



# The influence of user comments on perceptions of Facebook relationship status updates



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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine how social media users' comments influence people's perception of information on Facebook. This was explored in the context of relationship status updates, where a person makes an announcement via Facebook about the formation or dissolution of a real-world romantic relationship. An online experiment was conducted to investigate how positive or negative changes in a relationship status, in conjunction with either positive or negative comments toward the relationship status update, can influence attitudes toward the announcement made. Data was collected from 453 participants using a between-subjects  $2 \times 2$  factorial design. The findings suggest that comments from other users alter perceptions of a Facebook relationship status update. Not only do we show that positive comments lead to favorable attitudes toward the status and negative comments lead to poorer attitudes toward the status, the research also shows that observers' attitudes toward an updated relationship status are more driven by the valence of the comments than the nature of the status. That is, positive Facebook statuses can be seen as negative if the comments associated with the status are negative in nature. Implications toward theories of community formation and management online are presented as well as contributions toward those using social media as a means of promoting themselves to others.

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## 1. Introduction

Social networking sites have become an influential platform for people to share information and communicate with others, with Facebook being the most popular social networking site in the United States (Junco, 2013). With an increasing number of people turning to Facebook for information on a daily basis, the site also provides users with an opportunity to engage with not only traditional media information such as news content, but interpersonal information such as user comments (Smock, Ellison, Lampe, & Wohn, 2011). This research looks at the way in which comments on social media can influence perceptions of information posted on Facebook.

The ability to make public comments about other users on Facebook is by commenting on a posted status, picture, or link, or by writing directly on a friend's 'wall'. With this feature, friends of a Facebook user can leave messages, which may often express interpersonal affection, comment on some mutual events, or proclaim relational statuses (Carr et al., 2008). These peer-to-peer messages are posted in public, which means they can also be read

by the profile owner's friends, and potentially, other registered users. Wall postings have been classified as a 'masspersonal communication' (Carr et al., 2008), with this term first being proposed by O'Sullivan (2005). Specifically, these postings share features of both mass and interpersonal communication, as while they are posted in a public forum for others to see, they are often for personal or relational purposes.

Perceptions of a profile owner are influenced by the peer comments and postings others leave on their profiles (Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Schulman, 2009). The owner of a profile may not know that particular comments have been posted to their wall, yet even if they do, many do not remove comments from their walls, as doing so would be inconsistent with Facebook norms and possibly challenge their friendships. Indeed, even the act of hiding or unfriending Facebook contacts has been found to be influenced by both social and physical attractiveness (Peña & Brody, 2014). Moreover, although users interact with friends by sending private messages or posting information on walls, lurking and observing others' actions (e.g. reading the newsfeed about what friends are doing or looking at others' profiles) has been found to be more common than direct communication between users (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009).

The purpose of this study is to explore how user comments influence people's perception of information on Facebook. We

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argue that users may judge an online message on the basis of others' comments about the original message, in addition to the original message itself. Thus, this research seeks to answer the question: will the perceptions of an online posting on Facebook be affected if it is accompanied by opinionated comments? We explore this in the context of relationship status updates; where a person chooses to make an announcement via Facebook about the formation or dissolution of a real-world romantic relationship. This focus builds upon recent studies which have also examined aspects of romantic relationships, such as how Facebook is changing the way in which people develop, maintain and dissolve real-world romantic relationships (Fox, Osborn, & Warber, 2014).

## 2. Literature review and hypotheses

### 2.1. Understanding the role of user comments

Social networking sites allow identity construction to be built collaboratively, as once a user sets up an online profile, other users can contribute to it. These contributions are for the most part favorable, however friends have also been known to post discrediting and/or defamatory messages on users' Facebook walls (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007).

With Web 2.0 technologies allowing interactivity on websites and the co-creation of content by users (O'Reilly, 2005), a key area of research focus has been on the role of user comments on the online experience (Houston, Hansen, & Nisbett, 2011). There is some evidence that self-categorization theory (Turner, 1991) may help explain the effects of peer comments on perceptions of online content (Hogg & Tindale, 2005). This theory suggests that people categorize themselves and others by defining attributes of the relevant in- or out-group when the shared social identity is psychologically salient (Hogg & Reid, 2006). This self-categorization process depersonalizes self-perception in terms of the in-group prototype and generates a feeling of belonging and group identification, thereby causing our feelings, perceptions and behaviors to conform to the norms of the in-group (Hogg & Reid, 2006).

The social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE model; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995), which was built upon self-categorization theory, has been used in a number of computer-mediated communication (CMC) studies to explain peer influence (e.g. Walther, DeAndrea, Kim, & Anthony, 2010). The SIDE model argues that CMC users fall into fairly general social categories which characterize the definition of their sense of self, such as nationalities, gender, or majors of study. Due to the absence of social cues in CMC, people relate online on the basis of in-group/out-group identities, with the visual anonymity of CMC depersonalizing self-perception and perception of others (Lee, 2006). People perceive themselves and others as members of social groups rather than different individuals, which leads to greater potential conformity to group norms.

Although the SIDE model highlights the influence of visual anonymity, it also acknowledges that identifiability can increase accountability and influence behavior under certain conditions (Reicher et al., 1995). In addition, the theory of normative influence (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955) argues that group influence depends on social pressure from others, and that this pressure can be best exercised when group members are identifiable, under surveillance, and thus accountable to groups for their responses. Thus, theories relating to group influence are still likely to be applicable to wall postings, even though the comments may often be associated with pictures.

More recent web-specific studies have also highlighted the impact of user comments on other users. For example, and building upon the SIDE model, the comments left by YouTube users have been found to affect perceptions about the effectiveness of

anti-marijuana public service announcement videos (Walther et al., 2010). Specifically, the valence of comments was found to affect attitudes about the public service announcements, and the more the participants identified with the ostensible commenters, the more effective the comments were. Similarly, reader comments posted to online news sites have been found to affect other readers' attitudes about the issues described in the news stories (Houston et al., 2011). Moreover, it has been demonstrated that when there is a discrepancy between a Facebook profile owner's self-generated statements on extraversion and perceived attractiveness, and those characteristics implied by other users' postings on their wall, the comments made by others overrode the profile owner's self-claims (Walther et al., 2009). Following this discussion, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H1.** The valence of comments appearing with a relationship status update directly affects observers' attitude toward the posting. Specifically, positive comments generate favorable attitudes toward the status, while negative comments lead to less favorable attitudes, despite the nature of the status.

Warranting theory was proposed to better understand Internet communication (Walther & Parks, 2002). Warranting pertains to the perceived validity of information about another person that one observes online. The theory argues that individuals rely on information with greater warranting value; that is, the information that provides more confidence to readers about the potentially true nature of an individual's offline self (Walther & Parks, 2002). Given people often garner information and learn about others through online personal profiles on social networking sites such as Facebook, it is argued that the information one gathers via interaction from such sites leaves open the possibility for distorted self-presentations and deception in terms of the target profile's offline personality (Donath, 2007). Thus, readers may not believe the self-presentations individuals make in such virtual environments. Online information is more likely to be seen as truthful, depending on the extent to which the observer perceives it to be immune to any manipulation by the person to whom it refers (Walther & Parks, 2002).

The theory was tested experimentally by mixing flattering and unflattering comments about an individual on Facebook mock-ups (Walther et al., 2009), with some statements being made by the profile owner and other comments by the profile owner's friends. The results showed that when individual's self-claims about their own physical attractiveness and the comments from friends were conflicting, respondents' rating of the profile owner reflected the assessments made by friends, rather than the owner's self-disclosure. Similar studies have also demonstrated that friends comments and even the number of friends exert a significant impact on perceptions about the profile owner (Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008; Utz, 2010). Building on this discussion, there is reason to believe that the cues contained in peer comments may outweigh the messages conveyed by the original Facebook posting. As such, the second hypothesis states that:

**H2.** Observers' attitudes toward a relationship status are more driven by the valence of other users' comments than the nature of the original posting.

### 2.2. Potential covariate effects

Relationship status is considered to be one of the most important features on Facebook, with about 60% of Facebook users setting a relationship status on their profile (Darell, 2011). With this feature, people can easily access information that they previously

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