

**Social Psychological Relationship Theories Applied to Romantic Relationships
Initiated Through Computer-mediated Communication**

by

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From hand-written letters to email to instant messaging, the rapid progression of technology has drastically affected our personal lives, but as Carrie Bradshaw of *Sex and the City* once questioned: “are all these improvements in communication really helping us communicate?” (Chupack & Spiller 2001). In particular, the popularization of the internet, with its wide-sweeping application for modern society, has altered the way we communicate with other individuals. Through computer-mediated communication, people now have the ability to connect with each other regardless of distance, time, or availability. Group phone and video calls allow business partners on separate sides of the world to make important deals in a matter of minutes. Electronic mail, or email for short, gives people the opportunity to send various types of content to others in mere seconds. The days of waiting weeks for the pony express to arrive are over.

These societal changes are by virtue of the several ways in which individuals may communicate with each other nowadays. One can call or text over the phone, message over social media, chat with someone in a chat room or forum, and send emails from various devices. Because of the abundance of modes of communication available, our society has evolved with the expectation that one must always be present and available to communicate. Many messaging applications, such as iMessage and Facebook Messenger, have features that allow people to know when a message has been delivered, when the person they’ve messaged is typing a response, and even when the message has been seen by the other person. In addition to this phenomenon, technological advancements have made it so that our day-to-day conversations are permanently accessible. In the past, what was said in conversation was preserved only in our memory, and our words didn’t carry as much weight. However, many individuals

today have become highly calculated when choosing their words online. This type of conversation can often feel less organic than face-to-face interactions, as well as lead to miscommunications in a relationship.

As the use of the internet as a social space started to gain more recognition, the development of websites and phone applications tailored specifically toward certain communities began to emerge. Now, there are places on the internet for people to find and interact with others who have similar backgrounds, interests, goals, hobbies, or desires as themselves. One such phenomenon brought on by this movement is the creation of online dating websites: places where people make online profiles that reflect their real-life self. In a 2013 study, researchers found that 59% of Internet users believe that online dating is an acceptable way to meet other people, a statistic that had jumped up from 44% in 2005 (*D'Costa*). These profiles usually include flattering photos of the user, where they reside, their hobbies, interests, occupation, and any other relevant information about themselves. Viewers of their profile can then decide whether to initiate communication with this person in hopes of developing either a short- or long-term relationship. Studies have found that the majority of dating site users are searching for long-term relationships (*Whitty & Carr 2006*), however, this statistic has probably changed since the advent of "hookup" apps, such as Tinder and Bumble.

Despite the appearance of detail and charming aesthetics, the information presented on these profiles is often cursory and superficial. Although not always intentional, online profiles don't reveal as much about a person as face-to-face interactions do. Although at a casual glance, traditional relationships and relationships initiated online seem to be different, they both require careful attention to the same key

factors in order to be successful; in particular, open communication, honesty, and face-to-face interaction. This paper will discuss relationships that are initiated online and continue offline, as well as those that remain online indefinitely. In addition, these types of relationships will be compared with those that are strictly face-to-face, and those that are considered long distance.

Before delving deeper into the implications of the internet on romantic relationships, it is important to clearly understand a few terms that will be referenced throughout the paper. Computer-mediated communication has been defined as “any human communication achieved through, or with the help of, computer technology” (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic 2004). As previously mentioned, some examples of computer mediated communication are texting, emailing, and video chatting. In contrast to computer mediated communication, face-to-face communication describes any human communication that occurs in person. While face-to-face communication has been around for as long as humans have, computer mediated communication is much more recent. The first recorded exchange of prototype emails dates back to the early 1960s, which is relatively recent compared to other forms of communication (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic 2004).

In a study that investigated how couples meet each other, researchers discovered that by 2009 dating sites were the second most popular way for American adults to find their spouses or romantic partners (Rosenfeld & Thomas 2012). This is a great change from when dating sites first started to become popular. In the early days of online dating, there was a large amount of stigma surrounding the act of looking for love online. Many people, especially members of older generations who had not grown up

with computers or the internet, looked at online dating as an inorganic, lazy way of finding someone to date. As previously mentioned, what is said in online conversation can sometimes be premeditated, therefore unnatural. In addition, the ease of access to potential partners creates the stigma that online daters are lazy. While some people still have this view and refuse to use any sort of dating site, many people consider these sites the most effective form of dating. We now live in a tech-based society where instant gratification has become the norm. With only a few taps, anyone with a smart device can have food delivered straight to their door with apps like Uber Eats and GrubHub. This level of instant gratification is not lazy, so much as it is efficient. The to the idea of waiting for the right person to come along as we go about our lives has become less and less attractive. Dating sites allow people to take their fates into their own hands.

In light of these contrasting views of online dating, psychologists began exploring the similarities and differences between relationships that form online versus those that form offline. These scientific inquiries fall under a relatively new subdiscipline of behavioral science, known as cyberpsychology, which studies the ways in which humans interact with the internet, computers, and technology, and how those things affect our behavior (*Whitty & Young 2017*). Psychologists specializing in cyberpsychology have been able to apply traditional theories regarding the development of intimate relationships to the development of online relationships. However, it is important to understand that many traditional theories no longer accurately assess the behaviors exhibited in romantic relationships. As previously mentioned, the rapid development of technology in our society has altered relationship interactions

altogether. Therefore when applying traditional theories it is necessary to analyze with a critical lens, and administer adjustments when appropriate.

When it comes to interpersonal relationships, there are a few key factors that greatly impact the development of a connection between two people. These factors come together to form what is known as relationship maintenance, which refers to “the routine behaviors and strategies partners undertake to help ensure that their relationship will continue” (*Bradbury & Karney 2014*). One form of relationship maintenance is self-disclosure. According to the Social Penetration Theory, the type of personal information partners share with each other can either develop or stagnate a relationship. This theory categorizes self-disclosures on their breadth and depth. In order for two people to become emotionally close, they must disclose a wide variety of information about themselves, as well as information that is personally significant to themselves (*Whitty & Young 2017*).

When partners first interact with each other, whether it be online or offline, the information they choose to disclose about themselves tends to lack breadth or depth. What is disclosed can usually be considered small talk: superficial information about relatives, alma maters, and favorite colors. Over time, the level of breadth and depth in their self-disclosures increases. Individuals begin to share their greatest insecurities, loftiest dreams, and most embarrassing secrets. When information with greater breadth and depth is shared between partners, the connection between them grows stronger. If a person has trouble disclosing this kind of information about themselves after a significant amount of time, it can lead to negative outcomes in the relationship. It may cause that

person's partner to believe that a certain level of trust has not been developed between the two, or that they are not as invested in the relationship as the partner is.

Through a number of psychological studies, research has been found to support the notion that there are differences among how people self-disclose online and how they self-disclose offline. One study showed that people are more likely to reveal information about themselves to someone through computer-mediated communication than they are to someone face-to-face, and that they generally feel more comfortable sharing certain information with their online friends than their offline friends (*Mckenna et al. 2002*).

These differences are what is known as the Disinhibition Effect. When communicating online, most people feel more compelled to share personal information and freely speak their mind. This sense of bravery comes from the anonymity that is present in online spaces (*Whitty & Young 2017*). Those using online dating sites experience disinhibition when they begin chatting with a potential partner online, which leads to the disclosure of information with greater breadth and depth more rapidly.

This fast-paced development that occurs online can have both positive and negative influences on a relationship. On one hand, the two people who are communicating with each other can be more open about themselves and can save time by quickly gaining a strong sense of connection. On the other hand, one must take into account the fact that the anonymity of an online setting allows for more control over how a person presents themselves to others. Purposely luring someone into a relationship by using a false identity, also known as catfishing, is not uncommon. The term catfishing was made popular by a 2010 documentary and television series, both by the

name of *Catfish* (D'Costa 2014). It is used to describe “a person who is intentionally deceptive when creating a social media profile, often with the goal of making a romantic connection” (D'Costa 2014). In a study that was conducted in 2013, researchers found that 54% of online daters are under the impression that someone else has purposefully offered up false information in their online dating profile (D'Costa).

Regardless of this fear that the majority of online daters possess, studies have shown that most people tend to tell some form of the truth about themselves, sometimes exaggerating these truths when interacting online. The act of highlighting the most attractive parts of yourself and omitting the less attractive ones is fairly commonplace. This differs from catfishing in that it's often not an overt lie but merely a rose-tinted version of the truth. In fact, this kind of self-editing can lead to a hyperpersonal relationship. The Hyperpersonal Model suggests that computer-mediated communication can become hyperpersonal because it exceeds face-to-face interaction in the sense that it allows people to carefully choose how they appear to others, ultimately cultivating an augmented self-presentation (Whitty & Young 2017).

In a recent study, researchers found that most people believe that they have a better chance of dating someone when using an online dating site (Attrill-Smith & Fullwood 2018). When presented with photos of potential dating candidates, participants of this study with both high and low self-esteem rated their chances of dating them higher in an online dating scenario than in an offline one. This difference in confidence has to do with the anonymity of online dating. The combination of a controlled self-presentation and the disinhibition one feels when interacting with others through computer-mediated communication gives online daters an inflated sense of

self-assurance. When one can look at someone's dating profile and see exactly what that person is looking for in a relationship, they can then alter their own online presentation to match those credentials. All of these factors can cause people to become more confident in their ability to successfully initiate a relationship.

When communicating online, people have the ability to edit and enhance themselves, which causes the person they are conversing with to have inflated expectations. The longer the two people message each other online without ever meeting in person, the greater and more exaggerated their expectations of each other become. This loop in which expectations are confirmed and then reciprocated leads to an over-idealization of the other person (*Walther et al. 2001*). When finally meeting face-to-face, the discrepancies between the idealized vision of a partner and that partner's actual self may be difficult for some people to come to terms with. They may feel as though they've been lied to, even if there had been no overt lying during their online communication. This can lower the level of trust and sense of intimacy each person feels toward the other. An interaction such as this one may negatively influence the amount of time a couple stays together. In order to mitigate this effect, couples who meet online should be aware of the phenomenon and should try to meet in person sooner rather than later.

In addition, when partners who have exclusively been communicating online meet up for the first time, a large percentage of the ambiguity in the relationship is lost. Because people are able to cultivate a persona that emphasizes their best attributes, a lot about the person is left unknown (*Ariely, Frost, & Norton 2007*). This is partly due to the fact that humans are complex creatures, made up of experiences, beliefs, traits, and

lifestyles that are not always deemed desirable by others. In the beginning of a relationship, when these parts of a person are hidden, it only makes sense that that person would seem more attractive. As time goes on and we learn more about the person we are dating, it is more likely that we come across dissimilarities. Ariely, Frost, and Norton's study (2007) reinforced the theory that "once evidence of dissimilarity is encountered, subsequent information is more likely to be interpreted as further evidence of dissimilarity, leading to decreased liking." Because of the nature of computer-mediated communication, the time in which the most information about each partner is revealed is when they first meet in person. This sudden rush of new, occasionally disagreeable truths about a partner can sometimes lead to negative results in the relationship.

Unmet expectations do not always affect a relationship in an adverse way, though. If partners who initially interact online end up meeting each other face-to-face early in the relationship, the likelihood of each person being able to accept the inconsistencies between the other's online and actual self is much higher. Most online daters are somewhat hesitant to immediately meet in person. As a consequence of the anonymity of the internet, many sexual predators are able to use dating sites and applications to target unassuming users. The large amount of personal information that online daters are willing to share coupled with their eagerness to find a partner make them obvious targets to potential assaulters. A recent study found that individuals who used dating applications were more likely to be sexually abused in the following year, and also had a higher risk of lifetime sexual abuse (*Choi, Wong, & Fong 2016*). It is

clear that more attention needs to be given to the safety of those who use dating applications.

Statistics such as those detailed above have led online daters to become more careful when considering how, where, and when they want to meet up with prospective partners. Nowadays, relationships that are initiated online usually develop in a similar and somewhat predictable way. Individuals begin by chatting on the website or app, then exchange emails or phone numbers to text and later call or video chat, eventually building a level of intimacy in which they feel comfortable enough to meet this person face-to-face. While some prefer chatting online for a longer period of time, others prefer to meet up in person as soon as possible. Regardless of personal preference, studies have shown that moving through this stage of a relationship relatively quickly is ideal. Researchers have found that it is best to meet an online suitor face-to-face between 17 and 23 days after your initial online interaction with them (*Ramirez 2015*). Continuing to solely interact online after this amount of time is associated with a negative outcome.

Because online dating does not require that two people meet each other face-to-face, many couples end up not doing so at all. There can be numerous reasons for this. In some cases, individuals communicating through online dating profiles are too afraid to meet potential partners in person. They may feel as though they do not live up to others' expectations, and as was discussed earlier this is sometimes true. Another reason that two individuals may end up never meeting face-to-face is that they might be too busy to make time to meet each other somewhere, especially if they do not live near one another. When people who start talking online live too far away from each other, it could prove too difficult to organize a meet up, or if at all only rarely.

Distance, however, does not condemn a relationship. We know this to be true because successful long-distance relationships have been around far longer than the creation of the internet. Still, it does make forming and maintaining a relationship much more difficult. As previously mentioned, acts of relationship maintenance influence the level of intimacy in a relationship. Along with self-disclosures, proximity allows a connection to grow between partners. A study first conducted in 1950 found that “we are most likely to form relationships with people who are physically close to us because these are the people with whom we are most likely to interact” (*Bradbury & Karney 2014*). Having said that, times have changed. The internet now allows us to intermingle with people we would not normally run into face-to-face.

Regardless of the fact that people are able to bypass the rules of proximity by using computer-mediated communication when initially meeting potential mates, proximity still plays a role in the maintenance of a relationship. Another factor that influences the intimacy and, in turn, the success of a relationship is self-expansion. The Self-Expansion Model proposes that individuals use intimate relationships to expand their physical influence, increase their sense of belonging, acquire knowledge and perspective, and gain self-actualization (*Aron & Aron 1996*). Humans are motivated toward these goals because they increase our overall self-esteem. At the start of a relationship, partners have a lot to learn about each other and from each other leading them to expand their knowledge and identities. This is what makes a relationship particularly exciting in the first few weeks (*Aron et al. 2000*). As time goes on, there are less and less pieces of information that we do not know about our partners. The potential to expand our selves becomes limited. In order to combat this, couples are

advised to take part in various activities together. By participating in fresh and stimulating things as a couple, such as going on dates and picking up new hobbies, partners find more opportunities to discover new aspects about one another. Doing this can restore the energy and excitement that the couple experienced when their relationship was just beginning to form (*Aron et al. 2000*).

Whether or not two people are able to bring forth new opportunities for self-expansion and relationship maintenance partially depends on their ability to participate in shared activities. If two people are creating a relationship online, or the majority of their interactions are through computer-mediated communication, then partaking in shared activities is not easily done. When partners get to the point where their self-disclosures become less intimate because they have shared all of their most personal information, desires, and beliefs, then they must resort to other forms of relationship maintenance, such as participating in novel activities together. The less forms of relationship maintenance available to a couple, the greater the likelihood that the relationship will not last.

One can argue that streaming a television show or movie online while your partner does the same thing, and simultaneously watching, can be considered a shared activity. Some people also believe that video calls, such as FaceTime or Skype, can work as a substitute for face-to-face interaction. Psychologists, however, have used social theories and research to claim that no form of digital communication measures up to the real thing. The Social Presence Theory proposes that individuals feel a stronger sense of social presence when they are communicating with someone who is giving them cues that indicate they are engaged in the conversation (*White & Young 2017*).

During face-to-face communication, people alter the tone, volume, pitch, and speed of their voice, their facial expressions, and their gestures to convey a specific emotion or message that can be subconsciously read by the other person. Similarly, computer-mediated conversations involve changes in grammar, punctuation, and emoticon usage to convey varying tones. Nevertheless, there are more ways to subtly change paralanguage in face-to-face conversation, therefore allowing for a more accurate representation of emotion. The lack of nonverbal cues in online conversations causes computer-mediated communication to be much lower in social presence than face-to-face interaction.

Similar to long-distance relationships, online relationships restrict the amount of face-to-face time that partners have with each other, therefore limiting any opportunities for taking part in shared activities. It's no mystery that distance puts a significant amount of stress on a relationship. Furthermore, a long-distance relationship allows more time for partners to be in others' company; studies have shown that this creates more opportunities for jealousy and infidelity (*Bradbury & Karney 2014*). The same goes for couples who mostly communicate online. Even though computer-mediated communication allows partners to constantly be in contact with each other, there is no way of knowing where the other person is or what they are doing. Those who have lower self-esteem may experience paranoia in regard to their relationship. If partners are confident in their relationship and have built enough trust between each other, this is a factor that will affect the relationship less.

Attachment Theory is a social psychological model that may come into play in such relationships. This theory is centered around the idea that humans have a need to

form emotional bonds with others, leading us to view them as a secure base we can always return to and a safe haven in times of distress (*Bowlby 1969*). The model was first conceptualized using observations of behavior in infant-caregiver relationships, however it was later adopted to explain behaviors in adult romantic relationships as well (*Hazan & Shaver 1987*). It was theorized that the initial interactions we have with our caregivers during early childhood are internalized, leading to the interpersonal expectations we have for relationships in adulthood (*Meuwly & Dominik 2017*). These expectations determine our behavior in relation to others, or our attachment style.

There are three basic styles of attachment that a person can have in any given relationship. The orientation of an individual's attachment is based on avoidance and anxiety (*Brennan, Clark, & Shaver 1998*). When a person exhibits minimal anxiety and avoidance in relation toward their partner, they are securely attached. When a person exhibits high anxiety regarding the availability or care of their partner, they are anxiously attached. In contrast, a person who avoids becoming close or dependent on their partner has an avoidant attachment style.

Attachment styles can also affect the way people navigate their relationships in today's technological age. Given the expanse of communicative technology extant in society, there is a certain level of assumed availability that comes with it. People carry their cell phones on their person at all times; the state of being truly beyond the reach of communication exists less and less. A partner not responding to a call or text immediately could in turn cause anxiety among people who are anxiously attached. In contrast, those who are avoidantly attached may be less inclined to keep up with the

expectation of constant communication. While these tendencies have always existed, they are exacerbated by the instantaneity of computer-mediated communication.

Overall, it may be said that there are many similarities and differences between the development of relationships started online and relationships started offline, and each has its challenges. Couples who meet in person have less opportunities to alter their self-presentation, thus showing more of their true self from the start. While this may be true, exclusively face-to-face interactions can cause self-disclosures to remain shallow for a longer period of time. In contrast, couples who meet online feel less inhibited and can quickly disclose information that has more depth and width, but the anonymity of computer-mediated communication leads to more calculated conversation. It is important that couples who initially interact online meet offline at some point, and sooner rather than later. Face-to-face communication is key in any relationship, and because of its high levels of social presence, it is associated with stronger, more intimate relationships. While there is no clear indicator of whether meeting a partner online or offline predicts the relationship's success, open communication, honesty, and face-to-face interaction are all necessary components of a successful, long-term relationship. Although it may require more effort to preserve the connection that partners in an online relationship develop, it is certainly possible to do so. What's important is that each person works to maintain the intimacy that they have created together. It is through awareness of potential online dating obstacles and the right amount of dedication that these relationships can thrive.

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