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#Clickbait: Social Media, Attraction, and Relational Development

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An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the Department of Communication Arts.

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Under the mentorship of Dr. Beverly Graham

Abstract

In the age of social media networking and online dating, interpersonal communication has evolved. Today's young adults have grown up during the evolution of social media. Social Penetration Theory (SPT) proposes that interpersonal relationships develop through self-disclosure (Punyanunt-Carter, 2019). As we move from public to more private information in the process of self-disclosure, we develop deeper and closer interpersonal relationships. The purpose of this study is to analyze attraction, perceived authenticity, and relational development on social media through the SPT lens. I argue that Twitter is a popular social media platform that encourages user authenticity and that social media users interpret relational closeness and form impressions of other social media users' identities by analyzing disclosures. Twenty-one undergraduate college students participated in surveys and focus group interviews for the study. I surveyed participants about the perceived authenticity of social media users on Twitter, Instagram, and general social media platforms, as well as what attributes and qualities they examine while observing others' social media profiles. Participants rated Twitter higher than Instagram in depicting social media users' true, authentic selves. Results indicated that participants commonly observe the social media profiles of others to

determine similar interests, beliefs, values, appearance, and social circles. Furthermore, I created a Twitter profile and asked participants to observe the profile and attempt to apply the steps of the SPT. All participants analyzed disclosures from the Twitter profile to form impressions of the profile user's personality traits, values, and personal beliefs. By applying the SPT to social media, I explicate the common factors that influence attraction on social media and conclude that social media users analyze disclosures to form impressions and evaluate relational prototypes of others via social media.

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#Clickbait: Social Media, Attraction, and Relational Development

In 1973 psychologists Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor researched how individuals become psychologically closer to each other. They believed that relationships progressed through stages of "penetration" towards each person's inner self through a process of self-disclosure (Punyanunt-Carter, 2019). Self-disclosure increases intimacy in relationships and is the purposeful process of revealing information about oneself (Carpenter & Greene, 2016). Altman and Dalmas's ideas became the basis of the Social Penetration Theory (SPT). SPT states that relationships develop from superficial to more intimate through self-disclosure (Carpenter & Greene, 2016). Individuals use the stages of the SPT to form relationships and decide the extent of the relationship. This theory and process of self-disclosure are often metaphorically compared to an onion. The more layers you peel back from the onion, the closer you get to the core of the onion. According to Carpenter and Greene (2016), "social penetration is a process through which people "peel back" others' layers of personal information through interpersonal interaction to reach the core" (p. 1). One's "core self" represents the most intimate details about that person. The public image is the superficial, outer layer of a person, while the private self is the innermost layers of a person that are only revealed over time through self-disclosure. Two terms are used to describe the exchange of information in disclosure: breadth and depth. Breadth in self-disclosure describes the number of topics discussed about the various aspects of people's lives, such as work, family, hobbies, school, and more. Depth refers to the degree of intimacy and details shared about those various topics and aspects of people's lives. The more we engage in self-disclosure with other people, the deeper our interpersonal connections will be.

There are five stages of self-disclosure in the SPT: orientation, exploratory affective, affective, stable, and depenetration. The orientation stage is the "small talk" stage. If we applied

this to college students, communicators would share basic information about each other, such as their classification, name, and major. The exploratory affective stage allows communicators to reveal more about themselves, but nothing too intimate or deep. Communicators may share their favorite sports team, music preference, and food choices. Most relationships remain at this level. The affective stage discloses more personal and private matters. Communicators share their goals, aspirations, and beliefs. Communicators tend to develop personal ways of speaking, and they are more comfortable with criticizing or arguing with each other. Romantic relationships and genuine friendships develop at this stage. The stable stage is where communicators are open, and they feel they can predict how the other person will react. Communicators' deepest beliefs and values are shared here. Lastly, we have the depenetration stage. If the costs of self-disclosure outweigh the benefits, the communicators will terminate the relationship here.

In the age of social media networking and online dating, interpersonal communication has evolved. Profile creators use their social media profiles to present curated versions of themselves. Likewise, viewers use social media and profile accounts to generate impressions of others. Through these impressions, people make assumptions about potential relational closeness. Disclosiveness helps individuals gauge impression formation and analyze if others fit into their relational prototype. Relational prototypes are mental guides that specify expectations for certain roles and types of relationships (Trenholm & Jensen, 2013). For example, a person may have expectations for the role of a spouse or romantic partner to be someone that is romantic, funny, kind, nurturing and more. However, their relational prototype for a friend may not have the same attributes and expectations.

Today's young adults have grown up during the evolution of social media. Also, COVID-19 has caused masses of people to stay at home, which has put a greater emphasis on the use of

social media and computer-mediated communication (CMC). However, social media does not always depict our true selves. Social media users have the power to control what information they disclose on their profiles. Many social media users tend to depict the happy moments in their lives to portray a certain image of themselves and their lifestyle. These moments can be genuine, but they are not always realistic. Some people lie entirely and create a completely different persona on social media than their authentic selves. In a world where we are more technologically advanced and connected than ever before, it is hard to decipher genuine authenticity online.

Fortunately, some social media networks have a more relaxed environment than others. Twitter is one of the most popular social media platforms that tends to encourage authenticity. Twitter is a platform where jokes, sarcasm, happy moments, anger, pictures, and tidbits about the minuscule parts of your life are welcome. All content is welcome. The impression of that content lies within the other users. I would argue that Twitter users tend to say what they feel and post what they like because someone out there will not be ashamed to agree. Also, with constant stimulation of status updates, there is so much content to like and relate to. By tailoring your timeline to your interests, Twitter encourages authenticity. Participants can express their personal thoughts and be exposed to content that matches their interests, which users will display or support by liking or Retweeting the content. This is beneficial when making impressions of others on social media.

By examining Twitter profiles, users can analyze disclosiveness to interpret relational closeness and personality traits. The more in-depth information discovered in the profile via Tweets, engagements, and likes, the greater ability to judge potential relational closeness. It is important to understand what factors insinuate relational closeness and how social media-based

self-disclosure is utilized to formulate impressions. The purpose of this study is to apply SPT to social media, specifically Twitter. Whether people realize they are doing it or not, people are constantly forming impressions of others. By applying the SPT to social media, I will analyze how young adults form impressions and evaluate relational prototypes via Twitter profiles, as well as what factors influence attraction when observing social media profiles.

Literature Review

Self-Disclosure

One of the most common themes throughout the literature on CMC, SPT and interpersonal relationships is self-disclosure. Dunleavy and Booth-Butterfield (2009) investigated the relationship between idiomatic communication with solidarity and satisfaction to validate SPT using Knapp's stages of escalation and de-escalation. This study attempted to understand the differences between the functions in romantic relationships that are coming together and falling apart. Idiomatic communication consists of words, phrases, and nonverbal communication, that have unique meanings for relational partners. Knapp (1978) identified five stages of ''coming together'' or escalation stages: initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating, and bonding. Knapp's five stages of ''falling apart'' or de-escalation are differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating. Results show that people in escalating romantic relationships use more idioms than people in de-escalating relationships. Idiomatic communication, in addition to self-disclosure, aids in the penetration process. SPT assumes that partners develop a more unique relationship and way of expressing themselves as a relationship becomes closer. As relationships deteriorate, couples tend to use idioms with more negative effects. Dunleavy and Booth-Butterfield's (2009) study is beneficial in explaining the different stages of a relationship and self-disclosure's effects. I can apply this to my research by

studying how language and written social media communication impact first impressions and judgment.

Furthermore, Jiang, Bazarova, and Hancock (2011) studied and tried to explain increased self-disclosure intimacy in text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) versus face-to-face (FtF) interactions. Based on joint effects of perception intensification processes in CMC and the disclosure reciprocity norm, the authors predicted a perception-behavior intensification effect. People perceived partners' initial disclosures as more intimate in CMC than FtF and reciprocated this with more intimate disclosures of their own. In an experiment, participants interacted with a confederate who made either intimate or non-intimate disclosures across the two communication media. The utterances generated by the participants were coded for disclosure frequency and intimacy. Consistent with the proposed perception-behavior intensification effect, CMC participants perceived the confederate's disclosures as more intimate and reciprocated with more intimate disclosures than FtF participants did. This study contributes to my research by illustrating how social media has a heavy influence on the self-disclosure and impression formation of others. People felt it was easier to connect on a deeper level through social media than with face-to-face communication. This comfortability behind a screen makes it easier to self-disclose information and judge others.

Walther, Kashian, Jang, Shin, and Dai (2016) applied persistence and self-perception to the relationships between self-disclosure and liking. Participants were provided with a list of questions, either superficial or intimate, and instructed to choose five out of the six questions to ask and respond to their partners. After logging them into the chat channel, researchers told participants they could interact with their partners for up to 30 minutes. After participants finished their discussion, they completed an online questionnaire. Each participant recorded his

or her liking for the partner using 13 items of Rubin's (1970) liking scale. Walther et al. (2016) found that the persistence of messages appears to elevate liking and closeness toward a reciprocating partner. When self-disclosures between CMC users and a disclosive conversation partner were persistent, the CMC resulted in more liking and closeness between the user and partner. Results indicated minimal liking and closeness between CMC users and partners that shared limited disclosures and lacked persistence in disclosiveness. Message persistence may be an important factor in how CMC sometimes contributes to hyperpersonal levels of intimacy. This study contributes to my research by highlighting how immediacy in communication increases self-disclosure and relational closeness. People like immediate gratification and answers. Social media provides immediate gratification, which allows us to instantly find details about the person that has captured our attention. This immediate gratification and disclosure aids in relational closeness and immediate impression forming.

Goei and Tamborini (2017) examine if the positive effect of similarity might supersede the negative effect of norm violation on attraction and subsequent comforting. After completing self-reports of disclosiveness, participants in the study were paired with a confederate who made a deep, negative disclosure. Participant responses were videotaped and coded for comforting behavior. Participants receiving the highest scores on comforting responded with statements that explicitly acknowledged and addressed the feelings or perspective of the discloser. Goei and Tamborini (2017) found that deep or negative disclosures too early in the development of a relationship decreased attraction. Negative disclosures produce negative feelings, so humans are less attracted to persons who disclose negatively. The findings of Goei and Tamborini (2017) suggest that the effect of a disclosure to a stranger that is both deep and negative should decrease attraction.

Dai, Shin, Kashian, Jang, and Walther (2016) analyzed whether different forms of responses to self-disclosures in computer-mediated communication affected liking differently. Participants engaged in dyadic online communication. An interviewer communicated one of three types of responses to another individual's self-disclosures: reciprocal self-disclosures, compliments, or neutral deflections. Both reciprocal self-disclosure and compliments generated greater liking than did deflection. The findings indicate the importance of different forms of response to self-disclosure in interpersonal attraction online and the role of responsiveness to disclosure in initial relationships.

Dai et al. (2016) supports Ho, Hancock, and Minor (2018) by highlighting how self-disclosures have relational and emotional effects. Ho et al. (2018) found that disclosure can impact the immediate emotional experience of a discloser by reducing stress arising from negative experiences, diminishing anxiety, and increasing negative affect in the short term. Disclosure met with support can improve relational outcomes, enhancing relational closeness and intimacy. Also, disclosure can improve psychological outcomes deeply rooted in individuals' self-image, such as experiencing greater self-affirmation and a restored sense of worth after intimate disclosure. Ho et al. (2018) thought people would disclose more to chatbots and subsequently experience more positive outcomes because when the partner is a computerized agent rather than another person, individuals know that computers cannot judge them. Computerized agents reduce impression management tactics. However, Ho et al. (2018) found emotional disclosure was more beneficial than factual disclosure because of enhanced perceived understanding, and there was no difference depending on whether the partner was perceived to be a chatbot or a person.

Influences on Attraction

In Goei and Tamborini (2017), the similarity-attraction hypothesis states that the more similar A perceives B to be, the more A will be interpersonally attracted to B. Since most people hold a positive self-image, perceiving others with traits similar to their own increases attractiveness (Goei and Tamborini, 2017). Disclosive similarity increases attraction.

Wotipka and High (2016) analyze attraction on social media based on selective self-presentation (SSP) and impression formation. Online daters navigate between creating a flattering, yet honest, self-presentation, while other online daters engage in (SSP) to create their profiles. This means that social media users can filter out unflattering information about themselves while highlighting their positive attributes. Wotipka and High (2016) suggest that specific styles of profile development led to certain impressions, which influence people's decisions about attraction. Wotipka and High (2016) found that social attraction is when people perceived rewards from associating with someone. Social attraction describes people's desires to spend time with someone. The results in Wotipka and High (2016) indicated that perceptions of social attraction and trust were related to the desire to date and contact a person in an online dating profile.

Relational Prototype and Maintenance Behaviors

Sidelinger, Ayash, and Godorhazy (2008) examined computer-mediated communication (CMC) and its relationship with relational maintenance behaviors, communication satisfaction, interaction involvement, commitment, and relationship satisfaction. They concluded that assurances positively correlated with commitment and that women were more likely than men to offer positive communication and use the Internet to maintain relationships. This contributes to

my research by providing insight into how people maintain relationships and use technology in CMC for relational satisfaction.

Osburn (2012) integrated the Uses and Gratifications Theory to analyze the intersections of four primary variables—television viewing, belief in television's portrayals of relationships, general expectations for relationships, and assessments of actual relationships in a sample of married individuals. His research assessed relational satisfaction and commitment by focusing on married individuals' general attitudes toward relationships and future relational intentions. The UGT applied to the television belief approach received significant support, emphasizing that romantically themed programming affected rewards and costs, relationship commitment, relationship satisfaction, and relationship expectations. Osburn (2012) illustrated another technological medium that affects romantic relationships: television and movies. This supports my study by emphasizing that relational prototypes and media influence attraction and relational satisfaction. If someone does not seem to fit our relational prototype, we are less inclined to allow that person to fill that relational role.

Anderegg, Dale, and Fox (2014) applied social cognitive theory (SCT) to investigate relational maintenance behaviors of romantic relationships on prime-time television and identify the type of behaviors being modeled for viewers. SCT states that individuals can learn by observing the behaviors of others. The relational maintenance behaviors of positivity, understanding, self-disclosure, assurances, relationship talks, tasks, and networks appeared on prime-time television. Hefner and Wilson (2013) used romantic comedies to explore the top themes and romantic ideologies communicated in romantic comedies, as well as how these themes affect the adolescent perception of romantic relationships. They focused on four themes: love conquers all, idealization of partner, soul mate/one and only, and love at first sight. Hefner

and Wilson (2013) conducted two studies with four research questions about the prevalence of romantic ideals in popular romantic comedy films, challenges of romantic ideals featured in romantic comedies, consequences of romantic ideals and challenge expressions, and types of expressions voiced by males and females in romantic comedies. By analyzing the 52 highest-grossing romantic comedy movies from the recent decade (1998-2008), Hefner and Wilson (2013) found the movies contained at least one romantic ideal expression and featured a romantic challenge expression. Hefner and Wilson (2013) indicated that exposure to romantic comedies is related to young people's endorsement of romantic beliefs. Overall, Hefner and Wilson (2013) concluded "that positive portrayals of romance enhance reports of [relational] satisfaction, whereas negative depictions weaken endorsement of romantic beliefs" (p. 381). This information is relevant to my study by illustrating how the media and CMC influence relational prototypes and relational maintenance behaviors.

Parasocial Relationships and Attraction

Although parasocial relationships are one-sided, I frequently observed this commonality in my research about attraction and CMC. Parasocial relationships are one-sided, in which one party invests substantial time and emotional energy into the relationship, while the other person is completely unaware of the other's existence. Erickson and Cin (2017) examined the relationship between adolescent parasocial romantic attachments and current romantic scripts, schemas, and beliefs, as well as the degree to which these recalled parasocial relationships relate to assessments of current relationships and sexual experiences. Their study included measurement of the Multiple Parasocial Relationship (MultiplePSR) scale and Adolescent Romantic Parasocial Attachments (ARPA) scale. The MultiplePSR scale differentiates the experience of parasocial friendship from parasocial love. The ARPA scale examines the specific

experience of recalled adolescent romantic parasocial relationships. Erickson and Cin (2017) concluded that recalled parasocial romantic attachments to media figures influenced participants' understanding of their adolescent romantic and sexual development. Through an examination of the strength of parasocial attachments and romantic norms and beliefs, the importance of these relationships in the lives of young teenagers entering the dating world was evident. Rubin and McHugh (1987) explored parasocial interaction relationships and relationship development with media characters, by applying principles from both uses and gratifications (a commonality) and uncertainty reduction theories. Rubin and McHugh (1987) concluded that parasocial interaction is similar to the establishment of social relationships with others. In this investigation, the authors found that parasocial interaction was related strongly to social and task attraction towards the media personality, as well as the importance of relationship development with the personality. This impacts my study by explaining how social media relationships can be one-sided, and one person can form attachments based on attraction to someone's social media profile.

Modality and Self-Disclosure

Lastly, some researchers have studied modality with self-disclosure and CMC. Wildermuth and Vogl-Bauer (2017) viewed alternative ways to understand the nature of online relationships by focusing more on the meanings users construct around their interpersonal online interaction. They analyzed the relational perspectives of couples in online romantic relationships through five themes: emotion, caution, linguistic connections, extramarital affairs, and social networks. Wildermuth and Vogl-Bauer (2017) suggested that social cognition offers an appropriate framework for examining perceptions of online romances and the role of the medium in online romances. In their results, Wildermuth and Vogl-Bauer (2017) stated that "the online

medium influences the messages available to participants when making beginning decisions about relational development prospects" (p. 223). Modality affected relational closeness, because of message consistency and persistence, like in Walther et al. (2016). Oeldorf and Nowak (2018) took a different approach, by examining modality convenience and perceived appropriateness to test whether people select modalities they report are most appropriate for interaction or the most convenient. Oeldorf and Nowak (2018) tested this by having students indicate which modality choices they would make when faced with a variety of scenarios that they had to disclose to someone else, and why they would make those choices. Oeldorf and Nowak (2018) concluded that individuals prefer modalities that allow for greater control over the sharing of their information, and this need for control is more about permanence and potential distribution of the message, rather than appropriateness.

Taylor and Bazarova (2018) revisited media multiplexity theory's propositions intending to capture both patterns of interpersonal multimedia communication and their connections with the relational closeness between geographically close relationships and long-distance relationships. Media multiplexity theory tries to explain why we choose certain mediums to communicate and calls attention to the number of media we use in interpersonal relationships. Student partners were instructed to report on their relational closeness and media use weekly for six weeks. Taylor and Bazarova (2018) found relational closeness uniquely tied to each type of media multiplexity, but closeness stayed consistent throughout the six weeks.

This review provides a clear and concise depiction of the prominent factors in social media, attraction, and relational closeness. There were consistent commonalities in the research that included self-disclosure, relational maintenance, attraction, media influence, geographic location, parasocial relationships, and modality. People use social media to interact and

implement relational maintenance behaviors. The media depicts relational schema, themes, and romantic ideologies, that enhance peoples' expectations of their relationships and relational prototypes. Computer-mediated communication tends to lead to better relational closeness within long-distance relationships, due to easier disclosiveness, persistent messaging, and idealization of the disclosures. Self-disclosure and disclosiveness lead to greater intimacy. Parasocial relationships influence young adults' romantic beliefs and relationship development. Lastly, modality is contingent on message permanence and influences relationship development. A topic I did not see occur in my research is SPT and impression formation, as well as how impression formation, social media, and disclosiveness on social media affect attraction. Self-disclosure was a significant commonality, but I would like to research how young adults use SPT on social media as a tool to gauge disclosiveness and decide if people fit into their relational prototype. In conducting this research, there are three hypotheses I want to examine:

> H1: Young adults observe social media profiles of potential romantic interests before pursuing them romantically.

> H2: Young adults view Twitter as a more authentic and reliable social media platform than Instagram.

> H3: By applying the stages of the SPT, Young adults form impressions of social media users to analyze potential relational closeness.

Based on collected past research and the fact that we live in an era of CMC and social media, I presume that my hypotheses will be supported.

Methodology

Procedure

There are two segments to my methodology: surveys and focus group interviews. The focus group was conducted via Zoom. Participants analyzed a fake Twitter profile and articulated the correlating information found for each stage of the Social Penetration Theory. In the survey, participants rated their perceived authenticity of people on different social media platforms and verbally expressed what various interests attract them when forming relationships with others. Questions that required a respondent to rate social media platforms were answered via survey (see Appendix A); however, questions that required participants to list information for each stage of the SPT were answered verbally during the focus groups (see Appendix B). This element of the survey structure is designed to increase individuality in responses. Also, a focus group allows further explanation for open-ended questions and emphasis that attraction does not solely mean romantic interest.

I wanted to see if there were commonalities in attraction on social media, to determine the level of importance and dependence on social media for relational development. The focus group served to allow participants to gauge how other college students view the topic, open their mindsets, and challenge, accept, or extend others' feedback for more holistic results. After collecting the data, I constructed a thematic analysis. The focus groups occurred in sessions. Groups of up to 12 participants were included in the Zoom meeting at the same time. The study took no longer than an hour. I facilitated the discussion. The focus group was audio-recorded, and notes were taken. However, all responses remained confidential, and no names were included in the final report.

To conduct the thematic analysis, I analyzed the commonalities in factors of attraction and documented any trends. Then, I averaged social media authenticity ratings and reported trends in the survey and interview responses.

Participants

The study population consisted of 21 college students, ages 18-24, enrolled in Public Speaking and Introduction to Communication Research classes at a small, southeastern university. Public Speaking is an elective course for all majors at this university that allows for a wide variety of majors and classifications. This is an effective course to collect data from a diverse population of college students. Participants were recruited through emails to public speaking professors. Professors were asked to provide participants with extra credit. The email included a sign-up link for students to sign up to participate in the study.

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Results

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Participants were instructed to rate the perceived accuracy of Instagram, Twitter, and social media in depicting people's authentic selves via a survey. After participants submitted the survey, participants explained their ratings with me to begin the focus group interviews. Many common themes were discovered for each rating.

Social Media Platform Ratings

Instagram:

On a scale of one to ten, how reliable (10 being highly reliable) are Instagram profiles in accurately depicting people's authentic selves (beliefs, attitudes, values)
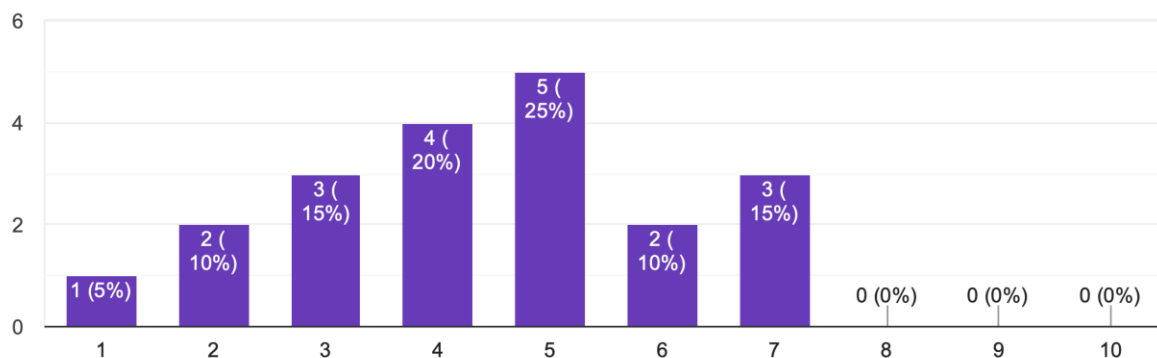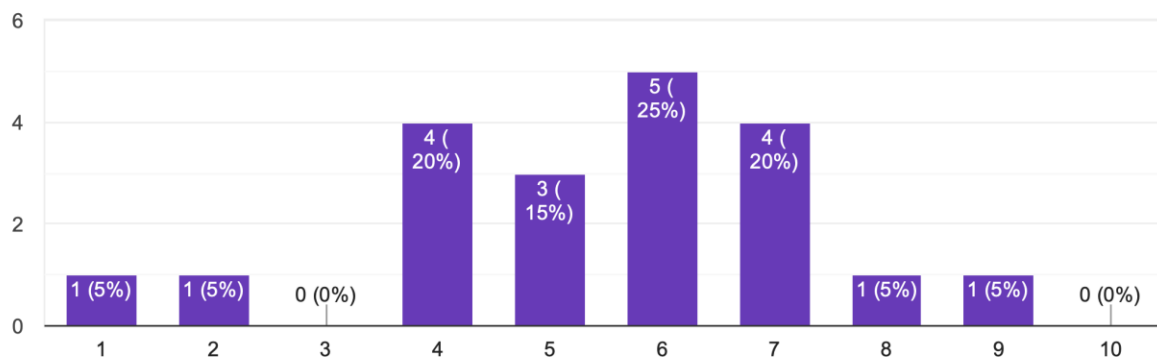
20 responses

Twitter:

On a scale of one to ten, how reliable (10 being highly reliable) are Twitter profiles in accurately depicting people's authentic selves (beliefs, attitudes, values)?
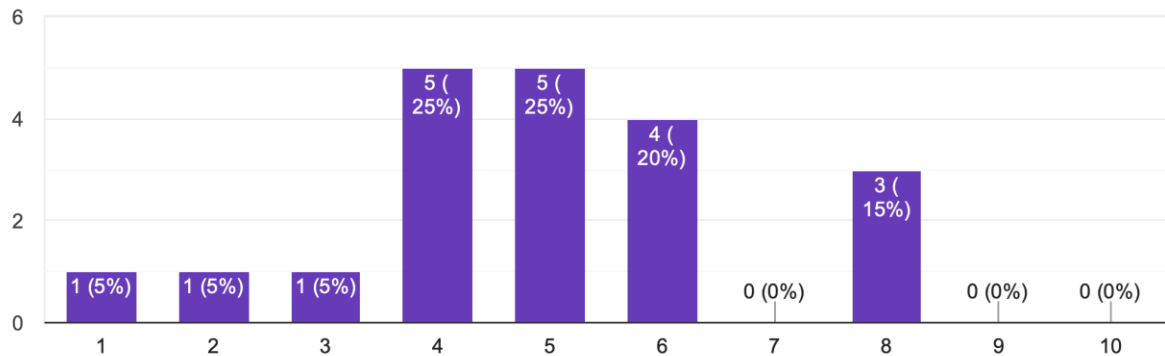
20 responses

Social Media:

On a scale of one to ten, how reliable (10 being highly reliable) are social media platforms in accurately depicting people's authentic selves (beliefs, attitudes, values)?
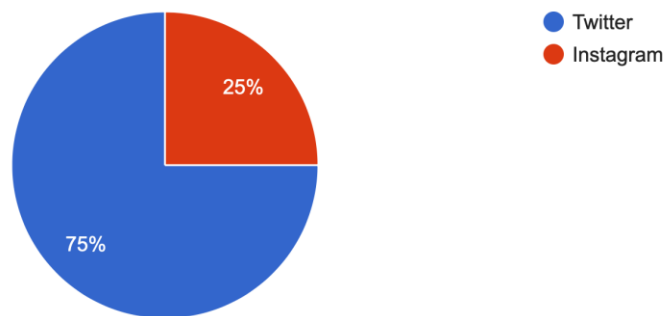
20 responses

Twitter vs Instagram

Between Instagram and Twitter, which social media platform is a more reliable source for accurate depictions of people's true, authentic selves? (Circle one)

20 responses

According to the results, 75% of participants rated Instagram as five or less in depicting people's authentic selves with five being the most common rating on a scale from one to ten. Five is a neutral number that signifies that Instagram neither strongly nor poorly depicts people's authentic selves. When asked to explain their ratings, the most common response was that

Instagram illustrates the "good moments". Seventy percent of participants rated Twitter as five or higher in depicting people's authentic selves with six being the most common rating. When asked to explain their ratings, participants often described Twitter as a platform for frequent status updates, current news, and "bolder statements". As stated by participants and my interpretation, bolder statements refer to Twitter users saying risky or daring statements, that may be inappropriate or that they probably would not say in a professional or family-friendly setting. Overall, 75% of participants rated Twitter as more reliable than Instagram in depicting people's authentic selves. Most participants felt Twitter was more personal and allowed space to share beliefs, thoughts, and opinions.

Although Twitter had higher ratings in its perceived authenticity of depicting peoples' true selves, social media ratings overall were neutral. Seventy percent of participants rated social media's perceived authenticity of depicting peoples' true selves between four to six on a scale of one to ten, with 50% of students evenly voting between four and five. Ten represented social media being highly reliable in depicting peoples' true selves with one being highly unreliable. The consensus was that you can never truly know a person via social media, so the four to six range represented a neutral standpoint on social media's reliability in depicting peoples' true selves.

Social Media Observation

Before pursuing a potential romantic partner, how often do you observe their social media profiles?
20 responses

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never
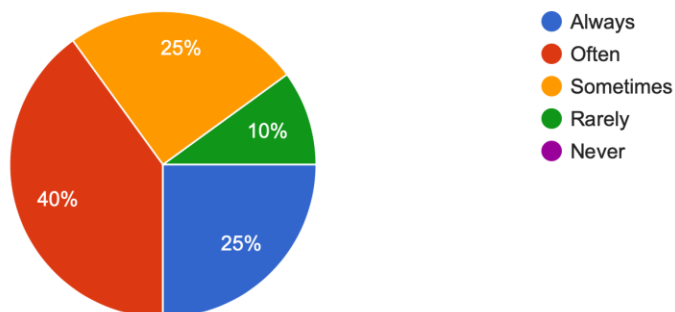
Sixty-five percent of participants reported that they often or always observe a potential romantic interest's social media profile before pursuing them. Only ten percent of participants reported that they rarely observe potential romantic interests' profiles, with zero percent reporting that they never observe potential romantic interest's profiles before pursuing them.

Participants were asked why they chose to observe or not observe a romantic interest's social media profile before pursuing them. The common answers were that participants observe social media profiles to observe interests, beliefs, values, appearance, and social circles. However, results were drastically different for platonic relationships. Participants did not feel the need to observe platonic interests' social media as frequently.

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Social Penetration Theory

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Participants were instructed to look at a Twitter Profile (@ThesisProject4) for at least three minutes and observe the Tweets, Retweets, followers, and likes. Then, I read an explanation of the SPT (see Appendix B). Based on the information observed from the Twitter profile, participants were asked to go through each step of the SPT and list the disclosures.

The orientation stage is the "small talk" stage. Communicators share basic information about each other, such as classification, name, major, and more. Participants were asked to list what orientation stage information they discovered about the person via Twitter. The majority of participants listed the profile user's desired occupation, classification, attending university, zodiac sign, place of residence, interests, and religious affiliation. Specifically, students listed that the user desires to become a future doctor, is a Senior at Mercer University, is a Sagittarius, resides in Orlando, likes sports, and is probably Christian.

The exploratory affective stage is when communicators reveal more about themselves, but nothing too intimate or personal, such as their favorite sports team, music preference, food choices, and more. The majority of participants listed the profile user's food preferences, music preferences, sports team affiliation, hobbies, and interests. Students listed that the user liked Mexican and Hibachi food, R&B, traveling, volunteering, sports, politics, and Netflix. Often, participants were specific when it came to sports and music. Participants analyzed who the profile user was following, such as Kehlani and Chloe and Halle, to conclude that the user liked Rhythm and Blues music. Also, they saw that the user Tweeted about the Brooklyn Nets often to conclude that this was their favorite sports team. By looking at the user's likes and Retweets, participants drew conclusions about the likes and interests of the profile user.

The affective stage of the SPT is where communicators disclose more personal and private matters, such as goals, aspirations, and beliefs. By observing the Twitter profile, participants interpreted the user's political beliefs, religious beliefs, career goals, passions, and work ethic. Participants listed that the user wants to become a medical doctor, is a Christian, plans to buy a home, is a democrat, values sustainable service and traveling, and has a strong work ethic. This stage was similar to previous stages. The main difference was the inclusion of

political affiliations, future plans, and participants explaining the value of those previous identities like religion. For example, instead of attributing Christianity to the profile user because of the cross emoji in their bio, participants analyzed tweets about prayer and scripture to explain the user's religious beliefs.

The stable stage is when communicators' deepest beliefs and values are shared. By observing the Twitter profile, participants determined that the user is a positive and uplifting person, values self-love and helping others, is not homophobic, upholds Christian values of love and prayer, and is dedicated. By analyzing the self-disclosures of the Twitter profile user, participants determine the personality traits and values of the profile user.

If the costs of self-disclosure outweigh the benefits, communicators will terminate the relationship in the depenetration stage. I asked participants to analyze likes and similarities with the profile owner, to see if the relationship was worth continuing. Participants determined what level of intimacy they would be willing to let the relationship develop as and explained their reasoning. For example, some people would be willing to engage in a romantic relationship with the profile user, while most would not let the relationship go beyond the platonic stage. According to the data, 95.2% of participants could see themselves developing some form of a relationship with the Twitter profile user. Around 76.2% of participants wanted to move past the exploratory stage of the relationship. Only 38% of participants could see themselves developing a romantic relationship with the profile user, while 90.5% of participants could see themselves developing a friendship with the profile user.

Discussion

Participants felt Instagram served as a highlight reel that was "polished" and mostly showed the positive aspects of life with little personal stories. Instagram was categorized as a

visual platform that focused on personal and profile aesthetics to show your best self. Another common explanation for lower ratings of authenticity was the significant use of editing for photos. Students shared stories of seeing peers and themselves using photoshop, filters, and other editing applications to alter their appearance on Instagram. Also, people can control the image they portray of themselves. Since Instagram emphasizes aesthetic, students said that peers control what pictures they post to create a favorable visual representation. One participant said they have seen numerous "mean girls with bible verses in their bio and captions". Likewise, one participant stated that Instagram allows people to be more performative with their values. When asked to further explain performative values, the participant referenced Black Lives Matter (BLM). The participant stated that they felt some people posted BLM resources and support posts just to look better in the eyes of others. Also, the participants referenced seeing people use the protests to have Instagram content and photo ops instead of genuinely supporting the cause. Trying to have an aesthetically pleasing profile allowed some people to be performative in their values instead of genuine.

Multiple participants compared Twitter to a diary or journal. Participants described Twitter as a place to openly express your thoughts and beliefs with less pressure to be "polished". Participants stated that Twitter users could be more authentic because they can Tweet miscellaneous thoughts and opinions. Also, Twitter users have a sense of anonymity because they can Retweet thoughts of others without physically stating those thoughts themselves. Twitter was viewed as a diary or journal, while Instagram was viewed as a highlight reel of happy moments. Therefore, my hypothesis was supported.

All participants observed the social media profiles of a romantic interest before pursuing a relationship. If participants answered yes to observing a romantic interest's social media

profile, they were told to list what qualities and attributes they look for and describe how they analyze these qualities and attributes to determine potential relational closeness. Over 90% of the participants claimed to look for interests, mutual friends, personal values, beliefs, and how the potential romantic interest presents themselves. These qualities were analyzed to see if there were any relatable character traits, similar interests, or aligning values. In contrast, participants consistently reiterated that a platonic interest's social media was not as important to them as a romantic interest's social media. When participants did observe platonic interest's social media, they commonly observed the interest's social circle and similar interests. Many participants mentioned they observed platonic interests' social media for "red flags" or signs of conflicting values.

All participants utilized the stages of the Social Penetration Theory to form impressions of social media users and analyze potential relational closeness. Each participant created an idea of what the actual person values and attributed personality traits and beliefs to the Twitter profile owner. However, this study did not suffice for romantic communication and more intimate relational development. No matter how many disclosures the participants perceived, all participants agreed that verbal conversation and face-to-face communication was necessary to develop a romantic relationship and get to the stable stage of relationship development.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study extends the use of the SPT to CMC and social media relational development in the communication field. Still, the transferability of these findings is bound by several study limitations that should be accounted for in future research. When rating the perceived authenticity of others on Twitter compared to Instagram, I did not account for "finstas". "Finstas" are fake Instagram accounts created by users to express miscellaneous

thoughts and images about their daily lives. "Finstas" include rants, likes, personal information, and more. The profile owner typically keeps this profile private, so that only close friends have access to the "finsta" information. Also, there was some bias in the data based on the preferred use of social media. Some participants were knowledgeable of Twitter but had little experience in using Twitter. Also, the study was conducted by analyzing a Twitter profile, which limits other modalities of social media and CMC. The study could have varying results with another social media modality, such as Facebook.

Furthermore, many participants stated their platonic relationships typically form before they look at their friend or acquaintance's social media profile. The majority of participants did not place a high level of priority on social media presence within friendships, which could account for the significantly higher ratings of participants seeing themselves develop a platonic relationship more so than a romantic relationship with the Twitter profile user in the study. Also, most participants said that the profile in the study was limited. They believed romantic relationships should be developed in person, and that a social media profile does not suffice for determining romantic interests. In addition, I did not include a profile picture on the Twitter account to limit gender bias. Many participants stated they wished the profile had a picture because appearance was an important factor in attraction.

Conclusion

All hypotheses were supported. Social media has a prevalent role in impression formation, attraction, and relational development. Young adults viewed Twitter as a more authentic and reliable form of social media than Instagram. As stated in Jiang, Bazarova, and Hancock (2011), self-disclosures can be more intimate in CMC than face-to-face interactions. Participants rated Twitter higher in perceived authenticity of profile users because they saw

Twitter as more of a journal or diary to express more disclosures than Instagram. Also, message persistence may be an important factor in how CMC sometimes contributes to hyperpersonal levels of intimacy (Walther et al., 2016). Twitter allows for constant status updates, news, and miscellaneous thoughts. Consistent disclosure on Twitter may have contributed to the higher ratings for Twitter than Instagram.

However, this persistent self-disclosure can negatively affect attraction. Goei and Tamborini (2017) found that deep or negative disclosures too early in the development of a relationship decreased attraction and produced negative feelings. Three participants said they check romantic interest's Twitter profiles to see how they handle negative situations and if they "tell too much of their business". If the user shared too many personal details, the participants were less likely to be attracted to that user romantically and platonically. Also, this study supports Goei and Tamborini (2017) because all participants stated that disclosive similarity positively influences attraction. If participants perceived the social media user to have traits similar to their own, they were more willing to engage in a relationship with the user. Lastly, Wotipka and High (2016) suggest that specific styles of social media profile development led to certain impressions, which influence people's decisions about attraction. Participants based their willingness to develop a relationship with the profile user based on their social media profile development. Some of the comments about why users would not engage in a romantic relationship with the profile user was because there was no profile picture, which emphasizes the importance of profile development.

Overall, even in the era of CMC communication, face-to-face communication still reigns supreme in forming romantic relationships. Social media is used as a tool to analyze similar interests, beliefs, values, and appearances. Young adults use social media as a preview into the

lives of others, in order to learn standard information about other social media users. This social media tool or preview becomes a guide to determine if further relational development is worth pursuing, but does not adequately suffice for developing deeper, intimate relationships. Instead of going through the layers of interpersonal relationship development in person, social media helps penetrate those layers in advance. Although we live in the era of social media, young adults understand that social media is limited and that you can only truly know a person through conversation and interpersonal interactions.

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Appendix A

Social Media Reliability Applied to Attraction and Communication

According to Clement (2020), 3.6 billion people use social media worldwide. Out of that 3.6 billion, 330 million users are active on Twitter and 112.5 million users are active on Instagram. Generation Z (born between 1996 and 2015) makes up 35.3% of Twitter users and 27% of Instagram users.

> On a scale of one to ten, how reliable (10 being highly reliable) are Instagram profiles in accurately depicting people's authentic selves (beliefs, attitudes, values)?

> 1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Explain your rating:

> On a scale of one to ten, how reliable (10 being highly reliable) are Twitter profiles in accurately depicting people's authentic selves (beliefs, attitudes, values)?
> 1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

Explain your rating:

> On a scale of one to ten, how reliable (10 being highly reliable) are social media platforms in accurately depicting people's authentic selves (beliefs, attitudes, values)?

> 1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8   9   10

> Between Instagram and Twitter, which social media platform is a more reliable source for accurate depictions of people's true, authentic selves? (Circle one)
> Twitter   Instagram

1. Before pursuing a potential romantic partner, do you observe their social media profiles?

   a. Why or why not?

If you answered yes, answer question two.

2. While observing a romantic interest's social media profile, what qualities and attributes do you look for?

      a.   How do you analyze these qualities and attributes to determine potential relational closeness?

3.   When you are attracted to someone (romantically or platonically), do you observe their social media profiles?

If you answered yes, answer question four.

4.   While observing the social media profile of someone you are attracted to, what qualities and attributes do you look for?

      a.   How do you analyze these qualities and attributes to determine potential relational closeness?

Appendix B

Relational Development on Social Media

Social Penetration Theory (SPT) states that relationships develop through self-disclosure. This theory and process of self-disclosure are often compared to an onion. The more layers you peel back from the onion, the closer you get to the breadth and depth of the onion. Breadth in self-disclosure describes the various aspects of people's lives, such as work, family, hobbies, school, and more. Depth refers to the intimate details about those various aspects of people's lives. The more we engage in self-disclosure with other people, the deeper our interpersonal connections will be. There are five stages of self-disclosure in the SPT: orientation, exploratory affective, affective, stable, and depenetration.

The orientation stage: This is the "small talk" stage. Communicators share basic information about each other (classification, name, major, etc.).

Q: What orientation stage information did you discover about the person via social media (Twitter)? If not applicable, write none.

The exploratory affective: Communicators reveal more about themselves, but nothing too intimate or personal (favorite sports team, music preference, food choices, etc.)

Q: What exploratory affective stage information did you discover about the person via social media (Twitter)? If not applicable, write none.

The affective stage: Communicators disclose more personal and private matters (goals, aspirations and beliefs).

Q: What affective stage information did you discover about the person via social media (Twitter)? If not applicable, write none.

The stable stage: Communicators' deepest beliefs and values are shared here.

Q: What stable stage information did you discover about the person via social media (Twitter)? If not applicable, write none

The depenetration stage: If the costs of self-disclosure outweigh the benefits, communicators well terminate the relationship here.

Q: What aspects/information did you like about this Twitter profile?

Q: What aspects/information did you not like about this Twitter profile?

Q: What commonalities did you find between you and the owner of this Twitter profile? If not applicable, write none.

Q: Could you see yourself developing any relational closeness with the owner of this Twitter profile? Why or why not?

- Could you see yourself developing a relationship with this person beyond the orientation stage?
- Would you be willing to engage in a relationship past the exploratory stage?

Q: If you were looking to pursue this person romantically, would you choose to further communication? Why or why not?

Q: If you were looking to develop a relationship (platonic or romantic) with this person, would you choose to further communication? Why or why not?

Appendix C

Focus Group Interview Questions (Additional)

1. What understanding do you formulate about those who rarely interact on social media? What about people who do not have social media?

2. Between Instagram and Twitter, which social media platform is a more reliable source for accurate depictions of people's true, authentic selves? Why?

3. Is social media a reliable source for accurate depictions of people's true, authentic selves? Why or why not?

4. How do you know you can relate to a person via social media?

5. What makes you feel confident in people's authenticity on social media? Specifically, what makes you feel confident in people's authenticity on Twitter?

6. How do you analyze personal qualities and attributes on social media to determine potential relational closeness (intimacy and connection)?