

# Chapter 1

# Reframing Social Psychology for the Virtual Age: Theoretical Shifts, Digital Realities, and Emerging Paradigms

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The chapter proposes a reframing of the discipline toward a socio-digital psychology, integrating classical theory with contemporary socio-technical realities. Four emerging paradigms are identified: computational authority, networked identity, presence without co-presence, and effortless cognitive regulation. Methodological innovations such as digital trace analysis and virtual reality experimentation, alongside ethical considerations concerning consent, privacy, and bias, are also discussed. In doing so, the chapter highlights both the resilience of classical frameworks and the need for interdisciplinary, ethically reflexive approaches to understanding behaviour in the virtual age.*

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of human society has unsettled long-standing assumptions within social psychology. Where the mid-twentieth century canon developed its insights in classrooms, laboratories, and community groups, the twenty-first century witnesses the dominance of digitally mediated interaction. Billions of individuals now participate in online platforms, virtual environments, and algorithmically structured spaces that blur boundaries between interpersonal, group, and human-machine communication. For social psychologists, this raises both a challenge and an opportunity: to determine how far classical theories travel into the virtual age and where they require reinterpretation or reframing.

The central claim of this chapter is that human motivations have remained stable but their manifestations have been altered by digital affordances. The drive for cognitive consistency persists, but dissonance reduction now occurs through platform-enabled shortcuts such as muting, blocking, or algorithmic filtering. Group identities remain vital, yet they are magnified by algorithmic curation and destabilised by the fluidity of online roles. Attributional processes continue to structure judgments, though in cue-poor environments they lead to exaggerated dispositional biases and anthropomorphism of machines. Conformity and obedience, once studied in the presence of peers or authorities, now operate through numerical cues, influencers, and computational authority. In each case, classical insights retain explanatory value but demand reframing for environments defined by social media, virtual reality (VR), and artificial intelligence (AI).

This theoretical shift is necessary because classical social psychology was grounded in face-to-face co-presence. Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance experiments assumed bounded groups and limited exposure to contradictory information. Asch's (1955) conformity studies relied on the physical presence of confederates delivering incorrect judgments. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory presumed group membership was relatively stable and socially demarcated. Heider's (1958) attribution theory assumed that observers had access to behavioural and contextual cues. The digital era unsettles these assumptions. Online spaces collapse contexts (Marwick & Boyd, 2011), render identities performative and ephemeral, and introduce non-human actors as targets of influence or attribution.

In light of these transformations, this chapter pursues three interrelated objectives:

1. To revisit the classical canon of social psychology, highlighting the foundational assumptions and constructs of mid-century theories.
2. To examine how digital realities alter these boundary conditions, particularly in relation to social media, VR, and AI.

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