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“Hello? Are You Still There?” The Impact of Social Media on Self-Disclosure and Reciprocity in Interpersonal Relationships: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Social Media sites have become increasingly popular platforms for developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Although the usage of computer-mediated communication is normal in day-to-day life, the understanding behind how and why these relationships grow is scarce. This literature review considers relational elements such as self-disclosure and reciprocity, and how they are impacted by online elements such as an asynchronous context, controllability, and the disinhibition effect. Contrary to interpersonal relationships that develop in a physical context, the law of reciprocity is fulfilled and replaced by affirmation and recognition from relational partners, while self-disclosure continues to be a vital element within relationships. Developing an online relationship isn't difficult, but the factors involved are varied and worth exploring in further study.

Keywords

Social media, self-disclosure, reciprocity, interpersonal relationships

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Introduction

Technological advances have rocked the 21st century world, but no improvement is as revolutionary as improvements within communication methods. The scope in which individuals are able to communicate with people around them is “virtually” limitless. The virtual arena of computer-mediated communication and, more recently, social media has shook the communication sphere to its core. The rise of the smartphone, internet messaging, and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have permanently launched conversation methods into the digital age.

The minds behind communication theories have studied the way relationships are developed, but the majority of them consider relationship development within the combination of interpersonal context and physical proximity. The goal of this literature review will be to study how social media changes the way relationships are developed, primarily through the lens of reciprocity and self-disclosure between interpersonal partners.

Table I: Definitions

Variable	Definition
Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)	Synchronous or asynchronous communication that primarily takes place from behind a computer, smartphone, or virtual platform.
Human-to-Human Communication	The reciprocal communication from senders to receivers and vice versa via social media. (Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005)
Human-to-Message Communication	Participants' interactions with messages (browsing and sharing messages) through the functions of social media instead of with other participants directly. (Lu, Lin, Hsiao & Cheng, 2010)
Reciprocity	The mutual exchange of personal disclosure from one interpersonal partner to another.
Self-Disclosure	The voluntary sharing of personal history, preferences, attitudes, feelings, values, and secrets; or, transparency. (Griffin, Ledbetter & Sparks, 2015)
Social Media	A platform such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, used for the primary purpose of developing and maintaining relational connections.

Part One: A Theoretical Basis for Relationship Development

To begin a discussion about relational effectiveness within a social media sphere, the theories behind relational development must be considered. Charles Berger's Uncertainty Reduction Theory predicts three reasons for developing a relationship: the expectation of interaction, the gratification of a need, or satisfaction of curiosity (Griffin et al., 2015). Although there is a multitude of reasons to begin and maintain an interpersonal relationship, and this is not an exhaustive list, Berger provides a simple starting point for the initiation and continuation of any relationship.

Elements of a Relationship: Self-Disclosure and Reciprocity

While there are many theories on the initiation and development of relationships, there have been even more studies conducted considering ways to maintain them. Altman and Taylor's Social Penetration Theory suggests that a thriving, intimate relationship requires two elements, self-disclosure and reciprocity.

The element of self-disclosure and other forms of vulnerability requires that relational partners must be willing to share with each other, specifically intimate and/or private details about their life.

Secondly, Altman and Taylor consider the law of reciprocity, which predicts that one person's openness leads to openness in another (Griffin et al., 2015). Therefore, for the purposes of this literature review, people can develop relationships for a variety of reasons but they must have mutual self-disclosure and reciprocity to grow and solidify the relationship.

Part Two: Why Do Individuals Use Social Media?

How then are these elements affected by social media? Computer-mediated communication can be used for marketing, professional networking, business or academia, but the specific platforms of social media are primarily developed and utilized for the purpose of fostering relationships. How reliable are these methods in light of what is known from Berger, Altman, and Taylor's relational theories?

How Does Social Media Impact Relationships?

Several theories have been developed highlighting key doubts and warning signs involved with maintaining effective relationships within the realm of social media. For the purpose of this literature review, the terms "social media" and "computer-mediated communication" (from here referred to as CMC) will be used interchangeably. For example, CMC deprives users of the sense that an actual person is involved in their interaction. This has huge implications on how interpersonal partners relate to each other. Dealing with human-to-human interaction is significantly different than human-to-message interaction, and yet, they are treated similarly (Walters, 1992). Furthermore, other research implies that CMC bandwidth is too narrow to convey rich relational messages (Griffin et al., 2015). The narrow bandwidth is attributed to the lack of nonverbal cues and, according to this theory, is the fatal flaw for relational development. If relational partners can only see written cues, not hear verbal cues or see nonverbal cues, will the relationship survive? In the case of face-to-face interaction, it cannot. However, the necessity of these cues may change when it comes to social media.

What Elements Change in Social Media Relationships?

On the cusp of the virtual age, Joseph Walther developed a series of research studies in 1992 that resulted in his Social Information Processing theory. The data postulates that relationships grow only to the extent that the parties first gain information about each other and use that information to form interpersonal impressions (Walther, 1992). This leads to two observations. First, any message spoken in person will take four times longer to say than it would through CMC. This is a significant length of time, and should not be underestimated. Not only does it take more time to say the same message, the chances of miscommunicating within that time are astronomical. However, perhaps to offset this factor, CMC offers a hyper-personal perspective. That means that online relationships are often more intimate than those with partners who are physically together.

One of the biggest dangers noted by this theory is over attribution of similarity. Walthers says that "In asynchronous interaction, one may plan, contemplate, and edit one's comments mindfully and deliberately than one can in more spontaneous, simultaneous talk" (Griffin et al., 2015). This ability to plan one's speech or interaction is known as controllability. With this element, people can edit, refine, and rehearse what they want to say, stripping the user of any constraint they would normally face in a physical, face-to-face relationship (Joinson, 1998).

Part Three: What Does a Social Media Relationship Look Like?

Although CMC relationships might become more intimate, they can lack accuracy and truth within the communicated messages. Are these relationships even worth pursuing? There are some differences in these relationships that must be considered. The first to note is the foundation of motivations. People will use relationships on social media to gratify desires and satisfy needs. If interaction with others on the web helps satisfy a social need, this will impact why and how a user depends on social media. (Hsu, Chang, Lin, & Lin, 2015). Several studies show that the relational quality of offline relationships is higher than online and, yet, the reverse is true for the intimacy level between interpersonal communicators (Hong-Yee CHAN & Lo, 2014). This may be because partners can self-disclose without risk of rejection or need to respond. What this does clearly show is that an anonymous context can increase both disclosure and the level of commitment within the relationship (Hong-Yee CHAN & Lo, 2014).

Ultimately, social media relationships succeed when interpersonal partners are equipped to connect with others and share their feelings without the pressure of spontaneous responses or social ostracizing (Yang & Bradford Brown, 2016). Notice that while reciprocity and self-disclosure are included in this definition, they play different roles than in a face-to-face relationship. How do these variables change?

Self-Disclosure and Social Media

Self-disclosure can be affected by several factors. When considering an online forum, self-disclosures are necessary for the growth of relationships due to the lack of physical context and nonverbal cues (Yu, Hu & Cheng, 2015). This can be both a blessing and a curse. Anonymity increases disclosure, as noted, but the lack of cues can lead to inappropriate or untimely disclosure. A face-to-face human interaction with self-disclosure usually depends on physical cues in order to determine whether to proceed with the sharing. Generally, the degree of sharing is determined by preexisting breadth and depth of the relationship (Nguyen, Bin & Campbell, 2012).

On a social media platform, however, a very personal message might be the first post or disclosure an online figure sees. So, the argument can be made that self-disclosure on social media may not be for the sole purpose of connecting with another interpersonal partner but for communicating with a varied audience of strangers. A study of self-disclosure on Twitter said that Twitter users who share more intimate information receive more attention from viewers (Baruh & Cemalcilar 2015). However, the catch of self-disclosure on the internet lies in the fact that the viewer, or, interpersonal partner, is no longer required to return with equally deep information. There is no expectation of similar sharing, only of recognition and perhaps approval of the sharing partner.

Self-disclosure is one of the central purposes of using social media sites to share about one's life, but there is no guarantee that readers or viewers will return the favor. Instead, disclosure on the internet is more strongly predicted by question prompts than prior disclosure. As a result, intimacy in a social media relationship doesn't necessarily depend on mutual self-disclosure, but whether the discloser feels validated through provided feedback (Dai, Shin, Kashian, Jang & Walther, 2016). The greatest benefit of self-disclosure on social media is the illusion that there is a supportive community ready to accept and affirm anything an individual has to say, regardless of the accuracy of that perception. People want to be heard and affirmed and social media is an easy way to express feelings and experiences to anyone who is willing to listen (Green, Wilhelmsen, Wilmots, Dodd & Quinn, 2015).

Reciprocity and Social Media

According to Altman and Taylor's Social Penetration Theory, reciprocity is necessary for the success of face-to-face relationships. But, is the same true for social media relationships? Is reciprocity even necessary for an online relationship? A response, an acknowledgment, or even a compliment of one's disclosure seems to be more than enough to replace reciprocity in online relationships. However, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Research has shown that although the frequency of disclosure and, therefore, reciprocity, is higher in anonymous contexts, the level of intimacy does not change (Hong-Yee CHAN & LO, 2014).

To examine this idea further, many studies have shown that audiences use social media relationships to gather situational context, gain social activity, or process gratifications. Clearly, reciprocity is not involved in any of those goals (Quinn, 2016, Rubin, 2009). So, while reciprocity may suffer in an online context, it is certainly not as necessary as originally thought for the success of interpersonal relationships.

Part Four: How Does This Impact Developing Relationships?

Limitations

There are several limitations to consider within the study of interpersonal relationships that are developed and maintained through the use of social media platforms. The first is a phenomenon called the disinhibition effect. This refers to the combination of anonymity, invisibility, and controllability of an online environment (Green et al., 2015). These elements create an illusion of safety within the asynchronous nature of online communication, allowing the user to benefit from the free self-disclosure environment (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2015). Although this disinhibition is 'benign' and positive in this arena, participants of social media platforms must be wary of toxic disinhibition, where these elements have the opposite effect. They enable users to take advantage of the lack of cues and responsibility to explore negative behaviors like bullying (Green et al., 2015, Suler, 2005). The difficult aspect of the disinhibition effect lies in the intent of the user. The only variable that changes between benign and toxic disinhibition is the human participants themselves. So, while the online forum may influence the messages that are sent, they still originate from human interpersonal partners.

Similarly, participants in social media relationships must constantly remember that they cannot always know the other person's intention for developing a relationship on social media. While this is true in face-to-face settings as well, it is incredibly more dangerous in the sphere of internet communication as the truth is easier to veil and the user is easier to deceive. Furthermore, prolonged use of social media can increase feelings of loneliness and cause the user to lose touch with the reality of their situation (Matook & Bala, 2015). These aspects limit the study and true understanding of the success of relationships within an online sphere.

Implications

What does this mean? What does this mean for the future of social media relationships and interpersonal interactions? This study brings to light several implications worth studying. First and foremost, studies show that individuals pursue relationships for all sorts of reasons, whether or not they take place on a social media platform. Considering social media specifically, interactions over an asynchronous and potentially anonymous context can create different relational outcomes. However, the outcome still depends on disclosures of some sort from at least one party. These disclosures do not have to be

personal, but they can be informational, financial, professional or academic. The specific type of disclosure and its varied impact is outside the confines of this review but would be interesting to consider for future study.

While disclosure is necessary for the continuing of relationships, however they may manifest, reciprocity is not crucial for the general maintenance of social media relationships. Instead, recognition and response seem to do the trick, satisfying one partner's need for affirmation online that reciprocity would fill in person. Out of these pieces of literature and consideration of the original research question, two hypotheses arise for further research:

H1: Self-disclosure will increase within computer-mediated communication.

H2: Reciprocity is less influential within human-message interaction than in human-human interaction.

Future Study

In addition to the study of the two hypotheses listed above, there are several questions that spring from this literature review alone. The theoretical basis for this review depended on theories that dealt mainly with the development and maintenance of reciprocal, face-to-face, interpersonal relationships only. But, with the widespread use of social media, the success of relationships no longer depends on reciprocity. This review notes a key assumption that may not be entirely correct: do all relationships have to last in order to accomplish their purpose? Or, are some relationships successful even if their duration is only for a specific time or event?

Furthermore, there are several implications and questions uncovered in relation to the disinhibition effect. What are the implications of learning the private lives of others without being invested in their well-being (Kim & Song, 2016)? How does the appropriateness and effectiveness of self-disclosure change when the audience is not accountable to respond to the information? Is self-disclosure affirming when there is no receipt or recognition of response? These questions are worth considering for the future study of interpersonal relationships in the social media sphere.

Conclusion

The effects of social media on reciprocity and self-disclosure in interpersonal relationships are a worthy but difficult phenomena to study. Perhaps the only thing more unpredictable than an internet platform is the human participants themselves and, yet, studying communication phenomena and their effects is not only necessary, but crucial to advancement in an increasingly digital world. Although the importance of self-disclosure and reciprocity may fluctuate from one relationship to another, the parties that participate

and communicate will always be of the utmost importance to the study of relational development within any sphere, digital or otherwise.

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