

# MANAGING UNCERTAINTY IN RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT AMONG DATING APP COUPLES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Joy Christy Rawung<sup>1</sup>, Inri Inggrit Indrayani<sup>2\*</sup>, Daniel Budiana<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup> Communication Science Department, Petra Christian University

Email : <sup>1</sup>joychristy28@gmail.com; <sup>2</sup>inri.inggrit@petra.ac.id\*; <sup>3</sup>[daniel@petra.ac.id](mailto:daniel@petra.ac.id)

\* corresponding author

## ABSTRACT

Relationships initiated via dating applications often encounter higher uncertainty than those formed face-to-face. This is due to limited initial information, potential discrepancies between online and real-life personas, and the absence of clear social references. This study examines how couples who met through dating apps manage relationship uncertainty in the lead-up to marriage decisions. Employing a transcendental phenomenology approach, the research explores informants' subjective experiences. Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) serves as the primary conceptual framework, complemented by Self-Disclosure within Social Penetration Theory (SPT) as a key communication strategy for uncertainty management. Data was gathered via in-depth interviews with married couples who met through dating applications. Findings indicate that couples employ various uncertainty reduction strategies: passive (observing online behavior), active (seeking third-party information), and interactive (direct communication and gradual self-disclosure). Self-disclosure is crucial for building trust and accelerating the decision to marry, particularly in terms of openness about life values, marital expectations, and past experiences. The results suggest that deeper self-disclosure leads to stronger relationships. This study contributes to the understanding of interpersonal communication in digital contexts, enhancing our understanding of communication dynamics from online interactions to committed relationships. Practical implications offer valuable insights for dating app users to foster healthier and more meaningful relationships.

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## 1. Introduction

The rapid development of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed how romantic relationships are initiated and developed. Dating applications such as Tinder, Bumble, and Tantan have become prominent platforms for partner selection (Witmer et al., 2025), allowing individuals to connect beyond traditional social boundaries. Globally, dating app usage continues to increase, and in Indonesia, adoption has grown significantly among millennials and Generation Z, reflecting shifting norms in courtship practices (Sharabi & Dorrance-Hall, 2024; Jang et al., 2025).

Dating applications have become one of the primary mediums for finding romantic partners in the digital age (Khan, Mujahid, Ali, Ibrar; Sanaulla; Khan, 2025). The use of online dating applications in Indonesia has increased significantly in recent years, particularly among young people. A Populix survey in January 2024 indicated that 63% of respondents in Indonesia use online dating applications, with the majority of users belonging to millennials (52%) and Gen Z (44%). The most popular applications in Indonesia are Tinder, used by 38% of respondents, followed by Tantan (33%) and Bumble (17%).

The popularity of online dating applications stems largely from the convenience and accessibility they offer. Apps like Tinder, Bumble, and Tantan enable individuals to search for potential partners with just a few screen swipes. This process is widely known as "swiping culture," where users can quickly assess someone based on their photo or brief profile information. The number of global dating app users reached 366 million, marking a significant increase from the previous year. In Indonesia, a 2021 Populix survey found that over 41% of respondents had used dating applications, with 20% of them successfully forming serious relationships. Through romantic communication, individuals express love, affection, and form shared meanings within the relationship (Jang et al., 2025). This communication encompasses various forms of verbal and nonverbal interaction, such as expressions of love, self-disclosure, and the negotiation of roles within the relationship (Muhtar, 2021).

Despite their growing popularity, relationships initiated through dating applications are often marked by heightened uncertainty. Initial interactions rely heavily on limited textual information, curated self-presentations, and the absence of shared social references, which can complicate trust-building and decision-making processes. Unlike face-to-face encounters, digital interactions restrict access to nonverbal cues and contextual background, increasing ambiguity regarding identity, intentions, and long-term compatibility (Odeunmi et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2025).

Previous studies on online dating have largely focused on user motivations (Menon, 2024), platform affordances, risks such as ghosting, or early-stage interaction dynamics (Šiša, 2024; Joseph et al., 2024). A study revealed that motivations for using dating applications vary widely (Singh et al., 2020), encompassing emotional gratification, sexual exploration (Yang et al., 2025), and the pursuit of long-term partners (Joseph et al., 2024). Consequently, individuals must employ various communication strategies to ascertain whether their counterparts' goals align with their own. If expectations are not managed effectively, relationships initiated through dating applications risk conflict or even an unclear ending, such as ghosting.

Over the past five years, numerous studies have examined the dynamics of relationships formed through online dating applications. The experiences of Tinder users in building interpersonal relationships, focusing on the communication and interaction processes occurring on the platform. This research found that ghosting is defined as the unexpected unilateral termination of communication in interpersonal relationships exerted through digital platforms (Šiša, 2024). Success in building relationships depended on the ability to maintain consistent communication and capture a partner's attention. This implied

that platform features and initial perceptions of other user profiles heavily influenced the interaction process on Tinder.

Furthermore, a study on the usage of the Bumble application as a communication platform discovered that it met users' social needs (Anggraini et al., 2024); however, conversations did not necessarily result in significant love partnerships. The Bumble application arises in relationships based on online dating applications, which can be attributed to how individuals approach match partners. Effective interpersonal communication, based on how it occurs between couples, will be defined by positive interpersonal relationships. Following a relationship, it moves on to the process of relationship repair, which seeks to keep the relationship stable and intact (Sawera Shakeel, Dr. Omer Shujat Bhatti, 2025).

While these studies provide important insights, most examine relationships that remain casual, temporary, or unresolved. Far less attention has been given to couples who successfully navigate uncertainty and transition from app-mediated encounters to long-term commitment, particularly marriage (Sharabi & Dorrance-Hall, 2024). This creates a significant gap in understanding how uncertainty is managed not merely to sustain interaction, but to support durable relational outcomes. Recent scholarship suggests that online relationships are not inherently weaker than offline ones, but rather require different communicative competencies, particularly in managing identity verification, expectation alignment, and value negotiation (Sharabi & Dorrance-Hall, 2024). Nevertheless, empirical research that integrates URT and self-disclosure within the lived experiences of married couples who met via dating applications remains limited, especially in non-Western contexts such as Indonesia

Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT) offers a useful framework for examining how individuals seek information to reduce ambiguity in interpersonal relationships. In digitally mediated contexts, uncertainty tends to be more pronounced, prompting individuals to rely on passive strategies (observing online behavior), active strategies (seeking third-party information), and interactive strategies (direct communication). However, uncertainty management alone does not fully explain how intimacy and commitment (Djufril et al., 2025) are formed. Social Penetration Theory (SPT) complements URT by explaining how gradual self-disclosure facilitates trust, relational depth, and emotional bonding (Cela et al., 2025), elements crucial for long-term relationship development (Forest et al., 2023).

Responding to this gap, the present study focuses explicitly on couples who met through dating applications and successfully progressed to marriage. Using a transcendental phenomenological approach, this research explores how these couples experienced uncertainty, managed relational ambiguity, and employed communication strategies, particularly self-disclosure, across different stages of relationship development. By centering on successful relational trajectories rather than failed or casual interactions, this study offers a novel contribution to interpersonal communication research in digital contexts.

Thus, this research will analyze how couples who meet on dating applications manage uncertainty throughout their relationship development journey and whether the strategies they employ are effective in building trust and commitment. This study contributes theoretically by demonstrating how URT and SPT operate synergistically in app-initiated relationships, rather than as isolated explanatory frameworks. Practically, the findings provide insights for dating application users seeking long-term commitment, as well as for platform designers and relationship counselors aiming to support healthier digital relationship practices.

Uncertainty in relationships initiated from dating applications is greater compared to relationships that originate from direct encounters. One primary factor contributing to this is the minimal information available in initial interactions. In face-to-face interactions, individuals can directly observe facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice, which

helps them assess a person's character more accurately (Sawera Shakeel, Dr. Omer Shujat Bhatti, 2025). Conversely, in dating applications, initial interactions rely on text, photos, and brief messages that can be easily manipulated. As a result, uncertainty regarding the authenticity of identity and a partner's intentions becomes higher (Odebunmi et al., 2025).

The absence of a clear social context also contributes to increased uncertainty in relationship development. In relationships initiated from direct interaction, individuals typically have clear social references, such as introductions through friends or colleagues (Teguh & Paramita, 2024), which can help reduce uncertainty. However, in dating applications, individuals often lack sufficient insight into their partner's social background. This lack of social references makes it more difficult for individuals to objectively assess a partner's commitment and personality (Firmannandya, 2024), thereby increasing uncertainty about the continuity of their relationship. In the context of relationship development, uncertainty management is a critical aspect that influences the continuity and quality of relationships. The communication strategies employed by couples, both during the online interaction phase (Azizah, 2025) and after transitioning to in-person meetings, are key to reducing uncertainty and building a more stable relationship foundation.

## 2. Method

This study employed a qualitative research design using a transcendental phenomenological approach to explore how couples who met through dating applications manage uncertainty throughout relationship development. Phenomenology was chosen to capture individuals' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2016) and the meanings they ascribed to uncertainty, communication, and commitment (Hossain et al., 2024).

Informants were selected using purposive sampling. The study involved five individuals who met through dating applications and subsequently decided to marry. The inclusion criteria were: (1) meeting a partner via a dating application, (2) developing a romantic relationship that led to marriage, and (3) willingness to share personal communication experiences related to uncertainty management. Focusing on married couples allowed the study to examine uncertainty management across the entire relational trajectory, rather than just at the initiation stage.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted individually with each participant. Each interview lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and was carried out either face-to-face or via online video conferencing. All interviews were audio-recorded with the informants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Interview questions focused on experiences of uncertainty, communication strategies, self-disclosure, and decision-making processes toward marriage.

Data analysis followed standard transcendental phenomenological procedures. First, the researcher conducted *bracketing* (epoché) (Bednall, 2006) to minimize personal assumptions through reflexive notes. Second, *horizontalization* was applied by identifying all significant statements related to uncertainty and communication. Third, these statements were grouped into meaning units through *coding* and organized into *core themes*. Finally, textural and structural descriptions were developed to capture both what informants experienced and how they managed uncertainty in their relationships.

Data triangulation was conducted by comparing responses across individuals and couples. This study adhered to the ethical standards of research. All informants provided informed consent before participation. Confidentiality was ensured through the use of

pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information. Interview data were securely stored and used solely for research purposes.

### 3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings, data analysis, and data triangulation obtained from informant interviews to address the research focus on how couples who meet through dating applications manage uncertainty in the relationship development process. Data were collected from five informants with diverse backgrounds and experiences in using dating applications, who had successfully developed relationships to more serious stages, including dating, engagement, and marriage. Table 1 summarizes the core themes of uncertainty and the adaptive strategies employed by informants to mitigate them.

Table 1: Thematic Summary of Digital Uncertainty and Management Strategies

Theme	Sources of uncertainty	Uncertainty management strategies
Identity and Credibility	Anonymity	Cross-platform verification; "digital stalking"; longitudinal interaction.
Relational Intent	Discrepancy in goals, diverse motivations	Selective engagement: "vibe checking" through conversation style.
Personality Fit	Discrepancy between 'curated' digital persona and real-life character	Gradual self-disclosure; observing consistency in communication.
Social Stigma	Fear of judgment from external social circles regarding "app-met" origins.	Concealment of relationship origins; narrative reframing.

Source: Researchers data

The following are the uncertainties found among the informants:

#### ***Uncertainty Regarding Identity and Credibility of Potential Partners***

One of the most salient forms of uncertainty experienced by informants concerned the authenticity (Burkhardt et al., 2025) and credibility of potential partners' identities. Unlike face-to-face interactions, dating application encounters begin in a context marked by anonymity, limited biographical information, and the absence of shared social references. Informants described entering relationships from what can be understood as an informationally imbalanced state, where identity cues were fragmented and unverifiable.

"...we're complete strangers. We don't know their background at all. We don't know the environment they grew up in, and so on, we don't know anything at all, that's what makes me doubt." (Informant 3)

"Of course there was. I kept thinking, 'Is this person for real?' Especially since he worked out of town, so we were in an LDR for a while too. But because he communicated consistently, I slowly began to trust him." (Informant 4)

"Because we don't know the partner's background for sure." (Informant 4)

From the perspective of Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT), informants' experiences initially appear to align with the theory's core assumption that unfamiliarity motivates individuals to seek information to reduce uncertainty. However, the findings reveal a significant limitation of URT in digital dating contexts: information availability does not ensure information reliability. Profiles, photos, and textual descriptions are often selectively curated or strategically enhanced, making them insufficient as stable indicators of identity or intention (Shen & Qian, 2024). As a result, informants did not rely solely on information acquisition but engaged in informal verification practices such as monitoring communication consistency, cross-checking narratives over time, and seeking introductions to friends or family members. This demonstrates that uncertainty in digital dating is less about a lack of information and more about a lack of trustworthy and verifiable information, a credibility gap not fully addressed in URT's original formulation. Identity in dating applications thus functions as a performative and negotiated construct (García-iglesias et al., 2026), shaped through interaction and behavioral coherence rather than confirmed through static profile attributes.

Moreover, informants reported that past relational experiences, including emotional trauma, failed commitments, or previous relationships, introduced an additional layer of uncertainty that inhibited emotional openness (Mare & Lee, 2023), particularly in early interactions. URT does not adequately explain this form of uncertainty, as it is rooted in emotional vulnerability rather than present situational ambiguity. In this context, Social Penetration Theory (SPT) provides a more robust explanatory framework (Aldin et al., 2023). The findings indicate that uncertainty related to past experiences was not resolved through observation or third-party verification, but through deep and reciprocal self-disclosure. Importantly, self-disclosure did not simply follow uncertainty reduction, as classical URT would suggest; instead, it functioned as an active mechanism for managing uncertainty and negotiating relational risk. These findings suggest that URT and SPT should be understood as interdependent rather than sequential theories in digital dating contexts, where managing uncertainty is less about eliminating ambiguity and more about building relational confidence through communicative consistency, emotional transparency (Strulov & Aderka, 2025), and mutual validation, particularly in relationships that progress toward marriage.

### ***Differences in Expectations and Goals in Dating App Usage***

In addition to identity-related ambiguity, informants experienced significant uncertainty arising from differences in expectations and relational goals when using dating applications. Unlike relationships initiated in offline social environments, such as friendships, workplaces, or educational settings, dating app encounters bring together individuals whose motivations are often unarticulated (Harris & Harris, 2024), fluid, and asymmetrical at the outset of interaction.

"...my initial goal when I started playing with dating apps was just to find someone to talk to." (Informant 1)

"But honestly, at first, I had no intention of being serious, because my partner and I are very different in our daily lives." (Informant 2)

"Slowly, perhaps. Maybe because I've used dating apps many times, I mean, not just Bumble, but Tinder too, so it was always just about looking for new friends, new acquaintances, just filling free time." (Informant 3)

These accounts indicate that dating applications function as multi-purpose relational spaces in which users pursue diverse objectives, ranging from casual interaction and emotional companionship to long-term commitment. From the perspective of Uncertainty

Reduction Theory (URT), such conditions might be interpreted as a lack of information regarding a partner's intentions. However, the findings reveal a more fundamental limitation, even when information is available, relational intentions may remain fluid and evolve through interaction. This challenges URT's assumption that uncertainty can be progressively reduced through information-seeking alone. In digital dating contexts, expectations are not always pre-existing facts waiting to be uncovered; rather, they are negotiated and co-constructed over time, often reshaped as emotional attachment develops.

For several informants, emotional intimacy emerged despite initially non-serious intentions, indicating that relational goals are frequently retrospectively defined rather than predetermined. URT does not adequately account for this dynamic reorientation of relational intent, as it conceptualizes uncertainty primarily as a temporary state preceding stable outcomes. In contrast, Social Penetration Theory (SPT) offers a more flexible explanatory framework. Progressive self-disclosure enabled informants to articulate evolving expectations, clarify relational boundaries, and renegotiate goals as relationships deepened. Importantly, expectation-related uncertainty was not inherently detrimental; when addressed through open and reciprocal communication, it became an opportunity for relational negotiation and growth. This reinforces the argument that uncertainty in digital dating is not solely informational, but also intentional and developmental, requiring communicative competencies that extend beyond information-seeking to include emotional openness, reflexivity, and mutual meaning-making.

### ***Uncertainty Due to Digital Personality VS Real Character***

Another salient form of uncertainty identified in this study concerns the divergence between digital personality and real-life character. During the early stages of app-mediated interaction, communication tended to be light, pleasant, and strategically positive, reinforcing favorable impressions (Zanden & Schouten, 2024). However, as relationships progressed toward more intensive and integrated stages, informants began to encounter differences in personality, mindset, and approaches to everyday situations. These discrepancies revealed that digital self-presentation often masks deeper character traits (Peetz, 2024), generating uncertainty that is not easily resolved through information-seeking alone. From a theoretical standpoint, this challenges URT's assumption that increased interaction naturally leads to reduced uncertainty, as prolonged communication may instead expose new layers of incongruence rather than eliminate ambiguity (Reinhardt et al., 2026).

Despite the potential for relational strain, informants who successfully navigated these differences reframed personality-related uncertainty as a relational learning process. Through sustained interaction and deeper self-disclosure (Aldahadha, 2023). Couples gradually learned each other's "communication language," allowing them to negotiate differences with empathy and adaptability. In this sense, uncertainty functioned not as a barrier to intimacy but as a catalyst for relational growth. This finding aligns more closely with Social Penetration Theory, which emphasizes the role of ongoing disclosure and mutual understanding in deepening relationships. It further suggests that in dating app-initiated relationships, uncertainty is not something to be entirely avoided, but rather an inherent and productive element that, when managed constructively (Rajan & Rajan, 2025), contributes to relational resilience and long-term commitment.

### ***Social Uncertainty in Digital Relationships: The Impact of Stigma on Dating Applications***

Beyond interpersonal dynamics, informants also experienced social uncertainty arising from the stigma attached to dating applications (Liew et al., 2023), particularly within the Indonesian socio-cultural context. Dating apps are often perceived as spaces associated with casual relationships, moral risk, or a lack of seriousness, leading some users to conceal the origins of their relationships from family members, peers, or extended social networks. This stigma created a dual burden, uncertainty about social acceptance, and anxiety regarding

negative judgments from both partners and significant others, who questioned the authenticity and durability of relationships formed online.

From the perspective of Uncertainty Reduction Theory, this form of uncertainty is not adequately addressed, as it originates not from interpersonal unfamiliarity but from social norms and collective perceptions (Liang et al., 2025). In Indonesia, where family approval, religious values, and communal validation play a central role in relationship legitimacy, uncertainty extends beyond the dyadic interaction into broader social evaluation. As a result, uncertainty management strategies were not limited to information-seeking between partners but also involved impression management, selective disclosure, and strategic timing in revealing relationship origins to others. This indicates that uncertainty in digital dating is not only interpersonal but also socially embedded, shaped by cultural expectations and moral frameworks (Tran et al., 2025).

Despite these challenges, informants emphasized that relational quality was ultimately determined not by the medium through which the relationship began, but by how communication, commitment, and shared values were sustained over time. Couples who successfully navigated social stigma relied on consistent communication and mutual reassurance to counter external doubts. In this regard, Social Penetration Theory offers stronger explanatory power than URT, as deeper self-disclosure, both within the relationship and to trusted social circles, helped normalize the relationship and reduce social uncertainty. These findings suggest the need for greater digital literacy and social normalization of online-initiated relationships in Indonesia, so that public discourse becomes more inclusive of evolving forms of intimacy and relationship formation.

### ***Uncertainty Management Strategies***

The following section delineates the strategic interventions employed by informants to navigate and mitigate relational uncertainty within the context of digital dating

### ***Identity Verification Strategies Through Social Media***

Informants actively engaged in identity verification through social media as a primary strategy for managing uncertainty in dating application-initiated relationships. This included observing partners' online behavior (Azizah, 2025), directly asking about ambiguous information, and examining social networks such as friends and family. At a theoretical level, these practices correspond with Uncertainty Reduction Theory's classification of passive, active, and interactive strategies. However, the findings suggest that in digital dating contexts, these strategies are not merely optional but structurally necessary, given the absence of institutionalized social references that typically accompany offline relationship formation.

Beyond verifying personal identity, social media functioned as a symbolic indicator of relational legitimacy and seriousness. Informants reported increased confidence in the relationship only after being introduced to a partner's social circle or appearing together in shared online spaces. This indicates that uncertainty reduction extended beyond the interpersonal level to include social validation, where acknowledgment by friends and family served as external confirmation of authenticity. Such practices reveal a limitation of URT, which focuses primarily on dyadic information exchange and does not fully account for the role of broader social visibility in reducing uncertainty within digitally mediated relationships.

Several informants described feeling as though they were "randomly picking people from the internet," reflecting heightened anxiety about fake identities, scams, and manipulative behaviors such as love bombing. These concerns underscore the limitations of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), which, despite offering efficiency and reach, restricts access to nonverbal cues and rich social contexts. Uncertainty was therefore not

limited to the partner but extended to the platform itself, including doubts about algorithm neutrality and user verification systems (Khan et al., 2026). Consequently, informants were compelled to conduct manual background checks by tracing digital footprints and consulting mutual networks—practices rarely required in conventionally initiated relationships. This finding highlights that uncertainty management in digital dating is a multi-layered process, involving not only interpersonal strategies but also compensatory actions for technological and structural limitations of the platform.

### ***Building selective engagement: Value Alignment and Communicative Compatibility***

Findings indicate that relationship continuity in app-initiated partnerships was shaped not merely by emotional attraction, but by selective engagement based on value alignment and compatible communication patterns. Several informants identified a critical turning point when they recognized shared perspectives with their partners, particularly in how conflicts were approached, how plans (including marriage) were discussed, and how relational roles were understood. Rather than pursuing indiscriminate emotional involvement, participants became increasingly selective, sustaining interaction only when communicative styles and expectations demonstrated long-term compatibility. This suggests that uncertainty reduction in mature stages of digital relationships is less about accumulating additional information and more about evaluating the fit between relational orientations.

This pattern supports the concept of relational schemas, which posits that couples who share similar cognitive frameworks regarding relationship norms, responsibilities, and trajectories are more likely to experience relational stability and satisfaction (Sharabi & Dorrance-Hall, 2024). In the context of digital dating, relational schemas are not assumed at the outset but are gradually revealed through sustained interaction and strategic self-disclosure. Importantly, this finding extends URT by indicating that not all uncertainty is reduced through engagement; instead, uncertainty functions as a filtering mechanism that enables individuals to disengage from misaligned partners. Thus, selective engagement emerges as a deliberate relational strategy, allowing couples to transform early-stage uncertainty into a structured evaluation process that supports relationship continuity and eventual commitment.

### ***Self-Disclosure is Gradual and Functional***

Informants in this study were aware of discrepancies between their offline selves and the identities they initially presented on dating applications. Limited profile information, the absence of nonverbal cues, and the tendency to display an idealized version of oneself often led to expectations that did not fully align with reality. Several informants described experiencing “zonk” moments, in which impressions formed through the application were contradicted during offline encounters. This finding underscores a key limitation of computer-mediated communication: while it enables efficiency and rapid connection, it leaves substantial ambiguity in understanding the person behind the screen. As relationships transitioned from online to offline contexts, these identity gaps became critical points of uncertainty that required deliberate communicative management.

From an analytical perspective, informants’ verification and disclosure practices can be understood as self-generated social control mechanisms operating within a minimally structured digital environment. In the absence of strong institutional or social safeguards, users are compensated through cross-platform observation and gradual openness. This reflects a shift in relational management from immediate, interaction-based assessment to a more investigative and reflexive process. Intimacy in digital dating thus demands greater cognitive and emotional labor, as trust must be built not only through affective connection but also through credibility established across multiple communicative settings. This finding challenges simplistic readings of URT by showing that uncertainty reduction in digital contexts requires sustained relational work rather than one-time information acquisition.

Consistent with Social Penetration Theory, self-disclosure in this study unfolded progressively, beginning with superficial and functional information, such as name, location, occupation, or hobbies, and gradually moving toward deeper layers, including past relationships, life values, emotional vulnerabilities, and aspirations for marriage. This gradual openness functioned as a relational ritual through which trust and emotional resonance were constructed. Drawing on Goffman's concept of impression management, the findings suggest that while curated self-presentation may be strategically maintained in early interactions, it becomes unsustainable as relational seriousness increases. At this stage, self-disclosure shifts from a strategic choice to a relational necessity, serving as mutual validation and acceptance. Ultimately, the success of app-initiated relationships in transitioning from virtual interaction to stable commitment depends not merely on reduced uncertainty but on the capacity for authentic and reciprocal self-disclosure over time.

### ***Reframing Intimacy in Digital Relationships***

Relationships initiated through dating applications generate uncertainty not only at the interpersonal level but also within the broader social context shaped by prevailing norms and stigma. Several informants expressed hesitation or embarrassment in disclosing that they met their partners via dating applications, fearing negative judgments such as being perceived as socially inadequate or undesirable. This reflects a form of intersubjective uncertainty, where individuals must negotiate between personal relational experiences and collective social expectations. In this sense, uncertainty in digital relationships extends beyond partner credibility or technological mediation to include identity negotiation within a society that has not fully normalized app-based romance (Iqbal et al., 2025). Stigma thus becomes an additional layer of uncertainty that couples must manage, requiring relational stability and the construction of alternative narratives that legitimize digitally initiated intimacy.

Despite these social pressures, the findings demonstrate that dating applications facilitate distinct forms of intimacy characterized by heightened communicative awareness rather than physical proximity. Emotional closeness often developed through sustained text, voice, and video interactions even before face-to-face meetings occurred. This process illustrates the intertwined operation of Uncertainty Reduction Theory and Social Penetration Theory: early interactions were dominated by uncertainty management strategies—passive observation, active information-seeking, and interactive communication—which gradually enabled deeper self-disclosure. As openness progressed from superficial information to core values and relational aspirations, intimacy and commitment were co-constructed rather than sequentially achieved (Forest et al., 2023) strategy. In committed relationships, open communication functioned both as a means of resolving differences and as a symbolic expression of trust. These findings suggest that in digital relationships, uncertainty and intimacy coexist dynamically, reinforcing the argument that relational development is not contingent on eliminating uncertainty, but on managing it through sustained, reciprocal, and meaningful communication.

## **4. Conclusion**

This study examined how couples who met through dating applications manage relational uncertainty as they progress toward marriage. Drawing on Uncertainty Reduction Theory and Social Penetration Theory, the findings demonstrate that uncertainty management in app-initiated relationships is a gradual and interactive process. Informants employed passive, active, and interactive strategies, with self-disclosure emerging as a central mechanism for building trust, aligning expectations, and fostering a stronger relational commitment. Rather than functioning independently, uncertainty reduction and self-disclosure operate

synergistically to support the transition from digitally mediated interaction to long-term marital relationships.

By focusing on couples who successfully married after meeting through dating applications, this study extends existing online dating research that predominantly examines early-stage, casual, or unsuccessful relationships. The findings contribute to interpersonal communication scholarship by illustrating how communication strategies not only reduce ambiguity but also facilitate relational stability and commitment in digital contexts.

This study has several limitations. First, the number of informants was limited to three married couples, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study relied on retrospective self-reported accounts, which may be influenced by memory bias. Third, the findings are situated within the Indonesian socio-cultural context and may not fully represent experiences in other cultural settings (Iqbal, 2025).

Future studies could involve a larger and more diverse sample, including couples at different relationship stages or those who did not progress to marriage, to enable comparative analysis. Longitudinal research designs would also be valuable to capture uncertainty management processes in real time. Additionally, future research could examine the role of specific platform features or cultural norms in shaping communication strategies and relationship outcomes.

The findings offer practical implications for multiple stakeholders. For dating application users, the study highlights the importance of gradual and reciprocal self-disclosure in building trust and reducing relational uncertainty. For application developers, the results suggest the need for features that support authenticity, transparency, and user education regarding healthy communication practices. For relationship counselors and educators, the insights can inform guidance for individuals navigating app-initiated relationships, particularly in managing expectations and uncertainty before long-term commitment.

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