Chapter V
Perceived Behaviors of Emergent and Assigned Leaders in Virtual Groups

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ABSTRACT

While considerable research has explored perceptions of groups and members in computer-mediated communication (CMC), and leadership behaviors in face-to-face groups, little research has examined how leadership is identified in CMC groups. Contemporary CMC theories alternatively stress the impact of salient, stereotyped roles on CMC groups' perceptions, or the accretion of exaggerated impressions based on behavioral cues. These perspectives, in turn, coincide with predictions about the predominance of alternative forms of leadership: Assigned versus emergent. This study draws on traditional leadership theories from face-to-face group research and applies them to CMC to examine dynamics related to assigned and emergent leaders in online groups. The results of the study demonstrate that CMC groups may identify more than one leader. When identifying emergent leaders, regardless of whether a leader was assigned or not, group members consider perceived amounts of communication, intelligence, and encouraging and authoritarian behaviors.

INTRODUCTION

Early research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) suggested that, due to the lack of nonverbal cues in the new medium, leadership in online decision-making groups was unlikely to take place. According to Kiesler (1986, p. 48),

without nonverbal tools, a sender cannot easily alter the mood of a message, communicate a sense of individuality, or exercise dominance or charisma. . . . Communicators feel a greater sense of anonymity and detect less individuality in others.

Such a state might affect the ability of appointed leaders to lead. In terms of emergent leaders, the prospects for such were considered unlikely even to occur (Rice, 1984).

As the field has matured, many types of groups have emerged that use CMC, but a mainstay of CMC research has involved task-oriented, decision-making, and problem-solving groups (see, e. g., Hinds & Kiesler, 2002). Moreover, prognoses about stark social dynamics online have given way to alternative frameworks, in which it is becoming recognized that social effects indeed arise in CMC, albeit through alternative cues and frameworks. On the basis of these frameworks, the capacity for individuals to be recognized in certain roles, and/or to distinguish themselves individually online seems most likely, under many circumstances. Indeed, the hyperpersonal model of CMC suggests that, rather than detecting no individuality in online groups, behavioral hints about individual characteristics early in the course of online exchanges become magnified through online social interaction. These processes lead to behavioral confirmation and exaggeration of such perceptions over time (Walther, 1996). Alternatively, from a social identification/deindividuation (SIDE) perspective, if a particular role or power position is ascribed to an online group member, members self-stereotype around those preconceptions and reify them (Postmes & Spears, 2002). These theoretical perspectives, while potent, have not yet been applied to leadership identification in online groups. Moreover, what specific behaviors individuate a CMC member as a leader, or what intragroup stereotypes lead to reification of leadership online is as yet not well known. It is clear that advanced information technologies can help leaders scan, plan, decide, disseminate, and control information (see Avolio, Kahai, & Dodge, 2001). How communication technology facilitates the recognition or emergence of an ad hoc small group leader may be less clear.

In traditional groups literature, while leadership is easy to recognize, it is not always easy to define and predict. An individual who aspires to group leadership may enact specific behaviors that will achieve this position. Behaviors identified with emergent leadership have previously been studied in face-to-face groups (Hollander, 1964; Kickul & Neuman, 2001). Do leaders in CMC groups behave as those in traditional groups? Do behaviors differ if leaders are assigned or if they simply emerge?

This study reports an experiment intended to address the questions of assigned versus emergent leadership identification in CMC groups. In this study, online groups participated in a decision-making discussion, with a leader appointed or with no leader appointed. Comparisons were drawn between perceived behaviors of an assigned leader and those of emergent leaders in online groups. The individuals nominated post hoc by others as the group leaders were perceived to exhibit several behaviors theoretically connected to leadership tendencies in traditional groups research. Surprisingly, assigned leaders did not reflect traditional expectations for group-related behavior and individual attributes as often, and were less likely to be recognized as the groups' leaders, despite their public appointment as such. It appears that the reification of behavioral stereotypes through hyperpersonal CMC allows emergent leaders to develop greater recognition. The background,

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