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Varying Definitions of Online Communication

Numerous studies have been conducted on various facets of Internet relationships, focusing on the levels of intimacy, closeness, different communication modalities, and the frequency of use of computer-mediated communication (CMC). However, contradictory results are suggested within this research because only certain aspects of CMC are investigated, for example, email only. Cummings, Butler, and Kraut (2002) suggest that face-to-face (FtF) interactions are more effective than CMC (read: email) in creating feelings of closeness or intimacy, while other studies suggest the opposite. To understand how both online (Internet) and offline (non-Internet) relationships are affected by CMC, all forms of CMC should be studied.

This paper examines Cummings et al.’s research against other CMC research to propose that additional research be conducted to better understand how online communication affects relationships. Literature Review In Cummings et al.’s (2002) summary article reviewing three empirical studies on online social relationships, it was found that CMC, especially email, was less effective than FtF contact in creating and maintaining close social relationships. Two of the three reviewed studies focusing on communication in non-Internet and Internet relationships mediated by FtF, phone, or email modalities found that the frequency of each modality’s use was significantly linked to the strength of the particular relationship (Cummings et al., 2002). The strength of the relationship was predicted best by FtF and phone communication, as participants rated email as an inferior means of maintaining personal relationships as compared to FtF and phone contacts (Cummings et al., 2002).

Cummings et al. (2002) reviewed an additional study conducted in 1999 by the HomeNet project (see Appendix A for more information on the HomeNet project). In this project, Kraut,

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