"I know you've seen it!" Individual and social factors for users' chatting behavior on Facebook

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ABSTRACT

An online survey ($N = 207$) investigated how the seen-function influences users' answering behavior in Facebook chatting. The seen-function is a chat-feature that provides more transparency over the course of a chat conversation and thus may also intensify the mutual awareness of chat partners. Based on the need to belong and fear of ostracism as motivators for user behavior it was hypothesized that users with a higher value of these personality traits would have a higher expectation for others to answer immediately and a higher perceived obligation to answer immediately. Indeed, fear of ostracism and need to belong were positively related to perceived obligations to answer and expectations toward chat partners. However, the perceived obligation to answer immediately was higher than the average expectation toward others to do so. Looking for different clusters of users, we found three groups of users in the data set that differ in terms of their expectations and perceived obligations.

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1. Introduction

In July 2012, Facebook introduced a new function, which is a chat-feature that provides more transparency over the course of a chat conversation. Through this so-called seen-function a user may see if and when his or her chat partner has read a recently sent message (e.g., "seen 7:15 PM") as well as when he or she is answering ("..."). In turn, the recipient of the message is aware of the fact that the sender can see when exactly the message was read. It seems plausible to assume that such status information may intensify the mutual awareness of chat partners, particularly in respect to these partners' willingness and readiness to respond.

The seen-function can be conceptualized as what Oulasvirta, Petit, Raento, and Tiitta (2007) call an awareness cue, that is, "[t]he unit of awareness information at the user interface [that] refers to a perceptually separable representational entity that can be used in the mental process of the social inference of a remote other" (p. 100). Since the interface of chat or instant messaging applications is a communication environment with very few social cues compared to a face-to-face situation (Dennis & Kinney, 1998,

p. 257), awareness cues are supposed to compensate this lack of social information and thereby support the chat conversation. But how does the seen-function exactly influence the communication in the Facebook chat?

In general, observing and interpreting awareness cues serves as a kind of social monitoring. By paying attention to the seen-function users may control their actual social standing. As the sociometer hypothesis suggests, checking whether a chat partner has seen a message is an attempt to monitor one's inclusionary status (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995, pp. 519–520). Delayed or all-together omitted answers may indicate rejection or exclusion and therefore motivate specific behaviors that help to restore the threatened inclusionary status, for example by sending a second message. However, as the seen-function has not received much scholarly attention since its introduction, its implications for the chat communication have not been explored yet. In general, compared to other functions on Facebook, there has been little research on its chat so far. However, user statistics show that already in 2009, ten months after the chat was launched, over 300 million chat messages were sent per day (Smith, 2009) and as of November 2014 there are over 500 million users chatting via the messenger app for mobile phones (Martinazzi, 2014). Since chats appear to be an integral part of users' interaction on Facebook, the study of individual needs that motivate this kind of behavior, of emotional responses to it, and on the perception of social norms guiding chat behaviors have become particularly relevant.

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2. Need to belong and fear of ostracism as motivators for user behavior

There has been extensive research on the question what motivates people to use Facebook. After reviewing much of the work done in this area, Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012) summarized and concluded on this by proposing a two-factor model: They suggest that the two primary motivating factors for people to use Facebook are their need to belong and their need for self-presentation. The influence of users' additional personality traits on their Facebook behavior, in their view, may be explained through how they relate to those two specific needs: sociodemographic variables, cultural background, and personality traits all factor into the perceived need to belong and the need for self-presentation.

As it seems reasonable to assume that maintaining one's social relationships is a primary goal of Facebook chats, we decided to focus on users' need to belong. Baumeister and Leary (1995) describe this need to belong as the "pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 497). Through tracking the relationships that users have and maintain with others and through offering tools for interacting with them, social networking sites like Facebook enable users to do what Tufekci (2008) describes as "social grooming", that is, the fostering of relationships in order to satisfy one's need to belong. Facebook chats, which allow to maintain the connection with friends, can be seen as a very useful tool in that effort.

Overall, "past research establishes a positive association between active Facebook use and belonging" (Tobin, Vanman, Verreynne, & Saeri, 2014, p. 32). For example, Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan, and Marrington (2013) found that connectedness in a social network is related to a decrease in anxiety and depression, and an increase in life satisfaction. In general, scholars argue that social networking sites have the potential to maintain and enhance social relationships (Tufekci, 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009).

However, despite the fact that Facebook's enduring success and pervasiveness has attracted a lot of scholarly attention (e.g., Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012), still little is known about the potentially negative cognitive, emotional, and relational implications of its communicative use (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011; Sagioglou & Greitemeyer, 2014). Psychological research has indicated that in order to feel that they belong somewhere, people's interactions with others "must take place in the context of a temporally stable and enduring framework of affective concern for each other's welfare" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). Thus, it seems also plausible to assume that (perceived) rejection in Facebook chatting can lead to negative (emotional) responses.

As users' chatting behavior on Facebook may be seen as an indicator of the status of their relationship, and as other users' delayed or missing responses might be experienced as a threat to these users' need to belong (which eventually could even lead to more anxiety), we believe the following hypothesis to be reasonable:

H1a. When a chat partner does not answer immediately to a sent message despite the fact that this message has been read, the stronger the need to belong of the senders, the more intensive their negative emotions.

Likewise, the need to belong may have an influence on people's perceived obligations and expectations in Facebook chatting. Bicchieri and Xiao (2009) argue that, in order to understand how social norms operate, it is necessary to look at what people expect others to do, what they perceive as being expected of them, and which forms of social sanctions exist that incentivize compliance

to such perceived norms. As both the expectations toward others as well as the perception of expectations toward oneself are probably influenced by users' needs, we expect the following:

H1b. The need to belong is positively correlated with the perceived obligation to answer a chat partner immediately.

H1c. The need to belong is positively correlated with the expectation that a chat partner answers immediately.

Looking at the importance of social relationships from the opposite perspective, that is, on the background of a lack of such or in light of their existence being threatened, similar conclusions can be made. As Vorderer and Kohring (2013) as well as Vorderer and Schneider (in press) point out, users' behavior on social media sites is not only driven by an approach motivation like the need to belong, but also by a complementary avoidance motivation, that is, by their attempt to avoid being ostracized.

Smith and Williams (2004) have argued that this feeling of being socially excluded (ostracized) "has the unique potential to threaten state levels of ... belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence" (p. 293). As opposed to face-to-face ostracism, which describes the physical exclusion of a person, exclusion in online-communication like Facebook chatting is referred to as cyberostracism (Vorderer & Schneider, in press; Wesselmann & Williams, 2011). In an experiment by Tobin et al. (2014) participants were involved in a laboratory-based Facebook activity and half of the profiles they dealt with were manipulated "so that participants would not receive any feedback on their status updates. Those participants who did not receive any feedback on their updates showed significantly lower levels of belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence" (p. 1).

Ostracism in an actual interaction situation was analyzed in an experiment by Karlen and Daniels (2011). Subjects watched videos of different Facebook interactions, including a chat situation. In the so-called inclusion condition, the chat conversation was initiated and answered; in the exclusion condition, an initiated chat conversation was not answered. "Participants were instructed to imagine that this was in fact their own Facebook page and asked to assess how they would feel were this condition true" (p. 19). Indeed, those "who were excluded had stronger psychological reactions to be ostracized" (p. 27).

However, because this study approaches the influence of the seen-function from a motivational perspective, the underlying concept of avoidance is not ostracism as a specific exclusion situation, but the *fear of* ostracism as a trait variable. Similarly as for need to belong we assume the following:

H2a. When a chat partner does not answer immediately despite having read the message, the stronger the fear of ostracism of the senders, the more intensive their negative emotions.

As hypothesized for the need to belong, we also expect that people's fear of ostracism may have an influence on their perceived obligations and expectations in Facebook chatting:

H2b. The stronger the recipients' fear of ostracism, the stronger their perceived obligation to answer a chat partner immediately.

H2c. The stronger the senders' fear of ostracism, the higher their expectation that a chat partner answers immediately.

In order to explain how Facebook's seen-function may influence social monitoring behavior and the fear of ostracism, it is also important to include its relationship to users' expectations toward other people's behavior, and consequently its relationship to social