

Multicommunicating and Attributions: Effects on the Analyst-User Relationship

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A healthy working relationship between IS analysts who develop an organization's information systems and the users of these systems is an essential ingredient for system success. Further, a key factor that can influence this relationship is how analysts communicate with users. Yet, how analysts communicate is being changed by the increasing prevalence of communication technologies such as mobile email- and text-enabled devices. One work practice which has emerged is multicommunicating (MC), or being engaged in multiple overlapping conversations at the same time (Reinsch et al. 2008), such as text messaging while in a face-to-face meeting, emailing while on the telephone, or engaging in multiple instant messaging conversations. These emerging practices are often undertaken to increase productivity or availability, but can also have unintended consequences such as increased perceptions of incivility. While an analyst may pull out a mobile device and respond to text messages during a meeting with a user in order to enhance their own productivity and be more available to those needing to get in touch with them, this behavior may negatively impact the user-analyst relationship. The present studies examine the extent to which analyst MC behaviors during meetings with users influence users' perceptions of analyst incivility.

Study 1: Using a 2X2 factorial experiment with video vignettes depicting meetings between an analyst and a user, survey data was collected from 80 participants. The results indicate that when the analyst engaged in MC, the study participants perceived significantly higher levels of analyst incivility (ANOVA: $F = 14.5, p < .001$).

Study 2: We hypothesize that attribution theory can be used to explain this result. Whether or not IS analyst MC increases perceptions of incivility depends on the various attributions that the user makes about the IS analyst's behavior. If the user attributes the behavior to external or situational factors – such as the IS analyst's demanding job – perceptions of incivility should not arise. If the user attributes the behavior to internal or dispositional factors they will believe that the behavior is a sign of the IS analyst's personality and judge that the IS analyst is a rude person. Thus, dispositional attributions made by the user should be associated with increased perceptions of analyst incivility and situational attributions should be associated with no increase.

Social cognitive neuroscience suggests that making attributions about others' behavior involves two systems: the x-system responsible for automatic processing and the c-system responsible for controlled processing (Lieberman et al. 2002). When making an attribution,

“people assume that an actor's behavior corresponds to his or her disposition unless it can be accounted for by some aspect of the situational context” (Lieberman et al. 2002, p. 200). Thus, dispositional attributions are often associated with the automatic processes of the X-system. On the other hand, the C-system “is typically invoked when the X-system encounters problems it cannot solve” (p. 219, Lieberman et al. 2002) and thus will be activated for situational attributions because more careful thought and reasoning are needed. Recent research has supported this distinction: internal attributions involve activations along the right temporoparietal junction (TPJ) and external attributions involve activations in a left lateralized parietofrontal network (Seidel et al. 2010). We thus hypothesize that dispositional/internal attributions – as indicated by activity in the X-system – will be associated with increased perceptions of incivility while situational/external attributions – as indicated by activity in the C-system – will not. This hypothesis can provide an interesting approach to testing whether attribution theory provides a plausible explanation of the MC-incivility link.

An fMRI study is proposed to test our hypotheses. Functional magnetic resonance imaging examines neural activity by measuring blood oxygen levels (Riedl et al. 2010) and has been used to study attributions (Seidel et al. 2010). During an fMRI session, study participants will watch one of two video vignettes from Study 1 (MC vs. MC with compensating situational factors such as high status of the analyst). Following the fMRI session, participants will complete survey questions related to the analyst's level of incivility. Survey responses will be compared to the fMRI results (X- versus C-system activation in the seconds following each MC occurrence) to see if dispositional versus situational attributions are indeed the theoretical explanation behind differences in perceived incivility found in Study 1.

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