Intragroup status and social presence in online fan groups

Stephen Reysen\textsuperscript{a,}\textsuperscript{*}, Jason D. Lloyd\textsuperscript{a}, Iva Katzarska-Miller\textsuperscript{b}, Brett M. Lemker\textsuperscript{c}, Russell L. Foss\textsuperscript{c}

\textsuperscript{a} Texas A&M University – Commerce, TX, USA
\textsuperscript{b} Transylvania University, Hazenrigg Hall 111, 300 North Broadway Lexington, KY 40508, USA
\textsuperscript{c} University of Kansas, Department of Psychology, 1415 Jayhawk Blvd., Lawrence, Kansas 66045, USA

\textbf{Abstract}

Low and high status member posts from online fan message board posts were examined. Low status members, as compared to high status members, were found to use more intimacy and immediacy social presence cues, including: praise for the group, self-disclosure, friendly and positive affective language, first person singular pronouns, and present tense verbs. Low status members were less likely than high status members to use articles, larger words, and discrepancy words. Lastly, low status members were rated as more likeable than high status members. The results suggest that low status members may strategically use social presence cues as a means of ingratiating themselves to the group.

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1. Introduction

Accessing the Internet is a daily activity for 184 million Americans with the average American spending 13 h each week online (\textit{Harris Interactive, 2009}). Popular uses of the Internet include staying up to date with hobbies (\textit{Griffith & Fox, 2007}), consuming media (e.g., videos and music), e-mailing, and social networking (\textit{Jones & Fox, 2009}). The social networking website “Facebook” has over 350 million active users (\textit{Zuckerberg, 2009}). A popular use for “Facebook” users is to keep up with their fan interests (e.g., sports, media, music, hobby) with over 600,000 interest-specific fan pages that “Facebook” has to offer (\textit{Schonefeld, 2009}). The plethora of specific interest websites offers researchers a diverse arena to examine in-group interactions (\textit{Skitka & Sargis, 2005}). Despite the geographical distance between group members (\textit{McKenna & Green, 2002}), fan pages can provide a niche group and support of like-minded individuals to interact, which can result in positive physiological effects (\textit{Shaw & Gant, 2002}).

A theory applicable to interpersonal interactions is social presence theory. Although social presence theory originated over 30 years ago (\textit{Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976}), researchers have yet to converge upon a single definition for social presence (\textit{Biocca, Burgoon, Harms, & Stoner, 2001}).\textsuperscript{1} After a series of interviews with online learners about social presence, \textit{KerhwaLD (2008)} defined social presence as “an individual’s ability to demonstrate his/her state of being in a virtual environment and so signal his/her availability for interpersonal transactions” (p. 94). \textit{Short et al. (1976)} suggested that social presence is related to intimacy (\textit{Argyle & Dean, 1965}) and immediacy (\textit{Mehrabian, 1966}). Intimacy has been defined as an emotional or interpersonal connection, and immediacy has been defined as the perceived psychological distance between two people (\textit{Tu & McIsaac, 2002}). Since non-verbal cues were thought to be crucial to presence, communication through mediums such as computer-mediated communications was assumed to convey less social presence (\textit{Connell, Mendelsohn, Robins, & Canny, 2001}). However, \textit{Rogers and Lea (2005)} show that two classes using only online forums to communicate between each other eventually led to a significant increase in social presence and group identity. Perceived social presence has been found to be positively related to satisfaction within interactions (\textit{Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997}; \textit{Richardson & Swan, 2003}), positive group behavior, and group cohesion (\textit{Kreijns, Kirshner, Jochems, & Van Buuren, 2004}). Research experimentally manipulating the degree of social presence has shown that increased social presence leads to higher levels of trust (\textit{Hassanein & Head, 2005}) and social attractiveness (\textit{Lee & Nass, 2002}).

Intragroup status has been found to affect how group members interact with one another. \textit{Dino, Reysen, and Branscombe (2009)} examined intragroup communications between high and low status members of online message boards. Supporting the communication accommodation theory (\textit{Giles & Coupland, 1991}), group members were found to adjust their communicative style in a complimentary manner to match the status of the other interactant. When communicating with a high status member, low status members used language that was rated as conforming, ingratiating, and affective. When communicating with a low status member, high status group members used language that was rated as more instructive and complex. While social status is subjective in real
world groups (Stewart, 2005) online message boards provide an objective and readily visible measure of status: users’ post count on the message boards. A post count is the number of messages a user contributes to the message board.2

The purpose of the present study is to examine the relationship between intragroup status and the use of social presence cues in online fan message forums. Two independent researchers rated high status and low status messages from various fan message boards for perceived friendliness of the message, degree of praise toward the group, amount of self-disclosure, and likeability of the author. In addition, the messages were analyzed using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count program (LIWC; Pennebaker, Chung, Ireland, Gonzales, & Booth, 2007).

While past research (Dino et al., 2009) shows that intragroup status affects dyadic interactions, no research has examined intragroup status and the utilization of social presence cues when posting a message to an ingroup. In general, high status group members set the group norms (Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1999), hold expectations that low status members will follow those norms (Levine & Moreland, 1991), and convey those norms to low status members (Ren, Kraut, & Kiesler, 2007). Past research has also shown that low status members strategically manage their self-presentation to correspond with the group’s norms when their actions are publically observable by the ingroup (Barreto & Ellemers, 2000; Jetten, Hornsey, & Ardavés-Yorno, 2006; Noel, Wann, & Branscombe, 1995). Because the messages posted by high and low status ingroup members in the present study are publically observable to the ingroup we expect that status differentials in language use will be upheld. In other words, even though the messages are not part of a dyadic interaction with a member of differential status, low and high status members will communicate in a manner that corresponds to their intragroup status.

Low status members have been found to attempt to ingratiate themselves to the group and increase their status within the group via conforming and flattering language (Dino et al., 2009). Baym (1997) suggests that low status members will attempt to ingratiate themselves by individualizing their messages (e.g., self-disclosure, emotional personal stories), and complimenting others. An overlap exists between these variables (e.g., emotional language, self-disclosure) and those described as components of social presence (i.e., intimacy, immediacy). Similarly, the use of social presence cues has been found to be positively associated with perception of trust (Hassanein & Head, 2005) and social attractiveness (Lee & Nass, 2002). Given that low status members strategically display their image when observable by the group, in order to elicit positive evaluations by other ingroup members, we predict they will do so through the heightened use of social presence cues. Furthermore, we expect that low status members will be rated higher on perceived likeability than high status members.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants included fans that posted messages to online forum groups (N = 1136). Two to three groups were selected from the following fan categories: music (e.g., Coldplay, Kiss), sport (e.g., L.A. Lakers, New Jersey Devils), media (e.g., Naruto, Heroes), and hobby (e.g., archery, computers). Each message board was dedicated to the specific fan interest, and the post count (e.g., frequency of postings) for each user was listed. Message boards that covered many fan interests were omitted from analysis because users may have posted heavily in some areas (e.g., Dr. Who) while being novices in others (e.g., Stargate). Thus, the post counts reflected ingroup status of the member for that specific topic. A minimum of 45 communications was collected from both high status members and low status members in each fan group.

2.2. Design and procedure

We operationalized high status members as posting at least 500 messages, while low status members posted fewer than 300 messages, however the majority of low status members had posted less than 100 messages. A user’s post count is a running total of all the messages posted on that message board. Most Internet message boards use post counts to rank members in terms of status or prestige. Each member’s post count is publicly displayed under their username, which accompanies their message. In the present study, we collected messages from high and low status members who started a thread. A thread is a conversation between multiple members regarding a specific topic, and started by a single member.

For inclusion in the present study the first communication of a thread must have met the following criteria: (1) the message must have at least two sentences, (2) posted by either a high or low status member, (3) the message must be originated by the user (e.g., not a copy of a news article), and (4) not posted by the moderator of the group. Each user was only included once in the present study in order to ensure independence of participants. In addition, two independent coders rated the communication (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) on degree of praise of the group (x = .63), disclosure of personal information (x = .80), friendliness (x = .67) and perceived likeability of the user (x = .64). The ratings from the coders were then averaged.

Friendliness was defined as comments that appeared non-confrontational and welcoming. Complimentary statements about the group were counted as praise. If a member posted information such as city of residence or family affairs the user was rated as disclosing personal information. Lastly, the two coders rated the user on perceived likeability. The two independent raters familiarized themselves with the definitions of the constructs and application to the texts prior to rating the communications.

Each text was then analyzed using Pennebaker et al.’s (2007) Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count program (LIWC). The LIWC counts the number of words and organizes them into meaningful categories. One demonstration of the usefulness of the LIWC is the categorization of words such as “I,” “my,” or “me” are totaled and reported as the author’s use of first person singular pronouns.

Based on previous social presence theorizing and research (for a review see Lowenthal (2009)) and research using the LIWC (Pennebaker & King, 1999), we selected variables that relate to the intimacy and immediacy components of social presence. Intimacy variables included praise of the group, self-disclosure, friendliness, affective language, and positive emotional language. Based on research by Mehrabian (1967) and Pennebaker and King (1999) identified five LIWC variables as tapping immediacy: greater use of first person singular pronouns (e.g., I, me, my), discrepancy words (e.g., should, would, could), and use of the present tense (e.g., is, does, hear), and less use of large words (i.e., words containing more than 6-letters) and articles (e.g., a, an, the).

3. Results

A one-way ANOVA (high vs. low status of member) was conducted for each of the dependent variables (e.g., praise of group, disclosure of personal information, LIWC variables). As shown in

2 The use of post counts as an indicator of intragroup status was supported by the fact that low status member were more likely to use first person singular pronouns. A number of studies have shown that low status group members are more likely than high status group members to use first person singular pronouns (e.g., I, me, my) when talking to a high status member (Chung & Pennebaker, 2007; Dino et al., 2009; Newman, Pennebaker, Berry, & Richards, 2003; Pennebaker & Davis, 2006).
Table 1, low status members used social presence cues, both intimacy and immediacy, to a greater extent than high status members with the exception of discrepancy words. Additionally, the coders rated low status members as more likeable than high status members.

4. Discussion

The present study examined social presence cues between high and low status members in online message forums. As hypothesized, status differences were displayed in the use of language, where low status members used more social presence cues, and were rated as more likable than high status members.

The greater use of first person singular pronouns (e.g., I, me, my) by low status members supports previous research regarding language use and intragroup status (Chung & Pennebaker, 2007; Dino et al., 2009; Newman et al., 2003; Pennebaker & Davis, 2006). This finding supports our operational definition of using post counts as indicators of status. Past research has shown that under the surveillance of high status members, low status members strategically portray themselves as good group members (Jetten, Branscombe, Spears, & McKimmie, 2003) via agreeable and ingratiating language (Dino et al., 2009). Indeed, the differences in language use between high and low status members in the present study support the notion that status differentials were upheld in the forums examined without the presence of a dyadic conversation with a high status member. This finding supports past research suggesting that low status members strategically manage their self-image when their actions are observable to the ingroup (Barreto & Elle, 2009; Barreto & Elle, 2009; Jetten et al., 2006; Noel et al., 1995). The use of social presence cues by low status members suggests that providing these cues may be a method of ingratiation to the group.

Following social presence theory (Short et al., 1976), we found that low status group members used more intimacy (emotional and interpersonal connection) and immediacy (close psychological distance) cues than high status members. Low status members were found to use more intimacy indicators of social presence derived from past theorizing and research (Lowenthal, 2009). Low status members’ messages were rated as more complimenting (e.g., praising the group), personal (e.g., disclosure of personal information), and friendly than high status members’ messages. Indeed, low status member language use was more affective and used more positive emotion words than high status members’ messages. This use of intimacy cues projects a warm and open self-image.

Low status members were also found to use more immediacy indicators as conceptualized by Mehrabian (1966) and operationalized by Pennebaker and King (1999) than high status members. Low status members’ frequency of first person singular pronouns (e.g., I, me, my) and present tense words (e.g., is, does, hear) was greater than high status members. Additionally, low status members used less large words (6-letters or greater) and articles (e.g., a, an, the) than high status members. However, the use of discrepancy words (e.g., should, would, could) was in the unexpected direction. The use of discrepancy words has been suggested to indicate a divergence from reality (Cohn, Mehil, & Pennebaker, 2004). The results advocate that high status members are using more abstract or removed language. Greater use of first person singular pronouns indicates directness in expression, use of present tense verbs show that the message implies a shared temporal space with readers, less use of articles implies a greater shared knowledge of the object that is being discussed, and shorter letters indicates a more informal tone (Hoyt & Yeater, 2009). Together these verbal markers suggest that low status members are presenting a more immediate psychological distance in their messages than high status members.

Cues of social presence indicate to others in the online environment that a person is present, and an actual human being. The use of intimacy cues presents the self as a warm and real human, and immediacy cues provide less psychological distance with the reader. Social presence cues may serve the dual purpose of gaining the attention of high status members and demonstrate that the user is a real person. Taken together the results suggest that these social presence cues may serve as a method to conform to the group by using norm appropriate low status language, and ingratiate oneself into the group. Indeed, the raters found low status members to be more likeable than high status members. Just as social presence cues can engender trust (Hassanein & Head, 2005) and social attractiveness (Lee & Nass, 2002), low status members may be using social presence cues strategically to gain acceptance from the group.

The present findings hold implications for organizational behavior and impression management. Social presence cues appear to be associated with a desire to ingratiate oneself. Under or overuse of social presence cues may affect others’ impressions of the originator of the communication depending on the audience. As previously stated, high status members expect lower status members to adhere to the group’s norms (Levine & Moreland, 1991). If, for example, a low status member is not accommodating (Giles & Coupland, 1991) high status members with respect to the use of the language in their messages, then this may be viewed as breaking the group’s norms. On the other hand, over-accommodation, or a greater use of social presence cues, may backfire as the employee may be viewed as obsequious (Jones, 1990).

One limitation of the present study is that our operationalized definition of post counts as a marker of status may be inaccurate.
Other indicators that are not typically displayed within online message boards (e.g., domain experience, individual differences) may more accurately provide cues as to one’s status. However, given that group rules often explicitly define post count as an indicator of status, and previous research concerning the relationship between intragroup status and the use of first person singular pronouns (Chung & Pennebaker, 2007) we feel post counts provide an objective means for defining status. A second limitation of the present study is the correlational nature of the data. Future researchers may experimentally manipulate status in a laboratory setting. However, the present study provides real world messages from a natural setting.

The present study found significant difference between group members of differing intragroup status. Low status group members were more likely to use social presence cues, presumably as a means of ingratiating themselves into the group. Low status members also used more first person singular pronouns supporting previous research regarding intragroup status and use of first person singular pronouns. The present study furthers our understanding of the effect of status and display of social presence cues as a means of ingratiating. Individuals may use social presence cues strategically to ingratiate themselves into the group. Further research is warranted concerning the display of social presence cues and their effects on impression formation.

References


