

## Another SIDE of CMC: Identifiability and strategic behaviour

### Overview

In this chapter, we outline research which investigates the effects of identifiability on communicative behaviour via computers. In particular, we investigated the strategic SIDE's prediction that identifiability to an ingroup audience will confine communicators to the expression of group normative behaviours. The findings of the research suggest that there *are* strategic concerns for identifiable communicators addressing an ingroup audience. These concerns are reflected by increased stereotyping of the outgroup under conditions of identifiability and relate generally to *sensitivity* to the communicative nature of the behaviour and its consequences. In this research, sensitivity to the consequences of communicating to an ingroup audience was demonstrated in two studies, through two processes: (a) increased feelings of obligation to the ingroup by identifiable participants (i.e., saying the 'right' thing) and (b) a 'rejected compliance' effect in which identifiable communicators asserted that their actions were not due to compliance to the ingroup. The research points to the importance of identifiability in communication which can enable or facilitate identity enactment.

### Introduction

The use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is constantly increasing, and is increasing rapidly. In 1995, an estimated 26.4 million people were using the Internet (MIDS, 1997) and this number of people is said to *double* every year (Joinson & Cooper, 1998). It has been estimated that at the onset of the new millenium, 10% of the world's population will be 'on-line' (see McKenna & Bargh, 1998). CMC is therefore naturally a topic of increasing interest to researchers and it has long been a key forum for testing and applying SIDE ideas.

It seems a common belief that e-mail and the Internet add something of a 'new dimension' to the way people communicate with others. After all, these tools enable us to communicate with others in situations which otherwise would be difficult and time-consuming. For example, if you wanted to exchange recipes from Australia with someone in Madagascar, you could do this in minutes over the Internet as opposed to days/weeks by ordinary mail. However, such obvious differences put

aside, how different is CMC *really* when we compare it with our everyday interactions? What specific elements make behaviour over the computer different to our everyday social behaviours? In this chapter, we outline research which examines the nature of intergroup behaviour in CMC (see also Douglas & McGarty, 1999). We endeavour to show that behaviour over the computer, in many ways, mirrors the ways in which we typically conduct our social interactions with others.

## Identifiability and flaming

Typically, examinations of behaviour in CMC have focused on the element of identifiability: the capacity for communicators to either disclose aspects of their identity or not disclose any personal details about themselves and therefore remain anonymous. It is thought that anonymity makes communication via computers different to everyday interactions by bringing out specific, uninhibited behaviours which are unique to the medium (e.g., Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire, 1984; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). This research into the social psychological phenomena of CMC proposed, deriving ideas from deindividuation theory, that anonymity reduces self-awareness and increases the prevalence of 'anti-social' behaviour (e.g., Kiesler et al., 1984; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler & McGuire, 1986; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991). This 'relaxing' of social constraints is said to result in a number of negative behaviours, most notably *flaming*.

Flaming in CMC is the 'hostile expression of strong emotions and feelings' (Lea, O'Shea, Fung & Spears, 1992, p.89). It therefore refers to *extreme* communication: expression of views which, for one reason or another are stronger than would normally be expressed. It can range from mild insults and name calling, to swearing, to more extreme threatening communication. According to Selfe and Meyer (1991) flaming is a 'common, if not universal feature of computer-based conferences' (p.170).

Flaming has therefore received a lot of attention in recent years as a negative consequence of computer interactions and generally speaking, focus has primarily been on flaming as an interpersonal phenomenon, that is, individuals flaming other individuals because of something 'personal' between them. Also, its supposed prevalence in CMC in comparison to face to face communication has attracted much attention.

However, a review by Lea and colleagues (1992) revealed that flaming is not as prevalent in CMC, at least in newsgroups on the Internet, as the early literature suggests. In particular, they showed that flaming is quite rare and is usually restricted to certain situations where hostility may be appropriate. For example, flaming would be very rarely found in a newsgroup where the topic of discussion was folk art or crocheting, whereas in a newsgroup concerned with issues like abortion and racism, one might expect there to be ample flaming. In other words, flaming is context-specific or restricted to certain situations conducive to flaming and hostility.

The focus on flaming as a purely interpersonal phenomenon is also very limited. It is often the case that flaming involves purposeful attacks on *groups*. For example, in 1998 an American student was convicted for sending derogatory messages and

'hate-mail', sometimes as strong as death threats, to Asian students at his university. This type of communication is clearly an *intergroup* phenomenon. It is impossible to argue that the American student had 'personal' differences with a large number of students of another nationality whom he had never met. We therefore believe that flaming is a type of behaviour similar to other types of hostility and conflict, and as it often involves interactions between groups it is a good tool for examining intergroup behaviour in the domain of computer-mediated communication.

## The SIDE model

The intergroup aspects of behaviour in CMC have been examined under the framework of the SIDE model. There are two components of the SIDE model but recent moves have been towards an integration of these dimensions (see Reicher, this volume). Research into the *cognitive* (or as we would call it the *self-categorical*) effects of de-individuation have primarily investigated the effects of anonymity of *others to self* on group behaviour. This research has broadly shown that anonymous behaviour is often group normative. That is, behaviour in the presence of anonymous group members leads to increased instances of stereotyping and group polarization when social group memberships are salient to begin with (e.g., Lea & Spears, 1991; Postmes, 1997; Spears & Lea, 1992; Spears, Lea and Lee, 1990; see also Postmes, Spears & Lea, 1998, for a review). That is, when everyone is visually anonymous within a computer-mediated group, and a particular group membership is salient, salience increases further due to anonymity which serves to obscure interpersonal differences and group normative behaviour increases. We will not focus too much on these findings in this chapter as they are elaborated upon elsewhere (Spears, this volume). Instead we will focus on the predictions made in the *strategic* SIDE, which have attracted less attention.

The strategic or *identity enactment* component of the SIDE model makes predictions about what will happen to people's behaviour when they *themselves* are anonymous or identifiable to others. Research has focused on the effects of identifiability to powerful *outgroup* audiences and issues regarding surveillance by powerful outgroups. Reicher and Levine (1994 a,b) found that identifiability to an outgroup audience increased group normative behaviour but only under conditions where no punishment was anticipated. Where punishment was anticipated, group normative behaviour was reduced. In relation to an *ingroup* audience, it has been predicted that anonymity of self to others in an ingroup will free people to express their own mind without the constraints of the group; they should therefore act in a less group normative manner when they are anonymous (Spears & Lea, 1994). On the flipside, we might expect those who are identifiable to *adhere* to these norms more out of feelings of accountability to the group; they want to appear to be 'good' ingroup members. Research into the strategic concerns brought about by identifiability to an ingroup audience are emerging in the literature (e.g., Barreto & Ellemers, in press; Noel, Wann & Branscombe, 1995) and the research reported later in this chapter attempts to extend this approach.

## This research

Putting the ideas derived from SIDE together, we might therefore expect group normative behaviour to increase under conditions of identifiability either out of (a) a desire to appear positively to the ingroup, or (b) a desire to express one's ingroup identity to the outgroup. How might these motivations affect flaming behaviour? As stated previously, flaming can clearly be an intergroup phenomenon. As such, it should naturally involve group normative behaviours such as stereotyping behaviour. By examining the effects of identifiability on stereotyping language in flaming, we will gain knowledge of the effects of identifiability on group behaviour in general. Also, in our research, we examined situations where identifiable participants were identifiable by name and location, and where anonymous participants simply supplied no details. No face to face contact was present. So this research also served to examine if the strategic SIDE predictions apply in a physically anonymous, but still identifiable setting.

Initially we predicted two main effects. Firstly, based on the strategic SIDE we believed that identifiable sources (the communicators themselves) would engage in more stereotyping behaviour than anonymous sources. Adherence to and expression of group norms should be greater when communicators are identifiable. SIDE predicts that this will occur in the presence of an ingroup audience and the research by Reicher and Levine (1994 a,b) for outgroup audiences also supports this idea.

Further, based on Wilder (1976), we reasoned that anonymous outgroup targets (the subjects of the communication) would be harder to individuate than identifiable targets. There is less individuating information available about them so they should be categorized more in terms of group memberships. We therefore predicted that anonymous targets would be stereotyped more than identifiable targets.

Our initial study was an archival examination of Internet communications from Usenet newsgroups. We examined the stereotyping language using the linguistic category model (Semin & Fiedler, 1988) of a large number of flames. Quite unexpectedly, we found an *interaction* between identifiability of source and target as is shown in Figure 1.

The pairwise comparison for the identifiable target condition was not statistically significant. However, in the case of anonymous outgroup targets (those not supplying any personal details), identifiable sources stereotyped these targets more than did anonymous sources. It is plausible to think that something concerning their identifiability was responsible for this effect, but their identifiability to whom? Because the audience was mixed, that is it contained both ingroup and outgroup members, it might be the case that identifiable communicators stereotyped the outgroup because they wanted to express their identity to the *outgroup* members of the audience *or* to present themselves positively to *ingroup* members of the audience. Perhaps both types of motivations were present.

To examine these possibilities we conducted two laboratory studies and created an 'e-mail style' experiment where participants were asked to write a response to an Internet message written by a member of a so called 'white-power group'. Making sure that everyone contributing to the data set was opposed to these groups we made communicators identifiable to either an *ingroup* audience (one that is opposed to

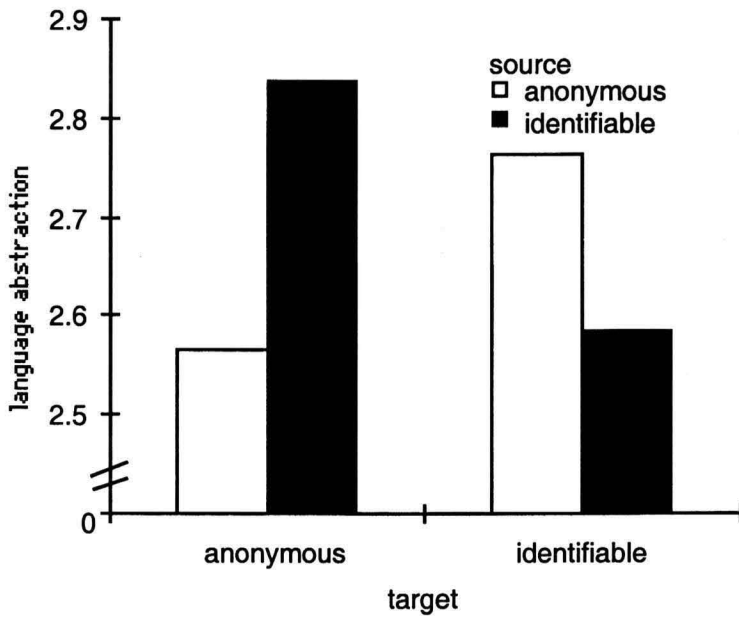


Figure 1: The effects of identifiability of source and target on stereotypical language use (archival study – Study 1).

white-power groups) or an *outgroup* audience (one that is not opposed to white power groups). We did this in two separate studies. It is interesting to note that a couple of participants were not opposed to white power groups and so their data were therefore omitted from the analysis.

The outgroup audience study (Study 2) revealed no differences in stereotyping across conditions. So, from this point we ruled out the possibility that stereotyping behaviour varied due to the presence of the outgroup audience. On the other hand, the ingroup audience (Study 3) study revealed the *same* interaction as observed in Study 1. This effect is displayed in Figure 2.

Similarly, in the anonymous target condition, identifiable communicators again stereotyped the most. Our archival findings were therefore most likely due to the presence of an ingroup audience.

So, *what* is it about an ingroup audience which can bring about these differences in stereotyping behaviour? How can the presence of ingroups influence behaviour? One way is through accountability. Being identifiable to an audience of ingroup members makes a person accountable to people whose evaluations are important to them. People will want to say things which will reflect upon them best when they are accountable to an important ingroup.

So, in Study 4 we predicted that accountability would mediate the identifiability effect obtained in previous studies. Quite simply, identifiability should lead to greater levels of accountability which should lead to increased stereotyping.

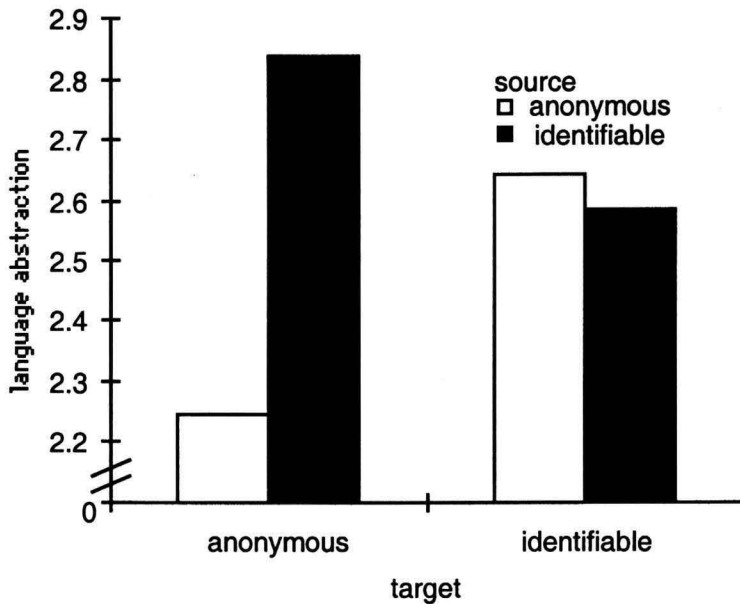


Figure 2: The effects of identifiability of source and target on stereotypical language use (ingroup experimental study – Study 3).

We used the same procedure as in Studies 2 and 3 to test this hypothesis, but also asked participants how accountable they felt during the experiment. We focused on the anonymous target condition alone this time as the effect interestingly only occurs under such conditions. So, this was a 2 group between subjects design (anonymous or identifiable source).

Again, identifiable participants stereotyped the outgroup more than did anonymous participants suggesting that this finding, which we call the *identifiability effect* is highly replicable. Identifiable participants also felt more accountable as predicted, but interestingly, accountability did *not* mediate the effect. Identifiable participants not only felt more accountable; they also felt less strongly committed to the issue they were discussing. An interaction between accountability and *low* commitment to the issue mediated the effect.

What then does it mean to be accountable, but to experience low commitment to an issue? We explain the findings in relation to feelings of *obligation* (see also McGarty, Taylor & Douglas, this volume). In the study, identifiable participants most likely felt obligated to the ingroup to act in line with group norms. They were not strongly committed to the issue they were discussing, yet they felt accountable. Therefore, they acted in a way that members of their ingroup would think was right. Perhaps these essentially *moderate* identifiers felt obligated to the ingroup and therefore expressed views more strongly than they actually felt. It may be described as a situation of expressing ‘overcommitment’ for the sake of positive self presentation.

At this point, we would like to make a distinction between commitment (doing something because you *feel* it is the right thing to do) and obligation (doing something because you are accountable; not because you are committed to it). Clearly the second scenario is more likely here since participants felt low commitment to the issue. They probably thought the racist target was 'wrong', but expressed views more strongly than they actually felt because of their accountability to the ingroup. Their obligation to this ingroup influenced their behaviour.

An example of obeying road rules illustrates this point. A person who is committed to the road rules obeys the rules because he/she thinks they are right and wants to obey them. Someone who feels obligated to follow the rules obeys them *not* because they are committed to the rules, even though they probably think they are right, but because they are accountable for their behaviour. So, in our studies we have evidence that strategic social behaviour occurs in CMC such that people express their views *more strongly* than they normally might because of obligation to the ingroup.

In our most recent study (Study 5), we directly manipulated commitment to the issue so that we could demonstrate this concept of obligation more clearly. It was anticipated that, under conditions of high commitment, the identifiability effect would be attenuated. We utilized a similar procedure to previous studies, but directly manipulated commitment to the issue by means of a false feedback technique. Our prediction was not supported. Instead, we replicated the identifiability effect under conditions of both high and low commitment, which at first we found puzzling. A closer examination of the data indicated that identifiable participants, in responding to questions regarding their sensitivity to audience surveillance, rejected the notion that they wrote their responses in line with what their audience would like to read. That is, they rejected *compliance* as a motivation for writing their responses. Identifiable participants rejected compliance more than anonymous participants and a mediator analysis revealed that this *rejection of compliance* mediated the identifiability effect. This indicates that identifiable participants are rejecting compliance as an account of their behaviour.

So this most recent finding, teamed with the results of Study 4 indicate more generally that identifiability can enable or facilitate identity enactment. In both studies, identifiability brought about increased group normative behaviour and yet the explanations for the behaviour in the studies were different. Whilst in Study 4 communicators stereotyped or acted group normatively because they felt obligated to the ingroup to do so, in Study 5 they revealed post hoc that they were not simply complying to the ingroup's expectations. Our research indicates that identifiability makes communicators both more *sensitive* to the consequences of their behaviour and also more likely to express their ingroup identity. We therefore believe that identifiability facilitates or removes barriers to the enactment of ingroup identity.

## Conclusions

Overall then, what do these findings mean and what can they offer the SIDE model? First of all, we have demonstrated that flaming in CMC exhibits properties of normative

group behaviour. As expected, stereotyping behaviour is alive and well in CMC as it is in everyday interactions. It is also clear that social behaviour in CMC bears remarkable similarities to social behaviour as it exists in 'the real world'. We have evidence that social behaviour in CMC is affected by the characteristics of the audience present and communicators' own identifiability to that audience.

These results have interesting implications for the SIDE model. We have shown that identifiability to an ingroup audience can affect strategic behaviour. So, the prediction made by the strategic component of the SIDE model, that identifiable behaviour in the presence of an ingroup audience will be more constrained by group norms and standards, was upheld in this setting. Our results also indicate that identifiability acts as a facilitator for identity enactment. It is not only accountability which is affected by the presence of an ingroup audience. Other *identity enactment influences* can be seen as a result of identifiability. In this research, we have observed two such processes. We observed that both obligation and rejection of compliance increased group normative behaviour. Both of these influences point to the sensitivity of identifiable participants to the communicative consequences of their behaviour. Clearly, identifiability to an ingroup audience raises important concerns and influences the expression of group normative behaviour of communicators.

In summary, our research reinforces the importance of CMC as a tool for examining intergroup phenomena, and points to identifiability as an important determinant of the enactment of ingroup identity. The study of identifiable behaviour, or 'another SIDE of CMC' is clearly an important area for future research.

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