



# Online intimacy and well-being in the digital age

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## ABSTRACT

Engagement in intimate social interactions and relationships has an important influence on well-being. However, recent advances in Internet and mobile communication technologies have led to a major shift in the mode of human social interactions, raising the question of how these technologies are impacting the experience of interpersonal intimacy and its relationship with well-being. Although the study of intimacy in online social interactions is still in its early stages, there is general agreement that a form of online intimacy can be experienced in this context. However, research into the relationship between online intimacy and well-being is critically limited. Our aim is to begin to address this research void by providing an operative perspective on this emerging field. After considering the characteristics of online intimacy, its multimodal components and its caveats, we present an analysis of existing evidence for the potential impact of online intimacy on well-being. We suggest that studies thus far have focused on online social interactions in a general sense, shedding little light on how the level of intimacy in these interactions may affect well-being outcomes. We then consider findings from studies of different components of intimacy in online social interactions, specifically self-disclosure and social support, to indirectly explore the potential contribution of online intimacy to health and well-being. Based on this analysis, we propose future directions for fundamental and practical research in this important new area of investigation.

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## 1. Introduction

Engagement in meaningful and intimate social interactions and relationships is one of the key components through which social factors influence general health and well-being (Berkman et al., 2000; Cohen, 2004; Helliwell and Putman, 2004; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; Kawachi and Berkman, 2001; Ryff and Singer, 2000). However, the recent and widespread integration of Internet and mobile communication technologies into our daily lives is changing the principal modalities through which we engage with others (Amichai-Hamburger, 2013; Steinfield, et al., 2012; Zhong, 2011). In light of these changes, it is critical to consider how interpersonal intimacy experienced in the context of online social engagement may influence health and well-being outcomes in the digital age.

Social factors act at multiple levels to influence health and well-being, including upstream effects of social-structural conditions (e.g., cultural and socioeconomic factors) and social network characteristics (e.g., size, density, reciprocity), as well as downstream effects of psychosocial mechanisms of interpersonal behavior, including intimate

interactions (Berkman et al., 2000). These effects ultimately converge at behavioral, psychological and physiological pathways that are linked more directly to particular health and well-being outcomes. Similarly, the social contexts of the Internet can be considered at multiple levels, from the explosion in the capacity for social connectivity enabled by online social networking applications (Dunbar, 2012; Steinfield et al., 2012) to interactions that facilitate interpersonal disinhibition and intimate self-disclosure (Jiang et al., 2011; Joinson and Paine, 2007; Ledbetter et al., 2011; Shim et al., 2011). While online social networking can increase one's social capital (Ellison et al., 2007; Steinfield et al., 2008), increased connectivity, however, does not necessarily translate to an increase in meaningful social connections (Dunbar, 2012). This has been described by some as the condition of being "alone together" (Ducheneaut et al., 2006; Schultze, 2010). Conversely, factors such as increased online disinhibition and self-disclosure favor online intimacy (Jiang et al., 2011; McKenna et al., 2002; Valkenburg and Peter, 2011), promoting increased satisfaction in online interpersonal interactions (Bane et al., 2010; Ko and Kuo, 2009). Thus, certain aspects of Internet-mediated interactions can facilitate meaningful and intimate social interactions, highlighting the potential of this medium for cultivating well-being through high-quality social engagement online.

The existing literature on the impact of the social use of the Internet on psychological health and well-being points to both benefits and

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draw-backs of this medium of social interaction (Bessiere et al., 2010; Kang, 2007; Moody, 2001; Shaw and Gant, 2002; van den Eijnden et al., 2008). However, there has been little consideration of the quality or the intimacy of different online interactions in relation to health and well-being outcomes. Furthermore, there has been no systematic exploration of the specific relationship between online intimacy and well-being. In light of this research void, the aim of this review is to consider the existing evidence in this emerging field to identify potential starting points for more systematic research in order to understand how online intimacy may influence well-being in the digital age.

We begin by considering the concept of intimacy in the digital age by identifying the characteristics of intimacy in online social interactions, its multimodal components and its caveats. We then summarize the evidence for the influence of online social interactions on health and well-being outcomes and consider findings from studies of different components of intimacy in online social interactions, mainly self-disclosure and social support, to shed light on the potential contribution of online intimacy to health and well-being. Finally, we discuss future directions for fundamental and practical research in this important new field.

## 2. Interpersonal intimacy in the digital age

### 2.1. Characterizing online intimacy

Interpersonal intimacy is regarded to be at the core of the most fulfilling, affirming, and gratifying human social exchanges (Prager, 1995; Ryff and Singer, 2000; Sperry, 2010). It is commonly related to a number of comparable concepts, such as love, closeness, self-disclosure, support, bonding, attachment, and sexuality, with the boundaries between them often considered to be continuous rather than distinct (Prager, 1995; Sperry, 2010). Although a number of definitions of the concept of intimacy exist (Register and Henley, 1992; Reis and Shaver, 1988; Waring, 1985; Wilhelm and Parker, 1988), in a broad sense, intimacy can be defined as a dyadic exchange that involves sharing what is personal and private (Prager, 1995). It can be realized in the context of intimate interactions and relationships that encompass both verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as shared behavioral, physical, emotional, and cognitive experience (Prager, 1995).

Advances in Internet-based communication and social networking applications over the last several decades have led to a major shift in the mode of human social engagement (Amichai-Hamburger, 2013; Steinfield et al., 2012; Zhong, 2011). This shift has resulted in new ways to experience and actualize intimacy, both in the context of pre-existing relationships and interactions with strangers. Physical proximity and direct face-to-face contact are becoming less prevalent in day to day interpersonal interactions with close individuals (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; McPherson et al., 2006; Putnam, 2000). This is indicated by changes in family lifestyles, including increased numbers of dual-career families, reduced intergenerational living, greater mobility, delayed marriage, and the increase in single-residence households, as well as by the increase in the number of individuals who report not having a confidant (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010; McPherson et al., 2006; Putnam, 2000). In contrast, Internet and mobile applications such as email, instant messaging, and video chat have become the mainstays of daily social contact with family and friends (Broadbent, 2012; Wilding, 2006). Likewise, social networking platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, have amassed millions of users throughout the world (Ellison et al., 2007; Pujazon-Zazik and Park, 2010; Steinfield et al., 2008) and multiuser virtual environments, such as massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) and other virtual social platforms, have become one of the most popular forms of online social entertainment (Cole and Griffiths, 2007; Ducheneaut et al., 2006; Zhong, 2011).

Since the early days of the Internet, researchers have questioned whether it would be possible to foster intimate relationships using this medium (Kiesler et al., 1984; Rice and Love, 1987). It is now evident

that the development and maintenance of friendships and romantic relationships online is common and that these relationships can be similar in meaning, intimacy, and stability in comparison to conventional offline relationships (Broadbent, 2012; Ellison et al., 2007; Hsu et al., 2011; McKenna et al., 2002; Pace et al., 2010; Parks and Roberts, 1998; Whitty, 2008, 2013). However, online contexts vary according to the features of different platforms, such as the number of participants (social parameters), the modalities of interaction (text, audio, video, etc.), or whether they facilitate contact and establishment of new relationships between strangers or the maintenance of existing offline relationships. Individual differences can also influence which online contexts users prefer and how they engage with others online (Amichai-Hamburger and Hayat, 2013; McKenna et al., 2002; Nadkarni and Hofmann, 2012). Therefore, a number of factors may influence the way in which intimacy is expressed and perceived by users in interpersonal exchanges online. Owing to the relative novelty of this field of research, there are still many outstanding questions regarding the contribution of these factors to the experience of online intimacy. For instance, what is the frequency of occurrence of intimacy in different online contexts and how does this differ from the occurrence of intimacy in conventional offline contexts? How do the modalities of interaction and the richness of the media, from text-based to immersive, contribute to the occurrence of online intimacy? Does the experience of intimacy differ when interacting with individuals who we already know offline compared to those we meet online? Although the lack of evidence to answer these types of questions does not permit an elaboration of a concrete model of online intimacy at this point, we summarize some of the factors that are important to consider in understanding how intimacy is experienced online in Fig. 1. We discuss these factors in more detail below.

### 2.2. Intimacy in new relationships established online

Many Internet and mobile applications facilitate social contact between strangers. Certain types of online platforms, such as online dating websites (e.g., eHarmony, PlentyOfFish) and mobile applications (e.g., Tinder), are specifically designed to facilitate meeting strangers for the purpose of subsequently establishing intimate interactions and relationships offline. Finkel et al. (2012) provide a comprehensive review of advantages and disadvantages of online dating for meeting potential partners online and subsequent relationship outcomes. Other platforms, that are not designed for this purpose, can nevertheless foster intimacy online. In particular, by preserving anonymity online contexts can promote the disclosure of personal information, opinions, and feelings much more readily than in face-to-face interactions (Joinson, 2001; McKenna et al., 2002). Meeting and maintaining interactions online also enables individuals to overcome certain “gating features” that may otherwise deter them from engaging with others, such as personal characteristics related to sex, gender, age, race, any physical features of appearance, disability, or any form of real or perceived stigma (McKenna et al., 2002). In particular, in many online multi-user virtual worlds or role-playing games, users are able to create avatars that portray personas as similar to or as different from themselves as they choose by varying their appearance, gender, species or form (Guitton, 2012b, 2015; Lomanowska and Guitton, 2012). These online social platforms also allow individuals to share common experiences as they explore virtual settings together or participate in role-playing games (Chen et al., 2008; Guitton, 2012b, 2015). Taken together, these features of online interactions between strangers can actually accelerate intimacy formation in comparison to offline contexts (Genuis and Genuis, 2005; Rosen et al., 2008). Indeed, as is the case for online dating websites (Finkel et al., 2012), relationships formed and maintained in other online contexts can lead to subsequent face-to-face interactions that continue to develop in the real world, and in some cases they have been shown to lead to lasting romantic partnerships and marriages (Baker, 2002; Cole and Griffiths, 2007; Ramirez and Zhang, 2007).

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