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The effects of anonymity on computer-mediated communication: The case of independent versus interdependent self-construal influence

Mikyeung Bae*

Media and Information Studies, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824, USA

ABSTRACT

This experiment investigated how anonymity influenced group identification, inter-group antagonism, and attitude change in computer-mediated communication in samples of both Korean and American participants. This study also examined how self-construal moderated the effect of anonymity on inter-group antagonism. Consistent with the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE), findings from an analysis of variance (ANOVA) test showed that anonymity fostered group identification among the discussion partners and created greater attitude change following a group discussion. Anonymity correlated negatively with the exhibition of critical comments in both Korean and American participants. Although Korean participants showed a greater interdependent self-construal than the American participants did, the effects of self-construal on group identification and inter-group antagonism did not differ from those of American participants. Implications are discussed in light of the social identity theory, SIDE, and self-categorization theory.

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1. Introduction

There is a long history of the idea that people who hold group-defining features that distinguish them from those who do not possess such characteristics are more likely to experience strong group solidarity (Tajfel, 1978). Moreover, as a result of such group cohesion, antagonism and prejudice towards the out-group have been considered to engender automatically (Turner, 1982).

Some have argued that the fast-growing popularity of the internet and social media has stimulated negative attitudes toward out-groups (Lohr, 2010; Sarita & Boyd, 2010; Sia, Tan, & Wei, 2002). As it has become much easier to seek out and share ideas online with others who have similar interests and values, the tendency for groupthink and out-group antagonism may be severe (Sarita & Boyd, 2010).

For example, immediately after the identity of the Boston bombing suspect was released, Twitter members posted antagonistic comments about immigrants, including some that blamed President Barack Obama for not having tightened immigration restrictions (Twitter, 2013). Similarly, when a foreign bride who migrated to Korea in order to marry was elected for the first time in history during South Korea's National Assembly election in 2012, she became the target of online racist comments. Some Twitter posts claimed that Korean politicians were discriminating against their own citizens in order to offer more incentives to foreigners (Lee, 2012). People also posted vulgar comments stating that immigrants should be ejected from Korea.

Such hostile, aggressive, and inflammatory online remarks have been labeled as "flaming," and are defined as messages containing hostility, lack of restraint and the expression of strong emotions and feelings (Bernthal, 1995; Kayany, 1998; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Lea, O'Shea, Fung, & Spears, 1992). Many scholars have argued that specific aspects of computer-mediated communication, such as anonymity and physical isolation, have an anti-social effect that contributes to flaming (Kiesler et al., 1984; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire, 1986; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991; Thompsen, 1996). From this perspective, an Internet user may easily forget appropriate norms when communicating with people online (Diener, 1980; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991).

However, some have questioned the consequences of the inherent characteristics of computer-mediated communication. Scholars have noted that online anonymity actually can enhance normative-collective behavior rather than anti-normative behavior (Lea, Spears, & De Groot, 2001; Postmes & Spears, 1998; Reicher,

* 404 Wilson Road, Room 367, Communication Arts and Sciences Building, East Lansing, MI, 48824, USA. Tel.: +1 517 898 1267.
E-mail address: baemikye@msu.edu.

1987; Spears & Lea, 1994). Other scholars also suggest that as individuals define themselves in terms of one social identity, they come to form the basis of collective psychology and act collectively (Reynolds & Turner, 2001; 2012). From this perspective, one frequently mentioned finding has been that intergroup competition heightens in-group cohesion, conformity to norms, and stimulates hostility toward out-group members (Coffey & Woolworth, 2004; Turner, 1982).

There has been a great deal of concern about the association between anonymity and out-group antagonism. In addition, several previously suggested that antagonism toward out-group might arise as a direct consequence of increased in-group cohesion; however, they did not specify social psychological process that might underlie intergroup relationship at the individual level. Very few studies have examined if individual differences triggered different reactions to the lack of individuating information in CMC.

In an attempt to address this inquires, the current study examined whether the effect of anonymity on out-group antagonism would be greater when an individual self is associated with a psychological tendency to emphasize interpersonal relatedness within a group than when social interdependence is less emphasized (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

The design of the present study permitted assessing other possible consequences of anonymity upon intergroup bias: (a) whether anonymity fosters in-group identification; (b) whether the phenomenon of out-group antagonism well depends on cognitively categorizing individuals according to an in-group versus out-group classification in an anonymity; (c) if this formulation is valid, whether heightening in-group identification in an anonymity increases conformity to the group norm, which in turn leads to attitude change; and (d) whether the effect of anonymity on out-group antagonism depends on how individuals see themselves in relation to others within a group.

In doing so, what is unique about the current study is the demonstration whether group behavior in anonymous computer-mediated communication (hereinafter, CMC) context would be driven more by the importance of relationship connections among in-group members or not. Furthermore, it may contribute to develop the social-psychological theory regarding the effects of anonymity on CMC by combining traditional social psychological theories (social identity theory and social categorization theory), the SIDE model, and cross-cultural perspectives (independent versus interdependent self-construal model).

2. Literature review

2.1. Deindividuation theory

Le Bon (1995) explained that anonymity in a crowd can be associated with the collapse of traditional norms, and afforded a good foundation on which the deindividuation theory was developed, with the core notion of the minimization of self-observation, self-evaluation, and concern for social evaluation (Diener, 1980; Festinger, Pepitone, & Newcomb, 1952; Zimbardo, 1969). Deindividuation is defined as a psychological state of decreased self-evaluation, causing anti-normative and disinhibited behavior (Diener, 1980; Festinger et al., 1952; Le Bon, 1995; Prentice-Dunn & Rogers, 1989; Zimbardo, 1969).

However, with this reasoning, individuals are not necessarily unaware of their behaviors or less self-regulated in a crowd; they may simply realize that their behaviors will go unpunished. Furthermore, although they explained that deindividuation was related to the feelings of not being under surveillance and of reduced self-observation, individuals still seem to be self-conscious of other's states and social norms. Thus, from the deindividuation

perspective, the anti-normative behavior and disinhibition phenomena in CMC cannot be fully explained.

2.2. Social identity theory and social categorization theory

The primary objective of social identity theory (SIT) is to understand when people think of themselves in terms of "we" rather than "I," and how this affects an individual's thoughts and behaviors (Tajfel, 1969). Tajfel (1978) set out to identify systematically the minimal conditions necessary for intergroup discrimination to occur. They found that even though groups were minimal in the sense that there was no social interaction between them, they had no shared goals and the members did not know who was in their group, group members tried to maximize in-group profit and gain in relation to out-group gain. Thus, seemingly trivial categories led members to define themselves in terms of a group.

Another important aspect of the social identity theory relates to positive social identity and positive distinctiveness. Hogg and Abrams (1990) proposed that individuals strive for a positive self-concept so that their social identities can be evaluated in positive terms. In obtaining a positive social identity, individuals achieve or maintain a positive self-evaluation (Reynolds, Turner, & Haslam, 2000). Moreover, a reduction of uncertainty about the position of the self in relation to others was proposed as a broader motive that may induce identity enhancement (Hogg & Mullin, 1999).

Turner (1987, 1991) further specified and extended Tajfel (1978) original proposition and formulated the self-categorization theory (SCT). SCT proposes that the same individual can be included in multiple categories on the basis of different criteria. The self not only encompasses one's individual identity, but also comprises social identities associated with valued group memberships (Tajfel, 1978). That is, as people defined themselves and others as members of the same category, they would self-stereotype in relation to the category and tend to see themselves as more alike in terms of the defining attributes of the category. Turner (1982) produced the concept of depersonalization, which is the cognitive redefinition of the self with unique attributes and individual differences compared to the shared social category membership and associated stereotype.

2.3. The social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE)

The social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE) challenged the idea that flaming and disinhibition were attributable to a reduction in social cues. Reicher, Spears, and Postmes (1995) assumed that effects in a crowd or in online environments had certain similar properties and concluded that the anti-normative collective behavior was guided by norms that emerged in a specific context. The SIDE theorists further argued that anonymity and immersion in a group could enhance the salience of social identity, thereby depersonalizing social perceptions of others and the self (Postmes & Spears, 1998; Reicher et al., 1995; Spears & Lea, 1994).

Postmes, Spears, and Lea (1998) defined depersonalization as the psychological process of seeing someone as an individual person (individuated perceptions) or not (depersonalized perception) in electronic interaction. Consistent with this idea, they described depersonalization as having an effect on social behavior.

The SIDE model proposes that within a context in which individuating information is scarce, individuals are more sensitive to group membership cues than when individuating information is abundant. The underlying process is that depersonalization makes it less likely that others are perceived as individuals with a range of idiosyncratic characteristics and behaviors; they are more likely to be seen as representatives of social groups or wider social