

Online Relationships:

Self-disclosure, Use of Deception, Effects of Absence of Gating

Online relationships are often formed through social media or via dating websites. The information people present online may not be representative of who they really are in person. There can however, be advantages to communicating via email/ messaging or dating apps, particularly if an individual has low self-confidence, anxiety or is living long distance from their partner.

Peter et al (2005) suggest that online communication allows people with poorer social skills to communicate more effectively. This could help vulnerable people access help and support online if they find face-to-face discussions challenging. This is particularly true of people with introvert personalities.

Interacting online allows for people to act anonymously, which may result in more honesty and less inhibition, as people are less concerned with how they appear to others. However in contrast, acting anonymously allows people to withhold information and perhaps even lie.

Bargh et al (2002) point out that when some people are aware that others do not know their identity, they feel less accountable for their behaviour. They called this concept the 'strangers on a train effect', arguing that people may well disclose more to a stranger than they would to a close, intimate partner.

Self-disclosure & Use of Deception

Self-disclosure is revealing information about yourself. In romantic relationships, partners tend to reveal more about themselves as the relationship develops. Sharing personal or intimate details with a partner helps to deepen the bond they have with each other.

Self-disclosure is important in building strong relationships face-to-face but as the internet has allowed for relationships to be formed online, psychologists have been interested in exploring the different contributing factors.

- **Reduced Cues Theory** - Sproull and Kiesler (1986) suggested that online relationships lack many of the cues we normally depend on in face-to-face interactions. These include nonverbal cues such as our physical appearance and emotional expression determined by our body language.

One problem with online relationships is that they can reduce a person's sense of individual identity (deindividuation) which can in turn lead to disinhibition. This may explain why some people feel more able to communicate in a blunt or aggressive way online.

Another implication of reduced cues is the increased potential for anonymity and deception. The absence of identifying features in online communication means that individuals can easily conceal their identity, lie about their background, or construct false personas.

- **Hyperpersonal Model** – Walther (1996, 2011) argues that online relationships can be more personal and involve greater self-disclosure than face-to-face ones. Often online relationships develop very quickly and once established can be more intense and intimate. There are two features of hyperpersonal self-disclosure in online relationships;
 - i) The individual sending the online message has more control over what they disclose and the cues they send, compared to if they were in a face-to-face environment. They can be very selective about how they present themselves to others, and this may be more idealistic rather than realistic. To achieve this manipulated picture they present of themselves, self-disclosure can either be too honest or extremely false.
 - ii) The individual receiving the online message gains a positive impression of the sender and may give feedback which unknowingly reinforces the manipulated self-impression.

This allows individuals to present a more favourable, idealised version of themselves. For example:

- People may share only their best photographs.
- They can hide socially stigmatised traits (e.g. social anxiety, disability).
- They can omit awkward body language, nervous laughter, or visible insecurity.

This enhanced control over self-presentation makes individuals appear more attractive, confident, or emotionally stable than they might seem offline. This, in turn, encourages others to disclose more deeply, assuming they are interacting with a trustworthy, emotionally available partner.

Cooper and Sportolari (1997) warned that the factors that make online relationships feel intense can also make them unstable. This is known as the 'boom and bust' phenomenon:

- The 'boom' phase involves a quick escalation of intimacy, fuelled by unfiltered disclosure and idealised perceptions.
- The 'bust' phase occurs when the relationship transitions into the offline world or inconsistencies emerge. For example, when real-life personality, appearance, or emotional expression does not match the idealised online image.

In this case as trust and emotional closeness were not built through real-world interaction, the foundation can feel fragile, and relationships may collapse once the illusion is broken. Sometimes, disappointment may stem from minor discrepancies, as idealisation sets unrealistic expectations.

Effects of Absence of Gating

Gating is where we place barriers in relationships in order to protect ourselves, particularly in new relationships when people are only just learning about each other. This can be done consciously or sub-consciously, without much thought.

McKenna and Bargh (1999) suggest a gate is any obstacle to forming a relationship. Face-to-face interaction is gated, in that it involves many features that can interfere with the early development of a relationship, as we see people in front of us, as they are. In online relationships there is an absence of gating.

The absence of gating refers to removing barriers that might generally inhibit relationship formation in face-to-face settings. These barriers or 'gates' can include physical unattractiveness, social anxiety, speech impediments, or shyness. In online communication, such cues are either absent or minimised, allowing individuals to focus on personality and self-disclosure rather than superficial factors.

A benefit to online relationships is that most gates are absent, this means it is easier for a relationship to begin more quickly than it would face-to-face. This can also allow people to self-disclose more openly and feel more confident in being their 'true selves'. However, this is still open to deception.

McKenna and Bargh (1999) looked at online communication by shy, lonely and socially anxious people. They found that these people were able to express their 'true selves' more than they would in face-to-face environments, with 71% of relationships surviving at least two years.

In some cases online relationship formation helps people build confidence before they move into meeting people in the offline world. As people we often seek positive reinforcement and adoration, value or respect from others in all aspects of life, and building confidence through communication online can help with this.

If people treat online communication as a tool designed to make an initial connection, and do not use it to set the foundation for a whole relationship, they are more likely to be successful in the long-term.

Zhao et al (2008) demonstrated that constructing a positive online identity can improve self-esteem and positively affect offline relationships. This has important implications for therapeutic interventions and digital education, suggesting that well-managed online interaction can support emotional and social development.

