

Online misunderstandings arise from an excess of clarity

June 13 2022



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An increasing proportion of our everyday conversations take place in online environments, but these conversations do not always end well when they involve controversial topics. It is often thought that this is because people express themselves less clearly or more ambiguously online due to missing nonverbal cues, or that people become disinhibited online because they feel like they are anonymous.

But research by Carla Roos of the Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences now shows that online misunderstandings are actually caused by too much clarity, and that this can cause people who are not actually disinhibited to come across that way to others.

Carla Roos and her team studied groups of three students who did not know each other. They discussed politically controversial statements via textual chat (anonymously), [video chat](#) (non-anonymously), and verbally.

This research showed that "woolliness" and ambiguity contribute to bridging differences of opinion, making discussions less likely to get out of hand. This is because the person who is speaking shows that he or she is not sure either and is open to the opinions of others. In verbal conversations, [conversation](#) partners do this with ambiguous expressions such as "maybe," "or so," "I think." In textual online conversations, however, people do this much less, which can cause the speaker to come across as if he/she is only concerned with broadcasting their own [opinion](#) and not concerned with how this comes across to interlocutors.

Signals of responsiveness

In addition to [ambiguity](#), it also appears to be important to show that the communication has been received and understood. In oral conversations, interlocutors do this, for example, with head nods and short responses of the voice such as "hmm" or "yes." However, these signals of responsiveness are also lacking online, which means that people feel

ignored more quickly and experience their mutual relationship as more negative.

Roos: "Our research shows that online misunderstandings and escalation are not due to changes in individual psychology, such as disinhibition or a lack of motivation to keep the relationship going, but to the behavioral limitations of the medium. Our research shows the importance of understanding exactly what happens within online and verbal conversations to explain the differences between these media: How do conversation partners communicate and how does that affect their [relationship](#)?"

Provided by Tilburg University

Citation: Online misunderstandings arise from an excess of clarity (2022, June 13) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-06-online-excess-clarity.html>

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