

SELF-ESTEEM, LOVE, AND THE INTERNET: IS SELF-ESTEEM A FACTOR IN CHOOSING TO PURSUE LOVE THROUGH ONLINE COMMUNICATION?

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Abstract

Because the internet relationship, that which is conceived and sustained online, is a new phenomenon, psychologists must study one's motivation in pursuing such a relationship to be able to better understand the role that the internet can play in one's life. This study, which examined self-esteem as a motivating factor, found a tenuous link between self-esteem and internet usage, whereby those with low self-esteem seemed to enjoy online communication more than those with high self-esteem when meeting someone for the first time. Thus, the knowledge gained from this study should serve as a basis for further psychological examination of the internet relationship and the motivation behind its pursuit.

Introduction

With technological advances becoming more integrated into our daily lives, we must explore how they can affect our behaviors and our feelings. One way in which technology has affected us is through the establishment of the internet, which allows for frequent and fast communication among people around the world. It is estimated that 9 million adults are accessing the Internet on a daily basis (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). As a result, people are meeting others that they may not have ever met before, even possibly forming friendships and romantic relationships. Some romantic partners who have met over the internet

feel that their relationships can be more stable, more intimate, and deeper than face-to-face relationships because they can be based on friendship and how well two people relate to one another, rather than physical attractiveness (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). However, many feel that sustaining relationships over the internet can be psychologically harmful, allowing for the manifestation of insecurities based on appearance and self-worth (Schnarch, 1997). Thus, psychologists need to investigate the phenomenon of internet love to determine the role it can play in people's lives.

The most essential question regarding internet love asks why people would search for a spouse or lover over the internet. While many people think that relating electronically promotes emotional disconnection and superficial erotic contacts, others have shown that it can facilitate initial meetings and interpersonal connections (Parks & Roberts, 1998). As stated before, romantic partners that have met over the internet believe that computers reduce the role of physical attractiveness, which is often a large component of the first meeting of two individuals. As a result, they feel that their relationships can be based on mutual disclosure, the key ingredient in developing intimacy with another, without regard to external attributes as seen in "real world" relationships (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). People can take risks in their revelations due to the anonymity and personal space that the web offers and can also develop social skills and confidence that they may have been too shy to express with another face-to-face (Cooper & Sportolari, 1997). As a result, computer users report less self-consciousness and less awareness of being evaluated by others than face-to-face communicators (Matheson & Zanna, 1990).

But, can internet couples develop a rapport that can lead to a relationship if they are not exposed to all of each other, including both their internal and the external characteristics? Studies have shown that although internet relationships take longer to develop due to the slowness of the communication exchange inherent in using the web, these couples are able to become as close as those who meet face-to-face along dimensions such as affection, immediacy, receptivity, trust, and depth (Walther & Burgoon, 1992). Other psychologists do not agree. Because the internet offers to its users emotional contact without risk or exposure, people can control what others know about them (Schnarch, 1997). A person can take advantage of the fact that there is no opportunity for a partner to compare a self-presentation to what he/she

can physically see; this can be done either by misrepresenting himself/herself or even creating a new self (Schnarch, 1997). If this is so, psychologists must then ask why a person would feel the need to change himself/herself to pursue a relationship, a pseudo-intimacy that can be based on false pretenses. Also, we must examine whether there is something inherent in a person that may lead him/her to seek a relationship that does not require close proximity or physical exposure. Is there a reason why a person might not want to face the vulnerability found in meeting someone face-to-face for the first time?

One such reason can be seen in studying self-esteem, an attitude about the self that affects how people feel and how they present themselves to others. Psychologists have shown that those with high self-esteem, associated with pride and satisfaction, have more confidence than those with low self-esteem, characterized by feelings of foolishness, shame, inadequacy, and awkwardness (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). As a result, those with high self-esteem are inclined toward self-enhancing self-presentations, while those with low self-esteem tend toward a self-protective orientation. A self-enhancer will seek highly visible performance settings, for such places will give this person a maximal chance of gaining a favorable reputation; he/she, as an aggressive and ambitious person, has the confidence to take the risk of failure to achieve his/her goals. A self-protector, on the other hand, will avoid all situations in which he/she could face public humiliation; he/she is willing to forego success and prestige, through this cautious and evasive approach, to avoid embarrassment and rejection (Baumeister, Tice, & Hutton, 1989). One can see that the internet can offer to the person with low self-esteem a solution to this problem, for the person can successfully engage in conversation and still not relinquish the protective shield that allows him/her to avoid humiliation.

Furthermore, Leary et al. (1995) have shown that people seek self-esteem because it is associated with feelings of control over one's environment. Therefore, those with low self-esteem feel that they have no power to dictate what happens around them, including how they are seen by other people. However, the internet can alleviate this issue by enabling the person to control what he/she wants others to know about them, either through a new representation of the self or through the dictation of the pace of self-disclosure. Thus, it is possible that there can exist this connection between the use of the internet in personal relationships and self-esteem.

But, just how does self-esteem affect one's relationships, whether they be friendships or romantic involvements? Psychologists have found that self-esteem is directly linked to attachment style in relationships, such that those with high self-esteem tend to feel more secure in their relationships than those with low self-esteem. Thus, those with low self-esteem, with a more ambivalent and avoidant attachment style, experience more difficulties in adult relationships than those with high self-esteem (McCarthy, 1999). Meyers (1998) went further in his findings, showing that self-esteem and attachment style are also linked to more general measures of one's own well-being; for example, it can be seen that lower self-esteem is highly correlated with more psychological distress and less personal competence.

But, one must wonder how self-esteem can affect or be affected by attachment style. Brennan and Bosson (1998) explored this question, examining attachment style differences in reliance on partner feedback to maintain self-esteem. They found that the association of attachment and self-esteem is partially mediated by attitudes about and reactions to partner feedback, such that those people who derive self-esteem from others are more open to and affected by partner feedback than those who value competence-based sources of self-esteem. Thus, those who have relational sources of self-esteem place the control of their self-worth in the hands of others, a lack of control that is often associated with low self-esteem. Since the internet can offer a person control over the information about himself that he discloses, that which serves the basis for the feedback that he relies upon for his self-esteem, he does not need to feel as though he is continually being judged. This comfort, in turn, can lead to higher self-esteem and a more secure attachment style.

Although there are many reasons why a person may desire an internet relationship, this study will attempt to discover whether self-esteem, or self-concept, could be a factor. It will attempt to show that people who describe themselves as having low self-esteem would feel more comfortable meeting someone online rather than face-to-face, while those who describe themselves as having high self-worth would rather meet someone face-to-face than through the internet. This study will compare first impressions and the level of comfort achieved when those high in self-worth and those low in self-worth meet members of the opposite sex face-to-face or over the internet for twenty minute interactions. Hopefully, with the knowledge gained from this study could come greater understanding of one motivation behind the pursuit

of internet relationships.

In addition, a first study will be conducted to determine the relative frequency of use of the internet to pursue friendships and relationships. In this way, psychologists will be able to assess the importance of the internet in our daily lives.

Study 1

Methods

Participants

This study involved 115 students, 46 men and 69 women, between the ages of 18-21 from a small liberal arts college in the northeast. For their participation, each student was given one lab credit for their Introduction to Psychology class.

Materials

A survey was administered to participants to determine frequency of internet usage and attitude toward seeking friendships and romantic partners over the internet. Students rated their responses to each statement given on a scale from 1 to 7 (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree). (See Appendix A.)

Procedure

All participants were asked to complete the survey given, this questionnaire being one of several in a pre-testing packet for Introduction to Psychology students. Upon completion of the packet, participants were permitted to leave the classroom.

Results

Survey I results show that, although students do use the internet often, 91.7% have never met a romantic partner over the internet and 56.4% have never met friends over the internet. Also, this survey illustrates that students do not see the internet as a useful tool for meeting a romantic partner, with 82.7%

having never considered looking for a partner over the internet and a great majority believing that the internet could never yield happy love relationships; most even think it is impossible to pursue love over the internet. Still, 45.9% know friends who have met a romantic partner over the internet. The means and standard deviations for this survey can be found in Table 1.

Study 2

Methods

Participants

This study involved 80 students, 40 male and 40 female, from a small liberal arts college. For their participation, each student was given one additional lab credit for their Introduction to Psychology class.

Materials

A pretest survey, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, was administered to participants to determine levels of self-esteem. It included questions regarding feelings of their own self-worth. Students rated their responses to each statement given on a scale from 1 to 7 (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree).

In addition, a post-session survey was given to participants of the study to determine how well they each got to know the person that they talked to, either over the internet or face-to-face, and how comfortable they felt talking to the person through that particular medium. Participants will be asked to rate their responses to each statement given on a scale from 1 to 7 (1= strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree). See Appendix B.

Two computers were used, each equipped with a computer interface through which participants could talk to one another.

Procedure

All participants chosen for this study were divided into three groups, those who scored high on the

self-concept scale, those who scored low, and medians. Each participant was assigned to an individual session that lasted approximately one half of an hour.

There were two conditions in this study, one where the participant met someone over the internet (A) and the other where the participant met someone face-to-face (B). Each participant exposed to Condition A, consisting of half of those who scored high on the self-concept scale and half of those who scored low, were brought into the lab and asked to sit at a desk with a computer equipped with a computer interface. He or she was then asked to login and, for twenty minutes, converse through the computer with a median of the opposite sex stationed in another room who had been given the same instructions. The participants were told that they would be talking with another student. Both participants were assured that their conversation will remain confidential, even to the experimenter. After the allotted time, the participants were asked to logoff and to complete the post-session survey. Upon completion and debriefing, they were permitted to leave the lab.

Each participant exposed to Condition B, consisting of the other half of those who scored high on the self-concept scale and the other half of those who score low, were brought into a lab and asked to sit in one of the two chairs in the room. He or she was told that the experimenter would leave the lab to bring in the other student (a median) that would also be participating in this session. When the median was ushered into the room, the two were asked to get to know one another for 20 minutes. They were also assured that their conversation would remain confidential, even to the experimenter. After the time allotted, the median was brought into another room and both participants were asked to complete the post-session survey. Upon completion and debriefing, they were permitted to leave the lab.

Results

Ratings of level of comfort, level of anxiety, conduciveness to learning, and ease of conversation were each subjected to a two-way analysis of variance having two levels of condition (internet or face) and two levels of self-esteem (high or low). For an alpha level of .05, only a condition effect on learning and a learning interaction effect were found to be statistically significant. The main effect of condition on

learning yielded an F ratio of $F(1, 36) = 38.16, p = .001$, indicating that participants learned more about the person with whom they spoke in the face-to-face condition than in the internet condition ($M_s = 6.30$ vs. $3.50, SD_s = .88$ vs. 1.57). The strength of the relationship, as indexed by η^2 , was $.47$. The learning interaction effect yielded an F ratio of $F(1, 36) = 9.51, p = .02$, with a strength, as indexed by η^2 , of $.07$. Post-hoc tests show that those with high self-esteem learned more about the person with whom they spoke in the face-to-face condition than in the internet condition, $t(17) = -5.95, p = .001$, and that those with low self-esteem also learned more in the face-to-face condition than in the internet condition, $t(19) = -2.71, p = .01$. A marginally significant t test also revealed that those with low self-esteem learned more about the other person in the internet condition than those with high self-esteem, $t(18) = 1.97, p = .06$. No significant results were found between self-esteem groups in the face-to-face condition.

A condition effect, $F(1, 36) = 3.90, p = .056$, and an interaction effect, $F(1, 36) = 3.00, p = .092$, on the ease of conversation were each found to be marginally significant. This indicates that participants found conversation to be easier in the face-to-face condition than in the internet condition ($M_s = 5.22$ vs. $4.72, SD_s = .86$ vs. 1.24). Post-hoc tests show that those with high self-esteem talk easier in the face-to-face condition than in the internet condition, $t(17) = -2.81, p = .01$, and that those with low self-esteem found conversation to be easier in the internet condition than those with high self-esteem, $t(18) = 1.72, p = .10$. No significant results were found between conditions for those with low self-esteem or between self-esteem groups in the face-to-face condition.

Also, a self-esteem effect, $F(1, 36) = 2.69, p = .109$, and an interaction effect, $F(1, 36) = 1.96, p = .17$, on anxiety felt during conversation were each found to be marginally significant. This illustrates that participants with low self-esteem were more anxious in conversation than those with high self-esteem ($M_s = 3.14$ vs. $2.37, SD_s = 1.68$ vs. 1.16). With respect to the interaction effect on anxiety, post-hoc tests show marginally significant results such that those with high self-esteem were more anxious in the face-to-face condition than in the internet condition, $t(17) = -1.99, p = .06$, and that those with low self-esteem were more anxious in the internet condition than those with high self-esteem, $t(18) = 2.07, p = .05$. No significant effects were found between conditions for those with low self-esteem or between self-esteem groups in the face-to-face condition. Finally, a condition effect, $F(1, 36) = 2.35, p = .134$, and a group

effect, $F(1, 36) = 2.69$, $p = .11$, on level of comfort during conversation were each found to be marginally significant. This indicates that both groups felt more comfortable in the face-to-face condition than in the internet condition ($M_s = 5.75$ vs. 5.35 , $SD_s = 1.15$ vs. 1.42), with those with high self-esteem having felt more comfortable than those with low self-esteem ($M_s = 5.89$ vs. 5.24 , $SD_s = 1.10$ vs. 1.51).

Medians' ratings of the ambitiousness, desirability, friendliness, intelligence, openness, and physical attractiveness of the person with whom they spoke, either one of high or low self-esteem, as well as how interesting the person was to talk to, were each subjected to a two-way analysis of variance having two levels of condition (internet or face-to-face) and two levels of self-esteem of partner (high or low). For an alpha level of .05, a self-esteem effect on intelligence was found to be statistically significant, $F(1, 36) = 4.53$, $p = .04$, indicating that those with low self-esteem seemed more intelligent than those with high self-esteem ($M_s = 5.52$ vs. 5.05 , $SD_s = .75$ vs. $.62$). The strength of this relationship, as indexed by η^2 , was .11. Also, for an alpha level of .05, a group effect on ambitiousness was found to be statistically significant, $F(1, 36) = 4.23$, $p = .05$, showing that participants with low self-esteem seemed more ambitious than those with high self-esteem ($M_s = 4.95$ vs. 4.32 , $SD_s = .92$ vs. 1.00). The strength of this relationship, as indexed by η^2 , was .10. No significant results were found for measures of desirability, friendliness, openness, and physical attractiveness.

Other medians' ratings, that of willingness to go on a date with the person with whom they spoke, willingness to date this person extensively, attractedness to the other, and ability to have a satisfying relationship with the other, were each subjected to a two-way analysis of variance. Although no significant results were found for an alpha level of .05, the analysis concluded the existence of one marginally significant effect, such that a group effect on willingness to date extensively, $F(1, 36) = 2.79$, $p = .10$, was found, showing that medians would rather date those with high self-esteem than those with low self-esteem ($M_s = 4.11$ vs. 3.38 , $SD_s = 1.33$ vs. 1.36).

Discussion

Study 1, a descriptive exploration, was designed to examine attitudes toward online communication as a way to meet new people, even romantic partners. This study found that most people have never even considered using the internet to become acquainted with romantic partner or friends, even though the survey indicated that internet use is quite frequent. Most do not even think that it is possible to sustain a happy love relationship through online communication, yet 46% do know people who have. This data seems to show that many people may have misconceptions regarding love on the internet, believing that searching for partners online is something that is done by people without any other social outlet, a reality quite different than the student living on a college campus whose social interactions are endless. Although this survey has yielded interesting data regarding the attitudes of people toward online relationships, both this study and Study 2 have a problem of a lack of diversity in the sample used: the population consisted of college students from one university, mainly of the same age, ethnicity, and economic status. As a result, the findings may be quite different if conducted with a wider variety of people, those who may represent different backgrounds and life experiences. Thus, these results must be replicated by other studies and tested against a hypothesis before its findings can be generalized beyond this small sample population and be considered valid.

Study 2, the central focus of this experiment, found a tenuous link between self-esteem and the use of the internet to pursue relationships. It showed that people with low self-esteem found conversation easier through the internet than those with high self-esteem. It also found that those with low self-esteem learned more about the person with whom they spoke in the internet condition than those with high self-esteem. These findings support this study's hypothesis in that it reveals a level of comfort for those with low self-esteem in using the internet, with its protective shield against humiliation and failure, that is not achieved by those with high self-esteem, those who found conversation to be easiest face-to-face.

This study also confirms tendencies of those with high self-esteem and those with low self-esteem that have been previously shown. For example, this study found that those with high self-esteem felt more comfortable than those with low self-esteem when meeting someone new across conditions. This supports

the findings of Baumeister et al. (1989), which illustrate the high self-esteem person as an aggressive being who is inclined toward self-enhancing presentations, whereas the low self-esteem person tends toward a self-protective orientation so as to avoid rejection and failure. Also, this study showed that medians would rather date those with high self-esteem than those with low self-esteem, most likely due to the confidence and outgoingness of the former and the lack thereof of the latter. In addition, the low self-esteem people felt more anxious than the high self-esteem people across conditions, a finding that also supports Baumeister et al. (1989). In the internet condition, however, those with low self-esteem felt more anxious than those with high self-esteem, a notion contrary to the hypothesis of this study. It is possible that the anxiety stemmed from a fear of trying something new because it is associated with a lack of control over one's environment, a characteristic of one with low self-esteem. This is consistent with the ideas of Tedeschi et al. (1985).

In addition, this study shows that participants learned more about the person with whom they spoke in the face-to-face condition than in the internet condition. It also found that both esteem groups felt that conversation was easier and more comfortable in the face-to-face condition than in the internet condition. This finding does not support the hypothesis of this study. However, one can argue that because the amount of time to talk is shorter in the internet condition than in the face-to-face condition, due to pauses as one waits for his partner to type a message, there is more of a sense of urgency in conversing. As a result, one might have felt that conversation in the internet condition as compared to the face-to-face condition was rushed, rather than relaxed, and not as conducive to learning about another person.

Furthermore, those with low self-esteem were found to be more intelligent and more ambitious than those with high self-esteem. This leads one to wonder why someone who sees himself to be of low self-worth would be considered so highly by others. This can be explained best by Gilovich, Savitsky, and Medvec (1998), who discuss the illusion of transparency, or the tendency for people to overestimate the extent to which others can discern their internal states: more specifically, people often mistakenly believe that they can be seen inside and out when, in reality, they come across to others very differently than they feel. The authors attribute this bias to a person's refusal to let go of his own beliefs about himself when attempting to assume another's perspective. Thus, although the low self-esteem people in this study may

not see themselves as ambitious and intelligent, they do appear that way to those that they meet.

Finally, one result of this study seems to be very out of the ordinary. Those with high self-esteem felt more anxious when talking face-to-face than over the internet, a phenomenon does not appear to have any explanation. Therefore, this aspect of the experiment needs to be replicated in order to judge its validity.

This study, in its attempt to link self-esteem with the internet, will hopefully set a precedent for future studies of the motivations behind pursuing an online relationship. Because self-esteem is a broad category, that which encompasses such things as one's feelings of physical attractiveness and possibility for success, it is necessary that these factors be studied independently to better reveal their role in internet relationships. Thus, with technology fast becoming such a great part of our lives, enabling us to form these relationships with people throughout the world, it is imperative that psychologists pursue research of this new phenomenon, the next wave of the future.

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Table 1

Means and standard deviations for internet survey

<u>Variable</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Minimum</u>	<u>Maximum</u>
MEETPEOP	2.58	1.42	1.00	7.00
PURSLOVE	1.93	1.04	1.00	5.00
HAPLOVE	2.02	.94	1.00	5.00
TRYMEET	1.23	.73	1.00	7.00
USEINTER	4.38	1.68	1.00	7.00
METPART	1.08	.37	1.00	4.00
KNOWPERS	3.34	2.65	1.00	7.00
METFRNDS	1.98	1.48	1.00	7.00

Appendix B (cont.)

Post-Session Questionnaire - Part B

Please also answer the following questions regarding the medium through which you spoke:

1. I enjoyed talking face-to-face/over the internet.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly						Strongly
Disagree					Agree	

2. I think meeting face-to-face/over the internet is conducive to learning about other people.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly						Strongly
Disagree					Agree	

3. I felt very comfortable talking to him/her face-to-face/over the internet.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly						Strongly
Disagree					Agree	

4. I felt very anxious conversing with him/her face-to-face/over the internet.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Strongly						Strongly
Disagree					Agree	

5. I would do this again.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Definitely						Definitely
No						Yes