Resolving Social Conflicts and Improving Intergroup
Relations in the Digital Age:
The Effects of Contact Contents and Channels

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Abstract

Drawing upon the intergroup contact hypothesis, this study investigates the optimal contact contents and channels for managing intergroup conflicts and improving intergroup relations. In particular, it examines how confrontation and smoothing as communication contents differently influence the evaluations of rival groups. Likewise, it examines how computer-mediated communication (CMC) channels and face-to-face (FtF) interactions might affect individuals in forming impressions and changing attitudes toward the opposing outgroup. Furthermore, this study examines how intergroup anxiety and group membership salience influence and intervene intergroup encounters.

The data were collected by two approaches in the context of conflicts between Hong Kong people and mainland Chinese in Hong Kong. First, an experiment was carried out using three channels (text-based CMC, video-based CMC, and FtF interaction) and two kinds of content (confrontation and smoothing), with a control group that had no contact. A total of 175 participants engaged in paired interactions with confederates. Second, a content analysis was conducted to analyze the dialogues in the contact process, with a focus on the information exchange, anxiety-reduction strategies, group membership salience, and cross-group friendship making. The conversations were transcribed by two coders. The intercoder reliability was satisfactory.

The findings from the experiment revealed intergroup contact could help generate positive attitudes toward the outgroup as a whole in CMC scenarios. However, FtF interaction was more effective than CMC channels because meeting face to face facilitated more positive evaluations of the interacting partner, and those benign attitudes could be generalized to a greater level of trust toward the other group. The potential for cross-group friendship, which resulted
from positive attitudes toward a particular interacting partner, significantly mediated the relationship between contact channels and outgroup attitudes. Despite the richness and availability of cues, video-based CMC was not a wise choice for initial intergroup encounters. Moreover, smoothing contents were slightly more beneficial than confrontational contents in improving intergroup relations. Nevertheless, confrontation was found to be effective when intergroup anxiety was attenuated during intergroup discussions.

The content analysis showed that there were more information exchange and personal disclosure among participants to make cross-group friends in the conditions of FtF interaction and video-based CMC than that of text-based CMC. In terms of contact content, more information was shared in the confrontational than smoothing interactions. Participants also revealed more awareness toward group membership in the confrontational setting than in smoothing communication.

Overall, this study extends the contact hypothesis by elaborating the effects of contents and channels in the process of intergroup interactions. It also bridges intergroup communication, conflict resolution, and CMC theories to explore better solutions for improved relations between rival groups in the digital age. This study offers practical suggestions for resolving social conflicts, attenuating intergroup negative attitudes, and promoting trust between groups in conflict.

**Keywords:** contact hypothesis, intergroup contact, conflict resolution, CMC, China, Hong Kong