

URT AND ROMANTIC  
RELATIONSHIPS

**Uncertainty Reduction Theory and Romantic Relationships**

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## **Introduction**

Charles Berger and Richard Calabrese's Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT), developed in 1975, provides insight into how and why people reduce uncertainty with each other. Berger believed that people had a natural drive to reduce uncertainty and that they were more likely to do so under certain conditions. These conditions are anticipation of future interaction, incentive value, and deviance. URT addresses cognitive uncertainty, not behavioral uncertainty.

The theory has a total of eight axioms that bring together the relationship between uncertainty reduction and relationship development. Axiom 1 states that uncertainty will be reduced by increased verbal communication. Axiom 2 states that non-verbal warmth will decrease uncertainty. Axiom 3 states that high levels of uncertainty increase information-seeking behavior. Axiom 4 states that as uncertainty is reduced, intimacy increases. Axiom 5 states that reciprocal vulnerability is high when uncertainty is high. Axiom 6 states that there is an inverse relationship between similarity and uncertainty. The more similarities between two people exist, the lower the uncertainty. Axiom 7 states that liking increases as uncertainty is reduced. Axiom 8 was added separate from the first seven axioms, and it states that shared networks reduce uncertainty. From these axioms, Berger created 28 theorems that link them together in casual relationships.

URT presents strategies used to seek information. An active strategy requires seeking information about the person of interest (POI) through a third party. A passive strategy involves observing the POI from a distance. Face-to-face encounters and direct conversations are interactive strategies. As media becomes a main communication method, a new strategy has emerged that describes information-seeking online: the extractive strategy.

URT stands well as an objective theory, meeting several of the criteria for objective theories. It makes testable predictions, is simple to understand, has practical utility and is supported by quantitative research. However, there have been contradictions concerning the accuracy of some of the theory's axioms, such as Axiom 7, which states that liking increases as uncertainty is reduced. Despite criticism, URT remains a valuable theory to communication research.

URT was originally developed to study first-time interactions, but scholars have applied the theory to all kinds of interpersonal relationships. Not only do strangers seek to reduce uncertainty, but people in close relationships also continuously seek to reduce uncertainty between each other. This theory contains several aspects that aid in understanding interactions in a variety of relationships, including romantic ones.

URT is applicable when analyzing three aspects of romantic relationships: the process of developing romantic feelings in-person and initiating a relationship, online dating, and dealing with a partner's previous relationship baggage. Current literature on the topic of URT and romantic relationships primarily studies romance between college students. The following literature reviewed contains studies relating to young adults' dating experiences, effects of profile viewing on first dates, information-seeking strategies online, and discovery of relationship baggage.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Reducing Uncertainty About URT**

To apply URT to real-life scenarios, it is first crucial to gain a solid understanding of its ideas and claims. Griffin et al. (2023) presented URT in the chapter "Uncertainty Reduction

Theory of Charles Berger” of the book *A First Look at Communication Theory*. This chapter provided an overview of URT by explaining each element of it, such as the motivations to reduce uncertainty, the aim of URT, the theory’s axioms, relationship theorems, questions raised by URT, information-seeking strategies, and critique of the theory. This chapter aids research by giving basic information on URT, which is necessary to understand and expand on the theory. In a romantic relationship, people may seek to reduce uncertainty with the other person because of all three of the motivations highlighted in this chapter: anticipation of future interaction, incentive value, and deviance. The eight axioms were described in detail with examples by Griffin et al. (2023) and are key in understanding relationship development. Four information-seeking strategies were presented towards the end of the chapter. These strategies are especially important when it comes to seeking information about a person of interest (POI) in a non-traditional dating setting, such as online dating.

### **Relationship Development**

Romantic relationships are developed through time and require getting to know someone else. LeFebvre and Carmack’s (2022) study *Catching Feelings: Narrating the Emerging Adults’ Relational Process* explored how emerging adults navigated and defined the process of “catching feelings,” or the process of developing romantic feelings for another person. Data was collected from a sample of collegiate students ages 18-22 at a large Southeastern University who were asked questions about “defining catching feelings, opinions about the influence/impact of catching feelings on current/future romantic relationships, and romantic commitment readiness/avoidance.” Once feelings are “caught,” LeFebvre and Carmack found that information seeking follows and a relationship may develop. In some cases, feelings are unwanted but unavoidable. They may, however, fizzle out if not reciprocated. Limitations of this study include

the limited age demographic that was surveyed. The goal of the study was to collect data on those in “emerging adulthood.” The researchers acknowledged that emerging adulthood is considered to span from the ages 18-29 and that over half this demographic was not represented. Many romantic relationships develop past college-age (18-22), and this study does not have any data to represent this large age population. However, viewed from a perspective that seeks to understand college-aged students, this study does survey the target demographic. Another limitation of this study is that data was only collected on 32 people who were mainly Caucasian and heterosexual. It is perhaps not wise to believe that the experience of these 32 individuals is in line with all college students. Despite this, the findings of the study make sense and resonate with the general population within this age group. The participants identified several common aspects of relationship development such as the stages of attraction, uncertainty reduction, information-seeking, relational rumination, and connection. “Catching feelings” is a very common term used by Generation Z, and this study embraced this term and sought to understand this generation, indicating that Millennials are no longer the new generation to study. This study relied heavily upon surveys of a self-reporting nature. The individuals interviewed gave their own personal anecdotes and definitions of the process of “catching feelings.”

Uncertainty reduction is often done unconsciously in relationship development. The eight axioms of URT are not explicitly explained in this study, but rather can be observed in its findings.

### **Online Dating**

Today, romantic relationships may be initiated through unconventional methods. Various online dating sites such as Hinge, eHarmony, and Match make this possible. A study that examined how social media platforms affect romantic relationships presented positive and

negative ways that online interactions affect romantic relationships. Arikewuyo et al. (2021) suggested that jealousy is more likely if an individual's partner is talking one-on one with someone else online. On the other hand, social media may increase affection between partners due to the multiple ways they can interact such as sharing videos or tagging each other in a post. Regardless, relationships formed online often begin with viewing a dating or social media profile.

In the study "Online dating profiles, first-date interactions, and the enhancement of communication satisfaction and desires for future interaction," conducted by Liesel L. Sharabi (2021), the effect of dating profiles on uncertainty reduction in first dates was examined. This study used an experimental method to compare how showing an online dating profile to 108 dyads prior to a first date affected pre-date perceptions, first-date conversational features, and post-date judgments. The control group was sent on a blind date without being shown an online profile. The results of the experiment were analyzed through the actor-partner independence model. Sharabi (2021) found that, "Profile viewing amplified the actor effects of eagerness to communicate, disclosure, uncertainty, and similarity, as well as the partner effect of nonverbal affiliation on the first date." This study supports the idea that URT is applicable to online dating because the hypotheses presented relate directly to the theory's axioms. Limitations of this literature include that it did not explain how information acquired online is used on a first date, and its qualitative nature prevents the results from being generalized.

When it comes to seeking information online, the extractive strategy is used, which is one of the four information-seeking strategies presented within URT. Both active and passive strategies can be used online. Dating sites are not the only way people date online. People might meet on social media sites and converse mainly through text. The International Communication

Association conference paper, “The (Un)Importance of a Gut Feeling: Information Seeking Strategies in Online Dating,” suggested that the type of information-seeking strategy used by those dating online was dependent on several factors. These factors included situation, goal-related, information-related, technology-related and communicator-related factors. Researchers also found that people who were worried about their POI misrepresenting themselves online would use more information-seeking strategies. Another finding in this literature was that high dating efficacy, or the belief that online dating can lead to a healthy relationship, was positively associated with the use of information-seeking strategies. A limitation of this literature is that it examined the use of individual information-seeking strategies rather than exploring how people can use a mixture of different strategies.

### **Reducing Uncertainty about Relationship Baggage**

Many people enter new romantic relationships with previous “baggage.” According to a study done on the discovery of relationship baggage, baggage is described as “...some weight that is carried from past experiences or relationships into a present relationship” (Sidelinger, 2008). While URT was originally applied to strangers, those who have been in a relationship for a while also seek to reduce uncertainty about their partner. Sometimes though, people have a desire to *maintain* uncertainty when it comes to relationship baggage. For example, there have been women who would rather not know or confirm that her husband is cheating even though she has suspicions.

The idea of reducing uncertainty with baggage challenges Axiom 7 of URT. Uncovering baggage means that uncertainty has been reduced, but this is not often linked with increased liking. If it has been discovered that a partner cheated, liking would most likely decrease. Axiom 7 would be contradicted if a reduction in uncertainty causes decreased liking.

Charles Berger believed that humans naturally seek to reduce uncertainty and did not address situations in which people might try to avoid information-seeking. Axiom 3 of URT states that uncertainty leads to information-seeking. However, some people do not want to seek information when they are uncertain about relationship baggage. Sidelinger et al. (2008) presented the idea that some individuals are more motivated to seek potentially relationship-damaging information than others. It was found that those with a high score on the Motivation to Acquire Relationship Threatening Information Scale (i.e., MARTI) scale used overt information-seeking tactics to uncover their partner's baggage. This study also found that people used the same mix of information-seeking strategies no matter the seriousness of the relationship. A limitation is that it did not assess an individual's uncertainty in the relationship before the discovery of baggage.

Anderson et al. (2011) found that people avoid talking about past sexual experiences in new relationships. This research involved 102 individuals in romantic relationships. Past sexual experiences may be seen as baggage. People seemed to avoid this topic because they were eager to leave the past behind, they were worried about comparison, or there was risk for jealousy. This is another example of a situation where people do not desire to reduce uncertainty. A limitation of this study was that it did not delve into the specifics of individual's past sexual experiences to further research.

### **Overview of Literature**

URT is a theory that appears to still be relevant as the literature discussed has all been published within the past 15 years. There was a mix of quantitative and qualitative research across the six studies cited in this review and at least two studies used scales to collect data. A



limitation of most of the literature presented is that the participants in the study were limited to university students. Relationships develop outside of a college environment and across all ages.

For the topic of relationship development, there is literature missing that describes the stages of a relationship according to Generation Z. This generation not only uses terms such as “catching feelings” but also “talking stage” and “situationship.” There seems to exist a good amount of research on online dating. Research revealed limited peer-reviewed studies on reducing uncertainty about relationship baggage. There is a need for literature that utilizes personal accounts of experiences regarding reducing uncertainty about baggage. URT has proven to be applicable to various aspects of romantic relationships with the help of the literature discussed.

### **Personal Application**

To apply URT personally, I will cover the topics of relationship development, online dating, and relationship baggage. I believe that there is literature missing on Generation Z’s experience with reducing uncertainty in romantic relationships, and I aim to provide an overview of my own experience.

When it comes to relationship development, I have had the opportunity to reflect upon more than one personal relationship progression. Although some relationships developed more quickly than others, the initial process of “catching feelings” was similar. I believe URT’s axioms allow me to better understand the progression of my past and current relationship. I “caught feelings” for someone I shared networks with. Knowing that we had mutual connections reduced uncertainty between us without even having to speak. However, verbal communication was truly the best reducer of uncertainty in my situation. The more verbal communication there was, the more I found similarities between me and my POI. This further reduced uncertainty.

Non-verbal warmth is a natural part of a romantic relationship, which reduces physical uncertainty. Asking my partner about their preferences regarding non-verbal warmth reduced uncertainty between us and opened opportunities for non-verbal warmth and verbal communication. Connecting the initiation of my relationship to URT's axioms is helpful in decoding and understanding the experience.

I have never been on an online dating site but have had a relationship that existed mostly online. I met someone last year whom I rarely saw in-person. To better understand them, I reviewed their social media profile, engaging in extractive and passive information seeking. I have found that texting is important to me in a relationship. Perhaps this is because I am a digital native. The person I met last year was bad at replying quickly. I would be left hanging for days on end. This did little to reduce uncertainty between us. In fact, I would say that uncertainty was created. Since I would mainly see this person at church or youth events, I kept the desire to reduce uncertainty because of two factors: anticipation of future interaction and attraction. I believe that URT does not account for attraction as being a motivation to reduce uncertainty, which may be a fault of the theory.

Relationship baggage can be a touchy subject. I believe I have a high motivation to acquire information about more "serious" partner baggage such as cheating. There is a wide variety of things that people may consider baggage and almost everyone has some type of baggage they bring into a new relationship. I prefer to know about my partner's baggage in the beginning before things get too serious. Admittedly, I have used an extractive information-seeking strategy to find information about a partner's ex. I have also used an interactive strategy, directly asking my partner to disclose past issues they had. As Anderson et al. (2011) found, people avoid talking about their sexual past with a new partner. I can attest to the idea that

talking about a partner's and their ex's sexual history can add baggage to the relationship.

Sometimes, finding out about partner baggage fuels my desire to learn more, but not in a good-feeling way. Other times, I am hesitant to find out more. Therefore, my personal experience challenges URT's third and seventh axiom.

### **Spiritual Application**

God wants us to reduce uncertainty with Him. There are several verses that apply to URT. Second Peter 3:18 (New International Version) says, "Rather, you must grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. All glory to him, both now and forever! Amen." This is a direct instruction to grow in knowledge with God. Galatians 4:9 says, "But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again?" After we come to know God, we should not turn back to old ways. John 14:6 says, "Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." When it comes to seeking information about God, Jesus makes it clear that it is only through knowing Him that we can know God. Finally, Jeremiah 29:13 says, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." This is a promise that we will find Jesus when we seek Him earnestly.

### **Conclusion**

Uncertainty Reduction Theory seeks to understand the motivations and strategies for reducing uncertainty between strangers. In recent years, this theory has been applied in studying different types of relationships including teacher-student, small groups, friendships, workplace relationships and romantic relationships. A focus has been made in this research on the topic of URT relating to romantic relationships. Specifically, literature was reviewed on URT in connection with relationship development, online dating, and relationship baggage.

URT's eight axioms are useful in understanding emerging young adults' experiences with "catching feelings." LeFebvre and Carmack's (2022) study was helpful in making this connection through its participant's personal anecdotes and narratives. A common theme emerged among the participants regarding the stages of relationship progression. The narration of "catching feelings" was one-sided and personal. Sometimes these feelings developed into a relationship, while other times they remained a fantasy. "Catching" these feelings happened in or led to the initiation stage of relationship development. Information-seeking strategies were mostly used in the experimental stage of relationship development. In my personal life, I have been able to use URT's eight axioms to examine the beginning stages of past relationships.

Previewing online dating profiles affects first dates and is helpful in reducing uncertainty (Sharabi, 2021). Viewing an online dating or social media profile is an extractive information-seeking strategy. Social media can have positive and negative effects on relationships. Arikewuyo et al. (2021) found that social media use may bring partners together or tear them apart due to worries of a partner talking with someone else online. The latter may be a valid fear for Generation Z. For example, great deal of uncertainty can be created when a woman sees that her partner has many other women on his social media accounts or is texting them privately. In my personal life, I used extractive strategies online and the use of social media has affected my relationships.

The way in which people interact with the idea of relationship baggage challenges URT's third and seventh axioms. Some people are more likely than others to desire uncertainty reduction when it comes to baggage (Sidelinger et al., 2008). Some baggage is perceived as more harmful than others. Anderson et al., (2011) found a great avoidance to the topic of a partner's sexual past. In general, the more negative things people find out about their partner, the less they

seem to like them. Therefore, liking does not necessarily increase with certainty. URT does not expand on possible limitations to the theory's claim that people have a natural drive to reduce uncertainty. In my personal life, there have been times when I have gone digging for information that is considered baggage. I have been successful, but this reduction of certainty did not yield to increased liking.

The Bible has much to say about reducing uncertainty with God. There were several verses highlighted relating to knowing God and seeking Him. Seeking information about God can be done through Bible reading and discussing Him with other Christians. Further, one can help reduce other people's uncertainty with God or Christianity by sharing knowledge about Him.

URT is applicable in studying romantic relationships. Although objective, this theory seeks to understand people. Because of this, it is simple to connect URT to personal and spiritual life. By applying this theory, one can reduce uncertainty with the idea of relationship development, online dating, and relationship baggage.

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