

CMCs, CMRs AND ETHICAL IDENTITY

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Abstract:

Computer-Mediated Communications (CMCs) and Computer-Mediated Relationships (CMRs) receive little regard and are taken lightly. Any nickname in a CMC does not consist in revealing a true self; and thus, every relationship that develops out of it is expected to be regarded lightly and is expected to fail.

Borrowing the idea of Charles Taylor, I argue that we can view the problem of identity in CMCs and CMRs in a more profound way. Self-presentation in most CMCs and CMR constitutes the self for the reason that the cyberspace is also a moral space that is premised on the notion that CMC and CMR still requires “respect and obligation for others, understanding what makes a full life, and sense of dignity.”

Keywords: Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), Computer-Mediated Relationship (CMR), Ethics of Identity, Self in Cyberspace, Taylor.

Computer-Mediated Communications (CMCs) have become undeniably integrated in the everyday life. In most circumstances, a man-on-the-street can no longer dispense with interconnectivity since, insofar as he has PDAs, cellular phones, laptops, and other communications gadgets, he is at all times connected to his social network. As a phenomenon, CMC at some point transforms into a computer-mediated relationship (CMR), regardless whether it is romantic or not. Ordinarily, we take for granted such online activities as chatting, texting, instant messaging (IM) and regard them as lightly since they are nothing more than meeting a stranger on the street, giving direction, and leaving him after such encounter—after all the cyberspace is so vast that communicating with a nicknamed entity online is a just a drop of an ocean. Thus, there is a feeling of surprise or wonderment when intimate relations develop out of CMC.

This type of reaction, apparently the most natural response, is not necessarily irrational. It, however, displays an attitude that CMCs need not be taken seriously since those who engage in them do not project their true identity. That is, a virtual presence through a nickname or avatar offers no self-disclosure. As a consequence, relationships that emerge out of a cyber-encounter can only be taken lightly or met with cynicism.

Is this an accurate view of CMRs or CMCs? Do CMRs and CMCs not relate according to their “true person”? Do they involve deceptions, and thus, must have been selfishly motivated by unscrupulous individuals? Do their virtual presences misrepresent their true identities? What regard have we on identities in CMCs? In this paper, I will explore the problem of identity in CMCs and CMRs. I borrow the ideas of Charles Taylor to explore how it might be possible to view identity in CMC and CMR differently from our kneejerk reaction to them. I argue that identity in CMCs and CMR constitutes the “self” for the reason that the cyberspace is also a moral space that is premised on the notion that CMC and CMR still requires “respect and obligation for others, understanding what makes a full life, and sense of dignity.”

CMC and CMR: Motivation and Self-presentation

Despite our computer-mediated engagements can be a cause for alarm, CMCs are inevitable. Facebook (2011), for instance, has 681,281,280 millions registered accounts. Its statistics shows that an average user spends 15.6 hours per month, which will be almost two work-days per month, per user. The Philippines alone, in the 7th place among all countries of registered users, has 23 million users. Among these users, CMCs nurture CMRs by virtue of increased, facile, and instantaneous communication among members of the social network.

In this regard, the Internet transforms as an important tool for social connectedness. Commenting on the role of online communications technologies, Chayko (2008, 4) writes:

... these technologies assist us in expressing ourselves, in extending and revealing ourselves to one another, and in creating our societies.

We appropriate technology to create vibrant and complex social worlds that are very much a part of our lives. Online and mobile technologies are used to share thoughts, ideas, photos, music, audio, video—anything that can be transmitted technologically—in increasingly creative, sociable ways.

Here, Chayko projects an optimistic view about computer-mediated communications since they offer a good medium for an expedient, convenient, insistent, if not intrusive, and artistic ways of expressing ourselves and connecting with others.

With Internet ubiquitous and smart phones abound, CMCs occur anywhere, anytime. In this case, we can roughly classify certain computer-mediated communications. But first, we assume, of course, that in the discursive engagements actual human beings participate at both ends of the communication medium and disclose themselves through virtual presence, that is, through texts, graphics, avatars, smileys, and so on. On the one hand, it is possible that we engage in CMC because the person is known to us in real life (IRL). This is nonymous CMC. Thus, we send IM to a virtual friend, that is, the one we accepted through an invite in a social networking site (SNS).

A unique CMC is one when parties involved are unknown to each other, perhaps they meet casually through a Multi-User Dungeon or Multi-Object Oriented environment or a group interest site as in the case of a hobby, sport, profession, interest, and so on, and yet, communicate with each other deeply that may lead to a relationship, CMR--perhaps, virtual friendship or romantic relationship. This anonymous CMC, so-called because it begins with each party stranger to one another, poses a lot of problems, and thus it often gives the impression that CMCs and CMRs lack depths.

What could be the motivations for CMC? In their study, Peter et al. identified five factors that motivate an individual to communicate online, viz., “entertainment, social inclusion, maintaining relationships, meeting new people and social compensation” (cited in Chieh-Chien

and Ya-Ting 2010, 289). Clearly, this observation holds true and can be viewed in some sites. Youtube, for example, include in video posts interactive functions for giving comments and evaluations—needless to say that they have corresponding filters. Similar functionalities can be found in Friendster in photo posts and multimedia posts(changed since 2011). These popular sites cater to the very motivations of CMC participants. We can relate to these findings because these sites integrate these motivations in their functionalities.

Moreover, Peris et al. observed such motivations for CMC as to “discuss work, hobbies, and topics which they are interested in, experiment in a new communication channel, satisfy their need to socialize, seek friendships, engage in virtual sex, and in an attempt to find a romantic partner” (Ibid., 289-290). Here, the motivations for CMC are noticeably not far different from the ones found in face to face engagements (F2Fs). F2F and CMC both entail self-presentation. Unlike the former, however, which involves physical cues in a communicative encounter, CMC does not include bodily cues, except in audio-visual CMCs, and has to depend on the textual messages for the communicative engagement. In this sense, F2F encounter is apparently superior over CMC. Often, the clues about the self in CMCs are limited to the texts, avatars, and emoticons. Also, self-presentation is coursed through nicknames or usernames, which have little connection or are remotely related to the user himself. Besides, uncertainty about the user at the other end of the line seems to hover constantly during the exchange.

With this predicament, can one determine that CMC lacks depths and seriousness? Do these engagements misrepresent the selves of each party? If we answer affirmatively, then we would be surprised about some developments out of these mediated communications. For instance, Fletcher-Toumenius and Vossler (2009, 27) discovered that trust is easier to establish in an online therapeutic relationships compared to face-to-face therapeutic relationships. Considering that a disembodied presence is involved, we are puzzled by the facility in encouraging a relation of trust. In addition, there are people who seek emotional support online; the impression in this regard is that if one cannot attain support in real life (IRL), then CMC would suffice to

provide for such a need. Are we then justified to regard CMCs as shallow?

Despite the privation of physical presence, CMC involves an investment of self or includes self-disclosure. This is evident in cyber-relationships that develop out of CMCs—here we label as CMRs (Computer-Mediated Relationships).

What are the factors that lead to the development of CMRs? In their research on cyber-relationships, Chieh-Chien and Ya-Ting (2010, 289) attributed nine factors that serve as the impetus for transitioning from CMCs to CMRs. These are: “anonymity, the opportunity to meet new people, easier communication, curiosity, emotional support, social compensation, away from the real world, love, and sexual partners.” It is rather puzzling that, in regard to these factors, anonymity facilitates the development of cyber-relationships when CMCs presuppose self-disclosure. IRL encounters prove wanting because of “personal” meeting. They don’t, however, come easy. They may even cause unnecessary anxiety. But anonymity may elicit candor, openness, or spontaneity because it prevents a person from embarrassment, rejections, rebuke or censure—after all, it is possible that one may not meet F2F the person at the other end of the line. Anonymity may cause one to develop cyber-relationships since self-disclosure without unwanted criticism is easy. In other words, because he or she is unknown to the other, then he/she may not be affected by others’ comments. “The Internet may reduce the impact of social norms and inhibitions present in face-to-face communication and allow individuals to express freely feelings and opinions on taboo topics” (Chou and Peng 2007 cited in Chieh-Chin and Ya-Ting 2010, 290).

With regard to other factors such as easier communication, curiosity, emotional support, social compensation, and away from the real world, they all appear commonsensical to us, especially now that Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs) empower us to have a “portable community.” To partake in CMR for love and sexual partnership, however, may be discomforting. Whether we like or not, loving and sexual “excursions,” do occur. Pertierra (2007), for example, documents CMCs—this time, text messaging—that lead to sexual

encounters, IRL or Virtual, among some Filipinos. Thus, these things do happen among people in more liberal societies.

Curiously, do these relations develop “real” intimacy as in real life friendships and romantic relationships? Atheunis, et al. (2007, 831) found out that although CMCs have no direct relation to interpersonal attraction, CMCs “stimulated both self-disclosure and direct questioning, both of which in turn enhanced interpersonal attraction.” With self-disclosure leading to personal attraction, a CMC participant might get involved, unsurprisingly, in an intimate CMR, romantic or otherwise. Several studies support this observation. Cooper and Sportolari (1997) found out that more “personal” involvement in CMCs tends to undermine the importance of “physical attributes” and may pave the way for the valuing of more essential important factors such as “similarity and harmony” (cited in Chieh-Chin and Ya-Ting 2010). In other words, when participants are way past beyond such concern for the physical, they put premium on nonphysical factors; “physical beauty”, for them, just becomes overrated.

At this point, we can now turn to an offshoot of CMC—online dating. Undeniably, there still remains a technophobic regard toward cyber-relationships. “Online interpersonal relationships, particularly romantic relationships, carry the stigma of being something of a ‘talk show phenomena’” Anderson writes (2005, 521). To consider, for example, the Internet as a replacement for a matchmaker or as a “bridge” between lovers sounds ludicrous. Or, to have a friend one hasn’t met f2f (face to face) appears mind-boggling. In this sense, questions come to mind: What goes on in the mind of those who have relationships online? (What’s the psychological make-up of those persons who engage in online relationships?) What are the motivational factors of those people who unfold themselves online? What’s beyond the hype about Social Networking Sites?

Of course, online dating is a possible source of concern. According to the Commission on Filipino Overseas, there is a significant increase in the cross-border marriages or intermarriages between Filipinos and Foreigners. In 2009, Filipino spouses of Foreign Nationals increase to 20,610 from 18,436 or 11.79% increase from the previous year. Of these, 4,662 are unemployed housewives. And,

these inter-marriages are perceived to have been abetted by increased online dating activities. Some countries, especially developed ones, have expressed alarm over the problem of transmigration caused by inter-marriages. South Korea, for example, showed alarm in these trans-national marriages by amending some of its laws and policies related to the phenomenon (Hye-Kyung Lee 2008, 107).

Despite these protectionist moves, will online dating be really stopped? Can one really curtail the Virtual Romeo and Juliet? Valkenburg and Peter's study the reasons behind such ado. They write,

The growing popularity of online dating sites is hardly surprising. First, on the Internet, spatial proximity is irrelevant, and meeting similar people is easier than in real-life dating. Second, online dating can occur without help from friends. Dating sites can be independently and constantly accessed, whereas going out with friends seven days a week is far more difficult to realize. Third, reduced visual and auditory cues that characterize online communication facilitate self-disclosure. This may apply even more to online dating because, contrary to many other types of computer-mediated communication, online dating participants often anticipate future interaction. The anticipation of future interaction increases the depth of communication and may thereby encourage relationship formation. (Walther JB 1994 quoted in Valkenburg and Peter 2007, 849).

Online dating cannot be prevented. Yet, what can we say about online daters? In the same study, we learn that the most active online daters are people at the age of 40 or more. And, "[d]ivorcees are more than three times likely to use a dating site than the average Internet user" (Ibid., 851). Does this mean that online daters are desperate? There are plausible explanations to these. One, members of younger generation are busy looking for jobs, if not chasing partners, in the real world. Two, active online daters on the other

hand have probably tried offline relationships, and are willing to find fulfillment through online relations.

With these data, can we devalue the quality of online relationships? Can we discount the type of self-presentation in these phenomena?

The Problem of identity

The presentation appears to be biased or gives the impression that CMCs and CMRs face no difficult predicament. Sadly, this is not the case. As in F2F, CMCs and CMRs do not preclude problems with identity.

There is always the possibility of creating one's alternate identity, an alter ego. Somebody can present herself online other than who she is as when she uses a picture or an avatar so flawless that encourages another to develop fantasies or another poses as a loving father rather than a pedophile, a nun rather than a slut, and so on—the possibilities are unimaginably endless. In fact, gullible individuals have fallen prey to the ruse of this type. Some have incredulously followed instructions to send load or something for the sake of a reward. Many have been victims of phishing or identity theft. That is why technophobic reactions to the early phase of communications are understandable. Besides, not only have we heard those troublesome experience, but we have also been conditioned by *Little red riding hood*—Do not talk to strangers!

Admittedly, there are 'real' scammers in the virtual world. Two cases are paradigmatic of their scams. In the first developed Multi-User Dungeon (MUD)—this is the prototype of a gaming world—there was an identity called "Sue" who was very popular to the MUDders and who gained amorous admiration from a wizard (a user who gained special powers in MUD) to the point that the latter proposed marriage. When "Sue" acted strange, out of character, MUDders investigated and discovered that Sue turned out to be Steve who was arrested for fraud (see Rheingold 1993, 164). Another is the case of Joan. Here, Rheingold writes:

Joan connected with people in a special way, achieved intimacy, and gave much valuable advice and support to many others, especially disabled women. So it was a shock to the CB community when Joan was unmasked as someone who in real life, IRL, was neither disabled, disfigured, mute, nor female. Joan was a New York psychiatrist, Alex, who had become obsessed with his own experiments in being treated as a female and participating in female friendships. (1993, 165)

Clearly, these examples depict some dangers of CMCs. They show a mental abuse and a clear violation of our disembodied selves. And, we surely get appalled by these cases as the members of the MUD felt.

How are we then going to treat identities in CMCs and CMRs in this regard? To consider the problem of identity in CMC and CMR, we'll consider Taylor's notion of identity.

Taylor's notion of identity

Identity, as we superficially construe it, refers to properties or distinctive features that constitute an individual person or that are instrumental in plucking out the individual from the collective. Identity describes the person as unique and different from others. This notion of identity focuses on the physical characteristics and seems to preclude the collective background from which the identity is differentiated against. In other words, identity in this sense is fundamentally private and individual.

Charles Taylor's notion of identity, in contrast, gives primary importance to the "inescapable frameworks" of identity. For him, identity is not essentially private and individualistic; it is drawn from the backdrop of community, of "web of interlocutions" (Taylor 1989, 36), and it need not be divorced from the communal framework as it is fundamentally inseparable from such horizon. In other words, identity presupposes a sense of self that is drawn and developed from the engagement with the members of the community who offer contrasting or affirming opinions on how one ought to be or how one

chooses one's life and from others who offer valuable insights on one's continuing self-development. Thus Taylor writes,

I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition; in another in relation to those who are now crucial to my continuing grasp of languages of self-understanding—and, of course, these classes may overlap. A self exists only within what I call 'webs of interlocation'.

It is this original situation which gives its sense to our concept of 'identity', offering an answer to the question of who I am through a definition of where I am speaking and to whom. The full definition of someone's identity thus usually involves not only his stand on moral and spiritual matters but also some reference to a defining community. (Taylor 1989, 36)

Here, the community is a primary condition for understanding one's identity. The community does not, however, determine the individual to be a specific entity; rather it merely participates in the discursive production of one's identity. Taylor's conception is neither determinist nor substantivist. (It might be recalled that Taylor criticized the behaviorist anthropological conception.) The self is not the 'punctual' self, which is "defined in abstraction from any constitutive concerns" (Ibid., 49). In other words, the traditional conception of identity that rests on substantial unity is here rejected.

It appears then that Taylor's notion of identity rejects the autonomy or independence of oneself. On the contrary, the independence of the self is set against the background of the community, social organization, or culture. The significance of one's independence or autonomy is defined in the light of these social backdrops. "The self exists among other selves" (Ibid., 35). "I define who I am by defining where I speak from, in the family tree, in social space, in the geography of social statuses and functions, in my intimate relations to the ones I love, and also crucially in the space of moral and spiritual orientation within which my most important

defining relations are lived out,” Taylor writes. This framework that constitutes my identity is indispensable for it forms parts of my concerns. That is why, Taylor here writes:

We are selves only in that certain issues matter for us. What I am as a self, my identity, is essentially defined by the way things have significance for me. And as has been widely discussed, these things have significance for me, and the issue of my identity is worked out, only through a language of interpretation which I have come to accept as a valid articulation of these issues. (Taylor 1989, 34)

Clearly, identity is basically connected to the communal framework—and thus not totally autonomous—because my self-identity is only significant when I matter to those significant persons who matter to me. Here, Smith’s words (2002, 96) come to light: “the most fundamental feature of a self is that things matter to it. The self is first and foremost a being with concerns.” And, the primary concern of the self is the significant others who matter most to it.

That is why, for Taylor, the notion of identity is primarily tied to moral thinking. How is this connection with morality possible? He writes,

What this brings to light is the essential link between identity and a kind of orientation. To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary. (Taylor 1989, 28)

In this sense, self-knowledge entails having the right perspective of my social standing, and this situated vision of my self presupposes, as Taylor claims, ‘strong evaluations’. The call to understanding my identity is not limited to my self-awareness as an individual different from others, but my identity beckons me to respond to questions concerning my social status before others, my role towards them, and position in relation to them. I must address the questions arising from

all these concerns. And, by addressing these questions, I define my identity. Thus, Taylor remarks:

My identity is defined by commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking stand. (Taylor 1989, 27)

This passage reveals to us that what partly constitutes a person's identity is the thing which he/she regards as of higher end, or of the good (Cf. Yeung-shik 2007, 60-63). And since his/her "reflective evaluation" of the higher end is inevitably set within a framework, his self-identity wades through the so-called moral space. When Taylor claims that identity depends on the commitments and identification of who I am, he does presuppose the so-called moral space. (In this sense, Flanagan does make a point in labeling Taylor as moralist in identifying identity with morality). In simple terms, identity is connected to morality.

Taylor identifies three axes of moral thinking that are connected to identity: respect for and obligation toward others, notion of full human life, and dignity. In our search for identity, we are concerned with how others look at us or how we regard others. This can be seen in a person who finds himself in a precarious situation and asks: "Do you know who I am?" It goes without saying that had the other been privy to his identity, the other would have treated him in a different manner. It is tacit, then, that my identity includes a specific way where either I'll be esteemed or demeaned. This axis of respect extends to a conception of what makes a full life. In what sense? Identity requires a "strong evaluation" on "what kind of life is worth living, or what kind of life would fulfill the promise implicit in... particular talents, or the demands incumbent on someone with... endowment, or of what constitutes a rich meaningful life..." (Taylor 1989, 14). Were we to discern and determine our identity we are

obliged to respect, in this sense not to infringe, one's pursuit of what makes a human life full.

Similarly, dignity is associated with respect insofar as the self commands respect from others. But such sense of self can only be discerned in the light of our actions as we perform our social roles. In a sense, my sense of dignity is grounded on my role as, say, a father, policeman, teacher, member of the community, and so on. If I am unable to act responsibly on these roles, it is then that I am regarded as having lost my self-worth or my identity (Ibid., 15).

Having said all these, we can then say that our sense of identity is inseparable to our sense of good. Consequently, identity cannot be construed as referring to one unified self with all the properties attributed to it; it is not substantive. And, since identity is drawn from the framework that provides orientation, it is "complex and many-tiered" (Taylor 1989, 29). Hence it is possible that one commits oneself to certain confession and assumes other identifications. For instance, a person professes as a Buddhist and still identifies himself as a businessman, client, provider, family man, citizen, and so on. Ordinarily, we relate to these identities because they are more noticeable. Our identity, however, is profound and multifaceted far more than we can imagine.

Based on the above, we can now explore the possibility of identity in CMC and CMR.

The possibility of identity in CMCs and CMRs

First, the stumbling block to our understanding of selves in CMC and CMR is the aberration we encounter in a situation where deception or misrepresentation of identities is as clear as broad daylight. Of course, similar cases of deception occur in real life (IRL). Philippines has a lot of examples IRL. But that is not the anchor of the argument. While it is true that misrepresentation or deception occurs in CMCs and CMRs, what is worth analyzing is the dejection and frustration that arise out of the discovery of such deception. The outrage felt by the members of the online community reflects a far deeper understanding or expectation in the virtual world. Despite the numerous possibilities for ruse, any person who engages in the virtual

world defines his identity according to the framework of the virtual community. That is why a newbie, Rheingold narrates, has to orient or be oriented in the MUD for him to be regarded with a certain persona. To use Taylor's language, his identity is defined according to the framework of the virtual community. And to attain an identity that merits certain "respect" entails that such member has to "strongly evaluate" the higher end of the community and be able to discern what it means to be in such community. His identity is fundamentally connected to the moral concerns of such virtual community.

Of course, an opponent can rebut that this notion is only acceptable in a virtual community, not in a "real" community. The rebuttal misses the point. That well-meaning members of the virtual community unanimously feel exasperated and strongly condemn such pretension show that virtual communities possess moral spaces where a member has to delicately consider the status of the members therein, the quality of virtual existence, and the sense of existence in such space. The virtual community has no lack for moral concern.

Furthermore, even if we regard the self as existing offline, its online presence poses no conflict to its identity. The "many-tiered" self does not preclude its online presence. As shown in the cited studies, online CMCs and CMRs embody the motivations, desires, and wishes of the individual; they project dimensions of the self that are kept but whose possibility of exposure is exponentially increased through such communications technology. Thus, cyberspace identities in CMCs and CMRs ironically tend toward a more profound conception of identities as they lead to the direction of nonphysical attributes, especially towards commitments and identifications that include values, beliefs, and so on.

Also, the initial condition of anonymity in CMC and CMR offers a predicament that can be taken, rather than met with skepticism, as an avenue for further disclosures of oneself. Surely, an authentic self-disclosure in an F2F encounter is wished for, but it is easier said than done. While we value IRL communications because we can honestly 'detect' through verbal cues and appearances the message and the personality of the other, parties to the CMCs may be freer or more open because they feel that the condition of anonymity protects

them from embarrassment and rejections, which can easily be received, felt, or discerned in F2F (face to face) communication.

On the part of the one engaging in CMC or CMR, he could be surprised at himself for disclosing an essential facet of himself to a total stranger or for falling for someone whom he has not yet met F2F. He could have said to himself these words: "I never thought I could have done that."

In the light of Taylor's notion of identity, this can be regarded as a disclosure of the complex and multifaceted self. On the one hand, the fear of embarrassment, rejection, or reproach occludes us from exhibiting our true identity IRL, and thus, on the other hand, the cloak of anonymity and almost non-attached attitude toward this online engagement slackens one's guards and inhibitions; the openness about ourselves also follows.

What about online dating relations? We may be cynical about such relationships, but the success or failure of online relationships is no less different from offline ones. Mesch and Talmud, in their study, support this contention. Success of online relationships entails the "meeting place,... social similarity, intensity, and content of relationships..." (Mesch and Talmud 2006, 138). Successful online dating relations that transform into offline relationships require the same honest efforts. Analogically, then, CMRs represent "real" identity in an online community.

Thus, if we were to assess CMCs and CMRs, they all presuppose a presentation of identity that disregards physical properties but emphasizes attributes that are consistent with the expectations of a moral space, even if such space is a cyberspace. If we dare say, CMC and CMR also partially constitute one's complex identity.

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