

Abstract

The rapid diffusion and use of the Internet in the past few decades have transformed the ways people communicate with each other. Nowadays, not only can we communicate in person or by phone, we can also use a wide variety of Internet-based communications technologies, such as e-mail, instant messaging, and online bulletin boards. In response, scholars have developed numerous theories to explain the psychological impact of Internet communication technologies on behavior.

This study explores the impact of face-to-face and e-mail communication in the process of social capital mobilization among church-affiliated small groups in Hong Kong. The concept of social capital, including its antecedents and outcomes, has been given much attention in the sociological literature. However, there has been a paucity of studies exploring how social capital is actually mobilized. Adopting perspectives and assumptions from the social identity approach, this study aims to demonstrate that members of faith-based small groups asked to donate money for the church are more likely to respond affirmatively to requests through e-mail than face-to-face. This is because a physically-isolating medium minimizes group members' cognitive perceptions of interpersonal differences within groups while group attributes become more psychologically salient. Therefore, such individuals are more susceptible to influence attempts.

Three factors were proposed that could affect the process: group identification, salience of social identity, and communication channel. The research design consisted of a survey and a field experiment that was conducted using a 2 x 2 factorial design crossing communication channel (email .v. face to face) with salience of social identity (emphasized .v. not emphasized). Twenty-nine small groups affiliated to the same

church (483 participants) in Hong Kong were randomly placed in one of the four experimental conditions.

Logistic regression analyses demonstrated significant positive effects for group identification and the salience of social identity on an affirmative response to the call for action. While communication channel had no significant main effect on the response it played an important moderating role for the other variables. Consistent with the previous literature, those in the e-mail/salience of social identity emphasized conditions were most likely among the experimental conditions to respond affirmatively. Moreover, a significant interaction was present between communication channel and group identification, such that the e-mail condition accentuated the likelihood of an affirmative response for those members who were closely identified psychologically to their small groups. Face-to-face influence attempts were more effective for those with low levels of group identification to their groups.

Several conclusions and contributions were drawn from this study. First, far from being a cold, impersonal medium unsuited for persuasive communication as predicted by most CMC theories, e-mail communication can, in certain situations and contexts, be effective for influencing those members who already have a strong sense of psychological closeness to their groups. Second, this study provides further support for the theoretical assumptions of the social identity approach and is among the first studies to test the constructs in a real life field sample. Third, it has practical implications for civic, non-profit and advocacy groups in disseminating information among their members for the purpose of instigating collective action. Limitations of the study and directions for future research were discussed.