



Virtual Relationships in Social Media

This Factsheet explains ways in which **virtual relationships** in **social media** may differ from **face-to-face relationships** and evaluates these explanations. The Factsheet includes examiner comments, and the worksheet gives you the opportunity to apply what you have learned to exam-style questions. Words in bold are explained in the glossary.

The examiner will expect you to be able to:

1. Explain the ways in which virtual relationships differ from face-to-face relationships.
2. Evaluate these explanations in terms of their strengths and limitations.
3. Support your answer with reference to published research.

Introduction

As internet use has increased, psychologists have become more interested in virtual relationships. Virtual relationships are social connections or partnerships formed between people online, who, in many cases, know each other only via the Internet. Since its inception, the internet has enabled people to socially interact in ways that were never previously possible. However, it is only through the rapid rise of specialist social media sites that these social interactions have begun to grow to the degree seen today. It is estimated that approximately 2 billion internet users are using social media, and these numbers are expected to grow (statista.com). Websites such as Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and Facebook offer users a range of platforms via which they can communicate with other users all over the world. Although many of these social media sites allow users to share a wide range of personal information with people they know and people they do not, some social media sites are much more specialist. For example, LinkedIn is a site which aims to allow networking between professionals for career purposes. Other social media sites such as Tinder and Match are dating sites which have the specific aim of creating romantic connections. However, the largest social media sites of all (such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter) offer users myriad ways of socially interacting with others, including sending private messages, conducting large-scale surveys, contributing to national or global conversations, and buying, selling and marketing products and services.

Social media in all its forms has enabled users to quickly and easily identify people with similar interests or views without the need to come into contact with, or establish a relationship with those people first, as would have been necessary in the past. In this sense, earlier psychological theories of relationship formation based on face-to-

face relationships may seem outdated. For example, **Filter Theory** (Kerckhoff and Davis, 1962) argued that relationship formation was only likely to occur between people who shared **social demographic** characteristics, which determine the likelihood of individuals meeting in the first place (such as geographical location). This 'filter' can now be bypassed along with many others, as desirable people can be identified at the touch of a button without the need to meet in the offline world first.



Recent research has also identified difficulties in maintaining relevance in the face of rapidly changing technologies and the new social norms that follow. Nonetheless, researchers have sought to explain how modern virtual relationships may differ to the more traditional face-to-face relationships in all of their phases, from initial relationship formation, to maintenance over time, and breakdown. This comparison of virtual and face-to-face relationships is sometimes simply referred to as a comparison of online and offline relationships. The research produced suggests these relationships differ in a variety of ways, including terms of **self-disclosure** and the **absence of gating**.

Exam Hint: You can use the rapidly expanding world of social media to help evaluate explanations of virtual relationships. This is because the vast range of social media websites and the pace of change on each site makes them difficult to test. For example, the ways that relationships form and develop will differ greatly from one site to the next, and from older versions of a particular social media platform to updated versions. This means research is limited to only ever understanding virtual relationships on a specific platform, and at a specific time, making it difficult to make generalisations beyond this.

Self-Disclosure in Virtual Relationships

Psychologists argue that self-disclosure (sharing intimate personal information about ourselves with another person) in social media is very different compared to face-face relationships. The **Hyperpersonal Model** (Walther, 2011) argues that online relationships can be *more* intimate and involve greater self-disclosure than face-to-face ones.



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Whitty and Joinson (2009) analysed a large number of research findings and concluded that questions in online discussions tend to be very direct, probing and intimate with direct responses given too, which is quite different from face-to-face discussions which often consist of more superficial small talk. This supports the central claim of the Hyperpersonal Model – that we self-disclose more online to present ourselves in an exaggeratedly positive light in order to aid relationship formation.

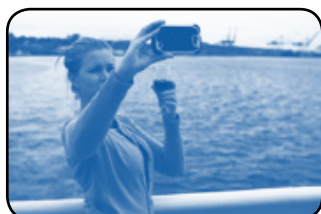


This could be because there is greater anonymity online and less fear of ridicule or rejection that might occur when self-disclosing face-to-face. As a result, self-disclosure may happen earlier online and be more intimate. Although this level of self-disclosure may appear to be a recent phenomenon that has arisen as a direct result of technological advances and changes in the way we communicate, some researchers have suggested this is very similar to a phenomenon first identified in 1975 by Zaik Rubin called the **'strangers on a train'** phenomenon. Rubin carried out a series of studies which showed that we are more likely to disclose personal information to people that we don't know (e.g. on trains) and are unlikely to meet again, possibly because they do not have access to our social circle, reducing issues of confidentiality. Perhaps then, these hyperpersonal exchanges seen on social media represent



a response to strangers and **unconnected others** that has existed as a social norm for a very long time. Nonetheless, with the proliferation of social media, what may have been a relatively rare occurrence has now become much more commonplace.

According to the Hyperpersonal Model, another 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 a face-to-face situation. This might include having more time to control our physical appearance online through posing and editing photographs, as well as choreographing social situations, in order to present ourselves in the most appealing ways possible. However, it also includes having more time to compose written communication, such as status updates and messages, in order to maximise the intended impact of our words in ways that may not always be possible in face-to-face verbal communication. As a result, 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 by self-presenting in a positive and idealised way. Walther calls this **selective self-presentation**. This, combined with the level of anonymity that can be achieved online, may explain why many of the barriers to self-disclosure that are present in the offline world, are removed by interacting via social media.



In terms of ways in which these hyperpersonal exchanges online might affect the formation and maintenance of a relationship, it is thought that social media sites allow relationships to both develop

and end more quickly. This is because the high excitement level of the interaction isn't always able to be matched by the level of trust between the partners involved. This has been called the **boom and bust** phenomenon of virtual relationships.

Examiner Comment: As self-disclosure can be discussed in relation to both face-to-face relationships and virtual relationships, there is a tendency for some answers to lose focus and start explaining self-disclosure in relationships more generally. Although concepts like the 'strangers on a train' phenomenon can be used here. It is only creditworthy if it is clearly linked to virtual relationships.

Explanations of Self-Disclosure in Virtual Relationships

The notion of greater self-disclosure online may even have a biological basis. Tamir and Mitchell (2012) found that there was an increase in MRI activity in the nucleus accumbens and the ventral tegmental area (VTA) of the brain when people were talking about themselves. These brain areas are associated with reward and were highly active during self-disclosure and showed reduced activity when participants were talking about someone else. This suggests self-disclosure is rewarding and, given an online forum via which we can freely self-disclose with no fear of any impact on our day-to-day lives, it is in our nature to maximise these rewards by self-disclosing more quickly and frequently.

Furthermore, although the 'boom and bust' characterisation of virtual relationships may suggest that such relationships are less robust than more traditional relationships, Rosenfeld and Thomas' (2012) research suggests otherwise. Their study of online and offline relationships found no difference in terms of the quality or fragility of the relationships analysed. This suggests, although virtual relationships may develop more quickly online (boom) they may not break down (bust) any more than face-to-face relationships, bringing Walther's claim into doubt.

However, critics have suggested that self-disclosure may differ depending on the type of social media used. It has been argued that self-disclosure on online dating websites in particular is, in fact, reduced. This may be because both communicators anticipate future meetings face-to-face in the offline world, a consideration that generally doesn't exist in many other social media forums such as blogging sites or chatrooms, for example. This is a problem as it suggests explaining virtual relationships as a single concept ignores the vast variety of different relationships that occur via different forms of social media.

The Absence of Gating in Virtual Relationships

Another key difference between virtual and face-to-face relationships comes in the form of **gating**. Gating refers to any barrier or obstacle to the formation of a relationship, such as physical unattractiveness, a stammer or social anxiety, which can interfere with face-to-face interactions. An advantage of virtual relationships is the absence of gating where barriers to relationship formation are not present. This is because social media removes a number of pressures that are present in face-to-face interactions, such as the pressure to look good, or to respond to a range of different social situations in a certain way. This serves to refocus attention on the content of conversation and away from potentially distancing features such as what people look

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and sound like. Zhao et al (2008) found that social media sites can empower 'gated' individuals to present a more socially desirable version of themselves that they aspire to be but have been unable to achieve in face-to-face situations. All of this might make it possible for some individuals to get to know each other, and develop a more intimate relationship, in a way that they might find more difficult in face-to-face relationships.

Exam Hint: It can be an effective strategy to refer back to ideas you introduced earlier in the essay. For example, in explaining how an absence of gating enables greater self-disclosure to occur if you had already introduced the idea of self-disclosure. This can be effective because it helps give the essay a sense of 'flow' and cohesion.

Evaluation of the Absence of Gating Explanation

Baker and Oswald (2010) surveyed 207 students about their shyness, Facebook usage and the quality of their friendships. They found that, for those who scored high for shyness, greater use of Facebook was associated with a perception of their friendships as being higher quality. This association between Facebook usage and friendship quality was not made by those who scored low for shyness. This suggests that individuals who are 'gated' by shyness find particular value in virtual relationships.

Furthermore, McKenna and Bargh (2000) found that lonely and socially anxious people felt more able to express their true selves online than in face-to-face relationships. Furthermore, of the romantic relationships that formed online, 70% survived more than two years which is a higher success rate than those formed in the offline world. This is positive as it supports the idea that an absence of gating can help develop successful relationships in a way that that is less likely to happen face-to-face.

Additionally, Zhao et al (2008) claim that when certain people are able to express their true selves online, this may enhance their overall self-image and, as a result, increase their chances of connecting to others in their offline world. This is positive as it suggests certain features of virtual relationships can have wider benefits to a person's life, both online and offline.

However, critics argue it may be wrong to see virtual relationships as distinct from face-to-face relationships. Walther (2011) argued that theorists should acknowledge the fact that modern relationships are most usually conducted both online and offline. Therefore, what we choose to disclose in our online relationships will inevitably be influenced by our offline interactions, and vice versa. Also, barriers to relationship formation (such as social anxiety) are only really reduced in our online communication with others and, in most cases, this may only account for a certain proportion of the total number of exchanges we have with our potential partners. This is a problem as it may be overly simplistic to assume relationships must be either online or offline.

Conclusion

It is clear that the factors that may have influenced relationship formation in the past have changed as a result of the Internet generally and social media use more specifically. Research suggests that these changes have had both positive and negative effects. Positive effects include social media making it easier for relationships to start as a

result of greater self-disclosure online. Furthermore, the absence of gating online may have enabled some people (such as socially anxious people) to build relationships that may otherwise have never developed in the offline world. However, in the same way that relationships may develop faster online, there is some suggestion that these relationships may also be more temporary and susceptible to breakdown. As the number of social media users grows, and as social media companies develop new technologies that connect people in ever more creative ways, it is likely that we will see more changes to the ways people conduct their relationships. This only makes it all the more important for psychologists to continue to develop their understanding of the changing face of modern relationships.

Glossary

Absence of gating: This refers to a difference between online and face-to-face interactions whereby barriers or obstacles to the formation of a relationship (e.g. physical unattractiveness or social anxiety) are not always present online.

Boom and bust: The idea that virtual relationships can both develop and end more quickly.

Face-to-face relationships: Social connections or partnerships formed and primarily conducted in person, as opposed to via virtual media.

Filter Theory: An explanation of relationship formation which suggests that there are consecutive factors (such as social demography) that act as filters to 'narrow down' the range of available romantic partners to a much smaller pool of possibilities.

Gating: Any barrier or obstacle to the formation of a relationship, such as physical unattractiveness or social anxiety, which can interfere with face-to-face interactions.

Hyperpersonal Model: The theory that online relationships can be more personal and involve greater self-disclosure than face-to-face ones.

Selective self-presentation: The process of manipulating your online image in order to promote a more positive and idealised version of yourself.

Self-disclosure: The sharing of intimate personal information about ourselves with another person.

Social demographics: This refers to personal characteristics (such as geographic location, age, and religion) which determine the likelihood of individuals meeting in the first place.

Social media: This refers to technologies that facilitate the sharing of information, ideas, interests and other forms of expression via online communities and networks.

Strangers on a train: The idea that we are more likely to disclose personal information to people that we don't know (e.g. on trains) and are unlikely to meet again.

Unconnected others: People with no links to any of our social networks, personal or professional, online or offline.

Virtual relationships: Social connections or partnerships formed between people who have met online, and in many cases, know each other only via the Internet.

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Worksheet: Virtual Relationships in Social Media

Name: _____

1. Summarise ways in which self-disclosure may differ in virtual relationships, compared with face-to-face relationships.

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2. Explain one strength and one limitation of research into self-disclosure in virtual relationships.

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3. Outline what is meant by ‘absence of gating’ in the context of virtual relationships.

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4. Briefly evaluate the research into the absence of gating in virtual relationships.

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