

Varying Definitions of Online Communication and
Their Effects on Relationship Research

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VARYING DEFINITIONS OF ONLINE COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

This paper explores four published articles that report on results from research conducted on online (Internet) and offline (non-Internet) relationships and their relationship to computer-mediated communication (CMC). The articles, however, vary in their definitions and uses of CMC. Butler and Kraut (2002) suggest that face-to-face (FtF) interactions are more effective than CMC, defined and used as “email,” in creating feelings of closeness or intimacy. Other articles define CMC differently and, therefore, offer different results. This paper examines Cummings, Butler, and Kraut’s (2002) research in relation to three other research articles to suggest that all forms of CMC should be studied in order to fully understand how CMC influences online and offline relationships.

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Numerous studies have been conducted on various facets of Internet relationships, focusing on the levels of intimacy, closeness, different communication modalities, and the frequency of use of computer-mediated communication (CMC). However, contradictory results are suggested within this research mostly because only certain aspects of CMC are investigated, for example, email only. Cummings, Butler, and Kraut (2002) suggest that FtF interactions are more effective than CMC (read: email) in creating feelings of closeness or intimacy, while other studies suggest the opposite. In order to understand how both online (Internet) and offline (non-Internet) relationships are affected by CMC, all forms of CMC should be studied. This paper examines Cummings et al.'s research against other CMC research to propose that additional research be conducted to better understand how online communication affects relationships.

In Cummings et al.'s (2002) summary article reviewing three empirical studies on online social relationships, it was found that CMC, especially email, was less effective than FtF contact in creating and maintaining close social relationships. Two of the three reviewed studies focusing on communication in non-Internet and Internet relationships mediated by FtF, phone, or email modalities found that the frequency of each modality's use was significantly linked to the strength of the particular relationship (Cummings et al., 2002). The strength of the relationship was predicted best by FtF and phone communication, as participants rated email as an inferior means of maintaining personal relationships as compared to FtF and phone contacts (Cummings et al., 2002).

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Cummings et al. (2002) reviewed an additional study conducted in 1999 by the HomeNet project. In this project, Kraut, Mukhopadhyay, Szczypula, Kiesler, and Scherlis(1999) compared the value of using CMC and non-CMC to maintain relationships withpartners. They found that participants corresponded less frequently with their Internetpartner (5.2 times per month) than with their non-Internet partner (7.2 times per month)(as cited in Cummings et al., 2002). This difference does not seem significant, as it isonly two times less per month. However, in additional self-report surveys, participantsresponded feeling more distant, or less intimate, towards their Internet partner than theirnon-Internet partner. This finding may be attributed to participants' beliefs that email isan inferior mode of personal relationship communication.

Intimacy is necessary in the creation and maintenance of relationships, as it is defined as the sharing of a person's innermost being with another person, i.e., selfdisclosure(Hu, Wood, Smith, & Westbrook, 2004). Relationships are facilitated by thereciprocal self-disclosing between partners, regardless of non-CMC or CMC. Cummingset al.'s (2002) reviewed results contradict other studies that research the connectionbetween intimacy and relationships through CMC.

Hu et al. (2004) studied the relationship between the frequency of Instant Messenger (IM) use and the degree of perceived intimacy among friends. The use of IM instead of email as a CMC modality was studied because IM supports a non-professionalenvironment favoring intimate exchanges (Hu et al., 2004). Their results suggest that apositive relationship exists between the frequency of IM use and intimacy, demonstrating

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