



Virtual Group Dynamics and Social Networks

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Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Social comparison



- To participate in an online group can **provide people with a sense of belongingness and helps people to realize they are not unique** (Brewer 1991; Deaux 1993; McKenna and Bargh 1998).
- Davison et al. (2000) shows that people **use online support communities for social comparison**.
- The **need for social comparison is inherent to a physical or mental health setting**, because of its high level of ambiguity and anxiety (Davison et al. 2000) and people may use the group to glean information on how to cope and behave.
- Social comparison is part and parcel of the process of social validation in which people **use relevant groups they are part of to establish meaning, values and identity** (see also Turner 1991).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Social comparison



Social validation is best achieved when people can compare themselves with others that are relatively similar to them (and whose experiences are therefore diagnostic to the self). The availability of similar others makes online support groups a good stage for social comparison purposes. There is however another reason why participating in this type of groups may benefit social comparison, which has to do with its online character.

Social Comparison

Social comparison theory (Festinger 1954) posits that people will compare themselves with others in times of uncertainty or anxiety, especially in situations in which it is not possible to derive this from the direct environmental context.

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

De-marginalization and self-esteem



- To be amongst others who face a similar situation, or at least have understanding of what someone is going through, can **provide a sense of community and safety and make people feel less lonely and unique** (King and Moreggi 1998).
- This can be **especially relevant for people who suffer from a stigmatized physical or mental condition** (such as obesity, stuttering, schizophrenia or manic depression) or who feel that an important part of their identity is not accepted by society (such as deviant sexual preferences, kleptomania, or extreme religious/political beliefs) because these people in particular run the risk of feeling lonely, not accepted, and cut off from society (Frable 1993; McKenna and Bargh 1998; Braithwaite et al. 1999; Davison et al. 2000).
- People **who perceive themselves as outsiders or outliers because they differ from others** on an important dimension of their identity – i.e., who have a marginalized identity (Frable 1993) – can have difficulties because they feel that they are deviant from the people in their social circle.

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

De-marginalization and self-esteem



For them, online social support groups can be an important place for meeting similar others, and to feel accepted and included in a social group.

- The ***feeling of being unique can even be more acute for people who have concealable marginal identities*** (Frable 1993; McKenna and Bargh 1998).
- ***For them (who may have a venereal disease, multiple personality syndrome, deviant sexual preferences, extreme political beliefs, or a history as a prison inmate, for example) the chance of recognizing someone with a similar predicament is very small: 'those with hidden conditions are not able to see similar others in their environment, so there is no visible sign of others who share the stigmatized feature' (McKenna and Bargh 1998: 682).***

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Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

De-marginalization and self-esteem



Because of the anonymity of interaction, online forums can make it easier to reveal hidden parts of one's personality, and the context increases the chance of meeting others that understand your situation.

- ***Through participation in online social support communities, people with concealed as well as conspicuous marginal identities can attain more self-esteem and gain confidence with respect to their identity***, this can reduce the inner conflict between the marginalized part of the identity and the socially accepted standards, and eventually result in more openness to discuss this aspect of identity with significant others such as friends and family (McKenna and Bargh, 1998).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online collective action



With the advent of modern communication technology and the Internet, the means of collective action have changed.

- The last decade has seen the emergence of a thriving literature on topics such as ***cyberactivism and online social movements*** (e.g., Rheingold 2002; McCaughey and Ayers 2003; Meikle 2003; Van de Donk et al. 2004b; Dartnell 2006).
- These publications usually take as their starting point an array of powerful and telling cases which speak to potential roles that technology can fulfil for the future organization of collective action. Among the oft-cited events are ***the 1994 Zapatista uprising*** (Ronfeldt et al. 1998), ***the 1999 'Battle of Seattle'*** (Smith 2001; DeLuca and Peeples 2002) and the ***toppling of Filipino president Estrada in 2001*** (Tilly 2004).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online collective action



With the advent of modern communication technology and the Internet, the means of collective action have changed.

- Earlier forecasts were that the ***Internet would so profoundly innovate collective action that it would revolutionize politics and civil society***, introducing a ‘paradigm shift’ on dimensions illustrated in Table 12.1 in Next Slide (Kapor 1993; Rheingold 1993; Barlow 1995).
- In contrast with what some forecasts would have us believe, the ***World Wide Web is bringing us at least as much progress in Western ‘liberal’ consumer culture as in progressive politics*** (Meikle 2003; Tilly 2004).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online collective action



With the advent of modern communication technology and the Internet, the means of collective action have changed.

Social effects of technology

The study of the social effects of technology is not, as a rule, helped by extrapolations of the potential that this technology affords the user. Key to understanding its social effects is also (if not more so) to analyse what the users of that technology may be motivated and influenced by.

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online collective action



That may seem paradoxical and unlikely. Ostensibly, the collective action in particular of crowds could not appear to be more different from those on the Internet. In the crowd we find ourselves in the close proximity of many others – their presence is almost over-whelming. In many ways the ***crowd is the ultimate collective experience.***

In contrast, for the isolated Internet user the presence of others is always mediated and therefore dependent on a good deal of imagination.

The technology therefore appears to be, in some ways, psychologically individuating and atomizing.

On a continuum of social contexts ranging from individualistic to collectivistic, the Internet and the crowd would be somewhere at the extremes.

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online collective action



Table 12.1 Paradigm shifts: predicted changes in the nature of collective action from the industrial age to the information age

	Industrial	Information age
Organization	Physically co-located	Global
Power	Social organizations	Individual
Means of conflict	Physical	Informational
Theatre of conflict	Physical space	'Hearts and minds'
Identity	Collective	Individual

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Theories of collective action and online action

Classic perspectives on the social effects of mediated communication



Although studies of the Internet are a recent phenomenon, there is a much longer tradition of research on the psychological consequences of mediated communication (e.g., Short et al. 1976; Hiltz and Turoff 1978).

Two kinds of social influence were widely documented and researched: **conformity to norms/social pressure** and **informational influence**. There is little disagreement that mediated communication provides greater freedom from social structures and reduces social accountability.

- This is often attributed to the relative anonymity that users can create for themselves online (Kiesler et al. 1984; Jessup et al. 1990; Spears et al. 2002), but other factors that might contribute are the ability to strategically present the self (Reicher et al. 1995; Walther 1996) and the greater control over whether to 'tune in' or 'out' afforded by physical isolation.

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Classic perspectives on the social effects of mediated communication



At the level of the group, there is a large literature documenting the phenomenon that ***when interactions are anonymous and depersonalized, the social influence exerted by factors such as group norms and shared identity can indeed be reduced, but can also*** (under subtly different conditions) ***be much stronger*** (Sassenberg and Jonas, Chapter 18, this volume).

At the macro level, the implication that the Internet would produce individualization, atomization and social alienation has not been confirmed either. Some scholars have argued that the Internet actually facilitates social relationships by overcoming limits of geographical isolation, isolation caused by stigma, illness, shyness, lack of mobility and so forth (McKenna and Bargh 2000; Katz et al. 2001) and have extolled the virtues and vibrancy of virtual communities (e.g., Rheingold 1993; see Haythornthwaite).

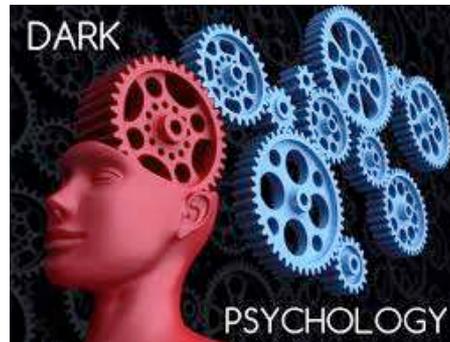
Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). Oxford handbook of internet psychology. Oxford University Press.

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Classic perspectives on the social effects of mediated communication



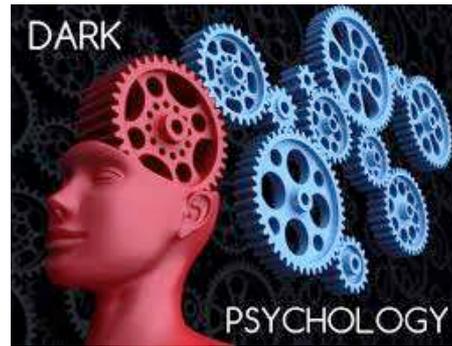
In order to account for the unexpected occurrence of these (mixed) social effects, the response of psychologists has often been to suggest that online communication was somehow a special and exceptional case (i.e., implying that there is a need for a psychology of Internet and computer-mediated groups that was somehow distinct from the mainstream literatures).



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Classic perspectives on the social effects of mediated communication

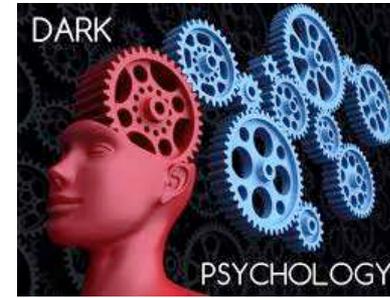


Online interaction is not really such an exceptional case: it is a fruitful testing ground for social psychological theory, highlighting the need for a social dimension to explanations of online behaviour, because in some cases the more individualistic explanations fail to make sense of it (Spears and Lea 1994; Postmes and Baym 2005).

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Social Networks and Online Communities: Theories of collective action and online action

Identifying key processes involved in collective action



In psychology, current work on collective action largely revolves around three distinct (but not necessarily independent) psychological states that are assumed to motivate collective action (Gamson 1992; Kelly and Breinlinger 1996; Klandermans 1997, 2004). These are

- 1. A sense of injustice,**
- 2. A sense of efficacy,**
- 3. A sense of shared social identity**

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

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A sense of injustice



In psychology, the emphasis on a sense of injustice as one key motivator of collective action was articulated in **relative deprivation theory** (RDT) (see Runciman 1966; Walker and Smith 2002).

The literature acknowledges a range of factors which play a role in whether perceptions of injustice arise and when they will be consequential.

- One is that **people need to be prepared compare themselves to particular target others to perceive any inequality that may exist** (cf. Festinger 1954).
- Moreover, perceptions of **inequality will only lead to collective action if they are collectively anchored**, that is if they are grounded in comparisons between groups – fraternal deprivation – rather than comparisons between individuals – egotistical deprivation (see Runciman 1966; Guimond and Dubé-Simard 1983; H. J. Smith and Ortiz 2002).

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A sense of injustice



There are actually two aspects to this issue.

- One is that one needs groups (not individuals) to **arrive at a shared perception of inequality: only if there is (implicit) consensus can collective action begin to be possible.**
- The second is that for this to develop into actual feelings of relative deprivation **one needs to achieve a shared view that this is inequity.**

Although this probably does not require actual consensus, it certainly requires a shared frame of reference which leads a sizeable part of the ingroup to interpret the inequality as unjust.

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

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A sense of injustice



Ultimately, this depends on a fair amount of intragroup interaction (Postmes et al. 2005).

Finally, research has shown that relative deprivation can be broken down into two related aspects.

1. One is the knowledge that inequity exists (a cognitive component),
2. The second the feelings of injustice associated with it (an affective component). The affective component is a much stronger predictor of collective action (Smith and Ortiz 2002).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

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A sense of efficacy



One basic problem facing the collective action literature is to explain that, despite the large social inequalities that are commonly found, collective action is such an infrequent occurrence.

- One reason for this, it has been argued, is the **difficulty of eliciting support for social movements** (McCarthy and Zald 1977).
- This **support depends on decisions by individual, rational actors who aim to minimize personal losses and maximize personal gains** (Olson 1968).
- Against this background Klandermans (1984) proposed that **individual motivations for collective action were a function of subjective expectancy-value products**. In his model, participation in social movements is partly dependent on the value of the intended outcomes of collective action, but it is also and crucially dependent on the expectation of whether collective action would be possible and whether it would be effective.

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A sense of efficacy



- In the wake of this proposal, **efficacy has become one of the key explanations of collective action** (Simon and Klandermans 2001).
- Relatedly, **collective actions have been associated with feelings of collective power** (Reicher 1996, 2001; Drury and Reicher 2005).

In all this work, the central psychological construct is the feeling that existing social realities can be changed – a feeling that, once again, depends on social consensus among in-group members.

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

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A sense of Social identity and Identification



• Social identity theory is unique among theories of collective action because it elaborates the various processes that lead to collective inaction.

1. It notes two key reasons why low status groups cease to strive for improvement of their position: **individual mobility** and **social creativity** (which occurs when people collectively explain away their disadvantages).
2. Only **when group boundaries are impermeable** (i.e., individuals can't abandon it), **the status differential is perceived as illegitimate** (i.e., there is a sense of injustice) and when status relations are insecure (i.e., there is a sense of efficacy) does collective action become likely.
3. Under these very specific conditions, **collective action becomes possible to the extent that group members are prepared to mobilize on behalf of their group.**

One key factor involved in this is group members' identification with the group – and particularly its politicized ideology (Simon 1998; Simon and Klandermans 2001; Stürmer and Simon 2004).

Social Networks and Online Communities: Theories of collective action and online action

The internet possibilities



Adopting a more clinical approach to this, one might say that essentially, these possibilities are derived from three features of technology.

1. The first is that, through technology, **users can contact other users** (i.e., links are established, data can be transferred).
2. The second is that the **technology can be programmed** (configured) **to fulfil a range of communication forms** (interpersonal, group-based, or mass communication; written, vocal, or videoed; synchronous, quasi-synchronous and asynchronous).
3. The third is that **all non-verbal forms of mediated communication leave a record**.

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

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The internet possibilities



It should be noted that although some of these features are shared by many communication media (certainly since the printing press extended the uses of paper), CMC is unique in the flexibility it allows – being able to program the medium has given rise to extensive experimenting with innovative forms of interaction and collaborative work, involving multiple ‘media’ in the traditional sense (Postmes et al. 1998).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

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The internet possibilities



The predominant use of Internet and modern communication technologies is not as a vehicle for direct action;

- it is to **support and organize offline actions** (Horton 2004)
- **to form (new) movements and organizations** (Adams and Roscigno 2005).

The first occurs when established movements integrate the mass communication potential of the Internet into their established repertoire of devices to influence established media or to establish alternative sources of news (e.g., indymedia), with the purpose of raising awareness about their agenda and activities, with an eye to mobilizing political pressure to further their cause.

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

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The internet possibilities



The second is a more indirect phenomenon where the Internet diverts the nature and purpose of movements themselves (Bennett 2004).

There is abundant commentary about these trends, perched on a somewhat narrower empirical basis. Nonetheless, we can infer quite a lot from existing research (mainly on online groups and social movements) about how the Internet affects the key psychological processes underlying collective action: injustice, efficacy and social identity.

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Theories of collective action and online action

A recipe for a collective action ergonomics

- A consistent and robust finding in the group decision support systems (GDSS) literature, is that **electronic brainstorming is more equal using such systems** (Chun and Park 1998; Rains 2005). In face-to-face groups, certain group members may dominate a brainstorming session, not so in GDSS. A key factor in producing this effect may be that GDSS systems are designed to extract as many ideas as possible. To achieve this, they encourage users to generate ideas in a procedure reminiscent of a production line – contributions are essentially entirely individually generated, with some comparison of ideas generated by others (Munkes and Diehl 2003; Dugosh and Paulus 2005).
- This is markedly different from face-to-face groups on a number of dimensions, not least because **in conversations we take turns, which ‘blocks productivity’ for those who are doing the listening** (Stroebe and Diehl 1994).
- **Electronic communications are not necessarily more equalizing per se** (e.g., as argued by Dubrovsky et al. [1991]),
- but may also **exacerbate existing status differences and foster greater inequality** (Weisband 1994; Weisband, Schneider and Connolly 1995)
- and **increased stereotyping** (Postmes and Spears 2002).

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A recipe for a collective action ergonomy

- Finally, there is a lot of evidence to suggest that the ***Internet encourages self-segregation into similarly minded groups*** (Adams and Roscigno 2005, see also Douglas,), thereby exacerbating inter-group inequalities.
- The literature ***consistently emphasizes the freedoms of the individual, discounting the relevance or very existence of social groups*** (Postmes and Baym 2005).
- ***The promise of individual mobility opportunities is a most effective way to undermine collective action*** (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Wright and Taylor 1998).

This individualized perception of Internet users may, because it is so widely shared, undermine the capacity for users to perceive inequalities along group and class lines that persist or are newly introduced through electronic media.

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A recipe for a collective action ergonomy

- There is no doubt that the ***Internet enhances the capabilities and versatility for intra-group debate and interaction*** (see also Flanagin et al. 2006).
- The Internet has been able to foster increased discussion on political topics in web-based discussion fora, to increase targeted mass-communication of social movements to provide their perspective on specific events or issues and to provide more continuous streams of ‘alternative’ perspectives on news. Although offline metaphors could be applied to these (the café, the newsletter, etc.), there is nonetheless a reasonable case that the ***Internet introduces both quantitative and qualitative changes to what activists can achieve and who can join them*** (Bennett 2004).
- ***The persuasive messages and propaganda may take a variety of forms and on the Internet***, affective and emotional processes are no less relevant than informational processing is. Also in online collective actions, passions remain a prominent motivator. This is partly because of the increasing possibilities to provide uncensored news and views. Due to the anonymity and perceived lack of (legal) control, the Internet and modern communication technology are excellent vehicles for rumour and the leaking of sensitive and confidential information.

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Social Networks and Online Communities: Theories of collective action and online action

A recipe for a collective action ergonomics

- There is a large literature documenting the way in which ***social movement organizations rely on modern communication technologies*** for the organization of their activities (e.g., Van de Donk et al. 2004b).
- The ***Internet enables multiple organizations to synchronize their activities and agendas*** and to subscribe to united causes: the anti-globalization movement is a good illustration of this phenomenon (Clark and Themudo 2006).
- Researchers have argued that the ***Internet has played a role in the ‘globalization’ of certain concerns and the unification of these concerns under a common banner*** – ironically of anti-globalization (Rosenkrands 2004).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Theories of collective action and online action

*A recipe for a collective action
ergonomy*

When considering the impact of the Internet on efficacy perceptions, it is worthwhile to distinguish three aspects of this (Klandermans 1997).

1. One is the **assessment of the degree to which others are likely to join in** – some actions may not be widely supported and hence may not ever become truly ‘collective’ actions.
2. A second is the **belief that the collective action, if carried through, would be efficacious** and result in the desired outcome.
3. The third is the belief that **the own contribution to the action will make a difference to its success.**

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Theories of collective action and online action

A recipe for a collective action ergonomics

- It is typical for the social movement literature to assume that relatively **individualistic and 'rational' cost-benefit analyses take into account these aspects of efficacy when individuals decide to join actions or movements** (see also Simon and Klandermans 2001).
- There is some evidence that the **Internet increases political participation**. Jennings and Zeitner (2003) showed that Internet access had a positive impact on political engagement.
- Research in one specific online community network suggests that **those who were previously active are particularly likely to become more involved in community activities by going online** (Kavanaugh et al. 2005).

Putting both together, one could infer that the Internet amplifies existing trends and efficacy beliefs may play a role here. To the extent that users are inclined to believe that this medium empowers the user and to the extent that they believe in its ability to affect change in others, their actions may become self-fulfilling.

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Social Networks and Online Communities: Theories of collective action and online action

A recipe for a collective action ergonomics

- Research on the Internet confirms that despite the undoubted potential for Internet users to be more individualistic, ***a remarkable degree of social embeddedness in ‘real life’ social contacts and social identities persists*** (Bargh and McKenna 2004; Boase et al. 2006)
- A proper understanding of this continued reliance on established identities should not just take into account the relative continuity in the individual’s idiosyncratic self-perceptions and motivations, for example in terms of ‘personality’, but take on board the full implications of the now largely uncontested understanding that ***self and identity are, in many ways, constituted socially*** (Mead 1934; Sedikides and Brewer, 2001).

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Social Networks and Online Communities: Theories of collective action and online action

A recipe for a collective action ergonomics

- ***Online identities are not markedly different from offline identities in this respect***, nor can they be. The underlying psychological process is one, after all, whereby the individual self is defined largely by affiliations with myriad social in-groups (social identities) and (under different conditions) by myriad contrasts to those in-groups as well (personal identities).
- This is not just due to mere conservatism or a lack of imagination. ***Social identities are part of what makes interactions meaningful in the first place*** (Turner 1991; Postmes 2003; Swaab et al. in press;), hence users engage in processes of social identification, self-categorization and social identity formation, because this is the way that they can make sense of the world ‘out there’ and the position of the self within it.
- There is a lot of evidence that ***speaks to the myriad ways in which social identities are influential online*** (Spears et al. 2002).

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Social Networks and Online Communities: Theories of collective action and online action

A recipe for a collective action ergonomics

- A key component of the argument that the *Internet liberates users to display their 'real self'*, for example, is in the observation that users display their stigmatized social identities and bond with others in online social groups such as gays, disabled people, racists, religious people, etc. (McKenna and Bargh 1998).
- Despite the greater freedom (and perhaps to compensate for the essentially indeterminate nature of an environment without any boundaries) *people are very likely to self-stereotype and apply group characteristics to themselves online.*
- *Social identities*, far from going out the window with the freedoms that the Internet provides, *are very much a feature of online social life.*

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Theories of collective action and online action

A recipe for a collective action ergonomics

As elaborated in the Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE), there are two dimensions to the influence of social identity in mediated contexts.

- On the one hand, ***CMC has the ability to make certain aspects of identity (personal or social) more or less salient*** (Spears and Lea 1992; Reicher et al. 1995).
- Importantly, however, ***SIDE replaces the idea that online anonymity de-individuates people*** (rendering them less responsive to social norms) ***with the idea that online anonymity can enhance the salience of their social identity and consequently their social identification with the group*** (rendering them more responsive to in-group norms, e.g., Lea et al. 2001).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.