Social Information Processing Theory:

Meaningful Groups in World of Warcraft

Michele Zorrilla

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The advent of the Internet has brought significant changes to the global population. From email and message boards to the World Wide Web to thousands of players logging in for simultaneous gameplay, connectivity between people has gone from local to global in a few short decades. With new media and technology come new questions, new concerns, and new research. Does this new communication channel change communication? If so, how? Is it good or bad? How can we best utilize it?

Research concerning this new channel of communication, computer-mediated communication (CMC), was varied and contradictory. Addressing these contradictory camps was Joseph Walther’s (1992) article that introduced the Social Information Processing (SIP) theory. Due to its sociopsychological nature, SIP theory looked at the discrepancies between the two contradictory camps of experimental research and field studies to develop its position. Before positing his own theory, Walther (1992) addressed the generally accepted view, based on social presence theory, the lack of social context cues, and media richness theory, of a “cues-filtered-out” approach (p. 58). This approach was supported by experimental findings, but weaknesses were noted, such as the failure to adapt to the variable of time, the complete exclusion of nonverbal data in face-to-face (FTF) groups, and a flawed coding system that relegated behaviors to only one of two functions, task or socioemotional, rather than the possibility of both (Walther, 1992). Compared to experimental research, field studies included CMC groups that had varying lengths of history (rather than zero-history groups) and observed CMC users “[developed] an ability to express missing nonverbal cues in written form” (Rice and Love (1987) cited in Walther, 1992, p. 66-67).

Based on his analysis, Walther (1992) developed his SIP perspective, “The development of relationships in CMC…is predicated on the passage of sufficient time and message exchanges.
It also [requires] that users adapt their remaining communicative cues – language and textual display – to the process of relational management” (p. 67). As a sociopsychological theory, SIP focuses heavily on relationships and the effects individuals have on one another through communication. The main concern SIP addresses is whether or not CMC is a viable communication channel for relationship establishment and maintenance. Walther’s development of SIP stemmed from the observations found in field studies, which are much richer in individual beliefs, attitudes, and differences than experimental research. These field studies and SIP theory provided the missing reasons as to why people were finding e-mail and computer-conferencing as effective means of interpersonal and group relationship building.

Taking in the account of extended time, SIP posits that relationships are viable through CMC based on the human need for affiliation, accrued knowledge of their partner, and their adaptation to the lack of nonverbal cues (Walther, 1992). These adaptations are commonplace today, such as the use of emoticons or smileys, expressing agreement/disagreement/emotion in text, and altering one’s typing style to convey nuanced meanings. Since its introduction, SIP has been updated and altered through studies by Walther himself, as well as its use as the theoretical basis for other research. Walther & Tidwell’s (2000) chapter introduces anticipation of future interaction as a driving force for “[overcoming] the effects of CMC versus FtF channels” (p. 326). Greater relational communication in CMC focuses on the sender, the receiver, and the channel between them. Because of the lack of nonverbal cues, receivers have a tendency to “inflate the perceptions they form about their partners” (Walther & Tidwell, 2000, p. 327) and judge them based on these impressions. Perception is also affected by whether a person holds a group or individual identity in mind. Group-minded individuals tend to see similarities, resulting in more positive evaluations of paralanguage such as smileys and typing style; individually-
minded individuals do not identify with their partner so “paralanguage works the opposite way, leading to judgments of users as less competent and less desirable” (Walther & Tidwell, 2000, p. 327). When establishing relationships, people will attempt to put their best foot forward; the “reduced communication cues and potentially asynchronous communication” allow them extra freedom in this regard (Walther & Tidwell, 2000, p. 327). These reduced cues force interactants to rely on each other’s words to form their impressions. Because words are more easily controlled than “the less conscious nonverbal and appearance features we present in FtF interaction,” we can more easily manage impressions (Walther & Tidwell, 2000, p. 327). This focus on a single channel allows interactants to ponder, write, and rewrite with greater depth and clarity than many FTF situations.

CMC is a brilliant interpersonal theory, offering explanations and descriptions for what happens in the online environment. It was relevant back in 1992 when new technology was email and computer-conferencing, and it is still relevant today (2011) where technology has advanced to permanent Internet connections, email on smartphones and laptops, and voice and video software to span communicative distances instantly. While CMC is a great interpersonal theory, it also has roots in group communication. Computer-conferencing is especially pertinent to group communication considering its past and present use by businesses to convey information and perform decision-making tasks. Indeed, some of the first observed effects of CMC besides greater impersonality and negative affect were task orientation and greater equality (Walther, 1992). CMC, while originally posited as a lean medium for interpersonal interaction, may have been ideal for certain situations requiring information exchange across time zones and distances. So where is SIP today regarding group communication? Can CMC support meaningful group relationships as it can interpersonal ones?
Personal experiences and observations support the idea that CMC group relationships can be just as meaningful as those in FTF groups. The primary example focused on in this paper will be guilds in Blizzard Entertainment’s Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game (MMORPG) World of Warcraft (WoW). Guilds are the primary unit of socialization in WoW, and may consist of anywhere from a handful of players to upwards of a hundred. They may be formed for a variety of reasons and involve players with zero to an extended history together. Besides guilds, which may center around a social component, other groups are formed to accomplish tasks, such as (5-player) dungeons, raids (10- or 25-player dungeons), or questing. Extending the group idea is Sherlock’s (2009) article on grouping in WoW. Not only are five-player groups discussed, but Sherlock (2009) introduces grouping in the WoW community around message boards and creating and editing articles on WoWWiki (http://www.wowwiki.com/Portal:Main). The content posted on message boards and WoWWiki may be considered public goods that the WoW community produces (Sherlock, 2009), and in-game groups and guilds may be seen as producing goods such as character advancement through experience or gear, and rankings against other players or guilds.

As a guild matures, various social roles will develop. While previous studies focused on attributes of individuals, groups or communities, Ang & Zaphiris (2010) focused on “the relational level of interaction between individual groups, i.e. who interacts with whom” (p. 593). They define MMORPGs as “communities-of-practice” because “the essence of a community lies in the common activities” (Ang & Zaphiris, 2010, p. 594). Guilds may be seen as communities within the community-of-practice of WoW, where formal (pre-defined, clear-cut) and informal (ambiguous, flexible) social roles are further defined (Ang & Zaphiris, 2010). Three social roles were defined, “a densely connected core members…loosely connected fragments semi-periphery
members…and an outer ring of disconnected periphery players….These three blocks of members, located at different structural positions in the guild network, clearly demonstrated distinct levels of participation and thus sense of belongingness to the community” (Ang & Zaphiris, 2010, p. 609). Generally speaking, the more history a player had with a guild, the more likely they were to be in the core block and to be actively involved in the guild; periphery members were either new to the guild or simply “freeloaders” (Ang & Zaphiris, 2010, p. 610). In my personal experience, I have performed all three of these social roles and can easily identify current members in my guild through these roles.

Of Ang & Zaphiris’ (2010) periphery members, the role they identified as “freeloader” stood out in particular. Albanese & Fleet (1985) developed free-rider theory to discuss just such individuals, those “who [obtain] benefits from group membership but [do] not bear a proportional share of the costs of providing the benefits” (p. 244). They argue that humans are rational beings who have “an ordered set of preferences” defined by their personal interests “and when free to do so will choose behaviors efficacious for achieving those preferences” (Albanese & Fleet, 1985, p. 245). Groups of any size may experience free-riders who benefit from the public goods they produce (Albanese & Fleet, 1985). The public goods produced in terms of guilds in WoW are status within/outside of the guild as well as monetary or item perks for the guild and individual characters. Free-riding may be influenced by the size of the guild – it is easier to fade into the periphery of a large group and remain undetected than it is in a smaller (Albanese & Fleet, 1985). Putting this into perspective, it is easier for a person in a 25-player raid to slack off because other players will pick up their slack; individual mistakes or lack of effort are much more noticeable in 10-player raids and will result in a player being penalized by their guildmates. Generally, raids may consist of members from all three of Ang & Zaphiris’
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(2010) social roles – the core members are those who consistently attend raids, semi-periphery members are those who have “made the cut” after a probationary period, and periphery members are generally new recruits. Freeloaders are often quickly identified and removed from raids with the use of third-party software to track performance and/or player observation with the justification that everyone must pitch in equally in order to receive a share of the public good (monetary and gear rewards, in this case).

Besides clashes with free-riders, groups may experience tensions between ingroups and outgroups. These tensions are based on cooperation/competition and similarity/dissimilarity and affect trust development, as described by Williams (2001). In- and outgroups may be seen as the guild and the outside community, or may be found within the guild itself. Group membership influences trust development through social categorization and self-categorization (Williams, 2001). Members of a group will categorize both themselves and others in relation to their group-status; these categorizations are based on previous personal experience and subcategories are assigned to individuals as they gather more information about them (Williams, 2001). These categorizations may extend trust or distrust to an individual based on a person’s experience and affect (positive or negative) towards a group (Williams, 2001). Competitive or cooperative interdependence that exists between similar or dissimilar groups will influence a person’s beliefs about group members’ trustworthiness and the affect associated with them; by extension, a person’s affect regarding a group may influence their feelings for an individual member of that group (Williams, 2001). The more positive affect towards an outgroup, the more motivated a person is to trust an individual of that group (Williams, 2001). Applying these ideas to guilds in WoW, ingroups and outgroups may be defined by Ang & Zaphiris’ (2010) social roles, by the guild hierarchy, or by goals. The two main categorizations of play in WoW are player-vs.-
environment (PVE), who generally focus on raids, and player-vs.-player (PVP), who generally face other players in (solo or team) combat. Guilds may focus on one, the other, or both.

Tensions may arise in guilds that partake in both, but they are also likely to arise in guilds that focus on one aspect. For example, my current guild focuses on PVE and has scheduled raids on Friday/Saturday. Sunday and other days of the week are free, and often people will schedule informal raids. There was an informal raid scheduled for Sunday, but many of the players who confirmed their attendance went on another raid the day before, rendering them unable to go Sunday due to in-game restrictions. Tensions may arise when players, even as members of the PVE ingroup, identify others as competitive outgroups who seek to steal players from one another for their own raids. This same competition-over-members may arise in guilds that have dedicated PVE and PVP groups that have scheduling conflicts.

Another influencing factor to guild relationships may be external information. Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman (2009) offered a new update to the CMC field of research, focusing on the effect other-generated statements have on perception. In their article, Walther et al. (2009) introduce the idea of warranting, “the capacity to draw a reliable connection between a presented persona online and a corporeally anchored person in the physical world (see Stone, 1995),” and warranting value (p. 232). Put another way, “…comments provided to Person B about Person A should be more valuable to B if they come from or are corroborated by another member of A’s social network (a testimonial) than if they came from Person A directly (a disclosure)” (Walther et al., 2009, p. 232). Information is granted warranting value because of the concern that people will falsely represent themselves, such as claiming to be of a particular sex or physique when they truly aren’t (Walther et al., 2009). Their study was done using the social networking site Facebook (www.facebook.com), where messages were posted to an
individual profile; these messages were designed to “suggest prosocial (popular and inclusive) or antisocial (drunken and promiscuous) behavior on the part of the profile owner. These messages…exerted a significant difference on observers’ ratings of the targets’ likeability and physical attractiveness” (Walther et al., 2009, p. 233). While their study was done on Facebook, it may be possible to extend their ideas to group CMC and guilds in WoW. Instead of external information in the form of public profiles that may be posted to, players have access to public forums, guild websites, and websites that track a character’s history and performance. Recruitment often involves an application posted on a guild forum. Players may discuss their history, abilities, and in-game achievements in these applications, but more weight is granted to outside websites that track the very same things, and they are often used to catch people misrepresenting themselves, addressing the causal fear cited in Walther et al.’s (2009) article.

Future explorations in the area of CMC include the introduction of voice and video into the online realm. Williams, Caplan, & Xiong (2007) presented a study done on guilds in WoW that utilized Voice-over Internet Protocol (VoIP), “the use of computer networks, including the global network, to carry a digitized voice signal” (p. 428). They represent VoIP as one of the factors for text-only CMC as falling by the wayside in the future. Analyzing guilds in WoW over the span of a month, Williams, et al. (2007) found that “[the] use of voice had no impact on balkanization, bridging, or bonding social capital, but interaction effects suggest significantly higher levels of relationship strength and trust between voice-based guildmates when compared to the text condition over time” (p. 439). They explained these findings via an adaptation of SIP media richness and uncertainty reduction; adding voice to text makes the media richer because it introduces more cues, and “those cues are then used by community members to reduce their uncertainty about others” (Williams et al., 2007, p. 441). VoIP may be seen as another adaptation
to the CMC channel rather than a departure from SIP’s original iteration. The use of VoIP programs such as Ventrilo and TeamSpeak may increase affect towards ingroups and outgroups by changing an individual’s categorizations (refer back to Williams, 2001). They may also serve to facilitate the transition between Ang & Zaphiris’ (2010) social roles by providing players another outlet to communicate with, provide feedback, and vocalic nonverbal cues. Personal experience attests to the influence of Ventrilo. While typing in WoW is a form of synchronous CMC, Ventrilo offers the time-advantage found in FTF communication. Using a combination of both in-game chat and Ventrilo can greatly reduce uncertainty between players and when completing tasks. Addressing the concerns of misrepresentation mentioned in Walther et al. (2009), hearing someone speak on Ventrilo is one way of verifying someone’s claim to a particular sex. Having two channels of communication is also useful because the chat-channel allows an individual the freedom to ponder, write, and rewrite intimate or embarrassing information, whereas VoIP may be better suited for relaying time-sensitive information and agreement/disagreement/emotion.

The fact that research has been done with SIP as a theoretical basis and the generally unquestioned notion in this day and age that CMC is almost interchangeable with FTF supports SIP theory. Not only do guilds form online, but they form around a purpose and meaningful relationships develop within them, as testified by Williams et al. (2007), Sherlock (2009), and Ang & Zaphiris (2010). These guilds reflect FTF and physical organizations well enough that studies performed in the physical realm may be applicable to CMC (Williams, 2001; Albanese & Fleet, 1985). While SIP is a great interpersonal theory, it is also viable concerning group communication. It can help explain the individual relationships that form within guilds, but can also demonstrate how meaningful guilds develop in the first place. While the meaningfulness of
interpersonal relationships that developed via CMC, such as marriages or funerals (both of which have been represented in WoW), the meaningfulness of guilds can be displayed in group activities such as attending the aforementioned marriage ceremonies, guild gaming parties (LAN parties) in real life, and even weekend trips to Vegas.

A note to make regarding SIP is its position as an explanatory or descriptive theory rather than a predictive theory. SIP explains how meaningful relationships can and have developed via CMC, but does not posit, “If you do ____, then you are sure to develop a meaningful relationship via CMC.” SIP also does not cover how CMC relationships become distanced or terminate. Future applications of SIP may include the effects of guilds utilizing both CMC and FTF channels and the idea of warranting information in guild recruitment.
References


