

Peer Influence in the 21st Century

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Itzhak Yanovitzky, SC&I - Communication

TH 09:50A-12:50P

Honors College Seminar Room N106

College Ave Campus

Will Count Towards SC&I - Communication Major

Peers are an important source of influence on our behavior, both positive and negative. While you may be already familiar with the concept of peer pressure, it is important to recognize other ways – conscious and unconscious, direct and indirect – in which peers influence our opinions and behavior. The primary interest of this course is in uncovering the processes and mechanisms (in other words, the “how”) of peer influence in communication technology-mediated environments such as the Internet and social media. With guidance from the scientific literature on this topic, we will first attempt to understand why peers occupy such a central role in our lives and what factors and circumstances make them more or less important to us. We will next engage the perspective of different theories (biological, economic, social, and psychological) to explain how and when peers influence us and what makes us susceptible to peer influence across a wide range of behavioral domains (politics, health, consumer behavior, pro- and anti-social behavior, etc.). We will use the insights we generate to hypothesize about the ways in which our interactions (both passive and active) with peers over web and mobile communication platforms, but also face-to-face, influence our perceptions, beliefs, decisions, and behavior. We will test our hypotheses by means of a self-study, keeping track of the interactions we have with our peers throughout the course and then exploring the data for systematic patterns of influence – that from peers on our thoughts and behaviors but also from us on our peers. The knowledge and insights you acquire will afford you greater control over your own susceptibility to influence from peers as well as suggest some strategies you can use to influence peers and/or mobilize the power of peer groups to advance prosocial causes.

ITZHAK YANOVITZKY (Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania) is an Associate Professor at the School of Communication and Information. He is an expert in the areas of strategic communication (persuasion, social marketing, and campaigns), behavior change, and program evaluation. Much of Professor Yanovitzky’s research is focused on developing strategies and tools to support individuals and communities that must cope with health-related problems. He has over 20 years of experience working with national and international organizations in the public health sector to develop, promote, and evaluate strategic communication programs that promote social or individual change.