Chapter 5

Relationship Development and Maintenance in a Mediated World

Jessica L. Moore
North Carolina State University, USA

Elizabeth A. Craig
North Carolina State University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a review of contemporary scholarship on relational communication, particularly as it relates to interpersonal relationship development and maintenance. Throughout the chapter, special attention is given to the role new technologies play in the communication process. This chapter draws together a wide array of communication research findings ranging from attraction and initial interactions to relational routines and social support. Consideration is also given to some of the methodological and conceptual issues that face contemporary communication researchers. Fundamentally, the function of this multifaceted chapter is to provide an accessible and informed introduction to relational communication and computer-mediated scholarship for both an academic and general audience. A list of recommended readings on communication scholarship concludes this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

New technologies profoundly influence the conditions under which interpersonal relationships are constructed and sustained. In fact, computer-mediated interaction is becoming a way of life for many people. Wood notes, “The increasingly technological character of our society powerfully affects individuals and personal relationships” (2000, p. 110). This movement toward implementing new technologies into the communicative process suggests an ever-escalating need for researchers and practitioners to consider the patterns within, and implications of, mediated interactions. Hence, this chapter explores several areas of contemporary scholarship on interpersonal and relational communication, particularly as it relates to the processes of “relationship development” and “relationship maintenance.” It has been suggested that one of the more remarkable developments in modern society is the diffusion of new communication technologies from the organization into the sphere of social
and personal relationships (O’Sullivan, 2000). Accordingly, this chapter also confers special attention to the function new technologies play in the communication process. A wide array of research findings ranging from attraction and initial interactions to relational routines and social support are presented herein. Consideration is also given to some of the methodological and conceptual issues that face contemporary communication researchers. Ultimately, this chapter hopes to convey that establishing and preserving interpersonal relationships is central to the human experience and that new technologies are progressively mediating that practice.

BACKGROUND

Many scholars argue that the evolution of media has decreased the significance of physical presence in the process of human symbolic exchange (Lin & Atkin, 2007; Meyerowitz, 1985; Shneiderman, 2003). That is, an increase in the availability, variety, and sophistication of communication media has progressively provided the opportunity for people to mediate their day-to-day interactions. For many individuals, it may be daunting to imagine living in a world without the Internet because it is now the central mechanism through which they most often work, relate, and play. According to a 2004 study conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 85% of Internet users believe that online interaction is a good way to communicate and 64% claim that their daily routines would be significantly affected if they no longer had access to the Internet. As technology continues to evolve, however, so do the notions of what it means to communicate and engage in computer-mediated communication (CMC). Thus, we will first offer a definition of communication, then note the subtle distinctions between the terms interpersonal and relational communication, and finally provide a frame for the use of the dynamic term CMC.

Communication is often regarded as the primary influence on our experience of developing and maintaining relationships (Knapp & Daly, 2002; Wood, 2000). In fact, most of us spend our lives attempting to communicate in significant ways with others. From the primitive expressions we communicate as infants to the complex behaviors we use to communicate our innermost thoughts and feelings as adults, it is the process of communication that enables us to connect with other people and ultimately develop and maintain meaningful human relationships.

Similar to human relationships, the various definitions of communication share common features although it is rare to find any that are identical. A definition of communication offered by the National Communication Association (2002), a professional organization representing scholars and practitioners in the field, seems to include many of the commonly shared features by positing that “communication is the process through which people use messages to generate meanings within and across contexts, cultures, channels, and media.” This particular definition highlights several fundamental features of human communication upon which many communication scholars continue to focus their research efforts. First, framing communication as a process suggests that it is not a static event or notion, but instead something that involves a constantly changing set of cognitions and behaviors. Second, this definition infers that communication is fundamentally situated in interaction, or the notion that communication is rooted in the symbolic exchange of messages within a social system. Third, noting that communication is contextually situated leads one away from the notion that communication occurs in a vacuum and toward the view that it is encompassed by a broad set of idiosyncratic and socio-cultural circumstances. It is also clarified in this definition that communication takes place across a series of sensory dimensions (e.g., verbal and nonverbal cues), or channels. And lastly, this particular definition
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