



Full length article

From social anxiety to interpersonal connectedness: Relationship building within face-to-face, phone and instant messaging mediums



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 June 2015

Received in revised form

4 August 2015

Accepted 5 August 2015

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Computer-mediated communication

Social anxiety

Instant messaging

Interpersonal relationships

ABSTRACT

The present research examined whether social anxiety moderates the potential relationship between conversation medium and interpersonal connectedness. Hypotheses predicted that individuals with high social anxiety would demonstrate greater interpersonal connectedness following instant messaging conversations; whereas, individuals with low social anxiety would report greater interpersonal connectedness following face-to-face and phone conversations. Undergraduate participants ($N = 165$) were randomly assigned to one of three conversation mediums (face-to-face, phone or instant messaging) during which they engaged in an interaction with an unfamiliar partner. Participants completed a measure of social anxiety before the interaction and measures of interpersonal connectedness prior to and following the interaction. Results revealed that level of social anxiety is a significant contingent condition for the association between type of conversation medium and attitude homophily (i.e., a measure of interpersonal connectedness). For individuals with low social anxiety, scores on the attitude homophily measure were significantly lower in the instant messaging condition, compared to the face-to-face and phone conditions.

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1. Introduction

The use of computer-mediated communication technologies has increased rapidly, profoundly altering the manner in which individuals engage in everyday conversations (e.g., Flanagin, 2005; Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2011; Lewandowski, Rosenberg, Jordan-Parks, & Siegel, 2011; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Pierce, 2009). This burgeoning growth in social media has stimulated much theoretical debate and scientific research aimed at increasing our understanding of its potential implications on relationship building (see Walther, 1996). Early theoretical perspectives viewed computer mediated communication (CMC) as impersonal and limiting with regard to the formation of friendships and intimate relationships (see Walther, 1996; Walther & Parks, 2002). More recently, however, the focus has shifted to identifying potential benefits and underlying mechanisms that digitally-based communication may offer individuals with respect to relationship building (e.g., Jiang et al., 2011). The purpose of the present research was to

determine whether specific groups of individuals, those with social anxiety, may reap unique benefits from computer-based interactions compared to other modes of communication. Social anxiety was explored as a potential moderator of the relationship between conversation medium and level of interpersonal connectedness following intimacy-building interactions with a stranger.

1.1. Social anxiety within traditional conversational mediums

Fear, discomfort and concern over negative evaluation during initial face-to-face or phone conversations can be detrimental to the formation of friendships and close interpersonal relationships (Clark, 2001; High & Caplan, 2009; Jones, Rose, & Russell, 1990; Leary & Kowalski, 1995a; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Mendlowicz & Stein, 2000; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997; Voncken, Alden, Bögels, & Roelofs, 2008). The anxiety and negative emotions during these interactions may emanate from a desire to create a positive impression on the interaction partner, while simultaneously lacking the confidence or interpersonal efficacy to achieve one's self-presentation goals (self-presentation theory; High & Caplan, 2009; Leary, 1983; Leary & Kowalski, 1995a, 1995b; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). In addition, an increase in anxiety may also result

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from a preoccupation with the interaction partner's nonverbal cues and potential negative impressions. The allocation of attentional resources to others' perceptions and the individual's concern over negative evaluation may result in cognitive overload (Reid & Reid, 2007, 2010; Spurr & Stopa, 2003). The combination of heightened anxiety levels and cognitive overload may potentially disrupt conversational flow and hinder one's ability to engage in well-connected and mutually satisfying interactions (Leary & Kowalski, 1995a; Reid & Reid, 2007, 2010; Spurr & Stopa, 2003).

It is not surprising then, that individuals with high social anxiety demonstrate a preference for text-based interactions over the more traditional modes of communication. (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Pierce, 2009; Shepherd & Edelman, 2005). Unlike face-to-face conversations, instant messaging may provide individuals with an increased sense of anonymity and a reduction in concern over appearance (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Weidman et al., 2012). The elimination of nonverbal cues and conversational spontaneity may diminish the potential for negative outcomes (Weidman et al., 2012). Furthermore, communication with others through text-based communication systems may enable individuals with social anxiety to satisfy their social needs, while avoiding the negative aspects associated with face-to-face conversations, a view consistent with the social compensation hypothesis (Pierce, 2009; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009; Zywicka & Danowski, 2008). Such individuals, then, may actually seek out less threatening mediums in order to feel more comfortable engaging in self-disclosure (High & Caplan, 2009; Leary & Kowalski, 1995a; Pierce, 2009).

A link between computer-mediated communication and enhanced levels of self-disclosure has been reported in survey (Hu, Wood, Smith, & Westbrook, 2004; Leung, 2002; Schouten, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2007; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009) and experimental research (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Joinson, 2001; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). From the perspective of the hyperpersonal theory (Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, 1996; Walther & Parks, 2002) two characteristics, the reduction of nonverbal cues and the ability to edit messages prior to sending, may explain the increased level of self-disclosure (e.g., McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006; Schouten et al., 2007). These characteristics appear to reduce inhibitions during conversations leading to higher levels of self-disclosure (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Schouten et al., 2007; Walther, 1996). Furthermore, individuals with higher levels of social anxiety tend to perceive these attributes (i.e., reduction in nonverbal cues and increased control over messages) as having greater importance, compared to those with lower levels of social anxiety (Schouten et al., 2007). Differences in the perceived importance of the online characteristics have been found to mediate the relation between social anxiety and online self-disclosure (Schouten et al., 2007). Thus, there is a growing body of literature suggesting that individuals with social anxiety may thrive in online platforms, and may potentially experience different outcomes compared to those who are less socially anxious (Gross, Juvonen, & Gable, 2002; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007), including increased levels of self-disclosure (McKenna et al., 2002; Schouten et al., 2007; Stritzke, Nguyen, & Durkin, 2004).

The disclosure of personal information, such as attitudes and beliefs, has been viewed as an important socio-cognitive mechanism involved in relationship building (Archer, 1980; Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986; Jiang et al., 2011; Sternberg, 1988). Disclosure facilitates interpersonal understanding, perceptions of similarity and even physical attraction (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Jiang et al., 2011; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986), characteristics considered important for relationship building (Byrne, 1971, 1997; Voncken et al., 2008).

Furthermore, from the perspective of traditional relationship building, during initial interactions with strangers, the primary

concern involves the reduction of uncertainty (regarding knowledge of the other's beliefs and attitudes) and the increase in predictability (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Individuals attempt to acquire information from partners in order to reduce uncertainties (entry stage), before progressing to a second (personal) stage, in which the partner's attitudes and beliefs are explored. Finally, interactions progress to the exit stage, in which each partner decides whether to pursue a friendship with the partner (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). The progression from the initial stage to the personal stage may occur within a few minutes, or relatively slowly. Partners within an unsatisfying interaction may progress quickly to the exit stage, eliminating the potential development of a relationship. The disclosure of personal information, then, may facilitate uncertainty reduction and relationship building.

Poor conversational flow and lack of disclosure within face-to-face interactions among those with high social anxiety may explain the negative perceptions formed by interaction partners. Face-to-face conversations with individuals with high social anxiety have been described as uncomfortable by interaction partners (Meleshko & Alden, 1993). In addition, interaction partners tend to rate them as less similar to themselves, and less likeable, friendly and attractive, in comparison with individuals with low social anxiety (Jones & Russell, 1982; Pilkonis, 1977). Unfortunately, the negative reactions by partners within face-to-face conversations may serve to reinforce one's social anxiety (Alden & Taylor, 2004; Clark, 2001; Rapee & Heimberg, 1997).

Meanwhile, instant messaging environments seem to provide a benefit for those with high social anxiety in terms of social evaluation. High and Caplan (2009) reported that individuals with high social anxiety were rated by instant messaging partners as being low in social anxiety. By contrast, low anxiety individuals were rated as being high in anxiety by their instant messaging partners. Moreover, within the same condition, partners rated their conversations with high anxiety individuals as more satisfying than low anxiety individuals. Some investigators have speculated that the attention and effort that high anxiety individuals allocate to composing their messages may promote the impression of a more confident and composed individual (High & Caplan, 2009; Walther, 2006). Conversation mediums devoid of nonverbal and vocal cues, such as instant messaging, may enable those with high anxiety to recapture cognitive resources, redirecting them to the composition of well-connected text messages (Walther, 1996; 2006). Moreover, the ability to strategically edit messages prior to sending may enable high anxiety individuals to project the desired image more effectively and with greater confidence, and attain their desired self-presentation goals (Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, 2006). Not surprisingly, then, those with high levels of social anxiety are more confident about their success in interactions via computer-mediated communication as compared to their face-to-face interactions (Shalom, Israeli, Markovitzky, & Lipsitz, 2015). In addition, refocusing attention away from the observer's perspective may potentially promote self-disclosure and a sense of interpersonal connectedness (Reid & Reid, 2007, 2010; Spurr & Stopa, 2003).

1.2. Present research

Although a good amount of recent empirical work has examined the utility of computer-mediated communication for those with social anxiety, whether individuals with social anxiety actually experience a higher level of interpersonal connectedness within text-based communication, compared to the more traditional mediums, has not yet been determined. Moreover, no known empirical studies have examined whether interpersonal connectedness is hindered when those with low levels of social anxiety use text-based communication instead of engaging in voice or face-to-face

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