Rapid Communication

Does Virtual Intimacy Exist? A Brief Exploration into Reported Levels of Intimacy in Online Relationships

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the levels of intimacy reported by individuals in face-to-face and computer-mediated (or "virtual") romantic relationships. As suggested by the media and promised by online dating services, some degree of intimacy was reported in computer-mediated relationships, but stronger intimacy was reported in all participants' face-to-face relationships. Results also indicated that individuals who had online, virtual relationships reported less intimacy in their own face-to-face relationships compared to individuals who had engaged exclusively in face-to-face relationships, suggesting that people may turn to virtual relating after challenges in their face-to-face experiences.

INTRODUCTION

BOTH MAINSTREAM MEDIA and online dating companies have promoted the idea that people can find and establish romance over the Internet or other electronic means of communication.[1–3] The public certainly seems hopeful, with online dating accounting for more revenue than any other type of online sales.[4] But can true intimacy really develop online? How influential is the mode of communication on the establishment of closeness, warmth, self-disclosure, and the investment of emotion?[5]

On one hand, intimacy development may be most strongly influenced by a person's basic capacity to establish an emotional connection with others, rather than by what mode of communication is utilized. For example, classic psychological theories suggest that this basic ability to form intimate relationships in adulthood is related to the successful negotiation of early childhood and adolescent

developmental milestones[6]; to the availability of positive attachment with caregivers throughout infancy and childhood[7]; and/or to resolving problematic family of origin dynamics and patterns.[8,9] On the other hand, intimacy may well be more influenced by the mode of communication used in the relationship than by a person's relational capacity or skills. For instance, in pioneering the measurement of love, Rubin[10] found more intimacy between people who had close and confidential communications through both verbal and nonverbal channels. Some of these very elements are compromised in computer-mediated (or "virtual") relationships.

METHODS

In our study, we compared virtual relators, individuals who had pursued computer-mediated relationships, with traditional relators, who had only

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face-to-face relationships. The study involved 546 participants (159 males, 387 females), ranging in age from 18 to 59 years, with mean age of 23.19 years old (SD = 8.47). Of all these participants, 30 males and 53 females reported having experienced a computer-mediated, romantic relationship; the remaining participants had experienced only traditional face-to-face romantic relationships. All participants completed both Sternberg's Intimacy Subscale[11] and Rubin's Love Scale[12] for their relationships.

Statistical analysis

Intimacy scores were obtained on the Sternberg and Rubin Scales completed by the participants for their relationships. In order to examine the levels of intimacy in the *virtual* relators' face-to-face relationships compared to their computer-mediated relationships, dependent samples *t*-tests were used to analyze the intimacy scores. To compare levels of intimacy obtained in face-to-face relationships of *virtual* relators to the levels obtained in the face-to-face relationships of the exclusively *traditional* relators, a between subjects one-way ANOVA was used. For all statistical tests alpha was set at 0.05.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our virtual relators reported significantly lower intimacy on the Sternberg and Rubin Scales in their virtual relationships compared to their own face-to-face romantic relationships. For the Sternberg Subscale, the mean for the virtual relationships was 85.99 (SD = 32.15) compared to a face-to-face mean of 104.83 (SD = 25.62), $t(81) = 4.59$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.65$. For Rubin's Love Scale, participants had a mean of 82.99 (SD = 19.49) for their face-to-face relationships compared to a virtual relationship mean of 62.21 (SD = 27.21), $t(71) = 5.854$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.88$.

Moreover, our virtual relators reported less intimacy in their face-to-face relationships compared to the levels of intimacy established in the face-to-face relationships of the *traditional* relators. *Virtual* relators had significantly lower intimacy scores (M = 104.84, SD = 25.47) on their face-to-face relationships than our *traditional* relators (M = 114.41, SD = 20.41; $F(1,542) = 10.14$, $p = 0.002$, partial etasquared = 0.018).

The results of our study suggest that the potential theorized benefits of computer-mediated communication—including greater self-disclosure, increased access to each other, and the possibility of sexual attraction developing out of genuine emotional connectedness rather than from superficial, physical attraction[13]—did not translate into increased reported intimacy in the participants' online, virtual relationships. Moreover, our virtual relators reported significantly less intimacy in their own face-to-face relationships compared to the level of intimacy reported in the face-to-face relationships of our traditional relators. This finding suggests that individuals who struggle with intimacy in their face-to-face relationships may turn to online relating as an alternative. Yet in general, these online relationships do not produce higher levels of intimacy than the virtual relators have in their face-to-face relationships.

Perhaps to the potential disappointment of virtual relators, relationships that develop online are not likely to result in greater intimacy than the levels experienced by individuals in their face-to-face relationships. Yet, it is important to also note that the results of this study indicate that some intimacy is present in online relationships—just less than in face-to-face relationships. Online romantic relationships do produce some intimacy between the relators. While individuals who are discouraged with the levels of intimacy they have achieved in their face-to-face relationships may turn to online relating, they are, statistically speaking, not likely to obtain greater intimacy online than they did face to face. Certainly online communication as a means to try to connect romantically with another person is not likely to fade away in the near future. Thus, the nature and development of virtual intimacy, the longevity and satisfaction of online relationships, and the characteristics of virtual relators are topics worthy of further exploration.

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