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Reactions to other-generated face threats on Facebook and their relational consequences

Donghee Yvette Wohn^{a,*}, Erin L. Spottswood^b^a New Jersey Institute of Technology, University Heights, GITC 5100, Newark, NJ 07103, USA^b Portland State University, University Center Building, 520 SW Harrison Street, Suite 440, Portland, OR 97201, USA

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ABSTRACT

Impression management refers to an individual's deliberate efforts to cultivate a particular image. Sometimes impression management occurs in reaction to a face threat—an incident or behavior that could create an impression inconsistent with one's desired self-image. On social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, where content can be shared widely and is often persistent, studies have repeatedly shown that people are vulnerable to face threats resulting from other-generated content. While there has been much documentation of face threats occurring in the context of SNSs and how people react to them, we know very little about the relational consequences of carrying out a particular reaction. This paper reports on a survey ($N = 150$) of adult Facebook users examining how certain reactive strategies and the severity of the face threat affect perceived changes in closeness between the victim and offender.

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1. Introduction

It was Spring Break, and Mindy,¹ a 20-year old college student, had some embarrassing photos taken of her passed out, drunk, on the ground. She was upset when her friend uploaded the photos against her wishes. “I messaged my friend to take down the photo, but she did not proceed to do so because the photo had garnered many Likes,” she recalled.

Mindy was a victim of a face threat—a situation that occurs when a person's desired image (i.e., “face”) is challenged or undermined (Cupach & Metts, 1994; Goffman, 1967). Face threats can be generated by the self (e.g., falling) or others (e.g., being tripped by another) (Cupach & Metts, 1994) and can lead to feelings such as embarrassment, self-consciousness, and awkwardness (Miller, 1992). When face threats are caused by others, the person creating the awkward situation—in the case of Mindy, her friend who uploaded the photo—is the offender.

The increase of social network site (SNS) use for day-to-day communication raises new questions about how people experience and react to face threats on SNSs to alleviate undesirable

situations, or “save” face. Face threats may make people particularly vulnerable on these sites because the characteristics of these networked environments makes content more persistent, accessible, searchable, and shareable than in face-to-face contexts (Boyd, 2010). In today's society where online presence often plays a role in shaping people's reputations and opportunities (e.g., Guitton, 2014; Preston, 2011; Wang et al., 2011), effective handling of potentially embarrassing or awkward acts has become a necessary skill or literacy (Davies, 2012).

SNS affordances such as persistence and scalability take control away from the victim who is trying to save face. Scalability refers to how many can see or view a piece of content while persistence refers to the endurance of a piece of content that is shared on a SNS (Boyd, 2010). The perceived scalability and persistence is higher on SNSs than face-to-face situations or other media (e.g., phone, text message) due to these sites' technical properties. As a result, embarrassing content that is shared on SNSs may be perceived as especially face threatening. It could also be that in comparison to face threats occurring in face-to-face situations, those occurring on SNSs cause more anxiety, as victims of such threats often have poor awareness of the audience for the threatening content (Litt, 2012).

While there are a number of actions that an individual can take in response to a face threat that is other-generated, taking those actions may risk provoking the offender; the person who generated

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: wohn@njit.edu (D.Y. Wohn), spot@pdx.edu (E.L. Spottswood).¹ All participants have been randomly assigned a gender-consistent name.

the face threat (Goffman, 1967). Saving one's own face to manage self-presentation with a wider audience can thus come at the expense of damaging an interpersonal relationship (Bevan, Pfyl, & Barclay, 2012; Peña & Brody, 2014). In the paper that follows, we use quantitative and open-response survey data to examine how particular reactions affect the victim's relationship with the offender.

2. Literature review

2.1. Reacting to face threats

Impression management refers to the ways people try to control how others perceive them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Researchers have also described this process as “self-presentation” and “face management” (Cupach & Metts, 1994; Goffman, 1967). Much of this work stems from Goffman's (1959) classic conceptualization of self-presentation, and in social contexts focuses on how people enact relationship norms to protect their own image as well as others' (Goffman, 1967). Such norms range from protecting each other's privacy to not publicly critiquing others (Argyle & Henderson, 1984). While people typically enact and behave seamlessly according to these norms, a person's desired image may sometimes be challenged.

When it comes to impression management, people can engage in proactive or reactive strategies (for review, see Bolino, Kacmar, Turnley, & Gilstrap, 2008). Proactive strategies aim to avoid threats before they happen while reactive strategies occur in response to a face threat that has already occurred. Reactive strategies, however, have some element of proactivity because the individual is taking steps to avoid potential reputation damage (Bolino et al., 2008; Cupach & Metts, 1992). Here, we focus on the measures taken by individuals to counter or alleviate the potential negative effects of other-generated face threatening content posted on Facebook. We use the term “post” to refer to any action on Facebook that generates content that is visible to people beyond the person who generated it. This can include writing a status update or comment, clicking the “like” icon, sharing media (e.g., photos, videos), and tagging photos.

2.2. Reactive strategies to minimize face threat

Scholars have identified eight reactions to face threats in face-to-face communication: avoidance, escape, excuses, justification, apologies, humor, physical remediation, and aggression (Cupach & Metts, 1992; Metts & Cupach, 1989). Drawing on traditional face threat literature as well as those identified in the context of SNSs (e.g., Brody & Pena, 2013; Chen & Abedin, 2014; Rui & Stefanone, 2013; Smock, 2010), we identified four general higher-order categories of reactive strategies that make sense in the context of SNSs, then mapped individual Facebook-specific actions onto the broader categories. The four strategies that can be employed in response to face threatening posts on Facebook are: disengagement, redirection, subtraction, and addressive strategies.

Disengagement strategies are those in which the face threatening situation is ignored or otherwise not attended to. In the context of Facebook this could mean leaving the face threatening content alone because comments intended to repair or otherwise respond to the threat may actually cause the algorithm to render the original post more visible (Litt et al., 2014). An extreme form of disengagement is escape (Metts & Cupach, 1989), which in this case could involve avoiding Facebook use altogether.

Redirective strategies include engagement with the face threatening content by the victim of the threat, in which he or she apologizes, offers excuses, or makes a joke to redirect attention and

help save face (Cupach & Metts, 1994; Schlenker, 1980). Excuses can help mitigate perceived intentions (e.g., “I didn't do it on purpose!”) while accounts aim to legitimize or justify behavior by explaining the circumstances of questionable content (Smock, 2010). Wang et al. (2011) found that Facebook users were apologizing and making excuses for self-posted content that offended others in their network; we could easily imagine the same being applied to other-generated content.

Humor can deflect face threatening situations by diffusing tension or redirecting attention (Cupach & Metts, 1994). On Facebook, individuals may try to make light of the face threat by commenting directly in response to the content (Rui & Stefanone, 2013; Smock, 2010).

Subtractive strategies include removing information that the individual does not want others to see. In face-to-face situations, this involves removing the face threatening artifact, such as washing out a stain after someone spills a drink on another. On Facebook, the same idea applies to the removal (i.e., subtraction) of content or one's visible connections to it, such as untagging (e.g., Dhir, Kaur, Lonka, & Nieminen, 2016; Lang & Barton, 2015; Rui & Stefanone, 2013; Smock, 2010; Strano & Wattai, 2012), deletion of unwanted posts (e.g., Raynes-Goldie, 2010; Young & Quan-Haase, 2013), and in extreme cases, asking Facebook to take it down (e.g., Wang et al., 2011). For example, when users add content to Facebook, they can “tag” others, in their posts, which indicates that the tagged individual is associated with that content (i.e., they are in the picture, part of the group, etc.). When one is tagged on Facebook, one's Facebook connections can view that content, even if a third party has posted it. While Facebook has, in more recent years, implemented privacy settings that limit who can see tagged materials by third parties, there is still a large element of uncontrollability by the person being tagged.

Several studies have examined why people try to remove undesirable content posted by others; typically photos posted by other users (Lang & Barton, 2015; Strano & Wattai, 2012).

Lang and Barton (2015) found that Facebook users frequently remove a tagged photo of themselves on Facebook in order to preserve their face or identity on the site. Moreover, Strano and Wattai (2012) found that one of the prevailing reasons why users untag themselves from a photograph because the photos were unattractive or misrepresented something about their character, or they wanted to be dissociated from other people in the photo or suppress a behavior that was accurate but that they did not want others to see.

Addressive strategies involve confronting the offender about the face threatening content to let them know one's feelings about it. These strategies are different from redirective strategies because they involve interaction only with the offender, whereas redirective strategies are intended for the entire actual or potential audience for the face threatening post. In the context of Facebook, the addressive strategy could take place within Facebook or outside of Facebook.

However, addressive strategies may be more difficult to carry out based on the power dynamic between the offender and victim—if the face threat came from a boss, one would be less inclined to use an addressive strategy (Brew & Cairns, 2004). Cultural norms can also affect the likelihood of using an addressive strategy (e.g., Brew & Cairns, 2004; Oetzel et al., 2001). For example, Chinese students from collectivist cultures were much less likely to confront the offender compared to Anglo-Australians of individualist cultures (Brew & Cairns, 2004).

As our strategies are derived from extant literature, our first research question aims to understand how these strategies manifest in the context of Facebook. It is important to focus on a specific context because even if the particular strategy is generalizable

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