Chapter 4
Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT):
A Cultural Perspective for International Online Communication Environments

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ABSTRACT

The Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT) proposes that given time and opportunity to interact, relationships between individuals can form in online environments. Although not an overt assumption of the SIPT, it is essential to understand how cultural factors are important components of any CMC interaction. The power of the SIPT lies within its ability to foster communication between individuals through communicative behavior that is valued by the other's culture. Therefore, Social Information Processing has the potential to aid the development of trust between virtual team members, establishing group cohesion, and accentuating cross-communication within international work groups.

INTRODUCTION

The use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) has grown exponentially in the last decade. Among the reasons for this expansion is an increase in international online access. However, increased access brings with it a variety of new challenges and concerns that affect international communication and interactions in online environments. In fact, many of these interactions entail communication expectations based upon cultural differences in interpretation, particularly in the face of diverse languages and cultural norms. Other issues, to name a few, include: the actual media of choice, technological compatibility in the global arena, a variety of laws governing interactions,

and differing hardware and software standards. All of these factors contribute to international online interactions, the usefulness of communication technologies, and the effectiveness of these technologies in international contexts. This chapter proposes using the social information processing theory to understand such international online interactions.

The Social Information Processing (SIPT) moves beyond social influence and relational models of interaction by arguing that meanings in communication activities are not mediated only by past interactions and time (Walther, 1992; Walther & Burgoon, 1992); rather, meanings are also bound by culture. In addition, SIPT accepts that social presence and media richness, or the ability of a medium to support or carry multiple cues, influences media perception. In turn, this perception of the medium becomes embedded and reinforced by culture. Social presence, media richness, and media appropriateness, then, are important issues because they emphasize media attributes that vary by context and are influenced by individual differences (Rice, 1993). Simultaneously, individual differences and experiences are rooted in culture, which influences perceptions and interpretations made about media attributes.

If one accepts the idea that meanings are influenced by—and entrenched in—culture, then according to SIPT, perceptions of CMC media attributes and social interaction would reflect the nuances of cultural differences of norms and beliefs in multinational (intercultural) and multi-domestic (cross-cultural) organizations. In other words, messages can be transmitted among people, but not meanings. For instance, CMC media are conduits and transmitters of symbols, which in turn influence meaning (Sitkin, Sutcliffe, & Barrios-Choplin, 1992). As a result, it is paramount that the culture from which meaning evolves is taken into consideration when studying online communication technologies (Hiemstra, 1982; Mesdag, 2000).

Because interaction in most globalized organizations involves relationships between people from diverse cultures, such interactions can be classified as intercultural. SIPT, in turn, appears to take this factor into consideration. For instance, CMC offers paralinguistic codes, or signs and symbols, that express emotion and meaning in written text through icon manipulation, capitalization, parenthetical notes (Spears & Lea, 1992), and recently, emoticons. Caution, however, must be exercised with paralinguistic cues in CMC, for they have localized meanings (Spitzer, 1986; Turkle & Papert, 1990). Thus, they can never convey a fixed meaning to all groups (Barthes, 1977; Olaniran, 2001). For these reasons, SIPT is a valuable tool in understanding specific issues and challenges facing encounters in international online communication environments.

While the effects of technology are certainly important in this debate, the goal of this chapter is to shed light on 1) how we come to understand international online interactions, and 2) the role that a good theoretical perspective plays in such a discussion. Hence, this chapter explores (SIPT) as an indispensable tool for understanding specific issues and challenges facing encounters in international online communication environments. The chapter also explores the value and contribution a SIPT approach can make to the current CMC literature—in particular, in the area of interpersonal communication.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

SIPT Core Assumptions

In its initial formation and in the earlier organizational literature, Fulk, Schmitz, and Steinfield (1990) use the term "social information processing" to illustrate a model of media choice, where socially constructed and subjective assessments of media and their features determine channel selection. For example, Walther (1992) uses SIPT

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