

Want to win friends and influence people? Use Facebook and IM, studies suggest

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Jeffrey Hancock, associate professor of communication, is co-author of a study about how people use information posted on Facebook profiles to their personal advantage. Lindsay France/University Photography

(PhysOrg.com) -- It's an age-old question: How do you get a new acquaintance to like you? Jeff Hancock, associate professor of communication, says that he and his research team have found in two studies that what works in face-to-face communication can also work in the cyber world.

In one study, some participants had access to an unknown partner's Facebook profile and some did not; both groups were asked to get their partners to like them in a short instant-message conversation. Those with Facebook access used that information -- such as the partner's interests

or favorite music -- to ask questions to which they already knew the answers. Or they mentioned the information to make themselves seem similar to the partner.

Did it work? "Very much so," Hancock said, noting that the participants who had access to the Facebook profiles were more successful. "The more they used the questions and mentions, the more the other person liked them." And in most cases -- more than 97 percent -- the partner failed to detect that their new friend seemed to know an awful lot about them.

Hancock attributes the technique's efficacy to homophily -- the social science theory summed up in the saying "birds of a feather flock together."

"We like people we're more similar to," Hancock said. "So by using these frames, the participants made themselves seem more similar to the new person."

The article, "I Know Something You Don't: The Use of Asymmetric Personal Information for Interpersonal Advantage," was published in the Proceedings of the 2008 Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW). Hancock presented the paper -- as well as one on text communication -- at the CSCW's annual conference Nov. 8-12 in San Diego. Both papers were nominated for Best Paper, awards given to only 1 percent of the studies submitted.

In the second study, which examined understanding e-mail, text messaging and similar text-only communication, Hancock found that people who send instant messages not only unconsciously reveal their mood in their messages, but they also pass that mood onto their texting partner.

"To the best of our knowledge, it's the first time that emotional contagion has been demonstrated in a text-only communication," Hancock said. Emotional contagion is a well-studied phenomenon in which a person or group influences the emotions or behavior of another person or group.

Texters in a sad, frustrated mood unconsciously said less in their messages, sent fewer messages and used more words related to sadness and anxiety, according to the article, titled "I'm Sad You're Sad: Emotional Contagion in Computer-Mediated Contagion."

"It's a common assumption that emotions can only be communicated when people are face-to-face, through such nonverbal cues as gestures and facial expression," Hancock said. "We found that's not true."

The two studies demonstrate that basic human psychological processes operate even in relatively new communication environments involving text messages and social networking Web sites.

"We've been interacting face-to-face with words for at least 60,000 years," Hancock said. "But we've been interacting via computer for 20 years, or 10 years for most of us. Yet these old principles and processes still hold up. We're very adaptive."

Hancock points out that his co-authors on the papers are four information science undergraduates who have since graduated and Ph.D. candidate Catalina Toma. "It's completely consistent with Cornell's vision to become the top research institution for undergraduate education."

Provided by Cornell University

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