Online Communication and Social Engagement

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INTRODUCTION

Early studies of online communication examined the predominantly textual nature of online communication (e.g., e-mail, discussion boards, chat rooms) and hypothesized that the reduced number of available message channels would restrict the level of social engagement. In other words, by reducing interpersonal communication to a textual experience, traditional nonverbal cues such as facial expression, eye contact, and gestures are eliminated. As Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire (1984) stated in an early study of computer-mediated communication, "Once people have electronic access, their states, power, and prestige are communicated neither contextually (the way secretaries and meeting rooms and clothes communicate) nor dynamically (the way gaze, touch, and facial and paralinguistic behavior communicate)" (p. 1125). They questioned whether online communication was inherently depersonalizing, not only because of such reduced cues, but also because it forces communicators to imagine their audience.

BACKGROUND

Impersonal assumptions of computer-mediated communication (CMC) are consistent with the use of social presence theory to evaluate dynamics of online communication. Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) hypothesized that communication media vary in their degree of social presence and that such variations have an impact on the interaction among those communicating via such media. They defined social presence as "the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships" (p. 65). Social presence is the degree to which each person perceives the other as a real person and perceives their interaction as a personal relationship. Social presence theory hypothesizes that reducing the number of communication channels available would correspondingly reduce the focus on the other person, thus making interactions less personal. Since online communication has been primarily text-based, such researchers posited that computer-mediated communication is low in social presence.

Hiltz and Turoff (1993) similarly stated that in face-to-face (FtF or F2F) communication, a person simultaneously received information through audible and visual channels. Audible channels contain the actual words spoken, their arrangement, and associated vocalizations such as tone, accents, and "nonword" sounds; visual channels contain facial expressions, clothes, and other appearance-related status cues, body movements, and psychophysiological responses (pp. 76-78). When examining computer-mediated communication, they observed that "the cue-emitting capabilities available in computerized conferencing are both more limited than and different from those in the well-rehearsed face-to-face situation" (p. 89). Like Kiesler et al. (1984), Hiltz and Turoff found that this so-called impersonal nature of computer-mediated communication fostered an increased level of participation and egalitarianism among group members.

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Walther and Burgoon (1992) challenged the "cues-filtered-out" perspectives and argued that such studies ignored time effects, inconsistent and unexplainable findings, and methodological shortcomings (p. 54). For example, they found than many studies of online relational communication failed to grant enough time to compensate for the comparably slow typing speed in electronic communication. When specifically considering the immediacy issue, they stated: "Although initial

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interactions among unacquainted others in CMC may be relatively low in immediacy/affection, interactants may increase this dimension over time....CMC interactants, limited to nonverbal cues, should reach this same level of immediacy/affection but more gradually" (p. 58). They found that the zero-history CMC groups did, in fact, show signs of significant relational communication, even approximating those of face-to-face groups over time. Specifically in the area of immediacy, they discovered that immediacy/affection increased and converged in face-to-face and CMC groups after many exchanges (p. 70).

Walther (1992) offered social information processing as an alternative framework to the cues-filtered-out perspective on CMC. Walther argued that individuals, regardless of the medium selected for communication, are driven to develop social relationships. As such, they will use the information presented to them to develop and test assumptions of one another, ultimately resulting in refined interpersonal knowledge and relational communication. Walther concluded that rather than computer-mediated communication having fixed qualities that promoted impersonal communication, individuals would develop normal relational communication online, albeit at a slightly slower rate than when face-to-face. "The key difference between these processes in CMC and FtF has to do not with the *amount* of social information exchanged but with the *rate* of social information exchange" (Walther, 1996, p. 10).

The hyperpersonal communication perspective was borne out of the realization that online interaction could actually exceed the level of affection and emotion of parallel face-to-face interaction (Walther, 1992, p. 17). This occurred not only in socially-oriented online activities, but also in decision-making groups and business communication. Walther defined hyperpersonal communication as "CMC that is more socially desirable than we tend to experience in parallel F2F interaction" (p. 17). In hyperpersonal communication, an individual selectively delivers an optimized presentation of self to others (thus taking advantage of the aforementioned lack of traditional nonverbal cues) while the receiving individual sometimes inflates the perception of the other partner. Furthermore, the asynchronous nature of online communication, including the extended time to compose messages and the ability to edit them before transmission, as well as online feedback further enhances the construction of messages that foster relational communication.

Berger and Calabrese's (1975) uncertainty reduction theory declares that people confronted with an unfamiliar environment generally seek to reduce uncertainty through interpersonal communication. When considering the online environment, Pratt, Weisman, Cody, and Wendt (1999) stated that such uncertainty is typically heightened in the online setting and thus a natural strategy for reducing this uncertainty is to ask questions. They suggested that there would be a greater need for question asking in computer-mediated environments given the greater level of ambiguity present and that the nature of such questioning would take on greater meaning for online participants. They tested these assertions by analyzing the content of asynchronous CMC interactions between youngsters and senior citizens. They found that CMC participants asked roughly the same number and same types of questions during their interactions even though CMC interactions were asynchronous and took longer to develop. One difference was that CMC participants asked more questions aimed at getting at the "inner self" of the other person.

Hancock and Dunham's (2001) information processing theory begins with the assumption that we all make inferences about another person's personality, values, and traits and that any number of communication tools may be employed in the formation process. Individuals in most cases are thrust into an online classroom setting with relative strangers and must determine early on how to interact. Inferences about other personalities engaged in a common enterprise are a necessary first step to learner engagement with subject matter. Hancock and Dunham found that impressions formed in the computer-mediated environments were less detailed but stronger than those formed as a result of face-to-face interactions. Online participants developed stronger reactions to others during computer-mediated interactions but those reactions were based on a relatively small amount of information. Whether such impressions formed via computer-mediated communication are more resistant to change, however, is not known. And whether stronger or clearer impressions of other learners can predict positive learner outcomes should be explored as a potential extension of this theoretical base.

In response to the assumptions of and preliminary research findings associated with uncertainty reduction and information processing theories, many online researchers and practitioners suggest the use of private gathering places (e.g., bulletin boards) where

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