and Stuart taught psychology. Dr. Stuart asked Dr. Wickelgren to talk about his on-line romantic relationship research project (also presented at the Brno IAICS conference along with this research) and the psychology students in the class asked to conduct the same research. A team that included sixteen psychology students and two faculty was formed. Dr. Wickelgren has returned to his tenured position at Suffolk University in Boston, and Dr. Stuart has taken on the role of Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Wenzhou Kean University.

Appendix 1. Participant Profiles

Interview No.	Interviewer Name	Interviewee Name	Interviewee Age	Interviewee Sex	Sex Orientation of Interviewees
1	Carl	Shawn	22	Male	Male
2	Sabrina	Xiaozhou	20	Female	Male
3	Vera	Liu Lu	20	Female	Male
4	Olivia	Qiu Qiu	21	Female	Male
5	Ingrid	Wang Peng	21	Male	Female
6	Suty	Lorrita	20	Female	Male
7	Walt	Davi	20	Male	Male
8	Alan	Xiao Meng	21	Female	Male
9	Bruce	David	20	Male	Female
10	Arturo	Daisy	22	Female	Male
11	Emily	Fang Datong	20	Female	Male
12	Teresa	Mike	20	Female	Female