

Analysis of the Irreplaceability of Offline Relationship

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Abstract: During covid 19, traditional offline social interaction becomes difficult. Benefiting from the availability of social media, people are increasingly relying on social media to socialize. Can social media interaction replace real-life interaction? Is a social media-based relationship a sufficient substitution for a real relationship? This article divides social media interaction into reciprocal and non-reciprocal and compares two different social media interactions with real-life interactions. For the reciprocal social media interaction, The first research question distinguishes computer-mediated communication (CMC) from face-to-face (FtF) and discusses the possibility of CMC replacing FtF. Because the absence of social cues cannot be made up, CMC is not a sufficient substitute for FtF. For the non-reciprocal social media interaction, the second research question focuses on parasocial interaction-induced parasocial relationships. Because of non-reciprocity and lack of authenticity, the parasocial relationship is not a good substitute for a real relationship. In conclusion, social media relationship is not a sufficient substitute for a real relationship, but they can be used as a good supplement to a real relationship. The difference between reciprocal social media relationships and non-reciprocal social media relationships is also discussed. Reciprocal social media relationships and real relationships are interchangeable, while non-reciprocal social media relationships cannot transform into real relationships.

Keywords: social media, CMC, parasocial relationship

1. Introduction

The outbreak of covid 19 has accelerated the gradual replacement of real personal interactions by social media interactions, a kind of computer-mediated communication (CMC). The availability and convenience of social media use and CMC is highlighted during covid 19. The COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of a physical distancing policy intensify people's dependence on social media. People are getting accustomed to interacting with others and developing relationships on social media. Transcending physical and geographical limitations, CMC becomes a norm for people to communicate. When FtF becomes impossible, CMC keeps people connected. During Covid 19, CMC helps people in quarantine stay in touch with family and friends and mitigate the psychological impact of social isolation [1]. CMC promotes well-being by uniting online communities and providing online social support. CMC helps to express emotions to overcome hardship and stimulate post-traumatic growth [2]. CMC brings people closer when they are not physically together.

Moreover, CMC can make up the part that F2F is short of. Identity concealment promotes authentic self-disclosure; people concern less about how others think of themselves in CMC. Communicators

feel less self-involved; they tend to be more honest and open. Communicators are not afraid of showing more explicit emotional expressions and a more authentic side of themselves in CMC. Honest self-disclosure increases the possibility of establishing a real connection between the two sides. People tend to establish a genuine connection in CMC [3].

CMC also promotes the formation of more positive impressions, according to the Hyper personal Model of CMC. The Hyper personal Model is based on selective self-presentation. Communicators make an effort to show their favorable selves [4]. In CMC, communicators have more control over self-presentation [5]. In face-to-face interaction, the reaction is instantaneously formed, while CMC provides communicators with a longer response time, enabling them to polish their responses. Long-distance couples engaging in CMC often result in a more idealized perception of each other, which prolongs and stabilizes their relationship. It is beneficial for long-distance couples using CMC to maintain relationships.

However, despite the advantages, can social media interaction replace real-life interaction? Is a social media-based relationship a sufficient substitution for a real relationship? The research topic is to discuss the possibility of replacing real-life interaction with social media interaction and replacing real relationships with parasocial relationships. This research divides social media interaction into reciprocal and non-reciprocal and compares two different kinds of social media interaction with real-life interactions. This research focuses on distinguishing social media interaction from real-life interaction. The first research question distinguishes CMC from face-to-face (FtF) communication, focuses on the drawbacks of CMC, and discusses the possibility of CMC replacing FtF. The second research question focuses on parasocial relationships as an extension of non-reciprocal social media interaction and discusses the possibility of parasocial relationships replacing real relationships. Current research mostly confuses reciprocal social media interaction and non-reciprocal social media interaction. The non-reciprocal nature of parasocial interaction is overshadowed. The significance of this study lies in distinguishing between reciprocal social media interaction and non-reciprocal social media interaction, emphasizing the non-reciprocal nature of parasocial interaction and highlighting how parasocial relationships affect social media users' well-being, helps to work with the complexity of social media use.

2. Comparison of Reciprocal Social Media Interaction and Real-Life Interaction

2.1. The Shortcoming of CMC

To start with, CMC comes with intuitive limitations. CMC is short of non-verbal social cues, which are necessary for both sufficient communication and relationship development. Facial expression and body language are important contextual information. Those typical non-verbal social cues convey the true intention of the other person, dominate communicators' impressions and responses and contribute to the mutual understanding of both sides [6,7]. Based on Cues filtered-out theories, the absence of non-verbal social cues harms relationship development [8]. Communicators have difficulty speculating the interpersonal context they are in. Non-verbal social cues reveal the individual identity, involuntary self-disclosure, and immediate emotional responses. Without that information, valid personal information is hard to obtain. Both parties who maintain their relationship through CMC lack a comprehensive understanding of each other. Relationship development is based on authentic and comprehensive information exchange. The information both sides observed from CMC is insufficient for relationship development [5]. Social cues are necessary for developing positive relationship outcomes, according to Social Information Processing Theory [9]. The absence of social cues induces miscommunication and identity deception. Communicators have difficulty detecting others' true intentions and identities, which harms the efficiency of communication and deteriorates the communication experience.

Moreover, CMC filters out involuntary self-disclosure, which is crucial for authentic and effective information exchange. Involuntary self-disclosure reveals authentic personal identity, which is necessary for relationship development. To sustain sufficient communication, accurate judgment and adaptive response to each other's intentions are indispensable. The lack of involuntary self-disclosure induces the deception of personal identity and reduces the chance for genuine communication. Distortion in self-disclosure makes CMC unreliable and hard to sustain. CMC-based relationship stands a good chance of being short-lived[10].

2.2. Overcoming Shortcomings

This part considers the constraint of CMC and shows how CMC solves the problem of the absence of non-verbal social cues. CMC communicators can make up for the absence of social cues with more expressive expressions. Social information can still be sufficiently exchanged, considering the absence of social cues [5]. Communicators would adjust to the constraints of computer-mediated communication by providing a higher quality of personal information. Communicators could consciously make efforts to share more valuable information about themselves to make up for the physical constraints [9]. Moreover, some non-verbal social cues can be verbalized. The emotional loss of not being able to communicate with each other face to face can be made up with emoticons use and emotional verbalization. The verbalization of emotion also improves the accuracy of emotional communication [3].

Other researchers suppose the absence of social cues may not play an important role in information exchange and relationship development. Mantovani argues that social interaction is more than physical interaction; co-presence is not necessary. The socio-cognitive factors play a key role in social interaction. The self that the communicator presents in communication is not monotonous. The communicator's response and reaction are influenced by context, culture, and environment. The information CMC transmits represents the context, culture, and environment where the communicator is located [3].

Although communicators can try to be more verbally expressive to sustain the accuracy of messages, CMC cannot afford the same intensity of information transfer as F2F. On the one hand, CMC eliminates the uncontrollable and impulsive nature of emotion. Offline relationship development is partially developed by emotional impulses. Without physical touch, emotional impulses are heavily distorted in CMC. On the other hand, CMC lacks visual and communicative emotional expression. Compared to experiencing the situation, the emotional reaction of both sides is less intensified. Emotional experience is heavily distorted. Emotional experiences in CMC may be of the same quality but lower in intensity and duration [3].

Furthermore, the reduction of spontaneity allows more self-reflection. Communicators have more control over their emotional expression. Because of masking, the turnover of authenticity is unnoticeable. They can offer more carefully constructed responses which may lead to better communication experience and better relationship outcomes. However, reduced authenticity breeds instability. Relationship-based on CMC costs more to sustain since communicators have to play the role of their idealized selves.

To sum up, the restrictions of CMC are not fully adapted despite the efforts made. Considering the advantages of CMC mentioned above, FtF provides more comprehensive information, and CMC provides more in-depth information; CMC could be a good supplement to FtF.

3. Parasocial Relationship as an Extension of Non-Reciprocal Social Media Interaction

3.1. Parasocial Relationship Supplements Real Relationship

Non-reciprocal social media interaction takes one step further, replacing the object of the conversation with an artificial media figure. The parasocial relationship can complement what is missing from a real relationship. The parasocial relationship provides companionship for people who have difficulty forming offline interpersonal relationships. The parasocial relationship is easily accessible and free from physical constraints. To actively engage in an interpersonal relationship, shared experience is necessary. However, under certain conditions, physical interaction is highly constrained. Certain people have a problem interacting with others in real life. The parasocial relationship provides sociability and affection for people who have insufficient interpersonal connections [11]. The reason why a certain group of people is short of social connection can be that they experience social ostracism in real life, they have a high need to belong [12], or they have physical constraints like quarantine through COVID-19 [13]. Those people turn to parasocial relationships for companionship. The parasocial relationship can partially satisfy people's need for companionship. In terms of providing security, predictability, and a sense of community, the parasocial relationship is a good complement to interpersonal relationships. The parasocial relationship can provide a sense of belonging despite its non-reciprocal nature.

Moreover, Parasocial relationship enables fans to engage in non-reciprocal relationships with their favorite celebrities. Parasocial relationship with celebrities is beneficial for personal growth [14,15]. Fans can engage in a parasocial relationship with their favorite celebrities. Engagement in parasocial relationships promotes their personal development and psychological well-being [16,17]. Parasocial relationship with celebrities promotes fans' self-congruity and well-being. Parasocial relationship with celebrities promotes positive self-review. Parasocial relationship with celebrities brings low-esteem fans closer to their ideal self. Low self-esteem fans view celebrities as their ideal selves. Parasocial relationships with celebrities made fans identify more with their ideal selves [18]. Celebrities can serve as effective role models. Fans tend to copy celebrities' interests and activities. If celebrities follow demonstrate healthy lifestyles, their fans are likely to have similar healthy lifestyles[19]. Likewise, if celebrities are confident and face challenges courageously, their fans tend to behave confidently and courageously.

3.2. The Shortage of Parasocial Relationship

Parasocial relationships are based on audiences' wishful thinking. Audiences stand an illusionary non-reciprocal relationship to the constructed media persona [11].

Social media users should be wary of confusing social media use with building real connections. Compared to interpersonal relationships. The parasocial relationship is short of reciprocity and authenticity [20].

On the one hand, non-reciprocity deteriorates parasocial relationships in three ways. Firstly, Non-reciprocity harms psychological well-being. Whether the relationship is reciprocal defines how social media use impacts users' psychological well-being. Baek et al. compare non-reciprocal relationships with reciprocal relationships on social media, focusing on how the reciprocity of relationships affects social media users' psychological well-being [20]. Burke et al. found that if the relationship is reciprocal, satisfaction with social networks increases and loneliness decreases. In contrast, if the relationship is non-reciprocal, satisfaction with social networks decreases, and loneliness increases [21].

According to the Uncertainty Reduction Theory, better predictability accompanies positive relationship experiences [22]. Non-reciprocity induces non-predictability, which might be the

reason why non-reciprocity harms psychological well-being. Secondly, a non-reciprocal Parasocial relationship adversely affects the reciprocal relationship. The non-reciprocal relationship is not only inferior to a reciprocal relationship but can also adversely affect the reciprocal relationship. Indulgence in non-reciprocal relationships harms the satisfaction of the reciprocal relationship. The parasocial relationship makes people construct unattainable idealized expectations for the relationship. Turkle argues that parasocial relationships do not take on the complexity of real relationships. People who indulge in parasocial relationships tend to oversimplify interpersonal relationships, focus on self-indulgence, and have unrealistic relationship expectations. Those attitudes undermine the construction of real relationships [23]. Especially for a parasocial romantic relationship, as the intensity of engagement in a parasocial romantic relationship with the media persona increases, relationship satisfaction and favorable perception of the real-life romantic partner decreases [18,24]. Thirdly, Non-reciprocity makes parasocial relationship lack stability and persistence. The parasocial relationship is impossible to improve. Because the parasocial relationship is non-reciprocal, whether the relationship lasts entirely depends on the audience. Although it seems like the audience has absolute control over the relationship, in fact, because of its non-reciprocal nature, when the audience feels unsatisfied about a certain aspect of the parasocial relationship, the relationship itself cannot be improved; the audience can only choose between ignoring the problem or leaving the relationship [11].

On the other hand, a lack of authenticity also hinders the development of the parasocial relationship. For a relationship to grow closer, increased self-disclosure and the sharing of personal details are necessary [25]. However, because the parasocial relationship lacks authenticity, uncertainty rises, and predictability is sacrificed. By Uncertainty Reduction Theory, the reduction of uncertainty correlates to deeper intimacy with the media figure; better predictability guarantees a positive relationship experience [22,26]. Audiences feel difficulty in growing closer to media figures over time.

People should be alert that parasocial relationships can be financially harmful. People who derive alternative satisfaction from parasocial relationships tend to confuse parasocial relationships with real-life relationships, which makes them easy to take advantage of. Many people are not aware of the profit-making in the parasocial relationship. Celebrities and influencers need followers to fantasize them. They make money out of fame and fans' admiration. They aim to earn money through constructing parasocial relationships. It is convenient to profit from parasocial relationship since it is mediated. In real-life relationships, the intention of the other side is easy to distinguish. People are more alert to observe each other's reactions and true intentions. While for a parasocial relationship, comprehensive information from the other side is unavailable. People are less alert. Profit-makers can easily show up as loving, caring, and ideal parasocial objects to induce consumption.

In conclusion, because parasocial relationship lacks reciprocity and authenticity, they parasocial relationship tends to be unstable and short-lived. The parasocial relationship is not an adequate substitute for an interpersonal relationship. Considering that parasocial relationship provides companionship for people who have difficulty forming an interpersonal relationship, and parasocial relationship with celebrities benefits self-perception and promotes personal development in a way that a real relationship cannot, the parasocial relationship could be a good supplement to a real relationship.

4. Discussion

The discussion focuses on the similarities and differences between reciprocal social media relationships and non-reciprocal social media relationships. The difference between offline relationships and online relationships is discussed.

Whether reciprocal or not, the establishment of online relationships must go through social media as a medium. In other words, both relationships are mediated by social media. Each of them falls

submissive to the constraint of mediated relationship. Interactions suffer a lack of non-verbal social cues, miscommunication and doubted authenticity.

A key difference between the two kinds of social media relationships is that the reciprocal one can transform into an offline relationship while the non-reciprocal one cannot. CMC facilitates relationships between real people, while the object of a parasocial relationship may not be a real person. Because CMC connects two real people, relationships based on CMC can be transformed into offline relationships. For example, online matches on dating can develop into real-life committed relationships. If CMC on tinder results in an offline meeting, a quarter of offline meetings lead to a committed relationship [26]. The boundary between reciprocal online relationships and real-life relationships is blurred. Because both of them are reciprocal, they are interchangeable if the physical constraint can be overcome. At the same time, since the object of a parasocial relationship is not necessarily a real person, the probability of a parasocial relationship turning into a real relationship is minimal. A parasocial relationship is hugely imagination based. Because of the lack of response, people tend to indulge in one-sided fantasies and gradually detach from reality. Addicting online relationships may exacerbate dissatisfaction with real-life relationships. However, the parasocial relationship cannot completely substitute the function of real relationships.

5. Conclusions

The absence of non-verbal social cues cannot be ignored; CMC is not sufficient enough to replace FtF. CMC is not an adequate substitution for FtF. Considering CMC is beneficial for establishing a genuine connection and maintaining a long-distance relationship. From the perspective of communicators, FtF provides more comprehensive information, and CMC provides more in-depth information. CMC is an ideal complement for FtF.

Compared to a real relationship, the parasocial relationship is short of authenticity and reciprocity. The parasocial relationship is not an adequate substitution for a real relationship. In contrast, the parasocial relationship provides companionship for people who have difficulty forming interpersonal relationships and makes physically impossible relationships possible. The parasocial relationship would be a good complement to real relationships.

The social media-based relationship is not sufficient enough to substitute for a real relationship. Social media relationship is best as a complement to a real offline relationship. In fact, regardless of the nature of the relationship, the establishment and development of a relationship always face various constraints and challenges. The good thing about social media is that it enlarges the pool of potential social networks. Social media-based interaction expands different possibilities for relationships. People are able to socialize freely without physical limitations.

Dividing social media-based relationships into the reciprocal and the non-reciprocal can help people to distinguish better how social media-based relationships affect them. Reciprocal social media relationships can be transformed into real relationships, while non-reciprocal relationships cannot. This article is an ideal reference for people who are unaware of the impact of social media and provides social media users with a comprehensive and detailed introduction to different social media-based relationships and their influences.

This research is mainly theoretical, focuses on analyzing literature review and lacks experimental data support. Future research can design experiments based on this theoretical framework. Future research can also dive deeper into financial risk derived from parasocial relationships or distinguish parasocial romantic relationships from dating app romantic relationships.

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