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Varying Definitions of Online Communication and

Their Effects on Relationship Research

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Abstract

This paper explores four published articles that report on results from research conducted on online (Internet) and offline (non-Internet) relationships and their relationship to computer-mediated communication (CMC). The articles, however, vary in their definitions and uses of CMC. Butler and Kraut (2002) suggest that face-to-face (FtF) interactions are more effective than CMC, defined and used as "email," in creating feelings of closeness or intimacy. Other articles define CMC differently and, therefore, offer different results. This paper examines Cummings, Butler, and Kraut's (2002) research in relation to three other research articles to suggest that all forms of CMC should be studied in order to fully understand how CMC influences online and offline relationships.

Keywords: computer-mediated communication, face-to-face communication

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Varying Definitions of Online Communication and

Their Effects on Relationship Research

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 mostly because only certain aspects of CMC are investigated, for example, email only. Cummings, Butler, and Kraut (2002) suggest that FtF interactions are more effective than CMC (read: email) in creating feelings of closeness or intimacy, while other studies suggest the opposite. In order 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 effects relationships.

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).

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Cummings et al. (2002) reviewed an additional study conducted in 1999 by 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.

Use two spaces after a period throughout your paper.

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.

Discussion

In 2002, Cummings et al. stated that the evidence from their research conflicted with other data examining the effectiveness of online social relationships. This statement is supported by the aforementioned discussion of other research. There may be a few possible theoretical explanations for these discrepancies. First, one reviewed study by Cummings et al. (2002) examined only email correspondence for their CMC modality. Therefore, the study is limited to only one mode of communication among other alternatives, e.g., IM as studied by Hu et al. (2004). Because of its many personalized features, IM provides more personal CMC. For example, it is in real time without delay, voice-chat and video features are available for many IM programs, and text boxes can be personalized with the user's picture, favorite colors and text, and a wide variety of emoticons, e.g., :). These options allow for both an increase in self-expression and the ability to overcompensate for the barriers of CMC through customizable features, as stated in Tidwell and Walther (2002). Self-disclosure and intimacy may result from IM's individualized features, which are not as personalized in email correspondence.

In addition to the limitations of email, Cummings et al. (2002) reviewed studies that focused on international bank employees and college students. It is possible the participants' CMC through email was used primarily for business, professional, and school matters and not for relationship creation or maintenance. In this case, personal self-disclosure and intimacy levels are expected to be lower for non-relationship interactions, as this communication is primarily between boss and employee or student

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Because all research has its limitations, it is important to discuss the limitations of articles under examina-tion.

and professor. Intimacy is not required, or even desired, for these professional

relationships.

Instead of professional correspondence, however, Cummings et al.'s (2002)

review of the HomeNet project focused on already established relationships and CMC's

effect on relationship maintenance. The HomeNet researchers' sole dependence on email

communication as CMC may have contributed to the lower levels of intimacy and

closeness among Internet relationships as compared to non-Internet relationships (as cited

in Cummings et al., 2002). The barriers of non-personal communication in email could be

a factor in this project, and this could lead to less intimacy among these Internet partners.

If alternate modalities of CMC were studied in both already established and professional

relationships, perhaps these results would have resembled those of the previously

mentioned research.

In order to gain a complete understanding of CMC's true effect on both online

and offline relationships, it is necessary to conduct a study that examines all aspects of

CMC. This includes, but is not limited to, email, IM, voice-chat, video-chat, online

journals and diaries, online social groups with message boards, and chat rooms. The

effects on relationships of each modality may be different, and this is demonstrated by

the discrepancies in intimacy between email and IM correspondence. As each mode of

communication becomes more prevalent in individual's lives, it is important to examine

the impact of all modes of CMC on online and offline relationship formation,

maintenance, and even termination.

The conclusion restates the problem the paper addresses and can offer areas for further research. See the OWL resource on conclusions: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/724/04/

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