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Does recent research evidence support the hyperpersonal model of online impression management?

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Abstract

The hyperpersonal mode of communication was conceived in the 1990s and has driven much of the research into online impression management. It is based on four principal tenets (increased control, asynchronicity of communication, increased physical distance, increased cognitive resources) and has largely been supported, especially by research involving text-only communication. This review briefly summarises this research before identifying four areas in which it is not supported by findings: use of language in online environments, online self-disclosure, the expanding nature of online platforms to include pictures and video, and the wider context of online communication. We suggest that the model is modified and updated, or its limitations defined, with respect to this evidence.

1. Introduction

Two distinct perspectives characterise the social and communicative repercussions of interacting via less ‘rich’ forms of media, i.e. those less able to handle multiple information cues concurrently [1]. This includes many forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC), such as e-mail and instant-messaging (e.g. WhatsApp), as they limit access to nonverbal communication (NVC) and social cues [2,3]. What might be labelled collectively as the ‘cues-filtered out’ perspectives [4,5] assume that NVC is important in human interaction as they increase our capacity to interpret the affective experiences of others and therefore reduce ambiguity in communication [3], but also help people garner more positive impressions from others [2,3,6,7]. Thus, platforms which restrict access to NVC may be less effective for certain types of interactions, e.g. those which rely on making accurate impressions of others [3,5,6] and result in low social presence [4,8,9,10].

In direct opposition to these perspectives, Joseph Walther proposed the Hyperpersonal model. Rather than thinking about what is ‘lost’ from CMC, Hyperpersonal theory centres on the benefits accrued from the attenuation of social and communication cues, focusing on the various affordances such modes of communication grant users. These affordances permit communicators to engage in strategic impression management to convey ‘optimal’ self-presentations, which may in turn lead to favourable outcomes for the individual [11,12].

2. The basic tenets of Hyperpersonal model

According to Hyperpersonal theory there are four idiosyncratic features of CMC which may enhance self-presentation [11,12]. First, users can exert greater control over how they present the self in CMC compared to face-to-face. This is especially true on social media sites like Facebook since the advent of Web 2.0 technologies enable individuals to choose and edit content to represent specific desirable self-images [13,14].

The second affordance concerns the notion that many forms of CMC do not take place in real time. Even in cases where users might assume synchronicity (e.g. instant messaging), an artefact of text-based CMC is that communicators decide when to send messages in full, depriving receivers access while it is being formulated [13]. An advantage of asynchronous communication is the ability to reflect on what and how one communicates, so as to come across in the most desired way [11,12].

The third affordance discusses the absence of physical proximity to one’s co-communicator. Not being in the same co-present location means that undesirable communication cues which we may wish to hide, e.g. blushing, are invisible to others. The resulting reduction in concern about receiving negative judgements frees users up to accentuate images they wish to convey [11,12].

The final affordance proposes that we can make more effective use of our cognitive resources in CMC. Walther argues that paying attention to others’ NVC, in addition to attending to environmental cues and engaging in self-monitoring, can be cognitively demanding. Thus, when we remove these competing, and potentially distracting, cues from communication, we can concentrate our efforts into the sole task of presenting the self optimally [11,12].

3. Evidence supporting Hyperpersonal theory

Evidence supporting Hyperpersonal theory's utility to explain different online behaviours comes in the form of self-report, observational and experimental data, thus providing assurances of the validity of the model through data triangulation. When given the option of how to communicate a socially risky message, e.g. asking for a pay raise, lower self-esteem individuals preferred email to face-to-face [15]. This might be because they can control for the communication of negative social cues because of a lack of physical proximity, but also compensate for having less self-confidence through an ability to edit messages to perfection, due to asynchronicity. Lower self-concept clarity [16], which has been associated with lower self-esteem, has also been linked to a preference for managing impressions online [17].

Further evidence to support these ideas comes from Fullwood and Attrill [18] who found that participants believed they would have more success attracting others to agree to go on a date with them if they were interacting online rather than offline. Evidence suggests that a greater level of editability of one's self-image on social media sites may lead to the belief that our profile portrays us as superior to the 'offline' reality on dimensions including humour and a sense of adventure [19]. Moreover, Antheunis et al. [20] found that dyads who had initially communicated in a more cue-restricted context (CMC) reported higher levels of social attraction with their communication partners face-to-face compared to dyads who had met first in a more cue-rich context (videoconferencing). Thus, evidence demonstrates that not only do people consider their own online self to be superior to their offline self, but others also seem to rate them more positively.

Observational data in the form of comparisons of different communication modalities of varying levels of richness, demonstrate that individuals ask more questions and disclose more personal information when communicating via text-only CMC in comparison to video-mediated and face-to-face communication. Moreover, this was also said to have enhanced interpersonal attraction between the communicators [21]. These data may be interpreted as communicators feeling more comfortable communicating in the way that they desired because of the affordances granted by the technology. Indeed, the affordance of asynchronicity has been shown to lead to more self-enhancement (e.g. discussing more interesting information) in comparison to synchronous communicators [22].

Finally, experimental evidence from Duthler [23] found that independent judges rated student requests to University professors for a meeting as more polite when these were communicated over email rather than voicemail. The authors argue that the asynchronous nature of emails provided communicators with a greater potential to consider how their request might be received, time to plan their message and edit it so they would be more likely to be perceived favourably. Furthermore, students were perceived more favourably via email even when they were making requests to meet outside of the professor's normal scheduled office hours.

4. Evidence against Hyperpersonal theory

While the evidence above supports the hyperpersonal model, other evidence highlights its limitations. These will be outlined below, focusing firstly on the language used in CMC, secondly considering the implications of research into online self-disclosure, and thirdly looking at the expanding nature of CMC to include photo and video communication, and the impact of this on a traditionally text-only theory. Finally, we will consider the context of communication on social media taking into account other evidence available to communication recipients forming impressions, including pre-conceived bias such as gender stereotypes.

Despite the asynchronicity of message sending communicators often formulate messages which lead to negative impressions. Accommodation in word use is a natural phenomenon and can increase positivity of impressions in both on and offline contexts [24,25]. However, online accommodation on the part of higher-powered towards lower-powered communication partners led to more negative impressions being formed [26]. In online environments use of unstandardized language is also normal [27]. Use of textspeak persists online today [28], but text-speak can lead to lower perceived conscientiousness [29] and lower perceived intelligence, competence and employability, with no increase in social-, physical-, or task-attractiveness [30]. Language errors occur often online and on dating sites negatively impact ratings of social and romantic attractiveness and intelligence [31].

A prediction of the hyperpersonal model is that online (vs. face-to-face) communication leads to greater intimacy, and hence increased depth and breadth of self-disclosure [32,33]. It has been observed that while experimental findings often support the hyperpersonal model by reporting increased self-disclosure in CMC vs. face-to-face environments, this is not always the case [34] and the same pattern is not found in survey-based research [35]. Although one 2012 literature review found support for the hyperpersonal model in more depth of self-disclosures in CMC, the same effect was absent for breadth of self-disclosures [36]. Two meta-analyses also examined this. One found no difference in self-disclosure in CMC vs face-to-face [37]. The other not only found greater self-disclosure in face-to-face, but that this was greater for depth (vs. breadth) of self-disclosure, and greater self-disclosure occurred in video-CMC vs. text-CMC communications. These findings oppose the assumption that greater intimacy will be built in text-based communications, although this second analysis noted that many of the relationships examined were both pre-existing

and multi-modal [35]. Increased self-disclosure also results in increased attributed victim blame in cases of cyberbullying [38].

The increasing photographic content online, particularly on social media, goes against what was traditionally a text-only model of communication. Users are often unaware how photos are perceived and thus cannot use them to positively self-present: on Air B&B multi-person photos promote trustworthiness but are utilized by only 13% of users [39]. Many individuals post selfies to try and positively self-present [40] but Facebook users who do so are viewed as less trustworthy, socially attractive, open, and more narcissistic than those depicted in photos taken by others [41].

Video is also being increasingly used for online communication, and users utilize text, audio, and video communication simultaneously [42]. This reintroduces synchronicity and many non-verbal cues, the absence of which were the basis of the hyperpersonal model. Contrary to the model's predictions participants interacting face-to-face report more liking, closeness, and enjoyment, and lower conflict towards their partner than those interacting via CMC-text. Participants interacting in a getting to know you exercise face-to-face experienced greater enjoyment, liking, and closeness than those interacting via CMC-text [34,43]. Sprecher [44] had participant pairs engage in two interactions. The second was always CMC-video (Skype), the first could be SMS text, CMC audio, CMC video, or face-to-face. After the first interaction CMC-text pairs scored lower on liking than the others, but they 'caught up' after the second interaction. Impression management in video calls is dependent on the communication partner, with qualitative evidence showing that individuals engaging in more scene-setting and presentation related to their personal appearance when talking to friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, rather than friends or close family [45].

The hyperpersonal model was initially devised as a way of explaining impression management in text-only communications but social media often includes information produced by third parties as well as the primary communicator. The hyperpersonal model only applies without the presence of contradictory information, specifically that present on social media pages, which can lead to reduced liking and increased uncertainty [46]. Warranting theory [47] states that when forming impressions observers rely on identity claims (overt claims by the communicator) and behavioural residue (unintentional information, including third party content online). Both influence impressions formed of communicators, and while identity claims can be manipulated to enhance impression management, observers are aware of this and thus attribute more weight to behavioural residue [48]. Personality judgments based on Facebook profiles are generally accurate, despite users' attempts to positively manage their self-presentation [49].

When the valence of the language used on Facebook was manipulated, positive language in author-generated posts (identity claims) resulted in higher ratings of physical and social attractiveness, but task-attractiveness was increased by other-generated content [50]. A separate study found that identity claims impacted perceived confidence, but behavioural residue increased perceived modesty and popularity [51]. Similarly, while ICs positively impacted cognitive and structural social capital, relational capital was only influenced by behavioural residue [52]. Content generated by third parties also impact the blame attributed to victims of online abuse such as cyberbullying, and the perceived severity of observed incidents. One study which examined perceptions of abuse on Facebook showed the behavioural residue (the volume and source(s) of abuse) influenced the amount of blame attributed to the victim [53].

While individuals may be able to control the information they convey online, how that information is processed by the receiver, and observers, is subject to innate biases such as gender stereotypes. Male Facebook profile owners are rated as more narcissistic and less trustworthy than female profile owners [41]. Women view insensitive messages received from other women especially negatively online versus face-to-face [54]. Third party accounts of heavy drinking and promiscuous behaviour on Facebook result in positive perceptions of male profile owners, but negative perceptions of females [55]. Analyses show differences in viewing strategy when looking at male vs female Facebook timelines, meaning that depending on gender different cues will be prioritised by viewers, and this is outside the control of the timeline owner [56]. The website on which a photo is presented can also influence perceptions. Physicians were rated more negatively when they presented casual vs. professional pictures on WebMD, but a different pattern was shown for Facebook, suggesting a knowledge of normative website expectations can lead to positive or negative evaluations [57].

5. Conclusions

The hyperpersonal model of online impression management was first hypothesized over two decades ago at a time when online communication meant two individuals communicating with each other in a text only online bubble. Despite the advances in technology, most notably the advent of web 2.0 technology and the rise of the Internet as we know it today, the tenets of the model still hold true in many situations, but the evidence outlined above demonstrated that aspects of the theory may need modified to account for new technology, or the limits of the model in the new online environment need to be more clearly delineated. In particular, where the bubble bursts and information from several sources (some of which may be incongruous to the primary communicator's identity claims) are available, and where communication mediums are richer than text-only (e.g., pictures and video communication on social media), are where research findings seem to diverge with the predictions of the original model.

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