



Exploring differences in how men and women respond to threats to *positive face* on social media



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ABSTRACT

A three-condition (rejection, criticism, control) experiment ($N = 78$) with gender treated as an additional factor and moderating variable examined gender differences in response to two types of threats to *positive face* – rejection and criticism – on a social-networking site. Results showed it did not matter if men or women were rejected or criticized on a social-networking site; both threats to *positive face* lead to more retaliatory aggression, compared to the control. However, men retaliated to a greater extent than women to both types of threats. Also, men responded differently to criticism than to rejection, while women's results did not vary. Findings are discussed in relation to face theory and politeness theory, particularly in regard to computer-mediated communication.

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1. Introduction

A rich history of scholarship has examined how people respond to threats to *face*, which are socially constructed identities people have about themselves (e.g. Brown & Levinson, 1987; Metts & Cupach, 2008; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). Scholars have examined how face-threatening acts challenge people's sense of identity during compliance-gaining episodes (Wilson, Aleman, & Leatham, 1998), vary across cultures (e.g. Ruhi & Isik-Guler, 2007; Yu, 2003), are influenced by nonverbal cues such as tone of voice and facial movement (Trees & Manusov, 1998), and may lead to retaliatory aggression (Chen, 2013). Some researchers have successfully applied these concepts to the computer-mediated world of chat rooms (Park, 2007), discussion groups (Burke & Kraut, 2008), online dispute resolution sessions (Brett et al., 2007), listservs (Herring, 1994), and email (Duthler, 2006). However, what has received little study is how responses to *face* threats may differ between men and women in the interactive world of strangers on social media.

This study aimed to fill this gap by using an experiment to examine how men and women differed in retaliatory aggressive responses to two types of face-threatening acts – rejection and criticism – on a specific type of online communication, a mock social-networking site created for this study. These two face-threatening acts were chosen because they both have a long

history of being seen as threats to *face*, as they can decrease people's relational value (e.g. Brown & Levinson, 1987; Duthler, 2006; Papacharissi, 2004). In addition, speech that rejects or criticizes people has become a growing problem online, ranging from uncivil comments on social-networking sites to outright bullying (e.g. Anderson, Brossard, Scheufele, Xenos, & Ladwig, 2013; Papacharissi, 2004; Wolack, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007). That makes these two face threats particularly relevant for study of social media.

Examining the differences in how men and women respond to face-threatening acts on social media is an under-explored area with rich potential for increasing understanding of computer-mediated human behavior. Ample research suggests men tend to be more aggressive than women (e.g. Bushman & Huesmann, 2010; Loeber & Hay, 1997; Wood & Eagly, 2010). Yet most of the study of gender differences in aggression in the computer-mediated world has focused on video games (e.g. Anderson & Murphy, 2003; Bartholow & Anderson, 2002; Eastin, 2006). Other research has examined how men and women differ in terms of expressing emotion, conversation style, language, or participation in computer-mediated communication (CMC; e.g. Fischer, 2011; Herring, 1994, 2000). What has not been studied is how men and women differ in aggressive responses to face threats specifically on social media. Types of CMC vary in terms of their interactivity level, asynchronicity, and availability of social cues (Tanis & Postmes, 2007). As a result, it is important to study CMC platforms independently, rather than assume experiences on one platform will translate to another. In addition, research suggests men and

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women navigate digital spaces differently (e.g. Herring, 1994, 2000; Savicki, Lingenfelter, & Kelley, 1996). Yet little research has explored how these differences play out when men and women receive face threats on social media, as this current study examined.

Specifically, this study had two aims: The first was to examine whether men exhibit more retaliatory aggression than women when confronted with two types of face threats, rejection and criticism, in the specific context of an interactive exchange on a social-networking site. The second goal was to examine whether gender differences in retaliatory aggression vary dependent on the type of face threat, either rejection or criticism.

First, face theory and how it relates to this study will be reviewed. Then the literature will be examined on differences responses to rejection and criticism to offer support for specific hypotheses. Finally, how these hypotheses were tested and how the results fit into existing research will be explained.

2. Theory

Face describes the socially constructed positive way people want others to see them by highlighting attributes that society values (Goffman & Best, 2005; Locher & Watts, 2005). Using this concept, Goffman (1955) proposed that people produce verbal or nonverbal communication to present their own identity to others (Oetzel et al., 2001). In essence, people act out their socially constructed public *face* in a form of performance during communication that gives others a sense the person is a competent social player (Goffman & Best, 2005; Metts & Cupach, 2008). In a sense, having *face* means a person is valued as a relational partner. Therefore, face theory proposes that aversive communication that threatens *face* attacks people's identities, undermining their sense of self by implying those who perpetuated the threat do not respect them (Brett et al., 2007).

Politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) builds on face theory by positing that any speech that violates politeness rules in society may be viewed as a *face threat*. Western society highly values politeness (Papacharissi, 2004), so impoliteness is considered a face-threatening act because it breaches societal rules (Duthler, 2006). Politeness theory divides threats to *face* that violate politeness into two categories. *Threats to positive face*, such as criticism and insults, challenge a person's relational value and desire for approval (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Duthler, 2006; Metts & Cupach, 2008). Requests or demands that challenge a person's competency or need for autonomy are *threats to negative face* (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Duthler, 2006; Metts & Cupach, 2008). This current study examined *threats to positive face* as subjects experienced either rejection from an online group they sought to join or criticism from that group. These two threats were examined because both rejection and criticism are common in many forms of online communication, from vitriolic comments on news websites to outright rejection that constitutes bullying or harassment on social media (Anderson et al., 2013; Papacharissi, 2004; Wolack et al., 2007).

2.1. Rejection and criticism

Both rejection and criticism are threats to positive face because they are forms of uncivil communication that violate politeness norms and challenge people's relational value, making the people appear less desirable to others (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Duthler, 2006; Metts & Cupach, 2008). Criticism is defined as a type of verbal aggressiveness that attacks one's identity and make a person feel badly about the self, similarly to taunts and insults (Rancer & Avtgis, 2006). Rejection also attacks one's identity because it

involves being rebuffed after one seeks a social connection with others (Blackhart, Nelson, Knowles, & Baumeister, 2009). Both rejection and criticism call into question one's value as a relational partner (Leary & Guadagno, 2011; Williams, Forgas, & von Hippel, 2005), and, therefore, threaten a person's social identity.

Under both face theory and politeness theory, rejection and criticism would lead people to *lose face*, which is a sense that one's relational value is diminished. People are attached to their own self-images, so they attempt to maintain *face* during conflict in a process called *face work* that may involve attempts to neutralize the threat and restore *face* (Brett et al., 2007; Goffman & Best, 2005). As a result, it would be expected that criticism and rejection online could lead to attempts to repair face and neutralize the threat through retaliatory aggression (Brett et al., 2007; Metts & Cupach, 2008; Oetzel et al., 2001). Retaliatory aggression is an aggressive behavior against a specific target that has hurt the person (Bushman & Huesmann, 2010). The aggressive act then could restore the attacked person's *face* by diminishing the *face* of the accuser (Brett et al., 2007; Metts & Cupach, 2008; Oetzel et al., 2001).

Research has found that people expect online communication that fits societal norms of politeness, even if they are communicating with a computer, not a person (Picard, 2000; Reeves & Nass, 1996). In CMC, some people may be more uncivil than they would be face to face (FtF) if they think they are anonymous (e.g. Christopherson, 2007; Halpern & Gibbs, 2013). However, people exhibit and experience emotions through online interactions much as they would in a FtF setting (Derks, Fischer, & Bos, 2008). So it stands to reason that people on a social-networking site in this current study would expect polite communication from other people on the site, and breaches of politeness would threaten *face* as has been found in offline communication.

2.2. Gender differences

The aim of this study was to expand on this foundation and examine whether men and women differed in retaliatory aggressive responses to two types of face-threatening acts, rejection and criticism, on a mock social-networking site designed for this project.

Gender was examined as a moderating variable because the relational work implicit in *face work* has been found to be dependent in part on social norms regarding gendered roles in society (Holmes & Schnurr, 2005). Gender was considered relevant because literature regarding politeness theory suggests that men and women have different concepts of what it means to be polite and how to respond to politeness or breaches in politeness (Holmes & Schnurr, 2005). Research has also found that men and women respond to threats to *face*, such as rejection and criticism in different ways (Blackhart et al., 2009; Downey, Mougios, Ayduk, London, & Shoda, 2004) both online and off. Women, for instance, are more likely to thank online, while men appear more comfortable violating politeness rules (Herring, 2000), although the gender make-up of an online group plays a role in how much people conform to stereotypical linguistic styles (Savicki et al., 1996). These studies suggest that men and women may bring their offline gendered norms of politeness to computer-mediated communication.

Meanwhile, decades of research support the view that men and women differ in how they exhibit aggressive behavior (e.g. Anderson & Murphy, 2003; Williams, Consalvo, Caplan, & Yee, 2009). Men are more likely to aggress physically and directly, while women are more apt to aggress indirectly (Bushman & Huesmann, 2010) through manipulation or withdrawing (Wood & Eagly, 2010). Scholars suggest both biological and psychological mechanisms explain these differences. Biological differences between

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