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Communication goals and online persuasion: An empirical examination

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Abstract

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is frequently applied as a tool for organizational marketing and consumer research. This paper explores the underlying structure of message receivers' communication goals and their impact on persuasiveness in the context of CMC. Extending prior research on the structure of primary and secondary goals, we identified five specific communication goals that are important to receivers. We conducted an online exercise in which subjects respond to a message requesting them to volunteer their time. The results demonstrate all five communication goals are important to one or more indicators of persuasiveness, including attitude toward the issue, source credibility, perceived information quality, and behavioral intention to comply with the request.
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1. Introduction

Organizations are using computer-mediated communication (CMC) for an increasing range of communication activities, including marketing and consumer research. Asynchro-

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nous CMC applications—such as email and web forms—offer benefits of speed, low cost, and accuracy that appeal to organizational managers (Chittenden & Rettie, 2003; Kent & Lee, 1999). Yet results have been mixed where CMC has been applied toward organizational marketing and market research, especially where messages are intended to establish initial communication with receivers. In such circumstances, CMC often results in low response rates (Kent & Lee, 1999; Ranchod & Zhou, 2001; Tse, 1998) and produces poor results in acquiring customers, creating brand awareness, and generating leads (Chittenden & Rettie, 2003).

Gaining individuals' compliance to respond to surveys, sign up for information, or purchase products requires persuasion, i.e., the shaping, reinforcing, or changing of message receivers' responses (Miller, 1980). In CMC contexts, it is not always clear which features or actions will actually prove to be persuasive (Citera, 1998; Moon, 1999; Tanis & Postmes, 2003; Wilson, 2003, 2005). For this reason, people typically find it more difficult to initiate persuasive communication via CMC than in face-to-face settings (Wilson, 2002). Although a substantial persuasion literature has emerged, complete with predictive models and theories, this literature has been developed largely using communication modes which differ from CMC in two key ways that obstruct the applicability of many findings.

First, many factors which are known to be persuasive in traditional (i.e., not computer-mediated) communication are not available in CMC. These include visual cues, such as facial expressions, and many non-verbal cues, such as vocal tone and intensity. Other persuasive cues may be substantially modified or subverted in CMC, such as interpreting how attractive a message source is when the actual sender may be a computer program.

Second, the communication literature categorizes communication as either interpersonal or mass-media in nature. Virtually all persuasion researchers have followed this tradition by focusing on one or the other literature stream. However, Hoffman and Novak (1996) model CMC as an amalgam of interpersonal and mass-media communication characteristics. In their model, organizations and consumers interact with one another through online message content (interpersonal communication) and also interact with the networked computer for such activities as browsing web pages (mass-media communication). Rather than conceptualizing CMC as an exceptionally "lean" interpersonal communication medium (cf. Daft & Lengel, 1986), Hoffman and Novak argue that personal–impersonal characteristics of email and other CMC technologies are intermediate to mass communication media and interpersonal media. In practice, much of the CMC developed by organizations for marketing and consumer research mixes characteristics of interpersonal and mass-media communication, thus taking advantage of the increased support for persuasion that is offered by CMC's bi-directional communication structure (Hoffman, Novak, & Chatterjee, 1995).

There are many ways that traditional persuasion research can guide CMC research and practice. Yet differences between CMC and traditional communication contexts suggest there is both a need and opportunity to explore alternative frameworks for understanding online persuasion.

Drawing upon theories of influence goals and uses and gratifications, this paper studies the underlying structure of message receivers' communication goals and their impact on persuasiveness in CMC. The results of an online exercise identify a bi-level structure of receivers' communication goals and demonstrate impacts of these goals on several indicators of message persuasiveness. In the following sections, we first review two prior literature streams that focus on communication goals, present the conceptual research model,