



Liberating or debilitating? An examination of romantic relationships, sexual relationships and friendships on the Net

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Abstract

Ever since the beginnings of the internet researchers have questioned its utility in developing and maintaining psychological healthy romantic and sexual relations. Advocates of the social presence theory and media richness theory purport that in leaner media individuals can be quite aggressive towards one another (e.g., in the form of flaming). In contrast, others believe that the lack of traditional cues in CMC can in fact be overcome and instead lead to more personal, intimate relationships. As this paper will demonstrate, when we consider how beneficial it is to form relationships online we also need to consider individuals' characteristics (e.g., personality characteristics and physical attractiveness), the amount of time people spend online, the duration of online relationships, and how these relationships effect individuals' offline activities and relationships. Overall, the view here is that online relationships can be empowering for many people; that is, cyberspace provides a unique environment for people to experience and learn about relationships and sexuality.

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0. Introduction

Over the years there has been much debate as to whether online relating can be liberating or debilitating. Those on the negative side argue that online relationships or what are

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also often referred to as ‘weak’ ties are not psychologically beneficial, and take important time away from more psychologically healthy offline relationships. Those who take a more positive stance do so because they believe that the internet provides a space for people to feel freer to express themselves without the usual harsh judgement that can be experienced in face-to-face settings. Of course, both sides have their merit and the debate should not be bifurcated. This paper will highlight the pros and cons of online relating. The view taken here, however, is that in many ways cyberspace has created new opportunities for people to feel empowered and has opened up new and fulfilling opportunities to relate to others.

To begin with this paper outlines early theories (which are still embraced by some theorists today) that contend that online relating can be an impersonal and negative experience. These theories emphasise what is lacking online compared to face-to-face settings.

1. Online relating: theories that emphasize the negative aspects

1.1. Social presence theory and social context cues theory

‘Social Presence Theory’ and ‘Social Context Cues Theory’ although first devised to explain interactions via teleconferencing, were two of the first theories to be applied to computer mediated communication (CMC). These theories point out that online, due to fewer non-verbal and paralinguistic cues, there is an extremely low feeling of social presence; that is, an individual’s self-perception is reduced and deindividuation is encouraged. Those who have applied this theory have argued that as social presence declines communication becomes more impersonal (Hiltz, Johnson, & Turoff, 1986; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). In the absence of typical social context cues, it is said that communication can become increasingly uninhibited and aggressive (e.g., as evident in flaming). In contrast, these theorists argued that an increase in the amount of personal information available will lead to greater positive regard. According to this view, online relating is a more negative and impersonal experience compared to face-to-face. Cyberspace is a space which fosters deceit, abuse and sometimes even harassment. As will be highlighted in this paper, there is some empirical evidence to support these theorists’ claims.

1.2. Media richness theory

‘Media Richness Theory’ takes a similar stance to ‘Social Presence Theory’ and ‘Social Context Cues Theory’ in that it examines what CMC lacks compared to face-to-face. This theory contends that individuals are driven to overcome equivocality and uncertainty. Media richness theory was originally applied to communication within organisations but has since been applied to other types of relationships. Those who applied it to organisations have suggested that different types of media typically work better for certain tasks. As explained by Daft and Lengel (1986):

Information richness is defined as the ability of information to change understanding within a time interval. Communication transactions that can overcome different frames of reference or clarify ambiguous issues to change understanding in a timely manner are considered rich. Communications that require a long time to enable understanding or that cannot overcome different perspectives are lower in richness. (p. 560)

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