

Social Information Processing Theory

of Joseph Walther

As depicted in the hit movie *The Social Network*, in 2003 Mark Zuckerberg created “Facemash”—a website allowing Harvard students to compare the physical attractiveness of their female peers.¹ Although Harvard’s administration quickly shut down Facemash and nearly expelled Zuckerberg, Facemash soon led to Facebook, now by far the most popular social networking site. According to a Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, 65 percent of online adults use social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, with 43 percent having accessed a site in the last day.² Young and middle-aged adults are particularly avid users, but even 33 percent of adults over 65 use social networking sites. Why does social networking have such appeal? A separate Pew study suggests much of the motivation is social—commenting on another person’s post is the most frequent daily Facebook activity.³

Chances are, social networking is part of your life, too. Consider the technological changes you’ve seen in your lifetime. If you’re a typical college student, you probably remember a time when you didn’t have text messaging or Facebook to get ahold of a friend. Perhaps you used instant messaging or email, but you probably have relatives who remember when those technologies weren’t available either. From telephone to smartphone, the rapid changes in communication technology have frustrated communication scholars seeking to understand what all of this means for interpersonal relationships.

Amid this flood of cyber-innovation, Joe Walther’s social information processing (SIP) theory has stood the test of time. Building on *social penetration theory* (Chapter 8), *uncertainty reduction theory* (Chapter 9), and other relationship development theories, the Michigan State University communication professor initially developed SIP to explain how people form relationships across the communication technologies that became popular in the early 1990s, such as email. Now, even after two decades of rapid technological development, the theory remains one of the most helpful explanations for why and how people form relationships online. To appreciate the theory’s staying power, we need to review its history.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SIP THEORY

CMC

Computer-mediated communication, often referring to text-based messages, which filter out nonverbal cues.

Social presence theory

Suggests that CMC deprives users of the sense that another actual person is involved in the interaction.

Media richness theory

Purports that CMC bandwidth is too narrow to convey rich relational messages.

Cues filtered out

Interpretation of CMC that regards lack of nonverbal cues as a fatal flaw for using the medium for relationship development.

From the 1980s through the early 1990s, many communication scholars expressed strong skepticism about building close relationships online through computer-mediated communication (CMC). They thought CMC might be fine for task-related purposes such as data processing, news dissemination, and long-distance business conferencing. But as a place to bond with others, cyberspace seemed like a relational wasteland—stark and barren. Scholars who studied new electronic media had already offered a variety of theories to explain the inherent differences between CMC and face-to-face communication. I'll mention three.

Social presence theory suggests that text-based messages deprive CMC users of the sense that other warm bodies are jointly involved in the interaction.⁴ To the extent that we no longer feel that anyone is *there*, our communication becomes more impersonal, individualistic, and task-oriented.

Media richness theory classifies each communication medium according to the complexity of the messages it can handle efficiently.⁵ For example, the theory suggests that face-to-face communication provides a rich mix of verbal and nonverbal cue systems that can convey highly nuanced emotions, and even double meanings. By contrast, the limited bandwidth of CMC makes it rather lean—appropriate for transacting everyday business, but not for negotiating social relations.

A third theory concentrates on the *lack of social context cues* in online communication.⁶ It claims CMC users have no clue as to their relative status, and norms for interaction aren't clear, so people tend to become more self-absorbed and less inhibited. The result is increased *flaming*—hostile language that zings its target and creates a toxic climate for relational growth on the Internet. Early in *The Social Network*, Mark Zuckerberg writes a blog post criticizing his ex-girlfriend's last name and bra size. Though it may be a fictional or exaggerated account of what actually happened, one suspects he wouldn't have had the gall to say those things face-to-face.

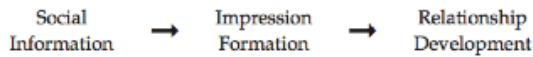
All of these theories share a *cues filtered out* interpretation of CMC. In other words, they assume that most online communication is text-only, without visual or auditory cues, which limits its usefulness for developing interpersonal relationships.⁷ To users accustomed to watching YouTube videos, browsing Pinterest boards, or playing the latest multiplayer game on *Xbox LIVE*, this no doubt sounds like a strange assumption. But in the early 1990s, text ruled the online world. At that time, the Internet was the province of scientific and academic users—the relatively few home users connected with slow dial-up modems that couldn't transmit images or sound quickly. In this historical context, it's not surprising that users and communication theorists were skeptical about close relationships online.

Yet in 1992, Walther countered this conventional wisdom with social information processing theory. He claimed CMC users can adapt to cue-limited media and use them effectively to develop close relationships. He argued that given the opportunity for a sufficient exchange of social messages and subsequent relational growth, *as goes face-to-face communication, so goes CMC*. Although many technologies you use today weren't invented when Walther first developed the theory, communication scholars have found SIP quite useful for understanding why and how people use cell phones, instant messaging, and social networking sites to build close relationships.

CMC VERSUS FACE-TO-FACE: A SIP INSTEAD OF A GULP

Michelle is one of my (Andrew) wife's close college friends. I didn't meet her until we moved to my first full-time job in Ohio, where Michelle lived just two hours away. It was close enough to eat dinner together a few times, but far enough that we didn't see her often. By the time she moved overseas, I'd discovered a bit about her from our handful of meals, such as her Tennessee roots and passion for studying chemistry. I enjoyed those face-to-face meetings, but still felt like I had a lot more to learn about her before I could consider her a good friend. Since our future communication would be through Facebook, I wasn't sure how our friendship would progress when she moved away. According to Walther's SIP, not a problem.

Walther labeled his theory *social information processing* because he believes relationships grow only to the extent that parties first gain information about each other and use that information to form interpersonal impressions of who they are. In taking this view, SIP theory is consistent with *social penetration theory* and *uncertainty reduction theory* (see Chapters 8 and 9). With these more or less defined impressions in mind, the interacting parties draw closer if they both like the image of the other that they've formed. SIP focuses on the first link of the chain—the personal information available through CMC and its effect on the composite mental image of the other that each one creates.



Impression formation
The composite mental image one person forms of another.

At its heart, the theory recognizes that the information we receive depends on the communication medium we're using. When I first met Michelle face-to-face, we had a range of nonverbal cues available to form impressions of each other. When she moved to England, we began connecting exclusively through Facebook, and those cues disappeared from our communication. On Facebook, we can't observe each other's physical context, facial expression, tone of voice, interpersonal distance, body position, appearance, gestures, or smell. According to the *cues filtered out* interpretation, that should mean interpersonal disaster.

Walther disagrees. He doesn't think the loss of nonverbal cues is necessarily fatal or even injurious to a well-defined impression of the other or the relational development it triggers. Walther highlights two features of CMC that provide a rationale for SIP theory:⁸

1. *Verbal cues.* When motivated to form impressions and develop relationships, communicators employ any cue system that's available. Thus, CMC users can create fully formed impressions of others based solely on the linguistic content of online messages. Because Michelle posts frequently on Facebook, I've learned more about her on many topics, ranging from her love of travel to her adventures in learning to cook.
2. *Extended time.* The exchange of social information through text-only CMC is much slower than it is face-to-face, so communicators form impressions at a reduced rate. Yet given enough time, there's no reason to believe that CMC relationships will be weaker or more fragile than those developed with the benefit of nonverbal cues.

The SIP acronym suggests a liquid analogy that can help us understand Walther's thinking.⁹ Suppose someone hands you a 12-ounce glass of water,

cola, or beer—whatever drink you find refreshing. You could hoist the glass and chug the contents in a matter of seconds. That big gulp is similar to being face-to-face with someone you've just met and want to know better. For just a few hours of face-to-face meetings in Ohio over the course of two years, Michelle and I had this large amount of social information available.

But what if you had to drink your beverage through a straw—one *sip* at a time? You'd still be able to drain the entire 12 ounces, however, it would take much longer. That's the situation for CMC users who are thirsty for social information. They end up with the same quantity and quality of interpersonal knowledge, but it accumulates at a slower rate. It's been three years since Michelle left the country. Since then, our Facebook conversations have ranged from political debates to discussions about Asian cuisine. I now consider her a good friend and, although I'm sure we could've built the same depth of friendship more quickly face-to-face, Facebook messages have worked just fine over a longer period of time.

VERBAL CUES OF AFFINITY REPLACE NONVERBAL CUES

Walther claims that the human need for affiliation is just as active when people communicate online as when they are face-to-face. For example, a Nielsen report found that the average American teenager sends 3,339 text messages per month—more than 100 per day.¹⁰ Evidently, teens believe a deluge of 160-character messages can quench their thirst for social information, even without the nonverbal cues that typically signal friendship or romantic attraction.

When it comes to building impressions of others, Walther is convinced that verbal and nonverbal cues can be used interchangeably. If this claim strikes you as far-fetched, remember that prior to electronic communication, people developed pen-pal relationships by discovering similarities and expressing affection through the written word alone. Long-distance romantic relationships thrived as the casual exchange of friendly notes progressed to a stream of passionate love letters. During World War II, postal letters so powerfully boosted soldier morale that the United States government launched a campaign encouraging citizens to write to loved ones serving abroad. When the mass of letters became too expensive to transport, a technology known as *v-mail* reduced letters to small pieces of film that were expanded to readable size upon reaching soldiers.¹¹ History supports SIP's claim that people creatively adapt their communication to connect across cue-limited media.

Experimental Support for a Counterintuitive Idea

The examples of teen texters and soldiers abroad suggest that people can express affinity just as well through a digital medium as when face-to-face. But as a communication theorist steeped in the socio-psychological tradition, Walther isn't content to rely on such anecdotes to support his theory. Over the course of the past two decades, he's performed numerous controlled experiments (see Chapter 3) to put his ideas to the test. After reading my description of the following study, see if you can identify how it provides evidence that humans are creative communicators, able to use text-only channels to convey a level of relational warmth that can equal face-to-face communication.¹²

Walther asked 28 pairs of students who didn't know each other to discuss moral dilemmas—a communication task used in many previous experiments. Half the pairs talked face-to-face, while the other half communicated online. In both cases, one member of each pair was a student accomplice—someone the researchers recruited ahead of time. Half of these confederates were asked to communicate in a friendly, positive way, while the other half were told to act unfriendly. During the experiment, video cameras recorded the face-to-face conversations from behind a one-way mirror, and all computer messages were saved. Afterward, trained raters categorized the different ways confederates communicated both verbal and nonverbal emotion. The naïve participants rated their partners on the degree of affection expressed during the discussion.

Results of the experiment indicated that the method of communication made no difference in the emotional tone perceived by naïve participants. Any discrepancy in warmth was due to the intention of each confederate—nice confederates successfully conveyed warmth, and grouchy confederates were perceived as mean. What verbal behaviors did confederates use in CMC to show they were friendly? As you might expect, self-disclosure, praise, and statements of affection topped the list. These are core strategies of making an impression by reducing uncertainty and drawing close through social penetration. Yet surprisingly, indirect disagreement, a change of subject, and compliments offered while proposing a contrasting idea were also associated with friendliness. When discussing a controversial topic, each of these verbal techniques allows a partner to save face and defuse potential conflict.

Of course, face-to-face confederates could have used these same verbal behaviors—and indeed, some of them did. But *what* confederates said when physically present seemed insignificant compared to *how* they showed it nonverbally. Consistent with previous research, confederates relied on facial expression, eye contact, tone of voice, body position, and other nonverbal cues to convey how they felt about their partners.¹³ Walther believes these results support SIP's claim that people meeting online can begin a relationship just as effectively as if they had met face-to-face, using the words they write rather than nonverbal cues.

EXTENDED TIME: THE CRUCIAL VARIABLE IN CMC

Multimodal

Using multiple media to maintain a relationship.

Our closest relationships, such as with a best friend, tend to be *multimodal*, meaning we use a variety of media to sustain them. But like my friendship with Michelle, you may have friends you communicate with only through one medium. In such relationships, Walther is convinced that the length of time CMC users have to send their messages is the key factor that determines whether their online messages can achieve the level of intimacy that others develop face-to-face.

Over an extended period, the issue is not the *amount* of social information that can be conveyed online; rather, it's the *rate* at which that information mounts up. Because typing is slower than talking, text-based messages take longer to compose. How much longer? Walther finds that any message spoken in person will take at least four times longer to say through CMC.¹⁴ This four-to-one time differential explains why many early experiments seemed to show that CMC is

task-oriented and impersonal. In the experiment described above, Walther compared 10 minutes of face-to-face time with 40 minutes of CMC. There was no difference in partner affinity between the two modes.

As a senior Nielsen executive notes, "Despite the almost unlimited nature of what you can do on the Web, nearly half of U.S. online time is spent on three activities—social networking, playing games and e-mailing."¹⁵ Perhaps the additional time necessary to convey an impression explains why people invest so much time in online socializing. Since CMC conveys social information more slowly than face-to-face communication does, Walther advises online users to make up for the rate difference by sending messages more often. Not only does this practice help impression formation in personal relationships, but it's also reassuring to virtual group partners who naturally wonder who their colleagues are, what they're thinking, and if they're going to do the work they've promised. I've found this to make a critical difference in my friendship with Michelle. We each update our Facebook status at least once a day. Without those updates, I doubt our friendship would've grown much closer.

Two other time factors can contribute to intimacy on the Internet—anticipated future interaction and chronemic cues. *Anticipated future interaction* wasn't part of Walther's original conception of SIP, but he now sees it as a way of extending psychological time. Recall that Chuck Berger claims our drive to reduce uncertainty about someone we've just met gets an added boost when we think we're going to see each other again (see Chapter 9). Through his empirical research, Walther's discovered that members of an online conference or task group start to trade relational messages when they are scheduled for multiple meetings. It's as if the "shadow of the future" motivates them to encounter others on a personal level.¹⁶

Chronemics is the label nonverbal researchers use to describe how people perceive, use, and respond to issues of time in their interaction with others. Unlike other nonverbal cues, no form of online communication can completely filter out time. A recipient can note the time of day a message was sent and then gauge the elapsed time until the reply. Does this knowledge really affect a relationship? Walther's work inspired me to investigate how college students evaluate email reply rate between friends. In the study, participants read an email message and a reply to that message. The text of the email exchange was the same for each participant, but the time stamp varied randomly. The study revealed that replying quickly (such as within an hour) yielded the most positive impressions, with some evidence that women are more attuned to reply rate than are men.¹⁷ So if you want to convey a positive impression, a fast reply is probably best.

You now have the basic predictions of social information processing theory. SIP claims that CMC users can get to know each other and develop a mutual affinity by using the medium's available cues to manage relational development. The process will probably take longer than face-to-face bonding, but there's no reason to believe the relationship will be any less personal. After offering a similar summary, Walther asks, "Is this the best that one can hope to attain when communicating electronically—the mere potential for intimacy where time permits?"¹⁸ His answer is no—sometimes, CMC actually surpasses the quality of relational communication that's available when parties talk face-to-face. Walther's hyperpersonal perspective shows how this works.

Anticipated future interaction

A way of extending psychological time; the likelihood of future interaction motivates CMC users to develop a relationship.

Chronemics

The study of people's systematic handling of time in their interaction with others.

HYPERPERSONAL PERSPECTIVE: CLOSER THROUGH CMC THAN IN PERSON

Hyperpersonal perspective

The claim that CMC relationships are often more intimate than those developed when partners are physically together.

Walther uses the term *hyperpersonal* to label CMC relationships that are more intimate than if partners were physically together. Under the familiar *sender-receiver-channel-feedback* categories, he classifies four types of media effects that occur precisely because CMC users aren't face-to-face and don't have a full range of nonverbal cues available. In an interview with fellow CMC researcher Nicole Ellison at the University of Michigan, Walther explained how these four characteristics shape the nature of online dating—a method more than 20 percent of Americans believe is a good way to find a significant other.¹⁹ I'll draw on his insights as I explain the four elements of the hyperpersonal perspective.

Sender: Selective Self-Presentation

Selective self-presentation

An online positive portrayal without fear of contradiction, which enables people to create an overwhelmingly favorable impression.

Walther claims that through *selective self-presentation*, people who meet online have an opportunity to make and sustain an overwhelmingly positive impression. That's because they can write about their most attractive traits, accomplishments, and actions without fear of contradiction from their physical appearance, their inconsistent actions, or the objections of third parties who know their dark side. As a relationship develops, they can carefully edit the breadth and depth of their self-disclosure to conform to their cyber image, without worrying that nonverbal leakage will shatter their projected persona. For dating site users, Walther notes that "selective self-presentation is a process that is probably very much involved in how people put together the profile" because they want people to find them attractive.²⁰ But Walther's colleague Jeff Hancock at Cornell University notes that the viewer of the profile sees it as a promise—and if online self-presentation differs too much from offline reality, partners will be disappointed if they meet face-to-face.²¹

Receiver: Overattribution of Similarity

Attribution is a perceptual process whereby we observe what people do and then try to figure out what they're really like. Our basic interpretive bias is to assume that the specific action we see reflects the personality of the person who did it. People who *do* things like that *are* like that. But when it comes to reading a text message or tweet, we have very little to go on. Our only basis for judgment is the verbal behavior of the person who sent the message. Walther says the absence of other cues doesn't keep us from jumping to conclusions. On the contrary, someone viewing an online dating profile will tend to overattribute the information on the profile and create an idealized image of the owner.

My student Taylor described how a new boyfriend's Facebook and text messages helped her build a positive impression of him:

Joseph Walther claims that communicators use whatever cues are available to form an impression, and I could tell by the frequency with which my boyfriend talked about his family and music that those were two things he really cared about. Because he was always on Facebook and quickly responded to my texts, I knew he was just as excited to talk to me as I was to talk to him, and his insightful questions meant he really was interested in who I was as a person.



"I can't wait to see what you're like online."

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Channel: Communicating on Your Own Time

Many forms of interpersonal communication require that parties synchronize their schedules in order to talk with each other. Although face-to-face interaction and phone conversations offer a sense of immediacy, co-presence is achieved at a high price. One partner's desire to communicate often comes at a bad time for the other. Parties may make a date to talk, of course, but locking in a time for communication raises expectations for significance that may be hard to meet.

In contrast, many forms of online communication are *asynchronous* channels of communication, meaning that parties can use them nonsimultaneously—at different times. With time constraints relaxed, CMC users are free to write when they are able to do so, knowing that the recipient will read the message at a convenient time. That's a big plus, especially when they are communicating across time zones or their waking hours are out of sync. Even within the same time zone, online communication helps busy people maximize their time, as Glenn's daughter Jordan described when explaining how she and her boyfriend met through online dating: "How do you get a date when you know about four people in town and have to spend most of your 'free' time studying or working?"

Asynchronous channel

A nonsimultaneous medium of communication that each individual can use when he or she desires.

We were both totally alone in a new city and had precious few avenues to meet people who shared our values. This is what led us to seek romance on the Internet.”

Walther notes an added benefit of nonsimultaneous CMC over face-to-face communication: “In asynchronous interaction one may plan, contemplate, and edit one’s comments more mindfully and deliberately than one can in more spontaneous, simultaneous talk.”²² This is a tremendous advantage when dealing with touchy issues, misunderstandings, or conflict between parties.

Feedback: Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Self-fulfilling prophecy is the tendency for a person’s expectation of others to evoke a response from them that confirms what he or she anticipated. Believing it’s so can make it so. This process creates hyperpersonal relationships only if CMC parties first form highly favorable impressions of each other. When an online romantic relationship doesn’t work out, daters might use that feedback to further revise their profiles with an eye toward better self-presentation. Then the process starts again: *Senders* self-select what they reveal, *receivers* create an idealized image of their partner, and the *channel* lets users express themselves the way they want, when they want. What’s not to like?

Self-fulfilling prophecy
The tendency for a person’s expectation of others to evoke a response from them that confirms what was originally anticipated.

Beyond online dating, Walther suggests hyperpersonal communication may improve relationships between groups with a strong history of tension and conflict, such as Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims. As Walther asks, “In CMC, when the turban and the yarmulke need not be visible during interactions, can [similarities] be made more [meaningful] than differences?”²³ A recent test in the Israeli education system suggests the answer can be yes, as one Jewish student reported after spending more than a year communicating online in a multicultural course: “This coming year, I will begin teaching . . . and when I use the word ‘Arab’ in my class, it will sound different than it would have before the course.”²⁴ Walther also points to similar successful online interaction between hostile groups in Northern Ireland.²⁵

Of course, CMC itself isn’t a magical cure for intergroup hostility. For CMC to ease tensions, Walther recommends focusing on common tasks rather than group differences, allowing plenty of time for communication, and exclusively using text-only channels.²⁶ If that last suggestion surprises you, remember Walther’s claim that fewer nonverbal cues means more positive sender self-presentation and receiver attribution. Walther hopes hyperpersonal effects might change the attitudes of hostile groups toward each other—changes that could persist even when they eventually communicate offline.

THE WARRANTING VALUE OF INFORMATION: WHAT TO TRUST?

Walther’s recent work examines how people process social information on social networking sites. One thing that sets social networking sites apart from other CMC forms is the ability to add information to other people’s pages—other users can supplement, or even contradict, the account owner’s claims. For Facebook users, such added information might include friends’ comments on posts or tags on pictures and videos. In other words, sites such as Facebook display two types of information—that controlled by the profile owner and that beyond the owner’s

Warranting value
Reason to believe that information is accurate, typically because the target of the information cannot manipulate it.

direct control. Walther believes this is a difference that truly makes a difference in how Facebook users process social information.

As an example, let's say you view a new classmate's Facebook profile for the first time. The classmate describes herself as "quiet and studious," lists her interests as "reading philosophy" and "playing solitaire," and is part of a group titled "I'd rather stay in and read a good book." Yet many of her friends' comments describe her as "the life of the party," with tags on photographs of her socializing with large groups of people. If you think these messages contradict each other, who are you likely to believe—your classmate or her friends? Answering this question is at the heart of Walther's investigation of the *warranting value* of personal information, or what he describes as "the perceived validity of information presented online with respect to illuminating someone's offline characteristics."²⁷ For both Walther and scholars of debate, the word "warrant" has a similar meaning to the word "reason": If the information we're reading has warranting value, then it gives us reason to believe the information is true.

If communicating via CMC is like sipping through a straw, SIP has assumed that "all water passing through the [straw] is the same sort of water."²⁸ But now Walther believes Facebook lets users sip two different kinds of liquid at the same time. Like email messages, whose content is under the sole control of the sender, information posted by a profile owner is *low warrant information* because he or she can manipulate it with ease. Walther argues that we may not trust this information: "Because online impressions are controllable, they are often suspect."²⁹ Since the profile owner can't as easily manipulate what's posted by friends, we're more likely to accept such *high warrant information* as true. As Walther notes, this happens offline, too: You might believe a classmate who says he'll work hard with you on a group project, but you'll probably give even greater weight to the testimony of his lab partner last term. For the purpose of impression formation, low warrant information is like a sip of grape juice, but high warrant information is like a taste of fine wine.

Walther and his colleagues have tested warranting value through a series of experiments, with participants randomly assigned to view different versions of fake Facebook profiles. These experiments confirm that people trust high warrant information. In one study, the content of friends' posts altered evaluations of the profile owner's credibility and social attractiveness.³⁰ Another experiment directly compared low and high warrant information, finding that friends' comments overrode the profile owner's claims when forming impressions of physical attractiveness and extroversion.³¹ These studies suggest that, unlike email, interpersonal information on Facebook comes from both the self and other site users. An outside observer won't give those two sources equal weight.

CRITIQUE: WALTHER'S CANDID ASSESSMENT

Because technology changes so rapidly, a valid CMC theory is difficult to craft and defend. Just as theorists begin to understand one technology, along comes the next.³² Yet in this train of high-tech innovation, Walther's theory stands strong. SIP remains popular among communication scholars because it stacks up well against all the criteria for a good social science theory (Chapter 3). It offers specific, *quantitatively testable hypotheses* about a *relatively simple* set of variables. It clearly *explains* differences and similarities between face-to-face

and online communication. The theory *predicts* communication behavior across media that didn't even exist when the theory was born, and SIP's advice is *useful* to many, ranging from spatially separated soulmates to international business partners.

However, communication theorists Tom Postmes (University of Groningen) and Nancy Baym (Microsoft Research, New England) believe SIP possesses two weaknesses.³³ First, they argue that the theory falls into the common sociopsychological ideology of *determinism*. If our interpersonal relationships are simply a product of the number of nonverbal cues afforded by the communication medium, are we really free to choose how and with whom we develop relationships? Second, they argue that the theory does not fully account for how group identification structures CMC relationship development.

Walther's response to these critiques suggests he's willing to consider the possibility that some elements of technology are deterministic. He takes Postmes and Baym to task for "accusing other approaches of determinism as though determinism is something to scrape off one's shoe," and argues that they "have ignored scrutiny of methodological features among studies" that might suggest how both intergroup and interpersonal processes explain CMC relationship development.³⁴ Clearly, Walther is committed to discovering cause-and-effect relationships, while Postmes and Baym are committed to human choice. Their debate may remind you of the tension between determinism and free will (see Chapter 2), and your reaction to their claims probably has something to do with whether you prefer an objective or interpretive worldview.

But perhaps the harshest critic of Walther's theory is Walther himself. For all the theory's success, he openly admits the existence of gaps and weaknesses in his analysis of CMC. For example, when referencing his four-factor hyperpersonal perspective, Walther takes pains to label the sender-receiver-channel-feedback model a *perspective* rather than a *theory*. As a rigorous social scientist, he understands that a good theory should offer a central explanatory mechanism to drive a synthesis of the observed effects. Walther doesn't believe the hyperpersonal perspective has reached that state, because "certain aspects of the model remain underresearched," including how the components of the model fit together and why feedback increases attraction.³⁵ Two recent experiments have begun to test the associations among the components of the hyperpersonal perspective, with results providing support for the model.³⁶ Nevertheless, Walther candidly acknowledges that only additional work can discover the theoretical glue that would bind the hyperpersonal perspective's four components into a coherent whole.

Walther's exploration of warranting value represents one attempt to expand SIP to newer forms of CMC. Like the core of SIP, a strength of Walther's warranting work is its relative simplicity—but perhaps it is too simple. One series of experiments suggests warranting may differ depending on the kind of information under scrutiny. For example, Walther speculates that warranting might depend on the information's *social desirability*, or value in the eyes of society. Physical attractiveness is one such socially desirable trait, and so we may suspect some Facebook members alter their profile pictures, erasing wrinkles and facial blemishes.³⁷ But society doesn't care as much about other characteristics, like favorite restaurants or TV shows. For such qualities, Walther suspects that "the warranting principle may not as strongly apply."³⁸ And so the idea of warranting remains a work in progress.

Rather than being disheartened by Walther's assessment of his theory, I'm encouraged by his candor:

CMC research has generated a good amount of information about how groups of relative strangers can be coaxed into quite positive relationships. The challenge remains to integrate and synthesize the research . . . and ultimately propose strategies that facilitate the use of sociotechnical arrangements to overcoming animosity, and apply generalizable theoretically-based strategies in applied contexts of dire importance.³⁹

All theories have flaws and limitations. Walther's honest evaluation gives me confidence in his optimistic belief that computer technology can help build truly human relationships.

QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. SIP proposes that CMC conveys relational information just as well as *face-to-face communication*, with only one difference. What is that difference?
2. Recall a time when you felt particularly drawn to another person when communicating through email, Facebook, or some other type of CMC. Why did you feel drawn to this person? Does the presence (or absence) of verbal cues or extended time explain your attraction?
3. The *hyperpersonal perspective* suggests that CMC effects of *sender, receiver, channel*, and *feedback* promote greater intimacy. Which factor do you think has the greatest relational impact? Which has the least?
4. Your online partner seems wonderful—but, because it's possible to create a *fictitious persona* through CMC, you want to make sure he or she is "for real." How would you find out? What might the warranting principle suggest you do to get trustworthy information?

CONVERSATIONS



View this segment online at
www.mhhe.com/griffin/e or
www.afirstlook.com.

Most of Em's conversation with Joe Walther centers on CMC users who have a great affinity for the Internet. Granted, they can develop strong impressions of others online, but does true intimacy require face-to-face communication? Are heavy CMC users more in love with the medium than with their partners? Can those who are socially shy develop better relationships through CMC? What code of ethical online behavior would Walther suggest? Walther offers advice to CMC partners who want to meet in person. He also discusses the scope of SIP and how building theory is a risky business.

A SECOND LOOK

Recommended resource: Joseph B. Walther, "Social Information Processing Theory: Impressions and Relationship Development Online," in *Engaging Theories in Interpersonal Communication: Multiple Perspectives*, Leslie A. Baxter and Dawn O. Braithwaite (eds.), Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2008, pp. 391–404.

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