

Forming Personality Impressions from Online Profiles: A Research Issue Illustrating the Science of Social Computing

In this proposal, we outline some productive conversation topics on the meaning of social computing and then review an illustrative research issue - online impressions of personality.

How is social computing any different than social life in general? Answering this question convincingly will help to demonstrate that social computing focuses on unique phenomena that are not already studied by the social sciences. Below is a preliminary list of differences between "everyday" and "digital" social behavior.

- **Differences of degree.** Computing power can elevate the scale, speed, organization and ease of digital social interactions much higher than is possible in everyday environments. Alone, this difference may not establish social computing as a unique field, but it is important to note that the ancient environments in which much human social behavior evolved ranged from small kin groups of 8-10 to communities of around 120 (Buss, 1995; Dunbar, 1992). As online groups become far larger, an important research question will become whether social behaviors can adapt to the new scale afforded by social software, or whether their usefulness will be limited by our evolved faculties of social interaction.
- **Knockout factors.** Everyday social behavior occurs in a complex mix of interdependent causes and effects. By contrast, digital platforms for social behavior often lack entire factors due to technical limitations of the interface. For example, instant-messaging completely lacks nonverbal behavior while retaining verbal and some paralingual behavior. Nonverbal behavior is thus a "knockout factor," analogous to "knockout genes" used to test hypotheses in genetics. Knockout factors have a unique impact on behavior, and the science of social computing should exploit them to test hypotheses that cannot be tested in everyday environments.
- **Meta-data and latent factors.** In digital social interactions, aggregate statistics, meta-data, and latent variables may be computed and piped back in to the social dynamics. For example, buyers and sellers on eBay are informed of each other's percentage of successful payments and deliveries at the time of sale. This aggregate information is generally not available in everyday social interactions and is thus a unique topic of study for social computing.
- **Reification.** Only 10 years ago, the notion that all humans were connected by 6-degrees of separation was still just a mathematical hypothesis (Milgram, 1967; Watts, 2003). Today, Friendster owns patents to 6-degrees technology and licenses it for everyday use. Social computing is uniquely positioned to study how people react to features of social life that were once very abstract but now digitally manifested, most notably, one's "network."
- **Isolation and evolution.** Online communities and multi-player online games often isolate members' interactions resulting in cultural evolution. Very quickly, unique idioms and norms arise in these communities, perhaps accelerated by technological factors (e.g., verbal acronyms arising from texting). This process may be studied in its own right or exploited to examine cultural evolution in general.
- **Unique social behaviors.** Although rare, social computing may introduce social behaviors, causes, and effects that are without counterpart in everyday social life. An example may be "social search" as on del.icio.us where users explore other users' bookmarks both to find information as well as learn about their tastes. Most social computing likely streamlines existing social behaviors, but any unique social features that are invented fall squarely within the study of social computing.

An illustrative research issue: online personality impressions.

Research on the accuracy of personality impressions has recently enjoyed a revival. The 40 years prior to that saw only slow growth in this area as valid measures of accuracy were being developed and as research methods too often collected impressions of fictitious rather than real targets who could not be used to verify accuracy (Funder, 1999).

Today, as news headlines appear almost daily warning people about the dangers of giving others wrong impressions through online profiles (MSNBC, Aug 14, 2007), research on this issue has returned to center stage.

Sam Gosling and his colleagues recognized that testing the accuracy of online impressions not only addressed whether people represent themselves faithfully online, it also allowed them to exploit a "knockout factor" in the interface to test their theoretical model. Vazire and Gosling (2004) postulated that there are two types of cues that people use to determine your personality: identity claims ("statements made by individuals about how they would like to be regarded," p. 124) and behavioral residue ("physical traces of a person's behavior left unintentionally," p. 124). Online profiles, by virtue of being so structured and deliberately created, markedly lack behavioral residue (at least compared to offices and bedrooms; see Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli & Morris, 2002). The result is that online profiles consist predominately of identity claims, that is, controlled statements of who you are and how you would like to be seen. This knockout factor makes online profiles ideal for studying the question - do people form accurate impressions based on identity claims alone, or must they see behavioral evidence of personality to be accurate?

Taking Gosling's two studies of Facebook and Yahoo! Geocities profiles together (Gosling, Gaddis, & Vazire, 2007; Vazire & Gosling, 2004), it appears that online profiles are as good as short interactions in communicating Extraversion and Conscientious; online profiles are slightly better at communicating Open-Mindedness and Agreeableness; but online profiles are no better at communicating Neuroticism, the most difficult trait to read. People do engage in some self-enhancement of their Neuroticism and Open-mindedness on their Facebook profiles, portraying themselves closer to their ideal selves than their actual selves (Gosling et al., 2007). But surprisingly, a stranger who visits your online profile can become as knowledgeable about your Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Open-mindedness as your long-term friends (Vazire & Gosling, 2004).

Gosling has now partnered with David Evans to build an online laboratory that will replicate and extend this work. Jovially named YouJustGetMe.com, 900 members have already formed nearly 2000 impressions of each other, and a Facebook application is due to launch in September, 2007. The average accuracy of personality impressions on YouJustGetMe is identical to Gosling's small-sample research ($r = .27$). And thanks to the unique design of the website, new findings are emerging too; for example, a previously theorized but untested gender interaction has emerged in which women guessing women ($r = .40$) are more accurate than the other gender combinations. YouJustGetMe will allow for multivariate tests of how different clues (e.g., favorite movie), different profiles (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, dating profile, resume), and different pairings of global demographic groups all affect impression accuracy.

This work raises a final important point about social computing: where possible researchers should build complex, realistic experimental conditions. Other social sciences often rely on naturally occurring behavior that prevents causal conclusions, or study trends only after they occur, simply because it is impossible to build a realistic laboratory analog. To study social computing, however, we should embrace partnerships between the scientists and the innovators and create digital social interactions that are both realistic and rigorously researched.

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Biographies

David C. Evans earned his Ph.D. in social psychology from the University of Iowa in 1999 working under Robert Baron who studied group polarization (a.k.a. groupthink). David's dissertation was the first online multivariate study published in a social psychological journal. He fulfilled a 3-year term as Visiting Assistant Professor at Union College in upstate New York before joining Microsoft to survey the first 5000 users of Office Communicator, an enterprise instant-messaging client. David then joined Classmates.com and performed over 40 studies and usability tests on topics ranging from social-networking to photo-sharing. David is now the Director of Research & Analytics with RIPL Corp., an online music hyperdistribution site.

Sam Gosling earned his Ph.D. at UC Berkeley in 1998 working under Oliver John and Kenneth Craik, international authorities on personality. As an Associate Professor at the University of Texas at Austin, Sam re-invigorated interest in the accuracy with which we form impressions of others' personalities. His studies of what offices and bedrooms tell people about your personality was featured in Malcom Gladwell's bestseller Blink. Sam's subsequent studies on forming impressions Yahoo! Geocities and Facebook profiles was most recently covered by US News & World Report and is the subject of a manuscript out soon with Basic Books.

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