

Computer-Mediated Relating: Liking and Self-Disclosure in Online Interactions

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Research Question

Does heightened self-disclosure online help build stronger interpersonal bonds (such as liking) between people who interact online than between people who interact face-to-face?

Background

There is an ongoing debate in the literature about whether the Internet is a relatively "impoverished" or impersonal environment because it lacks physical presence and facial or vocal cues (Culnan & Markus, 1987; Kiesler et al., 1984; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986) or whether the Internet can be a rich social environment because it allows people to overcome barriers to relationships such as stigma, shyness, or anxiety (Bargh et al., 2002; McKenna & Bargh, 1999; McKenna et al., 2002).

McKenna and her colleagues (2002; see also Bargh et al., 2002) have argued that **people who interact online like each other more** than if they interact face-to-face (FtF). They found that the same person is liked significantly more after an online chat than after a FtF chat.

Other studies have concluded that **online partners self-disclose more** than FtF partners (Joinson, 2001). Online discussions have been found to yield (1) higher proportions of self-disclosures, (2) higher proportions of questions designed to elicit disclosures, and (3) more intimate questions (Tidwell & Walther, 2002).

Collins and Miller (1994) reviewed studies that tested the relationship between liking and self-disclosure (but before Internet use was common and without medium as a factor). They found that

- (1) we like people who self-disclose to us,
- (2) we self-disclose to people we like, and
- (3) we like people to whom we self-disclose.

Goals & Predictions

- (1) Based on previous research, we predicted that liking and self-disclosure would be greater between partners who interacted online than between FtF partners.
- (2) We also wanted to investigate the relationship between liking and self-disclosure online—specifically, to test whether the 3 links identified in Collins and Miller's (1994) review also characterize online interactions—in order to see if heightened self-disclosure could account for greater liking online.
- (3) Because there is relatively less social information to process online, we hypothesized that people who interact online would be more attuned to how much their partners liked them and self-disclosed.

Method

Participants were randomly assigned to dyads. Each pair chatted for 20 minutes either online (using Yahoo! Instant Messenger) or FtF. Then they completed the dependent measures.

Participants

- 280 UC Berkeley undergraduates (194 females)
- Mean age = 19.83 (Range: 17 - 35)
- 80% use the Internet at least once per day, mostly to keep in touch with friends and family

Dependent measures

Liking (7-point Likert scales)

- How much did you like your partner?
- How much do you think your partner liked you?

Self-disclosure (7-point Likert scales)

- How much did you tell your partner about yourself?
- How much did your partner tell you about him/herself?
- How much personal or intimate information did you share with your partner?
- How much personal or intimate information did your partner share with you?
- How well do you think you got to know your partner?

Emotion ratings (9-point Likert scale)

- How much _____ did you feel during chat?
- 12 emotions, e.g., amusement, discomfort

Trustworthiness rating (5-point Likert scale)

- How well does "trustworthy" describe your partner's personality?

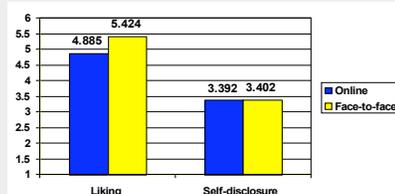
** Data were collected from two samples, and the order of the measures differed slightly between them. However, including sample as a factor did not change the results. Data are reported for both samples combined.

Results

Did participants report liking and self-disclosing more online than face-to-face?

NO.

- ▶ Participants liked their partners more in the FtF condition, $t(278) = -3.855, p < .001$.
- ▶ Participants did not differ in how much they reported self-disclosing, $t(278) = -0.071, ns$.



Results

Were liking and self-disclosure linked online?

YES...

- (1) Participants did self-disclose more if they liked their partners, $t(138) = 5.033, p < .01$.
- (2) Participants liked partners to whom they self-disclosed, $t(142) = 5.197, p < .01$.

...and NO!

- (3) Participants did **NOT** like partners if the partners self-disclosed, $t(142) = -1.049, ns$.

Results

Were participants who interacted online more sensitive to how much their partners liked them and self-disclosed, compared to FtF partners?

Agreement – i.e., Could individuals accurately judge how much their partners reported liking them and self-disclosing?

	Online	FtF
Did Partner A agree with Partner B about how much Partner B liked him/her?	$r = .05$ (ns)	$r = .28$ $p < .01$
Did Partner A agree with Partner B about how much Partner B disclosed to him/her?	$r = .26$ $p < .01$	$r = .40$ $p < .01$

Reciprocity – i.e., Did partners report liking each other and self-disclosing to the same degree?

	Online	FtF
If Partner A liked Partner B, did Partner B also like partner A?	$r = -.03$ (ns)	$r = .20$ $p < .05$
If Partner A self-disclosed, did Partner B also self-disclose?	$r = .21$ $p < .05$	$r = -.05$ (ns)

Additional Analyses

Observed differences in liking are not explained by differences in affect. FtF participants actually reported experiencing more negative affect overall, $t(278) = -2.557, p < .05$. There were no significant differences in overall positive affect.

These results were **not** due to a lack of trust between online partners. There was no significant difference in how trustworthy participants thought their partners online ($M = 3.13$) and FtF ($M = 3.29$), $t(114) = -.909, ns$.

Summary

- ▶ This study did not replicate previous findings. Participants reported liking their partners more in the FtF condition than in the online condition. There were no mean differences in self-reported self-disclosure.
- ▶ Only two of the three links between liking and self-disclosure identified by Collins and Miller (1994) emerged online.
- ▶ Different patterns of agreement and reciprocity were found for online and FtF partners.

Taken together, these results suggest that less interpersonal information is shared online than FtF. However, it is not clear from this data whether people are *unable* to transmit social information online or whether they simply do not send, attend to, or interpret cues in the same way.

Caution should be taken in applying these findings too broadly, as the quality and intimacy of social interactions online is most likely a function of other variables such as individuals' motivation for seeking out social interactions online and their comfort with computer-mediated communication.

Future Directions

- ▶ Transcripts from the conversations are being coded to see if differences emerge when observers rate the amount of liking and self-disclosure in FtF and online conversations.
- ▶ A follow-up study is underway in which partners interact for a somewhat longer period (35 minutes) to see if differences emerge. Additionally, we are examining in more depth the types of information people disclose online and FtF (i.e., whether people are more likely to share "hidden" aspects of themselves online).
- ▶ Future studies will continue to examine the bases of interpersonal liking and attraction online, in the absence of "traditional" factors such as physical attractiveness. Obviously self-disclosure is only part of the story.

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