Human Communication. A Publication of the Pacific and Asian Communication Association. Vol. 12, No. 2, pp.119 - 135.

Topic avoidance in close relationships: Applying the Theory of Planned Behavior

Su Ahn Jang

Jina H. Yoo

University of Missouri – St. Louis

Authors Note:

Su Ahn Jang (Ph.D., University of Texas at Austin) and Jina H. Yoo (Ph.D., Michigan State University) are assistant professors at the University of Missouri - St. Louis. A version of this paper was accepted for presentation to the Interpersonal Communication Division of the National Communication Association, Chicago, 2007. Correspondence to: Su Ahn Jang, Department of Communication, 591 Lucas Hall, One University Boulevard, St. Louis, MO 63121. Phone: 314-516-5498, E-mail: jangs@umsl.edu.

Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to demonstrate if the theory of planned behavior can expand our understanding of the factors that determine people's avoidance in close relationships. This study examined whether or not people's expected outcomes associated with communication (i.e., attitudes toward behavior), perceived partner's communication desire (i.e., subjective norms), and communication efficacy (i.e., perceived behavior control) contribute to the prediction of people's desire to talk about an issue (i.e., intention). The data revealed that partner's communication desire and outcome expectation predicted people's communication desire. In addition, the combination of communication desire and communication efficacy predicted people's avoidance behavior. The findings of the present study suggest that the theory of planned behavior could explain individuals' topic avoidance behavior within close relationships.

Keywords: The theory of planned behavior, communication efficacy, topic avoidance, close relationships

The quality of peoples' lives and their social worlds is associated with the quality of communication in which they engage. Communication is especially important in close relationships because it allows people to develop and maintain the relationship, which often provides pleasure in daily life (Knapp, Daly, Albada, & Miller, 2002). Despite the truth that communication is a key component in close relationships, people sometimes do not feel comfortable talking about some topics with their partner (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004) and resort to topic avoidance (Dailey & Palomares, 2004). Dailey and Palomares suggest that topic avoidance is "a goal-oriented communicative behavior whereby individuals [can] strategically try to keep a conversation away from certain foci" (p. 472). Given the idea that people may intentionally try to stay away from discussing some issues in close relationships, literature suggests that there are several motivations for topic avoidance. People may use avoidance to stay away from criticism and/or vulnerability that come with open communication (e.g., self protection), to keep away from conflicts or partner anger (e.g., relationship protection), and/or to deal with a partner who is unwilling or unable to provide support (e.g., partner unresponsiveness) (Guerrero & Afifi, 1995). People may also choose to avoid discussing a topic when the nature of the topic is unimportant, uninteresting, or socially inappropriate.

Although previous research has revealed several motivations for topic avoidance, we still know little about the cognitive process of individuals' topic avoidance behavior. The purpose of the current study was to understand how people come to make decisions to use avoidance using the theory of planned behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991). Accordingly, we began by looking at the TPB and examined if the TPB can be functional for topic avoidance behavior in close relationships.

The Theory of Planned Behavior

The TPB (Ajzen, 1991, 2002) suggests that individuals' behavioral beliefs, normative beliefs, and control beliefs influence behavioral intention, which ultimately predicts behavior. Of the three beliefs, behavioral beliefs (i.e., attitude toward behavior) and normative beliefs (i.e., subjective norms) originated from the earlier version of this theory, the theory of reasoned action (TRA) (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Attitude toward behavior reflects individuals' positive or negative evaluation of performing the behavior and subjective norms reflect individuals' perceptions of perceived social pressure to do or not to do the behavior. The TRA suggests that, if people perceive positive attitudes toward a behavior and perceive significant others support the behavior, their intention to perform the behavior should be strong (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

The focus of the TPB, however, is in the inclusion of control beliefs (i.e., perceived behavioral control) and its association with intention. The perceived behavioral control is referred to "the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior and it is assumed to reflect past experience as well as anticipated impediments and obstacles" (Ajzen & Driver, 1992, p. 208). These scholars suggest that normative beliefs and behavioral beliefs could adequately predict behaviors that are relatively easy, where an intention could sufficiently predict behavior. They argue, however, that attitudes toward behavior and subjective norms may not sufficiently predict behavior when people believe that there are constraints on intended action. By means of control beliefs, the TPB explains why intentions may not predict behaviors.

According to Ajzen (1985; 1991), while attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control influence individuals' behavioral intention, the relative importance of each in the prediction of intention may vary across the types of behaviors and situations. Armitage and Conner (2001), explain that "in situations where attitudes are strong, or where normative influences are powerful, perceived behavioral control may be less predictive of intentions" (p.

472). In other words, in conditions where the association between attitudes and/or subjective norms and intentions are unsurpassed, perceived behavioral control should have little to no influence on intentions (Ajzen, 2002). In such cases, attitudes toward the behavior and/or subjective norms should have sufficient influence on intentions, which guide behavior. In short, perceived behavioral control has little to no affect on intentions in situations where there is minimum conflict between attitudes and/or subjective norms and behavior.

In contrast, in situations where behavior is not under complete volitional control, perceived behavioral control becomes an important factor that influences behavioral intentions (Ajzen, 1985; Terry & O'Leary, 1995). When the link between attitudes and/or subjective norms and intention is weak, perceived behavior control should surface as the main belief that influences behavioral intentions. Although Ajzen (1991) put forward the claim that perceived behavioral control should moderate the link between intentions and behavior, due to the little evidence for the moderating effect, he later argued the direct association between perceived behavioral control and behavior. This alternative argument suggests that perceived behavioral control not only influences intention but also directly influences behavior (Ajzen & Driver, 1992). In any case, perceived behavioral control may be the key belief that affects intention as well as behavior when a target behavior is seen as difficult to complete.

Topic Avoidance and the Theory of Planned Behavior

Infante (1980), suggests that human communication behavior is volitional; people generally speak about what they intend to say. However, intimate partners admit that some issues or topics are not easy to discuss with their partner, and, as a consequence, they resort to topic avoidance (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000). Individuals do not always talk about what they wish to say with their partner. If they did, people would talk about things that they wish to say. Nevertheless, research suggests that people prefer to avoid discussing some topics despite their desire for communication of them, because of, for instance, potentially negative relational consequences. That is to say, some communication topics may not be under total volitional control. Given this, Ajzen (1991) would argue that the TPB could be applicable to explain individuals' topic avoidance behavior in close relationships.

Since the current investigation is the first one, to our knowledge, to apply the TPB on topic avoidance behavior, we were guided by the literature when choosing appropriate measures. Consequently, communication efficacy was used to measure perceived behavioral control, outcome assessment and communication emotion assessed attitudes toward behavior, perceived partner's communication desire was used for subjective norms, and finally, communication desires was utilized to assess behavioral intention. In the following section, we discuss each with regard to topic avoidance in close relationships.

Perceived Behavioral Control

Although Ajzen (1991) argued that the perceived behavioral control and self-efficacy perception are interchangeable in the TPB, several scholars advocate the use of self-efficacy perception measure in place of perceived behavioral control (de Vries, Dijkstra, & Kuhlman, 2003; Dzewaltowski, Noble, & Shaw, 1990). For instance, White, Terry, and Hogg (1994), found that self-efficacy, when compared with perceived behavioral control, had a stronger effect on intentions to talk about condom use as well as intentions to use condoms. Similarly, a meta-analysis by Armitage and Conner (2001) suggested that while both perceived behavioral control and self-efficacy are useful, "efficacy should be the preferred measure of perceived control within the theory of planned behavior" (p. 488). For that reason, the current investigation uses communication efficacy for perceptions of behavioral control. Communication efficacy referred

to an "individuals' perception that they possess the skills to complete successfully the communication tasks involved in the information management process" (Afifi & Weiner, 2004, p. 178). In other words, when people believe that they lack the ability to successfully carry on a conversation about a particular topic, they are more likely to avoid discussing the topic with their partner.

Attitude Toward Behavior

Attitude toward behavior reflects individuals' perceived positive or negative evaluation of performing the behavior (Ajzen, 1991). When people consider whether or not they should talk about a difficult topic with their partner, they consider if talking about the topic would produce more positive or negative outcomes (Baxter & Simon, 1993). Individuals may communicate about a topic if they perceive that the benefits of discussing the topic outweigh the costs. People would choose topic avoidance if talking would produce more negative personal or relational consequences. Bandura (1986) states that "In any given instance behavior would be best predicted by considering both self-efficacy and outcome beliefs" (p. 140). In other words, attitude toward behavior is an important factor when predicting behavior.

Given the idea that attitudes toward behavior may be associated with intentions to complete the behavior, we used an instrumental measure (i.e., outcome assessment) and an affect measure (i.e., communication emotion) to assess individuals' attitude toward behavior. The use of both instrumental and affect measures were noted in the previous research (Ajzen & Driver, 1992). Outcome assessment (2004) is defined as individuals' attitudes about the possible outcomes of talking about a topic with their partner (Afifi & Weiner, 2004). People may perceive more positive outcomes, more negative outcomes, or about the equal amount of positive and negative outcomes by discussing a topic with the partner. Because this measure is often used in research involving information seeking or avoidance decision making in uncertainty in close relationships, it could be an appropriate instrumental measure that taps into individuals' attitudes toward communication/avoidance. It should be noted that we assessed outcome assessment of communication rather than that of avoidance. The decision was based on the idea that people may initially consider communicating a topic, and as they believe communication would not be an optimal choice, they would turn to avoidance. In addition to outcome assessment, communication emotion measure was added as an affect measure. Literature shows that people are more likely to avoid discussing some issues when they experience intense negative emotion as they think about discussing the issues (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002). Thus, the affective component may be closely linked to attitude toward communication.

Subjective Norms

Previous research suggests that the subjective norms component may be an inadequate and useless construct, because it is weakly associated with intention (Sparks, Shepherd, Wieringa, & Zimmermanns, 1995). A number of scholars have argued that the way subjective norms are conceptualized in the TPB fails to tap important aspects of social influence (Conner & Armitage, 1998; Terry, Hogg, & White, 1999), and such may be the very reason for the weak association with intentions. An alternative explanation is due to the use of poor measurements of subjective norms (Armitage & Conner, 2001): the subjective norms were measured often using a single item. Although a few scholars have found that some actions were driven primarily by normative beliefs and not by attitudes toward behavior (Trafimow & Finlay, 1996), the majority of research on the TPB reported that the subjective norms construct needs more consideration. Given this, we used individuals' perception about their partner's desires about communication as a subjective norms measure. A relational partner is one of the significant others who could

potentially influence people. Moreover, when considering topic communication/avoidance, the partner is the very person with whom people are about to discuss/avoid the topic. Therefore, perceived partner's desire for communication may be the most important and relevant normative beliefs in the context of topic avoidance.

Intention

Although the intention construct is central in the TPB, many researchers have failed to accurately measure intention (Armitage & Conner, 2001). Hitherto, there are three prominent ways to measure the intention constructs. Warshaw and Davis (1985) suggest that behavioral intentions (e.g., I intend to perform the behavior) and self-predictions (e.g., I am likely to perform the behavior) are different methods to measure intentions to behavior. Alternatively, based on the idea that attitudes influence desires, which later develop into intentions to behave, Bagozzi (1992) suggests that perceived behavioral control should contribute more variance to the prediction of behavior when desires (e.g., I want to perform the behavior) is used. He adds that desires should take no account for facilitating/inhibiting factors unlike behavioral intention and self-predictions do. Aarmitage and Conner's (2001) meta-analysis has revealed that, of the three measures mentioned above, desires was most closely associated with the TPB variables: they reported that desires was the weakest predictor of behavior. Therefore, conservatively, the current investigation adopted desires to assess the intention construct.

Behavior

According to the avoidance literature, topic avoidance is a strategic behavior to circumvent discussing certain issues when people do not wish to talk about those issues (Dailey & Palomares, 2004). It is plausible that people might initially consider communication concerning a particular issue, and when they believe that discussing the issue is not optimal, they then choose the avoidance option. Alternatively, when people believe that discussing the issue/topic is advantageous, they would talk about the issue. That is, the cognitive process concerning communication about a topic may result in either topic avoidance or communication. Because the focus of the current investigation is topic avoidance, we believe that topic avoidance behavior would be an appropriate behavior indicator in the current study. Individuals who did not use avoidance, naturally, communicated the topic with their partner.

Pre-Test

Method

Prior to conducting the main study, pre-test data were collected to find frequently avoided topics between intimate partners. Bandura (1986) suggests that, to obtain a valid assessment of efficacy, researchers need to focus on the target behavior in a specific context. Because communication efficacy was used in the current study as a perceived behavioral control measure, we took the recommendation of Bandura. Accordingly, we planned to provide a specific topic to the respondents rather than asking them to think about a random topic. Based on the results of pre-test data, we chose two relatively frequently avoided topics in close relationships.

Participants and Procedures

Two hundred nineteen undergraduate students in a midwestern university have participated in the pretest. Ninety-two (42.1%) were men and 127 (57.9%) were women. Their ages ranged from 18 to 56, and their mean age was 29.4 (SD = 12.53). Respondents were instructed to list five topics that they try to avoid discussing with their relational partner. All respondents received extra course credits by participating in this survey.

Results and Discussion

Two independent coders coded the topics. All the responses were read and categorized in a list of types of topics respondents avoided discussing with their partner. Then, similar types of topics were combined and infrequent types of topics were put together. Dailey and Palomares's (2004) operationalizations of topics were used to sort the topics by type. According to Dailey and Palomares, for individuals in close relationships, their frequently avoided topics generally fit within seven categories or fourteen topics. The seven categories include the concerns of the current relationship, life experiences, social relations, past relationship experiences, lifestyle, money, and politics/religion (Dailey & Palomares's, 2004).

While the current data showed the similar types of topics as taboo in close relationships, five new topics emerged. Thus, we made some modifications of the seven categories or fourteen topics of Dailey and Palomares's (2004) findings. We maintained all seven categories, but renamed 'social relations' category to 'social/family relations' category. Due to the frequency or the lack of, we dropped 'relationship problems' and 'failures' topics and added five topics, including 'children', 'extended family', 'hobbies', 'school/work', and 'health/weight/foods.' Finally, we renamed two topics due to the nature of the avoided topics: 'dating experiences' to 'past relationships' and 'state of the relationship' to 'future of the relationship'. As a result, we attained seventeen different types of topics. The dissimilar topics between Dailey and Palomares and the current study may be due to the age difference of the respondents. While the mean age for this study was 29.4 (SD = 12.53), the mean age for Dailey and Palomares's study was 19.21 (SD = 1.35). Because many of the respondents in the present study were married and/or have children, topics of avoidance might be somewhat different from those of traditional college students.

As revealed in Table 1, the most frequently avoided topic was money/financial concerns. Participants also reported that the topic of the future of their relationship was the next most frequently avoided topic. Then, in the order of more to less frequently avoided topics were the following: conflict inducing topics, hobbies, past relationships, sexual experience, school/work, family/extended family, children, health/weight, negative relational behaviors, friendships, politics, religion, rules about the relationship, drinking/smoking, and past negative life experience. Based on the findings of the pre-test survey, we selected two frequently avoided topics: a topic that is relatively more frequently avoided (i.e., the future of relationship or future topic hereafter) and a topic that is relatively less frequently avoided (i.e., the rules about the relationship or rules topic hereafter). We chose two topics in a same topic category with different frequency of avoidance: the future topic was the most avoided and the rules topic was the least avoided topic in the current relationship's concerns category.

In the last two decades, communication scholars have identified a number of topics that individuals consider taboo in close relationships. Avoided topics that Baxter and Wilmot (1985) found include the relationship's current/future status, extra-relationship activities, relationship norms, prior relationships, conflict-inducing topics, and negative information. A decade later, Guerrero and Afifi (1995) added five more topics including relationship issues, negative life experiences, dating experiences, friendships, and sexual experiences topics. Based on the aforementioned research, Daily and Palomares (2004) incorporated four additional topics, such as money/financial, politics, religion, and drinking/drugs/smoking, as avoided topics in close relationships. The current study adds to the literature by suggesting that topics such as extended family, children, weight/health/foods, work/school, and hobbies are issues that people avoid when communicating with their intimate partner.

Table 1
Frequency of the Types of Topics that Respondents Avoid Discussing with their Partner

Types of Topics		Frequency
(1) Current relationship's concerns		
	Future of the relationship	89
	Conflicts inducing topics	87
	Negative relational behavior	37
	Rules about the relationship	18
(2) Life experiences		
	Past negative life experiences	12
(3) Social/family relations		
	Family/extended family	52
	Children	44
	Friendships	22
(4) Past relationship experiences		
	Past relationships	59
(5) Lifestyle		
	Hobbies	63
	Sexual experiences	57
	School/work	54
	Health/weight/foods	37
	Drinking/smoking	15
(6) Money		
	Money/financial	110
(7) Politics/religion		
	Politics	20
	Religion	16

Main Study

Method

Participants

One hundred ninety-six undergraduate students in a midwestern university participated in the current study. Eighty-three (42.3%) were men and 113 (57.7%) were women. Their ages ranged from 18 to 44, and their mean age was 24.4 (SD = 9.53). Of the total sample, 70.4% were Caucasian, 12.8% were Asian-American, 11.7% were African-American, 4.1% were Hispanic,

and 1% were of other ethnicities. The duration of the relationships that participants described in the study ranged from 1 month to 291 months, with a mean of 37 months (*SD* = 42.97).

Procedures

An on-line survey study opportunity was announced during undergraduate communication classes. The web address of the survey site was given to potential research participants. Once participants had gone to the site of the study, they read a brief introduction to the study, explaining and ensuring confidentiality, and a consent procedure. We explained to the participants that proceeding to subsequent pages indicated their agreement to partake in the study. After the consent page, the participants completed a questionnaire that consisted of numerous scales. Based on the findings of the pre-test, the future and rules topics were used in the main study. The definition of the future of the relationship topic was a discussion about marriage, engagement, separation, or the state of their relational future. The definition of the rules of the relationship was "time spent with one another, expectations, relationship roles, and acceptable behavior" (Dailey & Palomeres, 2004, p. 478).

Respondents were randomly put in one of the two topic conditions. Of the total sample, 83 participants responded to a questionnaire concerning the rules topic, and the remaining responded to that of the future topic. Respondents were given the definition of the topics and asked to think about the given topic when completing the questionnaire. Next, the respondents completed a series of measures, including communication desire, communication emotion, outcome assessment, perceived partner communication desire, communication efficacy, and topic avoidance behavior. Finally, demographics including age, sex, and ethnicity were assessed. After respondents had completed the questionnaire, they were thanked for their participation.

Measurements

Communication efficacy. Participants were asked to consider their *communication efficacy* concerning the topic. Afifi and Weiner's (2004) communication efficacy scale was employed. An item from the scale includes, "I feel I could approach this person to ask about the topic." Each item was followed by a 7-point Likert-type scale, with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 7 representing "strongly agree." The alpha reliability for the communication efficacy scale was .79.

Attitude toward the behaviors. Two measures were used to assess attitude toward communication in the current study. First, respondents were asked to assess the outcomes of communication about the topic with their partner. *Outcome assessment* measure asked respondents' expectations about the possible outcomes associated with talking about the given topic with their partner. This measure was comprised of three items (Afifi, Dillow, & Morse, 2004). Each item was followed by a Likert-type scale with -3 indicating "a lot more negatives than positives," 0 indicating "about as many negatives as positives," and 3 indicating "a lot more positives than negatives." Outcome assessment scores were recoded to eliminate negative scores. Thus, higher scores denote positive attitude toward communication about the given topic. This measure had an alpha reliability of .89.

Since previous research has not separated the affective dimension of attitude toward a behavior from the instrumental dimension (Ajzen & Driver, 1992), we added *communication emotion* measure, which can capture affective responses to communication concerning the given topic. Knobloch and Solomon's (2002) communication emotion scale was utilized. The scale included nine negative emotions such as mad, angry, irritated, sad, depressed, gloomy, scared, afraid, and frightened. Respondents were asked about the presence of nine negative emotions when thinking about having a conversation about the given topic with their partner. Each

emotion was followed by a 6-point Likert type scale with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 6 representing "strongly agree." This measure had an alpha reliability of .94.

Subjective norms. As discussed earlier in the paper, we focused on respondents' perception about their significant other's (i.e., the partner) endorsement of communication behavior. Accordingly, two perceived partner communication desire items were developed to assess respondents' perception of whether or not their partner wishes to talk about the given topic. An example item read, "Did you think your partner desired to talk about the topic with you?" Respondents answered in a Likert-type scale with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 7 representing "strongly agree." This measure had an alpha reliability of .92.

Communication desire. To assess respondents' communication desire, two items asked whether or not respondents desired to discuss the given topic with their partner. These items were developed for the current study. An example item read, "Did you wish to talk about the topic with your partner?" Respondents answered in a Likert-type scale with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 7 representing "strongly agree." This measure had an alpha reliability of .95.

Behavior. Two questions asked whether or not respondents used avoidance or communication with their partner. The first item asked if they talked or avoided discussing the topic with their partner. A dichotomous "yes/no" measure was used for the first question. Another question asked how often they talked about the topic with their partner. This item was followed by a Likert-type scale with 0 representing "never" and 1 representing "once" to 5 representing "very frequently." To score these items, the respondents who reported "no" in the first question and 0 in the second question were considered to have used avoidance with their partner. The respondents that indicated "yes" in the first item and 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 in the second item were considered to have communicated the topic at least once with their partner. Respondents that answered in any other combination of the two questions were excluded in the analyses because their answers were inconsistent. This procedure resulted in the exclusion of three respondents from the main analyses.

Results

In this section, we report the findings on the TPB to the prediction of desire to talk about the avoided topic and to avoidance behavior. The data of the current study were examined using Ajzen and Driver's (1991) analyses procedures. Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables are attainable in Table 2.

Table 2
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations among Independent and Dependent Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	*M*	*SD*
1. Avoidance	--							
2. Communication efficacy	-.24**	--					4.89	1.16
3. Communication desire	-.43**	.11	--				4.25	2.19

4. Communication emotion	.17*	-.48**	-.05	--			1.84	1.06
5. Perceived partner communication desire	-.35**	.23**	.66**	-.10	--		4.30	2.02
6. Outcome assessment	.14	.32**	.25**	-.22**	.26**	--	5.82	.98

* Correlation is significant at .05 level.
** Correlation is significant at .01 level.

Table 3 shows the results of the logistic regression analysis for topic avoidance behavior. In the analysis, communication desire and communication efficacy were regressed on avoidance behavior. Accordingly, communication desire was entered on the first step followed by communication efficacy on the second step. Topic avoidance was the dependent variable. Inspection of the regression coefficients revealed that communication desire made a significant contribution to the prediction of behavior, $\chi^2 = 40.15$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$, -2 Log Likelihood = 146.80. In addition to communication desire, communication efficacy made a significant contributor to behavior $\chi^2 = 11.10$, $df = 1$, $p < .01$, -2 Log Likelihood = 135.72. The findings such as these support the idea that the TPB may be an appropriate model for topic avoidance behavior in close relationships.

Table 3
Summary of Logistic Regressions Predicting Avoidance (N = 196)

Predictors	B	SE	□xp (B)
Step 1			
Communication desire	.64	.12	1.90***
Step 2			
Communication desire	.71	.14	2.03***
Communication efficacy	.59	.18	1.81***
Step 3			
Communication desire	.68	.16	1.97***
Communication efficacy	.49	.21	1.64**
Outcome assessment	-.07	.24	.93

Communication emotion	-.28	.22	.76
Partner communication desire	.09	.13	1.10

Note. Step 1: χ^2 (1, 195) = 40.15, $p < .001$, -2 Log Likelihood = 146.80, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .30$; Step 2: χ^2 (2, 194) = 51.24, $p < .001$, -2 Log Likelihood = 135.72, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .37$; Step 3: □ (5, 191) = 53.28, $p < .001$, -2 Log Likelihood = 133.67, Nagelkerke $R^2 = .39$.
$p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Moreover, the TPB suggests that attitudes to behavior and subjective norms would have no direct effect on behavior. Instead, attitudes to behavior and subjective norms are presumed to influence behavior indirectly through intentions and perceived behavioral control. To test this claim, the two attitudes to behavior measures and the measure of subjective norm were added to the prediction equation on the third step. As revealed in Table 3, attitude toward behavior (i.e., communication emotion and outcome assessment) and subjective norms (i.e., perceived partner communication desire) were not significant contributors to behavior, $\chi^2 = 2.04$, $df = 3$, $p = .56$. This result supports the claim of the TPB that attitudes to behavior and subjective norms have no direct effect on behavior.

Table 4 deals with the prediction of communication desire. A multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the model. The analysis included communication emotion, outcome assessment, and perceived partner communication desire on the first step, and communication efficacy was entered on the second step. Communication desire was the dependent variable. The data revealed that outcome assessment, β= .26, $p < .05$, and perceived partner communication desire, β = .64, $p = .01$, made significant contributions to the prediction of respondents' communication desire about the avoided topic, F (3, 192) = 52.6, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .45$. Communication emotion, however, was not a significant contributor to respondents' communication desire, β = .02, *ns*. Additionally, the analysis showed that communication efficacy did not improve the prediction of communication desire, F (1, 191) = 1.38, $\Delta R^2 = .004$, *ns*.

Table 4

Summary of Hierarchical Regressions Predicting Communication Desire (N = 196)

Predictors	B	SE	□
Step 1			
Outcome assessment	.22	.12	.10
Communication emotion	.08	.11	.04
Partner communication desire	.62	.05	.64***

Step 2			
Outcome assessment	.26	.13	-.12*
Communication emotion	.02	.12	.01
Partner communication desire	.64	.06	.65***
Communication efficacy	-.14	.12	-.08

Note. Step 1: R^2= .45, adjusted R^2 = .443; Step 2: ΔR^2= .004, adjusted R^2 = .444.
$p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Discussion

Given the idea that people can purposefully avoid discussing particular topics in close relationships, the main goal of the current study was to demonstrate if the TPB can expand our understanding of the factors that determine topic avoidance in close relationships. This study looked at the four predictor variables (i.e., outcome assessment and communication emotion, partner communication desire, and communication efficacy) that contribute to the prediction of desire to communicate about a topic. The data revealed that perceived partner communication desire (subjective norms) and outcome assessment (attitudes to behavior) contributed to the prediction of communication desire (intention). Moreover, the combination of communication desire (intention) and communication efficacy (perceived behavior control) predicted topic avoidance behavior. The findings of the present study suggest that the TPB could explain individuals' topic avoidance behavior in close relationships.

The current investigation, however, raises an important question that needs to be addressed. We found that communication efficacy (i.e., the perceived behavioral control measure) was not a factor that predicted communication desire. According to the TPB, communication efficacy should predict behavioral intention. Instead, the current study found that the outcome assessment (i.e., attitudes to behavior) and partner communication desire (i.e., subjective norms) predicted individuals' communication desire (i.e., intention). Nevertheless, in support of the TPB, we found that both communication efficacy and communication desire predicted topic avoidance behavior. On the surface, it may seem that the TRA may be more appropriate to explain topic avoidance, because the theory suggests that attitudes to behavior and subjective norms are sufficient to predict behavioral intention. However, although communication efficacy failed to predict communication desire, it directly influenced individuals' topic avoidance behavior. That is to say, communication efficacy may not affect communication desire, but influence topic avoidance behavior. The TPB suggests that intentions/desires do not always predict behavior and that perceived behavioral control provides the potential constraints on behavior. This investigation revealed that communication desire, together with communication efficacy, predicted topic avoidance behavior. Accordingly, the TPB is a fitting theory that expands our understanding of the factors that influence topic avoidance in close relationships.

With that said, we have some ideas of why the current data did not show communication efficacy as a predictor of communication desire. We believe that the issue may be mainly due to measurements used to capture the variables in the theory. To begin with, this study employed desire to assess behavioral intention instead of using other methods such as intention or self-prediction. The results of Armitage and Conner's (2001) meta-analysis suggest that "formation

of intentions and self-predictions are relatively more contingent on an assessment of perceived behavioral control than are desires" (p. 483). That is, perhaps communication efficacy may be the foundation of intentions and self-predictions. Consistent with this position, Armitage and Conner add that, when communication efficacy is included as a predictor, desire is a weaker predictor of behavior than intention or self-prediction. In other words, communication efficacy is a stronger predictor of behavior when desire is used. The effect of communication efficacy is largely directed to behavior, but not to desire. In contrast, when intention or self-prediction is used, communication efficacy not only affects intention or self-prediction, but also influences behavior. Thus, had we used intentions or self-predictions instead of desire, communication efficacy may have predicted behavioral intention.

An alternative explanation is that perhaps our attitudes to behavior and subjective norms measures sufficiently captured respondents' behavioral and normative beliefs. Previous literature indicates the problem with the use of inadequate measures to capture normative beliefs, and as a consequence, some scholars have excluded normative belief in their study (Armitage & Conner, 2001). The current study used a perceived partner communication desire measure to assess individuals' normative beliefs. We believe that people are more likely to value their partner's perception about communication on the topic than other significant persons in their life (e.g., best friend or parents). Afifi and Weiner (2004) suggest that perceptions about the partner's efficacy or honesty is one of the important attributes that people consider before seeking information about an issue in close relationships. Thus, the partner's desire to talk about an issue may affect individuals' communication desire.

Another possibility is that communication efficacy and perceived behavioral control are not entirely synonymous (Terry, 1993). Some studies found that efficacy perceptions and perceived control over behavior are distinct (Armitage & Conner, 1999); however, a meta-analysis revealed that the two have a comparable level of correlation with both intention and behavior (Armitage & Conner, 2001). We used communication efficacy based on the previous research advocating the use of efficacy measures in the TPB. However, additional research is essential to investigate the claims of this research and its implications.

Although Infante (1980) puts forward that communication behavior is volitional and that people generally speak about what they wish to say, the findings of this research suggest an alternative idea. Perhaps communication behavior is volitional for most conversational topics, but not for some taboo topics in close relationships. Communication behavior of such topics may not be volitional. Ajzen (1991) suggests that when a behavior is under conditions of high volitional control, attitudes toward behavior and subjective norms should fully explain behavioral intention. While the current data showed that attitudes to behavior and subjective norms predicted communication desire, communication efficacy was a strong predictor for behavior. In other words, communication efficacy was an important component of understanding avoidance of the topics. Therefore, communication about frequently avoided topics in close relationships may not be under conditions of high volitional control.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are several limitations to the current investigation. To begin with, research based on retrospective self-report is potentially problematic. The participants in the present study may not have accurately recalled, for instance, their desire for communication or avoidance behavior. Although some scholars suggest that self-report data are relatively unreliable compared with more objective behavioral measures (Armitage & Conner, 1999), previous researches on the TPB and TRA heavily relied on self-report measures. In relation to the first limitation, the second

limitation concerns common method variance. According to Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff, (2003), method biases are problematic because they are a source of measurement error which threatens the validity of the results. In the present study, each respondent was instructed to report on several constructs, and several analyses were conducted by examining the associations between these self-reported measures. Although self-report is a common way to gather data in social science research, previous research has indicated that "self-report data are less valid as a result of common method variance than are other indicators such as physiological measures" (Kline, Sulsky, & Rever-Moriyama, 2000, p. 402). For example, correlations between variables measured with the same method as self-reported surveys are inflated due to common method variance. However, Armitage and Conner's (2001) meta-analysis data revealed that the TPB accounts for both self-reported and observed behavior measures.

As mentioned earlier, another limitation may be concerning measurements. Previous research has revealed the problem in accurately measuring the TPB variables (Armitage & Conner, 2001). For instance, this research assessed desire instead of other methods to measure intention, such as behavioral intention and self-predictions. We chose desire because previous literature suggests that desire is closely associated with the TPB and is the weakest predictor of behavior. The current study found that both communication desire and communication efficacy were significant contributors to communication behavior, suggesting that desire may be an appropriate measure to assess intention. However, it would have been wise to add communication intention measure and to examine the differences, if any, between the desire and intention measures. When researching using the TPB, scholars need to be mindful of choosing the study measures.

This study raises many questions that may be elaborated and pursued in the future. The current research only examined two of the eighteen topics that people reported as taboo topics in close relationships. It would also be useful to look at other topics such as financial, health/weight/foods, or extended families. It also would be interesting to examine other groups of people. A type of relationship that might be interesting to study is friendship. Avoided topics in friendships are usually seen as more acceptable than they are in romantic relationships; individuals who are friends generally do not seek to understand as much as they would with a romantic partner. Afifi and Burgoon (1998) found that cross-sex friends are less likely to communicate about taboo topics than dating partners. It would be useful to understand how the TPB can explain topic avoidance behavior between same- and cross-sex friends.

References

Afifi, W., Dillow, M., & Morse, C. (2004). Examining predictors and consequences of information seeking in close relationships. *Personal Relationships, 11*, 429-449.

Afifi, W., & Guerrero, L. (2000). Motivations underlying topic avoidance in close relationships. In S. Petronio (Ed.), *Balancing the secrets of private disclosures* (pp. 165-180). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Afifi, W., & Weiner, J. (2004). Toward a theory of motivated information management. *Communication Theory, 14*, 167-190.

Ajzen, I. (1985). From intentions to actions: A theory of planned behavior. *Action control: From cognition to behavior, 2*, 11-39.

Ajzen, I. (1991). The theory of planned behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 50*, 179-211.

Ajzen, I. (2002). Perceived behavioral control, self-efficacy, locus of control, and the theory of planned behavior. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 32*, 665-683.

Ajzen, I., & Driver, B. (1992). Application of the Theory of Planned Behavior to leisure choice. *Journal of Leisure Research, 24*, 207-224.

Ajzen, I., & Fishbein, M. (1980). *Understanding attitudes and predicting social behavior*: Prentice-Hall Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

Armitage, C., & Conner, M. (1999). The theory of planned behaviour: assessment of predictive validity andperceived control. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 38*, 35-54.

Armitage, C., & Conner, M. (2001). Efficacy of the theory of planned behaviour: A meta-analytic review. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 40*, 471-499.

Bagozzi, R. (1992). The self-regulation of attitudes, intentions, and behavior. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 55*, 178-204.

Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thoughts and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Baxter, L., & Simon, E. (1993). Relationship maintenance strategies and dialectical contradictions in personal relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 10*, 225-242.

Baxter, L., & Wilmot, W. (1985). Taboo topics in close relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 2*, 253-269.

Conner, M., & Armitage, C. (1998). Extending the theory of planned behavior: A review and avenues for further research. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 28*, 1429-1464.

Dailey, R., & Palomares, N. (2004). Strategic topic avoidance: An investigation of topic avoidance frequency, strategies used, and relational correlates. *Communication Monographs, 71*, 471-496.

de Vries, H., Dijkstra, M., & Kuhlman, P. (2003). Self-efficacy: the third factor besides attitude and subjective norm as a predictor of behavioural intentions. *Health Education Research, 3*, 273-282.

Dzewaltowski, D., Noble, J., & Shaw, J. (1990). Physical activity participation: Social Cognitive Theory versus the Theories of Reasoned Action Plan and Planned Behavior. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 12*, 388-405.

Guerrero, L., & Afifi, W. (1995). Some things are better left unsaid: Topic avoidance in family relationships. *Communication Quarterly, 43*, 276-296.

Infante, D. (1980). Verbal plans: A conceptualization and investigation. *Communication Quarterly, 28*, 3-10.

Knapp, M., Daly, J., Albada, K., & Miller, G. (2002). Backgrounds and current trends in the study of interpersonal communication. In M. Knapp & J. Daly (Eds.), *Handbook of interpersonal communication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Knobloch, L., & Carpenter-Theune, K. (2004). Topic avoidance in developing romantic relationships. *Communication Research, 31*, 173-205.

Knobloch, L., & Solomon, D. (2002). Intimacy and the magnitude and experience of episodic relational uncertainty within romantic relationships. *Personal Relationships, 9*, 457-478.

Sparks, P., Shepherd, R., Wieringa, N., & Zimmermanns, N. (1995). Perceived behavioural control, unrealistic optimism and dietary change: An exploratory study. *Appetite, 24*, 245-255.

Terry, D. (1993). Self-efficacy expectancies and the Theory of Reasoned Action. In D. Terry, C. Gallois & M. McCamish (Eds.), *The Theory of Reasoned Action: Its application to AIDS-preventive behavior* (pp. 135-151). Oxford: Pergamon.

Terry, D., Hogg, M., & White, K. (1999). The theory of planned behaviour: Self-identity, social identity and group norms. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 38*, 225-244.

Terry, D., & O'Leary, J. (1995). The theory of planned behaviour: the effects of perceived behavioural control and self-efficacy. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 34*, 199-220.

Trafimow, D., & Finlay, K. (1996). The importance of subjective norms for a minority of people: Between subjects and within-subjects analyses. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 22*, 820.

Warshaw, P., & Davis, F. (1985). Disentangling behavioral intention and behavioral expectation. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 21*, 213-228.