# Chapter 4.8
# Computer-Mediated Communication:
## Enhancing Online Group Interactions

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## ABSTRACT

Advancements in information technology have transformed much in all aspects of today's society. In particular, synchronous and asynchronous electronic communication systems support countless interactions every day. However, these communication systems have specific limitations that can cause miscommunications as well. Because of that, computer-mediated communications (CMC) has been a robust research agenda in many disciplines. This is especially true of education, where online learning has become common place in all but a few universities, thus requiring learners to interact via CMC within virtual learning environments. This chapter will use educational CMC research as a lens to promote and support an understanding of how to better utilize and facilitate electronic communication, regardless of the field or endeavor.

## BACKGROUND

Over a decade ago, Rheingold (1993) described how the Internet, specifically, synchronous and asynchronous electronic communication could create a non-linear and level environment that provides the conduit for human interaction that is culturally neutral—where members meet in virtual communities judged by ideas, thoughts, and contributions, rather than by race, gender, age, physical appearance, or national origin. In particular, CMC was described as a venue where participants could engage in discussions on bulletin boards and listservs with equal impunity and have the opportunity to create a cyber community. Due to the lack of visible and contextual cues, participants engaging in this, somewhat, anonymous form of communication were free from prejudice and able to speak their mind more freely and openly than in traditional face-to-face

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group interactions. However, this turned out be only somewhat correct, and the literature provides ample examples of how CMC group interactions follow similar patterns and styles that have been identified within traditional face-to-face group interactions.

## Communication Style Differences

Communication style differences, particularly, gender-based differences have been identified as one area that has been investigated in more historic group interaction literature. Specifically, women tend to engage in group interactions with a style distinctly different than men. Eakins and Eakins (1978) in researching gender styles within group interactions discovered that women tend to be more engaged in developing intimacy and maintaining relationships than their male counterparts. In other words, women tend to be more interested in building relationships and developing closeness within their group than men do. For example, women are more apt to ask for another's opinion, desiring to engage others within the conversation. Men, on the other hand, tend to be more directive and less apt to draw out the interaction (Fishman, 1983). Perhaps this is because, in general, women are more interested in the social aspects of group interaction. For example, Carli (1984) reported that women are more social-oriented, while men are more task-oriented in their interactions. Furthermore, Briton and Hall (1995) reported that women tended to be better at using nonverbal cues, being more expressive, utilizing body language, eye contact, and gestures to send and receive subtle messages to promote and enhance communication in group interactions. Men, on the other hand, leaned toward competitiveness and dominance seemed more apt to be more competitive and less socially motivated in their group interactions—using fewer subtle nonverbal cues.

In terms of group interactions where productivity is at issue, Maguire (1999) reported that within studies of marketing executives women work more to build consensus while men tended to make faster decisions. One could argue that one style is better than the other at supporting communication in group interactions, as both have benefits and limitations. For example, being more direct could be seen as a way to improve communication by not clouding the issue with possibly vague nonverbal cues. On the other hand, by providing more information via other channels (e.g., body language, facial expressions, etc.), the verbal message might be further enhanced, with less chance of misunderstandings. Furthermore, by utilizing a communication style that seems competitive and dominating, issues of power may cloud or hinder the real message. Again, on the contrary, using less direct verbal communication could be seen to hinder one's ability to provide leadership. Which style makes a better communicator—one who builds community or consensus through social group interactions enhanced with non-verbal cues, or one who improves productivity with more directive style communication?

It could be argued that it might be better to try to understand these communication style differences, rather than trying to debate which might be more effective, as each has benefits and limitations. This is especially important within the CMC environment. As we will see in the next section, CMC group interactions have other issues based upon the various CMC media, which can greatly impact these more traditional communication style differences.

## CMC Communication Style Differences

Of course, these gender differences are generalities. One's individual group communication style is just that, individual. However, these gender-related communication style differences seem to parallel a CMC environment as well. As in all social environments, membership within a CMC group environment can be dominated by

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