Manoj Vasa

Shari Hartz

SPE 1710-004 Interpersonal Communication

11/12/2015

Metro State University of Denver

Lack of Intimacy in Online Interactions

Modern society has developed an immense attraction to online communication. Such social media as Facebook, and Twitter, and IM have imposed a strong impact on how we communicate today. As immense as these networks may be I believe that online communication lacks a true sense of intimacy that is present in interactions in the real world. Online communication refers to any form of digital communication on a computer or on a smart phone including emails, text messaging, Facebook, Twitter, and online chatrooms. These forms of online communications have deeply impacted our perception of social interaction. Intimacy is a feeling of closeness that exists between us and our relationship partners (McCornack, 2013, p.60). I will explain three different reasons as to why this online communication lacks the level of intimacy that the real word conveys. These three reasons consist of the construction of a mask online, lack of nonverbal communication, and the lack of the degree of empathy that may be present in offline interaction.

Social media is a dynamic environment that can be altered by any individual to their own preferences. They can create their own persona to define their interests, hobbies, and character. Although some people may abstain from dishonest profiling of themselves, others create a mask that is sometimes more appealing than their true selves. Dr. Don Ihde (2002) said in his observation,” through fantasy enhanced by evocative texting and (true or false) images, we may become ‘virtually enchanted’” (p. 82). Through this mask people speak their opinions and ideals in a way that influences their online personality. Others become attracted or enchanted to this personality crafted by this stranger. However, they are attracted to this mask rather than the true identity behind the mask. The sense of anonymity in social media allows various people to craft their own mask to be someone else apart from their offline personality. Sonia Livingstone (2008) has exclaimed that, “it seems that for many, creating and networking online content is becoming an integral means of managing one’s identity, lifestyle and social relations” (p. 396). This identity maintained in their social relations exhibits how they want to be perceived by others. In other words, people convey an alternate self-concept in social media than that of real life. Through her interviews Sonia Livingstone has concluded that, “thus a visually ambitious, ‘pick and mix’ profile, that frequently remixes borrowed images and other content to express continually shifting tastes offers for some a satisfactorily ‘successful’ self, liked and admired by peers” (Livingstone, 2008, p. 9). This unauthentic self-concept may in terms raise their self-esteem as they craft their unique personality. Self-concept is “your overall idea of who you are based on the beliefs, attitudes, and values you have about yourself” (McCornack, 2013, p. 40). Self-esteem, on the other hand, is “the overall value you assign to yourself” (McCornack, 2013, p. 41). Some people also take advantage of their anonymous profile to perform acts of deception to gain other people’s trust. McCornack (2013) explains that, “people communicating on online dating sites, posting on social networking sites, and sending messages via email and text distort and hide whatever information they want, providing little opportunity for the recipients of their message to check accuracy” (p. 201). This further affirms the idea that people take advantage of others by creating this mask and only sharing information that they’d think is necessary to gain their trust. Through their ploys they establish this false sense of intimacy from their receiver. However, online interactions lack the unspoken communication that is always present in face to face communication.

One of the most critical components of offline interaction absent in online communication is nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication is defined as the “intentional or unintentional transmission of meaning through an individual’s nonspoken physical and behavioral cues” (McCornack, 2013, p. 211). Several nonverbal communication cues consist of hand gestures, any facial features such as smiles, frowns, or lifted eyebrows, and sometimes a sigh or even a yawn. These aspects are all present in offline communication. When interacting with someone, these various cues help you interpret what the receiver is feeling and be able to interpret that feedback**.** Often times we rely more on nonverbal cues than verbal communication to determine someone’s genuine intentions behind their words.However, online interactions convey a message through a wall of text with the occasional emoticon that isn’t particularly honest. As McCornack (2013) explained, “Online communication also provides us with a sense of invisibility. Without sharing a physical context with the people with whom we’re communicating, we feel as if we’re ‘not really there’. Consequently, we feel distant from the consequences of our messages” (p. 128). In offline interaction we see their physical behaviors, their eyes, and discern their tone of voice to further validate the conversation as opposed to the delayed short response of an online interaction. In a Study Uwe Matzat (2010) did, he observed that “after periods with face-to-face meetings, online socializing activities and emotional exchange took place much more frequently. She argued that face-to-face interaction has a catalytic effect” (p. 1174). Furthermore, this proves that to foster a true, intimate relationship online you must also engage in offline interactions composed of emotion and nonverbal cues.

Uwe Matzat’s study that offline interaction further enhanced online interactions can be applied to certain online communication outputs such as skype or facetime. These forms of communication severely enhance interactions as they do alleviate the concern for lack of nonverbal cues. The presence of welcoming gestures such as smiles and laughs are present in this form of online communication. A study done by Dr. Lauren E. Sherman, Minas Michikyan, and Patricia M. Greenfield showed how participants bonded to one another depending on the medium of communication used. These mediums of communication consisted of text, audio, video and in-person communication (E. Sherman, 2013, p. 1). There were 29 pairs of female college students willing to participate in the study. In this Study, participants had to self-report their perceived rating of the bonding through each of these forms of communication. The scale the participants had to use ranged from 0(no emotion) to 8 (extreme emotion). Apart from overall bonding, the participants also had to rate the level of bonding they felt through specific actions as well. These actions included smiles, laughter, head nods and gestures. Dr. Sherman and colleagues found through the study that communicating through IM and audio chat yielded the lowest bonding scores of 5.88 and 6.02 respectively. However, the overall self-reported bonding score for in-person communication was 6.59 while the score for video chat was 6.31. Although it was only a slight difference, participants reported that they felt a higher level of bonding through in-person communication than video chat. An interesting finding in this study was that the amount of bonding the participants felt for smiles was higher in video chat than in person and the level for laughter was about the same in both with the level for gestures and head nods being dominantly favored in in-person (8.18 and 8.17 respectively) communication than in video chat (5.56 and 7.17 respectively) (E. Sherman, 2013, p. 4). Through this study we can conclude that some nonverbal cues may be present in offline communication and in video chat, but these cues are more appreciated and acknowledged in person than in video communication media such as skype and face time (E. Sherman, 2013, p. 6). Consequently, these results may present that there exists a higher sense of empathy in both the speaker’s and listener’s conscience in in-person communication than in online communication given the results of the self-reported bonding level for the different mediums.

Furthermore, online communication lacks the sense of empathy that is present in offline interactions. Empathy is “when we make an attempt to understand other’s perspectives and be aware of their feelings in order to identify with them” (McCornack, 2013, p. 99). There is a significant lack of feedback for the sender and receiver when participating in an online interaction. This lack of feedback makes it difficult to relate to the concerns of your audience. As McCornack (2013) has explained, “Without feedback, we have difficulty experiencing empathy and gauging the appropriateness of our emotional expression” (p. 129). Not being able to decipher how the other person feels as they send a message confuses the receiver. This confusion leads to an incoherent conversation that may lead to unique meanings to both parties. Often times, as Jeffery T. Hancock and Philip J. Dunham have found in their study that “we tend to ‘overattribute’ and develop our own idealized impressions of the other person in the conversation” (Hancock, J. T., & Dunham, P. J., 2001, p. 332). Furthermore, such a lack of feedback could also discourage us to reply as we would in an offline interaction. In an offline interaction there exists gestures, facial features, and a tone of voice to assist in decoding the meaning of the message being intercepted by the receiver. Manen (2010) has made the observation that, “ when writing to a friend about a topic, a book, or a movie it may happen that we get so involved in the writing that we temporarily seem to forget that we are writing to someone or that we are writing for others”(p. 1028 ). This emphasizes the idea that through online communication, it feels as if you are talking to yourself for the moment you are sending the message. This clarifies the lack of empathy in a conversation. With no eye contact or a reassuring nod confirming attention we find ourselves writing a message to our content momentarily disregarding whoever is receiving the message. This further declares the lack of intimacy in online communication.

Nonetheless, Offline communication can greatly effect online interactions. The sense of empathy and intimacy in offline interactions, however, doesn’t exist in online communication. Real world interactions consist of nonverbal cues to assist in the comprehension of the message put forth by the speaker. Such nonverbal cues as vocalicsassist in understanding a tone in the message as opposed to interactions that are conducted online. The tone of voice or hand gestures could convey more information in offline conversations. These interactions allow the listener to process the message and offer some feedback. These aspects of offline communications allow the presence of empathy and emotion along with intimacy to exist as opposed to the stagnant conversations online that often times promote misinterpretations of context. The masks that one may craft online may be easily seen through in offline interaction. The intimacy and empathy present in offline interactions can break through these masks to reveal the ingenuity of a rather falsified online persona through the cracks. I believe that this same sense of intimacy is not present in online communication.

References

Hancock, J. T., & Dunham, P. J. (2001). Impression formation in computer-mediated communication revisited. *Communication Research*, 28, 325-347.

Ihde, D. (2002). Bodies in technology. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 20, 95 – 111.

Livingstone, S. (2008). Taking risky opportunities in youthful content creation: Teenager’s use of social networking sites for intimacy, privacy, and self-expression. *New media and society*, 10, 393 – 411

Manen, Max V. (2010). The Pedagogy of Momus Technologies: Facebook, Privacy, and Online Intimacy. *Qualitative Health Research*, 20, 1023-1032

Matzat, U. (2010). Reducing Problems of Sociability in Online Communities: Integrating Online Communication with Offline Interaction. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 1, 1170 – 1193.

McCornack, S. (2013). Reflect & Relate: An Introduction to Interpersonal Communication. *Bedford/St. Martin’s*, 3, 1 – 419.

Sherman, L. E., Michikyan, M., & Greenfield, P. M. (2013). The effects of text, audio, video, and in-person communication on bonding between friends. *Cyberpsychology: Journal on Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 7(2), article 1.