



Constraints on message size in quasi-synchronous computer mediated communication: Effect on self-concept accessibility

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Abstract

Anonymity is often regarded as a variable of great importance in research on computer mediated communication. However, this view might neglect the role played by the design of the user-interface. The current study attempted to show the effects of manipulation of the user-interface in terms of quantitative aspects of communication and self-concept accessibility. The manipulation consisted of varying the number of characters available to interlocutors in two conditions. It was predicted that different designs will not only influence communication quantitatively, but also to what degree participants are able to introspect and strategically plan communication in a self-presentation task. The design that allowed elaborate composition of a message during communication was expected to lead to more strategic self-presentation, thus increasing availability of the “actual self”. Two experiments were conducted. The results show that constraints on communication are associated with predictable quantitative effects, among them higher turntaking. Also, accessibility of the actual self appears to be associated with less interactive and involving interfaces. The results are discussed with regards to the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects, as well as the differences between writing and speech.

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1. Introduction

Research on the use of electronic media has revealed that although such channels of communication do not fundamentally change human psychology and communication (Bargh, 2002), certain human needs and motivations might find an (unexpected) outlet in mediated communication channels (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). For example, the Internet has been a venue for relationship formation and maintenance (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Parks & Floyd, 1996; Parks & Roberts, 1998) and identity exploration and manipulation (Chenault, 1998; Reid, 1998; Talamo & Ligorio, 2001; Turkle, 1995). Parks and Roberts (1998) reported that 93.6% of participants in 235 MOOs (Multi-User Dimensions, Object Oriented) reported having formed personal relationships online, including close-friendships and romances (one-third of these would later migrate to the real-world). As for identity, Talamo and Ligorio (2001) and others have noted that participants online appear to manipulate their identities strategically according to the specific (virtual) environments, providing support for “dialogical theories” of identity.

The anonymity that many forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) offer to participants is frequently cited as an explanation for the said phenomena. Participants who communicate through text-based CMC are oblivious to the aspects of face-to-face communication (FTF) involving social norms, social desirability, and interpersonal evaluation. Thus, they feel confident enough to express their “true” qualities or express and explore alternative identities. This interpretation is supported by studies showing more spontaneous self-disclosure in CMC compared to FTF (Joinson, 2001), and specifically, higher accessibility of true self traits and characteristics after CMC compared to FTF (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002). Both these findings are commonly referred to as stemming from the anonymity of CMC compared to other communication channels.

However, it is possible that theories drawing solely on the concept of anonymity might overlook important inherent differences between text-based CMC and face-to-face communication. Most basic is the fact that CMC uses text and writing as the means for communication, while FTF communication is based on speech. Crystal (2001) provides an overview of the distinguishing characteristics of writing and speech (p. 25): “Speech is typically time-bound, spontaneous, face-to-face, socially interactive, loosely structured, immediately revisable, and prosodically rich. Writing is typically space-bound, contrived, visually decontextualized, factually communicative, elaborately structured, repeatedly revisable, and graphically rich.” These differences are clearly reflected in common asynchronous and text-based conceptualizations of CMC. First, text-based CMC is characterized by the lack of simultaneous feedback. Messages are composed character by character, but in most instances appear complete on the recipients display when they are sent (e.g., by pressing (Enter), clicking “Send”). Consequently, a period is created in which a participant is left anticipating feedback on their last message. Second, as messages in text-based CMC need to be transmitted through a computer network, the time it takes for a message to arrive is invariably longer than that of a face-to-face exchange. This is referred to as lag. Indeed, the very process of composition and typing typically takes more time than speaking (Čech & Condon, 1998).

However, the difference between face-to-face communication and text-based CMC is not straight-forward. As discussed by Crystal (2001), text-based communication on the Internet relies on characteristics from both sides of the speech-writing divide. Typically,

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