Assessments of Perceived Online Intimacy

People use online social networks to keep in touch, share and express their thoughts with their loved ones. The argument can thus be made that online social networks also support intimacy in relationships. This study critically examines the concept of online intimacy by employing a questionnaire (n=360) to explore the concept of perceived online intimacy from the perspective of the digital divide. The findings suggest that social networking promotes alterations in people’s perceptions of intimacy in both online and offline settings.

**Keywords: intimacy,** **online social networks, digital divide**

**Conceptualizations of Intimacy**

The definition and importance of intimacy have been the focus of scores of studies, mainly from the field of psychology (e.g., Mashek & Aron, 2004; Reis, 1990). Intimacy has been considered an essential aspect of interpersonal relationships (e.g., Clark & Reis, 1988; Prager, 1995; Reis, 1990). Most scholars agree that it is a multidimensional concept and that it varies considerably in how it is conceptualized, especially regarding development and maintenance. For example, Prager (1995) stated that intimacy “overlaps with concepts such as love, closeness, self-disclosure, support, bonding, attachment, and sexuality” (p. 13). Despite this suggested overlap, the concept of intimacy as self-disclosure seems to have prevailed. From this perspective, self-disclosure of personal thoughts and feelings is considered a means for attaining intimacy (e.g., Prager & Buhrmester, 1998; Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). Reis and Shaver (1988) postulated that intimacy develops using interactions in which individuals disclose information about themselves, and others listen and respond empathically. They proposed that this disclosure of emotions and thoughts may result in higher levels of intimacy than a revelation of facts. Lippert and Prager (2001) also found a discrepancy between factual and emotional disclosures, though both resulted in intimacy.

Does the concept of online intimacy conflict with our understanding of intimacy in general? Lomanowska and Guitton (2016) claim that distinguishing online intimacy from offline intimacy does not necessarily mean that the definition of intimacy must diverge. Instead, they propose that intimacy is realized in different ways contingent on the medium. Similarly, we argue that probing the possible evolution of the concept of intimacy should first involve an interdisciplinary investigation of the concept itself.

**The roots of the concept of intimacy.** The cultural phenomenon known as the concept of intimacy has its roots in Western philosophical thought. When we survey these roots and the cultural past of the idea of intimacy, we are brought face to face with the reality that what we think of as a given can only really be understood as the contingent product of a specific time, place, and condition (Foucault, 1982). Our analysis examined the way in which the concept of intimacy evolved, beginning in the classical Greek period, moving through the Middle Ages, then the Renaissance, and finally arriving at the present day (Lurie, 2006). Intimacy is a cognitive concept that has been expressed differently in different eras, cultures, and times. The evolution of the concept of intimacy goes hand in hand with the evolution of the concept of the ‘individual,’ along with attendant concepts such as ‘self’ and ‘self-knowledge.’ Thus, the concept of intimacy immerged with the concepts of self, perceptions of oneself concerning others, and patterns of interpersonal relationships with others (Levinas, 1995). One example of a resulting definition of the ‘individual’ refers to personhood as an emerging from and separation of the individual consciousness from the social-cultural contexts of that individual’s birth. Another definition treats the individual as the merging of one person with others and with himself. In this definition, individuation does not isolate the individual from the world, nor does it place one in opposition to the world; rather, it gathers the world into the individual. The process of individuation is a process in which the individual strives for self-realization as a single complete being (Jung, 1973).

**The roots of the concept of intimacy in the concept of individuality.** In the classical Greek world, the cradle of Western civilization, Socrates argued that individuation can be achieved only to the extent that man reaches a rational understanding of himself: The enlightened man must contemplate and analyze things in the light of his self-knowledge and self-analysis, and his understanding of others (Glicker, 1984). Despite the emergence of individualist thought in the ancient world, the Greeks did not employ the term ‘individualism,’ nor did they have an understanding of individualism similar to what we have today. Historical evidence indicates that the Greeks were not able to imagine themselves as independent entities: The perception of the self as ‘I’ was not established in the mindset of Greek society (Shanahan, 1992). Instead, Greek philosophers advanced the idea of sovereignty over oneself and one’s life as a path to liberty and freedom. They assumed that the ability to control one’s desires and master one’s choices shapes one into a better person and motivates one to excellence (Foucault, 1997).

A revolution in the perception of the individual occurred in Christianity during the Middle Ages – despite the lack of freedom – under the rule of the Catholic Church, which emphasized religious introspection and self-redemption (Nir, 2010). Despite the rigidity of the bonds holding the faithful to its path, Christianity instructed the individual to make choices and distinguish between good and evil in daily life, making self-realization possible in a way not found in other contemporaneous religions. This self-realization, as noted, was further elaborated upon, advancing the perception of the individual in Western culture, and leading to a developed self-knowledge (Fromm, 1969; Nir, 2010).

Individualism in its modern sense emerged during the Renaissance, evolving into a dominant feature of Western culture. While the emphasis during the Middle Ages was on introspection and self-redemption, during the Renaissance individualism became secularized (Burckhardt, 1944). The individual, who until that time was dominated by an aristocratic minority, was liberated: Tyranny became intermixed with freedom, and individuality with chaos (Fromm, 1965). Renaissance individualism strove to realize the abilities and capabilities of the individual separate from God and eternity (Bainton, 1950).

**Roots of the concept of intimacy in the modern era.** The modern era is characterized by social, economic, political, and technological developments marking the transition from a traditional culture to an advanced one (Laughey, 2007). Sociologists have argued that the modern era began with the rise of capitalism and the emergence of democratic institutions, coupled with the growing moral force of the concept of individualism (Illouz, 2007). With the blurring of accepted distinctions between the public and the private spheres over the course of the 20th century, the individual became increasingly focused on his emotional world – primarily by use of various techniques for uncovering the ‘self’ and its relationship to others (Illouz, 2007). Consequently, the development of the individual was not merely a process whereby a person aspired towards universal truth; instead, it became a journey into one’s self to connect to an inner truth – a journey towards authenticity. Idol worship (paganism) was no longer seen as an impediment to individualism; it was seen instead as an expression of resistance to the social pressures of conformity that hinder people in their quest for authenticity (Rousseau, 1930).

Our interpersonal relations and development of the individual are both influenced by various socialization agents that accompany us throughout our lives. Therefore, we may say that the ‘self’ is a product of the interaction between our internal biological nature and the external environment, and is limited in form. Self-knowledge and selfhood, as well as the very creation of life, do not occur in some unrelated parallel world; instead, they are processes driven by the fact that an individual is embedded in and belongs to social networks. Social networks themselves are dependent upon an intricate system of meanings, narratives, and cultural practices, and this system is rooted in the worldview that links our perceptions to our interpretations of the world. The core premise of this study is that a variety of definitions of the concept of intimacy have filtered down to the present day; therefore, differences in our understanding of intimacy might result from different variables and practices in social networks.

**Intimacy Meets Online Environments – Towards an Empirical Examination**

There are numerous papers that investigate the impact of the internet on social relationships (e.g., Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Subrahmanyam, et al., 2008). Cohen-Avigdor and Lehman-Wilzig (2003) assert the social aspect of the internet is inherently different from other means of mass communication, such as newspapers, radio, and television. The internet preserves some of the elements of mass communication, but also contains elements that enable and enhance individuality and interactivity. For example, people using this platform can express themselves as true individuals by creating and controlling their user profiles, thereby repeatedly creating themselves anew (Amichai-Hamburger & Hayat, 2013).

The internet gives people the potential control and power to be whomever they want to be – to shape and control their message. This control mechanism contributes to the collapse of class and other interpersonal distinctions, thereby creating virtual environments for sharing content, opinions, and ideas through enjoyable and positive user experience. Stanton, et al. (2016) developed a scale for measuring participants’' online intimacy. They found correlations between online intimacy and participants’ tendencies towards openness and extraversion, but the overall associations of online intimacy with personality traits was weak.

The availability and accessibility of communication technologies have transformed the internet into an inherent part of the individual’s daily life, one in which the internet is used in maintaining personal social relationships (Bazarova, 2012). The internet allows the construction of a common discursive space that is often described as the present-day alternative to the classical agora (town square). In fact, the internet is a modern-day agora of immeasurable scope, containing an infinity of subspaces (Kirk & Schill, 2011). While the internet offers a solution to the crises wrought by globalization and the loss of traditional circles of association, it also provides the means for the creation of new circles of association (Shner, 2012).

Social networks are meeting places in which users create user profiles, which facilitate interpersonal social interaction with other users of the network (Park, et al., 2011). For many users, the goal of socializing in these online social networks is to share information with both interested followers, as well as those who are not; and, more than anything, to see and be seen (Boyd, 2011). While social networks do lead to wider participation, there is also the fear that they are destroying interpersonal interactions by undermining face-to-face communication. The argument is that they encourage anti-socialization and the isolation of the individual (Chambers, 2013). Despite a constant connection to the virtual world, the individual is lonely, and the connection to the virtual world might only provide the illusion of a connection to the others (Turkle, 2011).

In this context, Bauman (2003) argues that the appearance of virtual intimacy has made human interaction more frequent, superficial, intense, and brief. The social networks that have ushered in that virtual intimacy have reshaped interpersonal relationships, which now require less time and effort to create, and less time and effort to destroy.

Virtual relationships directly imply the reversal of the traditional sequence in which interpersonal interactions have always taken place. While physical attraction has previously preceded the desire to learn more about the other person, knowledge often now comes before attraction and the realization of romantic interaction. People are initially encountered as abstract conglomerations of qualities and characteristics, and are only later met in physical form (Illouz, 2007).

Although social networks create the visual illusion of friendship circles among strangers, they also flatten friendship and interpersonal connections, transforming them from relations that must be maintained through effort, into mere sentiments (Kimchi, 2010). Despite the feeling of intimacy that appears to form in social networks, Park, et al. (2011) found that Facebook was not a site on which profound relationships could be sustained over an extended period, because there was a lack of ‘truth.’ In other words, they found little correlation between genuine and honest sharing and the existence of intimacy on Facebook. The somewhat shallow relationships to which Park and colleagues refer are continuously made even shallower by other social-cultural processes, such as the decreasing influence of traditional communities and families on the formation of interpersonal ties and on the construction of identity. The loss of traditional structures parallels the emergence of individualism, which makes relationships fragile and transitory (Lambert, 2013).

**Determining perceived intimacy along the digital divide.** The use of online social networks is prevalent among all segments of society. Nonetheless, the digital divide – the gap between different groups regarding their access and use of digital technology, especially the internet – has yet to disappear (Cooper & Kimmelman, 2001; DiMaggio, et al. 2004). Norris (2001) argues that the significance of the digital divide goes beyond the mere issue of access and levels of usage, because it reflects social, cultural, and economic inequalities. New claims about the shrinking of the digital divide are frequently advanced in the light of findings regarding the prevalence of new digital technologies and their usage.

Hargittai (2002) proposed a distinction between first-level and second-level digital divides. The first-level digital divide represents a gap in the level of access and frequency of use, while the second-level digital divide represents a gap in online skill levels. Various studies have examined the gaps in the level of access and frequency of use of the internet among different groups according to education, income, gender, age, and other characteristics (Chen, et al., 2002). Prensky (2011) identified two age groups with regards to their use of digital technology: ‘digital natives,’ those who were born into a digital environment and perceive it as a natural space; and, ‘digital immigrants,’ those who were forced to adopt (or reject) recent technological transformations.

In our study, the respondents were divided into five age groups to examine the extent to which users perceive social networks as a space for intimacy. The first hypothesis (H1) postulated that there is a significant difference in perceived intimacy among respondents’ age groups. Perceived intimacy was defined as a multidimensional variable, a subjective construct measured as an index ranging from 1-5 (M = 2.63, SD = 0.67, α = 0.7). The variable was based on respondents’ assessments of the following six statements:

* “One can find true love on the internet.”
* “One can find true love on online social networks.”
* “Intimacy can be established on social networks.”
* “Romantic relationships that begun through online social network can be developed.”
* “Romantic relationships that are primarily based on relations through a social network can be developed.”
* “One can keep close relationships through online social networks.”

Our second hypothesis (H2) postulated that there is a significant difference in perceived intimacy between high- and low-frequency users. That is, those who use the internet more frequently will feel more intimacy online than those who use it less frequently. For the purpose of our study, a heavy user is one who is above the median (Median= 3.13, SD=1.26) of the measured items for user activities, based on the actual sample of respondents.

**Method**

The study employed an online questionnaire that contained 42 closed questions, covering usage patterns of online social networks and the degree of agreement with statements regarding various aspects of sharing, self-confidence, love, relationships, and intimacy in the online and offline world. The questionnaire was comprised of four parts. The first part contained demographic questions and questions regarding present and past patterns of internet use and social networking. The second and third parts contained items which were to be rated on a five-level Likert scale (“not at all” to “very much”). The second part measured agreement with statements describing patterns of use and behavior on social networks; the third part measured agreement with statements regarding feelings related to sharing, self-confidence, and trust in social networking. The survey’s fourth part used a four-level scale (“strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”) to measure agreement with general statements indicative of the respondents’ views on topics such as love, relationships, and intimacy in the online and offline worlds.

**Results**

The following results are based on the online questionnaire (n = 360). 60% of the respondents were women, and half of the respondents had a college degree. Age distribution was as follows: 11% were 13-17, 39% were 18-24, 40% were 25-34, 5% were 35-44, and 5% were over the age of 45.

**Reliability tests and indexes.** Internal consistency was tested using Cronbach’s alpha to test the reliability of eight items related to actual behavior in relation to others on the Facebook social network. Examples include agreement with:

* “Keeping up-to-date on news in my close friends’ lives”
* “Keeping my circle updated on various thing that occurs in my life”
* “I usually respond to content posted by network friends, both online and in the real world.”
* “I share details of my personal life on social networks.”

The value arrived at was  0.68 When one of the items – “I thought a lot about sharing intimate content on social networks” – was excluded, the alpha value increased to  The variable index for behavior in relation to others was calculated for the seven items. The calculated index average is 2.99 (SD = 0.76).

To assess the reliability of items related to feelings about relationships with others online, internal consistency was first measured using Cronbach’s alpha for seven items, for example:

* “I feel that I can be whomever I want on the social network.”
* “It is important to me to share experiences and content from my personal life online.”
* “It is important to me that my friends on the social network respond in some way to the personal content I post.”

The value received was  = 0.57. When one of the items – “I do not feel that I can trust my online friends as much as I trust my real friends” – was excluded, the alpha value rose to  = 0.73. The variable index for feelings about relationships with others was calculated for the six items, and the index average is 2.7 (SD = 0.75).

The ten statements addressing perceptions of intimacy online were processed through a diagnostic factor analysis according to the theoretical conceptualization categories (for example, sharing, trust, and friendship) tested in this study. However, we were unable to clearly identify groups of statements with theoretical links, even when including statements that dealt explicitly with aspects of intimacy and love online, such as,

* “I believe it is possible to find true love on the internet in general and on social networks in general.”
* “There is a real chance of developing a strong romantic relationship that began and is primarily based on a social network connection.”
* “It is possible to form real intimacy in social networks.”

The above statements were tested using Cronbach’s alpha, and the value received was  = 0.67. An index variable for the three items was calculated with an index average of 2.63 (SD = 0.67).

To test H1, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was employed to test the mean differences of the perceived intimacy index among age groups. Significant differences were found (F(355) = 5.58, p < .01). For the 13-17 age group, the intimacy index average is 2.32 (SD = 0.55). The average increases for the 18-25 age group (M = 2.55, SD = 0.69) and the 26-34 age group (M = 2.76, SD = 0.68) and then peaks with the 35-44 age group (M = 2.98, SD = 0.43). The index value declines for the 45 and above age group (M = 2.54, SD = 0.42).

A t-test of the independent samples was carried out to test H2. The t-test examined the difference in the intimacy index averages between light and heavy user groups. An analysis of the results shows a significant difference with regards to frequency of use (t(358) = 2.32, p < 0.05). Heavy users received a higher intimacy index average (M = 2.75, SD = 0.75) than light users (M = 2.56, SD = 0.62).

Following the acceptance the hypotheses a two-factor analysis of variance difference (Two-Way ANOVA) was conducted among the respondents’ intimacy index. The independent variables were the level of use and age group. The analysis reveals a significant interaction between the variables [F(9,197) = 2.73, p < .001]. For example, respondents aged 13 to 17 with a light level of use have a higher intimacy index (M = 2.45, SD = 0.58), than those with a heavy level of use (M = 2.19, SD = 0.63). By contrast, respondents aged 45 and above with a heavy level of use have a higher intimacy index (M = 2.75, SD = 0.17), than those with a light level of use (M = 2.27, SD = 0.49).

**Discussion**

Data analysis suggested that it was impossible to confirm the assumption that being older mean that a person falls into the digital immigrants’ group. It could suggest, for example, that older people use online social networks less and perceive them as foreign and somewhat alienating spaces – which would make the internet unconducive to intimacy for them. However, age could correlate with length of experience online, which in turn contributes to viewing online social networks as natural spaces that are conducive to long-lasting intimate relationships. An additional explanation might be found in the ability of users in older age groups to compare expressions of intimacy in offline and online spaces. The possibility of comparing these spaces allows a deeper and more critical examination than what can be performed by digital natives, who exist in a single space where the online and offline world are indistinguishable. Intimacy may be transparent for digital natives, and they might not ascribe to it the same degree of importance as digital immigrants.

We found no significant correlation between understandings of intimacy and socio-demographic characteristics, such as age, gender, education, or place of residence. Nonetheless, we did find a significant correlation between understandings of intimacy and length of time using online social networks. Users who have spent a longer time on social networks, have used them more intensely, and are defined as heavy users (over 3 hours daily) are more likely to perceive online social networks as an intimate environment or one where intimacy is possible. Can we conclude that online intimacy is affected by users’ experiences and competencies in online environments (e.g., online social networks)?

… in terms of personal control and choice, mediated intimacies are increasingly being governed by sets of conventions or tacit rules to organize the moral dimension of communication. The technologies of texting, social network sites, and tweeting can offer a sense of personal control to manage the kinds of vulnerabilities involved in making a more emotionally intense connection. (Chambers, 2013: p.167)

As Chambers implies, the digital divide that matters here is the ability to utilize the potential of technology.

Our key conclusion is that social networking does indeed alter people’s perceptions of intimacy both in the online and the offline worlds. However, this transformation is most evident among heavy users – those who have fully incorporated social networking into their lives, and who have concurrently adopted the new rules of the game that come with social networking.

These findings can be explained with the help of ‘technological determinism,’ which argues that technology shapes the face of humanity and determines the course of history. Technological determinism argues that the means of communication shape the society within which they exist (McLuhan, 1967). From this, it follows that technological transformations – including the emergence of the internet and social networking – are what have led to the transformation in understanding the concept of intimacy in the present age. However, in contrast to the technological determinism approach, it may also be argued that internet technology and social networking have not brought about (or perhaps one should say, “have not yet brought about”) the demise of intimacy as it was understood prior to the rise of social networking and the infiltration of technology into our daily lives. Moreover, despite the conceptual transformation accompanying these far-reaching technological changes, technology’s impact is evidently neither indiscriminate nor comprehensive. Accordingly, the changes in understandings of intimacy are far from uniform. We have found that socio-demographic characteristics do not determine perceptions of intimacy as much as the distinction between heavy and light users, who understand intimacy differently. In these two cultural subgroups, intimacy is no longer the broadly accepted cultural concept it may have been in the past.

The present study sheds light on the differences between different groups of users with regards to the implications of technology use. The clear differences between heavy and light users in their understandings of social networks as intimate spaces suggest that increasing the use of online social networks both naturalizes them and makes them invisible to us. This might blur the boundaries between the online and offline worlds and create slippage of feelings and emotions between the two worlds. This would ultimately lead to a kind of online intimacy that is familiar to us in the offline world.