

Chapter 4

Digital Social Media in Adolescents' Negotiating Real Virtual Romantic Relationships

Catherine Ann Cameron

University of British Columbia, Canada

Arantxa Mascarenas

University of British Columbia, Canada

ABSTRACT

Previous grounded theoretical analyses of rural adolescents' romantic relationship discussions identified media as critical conditions in negotiating gender expectations in intimate relations. More recent emergent fit analyses of urban teenagers' discussions of virtual romantic relationships extended original theories to consider a lack of confidence in communicating adequately in the context of using digital social media. The current research specifically investigated emergent fit analyses of digital media influences on relationships. Urban participants identified online platforms' playing significant roles in 1) signaling interest, 2) initiating, 3) maintaining exchanges, and 4) dissolving romantic relationships. Participants both complained and commended asynchronous digital media in exacerbating discomfort/comfort in communicating intimately. Participants sought guidance in transforming contextually complex intimate relational communications into a healthy reciprocity.

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INTRODUCTION

Motivation for the Study

The theoretical and methodological motivation for the present study is to extend an originally developed grounded theory of intimate adolescent heterosexual relationships based on focused discussions of Canadian teenagers in rural and urban communities (Dmytro, Luft, Hoard, Jenkins & Cameron, 2013; Luft, Jenkins & Cameron, 2012). The primary organizing category for negotiating dating relationships was previously found to be '*wrestling with gender expectations*'. These expectations for teens to conform to gendered, stereotypical roles and behaviours constrained what the youth thought should be natural exchanges in initiating communications and 'doing the emotional work' in a relationship. Notably, for the present study, '*media*' were identified as a significant contextual condition of negotiating romantic relationships (Dmytro, et al., 2013; Luft et al., 2012).

A more recent study (Cameron, Luft, Dmytro, Kubiliene & Chou, 2017), using the 'emergent fit' analysis recommended by Wuest (2000) revealed that in '*communicating*', the contextual conditions of relational negotiations were subject not only to media in general, but even more strongly to '*digital and social media*'. The focus of the present investigation of *real virtual relationships* then, is on those relationship negotiations identified under the most salient subcategory *communications* that were largely comported via *digital and social media*.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND PERSPECTIVES

Romantic relationships create significant potentials for psychosocial development during adolescence, and potentially a 'training ground', according to the core research of Connolly and McIsaac (2009), for subsequent intimate relationships. Our focus on romantic relationships includes those in which partners have intimate feelings for one another that are closer and more passionate than simple friendships (Sternberg, 2013). The forms and functions of such relationships are evolving and transforming at the present time, particularly in the context of new virtual social media platforms. Today, adolescents initiate communication of romantic interest via outlets such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Text Messaging. This digital, asynchronous, world can take precedence over synchronous face-to-face interactions with many young romantic couples, whilst opening the door to an array of other forms of communication.

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