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Effects of gendered character representation on person perception and informational social influence in computer-mediated communication

Eun-Ju Lee *

Department of Communication, One Shields Avenue, University of California, Davis, CA 95616, USA

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Abstract

Two experiments examined (a) if the gender of a *randomly* assigned character would affect individuals' inferences about an anonymous partner in computer-mediated communication (CMC) and (b) how the gender inference would moderate informational social influence. In Experiment 1, participants played a trivia game on a gender-biased topic (sports vs. fashion) with their ostensible partner via computer, represented by a gender-marked cartoon character. The results showed that both men and women, despite the arbitrary nature of character assignment, categorized the partner according to the character's gender. However, the effects of the gender inference on conformity were moderated by the topic and the participant's gender. First, when the topic matched the participant's gender, there was no character effect. Second, whereas women used "expertise heuristics", exhibiting greater conformity to the male-charactered than female-charactered partner on a masculine topic, men displayed greater conformity to the male-charactered than female-charactered partner on a feminine topic, suggesting male resistance to female influence. Using a gender-neutral topic, Experiment 2 confirmed the explanations. Although the character triggered gender-stereotypical perception of the partner, when the gender was not diagnostic of expertise, the character's gender did not affect women's conformity behavior while men nonetheless showed greater conformity to the male-charactered partner.

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Keywords: Computer-mediated communication; Gender; Social identity model of deindividuation effects; Graphical representation

* Tel.: +1-530-754-8624; fax: +1-530-752-3156.

E-mail address: enjlee@ucdavis.edu (E.-J. Lee).

1. Introduction

Even though recent technological advancements support a wide array of communication channels beyond the exchange of simple texts between remotely located individuals, one of the most obvious differences between computer-mediated communication (CMC) and face-to-face (FtF) interaction is nonetheless the lack of social context cues in CMC, which range from non-verbal cues (e.g., facial expressions and gesture) to paraverbal cues (e.g., volume and pitch) to interpersonal cues (e.g., age, physical appearance) (Adrianson, 2001; Daft & Lengel, 1986; Rice, 1992). On the one hand, the absence of cues has been considered to lead to uninhibited behaviors, such as strong and inflammatory expressions, presumably by reducing the awareness of others' presence in the immediate communication environment (Kiesler & Sproull, 1992; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire, 1986). On the other hand, many researchers have regarded this "cueless" environment as a means to democratize communication by liberating individuals from power differentials based on various status cues (e.g., Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & Sethna, 1991; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; McGuire, Kiesler, & Siegel, 1987). Not only does CMC create a low-risk environment for an opinion deviate (or a low-status individual) to publicly express his or her unpopular opinion (Dubrovsky et al., 1991; McGuire et al., 1987; McLeod, Baron, Marti, & Yoon, 1997; Siegel et al., 1986), they argue, it also allows ideas to be evaluated in terms of their merit and worth, not on the rank of the members themselves (Jessup, Connolly, & Tansik, 1990).

The social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE), however, has challenged the notion that this cue-limited environment renders individual differences of status, social class, and group membership less visible and thus insignificant (e.g., Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1998; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2002). In contrast, it posits that under certain conditions, information restrictions of the medium would accentuate, rather than attenuate, the influence of available cues because of their salience in the immediate environment. When the individuating cues are scarce (i.e., depersonalized), as often manipulated by means of anonymity, people become more sensitive to simple category membership cues (such as gender or nationality) and associated stereotypes and thus are more likely to perceive others as representatives of those categories, as opposed to unique individuals (Postmes et al., 2002). That is, in the absence of personal information about the interactants, group identity takes on a special value, thereby privileging the "social" levels of self-definition and perception of others. In fact, a series of experimental studies have consistently demonstrated that depersonalization (i.e., lack of individuation) stimulated group-related behaviors such as conformity to the group norm and intergroup differentiation, provided that group identity is salient (see Spears, Postmes, Lea, & Watt, 2001 for a review).

Unlike previous research that focused on the role of depersonalization in enhancing the salience of group identity, however, the present experiments aimed to demonstrate the robustness of category information in determining the perception of and behavioral reactions to an anonymous partners in CMC by manipulating one of the most visually salient group membership cues, gender. Several aspects of the

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