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## Self-fulfilling prophecies: Perceived reality of online interaction drives expected outcomes of online communication

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### ABSTRACT

Individuals differ in the extent to which they believe online communication can contribute to the growth of close relationships – a concept defined as the perceived reality of online interactions. Perceived reality may function as a self-fulfilling prophecy: individuals who have positive attitudes toward online interactions will make behavioral choices that lead to positive outcomes. A sample of 207 undergraduates was assigned to a hypothetical online or face-to-face interaction with a stranger. In the online condition, levels of perceived reality predicted willingness to self-disclose and to provide social support within the interaction, which in turn predicted positive expectations of the interaction's success. This research reinforces the importance of studying users' attitudes as predictors of the outcomes of online interaction.

### 1. Introduction

The internet provides a wide array of tools that enable new forms of social interaction, yet some of the first research on its effects suggested it decreased social integration and increased loneliness – an effect that had changed only three years later (Kraut et al., 1998; Kraut et al., 2002). Later research suggested that many people rely on online communication, yet devalue its benefits as a relational tool (Schiffirin, Edelman, Falkenstern, & Stewart, 2010); however, these negative views are not universal (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006). In particular, individuals may differ in the extent to which they believe online communication can contribute meaningfully to the growth and maintenance of close relationships – a concept defined as the *perceived reality of online interactions* (Clark & Green, 2013). A user's level of perceived reality of online interactions may shape the outcomes of their online communications through directing their choices of online behavior.

#### 1.1. Online communication behaviors and their consequences

Research suggests that the consequences of online communication depend primarily on the specific behaviors of users. For example, passive use of Facebook is tied to negative consequences for affective well-being, but active use that contributes to relationship-building is not (Verduyn et al., 2015). Similarly, earlier research suggested that use of instant messaging, which allows for private conversation with known others, increases adolescent well-being via increasing time spent with

friends and friendship quality; however, the use of chat rooms, which allows for public conversation with strangers, does not show similar positive effects (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). These results underline the importance of focusing not simply on amounts of social internet use, but on the specific behaviors enabled through online communication.

More precisely, these results support the idea that the consequences of online communication may depend on whether or not that communication serves an important relational purpose. Individuals high in perceived reality of online interaction, those who believe that online contacts can contribute to close relationships, are more likely to engage in relationship-building types of communication. These important interpersonal processes, which help strengthen close relationships in face-to-face contexts, are likely to also matter in online contexts as well.

For example, self-disclosure is well-established as an important part of relationship growth. Individuals self-disclose more to those they already like, and they like those to whom they have self-disclosed (Collins & Miller, 1994). Evidence supports the idea that online self-disclosure contributes to relationships to a similar extent as face-to-face disclosure: online self-disclosure is as frequent as face-to-face self-disclosure (Nguyen, Bin, & Campbell, 2012) and is sometimes even seen as more intimate (Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2013).

The provision of social support is another critical relational process that is also well-established online. Social support is so central to healthy relationships that it may, on its own, explain many of the documented benefits that high-quality relationships have for physical health (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton,

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2001). Online social support contributes to well-being in similar ways, whether from online health support groups (White & Dorman, 2001), online gaming communities (Trepte, Reinecke, & Juechems, 2012), or Facebook friend networks (Nabi, Prestin, & So, 2013).

### 1.2. Attitudes toward online communication

These behaviors, as well as other important relational processes, are all likely to build relationship closeness when conducted online. Yet negative attitudes toward the relational value of online communication may make users less likely to engage in these exact behaviors. In one study, attitudes toward online social connection and online self-disclosure interacted to predict both Facebook communication and relational closeness (Ledbetter et al., 2011). The attitudinal measures used in this study seem to assess preference for online social connection and self-disclosure, including items such as: “I feel like I can be more open when I am communicating online”.

An alternative but related approach to measuring attitudes toward online communication is to measure beliefs about how suitable online communication is as a potential vehicle for interaction. This concept, the perceived reality of online interactions, can be more precisely defined as the extent to which an individual believes that online social interactions are suitable for the maintenance and formation of close relationships, as noted above. Initial work on the perceived reality of online interactions showed that those higher in perceived reality had higher levels of perceived social support from online sources (Clark & Green, 2013). However, this work did not test the full theoretical pathway: that positive attitudes toward online communication drive the use of relationship-building behaviors online, which in turn drive positive consequences for well-being and relationship quality.

### 1.3. Current study

To examine the effects of perceived reality of online interactions on relationship-building behaviors and positive outcomes post-interaction, participants were told they would participate in an interaction task with a fellow participant either online or in a face-to-face context. They were then asked to describe their expectations of how the interaction would proceed.

**Hypothesis 1.** Participants' level of perceived reality of online interactions will affect positive expected outcomes of an online interaction. This effect will be mediated by increased willingness to self-disclose and increased willingness to provide social support.

## 2. Methods

Undergraduates ( $N = 207$ ) participated for partial course credit. The sample was majority female (68.0%) and white (68.8%), with an average age of 19.0 years ( $SD = 1.62$ ).<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1. Procedure

Before the study, participants completed an online pre-survey that measured personality and individual differences. For the study itself, participants were brought into the lab and told that they would engage in a getting-to-know-you task with a fellow student, either online or face-to-face. In the online context, participants were further assigned to read one of three passages intended to manipulate perceived reality: one containing positive information about online interactions, one negative about online interactions, and a control passage on another

topic. All participants in the face-to-face condition read the control passage. After the manipulation, participants then described how they imagined the interaction would proceed, before completing scales measuring expected outcomes of the interaction.

### 2.2. Materials

#### 2.2.1. Presurvey

Participants completed an expanded ten-item version of the Perceived Reality Scale (Clark & Green, 2013) both in the pre-survey and during the session. Participants indicated how much they agreed with each of the statements on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale. Sample questions include “I don't think you can have a meaningful and deep conversation over the Internet” (reverse-scored) and “Whether I talk to my friends online, on the phone or in person, it's all the same to me.”

Participants also completed the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (SIAS-6) and Social Phobia Scale (SPS-6; Peters, Sunderland, Andrews, Rapee, & Mattick, 2012), as well as several other measures not discussed here (details available on request).

#### 2.2.2. Lab session

**2.2.2.1. Description of the interaction.** After completing the manipulation, participants were told they would discuss three questions drawn from the Generating Closeness Task (Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997). Participants were then asked to spend approximately 5 min writing about their expectations of the conversation.

**2.2.2.2. Willingness to self-disclose.** To measure willingness to self-disclose, participants completed a modified version of the Miller Self-Disclosure Index (Miller, Berg, & Archer, 1983). On a scale of 1 (not at all willing) to 5 (very willing), participants indicated how willing they would be to talk about a list of eleven topics online.

**2.2.2.3. Willingness to provide social support.** Participants were asked about their willingness, on a 1–7 scale, to complete helpful tasks for their partner such as sharing class notes, giving their partner rides, or providing advice on class choices and their college career.

**2.2.2.4. Positive outcomes.** In order to examine potential consequences of the interaction, participants completed several measures of positive affect and expectations about the interaction that were combined into a single scale ( $\alpha = 0.82$ )

Positive affect and most expectations toward the interaction partner were measured by seven questions scored on a 1–7 scale, from “Not at all” to “Very much.” These questions assessed expected similarity to and liking of the partner; expected happiness post-interaction; anticipation and anxiety (reverse-scored) toward the interaction; and expected desire/willingness to expend effort to interact with the partner again. Anxiety was discarded from the index due to low correlation with the other items. Maximum expected closeness post-interaction was measured by a slightly edited version of the Inclusion of Other in Self Scale (IOS; Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992).

## 3. Results

Perceived reality was significantly higher in the positive condition ( $M = 3.32$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ) than the negative condition ( $M = 2.73$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ;  $F(7197) = 2.38$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.08$ ). However, neither the positive nor negative condition significantly differed from the control conditions (face-to-face control,  $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ; online control,  $M = 2.84$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ,  $ps > 0.05$ ). Therefore, our primary focus in the analysis is participants' dispositional levels of perceived reality as assessed in the pre-survey.

**Hypothesis 1** claimed that perceived reality would indirectly

<sup>1</sup> Twenty-three participants suspected they would not actually be interacting with another person as part of the experiment. Omission of these participants did not significantly change the results, so all analyses are reported with the full sample size.

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