Social Information Processing Theory: Effects on Communication

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The Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT) is an explanation as to how and why people form relationships through technological communication. The theory is a cross between the Social Penetration Theory and the Uncertainty Reduction Theory. “From the 1980’s through the early 1990’s, many communication scholars expressed strong skepticism about building close relationships online through computer-mediated communication (CMC)” (Walther). Due to the uncertainties SIPT gives off and the extensive role that technology plays in today’s society, researchers took a closer look through studies on how communication differs between face-to-face interactions and Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) interactions.

There are many different forms of which CMC can take place, such as social media (Facebook, Twitter, MySpace) chat rooms, and email. Researchers also studied the positives and negatives attributes of each method. Face-to-face and CMC relationships are observed in all age groups ranging from children to adults and many different geographic regions all around the world. The SIPT is the basis of an ongoing debate “that the lack of nonverbal cues in computer-mediated communication (CMC) poses challenges for accomplishing personal goals using this channel” (Westerman 2008). Non-verbal cues are often said to not exist in CMC because there is no face-to-face interaction but researchers are now able to hypothesize how these cues can be detected through technology based on how long it takes people to reply, the use of slang/vocabulary, and emotional icons.

Studies ranging from dating sites, parent teacher interactions, effects on violent children, and employees in the workplace show both optimistic and pessimistic results from CMC. Overall, a majority of studies are now showing more positive than negative effects and outcomes that are experienced through CMC relationships. These kinds of breakthroughs in
communication will push aside traditional views and uncertainties to pave the way for modern technology and communication in the future.

The Social Information Processing Theory and CMC relationships can be observed in a variety of cultures. Recently the fad of online dating sites has become a popular form of mediated communication. Researchers James Farrer and Jeff Gavin explored the idea of Western-based theories in CMC by examining members of a well-known Japanese online dating site. The research proved that SIPT is applicable to Japanese dating interactions but also proves certain cues and behaviors to be specific to Japanese social setting.

Researchers typically believe that certain cues and nonverbal aspects of communication are missing in CMC, Farrer and Gavin think otherwise, “To compensate for the lack of nonverbal cues, CMC users employ content and linguistic strategies as well as timing-related and typographic cues to glean information about a CMC partner.” (Walther 2001). The meaning and boundaries within communication differs and is not uniform across cultures. Japanese culture has a preference for “high-context” communication where information is conveyed not directly in the message but more indirectly. “Some profiles included indirect forms of communication, such as self-deprecating humor or irony and sexual innuendo” (Farrer 2009). They also included cues that were specific to Japanese writing style.

The Japanese culture has a higher social resistance to online dating because of anxieties about unmarriageable singles, opinions from their families, and the distrust of the Internet due to the practice of online prostitution. In order to avoid this type of uncertainty, “the data were generated using an online survey consisting of a combination of 20 closed-ended and 35 open-ended questions, with 36 current and 27 former members of Match.com Japan” (Farrer 2009) (40 female and 23 male).
Farrer and Gavin’s findings show that in Japanese and Western-based cultures, there is a clear gender pattern in the sending of the introductory email/initial messages. “Most men (63.7%) have sent more than five introductory emails/virtual kisses to female members” (Farrer 2009), “Most women (73.1%) sending five or fewer” (Farrer 2009). Both men and women were responsive to the introductory messages they received. A majority of the members (90%) used the search method to set parameters on their search for appropriate partners. The informants varied in their attitudes toward dating on Japanese. Social cues played a major role in the communication process, “when describing their first messages, most informants answered that they tried not to write long e-mails at the beginning, with two to three lines being the norm.” (Farrer 2009). This was a way for them to maintain control over social context. The study ultimate showed how CMC relationships exist in different cultures though the approach differs. Overall, the data collected through Match.com Japan, strongly supports Walther’s Social Information Processing Theory and CMC in Western-based cultures.

Another example of how Social Information Processing Theory and CMC is being used in communication is through parent interactions with their children’s teachers. In the past, things such as being a part of the PTA and back to school nights were considered being involved. Now parents are expected to play a bigger and more frequent role. A study from 2007 conducted by Blair Thompson, applied SIPT and CMC to parent-teacher relationships. The purpose was to explore the increase in parental involvement. “In the past decade, the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as e-mail has reportedly increased the level of parental involvement in their children’s education and parent-teacher communication” (Thompson 2007). It has also proven to increase the quality of conversations.
The study was based off of 30 teacher interviews and 30 parent interviews. Although the parents and teachers identified more disadvantages than advantages, the advantages outweighed the negative aspects. E-mail makes communication more accessible and suitable for both parents and teachers. Research also identified that e-mail (CMC) was used for instrumental purposes while face-to-face communication was used for emotional conversations. The parents and teachers who communicated more frequently through CMC developed relationships. The parents who communicated showed an increase in parental involvement in their child’s education. The amount of involvement a parent plays in their child’s education has a major impact on the child’s learning ability and performance in school. There is a clear link between the success of students academically and their parent’s contribution.

“The messages communicated between parents and teachers may not be as supportive as perceived.” (Thompson 2007). Most researchers have overlooked the negative effects on parental involvement that CMC may cause. CMC develops the possibility of parents becoming too involved in their children’s education, which may hinder the student. Allowing the kids to be responsible for their own education allows them to develop the sense of responsibility, “further, the possibility exists students will become dependent on their parents if they help with and monitor homework too much” (Thompson 2007). The students may acquire a negative view of their parents if they fell as if their parent is constantly “checking up on them”. CMC can easily cause negative effects as well as positive ones. Ultimately, CMC relationships between parents and teachers is a key aspect and will create a breakthrough in children’s educational success.

The use of Social Information Processing Theory and CMC can also be seen within the workplace. Holly Harris conducted a study in 2011 on “Employee’s perspectives on Social Media Use In Organizations as a Form of Internal Communication”. The study focused on how
social media can enhance the workplace and how employees are currently using it. The study “found that although people generally have a positive perception about social media, the majority of people not eager to use these tools as forms of internal communication” (Harris 2011). Social media in the workplace not only allows for employees to communicate face-to-face but through media forms such as instant messaging, e-mail, and status updates. One of the benefits of social media in the workplace is that majorities of people use it within their personal lives so it does not need to be taught. This can help foster communication in organizations.

The study conducted was survey style and was distributed to employees from various organizations. The survey came back with 242 participants. It included old/young employees, people of higher/lower level positions, and those who are/are not computer savvy. The survey asked about their comfort level, their interest in trying new things, and questions to help understand their perspectives. “This study revealed that 90.6% of participants in this study either use or have used social media at some point in their personal activities to communicate with their peers” (Harris 2011). Overall, a majority of employees have a positive perception on social media networking. They agree that social media tools can help enhance communication efforts within the workplace. With this being said, it would be a smart idea for companies to put this type of CMC to use.

Although the Social Information Processing Theory has a numerous amount of positive effects, one of its negative effects is it being the base of aggressive behavior in children and adolescence. Kenneth A. Dodge and Nicki R. Crick did a study in 1990 titled, “Social Information- Processing Cases of Aggressive Behavior in Children”.

In their study, they were able to prove “that a deficit in any of these three processes will increase the probability of deviant social behavior in a particular situation, including aggressive
behavior” (Dodge 1990). This means that children are more likely to get into conflicts with others if they have trouble interpreting others cues. The study was conducted through a series of steps of processing. The first step was to encode relevant information and given meaning. Then the individual access one or more possible behavioral responses, this shows the individuals response to certain stimuli (whether it is aggressive or not) and reveals the cause. The final step is enactment “in which the individual uses protocols and scripts to transform the selected response into verbal and motor behaviors” (Dodge 1990). This proved that aggressive children perceive, interpret, and make decisions about social information in ways that increase the likelihood of their engaging in aggressive acts. This study shows the importance of the SIPT and how it can affect not only children but also adults and how it can play a negative role in everyday lives.

The Social Information Processing Theory and CMC have a major impact on communication in our everyday lives. It effects both children and adults in various ways. CMC helps us build relationships that are just as personal as face-to-face. Social media is helping organizations stay in constant contact. Ultimately, the Social Information Processing Theory is sculpting the future and how we communicate in personal and professional situations.
References


