Evaluating a target on social media: From the self-categorization perspective

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ABSTRACT

The question of how impression is formed online – especially on social media – has triggered a lot of research interest. While traditional impression formation literature mainly looks at this issue from the source perspective, little attention has been paid to the viewer or audience side. The accumulation of anecdotal evidence and scientific inquiry shows us that viewer's identity may play an important role as well. Drawing upon the self-categorization theory, this study aims to provide some insights on impression formation from a viewer perspective. An online experiment was conducted based on a 2 (microblog post topic: personal vs. professional) by 2 (fans count: few vs. many) between-subjects factorial design. Under each condition, a mock-up microblog page of a fictitious college professor (the target) was presented to two groups of respondents (in-groupers: teachers vs. out-groupers: students) before they were asked to evaluate this "professor." The results indicated that teacher respondents and student respondents rated the likability and credibility of this target professor significantly differently as the degree of prototypicality of this target changed. Theoretical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Research indicates that by the end of 2013, 73% of online adults use a social networking site of some kind (Duggan & Smith, 2013). This suggests that life on social media has been incorporated into many people's daily life. Individuals intentionally or unintentionally present their own images through online platforms, oftentimes multiple images within one account (Rui & Stefanone, 2013). Meanwhile, users actively form perceptions of others based on the targets' online presentation. Different from face-to-face interaction, an audience's cognitive judgment may be based on information other than the kind provided by those being judged (or "targets") (Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009). With years of use experience, social media users have been found to be quite accurate in detecting others' personality and behavior based on pictures and updates on social media (e.g., Roberts, 2009; Salamone, 2009). It is intriguing to consider how impressions are formed based on social media use.

In line with the traditional impression formation investigations in face-to-face contexts, impression formation on social media has drawn much academic attention. While previous studies have paid due diligence to messages and sources, little attention has been paid to the viewer or audience perspective. As anecdotal evidence and scientific inquiry accumulate (Naumann, Vazire, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2009), theoretical understanding is still, nevertheless, lacking with regards to how and why a certain impression is formed based on identity indicators. Drawing upon the self-categorization theory, this study aims to provide some insights on impression formation from a viewer perspective. Specifically, this study has two main objectives: First, it aims to test the applicability of self-categorization theory in the social media context. In simple words, whether in-group and out-group members evaluate a target differently on social media. Second, this study expands the extant literature by acknowledging that the degree of prototypicality of observable targets may vary, and therefore the evaluation toward targets may adjust accordingly.

2. Literature review

2.1. Impression formation on social media

The question of how impressions are formed online – especially on social media – has triggered a lot of research interest.

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Traditional impression formation literature mainly examines this issue from the source perspective. Following the development of online platforms, three types of information sources have been explored.

Firstly, self-provided information undoubtedly plays a considerable role in impression formation, both offline and online (Leary, 1995; Walther & Parks, 2002). The debate on cues-filtered-out vs. cues-filtered-in highlights the importance of the self as an information source. While cues filtered out models such as social presence theory argue that due to the lack of social context cues, especially nonverbal cues, computer-mediated communication is always impersonal (Culman & Markus, 1987; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). As evidence accumulated, more researchers are leaning toward cues-filtered-in models, including Walther's (1992) social information processing theory and his hyperpersonal theory (Walther, 1996). The social information processing theory postulates that if online communicators are motivated to reduce interpersonal uncertainty, form impressions and develop affinity, they will exchange social information up to the face-to-face level as long as there is no time constraint (Walther, 1992). Online inter-actions may even yield better results since information senders can subtly choose what and how to present, a process known as hyper-personal interaction (Walther, 1996). In fact, communicators' lan-guage style, content, chronemics, photographic and biographic information have been shown to play a significant role in online impression management (Tanis, 2003; Walther, 2006).

Secondly, the affordance of social media empowers users to provide input on others' profiles. For instance, individuals can leave messages on friends' Facebook walls or comments on friends' statuses. The effect of friends' Facebook wall postings on judg-ments of profile owners has been documented. Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, and Tong (2008) reveal that Facebook posts by a target's friends have a significant impact on viewers' rat-ings of social attractiveness and credibility of the target. As the other-provided information cannot be easily manipulated by a tar-get, viewers tend to add more weight on this type of information relative to self-provided information (Walther et al., 2009).

In addition to the self-provided and other-provided informa-tion, the third type of information has also garnered scholarly attention: website-generated information. One typical example of website-generated information is the friend count. This type of information is also found to impact observers' evaluations of a tar-get. For instance, a curvilinear relationship between sociometric popularity (friend count) and social attractiveness (perceived extraversion) has been observed on Facebook (Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008). That is, one can be popular up to a certain point based upon friend count.

While source perspectives are illuminating in understanding impression formation online, it is equally important to understand how receiver traits affect the impression formation processes. To that end, this study seeks to tease apart the impact of receiver identity on impression formation.

2.2. Online impression formation from the viewer perspective

Viewers' role in online impression formation has been investi-gated by the social identity-deindividuation theory from two per-spectives (Lea & Spears, 1992). First, this theory posits that online communication partners over-attribute the available social context or personality cues due to the absence of face-to-face cues and prior personal knowledge toward the target. This principle applies universally to all computer-mediated communication con-texts without predicting positive or negative perception formed by the viewer. The second angle emphasizes the relationship between partners connected by the Internet. Participants tend to hold a social self-categorization, rather than an individual self-

categorization, in online communication contexts (Walther, 1996). For instance, DeAndrea and Walther (2011) reveal that the relationship between observer and target influences the evaluations of the target: subjects rate the online–offline self-pre-sentation inconsistencies of acquaintances as more intentionally misleading, more hypocritical, and less trustworthy, compared to the inconsistencies of friends. Wang and collaborators explore one step further by finding that interpersonal evaluation in a virtual group largely depends on the in-group vs. out-group iden-tification in which respondents tend to view likable behaviors of in-group members more attractive relative to likable behaviors of out-group members (Wang, Walther, & Hancock, 2009).

Extant findings are in line with social identity theory and self-categorization theory, which describe how individuals derive their identity and form perceptions of other people (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Hogg & Hardie, 1991; Tajfel, 1974). While these two theo-retical perspectives are effective in explaining the discrepancies of evaluations between in-group and out-group members, they are less effective on several fronts. Most prior studies view in-group and out-group identifications two distinct but static processes. However, the degrees of self-categorization or other-categorization may vary; how would viewers evaluate the target accordingly? Moreover, as previous studies provisionally recruited and assigned participants to different groups (e.g., Wang et al., 2009), their responsiveness to this type of social identity is questionable.

2.3. Self-categorization process explicated

Compared to social identity theory, self-categorization theory shows less proliferation for social psychologists and communica-tion researchers. In reviewing these two theories, Hogg and Terry (2000) "see no incompatibility between self-categorization theory and the original form of social identity theory", but rather view the former as a component of an extended version of the latter (p. 123). Since the self-categorization theory (SCT) focuses more on the process of social identity formation, we limit our subsequent discussion to SCT due to its pertinence to the scope of this research.

The process of self-categorization initiates through forming prototypes which represent the defining and stereotypical attri-butes of groups (Turner, 1985). Prototypes are either in the form of representations of actual exemplary members or abstract ideal types (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). The attri-butes embodied in prototypes distinguish one group from another. In forming prototypes, a target is no longer viewed as a unique individual, but rather an embodiment of relevant prototypes (Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). For instance, a prototypical Christian should follow the Bible, while a prototypical Muslim should follow the Koran (Marques, Abrams, & Serodio, 2001).

Not every member of a group equally confirms the defining attributes of the group. As the degree of prototypicality of the tar-gets varies, perception toward the targets changes accordingly. One extreme example is the so-called "black sheep effect", in which a negative deviant group member is rejected by other in-group members; while, a positive deviant will be accepted by prestige-emphasized groups but rejected by solidarity and distinc-tiveness-focused groups (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Meanwhile, from an out-grouper side, a more prototypical target would generate more negative perceptions.

2.4. Impression formation on microblogging service

Although there is a growing body of research on social network-ing sites, microblog is largely ignored by social media researchers. To fill that gap, this study focuses on microblog services as a modality of social media. As social networking sites such as