

WHY? The Dynamic of Computer Mediated Communications

There are generally two theoretical paradigms to explain preference for *Computer Mediated Communications* (CMC).

CUES-FILTERED-OUT

An early theory was "*cues-filtered-out*" which emphasized channel limitations and limited information people obtained from nonverbal cues. It was argued that diminished nonverbal cues online limited effective relational interaction. (Culnan & Markus, 1987; Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987; Kiesler, 1986; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Rice & Case, 1983, Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976)

CUES-FILTERED-IN

In contrast, the more modern "*cues-filtered-in*" theory contends that computer mediated communication is an especially effective channel for interpersonal communication. (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998; Postmes, Spears, Lea, & Reicher, 2000, Walther, 1992, 1996, 2006, 2007) This view argues that computer mediated communication's diminished nonverbal cues and limited information transmitted online is actually an interpersonal advantage for some people. In fact, some theorists assert that computer mediated communication's unique properties allow online interactants to achieve more social success online than in face-to-face interactions. (Walther, 1996, 2006).

Social Information Processing (SIP)

This variation of Cues-Filtered-In theory rejects the assumption that computer mediation communication's lack of nonverbal cues limits communicators' capabilities. Instead, SIP theory argues that people adapt to the lack of nonverbal information online by putting more weight on the content, style, and timing of verbal messages (Walther, 1992, 1996). From this perspective, the cues that are available online carry information normally transmitted via a host of nonverbal cues in face-to-face exchanges. The key difference between exchange online vs. face-to-face, "*has to do not with the amount of social information exchanged but with the rate of social information exchanged.*" (Walther, 1996, page 10). Thus, the relative lack of nonverbal information in computer mediated communication does not necessarily limit the amount of information users can transmit; however, it does slow the rate of information transmission. After sufficient time passes and users exchanged numerous messages, levels of relational development in CMC will begin to equal those experienced in face-to-face interactions (Walther, 1993). People may need to invest more time in order to manage their online relationships, which could lead them to spend greater amounts of time online. (Young & Nabuco de Abreu, 2011, p. 43)

Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects" (SIDE)

This second variation of Cues-Filtered-In theory proposes that people adapt to the lack of nonverbal cues online (Postmes et al., 1998; Postmes et al., 2000). Rather than assuming people are constrained by fewer nonverbal cues online, SIDE posits that people focus their attention on contextual cues and information related to the social status of interactants (Lea and Spears, 1992; Spears and Lea, 1992). The theory hypothesizes that the anonymous or de-individuated conditions of CMC promote a social identity and strong group-based bonds. In the absence of personally identifying information, SIDE theory contends that people downplay their personal identities and emphasize the social identity they share with your fellow CMC conversants. Accordingly, people might emphasize identities related to shared group memberships or typographical styles. Rather than being an impersonal environment filled with superficial impressions, SIDE frames CMC as a socially rich environment in which group based cues are over attributed in the absence of individuated information (Spears and Lea, 1992, Young & Nabuco de Abreu, 2011, p. 43).

Hyperpersonal Perspective

This third variation of Cues-Filtered-In theory proposes that online interaction may be superior to face-to-face exchanges. The relative lack of nonverbal's online enhances interpersonal communication such that social goals can be more effectively pursued online than in face-to-face conversations. Computer mediated interaction affords actors the opportunity to adapt to and exploit the diminished nonverbal cues in CMC in ways that enhance their ability to attain interpersonal goals. (Dunthler, 2006; Walther, 1996, 2006). For example, the verbal content that dominates CMC exchanges is easier to control and strategically manipulate than nonverbal behaviors (Ekman and Friesen, 1969). Specifically, CMC requires people to type their

responses before sending them; a communicator is able to revise or abandon unfavorable messages more easily than in face-to-face conversations. (Walther, 1996, 2006, Young & Nabuco de Abreu, 2011, p. 44).

Computer mediated selective self-presentation may lead partners to form more favorable impressions than in face-to-face settings, which, in turn, leads to continued positive behavior by the sender. *"This may explain how such surprisingly intimate, sometimes intense, and hyper personal interactions take place in CMC. CMC provides an intensification loop."* (Walther, 1996, page 27).

Online, interactants can mask or edit undesirable and uncontrollable cues while magnifying preferred cues (Walther, 1996, 1997). By reducing the nonverbal cues that sometimes contradict verbal messages, partners in CMC are particularly likely to base their impressions of one another on the selectively presented information exchanged online. In fact, hyperpersonal theory speculates that receivers often over-attribute the selectively presented social information transmitted via CMC (Walther, 1997; Walther, Slovacek, and Tidwell, 2001). These over-attributions then result in idealized perceptions of relational partners. From this perspective, people engaging in online social interaction are likely to form idealized impressions based on limited but strategically filtered personal information. Walther (2006) suggests that hyper personal communication may foster higher levels of relational immediacy and affection than normal face-to-face interactions. Along these lines, scholars have documented that relational intimacy develops faster and reaches higher levels online than face-to-face. (Hian, Chuan, Trevor, & Detenber, 2004, Young & Nabuco de Abreu, 2011, p. 44-45).

The hyper personal perspective is especially useful for explaining why people with pre-existing psychosocial problems, such as social anxiety, prefer online social interaction (High and Caplan, 2009). These individuals may be drawn to the hyper personal communication online because they perceive it to be safer, easier, and more effective than ordinary face-to-face conversation. (Caplan, 2007; Erwin et al., 2004; Morahan-Martin and Schumacher, 2003).

"Online, social presence and intimacy levels can be controlled; users can remain invisible as they observe others' interactions, and can control the amount and timing of their interactions. Anonymity and lack of face-to-face communication online may decrease self-consciousness and social anxiety." (Morahan-Martin and Schumacher, 2003, page 659).

Advantages of Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC)

- Hyper personal communication is common in online social interaction (Chester and Gwynne, 1998; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006; Henderson & Gilding, 2004).
- One study examined preference for different interpersonal communication channels (computer mediated communication, face-to-face, and telephone) and found that people's preferences vary depending on how much self presentation risk they appraise the situation to have. Participants preferred mediated interpersonal channels when their self presentation was threatened. (O'Sullivan, 2000)
- Lack of nonverbal cues in CMC should enable communicators to free more cognitive resources to devote to message production, reception and exchange processes (Walther, 1996, 1997).
- In CMC contexts, communicators have more time to produce messages, are better able to organize their thoughts, and are able to better manage how they present themselves. (Dunthler, 2006)
- Online respondents take special care to strategically construct messages in CMC. (Henderson and Gilding, 2004)
- Scholars have noted that asynchronous communication allows people to organize, plan, edit and develop their thoughts more mindfully and deliberately than they can in temporally immediate media. (Dunthler, 2006; Hiemstra, 1982).