

Strategic Uses of Social Technology

An Interactive Perspective of Social Psychology



EDITED BY

Zachary Birchmeier

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Garold Stasser

CAMBRIDGE

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Strategic Uses of Social Technology

An Interactive Perspective of Social Psychology

On an everyday basis, we communicate with one another using various technological media, such as text messaging, social networking tools, and electronic mail, in work, educational, and personal settings. As a consequence of the increasing frequency of use and importance of computer-supported interaction, social scientists in particular have heeded the call to understand the social processes involved in such interactions. In this volume, the editors explore how aspects of a situation interact with characteristics of a person to help explain our technologically supported social interactions. The person-by-situation interaction perspective recognizes the powerful role of the situation and social forces on behavior, thought, and emotion, but also acknowledges the importance of person variables in explaining social interaction, including power and gender, social influence, truth and deception, ostracism, and leadership. This important study is of great relevance to modern readers, who are more and more frequently using technology to communicate with one another.

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1 Introduction

A social psychological analysis of computer-supported social interaction

*Zachary Birchmeier, Beth Dietz-Uhler,
and Garold Stasser*

The use of computer-supported social interaction (CSI) has become a primary feature of communication among individuals, due in part to its structural features (e.g., freedom of time and geographical constraints) and psychological features (e.g., anonymity). As a consequence, many social scientists have investigated the social processes in computer-supported interactions, including online impression formation, relationship development, and group dynamics. Because individuals communicate via the use of computers in many personal, educational, and professional settings, it is important to continue and encourage the study of social processes in such environments. These studies have identified a number of influences on the behaviors (i.e., conformity, economic choices, etc.), thoughts (i.e., attitude change, impression formation, etc.), and, to a lesser degree, physiological/emotional states of people involved in computer-supported interaction.

The goal of this volume is to impose the global theoretical framework of the *person-by-situation interaction* (Snyder and Ickes, 1985) onto the study of computer-supported social interaction. This perspective recognizes that people are affected by the expectations and limitations of social situations, but to varying degrees. The extent that a person will respond or react to social forces has been found to depend on the levels of internal characteristics (e.g., self-esteem) that a person brings with them to the social situation. For example, social psychologists have observed that those individuals who express higher levels of self-esteem are more resistant to social pressure and as a result are less likely to conform to the influence of others (Baumeister, 1982), and are more likely to persist in the face of obstacles to their goals (Gist and Mitchell, 1992). Originally posited by Lewin (1935), reinvigorated by Mischel (1968), and then tested and validated in decades of social psychological research across a broad range of social phenomena, the explanatory rubric of social

psychology can now be applied to the communication forums that have emerged in the relatively brief existence of internet technologies. Before discussing the details and benefits of the person-by-situation interaction perspective, we will review the existing theoretical frameworks that have been applied to computer-supported interactions.

Contemporary literature reviews

In reviewing the available literature on computer-mediated communication, a number of patterns can be observed. To date, the largest amount of research and theory on this topic has focused on the applied contexts of collaboration and team performance, as summarized in Bailey and Kurland (2002), Baltes *et al.* (2002), Coovert and Burke (2004), Gibson and Cohen (2003), Hertel *et al.* (2005), Hinds and Kiesler (2002), Kreijns *et al.* (2003), and other treatises. These works present theories from industrial and organizational psychology, as well as in human resource management. Broader psychological issues of online impression and relationship formation, as well as general patterns of group dynamics, have received less attention from psychologists. The existing psychological theories and research on these more general social issues have been summarized formally in a handful of review papers (McKenna and Bargh, 2000; Riva, 2002), including an entire volume of the *Journal of Social Issues* (2002, v. 58), as well as in a few edited books (Amichai-Hamburger, 2004a; Avgerou *et al.*, 2004; Gackebach, 1998; Joinson, 2003; Riva and Galimberti, 2001; Thurlow *et al.*, 2004).

In Gackebach's (1998) seminal text, the authors described the potential for internet technologies to both *enhance* and *transform* (Haythornthwaite *et al.*, 1998) a broad range of psychological and social phenomena as they emerged in the first few years following the inception of the world-wide web. Following the description of those possibilities for enhanced business, social, and educational practices, Riva and Galimberti's (2001) book contributed an impressive depth of detail on the status of virtual reality use in psychological research and practice, as well as ventures in telemedicine and e-therapy. The text also included some analysis of computer-mediated social interaction from psycholinguistic and communications perspectives. Galimberti and Riva (2001) expand on the idea that computer-mediated communication involves a negotiation of shared meaning with strong hermeneutical overtones:

Context may be co-constructed by social actors, but they use communication to exchange meanings, not pieces of information. More precisely, the content of communication is interpretations of the situations which actors are involved in.

In this sense, the most effective way of clarifying the meaning of messages is to relate them to a shared context of meaning. (p. 14)

Joinson's (2003) text cast a wide net in documenting the pervasive prosocial outcomes (i.e., internet dating and friendship formation) and deviancy (i.e., deception) that had been observed to date, but also inferred a theoretical framework that would characterize the global effects of internet technology for social relations, as noted below. Shortly thereafter, Thurlow *et al.* (2004) published a textbook for undergraduate audiences that also organized the existing phenomena in a coherent structure involving *learning* and *critiquing* of theories, *application* of social internet technologies, and *exploration* of newer uses of the tools (e.g., in legal and health communications). The authors in Avgerou *et al.*'s (2004) text blended both sociological and information systems perspectives to provide an interesting account of "innovations" and "actors" that are embedded in computer-mediated social contexts with functional interdependence.

Bottom-up approaches

Each treatise has summarized the existing theory and research on the implications of the internet for social contexts. Each has organized the available theories by categories of group dynamics, online relationships, and social influence, among others. Each has also drawn general conclusions about computer-mediated communication in a *bottom-up* fashion by noting general effects of technology on social communication and relationships.

Technological and social determinism

Sherman's (2001) chapter in Riva and Galimberti (2001) summarized the classic theories (e.g., media richness, Daft *et al.*, 1987; social presence, Short *et al.*, 1976) that differentiate computer-mediated modes of communication modes from more traditional ones. Spears *et al.*'s (2002) article in the *Journal of Social Issues* parsed out global assumptions made by classic theorists of CMC into *technological deterministic* models and *social deterministic* models. In technological deterministic accounts, technology has universal effects on social processes, which can lead to a widening of communication options on the one hand and a limit to the number of available social context cues on the other (Kiesler and Sproull, 1992). Walther (1996; Tidwell and Walther, 2002) has offered to explain how users can alter their information-seeking and behavioral strategies

to ask deeper questions and adhere more strongly to norms of disclosure reciprocity in the service of impression and relationship formation when communicating with others via relatively impoverished media.

In social deterministic accounts, individual users of technology construct their own meaning, which can lead to a decrease in self-regulation, and an enhanced sensitivity to social information and expectations. Social influence becomes very strong when online, but taking cues from others can have prosocial or antisocial influences on a person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, depending on the tone of the social climate that emerges in a particular interaction setting (Spears *et al.*, 2002).

Interactionist response

Spears *et al.* (2002) conclude that an interactionist model of social and technological influence may better explain variability in both the use of technology for social purposes and the tendency for technology to enhance social interaction. In sum, observations of social behavior in computer-mediated settings often parallel those in face-to-face contexts, but the social qualities of communication and cognition are also commonly enhanced by specific communication modes. Personal influences on online cognitions and behaviors are noted where the authors discuss individuals' strategic uses of social technologies (i.e., connecting to anonymous, online forums populated with like-minded others) as having cognitive effects on those users (i.e., enhanced social influence and attitude polarization).

Similarly, Joinson (2003) presented the Strategic and Motivated user model that includes Expected and Emergent effects (SMEE). This model accounts for users' selections of communication media and forums as a determinant of the effects of those media (i.e., cognitive changes in self-awareness and social identity salience; behavioral changes in language use and self-disclosure, etc.). These changes in users' cognitive and behavioral states are then construed to influence future choices of communication media. Elements of these ideas were also addressed in Mantovani's (2001) chapter in discussing the uses of and reactions to the computer-mediated social context. Attending to the ability for individuals to choose communication media for various purposes, Mantovani denotes that user goals of "information seeking" and "social gathering" both involve social interdependence, but with differing amounts of synchronicity and interactivity between communicators. These ideas are congruent with the intended uses for the world-wide web from its creators: to share

information, to develop a shared knowledge base, and to connect like minds (King *et al.*, 1997).

Top-down theories

Some of the available reviews and books on computer-mediated communication have sought to structure the available theories and research in a *top-down* fashion. For example, Galimberti and Riva's (2001) chapter applied theories of psycholinguistics and communication, in ephemeral terms, to characterize online social contexts. Sherman's (2001) chapter in the same text also applied social cognition theories of bias in social information processing to characterize impression formation and categorization processes among online interactants (see also Rafaeli *et al.*, 2004). Authors in Amichai-Hamburger's (2004a) text applied topic-specific social psychological principles and theories to specific domains of online communication, including persuasion (Guadagno and Cialdini, 2004), prosocial behavior (Sproull *et al.*, 2004), and prejudice (Glaser and Kahn, 2004).

Similarly, Spears *et al.* (2002) provided a notable theoretical framework for conceptualizing online group dynamics in light of a Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects. Their SIDE model characterized the effects of subjective group norms on spontaneous social identity salience that had been inferred and tested previously from observations of offline groups (Hogg and Abrams, 1988; Reichert *et al.*, 1995; Tajfel and Turner, 1986). The existing *social identity* framework of group dynamics was then applied against the potential for the internet to involve distanced users in meaningful social categorizations and to provide enhanced group identity salience via anonymous meeting forums. Thus, the online context was illustrated as a ripe field for potent social influence.

Amichai-Hamburger's (2004b) chapter discusses the existing research that involves strategic choices of social internet technologies as a function of personality traits, and calls for more research on the interaction of technologies and individuals. The author notes Kraut *et al.*'s (2002) observations that more extraverted individuals are more likely to use internet technologies in order to interact directly with others. Amichai-Hamburger's research has also shown that, when more introverted or neurotic individuals seek direct interaction with others online, they are more likely to express aspects of their self-concept that are not expressed during typical face-to-face interactions (i.e., "Real-Me" characteristics; Bargh *et al.*, 2002; see also Maldonado *et al.*, 2001). The author also speculates on how an individual's levels of need for closure, need for