

Chapter 89

Cyber Conflict and Management

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ABSTRACT

With the diffusion of networked technology in our society, online communication has become an integral part of daily life, and conflict no longer occurs only in face-to-face (FtF) contexts. Many people experience cyber conflict (i.e., a perceived incompatibility of goals among two or more cyber parties over computer-mediated communication (CMC) or online communication) and manages it online. While research in this significant and emerged topic is scattered across contexts and disciplines, this chapter provides preliminary knowledge by discussing the antecedents and outcomes of cyber conflict as well as factors that affect cyber conflict management. The chapter also offers future research directions.

INTRODUCTION

With the diffusion of networked technology in our society, online communication has become an integral part of our daily life. Accordingly, conflict no longer occurs only in face-to-face (FtF) contexts, but also in online contexts. Such cyber conflict is often managed online today. We define cyber conflict as a perceived incompatibility of goals among two or more cyber parties over computer-mediated communication (CMC) or online communication. Cyber conflict management is defined as the process used by parties in dealing with cyber conflict.

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OVERVIEW

Cyber conflict and management have been addressed by two influential theories on CMC since 1970s. Social presence theory (SPT) (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) posits that the lack of social context cues inherent in text-based CMC is perceived less warm, less personal, less sensitive, and less social than face-to-face (FtF) communication. In contrast, FtF can carry a lot of social context cues, which leads to intimate and immediate communication. Thus, a communicator can perceive a high degree of presence of the other person. Likewise, media richness theory (MRT) (Daft & Lengel, 1984, 1986) lists FtF as

the richest in their media hierarchy based on the availability of (a) immediate feedback, (b) verbal and nonverbal cues, (c) natural language, and (d) personal focus. The theory argues any media placed lower than FtF hinder successful management of highly equivocal tasks such as conflict resolution. In short, CMC is not appropriate for conflict management.

There has some evidence to sustain these foundational CMC theories. For example, the lack of social context cues inherent in text-based CMC actually increases task and relationship conflicts among virtual team members (Mortensen & Hinds, 2001) and hampers the group members' performance of conflict management (Martínez-Moreno, González-Navarro, Zornoza, & Ripoll, 2009). Compared to rich media such as FtF and videoconferencing, CMC is less effective for bargaining (Poole, Holmes, & DeSanctis, 1991; Wachter, 1999), which is a highly equivocal task. However, Poole et al., (1991) found in their study on group decision supporting system (GDSS) that it is not the system that determines conflict interaction or outcomes, but it is how group members use the system. Their study also showed some contradictory findings to the above foundational theories that GDSS groups express more positive emotions in writing than FtF groups, which can cool off the conflict and lead to more constructive conflict management. These inconsistent results motivated researchers to examine various factors that affect cyber conflict and management.

Despite the significance of this research topic, there have still been a limited number of studies in this emergent area. In addition, research on cyber conflict and management is scattered across contexts and disciplines. Thus, our goal is to provide preliminary knowledge regarding cyber conflict and management. In the following sections, we will first discuss antecedents and outcomes of cyber conflict. We will then examine factors associated with cyber conflict management. Based on past research, we will also provide prominent research topics for future.

CYBER CONFLICT

As stated above, it is acknowledged that CMC increases task and relational conflicts overall (Krebs, Hobman, & Bordia, 2006; Mortesen & Hinds, 2001; Polzer et al., 2006). In the following subsections, we will introduce some factors associated with cyber conflict.

Antecedents of Cyber Conflict

As SPT and MRT suggested, the lack of social context cues inherent in text-based CMC diminishes status and power differences, yet increases equality between communicators (Aydin, 1989; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Due to this equalization effect, online users are more likely to behave irresponsibly than FtF communication (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986), and they can be quite aggressive towards one another in CMC (Whitty, 2008). Thus, conflict is more likely to occur and intensify when team members became blunt and forthright (Correia, 2007). In addition, cyber conflict often arises when members use their second language (Lee & Panteli, 2009). However, the use of second language may not be always the issue. Gimenez' (2002) study on employees in a multinational organization indicated that conflicts do not result from misunderstanding of their second language but from the two realities operating in the subsidiary and the ethnocentric attitudes held by headquarters.

Further, a delay in an email response aggravates conflict (Correia, 2007). In addition to timing, frequency of communication is also related to cyber conflict. Furumo's (2009) study indicated that member's involvement influences their actual experience on cyber conflict. Inactive team members experience more conflict than active members with lower levels of trust, cohesion, and satisfaction with group tasks.

Similar to FtF contexts, gender also differentiates conflict experience. Wachter (1999) found that female only groups experience more relational

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