Manoj Vasa

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, 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. I will explain three different reasons as to why this online communication lacks the level of intimacy that the real word conveys.

Social media is a dynamic environment that can altered by any individual to their own aesthetics. They can create their own persona as 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. As 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. Nonetheless, some people are attracted to this character and claim their intimacy towards them. 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 than whom they really are in real life. 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. This unauthentic self-concept may in terms raise their self-esteem as they craft their unique personality. 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.

Online interactions lack many crucial aspects of offline interactions. One of the most critical components of offline interaction 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 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**.** However, online interactions convey a message through a wall of text with the occasional emoticon that isn’t particularly honest. As McCornack (2013) has 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).We see their physical behaviors, their tone of voice, and their eyes 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.

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. ~~Such a lack of feedback also discourages each person to reply as they 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 affect online interactions. The sense of empathy and intimacy in offline interactions, however, don’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 convey more information in conversations that take place offline. These 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.

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