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Language, Psychology, and New New Media: The Hyperpersonal Model of Mediated Communication at Twenty-Five Years

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Abstract

Research on the hyperpersonal model originally described how the substitution of language for nonverbal cues, necessitated by text-based computer-mediated communication systems, transforms users' reception, self-presentation, composition, and reciprocal reinforcement of messages in ways that create socially desirable relationships online. This article reviews the model after 25 years. It explicates the original model and mentions a sample of illustrative findings. It reflects on the state of internet diffusion and research traditions in the 1990s that affected the model's original focus, and how these conditions have changed. It enumerates contexts that continue to meet the model's original boundary assumptions, and some boundary expansions. It explores ways in which the model's principles extend into contemporary multimodal social media. It illustrates the evolutionary applicability of the model through cases of deceptive online romances, including contemporary online romance scams. It concludes by suggesting future research examining how many contemporary social media performances and responses comport with and illustrate the model's tenets, at scale.

Keywords

hyperpersonal model, computer-mediated communication, social media, online romance scam

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In 25 years of computer-mediated communication research, what has changed? Innovations and incarnations of communication technologies emerge so often, people no longer talk about the latest "killer app." Have the ways we use the communication tools of the day to make impressions and optimize relationships, and to accomplish the enduring needs of human affiliation changed, in strange or familiar ways? That is the challenge confronting conceptualizations of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and relationships. Theoretical understandings of social media require consideration of human drives, social interaction, and code systems, in order to model how we use communication technologies and how they affect us.

One approach that addressed these various factors is the hyperpersonal model of CMC, originally published in 1996 (Walther, 1996). It focused on the processes accompanying the exchange of messages via computer networks and the byproducts of perceiving and creating messages in the absence of the cues that accompany face-to-face (FtF) interaction. Following Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor, it focused on how CMC users perform themselves, and how partners reciprocally collude, leading to development of extraordinarily potent relations online. Although the model has had considerable impact on the field, it has also been subject to well-deserved criticism about its contemporary relevance (e.g., Hall, 2020). It is appropriate to ask whether and how the model adapts to newer contexts and social applications, and whether the properties of technology that existed at the time of the model's creation and affected its assumptions, persist. Or have conditions changed so much that the model requires revision, rejection, or application only within the boundaries of technological contexts that employ the same capacities?

This article reviews aspects of the hyperpersonal model of CMC, beginning with its explication and the technological, societal, and research contexts that informed its original articulation. It identifies present-day applications, extensions, and boundaries. It suggests the model's ongoing utility through notorious examples of deceptive online romance, including contemporary online romance scams. The hyperpersonal model focuses on relational optimization in many contexts, from intercultural academic collaborations to social support and beyond. Deceptive romances, nevertheless, provide cases that illustrate the model's tenets and its continued utility despite society's growing sophistication about the internet and changes to media and modalities through which these romances occur.

Explication

The hyperpersonal model of CMC borrows a central assumption comes from social information processing (SIP) theory (Walther, 1992): Communicators use whatever communicative code systems are available to them to encode and decode socioemotional messages conveying affect, attitude, personality, and identity. When any codes (originally, nonverbal codes) are unavailable in a medium, communicators express socioemotional messages through whatever codes remain. The paradigmatic extremes at the time these theories emerged were FtF communication, occurring in real time with all nonverbal and verbal cue systems, and CMC, which was exclusively

linguistic. Like SIP theory, the hyperpersonal model initially assumed that, using fewer code systems, the development of relations online required more time than FtF interactions. The model differs from SIP by proposing psychological and behavioral enhancements to message creation and reception that occur during the conversion of socioemotional content from multi-modal, multi-cue expressions into more limited modalities which, rather than dampen socioemotional exchange, lead to more affectionate, intimate, and intense relationships than typically occur in parallel FtF encounters.

The hyperpersonal model addresses how the four components of Berlo's (1960) model of communication—senders, receivers, channel, and feedback—are affected by aspects of communication technology. As unacquainted *receivers* get messages without the physical appearance and vocal cues upon which impression formation generally relies, they attend to cues in message content and style, and extrapolate. They "compensate for minimal cues by 'filling in the gaps' with positive interpretations" (Parks, 2017, p. 510). The model originally argued that CMC impressions followed group identifications. Revisions argued that personality characteristics or other attributes (e.g., smart, funny) can provide the basis of identity projections (e.g., Hancock & Dunham, 2001). Receivers also over-interpret relational messages: Online self-disclosure has a proportionately greater impact on intimacy in CMC than in FtF interactions (Joinson, 2001), and receivers attribute greater personal interest to disclosers online than offline (Jiang et al., 2011).

Message *senders* engage in selective self-presentation. Senders can be more deliberative about choosing the message elements that convey their most desired impression online than in spontaneous speech. They can also conceal undesirable physical appearance and behavior. Senders can be more poignant or sympathetic, or express similarity more readily than FtF interaction often affords. In a text-based game, for example, CMC users performed gender by choosing names, conversational topics, and to some extent, microlinguistic discourse markers typically associated with offline males or females, regardless of their own offline gender (Herring & Martinson, 2004).

The *channel* aspect of the model focuses on mechanical and temporal qualities of CMC interfaces that lend themselves to further message optimization. Users can focus their attention on message construction instead of their physical appearance and nonverbal behavior, or that of their conversation partner. They control message composition and edit before sending. One study found that editing activity correlated with the intimacy of the messages individuals produced (Walther, 2007). Even real-time CMC affords users greater reflection and strategic revision than does FtF interaction, and control over message composition is suggested to be most vital aspect of the hyperpersonal model in explaining the appeal of the internet and mobile phone texting for young people (Madell & Muncer, 2007).

The *feedback* component argued that reciprocally-enhancing CMC messages can transform users' relationships, and even their personae, through expectancy confirmation processes. Idealized perceptions, responded to by self-enhancing messages, optimized through the affordances of the channel, lead communicators to be perceived as, and to become, more socially desirable. Expectancy confirmation (and strategic

disconfirmation) effects are accomplished using sociable language in CMC just as strongly as using voice offline (e.g., Tong & Walther, 2015). Confirmatory feedback following individuals' selective self-presentation online changes their self-perceptions in line with their performance, more so when feedback comes from friends than from strangers (Carr & Foreman, 2016).

Contextual Influences on Applications of the Model

The formation of the hyperpersonal model occurred in a particular sociotechnical and research context.[1] Sociotechnically, internet technology diffused unevenly in the 1990s. While many academics and businesspersons had access to computer accounts, it was uncommon for many of one's off-campus friends, family, or other acquaintances to be online (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Researchers created interinstitutional collaborations and discussions, educators put distance learning online, and management developed virtual teams and organizations. Among them, people met and shared interests and information on topics aside from their occupation, giving rise to virtual communities irrespective of geographic proximity. As technology reached other citizens, chat spaces with pseudonymous capabilities also arose.

In this way individuals developed relationships online with people with whom they were unfamiliar by other means (Parks & Floyd, 1996). The hyperpersonal model lent understanding to the journalistic report about Joan Sue Greene (screen name "Talkin' Lady"), a vivacious conversationalist in online chats in 1983 (Van Gelder, 1985/1991). "Severely disfigured in a car accident" (p. 533), unable to manage face-to-face conversations, Joan provided friendship, counseling, and occasional erotic encounters with women exclusively through typed-out online messages. When she was discovered to be a man's deception, reactions ranged from outrage to mourning the loss of an intimate friend.

Experimental research designs likewise employed unacquainted research participants, in order to control for confounding effects of prior familiarity. New theories of online social dynamics arose, challenging their predecessors, and experiments replicated the use of "zero-history" groups in order to be able to make comparisons between new studies and older ones. The hyperpersonal model, like others, originally sought to explain the development of impressions and relations among communicators with no prior acquaintance and no medium or modality between them other than plain text electronic messaging.

Communication technology, particularly social media, have evolved dramatically since the 1990s, with numerous implications for relationship development (see Ellison & Vitak, 2015). Additionally, the relational contexts of their use have changed. Parks (2017) notes that most contemporary relationships are both multi-mediated and multimodal. Multi-modal means that any platform communicators may use involves a variety of symbols and communication code systems, including language, photos, graphics, voice, and/or video. Multi-mediated means that partners use a variety of communication platforms within their respective relationships.

Might multi-mediation and multi-modality put an end to deceptive relations and misleading eroticism such as the notorious 1983 Joan, described above? In 2005,

45-year-old Thomas Montgomery pretended to be to be an 18-year-old U.S. Marine in the chat section of an online game, and encountered 18-year-old Jessi from North Carolina, whose screen name was Tallhotblond. They used flirtatious one-on-one instant messaging, exchanged photos (his from 30 years prior, hers in "provocative poses"), made phone calls, sent love letters and gifts, and there was virtual sex, over time. But Jessi also struck up a relationship with one of Montgomery's co-workers, Brian Barrett, which also became a torrid online affair. Montgomery's jealousy overcame him: He shot Barrett in the parking lot where they worked, and fled. North Carolina police went to Jessi's house, fearing for her safety, but only her middle-aged mother was home. Eventually the police discovered it had always been the mother texting as Tallhotblond, using her daughter, Jessi's, name and photos (Laby, 2007).

Contractions and Extensions

Research has surfaced limitations to the model's original predictions, as well as applications and extensions into new online contexts. For instance, Gibbs et al. (2006) discovered a meaningful limitation to the selective self-presentation process: Users of online dating sites reduce self-enhancing distortion in their online dating profiles when they are seeking a long-term, offline relationship. A new line of research—warranting theory—confronted conditions in which CMC users desire *less* idealization, and factors that lend credence that individuals' online self-presentations match their offline personae (Walther & Parks, 2002). Other contractions, or limits to the model, appear in the literature as well.

Changes in communication technology, the diffusion of the internet, and the emergence of social media prompt examination of whether and how the model fits contemporary phenomena. Is the model extensible, and if so, which elements and how? Even though the hyperpersonal model was initially and explicitly applied in the purely text-based environments of new media of the 1990s, its assumption that communicators use whatever cue systems are available to form impressions, self-present, and reinforce relationships, provides considerable elasticity. Its original terms and conditions were broader, in principle, than discursive technology alone:

> When is CMC hyperpersonal? . . .When users experience commonality, are self-aware, physically separated, and communicating via a limited-cues channel which allows them to selectively self-present and edit; to construct and reciprocate representations of their partners and relations without the interference of environmental reality. Perhaps moreso when this communication is asynchronous, and/or when the CMC link is the only link there is. (Walther, 1996, p. 33)

These parameters invite researchers to ask what forms these elements take today, and how people exploit the limitations (and liberations) that even newer new media systems afford us.

Contemporary CMC appears to involve *receivers'* exaggerated perceptions of messengers in new contexts. Readers perceive that online product reviewers—strangers

about whom they really know nothing other than a photo that may appear—are homophilous to themselves and, therefore, highly trusted (Metzger et al., 2010). At one point in Facebook's evolution, users overinterpreted tiny cues to make big judgments, with assessments of users' personality and attractiveness subject to differences merely in the numerical representation of how many Facebook friends they seemed to have (Tong et al., 2008).

Senders' selective self-presentations include and surpass linguistic messages in social media settings. DeAndrea and Walther (2011) found that Facebook users uniformly acknowledged distorting their profile's self-descriptions and associations to garner favor, and were aware of friends' commissions as well. Online dating site users put photos online that were more favorable than spontaneous, candid photos, with respect both to their natural appearance and the extent they were digitally enhanced (Hancock & Toma, 2009). The creation and selection of visual images to display via social media also includes memes (pictures or artworks with a superimposed short, pithy text message) and tiny video clips, that is, GIFs (see Church et al., 2019).

Selective self-presentation appears with respect to avatars in online games as well. Individuals choose avatar appearances not just to reflect personalities, but to accommodate contextual goals, as well. Vasalou and Joinson's (2009) experiment found differences in the attractiveness and the accuracy of avatars that participants created as they prepared for dating, gaming, or blogging encounters. When an avatar cannot be chosen, Van Der Heide et al. (2013) found, women who believed they were represented online by unattractive avatar compensated through affectionate and sociable language, to create attractive impressions.

Research on the *channel* attributes that facilitate certain behavior now often refers to relational *affordances* of technology (Treem & Leonardi, 2013), the perceived operations and possible outcomes that specific technologies' attributes invite users to perform. Affordances remains an active and energetic research focus, especially as new technologies appear and older platforms incorporate new capabilities. Not all research on affordances has a focus on relationships, and hardly any examines hyperpersonal terms per se, but the notion that alternative sociotechnical characteristics can improve interaction between people or make it more pleasing is not a far cry from the channel dimension of the 1996 model.

The nature of *feedback* has changed in scale, from the dyadic and small group contexts of the 1990s to the vast social networks provided by social media today. Strangers alternatively congratulate or condemn one's comments online, potentially polarizing the poster's position with respect to ingroups and outgroups (see Carr, 2018). Feedback systems display new code systems, as well: People signal that they "Like" someone's message, clicking a graphic "thumbs up" for a Facebook posting or a heart on a Twitter tweet, while the poster (and audience) watch the number of these Likes increase (Singer & Brooking, 2018). The reinforcement potential of Likes is as strong as that of monetary and other social rewards, according to neuroscience research (Sherman et al., 2018).

Research has also applied all four of the hyperpersonal model's components withinongoing, close relationships. Toma and Choi (2016) suggested that romantic couples

use interpersonal media to sustain "hyperpersonal projections," or idealized perceptions of their partner. Sending text messages or email to one's partner involves selective self-presentation, and exploits the editability, asynchronicity, and reduction in nonverbal cues on offer. Bryant and Ramirez (2016) found that more frequent mediated interaction led to greater idealization and relational quality by college students toward their parents.

Boundaries

Assessment of the hyperpersonal model's applicability today also asks whether there are contemporary online activities that fit the characteristics and contexts that lent the model's original support. Are there meaningful and plentiful online interactions among people who meet as strangers anymore? Are there relations confined to text-based interaction any longer? And do hyperpersonal operations still apply when the constraints are relaxed, with the provision of multi-modality?

There are numerous mono-modal contexts. Many online social support groups use text-based forums. There participants find community with others and develop intensely intimate relationships with the group itself and with individual members (Turner et al., 2001). Text-based chat systems within which customers interact with business agents (e.g., salespeople or bankers) are also plentiful, and differences in agents' response contingency and latency affect customers' liking toward the agent as well as the agent's company (Lew et al., 2018). Research also shows that highly socially anxious individuals prefer text-based online social interaction and its hyperpersonal affordances, and achieve more rewarding social relationships online than offline (High & Caplan, 2009).

Mono-media affiliations persist as well, and the internet still brings strangers together. Students continue to do group activities in online conferencing systems, in geographically distributed distance education, at times developing relationships more affectionate than would be expected among members of the social subgroups the students represent (Oren et al., 2002). Social network systems such as Twitter support ongoing conversations among large groups that have never met offline, in which, according to Mejova et al. (2015), individuals "establish longstanding and cherished identities and reputations" (p. 13); "Users who desire status, admiration, social approval, and attention. . .will bring these desires to Twitter. . .as they seek information, political support, friendship, (or) romance. . ." (p. 12).

Mono-media multi-modal contexts exist as well, with processes and outcomes suggesting hyperpersonal dynamics. Online role-playing games invite participants to create the online identities they wish to convey, and represent themselves visually with an avatar. These channel attributes, and the teams and clans comprising the social structures of such games, fertilize the self-presentations, idealized impressions, and confirmatory feedback that the hyperpersonal model describes (see Klimmt & Hartmann, 2008). Online dating sites often constrain a couple's interaction to one medium, initially. Despite the multimodality (photos plus textual self-descriptions) of online profiles, interactions that occur between finding a match and meeting offline often go

through a site's proprietary email or real-time chat system. The potential for reciprocal idealization is great: The more time, messaging, and disclosure prospective dates express before meeting FtF, the more disappointed they often are upon meeting (Ramirez et al., 2014; Sharabi & Caughlin, 2017). This may be due to hyperpersonal confirmation, or discovery of deceptive self-presentations in one's original online dating profile (Toma et al., 2008), or the interim online interaction (Sharabi & Caughlin, 2019). Regardless, prospective daters are encouraged to move from date selection to a (public) FtF meeting very quickly, in order to avoid the ultimate disappointment that extended online interactions often instill (Whitty, 2008).

Similarly, the model fits, and helps to understand, the perpetration of online romance scams. Unlike the spontaneous affairs of the fictitious Joan Sue Green in 1983 and "Tallhotblond" in 2005, online romance scams involve the deliberate instigation of hyperpersonal relations, for a very specific purpose: Victims lose large amounts of money, and have been known to mortgage their homes, commit fraud, and borrow money from friends and family in order to give to the perpetrators. These events are among the most common online scams in the USA, UK, Canada, and Australia (see Whitty, 2013). They deliberately exploit idealization, selective self-presentation, CMC channel attributes, and intensely transformative feedback processes.

Romance scam perpetrators initiate relationships with potential victims on dating sites and social networking sites, and victims report falling in love very quickly. These *receivers* (victims) idealize their online partners so strongly that when authorities reveal to victims that they have been duped, victims choose not to believe it, seeking out evidence to support their beliefs that the perpetrator and relationship were genuine. Some victims are re-victimized, when the criminal dupes them a second time by telling the victims that, although they did set out to scam them, they genuinely fell in love with them in the process; whereupon they attempt to extract more funds from the victim. Such is the apparent reality of these relationships for the victims.

Senders (perpetrators) create a narrative that effectively woos their victims (often working from scripts). They create a very romantic self-presentation, writing in exaggerated romantic language, sending poetry, and sharing romantic songs. They create a persona with an attractive appearance (e.g., using stolen photographs of models) and identity (e.g., successful businessperson, military officer, or vulnerable nurse). Prior to initiating conversation with potential victims, criminals conduct homework on the person they intend to target beyond details on dating sites, seeking additional information online (e.g., in social networking sites). They weave this information into their narratives to signal similar interests and passions as the victim (a relational strategy also employed in innocuous getting acquainted chats; Hancock et al., 2008).

The variety and attributes of CMC *channels* also help the perpetrators. Engaging in frequent conversations with the victims makes the relationship a routine part of victims' lives (Whitty, 2018). Communication involves frequent textual exchanges throughout the day and evening (mobile text messages, instant messaging, and email), exchanges of photographs (often manipulated), and sometimes voice or video calls, often using devices to alter their accent and gender, and deep fakes in video conferencing. Online communication provides a persistent record of the romantic narrative that

can (and is) regularly revisited by the victims, strengthening their perception of the reality of the relationship and their attachment to the perpetrator.

Finally, *feedback* is an important feature of these relationships. Victims report feeling more listened to and understood by scammers than they had by any other person in their lives, making these relationships more difficult to relinquish. Victims disclose highly intimate details about themselves in these online environments, to which perpetrators provide highly complementary feedback that significantly boosts victims' self-esteem. They sometimes engage in reciprocal, virtual sex. Perpetrators are ready when victims' social network (family, friends, and colleagues) challenges these relationships' legitimacy and ask whether it might be a scam: Perpetrators capitalize on the trust they have nurtured by sharing (fabricated) secrets and securing victims' promises not to discuss them, such as secret military attack plans, confidential business deals, etc. In this way he nudges victims to separate from their networks and to accept that no one else can understand the uniqueness of their close and trusting relationship. After ending these relationships, victims often report having cut off contact with close ties in their networks, and struggle to re-build those connections.

Popular media have often portrayed the victims as stupid, or desperate and lonely. In reality, victims do not score high on measures of loneliness (Buchanan & Whitty, 2014), and they tend to be more educated that others who are not scammed (Whitty, 2018). The hyperpersonal model is a useful framework to explain why these scams are so effective and prevalent, as it is with games, online dating, and elsewhere.

Future Research: Social Performance at Scale

The hyperpersonal model originally described dyadic and small group phenomena, offering rival predictions to positions that had gained support using small group research methods. If the hyperpersonal model is not to be relegated to history, a final question may be whether it explains online social phenomena that take place "at scale," that is, social dynamics involving many, many interactants, as seen in the behemothian online social networks of contemporary social technology. Some speculative applications of the model to contemporary settings suggest that the its greatest explanatory process may be in the present.

In several ways the hyperpersonal model can describe a great deal of CMC intergroup and interpersonal interaction at scale in modern-day social media. The heart of the model involves how performing oneself, optimally and deliberately, using the affordances of the media, garners social reward, affecting one's persona and relations. These dimensions map onto a view of the online social world as largely performative, for better or worse. In a sense, all the screen's a stage, and all its users are players.

Much academic discussion concerns social media users' awareness and strategic performances for their "visible and imagined audiences" in social media (Baym & boyd, 2012). The contemporary notion of "curating" one's profile on a social network site—selecting photos and sharing valuable content—is a matter of strategic self-presentation (Zhao & Lindley, 2014). Posting statements on social media about political or social issues these days—in text, with a meme, or by sharing others' comments

appended with one's own—often reflects users' outrage over one thing or another. Outrage may be sincerely felt, yet there is also a performative aspect of these action. Such messages can also constitute *moral grandstanding*: "an individual engaging in (moral grandstanding) is likely to use public discussion of morality and politics to impress others with their moral qualities,. . .motivated to a significant degree by a desire to enhance one's status or ranking" (Grubbs et al., 2019, p. 3). Social media are replete with public presentations of self, deliberatively crafted to align with ingroup prototypes and with friends.

But the potential for hyperpersonal effects lies not in identifying new forms of selective-self-presentation alone, despite the intriguing ways in which individuals engage in "impression management 2.0" (Krämer & Winter, 2008). The multidimensionality of the model encourages looking for "downstream effects" as self-presentations instigate processes of reciprocal social interaction. If an individual's meticulously-crafted grandstanding messages garner numerous Likes and reinforcing comments from others—dozens or hundreds more indications of social approval than they could garner offline—we might predict a transformative shift in the individual's views and identity. Some evidence for this very transformation appears in research on "taste performances," that is, using social media to share music, artwork, or esthetic images created by third parties to online audiences (Johnson & Van Der Heide, 2015). Consistent with aspects of the hyperpersonal model, the degree to which individuals display such materials publicly, and the amount of feedback they receive, affects their internalization of the particular posture they presented to others. On the basis of such initial exchanges, conversations develop, and relationships emerge and intensify, just as the internet has long provided forums where fans bond together over their favorite musical artists or TV shows, and pair off to initiate personal relationships (see Baym & Ledbetter, 2009).

These dynamics are probably benign if one's tastes are merely matters of fashion or personal preference. These dynamics are good, even, if self-presentations, idealization, and reciprocation intensify ideas that are societally benevolent or morally righteous. Precisely the same dynamics, however, may look very different from the outside if the links and memes and advocacies that perpetuate certain online relationships are extremist, hostile, or hateful (see, e.g., De Koster & Houtman, 2008). The potential for hyperpersonal dynamics to explore self-presentation, idealization, reciprocation, and collaborative reification among members of online hate groups provides a rather sobering extension of the model. It implies that the social production of antisocial behavior can provide prosocial gratifications among hateful individuals who befriend one another online. It compels continued research on reciprocal social influence and collusion as online relational processes, both at scale and at interpersonal levels, for good as well as for ill. The ability to explore these questions may rest on the combination of interviews, and case studies, and sentiment analysis and content analysis, in combination with time-sensitive empirical observation of individuals' messages and interactions with others within and across media platforms (e.g., Reeves et al., 2020). Such techniques may be critical in order to see, for instance, whether a person who

strikes malice at a target using one online platform garners congratulatory comments from associates with strong social ties in a different online venue.

Conclusion

When *JLSP* began 40 years ago, the study of language most often focused on the language of speech, rich in its interactions with nonverbal communication, and complicated to study for that reason. The advent of internet communication in the 1990s provided space in which language comprised the entirety of messages. Yet predictions about the effects of purely verbal communication were complex and conflicted. The hyperpersonal model of CMC emerged about 15 years into the life of *JLSP*, focusing then explicitly on the potentially beneficial social effects that occur when translating all one's expression into the narrow communicative pipeline of words, alone, on a screen. For a long time, this perspective offered a powerful view with which to understand the pleasantness that often accompanied getting to know and like one another online.

Any theoretical perspective embedded in the capacities and limitations of technology at some time must be subject to reanalysis as technology subsequently changes. This article has attempted to provide a critical review of the status of the hyperpersonal model after a quarter century: its empirical support, its continuing application within and beyond the boundaries it initially assumed, and its possible extensions into new technological incarnations, changing social dynamics, new perspectives and nomenclature, and social interaction at scale.

It remains, as it was in the 1990s, that scholars and users often assert that FtF communication is most desirable, and that media necessitated by distance (or self-quarantining) are inferior. It remains commonly-held that the spontaneous and uncontrolled display of all possible communication cues—with language in speech accompanied by appearance, movement, and voice—tell us who is there and what they feel when we interact with them (e.g., Epley & Kruger, 2005). Consequently, over 25 years, research has sought to understand why hyperpersonal effects are sometimes dismissed and the value of text-based messaging, discounted, in favor of multi-modal media. One such effort showed that the perception of choice among channels diminishes the perceived value of lower-modality media, but when there is no choice among media, there is no difference in perceived closeness achieved between texting, phoning, videoconferencing, or FtF meeting (Walther & Bazarova, 2008). Research also shows that communication via FtF and video require less effort than does typing and waiting, and people prefer to expend less effort communicating, despite equivalent outcomes (Nowak et al., 2009). Additionally, people underestimate their ability to affect others' demeanors via CMC compared to voice and FtF interaction, despite their empirically-demonstrated success at it (Tong & Walther, 2015). Undoubtedly, FtF interaction and videoconferencing are desirable and advantageous in many contexts. Accepting them as superior, without boundaries or consideration of systematic moderating factors, however, is naïve, and frankly, offers little challenge to the imagination.

The hyperpersonal model has encouraged researchers to consider the counterintuitive, in its assertion that certain forms of mediated interaction exceed parallel FtF relational communication. As technologies perpetually change there will be more work to do at times to support, and at others, to dispel this assertion. Meanwhile, over a quarter century, the model reminds us that, in some cases, for some purposes, we look better to one another in the dark than we do in the light. There are some conversations we are gratified not to have FtF. The utility of the hyperpersonal model is that it prompts us to look for the ways we use language and other symbol systems in technology to reveal or to conceal ourselves when FtF communication is not available or not preferable, to convey ourselves just as we wish to, and the systematic communicative efforts we undertake to do so.

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Note

1. The original 1996 publication cited the existence of 19 million US email addresses and an estimate of 30-40 million worldwide. Recent estimates include 255 U.S. (statistica.com, 2020) and 4 billion worldwide email users, that is, over half the world's population (Radicati Group, 2019).

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