

# 10 Cyber-Attraction: The Emergence of Computer-Mediated Communication in the Development of Interpersonal Relationships

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**Abstract:** The main goal of this chapter is the analysis of cyber-attraction: the emergence of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) in the development of interpersonal attraction. According to recent theories and studies, it would seem that not only does CMC support emotional and intensely involving communication between people, but also that it would be characterized by and offer a specific allure, a special element that makes it so fascinating. In particular, different forms of miscommunication - implicit, say not to say, and obliquity – play an important role in this process.

Starting from this background, the chapter addresses the effects of CMC on interpersonal communication, and especially on the development of interpersonal attraction, aiming at identifying the specific features that this process has in cyberspace.

At the same time, the chapter underlines the fact that online and offline are not two separate dimensions to be dealt with separately and almost dichotomously. A broader approach to the study of interpersonal communication in CMC is needed: flexible and complex enough to account for the use of communication strategies in interaction contexts characterized by different levels of virtuality and by the presence of interfaces.

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## 10.1 Introduction

The social nature of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) is more and more evident. As Rheingold [1] asserts, “It is all about people communicating with other people, in any way they can and for many purposes: exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt...”. (p.3). The activities today carried out over the Internet are many and complex, in a way that could not be imagined at the beginning. Certainly one of the emerging features of the Web is its relational and communicative nature: the initial centrality of the information exchange is moving to the building of on-line relationships, from friendship up to romantic (and even sexual) relationships.

As pointed out before, this evolution was literally unthinkable only ten years ago, when the first studies on Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) in collaborative tasks [2-4] had found CMC to be an inadequate way for people to share emotional content, let alone develop meaningful, long-lasting relationships. According to the authors, the main reasons of this inadequacy had to be found in the lack of nonverbal cues and in the diminished sense of social presence.

Despite that preliminary vision, which conveyed the idea of CMC as cold and poor communication medium, the Internet is emerging as “a community of chronic communicators” [5], and we see that interpersonal relationships can and do develop online [6].

Parks and Floyd [7] pointed out that personal relationships conducted via CMC are “common,” with just over 60 % of people in their sample reporting that they have formed a “personal relationship” with someone they had initially contacted through a Usenet newsgroup. The result of research, as well as the now many accounts of personal experiences show that personal relationships are being established online, from friendship to romantic and even sexual relationships. As Chenault [8] affirms, “CMC becomes a new way to “find” each other, a way for personal relationships to build”.

The development of interpersonal (sentimental/friendship) relationships on the Internet, is a very important and complex issue, seen also the growing of this phenomenon in these very last years. In order to investigate it effectively, a broad perspective is needed.

Many elements are involved in this process: among these, surely interpersonal attraction is recognized as a key issue and a major push to interpersonal relationships. As Levine [9] points out, “Relationships can begin in many different environments - from the grocery store to the workplace to an online chat-room”. But, according to Brehm, “the first big step toward a relationship is always the same: interpersonal attraction, the desire to approach someone” [10] In other words, without attraction, there are no relationships, online or off.

We know that in usual face-to-face interactions interpersonal attraction strongly relies on physical factors (especially in the first phases). Since online these features are not present, communication features become the crucial element to influence whether we are attracted by someone or not. Similarly, when showing interest to someone, other means than smiles and glances have to be used.

Object of this chapter is thus *cyber-attraction*: the emergence of CMC in the development of interpersonal attraction. According to more recent theories and studies, it would seem that not only CMC does support emotional and possibly rich and intensely involving communication between people, but also that it would be characterized by and

offer opportunity for a specific *allure*, a special element that makes it so charming. There seems to be a specific room for implicit, *say not to say*, and obliquity. All those communication forms which can be defined as *miscommunication* do play a central role in cyber-attraction. Since you don't see the other person, there is much room for imagination and idealization, as well as the possibility of daring more "behind a wall"; there is an interface, which can act as a protecting barrier between the partners.

So, the chapter has the main goal to get a better understanding of this phenomenon: on the one hand, it addresses the effects of CMC in interpersonal communication, and especially in the development of interpersonal attraction, aiming at identifying the specific features that this process undertake in cyberspace. At the same time, the chapter underlines the fact that online and offline are not two separate dimensions, to be dealt with separately and almost dichotomously; instead, a broader approach to interpersonal communication is needed, flexible and complex enough to account for the use of communication strategies in different interaction contexts, characterized by different *levels of virtuality* and by the presence of *interfaces*.

Literature that can help shedding light on these processes consists of the early work of CMC [11-13], theories on interpersonal attraction [10, 14-17], psychosocial theories such as SAT [18, 19] and interpersonal communication psychology theories (Anolli, Chapter 1 in this volume) [20-23].

On the one hand we will focus on the specific devices and tools CMC offers to interpersonal communication (in terms of possibly richer communication options): the communication options which can be used to convey socio-emotional meaning and to foster the reduction of interpersonal distance will be analysed.

On the other hand we will investigate how online and offline dimensions merge in a number of psychological processes which are recognized as important for attraction and further steps; we will try to understand, how they develop in cyberspace and how traditional theories of interpersonal attraction apply online.

## **10.2 Supporting "relational"communication in CMC.**

A first step in order to understand the possibility of "online relationships" is investigating the consequences of CMC for interpersonal communication, with special focus on social and emotional aspects of communication, and on communication strategies involved in the reduction of interpersonal distance and the achievement of growing intimacy. This has mainly to do with being emotionally intense, open, express feelings and convey emotions, states of mind, etc.

Much CMC research [24] is concerned with how the technical features of different communication media might influence what it is possible to convey via each medium. Among these characteristics are the richness of cues that a medium conveys (e.g., whether it conveys texts or whether it includes visual and auditory cues), the visibility or anonymity of the participants and the timing of exchanges (e.g., synchronous or asynchronous communication).

Results from early research in computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW), examining the effect of different media on groups working remotely on collaborative tasks [2], on consensus building in business contexts [3], on cooperation in education [4] were not very encouraging and led to an early assumption that textual CMC systems support communication poorly, particularly socio-emotional communication.

As pointed out by Preece [25], two closely related theories that help to explain these

observations are *social presence theory* [26] and *media richness theory* [12].

*Social presence theory* is concerned with how successfully media convey a sense of the participants being physically present; face-to-face communication is used as the standard for the assessment. The dimension of social presence depends not only on the verbal features of the exchange but also on vocal and nonverbal cues, body language, and context [13, 27]. Reduced social cues (i.e. gestures, body language, facial expressions, appearance and so on) in CMC are caused by low bandwidth, which affects communication [28].

*Media richness theory* is similar to social presence but takes a media perspective [12]. It addresses the media's capacity for immediate feedback-how well it conveys cues, and how many and in which ways senses are involved.

Social presence fundamentally affects how participants feel emotion, intimacy, and immediacy [13]. Early studies in CMC reported fewer personal messages with lower socioemotional content (e.g. [29]) and lacking cues about social context. The "*cues-filtered-out*" theory [30] was used to explain these observations [11]. Bandwidth was insufficient to carry all the communication signals needed for conveying social, emotional, and contextual content. In text-only systems, for example, both task information and social information are carried in the same single verbal/linguistic channel, which, though adequate for most task information, cannot transmit nonverbal information such as body language, voice tone, and so on. [31, p.476].

It is clear that this filtering out social, emotional and contextual information can have important consequences on the interaction, especially where the development of an interpersonal relationship is the main focus. According to Preece [25], there are three main ways that this affects communication: first, signals needed to understand conversation may be missing; second, the management of speaking turns may be modified; third, the impossibility of seeing and hearing the speaker can make it more difficult to infer information regarding the context of the conversation and the speaker's feelings.

In face-to-face communication, the subject can use multiple communication channels, through which he can convey emotional content. On the phone, speakers rely mainly on linguistic and non-verbal vocal cues and make use of a synchronous style of interaction. Differently, as broadly discussed in the previous chapter, communicative environments characterized by higher virtuality levels are more rarefied than the kind of interaction that happens in normal conversation. Furthermore, while face-to-face (and, partially, telephonic) conversation occurs in a cooperative environment constantly regulated by mutual adjustment and correction, where feedback and tuning are constant [32], CMC occurs in a much less cooperative environment because of the special conditions imposed by the medium itself [33]. What is especially critical in this context is the lack of direct and immediate feedback: it can thus be more difficult to infer the intentions of the partners.

Nevertheless the absence of physical and nonverbal cues should not be taken to mean that the computer medium is (completely) impersonal or devoid of social cues, or that the cues it transmits lack the subtlety of those communicated face-to-face [34, p.216]. In fact, there is a high degree of socio-emotional content observed in CMC (e.g.[1, 35-37]), even in organizational and task-oriented settings [34, p.217].

A number of textual and graphical devices were created, for example, to reproduce the meta-communicative features of face-to-face conversation and to convey an emotional dimension with the literal meaning of messages (for an extended analysis see Chapter 9).

*Emoticons* (or 'smileys') are graphical signs combining punctuation marks and symbols into miniature sideways faces are extensively used in chat, e-mails and newsgroups to show sender's mood. Ending a sentence with ;-) for example, "lets other know that you're

joking or feeling cheerful” [38]. Adding a frowning face, such as :-( does the opposite effect.

As noted by Riva in Chapter 9, in Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), text-based multi-user environments, people can use narrative descriptions of conversational nonverbal behaviors (*‘emoting’*). They consist in typed messages that appear surrounded by quotation marks and preceded by dialogue tags, such as “emote” or ‘pose’ [8]. Emoting, in MUDs, is a way to use commands to bring action and emotion to language. For instance, for a user whose nick-name is Mary78, typing “emote laughs loud” would result for the other users as “Mary78 laughs loud”; the character can thus be given action and movement- and even emotion. The use of poses as well as words to convey meaning gives MUDs an “odd but definitely useful kind of disembodied language”.

More sophisticated CMC environments are represented by multi-user two- and three-dimensional worlds: within *2- and 3-D chats* such as “The Palace” or “Active Worlds” the users are represented by avatars (graphical representations of the user), and they’re immersed in a virtual environment, where they can move around like in a videogame and act with a predefined set of choices (usually 6 or 7, including actions such as “Wave”, “Happy”, “Angry”, etc.).

This can enhance the feeling of immersion and co-presence and re-introduces spatial elements as well as others nonverbal cues usually filtered out by traditional CMC. For example, as Krikorian [39] points out, the management of interpersonal distance in a virtual world can be a powerful element for the development of interpersonal relationships.

### 10.3 From cyber-attraction to cyber-seduction.

We can define *seduction* as the passage from a preliminary state of attraction and curiosity, to the search for contact and intimacy [14, 17]. More in detail, it can be considered as an intentional and strategic behaviour induced by the attraction (usually sexual) for a subject. Main goal of this behaviour is to establish “an intriguing bond with the partner” (Ciceri, Chapter 4 of this volume), in order to reach an intimate relationship, through a progressive reduction of interpersonal distance [40].

According to the Steps Theory of Givens [41] and the bio-social model of Kendrick and Trost [42], it is possible to describe seduction as a timed sequence of interactions characterized by different “steps” or phases: after the phase of choice of an attractive partner and the phase of attracting his/her attention and interest, the third phase consists in trying to reduce the interpersonal distance in order to obtain a higher level of intimacy (and possibly establishing a relationship).

The first step is thus attraction: almost all theorists agree that *interpersonal attraction* is a “positive or negative attitude toward another person” [15], p.2. “Attitude” can be defined as a “person’s readiness to respond toward an object, or a class of objects, in a favourable or unfavourable manner”. Interpersonal attraction is defined as “an individual’s tendency or predisposition to evaluate another person or symbol of that person in a positive way” [15], p.2.

This attitude usually leads to the desire of being noticed, “to change status from being anyone to being someone” [43, 44] through a careful management of *self-presentation* (exhibition) and of the show of interest into the other person. This with the aim of facilitating *self-disclosure* (which circularly leads to an increase in liking) and reducing interpersonal distance, in order to an intimate relationship.

As Ciceri points out in the fourth chapter of this volume, seductive interaction can be considered and analysed “as a flexible plurality of behavioural patterns, corresponding to the variety of communicative intentions: exhibition, approaching the partner, deepening reciprocal knowledge and reaching of a level of intimacy.”

The strategies behind seduction processes are usually focused on self-disclosure through a reciprocal filtering of the level of intimacy of the information provided. This communicative approach, described and discussed by the *Uncertainty Reduction Theory*, allows for the reduction of the uncertainty level without the risk of being excessively vulnerable to the decisions of the partner [38].

Given the impossibility of knowing the intentions of the partner, the seductive goal is manifested gradually, through the use of an “*oblique*” language [45]. Main characteristic of this language is ambiguity: the subject discloses him/herself without an excessive exposure. In this way it is possible to reduce the risk of being rejected, avoiding a possible reduction in the self-esteem. According to Ciceri (Chapter 4 in this volume), “the act of seducing is a subtle and enticing game, which requires using the right amounts of exhibition or disguise, flaunting or revealing slightly, saying something but not saying too much”.

In face-to-face communication, a significant role is played by nonverbal communication: the subject has both to be convincing and attractive; this is obtained by a subtle *negotiation* process in which nonverbal cues are of central importance [14; Anolli, Chapter 1 of this volume; Ciceri, Chapter 4 of this volume]. But what happens to this complex process within cyber-space, where a number of new opportunities (e.g. more careful management of self-presentation) and constraints (miss nonverbal channels) are present? It is now time to investigate the implications CMC has on important relational processes deeply involved in the development of interpersonal attraction, such as first impression formation, showing interest into someone, self disclosing etc. We will discuss which form they take online and whether and how traditional theories apply in this context; the general aim is however to highlighten the *globality of the communication experience* and to try to explain the continuity of the communication processes, from online to offline contexts of seductive interaction. As a general hypothesis, in fact, the mechanisms involved in offline communication are not different from the ones implied in the online communication. In particular, we assumed that a unitary and coherent theoretical framework and some general principles should be used to analyse seduction and interpersonal attraction in these different communication contexts.

### *10.3.1 First impression formation: choosing an attractive partner*

When first getting to know a new person, a central role is played by the development of impression formation.

In everyday face-to-face interaction the partners rely on different types of cues, such as beauty, voice, way of moving, way of talking, clothing, etc to build the first impression of the other. But how do these impressions develop in different environments and especially on-line?

As we have seen in Chapter 9, according to the “*cues filtered out*” theory [30], also called “reduced cues” theory, the computer filters out aspects of communication that are of central importance in face-to-face communication (eye-contact, self-contact gestures, posture, voice pitch, intensity, stress, rhythm and volume).

Absence of non-verbal cues makes the process of first impression formation take on partially new forms. Using alternative media, such as CMC, the actors rely on different

cues, such as language, style, timing and speed of writing, use of punctuation, use of emoticons, etc. According to Lea and Spears [34, p.217], “even first-time users form impressions of other communicant’s dispositions and personalities based on their “communication style”.

Furthermore, although it is true that the cues conveyed in face-to-face interaction are generally more than in CMC, in “real life settings”, they are overwhelmed by the so-called “*physical attractiveness stereotype*” [46]: physical attractiveness was found to be one of the essential factor influencing first impression formation and development of interpersonal attraction. The influence of physical attractiveness leads to a spiral by which more attractive people are addressed more favourably and thus induced to show the best of them and leading to a further increased liking. Online, the lack of visual cues about physical appearance can give the partners an opportunity to interact without the weight of physical attractiveness stereotype.

Finally, though we can generally affirm that the richness of cues conveyed in face-to-face interaction is hardly present in CMC, the impression of our partner built in mediated communication is not for that less complete and articulated. According to Lea’s and Spears’ “*SIDE theory*” [34], it is possible to predict that the smaller amount of cues that appear in CMC can take on great value, possibly leading to an “over-attribution” process, building stereotypical impressions of partners based on language content of CMC messages.

As far as rhythm and differences are concerned [8], Walther [28] also found evidence, within a “*social information processing perspective*”, that computer-mediated groups gradually increased in impression development to a level “approaching that of face-to-face groups (p. 381). Social information processing suggests different rates and patterns of impression development using alternative media, such as CMC. Thus, it takes longer to find enough information to be able to form impressions via CMC, but that it does happen, according to Walther, and that process by which we form impression is not actually “altered” via CMC, only slowed down.

### *10.3.2 The management of seductive interaction: attracting attention and showing interest*

After getting in touch with someone for the first time, how can we think these relationships develop online? And how can the game of courtship develop? What are the means to express/show interest into someone into such a “rarefied” communication medium? These are some of the questions we’re going to address in this section.

Usually, as pointed out by Altman, [47, p.27], as people go on in their interaction and start establishing a relationship, they “gradually move toward deeper areas of their mutual personalities through the use of words, bodily behavior, and environmental behaviors”.

In the management of seductive interaction, there are some important measures of attraction that do not come into play in CMC, nor can they be measured, including: eye-contact (duration and type), proxemic indexes such as “inclination” to one another (leaning towards and other body language), the distance between the partners, etc. According to Ciceri (Chapter 4 in this volume), “the form of seductive message is multimodal, depending on the relation between signals belonging to different systems of expression (vocal, verbal, visual, kinetic), which involves the whole person. During the course of seductive interactive game, communication is influenced by verbal and nonverbal components.”

In CMC, bodily and environmental aspects are reduced or removed, giving words/text all the importance”. Nevertheless, there are specific communication tools that have been

identified in the literature [8] as able to compensate for the lack of nonverbal cues and to convey emotion. Furthermore, "the seducer should be able to act in an implicit and intriguing manner because enticing the other person needs an attentive and sensitive process of negotiation".

In the following brief description there are some elements that are recognized playing a crucial role in the development of attraction, online as well as offline.

*Proximity and frequency of contact:* as noticed by Wallace [46], one obvious explanation for the proximity effect is that it provides the opportunity to meet and know significant others. This makes the other person become familiar, predictable and develops a positive effect of exposure [10]. Moreover, one reason the real-life proximity promotes attraction is that the person's nearness makes people expect -and anticipate- future interaction. In the online world, proximity is not defined by physical location, but instead by the shared use of a particular tool (chat room, newsgroup, etc.). This particular proximity is also called intersection frequency. In the design of new CMC environments this feature is supported through the insertion of "buddy lists", allowing people to know whether his/her friend are online, making it thus much easier to stay in touch.

*Similarity:* according to Brehm [10], people are more attracted to someone they believe has attitudes similar to their own than to someone whose attitudes differ: the greater the proportion of shared attitudes, the greater the attraction to that person. On the Internet, where it is more difficult and time consuming to learn how people think about multiple issues, the law of attraction may cause many "false starts" in friendship and love. In a virtual medium, in fact, as Schnarch points out [48], there is no way to really know whether someone's attitudes are similar to one another's, because it is not possible to compare a partner's self-presentation with what one can see for himself. This limitation, on the one hand produces a large amount of idealisations and expectations, and on the other hand allows a strategic management of the similarity perception.

*Express liking:* as Wallace [46] points out "when someone likes us, we tend to like this person back". Partly because we're flattered and the other person's attraction to us raises our self-esteem, just as physical attractiveness creates a spiral of positive treatment and positive response. In real life, there are many cues that people can rely on to detect that someone likes them: smiles, attention, glances, etc. On the Internet people must rely on other methods to show that they like someone else. The most important is probably attention: flatteries, compliments and signs of interest, which can be expressed in various forms (a nice compliment/positive comment on a message posted by someone in a forum) and multimedia devices (e.g. virtual flowers).

*Humour:* the role humour plays in making people more attractive is well recognized [49]. Especially as far as self- or object directed humour are concerned, also on the Internet, humour can be a powerful force in interpersonal attraction, particularly because it isn't overshadowed by the physical appearance factor. Humour can be expressed very easily on the Net in just typed text [50], and those who excel at it are probably increasing their score on the interpersonal attraction scale.

### *10.3.3 The paradox of self-disclosing in cyber-space*

As noted above, self-disclosure is a central process in the development of attraction and

crucial to the establishment of relationships [16]. In fact, developing a close relationship with another person calls for a certain level of intimacy, or self-disclosure. Over time, the exchange deepens and the two people disclose more and more information to one another. The management of self-disclosure, with the filtering of personal information is extremely delicate.

As Ciceri (Chapter 1 in this volume) underlines, “it is necessary to be able to get the right balance between allowing oneself yet denying oneself, putting oneself forward yet restraining oneself”; it is all a matter of “saying a little but not saying too much” [45].

People can manage the timing, the breadth and depth of self-disclosure, which is rewarding to the listener because it makes the other person feel worthy of receiving intimate information, thus raising self-esteem. Jourard and Lasakov [51] hypothesized that “liking” another person is mainly a result of having “disclosed” to the person, almost “independent of that person’s reaction to the disclosure” (cited in Altman and Taylor, 50). Altman and Taylor posit an interactional theory: “Revealing leads to liking and liking leads to revealing, “as a cyclical and continuous set of events (50).

As Chenault [8] points out, “because often in CMC people are interacting with relative “strangers” (people they have never met “in real life”), the dynamics of when to disclose, and what to disclose come into play. Within cyber-space, self-disclosure seems to be influenced in a quite complex and partially controversial way: on the one hand, self-disclosure is strictly tied to the development of trust and according to Mehrabian [52], “people are discouraged from expressing personal feelings to strangers and so it becomes necessary to rely on implicit behavior to infer how another person feels and how to pursue a relationship further” (p.156). On the other hand, it would seem that anonymity and the reduced sense of presence given by the interface between communicators allows a more dishinibited behavior, fostering the possibility to open oneself (there would be less or no fear of “losing face” [53]).

## **10.4 Towards a new perspective in cyber-seduction: communicating and miscommunicating in cyberspace**

### *10.4.1 Seduction and miscommunication*

As we have seen, establishing a sentimental/intimate relationship over the Internet is not an easy task.

As pointed out before, whether on- or off-line, seduction is a very complex communication act: it can be defined as a strategic and intentional sequence of moves, primarily pushed by attraction (usually sexual) towards another person (usually of the opposite gender), having the main goal to attract him/her in order to reduce interpersonal distance and establish an intimate relationship.

As we have seen, the strategies behind seduction processes are usually focused on the management of *self-presentation* and on *self-disclosure* through a careful reciprocal filtering of the level of intimacy of the information provided. Given the impossibility of knowing the intentions of the partner, the seductive goal is manifested gradually, through the use of an “oblique” language [45]. Main feature of this linguistic style is its ambiguity and enigmaticity: the subject discloses him/herself without an excessive exposure. In this way it is possible to reduce the risk of being rejected, avoiding a possible reduction in the self-esteem.

It is a very subtle task, where in order to achieve his goals, the subject has to run along

a border area between implicitness and explicitness, ambiguous and direct style, communication and miscommunication.

As Anolli points out in Chapter 1 of this volume, communication is a *complex game of intentions*, including both simple communication acts characterized by the pursue of a single intention (either instrumental or self-revealing) and complex acts (multi-intentional). In this second case, two separate intentions are present and coordinated within a hierarchical structure, which allows the pursue of an intention (self-revealing) through the achievement of the other (the instrumental intention). Seductive communication is made of complex acts (multi-intentional), where usually all first-level level communication acts (making questions, compliments, offering flowers, etc.) are super-ordinated by the higher-level intention (being noticed, bringing to self-disclosure in order to reduce interpersonal distance, etc.).

For example, manifesting an (instrumental) intention (for example asking for a glass of water) is used not only for the simple achievement of this intention by the means of its communication (to have a glass of water), but as an instrument to communicate a different intention at another level (I ask for some water to signal my presence, etc.). At the same time, manifesting a self-revealing intention (presenting oneself as rich, or powerful, etc.) is aimed at appearing more interesting to the partner's eyes, in order "to be chosen".

In this case, the management of self-presentation carried out during courtship, where people tend to present themselves at their best, enhancing their qualities and minimizing defects, has many point so f contact with deceptive communication.

The "*courtship dance*" is a context where people tend to resort to "say not to say, where the attitudes of the speakers seem to be intentionally ambiguous, confused, misdirected and pretended.

As pointed out by Anolli, in Chapetr 1 of this volume, this is a typical miscommunication situation, where discursive interactions have their opaque border areas where communication still succeeds without being openly and explicitly strived for. It seems to be a normal phenomenon in our everyday communications, where communication can be successful without being perfect. We are in a situation where the success and the value of a communication outcome are not in the transfer of a "package of information" (Shannon & Weaver's perspective [54]), but rely in the play of negotiation of the interactants' intentions.

Understanding the meaning of an utterance does not imply the understanding of a transparent semantic content determined solely by its autonomous truth conditions. Understanding it is more similar to an interactive play in which the players have to negotiate reciprocal intentions. (Anolli, Chapter 1 of this volume). On the one hand, this makes "communication a "risky" task" in which the borderline between communicative and noncommunicative intentionality in speakers" are very feeble. On the other hand this game of intentions, and the continuous process of reciprocal re-interpretation of the partners' intentions increases the possibilities in human communication. As suggested by the MaCHT (Miscommunication as CHance Theory) by Anolli (Chapter 1 in this volume), "miscommunication is not plainly a defect or a mismatch; actually, it is also a *chance*, because it enhances the degrees of freedom available to the communicators in their interaction".

#### 10.4.2 *Seductive (mis)communication in cyberspace and Situated Action Theory*

From the analysis carried out in the previous paragraphs, we can see that people engaged in a seductive interaction online as well as offline are faced to specific opportunities and

constraints, which can enhance both the risks and the opportunities of miscommunication.

In CMC, communicating to attract and seduce implies being able to manage the interaction and the relationship in the context of a different and new communication environment. It means adapting to and interacting with other people through an interface, in a complex way and adopting new channels, new codes, in a context which offers new opportunities as well as many limitations and constraints, as compared to the environments we're used to (e.g. face-to-face), etc.

There are in fact, in cyberspace, some specific elements that can influence miscommunication, enhancing opportunities and risks for the management of this complex communication act offered by it. For example, we could think that the presence of an interface would lower the fear of "losing the face" [53]; at the same time, it makes even more difficult than usual to detect the other person's feedback.

Baym [55] writes about the "*egalitarianism*", in that many see CMC allowing people-making aspects like appearance mute points and giving everyone who can type an equal chance. However, the very equalizing aspects of CMC that are seen as positive can also, as the reduced-cues [30] perspective points out, cause problems and a number of possible misunderstandings. The lack of context leaves a lot of room to misunderstanding, illusions, projections and also deception and lying. It is enough to remark that, for example, in face-to-face interactions we (usually, at least) know for sure the gender of the person we are talking to. It is a fundamental element for the choice. This is not the case in CMC, where gender swapping (presenting oneself as a person of the opposite gender) is not so rare a practice.

Although the described effect of CMC features on the definition of *opportunities and limits* for the interaction are generally accepted and considered true, the situation is somewhat more complicated.

Each communication environment (face-to-face, chat, 3D chat, etc.) is different: it offers different signalling channels, possesses different features. But also each interactant is different: he/she has different personality characteristics, different technological competence, culture, etc.; furthermore, each interaction is different, according to context and interactants.

The specific characteristics of the interactants and the unique features of their interaction come into play in determining the meaning of these features (in terms of opportunities and constraints) and in exploiting them in order to reach their goal.

Do different people univocally interpret these features as opportunities and limits? And how do people interact with these opportunities and limits in order to reach their goals?

A theory that helps understanding and investigating interactions typical of CMC is *Situated Action Theory* [19], as implemented in the model by Mantovani [56], which analyses this process (of interaction with artefacts) in a complex, multi-level way.

According to the SAT, the action is an adaptation of the subject to the context he's placed in, a context which offer him a number of specific affordances/opportunities and limits/constraints. The focus of the SAT approach is to "investigate how people use the affordances to develop an intelligent course of action".

According to the author, the way people use and interact with the artefact (computer/characteristics of CMC), the so-called "*local interaction with the artefact*", is always situated in a certain context. Interaction depends on the interpretation of the situation by the actor. According to this interpretation, the subject gives a personal meaning to the characteristics of the environments and identifies/perceives affordances and limits. This happens according to a number of elements, such as: personality

characteristics, socio-cultural contexts, objectives and *goals* of the actors.

#### 10.4.2.1 *Perceiving opportunities and limits*

The same CMC feature (e.g. presence of the interface/barrier) can be interpreted differently and represent something different, either an opportunity or a limit according to a number of subject's characteristics (the most salient are: extroversion/introversion, level of competence, physical appearance, previous experience with the media involved).

For example, someone who is very pretty (or handsome) can feel more comfortable in face-to-face interaction, because of the importance *physical appearance* has. He/she can see the fact of not being seen in chat as a limit, where as an ugly or not very attractive girl/boy could find it a resource. This, also because some of the elements that are overshadowed in face-to-face, such as the weight of words for words, do have a great importance and permanence in CMC.

As another example, this perception can also change also according to the *personality characteristics* of the people. For instance, we could expect an extroverted person could have no problems either in face-to-face or in other media, or probably miss the "human touch" when chatting; on the other hand, an introverted people could find himself more at ease in the context of a lower-emotional involvement situation, such as the one in chat, where you don't either see or hear the person you are communicating with.

Obviously, a very important element is also the *level of competence* (typing and writing) and chat experience. A person familiar with emoticons can find them as an opportunity, a useful device to convey emotions; otherwise they could just be meaningless signs.

#### 10.4.2.2 *Exploiting affordances and managing constraints*

Furthermore, the next step is to see whether the actors are able to exploit these affordances, depending on a complex inter-relationship of factors.

Once perceived and identified opportunities and constraints, they decide how to exploit them and how to structure the interaction.

We could assume that the subjects are not always able to communicate most effectively in different communication environments, either because of a general lack of knowledge and technical competence or because of contextual elements that make the situation uncomfortable to them (their perception/interpretation of the situation), or also because they can't tune to the other person.

We can hypothesize that the different interpretation of the features of varied communication environments can influence and modify (broaden/restrain/modulate) the *repertoire* of communication strategies that one person has. It is possible that this perception of opportunities and limits can bring people to communicate in different ways. Changing the communication environment and thus changing the context can be a powerful experience of discovering of new communication opportunities that are usually made difficult by the emotional involvement or other factors, such as personality characteristics.

For example, being ironic to seduce (in face-to-face conversation) is an incredibly complex act: irony in itself is a multi-level, meta-intentional act [57]. In the case of "being ironic to seduce", this act is even more complex and demanding: the ironic intention by itself becomes a sub-ordinated intention as compared to the higher-level seductive intention. This requires a very high level of attention to manage facial expression, gestures and voice in the interaction, attentional resources that are not always present in face-to-face seductive interaction, where usually the emotional involvement is high.

In CMC, being ironic could mean carefully underlining certain words with punctuation, an attentive use of capital letters or making use of emoticons, in much more controlled situation. The same person who, for many reasons, can be embarrassed in face-to-face interaction can experience in CMC a reduction in the relational stress and find a way to be ironic. The same person who cannot make an effective use of her voice and facial expressions, but is very effective with writing can become perfectly patron of the situation and of the managing of the codes in chat, and be so a very ironic and brilliant person. He/she can thus use this powerful weapon to seduce, a weapon she could never use in face-to-face where she would possibly prefer a different style.

As pointed out by Anolli in the first chapter of this volume, it is very important to consider the range of signalling systems, and the plurality of expressive means available to the communicators in order to express their communicative intention. The focus is “on the *semantic synchrony process*, intended as the speaker’s competence to organise, coordinate, and make the different communicative systems converge on each other in order to make explicit the meaning of one’s own communicative intention in a unitary and coherent way.”

It would thus emerge, as Mantovani [58] suggests, that seductive communication in cyberspace usually requires two tasks: the analysis of the characteristics of the communicative environment in which the play of interpersonal attraction develops, the exploitation of the affordances offered by communicative environment according to opportunities and constraints. Furthermore, the communication style used by the subject, in order to be effective, must be tuned and flexibly adapted according both to the partner’s personality and competence.

The key effort of the subjects involved in a computer-mediated interaction is always the negotiation of the meaning of the situation they are involved in. Within a communicative interaction, people are constantly involved into a process of negotiation: negotiation of the meaning and negotiation of the intention. Situations are always conjointly defined by both partners, and the meaning for the interaction always emerges as a result of the *process of negotiation* [18, 59] in order to reach a shared meaning.

This is coherent with the *dialogic principle* of human communication. As Anolli and Ciceri [20] have pointed out, communication is not simply an act but it is an inter-act, where both partners constantly co-determine the construction of the communicative reality and operate on it. *Miscommunication* as a founding feature of indeterminacy in human communication is the key element: it offers the basis for both misunderstanding and enrichment of the human communication at the same time. In the very moment that communication leaves space for indeterminacy, on the one hand this implies the risk of misunderstanding; on the other hand it allows a creative interpretation and construction of the interaction, through the process of negotiation. This allows the partners to constantly re-define the context they’re people are placed in. The relationship between context and communication is a bi-directional one: on the one hand, the context defines and influence certain elements of the interaction, on the other hand, communicators during their interaction constantly re-define and re-build the context.

## 10.5 Conclusions

As we have seen in this chapter, cyber-attraction is a very complex issue, in which a rich network of elements is at stake. In order to analyse this process effectively, we assumed that it was not possible to analyse it separately from “offline attraction”: there should be a

unitary framework to investigate this phenomenon online and off.

Along this path, we thus tried to investigate this phenomenon within a general and comprehensive perspective, in order to forward a unitary vision for *on-line and off-line communication* and behavior. This meant considering the existing differences but investigating them in a global and coherent framework, where insights and theories developed or concerning one level can enhance reflection and understanding of the other levels.

CMC is becoming more and more part of our life: thus “on-line” and “off-line” dimensions will merge/integrate more and more in our everyday experience and use; we thus need to look for comprehensive models to investigate and understand them.

In order to understand the specific features of online seduction and especially to explain the paradoxical co-existence of charm and risks, it was necessary to look up at a concept/perspective that could unify the analysis of seductive communication in different communication environments.

From the analysis carried out, it emerged that *miscommunication* (understood as the characteristic of indeterminacy and rarefaction of communication) can represent a powerful perspective for the comprehension of this process.

On the one hand, it explains how in cyberspace it is possible to overcome many of the constraints of face-to-face communication: first of all, the importance that physical appearance has in the choice/selection of the partner and in being noticed (which is a disadvantage for the non-beautiful); secondly, the time which is usually needed to reach intimacy. Because of the reduced cues, it is possible to be attracted by/attract more many people than in face-to-face, independently from physical appearance and it is possible to dare more with less fear of “losing face”. At the same time, it is possible, as literature on online support groups [60, 61] shows very clearly, to reach very high levels of empathy and intimacy in shorter time as compared to face-to-face.

On the other hand, the concept of miscommunication accounts for the existence of specific risks/limits in online attraction: the first one is represented by the risk of making illusions grow to far; although the cues which are given are only few, and anyway less than in face-to-face, this leads to make great use of fantasy and idealization to draw a complete picture of the virtual partner [34]. Theorists generally agree that “romantic love is inexorably tied up with fantasy” [15, p.153.]. As Waller and Hill [62] put it “*Idealization* is an essential element in romantic love” (p.120). How better to idealize than through CMC, where one is left to paint his or her own mental picture of someone? Obviously, this can be risky when deciding to be faced to reality.

This remark explains also some results from literature [6], reporting that many people do prefer to “stay online” and never “go back to earth”. Meeting offline means reducing the space for idealization and illusion, and can sometimes be disappointing, when expectancies don’t meet reality.

This leads us to a second limit of cyber-seduction, which consists of the impossibility, online, to compare what the partner says with what we see or with information got from other people/elsewhere; the only source is what the partner says. There is thus much room for deception, or at least distortion and *say not to say* in self-presentation; this brings to specific problems for the development of trust. It would seem that, coherently with the vision forwarded in this book, miscommunication, in its dark and bright side, is part of our everyday communication experience, online or off. It is simply a matter of managing opportunities and risks of this intrinsic feature of human communication.

In trying to understand the interpretation and perception of the affordances and limits for such a particular communication as CMC, we also looked up at *Situated Action*

*Theory.* According to this reflection, these opportunities and limits are not strictly and deterministically given, but are the result of a process of perception and interpretation by the people engaged in the interaction (who must possess new and specific skills). They finally are also the result of the process of negotiation of a shared meaning for the context and the interaction, and of reciprocal, continuous interpretation of the partners' intentions.

Also, it emerges how there is an interdependent, *circular relationship between interaction and context* (and thus the interpretation of the situation; there is always space for a redefinition of the situation and of the framework of opportunities and limits of the media). For example, this should adapt to different people and different steps in the relationship.

Probably, the factors of competence and previous experience are likely to impact heavily on our CMC interactions and relationships. Since the use of CMC (to meet people, discuss topics of interest, etc.) will become more and more familiar in the future, a medium among the others, it is likely that this will allow people to balance more objectively its opportunities and limits.

Through growing use and experience, they also could acquire new specific *skills* and become able to perceive and manage more effectively the communication resources available within that communication environment. Laurel N. Hellerstein [63] found that heavy users of e-mail and electronic conferencing, in a university setting, were more likely to use the computer to "initiate new friendships, make new friends, and communicate with others," whereas light users tended to do build relationships in other ways. She also saw that many of these relationships formed and started online then grew off online (friends or romance). This seems to be an interesting finding indeed, because it could support the idea (still to be tested) that, apart from pathological use, increased use in CMC leads to acquisition of specific skills in the management of online relationships and in their integration into their everyday life.

Although current research focused on the use of CMC to meet new people (and possible development offline), a very interesting field of study is represented by the uses of CMC in different contexts than getting in touch with "strangers". In fact, e-mail, chats, etc., are more and more used also to support the development of relationships born offline (occasional acquaintances), or to stay in touch with people with whom there already exists an intimate relationship.

As we can see from these remarks, there are no strict and fixed boundaries between online and offline communication. Future research should be aimed at trying to understand and detect how interaction develops according to the repertoires and possibilities allowed by different media and communication environments, as well as at identifying critical dimensions of the interactants which can account for a different perception and exploitation of these affordances. Also, we should define measures of communicative effectiveness in relationship with the achievement of relational goals in online relationships.

Further studies should be carried out, that investigate these processes in different environments, from face-to-face to different forms of CMC, in order to explore more into depth the role and the complex interaction of the variables pointed out in this chapter. This approach would allow for the continuity of study of communication in different interfaces, in order on the one hand to see how insights and categories from traditional literature can be applied to online behavior, and on the other hand to use the findings from studies of cybercommunication to refine our theoretical models.

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