UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

COURSE SYLLABUS

Psychology of Social Influences

2627-2-F5112P014

Learning area

2: Social psychology, economic psychology and decision-making

Learning objectives

Knowledge and understanding

By the end of the course, students will have acquired advanced knowledge of the main theoretical models and empirical findings related to the psychology of social influence. In particular, they will know:

- the theoretical and methodological foundations of the study of social influence;
- the main forms of social influence, including normative and informational influence, conformity, majority and minority influence, persuasion, and obedience to authority;
- the principles of persuasion in Robert Cialdini's perspective;
- the antecedents, mechanisms, and consequences of social influence processes;
- strategies for resisting social influence;
- some applied domains of social influence, with reference to health, well-being, marketing, social change, groups, organizations, and digital environments;
- social influence processes in the digital age and in interactions with human and non-human agents.

Applying knowledge and understanding

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- recognize and distinguish different forms of social influence;
- critically analyze situations in which opinions, attitudes, and behaviors are shaped by social influence

processes;
- apply theoretical models of social influence to concrete cases, organizational contexts, persuasion campaigns, digital phenomena, and processes of social change;
- deconstruct persuasive strategies used in messages, communicative contexts, and social practices;
- design and evaluate simple interventions or project ideas based on the principles of persuasion;
- identify strategies to promote resistance to unwanted or problematic forms of social influence.

Making judgements

The course aims to promote students' ability to critically evaluate forms of social influence, their determinants, and the ways in which they operate in different contexts, including digital ones. This ability will be developed through lectures, guided discussions, case analyses, discussion of multimedia materials, critical examination of the scientific literature, and optional group-based practical activities.

By the end of the course, students should be able to formulate reasoned judgements on social influence processes, distinguishing between description of phenomena, theoretical interpretation, and empirical evidence. They should also be able to autonomously evaluate how different influence strategies can shape opinions, attitudes, and behaviors in individual, collective, organizational, and digital contexts.

Communication skills

The course aims to foster students' ability to communicate clearly, effectively, and rigorously about contents, data, and findings related to social influence processes. Through classroom discussions, case analyses, interactive activities, and optional group work, students will be encouraged to use the specific vocabulary of the discipline, argue their analyses, and present connections between theoretical models, empirical evidence, and social phenomena.

Optional practical activities, when carried out, will also contribute to the development of students' ability to present a project idea or a scientific article in a structured way, including through the use of slides, multimedia materials, and classroom discussion.

Learning skills

The course provides theoretical, methodological, and applied tools that are useful for continuing the study of social influence processes independently beyond the course. To this end, students will be guided in the use of the reference texts, the teaching materials available on the e-learning platform, the scientific articles indicated by the instructor, and the multimedia materials included in the program.

By the end of the course, students should be able to autonomously update and expand their knowledge of models and practices of social influence, further explore the relevant scientific literature, and apply the concepts learned to the critical analysis of complex and changing social phenomena.

Contents

The course examines the main processes of social influence, with attention to both the theoretical foundations of the field and contemporary applications. The course addresses different forms of social influence, including normative and informational influence, conformity, majority and minority influence, persuasion, and obedience to authority.

A central part of the course is devoted to Robert Cialdini's perspective and to the main principles of persuasion. The course also addresses antecedents, applied domains, and forms of resistance to social influence, with reference to contexts such as health, well-being, marketing, social change, groups, organizations, and digital

environments.

The course also includes the analysis of multimedia materials and, for students who choose to participate, optional group-based practical activities aimed at applying theoretical concepts and critically engaging with the scientific literature.

Detailed program

PART ONE: FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL INFLUENCE

- The main theoretical and methodological models in the psychology of social influence
- The different forms of social influence
- Direct and indirect forms of social influence
- Informational influence and normative influence
- Majority influence and minority influence
- Conformity and obedience to authority

PART TWO: PERSUASION AND CIALDINI'S PRINCIPLES

- Persuasion as a form of social influence
- Robert Cialdini's approach
- The main principles of persuasion
- Applications of persuasive strategies to cases, messages, and social contexts
- Ethical and problematic uses of persuasive strategies

PART THREE: ADVANCED TOPICS, APPLICATIONS, AND RESISTANCE TO SOCIAL INFLUENCE

- The antecedents of social influence, with particular attention to uncertainty, isolation, and social exclusion
- Social influence, health, and well-being
- Social influence and marketing
- Social influence in groups and organizations
- Social influence and social change
- Social influence in the digital age
- Interactions with human and non-human agents as sources of social influence
- Resisting social influence: individual and collective resistance strategies

PART FOUR: MULTIMEDIA MATERIALS AND CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL INFLUENCE PROCESSES

- Analysis of the multimedia materials indicated in the reference texts
- Connections between multimedia materials, theoretical models, and social influence processes
- Critical analysis of complex social phenomena through the lens of social influence

The exam program includes the texts and materials indicated in the "Textbooks and Reading Materials" section.

Prerequisites

No specific disciplinary prerequisites are required. Basic knowledge of the foundations of social psychology may facilitate engagement with the course, but it is not necessary in order to attend the lectures and take the exam.

In order to make the course accessible also to students from different educational backgrounds, the first lectures will be devoted to reviewing the fundamental concepts of the discipline that are relevant to the study of social influence.

Teaching methods

The course consists of 56 hours in total, corresponding to 8 ECTS credits. Teaching activities are held in person. Any changes due to organizational needs or contingent circumstances will be communicated through the course e-learning page.

Teaching is organized as follows:

- 42 hours of lecture-based teaching, delivered in person, devoted to the presentation of the main concepts, theoretical models, empirical findings, and research methods related to the psychology of social influence.
- 14 hours of interactive teaching, delivered in person, devoted to guided discussions, case analyses, discussion of multimedia materials, application of theoretical concepts to concrete social situations, and optional group-based practical activities.

During the course, optional group-based practical activities will be proposed, according to procedures and a schedule communicated through the course e-learning page. The activities will be organized into two main phases. The first phase will be devoted to the development of a project idea based on persuasion strategies in Robert Cialdini's perspective. The second phase will be devoted to the analysis and critical presentation of a scientific article assigned by the instructor. The activities will take place in person, under the instructor's supervision, and will aim to foster the application of theoretical concepts, critical analysis skills, and communication skills.

Participation in the practical activities is optional and does not replace the final written exam. The practical activities constitute an integrative way to further explore and apply the course contents.

Whenever possible, teaching materials, including lecture slides and additional support materials, will be made available on the course e-learning page. These materials support individual study but do not replace the reference texts and exam materials indicated in the syllabus. The course is taught in Italian.

Assessment methods

The final assessment takes place through a written exam only. No compulsory mid-term exams are planned.

The written exam covers the entire exam program indicated in the "Textbooks and Reading Materials" section and consists of 4 open-ended questions. The questions are designed to assess the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, the ability to apply it to the analysis of social phenomena, argumentation skills, synthesis, the ability to create connections across the different areas of the course, and the critical reading of the phenomena presented.

The 4 open-ended questions will cover the main areas of the program:

- foundations of social influence;
- persuasion and Cialdini's principles;
- advanced topics, applications, and resistance to social influence;
- multimedia materials and critical connections with the theoretical contents of the course.

Each question will be assessed from 0 to 8 points. The maximum score for the written exam is 32 points. The final

grade is expressed out of 30; scores of 31 or 32 will be converted into 30 with honours.

Answers will be assessed according to the following criteria: correctness and completeness of the contents, mastery of theoretical concepts, ability to apply models of social influence to the analysis of cases and phenomena, clarity of exposition, synthesis, argumentation skills, and quality of the connections among the different parts of the program.

For each open-ended question, the assessment will follow this grading rubric:

- 0 points: absent answer, off-topic answer, or seriously incorrect answer.
- 1-2 points: very incomplete answer, mainly descriptive or with references that are not relevant to the course contents.
- 3-4 points: partial answer, with some correct elements but incomplete knowledge, weak connections, or limited argumentation.
- 5 points: sufficient answer, correct in its essential points and relevant to the question, but not fully developed.
- 6 points: good answer, clear, correct, and with relevant connections among concepts, materials, and phenomena.
- 7 points: very good answer, well-structured, critically grounded, and able to appropriately integrate different course contents.
- 8 points: excellent answer, complete, well-argued, theoretically solid, with original connections and mature use of the concepts.

Participation in the optional practical activities proposed during the course may contribute to the final grade up to a maximum of 3 points, based on the quality of the work carried out, the ability to apply theoretical concepts, the clarity of the presentation, and the contribution to group work. This contribution will be considered only if the written exam is passed and may integrate the final grade up to the maximum of 30 with honours.

The practical activities are optional and constitute an integrative way to further explore and apply the course contents. The final written exam covers the exam program indicated in the reference texts and is required for all students.

Textbooks and Reading Materials

Andrighetto, L., & Riva, P. (a cura di). (2026). *Psicologia sociale. Fondamenti teorici ed empirici* (2ª ed.). Bologna: il Mulino. ISBN 978-88-15-39712-6. Chapters 1, 2, 4, 13, and 14.

Cialdini, R. B. (2010). *Le armi della persuasione*. Florence: Giunti. Editions published by the publisher from 2010 to 2021 are valid for the exam program.

The following chapters/articles:

1. Hales, A. H., Ren, D., & Williams, K. D. (2017). Protect, Correct, and Eject: Ostracism as a Social Influence Tool. In S. G. Harkins, K. D. Williams, & J. Burger (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Social Influence*. Oxford University Press. Chapter 11.

2. Sagarin, B. J., & Henningsen, M. L. M. (2017). Resistance to Influence. In S. G. Harkins, K. D. Williams, & J. Burger (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Social Influence*. Oxford University Press. Chapter 23.

3. Riva, P., Telari, A., & Marinucci, M. (2026). Social influence in digital environments. In D. Giles & J. Johnston (Eds.), *Research handbook on the social psychology of the media* (pp. 199–215). Edward Elgar Publishing. ISBN 978-1-03532-149-0

4. Riva, P., Marinucci, M., Telari, A., & Pancani, L. (2025). Updating the temporal need-threat model of ostracism: Challenges and future directions. *The Journal of Social Psychology* 166(1), 26–38.

5. Alvisi, L., Popa, V., Cola, G., Tardelli, S., & Tesconi, M. (2026). From toxicity to conformity: Adaptive user behavior to social norms in Telegram communities. *Scientific Reports, 16*, Article 18907. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-026-49756-w

6. Huang, H., & Cruz, N. (2022). Propaganda, presumed influence, and collective protest. *Political Behavior, 44*, 1789–1812. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-021-09683-0

7. Fu, M., Liu, R., & Zhang, Y. (2021). Do people follow neighbors? An immersive virtual reality experimental study of social influence on individual risky decisions during evacuations. *Automation in Construction, 126*, Article 103644. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.autcon.2021.103644

8. Monik, A., & Parzuchowski, M. (2024). Mind the like-minded. The role of social identity in prosocial crowdfunding. *Social Science Computer Review, 42*(1), 103–121. https://doi.org/10.1177/08944393231173889

All the articles listed above are required reading for the exam, regardless of participation in the group activities. The PDFs are available on the course e-learning page.

Listening to the following podcast is also part of the exam material:

Io ero il milanese - RaiPlay Sound

Watching the following videos is also part of the exam material:

Comizi d'amore, 1965 documentary by Pier Paolo Pasolini

Processo per stupro, 1979 documentary by Maria Grazia Belmonti, Anna Carini, Rony Daopulo, Paola De Martis, Annabella Miscuglio, and Loredana Rotondo https://archive.org/details/ngv_rm_it_19790601_processo_per_stupro

Lecture slides and any additional materials made available on the course e-learning page are intended to support individual study, but they do not replace the reference texts and exam materials indicated in this section.

Erasmus students may contact the instructor to agree on the possibility of studying with an English-language bibliography and/or taking the exam in English.

Sustainable Development Goals

GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING | GENDER EQUALITY | INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE | REDUCED INEQUALITIES | SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES | PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS