



Full Length Article

Are you happy for me ... on Facebook? The potential importance of “likes” and comments[☆]Anne L. Zell^{*}, Lisa Moeller

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ABSTRACT

Sharing positive personal news—known as capitalization—with an enthusiastic listener in personal interactions has been associated with positive outcomes (Gable & Reis, 2010). We sought to extend this capitalization model to an online context involving masspersonal communication (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2017). We surveyed participants ($n = 311$) about their Facebook status updates from the previous two weeks. As hypothesized, participants perceived as more positive and important and recalled better their status updates that had received more responses. Receiving more likes and comments on one's status updates was also associated with reporting greater happiness and self-esteem, greater satisfaction with the responses one's status updates received, and perceiving one's Facebook community to be more interested in one's good news. The present findings point to the potential importance of the likes and comments people receive on their Facebook status updates.

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1. Introduction

Capitalization refers to the “social sharing of positive events” (Gable & Reis, 2010, p. 198). According to Gable and Reis's (2010) model of capitalization processes, sharing news of the positive events in one's life increases subjective well-being (e.g., Lambert et al., 2013) and fosters relational intimacy (MacGregor, Fitzsimons, & Holmes, 2013; Otto, Laurenceau, Siegel, & Belcher, 2015). The model additionally states that the benefits of sharing one's positive news with others stem at least partly from the audience's response, specifically how constructive vs. destructive and active vs. passive it is (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). As Gable and Reis (2010, p. 213) put it, “capitalization attempts create an opportunity for the partner to demonstrate responsiveness to the self”. Consistent with this model, research has found that sharing positive events with an enthusiastic audience compared to with a disinterested or negative audience produced a greater increase in positive mood (Gable et al., 2004; Lambert et al., 2013) and

intimacy (Otto et al., 2015).

Initially, research on capitalization focused on face-to-face interactions. However, interacting with others online using social networking sites is widespread, and the quality of these online relationships seems potentially important, as feeling supported by one's Facebook community has been associated with greater subjective well-being (Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan, & Marrington, 2013; Lee, Noh, & Koo, 2013). People post status updates containing positive news often in hopes of receiving validation from others as a way of seeking support on Facebook (Blight, Jagiello, & Ruppel, 2015). Status updates posted on one's Facebook wall are *masspersonal communications* (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2017), as they are made available for any and all in one's social network to see rather than being transmitted directly and privately to a specific individual. Would masspersonal capitalization attempts on Facebook yield the same positive effects as personal capitalization attempts have been found to produce? Choi and Toma's (2014) finding that sharing positive events on Facebook was associated with experiencing greater positive affect implies that they might. Going a step further, the present study focuses on the effect of the responses people receive to their Facebook status updates in general. We propose that receiving more (vs. fewer) “likes” and comments on one's Facebook status updates is associated with positive outcomes, detailed below in section 1.1 and subsections. To our knowledge,

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this is the first study to apply capitalization theory (Gable & Reis, 2010; Gable et al., 2004) to an online context such as Facebook.

1.1. Possible benefits of receiving responses (i.e., likes and comments) to Facebook status updates

How might sharing news with an enthusiastic audience on Facebook lead to positive outcomes? Gable and Reis's (2010) model, drawing upon Langston's (1994) hypotheses, proposes that capitalizing increases subjective well-being in part because it makes the personal event seem more significant and increases its memorability and because it gives the audience an opportunity to exhibit care and supportiveness. Applying this model to Facebook requires that we first consider differences between offline and online contexts: Whereas Gable and Reis's (2010) model assumed that the capitalization attempt would be directed toward an individual, in the case of Facebook status updates the target of communication is a group. Thus, the present investigation looks at the perceived responsiveness of a group, not of an individual. Furthermore, responses to status updates posted on Facebook will be affected by Facebook's affordances: people who wished to respond to a status update could post comments or employ a one-click communication in the form of the thumbs-up "like" button. Facebook displays the total number of comments and the total number of likes that each status update has received. With those differences in mind, we generated specific hypotheses about how the capitalization processes observed in personal interactions play out on Facebook walls.

1.1.1. Perceptions of one's own news

The capitalization model states that telling a supportive person about a positive personal event causes one to value that event more highly and perceive it as more significant (Gable & Reis, 2010; Langston, 1994). Consistent with the model, Reis et al. (2010) found that sharing news of a positive event with an enthusiastically responsive (vs. passive) person face-to-face caused people to view their personal event even more positively, perhaps because the audience's excitement confirmed the event's significance. Generalizing this to an online context, we speculated that participants would value their Facebook status update more highly the more responses that particular update had received. Thus, we hypothesized that receiving more responses to a status update would be associated with perceiving the update as more positive and more important.

1.1.2. Recall of one's own news

The capitalization model also states that, because capitalization conversations typically entail rehearsing and vividly describing the event, they increase the memorability of that shared event. The increased memorability, in turn, helps to explain capitalization's positive effect on subjective well-being: Positive events may have a greater impact if they are remembered than if they are forgotten. Supporting this line of the capitalization processes model, Gable et al. (2004) found that people were more likely to remember a positive personal event later the more people they had told about it, even while accounting for the rated importance of the event.

We reasoned that this enhanced memory for more frequently shared positive events could also occur on Facebook where receiving more responses on a status update might be partially analogous to telling more people face-to-face. The feature on Facebook that gives "notifications" each time someone responds to one's status updates may additionally prompt people to look at or think about their posts again. Therefore we hypothesized that participants will be more likely to remember their own status update the more responses it had received. Following the practice in

prior capitalization research, we planned to control for the rated importance of the update in order to minimize the influence of this confound.

1.1.3. Subjective well-being

Subjective well-being, although multifaceted, refers broadly to how positively people evaluate and feel about their lives (e.g., Diener et al., 2017). As predicted by the capitalization processes model, capitalization has been found to be associated with higher subjective well-being (measured by positive affect and life satisfaction), particularly when the target responded in an active-constructive way (Gable et al., 2004; Lambert et al., 2013). We hypothesized that on Facebook as well, people will experience higher subjective well-being when the target of their communication (which in this case would be their group of Facebook friends) is responsive.

In the present study, we were also interested in a construct closely tied to subjective well-being: self-esteem. As predicted by sociometer theory, perceiving oneself to be popular leads to higher self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Reitz, Motti-Stefanidi, & Asendorpf, 2016). On Facebook, information about one's popularity is available via the open display of the number of respondents on status updates. In prior research, perceiving that many people are reading one's status updates (Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012) and the number of responses received to one's last three status updates (marginally; Greitemeyer, Mugge, & Bollermann, 2014) have been linked with higher self-esteem. Being assigned to receive no response to one's status updates (Tobin, Vanman, Verreyne, & Saeri, 2014) or to view the profile of someone else who had received a great deal of response (Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014) have been found to lower self-esteem. On this basis, we predicted that receiving more responses to one's status updates on Facebook will be associated with greater subjective well-being, operationalized as self-reported happiness and self-esteem.

1.1.4. Perceptions of one's Facebook community

Supporting the capitalization processes model (Gable & Reis, 2010), enthusiastic responses to face-to-face capitalization attempts have been found to increase intimacy (Otto et al., 2015). Do similar processes operate on Facebook? The small amount of existing research examining whether receiving responses to status updates is linked to positive interpersonal outcomes has thus far yielded inconsistent results: On one hand, Utz (2015) found that the likes and comments people received on their Facebook status updates did not predict feeling connected to those reading their status updates. große Deters and Mehl (2012) found that, although being assigned to post more on Facebook reduced loneliness, this reduction in loneliness was not attributable to the proportion of status updates that had received a response. On the other hand, Burke and Kraut (2014) found that receiving comments, messages, and wall posts from someone predicted increases in feelings of closeness to that person. Furthermore, Stavrositu and Sundar (2012) found that receiving more (vs. fewer) comments led bloggers to report a stronger sense of community. Our hypothesis was that likes and comments—the more the better!—received on one's status updates convey the message that other people are interested and are happy that one has positive news. Therefore, we wanted to examine those perceptions specifically.

The Perceived Responses to Capitalization Attempts (PRCA) scale was developed by Gable et al. (2004) to measure perceptions that one's close friend or romantic partner typically responds with excitement rather than passivity, disinterest, or negativity to one's news about positive personal events. It assesses perceptions of responses that vary along two dimensions: active/passive and constructive/destructive. Active-Constructive responses show high

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