Making “Real” Connections: The Perceived Reality of Online Interactions

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ABSTRACT

Examining the subjective aspects of online social interaction can help explain contradictory results about the consequences of such interaction. The authors posit a new theoretical construct, the perceived reality of online interactions, defined as the extent to which an individual believes online interactions are suitable for the maintenance and formation of close relationships. Higher perceived reality of online interactions is theorized to lead to more investment and effort in computer-mediated communication, thus increasing benefits such as perceived social support from online relationships. An experiment using an Amazon Mechanical Turk sample (n = 169) and undergraduate students (n = 88) found correlational evidence that perceived reality of online relationships predicted perceived social support from online sources. Additionally, patterns of correlations between perceived reality, personality traits, and general attitudes toward the Internet point at differential implications of this variable between samples.

Keywords: Connections, Online, Relationships, Social Interaction, Social Support

INTRODUCTION

Whenever a new communication technology makes its debut, arguments over its value and the consequences of its use invariably follow. Though many consider these debates a particular hallmark of new media, they have a long and storied history; first appearing with the invention of the telegraph, they have accompanied essentially every major innovation in communication technology since (Katz, Rice, & Aspden, 2001). These debates are also long-lasting. It has been the better part of a century since television first entered American homes, yet its effects on viewers are still hotly contested (Hearold, 1986). Perhaps, then, it is unsurprising that the impact of the Internet—a much newer technology—remains contentious. In the early history of scholarly study of online social interaction, two initial camps clashed: research that highlighted its benefits in connecting others, and research that emphasized its drawbacks in terms of loneliness, depression, and lack of genuine connection to others (see Katz, Rice, & Aspden, 2001 for an in-depth discussion of both perspectives).

Only recently have the two camps begun to reconcile through a growing body of literature that suggests that a more specific focus must be applied to study this question. The Internet
is not a single, monolithic entity that can be consumed in only one way; instead, individuals can use the Internet in a variety of ways to meet a variety of needs. The question of what happens if one uses the Internet for social interaction is less informative than the question of what happens depending on how one uses the Internet for social interaction.

Research on the "hows" of online social interaction can focus on the type of use (social networking vs. email vs. instant messaging, for example) or on cross-platform variables such as motivations for use, attitudes toward use, or specific behaviors. This paper will examine the latter question: what are the effects of one’s approach to Internet use on its outcomes? Specifically, we propose that one’s attitude toward online interactions can in part determine the outcomes of those interactions.

**ONLINE INTERACTION: CONNECTED OR DISCONNECTED?**

Online social interaction has the potential to increase our connectedness to others by allowing us to reach out to those whom we might otherwise be unable to reach (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). However, it is equally possible that, despite their appealing features, these online social interactions are lacking in many of the rewards and benefits of face-to-face social interactions – leaving us more disconnected from others. Indeed, much of the early research in the field of online social interaction detailed below painted a bleak picture of lonely, isolated individuals trading fulfilling face-to-face interactions for less meaningful computer-mediated communication.

The HomeNet study (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukhopadhyay, & Scherlis, 1998) was among the first of its kind, examining the first two years following the introduction of Internet access to a sample of homes. Greater use of the Internet was found to lead to decreases in family communication and size of the local social network and increases in loneliness and depression. Kraut et al. advanced the time displacement hypothesis to explain these findings – time spent online simply decreased the number of hours available to spend time with family and friends in a face-to-face context. Other research (Nie, 2001; Nie & Erbring, 2000) seemed to confirm that time spent online was indeed directly taking away from time spent with close others.

However, this perspective was soon challenged by further research. A replication of the HomeNet Study did not find the same negative effects (Wastlund, Norlander, & Archer, 2001). Looking at more specific uses of the Internet beyond general indicators, research indicated that social use of the Internet might in fact reduce depression and loneliness, leading to increases in well-being (Bessiere, Kiesler, Kraut, & Boneva, 2008; Morgan & Cotten, 2003; Shaw & Gant, 2002). The hyperpersonal perspective suggested that in some circumstances, computer-mediated communication could prove more suitable for relationship formation than face-to-face communication (Walther, 1996). Revisiting the HomeNet sample three years later, Kraut et al. (2002), found that the negative effects they had originally chronicled had dissipated. Yet the pattern of conflicting results only continued. A recent meta-analysis of 43 different studies (Huang, 2010) found a very small negative correlation ($r = -0.05$) between Internet use and well-being, while failing to identify any significant mediators.

Valkenburg and Peter (2009) suggested that the consequences of online social interaction might have actually altered over time via two different mechanisms. First, the increasing prevalence of the Internet may have increased the extent to which individuals were able to use online social interaction to maintain existing connections in their life. That is, individuals’ friends and family members were more likely to also be online. Second, Internet communication technologies shifted from platforms that encouraged interacting with strangers (such as chat rooms) to technologies that encouraged interacting with pre-existing connections (such
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