Computer-mediated communication: from a cognitive to a discursive model

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Abstract
In this article, we evaluate the ways in which computer-mediated communication (CMC) has thus far been conceptualized, proposing an alternative approach. It is argued that traditional perspectives ignore participants’ everyday understanding of media use and media characteristics by relying on an individualistic and cognitive framework. The SIDE model, while improving on the definition of what may count as ‘social’ in CMC, still disregards the way in which identity is constructed and managed in everyday talk and text. To fill this gap, we offer a discursive psychological approach to online interaction. Presented here are the materials from an online discussion forum on depression. It is shown that participants’ identities do not so much mirror their inner worlds but are discourse practices in their own right. More specifically, we demonstrate how participants attend to ‘contradictory’ normative requirements when requesting support, thus performing the kind of identity work typically obscured in cognitive models.

Key words
computer-mediated communication • construction • discursive psychology • identity • interaction • online support groups
In recent years, studies on computer-mediated communication (CMC) have gradually changed their focus of research from analysing CMC as the outcome of a set of allegedly fixed characteristics of new media, towards approaches that somehow appreciate the role of social context. First and foremost, this development involves a shift from the traditional conception of CMC as generally promoting task-oriented, depersonalized and anti-normative behaviour. For example, the basic tenet of the Social Identity model of De-individuation Effects (e.g. Postmes et al., 1998, 2001; Spears and Lea, 1992) is that many of the apparently asocial features of CMC, which were originally conceived as inherent to the medium, are essentially social phenomena. Partly as a result of acknowledging this social dimension, CMC is approached less often as a second-class form of communication, in which ‘meaningful relations’ cannot be developed at all or only achieved with great difficulty (cf. Jones, 1998).

However, despite their emphasis on what is called social context or social influence, contemporary perspectives do not seem to grasp the everyday dynamics of online interaction. In this article, we argue that such an understanding of CMC would require an approach in which text and talk are analysed as part of social practice. Rather than viewing talk as a descriptive route to what we ‘really’ think, it must be understood as performing various kinds of discursive actions. Such a discursive social psychological approach would not be based on laboratory experiments, but rather on analyses of naturally occurring online conversations.

First, we shall critically review some of the early theories on CMC. Hence, we point towards a more recent theoretical perspective, namely the Social Identity model of De-individuation Effects which, by stressing the social potential of online communication, counters assumptions about anti-normative behaviour in CMC. Although definitely providing more room for contextual interpretation when compared to the rather rigid framework of previous approaches, we will argue that this approach still does not recognize fully the social nature of online interaction. For that purpose, we have to shift our focus of analytic attention from a mainly cognitivist approach to a discourse-based alternative. To illustrate the benefits of such a discursive social psychological approach, we shall present some examples of ‘identity work’ which have been taken from an internet discussion forum on the topic of depression. More specifically, it is shown that in order to understand how identity categories work in actual online discourse, we have to reformulate the dominant cognitivist notion of identity into a participant-centred and action-oriented account.

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EARLY APPROACHES OF CMC: THE SOCIAL CUES PERSPECTIVE

Ever since the early 1980s, the social cues perspective has been very influential in describing the characteristics of CMC as less socially-oriented. In fact, this perspective encompasses three related approaches, namely, the social presence model, the cuelessness model and the reduced social cues approach. Two pivotal theoretical notions are crucial to our understanding of how early approaches have understood the potential of CMC, namely social presence and cuelessness.

The social presence model, as developed by Short et al. (1976), argues that the critical factor in any communication medium is its social presence. Social presence refers to various dimensions related to the degree of interpersonal contact. It illustrates ‘the capacity to transmit information about facial expression, direction of looking, posture, dress and non-verbal vocal cues, [which] all contribute to the Social Presence of a communications medium’ (1976: 65). How precisely these separate elements contribute is taken to be determined by the individual, since social presence is not only considered to be a quality of the medium, but also as a ‘mental set towards the medium’ (1976: 65).

The notion of social presence was measured in laboratory-based rating studies using the semantic differential technique. Experimental subjects were asked to rate communication media on a series of seven-point, bipolar scales. It was found that the social presence factor was typically marked by scales such as unsociable–sociable, insensitive–sensitive, cold–warm and impersonal–personal. The degree of social presence was hypothesized to result in the avoidance of particular media for certain types of interaction, for example: ‘in tasks involving a high degree of confrontation or interpersonal tension, conversation over audio links might be preferred to those encountered over the more intimate media’ (1976: 108). Although CMC was not directly involved in these studies, we may expect that it would have been rated relatively low in ranking.

Related to the notion of social presence is the concept of cuelessness which has been introduced by the cuelessness model (Rutter, 1984). Cuelessness points towards the lack of social cues that are available to, or usable by, subjects who are involved with particular media (based on rating studies). As Rutter states, ‘as we move from face-to-face, to video and curtain, to audio . . . the conditions become increasingly cueless’ (1984: 139). In addition, he argues that there is a link between cuelessness and particular communicative outcomes:

[T]he smaller the aggregate number of available cues from whatever source – visual communication, physical presence, or, indeed any other – the more task-oriented and depersonalized the content, the less spontaneous the style, and in
negotiations, the more likely the side with the stronger case to win a favourable outcome. (1984: 139)

The conclusions reached in both the social presence tradition and the cuelessness model about the shortcomings of CMC were confirmed and extended in subsequent research conducted within the so-called reduced social cues (RSC) approach. This approach covers a cluster of explanations (Sproull and Kiesler, 1986, 1991), and in contrast with the models discussed earlier, it has dealt directly with computers and CMC. The RSC approach states that certain inherent features of CMC, such as a lack of social cues, lead to psychological states that undermine social and normative influences on groups or individuals. The result is deregulated ( uninhibited) and extreme behaviour, as well as more polarized, extreme and risky group decisions (Sproull and Kiesler, 1991).

Coined to illustrate this particular type of behaviour is the notion of flaming. As Sproull and Kiesler state: ‘ electronic messages are often startlingly blunt and electronic discussions can escalate rapidly into name calling and epithets’ (1991: 48). According to them, flaming is closely linked to the typical ephemeral character of CMC, in which text messages appear and disappear from the screen without leaving behind any ‘tangible artifacts’, and to the low level of social information in CMC (1991: 40). Moreover, they argue that participants who communicate via CMC imagine that they must use stronger language to get their messages across.

Some critical observations with respect to the social cues perspective

If we consider more closely how this set of research approaches conceptualizes computer-mediated interaction, three related observations of interest emerge.

First, the qualities of the medium are measured according to the researcher’s thesaurus. For example, social characteristics are captured in terms such as ‘warm’, ‘personal’ and ‘sensitive’. In this way, the social nature of media is reduced to a handful of predetermined characteristics, which also happen to restrict ‘social’ to something inherently positive. More generally, the fact that the evaluative labels are fixed means that participants cannot but assess the medium within those parameters. What is missing is participants’ own and everyday understanding of media characteristics and use. As we will show later in this article, such a study would undermine the tacit assumption that these, or similar labels, can be treated as passive or neutral descriptions of participants’ orientations.

The lack of attention to these orientations brings us to a second and related shortcoming of these models, that is, the assumption that participants’ evaluations are essentially rooted in individual psychological states. This starting point separates assessments from the interactional
environments in which they are normally embedded, and thus the social
tasks for which they are used (cf. Potter, 1998a). For example, to define a
medium as insensitive or impersonal may be one way to resist its use in
particular circumstances. For this to be noticed, however, one has to focus
on *everyday* conversations about media use. In a similar way, drawing
conclusions such as ‘the more task-oriented and depersonalized the content,
the less spontaneous the style’ (see the cuelessness model), assumes that what
participants *do* with their often ostensibly neutral and factual descriptions –
for example, making accusations or blaming someone – can be excluded from
analysis without impairing it. More broadly, we could say that the social cues
perspective draws on an essentially individualistic notion of online interaction.
Edwards (1997: 17) has described this conception of interaction as the image
that is dominant in most social scientific pursuits. He refers to it as the
‘metaphor of communication . . . where two (imagined) individuals,
possessing thoughts, intentions and so on, have the problem of getting these
messages across the airwaves via a communication channel’.

Finally, the idea of anti-normative behaviour in the RSC approach starts
from an abstract, a priori notion of what a norm is (and, for that matter,
normative or anti-normative behaviour) and how it functions in interaction.
As we will see, researchers who draw upon the so-called social identity
model of de-individuation effects (SIDE model) have criticized the negative
characterization of CMC developed within the social cues perspective,
which almost exclusively ascribes so-called asocial characteristics (such as
‘flaming’) to online interaction. At the same time, however, they leave aside
the question of how participants negotiate ‘norms’ and attend to norms in
the routines of their daily existence.

**THE SIDE MODEL**
The SIDE model, as developed by Spears and Lea (1992; but see also
Postmes et al., 1998) has tried to overcome the inconsistencies and flaws of
the social cues perspective. However, as we shall point out, despite its focus
on social influence this model retains a rather mechanistic image of online
interaction in both method and theoretical perspective.

Spears and Lea have argued that the empirical basis for referring to
uninhibited behaviour as a necessary outcome of communicating via
computers, as it is put forward by the RSC approach, is rather small when
compared to the broad and rather inflated claims about flaming as a
seemingly universal feature of the medium (Spears and Lea, 1992: 108).
However, a more fundamental criticism is connected to their alternative
explanation of what is described by the RSC approach as uninhibited
behaviour. Spears and Lea put forward the view that what is considered as
uninhibited or anti-normative behaviour in terms of the RSC perspective,
may actually represent an example of *normative* behaviour. There are no
grounds for physicalist claims, which refer to physical presence as a prerequisite for social influence. Even when group members are not co-present, they are able to exert social influence. The basis of the SIDE model, and of the social identity theory (for example, Tajfel, 1982) and the self-categorization theory (for example, Turner, 1987) on which it leans heavily, can be found in precisely this idea. As Spears and Lea (1992: 44) point out, an approach that equates social influence with interpersonal and informational influence would neglect pre-established social categories and norms and would also deny the possibility of developing new social identities within CMC.

A basic distinction in the SIDE model is between social and personal identities. Social identities refer to people’s identification with certain groups, whereas personal identities refer to the unique attributes that define an individual. The SIDE model proposes (based on Reicher, 1984, 1987) that de-individuation processes as found in CMC environments may actually enhance social identity. Assuming that people identify with a particular social group, perceived intra-group differences will become less important as a result of physical isolation and visual anonymity. This will strengthen normative behaviour and group response in an online group. On the other hand, when people do not identify with a social group but adhere to their personal identity, group salience will decrease as a result of anonymity and physical isolation. In short, as Spears and Lea state: ‘de-individuation as anonymity should serve to accentuate the effects of the salient identity (social or personal) and the dominant normative response associated with it’ (1992: 47). Spears and Lea argue that individuals will use whatever cues available to construct impressions of one another. This implies that if certain relevant context cues are lacking, people draw more heavily on social categorization processes to form an adequate social context (1992: 324).

The SIDE model: some shortcomings
Whereas the protagonists of the SIDE model are right not to confuse physical proximity with social influence, their conceptualization of identity and the social nature of computer-mediated interaction in general is still limited. Let us make a few critical observations, in line with the discursive psychological focus that we will further elaborate in the next section.

First, identities – either individual or social identities – are ultimately treated as objective entities (cf. McKinlay and Dunnett, 1998). While the model emphasizes participants’ flexibility in choosing one identity rather than another, it still retains a rather mechanistic view of identity management. Identities, or their components, are taken as ‘already there’ – participants pick from a pre-established set of building blocks for possible identities. This aspect is illustrated by the vocabulary invoked by the SIDE model: rather than being put together by participants, identities become
salient. A discursive psychological approach, on the other hand, shows how identities are actively constructed for particular occasions. Moreover, identities do not only show situational dependence but also work to define situations (see our third comment below).

Second, identities are conceived as essentially individual phenomena. Despite the addition ‘social’, the actual process by which a social identity is taken on is triggered on the individual level, through some cognitive process. In contrast, a discursive psychological perspective begins from the idea of categorization or identity work as actions performed in, and through, talk. The focus of analysis is on how categories (of other people, of participants themselves) are deployed and what kinds of socio-interactional business they perform, such as resisting accountability or establishing authenticity. Rather than passively reflecting people’s real nature, categorizations are handled in use (cf. Edwards, 1998).

Third, the assumptions that are held in the SIDE model are tested primarily on the basis of experiments. This brings us to another limitation. In these experimental settings, priming procedures are used to simulate contextual features. The way in which particular context-stimuli lead to the adoption of either a social or an individual identity is the starting point for the SIDE model. In this sense, an understanding of the precise working of context factors is crucial. However, the model is unclear as to how exactly context is supposed to influence people’s behaviour. Moreover, as far as it is spelled out, context is defined as a rather passive phenomenon. It is used as an umbrella term representing all the features that surround participants’ behaviour. On the other hand, a discursive psychological approach assumes that context is not simply pre-existent but selectively oriented to, and continually updated. Participants’ social practices are both context-shaped and context-renewing (cf. Heritage, 1984). Each utterance provides a context for what comes next, i.e. it becomes part of the contextual framework in which the next social action will be understood. This understanding of context involves a much more active role for participants. Furthermore, it urges the researcher to show how context is implicated in the production of the details of interaction.

Finally, the SIDE perspective employs a ‘rule-governed’ model of human action, in which the role of norms is essentially that of regulating or determining action. In doing so, the role of norms as participants’ resources for performing all sorts of social actions is ignored. By contrast, a discursive psychological perspective starts from the assumption that social order is an issue that members themselves have to solve. That is, order is not so much the result of a process in which certain norms are internalized, but the product of a set of locally managed procedures through which actions can be accomplished and recognized (cf. Heritage, 1984). Take, for example, the social activity of greetings. The orderliness of the setting is achieved, not so
much because the norm determines that greetings are returned, but rather because participants treat return or non-return as the product of an actor’s practical choice, which can also be accounted for as such. As our analysis will illustrate, ‘norms’ are powerful resources for participants’ discourse practices. However, such intricacies can only be noticed if one moves beyond laboratory experiments and begins from a detailed analysis of talk-in-interaction.

A DISCURSIVE APPROACH TO ONLINE INTERACTION

Before focusing on concrete examples of identity work in everyday online interaction, it is useful to pay some attention to the basic theoretical and methodological principles of discursive psychology (see also Edwards, 1997; Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996; te Molder, 1999). Discursive psychology focuses on text and talk as social practices, an emphasis that it shares with ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. From this perspective, language is not viewed as a passive medium that simply transmits information about what is really going on or what people really think about the world. Instead, language is reformulated as talk-in-interaction: involving (social) action rather than cognition.

The perspective of discursive psychology can be typified by three pivotal notions, captured under the headings: naturalistic materials, participants’ orientations and talk as action-oriented.

Naturalistic materials

Discursive psychology preferably focuses on ‘naturally occurring’ conversations. In general, the emphasis is not on data that is produced for the purpose of study, as in the case of laboratory experiments or controlled observations, but on interactions that would have occurred regardless of whether a researcher was involved. However, the distinction between natural and artificial is not as clear-cut as it may seem. Discursive psychologists regard the phenomenon of natural talk, first and foremost, as the product of a specific research orientation. While some materials are more suited to the purpose of discursive analysis than others, in principle this focus can be applied to any kind of text, including data from experiments (cf. Potter and Wetherell, 1995).

From a discursive psychological perspective, talk and text are analysed as part of sequences of interaction. However, while talk is oriented to its sequential position and setting, it is not determined by it (cf. Edwards and Potter, in press). For example, a question establishes the normative relevance of an answer, but the answer may well be deferred or withheld. As a result, social order does not break down and is not even disturbed. Rather, participants will use the non-implementation of a normative expectation as a way of making sense of each other’s actions. Withholding an answer may
be treated by co-participants as a sign that something is wrong, for example, that the other person is angry with him or her.

Participants’ orientations
A discursive approach is participant-centred, i.e. it begins from the perspective of the participant rather than that of the researcher. This starting point is visible in a number of discursive psychological pursuits. For example, discursive psychologists have reformulated central concepts in traditional social psychology from analysts’ categories into participants’ resources. Cognitive notions such as scripts, attributions, motives and identities, are part and parcel of participants’ interactional work, rather than simply reflecting their inner worlds (Edwards, 1997; Edwards and Potter, 1992, 1993; Potter, 1998a, 1998b; te Molder and Potter, in press). From this perspective, identities, for example, are no longer private mental states which can be ‘switched on’ in relevant situations, but rather social phenomena which are locally produced and managed.

The theoretical respecification of cognition is closely intertwined with methodological considerations. An important starting point for analysis is the way in which participants themselves orient towards a particular utterance. Instead of using researchers’ informed guesses, the focus is first on the kind of understanding that co-participants display in subsequent turns (for example, they may treat a particular utterance as a compliment, an invitation or an accusation).

However, this principle is not the only means by which analysis is accomplished. Another major methodological procedure is to inspect a piece of discourse for its rhetorical quality; that is, to assess what other plausible counterdescription is at issue (Edwards, 1997).

Talk as action-oriented
Discursive psychology assumes that ‘language’ is a resource in the hands of conversational partners through which all sorts of interactional work can be accomplished (Edwards, 1997; Edwards and Potter, 2001; Potter, 1996). Rather than regarding language as an abstract system of reference, the perspective takes as its focus what participants do with it, such as making accusations, playing down responsibility or presenting something as factual. This involves taking discourse as a domain of action in its own right, rather than as the result of some cognitive process (Edwards and Potter, in press).

It is precisely this action orientation which holds a central position in our subsequent exploration of a discussion group on depression, where people continuously define and redefine their identities. By showing this kind of identity management, we will be able to point out some of the main limitations of present theorizing on CMC, in particular with respect to the SIDE model.
MANAGING IDENTITY IN DISCUSSING DEPRESSION

Analysis of everyday discourse has demonstrated how identity construction can be seen as something people actively do, and do things with (see, for an overview, Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998). Instead of beginning with the conception of identities as relative static entities with an objective grounding, we shall illustrate how identity categories are handled in practice in an online discussion on depression, and how they are negotiated continuously and defined in ways which manage particular inferential implications of these categories.

Analytic materials and context

The data set presented here is derived from an internet discussion forum that entails publicly accessible discussions as part of a broader platform. The forum is specifically aimed at senior citizens. The discussion on depression is part of a set of discussions on health issues that covers more than 68 different discussion lists. The discussion on depression is not only the largest list on the forum but also the list that has the largest amount of different users over time. The list was established in March 1997, and since then more than 3000 messages have been posted. The names of the participants have been altered to respect their privacy.

For our current analytical purposes, we have selected a small number of extracts from a large corpus of online data on depression talk. The extracts were chosen because they indicate and illustrate the shortcomings of cognitivistic perspectives – in this particular case, the SIDE model. Our aim here is not to draw general conclusions on the support group materials from which these fragments were selected (Lamerichs, 2003), but to reveal some of the limitations of prevailing assumptions with regard to CMC and to ‘flesh out’ a potential alternative approach.

Rather than focusing on pre-defined categories, the analysis begins from what participants themselves are making relevant in their talk. In the excerpts of talk which will be shown, participants focus on (in)competence as one of the possible building blocks for identity work. However, we do not claim that participants’ (online) interactational work is necessarily restricted to identity issues, or that identity is automatically linked to (in)competence. A discursive analyst will focus on those kinds of conversational activities that participants demonstrably attend to in their talk. Rather than assuming a mechanical relevance to participants’ interaction, they will try to find out if, when and for what, these may have such relevance (Edwards, 1998).

The analysis has been conducted and checked in accordance with methods of discursive psychology and conversation analysis (for example, Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998; Potter, in press). These procedures include the emphasis on how other speakers orient towards utterances, analysing how participants’ accounts are designed to undermine alternative versions (what
other plausible version of the world is at issue?), assessing the extent to which the current study is coherent with other studies, and allowing for readers’ evaluation by presenting extended, ‘raw’ materials.

Displaying competence
In the following analysis, we shall focus on two issues. First, we shall illustrate how identities, rather than being selected from a pre-established set of potential categories, are locally constructed in such a way so as to perform all sorts of interactional business. Second, it will be demonstrated that the relevance of these categories is embedded in participants’ orientations to the normative requirements of a support environment. However, rather than regulating members’ interaction, these ‘norms’ are used as interpretative resources by which participants make sense of their interaction with others. While it is tempting to conceptualize norms as guiding principles, as is being assumed by the SIDE model once people’s social identity is (considered) prevalent, the analysis below indicates that norms are used and constructed as relevant for particular occasions. In that sense, they are fundamentally local practices.

Let us first examine a fragment (1) in which Dorothy presents herself as someone who is ‘at risk for’ a depression:

Extract (1)
1 I am pleased to see this folder come into existence. I had experienced
2 depression brought on by working hard to get a college degree, while
3 juggling a household with three children, and then being unable to get a
4 job . . . That’s ‘depression for a reason’ – I think there is a double-
5 barrelled psychological term for it, but I can’t remember what it is. That
6 depression disappeared as soon as I did land a job!
7 Then, there is the current situation – not depression, but being ‘at
8 risk for’. I live alone, my children are hundreds of miles away and I am
9 exceedingly careful to place no demands on them, having experienced such
10 behavior from my late parents (as I am an only child and my parents
11 immigrants, with no other family members here, the pressure was really
12 great). I am an intellectually demanding person. The two friends I have,
13 while sweet, gentle souls, also tend to be incredibly circumscribed in
14 their interests, their over-long phone conversations revolving around the
15 same small circle of interests – a grandchild’s toilet training, the
16 daughter’s wedding (twelve years ago, for Pete’s sake!) so I am distancing
17 myself even from them . . .
18 Am I doing something dangerous to my mental health, or is listening to
19 boring monologues worse? I feel quite happy, content with my life, but am
20 wondering whether flying in the teeth of conventional wisdom to ‘have a
21 social network’ is asking for trouble? Would appreciate some feedback.
22 Dorothy

For the purpose of analysis, we shall deal with the fragment in four parts: lines 1–6, lines 7–11, lines 12–17 and lines 18–22. In the first part, we see
how Dorothy accounts for an earlier depression by referring to three related external causes (lines 1–4). In describing her situation as determined by practical realities, she is undermining the rhetorical alternative that she might be personally ‘responsible’ for this depression. That is, given those circumstances, anybody would have become depressed. Moreover, by positioning herself as someone who was awkwardly situated but nevertheless managed to earn a college degree, she displays the identity of a competent person, who is ‘trying hard’ and in principle able to achieve something. Note how she builds up the factuality of her report, first, by attributing a wider psychological significance to it (‘I think there is a double-barrelled psychological term for it’, lines 4–5) and second, by underlining that her depression disappeared as soon as the external cause that she held responsible for it was taken away (‘That depression disappeared as soon as I did land a job!’, lines 5–6). In doing so, Dorothy fashions her account in a way which carefully counters a potential negative inference of being a member of the category of depressed people, namely that depression can be attributed to a lack of willpower or another character flaw.

The second part of her post, in lines 6–9, refers to her current situation and offers a reason for posting to this list: not depression, but being ‘at risk for’ (lines 7–8). Note how she presents herself as a person who, despite being in potential trouble, is able to manage her own affairs. She does not want to place demands on her children, although there might be legitimate reasons for doing so.

In the third part of her post (lines 12–17), which is the introduction to her ultimate request, Dorothy describes herself as an ‘intellectually demanding person’. What work is being done in the production of such a self-description? Following her remark about being an intellectually demanding person, Dorothy begins to build a contrast between her friends’ behaviour and her own capacities. Consider, for example, how in lines 13–14, she describes them as ‘sweet and gentle souls’ while at the same time being ‘incredibly circumscribed in their interests’. In doing so, she provides a logical explanation for ‘distancing’ herself ‘even from them . . . ’ (lines 16–17). More specifically, putting her intellectual abilities in the foreground enables Dorothy to explain why she might be relatively alone (‘only’ having two friends and thinking about breaking with them as well), while at the same time being someone not to be pitied. Being intellectually demanding makes possible the inference that she is the one who places (high) demands on other people, and it is others who cannot always live up to these standards, instead of the other way around. Moreover, having a limited set of friends is explained by a personal ‘merit’ (intellectual capacities), rather than some personal shortcoming. Notice also that she presents having friends (or not having having friends) as a choice, not as something that happens to her.
Finally, in part 4 (lines 18–22), Dorothy explicitly asks for feedback (line 21). This suggests that she is not necessarily looking for ways to resolve this matter on her own. Consider, however, the ambivalent orientation of her request: on the one hand, she describes giving up her old friends as a potentially risky enterprise in terms of her mental health, thereby presenting herself as being (partly) dependent on others. On the other hand, she formulates the potential problem as resulting from not complying with certain social rules, (‘flying in the teeth of conventional wisdom’, line 20). In this way, she portrays herself as an autonomous person who wants to do her own thing.

Overall, Dorothy presents herself as being at risk for depression and in need of advice, but she does so in a way which neatly undermines particular expectations that might be associated with the category of depressed people. What is brought to the foreground are precisely those activities not commonly associated with a depressed person, such as managing your own affairs in the face of adversity, not being dependent on others, making your own choices and breaking with your social network because of a difference in intellectual capacities (rather than staying away from others because of depressive feelings). Instead, she portrays herself as a competent person who is in control of her own well-being, even with respect to her ability to recognize an oncoming depression.

Not showing depressive feelings as an accountable matter
Interestingly enough, this happens in a support group on depression. We might have expected that showing one’s inability to cope would be a perfectly ‘appropriate’ activity in such an environment, that is, not an accountable phenomenon. The next few extracts, however, will illustrate that what is appropriate or inappropriate is continuously subject to negotiation, as are participants’ ‘corresponding’ identities. Let us first consider extracts 2 and 3, which are both contributions from Betty. In extract 2, we see how she provides an account for having displayed feelings of depression. Extract 3, however, shows how Betty attends to the problematic nature of not revealing these kinds of feelings.

Extract (2)
1 I am sorry that I am upsetting everyone. I don’t want to depress
2 anyone or make them cry. Posting my honest feelings was my
3 therapist’s idea. He thought I needed to be able to talk honestly
4 about what I am feeling somewhere, but I don’t want to take my
5 friends down with me. Betty

The idea that there are particular limitations to the display of sad feelings is oriented to as a normative expectation by the fact that Betty accounts for
it. Note first how Betty reduces her responsibility for showing her downheartedness by underlining the fact that posting her ‘honest feelings’ (line 2) was her therapist’s idea. Betty’s ‘honest feelings’ (our emphasis) also make another kind of inference available: reflecting a pure state of mind cannot be wrong since it is normatively preferred to show your true self, i.e. not to hide (authentic) feelings. In providing these accounts, Betty depicts herself as a person who merely wants to say what she feels — without any ulterior purpose and without losing sight of the group’s interest (‘but I don’t want to take my friends down with me’, lines 4–5).

Consider now extract 3, which is Betty’s response to a contribution from Naomi. Naomi has pointed out that she hesitated to visit the support group ‘because with Betty’s joy, I didn’t want to admit where I’ve been lately’ (full data not shown here). In her reply, Betty does not confirm the accountable status of showing one’s feelings (extract 2) but instead turns not showing (gloomy) feelings into an issue of accountability:

Extract (3)

1 Naomi, I am really upset with you. I mean it. You are one of the most
2 loving, giving people I know. Look what you started this week.
3 [9 lines omitted here; JL and Htm]
4 How can we give you the TLC [tender loving care]
5 that you might be needing if you do not let us know what is going on.
6 Isn’t it just a little selfish of you to do loving things for others
7 and then not allow them to do the same for you? I have learned that
8 one of the greatest gifts that another can do for me is to let me help
9 them. This is what gives me a sense of purpose and helps me feel
10 like I am needed. SHAME ON YOU NAOMI!!!
11 Now that I have yelled at you. Please let me put my arms around you
12 and comfort you. I love you dear Naomi. You are one of God’s angels.

Note first how Betty defines reporting ‘what is going on’ (line 5), and letting people help you, as a way of doing others a favour: ‘I have learned that one of the greatest gifts that another can do for me is to let me help them’ (lines 7–9). She thus attends to the rhetorical alternative at stake in the interaction — telling others your troubles is a self-centred action — and counters it by inverting the claim: it is selfish to hide your feelings and not allow people to help you (‘Isn’t it just a little selfish of you to do loving things for others and then not allow them to do the same for you?’, lines 6–7).

Interestingly, in so doing, Betty formulates sharing emotions not so much as a matter of wanting to share but rather as a kind of moral obligation: you should feel ashamed when you do not share or hesitate to do so (‘SHAME ON YOU NAOMI!!!’, line 10). At the same time, by explicitly imposing this rule on Naomi (note the capitals and exclamation marks) and subsequently ‘making it up’ again (lines 11–12), Betty also creates space for
Naomi to display her feelings without being the only one responsible for it (since she has been ‘told to do so’). By ‘ordering’ Naomi to say what she feels, Betty provides a candidate solution to the problem of revealing your (temporary) lack of being able to deal with life without being self-centred: showing your emotions is something you (have to) do for others rather than for yourself. In an indirect way, this conversational move not only creates space for Naomi to show what she feels but also for Betty herself, in that she puts forward a normative order in which it is permitted, or rather required, to tell the worst part(s) of your story. We will come back to this in the next section.

Thus, what we see is that participants build up their competence in a range of subtle ways (and provide accounts for having displayed ‘incompetence’), while at the same time orienting towards uncovering one’s own (temporary) lack of ‘competence’ as an equally important normative requirement. In this respect, participants’ identities – the identities that are made relevant in, and to, this piece of interaction – can be seen as a product of negotiation that is embedded in a double normative orientation: on the one hand, to show a certain amount of competence, and on the other, to show a certain amount of incompetence. In other words, rather than adopting one clear-cut identity at the outset, members continuously (re-) design their identity in such a way as to meet these apparently contradictory interactional requirements.

Managing the dilemma of support
The next few extracts (4–6) further illustrate how participants of this support forum portray themselves so as to attend to both normative orientations. Interestingly, by telling each other that one must show one’s feelings and, at the same time, accounting for having shown them, participants seem to collaboratively produce space for providing and receiving support (for an overview of devices by which participants manage support dilemmas, see Lamerichs 2003; Lamerichs and te Molder 2002). Consider the next contributions, in which we see how Janice on the one hand delivers an account for ‘being such a baby yesterday’ (extract 4) and on the other hand, tells another participant that she ‘should post’ her ‘feelings here of all places’ (extract 5):

Extract (4)
1 I’m a little shame-faced though, for being such a baby yesterday. It
2 may have been a compilation of all the losses I have experienced
3 overwhelming me at once. Strange how emotions do that: make that
4 surprise attack when you least expect it, and nearly inundate you.
5 Well, onward and upward . . . Thank you ALL once more for the
6 (((HUGS))) and caring thoughts. I would dearly love to meet each one
7 of you and personally deliver a barrel of (((HUGS))))). Luvya, Janice.
Janice accounts for ‘being such a baby yesterday’ by noticing how her post may have been the result of ‘a compilation of all the losses I have experienced overwhelming me at once’ (lines 2–3). It is interesting to see how she furnishes her account in such a way so as to provide for the ‘external’ character of her emotions (see Edwards, 1997, on the interactional business performed through emotion talk). Consider how describing emotions as making a ‘surprise attack’ (line 4) raises the suggestion that these emotions come from outside: it minimizes the involvement of the participant herself (cf. Potter, 1996). Moreover, Janice describes these emotions as overwhelming (line 3) and nearly inundating her (line 4), thereby suggesting how she was left unable to do anything against it. Notice how she also generalizes, and thus depersonalizes, this mechanism by defining the power of emotions in general terms (‘Strange how emotions do that’, line 3). In these ways, Janice constructs ‘her’ emotions not so much as part of a particular inner state but rather as a force that operates relatively independent of her, as a consequence of which she can hardly be held personally responsible for them.

In extract 5, however, Janice no longer formulates showing emotions as an accountable phenomenon. Instead, she turns disclosing one’s feelings into the preferred alternative:

Extract (5)
1 Betty – You are NOT taking me down with you!! And you most certainly
2 should post your feelings here of all places. Here is where one can
3 be totally honest and there is no judgementalism or censure. Please
4 keep it up – it’s good for what ails you!! [7 lines omitted]
5 This folder is for exactly what you are doing here. Don’t give up on
6 the ones who care the most for you.

Particularly look at lines 5–6, in which Janice describes not posting one’s feelings as giving up on ‘the ones who care the most for you’. With this formulation, she defines showing one’s feelings as a kind of moral obligation: not showing them means that you don’t take other members seriously. At the same time, Janice suggests that not revealing one’s emotions is of little use for Betty as well, since she then would drop the people who care the most for her.

Note that there is a difference in the ways in which participants orient towards these normative expectations. While participants tend to build their competence in a subtle and largely implicit manner, they refer to displaying their vulnerable side in a predominantly explicit way. This might have been expected, since sharing one’s feelings can be considered one of the obvious goals of support groups in general. It is important, however, to bear in mind that although the participants’ way of orienting to these norms might be different, they attend both to the normative reportability of one’s emotions and to displaying a certain competence. Participants’ identities are the
variable and complex interactional outcome of both expectations. It is, in other words, too simple to conclude that one norm is primary, even apart from the question of whether it is an analyst’s task to do so (cf. Edwards, 1997). Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, the exact nature of these ‘norms’ is not so much given and pre-established. What ‘competence’ comprises, for example, is continuously constructed and re-constructed, as we have seen.

In the last extract, we can observe once more how establishing a particular identity requires a constant and subtle negotiation process:

Extract (6)

1 Polly . . . I’m not a complainer either . . . not one person in my family
2 knows my worry about my son. I don’t say a word. I sort of let it
3 slip that I was going through a bad time emotionally, and I’ll be
4 darned if it didn’t start to rub off . . . I can’t do that again. I’m
5 always the one encouraging others. For them to see me going through
6 anything . . . it’s like the world tilted a bit. :) So . . . shouldn’t there
7 be at least one place where we can come to say what we are feeling?

In this fragment, Naomi (see also extract 3) describes herself as someone who, in the outside world, needs a high degree of self-reliance in order to cope. Therefore, a support environment such as this one is desperately needed. In doing so, Naomi provides an implicit account for openly showing her emotionally-bad times in the group: when required, she is able to look after herself and this ‘entitles’ her to share her real feelings with people at some other place (see Potter, 1996 for the ways in which identities ‘entitle’ participants to certain experiences). This account both enables Naomi to show a more vulnerable side and to preserve her competence. Note how she uses dots (and a smiling emoticon :) ) to display cautious thinking, thereby explicitly establishing her assessments in this respect as being the result of a careful process of consideration.

CONCLUSION
At the beginning of this article, we described how researchers of CMC have shifted from predominantly appreciating inherent characteristics of the medium towards including, to some degree, what are called social context factors. A model that has explicitly put forward the social character of CMC is the SIDE model (Postmes et al., 1998; Spears and Lea, 1992). We have tried to demonstrate that despite its mission, the SIDE model fails to represent a truly social approach. First and foremost, the cognitive focus of the model draws attention away from what people do with their talk when they represent their ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ worlds. Separated from their practical discursive and rhetorical context, participants’ descriptions are easily imagined as the result of underlying mental entities. When we apply this insight to the concept of identity, we see that identities are much more
active phenomena than is assumed by the SIDE model. Instead of becoming salient, which suggests that people select their identity from a pre-established, and therefore limited, set of possible identities, social categories are locally built and rebuilt so as to manage a great deal of mostly subtle interactional work.

In order to illustrate the relevance of this idea, and to indicate some of the limitations of present theorizing on discussion forums, we have outlined an alternative approach to participants’ talk on the internet. This discursive psychological perspective replaces objectivist and, by and large, mechanistic notions of online identities with an approach that views identities as a fluctuating body of interactional resources upon which people draw in order to perform all sorts of social business.

Finally, by exploring a few contributions to an online discussion on depression, we have tried to illustrate how participants manage their identities in ways which cannot be accounted for when adopting a traditional social psychological view. We have shown how participants’ identities can represent subtle and provisional products of moving back and forward between, on the one hand, attending to the normative requirement of being a competent member of society and, on the other hand, to also display one’s (temporary) lack of competence. That is, they are the interactional, and thus flexible, result of attending to a double normative orientation. One of the ways in which this dilemma was managed was by formulating the revelation of problems as a moral obligation to others, rather than a voluntary choice.

Instead of following these ‘social norms’, participants used them as a double grid against which their actions were made accountable (cf. Heritage, 1984). For example, they delivered elaborate accounts for having been too open about their ‘incompetence’, while continuing to display their ‘going through an emotionally bad time’. Moreover, of what exactly the ‘proper’ action consisted turned out to be a local matter as well. In this sense, the straightforwardness of norms disappears as soon as we begin to analyse participants’ talk in practice, and thus in more detail.

Overall, the analysis indicates a much more dynamic view of identities and social norms than is proposed by models that are based on mainly laboratory experiments, such as the SIDE model. As such, this article has been a plea for a much more thorough study of the actual discursive practices of participants in online environments.

It is important to recognize that a significant contribution to exploring participants’ naturalistic encounters on the internet has been made by ethnographic studies (for example, Baym, 1998, 2000; Turkle, 1995, 1997). These studies offer a correction of the view held in traditional and largely experimentally-based studies, which identified CMC as an impoverished medium that offers no possibilities for ‘real’ social interaction. However,
although this kind of research gives an impression of the kind of interaction that takes place in online settings, it lacks the detail that is crucial for beginning to understand participants’ discourse practices. A related, more fundamental limitation is that these studies originate from an essentially cognitivistic perspective. That is, they still fail to address the social practices performed by people when they produce descriptions of what they think, do or experience in the offline and online world (cf. Edwards, 1997; te Molder and Potter, in press).

Similar observations can be made with regard to a second strand of research, which is specifically focused on support groups. An important characteristic of these studies is that they draw on pre-defined categories or analytic themes in order to describe the interaction between participants (for example, Miller and Gergen, 1998; Preece, 1999, 2000; Preece and Ghosati, 2001; Winzelberg, 1997). Although, again, these studies provide more insight into the everyday concerns of support groups than traditional laboratory research, they fail to incorporate a thorough and detailed account of participants’ actual conversations. They apply a form of content analysis that is based on the use of relatively rudimentary categories which, furthermore, represent a set of concepts defined by the researcher rather than participants themselves. Moreover, the classified statements are taken for what they are rather than what they do. In this way, the vast array of interactional business that participants attend to in their everyday online talk is overlooked. Also, in the case where the authors claim to apply a form of ‘interpretive discourse analysis’ (Galegher et al., 1998), the analysis does not go beyond taking participants’ talk as neutrally transmitting what they really think and what the world really looks like.

We can conclude, then, that present research on CMC still needs to make a shift from a cognitive model that attempts to understand phenomena in terms of mental objects and processes, towards a discursive approach in which text and talk are treated as social practices in their own right. With respect to online support groups, two issues would be particularly relevant for further research. First, it would be interesting to explore whether the kind of identity work which was demonstrated to be an important feature of participants’ interaction in this group is an equally important concern for participants in other online settings. We can imagine, for example, that the handling of ‘contradictory’ normative requirements with respect to issues of competence is not unique to this support environment, but represents a more general feature of ordinary (online and offline) conversation. On the other hand, part of the identity work may be related to the mental health setting that we find here. Suggesting that depression ‘could happen to anybody’, rather than presenting it as an endogenous disease (see extract 1), could be a more specific characteristic of depression talk.
A second promising avenue for future study would be to examine differences and similarities between the conversational practices of an internet support group and those of an offline or face-to-face support setting. This might be even more relevant when we consider that increasingly these are becoming complementary options for people seeking peer-based support. In this respect, it would also be worthwhile to consider the influence of studying written, delayed online interaction for its methodological consequences, since most discursive psychological studies have dealt with transcribed, audiotaped conversations (see also Lamerichs, 2003).

In a general sense, future research on online interaction would strongly benefit from exploring participants’ actual use of the medium. As we hope to have illustrated, a discursive approach would reveal precisely those qualities of online environments that present research, starting from analysts’ themes and categories, typically ignores.

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Notes
1 We prefer to use the term CMC or computer-mediated communication in cases where we refer to the original body of theories and methodologies for which this heading is being used. However, as we shall point out in this article, the term itself is connected with a range of assumptions that we want to resist. For this reason, we sometimes replace ‘CMC’ with ‘online interaction’.

2 We have restricted ourselves to the SIDE model, leaving aside other recent and related models, most notably the social information processing perspective (SIP) model (for example, Walther, 1996), for reasons of clarity and space, and because it connects directly with the central theme of our analytic example: identity. However, many of the critical remarks that we make with respect to the SIDE model are also applicable to the SIP perspective.

3 These theories were developed to describe media choice and, more specifically, how people would use various media on the basis of certain characteristics. This body of research has been called either cues filtered-out theories, or social cues perspective, depending on the theories to which were referred. The cues filtered-out perspective encompasses the social presence model by Short et al. (1976), the cuelessness model by Rutter (1984), the reduced social cues approach, as developed by Sproull and Kiesler (1991) and the media richness model by Daft and Lengel (1984). The social cues perspective, a notion introduced by Spears and Lea (1992), omits the media richness model. The media richness model will not be explored here. One could argue, though, that the notion of media richness also aims to describe the characteristics of various media as such, and does not differ too much from the theoretical notions pointed out in the social cues perspective.
4 The researchers who have conducted research in the social cues perspective have in subsequent, more recent research pointed towards the social dimension of CMC, and to the role of the internet and thus CMC for facilitating support groups. However, in this article, the influence of their early research is being emphasized, and the way it is taken up by the SIDE model. See for an overview, Kiesler (1997).

5 ‘Local’ refers to the fact that language is operating practically, within the scene of the action, rather than an abstract system of reference. Participants draw upon all kinds of interactional resources which are locally (re-)formulated so as to make them situationally relevant.

References


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