Chapter XXXV
Social Influence and Computer Mediated Communication

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines contemporary research in computer-mediated communication (CMC) with regard to a specific question: How does attempting to influence individuals via CMC affect the social influence process? Over the past 15 years, the use of the Internet has shifted from an exhaustive information store, to another means with which to create and maintain group and individual social relationships (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2002). As a result, individuals engage in social influence via CMC. This chapter focuses on persuasion via instant messaging (synchronous text-based CMC) and e-mail (asynchronous text-based CMC) from two theoretical perspectives: dynamic social impact theory (Latané, 1996) and social role theory (Eagly, 1987). The findings of these two lines of research speak to the differences in the persuasion process when using CMC as well as individual differences such as gender of the interactants. Implications for research on computer mediated communication and social influence are discussed. .

INTRODUCTION

Social Influence and Computer Mediated Communication

Social scientists have spent years examining how people reciprocally influence one another on a daily basis. This research has taught us much about several social influence processes such as attitude change (Tesser & Shaffer, 1990), persuasion (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984), and compliance (Cialdini, 2001). However, most of the accumulated research examining social influence has been done using traditional face-to-face (FTF) communication. Because computer mediated communication (CMC) differs from FTF in many ways (absence of social cues, latency of response, etc.), it stands to reason that differing mediums have differing effects on interpersonal processes such as social influence.

With recent trends in Internet usage for building and maintaining social connections, researchers have started to turn their attention to the nature

of social interaction in computer-mediated contexts (see Bargh & McKenna, 2004; McKenna & Bargh, 2000 for reviews). This growing interest is evidenced by the increasing number of researchers examining the different interpersonal outcomes that appear to be a function of the interaction medium (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). In order to understand and predict how communication mode differences impact social influence processes, we must first understand how these communication modes differ from each other.

The objectives of this chapter are twofold. First, we plan to examine the reasons behind some of the reported differences in instant messaging and e-mail communication. Second, we will explore some current research that tests the differences between FTF and CMC. To accomplish this second objective, we will review the literature on differences between CMC and FTF and how those differences impact social interaction. Then, we will explore two current lines of research that have applied social psychological theories to understanding social influence processes in CMC. Finally, we will conclude with a discussion of future trends in the area.

BACKGROUND

The Internet as a Source of Social Influence

An estimated 73 percent of the nation's population is connected to the Internet (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2006), and this number is increasing every day. Social interaction via the Internet is also rapidly growing. Nearly 80 percent of people who go online in a given day do so to send e-mail (Pew Internet Report, 2000) and four in 10 Americans who are online use an instant message program (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2004). The use of the Internet has now shifted from an exhaustive information store, to another means with which to create and

maintain group and individual social relationships (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2002). The proliferation of chat rooms on the Internet has created opportunities for individuals to engage in social influence attempts 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and 365 days a year. Owing to the unique properties cyberspace affords its users, social influence attempts over this new medium may not be similar to that of face-to-face interaction.

Computer Mediated Communication vs. Face-to-Face.

A review of the existing literature on CMC indicates that there are marked differences between face-to-face and computer-mediated communication (see Bargh & McKenna, 2004; McKenna & Bargh, 2000 for review). For instance, McKenna and Bargh (2000) proposed four domains in which social interaction via computer mediated communication (CMC) differs from other more conventional interaction mediums: relative anonymity, reduced importance of physical appearance, attenuation of physical distance, and greater control over the time and pace of interactions.

Anonymity. Perhaps the most attractive and unique traits the Internet has to offer are that of relative anonymity and social interaction opportunities (see discussion in Postmes et al., 2002). The Internet offers its users relatively anonymous social interactions, if they so choose, in instant messaging chat rooms, message boards, games, and personal Web sites. Specifically, the ability to be relatively anonymous in a social interaction reduces accountability leading to the depersonalization and deindividuation of its users (Postmes et al., 2002).

Depersonalization is defined as a state in which a normal sense of personal identity and reality is lost. Deindividuation is also heightened when interacting on the Internet due to anonymity and group salience (Postmes et al., 2002). Both deindividuation and depersonalization lead to elevated group salience and polarization between groups

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