

Interpersonal Communication and Technology

Can you really communicate *interpersonally* with people on a smartphone or the Internet without meeting them face to face (FtF)? Yes, of course. You probably relate to others through such media every day, to both initiate and maintain relationships. When you go on Facebook or Twitter or text friends and family members, you are using **electronically mediated communication (EMC)**. As social media expert Sherry Turkle has noted, “Those little devices in our pockets don’t only change what we do, they change who we are.”³⁷

Mediated communication is not new; people have been communicating for centuries without being face to face; sending letters and other written messages to others is an age-old human way of relating to others. And even before written communication was widespread, humans used smoke signals and drum beats to communicate via long distances. What’s new is that there are so many different ways of *immediately* connecting with someone, such as using a smartphone, social networking applications (such as Facebook and LinkedIn), text messages, e-mail, instant messaging, video messages on YouTube or Skype, and a host of other Internet-based ways of communicating that shift in their popularity. E-mail was once the hot new way of connecting; then came instant messaging (IM). Today, as noted in the E-Connections box on page 23, texting and connecting via Facebook or Twitter are among the most used EMC technologies.

We frequently use our technology to make and keep friends, to share information, to listen and respond to and confirm and support others.³⁸ Interpersonal communication is only a click or a keystroke away. Mediated communication relationships can be as satisfying as

electronically mediated communication (EMC)

Communication that is not face to face, but rather is sent via a medium such as a smartphone or the Internet.

face-to-face relationships; people seamlessly and easily switch from EMC to FtF context. That’s why throughout this book we’ll discuss electronically mediated as well as FtF interpersonal communication. Our gadgets and EMC have a major impact on our real-life relationships.

Do people who communicate online ignore other face-to-face relationships? Not according to research by social media researcher Sook Jung Lee, who found support for what he called the “Rich get richer” hypothesis: If you are already “rich” in terms of the quality of face-to-face interpersonal relationships, you will also enrich your online interpersonal relationships. Researchers have found that spending time online with friends does not necessarily result in your avoiding “real time” friends.⁴⁶ Another research study found similar results: Spending time on Facebook does not mean that your face-to-face interpersonal relationships suffer. Rather, your Facebook use is merely an extension of relationships, not a substitute for them.⁴⁷

In fact, using EMC messages can result in relationships becoming more intimate *in less time* than they would through FtF interpersonal communication. **Hyperpersonal relationships** are relationships formed primarily through EMC that become even *more personal* than equivalent face-to-face relationships, in part because of the absence of distracting external cues (such as physical qualities), an overdependence on just a few tidbits of personal information (which increases the importance of the information), and idealization of the partner.⁴⁸ Hyperpersonal relationships were first identified in a study in which pairs of students who were initially strangers interacted for up to an hour in a simulated instant-messaging situation, while another group of pairs met face to face for up to fifteen minutes. Those in EMC interactions skipped the typical superficial getting-acquainted questions and

hyperpersonal relationship

A relationship formed primarily through electronically mediated communication that becomes more personal than an equivalent face-to-face relationship because of the absence of distracting external cues, smaller amounts of personal information, and idealization of the communication partner.



used more direct questioning and disclosure with their partners.⁴⁹ Online pairs engaged in more intimate probes and responses and reached a similar level of understanding and ability to predict their partners' behaviors as those in FtF interactions.

Researchers have explored questions about the type of person who is more likely to use EMC messages to initiate and maintain relationships. For example, researchers have asked whether people who spend a lot of time online generally have more or less personal contact with other people. A team of researchers led by Robert Kraut and Sara Kiesler made headlines when they published the results of their study, which concluded that the more people use the Internet, the less they will interact with others in person.⁵⁰ The researchers also found a correlation between claims of loneliness and Internet use. But other research contradicts this finding: Two follow-up studies found that people who use the Internet are more likely to have a greater number of friends, are more involved with community activities, and overall have greater levels of trust in other people. The most recent research seems to suggest that for some people—those who are already prone to being shy or introverted—there may be a link between Internet use and loneliness or feelings of social isolation. However, their isolation may not be the result of their use of the Internet, but simply because they are naturally less likely to make contact with others.⁵¹ For those who are generally outgoing and who like to interact with others, the Internet is just another tool to reach out and make contact. If you're shy in person, you also may be less likely to tweet or IM; however, there is some evidence that shy or introverted people may be more comfortable using instant messaging.⁵²

A comprehensive study that investigated whether instant messages and text messages are more like speech or writing concluded that instant messages contain elements of both, but nonetheless differ from speech in grammar, style, syntax, and other language factors. Text messages are more like writing than they are like spoken messages. There are also gender differences: Women's text and instant messages use more words, longer sentences, and more emoticons, and they discuss and include more social and relational information than men's messages.⁵³

Differences Between EMC and FtF Communication

How is electronically mediated interpersonal communication different from live, face-to-face conversations? There are six key differences, which have to do with (1) time, (2) varying degrees of anonymity, (3) potential for deception, (4) availability of nonverbal cues, (5) role of the written word, and (6) distance.⁵⁴

Time. When you interact with others using EMC, you can do so asynchronously. **Asynchronous messages** are not read, heard, or seen at the same time they are sent; there is a time delay between when you send such a message and when someone else receives it. A text message sent to a friend's phone or to someone who is not monitoring Facebook or a voicemail message are examples of asynchronous messages.

Synchronous messages are sent and received instantly and simultaneously. Face-to-face conversations are synchronous—there is no time delay between when you send a message

asynchronous message

A message that is not read, heard, or seen exactly when it is sent; there is a time delay between the sending of the message and its receipt.

synchronous message

A message that is sent and received simultaneously.

and when the other person receives it. A live video conference or a phone conversation are other examples of synchronous messages. New research is helping us understand phone etiquette. One study has developed a scale to measure what the research calls "mobile communication competence." Research confirms what you'd expect: We don't like to overhear loud, personal conversations. And the time and place of phone conversations are important variables that help determine whether we are using the phone competently or annoyingly.⁵⁵

The more synchronous an interaction, the more similar it is to face-to-face interactions. The more a technology simulates a face-to-face conversation, the more social presence it creates. **Social presence** is the feeling we have when we act and think as if we're involved in an unmediated, FtF conversation. Technically, there is always some delay in sending and receiving messages (even in FtF interactions, sound takes time to travel). The key distinction among different forms of EMC and the degree of social presence we experience is whether we *feel* we are in a synchronous interaction. When we send text messages back and forth, or instant message, we create a shared sense of social or psychological co-presence with our partners. Receiving a tweet from a friend letting us know what he or she is doing at that moment gives us the feeling of being instantly connected to that person.

Another time difference between EMC and FtF messages is that it takes longer to tap out a typewritten message than to speak or to convey a nonverbal message. The amount of delay (which corresponds to silence in FtF interactions) can have an impact on the interpretation of a message's meaning. When texting, participants may expect to see a response to their message very quickly. This is one reason text messages are often very short and concise. (Another reason is that it can be tricky to type on smaller keyboards with your thumbs—although some people are quite adept at using tiny keyboards.) A rapid succession of short messages fosters a sense of synchronicity and social presence.

Texting someone (as well as sending e-mail, instant messages, and tweets) allows you time to compose your message and craft it more carefully than you might in an FtF interaction. As a sender of text messages, you have more control over what you say and the impression you create; as the receiver of Internet messages, you no doubt realize that the other person has had the chance to shape his or her message carefully for its greatest impact on you.

Varying Degrees of Anonymity. Maybe you've seen the cartoon of a mutt sitting at a computer and saying to his companion, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." The cartoon canine communicator has a point: You may not always know precisely with whom you are communicating when you receive an e-mail message or are "friended" or "poked" by someone you don't know. When you are friending someone on Facebook, that person may not know precisely who you are. (One study found seventeen Karl Marxes, seven Kermit the Frogs, four Anne Boleyns, and three people named Socrates of Athens who had Facebook pages.)⁵⁶ Because you can be anonymous, you may say things that are bolder, more honest, or even more outrageous than you would if your audience knew who you were. And being anonymous may also tempt you to say things that aren't true. Yet many of the EMC messages you send and receive are from people you know. So there are varying degrees of anonymity, depending on the technology that you are using and the honesty between you and your communication partners.

Potential for Deception. Because with many forms of EMC you can't see or hear others, it's easy to lie. Here's evidence that people are deceptive when using EMC: 81 percent of people lied about their height, weight, or age in a dating profile.⁵⁷

Online deception is almost as easy as typing. We say "almost," because you *can* assess the content of a written message for clues to deceit. In a study by Katherine Cornetto, college student respondents reported the most common indicator of deception was someone's making an implausible statement or bragging.⁵⁸ As friendships develop over the Internet, to detect deception, people come to depend on personal knowledge and impressions of their

social presence The feeling that communicators have of engaging in unmediated, face-to-face interactions even though messages are being sent electronically.

partners acquired over the course of their correspondence.⁵⁹ Interestingly, Cornetto's study found that those who reported lying frequently were most likely to suspect others of lying.⁶⁰ The ease with which someone can create a false persona means that you need to be cautious in forming relationships with strangers over the Internet.

One researcher suggests looking for these top lying cues when reading online profiles:⁶¹

1. Liars often use fewer first-person pronouns (such as *I* or *me*).
2. Liars are more likely to use more negative terms like "not" and "never."
3. Liars use fewer negative emotions words such as "sad" and "upset."
4. Liars write briefer online personal essays. The authors of the study suggested that it's easier not to get caught lying if you use fewer words.⁶²

Nonverbal Cues. Words and graphics become more important in EMC than in FtF interactions, because when communicating electronically, you must rely solely on words to carry nonverbal messages. Of course, a YouTube or Skype video does include nonverbal messages, but even when using video some cues may be limited, such as the surrounding context and reactions from others.

There are some basic things text users do to add emotion to their messages, including CAPITALIZING THE MESSAGE (which is considered "yelling"), making letters **bold**, and inserting emoticons—a smiley face :-), a frowning face with glasses 8-(, and so on. In FtF communication, we laugh and smile in direct response to what we or others are saying. In the EMC context, we use emoticons to provide emotional punctuation in our written messages. There are predictable places where we place a smiley face or a frowning

face to underscore something we've just written.⁶³ The ability to tease or make sarcastic remarks is limited with EMC, because there is no tone of voice in the written message—so emoticons must provide information about the intended emotional tone of what is written. You can also write out an accompanying interpretation—for example, “Boy, am I insulted by that! (just kidding)” to compensate for the limited emotional cues.

There is also typically less emphasis on a person's physical appearance online than in FtF situations, unless you're using Facebook, Skype, or other video messages. In those forums, not only does your appearance as depicted in your photos help determine how others react to you, but one study found that the physical attractiveness or unattractiveness of your “friends” rubs off on you. If you have Facebook friends who are perceived as attractive, you will be perceived as more popular and attractive.⁶⁴

Role of the Written Word. The reliance on the written word also affects EMC interactions. One scholar suggests that a person's typing ability and writing skills affect the quality of any relationship that is developed.⁶⁵ Not everyone is able to encode thoughts quickly and accurately into written words. Writing skills not only affect your ability to express yourself and manage relationships, they also affect how others perceive you. Your written messages provide insights to others about your personality, skills, sense of humor, and even your values. Consider the following two text messages and think about the impressions you form of the two authors.

Parr: “Hey, babe, whaddup? no what im thinking now we shuld do?”

Chuck: “Hello, Ashley. I have been thinking about some options for our evening's entertainment.”

What's your impression of the two texters? What affected your impression? The first example is filled with grammar and spelling shortcuts that might create a negative impression because the author is not particularly skilled at writing—or, just the opposite, you might have a positive reaction because you think the author is cool and contemporary. The second author uses correct grammar and spelling, which may produce a positive impression, yet (because text messages are typically brief and casual) you may think author number two is a nerd, or at least older and more traditional. You communicate a message about the nature of a relationship based on the formality or informality of your language and whether your style reflects what the receiver expects.

Distance. Although we certainly can and do send text messages to people who live and work in the same building we're in (or even the same room), there is typically greater physical distance between people who are communicating using EMC. When using the Internet or a smartphone, we can just as easily send a text or a video message to someone on the other side of the globe as we can to someone on the other side of the room.

Understanding EMC

We've noted that EMC messages have both similarities to and differences from FtF messages. Which theories and models of electronically mediated messages help us understand how relationships are developed and make predictions about how we will use EMC messages?

The communication models that we've presented (communication as action, interaction, and transaction) on pages 8–9 are certainly applicable to EMC. There are times when EMC is like the action model of communication. You post a message on a message board, blog, or Facebook wall and you get no immediate response from others. The communication is asynchronous—there's a time delay, so you're not really sure you've communicated with anyone. During some e-mail or text-message exchanges, your communication is more like the communication-as-interaction model; you send a text message and you wait for the response. There's a time delay, but sooner or later you get a response. And then there are instances when you can see and hear the other person simultaneously, such as in a live conversation with someone via a webcam—which is a synchronous interaction. In this instance the EMC resembles the transactional communication model, in that communicating this way is almost like being there in person because of the immediacy of the communication. Three theories have been developed to further explain and predict how EMC works.



People use electronically mediated communication (EMC) to share information that ranges from the dramatic to the routine. EMC can create a shared sense of social or psychological presence between two people, giving them the feeling of being instantly connected to each other.

Theory	Description
Cues-Filtered-Out Theory	The communication of emotion and relationship cues is restricted in e-mail or text messages because nonverbal cues, such as facial expression, gestures, and tone of voice, are filtered out.
Media Richness Theory	The richness or amount of information a communication medium has is based on the amount of feedback it permits, the number of cues in the channel, the variety of language used, and the potential for expressing emotions.
Social Information-Processing Theory	Emotional and relationship messages can be expressed via electronic means, although such messages take longer to be communicated without the immediacy of nonverbal cues.



FIGURE 1.5

A Continuum of Communication-Rich and Communication-Lean Channels

Adapted from L. K. Trevino, R. L. Draft, and R. H. Lengel, "Understanding Managers' Media Choices: A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective." In *Organizations and Communication Technology*, edited by J. Fulk and C. Steinfield (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990), 71–94. Reprinted by permission of Sage Publications, Inc.

Assignment 01(Team work):

Does electronically mediated communication make us more or less other-oriented than face-to-face communication? Keep a one-day log of your electronically mediated interactions (e.g., phone calls, Facebook messages, text messages, etc.). Select several messages and note whether there was a greater emphasis on the content or the relational elements of the messages you exchanged during the interaction.