Social Influence Online

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INTRODUCTION

Social influence is typically defined as a change in an individual's attitudes, behaviors, or beliefs due to real or imagined external pressure (Cialdini, 2009). By extension, online social influence is any attempt to change attitudes, behaviors or beliefs via the Internet or other technological medium (Guadagno & Cialdini, 2005). As technology advances, and becomes more portable (smart phones, tablets, etc.), so have the avenues for technology-mediated social influence appeals. Influence attempts via communication mediums such as webpages, email, instant messaging, SMS, and social networks, individuals in contemporary society are regularly targeted by a pervasive, portable source of constant consumer influence.

Consider, for example, the number of influence attempts experienced by an individual with a smart phone and a laptop going about his/her daily activities—checking email, browsing websites, visiting social networks, etc. We actually attempted this -- the first author counted approximately 500 influence attempts in less than ten minutes before he gave in to the need to shield himself from the barrage of information overload (Guadagno, Okdie, & Muscanell, 2013). To facilitate targeted advertising, Google and other online titans have implemented both "featured search results," as well as targeted advertising based on individuals' search histories and information stored on their computers, (Rosso & Jansen, 2010). In a relatively short period of time, targeted influence appeals have become commonplace online. Furthermore, emerging evidence suggests these online attempts are quite successful (Kaptein & Eckles, 2012).

In this entry, we discuss the dynamic phenomenon of social influence in online contexts while highlighting how social influence processes have progressed and continue to change in concordance with technological advancements. First, we will review Cialdini's (2009) theoretical framework of social influence. Next, we discuss how interactions via technology differ from face-to-face interactions. In doing so, we explore the magnitude of these various differences by relating these concepts to the most current literature on social influence across various communication mediums and technologies. Finally, we will discuss the implications of our review and offer some suggestions for future research on social influence in today's wired world.

BACKGROUND

Social Influence

As indicated above, social influence appeals target an individual's attitudes or behavior in an effort to change that individual's pre-existing response (Cialdini, 2009). Despite the best of intentions (and skill on the part of the influence practitioner), not all social influence attempts are successful. Influence attempts that are unsuccessful do not influence, thus, for the purposes of this review, *social influence* synonymously referred to as *influence*, only pertains to examples in which an attempt is successful. The *social influence agent* or *practitioner* (i.e., a car salesperson) refers to the person attempting to exert social influence, while the *influence target* (i.e., a potential customer) refers to the person being targeted in an influence attempt.

The social influence literature generally differentiates between two primary, related types of social influence: compliance and persuasion (Cialdini, 2009). Compliance refers to a change in behavior resulting from a direct request. For example, if a student receives an email from his/her university asking them to fill out a questionnaire on the quality of the recreation center and s/he agrees to fill it out, we would say s/he complied with the request. The influence target (student) may not have changed his/her attitude about the university, the center, working out, or agreeing to requests from his/her university as a result of complying with the request. Persuasion involves changing an attitude or belief. A person browsing his/her social networking news feed before a Presidential election may be bombarded by arguments intended to persuade them to change their political opinion. While these messages may or may not be persuasive, they are unlikely to be related to actual voting behavior. Thus, while there are differences between the two forms of social influence; persuasion and compliance are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

The Social Influence Process

Before we review how social influence works in technology-mediated contexts, we will first review how it works in a communication mode with a more extensive history. Research has shown that there are two different routes through which social influence can occur: the central route and the peripheral route (Chaiken, Wood, & Eagly, 1996; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984). These terms refer to the manner in which influence targets to process influence attempts. Central or systematic processing occurs when a target actively focuses on and considers the quality of the persuasive argument or request being made. Targets tend to use the central route when a topic is particularly important to them; they are knowledgeable about the topic, they have the ability to engage in central processing, or when the topic is interesting to them. When centrally processing, the logic of the persuasive message is the most important feature of the influence attempt.

A classic study by Petty and Cacioppo (1984) asked college students to evaluate a proposal to institute comprehensive exams as a new potential graduation requirement; when students thought the policy would apply to them (i.e., it was personally relevant), they engaged in central processing and relative to low quality, were more persuaded by high-quality arguments. In contrast, when the students thought the policy would not apply to them (i.e., it was not personally relevant), they engaged in peripheral processing, and were more persuaded by the argument that listed more reasons for the argument, regardless of the quality of those reasons listed. Peripheral, or heuristic, processing occurs when individuals are not sufficiently motivated, or do not have the cognitive resources to process an influence attempt systematically. Peripheral processing relies on heuristics, which are mental shortcuts, or "rules of thumb," for decision-making. Heuristics are typically activated when the topic of influence is not of great relevance to the influence targets, when they do not have the cognitive resources to process the message, and when the physical cues of the influence agent are particularly salient (Chaiken et al., 1996; Petty & Cacioppo, 1984).

Cialdini (2009) outlined six principles of influence that can be used to influence individuals' options or behavior: reciprocity, social validation, commitment and consistency, liking, authority and scarcity. Many of these techniques have been studied in depth in face-to-face contexts and are being increasingly investigated in technological mediums using a conceptual framework outlined by Guadagno and Cialdini (2005). Before we discuss social influence via these communication mediums, we review how communication mediated by technology is different from everyday FTF interactions.

Computer-Mediated vs. Face-to-Face Interactions

Early work in this area by McKenna and Bargh (2000) proposed that CMC differed from FTF communication in four key ways: increased anonymity, decreased importance of physical appearance, irrelevance of distance, and greater control over the time and pace of the interaction. This seminal paper provided the framework for much of the early work on the role of technology in social influence, including work by the third author. However, with the increasingly widespread availability of technological mediums allowing for real-time video chat (Skype, FaceTime, Google Hangouts, etc.) along with the rise social media, theorists have begun to argue that the differ-

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