

RECENT PhD DISSERTATIONS IN CULTURAL AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES

EDITED BY

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The volume of scholarly production in the field of cultural and communication studies has been rapidly increasing during the past decade. Much of this work, however, remains unknown or inaccessible to most of the academic community. A few dissertations are released by small commercial publishers, houses usually without the infrastructure for international marketing and distribution. This means that even in the best of circumstances, most quality academic dissertations become known and available to no more than a fraction of the potentially interested scholars.

Euricom, through involvement in the service *Scholarship On-demand Academic Publishing*, is committed to increasing access to quality dissertations, and is initiating a section within the journal *Javnost—The Public* for this purpose. We intend to regularly present abstracts of a select number of recent PhD dissertations here, along with contact information of the authors and degree-granting institutions.

Institutions and authors who would like to propose recently completed titles for this section of the journal are requested to send copies and abstracts to the editor of this section at the following address:

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SCHOLARSHIP

ALBERTO BEUCHOT

INTERACTION AND INTERPERSONAL BEHAVIOR IN COMPUTER-MEDIATED ACADEMIC FORUMS

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Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is rapidly emerging as a new modality of educational delivery, either as an alternative to face-to-face contact or as an additional resource to enhance and extend existing pedagogical processes. Computer-mediated technologies produce social environments that are different from traditional classrooms. As such, research is needed to review and redefine the character of online participation/interactivity, as well as to explore the nature of interpersonal aspects of online group learning.

On the one hand, interactivity – or intermessage referencing – may be the single most required feature of online communication aiming at the formation of knowledge building and the implementation of learning communities. Interactivity was here considered not primarily a characteristic of the medium, but a quality of the communication relationship established by participants themselves. Interactivity is therefore a pivotal dimension of the social dynamics of group communication. It constitutes the pre-condition for online co-operative learning, critical thinking, and knowledge construction. Nonetheless, asymmetry in interactivity levels in CMC is a common issue: only a small number of participants and messages get involved in exchange processes in academic group discussions.

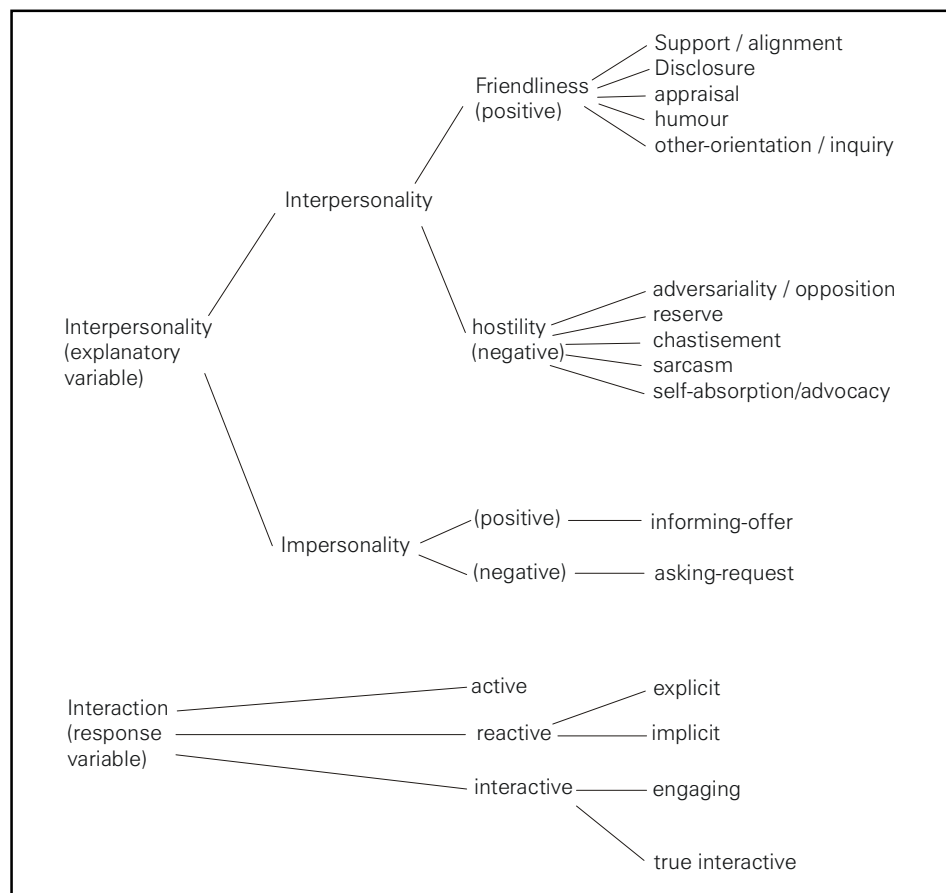
On the other hand, interpersonality – or communication content, which deals with socio-affective relationship among group members – has been repeatedly acknowledged as necessary for group cohesion and an issue that deeply affects the outcomes of a group. However, its impact upon academic online exchanges remains unexplored. Most group theoretical and research studies assume that group relational processes are a fundamental basis by which group task performance is shaped. However, the empirical evidence for such process/outcome relations is limited and mixed. Even when a number of studies have stressed the dynamics of group communication within the online learning process, it is still a highly neglected issue in CMC. Thus, this study had four main purposes:

1. Describe the level and amount of participation in online academic discussion forums and determine the quantitative dimension of online participation through time.
2. Assess the relationship among messages (type of interaction) posted by participants in online academic forums over time, and identify and assess the type and amount of interpersonal content in messages posted to online academic forums over time.
3. Determine the level of association between interpersonal content and the type of interaction in discussion forums, as well as the behaviour of the relationship through time.

4. Determine the understandings of students about interactional and interpersonal issues in online postings.

Additionally, this study planned to contribute to the design and development of both a coding instrument and a procedure to assess categories of interpersonal content and types of interaction in online CMC, and to expand pioneering efforts dedicated to explore the nature of online participation in computer-mediated groups by reframing the theoretical constructs of interactivity, interaction and participation. This study therefore analysed online interactions both in structure and content as a requisite for online co-operative learning, critical thinking, and knowledge construction. It also considers the social dimension of computer conferencing, acknowledging the importance it may have for participation and interactivity.

This study focused on a continuing interaction of a small group discussing on academic forums equally spaced throughout three semesters, on asynchronous, unstructured discussions based on reflection questions posed by a tutor. It involved the same natural group working on multiple tasks of the same task type through an extended period of time and measured at three different points in its history. The online group relationship was considered as one homogeneous, holistic interaction. A coding instrument based upon the following categories for each variable (interactivity and interpersonal) is included:



The study of the structure and content of online helped dispel the notion that academic CMC is (and must be) fundamentally and solely impersonal, and contributed to the better understanding of group dynamics and development in online conferencing. It also aided in supporting the notion that many of the traits of online conferencing are not directly related to the medium itself, but have been brought by the participants themselves and by some features of the course design. Moreover, it seemed to indicate that interactivity could be heightened or diminished entirely by the way participants craft their online contributions. This study also established that interactivity could largely be determined by the type and degree of students' socio-affective content in postings. Establishing a social environment, making more "human" connections while continuing with the learning process, and creating the sense that a group is working together in real time may lead to more successful conferencing experiences. Specifically grading support, appraisal, humour, inquiry, self-disclosure, supported opinion based upon personal experiences and factual information, educated adversariality and healthy, critical opposition – without endangering discussion by exclusively focusing on the specifics of a particular "netiquette" – will enhance reactivity and improve interactivity, thus aiming at collective knowledge construction. It may also help improve the quality of interactivity towards building stronger, healthier online learning communities. Better understanding interactions and sauce-emotional content in an electronic environment, and better interpreting their relationship within a computer-mediated course, may allow designers and educators to develop a strong learning community. Fostering support, appraisal, interest in others' comments, as well as sharing insights and opinions among a collection of virtual learners may help them improve the quality of interactivity to socially construct meaning and to gradually generate online relationships that develop into a cohesive group of people that accomplish their collective goal of learning with and from each other.

DORINE ANDREWS

COMPUTER-SUPPORTED SOCIAL NETWORKS: AUDIENCE-CENTRIC ONLINE COMMUNITY IMPLEMENTATION

SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATIONS DESIGN, UNIVERSITY OF BALTIMORE, 2000

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Audience-centric online community is an emerging marketing theme in the volatile world of the commercial Internet. Business, non-profit, and grassroots organisations see potential benefit in using online community as a mechanism for attracting audiences to their Internet services, retaining the interest of existing customers, and growing the value of their revenue potential (Hagel and Armstrong 1997). However, these audiences and customer groups are unlike early online community members, which suggests that implementing online communities for these people may be fraught

with issues not encountered in the early years of online community development.

This research seeks to understand more fully the issues of building and implementing online communities for large audiences. It is a case study using a specific instance of audience, North American mid-life career changers. It explores what must be known about an audience to develop requirements that address audience common needs and interests but also motivates members to participate. It demonstrates how audience requirements and needs may be translated into online community technology, content, and functionality. And, it discusses the issues regarding economic structures and financial business models. The case study results suggest a generalised model to guide audience-centric online community implementation.

The characteristics of these new audiences are not the same as those of early adopters in the mid-1980s such as 'The Well' online community. These audiences are more mainstream and pragmatic. People in these audiences participate and develop technical competence only when they foresee significant incremental improvement for their efforts. They are willing to take closely managed risks if safety nets are present. Their trust in technology and its providers cannot be assumed; it must be earned. Therefore, to transform an audience into an online community, you must convince people they can benefit by becoming members of the online community because an audience is not a community.

Audiences – market segments that shares demographic similarities and common needs – do not constitute communities because they do not share existing social relationships and do not expect to form such relationships. People within an audience do not work in the same industry, attend the same schools, or belong to the same associations or companies. They may or may not be aware of the benefits of interacting with each other. When people create social relationships to communicate with each other, to find answers to questions, solve problems, or get empathetic support from each other, they transform themselves from an audience into a community (Mickelson 1997). The community might be a "traditional" community where people interact face-to-face in "physical" space, or it might be an online community where people meet electronically in a "virtual" space. Defining what constitutes that "virtual" space of online community has been an evolving effort.

In this research, the term *online community* includes both social and technical aspects of CMC. The technical aspects also include a website that may have informational content as well as the software that supports the CMC.

Understanding how social networks operate provide insight into how audiences can be transformed into online communities. Wellman's (1997) sociological approach to online community as a network of weak tie or strong tie social relationships presents a comprehensive approach for understanding a possible transformation process of audience into community. The lower social presence of CMC should make creating weak-tie social networks online relatively easy whether or not the weak-tie social network already exists in the face-to-face world.

The overall objective of this research is to define a model for online community implementation that enables an audience to establish weak-tie, computer-mediated social networks for problem solving and fact finding and, as a result, transform itself into a community. As stated earlier, this research examined one of many possible audiences, North American mid-life career changers, whose common need is to change the content and/or work style of their careers. The specific questions investigated in this research were:

1. What knowledge about an audience will help to develop an appropriate online community to address its common needs and motivate members to participate?
2. How are an audience's needs and requirements translated into online community technology, content, and functionality?
3. Can these online communities be sustained economically? What are the essential characteristics of a viable economic model?
4. Can what is learned from a single audience be generalised into a model for online community implementation for other audiences?

This research followed the Complementary Data Analysis (CEDA) framework of Sudweeks and Simoff (1999). This included literature review along with a qualitative interview-based study using serial case study analysis and an online quantitative survey approach. The results of these studies were then translated into a requirement document and a prototype, which provided the foundation for an examination of the economic issues and alternatives for financial stability of the online community.

A model for online community implementation is suggested based upon the research and case study prototype that is based upon the following:

1. *There are differences between existing communities and audiences.* These differences impact on online community requirements and online community marketing strategies.
2. *Audiences may have characteristics that negatively affect their potential for online community participation.* There are differences between the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviour regarding audience common needs and Internet use. In addition, audience perceptions and their actual behaviour may differ significantly.
3. *The role and influence of the community organisers/owners may affect trust in an online community.* There are potential conflicts between organisers/owners and community members that must be mitigated through governance policies and operating practices.
4. *Economic realities may prevent audience-centric online communities from becoming self-sustaining.* Organisers/owners must be aware of the implementation risks, economic structures, and financial model alternatives they may pursue to reduce risks.

There may be ways to mitigate audience resistance to CMC. There are approaches for attracting new members, engaging them interactively, and moving them toward self-sustaining membership that may not be necessary for existing communities or for audiences who are experienced and accepting of CMC technologies.

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