

## From Texting to Tangible: When Online Communicators Meet Offline

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**Abstract:** Online dating platforms are a popular method of meeting potential romantic partners, but only a few studies have looked at what happens when online communicators choose to meet face-to-face (FtF). Walther's Hyperpersonal Model of computer-mediated communication (CMC) argues that communicators often form idealized perspectives of their online partner due to the ease of curating a positive self-image through CMC. The modality switching perspective then suggests that this idealized perspective can lead to violated expectations when the relationship moves offline, as reality does not often match the perception individuals have mentally formed through CMC. Through in-depth interviews, this study uses qualitative analysis to evaluate the validity of this scenario suggested by both the hyperpersonal model and the modality switching perspective.

**Keywords:** Interpersonal communication, on-line dating, hyperpersonal model, modality switching

### 1. Introduction

A recent study of online dating found that “for as long as humans have recognized the urge to form romantic relationships, they have also recognized that finding an appropriate partner can be challenging, and that sometimes it is useful to get some help” (Finkle, Eastwick, Karney, Reis & Sprecher, 2012, p. 4). Over the past decade, online dating has become a popular form of meeting potential romantic partners, especially among the younger population. Between 2013 and 2016, the number of 18- to 24-year-olds who use online dating roughly tripled, coming to 27% of the population (Pew Research Center, 2016). This same study found that of this population, 22% use online dating via mobile applications – a more than four-fold increase from three years prior (Smith, 2016). These mobile apps include Tinder, Grindr, Happn, Coffee Meets Bagel, and Bumble—descendants of websites like Match.com, OK Cupid, and Christian Mingle.

Regardless of the device, online dating platforms typically have members create a profile including photos and personal information, and then they have the option to browse others' profiles or be matched with a likely partner with similar interests. Members chat online, forming relationships that may eventually reach the tangible world. One study found that two thirds of online daters say they have met FtF with someone they met through a dating site or app, and 5% of Americans who are married or in a committed relationship say they met their partner online (Pew Research Center, 2016). These statistics are not surprising considering that compared to

the traditional way of meeting people through work, mutual friends, or other social situations, online dating provides a vastly wider pool of dating applicants, the ability to communicate before deciding to meet FtF, and the option to be matched through romantic compatibility algorithms (Ramirez, Sumner, Fleuriet & Cole, 2015).

The process of online communication shifting to offline interaction has been labeled “modality switching” by the communication research community. Researchers have looked at how modality switching affects communicators’ perceptions of one another, but primarily through quantitative studies (Ramirez, Sumner, Fleuriet & Cole, 2015; Sprecher & Hampton, 2017).

This study aims to add a human voice to these statistics through qualitative interviews with online daters who have experienced modality switching. As Poole, McPhee and Canary (2002) stated, “theory should guide method; it should indicate what data are appropriate and suggest the types of evidence best suited to test ideas” (pp. 23-24). In this study’s interviews, questions focused on participants’ experience with modality switching, framed through the Walther’s Hyperpersonal Model. These theories created the scaffolding of this study, so it is necessary to review the previously established literature focused on their development and use.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Hyperpersonal Perspective of CMC**

As CMC became more proliferate, researchers began analyzing its ability to foster personalization. In the 1980s and early 1990s, researchers believed CMC provided a “reduced interpersonal affect” that created “uninhibited and depersonalized” communication (Walther, 1996, p. 5). This was believed largely because of the lack of social context cues in CMC. Sprecher and Hampton (2016) report that other studies, however, found that participants could learn to adapt to the mode of communication, providing more intimate verbal communication to compensate for the lack of social cues. This adaptation takes time though, which may explain why participants in studies that focused on short, structured, task-related communication preferred FtF, while studies that focused on a long-term social atmosphere found participants might even prefer CMC (McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002).

As these researchers found conflicting results about the personalization of CMC, Joseph B. Walther outlined a new viewpoint, a hyperpersonal perspective, in 1996.

The hyperpersonal model argues that in some cases, CMC can actually be more positive than FtF communication. The first part of this model includes the idealized perception created by the message receiver. Walther used social identity-deindividuation (SIDE) theory to explain the circumstances of this occurrence, citing studies by Spears & Lea (see Spears and Lea, 1992). According to SIDE, the lack of FtF cues in CMC combined with no prior personal knowledge of one’s partner leads to inflated perceptions of whatever subtle personality cues appear in CMC (Walther, 1996). For example, misspellings, typographical errors, or excessive punctuation may equate a certain perception of the communicator, when in FtF conversation similarly minimal cues would most likely not be considered so strongly. This process of making minute judgments leads to an overall perception of one’s partner, but they may all be made subconsciously. This study aims to analyze if communicators created idealized perceptions of

their partner, and if they were aware of it enough to report it in interviews.

**RQ1:** What perceptions of their partner did individuals create when communicating via CMC, before meeting FtF?

While the message receiver creates idealized perceptions, the message senders of CMC have the opportunity for optimized self-presentation. Due to the delayed timing of CMC compared to FtF communication, Walther's 1992 study found CMC message senders plan and self-censor their communication: "With more time for message construction and less stress of ongoing interaction, users may have taken the opportunity for objective self-awareness, reflection, selection and transmission of preferable cues" (as cited in Walther, 1996, p.19). Additionally, the cognitive resources typically devoted to maintaining physical norms in FtF communication – nodding, smiling, "looking interested," etc. – can be redirected to language selection in CMC, allowing for a more positive self-presentation (Walther, 1996). In other words, "without having to monitor nonverbal expressions, people can devote increased resources to verbal message production" (High & Caplan, 2009, p. 476). This study aims to analyze the self-presentation of communicators in their own words.

**RQ2:** How do individuals present themselves when communicating via CMC, before meeting FtF?

The third and final aspect of the hyperpersonal model is the intensification loop. Through behavioral confirmation, the effects of the receiver's idealized perception and the sender's optimized self-presentation becomes magnified (Walther, 1996). The phenomenon of behavioral confirmation has been presented through early research with telephone interactions. In Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid's (1977) research, males who believed they were speaking to an "attractive" partner used different communication than males who believed they were speaking to "unattractive" females. When males believed they were speaking to an attractive partner, their behavior affected the female partner's engagement in the conversation; the female partner came to behave in the expected fashion, with more confidence and greater enjoyment of the communication. This exemplifies the intensification loop of CMC in Walther's hyperpersonal model.

According to Walther (1996), "CMC provides, in some cases, opportunities for selective self-presentation, idealization, and reciprocation. This renders hyperpersonal communication, forms of interaction that exceed what we may accomplish FtF, in terms of our impression-generating and relational goals" (p. 28). This hyperpersonal communication can, however, lead to unrealistic expectations when partners meet FtF (Sprecher & Hampton, 2016).

## 2.2. Modality Switching Perspective

Online dating provides a platform for potential partners to communicate, but it is up to the individuals to decide if and when they will meet FtF. In a 2006 study of online daters by Whitty and Carr (as cited in Ramirez, Sumner, Fleuriet & Cole, 2015), 65% of participants made plans to meet within the first week of communicating online. The modality switching perspective

suggests that online daters experience different outcomes depending on the length of time communicating via CMC before meeting FtF (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007; Ramirez & Wang, 2008). Research has shown that modality switching “leads to reduced uncertainty and more positive outcomes within short-term online partnerships, yet often provokes uncertainty and more negative outcomes by violating the expectations of long-term online partners” (Ramirez, Sumner, Fleuriet & Cole, 2015, p. 100). The hyperpersonal model has been suggested as an explanation as to why long-term online partners frequently experience unexpected outcomes when meeting FtF (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007). In a study by Sharabi & Caughlin (2017), the majority of online communicators experienced an overall decline in social attraction after meeting FtF for the first time, showing evidence of “disillusionment.” This study aims to analyze personal experiences with this situation.

**RQ3:** How did moving from CMC to FtF within a short time period of initial interaction affect the relationship?

**RQ4:** How did taking a longtime to move from CMC to FtF after initial interaction affect the relationship?

Multiple studies have analyzed the effects of modality switching on short-term and long-term online relationships, but only through statistical data (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007; Ramirez & Wang, 2008; Ramirez, Sumner, Fleuriet & Cole, 2015). Bubbles on a questionnaire can be labeled “physical attractiveness,” “intimacy,” “uncertainty levels,” and “social attraction,” but what do these phrases mean in the real world? Are feelings really best measured numerically? This study aims to add to this conversation by contributing voice to areas of study that have been previously dominated by quantitative data.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Data Collection & Analysis**

This qualitative study consisted of 16 one-on-one in-depth interviews. Participants must have utilized an online dating platform in the past and have met at least one partner from that platform FtF. Participants were recruited via a flyer shared on the first author’s personal Facebook page, which called for individuals to self-nominate for the study or share the flyer themselves. Other participants were recruited by asking friends to recommend others who fit the study’s parameters. This last method is known as the “snowball effect” and has been determined to be a successful method of recruiting (Granovetter, 1976).

Interviews were conducted either FtF in the first author’s apartment or via Skype/ Facebook video chat if the participant lived outside of Boston. The interviews were recorded with participant permission. Questions focused on the communication between the partners both online and offline, what perceptions the participant had of their partner while communicating online, how these perceptions were met or violated when they met FtF, and how this affected their relationship from that point forward, if at all. Interviews were conducted with a casual,

conversational tone and aimed to create a narrative of the participants' experiences with modality switching. They ranged from 8 to 34 minutes in length, with most lasting around 15 minutes.

After the interviews were completed, the interview transcriptions were analyzed to determine commonalities or differences between the participants' experiences. Through the reporting of these experiences, the reality of the scenario proposed by the hyperpersonal and modality switching models, which states that idealized perceptions of an online communication partner may lead to violated expectations upon FtF meeting, depending on the amount of time spent communicating before meeting FtF, emerged (Walther, 1996; Ramirez, Sumner, Fleuriet & Cole, 2015). Other studies defined short and long time periods as 2 vs. 4 weeks, or 4 vs. 6 weeks (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007; Ramirez & Wang, 2008), but in this study no participants communicated with an online partner for longer than three weeks. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, a short time period is defined as anything less than one week, and a long time period is anything lasting a week or more.

### **3.2. Participants**

Sixteen participants volunteered to be interviewed for this study: eight women who spoke about dating men, two women who spoke of dating both men and women, one woman who self-identified as queer, and one man who self-identified as gay, and four men identified as heterosexual. Their ages ranged from 21 to 27 years. All currently live in the New England region, except for one who grew up in Massachusetts but now studies in Montreal, Quebec. The majority of participants stated they used/use online dating platforms to meet potential relationship partners, but two stated using them for the purposes of finding people they could have sex with, or a hook-up.

Many of the participants had some sort of prior knowledge of the first author of this work, whether they are close friends from college or met once at summer camp seven years ago. Some of them were recommended by those who knew the author. Participants were allowed to decide what name to use in the research and some of the participants selected pseudonyms for the purpose of concealing their identity in this research. Others chose to have their real names used. More information on each of the participants can be found in Appendix 1.

## **4. Data**

### **4.1. Perceptions of Communication Partners via CMC**

The first research question asked what perceptions individuals create of their partner when communicating via CMC, before meeting FtF. Interviews determined that overall, participants created positive views of their partner, but the depth of this perception depended on the individual's goal. Those who were seeking a long-term relationship created a more dynamic opinion of their partner than those who were using the dating platform out of boredom or simply seeking sex. The basis for partner perceptions could be broken down into four different areas: participants either had no expectations or based their expectations on profile pictures, conversational topic/tone, or the partner's hobbies. Profile pictures and conversational topic

were the most popular foundations for expectations.

**No Expectations.** Nadia, 22, has been using the dating app Coffee Meets Bagel for almost a year now, looking for a relationship but occasionally just hooking up with partners. One man she spoke with turned into a few months of casually dating. “He seemed very well-read and intelligent, which he was... I don’t think I had too many expectations for him to be honest,” said Nadia. “I was just kind of winging it, and I feel like that kind of works better in a way when you don’t have expectations.”

For Nadia, the first time she meets FtF with a partner is important, regardless of how they seem online. “I feel like that kind of stuff is physical attraction, and someone can seem great on paper so to speak, but it’s different actually talking to someone and actually seeing what they look like, and being around their aura,” she said, “so that first actual meeting, I put a lot of stock into that.”

Asha, 21, prefers to meet quickly after connecting online, but this doesn’t always leave a lot of time to learn about the other. When you are just looking for sex, this is not much of an issue. She recently went on her “first real Tinder date” though, after talking with a man for three days, and still did not grasp much of a perception of his personality. “He’s really into me, so I expected me to be less into him,” said Asha, “and I was interested in figuring out how that dynamic would be. Real good.” When asked about his personality though, she responded “I didn’t think about it. I didn’t think about his personality. It was three days [of talking].”

**Profile Pictures.** Dan, 24, has been using Grindr for nearly 8 years, excluding a couple years when he was in a relationship. “I’ve definitely met guys where it’s like, ‘Okay, you take a good picture,’ or ‘Okay, I guess I didn’t ask for a body pic,’” said Dan, but overall, people’s photos are true to what they look like in real life. Still, in one instance, Dan met with an individual who surprised him: “He was like way cuter than I was expecting him to be,” said Dan.

Both Jill, 21, and Nichol, 22, had experiences where individuals did not look like how they presented themselves on Tinder. For each of them, this was a notable experience. “She looked nothing like her picture,” said Jill, whose partner was heavier than she seemed in pictures. “[The photos] must have been Photo-Shopped or from years ago.” Nichol said her partner’s photos were definitely not recent; they were from when he was in the Navy. He was much thinner than from the required training. “Which is fine,” said Nichol, “but your pictures need to be up to date... like he really let himself go.”

Obviously, due to the visual nature of profiles, these pictures only helped to build expectations of what an individual would be like physically. Emotional and social expectations were built through the following two areas.

**Conversational Topic/Tone.** Sophie, 24, thought a man she met with recently would be “very brainy” because of their first conversation. They began talking when she was reading before bed, “so we talked about books,” she said. “We talked about post-colonialist literature. I don’t get to talk about that to too many people, so I was so excited, so happy to talk to him about really brainy stuff.”

Jill communicated with one woman for two weeks on Tinder. This woman seemed very talkative via chat, so Jill expected her to be this way in person. Phyllis, 21, expected someone to be more interesting in person because they held good conversations via text. Each of them cited the frequency of the messages and the easygoing tone as indicators of their partner’s personality.

For Dan, the speed at which relationships commence on Grindr doesn't have to minimize the grasp he can get on a person's persona or physicality. "You get it down to a fuckin' science after a while," he said, noting the blunt and straightforward conversations that lead to hookups: "It's like, 'Hey,' 'Hey,' 'How's it going?' 'Good, where you from?' blah, blah, blah, 'You looking?' 'Yeah, what are you into? Verse, top, bottom, oral, whatever.' 'Can you host, or do you travel?' 'Do you want to come over now?' 'Cool, see you soon.'" The immediacy of the meet tends to discourage people from sharing photos that aren't true to their physical reality.

**Hobbies.** Olivia, 21, lives in Montreal, Quebec. She matched with a man on Tinder who she already knew of because they had similar friend groups at university. "I kind of imagined them to be very intellectual and sort of understanding, and a good conversationalist just based on their friend circle and what they studied," said Olivia.

Nichol spoke of a relationship with a woman where their shared interests created a certain expectation. "I pictured her being mostly like me because we liked a lot of the same things," said Nichol, "and we both did sports in high school, and she's a gym teacher now."

While participants used profile pictures, conversational topics/tones, or hobbies to build expectations – if they built expectations at all – many of these same categories were the focus when participants were building their own online persona.

#### 4.2. Self-Presentation via CMC

The second research question asked how individuals present themselves when communicating via CMC. Most participants, when prompted, had to think for a while about the image they attempt to curate, but were able to give insightful answers. Some steered conversation towards certain topics. Others were more focused on their physical representation (i.e. photo choices) than their portrayal of emotions. Even then, they usually tried to show their personality/interests through the photos. Many include travel photos, or photos with their favorite drink at a bar. Overall, the process of self-presentation could be broken into two categories: profile construction and conversation topics/tones.

**Profile Construction.** "I try to use photos that really describe who I am," said Nichol. "A smiling photo, a goofy photo, kind of like the photos that I would use on my profile picture on Facebook. Those are generally the photos that I would choose because that's how I want people to see me."

"I'm definitely like 'Oh my God, I need to pick my hottest picture,' for my profile picture or whatever," said Dan. "My bio, I try to keep it short and light and witty." Olivia said she is very particular about the images that create her profile; they're "of course... very censored." She chooses photos that are "glossy and dreamy."

Phyllis was hesitant to dissect her online persona. When prompted, however, she admitted, "Yeah, I mean I don't want to put an ugly picture. Yeah, I'd say I try to put myself in a good light."

Participants with heavy body types in particular were very clear about having to include a full-body picture in their profile. "There's this whole thing about people thinking that you're going to be thinner than you are in person," said Sophie, "so I try to just nip that in the butt immediately. This is what I look like." Asha was even more upfront about this: "It's good to have body pictures. I don't want to shock someone that I'm fat."

There was an awareness among participants that when you put together a profile, you are curating your personality. Asha, an Indian woman, is adamantly opposed to dating or hooking-up with any Caucasian, but feels it would be inappropriate to share this outwardly on her profile. “I want my Tinder profile to say just: ‘Do I look like I fuck white people?’ I want to say it so much,” said Asha. But why doesn’t she? “Because people from work are on Tinder, and I don’t want them to know that I’m racist.” Still, even with this slight self-censorship, she said “nothing is not who I am.”

**Conversational Topics/Tone.** In conversation, Dan said he chats the way he would with someone he just met in the street: less flamboyant and more straightforward than usual. “I guess when I’m online it’s more like ‘Hey bro, what’s up?’ like, ‘You got a big dick?’” said Dan, laughing. Or, in general, he’s “kind of witty to draw him in a little bit.”

Olivia said she communicates how she imagines she would on a first date. “I think I would do a lot of mirroring of what the other person would do in their style of language use,” she said, “so that might not have been as genuine as my own typical vocabulary when I talk to a friend.”

Asha is a straightforward person and says she does not communicate differently with different people. Still, she said while she will message women first, the men have to reach out to her first. In conversations, she will be more guarded with men, but “not smarter or stupider or girly-er or any of that.”

Nadia, also a very straightforward person, did not feel she self-censored at all, but said she would usually talk about work and travel first. “I think right away one of the first things I talk about is work, because I have an abnormal job that people tend to find interesting,” said Nadia, a broadcast reporter. “And traveling. Really I think that’s the best way I first connect with a guy because if they’re not interested in traveling, I can just tell that we have different personalities.”

### 4.3. Modality Switching After a Short Time Period

The third research question asked how the relationship was affected when communicators transitioned from CMC to FtF within a short time period of initial interaction. For the purposes of this study, any amount of communication less than one week was defined as “a short time period.” Participants reported what expectations they formed of their partner, if these expectations were violated when they met FtF, and how this affected the relationship. The data can be divided into two experiences: those where expectations were met, and those where expectations were violated. Through participant interviews, six total situations of short-term modality switching were reported. Of these, expectations were fulfilled in two situations, both leading to positive outcomes. Expectations were violated in the other four situations, three leading to negative outcomes and one leading to a positive outcome. There were no situations where fulfilled expectations led to negative outcomes.

**Expectations Fulfilled.** Asha was only talking to her partner for one day on Tinder before the two met up. With such a short period of conversation, she had few expectations beyond him being cocky and funny. When they met, “he was very smooth.” They met up for hook-ups a few more times and remain friends now.

Another man Asha met up with was a collegiate coach, so she expected him to have a fit body – all she really cared about since they were only meeting for sex. They communicated for

four days on Tinder before meeting FtF. He fit her expectations physically, but not emotionally.

**Expectations Violated.** After Asha and the man hooked up, he later messaged her saying, “You haven’t said one positive thing about my dick.” Asha was shocked – she had not said anything negative to prompt this message. “One of the most beautiful men I’ve been with. He was so insecure,” laughed Asha. “That was a good body. And a good dick! I don’t know why he was upset.” This man was physically what she expected, but after four days of talking she did not realize he was so emotionally insecure. “He was weird emotionally,” she said. “And he kept asking me about my other Tinder happenings...and I just answered him because I didn’t think too much about it.” This did not ruin the relationship (Asha said they’re making plans to hang out again), but it was a violated expectation.

Olivia met a man from Tinder at a coffee shop after two days of talking, expecting him to be an intellectual, but in reality, “he was sort of restrained and a little bit judgmental.” They disagreed in political viewpoints, and he carried himself in a very “proud” manner. “It was a little bit off-putting,” said Olivia. Expectations were violated and Olivia did not hold a very positive opinion of the experience. Still, the two did meet once again before ending the possibility of a relationship. “It was okay,” said Olivia, “but I don’t think either of us were that committed to the idea of continuing it.”

Dan was chatting with a man on Grindr for less than a day when the two met FtF for the purpose of buying and selling some marijuana. When he went over, Dan found the man to be much more attractive than he had thought he was based on the Grindr profile. The two ended up hanging out, which led to a hook-up relationship for six to eight months. Although they’re not intimately involved anymore, they are still good friends today. For Dan, the violation of expectations was a positive experience.

This was not the case for Nichol. Nichol was chatting with a man on Tinder for just a day or two before they met up. While he seemed like an average conversationalist via the online dating platform, he ended up being rude and inconsiderate when they met FtF. “He’d just talk right over me,” said Nichol. “He had no respect for my thoughts...I didn’t notice any weirdness until we actually met up and I was like, this guy doesn’t shut up.”

Overall, when expectations were fulfilled, participants had a positive experience. When expectations were violated, participants had mostly negative experiences; there was only one instance when violated expectations created a positive experience. This trend held true for modality switching after a longer time period as well.

#### 4.4. Modality Switching After a Longer Time Period

The fourth research question asked how the relationship was affected when communicators transitioned from CMC to FtF after a long time period of online interaction. For the purposes of this study, “a long time period” was defined as any amount of communication lasting one week or more. Again, participants reported on their perceptions of their partner, if their expectations were fulfilled when the two met FtF, and how this affected the relationship. Experiences can be divided into the same two categories – expectations fulfilled and expectations violated – and participants had positive and negative experiences with each. Through participant interviews, eight total situations of long-term modality switching were reported. Of these, expectations

were fulfilled in two situations, both leading to positive outcomes. Expectations were violated in the other six situations, five leading to negative outcomes and one leading to a positive outcome. There were no situations where fulfilled expectations led to negative experiences.

**Expectations Fulfilled.** Dan was studying abroad in England when he met James on Grindr. “I remember I liked him because his bio was like, ‘I’m willing to lie about how we met,’” said Dan. After chatting for a week or so, the two met FtF. “I expected him to be a witty, asshole, English dude,” said Dan, “and he was, and I fell for it.” Dan and James dated for two and a half years, a large portion of which was long-distance once Dan moved back to the United States. In this situation, Dan’s communication partner met his expectations and he had a very positive experience.

Nadia did not have many expectations going into her Coffee Meets Bagel date, but after talking for a week, she knew he was an avid traveler. Therefore, she expected him to talk about his travels a lot (a topic she also enjoys), and he did. She also expected him to be intelligent, and he was. While she did not have too many expectations for her date overall, those she did have were met. This was a positive experience for her, and the two continued casually dating for a couple months afterwards.

**Expectations Violated.** After communicating for a week, Olivia met a Francophone man FtF. Living in Quebec, English and French language and culture often interact, but sometimes jokes and other small aspects of conversation do not translate well. This made the date “intense,” said Olivia. “He seemed much more chill and ‘go-with-the-flow’ and a little bit artsy on his profile. Everything seemed very calculated and mechanical in person.” Additionally, the two had different expectations of how the evening would end. “It’s always a red flag for me if they end the date by saying ‘So why are you on Tinder?’” said Olivia, “and I’m like, ‘Well we’re probably not going to have sex right now if that’s what you’re wondering.’” Overall, “it was a weird, tense evening,” and Olivia did not meet with him again.

Nadia met with Corey from Coffee Meets Bagel after chatting for 1-2 weeks, but did not find him as physically attractive as she thought she would. “He was really nice,” she said, “and that was the weird thing – it was like effortless conversation, but literally two seconds in I was like, I’m not attracted to you at all.” Since Corey was over six feet tall, she expected him to have a more masculine voice than he did. While she says she knows it sounds terrible to turn down a guy because he has a high voice, Nadia just did not find herself attracted to him. This violation of expectations ended the relationship they had started to build online.

Phyllis also met with a man from Coffee Meets Bagel after chatting for two weeks, but while Nadia’s physical expectations were violated, the man Phyllis met with violated her expectations for his personality. Physically, he fit his profile, but, “He was probably more boring in person, better through chatting,” said Phyllis. “I think it’s easier for people to carry conversation when you’re just texting back and forth, and then in person it’s just hard to do it on the spot especially.”

This change in chattiness also happened when Jill met a Tinder partner FtF. “She was so talkative online, like we talked for two weeks every second of every day, and she would tell me stories and laugh with me, and I saw her in person and literally not word out of her,” said Jill. Not only this, but the woman looked completely different as well. “I literally didn’t even recognize her,” said Jill. “She was not pretty at all in person, and she was heavier, which

I wouldn't care, but I was not expecting it." With both physical and personal expectations violated, Jill remembers this date as the worst she has ever been on. "I literally felt like I got catfished," she said.

For Nichol, the violated expectations created a positive experience. She had been talking with a woman on the all-female application Her for around two weeks before they met FtF. When they Snapchatted before meeting, Nichol noticed that her partner took very masculine photos, and would not really smile in them. This led to her to be uncertain of what to expect, "but then when I met her, she's all smiles." Her personality was also more outgoing than Nichol had expected. "I was surprised by how much she actually initiated the conversation because I was really shy, and I thought she was going to be really shy," said Nichol. They dated for around two months and are still friends now.

Sophie was talking to a man on Tinder for two and a half weeks before they met FtF. They talked about literature and he was a good conversationalist. This translated to FtF, but he was more nervous than Sophie was expecting. "He seemed pretty confident in text, so I was kind of expecting that, but he was very fidgety in person," she said. He also looked older in his pictures than he did FtF. He was actually younger than her and acted more childish than she expected. "He was just a lot more immature in person than I was expecting, like he's very well-read so I thought that would equate maturity," said Sophie, but that was not the case.

As stated, fulfilled expectations created positive experiences for participants, and violated expectations created negative experiences for all but one participant.

## 5. Discussion

As online dating platforms gain popularity with the increasing prevalence of technology in our daily lives, more studies are looking towards the effects of technology on human communication (Pauley & Emmers-Sommer, 2007; Corriero & Tong, 2016; Yeo & Fung, 2018; Tang, 2017). Most studies have used quantitative data to understand these trends (Ramirez, Sumner, Fleuriet & Cole, 2015; Sprecher & Hampton, 2017), but this study aimed to add voice to the understanding of human communication. Specifically, this study aimed to analyze how CMC affected communicators' perceptions of partners, plus their own goals with self-presentation. This study also aimed to look at communicators' experiences with modality switching – when online partners meet FtF for the first time – based on the amount of time they communicated online before meeting FtF. Walther's hyperpersonal model (1996) and the modality switching perspective (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007; Ramirez & Wang, 2008) provided a framework for these analyses.

### 5.1. Perceptions of Communication Partners via CMC

The hyperpersonal model uses the social identity-deindividuation (SIDE) theory, outlined primarily by Spears & Lea and cited by Walther (1996), to state that since CMC lacks the social cues unique to FtF communication, communication partners will create inflated perceptions of the subtle personality cues that do appear (if they have no prior personal knowledge of each other). These cues can include misspellings or punctuation use – factors that would not exist in FtF communication. These minute judgments lead to a constructed identity for the partner, but

their importance may be inflated by the lack of other social cues.

The participants of this study were asked about the perceptions they had of their communication partners. Overall, the details that created perceptions were profile pictures, conversational topic/tone, or the partner's hobbies.

Two participants, Nadia and Asha, did not create perceptions of much depth for their partners. Possibly because they were not seriously seeking a long-term relationship, each of them did not read into their online conversations too much. Nadia said she was just "winging it" with her dates, so did not think beyond her partners' general interest in travel or work. Asha was usually just seeking sex through Tinder, so she created a habit of not considering one's personality. In most relations, the partner's physicality is all that mattered. Even when Asha went on "a real Tinder date," she did not consider the man's personality.

Profile pictures can create a perception of one's personality (Wu, Chang & Yuan, 2015) – something participants seemed to be more aware of when constructing their own profile – but pictures merely created superficial perceptions of their partner. Olivia thought her partner would be more "artsy" based on his profile. Nichol mentioned that her partner rarely smiled in any of her photos – profile or Snapchat – so she was worried her partner was not a very cheerful person. But beyond these vague ideas, the perceptions created through photos were nearly always focused entirely on physicality. Dan, a frequent user of Grindr, said you learn to ask for more pictures if the profile did not create a full idea of what the partner looked like.

Instead of reading into every available detail, as the hyperpersonal model suggests, participants rarely used photo cues as important indicators of personality. They were used more as potential guidelines of reality in terms of personality, but created strict expectations for physicality.

Conversational topics and tone led participants to create perceptions with more of a focus on their partner's personality. In line with the hyperpersonal model, Sophie had one conversation with a partner about post-colonial literature and took this as an indicator that he was "brainy" overall. Jill and Phyllis took the frequency of messages and the easygoing tone as cues that their partners were more talkative than in reality.

Lastly, knowledge of partners' hobbies led to certain inflated perceptions, as the hyperpersonal model predicted. Olivia knew her partner was a political science major with a similar group of friends as her, so she expected him to be intelligent and understanding. She applied general perceptions about her friend group and people with a political science major to this man. Nichol expected her partner to have the same personality as her because they were both women with similar interests in sports.

Throughout nearly all the participants' reports of how they created perceptions of their online partner, the hyperpersonal model's predictions reigned true. It was only with perceptions created through photos that participants did not inflate the information available into an idealized understanding of their partner. With cues presented through conversation, participants took small aspects of their partner and applied them to their partner's whole persona, as outlined in the hyperpersonal model. The same occurred with inferences of personality based on hobbies.

## **5.2. Self-Presentation via CMC**

The hyperpersonal model also argues that CMC allows for optimized self-presentation. The

delayed timing of CMC allows communicators to self-censor their messages, and since they do not have to worry about maintaining the social norms required in FtF communication, more energy can go towards language selection (Walther, 1996). Thus, in CMC, message senders can almost always put their best face forward.

The participants of this study were asked about their own self-presentation via online dating platforms. Responses show most participants are aware they are crafting an optimized persona via their profile, although sometimes the decision to do so seemed almost automatic or subconscious. Self-presentation was curated through profile construction and conversation topic/tone.

When designing their profile, most participants put more consideration into their photo selection than their bio. The types of photos they chose related to the type of image they wanted to create for themselves. Nichol said she tries to pick personality pictures, like a goofy photo; Dan said he chooses his hottest photos; Olivia creates a dreamy aesthetic. Phyllis did not vocalize putting much thought into her profile, but conveyed a sense of obviousness behind her choosing her best photos. Sophie made sure her photos included her interests and hobbies: a photo at a museum, a bar, traveling abroad, etc.

While everyone knew they wanted to put their best face forward, there was also an importance that you have to portray how you really look – posting PhotoShopped images would only lead to violated expectations upon FtF interaction. Both Sophie and Asha, who have heavier body types, noted the importance of including body pictures to show what they look like. Everyone followed the patterns of the hyperpersonal model's optimized self-presentation when it came to profile construction, but participants also took steps to avoid violating the potential expectations of their partner.

Bios provide more flexibility for self-presentation than photos because it is all intangible attributes. Most participants expressed trying to be witty, naming their music or drink interests, or including lines from their favorite TV show. Asha decided to censor herself in her bio by not including a comment that could be seen as racist. In aFtF interaction, Asha may inadvertently say something that reveals this aspect of her personality, but through her online dating profile, she has all the time to construct the personality she wants to portray. This is a clear example of optimized self-presentation through CMC.

Participants were also aware of the judgments their partner would make based on their conversation when chatting through CMC. Many noted using a tone or language similar to that they would use on a first date, or when meeting a stranger for the first time. Dan said he is usually a bit less flamboyant but tries to be wittier and more engaging. Olivia said she might be less quirky or mirrors the tone and language of whoever she is chatting with. Via CMC, she said she is "more thoughtful in [her] responses." The hyperpersonal model says being able to pause and be more thoughtful is a strength of CMC, allowing more time for optimized self-presentation.

The topic of conversation can also allow for control of self-presentation. Nadia, a broadcast reporter, said she usually talks about work and travel via her online dating apps because she has a job most people find interesting. She has also traveled a lot, and whether her partner likes to travel is a strong indicator if she thinks they are compatible or not. The blank slate of CMC allows communicators to steer conversation towards topics that may put them in a

better light. This is possible in FtF communication as well, but external stimuli and other social implications may have more influence on conversation.

On the whole, the hyperpersonal model provides an accurate framework for understanding the participants' perceptions and decisions when using CMC. Individuals had both inflated perceptions of their partner and optimized their self-presentation. The awareness of these factors varied, however. Participants seemed to be more aware of their control of optimized self-presentation than the likelihood to create inflated perceptions of their partner.

### **5.3. Modality Switching**

The modality switching perspective (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007; Ramirez & Wang, 2008) suggests that online communicators are likely to have positive experiences when they meet FtF within a short-time period of initial online interactions (Ramirez, Sumner, Fleuriet & Cole, 2015). When they transfer from CMC to FtF after a long period of online interaction, however, they are more likely to have negative experiences; this is due to the violation of expectations built up through inflated perceptions of the partner (Ramirez, Sumner, Fleuriet & Cole, 2015; Walther, 1996).

In reports from participants, however, the amount of time spent chatting via CMC seemed to have no connection with whether expectations were fulfilled or violated. Whether they communicated for a short time period (defined as less than one week) or a longer time period (defined as any amount of time a week or more), more participants reported violated expectations than not. This may be due to the nature of the study. Participants were asked to disclose their most memorable experiences – which, when emotions are involved, can lean negative (Garcia-Bajos & Migueles, 2013) – and negative experiences usually correlate with violated expectations (Ramirez, Sumner, Fleuriet & Cole, 2015).

There also may have been an issue with the definitions of time. The difference between communicating for three days and communicating for a week may not be large enough to allow for unique experiences in terms of expectation formation. Other studies have used much longer time frames to define short term and long term: Ramirez & Zhang (2007) defined short term as two weeks and long term as four or more weeks, while Ramirez & Wang (2008) defined short term as three weeks and long term as six weeks. In their quantitative studies, however, interactions were structured and controlled, while this current study used data gathered from participants' past experiences.

Participants did report having positive experiences when expectations were fulfilled, and majority negative experiences when expectations were violated. This connection does agree with the framework of the modality switching perspective (Ramirez, Sumner, Fleuriet & Cole, 2015), even if the length of time aspect does not.

### **5.4. Limitations**

This study's results were limited by time constraints, participant recruitment, and human bias in self-disclosure. Where previous studies have included results from hundreds of individuals, this study only included personal reports from sixteen participants. A larger, more diverse range of participants are recommended for future studies of similar formats. This could also aid in

creating a larger difference between short term and long term modality switching. Since only 16 participants were interviewed, there was a small range of experiences in terms of length of time chatting via CMC. The first author of this research divided the time periods available into two categories in order to analyze the modality switching perspective; this led to this study's definitions of short term and long term, but those may not be the best definitions.

This research was also reliant on participants self-disclosing information about their previous romantic relationships. It is possible that the positive or negative labels on each situation may be influenced by the effects of these relationships on the participant. Due to the nature of qualitative data, however, this immersion of emotions is natural.

Participants also did not disclose every single time they have had aFtF meeting with someone they met through CMC. They were only asked to disclose the most memorable, which may have swayed the data towards the more extreme situations of modality switching. Had every single situation been disclosed, this study could have created a fuller picture of the modality switching perspective.

In terms of the hyperpersonal perspective, this study considered only the inflated perceptions of partners and optimized self-presentation – neglecting to incorporate the intensification loop. This third aspect of the hyperpersonal perspective could not be analyzed because interviews were only conducted with one side of a communication dyad. Participants' partners were not sought out for interviews.

### **5.5. Call for Future Research**

In the vast array of communication studies on modality switching and the hyperpersonal model, close to none use qualitative data. While this study attempted to add voice to the literature, other studies could take it further, correcting the limitations outlined above and deepening the qualitative studies in this field.

Additionally, it is uncertain what length of time communicating online leads to inflated perceptions of one's partner. Studies have used all different lengths of time, but none were definitive. This may be dependent on the individual, so perhaps it would be more constructive to analyze frequency or depth of communication to determine the effectiveness of the modality switching perspective.

Other interesting aspects of online dating platforms emerged while interviewing participants for this study, and some could become studies of their own. For example, participants reported various motivations for using online dating platforms (to create a social network, for entertainment, to find a romantic partner, to find a sexual partner, etc.). It would be interesting to see how the motivation for using a dating platform affects the user's experience.

### **6. Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to add human voices to the data surrounding the hyperpersonal perspective (Walther, 1996) and the modality switching perspective (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007; Ramirez & Wang, 2008). The data was analyzed to test the validity of these perspectives in terms of participant reports. Through interviews with sixteen individuals, this study found

that the hyperpersonal model was exemplified in participant's experiences, although they were not always aware of the idealized perspective they were creating for their partner. The modality switching perspective, however, was not exemplified, as it seemed length of time communicating via CMC before meeting FtF did not impact the outcome or evaluation of the situation. Whether or not expectations were met or violated was a better indicator of participant's response to an FtF meeting.

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### Author Note

The first author, Renae Reints, conducted the pilot study for this research in a capstone Honors class taught by the second author. This paper won an award for the best Communication and Journalism project and was awarded second prize in the College of Arts and Science at Suffolk University. She graduated from Suffolk University in Spring of 2018 and is currently working in California.

The second author, Bruce Wickelgren, was the professor for the capstone class and coupled with Renae to turn the pilot study into a full blown study appropriate for publication. Dr. Wickelgren presented the research at the IAICS conference in Brno, Czech Republic in July 2019.

### Appendix 1. Participant Profiles

**Olivia** is 21 years old. She is from southcoast Massachusetts, but is currently a senior at a university in Montreal, Quebec. She is studying cognitive science with a minor in social studies in medicine. Olivia has been using both Tinder and Bumble off and on for roughly two years.

She communicates via CMC with 5-10 people per month, but not on-going conversations. During the past two years, Olivia has met FtF with 6 or 7 people from these platforms. Olivia is seeking a relationship, and ceases using online dating platforms when she is dating someone or if she thinks she will soon be dating someone. Olivia only discussed meeting with men.

**Dan** is 24 years old. He is from Rhode Island. He studied marketing and business administration at a university there, then moved to Boston after graduation three years ago. He currently works for a designer fashion company. Dan has three different online dating profiles: Grindr, The League, and Seeking Arrangement. He self-identifies as gay and only uses these apps to meet men. He has been using Grindr for 7 or 8 years but deletes it if he has a boyfriend (which has happened twice within this time period). Dan will sometimes talk to up to 15-20 people per day on Grindr, but only meets FtF with someone once every couple months. He has had a profile on The League for roughly two years, but uses this app less often. Seeking Arrangement is newer to Dan – he has had it less than a year – but he only uses it once every two months or so. Dan primarily uses Grindr, usually with the goal to hook up with someone while away on travel. He also uses it as a social network – to find what bars/clubs are popular, where to buy marijuana, etc.

**Nadia** is 22 years old. She is from the north shore of Massachusetts, got her undergraduate degree at a university in Boston, and now works as a reporter in rural Maine. Nadia used to have Bumble, but stopped using that app around a year ago and switched exclusively to Coffee Meets Bagel. On Coffee Meets Bagel, Nadia has talked to around 25 people, possibly more. Of these, she has met FtF with five. Nadia is seeking a more long-term relationship, but occasionally just hooks up with people she meets. Nadia only spoke of dating men.

**Phyllis** is 21 years old. She was born in Indonesia, but grew up in the US, primarily in New Hampshire. Phyllis got her undergraduate degree in computer science at a university in Boston. She still lives in Boston and works for an insurance company there. Phyllis has been using the app Coffee Meets Bagel for around two years, but stopped for roughly seven months during a transition at work. She has talked to around 24 people within the past two years, but has met FtF with just one. Phyllis is seeking a relationship. She spoke only of dating men.

**Jill** is 21 years old. She is from south coast Massachusetts and studies criminal justice victimology and political science at a state university in this area. She used to use Tinder, but has not for roughly seven months because she got a boyfriend. While on Tinder, Jill talked to about 4 or 5 people per week. She met FtF with three people in total. Jill was seeking more of a long-term relationship on the dating platform. She spoke of dating both men and women.

**Asha** is 21 years old. She is from India, got her undergraduate degree in computer science in Boston, and now works as software engineer in Providence, Rhode Island. She has been using Tinder for roughly six months and has chatted with around 400 people. Of these, she has met FtF with less than 10. Asha uses Tinder primarily for hook-ups, but recently started using it to date as well. She spoke of seeing both men and women.

**Nichol** is 22 years old. She is from south coast Massachusetts but currently studies public health at a state university in northern Massachusetts. She self-identifies as a queer, cis-gendered female. Nichol used to have Tinder but has not used it since 2016. She used the app Her for maybe month at the start of this year. On Her, she had conversations with around 3 people and met FtF with one. Nichol was seeking a relationship but says she is now too busy to date.

**Sophie** is 24 years old. She is from western Massachusetts. She got her undergraduate degree in history with minors in German language, English literature, and women and gender at a university in Boston. She still lives in the Boston area, and currently works at the Boston Public Library. Sophie has been using both Tinder and Bumble since January but has not used Bumble since March. On Tinder, Sophie has communicated with 17 people and met FtF with one. Sophie recently got out of a three-year relationship. Before that relationship, she had also used Tinder. Sophie is seeking more of a long-term relationship. She spoke only of dating men.

**Brianna** is 23 years old. She is from Wareham, Massachusetts. She is currently a first-year graduate student at the University of Pittsburg where she is advancing her biomedical engineering career. She used Tinder for two to three weeks roughly three months ago, during which time she chatted with 15 to 20 people. She met FtF with two men. Brianna was seeking a relationship but stopped using Tinder because she felt online dating wasn't for her. She spoke only of dating men.

**Anna** is 20 years old. She is from Yarmouth, Massachusetts. She is a prelaw student in Boston heading to law school next fall. She has been using Bumble for roughly three months. She began using Tinder around the same time but has since stopped using that platform. Anna began using dating platforms as a sort of research project/pact with friends and said she wouldn't normally have been so proactive on them. With this in mind, she said she communicated with around 20 people on each Bumble and Tinder in the last three months or so. She met FtF with four people. She is seeking dating experience but is not opposed to a relationship. She spoke only of dating men.

**Marc** is 23 years old. He has lived in Stamford, Connecticut his whole life and currently works for a reinsurance company. He's used Tinder, Bumble, Hinge, and Coffee Meets Bagel. He's used Tinder for roughly four years, Bumble and Coffee Meets Bagel for around two years, and Hinge for less than one year. Across these years, he's communicated with around 10 people on each platform, except for Hinge, which he estimates is around three or four people. He's met FtF with three women from these platforms. He is seeking a relationship and identifies as a straight man.

**Jamie** is 25 years old. She grew up in New Hampshire but now lives in New York City, where she works as a journalist. She's used Hinge off and on for roughly a year and a half (stopping use during brief relationships). She said she's communicated with 30 to 35 people via this platform and met FtF with six or seven people. She initially started using Hinge as a way to meet people when she first moved to New York, but after some time began dating with more of an intention to find a relationship. She spoke only of dating men.

**Kaelie** is 23 years old. She grew up in Connecticut, studied in Boston, and moved to New Jersey to be with her boyfriend, Kevin, about six months ago. She works in retail and at a bakery. She started playing Minecraft seven years ago and started talking to Kevin more frequently off the platform around two years ago. They were talking online for around two months before they met in person but had done video calls before then. Kaelie has met and dated other men from Minecraft as well, using the platform as a way to meet and talk with boys with a similar interest.

**Kevin** is 27 years old. He was born in New Jersey and lives there today with his girlfriend, Kaelie. He is a chemist. Kevin met his girlfriend through playing Minecraft online.

**Josh** is 22 years old. He was born and raised in Boston, where he's currently studying graphic design and works as a barista. He's used Tinder on and off for the past three years or so, but hasn't used it since he met his boyfriend on the platform last August. He said he's chatted with 30 to 40 people over this time and met FtF with around five to seven. He fluctuated between looking for a casual relationship and just wanting to meet other homosexual men in the area. Josh identifies as a gay man.

**Peter** is 25 years old. He is from Maryland but now lives in New York City. Peter is an audio engineer in the podcasting industry and he's also a musician. For the past three months, he's mostly just been using Hinge, but he's used various platforms over the past four years. He's used Tinder, OkCupid, Bumble, Coffee Meets Bagel, and Hinge over the years, sometimes using four or five at a time. He roughly estimates that he's communicated with around 300 people across these platforms over the past four years. He's met FtF with around 50 people. He fluctuated between wanting hookups and seeking a relationship. Peter spoke only of dating women.