RESEARCH REPORT: EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF CMC ON SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS-INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX, U.K.

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Abstract

This research project encompasses a study of the impact of computer mediated communication (CMC) on the social relationships of international students at a university in the South East of England. In this particular study, the term 'international student' refers to the students of a different nationality than British. Two in-depth interviews were conducted in order to explore the way in which international students communicate online, why they do so, with whom they usually connect trough computer mediated communication and if/how their social relationships change as a result of using CMC. There are various theories regarding the use of computer mediated communication in maintaining social relationships and some of them will be addressed in this paper. Whether referring to friendship, family members or even romantic partners it has been proven that internet based social technologies do have an impact on social relationships maintenance. As such, a number of factors have been determined throughout this study including the most popular online platforms amongst students, the benefits and disadvantages of using CMC as a tool in maintaining social relationships.

Keywords: Computer Mediated Communication (CMC); Social relationships; International students; Interaction.

1. Introduction

This research project encapsulates a study of the impact of computer mediated communication on the social relationships of the International students at University of Essex, Colchester, U.K. The focus of this research project is generated by the shift in terms of communication forms from face-to-face interaction being the most common amongst people decades ago, to the excessive use of computer mediated communication and specially tailored social networking websites. It is rather important to mention that in this particular study, the term 'international student' refers to the students of a different nationality than British. In order for such complex research question to be addressed, a number of factors have been determined throughout this study, including the most popular online platform used by

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undergraduate students nowadays, but also the advantages and disadvantages of using this medium of communication.

1.1. Research questions

The general research question that this piece will cover is: What is the impact of computer-mediated relationships on the social relationships of the international students at University?

One aim of this research piece is to determine the most wildly used computer mediated technology amongst International students at University (such as email, blogs, social networking sites-Facebook, Instagram or microblogging via Twitter) and present the way in which these large number of technologies might apply to relational maintenance behaviours in relation to friendships.

A further objective would be to explore the way in which the use of technology manifests in the case of proximate relationships - people who are in frequent physical contact and choose the use of computer mediated communication as an additional form of relational maintenance.

1.2. Basic design

In order to explore the impact of computer-mediated communication on personal relationships of international university students, it is highly important to gain an insight of the views that they have on the particular topic, their feelings in relation to social relationships and how to maintain them. The research design chosen to capture this kind of views is interview as it usually provides coherence, depth and density to the material (Weiss, 1995, p. 3). The key reason for choosing to conduct the two interviews would be developing a detailed description of the way in which students communicate online, why they do so and with whom they usually connect with trough computer mediated communication and if/how their social relationships change as a result of using this type of communication (Weiss,1995, p. 3).

1.3. Ethics

One of the core ethical problems that research projects generally involve regards the informed consent. Participants were asked to sign a consent form prior the interview. Additionally, their right to withdraw from the research process was addressed on the consent form as well as verbally explained during the briefing before the interview process. They were assured that they have the right to stop being a part of the project at any point and that they are entitled to ask for the data that they have created to be destroyed.

Furthermore, the personal information with relation to the participants will be kept confidential by doing the following: using pseudonyms instead of their real names, removing any sort of identifiers that could jeopardize their confidentiality and the data will be securely stored without handing in the information sheet which contains the identifiers of the participants. This solved another ethical problem, the confidentiality of the participants.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Relationship Maintenance

Mainstream literature on interpersonal communication proposes various approaches and definitions of 'relational maintenance' making it rather difficult to determine a sole interpretation of this concept (Dindia, 2003). The basic definition of 'relational maintenance' is proposed by Duck which directly refers to preserving a relationship existence (Duck, 1999, p. 74). Nonetheless, that definition does not include any pointers to either the state of the specific relationship or the feelings involved, not even the intensity or the performance of relational maintenance behaviours. Once the research in the field extended, these issues started to be addressed (Tong & Walther, 2011). Some scholars consider relational maintenance as fundamental behaviours used in order to maintain the stability of the relationships leading to supporting a level of intimacy and closeness (Dindia & Canary, 1993) whilst others are implying that relational maintenance does not only involve consistency but also a trajectory towards a mutually satisfying end state (Tong &Walther, 2011). Throughout this paper, both the consistency of relational maintenance behaviours and the need for a mutual satisfying end state are considered key aspects of relationship maintenance.

In recent years, literature concerning the use of computer-mediated communication in relationship maintenance has pointed out to a noticeable differentiation between the use of technology in the two major types of relationships: long distance (a geographical and physical separation) and proximate relationships (Rabby, 2007). Nonetheless, a lot more progress has been made in studying long distance relationships and the way in which the individuals are using online platforms in order to mediate the lack of physical contact due to the geographical separation (Stafford, 2005).

2.2. Equity Theory

One of the generally used approaches with regard to relational maintenance is equity theory. This theory states that both parties of a relationship tend to aspire towards equitable ratios of behavioural input or costs following a positive relational outcome or advantages. Both parties are fulfilled only when the cost to reward ratio equilibrates in the case of each partner (Hatfield, Traupmann, Sprecher, Utne & Hay, 1985). Furthermore, in the eventuality that one of the parties considers that its relational maintenance costs surpass the outcomes earned, that person is discerned as under-benefited. Simultaneously, if the partner is of the opinion that their benefits are higher than the relational maintenance costs, it is considered over-benefited. Provided that this balance is jeopardised, equity theory suggests that both the individuals will be making an effort to try and generate the cost-rewards equitability (Dainton & Lendzinki, 2008). The principles of equity theory are very much related to the topic in question and will be applied to real life examples provided by the participants in order to create a more detailed perspective on how and why international students communicate online in terms of relational maintenance.

With the increased amount of usage of such mediums of communication with relational maintenance purposes, new relational maintenance behaviour types have been proposed by the literature. The first one would be presence which refers to the concept that relational partners are given the opportunity of feeling close to one another in spite of geographical separation, particularly when more complex forms of communication are not possible to engage in (Walther & Bazarova, 2008).

Another would be tie signs, which generally refer to exhibiting mutual belonging through physical behaviour but in the case of online communication it has been demonstrated that social networks present the ability of suggesting 'public display of connection'. In other words, when using social platforms such as Facebook you can see from the beginning who is connected to whom by their posts and messages (Donath & Boyd, 2004).

Mundane sharing of activities and experiences has not been the centre of relational maintenance behaviours but the new technologies make this type of activities more and more sustainable. Online platforms such as Facebook allow its users to share the mundane activities and experiences that they take part of leading to a connection with the geographically separated partners and even the close ones with whom are separated during brief periods of the day (Tong & Walther, 2011). This shift in relational maintenance behaviours is critical to this research piece as it provides an accurate frame of discussion and allows the social interaction to be explored in a more detailed manner.

2.3. The online platforms

A clarification of the online platforms that are used by students nowadays is necessary in order to be able to properly observe the relationship patterns created and the way in which they maintain contact trough this communication channel.Stafford, Kline and Dimmick discovered that 61 % of randomly sampled interviewees were using this channel of communication to 'keep in touch with friends, family and relatives (Stafford, Kline and Dimmick, 1999, p. 663).A relatively large body on research has dealt with the way in which people communicate through email with their family and relatives who have moved away from home or simply live on other sides of the world. By interviewing a sample of 1,500 internet users, Horrigan and Rainie have discovered that 84 % of them were using email to communicate with family members, 70 % were emailing them for asking advice and 63 % were expressing their worries through e-mail (Horrigan and Rainie, 2002).

University students more particularly tend to use the new technologies - Web 2.0 applications, which provide them means of communication with long distance friends with a lot less effort. Horrigan J.B. & Rainie, L. (2002) discovered that 72 % of the university students from United States mainly use internet as a form of communication with their friends and acquaintances, in most cases with high school friends (35 %), but also with friends living on campus (24 %) and friends which do not live on campus (20 %).The extensive use of Web 2.0 applications such as Facebook and other relatively new technologies comprise four relevant

characteristics which contribute to relational maintenance and other social functions. A general characteristic would be that they are asynchronous – as in the case of e-mail, they are sent only after they have been edited and constructed especially for that person. A highly important feature of such websites is the possibility of setting the privacy in such a way that the users have the ability to restrict access to their posts to a specific audience (Tong & Walther, 2011).

In 2008, over 100 million people were actively using Facebook and there are now 1.71 billion monthly active users (as of July 2016) (Facebook.com). Disposing of various features such as setting up an online profile and photo and video sharing but also private messaging has made Facebook one of the key social networks to aid in relational maintenance. The results of a survey administered to University students that were Facebook users have concluded that most of the time spent on the social platform was to 'keep in touch with an old friend, or someone I knew in high school' (Lampe, Ellison and Steinfield, 2006, p. 169). A more recent survey conducted in 2008 revealed that Facebook users were generally using the platform for 'maintaining relationships with people you don't get to see very often' (Joinson, 2008, p. 1030). A rather dense discussion was lead throughout the interviews with relation to Facebook and how it affects social relationships of international students but also an interesting viewpoint was provided on the variety of social platforms that are now available at one click away and the different modalities in which they can be accessed and used with relational maintenance purposes.

3. Findings

The purpose of this research project was to examine the impact of computer-mediated communication on the social relationships of international students at the University of Essex. The two students that were interviewed were in their second year of Undergraduate studies, doing degrees unrelated to the topic of interest. They were asked a series of questions regarding both the use of online platforms at the beginning of their first year as well as later on during their studies in order to observe the evolution of their relational maintenance behaviours as well as any kind of difference between their first year and the following one in terms of social relationships.

The main reason for having chosen international students as subjects for the two interviews conducted was the alleged higher tendency of using computer-mediated communication due to the geographical distance set between them and their family, friends, acquaintances or even partners when coming to University. When asked about the amount of time spent communicating online compared to before coming to University, only one of the two participants confirmed our hypothesis responding: 'Um, much more (time), obviously (laughter). As like... four hours, maybe 5 hours per day.'

When the same participant was asked to enlarge on the reasons why the amount of time spent communicating online has increased since coming to University, she gave a quite detailed response. Firstly, as referred to in the literature, a clear distinction was made between the proximate relationships and those that are

affected by geographical distance. When referring to proximate relationships, a lack of time due to other commitments and how it affects the availability to meet friends face to face was mentioned: 'Well, I don't really have the same opportunity of spending my time with my friends here anymore(sighs) … I mean with all the deadlines and everything...'. The participant's non-verbal reaction, '(sighs)' presumably suggested a feeling of disappointment due to this lack of time. Nevertheless, the respondent still concluded using 'a great deal' the computer-mediated forms of communication when maintaining the relationships with the people at home especially pointing out to the inability of using other mediums to contact them: 'And the friends back home are basically impossible to reach otherwise. I mean I cannot see someone that lives in another country face to face so I kind of have to use social networks such as maybe Skype'.

By contrast, the other participant reported spending a lot less time communicating online and argued that the main reason for this would be the lack of time generated by University duties, the same as in the previous case, mentioning that: 'I have no time due to the deadlines and general commitments. I've got classes and a job so I'd say that online communication is not really my priority right now.' Later during the interview, however, the same participant mentioned that in the first months after moving to University the use of online platforms to mediate contact with friends and family was inevitable: 'I was almost 24/7 on Skype or Facebook or even Facetime.', suggesting that maintaining communication with people back home was rather necessary because of the lack of time to adjust and form social relationships as it was the beginning of the first year of studying in a new country 'I basically knew no one when I first got here.'.

In terms of the online platforms used the most, both participants referred to Facebook as the core medium but also mentioned a frequent use of Skype which was referred to earlier as well, but also FaceTime and Whatsapp. Nonetheless, there was no mention of e-mail as medium of maintaining communication as it was suggested by the literature. In terms of benefits of CMC, the answers that both respondents gave were the same ones suggested by the literature, alluding that such mediums of communication are 'cheap and effective' but also allow communication with more people at once- 'multitasking' as one of the participants disclosed. Proposing features more or less similar to face to face interaction, platforms that offer the possibility of seeing the communication partner whilst talking such as Skype or even smart phone applications such as FaceTime, were mentioned on various occasions in both interviews.

When asked to discuss the benefits of computer mediated communication, one of the respondents discussed a particular occasion when 'my friends went out and Facetimed me and I kind of felt like I was there somehow.' This situation would be the most suited to demonstrate the capacity of computer and smart phone mediated communication to facilitate the sharing of mundane activities and happenings (Tong & Walther, 2011) but also to establish a feeling of presence (Walther & Bazarova, 2008) 'I felt like I was there' that might further benefit in terms of relational maintenance as proposed by the literature on the topic. In spite of these types of

maintenance behaviours having been applied only to the use of social platforms before, considering the additional features that applications such as Skype and FaceTime provide it would be fair to acknowledge their benefits as well. Besides offering the same relational maintenance behaviours as the online social platforms, Skype, FaceTime and even Facebook messenger provide video calling that allow the partners to see each other while engaged in the verbal exchange, thus offering the possibility to better understand the messages due to the additional non-verbal cues and therefore being potentially more beneficial in terms of relational maintenance. Additionally, they provide a real feeling of closeness, in spite of the physical distance 'It makes me feel closer to home.' the participant concluded.

Most of the data gathered throughout this research project was centred upon friendship. The online communication was briefly addressed with regard to family, when one of the respondents mentioned maintaining contact with them through Whatsapp - an instant messaging application available for smart phone users that only requires internet connection, being thusly cheaper but also containing the other benefits of computer mediated platforms. The reason implied by the respondent for not using other mediums such as Skype was the lack of time, considering messaging to be more effective:' I mean you'd think that we Skype or something, but we very rarely do it because they don't have the time generally.' The other participant, however, disclosed that 'Well, I usually prefer Skype. It brings me much closer to them.', pointing out to the advantages discussed earlier regarding Skype and other forms of communication that present a video call feature.

Nonetheless, these relational maintenance behaviours that on social platforms such as Facebook might be visible to a much larger audience than in real life, as one participant suggested, could end up jeopardising social relationships as well. The respondent suggested 'if I send a message and they don't reply and I'd see them online posting and ignoring my message I'd be pissed. Or I see a check in or something with our friends and I'd be like why are you not answering my message and then do whatever you want to (afterwards)?'. Referring to the equity theory, the respondent could be considered underbenefitted, due to the lack of support showed by the partner, and thusly unhappy with the relational outcome. As previously mentioned, one of the key maintenance behaviours in terms of computer mediated communication refers to presence and sharing mundane happenings, but tie signs are equally as important. In the situation proposed by the participant, who is exclusively mentioning a 'check in' with some friends, therefore an online tie sign, along with the possibility of it being more important than the message sent by her, leads to an equitability issue that results in a feeling of neglect. As such, the participant highlights the way in which the features of social platforms have the potential of impacting social relationships not only positively, but also in a negative way depending of the circumstances.

In order to explore the impact of computer-mediated communication on social relationships, the disadvantages of such mediums of communication have to be addressed. Both participants mentioned having lost friendships due to the geographical distance set between them. One of the biggest issues which was named

in one of the interviews referred to the impossibility of reaching out to the specific person when most needed 'I mean there are times when I feel the need to talk to someone and they don't reply to that message or just don't answer the phone.' In relation to this, the participant also added: 'Whereas when I was at home I could just knock at their door and talk to them. But on social networks or on the phone they can just forget or they don't have the time to do that or they are doing something else in that particular moment' – the impossibility of making contact with that person eventually leads to losing the ties with them. One of the advantages proposed by the literature is the asynchronous character of online messages, but in such situations it can turn into a downside. Also, the participant compared the situation of online communication with face to face interaction and classified the latter as being more useful as you can approach the person at all times when needed. An important aspect was mentioned by the participant: the fact that computer-mediated communication, regardless of how advanced it might be, cannot fully replace face to face interaction.

In this sense, a noteworthy addition was made by one of the participants right before the end of the interview 'Even if the online medium presumably gives you the opportunity to talk to each other, you are still the one that has to take the opportunity, you know what I mean? This kind of communication is only helpful if you want it to be helpful.' In the exact same manner as in the use of the other forms of communication, an effort should be made in order for a social relationship to be maintained. A large variety of factors impact on social relationships, and the form of communication is certainly one of them. Computer-mediated communication is a valid way of maintaining a relationship and has both advantages and disadvantages.

This response might represent the essence of this research project, as it draws a picture of a really important issue, despite having the possibility of accessing more and more technologies to maintain communication, not everyone chooses to do so due to various personal reasons, and the bound with the specific person might be the one that matters in the end.

4. Reflections

The research method used was effective because it provided viable insight into the problem leading to real life examples and allowed to discuss particular situations. Nonetheless, the research topic chosen is comprehensive and could be addressed in lengthy papers.

The goal of this research project was to explore all types of relationships; however, the problem of romantic relationships was only addressed briefly as it is a whole different research topic in its own rights. During one of the interviews, the participant pointed out to the general shift in dating but also made references to a different branch of research, the online self, mentioning that: 'Now you 'have' the bar at your own place... in your own cell phone or computer. You just go on tinder or whatever just swipe right, swipe left (laughter) and that's all. So it has changed our perception of people, in general, because you need to have really good marketing techniques (laughter) to learn how to sell yourself, we need to present that image. This insight certainly presents potential for further research in the area of social

relationships and the online platforms now wildly available one touch away on our phone screens.

5. Conclusion

The data gathered from the interviews was analysed in the light of the existing perspectives on both relational maintenance as well as computer-mediated communication. It was revealed that the most used platform for communication purposes in this case was Facebook, followed by Skype and FaceTime. The findings have offered a more in-depth perception of the way in which relational maintenance behaviours could be extended to the use of Skype and Facetime, not only to the traditional online platforms such as Facebook. The benefits addressed by the literature on the topic were also subject of the interviews, the participants listing CMC as being time effective and cheap, as well as allowing multitasking. Additionally, some real life examples of how online platforms might also impact negatively on relational maintenance were provided, giving rise to a more complex outlook on how international students at a University in the East of England communicate online and how it affects the social relationships they have built both before and after coming to University.

Consequently, computer-mediated communication impact on the social relationships of international students in both positive and negative ways. The mediums are available for maintaining the social relationships and can be used by everyone nowadays, but it is question of personal motivation and the bond with the specific person to determine whether or not it is sufficient to maintain social relationships.

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