



Research Report

Problem-focused discussions in digital contexts: The impact of information and communication technologies on conversational processes and experiences



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ABSTRACT

To understand the effects of information and communication technologies (ICTs; e.g., texting, instant messaging) on conversational processes and socioemotional well-being, researchers have often relied on experimental designs in which unfamiliar adults engage in relatively superficial conversations. This paradigm limits our understanding of ICTs, as individuals rely primarily on ICTs to converse with close others, in more intimate discussions. To address this limitation, this study examines the use of ICTs by friends engaging in problem-focused discussions. Fifty-three female friend pairs engaged in problem-focused discussions in an ICT-mediated or face-to-face context. Observers rated the degree to which individuals exchanged information, dwelled on negative affect, rehashed problems, and speculated about problems. Participants provided ratings of perceived self-expression, similarity, self-disclosure, positive and negative affect and closeness with the friend. Participants in the ICTs condition reported less positive affect after the conversation than those in the face-to-face condition. Although participants interacting through ICTs exchanged less information, rehashed problems less, and reported lower levels of perceived self-expression, they experienced higher levels of perceived similarity and self-disclosure. Discussing problems through an ICT was indirectly related to dampened closeness through observed information exchanged and enhanced closeness through perceived similarity. Implications for the study of ICTs are discussed.

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1. Introduction

During early adulthood, information and communication technologies (ICTs; e.g., texting, instant messaging) are an integral part of interpersonal relationships. A bulk of young adults' social interactions occur using some form of ICT. Furthermore, they primarily use ICTs to engage in social interactions with friends and close others (Cole, Suman, Schramm, Zhou, & Salvador, 2013). Indeed, sixty-two percent of those between 19 and 24 rate the internet as very important for their social relationships, and 71% report texting as very important (Cole et al., 2013). The central role that ICTs play in young adults' social lives suggests that many interactions that friends once shared in face-to-face contexts likely now occur in digital contexts.

Socializing through ICTs may have a profound effect on the nature and quality of communications between close others and the impact those interactions have on socioemotional well-being. Text-based ICTs (e.g., text-messages, social network sites, instant messages, email), which are the most commonly used form of ICTs (Zickuhr & Smith, 2012), may have a particularly strong impact on the course of conversations and individuals' perceived experience of a conversation (Dietz-Uhler, Bishop-Clark, & Howard, 2005; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Tanis & Postmes, 2007, 2008; Walther, 2011). Text-based ICTs limit the number of non-verbal social cues available during social interactions (i.e., facial expressions, vocal inflections, body language; Lee, 2004; Tanis & Postmes, 2003; Walther, 2011), which in turn reduces the total amount of observed information that is exchanged during interactions. The consequence is that ICTs may reduce the total amount of information exchanged, including the ability to convey ones' emotions, revisit topics, and discuss topics in detail. ICTs have also been shown affect individuals' experience conversations. Despite these limitations to conversational processes when conversing through text-based ICTs, individuals feel as if they express

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a wider range of personality traits (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002), experience enhanced feelings of similarity with interactive partners (Postmes, Speares, & Lea, 1998; Tanis & Postmes, 2008; Walther, 1996, 2011), and perceive that they disclosed more personal information about themselves compared to individuals conversing face-to-face (Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2013; Joinson, 2001; Jordán-Conde, Mennecke, & Townsend, 2014; Schouten, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2009). Changes in these observed conversational processes (e.g., exchanging information, dwelling on negative affect, rehashing problems, speculating about problems) and phenomenological experiences (e.g., increased perceptions of self-expression, similarity, self-disclosure) are thought to contribute to feelings of positive affect following interactions and to closeness and liking toward interactive partners (Antheunis, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2007; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007).

Although much has been learned regarding the impact of ICTs on socioemotional experiences, the foundational work used to develop explanatory models of ICTs has primarily focused on a limited number of conversational contexts (e.g., “getting to know you” conversations, group conflicts) between unfamiliar partners (Antheunis et al., 2007; Joinson, 2001; McKenna & Green, 2002) or between a participant and a confederate (Jiang et al., 2013). Limiting research on ICTs to use between unfamiliar conversational partners is problematic as over 70% of young adults’ social interactions occur with individuals they know on a face-to-face basis (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). Their ICT-mediated conversations, therefore, are likely more intimate than those that occur with a stranger in a lab setting. To address this limitation, the current study was conducted to elucidate the effects of engaging in a more personal conversation through ICTs on observable conversational behaviors, self-perceptions, and emotional experiences. Specifically, this research focuses on the effects of ICTs on problem-focused conversations occurring between friends.

2. Problem-focused, co-ruminative social interactions

One form of social interaction that has been shown to significantly contribute to social and emotional well-being and that likely occurs in ICT-mediated contexts is problem-focused discussion. Friends often turn to one another to discuss problems and negative emotional experiences in an effort to seek and provide social support. While supportive interactions between friends generally have been shown to promote healthy socioemotional adjustment (Bolger & Eckenrode, 1991; Uchino, Uno, & Holt-Lunstad, 1999), problem-focused discussions may lead to excessive focus on the causes and consequences of one’s problems and concurrent negative emotions, a process known as *co-rumination* (Rose, 2002). While these well intentioned attempts at supporting one another are meant to alleviate the distress of the situation, research has shown that co-ruminative interactions are related to negative emotional outcomes. Consequently, although friends typically experience heightened feelings of closeness and friendship satisfaction after co-ruminating, they also experience heightened levels of negative affect and internalizing symptoms (Calmes & Roberts, 2008; Rose, 2002; Rose, Carlson, & Waller, 2007; Rose, Schwartz-Mette, Glick, Smith, & Luebbe, 2014).

The processes involved in co-rumination may be significantly influenced by the context in which the conversation occurs. When engaging in co-ruminative conversations, interactive partners have been observed to dwell on negative emotional experiences, rehash events and feelings of emotional distress, and speculate about the potential impetus and outcomes of their problems (Calmes & Roberts, 2008; Rose, 2002; Rose et al., 2007). These co-ruminative behaviors predict increased negative affect and internalizing symptoms (Calmes & Roberts, 2008; Rose, 2002;

Rose et al., 2007, 2014). At the same time, this detailed focus on conversational partners’ problems and emotional experiences potentially enhances perceptions of self-expression, similarity, and self-disclosure (Calmes & Roberts, 2008; Rose, 2002; Rose et al., 2007, 2014). As ICTs affect the amount of information exchanged during conversations and alter individuals’ subjective experience of the conversation (i.e., perceived self-expression, similarity, self-disclosure) that are thought to play an important role in problem-focused discussions between friends, examining the effects of ICTs on the emergence of co-ruminative behaviors and subjective experiences during problem-focused conversations provides an opportunity to examine how friend interactions may be influenced by ICT-mediated communication.

3. Potential impact of ICTs on co-ruminative behaviors

The Hyperpersonal Theory of Computer-Mediated Communication provides a theoretical model of how ICT-mediated communication influences the experience and outcomes of social interactions. According to the Hyperpersonal model, the medium an individual uses to engage with an interactive partner determines the number of interpersonal cues that are available during the interaction. Interactions that are rich in interpersonal cues (e.g., face-to-face conversations, video chats) allow individuals to exchange large amounts of information through the content of their discussions as well as through the non-verbal social cues that are present during these interactions (Joinson, 2001; Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, 2011). Text-based ICTs (e.g., instant messenger, email) limit the number of interpersonal cues present during social interactions, thereby limiting the amount of information exchanged.

Conversing through ICTs likely has similar influences on problem-based conversations. When conversing through ICTs, individuals should be limited in the extent to which they are able to share information in general, which should limit the extent to which they dwell on negative affect, rehash problem information, and speculate about issues surrounding their problems. Thus, many of the ruminative qualities that emerge during problem-focused discussions are likely reduced when such discussions occur in ICT-mediated contexts. As these behaviors have negative implications for one’s emotional experiences (Rose et al., 2014), discussing problems with others through ICTs may ultimately blunt the negative emotional experiences of these conversations leading to lower levels of negative affect, higher levels of positive affect, and increased feelings of closeness.

Hyperpersonal theory further posits that, although the presence of interpersonal cues allows for more efficient communication, the consequence is that interactive partners have more cues to process and interpret which takes attention away from the content of the conversation and leads to increased focus on the behaviors and reactions of one’s interactive partner. This leads partners to draw more distinctive contrasts between their thoughts and feelings and those of their partner (Joinson, 2001; Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, 2011). In limited cue environments, such as text-based ICTs, individuals become less attuned to individual differences and begin to perceive that they are similar to their interactive partners, sharing similar thoughts and feelings (Joinson, 2001; Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, 2011). This leads to the subjective experience of being better able to express oneself, heightened perceptions of similarity, and an enhanced sense of having disclosed personal, intimate experiences. Such effects may be particularly pronounced during problem discussions, as individuals address personal issues and feelings and sort through emotionally charged issues (Rose et al., 2007). Perceived self-expression, similarity, and self-disclosure have each been shown to be negatively associated with negative emotions

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