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| **Virtual Relationships in Social Media AO1** | **Virtual Relationshipsin Social Media AO3** |
| ***Self-Disclosure in Virtual Relationships***  Psychologists know that self-disclosure is important in face-to-face (FtF) relationships in the offline world. In recent years researchers have examined the role of self-disclosure in relationships rooted in social media.  How does self-disclosure operate in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)? There are two major and contrasting theories: | **Types of CMC**  P: One weakness of self-disclosure as an explanation for virtual relationships in social media is that it fails to consider the variety of CMC that there is.  E: For example, there are so many different types of CMC including Facebook, gaming, and online dating that people respond differently depending on the platform.  E: This is a weakness because the self-disclosure theory only considers CMC as a single concept. In the case of social networking sites, people generally have relationships in the offline world. People will disclose more personal information in a Facebook status update than they would when filling out an online e-commerce web form. The same goes for online dating: self-disclosure is reduced because both people expect to eventually meet FtF, whereas this wouldn’t be a consideration if they met in a chat room or on a gaming site.  L: As a result, the self-disclosure theory of virtual relationships in social media is not a completely valid explanation. |
| ***Reduced Cues Theory:***  Sproull and Kiesler (1986) stated that CMC relationships are less effective than FtF ones because they lack many of the cues we normally depend on in FtF interactions. These include non-verbal cues e.g. physical appearance. CMC particularly lacks cues to our emotional state e.g. facial expressions and tone of voice. This result in ***deindividuation*** because it reduces people’s sense of individual identity, which in turn creates ***disinhibition*** in relating to others. Virtual relationships are therefore more likely to involve blunt and even aggressive communication. We therefore do not self-disclose, and therefore we are less likely to want a relationship with someone who is so impersonal, or reveal our innermost feelings to them.  ***The Hyperpersonal Model:***  Walther (1996, 2011) argues that online relationships can be *more* personal and involve greater self-disclosure than FtF ones because CMC relationships can develop very quickly as S-D happens earlier, and once established they are more intense and intimate. They can therefore also end more quickly because the high excitement level isn’t matched by the level of trust between the relationship partners. Cooper and Sportolari (1997) called this the *boom and bust phenomena* of online relationships.  A key feature of self-disclosure in virtual relationships is that the sender of a message has more time to manipulate their online image than they would in an FtF situation. Walther calls this selective self-preservation. People online have more control over what to disclose and the cues they send. This means it is much easier to manipulate self-disclosure to promote intimacy in CMC relationships, by self-presenting in a positive and idealised way.  There is also a sense of anonymity. Bargh et al. (2002) point out that the outcome of this is rather like the *strangers on a train* effect in FtF relationships. When you’re aware that other people do not know your identity, you feel less accountable for your behaviour. So you may well disclose more about yourself to a stranger than to even your most intimate partner. | **Lack of Research for Reduced Cues Theory**  P: One weakness of the reduced cues theory as part of the explanation for virtual relationships in social media is that there is a lack of supportive evidence.  E: For example, Walther and Tidwell (1995) found that people in online interactions use other cues, such as style and timing of their messages, suggesting that nonverbal cues are not absent entirely, but rather they are just different. For instance, taking time to reply to a social network status update is often interpreted as a more intimate act than an immediate response. But not too much time or it might be considered a snub.  E: This is a weakness because there are clearly nuances here that are just as subtle as they are in FtF relationships. Acrostics such as (LOL), emoticons and emojis are used as effective substitutes for facial expressions and tone of voice in FtF interactions. The success of online communication is hard for the reduced cues theory to explain, because it shows that CMC interactions can be just as personal as those that conducted FtF and that it’s possible to express emotional states in virtual relationships.  L: As a result, the credibility of the reduced cues theory is reduced.  **Research Support for the Hyperpersonal Model**  P: One strength of the hyperpersonal model as a part explanation for virtual relationships in social media is there is supportive evidence.  E: For example, Whitty and Joinson (2009) explain how questions asked in online discussions tend to be very direct, probing and intimate. This is quite different from FtF conversations, which are often hedged around with ‘small talk’. Responses are likewise direct and to the point.  E: This is a strength because the hyperpersonal model predicts that people are motivated to self-disclose in CMC in ways which are sometimes ‘hyperhonest’ and sometimes ‘hyperdishonest’. The findings of this study support the model when it explains that the way we self-disclose in CMC relationships is designed to present ourselves in an exaggeratedly positive light which aids relationship formation.  L: Consequently, the explanatory power of the hyperpersonal model is increased. |
| ***Absence of Gating in Virtual Relationships:***  A gate is any obstacle to the formation of a relationship. FtF interaction is said to be gated e.g. physical unattractiveness, a stammer, and social anxiety (blushing, shyness etc.). McKenna and Bargh (1999) argue that a huge advantage of CMC is the absence of gating. Therefore the relationship can develop to the point where S-D becomes more frequent and deeper. This absence of gating allows an online relationship to ‘get off the ground’ in a way that is less likely to happen in FtF situations.  Absence of gating works by refocusing attention onto S-D and away from superficial factors. Online we are more interested in the person, than in what they look and sound like. People are also free to create online identities that they could never manage FtF. A man can become a woman, an introvert becomes an extravert, and a plain person can become the world’s most desirable sex symbol.  The ultimate expression of this is *Second Life*, where anyone can create any kind of avatar to represent themselves in a virtual reality. | **Support for Absence of Gating:**  P: One strength of the absence of gating as part explanation for virtual relationships in social media is that there is supportive evidence.  E: For example, McKenna and Bargh (2000) looked at CMC used by lonely and socially anxious people. They found that such people were able to express their ‘true selves’ more than in FtF situations. Of the romantic relationships that initially formed online, 70% survived more than two years. This is a higher proportion than for relationships formed in the offline world.  E: This is a strength because in FtF relationships, there is more of a need to fulfil the initial ‘superficiality’ of dating such as having to look good, or hold an interesting conversation, even trying to hide issues such as speech disorders or social anxiety, but as the theory explains, these are reduced in the online world. The aforementioned statistic highlights the fact that by eradicating these ‘issues’ and only focusing on the individual you are talking to, the depth of the relationship can grow much more easily and much more quickly in the virtual world.  L: As a result, the explanatory power of the absence of gating as part explanation for virtual relationships in social media is increased. |