Cues to identity in CMC: the impact on person perception and subsequent interaction outcomes

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CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION

Purpose of the Thesis

This thesis set out to argue that numerous theoretical perspectives (at least those that make clear predictions regarding effects of media characteristics) relate the social effects of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) to the capacity for conveying social cues (e.g., Bordia, 1997 for overview). However, as was concluded from the overview, various perspectives consider the effects of different types of cues, and moreover they focus on different theoretical consequences (see Chapter I, in particular Table 1). Despite the many differences between approaches, the introduction to this thesis argued that there is an underlying core assumption common to all theoretical perspectives in this area, that providing personal information (i.e., cues to identity) affects person perception in one way or another. Nonetheless, the subsequent consequences of this for a variety of social outcomes are generally taken for granted, notwithstanding the fact that these outcomes themselves are hypothesized to be quite varied and sometimes even contradictory.

On the basis of the theoretical literature review, a first aim of this thesis was to gain more insight in the way in which cues to identity influence person perception. It was argued that this is an important issue to consider more closely, partly because of the theoretical centrality that has been awarded to the presumed effects of cues on person perception, and partly because of the relative negligence of these effects in the empirical literature. Thus, where one tends to find strong assertions throughout the literature that “the eyes have it” (e.g., McLeod, Baron, Marti, & Yoon, 1997) upon closer scrutiny one finds that these assertions ignore the question of exactly what it is that the eyes are supposed to have. Thus, the main purpose of the thesis was to examine the more proximate effects of cues to identity on person perception. However, the thesis was also about the relation between these proximate outcomes and more distal outcomes, more specifically the effects on interpersonal evaluations (such as ambiguity reduction, positivity and trust), interaction evaluations (such as reciprocity
expectations, collaboration preferences, work satisfaction, and subjective performance), and medium evaluations (such as satisfaction).

A Summary and Interpretation of Results

The thesis started out with examining what effects cues to identity would have on person perception, but ended up concluding that it may be fruitful to distinguish between three aspects of person perception: the individuation of the other (i.e., getting to know things about the other that makes him or her a unique individual), the interpersonal relation that one has with the individual (i.e., liking this person more or less on the basis of the impression), and social categorical perceptions about the other (in terms of one's categorization of the other as ingroup or outgroup member). In the first phase of the research, I focused on the effects of cues on the first two of these. As was initially demonstrated in Study 2.2, but repeatedly found in subsequent studies (Studies 2.2, 4.1, and 5.1), providing participants with personal information in the form of a portrait picture, basic biographical information or even just a first name, has strong effects on interpersonal evaluations. In all these studies, cues to identity exerted relatively strong and consistent effects on the first of the three components of person perception: ambiguity. They reduced ambiguity in that they gave the participants a sense of knowing who they are interacting with. Although it should be noted that the effects on ambiguity were by no means consistent throughout the thesis, the overall pattern is quite clear: One should not over-interpret the isolated null effects on this variable. Where cues reduce ambiguity, this is completely in line with the implicit assumptions that are made in all perspectives that suppose a direct relationship between the availability of personal information and feelings of “immediacy”, as in Social Presence Theory (Rutter, 1987; Short, 1974; Short et al., 1976), the Cuelessness Model (Rutter, 1987), the Reduced Social Cues Perspective (Culnan & Markus, 1987; Kiesler et al., 1984; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991), and the SIDE-model (Postmes et al., 1998; Reicher et al., 1995; Spears & Lea, 1992).

The research also showed a similarly consistent effect of cues to identity on the second of the three components of person perception, positivity. As was demonstrated in Study 2.2, 3.1, 4.1, 4.3²², providing participants with individuating cues such as a portrait picture or biographical information also has strong effects on the positivity of those perceptions (there were a few studies in which this effect was not obtained, but again there is no clear pattern to

²² In Study 4.3, the dependent variable was not positivity, but (interpersonal) trust, which is distinct, however very likely closely related to notions of positivity.
explaining these null effects). This finding is again consistent with most theoretical perspectives, which predict that cues to identity as conveyed through particular media would increase "intimacy", as in Social Presence Theory (Rutter, 1987; Short, 1974; Short et al., 1976), the Cuelessness Model (Rutter, 1987), Information Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984), as well as more recent perspectives such as Social Information Processing Theory (Walther, 1992, 1996; Walther et al., 1994; Walther et al., 2001).

However, as was shown in Chapter III, the positive effects of cues to identity on interpersonal impressions and evaluations are not necessarily mirrored by the evaluation of the interaction itself and its products. Thus, the implicit assumption that is made in many of the theories mentioned above (and is very evident in lay people's perceptions—as demonstrated in Study 2.1), that the richer the medium is, the better the collaboration must be, was not corroborated in our research. When it came to evaluating the interaction in terms of work satisfaction (Study 3.3), subjective performance (Study 3.2 and 3.3), or satisfaction with the medium (Study 3.1 and 3.2), participants preferred to be working anonymously. Overall, an effect was found that when interacting in the absence of cues to identity, participants felt more certain about the interaction.23

These findings are remarkable, when evaluated by the assumptions underlying classic theories of CMC (excluding the SIDE model) that the proximate effects of cues on person perception and positivity of impressions would have parallel effects on the enjoyment and success of the subsequent interaction. These assumptions are challenged by my findings. In fact, the results reported (particularly those in Chapter III) are opposite to what could be expected on the basis of Social Presence Theory, the Cuelessness Model and the Reduced Social Cues Approach. The latter of course predicts that anonymity promotes a state of de-individuation by which people lose their individuality and become less aware of the self and the others, which is believed to result in anti-normative, self-centered, and unregulated behavior (Kiesler & Sproull, 1992). These predictions are clearly inconsistent with the findings in Chapter III, which indicate that participants felt more certain, collaborated better and were more satisfied with the medium under anonymous conditions.

23 Study 3.1 showed that these effects were only found for experienced users. As was shown by the interaction effect, inexperienced users were indifferent to whether or not cues were present. Their degree of "dislike" for both conditions was similar to the experienced users who had cues present. This suggests that inexperienced users do not prefer interacting online whatsoever, but does not explain the counter-intuitive effects for the experienced users.
In order to explain these paradoxical effects, we need to turn to the third component of person perception that was identified in the introduction. There, it was argued that person perception has its implications for interpersonal relations (i.e., in terms of the *prima facie* attractiveness and likeability of the other) but also for a different kind of relational inference, namely that based on social categorization. Based on the SIDE model (Reicher et al., 1995; Spears & Lea, 1992, 1994), assumptions were made that the absence of cues to identity may indeed foster "de-individuation" (in the sense of depersonalized perceptions of self and other), but at the same time increase attention to shared group membership (i.e., foster a categorization of the other as belonging to the same social category as the self). In other words, in contexts where people may recognize themselves as belonging to a same (social) group, the absence of idiosyncratic information (as conveyed through cues to identity) can draw away attention from the individually differentiating characteristics, and accentuate similarities in terms of shared group membership (cf. Sassenberg & Postmes, 2002). Although group membership was not made explicitly salient in the first two studies described in Chapter III, participants were all aware that students similar to them were partaking alongside (and moreover, nowhere was it even suggested that their counterparts could have belonged to an "outgroup" or that they could have had contrary motives of any sort). Therefore, the findings of Studies 3.1 and 3.2 could well have been due to these contrary effects of cues to identity on social categorization. This was indeed confirmed in Study 3.3. In a similar setting, the absence of cues to identity was found to positively affect the feeling of a shared identity. Thus, Study 3.3 provided direct support for SIDE's prediction that an absence of cues to identity (within a context in which a shared group membership can be assumed) has beneficial effects for social relations at a different level than the interpersonal, namely that of the group.24

Thereby, these findings confirm the assumption made in the introductory chapter that, beyond effects on ambiguity of impression formation, it is vital to make a distinction between two proximate effects which cues to identity may have: On the one hand a receiver of communication may use cues to identity to individuate a target in terms of personal identity (i.e., cues to personal identity). On the other hand, cues to identity can function as a basis for

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24 The assumption that such "belongingness" to the same group can be derived from the setting itself was strengthened by the fact that the manipulation of identity (in which either personal identity or social identity was made salient) had no effects on the outcomes.
social categorization, in which targets can be assigned as belonging to an ingroup or outgroup (i.e., cues to social identity), depending on the situation at hand.

All this relies on the assumption that cues provide information about a person and may form the basis for individuation as well as for social categorization. So, cues themselves have no intrinsic meaning determining whether they will be used for one or the other. Whether or not a cue will be picked up to categorize is strongly dependent on the extent to which the social identities referred to by these cues are accessible and relevant to everyday life (i.e., "fitting"), and have strong social stereotypes associated with them. As discussed in Chapter III, the wider context of the interaction and the relevance of cues determine whether or not cues to identity will be used for individuation or social categorization. Therefore, whether cues to identity are used as cues to personal identity or as cues to social identity is not necessarily determined by intrinsic features of these cues, but is the result of an interaction between cues, their social background and wider context, and properties of the perceiver.

The notion that cues to identity can be used to form impressions of personal identity as well as provide information about social identity was further elaborated in Chapter IV, which examined how cues function in an inter-group context. Results of Study 4.1 showed that when having to select a collaboration partner in the absence of cues to personal identity (i.e., when the formation of a relatively unambiguous impression is impossible) cues to social identity become important in such a way that ingroup members are preferred. More importantly, when cues to personal identity were present (even relatively superficial cues such as portrait pictures and first names), this ingroup favoritism disappeared and no consistent preference for either group was shown. These findings were qualified in the second study of Chapter IV, which showed that it is not merely the recognition that someone belongs to a shared or different group, but also one's stance towards these particular groups (in terms of the relative identification with in- and outgroup). As results indicated, ethnocentric behavior under conditions of anonymity was only displayed by individuals that strongly identified with the ingroup. But also for this latter group this effect completely disappeared when cues to identity were present. Thus, the first two studies of Chapter IV suggest that when cues to personal identity are not available, cues to social identity "kick in" and can rather strongly influence behavior towards the interaction partner (particularly among high identifiers). What this suggests is that high identifiers are most prone to forming "depersonalized" perceptions

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25 and as a consequence identified relatively low with the outgroup, as ingroup identification was measured by subtracting identification with the outgroup from identification with the ingroup.
of their interaction partners—a logical consequence of their greater adherence to the ingroup-outgroup distinction.

In Study 4.3 these findings were further explored. This study provided more insight in the paradoxical relation between interpersonal evaluations (in the form of interpersonal trust) and (social) behavior (in the form of invested trust). In this study, cues to personal identity proved to be important for developing interpersonal trust (i.e., relational effects that associate with positivity). However, the occurrence of trusting behavior depended once again on a counterpart’s group membership (i.e., social identity). Only in the absence of cues to personal identity did cues to social identity come into play, influencing whether trusting behavior was displayed (i.e., toward ingroupers) or not (i.e., toward outgroupers). This finding underlines a pattern that emerges from the results: effects of cues to identity being noticeably different (and even contradictory) when comparing the effects on interpersonal perceptions (such as liking, attraction, and interpersonal trust), effects on social categorizations, and the subsequent behavioral consequences (in terms of collaboration preferences, work satisfaction, and actual trusting behavior). It appears that the effects on different components of person perception can be contradictory, and this may explain the heterogeneity of the more distal social effects of cues to identity.

In sum, these findings corroborate the SIDE model, in that participants proved to be less willing to team-up, and demonstrated less trusting behavior with anonymous others with whom they could not identify (either on grounds of the other belonging to an outgroup, or because the ingroup has no affective meaning to the individual). Notably, this demonstration of SIDE effects was obtained in dyads, which presents a social context for interaction which would appear to be so strongly revolving around interpersonal considerations that one would expect only weak effects of social category membership other than pervasive social categories such as gender and race.

However, for people that share group membership, findings were a little different from effects traditionally demonstrated within the SIDE framework. The SIDE model predicts that personal cues have an individuating effect, which disturbs the perceptual unity of the group (Lea et al., 2001; Postmes et al., 2001; Sassenberg & Postmes, 2002; Spears & Lea, 1992). By this, feelings of shared social identity decrease, which consequently affects the social influences exerted by that identity. Direct support for this suggestion was indeed found in Study 3.3. Based on SIDE, one would expect that cues could have more consistent effects on the willingness to collaborate with ingroup others, or invest trust in them, in those conditions in which ingroup members cannot be individuated (i.e., when there are no cues to identity).
However, this is not what the studies in Chapter IV showed: In these studies, presence of cues to identity did not negatively affect interactions with people with shared social identities.

Study 4.3 provided a possible explanation for this by showing that trusting behavior is displayed both as a function of interpersonal trust (a variable that has much in common with interpersonal affection or positivity) and a salient shared social identity as members of an overarching social group. Therefore, pro-social behavior was predicted by both interpersonal and social identity related factors. Put differently, behavior was influenced by liking of the group ("we"), but also by liking of the individual ("you"). It appears, then, that the results obtained in Chapter IV qualify those of Chapter III in one important regard: they do not only lend support for the SIDE prediction that cues to identity can have negative effects on interaction outcomes, but they also suggest that effects of cues to identity can be beneficial by increasing interpersonal attraction. This qualification of course lends indirect support to the predictions of classical theories of media effects, such as Social Presence Theory, Cuelessness Model, and Social Information Processing Theory that argue that highly personalized impressions are needed for social interactions. Thus, it shows that the effects of cues to identity are at least in one sense as predicted: interpersonal attraction also being associated with positive social consequences such as invested trust and willingness to collaborate. However at the same time the mixed nature of these effects also fundamentally undermines the assumption embedded in these theories, that there would be fixed (determinist) effects of communication media. These results show that the social context importantly moderates the type of social effects found. In that sense, results are also completely consistent with the distinction made by SIDE (and SCT) between interpersonal and social level effects.

Similar results were found in the last empirical chapter of this thesis that reports an experiment in a real interaction setting. In this chapter, it was shown that the level of identification with a social group, in combination with the inability to individuate its group members affects the perception of shared identity. When cues to personal identity were not available, high identifiers perceived more shared identity with people from the ingroup compared to low identifiers. This is completely in line with previous findings (Study 3.3) and SIDE-expectations.

However, the opposite effect, in which cues to personal identity disrupt the unity of the social group, thereby decreasing the feeling of shared identity was—again—not confirmed. This suggests that when the shared social identity is de-emphasized due to cues to personal identity, these cues at the same time increase rapport through making the person identifiable, which is believed to have been responsible for strengthening a perceived
common bond with that target. Even though these interpersonal affections are theoretically
distinct from social identification, they could both produce social attraction (i.e.,
identification).

The feeling of shared identity was mirrored by perceptions of the collaboration: The
participants were satisfied working, and thought they had performed well when they had a
clear unambiguous impression, or when teamed-up with a person with whom they could
identify on the basis of sharing a salient social identity.

This again confirms that two processes might be taking place at the same time, both
leading to more positive evaluations of the interaction: On the one hand, positive evaluations
are formed on the basis of the social identity that people share. Then again, when cues to
personal identity might decrease the attention to this social identity, interpersonal attraction on
the basis of these cues seem to compensate for this loss, resulting in similarly positive
outcomes.

**Implications**

As was shown throughout the thesis, cues to identity affect person perception. In fact, the
results provide clear and unambiguous evidence that even relatively simple cues (portrait
pictures, banal biographical details, first names) have considerable influence on how people
are perceived. This finding has some important implications for theorizing about media
effects, and expands our understanding of the "social" causes and consequences of these
effects.

However, it should be kept in mind that a paucity of cues to personal identity may lose
(some of) its depersonalizing impact when communicators are not complete strangers. Put
differently, the effects of absence of cues to personal identity are potentially different when
people have pre-existing (maybe offline) relationships, for obviously, under those conditions
people already have (more or less crystallized) impressions of each other, which will be kept
in mind while interacting (for example, interacting via e-mail with a colleague who is working
at home does not mean that one forgets what he or she looks like).

Another point that has to be made is that in ongoing interaction, people may overcome
the absence of instantly available cues to personal identity by textual or linguistic behavior, by
which they could achieve more "personal" relationships over time (Walther et al., 1994). Evidence exists that, when given sufficient time, a (computer-mediated) relationship could
develop into a relationship as personal and intimate as a face-to-face relationship would be.
However, when initial impressions are negative, it is questionable whether people voluntarily will pursue future interaction, thereby giving time no chance.

These caveats notwithstanding, the present research lends itself to examining some of the key assumptions made by various theoretical perspectives on the social effects of mediated communication. All of these implicitly assume that cues to personal identity (even if not labeled as such) impact upon the perception of others: Social Presence Theory relates nonverbal signals and proximity to the communicator’s sense of awareness of the other being present (Short et al., 1976), the Cuelessness Model connects the absence of cues to personal identity to psychological distance and the feeling that the other is “not there” (Rutter, 1987), and also the Social Information Processing Model mentions the presentation of socially revealing information as important for social presence (Walther et al., 1994). Absence of cues to personal identity is believed to lead to deindividuation, which is a state in which people lose their individuality because “group members do not feel to stand out as individuals”, and people act as if they are “submerged in the group” (Festinger et al., 1952), and a lack of cues is expected to decrease awareness of self and others (Kiesler & Sproull, 1992). Also the SIDE-model mentions that personal information individuates a person by which idiosyncratic impressions are formed (Spears & Lea, 1992).

The implicit assumptions of all of these perspectives is backed up by the results of the studies presented in this thesis, in that even simple and relatively superficial cues to personal identity exerted strong impacts on the perception of others. Cues to identity reduce ambiguity of person perceptions, and make them more positive.

However, the different approaches are less successful when it comes to predicting the more distal outcomes of cues to personal identity on online interaction and collaboration in particular. As was shown by the results, personalized impressions were no prerequisite for flourishing collaborations. This seems contradictory to the beliefs derived from Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976) and the Cuelessness Model (Rutter, 1987) arguing that in the absence of information about physical appearance or other forms of nonverbal cues, the interactions will become impersonal, less spontaneous, and altogether less social. Therefore, it would be expected that interacting in the absence of such cues to personal identity would result in more negative evaluations compared to when those cues are present. That is not what the results presented in this thesis suggest. It seems that an absence of cues to personal identity does not threaten the subjective quality of the interaction per se, and anonymity may even be beneficial, as was shown in Chapter III, where communicators felt more certain when no cues to personal identity were present.
Based on these findings we can conclude that the way in which cues to personal identity are used is more complex than was initially assumed, in part because usage may depend on the social context of the interaction, i.e. where cues to social identity provide relevant information about the individual. In the research presented in this thesis, cues to personal identity prove to be essential only in conditions where participants are to interact with a person “across the boundaries” of his or her group. In such a setting, overcoming anonymity, even by “simple” cues to personal identity is sufficient to overcome initial aversion to collaborate with, or put trust in the outgroup members. This adds power to the claims made by the perspectives described above, that cues to personal identity are important for interpersonal interactions. Indeed, it was shown that these cues increase interpersonal trust, which caused the participants to expect reciprocal behavior (Study 4.3), but this is only the case for counterparts from a distinct outgroup. It can therefore be questioned whether the predominant value of these cues lies in providing highly personalized, warm, and affectionate impressions, or in merely overcoming stereotypical thinking that is based on the cues to social identity indicating the other’s outgroup membership. As was shown in the seminal work of Tajfel et al. (1971), ethnocentric behavior can occur on the basis of mere categorization (as in the minimal group studies that were described in the introductory chapter), but, as it seems, also easily overthrown by the individuating effect of cues to personal identity. One could argue that if such a social “boundary” does not exist between communicators, cues to identity quickly lose their value, or even have negative effects (see Chapter III)

Therefore, heralding that in collaboration practices rich communication is to be preferred seems to be shortsighted if the moderating effect of social identity is not taken into account. These findings accentuate that social contextual factors have to be taken seriously in order to fully understand what functions cues to identity fulfill: As the results clearly show, the absence of cues to personal identity by no means harms interactions as long as there is no indication that a relevant social identity is not shared.

However, claims to the opposite—as could be made on the basis of SIDE—and suggesting that collaborators would be better off being anonymous to each other when this might distract from their perceived unity, also does not receive consistent support in this thesis. Following SIDE-reasoning, predictions were that when interacting with an ingroup other, cues to personal identity result in individuation, by which these cues would de-emphasize unity on the basis of their shared group membership. Consequently, these cues draw away attention to the one thing that binds them together: their shared social identity. This effect was found in the studies presented: Cues to personal identity decreased the
perceptions of shared social identity. However, the subsequent effects that this was expected to have on outcomes related to the interaction were less uniformly found. Although in Chapter III, interaction was preferred in the absence of cues to personal identity, the subsequent chapters suggested that participants were not influenced in their evaluations whether they were able to individuate the other or not, providing no support for the SIDE model.

There is no watertight argument for the fact that SIDE-predictions for the ingroup are inconsistently supported in this research, but a possible explanation could be found in the nature of the dependent variables that are commonly studied in SIDE research, compared to the variables under investigation in this thesis. Much of the work on the SIDE-model has focused on outcomes related to normative behavior, social influence, and group polarization (see Postmes & Spears, 2000b for overview of SIDE research). All of these are variables that revolve around perceptions of groups and are relatively insensitive to interpersonal relations within those groups.

The variables that are under investigation in this thesis are of a slightly different nature, and are more closely related to interpersonal relationships. Put differently, variables such as trust, collaboration preference, and work satisfaction are likely to be under the influence of interpersonal perceptions as well as social categorization perceptions. Following this reasoning, it seems possible that the outcomes in Chapters 4 and 5, which showed no sensitivity to the absence of cues to identity, may actually have been equally influenced by a greater shared social group membership as by decreased interpersonal rapport—both exercising an influence on the outcome variables, but in opposite directions. This was most clearly and directly demonstrated in Study 4.3, where reciprocal behavior was expected on the basis of ingroup membership, but, when cues to personal identity were present, on the basis of interpersonal trust. Similar reasoning would hold for the results of Study 5.1, where again it was shown that the outcomes were related to the impact of (shared) social identity as well as to a rapport between individuals (e.g., Turner, 1999).

This brings us back to a point that was made in the introduction, in which I questioned what the best setting would be to study the effects of cues to identity. From an ecological validity point of view, it was argued that the dyad would be preferable since one-to-one communication is a common form of interaction, both off- as well as online. In addition, and maybe more importantly, such a setting could be beneficial from a theoretical perspective. As was concluded on the basis of the overview, the different theories do not agree on the more distal outcomes that cues to personal identity are believed to cause, with biggest antipodes being Social Presence Theory versus the SIDE-model. It could be that this clash of beliefs
stems from their different points of departure: For the majority of theories in this area, what is "social" is restricted to the interpersonal sphere, whether with respect to what constitute "social" cues or when considering "social" effects (Lea & Spears, 1995). Moreover, it is a given in such perspectives that face-to-face interaction should be the benchmark for what constitutes the most "social" of settings imaginable. Given these points of departure, it is almost inevitable that mediation is seen as a restriction. Even if "mediated" relations are able to become equally rich, as suggested by Social Information Processing (Walther, 1992), it might take more effort and time compared to the highly interactive form of face-to-face interaction. For SIDE, however, "social" is understood to be group-related, and social behavior is derived from group norms and group perspectives. Thereby, any signal that forms a threat to the emphasis on the group inherently decreases its social power. By this, the possibility to exchange individuating information is not seen as social per se, and could even be seen as operating in a certain sense to reduce social influences. So, whereas Social Presence Theory and its followers place the individual center stage in their analyses of social cues and social effects, SIDE ascribes a main role to the social group.

It could well be that dyads form the "missing link" between on the one side the interpersonal perspective and on the other the group perspective, since in such assemblies, notions of the individual ("you") and the group ("we") are closely related. By this, studying dyads would form the most conservative test for both the interpersonal as well as the group perspective, and it puts their claims to the test in a setting in which people may find it relatively easy to transgress interpersonal and social levels of interaction; from "I like the group", to "I like you" and vice versa. As was shown in the last two empirical chapters of this thesis, ingroup others can be entrusted and are thought apt for collaboration on the basis of their social identity as well as on their personal identity.

So, even though it might sometimes seem that in these small ingroups of two persons interacting online, the social outcomes of an interaction are unaffected by whether or not cues to personal identity are present, the conclusion that "anything goes" is not the right one to draw. It is important to realize that even when distal outcomes are similar, this may be because opposite effects on two distinct more proximate processes cancel each other out. In the presence of cues to identity positive interpersonal impressions may have effects consistent with classical (determinist) theories of media effect which are counteracted by opposite effects on social categorical effects (consistent with SIDE) exerted by those very same cues.
In conclusion, this thesis has shown that in CMC cues to identity have an impact on person perception and subsequent effects related to collaboration practices. The fact that in (most forms of) CMC interactions the capacity to convey such cues is limited or may be absent at all adds importance to the understanding of their effects. By this, I mean that cues to identity may be important for first impressions and may play an important role in interpersonal evaluations by creating clear, unambiguous impressions. However, when cues to identity are limited, and picked up as cues that foster categorization, perceiving the other as a member of a relevant outgroup can have serious consequences for the subjective quality of the interaction.

As CMC is increasingly used in (inter-) group settings such as work units, departments or complete organizations (Fulk & Collins-Jarvis, 2001; Rice & Gattiker, 2001), understanding the effect of (characteristics of) CMC on the perception of others, and how this subsequently affects interpersonal evaluations, is of key value. The results suggest that exchanging personal information – even if it is very basic information such as a portrait picture or first name – has a significant effect on interpersonal evaluations and maybe helpful to build interpersonal rapport.

However, this seems to be independent of, and different to how collaborations are perceived. Results show that when having to interact across the boundaries of one’s group (in which groups can range from work units, departments, to organizations as a whole), cues to personal identity may prove important. However, the results also clearly indicate that when communicating within such boundaries, highly personalized interacting might be a lesser strategy, and making communication tools as “interpersonally” rich as possible seems unhelpful at best.

The final suggestion is therefore to have a broader focus in the study of media effects, looking beyond the mere capacity to convey cues, to the wider relation of those cues to the social context, and the nature of the tasks at hand. What cues are used for is not so much determined by the medium, nor is it determined by the one giving off these signals: Ultimately, the understanding of the effects of cues to identity depends on our understanding of the receivers of such cues in their attempt to decode and make sense of an interaction as it occurs within its proper social context.