

Managing Difficult Conversations

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Abstract

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The present thesis examines how people manage difficult conversations in daily life through online surveys, live interaction studies, field studies, text analysis methods, topic models, and multilevel linear regression models. The thesis consists of three chapters.

Chapter 1 establishes a process model of conversation avoidance, investigating people's motivations, emotions, and behaviors when they are put into an unwanted conversation. I find that when people are concerned about their privacy, they are more likely to feel anxious and to stay quiet in the conversation. At the same time, when people are concerned about creating a conflict, they are more likely to feel angry and to leave the conversation.

Chapter 2 evaluates the effectiveness of delaying conversations as an avoidance strategy. I find that although people prefer their partners to confess to them immediately after the events happened, people often delay their confessions. The waiting time is not associated with positive outcomes of the conversation or how their conversation partner reacts.

Chapter 3 investigate a socio-ecological factor that predicts conversation avoidance and conversation seeking behaviors using the concept of relational mobility. I find that individuals with the ability to choose who they want to affiliate with are less concerned about their privacy

or creating a conflict in a conversation. However, these individuals tend to have shallow conversations. Individuals with the ability to meet many new people tend to have deep conversations.

Overall, this dissertation contributes to our understanding of how people handle difficult conversations in daily lives.

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Dedication

To Mama, Baba and Laolao.

Introduction

Is it hard to have a conversation? You wake up in the morning and have a conversation with your partner about tonight's dinner plans; you go to work and have a conversation with a coworker about a recent policy change by the coffee machine; you go to a meeting and have a conversation about the next steps to take with a new client; and after work, you go to the celebration dinner your friends have organized for your recent promotion and have conversations on everything and anything. Conversations are so omnipresent that every step of having a conversation seems so natural that it is almost unimaginable to study the difficulties of a conversation.

The constant and routinized nature of conversation can sometimes cause people to forget the intentions or goals behind their interactions. No matter how natural and automatic conversations seem to be, people have conversations for a purpose. There are two motives for a conversation: informational and relational. An informational motive is to exchange information, and a relational motive is to build a relationship. A conversation can be high or low on both, or high on one motive and low on the other (Yeomans, et al., 2022).

These two motives map out a model of conversation communication difficulties. To complicate the task further, succeeding at either goal requires interlocutors to find a common zone of comfort. To fulfill the informational motive, people often struggle to find the right balance between sharing too much information and not sharing enough. Too little self-disclosure leads to individual consequences, such as cognitive exhaustion and worse executive functioning of the person not disclosing, as well as interpersonal consequences, such as not building a shared reality and being perceived as untrustworthy (Baum and Critcher, 2020; Critcher & Ferguson, 2014; Lane & Wegner, 1995; Liu & Slepian, 2018; John, et al., 2015; Silver & Shaw, 2022).

On the other hand, sharing too much information may not be ideal either. Sharing more than a friend or a family member initially solicited might create a burden on them; too much disclosure may decrease marital satisfaction; and, sharing one's secrets with others might lead to moral punishment by the confidants (Petronio, 2002; Salerno & Slepian, 2022; Slepian & Greenaway, 2018).

When it comes to fulfilling the relational motives, previous research has demonstrated the difficulty of finding the common ground for all conversation participants. In a conversation, holding one's own position too much might not be perceived well by the audience members. Sellers making upward claims that only they see as probable will worsen the listener's impressions; trying to self-promote but also be seen as humble (such as humble bragging) might actually lead to decreased liking from the listener; and, caring only about one's individual achievement is more likely to lead to conflicts and competition (Li et al., 2022; Morris et al., 1998; Sezer et al., 2018).

And of course, giving up one's own position is not helpful for one's personal or professional growth either. Female MBA students not being publicly assertive are associated with academic underperformance; negotiating in a "warm and friendly" style receives worse offers than with a "tough and firm" style; and an absolute goal of harmony and cooperation is related to ingroup vigilance such that kind and friendly behaviors might be perceived as ill-intended (Wallen et al., 2017; Jeong et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2019).

People's privacy management, which is used to achieve the informational motive, and people's conflict management, which is used to achieve the relational motive of conversations, have been studied by psychologists before. When managing one's privacy boundary, everyone has things they intend not to share, and that is the definition of secrets (Slepian et al., 2017).

Previous research on privacy management focuses on instances of secrets (Slepian et al., 2017, Slepian & Greenaway, 2018), or specific social relationships, such as between intimate partners, stepfamilies, and strangers (Afifi, 2003; Afifi et al., 2009; Kim et al., 2020). This suggests that people's privacy boundaries are rather fluid and dynamic across different kinds of information and different social contexts, indicating that a wider range of topics and social relationships need to be studied.

While it has been believed that people from individualistic cultures rely more on a competitive conflict management style, less is known about conflict management styles in daily interactions. Previous research shows that in certain cultures and certain social relationships, conflicts are more likely to be avoided. The stakes associated with the conflict also play a role in whether people avoid conversation. Conflict avoidance is a strategy of conflict management when the stakes are low, and it might not be worth it to pursue the conflict (Leung, 1988). In addition, a self-enhancement orientation is more likely to be associated with a competing style of conflict management (Morris et al., 1998). But conflicts exist not only in competitive settings such as business exchanges and court rulings but also in daily life. With contentious moral and political issues, people often try not to take a side in hopes that their opposing views are not judged negatively (Silver & Shaw, 2022). Moving beyond business interactions or political debates, conflict management among daily interactions through conversations is understudied.

Besides the specific things we intend to keep private from specific people and the conflicts that involve a clear advancement outcome, privacy and conflict management in daily activities can make daily conversations difficult. These daily privacy and conflict management through conversations might be small but do happen frequently. It is through the little-by-little information exchange and relationship building that humans function in society.

In this dissertation, I looked at a more common and more general process of how people manage challenges inherent in having difficult conversations. In Chapter 1, I presented a psychological process model of conversation avoidance, examining the relationships between the motivations, emotions, and behaviors of people facing an unwanted conversation. I found that when individuals are concerned about their privacy, they are more likely to feel anxious and stay quiet. When individuals are concerned about creating a conflict, they are more likely to feel angry and leave the conversation. In Chapter 2, I tested the effectiveness of a tactic people commonly employ in dealing with unwanted topics: deferring the discussion to a later future point. However, the results showed that delaying isn't an effective strategy in handling unwanted conversations. Lastly, in Chapter 3, I examined how relational mobility, a socio-ecological factor depicting how mobile one's social relationships are, predicts people's concerns for having difficult conversations. Individuals who live in a social environment that is high on relational mobility, the ability to meet new people and choose who to be friends with, are less concerned about their own privacy and having conflict with others.

Chapter 1: The Conversations We Seek to Avoid

Motivations for Topic Avoidance

Prior work has looked at which topics people avoid bringing up in specific settings (Golish & Caughlin, 2002). For example, a parent may not want to bring up a financial issue with their child, an employee may not want to talk about an ongoing work conflict at home, and a woman who recently had a miscarriage may not want to talk about pregnancy until some time has passed. In contrast to this work, I examined the psychological experience of having an unwanted topic brought up by *someone else* in a conversation. Choosing to not bring something up in a conversation should be quite different from having someone else bring up an unwanted conversation topic. For example, one may not want to talk about sex at work, and thus not bring it up. Yet, having a coworker bring up the topic of sex is quite a different situation. Now, one must decide how to handle being in a conversation that one does not want to have. I propose that how one feels and acts in response to an unwanted conversation topic will depend on one's motivations for avoiding that conversation topic. Studies 1-3 are deliberately data-driven so that participants can report their motivations for topic avoidance (rather than impose any top-down). As will be demonstrated, two broad motivations emerged (in Study 3), concern for privacy and concern for creating a conflict.

Privacy. In everyday life, people seek to establish some degree of privacy by setting a boundary between the self and others. A completely permeable boundary between the self and others means that any internal thought or feeling a person has would be freely shared with others, whereas an impermeable boundary would mean complete secrecy (Petronio, 2000). People's personal preference for privacy falls somewhere between the two extremes of total transparency and total secrecy (Petronio, 2000).

For employees, managing privacy is complicated given that people on average spend 90,000 hours at work over 40 years of 40-hour work weeks. The average U.S. full-time worker works 8.56 hours every day (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017), spending one-third of their time with their coworkers. With so much time at work, managing privacy and maintaining work-life balance is not easy. Employees seek privacy at work for good reasons; work home-life separation has emotional benefits (Sonnentag, Kuttler, & Fritz, 2010) and sharing of private information can harm relationships at work when employees come from different backgrounds and have different value systems (Phillips, Rothbard, & Dumas, 2009).

Organizations often have a larger diversity of people than one might typically encounter in their friend groups and families, and hence this might heighten concern for privacy. A large body work has studied how employees try to separate their work identity from their private identity (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000; Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2006; Rothbard, Phillips & Dumas, 2005). Not only do people try to avoid bringing work home, which only serves to increase a sense of exhaustion (Sonnentag, Binnewies & Mojza, 2010; Sonnentag, Kuttler & Fritz, 2010), but people also try to avoid bringing their self to work, for fear that one's true self may not belong in the workplace (Hewlin, 2003, 2009).

In the workplace, there is surely at least one domain where an employee feels to be in the minority (whether it is one's hobbies, preferences, personality, prior experiences, upbringing, social network, or other demographic variables; Slepian & Jacoby-Senghor, 2020). In particular, if one's personal life attributes seem inconsistent with what makes for a good or professional employee, self-expression at work can feel fraught with risks and uncertainties. Mothers will avoid talking about their family as a family-orientation may be seen as at odds with work (Cuddy, Fiske & Glick, 2004; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Similarly, other minority group

members will conceal invisible social identities such as sexual orientation and multi-racial backgrounds when people feel that these identities will not fit in, or that the expression of these identities may lead to unwarranted assumptions (Ragins, Singh & Cornwell, 2007; Clair, Beatty & Maclean, 2005). Thus, the stakes might feel especially high in the workplace; staying quiet may be the preferred option, rather than taking a risk and saying the wrong thing. From the literature on privacy and work-life separation, I thus predicted that the more one is concerned for privacy, the more one will inhibit and stay quiet in response to an unwanted topic introduced into a conversation.

Conflict concern. Understanding the processes of topic avoidance will bring not only new theoretical insights, but also practical benefits. For instance, understanding how to foster more effective communication in the workplace should help increase employee satisfaction (Abugre, 2011; Orpen, 1997; Pincus, 1986). That said, reducing barriers to such free communication must be done carefully. When communicators come to the table with different perspectives and values, especially in diverse environments like the workplace, it is likely that those perspectives and values will conflict with one another.

Conflicts between interaction partners often arise when there are differences in values, education, and social backgrounds (Galinsky et al., 2015; Jehn, Northcraft & Neale, 1999; Montalvo & Reynal-Querol, 2005). Having different values can increase relationship conflict and process conflict, and thereby decrease workgroup performance and worker morale (Jehn, Northcraft & Neale, 1999). Different belief structures can create interpersonal friction, and subsequent conflicts can hurt job performance (Pelled, Eisenhardt & Xin, 1999). Furthermore, conflicts hurt personal relationships (Collins & Read, 1990; Saaverda, Chapman & Rogge, 2010) and make professional relationships difficult to manage (Petriglieri, 2015; DiBenigno, 2017).

What happens when a conflict arises? Research seeking an answer to this question has focused on different styles of conflict resolution (Xie, Song & Stringfellow, 1998). Overt and significant conflicts more often prompt active styles of conflict resolution, whereas more covert and subtle conflicts prompt passive styles of conflict resolution (Leung, 1988; Leung, Koch & Lu, 2002; Ohbuchi & Takahashi, 1994). Thus, the more a conflict clearly presents itself, the more people are inclined to take action to resolve that conflict. I thus predicted that to the extent someone is concerned with creating a specific conflict with an interaction partner (e.g., stemming from opposing viewpoints), they will be more inclined to take action in response to an unwanted conversation topic (e.g., leave the conversation).

Reactions to Unwanted Conversation Topics

I propose that concern with the integrity of one's privacy is an inhibiting motivation, prompting inhibiting responses to unwanted conversation topics. If the reason one is worried about saying the wrong thing is out of concern for privacy, then not saying anything at all might be the preferred response.

In contrast, I propose that concern with creating conflict is an activating motivation, prompting activating responses to unwanted conversation topics. That is, if the reason one seeks to avoid a conversation topic is the concern for creating a conflict about the conversation topic, staying quiet may not be preferred as it still could lead the interaction partner to ask for a response. Taking action, such as exiting the conversation may be the more effective strategy to prevent a conflict.

Emotional reactions. An unwanted conversation topic is likely to lead to some discomfort, yet no prior work has explored the emotional reactions people have to a conversation partner bringing up an unwanted conversation topic.

There are some hints in the prior literature that topic avoidance is associated with some level of negative affect. For instance, the more people seek to avoid bringing up topics in a conversation, the lower their relationship satisfaction. Both within the context of parent-child dyads and heterosexual dating couples, topic avoidance has been associated with relationship dissatisfaction (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004). Thus, at least with respect to not wanting to introduce a topic into a conversation oneself, negative affective judgments seem to follow. Yet, rather than looking at global negative responses to unwanted conversation topics, I seek to understand the more nuanced emotional reactions people have to someone else bringing up an unwanted topic, and how these, in turn, relate to motivations and behaviors.

Gathering all common emotional reactions participants reported in an initial free-response survey, the new scale was introduced to a new set of participants based on 1,000 participants' free responses. This scale was found to have two factors, one which aligned with the behavioral inhibition system (anxiety, nervousness, and embarrassment), and one which aligned with the behavioral activation system (annoyance, irritation, frustration).

Behavioral reactions. Prior work on topic avoidance has examined which topics participants introduce or seek to not introduce in a conversation, rather than the experience of being in a conversation when someone else brings up a topic that one does not want to talk about. Accordingly, prior work has yet to examine how people respond to unwanted conversation topics arising.

When someone starts talking about something one does not want to talk about, what happens next? When the conversation has many people, one option is simply staying quiet, waiting for the topic to change. Yet, if the conversation is a dyad only, simply staying quiet will not be a particularly feasible option. Perhaps instead the person can seek to change the subject.

Another option might be to exit the conversation. I theorized that these potential reactions would fall under two categories: inhibitive reactions such as staying quiet and more active reactions such as leaving the conversation.

1.1 Study 1

Missing from prior work is a broad and systematic overview of the common topics people seek to avoid talking about in their daily life, the motivations for such topic avoidance, the emotional reactions experienced when unwanted topics come up in conversations, and the subsequent behavioral responses. In introducing a process model of conversation topic avoidance, the current work sought to fill this research gap. Study 1 first examined the conversation topics people avoid in everyday life, across a range of contexts, through a large online study.

Method

One thousand participants via Amazon Mechanical Turk were recruited (Mage = 36.27 years, SD = 11.64, range = 18–80, 637 women, 360 men, 3 other). Participants were asked to list five topics they seek to avoid talking about with four different groups (order randomized), friends, family, romantic partner, and coworkers. Participants were allowed to list the same topic across multiple social groups. After having listed the 20 topics, participants were asked two additional open-ended questions: 1) how they would feel and 2) what they might do when any of the topics (they listed above) come up during a conversation.

Results

Free response data was analyzed via R statistical software (version 1.2.1268). The most frequent topics across the four categories were identified. A standard dictionary from the R-package tm was used (Meyer, Hornik, & Feinerer, 2008), after removing “stop words” (i.e.,

common function words that do not have content such as “the,” “to,” “a,” etc.) and stemming the words (i.e., “finance” and “financial” will be counted towards the same stem of “financ”). Subsequently, synonyms were combined (following a recent paper that identified the most common secrets people keep; Slepian et al., 2017) and counted the frequency of all words, presented with frequency tables. The top 10 unwanted conversation topics identified with this approach were selected and used for the remainder of the paper (see Table 1). People most commonly seek to avoid talking about politics, money, personal issues/problems, work, religion, family, romantic relationships, sex, the past, and friends.

Table 1: Frequency of Topics Reported by Participants (Study 1, Chapter 1)

The goal of identifying the emotions experienced was to create a scale for later studies, and thus it was desirable to not combine synonyms (i.e., emotion scales typically include several adjectives that could be considered synonyms, but have important and meaningful differences). The ten emotion words that were most frequently reported as experienced when unwanted topics came up in conversation were identified (see Table 2). Participants reported (in order of decreasing frequency) commonly feeling uncomfortable, anxious, nervous, annoyed, awkward, irritated, angry, uneasy, embarrassed, and frustrated.

Table 2: Frequency of Emotions Reported by Participants (Study 1, Chapter 1)

Emotions	Frequency
uncomfortable	299
anxious	166
nervous	146
annoyed	139
awkward	88
irritated	69
angry	63
uneasy	58
embarrassed	49
frustrated	39

Unlike conversation topics which were commonly reported using single words and short phrases, and emotion adjectives which were single words, the behavioral strategies were full sentences that required a different text analysis. The frequency of bi-grams were calculated to reduce this complexity while still maintaining more nuance than a single word could represent. As before, stop words were removed and the words were stemmed. Then the similar bi-grams were combined, leaving only at three common strategies implemented when unwanted topics came up (Table 3). When an unwanted topic came up in conversation, people commonly reported (in order of decreasing frequency) that they sought to change the subject, leave the conversation, and stay quiet (other words were specific ways to achieve those aims; e.g., making an excuse, listening).

Table 3: Frequency of Bi-grams Representing Strategies Reported by Participants (Study 1, Chapter 1)

Bigrams	Frequency
Change subject , try change, change topic, something else, steer conversation, make joke, say anything, try steer	706
Leave conversation , walk away, leave room, go bathroom, excuse myself, excuse leave, excuse from, make excuse	237
Stay quiet , just listen, stay silent	59

Note: The labels we use throughout the paper in bold.

Discussion

Study 1 recruited a sample of 1000 participants across the U.S., and found that across a range of contexts, a set of conversation topics are commonly sought to be avoided. People often do not want to talk about politics, money, personal issues/problems, work, religion, family, romantic relationships, sex, the past, and friends. From these responses, I created the Unwanted Conversations Questionnaire, presented in Appendix A. In subsequent studies, participants were provided with this questionnaire to examine their specific experiences with seeking to avoid these conversation topics, when introduced by others, and their motivations for not talking about these topics. In Study 1, a set of emotions people frequently experience in response to unwanted conversation topics were also collected, as well as common strategies deployed in response to unwanted conversation topics. In Studies 2–3, the relationships between the emotions and strategies people deploy in encountering these conversation topics as well as the motivations participants have for avoiding these topics are explored.

1.2 Study 2

Study 1 revealed that people commonly sought to avoid talking about politics, money, personal issues/problems, work, religion, family, romantic relationships, sex, the past, and

friends. When these topics were introduced into conversation, people reported feeling uncomfortable, anxious, nervous, annoyed, awkward, irritated, angry, uneasy, embarrassed, and frustrated. Finally, in response to these unwanted conversation topics being introduced, people reported changing the subject, leaving the conversation, and staying quiet. I created a scale from the most commonly experienced emotions. I predicted that in reporting one's experience with an unwanted conversation topic, participants' responses to the emotion scale would fall into two factors, inhibition- and activation-oriented emotions. Moreover, I predicted that inhibition-oriented emotions would predict staying quiet (an inhibition response), whereas activation-oriented emotions would predict leaving the conversation (an action-oriented response). I was agnostic as to whether trying to change the subject would be more linked to inhibition or activation as this could be in service of trying to stay quiet about a topic, or might be one trying to take action and change the course of the conversation. In other words, this goal may be common to all contexts in which an unwanted topic enters a conversation. The number of people in a conversation might also predict the strategy utilized when an unwanted conversation arises. A conversation with more than two parties differs in numerous ways from a dyadic conversation (for a review, see Cooney, Mastroianni, Abi-Esber, & Brooks, 2019). Of particular relevance to the current work, in a multi-party conversation, as compared to conversation composed of only a dyad, each individual will have less airtime. Thus, staying quiet should be more difficult in a conversation of two people, whereas this is far more feasible in a conversation composed of more people. Likewise, leaving a conversation of only two people is quite different from leaving a conversation with many people. In a multi-party conversation, when one individual exits, this does not necessarily mean the end of the conversation, whereas in a dyadic conversation, to leave the conversation is to end the conversation. Accordingly, I predicted that when an unwanted

topic is introduced, people would be both more likely to stay quiet in a multi-party conversation, and more likely to leave a multi-party conversation than a dyadic one.

Method

Two hundred participants on Amazon Mechanical Turk were recruited, and 206 completed the study. Due to a programming error in the survey flow, the demographics block of questions was only displayed to a subset of participants (thus there were demographic data only for 28 males and 21 females, 24% of the participants; Mage = 34.39, SD = 11.93, range = 19–63).

Participants were presented with the 10 topics identified in Study 1. Specifically, participants completed the Unwanted Conversations Questionnaire that was introduced in the current work (see Table 4 above). Participants were asked to reflect on the past month. Per each topic, they were asked to choose from the following choices: 1) “Yes, this recently came up in a conversation I was in, and I did not want to talk about it”; 2) “Yes, this recently came up in a conversation I was in, and I did not mind talking about it”; 3) “No, this did not recently come up in a conversation I was in.” Per each instance of an unwanted topic coming up in a conversation (i.e., response option 1), participants reported the type of conversation (dyadic vs. multi-party) they were in, the emotions experienced when the topic came up, and the behavioral responses one took when the topic came up. I analyzed each individual conversation with multilevel modeling, treating participant and topic as random factors (for a similar example of this kind of approach, see Slepian et al., 2017). 3.1.2. Conversation type I first collected data to capture a dichotomous variable, measuring whether the conversation was a dyad (only one other person beyond the participant), or whether the participant was involved in a multi-party conversation.

Participants were asked, when the unwanted topic came up in conversation, to what extent they felt each of the 10 emotions (most frequently experienced by Study 1 participants): uncomfortable, nervous, irritated, uneasy, annoyed, awkward, embarrassed, frustrated, anxious, and angry (ranging from 1-not at all to 7-very much). Additionally, participants were asked what they did when the unwanted topic came up. Participants were shown the top three strategies identified in Study 1. Participants were allowed to select any options that fit, “stayed quiet,” “tried to change the subject,” and “left the conversation.” Also, to allow the participants to indicate that they did not actually avoid the conversation topic, they were allowed to indicate “talked about it anyway.” At the end of the study, participants were asked whether they had read all survey questions and responded carefully, or if they did not respond with care and that their data should be dropped.

Results

As multiple observations per each participant was collected, the data was analyzed via multilevel modeling while keeping participant and conversation topic as crossed random factors. Correspondingly, the remaining variance explained in each model corresponds to the general relationships of our measures that are not specific to any particular participant or conversation topic (Judd, Westfall, & Kenny, 2012). R-packages lme4 (De Boeck et al., 2011) and lmerTest (Kuznetsova, Brockhoff, & Christensen, 2017) ran multilevel lmer models through Satterthwaite approximation tests to calculate p-values (scaling model estimates to approximate the F-distribution to estimate degrees of freedom, which are thus non-whole numbers and differ by predictor). Models that examined binary outcomes used glmer to model a binomial distribution (thus not needing to approximate the F-distribution, and hence yielding whole number degrees of freedom to test the significance of Wald’s z tests).

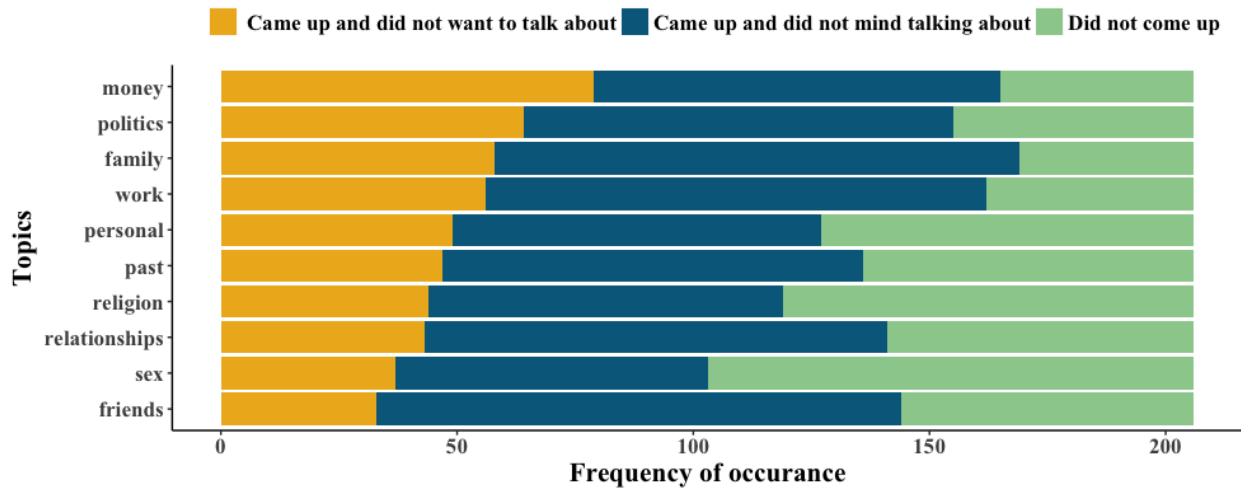


Figure 1: The frequency of topic avoidance of Study 2 participants from the Unwanted Conversations Questionnaire. (Study 2, Chapter 1)

Figure 1 presents the extent to which participants in the past month had sought to avoid each conversation topic. From our sample of 206 participants, there was a total of 510 times when an unwanted conversation came up, which translates to an average of 2–3 unwanted conversations per participant. Of course, not every instance of having politics, religion, family, etc. arise in conversation is unwanted. Indeed, as can be seen in Fig. 1, occasionally our participants did not mind talking about these topics. That said, they also frequently did not want to talk about them either. The frequently unwanted topics identified in the current work can be clearly differentiated from the topics people like to talk about (as demonstrated in Study 4b; those topics include, movies, TV shows, food, and music). Importantly, this study designs ensured that it specifically examined psychological processes related to when these unwanted topics were indeed unwanted.

A Principal Factor Analysis with a varimax rotation identified two factors with an Eigenvalues larger than 1 (Table 4). The first factor is labeled “anxiety,” which includes anxious, awkward, embarrassed, nervous, uncomfortable, and uneasy, emotions that have been shown to map onto the behavioral inhibition system (i.e., rather than acting, inhibiting to avoid a negative

outcome; Dissabandara, Loxton, Dias, Daghish, & Stadlin, 2012; Gray, 1982; McNaughton & Corr, 2004). The second factor is labeled “annoyance,” which includes annoyed, frustrated, irritated, and angry, emotions that have been shown to map onto the behavioral activation system (i.e., taking action to avoid a negative outcome, or bring about a positive outcome; Cooper, Gomez, & Buck, 2008; Gray, 1982; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2002; McNaughton & Corr, 2004). Both factors together accounted for 69% of the variance in the 10 variables. Thus the averages of the emotions per each factor was used to examine how these emotion composites predicted behavioral responses to unwanted topics coming up in conversation.

Table 3: Factor Analysis of Emotion Scale (Study 2)

Item #		Anxiety Factor	Annoyance Factor
1.	Uncomfortable	.71	.12
2.	Nervous	.80	.28
4.	Uneasy	.74	.35
6.	Awkward	.80	.15
7.	Embarrassed	.77	.23
9.	Anxious	.72	.39
10.	Angry	.34	.79
3.	Irritated	.19	.87
5.	Annoyed	.17	.83
8.	Frustrated	.33	.78

Implementing the multilevel modeling strategy described above, per each insistence of topic avoidance, I entered both emotion composites (inhibition- and activation-oriented emotions) as simultaneous predictors of each behavioral response to address the unwanted conversation topic. These models included random intercepts for participant and topic of conversation. The outcome variable was binary, coded as 0 if the participant did not select the strategy, and 1 if the participant selected the strategy. Whether the conversation was a dyadic

conversation (coded as 0) or multi-party (coded as 1) would also likely determine the behavioral response, and thus was also included as a predictor (see Table 5). This revealed that, as predicted, the more anxiety participants experienced when an unwanted topic was introduced into the conversation, the more likely they were to stay quiet. In contrast, the more annoyance participants experienced when an unwanted topic was introduced into the conversation, the more likely they were to leave the conversation. The results demonstrate that the emotions experienced in response to unwanted conversation topics indeed cohere with the two core systems for behavioral regulation, the behavioral inhibition system and the behavioral activation system. That is, the emotions fell into two factors, with the corresponding emotions per each factor perfectly aligning with the ways in which these emotions have been previously associated with the behavioral inhibition and activation systems (see Carver & White, 1994; Fowles, 1980; Gray, 1982; McNaughton & Corr, 2004; Sutton & Davidson, 1997). As further evidence for this alignment, emotions that are inhibiting (e.g., anxious, nervousness, embarrassment) predicted staying quiet when someone brought up an unwanted topic, and emotions that are activating (e.g., annoyance, irritation, frustration) predicted taking action, and leaving the conversation. I did not have a clear prediction for which behavioral system would predict trying to change the conversation topic. That said, inhibiting emotions predicted trying to change the conversation topic. Trying to change the subject of a conversation could be more in service of an inhibition goal than a goal of taking action per se.

Table 4: Strategies utilized with different emotions (Study 2, Chapter 1)

	<i>B (Log likelihood)</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Predicting Staying Quiet (30.59%)</i>					
Anxiety	0.20	0.09	1.22	2.19	.03
Annoyance	-0.10	0.08	0.90	-1.24	.22
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	0.86	0.24	2.36	3.63	<.001
<i>Predicting Leaving conversation (18.24%)</i>					
Anxiety	0.01	0.13	1.01	0.09	.93
Annoyance	0.69	0.14	1.99	4.81	<.001
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	0.95	0.33	2.59	2.85	.004
<i>Predicting Changing subject (46.27%)</i>					
Anxiety	0.17	0.08	1.19	1.99	.05
Annoyance	-0.14	0.08	0.87	-1.81	.07
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	-0.51	0.22	0.60	-2.31	.02
<i>Predicting Talking anyway (27.84%)</i>					
Anxiety	-0.17	0.10	0.84	-1.62	.11
Annoyance	0.14	0.09	1.15	1.52	.13
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	-0.61	0.28	0.54	-2.19	.03

Note: Focal emotion predictors in bold. Percentages indicate the proportions of participants to have engaged in the particular behavior.

If anything, activating emotions predicted a reduced tendency to change the subject.

Conversation type also predicted behavioral responses. In response to an unwanted conversation topic, when participants were in a multi- party (vs. dyadic) conversation, they were 2.36 times more likely to stay quiet (far more feasible in a multi-party than when in a dyad), and 2.59 times more likely to leave the conversation (also easier to do in a multi-party than when in a dyad). In contrast, in response to an unwanted conversation topic, when participants were in a dyadic (vs. multi-party) conversation, they were 1.67 times more likely to try to change the subject

(participants may assume in a multi-party conversation, the topic will change course on its own). In sum, in response to common unwanted conversation topics (when these topics were indeed unwanted), the emotions people frequently experience cohere into two factors, each representing a core system for behavioral regulation, 1) the behavioral inhibition system and 2) the behavioral activation system. Emotions that are inhibiting were related to trying to stay quiet and trying to change the subject. Activating emotions were associated with leaving the conversation. To clarify the nature of these relationships, Study 3 next sought to examine the motivations people have for topic avoidance.

1.3 Study 3

Study 2 found that the most common emotional reactions to unwanted topics introduced into a conversation (from Study 1) cohered into two factors that aligned with the behavioral inhibition system and the behavioral activation system, which in turn predicted corresponding behavioral responses to unwanted conversations. Inhibiting emotions, in turn, predicted inhibiting behavior (e.g., staying quiet) and activated emotions predicted taking action (e.g., leaving the conversation). However, the specific motivations behind these responses remain unknown.

In Study 3, free response data from participants were collected on why they might seek to avoid talking about the commonly avoided conversation topics identified in Study 1. The aim was to collect free-text responses per each of 1,000 participants, yielding 1,000 documents of text responses for which to submit to a machine-learning algorithm. This analysis revealed the latent semantic structure in participants' described motivations for avoiding unwanted conversation topics.

Method

One thousand participants were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk, and 1,005 participants completed the study (mean age= 36.41, SD=12.40, range= 18 to 77, 621 women, 383 men, and 1 other). An honesty check question was included in the end of the survey asking participants whether they had been honest in their responses in the survey (they were paid regardless of their answer); all participants responded yes.

Participants were randomly presented with one of the 10 topics identified by the Unwanted Conversations Questionnaire, introduced in Study 1 and implemented in Study 2. To generate a large dataset of text responses, I provided participants with a free response textbox per each of four social groups. Specifically, for a randomly selected topic, participants were asked to write about the reasons for which people would not want to talk about the topic with family, friends, romantic partners and coworkers.

Results and Discussion

Consistent with the earlier proposal of two distinct topic avoidance processes (one based in the behavioral inhibition system, and one based in the behavioral activation system), I predicted two major corresponding machine-learning derived topics (i.e., constellations of co-occurring text in participants' responses) would emerge, one per system. First four responses from each participant were combined into one document. Then English stop words and other context-specific words (topic-related words, i.e., family, friends) were removed and participants' response words were stemmed. Then, a machine learning algorithm was applied to identify the underlying structure of the free responses for why they sought to avoid the conversation topics.

Specifically, to identify two topics that emerged from this free response data, I utilized the Latent Dirichlet Allocation topic model using R-package *topicmodels* (Hornik & Grün, 2011), and constructed a frequency table to visualize the words that most differentiated the two

underlying clusters of motivations for topic avoidance (see Table 6). The machine learning algorithm identifies constellations of words that tend to uniquely cooccur, but the results (like with a factor analysis) require some interpretation (Sievert & Shirley, 2014). Table 6 thus provides the per-topic-per-word beta probability of stemmed words that are highly associated with each topic.

As can be seen, the first motivation for conversation avoidance that emerged from this analysis deals with privacy, worry, awkwardness, and concern with being judged (Topic 1) and is labeled as *privacy* concerns. The second motivation deals with different opinions/views, conflict, and argument, which is labeled as *conflict* concerns (Topic 2). With privacy concerns, people noted being worried about how they look to others and were afraid of being judged. With conflict concerns, people described wanting to avoid creating arguments among those with different views and opinions.

Table 5: Order of Motivations Reported by Participants (Study 3, Chapter 1)

	Topic 1	Beta*	Topic 2	Beta*
#1	embarrass	.022	differ	.037
#2	share	.017	avoid	.026
#3	judg	.015	time	.019
#4	much	.015	argument	.017
#5	bring	.015	view	.014
#6	privat	.012	opinion	.013
#7	feel	.012	discuss	.010
#8	fear	.011	fight	.010
#9	worri	.010	conflict	.009
#10	need	.009	lead	.009

* Beta represents the probability a word is generated from each topic. The higher the beta, the more likely the word is generated from that topic.

I propose that the privacy concern topic that emerged from the machine learning algorithm is an inhibiting motivation (i.e., wanting to hold back private personal information to avoid feeling embarrassed or being judged). In contrast, the conflict concern topic is an activating motivation (i.e., wanting to take action so as to circumvent an argument, a fight or a conflict).

Accordingly, in Studies 4a and 4b, I predicted that when an unwanted topic comes up in conversation, privacy concerns would predict inhibiting emotions, whereas conflict concerns would predict activating emotions.

1.4 Studies 4a and 4b

Study 3 identified two broad motivations for conversation topic avoidance, concern for one's privacy and concern for creating a conflict with another. Studies 4a and 4b built on Study 3 by formally introducing and testing our Topic Avoidance Process Model. Specifically, I tested our prediction that 1) concern for privacy that follows from an unwanted conversation would predict inhibition-oriented emotions, whereas 2) concern for creating a conflict would predict activation-oriented emotions (Study 5 then also examines behavioral responses).

I examined this hypothesis in two unique settings. In Study 4a, I approached individuals in the field (Central Park in New York City), and randomly assigned them to (believe that they would) talk about one of the unwanted conversation topics (from the prior studies), specifically with a known other / others, with them in the park.

In Study 4b, I recruited individuals online, and they had an instant message computer-mediated conversation with another participant (a stranger). In both studies, immediately before the conversation, I measured privacy and conflict concerns. In Study 4a, before the conversation

started, I measured anticipated emotions in the conversation, and in Study 4b, I measured emotions experienced during the conversation (after it finished).

I predicted that increasing levels of privacy concerns would predict increased inhibition-oriented emotions (e.g., anxious, embarrassment, nervous), whereas increasing level of conflict concerns would predict increased activation-oriented emotions (e.g., annoyance, irritation, anger).

Study 4a

Two hundred participants were sought after, as in the prior studies. After attempting to recruit as many participants as possible over two Saturdays in the summer, a total of 223 participants were approached in Central Park in New York City. After excluding three participants who did not speak English, our final sample size was 220 participants ($M_{age} = 30.40$, $SD = 8.52$, range = 18 to 68, 129 women and 91 men). These participants included those who lived in the U.S., but also tourists who reported to be visiting from Argentina, Australia, Bangladesh, Belarus, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China (/Hong Kong), Colombia, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Germany, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Kosovo, Mexico, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, Poland, Puerto Rico, South Africa, Trinidad, U.K., and Ukraine.

Experimenters approached groups (which ranged naturally from 2 to 6 individuals) by asking if they would be interested in participating in a very short study. After the participants agreed, the experimenter informed participants that they would have a very short, two-minute conversation with each other on a randomly selected topic.

After informing participants of the randomly-selected conversation topic (from the ten unwanted topics from Study 1; politics, money, personal issues/problems, work, religion, family, romantic relationships, sex, the past, and friends), but before the conversation, participants were

asked to complete a one-page survey. The survey contained two sets of questions, a six-item motivation scale (introduced here), and a ten-item emotion scale (from Study 2). For the former, participants were asked, in having the upcoming conversation, how much they were concerned (from 1-not at all concerned to 7-very concerned) with “privacy,” “being judged,” “how people think of you,” (privacy concerns; $\alpha = .75$), and “causing an argument,” “creating a conflict,” and “having a disagreement” (conflict concerns; $\alpha = .83$). After the participants completed the scales, participants were thanked and debriefed (no conversation about the randomly-assigned topic actually took place).

Study 4b

In Study 4b, participants were connected online through ChatPlat, an instant message platform for research (Brooks & Schweitzer, 2011; Huang et al., 2017). Anticipating some participants would fail to connect with others, two hundred and fifth participants were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk, with the goal of seeking a final sample of 200 participants. A total of 253 responses were received and three participants reported that their data should be dropped from the study (not responding with honesty or care), and 73 participants were unable to connect with another participant (i.e., two participants were not online at the same time). This led to a sample size of 177 participants who connected with a conversation partner for the study ($M_{\text{age}} = 35.37$, $SD = 10.72$, range = 21 to 72, 102 women and 75 men).

Participants first were informed they would have a conversation with another person (but not until after the study begun), and were randomly displayed a choice between two topics. One option was always “personal stories,” a topic I anticipated would be unwanted relative to a randomly selected topic pre-tested to be desirable (movies, food, TV shows, hobbies and music). As anticipated, most participants did not want to talk about “personal stories,” relative to

the other topics (130 participants; 73% of the 177 participants). Data from the participants who wanted to talk about personal stories were not included as such participants could not be said to be having an unwanted conversation.

To increase the personal nature of what was to be discussed, participants completed a modified version of the Common Secrets Questionnaire (Slepian et al., 2017). Participants were shown five common categories of secrets, presented in quotes, that shared conceptual overlap with the topics from Study 1 (presented in parentheses), such as “dislike a friend” (topic: friends), “dissatisfied with your situation at work” (topic: work), “personal beliefs” (topics: religion and politics), and “unhappy in a romantic relationship” (topic: romantic relationships). Participants were asked among the common secrets (presented in quotes), which secrets they were currently keeping, and to identify one to two secrets that they could use some advice on.

Participants were next informed that they would have a conversation where they would specifically ask for advice on one of their secrets. Participants reported, in having the conversation, how much they were concerned with privacy, and creating a conflict with the other participant (as in Study 4a).

Participants were then paired with one another for a live conversation via ChatPlat, and asked to have their conversation (i.e., about their secrets and to ask for advice). After the online conversation, which lasted 5 to 10 minutes, participants reported the emotions they experienced during the conversation (using the same scale as in Studies 2 and 4a).

Results and Discussion

Adopting the multilevel modeling strategy from Study 2, privacy and conflict motivations were entered for topic avoidance as simultaneous predictors of emotions, treating conversation group (Study 4a) / dyad (Study 4b) as a random factor. To isolate the unique relationship of each

motivation with each emotional response to an unwanted conversation topic, the alternate emotion composite in each analysis were entered.

As conversation type varied in Study 4a (i.e., dyadic vs. multi-party, depending on the size of the group that Central Park participants were in), whether the conversation was dyadic (coded as 0) or multi-party (coded as 1) was also included, as in the prior studies. As can be seen in Tables 7 and 8, only two positive effects consistently emerged in both studies: *privacy concerns predicted inhibition-emotions of anxiety*, whereas *conflict concerns predicted activation-emotions of annoyance*.

Table 6: Emotion as a function of privacy and conflict concerns (Study 4a, Chapter 1)

	<i>b</i>	95% CI	SE	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Predicting Anxiety</i>						
Privacy Concerns	0.29	0.17, 0.40	0.06	4.84	213.85	<.001
Conflict Concerns	0.11	-0.01, 0.23	0.06	1.86	210.70	.06
Annoyance	0.47	0.36, 0.58	0.05	8.68	210.85	<.001
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	-0.34	-0.62, -0.05	0.14	-2.33	51.68	.02
<i>Predicting Annoyance</i>						
Privacy Concerns	-0.15	-0.28, -0.02	0.07	-2.25	211.06	.03
Conflict Concerns	0.14	0.01, 0.27	0.07	2.04	212.34	.04
Anxiety	0.55	0.43, 0.68	0.06	8.69	210.32	<.001
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	0.21	-0.09, 0.52	0.16	1.37	51.89	.18

Note: Focal motivation variables in bold.

Whereas there was a positive relationship between conflict concern and anxiety in Study 4a, there was no such relationship in Study 4b; hence this unexpected relationship was not reliable. In both Studies 4a and 4b, there was also a negative relationship, such that while conflict concerns predicted increased annoyance, privacy concerns predicted reduced annoyance.

In Study 4a, which had both dyads and multi-party groups, an unwanted conversation topic evoked more anxiety in multi-party groups than in dyads.

Table 7: Emotion as a function of privacy and conflict concerns (Study 4b, Chapter 1)

	<i>b</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Predicting Anxiety</i>						
Privacy Concerns	0.43	0.25, 0.60	0.09	4.85	124.00	<.001
Conflict Concerns	-0.05	-0.23, 0.14	0.10	-0.47	124.00	.64
Annoyance	0.72	0.48, 0.95	0.12	5.96	124.00	<.001
<i>Predicting Annoyance</i>						
Privacy Concerns	-0.12	-0.23, -0.002	0.06	-1.9	111.12	.05
Conflict Concerns	0.14	0.03, 0.26	0.06	2.41	115.24	.02
Anxiety	0.31	0.21, 0.41	0.05	6.15	117.06	<.001

Note: Focal motivation variables in bold.

Study 4a asked participants who were with known others (who were lounging in a park) to have a conversation about a randomly-chosen topic from the 10 most-commonly unwanted conversations. Concerns with the upcoming conversation and anticipated emotions (participants believed they were about to have the conversation) were measured. Study 4b paired participants with strangers over the internet, and asked participants to actually have the unwanted conversation, thus allowing us to measure emotions experienced in the conversation (immediately after it finished).

In both studies, despite different manners of having a conversation (live in person, vs. over the internet), different interaction partners (known others vs. strangers), and very different participant populations (tourists hailing from all across the world vs. MTurk participants), there was evidence for both of our predicted effects in both studies.

As predicted, the more participants were concerned with privacy with regard to the unwanted conversation, the more they anticipated and experienced inhibiting emotions of anxiety (e.g., anxious, nervous, embarrassed). In contrast, the more participants were concerned with creating a conflict with their conversation partners, the more they anticipated and experienced activating emotions of annoyance (e.g., annoyed, irritated, frustrated). Although not predicted, this distinction was further reinforced by privacy concerns being linked with reduced activating emotions.

1.5 Study 5

The Topic Avoidance Process Model that is introduced in the current work proposed *motivational* contexts for topic avoidance would predict *behavioral responses*—through *distinct emotional reactions* to unwanted conversation topics. Specifically, there is an inhibiting pathway and an activating pathway based in the two core systems for behavioral regulation (i.e., inhibiting behaviors that could result in negative outcomes, and taking action to bring about positive outcomes or avoid undesired outcomes; Carver & White, 1994; Fowles, 1980; Gray, 1982; McNaughton & Corr, 2004; Sutton & Davidson, 1997).

Study 2 revealed that, in response to unwanted conversations, inhibiting emotions of anxiety (anxious, nervous, embarrassed) predicted an inhibited response (staying quiet), whereas activating emotions of annoyance (annoyed, irritated, frustrated) predicted an activating response (taking action by leaving the conversation).

Study 3 then revealed with a bottom-up descriptive approach two broad motivations for conversations avoidance, concern for privacy and concern with creating a conflict. Studies 4a and 4b found that these two motivations align with the two proposed pathways, whereby privacy

concerns predicted emotions that were inhibiting, and conflict concerns predicted emotions that were activating.

Studies 4a and 4b designs did not allow participants to have the option to remain quiet, change the conversation topic or leave the conversation. Therefore, in Study 5, behavioral responses to unwanted conversations to test our full model were measured (Figure 2).

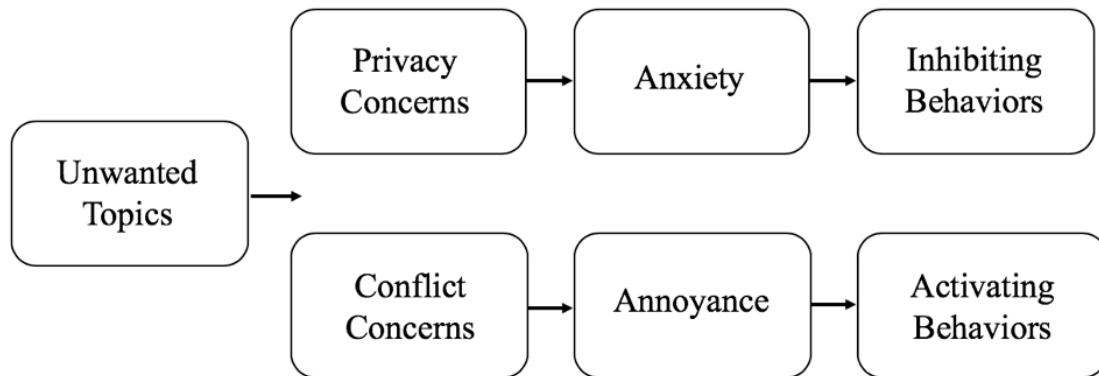


Figure 2: Conversation Avoidance Process Model. (Study 5, Chapter 1)

Method

Two hundred participants on Amazon Mechanical Turk were recruited and received 202 responses were received. The same honesty check question as in the prior studies was included. Two participants who indicated they did not respond with care and accuracy were excluded, which yielded a final sample of 200 participants ($M_{age} = 37.43$ years, $SD = 12.00$, range = 20 to 76, 105 women, 96 men).

Study 5 had a similar design to Study 2. As in Study 2, participants completed the Unwanted Conversations Questionnaire. Per each topic that participants answered "Yes, this recently came up in a conversation I was in, and I did not want to talk about it," participants completed measures per the specific conversation they were in.

Per each recent unwanted conversation, participants completed the scale of motivations for topic avoidance (from Studies 4a and 4b), as well as the scale of inhibiting and activating emotions experienced during the conversation (from Studies 2, 4a, and 4b), and behavioral responses to the unwanted conversation (from Study 2).

Results and Discussion

Frequency of Topic Avoidance. From our sample of 200 participants, there was a total of 440 times when an unwanted conversation came up, which translates to an average of 2-3 conversations each participant was in (in the past week) where they sought to avoid talking about a topic introduced by someone else (Figure 3).

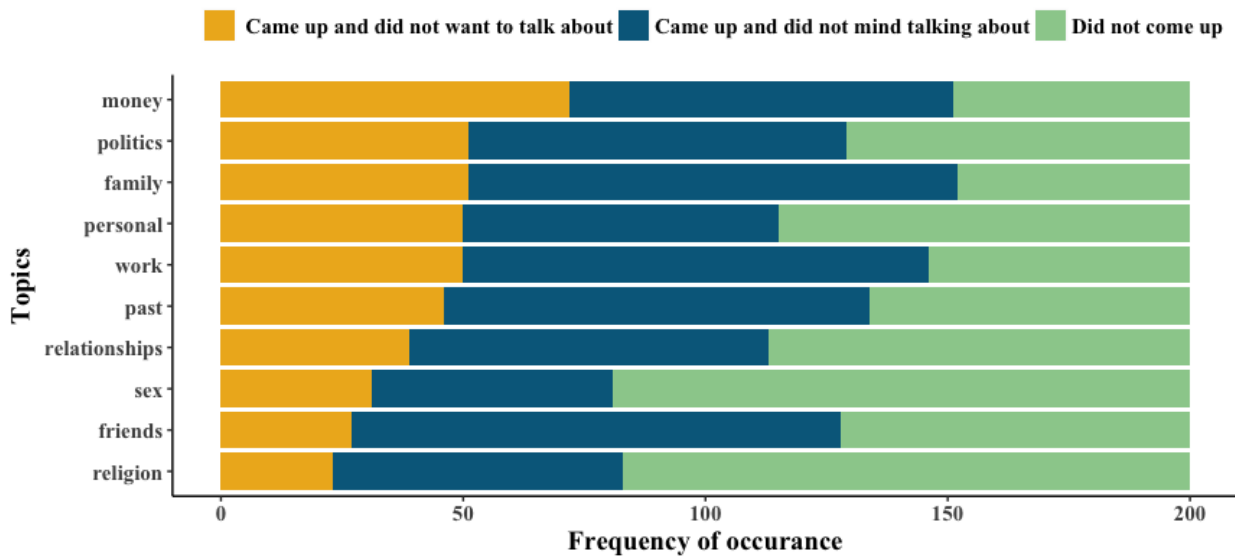


Figure 3: The frequency of topics participants report having encountered each topic in the past week. (Study 5, Chapter 1)

Motivations for topic avoidance predicting emotional reactions. The motivations for topic avoidance as simultaneous predictors of emotional reactions to unwanted conversation topics were examined, with the same multilevel modeling approach from the prior studies. In addition, the unique relationship of each motivation for topic avoidance with each emotional response to an unwanted conversation topic was also examined (see Table 9).

Table 8: Emotions as a function of privacy and conflict concerns (Study 5, Chapter 1)

	<i>b</i>	<i>95% CI</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Predicting Anxiety</i>						
Privacy Concerns	0.48	0.42, 0.55	0.03	14.52	426.43	<.001
Conflict Concerns	0.03	-0.03, 0.09	0.03	1.03	417.02	.30
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	-0.24	-0.47, -0.01	0.12	-2.07	423.03	.04
Annoyance	0.27	0.19, 0.34	0.04	6.97	424.27	<.001
<i>Predicting Annoyance</i>						
Privacy Concerns	-0.12	-0.21, -0.03	0.05	-2.49	422.75	.01
Conflict Concerns	0.34	0.27, 0.40	0.03	10.15	402.99	<.001
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	-0.25	-0.51, 0.02	0.14	-1.81	413.73	.07
Anxiety	0.37	0.26, 0.48	0.05	6.84	433.28	<.001

Note: Focal motivation predictors in bold.

As predicted, the more that participants were concerned for their *privacy* when an unwanted topic came up in conversation, the more they experienced *inhibiting* emotions of anxiety (e.g., anxious, nervous, embarrassed).

In contrast, the more that participants were concerned with creating *conflict*, the more they experienced *activating* emotions of annoyance (e.g., annoyed, irritated, frustrated). The concern with privacy also predicted reduced activating emotions. Each of these effects replicated Studies 4a and 4b's results.

Emotional reactions predicting behavioral responses. Whether emotional reactions to unwanted conversations predicted behavioral responses was also examined. In pursuit of testing a mediational model, the two motivations was also entered in the analysis (as is required by a mediational model to isolate the *b paths*; see Table 10 below).

This revealed that independent of the motivations for topic avoidance, the more *inhibiting* emotions of anxiety that participants experienced (e.g., uncomfortable, uneasy, awkward) the more likely they were to *stay quiet*.

In contrast, the more *activating* emotions of annoyance they experienced (e.g., annoyed, frustrated, angry), the significantly more likely they were to *leave* the conversation.

Here, neither anxiety nor annoyance predicted changing the subject, whereas changing the subject was predicted by anxiety in Study 2. Across studies, changing the subject thus was not reliably related to one pathway over the other. Consistent with Study 2, when participants were in a multi-party (vs. dyadic) conversation, they were more likely to stay quiet.

Table 9: Strategies utilized with emotions (Study 5, Chapter 1)

	<i>B (Log likelihood)</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Predicting Staying Quiet (29.32%)</i>					
Anxiety	0.27	0.11	1.31	2.37	.02
Annoyance	-0.08	0.09	0.92	-0.90	.37
Privacy concerns	-0.19	0.09	0.83	-2.00	.05
Conflict concerns	0.08	0.07	1.08	1.09	.27
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	1.20	0.26	3.32	4.55	<.001
<i>Predicting Leaving conversation (14.78%)</i>					
Anxiety	-0.22	0.16	0.80	-1.40	.16
Annoyance	0.47	0.14	1.60	3.39	<.001
Privacy concerns	0.02	0.13	1.02	0.14	.89
Conflict concerns	0.07	0.10	1.07	0.68	.50
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	0.54	0.36	1.72	1.48	.14
<i>Predicting Changing subject (39.78%)</i>					
Anxiety	-0.08	0.10	0.92	-0.85	.39
Annoyance	-0.02	0.08	0.98	-0.21	.83
Privacy concerns	0.29	0.09	1.34	3.43	<.001
Conflict concerns	0.01	0.06	1.01	0.22	.83
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	-0.42	0.25	0.66	-1.70	.09
<i>Predicting Talking anyway (29.32%)</i>					
Anxiety	-0.05	0.11	0.95	-0.41	.68
Annoyance	0.004	0.09	1.00	0.04	.97
Privacy concerns	-0.15	0.09	0.86	-1.63	.10
Conflict concerns	-0.14	0.07	0.87	-1.94	.05
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	-0.38	0.28	0.68	-1.36	.17

Note: Focal emotion predictors in bold.

Mediation analysis. Our mediation analysis is unique in that the models are multilevel and the outcome variable is binary. There is no current consensus on how to conduct multilevel mediation analyses nor on how to examine indirect effects when the units of the two paths differ

(i.e., the a path here is an unstandardized regression coefficient from a Gaussian model, whereas the b path is a log-likelihood value from a binomial model).

Table 10: Significance test of mediation model with binary outcomes (Study 5, Chapter 1)

IV	Mediator	DV	95% CI	$Z_{mediation}$	p
		Stayed Quiet	0.46, 4.38	2.42	.02
Privacy →	Anxiety →	Left Conversation	-3.33, 0.59	-1.37	.17
		Changed Subject	-2.76, 1.16	-0.80	.42
Conflict →	Annoyance →	Stayed Quiet	-2.84, 1.08	-0.88	.38
		Left Conversation	1.25, 5.17	3.21	.001
		Changed Subject	-2.21, 1.71	-0.25	.80

Note: Significant indirect effects in bold.

A recent paper suggests a formula for calculating an indirect effect that circumvents both of these issues (Jacobucci, 2012). The logic of the bootstrapped indirect effect test (which multiplies the two path coefficients per some number of empirical bootstrapped simulations of the dataset) is maintained in this method, while also converting the paths into standardized units so that they can be multiplied. The $Z_{Mediation}$ statistic divides the a coefficient by its standard error, and the b coefficient by its standard error, and multiplies these resulting z -values, yielding the numerator of the equation, which is divided by the pooled standard error (i.e., the square root of the sum of the two squared z -values and one). The result is the $Z_{Mediation}$ statistic, a standardized representation of the strength of the indirect effect, whereby its significance can be tested via a z -test. The indirect effect for our two postulated pathways with this formula using the coefficients from Tables 9-10 was calculated (see Table 11). While it might be logical to consider the

behavioral outcome as occurring last, and the motivation occurring first, these indirect effects should be understood as based in correlation, rather than as demonstrating a casual process.

When an unwanted conversation topic came up in the past week, the more participants were concerned with *privacy*, the more likely they were to *stay quiet*, through increased *inhibiting emotions of anxiety*.

In contrast, the more participants were concerned with creating *conflict*, the more likely they were to *leave the conversation*, through increased *activating emotions of annoyance*. The concern with privacy did not predict staying quiet through activating emotions, nor did concern with conflict predict leaving the conversation through inhibiting emotions.

These findings provide support for our Topic Avoidance Process Model, whereby in responses to unwanted topics being brought up in conversation, 1) a set of two pathways, one based in the behavioral inhibition system, and one based in the behavioral activation system, and 2) that motivational contexts for topic avoidance would predict behavioral responses through corresponding emotional reactions (see Table 10). Indeed, participants' emotional reactions to unwanted conversation topics showed a two-factor structure of inhibiting and activating emotions, which aligned both with corresponding motivations for topic avoidance (concerns for privacy and for conflict), and corresponding responses (staying quiet, and leaving the conversation, respectively).

General Discussion

Much of life is filled with social interaction and conversation. Yet with the diversity of situations and places in which these conversations occur along with the diversity of individuals that we encounter, an interaction partner may sometimes bring up a topic of conversation one would rather not talk about. The current work finds that this experience is common, and

examined underlying motivations for topic avoidance as well as emotional reactions, behavioral responses, and foci of attention. The Topic Avoidance Process Model predicted two distinct motivational pathways in response to an interaction partner introducing a topic of conversation one would rather not talk about and was supported across diverse contexts, including retrospective recall, live conversations, and with studies online and in the field.

Theoretical implications

The current research advances the understanding of the psychology of conversations. Conversation is a joint action (Pickering & Garrod, 2004) and a coordinating process (Richardson et al., 2007, Sacks et al., 1978). Moreover, the content of dialogue serves a functional purpose; it allows people to understand each other (Fusaroli, Rączaszek-Leonardi, & Tylén, 2014). There are also social benefits to conversation. For instance, asking questions during conversation leads one to be more liked by an interaction partner (Huang et al., 2017). Less research, however, has examined the disruptive components of conversations. While asking questions increases liking, asking questions may also elicit topics that conversation partners would prefer not to talk about. The current research adds to the literature on conversation by investigating psychological processes that arise when an unwanted conversation topic is introduced into conversation. Whereas prior work has examined participants as the arbiter of what topics are introduced into a conversation (Afifi and Guerrero, 2000, Golish, 2000, Merrill and Afifi, 2012), how individuals react to unwanted conversation topics that were brought up by another party was examined. Through a bottom-up process, two broad motivations and emotional reactions were uncovered. Additionally, whereas past literature has examined topic avoidance in close relationships and family relationships (Afifi and Guerrero, 2000, Afifi and Schrod, 2000),

2003, Afifi, 2003, Golish and Caughlin, 2002, Golish, 2000), the current studies examined topic avoidance across all relationship types (Studies 1–5).

Future Directions

The present work identified potential strategies for avoiding unwanted conversation topics. But the utility of these strategies and their psychological implications await future research. One strategy, “change the subject,” was not clearly linked to either activating or inhibiting systems. Future work might choose to create two versions of this item, one that could be considered approach-oriented (e.g., explicit calls to change the subject), and the other, avoidance-oriented (e.g., more subtle shifts to redirect the conversation). Future research should more closely explore how people seek to shift the topic of conversation, and how successful these attempts are. More generally, future work could gain better temporal resolution into how the unwanted conversation unfolds (Chapter 2).

The unwanted topics identified in this paper are also categories that people often do talk about. Fig. 1 and Fig. 3 demonstrate that across the top 10 most common unwanted conversation topics that come up in people’s daily life, people also frequently do not mind talking about them. Of course, there are instances in which people enjoy talking about these topics too. Aside from extremes of threat and enjoyment, people’s preferences and non-preferences for discussing these topics will be multiply determined. One may seek to avoid a topic in conversation to keep it light and enjoyable. Or, one may want to discuss a certain topic, but at a different time. Future work should explore what other factors are related to people’s conversation avoidance and conversation seeking behaviors, and how these factors differentially shape downstream processes and outcomes (Chapter 3).

Chapter 2: The Conversations We Seek to Delay

The ability to avoid an unwanted conversation when someone else raises it can involve staying quiet, changing the topic, or leaving the conversation. However, there are conversations that people prefer not to initiate themselves, even though there might be a need to inform others about it. Besides avoiding a conversation completely, another way of handling a difficult conversation would be to delay having it.

Imagine one has a history of mental illness that they didn't share when they first started dating. As time goes on, it becomes harder and harder to share the information with their significant other. Perhaps only after receiving sufficient treatment and no longer experiencing symptoms in daily life will the person feel comfortable confessing, and the listener will be appreciative of the open communication. The same could be true with financial situations, sexual history, mental infidelity, and many more. And for financial situations there might be a way to improve the situation but for other scenarios less so. Either way, this dynamic of "should I tell person X about event Y?" does not only exist in romantic relationships but also between family, friends, and even coworkers, in any relationship that involves long-term and repeated interactions.

When deciding on taking an action or not taking an action, people often weigh the benefits and costs of taking the action. When facing the choice of initiating a difficult conversation or not, there are several factors they take into consideration (Afifi & Steuber, 2009). Foremost, the confessor will estimate how the confidant will react to the content of the conversation. Earlier models of self-disclosure often start with the confidant's reaction as the goal of the disclosing behavior. The goals for self-disclosure include pursuing positive outcomes, avoiding negative outcomes, and establishing approval or intimacy (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2011;

Omarzu, 2000). The more the initiator expects the reaction to be positive, the more the initiator will share (Barak & Gluck-Ofri, 2007; Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010).

But it is not easy to predict how the confidant will react to the content in a conversation the confessor finds difficult, and people are not very good at predicting how conversations will go. On average, people underestimate the benefits of talking with strangers, asking sensitive questions, and having deep conversations (Hart et al., 2020; Kardas et al., 2021; Schroeder et al., 2022). When facing uncertainties, there is a possibility that one just does not make any move. The status quo bias found exactly that people prefer to continue with whatever decision they have already made and not take any action (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). In other words, instead of having a specific goal to achieve, the self-disclosure process might involve a period of time with no actions taken—the delaying process.

The type of conversation that involves a person having important information to share with others but is hesitant to share is confession conversations. Confession conversations embody an interesting dynamic between present benefit and cost expectations vs. future benefit and cost expectations. Assuming a confession conversation is one with an overall negative return because, by confession, it means the confessor has conducted some unethical or unpopular behaviors. Performing the confession to someone in the confessor's social circle would mean diminishing the public image of the confessor. The choice between initiating a difficult conversation now versus initiating the same difficult conversation later depends on the expected cost and benefits at both periods. At time zero (the event happening time), when the confessor does not confess to those who need to know about the event, there is a benefit of important others not knowing about the event (e.g., one's romantic partner does not know of them being cheated on). Of course, there are different types of costs associated with holding the information.

One type of cost is the information itself. For example, when someone discovered their mental or physical illness, the experience of having to live with the illness is for sure burdensome and costly. The other type of cost is with keeping the information. Previous research on secrecy has shown that it is burdensome to withhold personal information (Slepian et al., 2017). However, the first type of cost is not directly related to the confession conversation. In other words, the decision of whether to confess or not will not change the fact that the person now is under a particular circumstance. The second type of cost does not apply to time zero because in the particular slice of time period (time zero), the keeping of secrets just happened but no time for the burden to accumulate. To summarize, at time zero, there is a benefit of not confessing and the benefit comes from whoever needs to know about the event still in the unknown.

Starting from time one, the risk and indecision of whether to confess comes in. If the person decides to not to confess, they will be able to keep the benefit of not confessing, that is the important other wouldn't know about the event, unless they found out through other channels. Besides the cost of the confession being discovered through other channels, the cost of not confessing also includes the increasing burden of holding that specific piece of information.

If the person decides to confess, they will face the uncertainties involved in a difficult conversation, that is, not knowing how their conversation partners would react to their confession. The status quo bias shows that people tend to stay at their original position when facing an uncertain situation (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988), and this suggests that potential confessors are likely to stay at their original position when facing an uncertain conversation.

As time goes on, the cost and benefit analysis between delaying the confession and making the confession shifts direction. On the benefit side, the benefit of the confidant not knowing about the confession remains. In addition, as time goes on, there might be other benefits

associated with time, that is the confessor could be practicing their confession and the confessor is creating some space between the event in the past and the people who need to know about it. And more importantly, delaying can generate added benefit if the confessor could improve the damage done by the confession topic. An example could be financial situations. If the confessor has means to save up to cover a financial loss, then delaying time will contribute to the delivery of the confession. Therefore:

H1a: With delaying to confess to an important other of what one has done in the past, if the confessor could actively improve the situation, then the longer time the person has waited before confessing, the better the confession conversation will go and the more positive their conversation partner will react.

At the same time, as waiting time goes on, the possibility of the secret being discovered through some other channel increases simply because the chances of something being discovered multiplies as time accumulates. And more importantly, supposedly sharing personal information increases social connections, but such social connections are built based on a mutual understanding of honesty and sharing (Sprecher et al, 2013; Hart et al, 2021). Delaying a confession to someone important means a hesitation to bring honesty to the table, and thus when the person being confessed to discovers such delay, the sincerity and transparency of the confession are marked with a question mark. Therefore:

H1b: With delaying to confess to an important other of what one has done in the past, the longer time the person has waited before confessing, the worse the confession conversation will go and the more negative their conversation partner will react.

At the same time, there could also be increasing cost of delaying a confession for the confessor. The cost of delaying increases as the mental burden of carrying the confession

increases, and the mental burden of carrying the confession increases with waiting time.

Therefore:

H2: The longer one waits before making a confession, the more mental burden the confessor puts on themselves.

2.1 Study 1

In this chapter, I will investigate how individuals manage a difficult conversation by delaying it and examine the relationship between waiting time and conversation outcome and conversation partner's outcome. Given the uncertainty of how people will react to others delaying an important conversation, the first step is to gather information on what are the things people often confess to others. Study 1 aims to identify the most common confession topics in daily life.

Participants and Methods

The collection of free response answers took place in several rounds to capture different confession stages. One type of confession is the things that need to be confessed but not yet confessed, another type is things that people recently have confessed and lastly there's also a type of confessions that are done by others. A total of 1000 responses were collected (489 males, 510 females, and 9 non-binary, $M_{age} = 39.02$, $SD = 11.88$, 95% $CI = [38.29, 39.75]$). Out of the 1000 responses, 400 were based on the question "What have you been meaning to confess to someone, but have not yet confessed?", 400 were based on the question "What are some of the sensitive things that you have recently confessed to someone?" and 200 were based on the question "What are some of the sensitive things that you have recently been confessed to? In other words, what have others willingly confessed to you recently?".

Because the way these questions were asked, responses do not come in as the basic level of categories as conversation topics. Example responses are “I lied about going to a friend's house for dinner so I wouldn't have to go to a work function” and “I recently confessed to my friends that I lied about being a fan of Chelsea.” Instead of using the bags-of-words method, I manually coded participant’s responses by sorting their responses alphabetically and grouping the common responses together. In the end, there are 18 categories of common confession topics (Table 12).

Table 11: Common Confession Topics (Study 1, Chapter 2)

Addictions (any type of)
Mental health struggles (but not involving addictions)
Physical health struggles
Cheating on someone
Lying (but not about cheating on someone)
Disliking/ hating someone
Disliking/ hating something
Liking/ loving someone
Fear and worries
Future plans
Finances
Job/ work related
Personal identity (political, religious, sexual orientation etc.)
Sexual behaviors
Something about family
Stealing
Trauma
Opinions

2.2 Study 2

After identifying the common confession topics, the goal of Study 2 is to understand what people’s preferences are for how soon and how late they would want to learn about a

confession coming from someone they're close to. Taking the example of sexual infidelity. How sooner or later would people want to learn about the event if their partner did it? Or maybe never?

Time passing in the confession scenario might have two simultaneous effects on how the confessor and the event are perceived. On the one hand, as time goes on, some distance is created between the event and the present. Because as the distance to an event increase, the event becomes more abstract, then it seems less likely to happen (again) (Wakslak & Trope, 2009). In this way, the relationship between waiting time and confession outcome would be the longer the better. People would prefer to hear the confession later rather than sooner. In other words, creating some distance between the actual event and the confession conversation would make the confession conversation easier to process and the person listening to the confession feel better about it.

On the other hand, there are benefits associated with confessing immediately. People might prefer to hear the confession immediately without any delays because an immediate self-disclosure indicates a sense of trustworthiness and transparency. The intention to wait and the intention to delay something in the future seems very intentional and on purpose, making the disclosure even less sincere. When and how do people in the real world prefer a confession is delivered is the key research question of Study 2.

Participants and Methods

Two hundred participants were recruited for the study, and 200 responses were received. Two exclusion criteria were applied to this study and the other studies in the paper. An honesty check was conducted by asking participants to indicate whether their responses were honest and should be kept. An engagement check question asked participants to write full sentences about

their conversational experiences. After excluding participants who didn't provide written answers with full sentences, there were 188 complete responses ($M_{\text{age}} = 39.72$, $SD = 11.59$, $95\% \text{ CI} = [38.05, 41.39]$, 105 identified as women, 86 identified as men, and 3 identified as non-binary).

The goal of the study is to understand people's temporal preferences of their partners confessing to them. Two framings of the confession situation were created to test people's preferences of when they want to hear about the confession. To make the benefit of temporal distance more salient, the framing for delaying might be preferred is to set up the situation as a past event, looking back into the past and see whether people would appreciate the distance. In order to achieve this goal, the question asked to participants is: "Imagine your partner had an addiction that you didn't know about. Would you rather learn about this TODAY if it happened [some time ago]?" For the time choices, there were five options. The first option was the same across all categories, which was "today." The second option was randomly chosen between 1 day to 6 days; the third option was randomly chosen between 1 week to 3 weeks; the fourth option was randomly chosen between 1 month to 11 months; and lastly, the fifth option was randomly chosen between 1 year to 6 years.

Besides the framing that emphasize the distance waiting time creates between the present and the past event, the other framing aims to highlight the intended waiting behaviors after the event happens. In this "waiting is intentional" framing, participants were asked to: "Imagine your partner has an addiction that you don't know about; would you prefer they confess this to you [after some time]?" Similarly, the participants were presented with five choices; the time frames were the same as the earlier set of time frames, with wordings changed from "[some time] ago" to "after waiting for [some time]".

For each framing of questions, participants went through all 18 topics that came from Study 1. And the 18 topics are: addictions, mental health struggles, physical health struggles, cheating on someone, lying, disliking/hating someone, disliking/hating something, liking/loving someone, fears and worries, future plans, finances, job/work-related, personal identity (political, religious, sexual orientation, etc.), sexual behaviors, family, stealing, and trauma.

Results

Given there were five time-frame options in the study, they were coded as 0-4. A two-tail t-test was conducted to see if there is any difference between the averages of people's preferences for waiting time in both framings. The results show that participants prefer a shorter waiting time when their partners are waiting to share the information but would prefer a longer waiting time when they were to learn about something that happened some time ago ($t = 25.578$, $df = 5591.2$, $p < .001$). The distribution of waiting times can be found in Figure 4.

Discussion

The current findings show a general preference for immediate confession, suggesting that no matter how much potential benefits the distance might create, immediate transparency and honesty is preferred. However, when it comes to looking at past events, some participants prefer to learning about such events after some delay, sometimes as much as a couple of years. An extension of this preference could be that participants prefer to never learn about the event and just chose the longest waiting time.

Although there is a difference in temporal preferences between a framing that emphasizes distance to the past vs. waiting time into the future, there is an overall preference to an immediate and right away confession to take place. With such an asymmetry of preference for waiting, the next question is, what happens in real life with delayed confession? Do people do as

other people want them to do and share the information immediately? Or do people do as they want themselves, and create some distance before sharing such information?

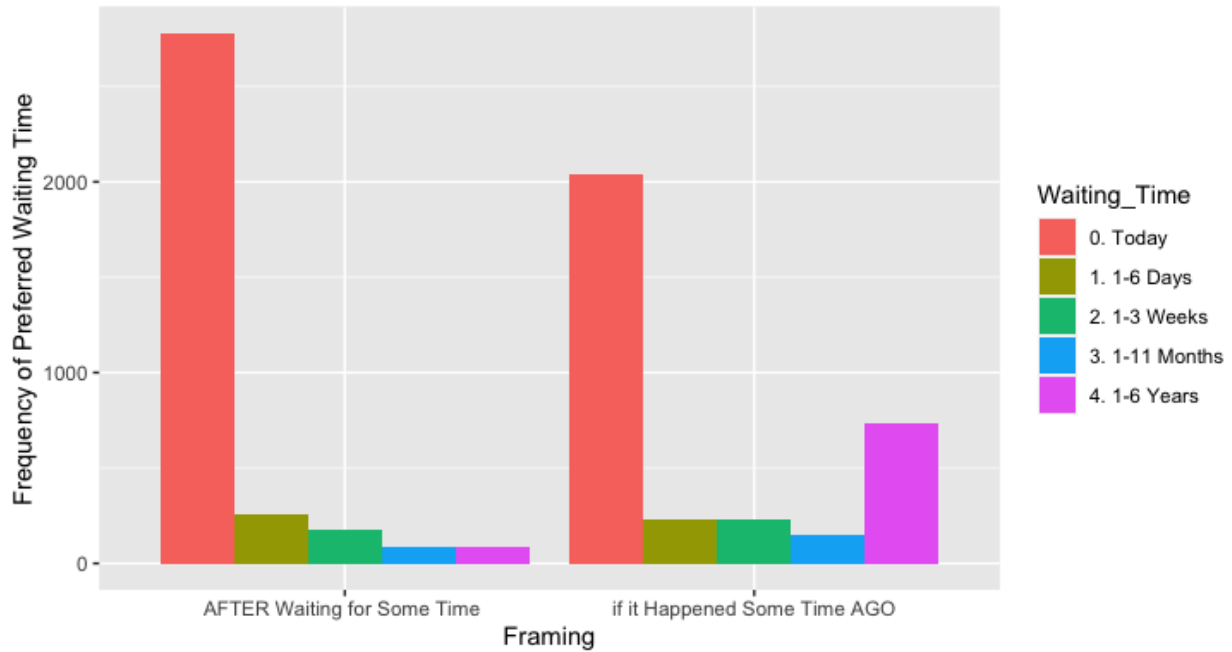


Figure 4: Frequency of Choice of Waiting Time Across Different Framings of the Question. (Study 2, Chapter 2)

2.3 Study 3

To answer the remaining questions from Study 2, In Study 3, I examined exactly what would happen when people wait to have an important conversation with their partners by asking them to recall recent events.

Participants and Methods

Two hundred participants were recruited for the study, and 199 responses were received. The same exclusion criteria were applied to this study as in Study 1, resulting in 191 participants ($M_{age} = 38.30$, $SD = 11.28$, $95\% CI = [36.69, 39.90]$, 182 identified as women, 109 as men, and 1 identified as non-binary).

At the beginning of the study, participants were asked to indicate whether they have recently confessed to someone about one of the 18 common confession topics. Participants chose from four options: “Yes, I have recently confessed this to someone”, “Yes, I confessed this to someone, but not recently”, “No, I have not confessed this to someone, but I have been waiting to confess this to someone”, and “No, this doesn't apply to me”. After going through all 18 categories, they then were redirected to the confession-specific questions if they chose the first option, that they have recently confessed this to someone.

To understand the relationship between waiting and conversation outcome, participants were asked participants to indicate how long they had waited before making this confession (a few hours to a day, several days to a week, several weeks to a month, more than 6 months, more than 1 year). To measure the outcome of the conversation, participants were also asked how the confession went, ranging from 1 (extremely negatively) to 7 (extremely positively). To measure the conversation partner's reactions, they were asked how upset and how disappointed they were to learn about how long the participant had waited to confess (1, not at all to 7 very upset/disappointed). To control for the significance of the confession, I also asked participants to indicate the significance of the issue and how much it impacted the relationship between them and the person they confessed to (both on 1 to 7 Likert scales) and who they confessed to (partner, family, friend, coworker, or other).

Results

Because participants could answer questions on more than one confession and each confession topic had responses from multiple participants, a multi-level mixed model with random intercepts to analyze the data was used. The random factors include the participant, the confession topic, and the conversation partner type.

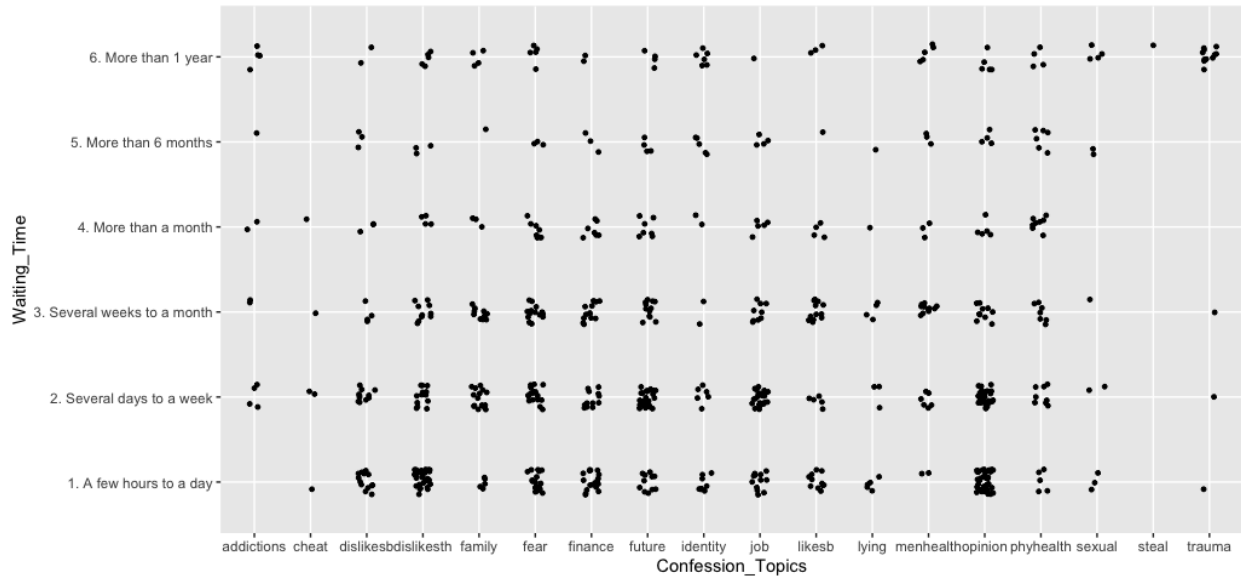


Figure 5: Frequency of Confession Topics Occurrence at Different Waiting Time Before the Confession. (Study 3, Chapter 2)

There were 664 confessions reported by 191 participants, resulting in an average of 3 to 4 confessions per participant. The distribution of confession topics can be found in Figure 5. The results show that waiting longer was negatively associated with how the confession went ($b = -0.22$, 95% CI = [-0.29, -0.14], SE = 0.04, $t(623.08) = -5.68$, $p < .001$) and the effect remained after controlling for the significance of the issue and how much it impacted their relationship with the person they confessed to (waiting: $b = -0.16$, 95% CI = [-0.24, -0.09], SE = 0.04, $t(612.19) = -4.34$, $p < .001$; significance: $b = -0.03$, 95% CI = [-0.10, 0.03], SE = 0.03, $t(650.32) = -1.00$, $p = .32$; impact relationship: $b = -0.23$, 95% CI = [-0.30, -0.16], SE = 0.03, $t(655.81) = -6.69$, $p < .001$).

Besides a negative relationship between waiting time and the conversation outcome, the relationship between waiting time and the confession partner's reaction was also examined. There was a negative relationship between waiting time and the confession partner's reaction, such that the longer the confessor waited, the worse their confession partner reacted ($b = -0.28$,

95% CI = [-0.35, -0.21], SE = 0.04, $t(523.22) = -7.93$, $p < .001$) and the effect held after controlling for the significance of the confession and the impact to their relationship (waiting: $b = -0.22$, 95% CI = [-0.29, -0.15], SE = 0.04, $t(620.43) = -6.17$, $p < .001$; significance: $b = -0.03$, 95% CI = [-0.09, 0.03], SE = 0.03, $t(639.57) = -1.04$, $p = .30$; impact relationship: $b = -0.25$, 95% CI = [-0.32, -0.19], SE = 0.03, $t(641.06) = -7.98$, $p < .001$). The correlation between waiting time and conversation outcomes and conversation partner's negative reaction can be found in Fig. 6 & 7.

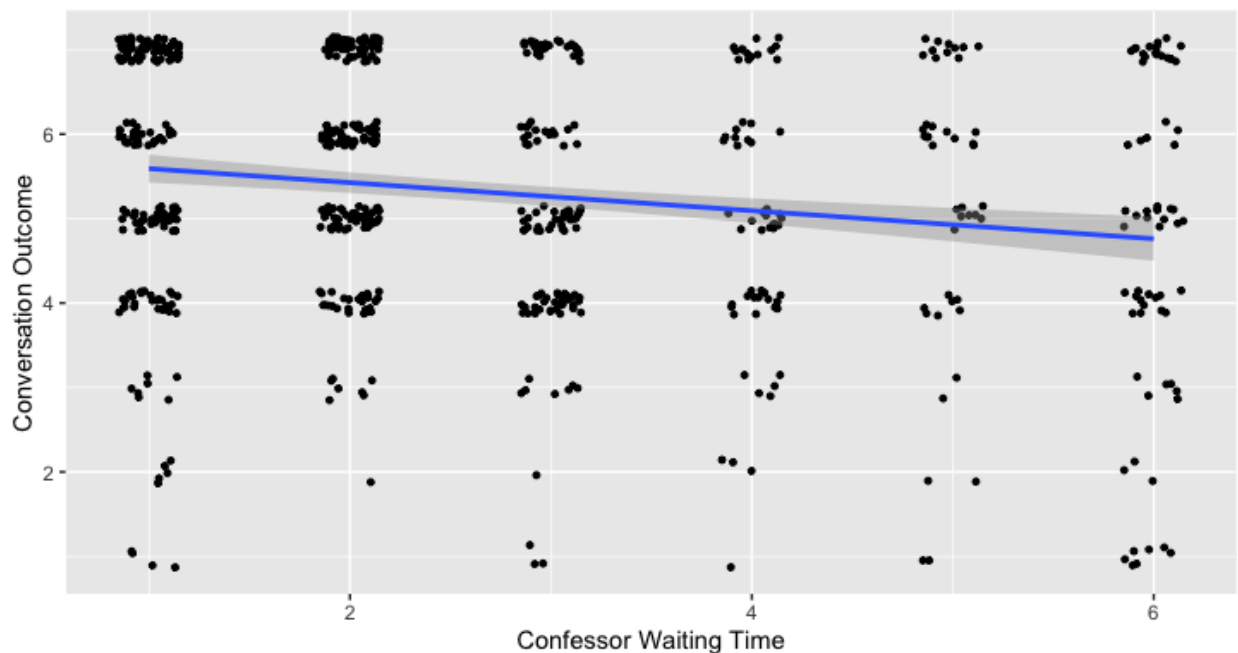


Figure 6: Correlation Graph between Waiting Time and Conversation Outcome. (Study 3, Chapter 2)

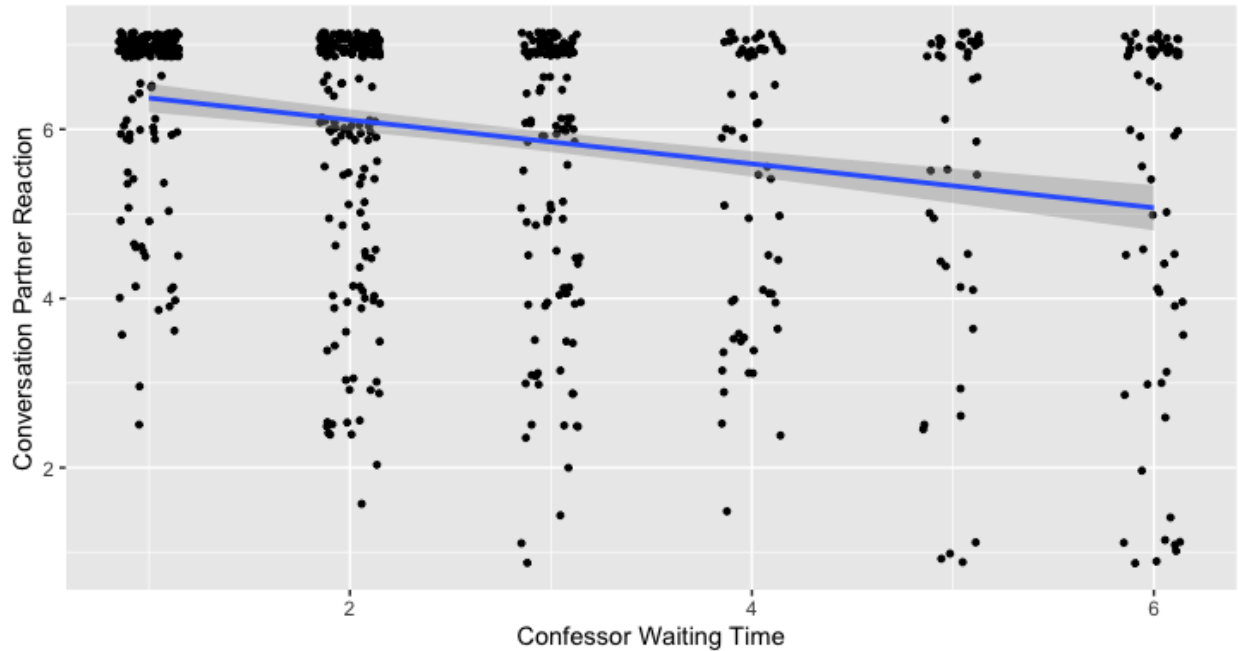


Figure 7: Correlation Graph between Waiting Time and Conversation Partner’s Reaction. (Study 3, Chapter 2).

Discussion

The study shows a strong pattern that waiting to confess is not associated with a positive outcome. When participants waited to have a confession, they perceived the conversation to go worse and their confession partner to react more negatively. Recall in Study 2, participants showed a preference for others to confess immediately, but for themselves, the preference was to learn about things that are more distant from the present. Besides the difference in the two framings regarding past vs. future, there existed another difference that is one’s own preferences of learning about something vs. one’s preferences for other people to say something. Could it be the case that participants would have a different response when they answer these questions from another perspective, the perspective of a person being confessed to? In Study 4, I asked a subset of participants to answer the delayed confession questions from the perspective of a person being

confessed to and compared the results with the answers from the perspective of a confessor (which would be the same perspective as in Study 3).

2.4 Study 4

Participants and Methods

Two hundred participants were recruited for this study and 201 finished responses were received. After applying the same exclusion criteria as in the earlier studies, there were 181 complete responses (89 identified as men, 92 as women, $M_{age} = 39.37$, $SD = 12.31$, 95% CI = [37.56, 41.18]).

At the very beginning of the survey, participants were randomly assigned to the confessor condition or the partner condition. In the confessor condition, participants were asked about their own experiences of confessing to other people. In the partner condition, participants were asked about their experiences of other people confessing to them. Besides the direction of the confession and thus the specific wordings of the questions, participants in both conditions were asked the same kinds of questions.

Similar to Study 3, the participants first were shown the 18 categories of confession topics. For each topic, they were asked to indicate whether they have recently confessed this topic to others (or others confessing to them on this topic in the "partner" condition). If they indicated yes, then they would be directed to conversation-specific questions.

For each confession conversation, the participants answered the same set of questions as in Study 3: how significant the issue was, who they confessed to, how much it impacted the relationship between the two people involved in the confession conversation, how long they waited before making this confession, how the confession went, and lastly, how upset and how disappointed the person being confessed to was about how long the confessor had waited to

confess. While most of the questions have similar meanings no matter which condition the participant was in, the last two questions about how the person being confessed to felt were probably the questions with the most different information. Although in both conditions the last two questions were both asking about the feelings of the person being confessed to, in the confessor condition, the question was an estimate from the participants of the other person in the conversation; and in the partner condition, the question was an estimate from the participants of their own feelings in the conversation.

Results

The 181 participants generated a total of 776 confession conversations, resulting in an average of 4 to 5 conversations per participant. The distribution of confession topics can be found in in Figure 8.

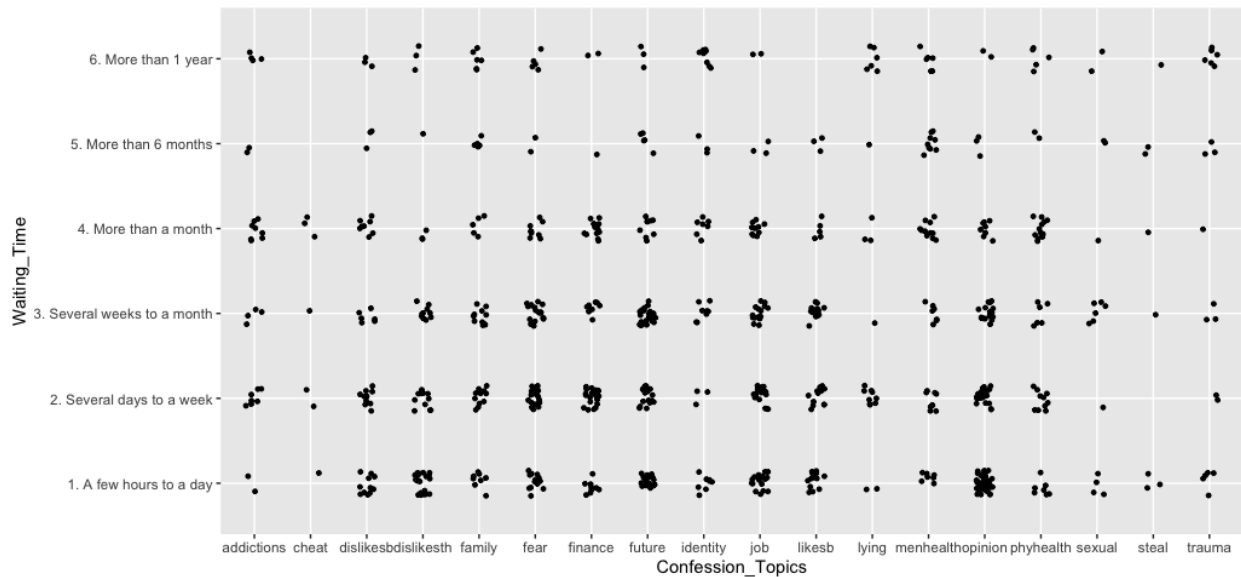


Figure 8: Frequency of Confession Topics Occurrence at Different Waiting Time Before the Confession. (Study 4, Chapter 2)

Following the same data analysis procedure as in Study 3, I first looked at whether the negative relationship between waiting time and how the conversation went held for both parties

of the conversation. The results showed that there was an overall negative relationship between waiting and confession outcome ($b = -0.08$, 95% CI = $[-0.14, -0.01]$, SE = 0.03, $t(768.15) = -2.26$, $p = .02$). When the question was asked from the perspective of the confessor, waiting was negatively associated with a worse conversation outcome ($b = -0.12$, 95% CI = $[-0.20, -0.03]$, SE = 0.04, $t(359.12) = -2.72$, $p = .007$); however, when the question was asked from the perspective of the person being confessed to, such negative association disappeared ($b = -0.04$, 95% CI = $[-0.14, 0.06]$, SE = 0.05, $t(403.89) = -0.82$, $p = .41$). These results are reflected in the correlational graphs (Fig. 9 & 10).

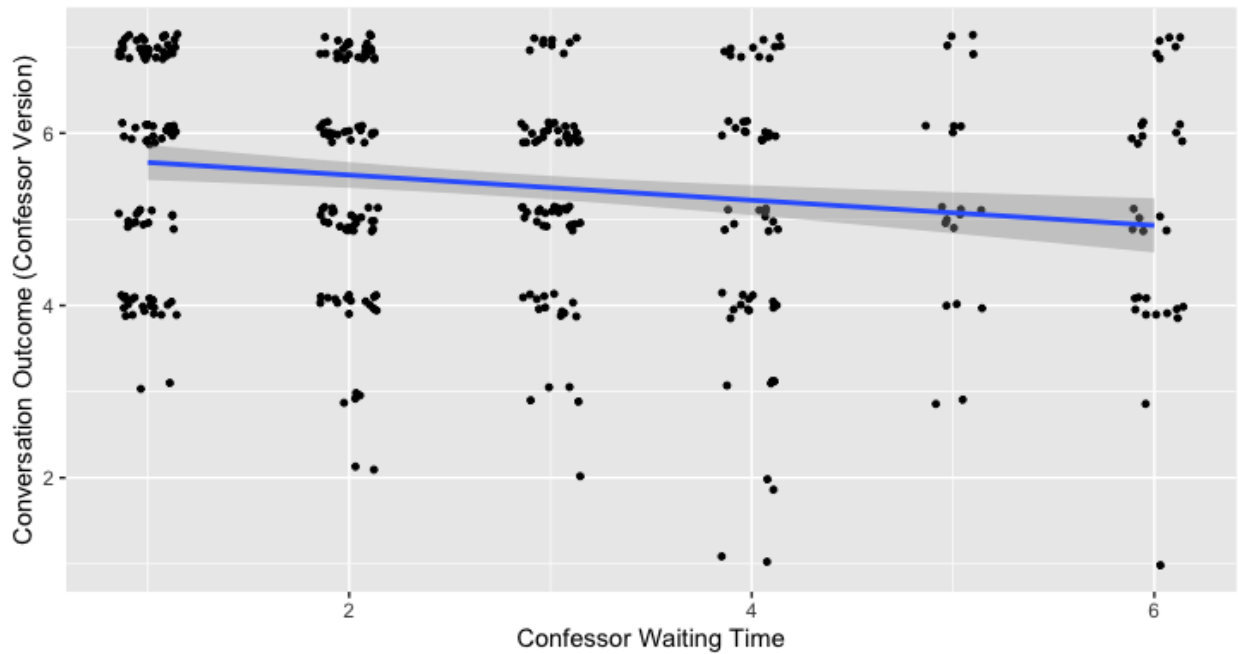


Figure 9: Correlation Graph between Waiting Time and Conversation Outcome (Answered by Confessors). (Study 4, Chapter 2).

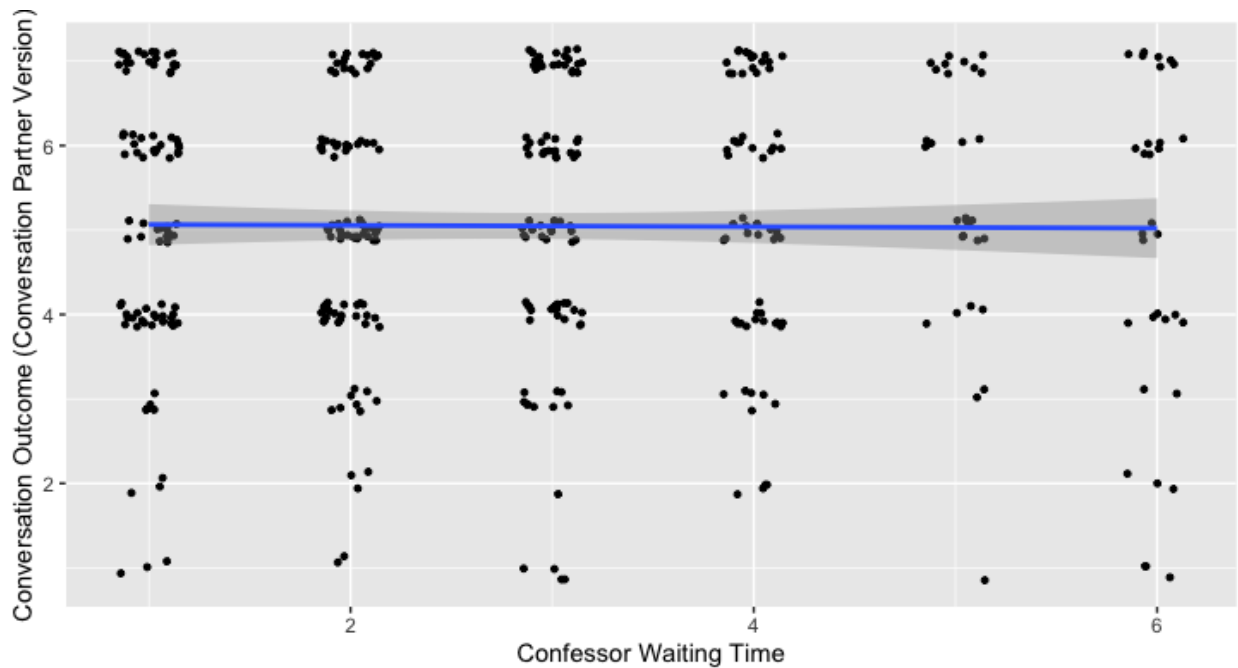


Figure 10: Correlation Graph between Waiting Time and Conversation Outcome (Answered by the Person Being Confessed to, “Partner Condition”). (Study 4, Chapter 2).

After controlling for the significance of the issue (how significant it was and how much it impacted the relationship between the two parties of the conversation), there was no longer an overall negative relationship between waiting and conversation outcome ($b = -0.05$, 95% CI = [-0.12, 0.02], SE = 0.03, $t(760.35) = -1.49$, $p = .14$). The negative association remained in the confessor condition ($b = -0.11$, 95% CI = [-0.20, -0.02], SE = 0.04, $t(363.75) = -2.51$, $p = .01$), but not in the partner condition ($b = -0.004$, 95% CI = [-0.10, 0.09], SE = 0.05, $t(395.91) = -0.07$, $p = .94$).

The other important outcome variable I looked at in the earlier study is the conversation partner's negative reaction. Here, there was an overall negative association between waiting and the conversation partner's negative reaction ($b = -0.18$, 95% CI = [-0.24, -0.11], SE = 0.03, $t(703.99) = -5.21$, $p < .001$). The same was true in the confessor condition ($b = -0.10$, 95% CI = [-0.19, -0.02], SE = 0.04, $t(324.26) = -2.32$, $p = .02$) and in the partner condition ($b = -0.26$, 95%

CI = [-0.36, -0.17], SE = 0.05, $t(352.59) = -5.28$, $p < .001$). These results are reflected in the correlation graphs (Fig. 11 & 12). In addition, after controlling for the significance of the confessed issue, the overall negative relationship remained ($b = -0.11$, 95% CI = [-0.17, -0.04], SE = 0.03, $t(734.84) = -3.33$, $p < .001$) but not for the confessor condition ($b = -0.05$, 95% CI = [-0.13, 0.04], SE = 0.04, $t(334.94) = -1.09$, $p = .27$). Although in the partner condition, there was a negative relationship between how long the confessor waited and their own negative reactions towards this confession conversation ($b = -0.17$, 95% CI = [-0.26, -0.08], SE = 0.05, $t(391.47) = -3.72$, $p < .001$).

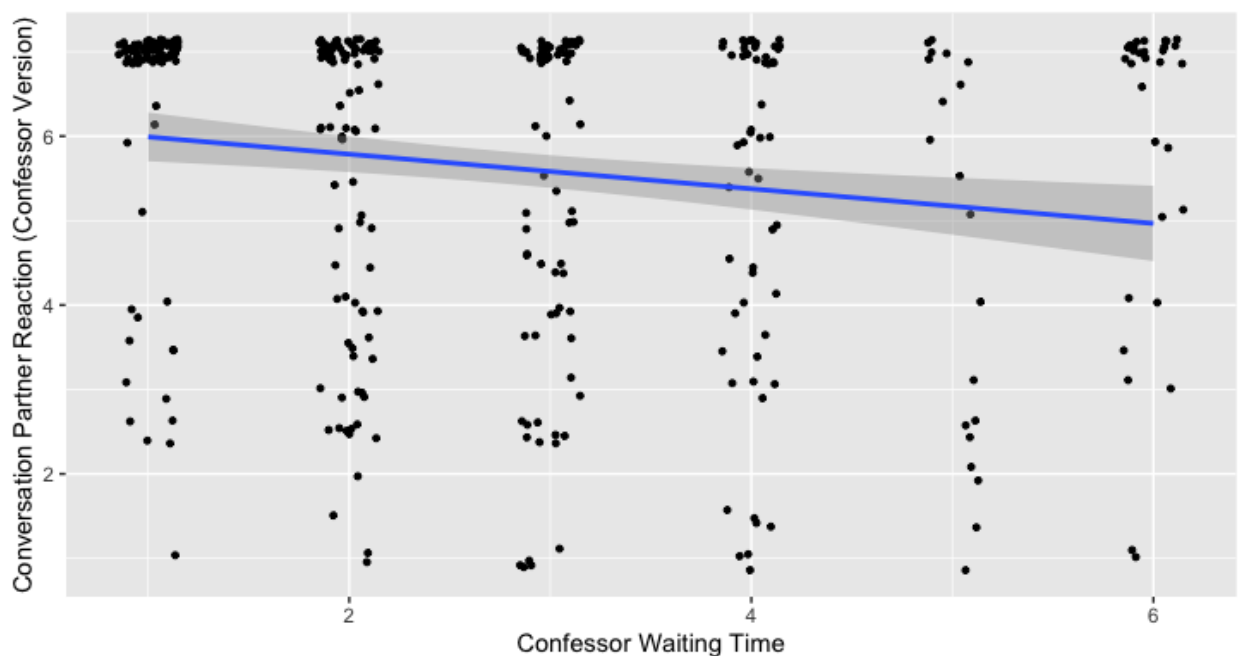


Figure 11: Correlation Graph between Waiting Time and Conversation Partner’s Reaction (Answered by Confessors). (Study 4, Chapter 2)

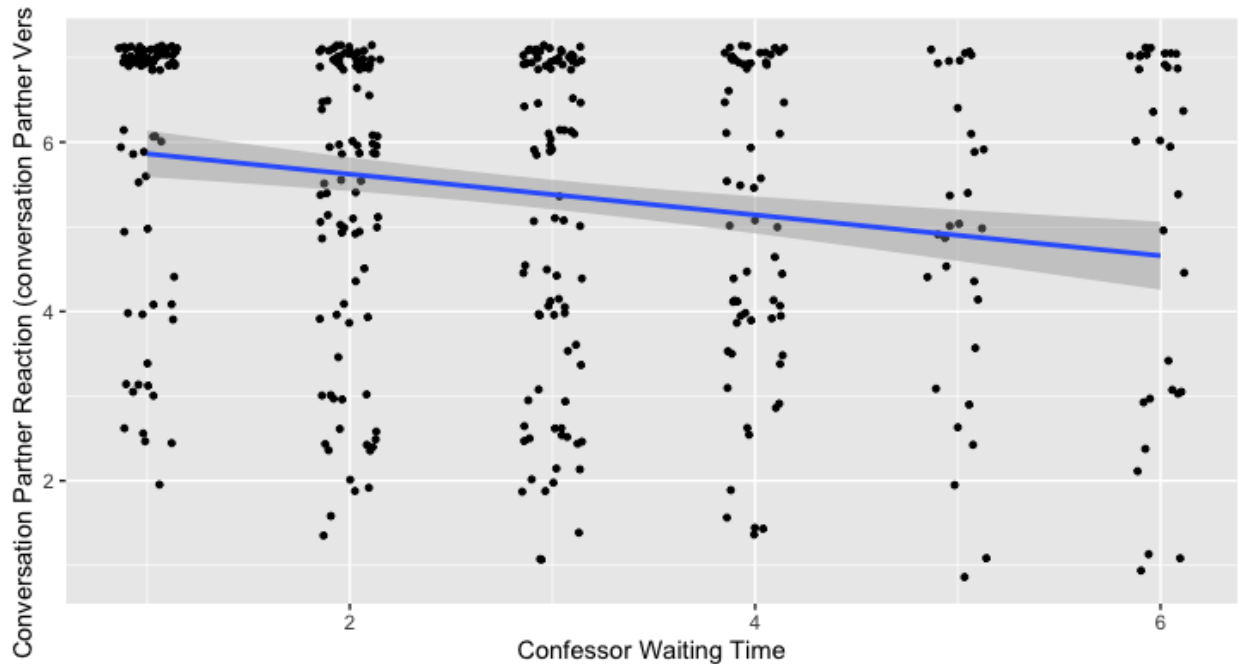


Figure 12: Correlation Graph between Waiting Time and Conversation Partner’s Reaction (Answered by the Person Being Confessed to, “Partner Condition”). (Study 4, Chapter 2)

Discussion

Although all of the regressions between waiting time and conversation outcome and confession partner’s reaction show a non-positive relationship, there is an asymmetry between the confessor and the confession partner conditions. To summarize, when the participant was answering the questions from the perspective of the confessor, waiting was strongly associated with negative conversation outcomes but not with the conversation partner's negative reactions; however, when the participant was answering the question from the perspective of the person being confessed to, waiting was strongly associated with negative reactions from the person being confessed to (in other words, the participant's own negative reactions), but not so much with the conversation outcome. There might be several potential explanations for this asymmetry. On the one hand, the confessor (participants filling out the survey) had more accurate information on how the conversation went than how their confession partner felt after

hearing about it. And this is because the confessors initiated the conversation and provided the initial information in the conversation. At the same time, the confession partner (the listener) had more accurate information on how they felt after hearing about the confession than how the conversation went. Therefore, it could be the case that the effect of delaying is reflected by the question that the participants have more information on.

Regardless, the waiting time is not positively associated with neither conversation outcome nor confession partner's reaction after hearing about it, rated by the confessor and the person being confessed to. Then the question becomes, why do people still delay confessing to others? The reasons for people to delay their confessions are examined in the next study.

2.5 Study 5

Study 5 examined the reasons people choose to delay their confession. In Study 5, the perspectives of the confessor and the person being confessed to were both examined, including the reasonings of the delaying process and how the reasonings relate to the outcomes of the confessions.

Participants and Methods

Two hundred participants were recruited for this study, and 200 completed responses were received. After applying the same exclusion criteria as in the earlier studies, there were 175 complete responses (95 identified as men, 78 as women, and 2 non-binary, $M_{\text{age}} = 40.54$, $SD = 12.37$, 95% $CI = [38.70, 42.39]$).

The procedure of Study 5 was similar to that of Study 4. Participants were randomly selected to recall whether they have recently experienced a confession event from the 18 categories either as a confessor (confessor condition) or as a person being confessed to (partner condition). If the answer was yes, then participants were guided to answer confession specific

questions as in Studies 3&4. The addition in Study 5 was that participants were asked to rate the extent to which they think they (or the person who confessed to them, in the partner condition) waited to confess for several reasons. These reasons were identified in a pilot study and can be found in Appendix B. The five items for delaying reasons were: “I was trying to figure it out first”, “I was trying to work on it”, “I needed to work up the courage”, “I felt embarrassed to confess this”, and “I didn’t want to put the burden on the other person”. All items were rated on a 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely) Likert scale.

Results

The first part of the analysis around the relationships between waiting time and conversation outcome and conversation partner reactions followed the same procedure as in Study 3. Overall, there was a negative relationship between waiting and confession outcome ($b = -0.10$, 95% CI = [-0.16, -0.04], SE = 0.03, $t(899.04) = -3.36$, $p < .001$). For the confessors, the relationship was marginally significant (confessor: $b = -0.08$, 95% CI = [-0.17, 0.01], SE = 0.05, $t(374.43) = -1.68$, $p = .09$) but for the people being confessed to, the association was significant ($b = -0.11$, 95% CI = [-0.19, -0.03], SE = 0.04, $t(519.22) = -2.85$, $p = .005$). The results are reflected by the correlation graphs (Fig. 13 & 14).

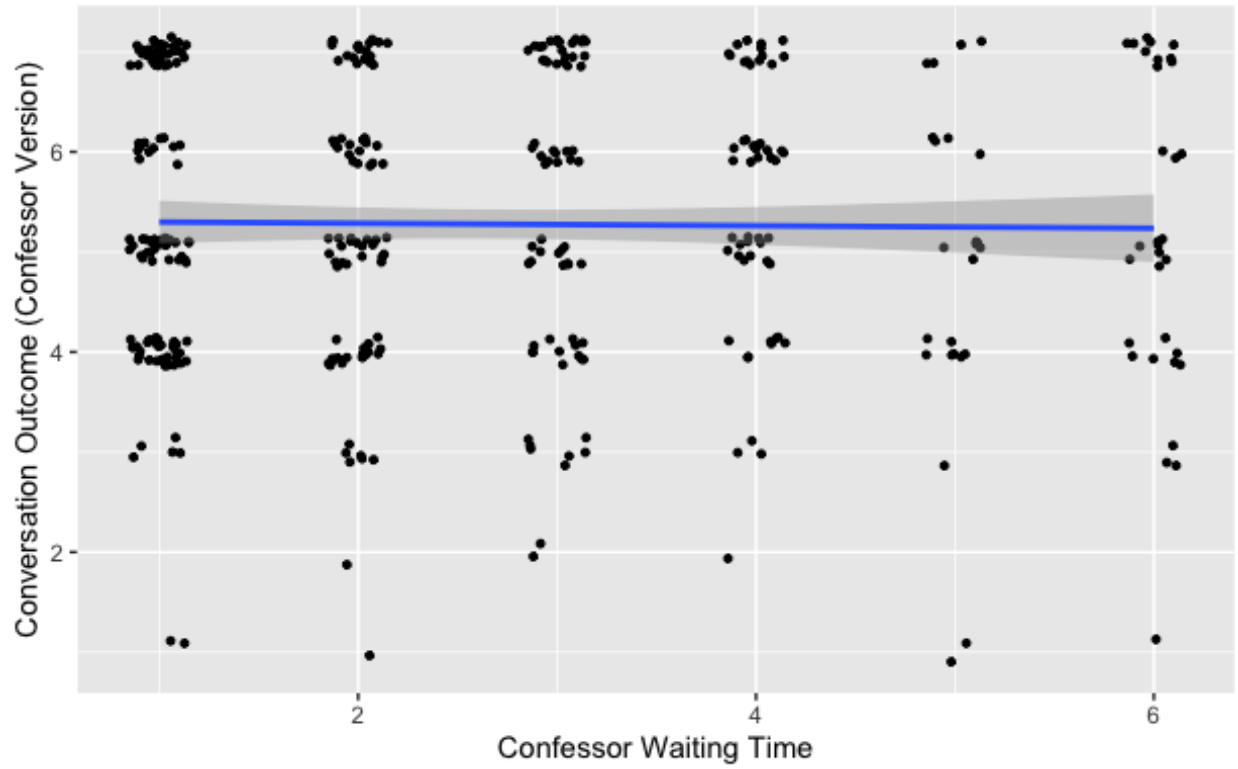


Figure 13: Correlation Graph between Waiting Time and Conversation Outcome (reported by the Confessor). (Study 4. Chapter 2)

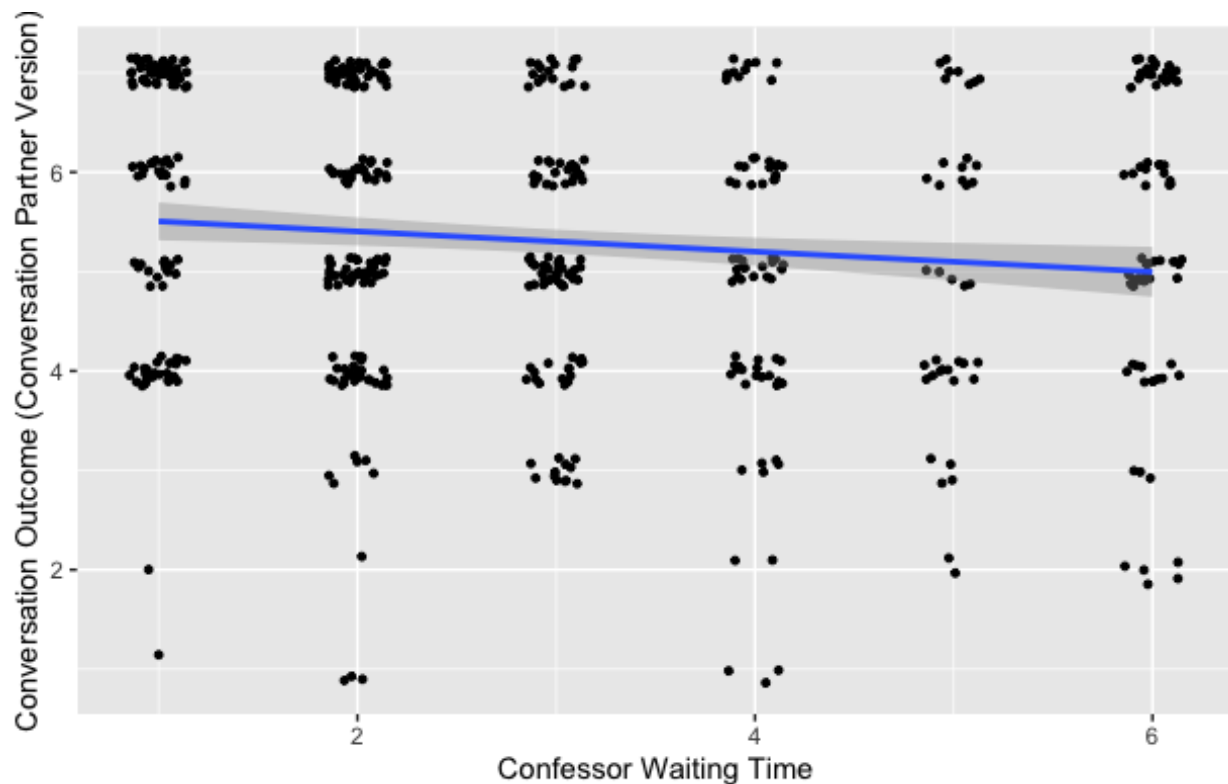


Figure 14: Correlation Graph between Waiting Time and Conversation Outcome (reported by the Person Being Confessed to, "Partner Condition"). (Study 4, Chapter 2)

However, after controlling for the significance of the issue (how significant the confessed issue was and how much it impacted the relationship between the two parties involved in the conversation), there was still an overall negative relationship between waiting and conversation outcome ($b = -0.08$, 95% CI = $[-0.14, -0.02]$, SE = 0.03, $t(904.93) = -2.59$, $p = .01$), but not for the confessors ($b = -0.04$, 95% CI = $[-0.13, 0.06]$, SE = 0.05, $t(372.93) = -0.74$, $p = .46$). Instead, when the participant was the person being confessed to (partner condition), the negative relationship held ($b = -0.10$, 95% CI = $[-0.18, -0.02]$, SE = 0.04, $t(523.81) = -2.54$, $p = .01$).

Now moving on to the partner's negative reaction questions. Here, there was an overall negative association between waiting and the conversation partner's negative reaction ($b = -0.11$, 95% CI = $[-0.17, -0.05]$, SE = 0.03, $t(812.41) = -3.43$, $p < .001$). The same was true for both confessors ($b = -0.13$, 95% CI = $[-0.21, -0.04]$, SE = 0.04, $t(336.00) = -2.90$, $p = .004$) and the

people being confessed to ($b = -0.09$, 95% CI = $[-0.18, -0.01]$, SE = 0.04, $t(435.58) = -2.22$, $p = .03$). These relationships are reflected by the correlation graphs (Fig. 15 & 16).

However, after controlling for the significance of the confessed issue, there was no significant relationship in all three regressions (overall: $b = -0.03$, 95% CI = $[-0.09, 0.03]$, SE = 0.03, $t(872.15) = -1.01$, $p = .31$; confessor: $b = -0.02$, 95% CI = $[-0.10, 0.06]$, SE = 0.04, $t(347.47) = -0.48$, $p = .63$; person being confessed to: $b = -0.03$, 95% CI = $[-0.11, 0.05]$, SE = 0.04, $t(514.92) = -0.70$, $p = .48$).

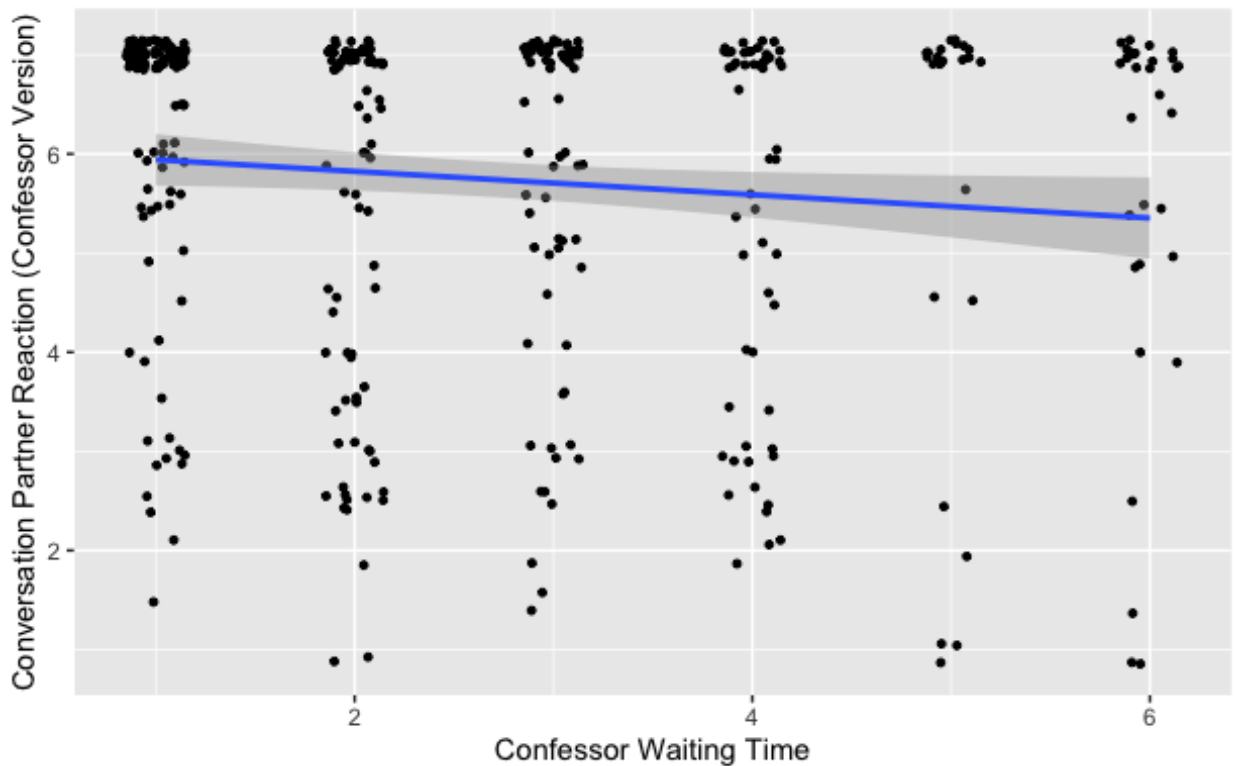


Figure 15: Correlation Graph between Waiting Time and Conversation Partner’s Reaction (reported by the Confessor). (Study 4, Chapter 2)

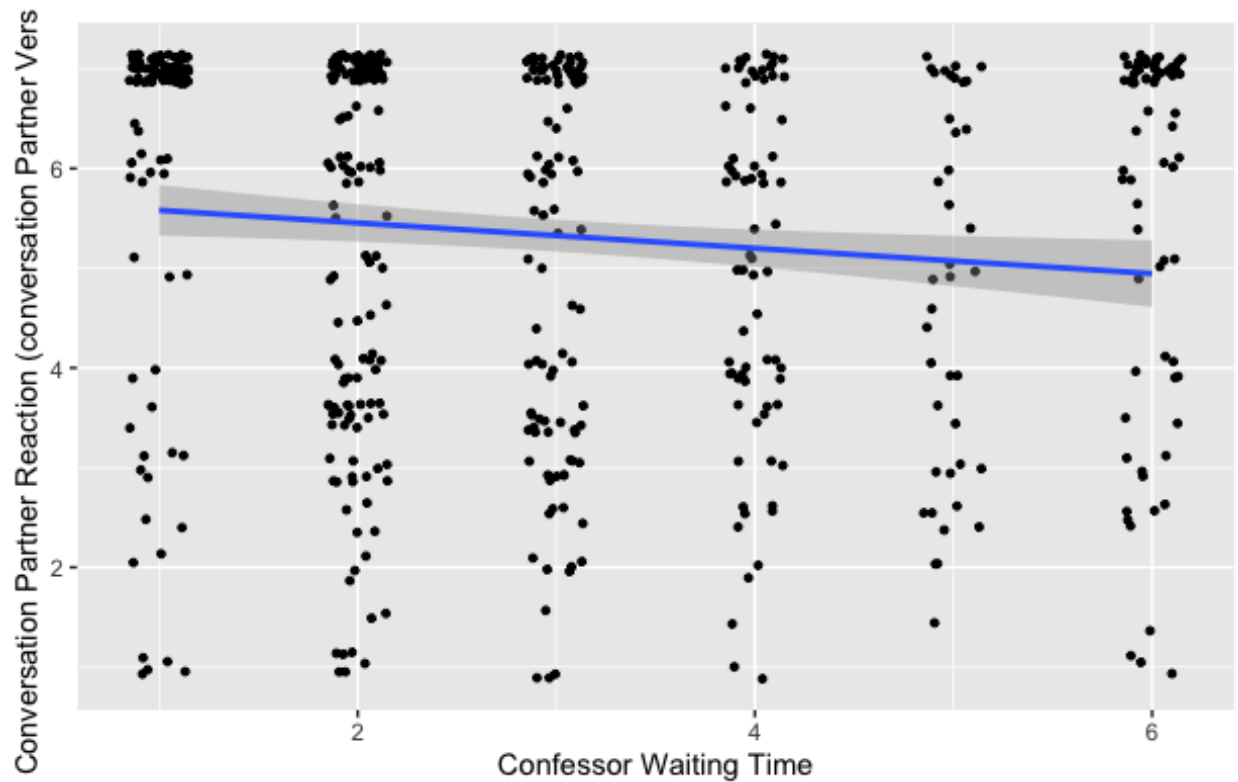


Figure 16: Correlation Graph between Waiting Time and Conversation Partner’s Negative Reaction (reported by the Person Being Confessed to, “Partner Condition”). (Study 4, Chapter 2)

The next part of the analysis is the added reasonings questions. Earlier pilot data showed that the optimal number of factors is 2. The factor loading of the items can be found in Table 13. The averages of both factors are calculated, and one factor is about making progress, which includes items of “figuring it out” and “working on it”. The other factor is about one’s own worries, which include items of “needing courage”, “feeling embarrassed”, and “didn’t want to put the burden on the other person”. The two factors in total explain 71.4% of the variance in the data.

Table 12: Factor Analysis of reasons to delay (Study 4, Chapter 2)

	Factor 1	Factor 2
Burden on others	0.58	0.37
Need courage	0.74	0.32
Feel embarrassed	0.91	0.18
Figure it out	0.26	0.82
Work on it	0.29	0.88

When the items were averaged within each of the factors, I then ran regression analysis on the conversation outcome and conversation partner's reactions, including waiting time and significance of the issue as control variables. Overall, there was a positive relationship between the making progress factor ("figuring it out" and "working on it") and conversation outcome ($b = 0.06$, 95% CI = [0.01, 0.12], SE = 0.03, $t(904.99) = 2.16$, $p = .03$). This relationship was marginally significant when the participants were answering as the confessor ($b = 0.08$, 95% CI = [-0.004, 0.15], SE = 0.04, $t(364.95) = 1.87$, $p = .06$) but not when the participants were answering as the person being confessed to ($b = 0.05$, 95% CI = [-0.02, 0.13], SE = 0.04, $t(514.77) = 1.37$, $p = .17$). There was no significant relationship between the "confessor's own worries" factor ("needing courage", "feeling embarrassed", and "didn't want to put the burden on the other person") in all three regressions.

Regarding the conversation partner's negative reactions, overall, there was a marginally significant positive relationship between "making progress" and partner reaction ($b = 0.05$, 95% CI = [-0.01, 0.10], SE = 0.03, $t(821.05) = 1.76$, $p = .08$) and a negative relationship between "confessor's own worries" and conversation partner's reaction ($b = -0.20$, 95% CI = [-0.26, -0.14], SE = 0.03, $t(890.44) = -6.18$, $p < .001$). The effect of "making progress" on conversation partner's reaction was not significant when the participants were answering as the confessor ($b = -0.001$, 95% CI = [-0.07, 0.06], SE = 0.03, $t(263.09) = -0.04$, $p = .97$) but significant when the

participants were answering as the person being confessed to ($b = 0.09$, 95% CI = [0.01, 0.17], SE = 0.04, $t(487.12) = 2.23$, $p = .03$). The effect of the “confessor’s own worry” factor remained significant for both the confessor participants and the being confessed to participants (confessor: $b = -0.17$, 95% CI = [-0.26, -0.09], SE = 0.04, $t(340.52) = -3.97$, $p < .001$; being confessed to: $b = -0.22$, 95% CI = [-0.30, -0.13], SE = 0.05, $t(524.64) = -4.70$, $p < .001$).

General Discussion

Although people report a strong preference for knowing about what their partner did immediately across 18 confession topics, people still delay their confessions to others. This asymmetry of the listeners' preferred way of communication and the confessor’s actual behavior highlight another difficulty of sensitive conversations—the timing of the conversation. Over five studies, the results show that delaying a confession conversation is neither related to positive conversation outcomes nor conversation partner’s positive reactions. The asymmetry of people’s conversation behavior and the actual conversation outcomes again demonstrated how difficult it is to predict conversation partner’s reaction, especially among sensitive conversations.

Although the results from Studies 3 through 5 provided more support for Hypothesis 1b, that delaying a conversation is not associated with positive outcomes, the reasoning to delay conversations measures in Study 5 also provided some support for Hypothesis 1a. Future studies could measure whether participants believe that the confession is on an event that could be improved upon with time and test if this belief moderates the main effect of waiting time on conversation outcomes.

Admittedly these relationships are all correlational rather than causal, but given the unique nature of conversations, and especially confession conversations, it becomes difficult to randomly assign participants a conversation and examine the outcomes of that manipulated

conversation. In addition, although there is a consistent non-positive relationship between delay time and conversation outcomes (and conversation partner's outcomes), it is not the goal of the Chapter to provide recommendations as to waiting is for sure a behavior that one should not do when deciding whether or not to have a confession conversation.

Lastly, future work examining the relationship between waiting time and conversational consequences could look at what triggers people's eventual confessing behaviors and examining whether an internal vs. external trigger has different effects on the conversational consequences. This may help provide further insights into the complex dynamics at play during confession conversations and how various factors impact their outcomes.

Chapter 3: The Conversation Topics We Seek to Have

Conversations are everyday activities that people use to establish social connections. While Chapters 1 & 2 identify cases of people avoiding conversations and potentially avoiding social connections, Chapter 3 aims to look at a broader picture of how socio-ecological factors influencing relationship formation might be related to the way people communicate.

Conversations are intended to build relationships; at the same time, relationships determine the type of conversations that occur. The most intuitive understanding of conversational depth and relational depth would be that people have in-depth conversations with those they are close to and more shallow conversations with those they are not close to (Kardas et al., 2021).

There is a lay belief that we should not initiate in-depth and personal conversations with strangers. For example, people do not think their sensitive and personal questions will be perceived well by strangers, and they estimate that conversations with a stranger on a deep and personal topic will be much more awkward than a shallow and generic topic (Hart et al., 2020;

Kardas et al., 2021). However, when these conversations are carried out, the anticipated negative consequences are alleviated - the strangers being asked sensitive questions feel comfortable with sensitive questions, have positive impressions of the asker, and experience high connectedness with those after a deep conversation (Hart et al., 2020; Kardas et al., 2021). These findings on the asymmetry of pre- and post-conversation judgment highlight the difficulty of predicting what would be a good conversation with whom.

Besides focusing on shallow vs. in-depth conversation topics, previous research has also focused on the social relationships in which in-depth conversations happen, which is counter-intuitive to the lay belief that we share shallow conversations with distant others and in-depth conversations with close others. People share their worries with weak ties (Small, 2017) and reveal their personal insecurities to strangers (Kim et al., 2020). One reason for people to do so is reminder avoidance, that when negative information is shared with someone who is not constantly in their close social circle, they won't be reminded of the negative information again because they won't see this person as much.

Following the logic of reminder avoidance, for certain difficult conversations, people have a concern about whether they will see the person they had the conversation with in the future or not. This concern of how often a social relationship will be continued is described as the concept of Relational Mobility. Relational Mobility describes the extent to which people from certain societies are highly likely to move in and out of social relationships. In a highly mobile society (like the United States), people are highly likely to meet new people and can freely choose with whom they want to maintain a social relationship. On the other hand, in a low mobile society (like Japan), people are unlikely to meet new people and do not have the freedom

to exit a relationship even if they no longer enjoy this relationship (Thomson et al., 2018; Yuki & Schug, 2011; Schug et al., 2010).

Because relationships are more mobile in high relational mobile societies, it requires more effort to maintain a desired social relationship, and it ensures a higher possibility to leave an unwanted social relationship. Exemplar behaviors of people from highly mobile societies include more self-disclosure, support-giving, gift-giving, and conspicuous consumption (Chen et al., 2012; Schug et al., 2010, Komiya et al., 2019; Zhu et al., 2023). These behaviors highlight a tendency to explicitly showcase the self, to win trust and respect from others who are likely not familiar with the target person.

The relational mobility scale also breaks down into two separate dimensions: the ability to meet new people and the ability to choose who to be friends with. The opportunity to leave old relationships and enter new relationships arguably grants greater risk-taking abilities when it comes to social relationship building. When meeting new people, individuals tend to engage in shallow conversation topics as a first step to ease into the relationship; when meeting with old friends, people can freely chat about their feelings and opinions, knowing that if the conversation doesn't work out, they can end the current relationship and form new ones. Therefore:

H1: When someone is high on the meeting new people dimension of relational mobility, they are more likely to want to talk about shallow conversation topics than those who are low on the meeting new people dimension of relational mobility.

H2: When someone is high on the ability to choose dimension of relational mobility, they are less likely to be concerned about personal privacy or creating conflict when it comes to unwanted and deep conversation topics.

In this chapter, I examined how relational mobility can impact the way people approach and engage in conversations. Understanding how relationships are established and maintained can help individuals navigate the complexities of social interactions and form more meaningful connections with others.

3.1 Study 1

Given that Chapter 1 looked at the psychological processes of unwanted conversations, Study 1 first examined how relational mobility is related to people's conversation avoidance behaviors.

Participants and Methods

Two hundred participants were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk to participate in the online study. An engagement check question was included at the end of the survey, resulting in a final sample size of 192 (109 males and 83 females, $M_{\text{age}} = 39.08$, $SD = 11.29$, 95% CI = [37.50, 40.65]).

Participants first completed the conversation avoidance process questionnaire as in Study 5 of Chapter 1. After the conversation avoidance process questionnaire, participants then completed the relational mobility scale (Schug et al, 2010, Yuki & Schug, 2012).

Results

The conversation avoidance process measures (such as privacy concerns and conflict concerns) were averaged across the items within each factor, per Chapter 1. The Relational Mobility scale includes two dimensions: the ability to meet new people (meeting) and the ability to choose social relationships (choosing). The complete list of items from this scale can be found in Appendix C. The average for each participant was calculated within each of the two dimensions. Then, the relationship between one's perceived relational mobility in their

environment and their concerns facing unwanted conversations was examined. Multilevel linear regression models were applied to all analysis, with the conversation topics and participant being random intercept factors.

The ability to meet new people was not related to either privacy concerns or conflict concerns; however, the ability to choose friends was negatively associated with privacy concerns ($b = -0.48$, 95% CI = [- 0.74, - 0.22], SE = 0.11, $t(157.19) = -3.58$, $p < .001$) and conflict concerns ($b = -0.57$, 95% CI = [-0.85, -0.28], SE = 0.15, $t(150.54) = -3.85$, $p < .001$).

In addition, relational mobility was not associated with the conversation avoidance process, such that no matter how much participants were concerned about privacy or conflict, participants' reported anxiety emotions were more associated with privacy concerns than conflict concerns (privacy concerns: $b = 0.25$, 95% CI = [0.17, 0.33], SE = 0.04, $t(434.98) = 6.85$, $p < .001$; conflict concerns: $b = 0.11$, 95% CI = [0.05, 0.17], SE = 0.03, $t(400.18) = 3.52$, $p < .001$). On the other hand, their annoyance emotions were more associated with conflict concerns than privacy concerns (conflict concerns: $b = 0.27$, 95% CI = [0.21, 0.33], SE = 0.03, $t(286.27) = 7.68$, $p < .001$; privacy concerns: $b = 0.05$, 95% CI = [- 0.03, 0.13], SE = 0.04, $t(341.38) = 1.215$, $p = .23$). These relationships replicated the findings in Chapter 1.

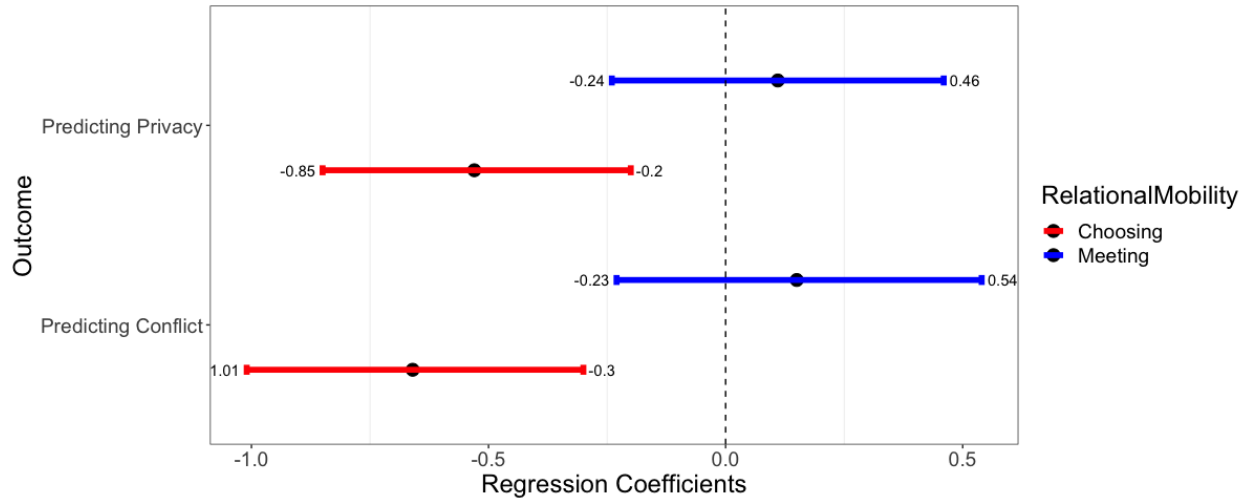


Figure 17: Regression Coefficients of Relational Mobility Predicting Concerns for One's Privacy and Creating a Conflict. (Study 1, Chapter 3)

Discussion

The association between high relational mobility and more self-disclosure has been documented before (Schug et al., 2010). However, the current study further identified the one dimension that's uniquely related to conversation avoidance behavior, that is, if people can choose who they want to be friends with, they would have fewer concerns about certain conversation topics.

A social relationship process includes a beginning stage of meeting new people, a middle process of getting close, and an ending stage (that may or may not happen) of choosing others over the current relationship or exiting from the current relationship. Before choosing whether to be friends with a person, one must first meet this person. If unwanted conversations, those that particularly touch upon people's sharing of private and potentially conflicting information (deep and personal conversations), meeting new people might be more related to more shallow and non-personal conversations. In other words, if knowing that one can freely exit a relationship is related to lowered concern for privacy and conflict-inducing conversations, could there be a

beginning stage of social relationship building of meeting new people that's related to other types of wanted conversations?

The next two studies aim to study all types of conversation topics and investigate: 1) what other conversation topics are constantly talked about in people's daily life, and 2) among these conversation topics, how relational mobility (both "meeting" and "choosing" dimensions) relate to the tendency of having certain kinds of conversations.

3.2 Study 2a

Before answering the remaining questions from Study 1, the goal of Study 2a was to identify a full list of conversation topics, not just the unwanted ones from Chapter 1.

Participants and Methods

One thousand participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk were recruited and after an engagement check question exclusion, there were 993 valid responses ($M_{\text{age}} = 40.65$, $SD = 12.54$, $95\% \text{ CI} = [39.87, 41.43]$).

All participants were asked to list ten topics they have had in the past week, across five different social relationships. These five social relationships were romantic partners, friends, family, coworkers acquaintances, and strangers.

Results

A bags of words method was utilized to get the frequency of topics that were reported by the participants (similar to Chapter 1). Single words that appear for more than 100 times were kept and bigrams that appear for more than 50 times were kept for further analysis.

There are 125 words and 101 bigrams that entered the next stage of topic identification. Similar meaning words were combined (such as kids and children) but some similar meaning

words with different levels were kept separate (such as family news, local news and news). The overall list of the frequency of conversation topics are in Table 13.

Table 13: Frequency of Topics Reported by Participants (Study 1, Chapter 3)

Topics	Words Included	Frequency
business/ economy/ inflation	economi, inflat, busi	496
work/ job/ career	work, job, boss, cowork, career	3386
coworkers/ boss	cowork, boss	211
school/ education	school, educ	501
house/ home	home, hous	608
car	car	490
money / finances	money, bill	821
ambition/ dream	dream	120
goal	goal	322
kids/children	children, kid,	1251
parents	parent	140
other family members	other famili, family member	245
family issues or family news	famili	2071
holidays	holiday	153
vacation	vact, vacation plan	862
travel (but not involving vacation)	travel, travel plan	888
weekend plan	weekend, weekend plan, the weekend	534
future plan (other than weekend plans)	plan, futur, future plan	1794
friends	friend	876
health/ wellbeing	health, well, exercis	1163
life (in general)	life, live	675
help	help	128
advice	advic	119
culture	cultur	113
movies	movi	1132
music	music	599
books	book	404
sports	sport	1028
video games	game, video, video gam	913
technology	technolog	143
social media	social media, social, media	404
pets	dog, pet	997
tv shows	televis, tv show, show	1272
jokes	joke	141
hobbies (in general)	hobbi	544
food/ restaurant	food, restaur,eat,	2198

Topics	Words Included	Frequency
cooking/ groceries/ lunch/ dinner	lunch, cook, for dinn, groceri, dinner	389
drinking	drink	511
love	love, romantic partn, partner	577
sex	sex	318
relationships	relationship, relat	499
gossip	gossip	130
memories	past, memori	317
current events	event	791
local news	local, local new, local ev	537
news (but not specifically local news)	news	944
traffic	traffic	199
weather	weather	2451
politics	polit	1110
religion	religion	194

3.3 Study 2b

With the commonly talked about topics from Study 2a, the goal for Study 2b was to replicate the findings of Study 1 using unwanted conversations while extending the findings from unwanted conversations to also include wanted conversations.

Participants

Five hundred participants were recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk and 501 responses were received. After an attention check question exclusion, there was a total of 484 participants (208 Males, 271 Females and 5 non-binary, $M_{age} = 41.48$, $SD = 12.87$, 95% CI = [40.33, 42.63]).

Methods

The survey investigated the psychology of conversations by asking respondents about recent conversations they have had regarding various topics. Specifically, the survey asked participants whether they have had a conversation about a specific topic (e.g., business/economy/inflation) in the past week, whether they wanted to have the conversation or

not. If the participant's answer was yes, they have had a conversation about topic X (regardless of whether they wanted to have it or not), they were then directed to topic-specific questions.

For each topic, participants were asked to indicate with whom they were talking during the conversation, choosing from options such as romantic partner, family, friends, coworkers, acquaintances, strangers, or others. Next, participants were asked to rate whether they were concerned about their own privacy, concerned about creating conflict, and willing to talk when the topic came up in the conversation. These ratings were measured using a seven-point Likert scale, with options ranging from "Not at all concerned/willing" to "Very concerned/willing." Participants were also asked to rate the depth of the conversation using a similar seven-point Likert scale, with options ranging from "Very shallow" to "Very deep."

Results

Multilevel linear regression was used to analyze the current study, with the conversation topic, the participant, and the relationship with conversation partner as random intercepts. The first step of the analysis aims to replicate the previous study. In the previous Study, the results showed that for a conversation that people didn't want to have, the ability to choose one's social relationship alleviates people's concerns for privacy and conflict. The conversation topics in the current study has been expanded to a larger set of daily conversations. And the results replicated previous findings such that when participants reported higher ratings in the ability to choose who they want to associate with, they reported lower concerns for privacy and conflicts (privacy: $b = -0.42$, 95% CI = [-0.59, -0.26], SE = 0.08, $t(469.15) = -5.04$, $p < .001$; conflict: $b = -0.46$, 95% CI = [-0.61, -0.30], SE = 0.08, $t(470.79) = -5.65$, $p < .001$).

Besides the associations with choosing who to associate with, the concept of relational mobility also includes a dimension of meeting new people. The goal of the current study was to

understand if the meeting dimension is also associated with some aspects of conversation. The item chosen to be tested in the study is “the depth of conversation”. A multilevel linear regression with the depth of conversation as the dependent variable and the meeting and choosing dimensions as independent variables showed that the ability to meet with other people was positively associated with the depth of the conversation ($b = 0.19$, 95% CI = [0.07, 0.32], SE = 0.06, $t(467.14) = 3.10$, $p = .002$). The empirical evidence contradicts Hypothesis 2. At the same time, the ability to choose who to stay connected with is negatively associated with the depth of conversation ($b = -0.14$, 95% CI = [-0.28, -0.003], SE = 0.07, $t(465.63) = -2.01$, $p = .05$).

Being concerned about one’s privacy, being concerned about creating a conflict with others, and having more shallow than deep conversations all suggest a tendency to not having engaging conversations. This tendency is associated with the relational mobility dimension of choosing who to be friends with. On the other hands, when someone’s social environment allows them to meet many new people, they are more likely to engage in deep conversations.

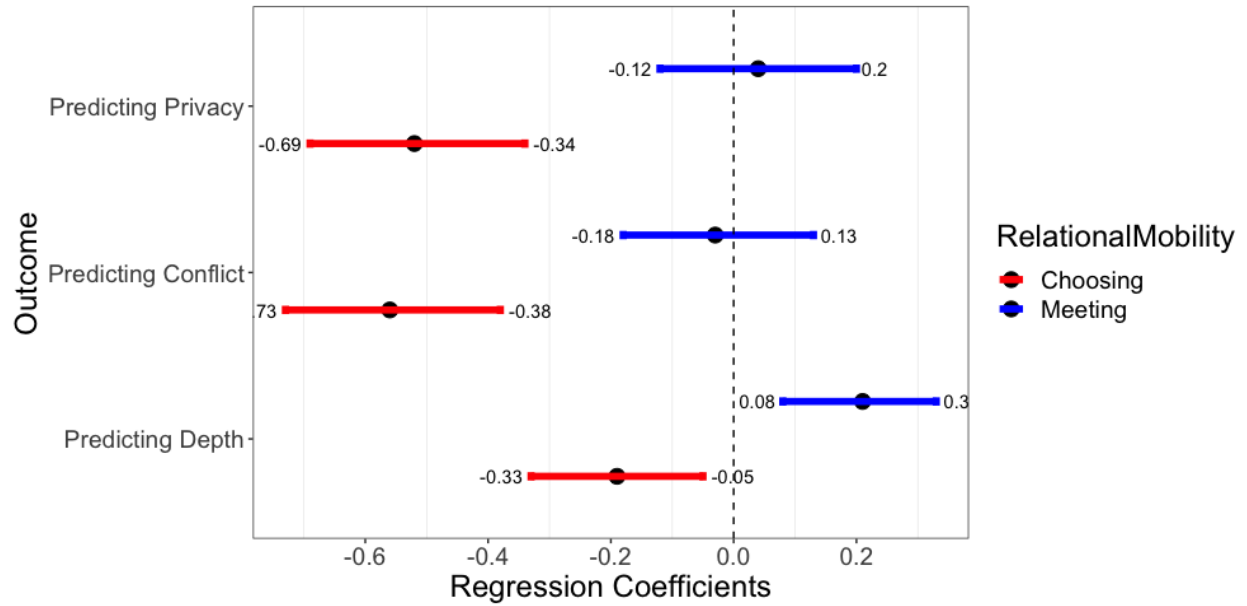


Figure 18: Regression Coefficients of Relational Mobility Predicting Concerns for One's Privacy and Creating a Conflict and Conversation Depth. (Study 2, Chapter 3)

General Discussion

The three studies aimed at understanding how one's social environment impact people's conversation avoiding and seeking behaviors. Starting with unwanted conversation topics and continuing with all daily conversation topics, I found that the ability to choose who to be friends with is negatively associated with concerns for one's privacy and creating a conflict. In addition, the ability to choose who to be friends with is also negatively associated with the average depth of conversations. On the other hand, the ability to meet new people, is positively associated with the average depth of conversations.

The concern for one's privacy and the concern for creating a conflict are the two broad motivations for people to avoid certain conversation topics. The relationship between one's ability to choose who to be friends with, measured by items such as people are able to choose whom they interact with in their daily life; they are able to choose the groups and organizations they belong to; and, if they did not like their current groups, they could leave for better ones. Therefore, when they have the freedom to leave such social affiliations if a conversation went badly, they would have much less concerns for having a risky conversation. This logic could explain the link between ability to choose (dimension of relational mobility) and concerns for one's privacy and creating a conflict.

However, the same logic couldn't apply to the relationship between the ability to choose dimension and conversation depth. Previous research suggests that there are uncertainties associated with deep conversations such that people are hesitant to ask sensitive questions and having deep conversations (Hart et al., 2020; Kardas et al., 2021). Following earlier logic, people would have lowered concerned for having deep conversations if they are high on the choosing

dimensions of relational mobility. However, it was the other dimension of relational mobility—the ability to meet new people, that had a positive associated with having deeper conversations.

One possible explanation is that in a social environment where people have many chances to know other people, depth of conversation becomes a useful tool to establish social connections. At the same time, because people often have the opportunity to meet new people, the skill of having deep conversations are constantly practiced. Another possible explanation for the results on conversation depth could be that individuals in high vs. low relational mobile environment have different understandings of “in-depth conversations” and their actual “depth” of conversation is the same. For individuals who are in a high mobile society, their experiences of the deepest conversation might never reach to the same level of depth as individuals who are in a low mobile society, assuming that in low mobile society, individuals have lifelong social relationships where the depth of conversation can reach to the deepest level. Then, when asked to rate the same conversation, individuals from high relational mobile societies might rate it as more in-depth than individuals from low relational mobile societies.

Future research could explore the meaning of “deep” conversations and whether people from different social environment have similar perceptions of “deep” conversations. In addition, the functions of deep conversations in high vs. low relational mobile societies might be worth investigating in order to understand how social closeness is established through conversations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this dissertation investigated how people manage difficult conversations. When people are concerned for their privacy in an unwanted conversation, they are more likely to feel anxious and stay quiet in the conversation. When people are concerned for creating a conflict, they are more likely to feel angry and leave the conversation. In addition, people use delaying as a strategy to avoid initiating an unwanted conversation, though this strategy does not lead to positive outcomes. Lastly, the social environment one is in also dictates people's concerns and motives for having a conversation. Individuals in a society where social relationships are more mobile are less concerned about their privacy or creating a conflict and more likely to have in-depth conversations with others.

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Appendix A

Unwanted Conversations Questionnaire

We are interested in the psychology of conversations. Sometimes, certain topics come up during conversations and people want to avoid talking about them.

We would like to know whether IN THE PAST WEEK if YOU have been involved in a conversation with one or more people, and a topic came up that you wanted to avoid talking about.

For each conversation topic, select the option that best fits.

- *Yes, this recently came up in a conversation I was in, and I did not want to talk about it.*
 - *Yes, this recently came up in a conversation I was in, and I did not mind talking about it.*
 - *No, this did not recently come up in a conversation I was in.*
-

Family

Friends

Work

Relationships

Money

Sex

Politics

Religion

The Past

Personal Issues/ Problems

Appendix B

Motivations to Delay Confession Conversations

Study 1: Identifying Reasons to Delay Confessions.

Participants and Methods

Two hundred participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk were recruited and after excluding participants based on an honesty check (whether they answered all questions honestly and their responses should be kept), there were 196 complete responses (112 Females, 83 Males, and 1 person identified as non-binary, $M_{age} = 39.58$, $SD = 11.33$, 95% CI = [37.99, 41.18]).

Participants answered two sets of questions: the confessions they intended to make and the confessions they recently made, and they could report up to 6 conversation instances in each set. Per each confession conversation, participants were asked about conversation related questions that were similar to other studies in the main text. More importantly, they were asked “In 2-3 sentences, briefly describe what made you decide to delay confessing” when answering questions about waiting to confess and “In 2-3 sentences, briefly describe what made you decide to confess” when answering questions about a recent confession.

Results and Discussion

Bags of words methods were initially used for single words and bigrams on the reported reasons to be delaying confession conversations, but the results were not very meaningful as people’s responses were longer than reported topics. Therefore, I hand-coded the reported reasonings. There were 10 different reasons reported by participants: I was trying to figure it out first; I was trying to work on it; I was hoping that time would reduce how strongly they react; I needed to work up the courage; I was trying to find the right time; I felt embarrassed to confess this; I didn’t want to put the burden on them; I was just being selfish; I was just being lazy; I was hoping that time would make the information easier to digest.

Because these responses were hand-coded, further testing of these reasonings were conducted on separate group of participants.

Study 2: Validating the Reasons to Delay Confessions.

Participants and Methods

Three waves of participants were recruited, with each wave targeting at 200 participants. After the honesty check questions, there were a total of 584 participants (309 males, 271 females, and 4 non-binary, $M_{age} = 39.47$, $SD = 11.81$, 95% CI = [38.52, 40.41]).

The general structure of these studies was very similar to previous confession conversation studies, that participants first wrote down up to six recent confession conversation instances and then report on conversation specific questions. These confession conversations were asked in different ways, such as being asked to report confessions they’ve made themselves, to report confessions that went positively or negatively, and to report confessions they recently received from others. Regardless of how the question was asked about their recent conversation experiences, participants answered the 10 reasons to delay a confession conversation identified in the earlier study.

Results and Discussion

Because the reasoning items were hand-coded from Study S1, the first goal of identifying what might be the reasonings was to calculate the averages across these items and identifying the items that participants highly identified with. Table 14 shows the averages of all 10 different

reasons across the studies, in a descending order. The top four items were kept in the main study, in addition to the 6th item.

Table 14: Mean and Standard Deviations for the Delay Motivations Reported by the Participants.

	Mean	SD
I was trying to work on it.	4.69	2.16
I was trying to figure it out first.	4.62	2.15
I was trying to find the right time.	4.60	2.09
I needed to work up the courage.	4.30	2.23
I felt embarrassed to confess this.	4.20	2.33
I didn't want to put the burden on them.	3.81	2.29
I was hoping that time would reduce how strongly they react.	3.71	2.25
I was hoping that time would make the information easier to digest.	3.70	2.23
I was just being selfish.	2.72	2.08
I was just being lazy.	2.60	2.05

Appendix C

Relational Mobility Scale

rmob1 | They (the people around you) have many chances to get to know other people.

rmob2 | It is common for these people to have a conversation with someone they have never met before.

rmob3 | They are able to choose, according to their own preferences, the people whom they interact with in their daily life.

rmob4 | There are few opportunities for these people to form new friendships. (reverse)

rmob5 | It is uncommon for these people to have a conversation with people they have never met before. (reverse)

rmob6 | If they did not like their current groups, they could leave for better ones.

rmob7 | It is often the case that they cannot freely choose who they associate with. (reverse)

rmob8 | It is easy for them to meet new people.

rmob9 | Even if these people were not completely satisfied with the group they belonged to, they would usually stay with it anyway. (reverse)

rmob10 | They are able to choose the groups and organizations they belong to.

rmob11 | Even if these people were not satisfied with their current relationships, they would often have no choice but to stay with them. (reverse)

rmob12 | Even though they might rather leave, these people often have no choice but to stay in groups they don't like. (reverse)

1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Slightly disagree, 4 = Slightly agree, 5 = Agree, 6 = Strongly agree