

Subtle visual cues nudge users to reveal more in online forum

November 6 2018

Pictures may be worth a thousand words, but icons may be even more powerful in nudging people to disclose more information online, according to an interdisciplinary team of Penn State researchers.

In a study, researchers found that people using an online sexual health forum featuring computer graphics, called icons, that implied a sense of crowd size and connectivity, revealed more sensitive [information](#) than visitors to a site without those visual cues, said S. Shyam Sundar, James P. Jimirro Professor of Media Effects and co-director of the Media Effects Research Laboratory. Pictures meant to convey a sense of community on the web forum did not significantly affect the user's disclosure, he added.

The subtle power of these cues could both help people build stronger online communities, as well as possibly lure them into revealing personal information, according to the researchers.

"This shows that little changes can mean a lot and it could help sites, such as online health forums, stay alive and help support their users," said Sundar. "If people don't reveal information in an online forum, the vitality of that forum decreases because not enough people are sharing details that make the forum worthwhile. On the other hand, if spam sites use these cues, they may be able to get more people to reveal sensitive information about their personal life, and that would be a bad thing."

The researchers used a dynamic graphic representation of people

standing in a crowd to convey crowd size. The size of the crowd suggested by the icon changed randomly for participants so that they were not merely jumping on the bandwagon of a

large crowd, according to the researchers. The connectivity icon showed a network map with one circle labeled "You" to suggest the participant's place in the network. This icon also changed randomly.

The researchers, who report their findings today (November 6) at the Association for Computing Machinery's annual Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing in Jersey City, NJ, tested the icons on a sexual health forum because while people tend to be reluctant to share information about their sexual behavior, disclosure is important to help them access health information, as well as help them make better health decisions.

"In a marginalized—or stigmatized—group, it's often hard to get people to talk or to reveal [personal information](#). However, we found that once the users got the sense that they were in the same boat as others, or that they were connected to others in the same network, they were more willing to disclose their private information and revisit the forum." said Andrew Gambino, doctoral student of mass communication, Penn State. "What we've found is a very basic design solution to increase participation in this group. This might be a way for small groups, particularly ones that deal with stigmatized or marginalized topics, to survive."

The cues of both the crowd and connectivity icons may be stronger for people who have a desire to be part of an effort to build a community, according to the researchers. For instance, users of the site who indicated they were willing to share information to build a community were also more likely to disclose more highly [sensitive information](#) when they saw the crowd and connectivity icons.

A website with pictures that suggested a sense of community—for example, group pictures, or people holding hands—did not significantly affect the user's sense of community or disclosure behavior.

"Sense of community may be a relatively stable attribute of [forum](#) participants, which would make it difficult to influence with a short-term intervention," said Mary Beth Rosson, professor and associate dean of information sciences and technology, and a collaborator on the project.

The researchers recruited 218 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk, an online task platform. The volunteers were randomly assigned to one of six different websites that were designed to reflect a site with a crowd cue or one without the crowd cue, a site with a connectivity cue or no connectivity cue, or a site that reflected the community framing or no framing.

Participants were asked to join a [site](#) described as "an online community open to anyone interested in exploring their sexuality and learning about sexual health and well-being." The participants were then asked to share information about their sexual behaviors and health. They were also told that information would be used to connect them to similar people in the community.

Participants were given the option to not disclose information in every question, as well as the option to leave the website at any time.

"Offering many small opportunities to disclose or not disclose was intended to approximate the ubiquitous requests for sharing that users get from Web and smartphone apps in their everyday lives," said Rosson.

In the future, the [researchers](#) may see if these cues influence disclosure on other types of online media, such as social media sites.

"We may see similar effects in social media, for example," said Gambino. "If anything, we intentionally chose a very difficult subject, a difficult context, and found [people](#) sharing more information due to these simple cues and mindsets."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Subtle visual cues nudge users to reveal more in online forum (2018, November 6)
retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-11-subtle-visual-cues-nudge-users.html>

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