Preface

INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technologies has enabled dynamic social interaction through a computer-mediated communication (CMC) channel. Human interaction in a dyadic (one-on-one), public or group context through networked computers constitutes computer-mediated communication. A survey of internet use revealed phenomenal growth (132%, totaling over 250 million users) of internet usage in just North America between 2000 and 2008 (Internetworldstats, 2009). Accordingly, there has been rapid growth in CMC genres and applications of social interaction encompassing online message boards and discussion lists, newsgroups, digital reference, instant messaging, multi-user dimensions, blogs, social support groups and social networking sites.

The proliferation of CMC applications calls for new perspectives, methods and tools for research and practice in order to broaden our understanding of communication patterns and augment our understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of communication in CMC contexts. Also necessitated is an understanding of online social interaction and an analysis of interpersonal relations and social discourse in order to facilitate effective and dynamic interaction and building a sustainable online community. In daily interaction, it is inevitable that one will be involved in speech acts such as requests, disagreements, apologies, acknowledgment or thanks. Daily interaction is therefore anchored in interpersonal relations and social discourse involving communication in a dyadic, public or small-group context.

The impact of information and communication technologies vis-à-vis interpersonal relations and online social discourse has been relatively unexplored. This book addresses these issues by looking into conceptual foundations of computer-mediated interaction, language action and discourse features in various CMC contexts. The authors explore the manifestations of communicative and networking behavior of participants engaged in online discourse and address interpersonal relations and social discourse in the building of online communities and virtual teams for online learning and collaboration. In addition, online social support and networking across cultures and social technology are discussed in relation to social discourse and information technologies.

There is a rapidly growing body of literature in the area of CMC; however, there remains a dearth of literature dealing with CMC topics from interdisciplinary perspectives. This book provides interdisciplinary perspectives utilizing a variety of research methods to uncover the fundamental components of CMC (i.e., language, interpersonal relations/communication and information technology) which will be discussed in the following section.

Authors present data that are drawn from a wide range of sources including surveys, interview transcripts, personal blogs, online message boards and student discussion forums, health support groups, social network sites including Facebook and three-dimensional multi-user virtual environments such as Second Life. Data sources represent local and global CMC interaction.
Language confers humanity. Acquisition of a mother tongue is one of the most prominent characteristics of human beings. Language enables us to communicate, organize and access information and knowledge beyond the boundaries of time, space, and media. It is the cornerstone of socio-cultural experiences and the fundamental means for the embodiment and inheritance of intellectual and cultural heritages and values.

Studies of online language usage vis-à-vis face-to-face language usage are critical for understanding social interaction and interpersonal relations through CMC channels. Face-to-face communication makes use of a number of discourse features that facilitate an efficient process for encoding and decoding linguistic and paralinguistic elements that convey interpersonal and affective meanings among participants. Paralinguistic features are supra-linguistic cues that are added to linguistic elements. For instance, prosodic features such as high pitch intonation, pause and accent, together with non-verbal signals such as gesture and facial expressions function to convey interpersonal and affective meanings as well as to modify semantic meanings delivered by the linguistic elements.

Users of text-based CMC by and large lack these contextual cues. In contrast to a face-to-face setting, text-based CMC does not afford discourse participants opportunities for communicating meanings through the above mentioned paralinguistic cues. However, studies show that that CMC employs a high degree of interpersonally-oriented language (e.g., Park, 2007). Online discourse participants employ a variety of creative linguistic and paralinguistic devices to signal non-verbal communication cues that serve to build interpersonal solidarity and rapport. As well, by seeking common ground and by expressing agreement, online participants may build mutual understanding and harmonious social interaction. Communication based on shared interest and common ground facilitates dynamic interaction (Park, 2008).

The text-based real-time synchronous communication channel enables discourse participants to engage in spontaneous interaction. This allows discourse participants to experience online social interaction similar to communication achieved through spoken language. Rapid feedback is possible and online discourse participants are able to develop rapport. Such rapid feedback and rapport enhances social presence among discourse participants and engenders the building of social cohesion. On the other hand, the text-based asynchronous communication channel affords discourse participants time for reflecting on the message before transfer and allows them to preserve and revisit messages. These characteristics of CMC are to some degree analogous to written language and contribute to enrich the depth and quality of asynchronous social interaction. Accordingly, this may engender online social support, learning and group collaboration.

The advancement of information and communication technologies has brought to the fore social interaction across languages and cultures. Geospatial boundaries are no longer barriers to social interaction, which enables stakeholders of online communities from diverse cultural backgrounds to interact with each other. However, there is still a lack of studies on cultural representation and manifestations in CMC (Herring ed., 1996). Several studies in this volume begin to fill this research gap (e.g., Mao et al.; Rosen et al.; Li).

The Web page, a new form of communication system and information technology, can be seen to represent a society’s original cultural and social attributes. It constructs and reproduces both social and cultural inequality. The chapter by Li in this volume looks at the impact of cultural representation on web interface design. Through language representation, Li examines the relationship between interpersonal relations and online communications from a cultural perspective. The chapter provides insights and implications regarding human-computer interaction and usability within culture. Interpersonal as well
as the emotional and affective aspects of communication have been studied as critical factors in designing interactive systems of social technologies (Sharp, 2007). Issues of interactive system design, social technology and social interface need to be further examined in relation to intercultural dimension.

**ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK**

This volume consists of five sections consisting of a total of twenty-one chapters: 1) Online identity and self presentation; 2) Interpersonal relationships and gendered communication; 3) Language action and discourse features in the CMC; 4) Online learning and collaboration; 5) Social support and networking and social technology. The section topics are not mutually exclusive and there is some overlap. Some chapters could have been placed in multiple sections. For instance, most of the studies in this volume deal with language in one way or another; although not grouped in section three, language action and discourse features in CMC

The first and second sections of the book discuss the conceptual grounds of interpersonal relations and social discourse in CMC contexts. Chapters in the first section discuss presentations and projections of online identity and self through relational perspectives. Identity is conceptualized as socio-culturally situated and constructed. Multidimensional self and identity are presented and realized through language action and social discourse. Issues related to self disclosure, privacy management and anonymity are also discussed. The second section explores relationship development and maintenance, particularly gendered identity, in depth. Gendered identity is revealed through examination of communication styles of linguistic features. Socio-cultural variables in relation to gender and their impact on the CMC are investigated as well.

The third section of the book concerns language action and discourse features in CMC. Chapters in this section explore key characteristics of online language attributes during social interaction. These encompass the metaphoric dimension of social interactions, discourse structure and coherence, verbal and non-verbal signals and devices in relation to interpersonal discourse, (in) formal conversational practices, rhetorical acts and meaning negotiation and affective language uses.

The first three sections are further extended and applied to elements of sections four and five; namely, online learning and developing online community through group collaboration and virtual teams and online social support and networking across cultures and social technology.

The fourth section focuses on the online learning community and group collaboration. Chapters in this section discuss the psycho-social and interpersonal dynamics of online learning and group collaboration and implications to online education. Owing to richness of emerging information technology, stakeholders of online learning communities reflect the diverse geographic and language backgrounds as well as various socio-cultural values and norms. Such contexts foreground interpersonal communication as a key factor in facilitating group involvement and collaboration (Park, 2007). Through examining social presence, along with teaching and cognitive presence of discourse participants, chapters in this section uncover complex and intricate process of online learning and collaboration and construction of online groups and communities in virtual as well as blended contexts.

The fifth section explores the impact of communication technologies in seeking and sharing information through online social support and social networking beyond cultural boundaries. This section addresses the lack of research on cultural manifestations in the CMC and online networking behavior across cultures. It also presents communication patterns of online social support and networking while taking cultural differences into account. Cultural representations on web interface and usability issues are also discussed in depth.
OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

Each chapter contains an introduction, background/literature review, research findings and discussion, future trends/research directions and a conclusion and references.

Section 1: Online Identity and Self Presentation

Leonard, Withers, and Sherblom integrate theoretical frameworks and empirical research on both the negative and positive effects of the CMC on identity into a perspective of technological realism that embraces paradoxical predictions. Guided by this perspective, the authors analyze student papers reflecting on their identity choices in the creation and development of a Second Life avatar. Some users described developing avatars that mirrored their perceptions of self; others reported exploring creative identities ranging from the fictional to the fantastic. This chapter highlights the need to view the relationship between identity and CMC as complex and reflective, taking into account our motivations and intentions when communicating with others.

The chapter by Kvasny, Payton, and Hales uses ethnic identity labels as a sensitizing framework to explore the relationships among CMC, language, and social interaction. By looking into an online community composed of people of African descent, the study presents how Web forums serve as a narrative space for negotiating and representing a shared African Diaspora Identity. The discussions taking place on the forum (re)construct symbols of identity (labels) that reflect positive images that result from reflective identity politics. Black selfhood is (re)constituted through both deference and opposition to dominant constructions such as whiteness, nationality and colonialism that have historically serve to subjugate people of African descent.

Using examples primarily drawn from the social networking site Facebook, Leiter and Dowd interpretively highlight the axiological affordances of media platforms and how they intersect with social expectations surrounding media and the genres they afford. By looking at the ethical dimensions in and around digital sites that stand at the intersection of the expectations of written communication and face-to-face conversation, the authors investigate how these hybrid spaces and their inherited social expectations variously represent identity and (dis)embodiment.

Information and communication technologies have affected the way people both build and maintain interpersonal relationships. Self-disclosure has been investigated by scholars because of the important role it plays in relationships, yet we know little about decisions to disclose through the CMC outside of relationship initiation (e.g., dating services). To date, limited research has explored the influence of CMC on disclosure and relationships. However, much of this research has been lacking in integrative interpersonal theory and assumes marked differences in interaction patterns using CMC (as compared to face-to-face communication). The chapter by Greene and Magsamen-Conrad offers a theory-driven approach to the exploration of an important aspect of communication decision-making, self-disclosure and privacy management, as it relates to how people maintain existing interpersonal relationships through CMC interaction.

Section 2: Interpersonal Relationships and Gendered Communication

Moore and Craig demonstrate how CMC technologies play a key role in the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. A review of contemporary scholarship on relational communication in relation to interpersonal relationship development and maintenance are provided while drawing on a wide array of communication research findings covering initial interactions to relational routines and social support.
For some CMC users, the ability to interact anonymously with other people online allows them the freedom to say or be whatever they want without fear of retribution. Yet, this level of anonymity can also lead to consternation for others who want to know more about their interaction partners—including their “real life” gender (RLG). The chapter by Maguire explores these issues in-depth and examines the extent to which a CMC user’s RLG can often be determined by language use, interaction style and message content. She concludes that motivated users will rely on gender stereotypes to make their gender assessments and are often accurate at a rate greater than chance. Yet, whereas some research has found that gender differences do emerge when gender is made a salient aspect of the interaction, other studies show that these differences practically disappear when the RLG of users is not an issue.

The chapter by Burrell, Mabry and Allen investigates gendered communication and language styles in the context of mixed public discussion groups in asynchronous, text-based CMC. It presents similarities and differences in language use of men and women participating in online groups in order to discern the presence and empirical distinctness of gender markers that emerge during CMC. The authors analyze 3000 messages from 30 Internet discussion groups. The study provides evidence of gender differences in the linguistic stylistic features embedded in CMC. Results highlight the important role of gender in language employed in the construction of social identity in the CMC.

Section 3: Language Action and Discourse Features in the CMC

In order to understand the nature of the CMC, it is essential to take into account the diversity of circumstances that give meaning to the uses made of various information technologies. In this process, metaphors play an important role. The chapter by Vayreda and Núñez analyzes the role of metaphors in the interpersonal discourse of online forums. By examining a health-related social support community and a students’ online forum, the study presents the mediating role of metaphors in four fundamental CMC dimensions: metaphors play a prominent role in the construction of social reality; metaphors are a source of social norms in the CMC; metaphors generate confidence and identity at an individual and group level; metaphors contextualize, both historically and culturally, the reality constructed by the CMC.

The chapter by Gong adopts a sociolinguistic perspective in exploring the language, social interaction and information and communication technology constituting personal blogs. The study presents the linguistic strategies that bloggers from two different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (i.e., American and mainland Chinese bloggers) employ to express themselves and their identities in their blog entries. By examining differences and similarities in bloggers’ employment of linguistic strategies, this chapter offers insights into the influence of language, culture and information technology on the expression of online self and identity.

Taiwo examines the discursive practices of Nigerians as they engage in social interaction through online forums. The chapter demonstrates that despite non-sequential turn-taking patterns, participants are still able to achieve interactional and topical coherence with their choice of quoting as a turn-tracking device and addressivity as a means of sustaining interpersonal relations. The study identifies how the features of discourse were manipulated in the complex social interaction system of the asynchronous mode to achieve coherence in discourse. It also identifies the building of a dynamic online community of Nigerians who through their interpersonal discourse look at Web forums as a public space for agitating for social reforms.

To study the affects of information technology on language use, the chapter by Cottrill examines the differences in texts created for traditional classroom assessment and in CMC environments, specifically blogs. This comparative study looks at how student writing differs in traditional essays and assigned blogs and explores how students demonstrate rhetorical acts such as how students convey meaning,
express emotion and elicit reader response. The results of this study demonstrate how space complicates communication and the understanding of language and conventions.

Ending this section, Markman explores the relationship between language and conversational practices and small group dynamics in her chapter on computer-mediated team meetings. By examining one specific conversational practice, the repair of minor errors and typos, she is able to document empirically the emergence of a group norm of informality. She discusses how the affordances and constraints of synchronous chat inform the need for this particular interactional norm and shape how repair is deployed as a resource for norm development in group meetings. In addition to contributing to our understanding of group development, Markman's chapter provides further evidence for the ways that the technical infrastructure of online group discussion spaces shape conversational practices.

Section 4: Online Learning and Collaboration

In her chapter on student-instructor interactions, Stoerger begins section four by examining the computer-mediated communication that takes place in continuing education classes based in the three-dimensional virtual world Second Life. This discussion is situated within theoretical frameworks used to investigate early virtual worlds such as Multi-user Dungeons as well as synchronous educational chat. A discourse analysis approach was used to analyze these virtual classroom interactions. In contrast to the literature that suggests SL classes are often more student-centered and have the potential to disrupt physical world hierarchies, her study revealed that the virtual world classes were teacher-centered. Instructors wishing to create a more student-centered and egalitarian learning space may need to reflect upon their teaching methods and the ways in which those techniques translate in a virtual world.

Annese, Traetta, and Spadaro’s chapter focuses on social features of the CMC by comparing interpersonal relations and social interaction in the virtual and real environments of “blended” communities. The authors explore the psychosocial dynamics of participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and identity (Hermans, 1996) in learning communities interacting both online and offline. Their research helps to explain the increasing diffusion of this new model of community and its successful learning process. Research findings show specific participation dynamics developing in virtual and real contexts, deriving from special intertwinnings of individual and social identity. The authors suggest that blending virtual and real contexts allows community members to construct a sense of belonging based on intersubjective negotiations.

Hales and Troutman contribute a unique perspective to CMC-based social interactions that inform learning. In the case of the electronic palimpsest, the study highlights interpersonal, technology-based relations to reveal the way higher education continues to evolve with respect to changing -- and as a result "blurred"-- boundaries between the academic and the personal domains. The study demonstrates the complexity of hybridized courses with special attention paid to student interactions therein. It also demonstrates how the advantages of an electronic environment provide individuals with a multitude of opportunities and new ways of self-expression. The chapter illustrates varying viewpoints regarding the hybrid course approach and how it may change the realm of education and learning.

The chapter by McArthur examines the developmental processes of groups and teams in interpersonal and social interaction contexts. By intertwining group development theories with a discussion of emerging research in group interaction technologies, this chapter addresses the impact of the use of communication technologies on issues including group cohesion, conflict, verbal and nonverbal communication patterns, group interaction and task performance. These issues shape an understanding of the means whereby groups develop in online communities, in virtual meeting spaces and through other social networking technologies.
Section four ends with the chapter by Kristjánsson which presents a snapshot of the outworking of diversity in the context of online collaboration. Through discourse analysis and a model of situated multidimensional identity, the study demonstrates the complex social practice of online collaboration in the context of computer mediated learning especially when stakeholders from a range of backgrounds are drawn together. The manner in which collaboration or the lack thereof is understood, interpreted and evaluated, can be linked to perceptions of self, constructions of identity and frames of reference that merge online together with offline situations.

Section 5: Social Support and Networking beyond Cultures and Social Technology

In the era of new information technology, the Internet provides an avenue for individuals with special health needs to interact with and provide social support to each other, share personal narratives and experiences and exchange information. The first chapter in this section by Mao, Qian and Starosta focuses on comparing online social interactions of American prepartum and postpartum women with those of overseas Chinese prepartum and postpartum women. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from two popular online message boards maintained by American women and overseas Chinese women. The results show both similarities and differences between those two online communities in content and types of social interactions. A culture-centered approach was applied to understand the differences. The findings of this study are well positioned to help both researchers and practitioners tailor health messages to cultural characteristics of the audience and to better serve the unique needs of cultural minorities in the prepartum and postpartum period.

The chapter by Rosen, Stefanone and Lackaff compare behavioral patterns in social-networking sites and social-psychological measures of satisfaction among people who identify with two distinct cultural backgrounds. The findings suggest that people who identify with different cultural backgrounds behave in systematically different ways when networking online and have significantly different levels of satisfaction with their social lives. Taking a social networking approach, findings also suggest that one’s offline social support network size is more closely associated with satisfaction than one’s online network size.

Li presents culture dimensions represented on Web interface design through the use of power distance, one of the culture dimensions identified by Geert Hofstede (2001), by examining government-based and business-oriented web sites. The aim is to determine any appreciable differences in the representation of national political freedom in those websites. This study investigates the representation of social and interpersonal relations in online communications and contributes to the advance of knowledge in sociological and cultural studies of online communities.

The final chapter in section five and in the volume by Bach, Jiang, and Carroll examines computer-mediated communication practices in a large software company. In an empirical study surveying these practices, the authors found that challenges arose using information and communication technologies and revealed the paradox that participants actually wanted drastically different communication mechanisms than what they were practicing. The explanations for this paradox include a rich web of social and interpersonal interconnections that make electronic communication much more challenging than face-to-face communication. Furthermore, the authors explain the challenges through a theoretical framework from Computer-Supported Cooperative Work that includes looking at common ground, coupling of work, collaboration readiness and technology readiness. The paradox can be explained mainly in terms of common ground and coupling of work. The study provides insight to usability information sharing among software engineering teams.
SUMMARY

Through systematic research findings, using various perspectives and research methods, all twenty-one chapters in this volume address key ingredients of the CMC (language, social interaction and information/communication technologies) and future research directions. We hope that this volume provides a bridge between the fundamental components of CMC and serves to bring together academic disciplines engaged in CMC research and practice. The reader is provided with a broad interdisciplinary view of emerging CMC research as well as in-depth discussion of areas associated with specific disciplines. Readers may also benefit from practical perspectives and applications of interpersonal relations and social discourse for online interaction across CMC applications. We hope that this volume stimulates new avenues of research and engenders the development of a better understanding of online social interaction.

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REFERENCES


