

Social capital and Socioemotional support in a diasporic online community: Bengalis' text-based interactions on *Orkut*[®]

Text-based computer-mediated communication (CMC) is a potentially rich source of insight into human behavior. Talk, action, and expression of internal states take place through words typed on a keyboard and displayed on a computer screen. Increasingly, researchers are seeking ways to extract meaning from online discourse, starting with the fundamental question: What is it that interlocutors are doing (or intending to do) when they exchange messages in a particular computer-mediated context?

This study investigates the interplay of CMC acts, interaction processes, and frequency of message exchange in naturally-occurring text-based dyadic interactions of diasporic Bengalis that take place on the social network site *Orkut*. *Orkut* is popular primarily among Brazilians and Indians. Much like *Facebook* and *MySpace*, *Orkut* users create profiles, articulate their social networks, and establish or maintain connections with others primarily through text-based communication. Previous research has observed that the internet in general, and social network sites in particular, offer migrants a new resource for the formation of social capital, broadly defined as the resources gathered through relationships among people (Coleman, 1988). However, few studies have investigated the actual content of online interactions in terms of what the interlocutors intend to accomplish. This study, thus, addresses two research questions (1) what do diasporic Bengali users primarily achieve through their text-based interactions on *Orkut*? (2) What interactional processes and moves do they primarily employ in achieving their goals?

The present study analyzes 48 dyadic interactions of 19 *Orkut* users in a college town in the USA that took place among diasporic Bengalis on *Orkut* between November 1, 2007 and December 31, 2007, for a total of 401 messages and 998 utterances. The participants were selected through snowball sampling. Two months of *Orkut* "scraps" (asynchronous text messages posted to users' "scrapbooks") were selected, in order to provide enough natural textual data to be representative of all participants' linguistic and communicative behaviors. During these two months, many of the core participants appeared to be actively engaged in scrapbook conversation with their friends, especially during three major festivals: Diwali/Kalipujo (a Hindu festival), Christmas, and English New Year. The data also include enough non-festival times that normal scrapbook posting activity is well represented.

For analysis of the data, I applied computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring, 2004), pragmatic and social network theories. Two categorization schemes were applied to analyze each utterance: 1) the four main content categories ('positive socioemotional', 'negative socioemotional', 'task', and 'other') of Interaction Process Analysis (IPA) (Bales, 1950) and 2) the 16 CMC act categories developed by Herring, Das, and Penumarthy (2005) for coding "speech" acts in computer-mediated discourse. The taxonomy is a simplified and modified synthesis of the act categories elaborated for spoken conversation by Francis and Hunston (1992) and for formal, deliberative discourse by Bach and Harnish (1979). In addition, each utterance was coded for two meta act categories (a) bona fide vs. non-bona fide communication and (b) self- vs. reported perspective.

Multilayered coding schemes were incorporated, because both IPA and speech act theories have been criticized over the years for glossing over of multidimensional aspects of communication (Hirokawa, 1988). By applying IPA, CMC acts, and meta act analysis, I am able to investigate the multidimensional aspects of *Orkut* scrapbook communication. The categories

of IPA are particularly helpful in identifying transactional vs. social dyadic interaction, the CMC acts provide nuanced characterizations of interactional moves, and metalinguistic aspects of the communication are captured through the meta act categories.

The results show that the Bengali subjects on *Orkut* produce mostly bona fide positive socioemotional content (e.g., I still remember the melodious song you sang the other day). This is achieved primarily through 'greet' and 'claim' CMC acts. Dyads who exchange messages on a daily basis produce more task-oriented content (e.g., I think you can request Ujjal to take a look at the script on Sunday) than those who exchange messages occasionally; this is achieved primarily through the CMC acts 'inquire' and 'inform'. Negative socioemotional content surfaces very rarely in the interactions. Occasionally, however, dyads who exchange messages on a daily basis use negative socioemotional content with non-bona fide intention (e.g., in friendly teasing). I conclude by proposing that 'bona fide positive socioemotional' and 'non-bona fide negative socioemotional' content help the diasporic Bengali community maintain its socio-psychological well-being (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Additionally, task communication help the participants gather social capital.

This study will be helpful for those who are interested in analyzing meaning-in-context at the level of the utterance in computer-mediated communication. It systematically describes three methodologies to do this within the general framework of computer-mediated discourse analysis (Herring, 2004), including a new taxonomy for analyzing 'speech' acts in CMC. The findings of the study also contribute to sociolinguistic and communication theories about speech acts, interaction processes, and social networks in CMC from the perspective of a lesser-studied culture group, Bengalis. Finally, social network sites such as *Orkut* are growing in importance; the study sheds light on the nature of communication and the social dynamics that take place in such environments.

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