Chapter 15
Humor and Play in CMC
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ABSTRACT
This chapter summarizes the growing body of research on humor and play in computer-mediated communication (CMC) from disciplines such as psychology, applied linguistics, and foreign language acquisition that seeks to explain the abundance of humor and language play in computer-mediated communication. Humor researchers, for example, have shown how the absence of the nonverbal repertoire in CMC may encourage play while, at the same time, making it more difficult to signal a joke. From the perspective of computer-mediated discourse analysis, certain linguistic and interactional features of computer-mediated discourse may promote non-seriousness (Herring, 1999). Another strand of research focuses on the social functions of humor in constituting and maintaining online communities (Hübler & Bell, 2003). The emerging picture of language play and humor in CMC is becoming clearer but, at the same time, increasingly complex.

INTRODUCTION
More than other media, digital communication has been associated with humor, joking, language play, role play, and other nonserious communication (e.g., Belz & Reinhardt, 2004; Crystal, 2001, 2008; Daisley, 1994; Danet, 1998, 2001; del-Teso-Craviotto, 2006; Fisher et al., 2000; Georgakopoulou, 2005; Hancock, 2004; Herring, 1999, 2001; Kopomaa, 2005; Nastri et al., 2006; North, 2007; Rellstab, 2008; Rouzie, 2001; Sotillo, 2000). Because of its central role in human interaction, different strands of research from disciplines such as psychology, applied linguistics, and foreign language acquisition have sought to explain the abundance of humor and language play in computer-mediated communication (CMC). The present chapter surveys...
this growing body of research on verbal humor, spontaneous joking, and play in CMC-based environments. Following a working definition of the notion of play, the chapter discusses different types of humorous discourse in CMC. It then summarizes how different CMC modes and their contexts of use affect language play. In view of the rapid growth of digital communication, its potential as a creative medium, and the accompanying changes in social interaction, the chapter aims to outline and synthesize research on verbal humor and play in CMC and thus provide a snapshot of what we know and do not know thus far. The emerging picture is complex and, in many ways, unexpected. A number of empirical studies of humor and play in CMC have produced surprising results. For example, Baym’s (1995) early study found that CMC, conceived as a tool for transactional workplace functions to distribute information and increase efficiency, was found to be surprisingly hospitable to humor. Along the same lines, Hancock’s (2004) study also shows that CMC participants use irony more frequently than in face-to-face (FTF) interaction, even though irony is assumed to rely on subtle cues that are unavailable in CMC. These two studies are mentioned here to exemplify how emerging research findings continue to challenge widely held beliefs.

Humor can be defined as anything that is “funny, amusing, or laughable” (Attardo, 2005, n. p.). Verbal humor has often been discussed under the larger heading of ‘language play,’ a term which subsumes “a range of normally dissociated activities” (Cook, 2000, p. 5) such as children’s verse, fiction, insulting, joking, magical rituals, puns, riddles, and play languages. Such language play activities are all “expressions of a single underlying phenomenon” (ibid.), which Cook describes as “disconnection from reality, disruption and subversion of social structures, and the introduction of random elements” (ibid.). Language play may or may not be humorous, but humor is often viewed as a form of play (e.g., McGhee, 1979). Whereas both play and humor may be