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Using You’ve Got Mail to Teach Social Information Processing Theory and Hyperpersonal Perspective in Online Interactions

Daria S. Heinemann

Courses: Communication Theory; Interpersonal Communication; Computer-Mediated Communication
Objective: To illustrate the implications of social information processing and hyperpersonal perspective in CMC relationships
Time required: 1 hour
Materials needed: a DVD of You’ve Got Mail. scene 2 “Morning log-ons” and scene 21 “Still here” will be used

With the expansion of online interactions and exponential growth of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), attention is brought to those theories in communication that address the implications of relationships developed within these contexts. In communication courses students learn about both face-to-face (FtF) and CMC relationships and have the opportunity to contrast the quality of interactions, identity management, self-disclosure, and perception formation within both environments. Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT) offers a perspective regarding online interactions by exploring what happens in CMC environments that allows for interpersonal and relational development. SIPT argues that communicators in online interactions are as equally motivated to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships as those involved in FtF interactions (Walther, 1992). This desire is satisfied in spite of absence of nonverbal communication through the substitution of messages that carry impression-formation and expression-delivery.

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information with those suitable for and available through CMC. Online commun-
icators form initial impressions based on textual information extracted from CMC
contexts. They then engage in a variety of “knowledge-generating strategies” to test
their first impressions and modify or enhance their impressions (Walther, 1992).
As a result, while CMC interactions take longer and are more dependent on a provision
of ample amount of time to test and evolve these first impressions (the provision which
is more favorable in FtF interactions), communicators in online settings are able, over
time, to gather and construct images of their communication partners that are quite
parallel to the images they might have constructed through FtF interactions. To establish
and maintain social relationships, online communicators utilize a variety of options,
such as timing, style, and verbiage content to create as favorable an interaction
environment as possible, and, therefore, are able to satisfy their communication needs.
Moreover, it argues that while the asynchronous nature of these interactions puts time
restrictions on task achievement and can impede relationship construction and
maintenance, those who are not affected by these time limits are as capable of reaching
a similar level of relationship development as those engaged in FtF relational exchanges
Furthermore, SIPT puts forth a hyperpersonal perspective that states that
communicators in CMC have the opportunity to be selective in how they can
present themselves online by taking time to carefully choose which areas to disclose
and which to withhold. This self-selective presentation leads to a more intimate
(i.e. hyperpersonal) level in comparison to the FtF communication. The contention is
that communicators do not have to worry about how they look, or how to get others
to like them, and the sender has the opportunity to “stop and think” about what
he/she wants others to know. This creates an opportunity for a friendlier atmosphere
in an online interaction, which consequently leads to a development of a stronger
relational bond.

The Activity

You’ve Got Mail is a movie that highlights the relationship of Kathleen Kelly (Meg
Ryan) and Joe Fox (Tom Hanks), business rivals who meet in an online chat room,
are clueless of each other’s true identities, engage in relational communication, fall in
love, and begin to alter their real life communication styles as a result of the identity
management and self-disclosure they go through online.

It might be beneficial to invite students who have not seen the movie to watch it in
their own time, so that they are familiar with the premise of the film. However, such
review is not expected, as the scenes in this activity are able to stand alone and
demonstrate the concepts of SIPT and its hyperpersonal perspective. For the purposes
of this activity, scene 2 (“Morning log-ons”) of the movie will introduce the
relationship that Kathleen and Joe have developed online, and scene 21 (“Still here”)
will demonstrate the hyperpersonal perspective.

The opening scene 2 (“Morning log-ons”) demonstrates the relationship that
Kathleen (known online as ShopGirl) and Joe (NY152) have developed online. As
ShopGirl and NY152 engage in CMC, the SIPT is demonstrated in their interactions, self-disclosures, and quality of the relationship. The blind interaction allows Kathleen and Joe to establish their relationship based on the qualities of each other’s personalities, as opposed to physical attraction. They create a positive communication climate through creating and exchanging messages that provide support for each other. As the opening scene unfolds, it is clear that these two characters do not have anything in common with their real-life partners, yet in their online relationship they are able to talk more openly with each other about concerns and fears they have, than with their real-life partners. Clueless of their own true identities they create their own rules of a relationship in which they agree not to share anything personal about each other so as not to reveal their true identities (they agree not to share their names, addresses, professional occupations, or anything else that might reveal their true identity). Instead, they talk about their interests, hobbies, pets, friends, etc., and engage in an ample amount of self-disclosure, perception, and impression formation. As they engage in conversation they are able to engage in SIPT’s knowledge-generating strategies by compensating for the lack of nonverbal cues with linguistic content that expresses nonverbal communication. Kathleen’s email that is read in the opening credits sets up the warm communication climate through careful selection of words and phrases that construct specific meanings carrying feelings and impressions: “My dear friend . . . I pretend we’re the oldest and dearest friends, as opposed to what we actually are, people who don’t know each other’s names and met in a Chat room.” She expresses her excitement and anticipation by stating that she “wait[s] impatiently as it [her computer] connects . . . My breath catches in my chest . . .” She is able to express to Joe how much she really enjoys interacting with him by continuing to express herself nonverbally: “I hear nothing. Not even a sound on the streets of New York, just the beat of my own heart. I have mail. From you.” Kathleen’s strategic placement of punctuation allows her to put emphasis on specific words and phrases and relates exactly what it is she wants to express through email. This ability to replace nonverbal communication with linguistic content is part of SIPT’s argument that communicators are able to compensate for the absence of nonverbal communication in CMC environments by utilizing any verbal cues available.

As far as Joe’s communication, anonymity of the CMC environment provides him with the opportunity to engage in highly strategic impression formation and allows him to bring out the sides of his personality that he would not typically disclose in real life. As he is a highly respected and successful businessperson, being “soft” is not part of the package, thus, he is unable to be himself around his clients. However, CMC interactions allow him to reveal his true identity and bring forth the sensitive side of his character.

On the other hand, Kathleen is non-confrontational character who is unable to be direct with people for fear of hurting their feelings. She is kind, polite, and reserved, especially when it comes to facing her rivals. As she engages in CMC with Joe she discloses this “negative side” (as she considers it) to him and is able to share her true feelings about her inability to “face her accusers,” disclosing her desire to be more direct and confrontational, a side of her no one but NY152 would know.
Over time Kathleen and Joe develop an intimate online relationship, as this anonymity allows them to be honest with each other. “The odd thing about this form of communication is that you are more likely to talk about nothing than something, but I just want to say that all this nothing has meant more to me than so many . . . somethings.”

Scene 21 (“Still here”) demonstrates the application of hyperpersonal perspective of SIPT (Walther, 1996). In this scene, ShopGirl contacts NY152 asking why he did not show up. In the same message she opens up to him about the way she truly felt when confronting her business rival, Joe Fox. She discloses how terrible she felt to be completely honest with someone, yet knowing that she hurt him emotionally. She felt “cruel.” It is interesting that a careful election of words allow Kathleen to express exactly the type of feelings she had when faced with the situation she described. As she asks NY152 why he did not show up she also points out the receiver’s point of view in light of SIPT. “You don’t seem like a kind of person who’d do something like that” (referring to being stood up). According to SIPT Kathleen is able to construct an image of Joe by generalizing his positive qualities and magnifying them. She reflects that he is always kind in her communication with her, so he must be always kind, and never would hurt a woman by not showing up at a date without a reason.

Joe considers a number of options to answer Kathleen. As a Sender in SIPT he is able to stop and think about his response to Kathleen. His first option is not to respond at all. He is angry having found out the true identity of Kathleen, and attempts to react by hurting her with a non-response. However, his true identity of a kind, honest, and caring person in this online environment and this particular relationship comes through in the end. As a result he decides to answer her as to the reason of his absence. Now he is considering his options (which is something that the online environment allows him to do). He begins crafting his reply and has the chance to consider his online identity, thus, working out a response that best fits the image he created online. His first response is to lie to her: “I am in Vancouver . . .” He then realizes that this response is unrealistic, so he deletes the message and attempts to craft another lie. “I was stuck in a meeting, which I couldn’t get out of. And the electricity went out in the building. And we were trapped on the 38th floor . . . And the telephone system blew too . . . Amazingly enough.” After crafting this message Joe is shown as thinking very hard about what he wrote. Realizing that in this relationship he does not need or have to lie, he looks determined and changes his response to reflect more of who he really is by being honest about what happened. Moreover, he maintains his identity as a supporter by offering Kathleen more than just an answer to her question. “Dear friend. I cannot tell you what happened last night. But I beg you from the bottom of my heart to forgive me for not being there.” Realizing that stating “not being there” would be another lie he quickly deletes these words and replaces them with “for what happened.” He then discloses his true feelings: “I feel terrible,” and continues to encourage her and provide her with advice and support of her behavior, thus, stepping their relationship up to the hyperpersonal level of interaction.
Debriefing Questions

- What knowledge-generating strategies do NY152 and ShopGirl engage in to compensate for absence of nonverbal communication in their online interactions?
- How can CMC environment initiate, develop, and maintain relationships?
- Describe the communication style of ShopGirl and NY152 in the CMC interactions. What impression-formation strategies do these characters employ to create the communication climate shown in the scene?
- What role does anonymity play in self-disclosure and identity management? How does it help foster honesty and the development of hyperpersonal relationships?
- What importance does time play in the relational development of NY152 and ShopGirl?

Appraisal of the Activity

This activity is a great example of SIPT and its hyperpersonal perspective that engages students in more than just a theoretical way. A light-hearted movie allows students to understand the theory visually and to think about the concepts beyond their textbook application. As students observe how the characters engage in CMC and develop their relationship, they also observe how SIPT and the hyperpersonal relationship develop, and are able to fully apply the concepts. Much of this theory is also applicable in their own experiences online, and this activity provides a great opportunity to engage in reflection of these examples and inspire a dialogue among students.

Moreover, this particular film may be used to discuss a number of other theories, so any communication course that focuses on theories and/or interpersonal relationships may draw a number of concepts from the movie, such as identity management, uncertainty reduction, attribution theory, communication climate, self-disclosure, perception, relational intimacy, computer-mediated communication, and internet safety. If possible and desired, it may be beneficial to set a period to watch the movie with the class, so that future class periods may draw specific scenes from the film to demonstrates a number of the communication concepts mentioned above.

Limitations

SIPT focuses explicitly on relationships developed in online environments. This movie demonstrates the relationship between two characters in both online and FtF interactions. Therefore, it is imperative to stress to students that while this movie does demonstrate SIPT, SIPT does not explain what happens to relationships once they are carried over from one medium (i.e., CMC) to another (i.e., FtF).

Another limitation might be encountered in familiarity with the film. If students are unfamiliar with the movie, it might be difficult to explain to them the intricate elements of ShopGirl’s and NY152’s relationship. This limitation maybe addressed in
a number of ways. Students might be invited to view the film on their own before class, or an extra class may be afforded to watch the entire film.

References and Suggested Readings


