

Social Influence Online: A Tale of Gender Differences in the Effectiveness of Authority Cues

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the extent to which communicator salience manipulated by varying communication modes, authority-based social influence, and gender affect persuasion in online environments by utilizing a 2 by 2 between subjects design. Participants of the experiment were either presented with an authority-based influence attempt or no influence attempt. They then engaged in a persuasive interaction with a same-sex confederate via computer-mediated communication (CMC) or face-to-face. Results revealed that men in the Authority condition who interacted via CMC were more persuaded than men in the Peer condition who interacted via CMC. Additionally, men reported more confidence when interacting via CMC and reported that their decision was more influenced by the confederate online. Moreover, perceptions of the confederate varied by gender and communication mode. Analysis suggests that authority based influence tactics via CMC are more effective for men than for women.

Keywords: Authority, Communicator Salience, Gender Differences, Online, Persuasion, Relationships, Social Influence, Social Interaction

INTRODUCTION

The extent to which individuals interact and spend time online continues to grow. With the rise in time spent online, comes an increase in influence attempts occurring in online environments (Guadagno & Cialdini, 2005; Guadagno, Muscanell, Rice, & Roberts, 2013). Influence appeals have become normative in most online venues. For example, advertisements appear

on web pages, social networking sites, in news feeds, and in email form. Past research provided information detailing the psychological processes and moderators for this influence when it occurs in a traditional face-to-face context (see Cialdini & Guadagno, 2005 for review). However, little is known about the process through which attitudes change when individuals are influenced while communicating online. With the advent of the Internet and the World

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Wide Web, a new communication medium for interpersonal influence has emerged. Over the years, the literature on new media effects and social influence has grown. However, few researchers examined how attitude change occurring face-to-face (FtF) may differ from attitude change when the communicator of the influence is less salient. The present investigation focuses on the impact of communicator salience, authority, and gender on persuasion in online contexts.

Online Communication

Research has identified four features that differentiate computer-mediated communication (CMC) from face-to-face (FtF) communication (McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Bargh & McKenna, 2004): the time and pace of interaction, the ability to be relatively anonymous, the attenuation of physical distance, and the reduced emphasis on physical appearance (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). These features may account for differences between FtF and CMC (Sproull & Kiesler, 1985; Walther, Anderson, & Park, 1994) in such domains as groups (Spears, Postmes, Lea, & Wolbert, 2002), work settings (Cummings, Butler, & Kraut, 2002), and relationship formation (Guadagno, Okdie, & Kruse, 2012; McKenna et al., 2002). Although scholars have investigated these differences across multiple domains, little research has examined how these attributes might affect social influence processes in an online environment with decreased communicator cues (for reviews, see Guadagno & Cialdini, 2005; Guadagno, in press). The decrease in the salience of communicator cues (i.e., the decrease in the importance of physical appearance) may affect the degree to which influence attempts are efficacious across differing media.

Social Influence Principles

Cialdini (2009) has theorized that all influence tactics can be distilled down to six key principles of influence: authority, scarcity, social validation, commitment and consistency, and reciprocity. As implied by their names, each principle

increases susceptibility to an influence appeal. Thus, people are more swayed by an authority figure, they find scarce items more desirable; if people see that others are acting in a certain manner or selecting a certain course of option; they are quick to jump on the bandwagon, people are consistent with their prior commitments; and people reciprocate to individuals who have given them items or done favors for them. These processes work best when people are heuristically processing information. Thus, if individuals are not motivated or unable to process the message in a thoughtful deliberate manner (i.e., centrally or systematically; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984; Chaiken & Eagly, 1976) they are more likely to use other cues to base their attitudes and decisions on (i.e., peripherally or heuristically).

When individuals are processing information heuristically, each of the six principles can serve as heuristic cues on which individuals can base decisions. For example, individuals may perceive the actions of many similar others as evidence that they should agree or comply with a persuasive communication or request. Each of the six principles has received extensive empirical support in FtF contexts (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). However, few of the principles have been applied to CMC (see Guadagno, in press, for an updated review). Given that substantial differences exist in social interaction in CMC versus FtF, there is evidence to argue that the six principles may operate differently online (Guadagno, in press; Guadagno & Cialdini, 2005; Guadagno, Muscanell, Rice, & Roberts, 2013). Of particular interest to the current paper is the principle of authority.

Authority

There is a dearth of research on examined differences in the social influence process across communication media leading some researchers to hypothesize that influence appeals may be differentially impactful because of the unique characteristics of the medium (Guadagno & Cialdini, 2005; Guadagno, in press). The principle of authority posits that information origi-

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