

❖ Getting Hyper-personal

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Abstract

The internet, along with the increasing variety of social computer-mediated communications available, has revolutionised traditional methods of forming friendships and romantic attachments (Hardie & Buzwell, 2006; Yum & Hara, 2005). As a contemporary opportunity for social interaction, technology has also affected the type of relationships that develop. Computer mediated communication (CMC) intensifies interpersonal interactions by transferring them into text-based domains where a whole new scope of human interaction has developed. This paper focuses primarily on hyper-personal relationships within a romantic context; the way in which they provide the perfect opportunity for online infidelity or cyber cheating (Barnes, 2003; Gwinnell in Hardie & Buzwell, 2006; Adamse & Motta, 1996); and the development of these relationships via epistle-simulated communication methods such as emails and text messages.

Key words: hyper-personal, CMC, digital, epistolary, communication, romance, relationships, technology, emotional mimicry

The internet, along with the increasing variety of social computer-mediated communications available, has revolutionised traditional methods of forming friendships and romantic attachments (Hardie & Buzwell, 2006; Yum & Hara, 2005). Statistics indicate there are currently 21 million mobile phone subscribers in Australia and 72% of Australian households have home internet access (AMTA, 2009; ABS, 2009). This demonstrates the scope of Australians who have access to the kinds of technologies that enables them to digitally connect with others. As a contemporary opportunity for social interaction, technology has also affected the type of relationships that develop. Computer mediated communication (CMC) intensifies interpersonal interactions by transferring them into text based domains, where a whole new scope of human interaction has developed.

In the mid 1990s, as the popularity of the internet and technological methods of social interaction were rising, Joseph Walther (1996) proposed three main types of relationships that form online via CMC – impersonal, interpersonal and hyper-personal. An example of impersonal would be those business related or automated messages, while interpersonal communications typically include the sharing of comments, jokes or personal stories – developing a rapport with someone whether you have met in person or not. Hyper-personal communication, to Walther, is different again as it occurs when “users experience commonality and are self-aware, physically separated, and communicating via a limited-cues channel that allows them to selectively present and edit; to construct and reciprocate representations ... without the interference of

environmental reality " (33). In a modern context, Barnes simplifies this concept of hyper-personal relationships, asserting they occur at times when CMC is more socially desirable than parallel face to face (FtF) interaction (2003).

This essay focuses primarily on hyper-personal relationships within a romantic context; the way in which they provide the perfect opportunity for online infidelity or cyber-cheating (Barnes, 2003; Gwinnell in Hardie & Buzwell, 2006; Adamse & Motta, 1996), and the development of these relationships via epistle-simulated communication methods such as emails and text messages. To understand the simple ways in which hyper-personal relationships can lead to love affairs, one need only take a look at the recent scandals of golf superstar Tiger Woods. Earlier in 2010, Woods' alleged mistress, Jolsyn James, posted over 100 sexually graphic text messages on her website that were supposedly sent from Tiger Woods' mobile phone (Eggenberger, 2010). In 2009, intimate text messages between Woods and another mistress, Jaimee Grubbs, also came into the spotlight. These texts demonstrate the way in which hyper-personal relationships can seem disconnected from the participants' 'real' lives. In Woods' case he seemed to separate the affair from his marriage, allegedly sending one message to Grubbs stating "don't text me back till tomorrow morning. I have too many people around me right now" (ninemsn.com.au, 2009).

CMC's potential for revolutionising relationships continues to be a topic of interest in news, academic research and popular culture. The 2009 film *He's Just Not That Into You* clearly questions the concept of where social technologies fit in to modern relationships. Numerous characters in the film communicate with romantic partners – both potential and actual – via CMC. In an interview with *The Sydney Morning Herald* about the film, producer and actor Drew Barrymore said, "I would call the writers all the time and say 'I really want to talk about how confused I am with technology. This is a new era, a new generation. What does the text message mean?' A hundred years ago we waited months at a time for just a letter. We're living in a day and age where everything is instant gratification in the pocket of your jeans" (2009:9).

In a *Sydney Morning Herald* article, "Techno for an answer: Have modern gizmos killed off romance rather than helping it?" writer Bryony Gordon questioned the role technology such as text messages and *Facebook* played in her own personal relationships, coming to the conclusion that "old-fashioned courtship has been replaced by some accelerated version of romance, where relationships are as changeable as Facebook status updates" (2009: 9). Relationship therapist Paula Hall, interviewed for the article, said, "There is less space for personal reflection and there is a danger that you make personal judgements based on what you see of them on the internet, rather than face to face" (2009:9).

In *The Virtual Self*, Ben Agger (2004) looks at gender online and suggests that men and women are accessing the romantic avenues of the internet for different purposes. Agger claims that men are accessing the internet to satisfy their libidos while women do so for emotional satisfaction. Whether or not truth can be found in this claim, Agger does report that intimate connections and relationships are still occurring regardless and because technology is obviously playing this important role in modern relationships, it is crucial to recognise the way CMC affects the development of these romantic hyper-personal relationships. So, what is a romantic relationship?

Before focusing on romantic hyper-personal relationships, there is first a need to understand relationship development in a general sense. According to the Sternberg triangle of love, heavily referenced in the field of psychology (eg Feldman, 2005; Vaughan & Hogg, 2005), there are three main components to close relationships: intimacy, passion and commitment. Psychology researchers have theorised that there are two main types of love that can be derived from this triangle. There is "Passionate" or "Romantic Love", which is "a state of intense

absorption in someone that includes intense physiological arousal, psychological interest, and caring for the needs of another". Then there is "Companionate Love", which is "the strong affection we have for those with whom our lives are deeply involved" (Feldman, 2005). It is the former version – Romantic Love – that will be the focus of this essay.

Romantic hyper-personal communication has the ability to produce intense, and sometimes overly intimate relationships, by magnifying similarities and minimising differences (Walther, 1996). These asynchronous communication channels also transcend the limitations of chronemics – the interpersonal management of time – and proxemics – the interpersonal management of place (De Vito in Doering & Poeschl, 2007). It is the combination of these elements that exaggerates sexual intensity and fosters intimacy (Barnes, 2003, Ben-Ze'ev, 2005) making it evident that the intensity of romantic love quite easily develops via text-based CMC (Chenault, 1998; Solis, 2006).

What makes a hyper-personal relationship different?

When the social aspects of the internet were first burgeoning, Walther (1996) outlined four elements that further define hyper-personal relationships. These elements are: idealised perceptions of the receiver; the creation of idealised versions of our selves; asynchronous CMCs capacity to self-edit; and the creation of a feedback loop that reinforces the idealised perceptions.

Contemporary research draws upon these basic elements when demonstrating that familiar and intimate rapport is possible via textual constructs. For example, Hian et al. (2004) claim that as interaction accumulates, CMC relationships develop at the same pace as FtF interactions, which verifies the creation of a feedback loop. Others argue that the reduction of non-linguistic communication cues produce a constructive influence on the more controllable verbal cues that text allows and therefore places more importance on the transference of emotions online and the ability for individuals to present themselves positively and deliberately (Chenault, 1998; Gibbs et al., 2006; Scissors et al., 2008).

One of the downfalls of hyper-personal relationships is the way in which a lack of FtF cues and idealised perceptions can cause what Barnes refers to as 'positive impression formation', leading to deluded expectations for either party about the expectations of the relationship's development (2003). It is these deluded expectations that set-up hyper-personal communication as an avenue for love affairs. What hyper-personal communication does encourage is reciprocated probing questions that are not normally appropriate for FtF meetings. When this type of questioning is responded to with heightened self-disclosure, it is possible for a cycle of hyper-personal interaction and relational intimacy to occur (Agger, 2004; Gibbs et al, 2006). Although false images may be constructed (Turner et al., 2001; Schofield and Joinson in Barak, 2008) and the reality of these connections can be argued, it seems the overall perception of hyper-personal relationships is a positive one, with Hian et al. (2004) finding that relational intimacy increases at a faster rate in CMC than in FtF interactions.

How do these romantic hyper-personal relationships develop?

Psychologists assert that intimate romantic relationships develop in stages (Feldman, 2005). In the coming together of a couple to form a romantic attachment, Knapp and Vangelisti (2004) depict five stages: initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating and bonding. Of course, those aspects incorporated into each of these stages, such as emotional mimicry, physical intimacy and self-disclosure, can affect the pace at which a relationship develops.

Malcolm Parks' relational life cycle, on the other hand affords an overview of the complete circle of a relationship, defining three main stages in the relational life cycle and they are: initiation,

maintenance and deterioration (Parkes, 1997). Although neither account is wrong one could easily situate Knapp and Vangelisti's (2005) stages solely within the initiation stage of Parkes' relational life cycle. Adamse and Motta's (1996) examination of affairs online recognise that there are endings to hyper-personal relationships no matter how fulfilling and intimate a connection can become, affirming the idea that cyber cheating can and often does stop at the keyboard.

Alain de Botton's *Essays In Love*, although fictional, draws on the philosophical and emotional aspects of Parkes' relational life cycle. Charting the progress of a romantic relationship, de Botton provides thought-provoking analysis of the emotions of love, intimacy and heartbreak. Even though *Essays In Love* was originally published in 1993 years before the arrival of the internet, it draws on many universal truths, demonstrating the full amalgamation of emotions that relationships can go through. It serves as a reminder that there are differences between CMC and FtF relationships.

What are the key differences between CMC and FtF relationships?

While offline relationships may be considered the norm, this does not mean that they are the only way people can go about initiating and developing healthy relationships (Chenault, 1998; Whitty & Carr, 2006). The core difference between CMC and FtF relationships is the lack of physical presence and the chronemics and proxemics of each communication method (De Vito in Doering & Poeschl, 2007). Although non-linguistic cues are missing in CMC, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Lovers must simply be more creative and add elements of fantasy and play to the messages (Barnes, 2003).

Whitty and Carr (2006: 13) assert that the lack of FtF cues "does not necessarily represent an insurmountable obstacle to the development of close personal relationships". Some people even claim that the visual anonymity and lack of co-presence adds to the "magic" of online relationships (Whitty & Carr, 2006). The virtual or imaginative nature of cyberspace is thus its unique characteristic and often how people differentiate between online and offline (Ben-Ze'ev, 2004; Hogan, 2001).

Text gains significance in CMC as physical aspects such as bodily or environmental factors are reduced or non-existent (Chenault, 1998; Walther & D'Addario, 2001). Due to the way CMC "filters out important aspects of communication that participants in FtF communication are privy to" (Chenault, 1998: 7), relational intimacy must be developed in different ways (Hogan, 2001).

Certain language behaviours involving codes in CMC actually accomplish what non-verbal behaviours and cues typically perform in FtF communication (Hian et al., 2004). Although relationships developed through CMC may lack non-verbal cues, such as those involved with visual forms of emotional mimicry (Hatfield et al., 1994), it is possible for couples to develop intimate rapport with each other through text alone. This theory is supported by Chenault (1998), who demonstrated in the early years of the internet that emotion is present in CMC. Her research revealed that people meet via CMC every day to exchange information, debate, argue, woo, commiserate, and support.

Emotional mimicry in CMC can ultimately determine the level of attraction between couples almost instantaneously (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005). Hatfield et al. (1994) suggest couples feel more attracted to each other and more comfortable in well co-ordinated interactions. Therefore, as we "generally mimic the behaviour of those to whom we feel close, and feel closer to those who mimic our behaviour" (1994: 44), those communicating in text-based environments must find text-based actions that will provide the same type of emotional mimicry and rapport. A 2008 study of Linguistic Mimicry and Trust in Text-Based CMC

hypothesises that non-verbal and paralinguistic mimicry serves as a form of social grooming supporting the fluidity of interactions. This implies that the more a couple imitates one another the higher the perceived levels of attractiveness and feelings of rapport are (Scissors et al., 2008).

Emoticons and emoting have therefore become essential elements to complement or enhance hyper-personal communications (Walther & D'Addario, 2001) and characterise non-verbal cues by providing visual representations with text. For example, a colon and close bracket represents a smile, whereas a semi-colon and close bracket symbolise a flirt or a wink. Emoting is slightly different in that it incorporates actions into the online conversations by placing stars either side of a verb or phrase. For example when a person is told something of significant excitement they may type *jumps up and down* to give the illusion of action.

'Sexting' and cybersex have also become a substitute for physical intimacy. This is the stage of a hyper-personal relationship where CMC's effects on proxemics is most evident. If one cannot be physically close to another, can they share any form of physical intimacy, thus intensifying their relationship? Cybersex thus becomes a substitute for the real thing.

Cybersex is when "people send provocative and erotic messages to each other, with the purpose of bringing each other to orgasm as they masturbate together in real time" and "requires the articulation of sexual desire to an extent that would be most unusual in FtF encounters" (Ben-Ze'ev, 2005: p.5). Research shows that cyber cheaters frequently engage in cybersex with online partners to enhance or replace missing physical facets from their committed offline relationships (Adamse & Motta, 1996; Orr, 2004).

Cyber cheating – does it count?

While there is the opportunity to form romantic attachments, one must remember that when a hyper-personal relationship is formed by a cyber cheater, chances are they aren't viewing their online affair in a rational manner (Adamse & Motta, 1996; Barnes, 2003). Ben-Ze'ev's theories on detached-attachment affirm this principle as intense online romantic attachments are often between people who are physically separated but who are committed in some way to a different romantic relationship (2005). Ben-Ze'ev comments that if these online affairs are going to prevail, significant changes in our moral and emotional norms are to be expected.

People in committed relationships found ways to cheat long before they were able to communicate online (Orr, 2004) and of course the common social viewpoint was always that cheating is cheating, no matter what the circumstance. However, with online dating websites targeting infidelity becoming so accessible (Adamse & Motta, 1996) a new rationalisation for cheaters has evolved. Cheaters rationalise that, if there is no touching, there can be no infidelity (Mileham, 2004).

Because hyper-personal relationships are often intense sexually and emotionally, love affairs develop easily. However, it is the reaction of the offline partner upon discovery of these relationships that will ultimately determine the morality of the deception. (Adamse & Motta, 1996; Boellstorff, 2008; Mileham, 2004). Boellstorff (2008) found that when both people in a marriage participated in virtual world *Second Life*, they were often both in alternate hyper-personal relationships online. Therefore, as Mileham (2004) suggests, until partners clearly define boundaries of what constitutes a harmless flirt and actual text-based cheating in the digital realm, committed individuals may go on cheating and disconnecting between their CMC encounters and actual real life relationships. Cheating itself, of course, is not a new phenomenon, with infidelity demonstrated in literature as far back as 1780s, when Pierre Choderlos de Laclos first published French epistolary novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (Dangerous Liaisons).

Where does epistolary come into it?

Letter writing as a social practice has been around for centuries and the conception of email and text messages brought about the advent of modern epistolary (Barton & Hall, 2000; Chartier et al., 1997). However, contemporary research into the digitisation of epistolary is almost non-existent. This oversight could perhaps be because the letter is associated with traditional literary styles or the so-called "lacklustre image of artists or overly sentimental romantics" (Simon, 2002). Scholars tend to ignore the experimental, postmodern and playful possibilities of epistolary (Bower, 1997). These possibilities include, in all their similarities, the asynchronous communications of emails and text messages (Barton & Hall, 2000). Recent research does occasionally recognise email as the digital equivalent of hand-written love letters. In his study of *Second Life*, Boellstorff (2008) hints at this historical transition, suggesting that the internet is simply one element in a "broader history of technologically mediated intimacy going back even to love letters" (167).

Letters and emails both incorporate two fundamental forms of human communication – language and writing (Shedletsky, 2004). The construction and dissemination of each communication is also the same, which raises the idea that perhaps hyper-personal intimacy occurred before the introduction of CMC to society. The similarities of letters and emails replicate Walther's (1996) elements that define hyper-personal communications. In an exploration of epistolary literature, Linda Kauffman (1986) asks, "what does it mean to be 'present' to one's beloved?", highlighting the timeless truth about the problematic of presence which can then be carried over into a digital context (Doering & Poeschl, 2007).

Letter writing and thus emails and text messages are an important social practice in terms of modern relationship maintenance (Barton & Hall, 2000; Solis, 2006). When examined in a narrative format of correspondence between lovers, traditional epistolary literature becomes "oblique and elliptical because we frequently see only the repercussions of events that like the love affair itself are never narrated" (Kauffman, 1986: 20). This background knowledge of traditional epistolary and the parallels between the old and new formats, provides a comprehensive viewpoint from which to inspect romantic hyper-personal relationships in the modern framework of CMC.

Conclusion

Technology has evolved to revolutionise relationship maintenance methods to the point where people often prefer the safety of online relationships, or even use them as an escape from their own reality (Adamse & Motta, 1996; Hardie & Buzwell, 2006). According to Walther (1996), hyper-personal relationships develop as a result of these types of connections. Due to a number of factors, including the transference of emotions and physical actions into text, chronemics and proxemics of CMC and the way in which CMC exaggerates sexual intensity and romantic intimacy (Barnes, 2003; Hian et al., 2004), hyper-personal relationships are frequently romantic in nature. As a relationship term that is still being explored in contemporary research, hyper-personal connections that occur via CMC are most evident in the online relationships of cyber cheaters, where one or both of the couple is committed in some way or another to a different romantic relationship (Ben-Ze'ev, 2005). The morality of cyber cheating is determined by the reaction of the real life partner but is yet to be defined (Mileham, 2004).

Furthermore, although the concept of modern epistolary is often overlooked (Bower, 1997), there are major similarities between letter-writing as a social practice and emails and text messages as relationship maintenance tools (Barton & Hall, 2000; Solis, 2006). The connection between emails and text messages as the post-modern possibility for traditional epistolary (Bower, 1997) makes it the perfect foundation for the initiation, maintenance and deterioration

of a romantic hyper-personal relationship.

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