

Chapter XIX

Electronic Meeting Topic Effects

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ABSTRACT

In the literature of electronic meetings, few studies have investigated the effects of topic-related variables on group processes. This chapter explores the effects of an individual's perception of topics on process gains or process losses using a sample of 110 students in 14 electronic meetings. The results of the study showed that topic characteristics variables, individual knowledge, and individual self-efficacy had a significant influence on the number of relevant comments generated in an electronic meeting.

INTRODUCTION

An **electronic meeting system** (EMS), otherwise known as a **group support system** (GSS), is “an information technology-based environment that supports group meetings, which may be distributed geographically and temporally” (Dennis, George, Jessup, Nunamaker, & Vogel, 1988). In these automated meetings, groups perform negotiation, conflict resolution, systems analysis and design, and other collaborative group activities.

Often during traditional, verbal meetings, some group members might not be able to participate because others are talking, and some might be apprehensive about saying what they think (Nunamaker, Dennis, Valacich, Vogel, & George, 1991), but using an EMS, most of these problems are alleviated. People in **electronic meetings** often participate more, save more time, and are more satisfied than those in traditional meetings (McLeod, 1992).

Many variables can affect the processes and outcomes of electronic meetings, however, including group size, individual typing speed, the idea generation technique used, and the **topic** of the meeting (Aiken & Paolillo, 2000; Aiken & Vanjani, 2002; Benbasat & Lim, 1993). Much EMS research has focused on the impacts of group structure, task characteristics of the technology, and context (Zak, 1994), but the choice of discussion topic can be a major influence on meeting process gains (e.g., more information, synergy, and learning) and process losses (e.g., free riding, evaluation apprehension, information overload, and conformance pressure). Relatively few studies have investigated the effects of topic choice on meeting outcomes (Briggs, Nunamaker, & Sprague, 1998; Pervan, 1998).

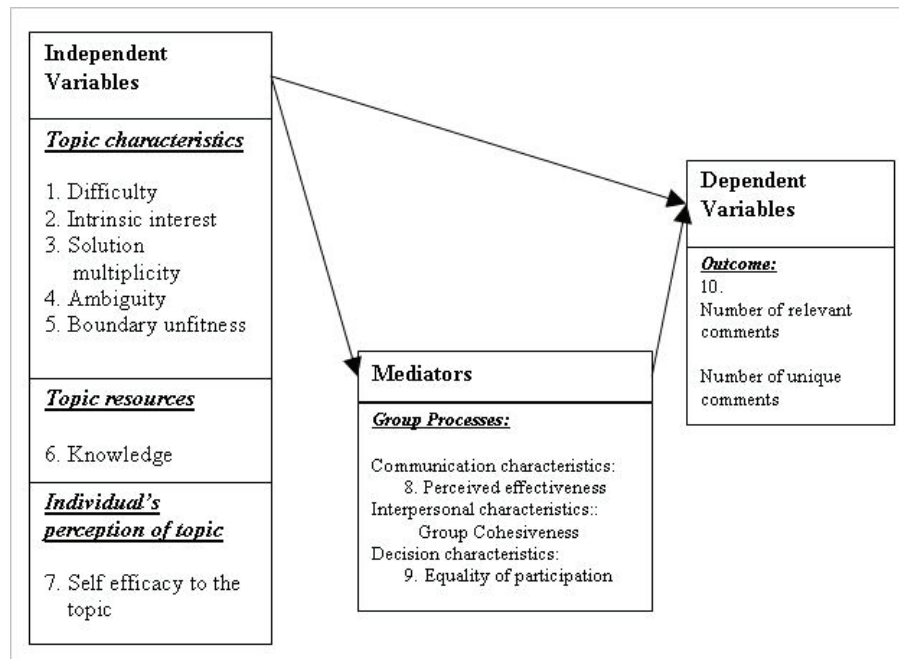
One earlier study (Reinig, Briggs, & Nunamaker, 1997) showed that uninteresting **topics** brought more “**flaming**” (i.e., hostile, obscene, or inappropriate comments). In addition, group member participation can vary with the meeting

topic (Cornelius & Boos, 2003; Pinsonneault, Barki, Gallupe, & Hoppen, 1999). Finally, group members’ knowledge of the topic and judgments of the importance of the problem and their influence over the final decision can affect the number of comments in a discussion (Aiken, 2002; Aiken & Waller, 2000; Tyran, Dennis, Vogel, & Nunamaker, 1992). Thus, inappropriate topic selection has the potential to produce flaming, less participation, and fewer useful comments in a meeting. The purpose of this chapter is to advance our understanding of topic choice further by investigating the relationships of multiple characteristics including ambiguity, difficulty, and self-efficacy on outcomes such as group cohesion, effectiveness, participation, and number of comments generated.

RESEARCH MODEL

The research model (shown in Figure 1) includes many variables not used in prior studies of topic

Figure 1. Research model of topic effects on electronic meetings



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