

## “DISTANCE AND AVATAR” – SELECTED ELEMENTS OF COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION (CMC) AND THE RECEPTION OF SELF-PRESENTATION CONTENTS

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**Dates:**

Received: 07.09.2016

Reviewed: 22.10.2016

Accepted: 30.11.2016

**DOI:** 10.15503/edut.2016.1.63.71  
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**Abstract:** The research pertains to the relevance of selected features of CMC to the reception of self-presentation contents. I checked whether the place of residence (distance) between the sender the recipient of self-presentation can change the attractiveness of a self-presentation. The second hypothesis pertains to the influence of avatars on self-presentation. I assumed that a negative avatar can decrease the attractiveness of self-presentation, and a positive one can increase it. The avatars and the names of towns and cities were randomly allotted to the persons who would present them. That is why, in theory, they were to have no bearing on what the persons would say about themselves. 10 presentations by persons applying for a job were used. Each self-presentation was analysed with the use of the ANOVA model. In the case of half of the self-presentations the hypotheses were confirmed – small distance increased the attractiveness of the self-presentations, and a negative avatar decreased it.

The research has provided a number of conclusions as to its technical aspect. I treat these conclusions as preparation for broader research in which I am going to examine the relevance of five features of CMC to the attractiveness of self-presentation. Even at the present stage I can state that such research requires a thorough experimental plan both in its factual and technical aspect.

**Keywords:** *CMC, avatar, distance, self-presentation.*

## A THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

Self-presentation and online self-presentation. CMC has become an equal means of communication on multiple levels of social life. This channel is also used for self-presentation. For communities such as Goldenline or Facebook the function of self-presentation appears to be prevalent.

I am also interested in the relevance of CMC to self-presentation. I have assumed that the particular features of computer-mediated communication, which create the anonymity typical of this medium, diversify the reception of self-presentation content. I have selected only two elements that can be relevant to this form of communication. The problem that I addressed is: *What is the relevance of distance (the place of residence of the sender and the recipient) and the avatar image (positive or negative) to the reception of the content of self-presentation.* Such approach to the subject is only an introduction to further research into the relevance of the five features of CMC (as described by Marc A. Smith, 1992).

The character of the project makes it necessary to become acquainted with the meaning of two terms: *self-presentation and computer-mediated communication (CMC).*

Systematic research into self-presentation was initiated more or less simultaneously by Ervin Goffman (in sociology) and Edward Jones (in psychology) (Leary, 2007). Earlier, in 1948, the first communication model was proposed by Shannon and Weaver. Research into CMC was started in the 1980s. With time, scholars became interested in online self-presentation. The problems addressed in the present paper are, therefore, quite new. Because of the time when they were formed as well as the changes that one can observe in technology many areas still have not been examined, in spite of the major interest of psychologists and sociologists.

Following Mark Leary I understand self-presentation as "(...) the process in which an individual controls the way they are perceived by the environment" (Leary, 2007, p. 27). When analysing the understanding of self-presentation behaviour proposed by Andrzej Szmajke (1999) one can define three important features of the information revealed by a self-presenter:

- 1) selectiveness (only certain pieces of information are presented);
- 2) legibility (the environment needs to be able to understand the information);
- 3) truthfulness (Szmajke, 1999, p. 228).

Thanks to CMC the number of opportunities to present oneself in front of a very diverse audience has increased. The number of photo galleries, differences in age and education, etc., of the users prove that the phenomenon of presenting oneself on the internet is becoming quite common. However, unlike other media such as television there is no "elite" selection of persons who can broadcast their image. After a fairly quick evolution it is not the "elite" [in this context *digerati* (Brockman, 1996; Zawojski, 2010) - the digital elite<sup>1</sup>] that forms the culture of the medium; it is the users, "online crowds" (Zawojski, 2010, pp. 22-27).

The following are typical of online presentations, and also set them apart from self-presentations in different conditions:

- increasingly numerous and diverse "audience";
- actor (self-presenter) has the opportunity to use a high number of symbols;
- certain "web competences" are required of the "actor" and the "audience" which serve to facilitate the process of coding and reception of self-presentation contents.

## COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION (CMC).

To describe the broadcast in mass media at the

<sup>1</sup> "Digital" and "litterati" based on *glitterati* - renaissance men of letters (celebrities) - the first generation of the cyber-elite. The term was first used by Tim Race in 1992 (Zawojski, 2010).

beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century theories of mass communication are used. These problems are discussed in detail by Denis McQuail (2008). Because of the interaction between the sender and the recipient of messages the internet is different from other media, what is more, as Peter Winterhoff-Spurk notes, "it is the first time in the history of broadcasting that media are not defined by particular yet diverse broadcasting techniques, but by the different ways in which one technique is employed" (Winterhoff-Spurk, 2007, p. 17). This is communication of the "many-to-many" type, where the senders are also the recipients. The quoted author proposes to name this type of communication "*interactive or participant* mass communication, or *netcasting*" (Winterhoff-Spurk, 2007, p. 17). The specificity of CMC has caused a number of researchers to separate it from communication/communicating in other media.

The symbols of CMC and the use of this medium require a certain type of competency. In light of this fact some research older than about 20 years ought to be replicated, because with the development of technology and universalization of the medium the users have become increasingly "web-competent" which can significantly influence the quality of communication and the satisfaction that one derives from using this channel. Alison Newlands, Anne H. Anderson, and Jim Mullin (2003) conducted research of which the results confirm that the effectiveness of communication increases with the acquiring of basic web competences.

Research into CMC originated in the USA in the 1980s. In Poland it began later, nevertheless contemporarily the number of Polish researchers interested in the subject is rising. Research reports

and theoretical papers pertaining to CMC and the problems of online identity have been edited by Władysław Jacek Paluchowski (2009). Other authors are, among others: Magdalena Szpunar (2009), Włodzimierz Gogołek (2010), Aleksander Kobylarek (2008).

In spite of the numerous papers published in Poland and abroad in most of the research conducted CMC is contrasted with f2f communication. On the other hand, if the features are examined, the researchers in a single research process focus on a single continuum presenting one of the features. These are typically synchronicity/asynchronicity or anonymity/lack of anonymity.

I believe that considering CMC exclusively in contrast with f2f communication is a simplification. Diversity of the features of CMC, the various levels of their intensity, and the number of their combinations ought to be investigated, as well. This is the understanding of CMC that I have employed in my research.

The authors describing the features of CMC employ various classifications. In my opinion, the fullest list of significant features was presented by Marc A. Smith (1992):



**Fig 1.** Features of CMC<sup>2</sup> according to Marc A. Smith.  
Source: developed on the basis of Smith, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Researchers of CMC enumerated other features, as well. The selected classification presents the most common of them. These features are also the easiest to use in experimental manipulation (e.g. according to John Suler, one of the features of cyberspace is recordability – communication is being recorded. The awareness of the fact that all our conversations are recorded as, for example, text, can also influence communication (Suler, 1996).

On the basis of the description of features provided by M. A. Smith (1992) I have conceptualized them as follows:

- **Aspatial:** Lack of localisation of an individual: lack of geographical, territorial, local reference.
- **Asynchronous:** Lack of the necessity for the sender and the recipient to be present at the same time. Delays in communication.
- **Acorporeal:** Lack of non-verbal communication (reflected in facial expressions, tone of voice, clothes, gestures, showing emotions, etc.).
- **Astigmatic:** Lack of evaluation of psychophysical traits of an individual (such as gender, ethnicity, appearance, stuttering, etc.).
- **Anonymous:** Lack of information making identification possible.

In my research I focus on the Aspatial feature, which is connected with, among others, the perception of distance. The second selected feature is Astigmatic, and it is characterised by the fact that one does not judge the psychophysical traits of an individual. A negative avatar can constitute a stigma. I assumed that a negative avatar can influence the perception of a presentation even when it is not related to its content.

Researchers perform operationalisation of the particular features by diversifying the selection of CMC channels (ways of communicating) and the information that the investigated individual receives. Operationalisation of the asynchronous is the most common. The channels that diversify the intensity of a feature can be, e.g., email and online chatting. The feature that interested me in my research – aspatiality (precisely, its level) was, among others, operationalised by researchers as awareness of the length of the distance – distance of the location of logging in by the interlocutor was presented on screen, in miles (Moon, 1999).

It is difficult to find examples of operationalisation of the astigmatic feature. While there is certain research into, e.g., the relevance of visual anonymity

to self-disclosure, where persons “visually anonymous” (Joison, 2001) chatted online, and those not anonymous talked f2f. However, the research does not look at whether it was the lack of judgement about psychophysical traits that led the visually anonymous to reveal more information about themselves, or was it simply the anonymity itself. It is my opinion that research on self-presentation provides better opportunities for the operationalisation of a particular feature.

My research is aimed to answer the following research questions: Main questions: How does the reception of self-presentation change with the appearance of additional information, unrelated to its content.

#### **Detailed questions:**

1. What is the relevance of the location of the person presenting him/ herself to the reception of self-presentation?
2. How is the reception of self-presentation changed after it is supplemented with an avatar?

Taking into account the results of research on self-presentation and online self-presentation I have formulated the following research hypotheses:

#### **Main hypothesis**

Selected elements of CMC (Avatar and Distance) unrelated to the content of self-presentation influence its reception.

#### **Detailed hypotheses**

1. The location (distance) between the sender and the recipient of self-presentation can change its attractiveness – short distance increases attractiveness, and long distance decreases it.
2. A negative avatar decreases the attractiveness of self-presentation and a positive avatar increases it.

## THE RESEARCH

### Method

#### Research subjects

10 self-presentations of persons acting the role of individuals interviewed for a job were used in the research. The self-presentations were recorded by a person conducting training courses for the unemployed. According to my instructions, 3 questions were asked:

- Please introduce yourself.
- Please tell us what you expect of our company.
- Please tell us why you are the right candidate for the job.

The presentations were recorded on a voice recorder. Unfortunately, for ethical reasons as well as the lack of approval of the research participants the presentations were not filmed. The average length of the presentations was 3.5 min.

#### Procedure

45 persons were selected to evaluate the self-presentation. The research was conducted among the students of the Witelon State University of Applied Sciences in Legnica. The persons were randomly assigned to 3 groups:

- “Clean” – persons listening to the recordings with no additional factors.
- “Avatar” – persons listening to the recordings and seeing an Avatar that the author of the presentation supposedly posted in social media.
- “Territory” – group of persons who had received information about the place of residence of the presenter. I have selected the place of residence rather than birth because some persons talked about where they lived in the presentations, but in the case of these persons I provided place of birth near to the place of residence.

#### Tool

The recipients of the self-presentations evaluated the attractiveness of the content of each recording

separately on a 5-point Likert scale.

Instructions: Imagine that you are the employer. On a 1-5 point scale mark whether you would like to employ that person

- 1) I definitely will not employ them.
- 2) I do not think I will employ them.
- 3) I will employ them if there are no other candidates.
- 4) I think I will employ them.
- 5) I will definitely employ them.

### Results

A combined evaluation of the results of the self-presentations would not have produced specific outcomes, which is why half of the persons received positive avatars, and half received negative ones. So was the case with the place of residence – half of the presenters had a place of residence near to the place of residence of the persons evaluating the self-presentations, and half were far away. That is why there was a separate analysis performed for each self-presentation. Because 3 measurements were evaluated I have selected the Anova statistical model. In the case of homogeneity of variation in post hoc tests I employed the Bonferonni test, and when variations were heterogeneous I used the T3 Dunnet test.

Differences were found in the case of the following persons:

- **Person 1.** “Avatar” with “Territory” (df=2; F=3.284, relevancy 0.047).
- **Person 3.** “Location” with “Avatar” (df=2; F=5.939, relevancy 0.005).
- **Person 6.** “Clean” with “Avatar” (df=2; F=3.413, relevancy 0.042).
- **Person 8.** “Clean” with “Location” (df=2; F=3.320, relevancy 0.046).
- **Person 10.** “Clean” with “Location” and “Avatar” (df=2; F=9.100, relevancy 0.001).

Let us take a closer look at the results of the particular persons.

- **Person 1.** The person had a very negative avatar that could have brought to mind a swastika, which explains the low results in this group. However, this person's location was Legnica, which can explain the high results in the second group. This led to the substantial disproportions between the groups in spite of the neutral evaluation of the presentation itself.
- **Person 3.** This person also had a negative avatar, which can explain the low results in this group. The location was also near to that of the research participants – it was Złotoryja, located 20 km away from Legnica.
- **Person 6.** In the case of this person the avatar was positive. However, the person had low results in the Clean group, in the Avatar group the results increased.
- **Person 8.** In the case of this person the results were increased by the closeness of the location (Uniejowice), as with persons 1 and 3.
- **Person 10.** The results of this person are very interesting. In the Clean group their results were the highest, but they decreased in the Avatar group and in the place of residence group (Territory). The person had a very negative Avatar (an entity resembling a personification of death) and the place of residence was very distant – Biała Podlaska.

## DISCUSSION

In spite of the fact that my hypotheses were confirmed, the achieved results ought not to be perceived as promising. As I have mentioned above, the research was helpful first and foremost in the stage of constructing a more elaborate experiment plan.

The first objection that can be raised in relation to the discussed research is that it was not realistic. The evaluated situation is natural, however, if we take into account that I was investigating CMC the fact that computers were only used to play presentations and there were no interactions between the senders and the recipients leads

to the abandoning of the basic assumptions of computer-mediated communication. That is why interaction between the sender and the recipient needs to be considered in future research.

As Joseph B. Walther (1995) noted research on the results of CMC is inconsistent because some leads to conclusions that this type of communication is characterised by impersonality, hostility, and some presents CMC as “warm” communication, while other authors discuss gradual changes in personal relations over time. This discrepancy is no longer questionable when one bears in mind the diversity of the features of CMC, their intensity, and combinations. What is more, as Giuseppe Riva (2002, pp. 595-596) states – “Communication is the result of a complex process of coordinated action which generates the space of conversation into a cluster of personal and social relations. In this way, communication is not only – or not as much – information transfer, but also repeated relations, a process in which the interlocutors create the realm of reality together. In CMC this happens within and the unique type of container – the cyberspace – has the tendency to discharge/dilute structural and technological features of the communication process”.

This approach to CMC shows how difficult it is to operationalise CMC features in natural conditions. That is why one ought to bear in mind that although one can investigate the particular CMC features in laboratory conditions one can never be certain whether the context that one removes is not, in fact, the most relevant element in the reception of self-presentation content.

Another problem that needs to be taken into account when designing future research is the type of scale in which the presenters are evaluated. In my research the scale was treated as an interval one, however, experts in statistics may object.

What ought to be emphasised is that self-presentation content should be real. This aspect is underlined by A. Szmajke when he justifies that instead of the “mask” metaphor one ought to use

the metaphor of a “facial expression” or “pose” – masks can be perceived as something detached from the identity of the author (Szmajke, 1999, p. 228). Although the persons take roles the realness aspect was preserved, because the persons were asked to provide truthful information about themselves. With authenticity of the presentations in mind I did not limit the type of place to which the participants were being “recruited”, they were asked to think about the place where they would really have liked to worked and reveal the competences that would have been necessary in this job. I believe that this formula ought to be employed in future research, as well.

Another feature of self-presentation that I have mentioned in the theoretical introduction is the selectiveness of information. This feature was also preserved in my research, because the researched persons only revealed the information about themselves that could have been perceived favourably by the employer.

Pertaining to the legibility of self-presentations objections can be raised. Sometimes the persons were not speaking very clearly, sometimes it was difficult to hear what they were saying. On the one hand, one might try to eliminate such interference, on the other, it is an integral element of self-presentation.

I shall move on to discussion of the operationalisation of CMC features. In Youngme Moon’s research (1999), which I have mentioned in the theoretical part, aspatiality was operationalised as presentation of the distance between the interlocutors. I believe that the formula employed in my research (presenting the place where a research participant came from) is better for Polish conditions; what needs to be done, however, is that the location is presented visually, not said by the experimenter. That is because in real situations that fact that one pays no attention to the location may indicate that aspatiality plays no significant role in self-presentation.

As to the operationalisation of the astigmatic feature, Smith (1992) states that one does not learn of psychophysical traits that could interfere with the evaluation. In my research the trait that was to be the “stigma” was presented through the avatar which, being a symbol, not a photograph of the presenter, ought not to be connected with the identity of a self-presenter. Nevertheless, it should be considered whether instead of psychophysical traits in CMC it is the avatar and, e.g., the emoticons or the style of expression (spelling mistakes, vulgarisms) may not also constitute stigma. If it were so it would be difficult to declare CMC astigmatic. What is obvious, however, is that the research subjects can be more anonymous and not reveal such stigma, depending on the CMC channel.

Anonymity is relevant to the designing of further research because the specificity of CMC is connected with the phenomenon of self-disclosure. Research by Adam N. Joinson (2001) has shown that persons in a situation of “visual anonymity” disclose more information about themselves than in f2f communication. This may be of great importance to self-presentation because such messages can be perceived as more honest and the persons that issue them as more open. In my research the subjects did not present themselves by means of a computer, which is why they did not feel anonymous, even in front of the researcher’s assistant. This may have influenced the quality of self-presentation and, at the same time, the recipients’ evaluations.

Another problem that needs to be addressed is the question of the web competences of the recipients of self-presentations. The research was not conducted online and the computer was only a tool to play the voice recordings and present the avatars, therefore it would seem that the evaluators did not have to have special competences. Such a conclusion would be a simplification because the recipients of the presentations should know, for example,

what an avatar is and what social media are to understand why they are being shown the images. The evaluators were students of full-time studies, which is why it can be assumed that because of their age and the fact that they were students they did have this scope of competences. One ought to bear in mind, however, that if the evaluators had been seniors they might not have known what an avatar is and the researcher's explaining what an avatar is would have been pointless because to comprehend the meaning of such symbols one needs to be an internet user. This narrows the group of people who could potentially evaluate self-presentations.

The last objection that I can formulate pertaining to my research is the low number of persons in the evaluator groups. For the results to be reliable the evaluators ought to be more numerous. However, such groups are sufficient if one considers the discussed research as preliminary research. It would also have been difficult to conduct this research in

larger groups. I would increase not the number of people in the groups but the number of groups that could evaluate self-presentations in the particular situations.

## CONCLUSION

The results appear highly interesting. Two additional pieces of information that are not related to the verbal content of self-presentation can have a significant influence on it. In my research the place of residence near to that of the research participants led to higher evaluations of the self-presentations. The influence of the Avatars proved substantial, especially in the case of negative Avatars, because these could significantly lower the results of self-presentation.

To summarise, I would like to point out that the described research was for me a hugely valuable source of knowledge on conducting research on subjects of my interest. I shall definitely use this knowledge when designing further research.

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