CHAPTER 10

SOCIAL INFORMATION PROCESSING THEORY

Outline

XXI. Introduction.
   A. Scholars who studied new electronic media have offered a variety of theories to explain the inherent differences between computer-mediated communication (CMC) and face-to-face communication.
      1. Social presence theory suggests that text-based messages deprive CMC users of the sense that other people are jointly involved in the interaction.
      2. Media richness theory classifies each communication medium according to the complexity of the messages it can handle efficiently.
      3. A third theory concentrates on the lack of social context cues in online communication.
   B. Each of these theories favors a cues-filtered-out interpretation in regard to the absence of nonverbal cues as the medium’s fatal flaw.
   C. Joe Walter, a communication professor at Cornell University, argued that given the opportunity for sufficient exchange of social messages and subsequent relational growth, face-to-face and CMC are equally useful mediums for developing close relationships.

XXII. CMC versus face-to-face: A sip instead of a gulp.
   A. Walther labeled his theory social information processing (SIP) because he believes relationships grow only to the extent that parties first gain information about each other and use that information to form impressions.
   B. SIP focuses on the first link of the chain—the personal information available through CMC and its effect on the composite mental image of the other.
   C. Walther acknowledges that nonverbal cues are filtered out of the interpersonal information sent and received via CMC, but he doesn’t think this loss is fatal.
   D. Two features of CMC provide a rationale for SIP theory.
      1. Verbal cues: CMC users can create fully formed impressions of others based solely on linguistic content of messages.
      2. Extended time: Though the exchange of social information is slower via CMC than face-to-face, over time the relationships formed are not weaker or more fragile.
   E. You’ve got mail—A case study of online romance
      1. The film You’ve Got Mail portrays an online relationship.
      2. It also illustrates verbal cues and extended time, concepts crucial to SIP theory.

XXIII. Verbal cues of affinity replace nonverbal cues.
   A. Walter claims that humans crave affiliation just as much online as they do in face-to-face interactions. But, with the absence of nonverbal cues, which typically signal affinity, users must rely on text-only messages.
B. He argues that verbal and nonverbal cues can be used interchangeably.

C. Experimental support for a counter-intuitive idea.
   1. Walther and two of his former graduate students ran a comparative study to test how CMC users pursue their social goals and if affinity can be expressed through a digital medium.
   2. In their study, the participants discussed a moral dilemma with a stranger via either CMC or face-to-face. The stranger was in actuality a research confederate told to pursue a specific communication goal. Half the confederates were told to interact in a friendly manner and the remaining pairs were told to interact in an unfriendly manner.
   3. The mode of communication made no difference in the emotional tone perceived by the participants.
   4. Self-disclosure, praise, and explicit statements of affection successfully communicated warmth as well as indirect agreement, change of subject, and compliments offered while proposing a contrasting idea.
   5. In face-to-face interactions, participants relied on facial expression, eye contact, tone of voice, body position, and other nonverbal cues to convey affiliation.

XXIV. Extended time: The crucial variable in CMC.
   A. Walther is convinced that the length of time that CMC users have to send messages is the key determinant of whether their message can achieve a comparable level of intimacy as face-to-face interactions.
   B. Messages spoken in person take at least four times as long to say via CMC. This differential may explain why CMC is perceived as impersonal and task-oriented.
   C. Since CMC conveys messages more slowly, Walther advises users to send messages more often.
   D. Anticipated future interaction and chronemic cues may also contribute to intimacy on the Internet.
      1. People will trade more relational messages if they think they may meet again and this anticipated future interaction motivates them to develop the relationship.
      2. Walther believes that chronemic cues, or nonverbal indicators of how people perceive, use, or respond to issues of time, is the only nonverbal cue not filtered out of CMC.

XXV. Hyperpersonal perspective: It doesn’t get any better than this.
   A. Walther uses the term hyperpersonal to label CMC relationships that are more intimate than romances or friendships would be if partners were physically together.
   B. He classifies four types of media effects that occur precisely because CMC users aren’t proximal.
         a. Through selective self-presentation, people who meet online have an opportunity to make and sustain an overwhelmingly positive impression.
         b. As a relationship develops, they can edit the breadth and depth of their self-disclosure to conform to the cyber image they wish to project.
      2. Receiver: Overattribution of similarity.
a. Attribution is a perceptual process where we observe people’s actions and try to figure out what they’re really like.

b. In the absence of other cues, we are likely to overattribute the information we have and create an idealized image of the sender.

c. Martin Lea and Russell Spears describe this identification as SIDE—social-identity-deindividuation.
   i. Users meet around a common interest.
   ii. In the absence of contrasting cues, they develop an exaggerated sense of similarity and group solidarity.

3. Channel: Communicating on your own time.
   a. Walther refers to CMC as an asynchronous channel of communication, meaning that parties can use it nonsimultaneously.
   b. A benefit is the ability to plan, contemplate, and edit one’s comments more than is possible in spontaneous, simultaneous talk.

   a. A self-fulfilling prophecy is the tendency for a person’s expectation of others to evoke a response from them that confirms what was anticipated.
   b. Self-fulfilling prophecy is triggered when the hyperpositive image is intentionally or inadvertently fed back to the other person, creating a CMC equivalent of the looking-glass self.

XXVI. Critique: Walther’s candid assessment.
   A. Walther rejected the notion that online communication is an inherently inferior medium for relational communication.
   B. Walther’s empirical studies show that relationships in cyberspace often form at the same or even faster pace than they do for people who meet offline.
   C. CMC users who join online discussion groups or enter chat rooms may have a higher need for affiliation than the typical person whose relationships are developed through multichannel modes.
   D. The hyperpersonal perspective lacks a central explanatory mechanism to drive synthesis of the observed effects.
   E. The hyperpersonal perspective has also been less explicit in predicting negative relational outcomes in CMC.

Key Names and Terms

**CMC**
Computer-mediated communication.

**Social Presence Theory**
Earlier CMC theory that suggests that text-based messages deprive CMC users of the sense that other people are jointly involved in the interaction.

**Media Richness Theory**
CMC theory that classifies each communication medium according to the complexity of the messages it can handle efficiently.
Flaming
Hostile language that zings its target and creates a toxic climate for relational growth on the Internet.

Cues Filtered Out
Interpretation of CMC that regards the absence of nonverbal cues as the medium’s permanent flaw, which limits its usefulness for developing interpersonal relationships.

Joseph B. Walther
Communication professor at Cornell University who argues that given the opportunity for sufficient exchange of social messages and subsequent relational growth, face-to-face and CMC are equally useful mediums for developing close relationships.

Social Information Processing (SIP)
Walther’s perspective regarding CMC, so labeled because he believes relationships grow only to the extent that parties first gain information about each other and use that information to form impressions.

Verbal Cues
In the absence of any other cues, CMC users will use verbal cues to form impressions.

Extended Time
Because CMC information is exchanged at a much slower rate, online relationships will develop the same intimacy possible in face-to-face relationships only if given an extended time.

Anticipated Future Interactions
In Walther’s perspective, it’s a way of extending psychological time. The possibility of future interaction motivates CMC users to develop a relationship.

Chronemics
Nonverbal scholars label used to describe how people perceive, use, and respond to issues of time in their interactions with others.

Hyperpersonal
CMC relationships that are more intimate than romances or friendships would be if partners were physically together.

Attribution
A perceptual process where we observe people’s actions and try to figure out what the person is really like.

Martin Lea and Russell Spears
European social psychologists who explain over-the-top identification as social-identity-deindividuation (SIDE).

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy
The tendency for a person’s expectation of others to evoke a response from them that confirms what was anticipated.

Principal Changes
This chapter is entirely new to the sixth edition.
Suggestions for Discussion

Only a theory of “new media” relationships?

Social information processing theory appears to be an exciting new approach to the “new media,” a way of accounting for online communication, particularly as it stacks up against face-to-face encounters. On the other hand, could the central ideas developed in this theory apply just as well to old-fashioned letters, even those sent through the U.S. Postal Service? Is this simply a theory of written communication? Glen’s great-grandfather became engaged to a woman he’d never met through written correspondence. Their relationship developed gradually, letter by letter, until they were sufficiently attached to one another to get married. It’s possible that Walther’s theory building applies as well to their communication as it does to You’ve Got Mail.

Longevity of relationships

It’s likely that some students in your class have developed a relationship through CMC, either via e-mail, chat rooms, or as part of a virtual community. As such, they are likely to warmly embrace SIP’s perspective about online relationship development and be vocal advocates that relationship development is not only possible, but probable. But, with the relative newness of technologies such as digital cameras, webcams, text messaging, and e-mail, can we predict how technology might affect the longevity of these mediated relationships? Some might speculate that physical closeness at some time in the relationship is necessary to guarantee the long-term survival of close bonds.

The virtual girlfriend

Your students may be familiar with Asia’s “virtual girlfriend.” After joining (and paying a subscription fee), a “girlfriend” appears as an animated message on the subscriber’s mobile phone video screen. Disclosure comes at a price—literally, as the anime only responds when she has been bought flowers or gifts by paying more money. The “relationship” develops as money is exchanged for more information about one’s “girlfriend,” sweet talk, and introduction to her “friends.” You might want to engage students in a comparison of the differences between online relationships with real people versus connections established with such simulations. Given Walther’s position regarding the possibility of idealizing one’s online partners, are these “sims” very different than such relationships?

Distance education

You might want to discuss online education and the development of relationships with professors and other students when the only contact you have is through e-mails, message boards, and chat rooms. Does that environment help or hinder the learning process? A host of communication scholars, led by the work of James McCroskey, suggests that nonverbal immediacy is a critical component of teaching effectiveness. How might effectiveness be moderated by a mediated relationship? If your students have participated in online only or technology-assisted classes, how have the various modes of communication affected their relationships with students and professors?

Critiquing the theory

As speculated by Griffin in the chapter’s Critique, Walther’s theory hasn’t addressed a perhaps fundamental question: why do people choose to develop online relationships?
Encourage students to probe some motivations. How might these varied motivations affect the quality and quantities of one’s relationships, both online and off?

**Sample Application Log**

Laine

I’ve definitely seen Walther’s hyperpersonal “selective self-presentation” at work in my relationship with my boyfriend. In the beginning stages of our relationship, our self-disclosure was most often via instant messaging for the very reason that Walther claimed—“people who meet online have an opportunity to make and sustain an overwhelmingly positive impression.” IM allowed us to carefully process and edit what we were going to say before we committed to saying it by pushing “send.” I would often type on the instant message screen, read it through, delete it and start over if there was something that I said in a way that might leak information that I wasn’t yet ready to disclose.

I have found that once you move beyond the slower pace of online interaction and get used to the pace of face-to-face interaction, it’s hard to go back. For example after we became comfortable with each other face-to-face, our CMC became almost nonexistent. When we are living in separate states, the different pace of online communication becomes frustrating.

**Exercises and Activities**

Comparing CMC and face-to-face relationships

Ask your students to compare a relationship that they have developed via CMC (or maintained if they don’t have online relationships) to a face-to-face relationship. How would they characterize the relationship, their impression of the other person, and what they believe they have portrayed about themselves? Walther suggests that a self-fulfilling prophesy may be at work in which impressions are carefully crafted and messages obtained at one’s own convenience. In comparison to flesh-and-blood people, do students have a more idealized version of the other when the relationship has been mediated?

Feature film illustration

In addition to *You’ve Got Mail*, another feature film that may provide interesting discussion is *Simone*. It is the story of a movie producer, played by Al Pacino, who—unbeknownst to the audience—creates a digital actress. The film demonstrates the power of technology to “create” people and you might find it a good tool to stimulate discussion about simulating reality.

**Further Resources**

- Barbara Warnick takes a rhetorical approach to theoretical issues of the Internet in “Rhetorical Criticism of Public Discourse on the Internet: Theoretical Implications,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 28 (Fall 1998): 73-84. She has also produced a full-length treatment of rhetoric and technology entitled *Critical Literacy in a Digital Era: Technology, Rhetoric, and the Public Interest* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002), and a review essay on the

**Relationship development**


**Communication and technology**

For discussion of information technology and the computer’s effect on communication, see:

- Tharon W. Howard, *A Rhetoric of Electronic Communities* (Greenwich, CT: Ablex, 1997).


**Distance Education**


Jennifer Waldeck, Patricia Kearney, and Timothy Plax explore e-mail messages between educators and students in their article, “Teacher E-mail Message Strategies and Students’ Willingness to Communicate Online,” *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 29, 1 (February 2001): 54-70.


For more on teacher immediacy in online classes, see:

Sample Examination Questions

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