



Computer-Mediated Communication in Personal Relationships

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PREFACE

It began with a simple email: “When you edit a book on CMC in close, personal relationship, let me know. I’d like to contribute a chapter.” Then an email back offering a co-editorship for such a book, and the adventure began. From the beginning, we imagined that the edited volume would offer factual descriptions, based in research and theory, of how individuals employ computer-mediated communication (CMC) to effectively enact their online and offline relationships. Worth noting, we developed all our ideas and framing for this book in what seemed like record time: We were three months from the first email suggestion to a signed contract. Our 12-page proposal envisioned an edited volume of chapters that reviewed cutting-edge research examining how individuals use CMC to enact their personal relationships. The book you hold in your hand achieves that goal. Also worth noting: We communicated about our ideas and framing for the book exclusively via email, including developing the book proposal and the call for chapter proposals. We developed our book describing CMC via CMC.

Our vision for the book. We proposed an edited volume that focused on CMC issues of ongoing importance to interpersonal communication researchers, such as interpersonal perception, privacy issues, and social support. We wanted the volume to provide equal focus on issues that CMC scholars thought important in explaining interpersonal communication online, such as anonymity, synchronicity, and channel limitations. In short, we wanted to gather essays that covered the intellectual ground at the intersection of these two important bodies of research. We noted that no textbook or book of readings existed on the interpersonal aspects of CMC. We designed our book to serve as the ideal textbook for advanced undergraduate classes as well as graduate seminars in the popular and fast-growing area of CMC in personal relationships.

Scholarly contribution. The body of research on CMC has grown by leaps and bounds, including studies of interpersonal issues in CMC. Nearly 38% of the manuscripts submitted to the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* (an ICA journal) between March 2006 and March 2008 had an interpersonal focus (ICA, 2008). In the past decade, additional journals, including *Human Communication Research*, *Communication Monographs*, and *Communication Research*; have published an increasing number of articles reporting interpersonally focused CMC research.

Our book adds to the literature of the discipline by offering the first collection of essays on interpersonal CMC. The book brings together the multiple ideas, topics, theories, and authors addressing the interpersonal aspects of CMC. It focuses scholarly attention on an applied, pragmatic area of study in the field of communication. We envision our book inspiring and facilitating further growth of the CMC area of specialization within the discipline of communication, an area widely considered one of the fastest growing specializations within the communication discipline.

First of its kind. We wanted this book to be a first of its kind in multiple ways. We knew that a sufficient body of scholarship existed to warrant an edited volume of literature-review essays on the topic of CMC in close, personal relationships. We reasoned that because scholarship in CMC (or if you prefer, “communication and new technologies” or simply “new media”) was growing at such an enormous rate, it was only a matter of time before specialty books and courses began appearing in narrower subject areas within the broad CMC area. We wanted a book on our interest area, interpersonal communication via CMC, to be among the first to appear on the scene. We believed that if we could develop a readable book, accessible to advanced undergraduates as well as graduate students and their professors, the book would encourage the development of upper-division specialty courses in CMC beyond simply the “general course” in CMC as well as further research on CMC in close, personal relationships. Thus, our goals were two fold: to inspire further research and teaching on the subject and to inform scholars unfamiliar with this body of research about its existence and its enormous potential to assist us in understanding communication within relationships in the 21st century.

Debunk the myths. The popular press emphasizes negative aspects of online interaction (e.g., cyberporn and pedophiles trolling for unsuspecting victims). However, we knew from reading the scholarship (see the final four chapters of this book) that such a depiction was simply misleading as it failed to describe how the vast majority of users employed new technologies to meet people as well as, develop, maintain, and end relationships. We wanted our book to be one of the first books to contradict these negative, popular notions, not once or with one study, but systematically, with chapter after chapter examining diverse bodies of research.

Theory-based chapters. We wanted to develop, for the first time, a multi-theoretical book on CMC. While various communication journals had published attempts by interpersonally oriented CMC scholars to better integrate traditional communication theories (and extensions of these theories) with empirical findings (e.g., See Walther’s work linking empirical findings to social information processing theory), our new book provides more in-depth discussions of communication theory vis-à-vis empirical findings. Indeed, we designed our book to integrate recent CMC theory with recent CMC findings in new lines of research (e.g., relational maintenance, online health-care provider communication, social network sites).

To these ends, we wanted each chapter to interpret a line of research via theory. Thus, our book affords readers the opportunity to survey three distinct bodies of theory: (a) theories used in face-to-face research on relational communication that also provide useful explanations for CMC in relational contexts; (b) CMC theories that, although designed to describe CMC in general, also provide explanations of CMC in personal relationships; and (c) the native theories developed within the communication discipline to explain how relational partners communicate via new technologies.

Represent the diversity of the research. While we wanted our book to cover the intellectual territory which we staked out, we also wanted the chapters individually to display the diversity of topics and approaches that exist in the relevant lines of research. Indeed, we wanted each chapter to describe relevant theory and research regarding *one distinct aspect* of CMC in personal relationships (e.g., online dating). For this reason, we selected chapters that examine a diverse array of relation types (family members, romantic partners, friends, collaborators, colleagues, and other types of partners in personal relationships), that analyzed interactions at a wide variety of communicative levels (words, language, interacts, transactions, relational stages, communication patterns across relationships and groups of relationships), and that examined messages communicated via a wide variety of media (email, skype, cell phones, twitter, texting, www, virtual networks). In sum, we elected to examine the phenomenon under study in its complexity rather than limit our examination. Indeed, at every turn, we embraced opportunities to expand rather than limit our examination of CMC in close, personal relationships.

Organizing the diversity. We settled on an organizational scheme for the chapters that we believe provides a fair representation of the diversity of approaches undertaken by scholars who study interpersonal communication enacted via CMC. We organized the chapters into four units:

1. The Power of Technologies to Influence How Relational Partners Communicate via Computer
2. Processes and Goals in Computer-Mediated Communication in Personal Relationships
3. The Mutual Influences of the Medium and Relational Contexts on Computer-Mediated Communication
4. The Dark Side of Computer-Mediated Communication in Personal Relationships

Thus, we offer chapters centered on four factors: (1) *channel factors* (e.g., interaction via online social networking utilities), (2) *process factors* (e.g., relational maintenance via CMC), (3) *relational factors* (e.g., CMC in long-distance relationships), and (4) *task factors* (online deception and surveillance). This format offers the reader perspectives from a variety of angles, thus providing insights into connections and diverse phenomenon. Each chapter provides a comprehensive review of relevant theory and research findings. Together, the chapters present knowledge obtained via a variety of research methods, theoretical orientations, and relational foci. These views are united by a common perspective—the perspective of the communication discipline, specifically from an applied communication perspective.

A word about using this volume as a textbook. Faculty members find relatively few choices for undergraduate and graduate CMC books. No previous book focused on CMC in personal relationships, an avid interest of undergraduate students and

many college professors selecting textbooks for their courses in CMC. Despite increased interest in interpersonally oriented CMC research, a brief scan of available CMC textbooks and edited volumes reveals relatively few books written at the advanced undergraduate or graduate level. While previous CMC books were innovative at the time of their publication and did an outstanding job covering the breadth of CMC research, we saw a clear need for a new undergraduate/graduate book that provides an in-depth look at the growing area of interpersonal CMC research, on such topics as online dating, self-disclosure, and surveillance.

To undergraduate instructors. Our book addresses this need and offers an ideal selection for an instructor looking for a text for an upper-division, undergraduate course focused on the interpersonal aspects of CMC. Our book can readily serve as the sole or primary textbook in a course in CMC in Personal Relationships. Additionally, our book can be used as one of multiple textbooks in a traditional undergraduate class or honors seminar in CMC, where the instructor desires students to read interesting and well-written literature reviews about how users enact personal relationships via CMC.

To graduate instructors. Our book can assist professors of graduate seminars to cope with the large body of scholarship published on CMC in two ways:

- Our book provides focus (i.e., interpersonal CMC) for a narrowly drawn CMC seminar. It provides an obvious choice of textbook for a course on Interpersonal Aspects of CMC, perhaps, but not necessarily, supplemented by original research reports.
- When an instructor desires to teach a “broad sweep” seminar in CMC that offers a sampling of the theory and topical foci, our book could serve as one of multiple texts.

In sum, our book addresses the needs of both graduate and undergraduate instructors by offering a text with a narrow and popular focus of interest to both students and instructors alike. It contains multiple chapters that review original research representing a diversity of relational foci as well as methodological and theoretical approaches. The chapters, each written specifically for this book, review cutting-edge research that will remain relevant for many years to come. In sum, our book is designed to function as the core text for a specialized graduate seminar in CMC and as a primary text for undergraduate courses focused on CMC in personal relationships.

Selecting the chapters. Whenever editors attempt to gather literature review essays written especially for a volume they are faced with the choice of two traditional processes: editors either (a) conduct research to determine the finite list of scholars who are writing extensively on the topic of their book and then invite review essays from these “heavy hitters” or (b) issue a call for chapter proposals that allows the best proposals to emerge in open competition from junior as well as senior scholars in the field. To gather the strongest possible author list, we did both.

We conducted a detailed content analysis of the Communication Institute for Online Scholarship (CIOS) database ComAbstracts using appropriate key words. ComAbstracts is a searchable, online data base containing the bibliographic entries (as well as typical abstracts and key words) for more than 50,000 articles published in 92 scholarly journals and annuals in the communication discipline. The search yielded a finite list of well-published scholars who examine interpersonal communication via CMC. These nine scholars were contacted individually and invited to prepare a chapter. We are delighted that so many accepted our invitation. Second, we issued an open call for proposals that we distributed widely (newsletters and/or list serves of nine professional associations of communication scholars). We asked for brief proposed literature reviews examining “relational, task, or channel influences on interpersonal CMC.”

This book contains essays authored or coauthored by names that will look very familiar to any scholar who reads or writes in this area of research. The remaining essays were selected from among the 29 proposals we received in response to our open call. We received many excellent proposals—far more than we could use. Nonetheless, we experienced little difficulty selecting the essays. We looked for unique, effective, and theoretical treatments of distinct bodies of research and then simply selected the well written proposals that offered us more diversity than others.

Our author list. Our author list includes new, “rising stars” in the scholarly world of CMC as well as most of the best CMC scholars writing about interpersonal communication today. Our author list represents an eclectic mix of published scholars in the communication discipline who hold professorial positions at primarily graduate institutions, and who vary in age, sex, geographic location, and type of affiliated institution (public versus private). In addition, the chapter authors represent diverse career stages from graduate students to tenured full professors. We believe such diversity benefits our edited volume as the authors provide diverse viewpoints that represent the diversity of thinking in the discipline today.

Reviewing the work. Ultimately, it matters little what we set out to do or how we came to our decisions. What will matter, ultimately, is the opinion of the readers and users of this edited volume. We hope that users of this book find not simply one or two but almost all of the chapters very useful in augmenting their understanding of how everyday people communicate with their relational partners via CMC. Here is our synopsis of the chapters that we found so compelling:

In Chapter One, Bryant, Marmo, and Ramirez examine social network sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace, from a functional perspective. These authors focus on central functions of SNSs, such as how individuals use them to maintain relationships, initiate relationships, seek social information about potential relationship partners, construct individual or multiple identities, manage interpersonal impressions and relationships, and enact metacommunication.

In Chapter Two, Child and Petronio consider the viability of using communication privacy management theory to investigate the privacy-regulating decisions people make in relationships and how they manage communication and information flow within a variety of new media contexts, including social networking sites, microblogs, and other Internet-based technologies.

In Chapter Three, Toma and Hancock offer a general theoretical framework for online self-presentation that examines the role of both psychological antecedents and of the communication medium in shaping self-presentation. They then apply this framework to the distinct context of online dating and provide empirical support for it by reviewing findings from both a large study on this topic conducted by the authors and other relevant studies.

In Chapter Four, Balard-Reisch, Rozzell, Heldman, and Kameron focus on the development, maintenance, and dissolution of interpersonal relationships within various forms of microchannel communication, such as instant messaging, SMS, and Twitter. These authors explore social construction theory, systems theory, uses and gratifications theory, social exchange theory, social penetration theory, and their corollary theories as potential frameworks to increase our understanding of relational processes among individuals who use microchannel communication media.

In Chapter Five, Sanders and Amason examine the impact of CMC on relationships formed and primarily grounded in face-to-face interaction. The authors explore several issues within this relational context, including impression management, self-disclosure, communication competence, and communication apprehension. Sanders and Amason argue that the nature of CMC provides a unique context that alters our traditional understanding of these concepts and provides theoretical challenges for CMC and interpersonal researchers.

In Chapter Six, Tong and Walther examine current trends in relational maintenance surrounding contemporary CMC technologies such as email, blogs, social network sites, and microblogging. These authors also focus on relationships among intimates and families who cohabit or are in frequent physical contact, but use CMC to supplement relational maintenance as well as long-distance relationships of various kinds. They conclude by providing recommendations for future research in terms of studying CMC applications and their effects on relational outcomes.

In Chapter Seven, High and Solomon look at social support in CMC relationships. Specifically, these authors discuss how different modes of CMC provide fundamentally different contexts for social support. They begin by providing various definitions of social support and computer-mediated communication, and then they focus on various types of support and social support processes that are frequently observed within several CMC contexts, including online support groups, instant messaging, discussion boards, and virtual worlds.

In Chapter Eight, Wright and Muhtaseb assess interpersonal issues related to the giving and receiving of social support within computer-mediated support

groups. Towards that end, he explores the link between social support and health outcomes, relational dilemmas surrounding the provision of social support, and advantages and disadvantages of online support groups/communities. In addition, the chapter discusses several theoretical frameworks used in previous empirical work and offers suggestions for future research.

In Chapter Nine, Kim and Dindia assess the state of the literature on online self-disclosure and suggest future directions for online self-disclosure research. They do this by examining the qualities of online self-disclosure and reviewing empirical findings regarding the relational differences between features of CMC self-disclosure and face-to-face self-disclosure. The chapter concludes with theoretical and methodological suggestions for future computer-mediated self-disclosure research.

In Chapter Ten, Turner and Reinsch focus on the constructs of multicomcommunication and interpersonal presence. They take an in-depth look at the definitions of both constructs and also link them to existing computer-mediated communication research and theory. The authors point out that the study of multicomcommunication is in its relative infancy, and they point to several promising future areas of research as well as methodological and theoretical challenges.

In Chapter Eleven, Edley and Houston offer an interdisciplinary perspective focusing on how new communication technologies intersect with family communication. These authors focus on cross-disciplinary literature that connects work-life studies with the adoption and uses of new communication technologies to reveal how family relationships and responsibilities are managed.

In Chapter Twelve, Johnson and Becker investigate the enactment of friendship through computer-mediated communication. The authors begin by looking at traditional features of friendship and how these have been influenced by the advent of CMC technologies. In addition, they examine the concept of flexibility in friendships and relational maintenance process within geographically close and long-distance friendships through various forms of CMC. Finally, they discuss several promising directions for future CMC research on friendship.

In Chapter Thirteen, Maguire and Connaughton bring together theory and research from the distanced relationship and social presence literatures in an effort to understand how partners maintain their distanced relationships. Specifically, the authors argue that distanced relational partners utilize communication technologies that enhance (or diminish) feelings of social presence to maintain and sustain their relationships. These authors focus on a variety of issues related to social presence theory and their implications for long distance relationship and CMC research.

In Chapter Fourteen, Avtgis, Polack, Staggers, Wieczorek explore the multitude of ways provider-patient relationships have been influenced by computer-mediated communication. The authors begin by discussing the history of earlier technologies on provider-patient interaction and then discuss a variety of current

issues surrounding the Internet and related communication technologies and their effects on provider-patient relationships. These issues include demographic differences in CMC technology-use among patients, patient and provider expectations surrounding CMC usage, financial and legal issues, and various benefits and limitations of CMC technology for healthcare.

In Chapter Fifteen, Mesch and Frenkel provide a comprehensive review of studies dealing with the effects of information and communication technologies on families with adolescents. The authors frame the review with the context of family systems theory and a life span developmental approach. The authors contend that these technologies are a challenge for the preservation of family boundaries because they provide new sources of information and may compete with parental values. In addition, the authors highlight several promising future areas of research stemming from these perspectives.

In Chapter Sixteen, Hans, Selvidge, Tinker, and Webb review three lines of research dealing with gender performance and interpret the findings via performative theory while focusing on gendered blogging, gender-bending, and cybersex. These authors examine both public and scholarly discourses on CMC and gender performance as well as viewing online performances of gender.

In Chapter Seventeen, Dunbar and Jensen discuss deception within computer-mediated relationships. They begin by defining deception and how it occurs within computer-mediated environments as well as several theoretical frameworks drawn from the deception literature. The authors then move to several relevant issues, including deception detection and CMC, motives behind using CMC for deception vis-à-vis face-to-face relationships, and features of CMC that may facilitate the discovery of deceptive behaviors, and effects of deception in interpersonal relationships.

In Chapter Eighteen, Phillips and Spitzberg delve into the dark side of computer-mediated relationships by focusing on social network site surveillance and obsessive relational intrusion within social networking sites. Moreover, the chapter deals with a variety of theories relevant to understanding these trends and their implications for relationship development, including identity formation, online disclosure and intimacy development, dialectical theory, and privacy management theory. Finally, the authors offer a critique of existing literature in this area and directions for future research.

Finally, in Chapter Nineteen, Schrock and boyd summarize and provide their perspectives on research dealing with two deleterious aspects of computer-mediated relationships: sexual solicitation and cyberbullying. Specifically, they discuss legal aspects of these online activities among young Internet users, characteristics of perpetrators, Internet-initiated online encounters, and characteristics of victims of online sexual solicitation and cyberbullying. In addition, the authors examine online contexts for the problematic activities, effects on victims, and directions for future research.

There are a number of people who are responsible for this project, and we would like to acknowledge them here. First, we want to thank all of the authors who contributed their expertise and experience to this volume. We feel honored that so many well-respected CMC and interpersonal communication scholars were willing to participate in this project. We are very grateful for their contributions. Next, we would like to thank the publication team at Peter Lang for their suggestions and expertise in terms of putting this volume together. In particular, we would like to thank Mary Savigar, Senior Editor, for her assistance and support of this project. Finally, we sincerely hope that this volume will be an important catalyst for CMC stimulating discussion and future research among interpersonal scholars, graduate students, and undergraduate students.

References

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