

Varying Definitions of Online Communication and Their Effects on Relationship Research

Source: Purdue Owl, https://owl.english.purdue.edu/media/pdf/20090212013008_560.pdf

Introduction

Numerous studies have been conducted on various facets of Internet relationships, focusing on the levels of intimacy, closeness, different communication modalities, and the frequency of use of computer-mediated communication (CMC). However, contradictory results are suggested within this research because only certain aspects of CMC are investigated, for example, email only. Cummings, Butler, and Kraut (2002) suggest that face-to-face (FtF) interactions are more effective than CMC (read: email) in creating feelings of closeness or intimacy, while other studies suggest the opposite. To understand how both online (Internet) and offline (non-Internet) relationships are affected by CMC, all forms of CMC should be studied. This paper examines Cummings et al.'s research against other CMC research to propose that additional research be conducted to better understand how online communication affects relationships.

Literature Review

In Cummings et al.'s (2002) summary article reviewing three empirical studies on online social relationships, it was found that CMC, especially email, was less effective than FtF contact in creating and maintaining close social relationships. Two of the three reviewed studies focusing on communication in non-Internet and Internet relationships mediated by FtF, phone, or email modalities found that the frequency of each modality's use was significantly linked to the strength of the particular relationship (Cummings et al., 2002). The strength of the relationship was predicted best by FtF and phone communication, as participants rated email as an inferior means of maintaining personal relationships as compared to FtF and phone contacts (Cummings et al., 2002).

Cummings et al. (2002) reviewed an additional study conducted in 1999 by the HomeNet project (see Appendix A for more information on the HomeNet project). In this project, Kraut, Mukhopadhyay, Szczypula, Kiesler, and Scherlis (1999) compared the value of using CMC and non-CMC to maintain relationships with partners. They found that participants corresponded less frequently with their Internet partner (5.2 times per month) than with their non-Internet partner (7.2 times per month) (as cited in Cummings et al., 2002). This difference does not seem significant, as it is only two times less per month. However, in additional self-report surveys, participants responded feeling more distant, or less intimate, towards their Internet partner than their non-Internet partner. This finding may be attributed to participants' beliefs that email is an inferior mode of personal relationship communication.

Intimacy is necessary in the creation and maintenance of relationships, as it is defined as the sharing of a person's innermost being with another person, i.e., self disclosure (Hu, Wood, Smith, & Westbrook, 2004). Relationships are facilitated by the reciprocal self-disclosing between partners, regardless of non-CMC or CMC. Cummings et al.'s (2002) reviewed results contradict other studies that research the connection between intimacy and relationships through CMC.

Hu et al. (2004) studied the relationship between the frequency of Instant Messenger (IM) use and the degree of perceived intimacy among friends. The use of IM instead of email as a CMC modality was studied because IM supports a non-professional environment favoring intimate exchanges (Hu et al., 2004). Their results suggest that a positive relationship exists between the frequency of IM use and intimacy, demonstrating that participants feel closer to their Internet partner as time progresses through this CMC modality.

Similarly, Underwood and Findlay (2004) studied the effect of Internet relationships on primary, specifically non-Internet relationships and the perceived intimacy of both. In this study, self-disclosure, or intimacy, was measured in terms of shared secrets through the discussion of personal problems. Participants reported a significantly higher level of self-disclosure in their Internet relationship as compared to their primary relationship. In contrast, the participants' primary relationships were reported as highly self-disclosed in the past, but the current level of disclosure was perceived to be lower (Underwood & Findlay, 2004). This result suggests participants turned to the Internet in order to fulfill the need for intimacy in their lives.

In further support of this finding, Tidwell and Walther (2002) hypothesized CMC participants employ deeper self-disclosures than FtF participants in order to overcome the limitations of CMC, e.g., the reliance on nonverbal cues. It was found that CMC partners engaged in more frequent intimate questions and disclosures than FtF partners in order to overcome the barriers of CMC. In their 2002 study, Tidwell and Walther measured the perception of a relationship's intimacy by the partner of each participant in both the CMC and FtF conditions. The researchers found that the participants' partners stated their CMC partner was more effective in employing more intimate exchanges than their FtF partner, and both participants and their partners rated their CMC relationship as more intimate than their FtF relationship.