



Your post is embarrassing me: Face threats, identity, and the audience on Facebook



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ABSTRACT

While Facebook is a popular venue for sharing information about ourselves, it also allows others to share information about us, which can lead to embarrassment. This study investigates the effects of shared face-threatening information on emotional and nonverbal indicators of embarrassment using an experiment ($N = 120$) in which pairs of friends posted about each other on Facebook. Results show that face-threatening information shared by others produces a powerful emotional and nonverbal embarrassment response. However, it is not the content of the face-threatening post that produces this effect. Rather, the level of embarrassment depends primarily on whether that information violates the individual's identity and if they perceive that unknown members of their audience can see it. In response, individuals were most likely to joke about the post, although those who were most embarrassed were more likely to delete it. These results inform our understanding of how the process of embarrassment works online. The emotional embarrassment response is similar to offline, but is affected by the features of these sites, such as a large, invisible audience, and the need for ideal self-presentation. This finding has important implications for treating online social networks and their effects to be as "real" as those offline.

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1. Introduction

Online social networks such as Facebook offer a space for users to disclose information about themselves. However, they also allow friends and contacts to disclose potentially embarrassing or face-threatening information about users that can be visible on the users' profiles, or otherwise linked to their identity on the site. These online threats to self-presentation can occur in a variety of situations, ranging from cyber-bullying to more minor episodes that can nonetheless have a significant impact on one's identity. Recent research on face-threatening Facebook posts by users' friends or contacts further revealed many types of embarrassment experienced by users due to others' posts about them, such as unflattering photos or broad revelation of information intended for a narrower audience (Litt et al., 2014; Wohn & Spottswood, 2016).

While face threats have been documented online and have clear effects (Litt et al., 2014; Wohn & Spottswood, 2016), this work has

largely been retrospective. To our knowledge, no experiments have examined these processes in real time, so we know little about the details of how online face threats occur in real time, how people react to them, and how people take action to respond. We seek to understand how embarrassment from online face threats is experienced, using a laboratory experiment to focus on the emotional and nonverbal effects of face-threatening information shared by others on Facebook.

2. The process of embarrassment

Embarrassment is a short-lived emotional and psychological response to a discrepancy between one's idealized role-identity and one's presented role-identity (Singelis & Sharkey, 1995). Edelmann (1985) mapped the process of social embarrassment across a wealth of data and models on the causes, experience, and responses to embarrassing experiences. First, the process starts with the assumption that individuals are aware of and trying to follow a particular set of social rules. As part of this effort, individuals attempt to manage others' impressions of them via selective self-presentation of information about themselves

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(Schlenker, 1980). However, this self-presentation can be challenged by others (Higuchi & Fukada, 2008). Thus, the process of embarrassment is triggered when a disruption of social routine (e.g., a secret being revealed about the individual) creates an undesired impression of a person. These disruptions tend to fall into one of five categories of embarrassing events: awkward acts, violations of privacy, forgetfulness, criticism, and image appropriateness (Sharkey & Stafford, 1990).

Next, an awareness of this discrepancy draws attention to the target. Being the center of attention is a key situation that individuals find embarrassing, along with committing a faux pas, and threatening another's social identity (Sabini, Siepmann, Stein, & Meyerowitz, 2000). This attention highlights the threat to the target's desired identity in relation to others, another key element of inducing embarrassment. Singelis and Sharkey (1995) note the role of self-construal in embarrassment, or one's thoughts, feelings, and actions about the self as related to others. Those with higher interdependent self-construal show an increased susceptibility to embarrassment.

Finally, the presence of an audience, real or imagined, makes the individual aware that this discrepancy in self-presentation is visible to others. Most models of embarrassment, while addressing various causes, assume that an audience is a necessary condition for embarrassment (Manstead & Semin, 1981; Modigliani, 1971; Sugawara, 1992). Robbins and Parlavecchio's (2006) unwanted exposure model gets to the root of what makes any situation embarrassing: the revelation to an audience of something that one prefers to keep hidden. Embarrassment caused by others is particularly influenced by the perception of negative social evaluation (Withers & Sherblom, 2002), and by one's relationship to the audience (Singelis & Sharkey, 1995). Onlookers may even experience vicarious embarrassment when witnessing threats to another's social integrity (Müller-Pinzler, Rademacher, Paulus, & Krach, 2016).

In response, the individual will experience a feeling of embarrassment, characterized by both emotional and nonverbal responses. Embarrassment is emotionally unique from other negative emotions, such as shame or guilt (Keltner & Buswell, 1997). Embarrassment is also characterized by specific nonverbal responses, such as decreased eye contact (Modigliani, 1971), increased smiling (Edelmann & Hampson, 1981), speech disturbances (Edelmann & Hampson, 1979) and laughter (Fink & Walker, 1977; Kreifelts et al., 2014; Sharkey & Stafford, 1990). Once embarrassed, an individual will engage in "facework," or attempts to minimize the negative effects of the situation that caused embarrassment (Cupach & Metts, 1994), using a variety of protective and defensive communication strategies (Petronio, 1984). Response tactics include excuses, justifications, apologies, remediation, avoidance, aggression, mitigation, correction, and humor (Cho & Sillars, 2015; Fink & Walker, 1977; Metts & Cupach, 1989).

2.1. Embarrassment on Facebook

Edelmann's (1985) proposed process may play out similarly on Facebook. The effects of embarrassment on Facebook, however, may be exacerbated by the features it provides for self-presentation and content sharing. Individuals work to manage favorable impressions on Facebook as well as offline, engaging in selective self-presentation (Walther, 2007) by controlling what information is displayed to whom (Child, Duck, Andrews, Butauski, & Petronio, 2015; Christofides, Muise, & Desmarais, 2009). By protecting their information, users engage in communication boundary management, putting up a protective boundary to regulate the way they communicate to others (Petronio, 1991). For instance, high-intimacy disclosures are not considered appropriate when

publicly posted on Facebook (Bazarova, 2012). Individuals generally refrain from making such disclosures on Facebook, by self-censoring posts before they are made (Sleeper et al., 2013), or by using strategies such as "vague-bookings" (Child & Starcher, 2016). Yet, 23% of Facebook users have made posts they later regret because they revealed too much or the wrong kind of information (Wang, Leon, Norcie, Acquisti, & Cranor, 2011).

Facebook also enables users to share content such as photos or status updates about their contacts, including information those contacts may not have chosen to reveal about themselves. We refer to these as "other-generated disclosures," and they are important because they can reveal key information about individuals that comprises their identity, perhaps even more so than the content they have chosen to reveal or share about themselves (Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009). Sometimes this information may be in contrast to information users share themselves and could be embarrassing or "face-threatening" (Cupach & Metts, 1994).

Embarrassment due to face-threatening, other-generated disclosures on Facebook is not uncommon. About 21% of individuals report having been embarrassed by face-threatening posts made about them online by someone else (Best, Taylor, & Manktelow, 2015). This indicates that while individuals may manage their own privacy boundaries on the site, they do not necessarily coordinate these boundaries with those of their Facebook friends (Fox & Moreland, 2015). These face-threatening other-generated disclosures violate communication privacy boundaries, which can create turbulence in the relationship between the discloser and the target (Fox & Moreland), and induce significant negative affect (Chen, 2015), such as embarrassment. Thus, in terms of embarrassment, we predict that:

H1. A Facebook post that contains face-threatening information will cause more embarrassment than one which does not.

As noted in the detailed list above, it is common for people to experience a variety of nonverbal responses to embarrassment in face-to-face interactions. Less is known about these types of responses to embarrassment in mediated environments, where the target is not physically present with the person embarrassing them. While no one is present to see the responses, they may occur automatically. Therefore, based on strong evidence for nonverbal responses in other settings, we predict that:

H2. A face-threatening post will lead to significant perceptible changes in a) eye, b) mouth, c) head, and d) body movements, as well as e) vocalizations linked to embarrassment.

We predict that the embarrassment felt from face-threatening posts on Facebook will be due to three key elements in Edelmann's (1985) process: The post's content, disruption of the target's identity, and the audience. As a result, the target will engage in a variety of mitigation strategies to reduce the impact of the embarrassing post.

2.1.1. Embarrassing content

Previous research (Litt et al., 2014) indicates that embarrassment caused by other-generated face-threatening posts fall into one of three categories: norm violations, ideal self-presentation violations, and association effects. Norm violations present information that would be acceptable to a certain sub-group of the target's network (e.g., close friends), but not to another sub-group (e.g., parents), such as drinking behaviors. Ideal self-presentation violations include posts in which information shared detracts from the target's ideal self-presentation. Association effects are those in which the target is associated with others' actions that may embarrass them (e.g., posting a link on the target's page about a

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