9.7 Virtual Relationships in Social Media

AQA 7182 · about 55 minutes · Write-in edition

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer all questions. At least four of the longer questions require full sentence answers. Time guidance: 55 minutes for the whole pack.

1 Identify two ethical concerns researchers should consider when studying virtual relationships on social media, and state one practical way to reduce each concern.

(Total for Question 1 is 2 marks)

2 Outline the reduced cues theory in the context of virtual relationships on social media, referring to nonverbal cues and effects on self disclosure.

(Total for Question 2 is 2 marks)

3 Explain what is meant by 'absence of gating' in online relationships on social media, and give one concrete example of a gate that is removed in social media contexts.

(Total for Question 3 is 4 marks)

4 Compare self disclosure in virtual relationships on social media with self disclosure in face to face relationships, highlighting one similarity and one difference.

(Total for Question 4 is 4 marks)

5 Identify one piece of empirical evidence that supports the hyperpersonal model in the context of social media or online dating, and briefly explain how it supports the model.

(Total for Question 5 is 3 marks)

6 State one theoretical strength of the hyperpersonal model when explaining virtual relationships on social media.

(Total for Question 6 is 2 marks)

7 Explain one challenge to the temporal validity of findings about virtual relationships on social media, and suggest one way researchers could address this challenge in future studies.

(Total for Question 7 is 4 marks)

8 Discuss virtual relationships in social media. In your answer, refer to the hyperpersonal model, the absence of gating, relevant empirical evidence such as McKenna and Bargh (1999), and methodological or validity issues including mixed evidence for the hyperpersonal model, temporal validity due to rapid technological change, and limitations of self-report studies of online daters.

(Total for Question 8 is 16 marks)

9 Outline Walther's hyperpersonal model of online communication (as applied to social media) and explain briefly how it contrasts with the reduced cues idea when explaining self disclosure online.

(Total for Question 9 is 3 marks)

10 Explain two methodological limitations common to self-report studies of online daters that evaluate levels of self disclosure or intimacy on social media platforms.

(Total for Question 10 is 4 marks)

Mark scheme · 9.7 Virtual Relationships in Social Media

Question 1

identifies one ethical concern and a way to reduce it, e.g. privacy of personal messages: anonymise data and gain informed consent for use of messages oe — **B1**

identifies a second concern and a way to reduce it, e.g. potential distress from recalling personal experiences: provide debriefing and signpost support services oe — **B1**

Answer: Examples: protect participants' privacy by anonymising data and obtaining informed consent for use of messages; reduce potential distress from recalling personal experiences by thorough debriefing and signposting to support services.

Question 2

states that reduced cues theory argues online interaction lacks nonverbal cues such as tone, facial expression and body language oe — **B1**

explains that this can lead to more impersonal or deindividuated communication and reduced self disclosure in some accounts oe — **B1**

Answer: Reduced cues theory argues online interaction lacks nonverbal signals like tone of voice, facial expression and body language, which can make communication more impersonal and reduce self disclosure.

Question 3

explains absence of gating as the idea that physical and social cues that normally filter interaction are reduced or absent online oe — **M1**

states that this allows people who would be inhibited face to face to interact more freely online oe — **A1**

gives a concrete example of a gate removed, e.g. appearance, stammering or visible shyness is less obvious online oe — **M1**

explains how that example helps self disclosure, e.g. someone shy may disclose more when their voice or appearance are not immediate cues oe — **A1**

Answer: Absence of gating is the idea that physical and social filters like appearance, voice or visible shyness are reduced or missing online; for example, someone with a stammer or who is visibly shy face to face may disclose more on social media because those cues are not immediately apparent.

Question 4

states one similarity, e.g. both online and face to face relationships can deepen through increasing levels of self disclosure oe — **M1**

explains why this is similar, e.g. reciprocal disclosure builds trust and intimacy in both contexts oe — **A1**

states one difference, e.g. online disclosure can be faster or more selective due to hyperpersonal processes and reduced gating oe — **M1**

explains the difference, e.g. asynchronous messaging and selective self presentation can accelerate perceived intimacy online, unlike most face to face exchanges oe — **A1**

Answer: Similarity: both online and face to face relationships can deepen via reciprocal self disclosure, which builds trust. Difference: online disclosure can be faster or more selective because of hyperpersonal processes and absence of gating, for example people can craft messages and reveal personal information more quickly than in typical face to face interaction.

Question 5

identifies a supporting finding, e.g. studies showing that online partners report faster development of intimacy or higher self disclosure than comparable face to face pairs oe — **M1**

explains how this supports the hyperpersonal model, e.g. faster/intense disclosure is predicted by selective self presentation and idealisation in CMC oe — **A1**

may mention mechanisms such as asynchronous messaging, message editing or feedback loops that intensify impressions oe — **A1**

Answer: Example: research has found that people in online relationships often report faster development of intimacy and higher levels of self disclosure than similar face to face pairs; this supports the hyperpersonal model because selective self presentation, asynchronous message editing and reciprocal idealisation can accelerate and intensify perceived intimacy.

Question 6

states a plausible strength, e.g. it explains how online features like asynchronous communication and selective self presentation can lead to rapid, intense intimacy oe — **B1**

adds a brief reason why this is useful, e.g. it accounts for phenomena that reduced cues theory cannot explain, such as increased disclosure online oe — **B1**

Answer: Strength: the hyperpersonal model explains how online features like asynchronous messaging and selective self presentation can produce rapid, intense intimacy, accounting for increased disclosure online that reduced cues theory cannot explain.

Question 7

identifies a temporal validity challenge, e.g. rapid technological change in platforms, features and norms means past findings may not apply now oe **M1**

explains consequence, e.g. features like ephemeral stories, video messaging or algorithmic feeds change how disclosure happens, so earlier results may lack current relevance oe **A1**

suggests a way to address it, e.g. conduct longitudinal replications or use repeated cross sectional studies that sample users as platforms evolve oe **M1**

explains how this helps, e.g. repeated contemporary data collection would show whether patterns of disclosure persist or change as technology and norms evolve oe **A1**

Answer: Challenge: rapid technological change alters platform features and social norms, so earlier findings may not generalise to current social media. To address this, researchers could run repeated cross sectional studies or longitudinal replications across new platform features, which would reveal whether patterns of disclosure persist or change over time.

Question 8

Level 4 Knowledge is accurate and detailed. Discussion is thorough and analytical, showing evaluation that integrates evidence and theory. The answer addresses the hyperpersonal model, absence of gating and empirical studies, and offers balanced criticism of methodology and validity, with clear, well-developed conclusions. Specialist terminology is used appropriately. **13-16**

Level 3 Knowledge is clear with some detail. Discussion and evaluation are present and generally effective, though may be less comprehensive. The answer refers to key theories and studies and recognises methodological and validity issues, with reasonable application and some critical analysis. **9-12**

Level 2 Knowledge is limited or only partially accurate. Discussion/evaluation is basic or descriptive rather than analytical. The answer may mention theories or studies but with limited application to social media, and methodological concerns are noted but not well developed. **5-8**

Level 1 Very limited knowledge and understanding. Little or no effective discussion or evaluation. Answer may be a list of points with minimal development and little relevance to the required material. **1-4**

Level 0 No creditable content. **0**

Indicative content:

- AO1: Define virtual relationships, computer mediated communication, hyperpersonal model (Walther 1996) and absence of gating (gates such as appearance, voice, stammering, social status).
- AO1: Explain mechanisms of the hyperpersonal model: selective self presentation, asynchronous communication, message editing, sender and receiver idealisation, and self-fulfilling feedback loops leading to accelerated intimacy.
- AO1: Explain absence of gating: reduction of physical and social filters online allows individuals who are inhibited face to face to disclose and form relationships, as argued by McKenna and Bargh (1999).
- AO2: Apply McKenna and Bargh: socially anxious individuals formed intimate relationships online and sometimes these developed into supportive, lasting ties, illustrating absence of gating and selective disclosure in practice.
- AO3: Evaluate supporting evidence for hyperpersonal model: cite studies reporting faster or more intense disclosure online and cases where crafted messages elicit strong reciprocity; explain how this supports model mechanisms.
- AO3: Discuss mixed empirical evidence: mention failures to replicate hyperpersonal effects in some contexts, and that reduced cues theory still explains impersonal behaviour in some online interactions, so no single model fits all cases.
- AO3: Methodological criticisms: many studies use self-report, retrospective recall and convenience samples of online daters; social desirability and memory biases can distort findings; experimental lab studies may lack ecological validity.
- AO3: Temporal validity concerns: rapid changes in platform features (ephemeral messaging, video chat, algorithmic feeds) alter the mechanics of disclosure and gating, so earlier findings may not generalise to current social media.
- AO3: Ethical and practical considerations: privacy, anonymity and potential for deception online complicate research and the real-world consequences of intense online disclosure need careful consideration.
- AO3: Synthesis and conclusions: balanced view that virtual relationships can sometimes be more intimate and develop faster due to hyperpersonal and absence-of-gating processes, but effects depend on platform, purpose of interaction and individual differences; researchers should use mixed methods, longitudinal designs and contemporary samples to improve validity.

Question 9

states that the hyperpersonal model suggests CMC can produce faster, more intense self disclosure because users selectively present themselves and manage impressions oe **M1**

mentions asynchronous communication and feedback loops that lead to idealised impressions and intensified intimacy oe **A1**

contrasts with reduced cues theory by arguing absence of cues can be used to create more personal interaction rather than only less personal interaction oe **A1**

Answer: Walther's hyperpersonal model proposes that computer mediated communication can produce faster, deeper self disclosure because users selectively present themselves, exploit asynchronous messages and create idealised impressions that intensify intimacy, contrasting with reduced cues theory which predicts more impersonal interaction.

Question 10

identifies a limitation: social desirability or self-presentation bias in self-report measures oe	**M1**
explains effect, e.g. participants may overstate intimacy or understate risky disclosures to appear favourable, reducing validity oe	**A1**
identifies a second limitation: reliance on retrospective recall or subjective judgements oe	**M1**
explains effect, e.g. participants' memories of how quickly intimacy developed may be inaccurate and differ by individual, reducing reliability and temporal precision oe	**A1**

Answer: Two common limitations are social desirability bias, where participants may overstate intimacy or underplay risky disclosures to look better, reducing validity; and reliance on retrospective self-report, where memory errors or subjective judgements distort accounts of how quickly relationships developed, reducing reliability.