

How do you judge someone's arguments? Do you look at the speaker's character, types of words they use, or the internal structure of argumentation? Does it matter if you like that person? Do you tend to agree with others more easily when you are in a good mood? Does your communication differ between face-to-face and online discussions? Those are the questions we attempt to answer in the PersOn project. We plan to study not only the structure of arguments, but also the personal context of online persuasion.

We will use computational tools and psychological experiments to test our hypotheses regarding the role of pragmatic (dialogical, interactive) factors influencing the persuasion (understood here as a perceived strength of an argument). With the use of artificial intelligence we will measure the emotions, linguistic styles and interaction patterns of persuaders and persuadees. It will allow us to investigate the influence of those factors on the persuasiveness of the message on the one hand, and the vulnerability to persuasion on the other hand. We will conduct our analyses on material from real discussions in social media — for example, from X (prev. Twitter) and Reddit. We will investigate communication between individual users as well as between and inside user communities. We will also try to simulate in an artificial environment the dynamics of online persuasion following the results of analysis of social media. This method called agent-based modelling reminds traditional psychological experiments or observations of social behaviours, for example. One difference is the environment — instead of a real world, we run the simulation in a computer (artificial) environment, where each agent is independent but programmed to behave in a certain way. Those agents can also communicate with each other. This method allows the researcher full control of the environment as well as transparency in the mechanism of emerging structures. Finally, in our psychological experiments we plan to gather a group of participants with a full spectrum of attitudes and let them debate on specific topics such as gun control or climate change, with the goal of convincing the other party to their viewpoint. We plan to conduct two versions of this study — online and face-to-face settings and compare the mechanisms of persuasion between those two conditions.

Our project proposes a new model of pragmatics, suitable for the modern form of communication. We believe that traditional concepts and theories used in studying offline persuasion are insufficient for the specifics of the digital world. Therefore, we plan to uncover the factors that differentiate face-to-face and online persuasive argumentation.