Full length article

The positivity bias and prosocial deception on facebook

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ABSTRACT

Can the positivity bias, observed across various Social Network Sites (SNSs), predict the use of prosocial lies in a SNS such as Facebook? The positivity bias may be a product of politeness norms (i.e., positive face concern) that have influenced communication phenomena before these sites existed. In addition, positive face concern may also be affected by unconscious cues or primes that promote prosocial behavior on Facebook. We conducted an online experiment using current Facebook users to examine how positive face concern and surveillance primes affect prosocial lying in public and private Facebook contexts. Although positive face concern and publicness predicted the use of prosocial lying, positive face concern was not affected by the publicness and surveillance primes did not affect positive face concern or the use of prosocial lies in our study. This hints towards the nuance of positive face concern and the potential limitations of surveillance primes on prosocial lying behavior.

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1. Introduction

An important asymmetry of affect in how people post information on Social Networking Sites (SNSs) has been observed in many studies, with a bias towards posting positive emotions and successes rather than personal struggles and failures (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014; Tobin, Vanman, Verreynne, & Saeri, 2015; Utz, 2015). This bias potentially stems from users applying politeness norms (Brown & Levinson, 1987) to their Facebook posts (Georgalou, 2016). For example, Bryant and Marmo (2012) found that refraining from posting disrespectful content was one of the norms that users believe is important to follow on Facebook. McLaughlin and Vitak (2012) found that Facebook users think they should avoid publicly posting insulting or offensive content about other users on the site. These findings partially explain the observed positivity bias on SNSs such as Facebook; users believe their posts should be polite and positive rather than rude and disrespectful. These findings also suggest that users may resort to posting a white or prosocial lie in order to avoid posting rude or disrespectful content on SNSs such as Facebook. We posit that aspects of a SNS's design and visual layout likely contribute to the observed positivity bias on Facebook, and seek to explore how

politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), affordances (Boyd, 2010), and surveillance primes or subtle cues that promote prosocial behavior (Bateson, Nettle, & Roberts, 2006), potentially predict prosocial lying on Facebook. We will then describe an online experiment designed to uncover factors which affect prosocial lying on Facebook, followed by a description of the findings. Finally, we will discuss the theoretical implications of our study, the limitations of our methodology, and offer recommendations for future research.

2. Literature review

In the 1950s, Goffman developed and defined "face theory" which depicts how and why people behave politely versus bluntly in public versus private interactions.

Brown and Levinson (1987) built upon Goffman (1955) work and distinguished between different kinds of face. "Positive face" focuses on how interaction partners work together to uphold each other's desired identity before, during, and after their interaction. Interaction partners are expected to be especially mindful of each other's positive face when they perceive that what they say will affect their partner's positive face beyond the interaction itself. For example, if Amanda says something positive-face threatening to her friend Brandy (e.g., "Your haircut looks awful"), Amanda undermines Brandy's positive face as an attractive and stylish woman during the interaction. Should Amanda's blunt comment spread throughout her social network, Brandy could accrue more negative

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judgments about her appearance from her peers. It is this concern for an interaction partner's positive face that may explain why people engage in positive facework generally and on SNSs, such as Facebook. Moreover, there are a few key Facebook affordances that may heighten positive face concern and increase the use of pro-social communication on the site: identifiability and publicness.

Identifiability is one of the key affordances inherent in Facebook's design that may partially explain the positivity bias or the high degree of positive facework observed on the site (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014; Tobin, et al., 2015; Utz, 2015). Affordances are the perceived functions and utilities of an object (Gibson, 1986). Facebook's design forces users to create a profile using "the name they use in real life" (Facebook, 2016), linking their Facebook profile to the identity known to their family, friends, colleagues, boss, acquaintances, etc. Facebook also encourages users to connect to these same offline contacts on the site itself. These site connections or "friends" comprise a user's Facebook "friend" network. This means that when two users interact with each other on the site, they can see who they are interacting with and be reminded of their relationship to that person. According to Bazarova and Choi (2014) functional approach, "SNS affordances amplify and make more visible a set of strategic concerns and motivations that shape self-disclosure characteristics" on these sites (p. 635). According to this approach, the perception of being identifiable activates relationship goals when friends are interacting with each other on Facebook, and prompts them to post positive-face oriented messages to or about each other on these sites.

Another Facebook affordance that may heighten positive face concern is publicness or the perception that others can view a post that is displayed on their own or another user's Timeline. The Facebook Timeline is a history of content that includes what a user has posted, or others have posted about or to them, on the site that is made accessible to their "friend" network (depending on their privacy settings). When a user posts something on their own or another user's timeline, it alerts each other's "friends" of the post, increasing the likelihood their "friends" will see and evaluate their post. Given that users and their "friends" are identifiable on the site, public posts heighten positive face concern due to the perception that some or all of their "friends" on the site could see their public posts coupled with their identifying information (e.g., birth name). It is akin to Amanda telling Brandy, "Your haircut looks awful" in front of their mutual friends, colleagues, acquaintances etc. at a large in-person gathering. The only difference is that people can usually see whether or not they know anyone within earshot when interacting FtF (i.e., face-to-face), while on Facebook, it is unclear when their "friends" will see and evaluate their public posts (Litt, 2012). As a result, users strive to ensure that their public posts support each other's positive face on the site just as they would in any other public and identifiable environment. This leads us to expect that:

H1. Users are more likely to be concerned about their friend's positive face when interacting with them publicly on Facebook.

Identifiability and publicness should promote communication behaviors meant to preserve an interaction partners' positive face when communicating on Facebook. These behaviors include compliments, social support, and even prosocial deception.

2.1. Prosocial deception

Although studies have highlighted the potential negative interpersonal effects of deception (Brandt, Miller, & Hocking, 1982; Pollack & Bosse, 2014), several other studies have demonstrated how deception can be used to uphold social norms and preserve relationships (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998; Levine & Schweitzer, 2014;

Levine, Kim, & Hamel, 2010). The crucial difference between the former and latter type of lie is the intent of the lie itself. Lies are "messages knowingly transmitted by a sender to foster a false belief or conclusion by the receiver" (Burgoon, Buller, Guerrero, Afifi, & Feldman, 1996, p. 51). Prosocial lies are "false statements made with the intention of misleading and benefitting" the receiver (Levine & Schweitzer, 2014, p. 108). It is the intent to benefit that determines a prosocial from an antisocial lie. In situations where a friend asks a question that cannot be answered truthfully without undermining the friend's positive face, a prosocial lie is told in hopes it will preserve the friend's positive face.

Levine et al. (2010) tested this premise by asking participants to imagine themselves in scenarios where they were either motivated or not motivated to tell a prosocial lie. For example, participants were asked to imagine themselves in a scenario where their friend gets a new haircut and then asks them if they like the haircut. Half the participants were told they did not like the haircut (deception condition) and the other half were told they did like the haircut (control condition). Levine et al. (2010) found that participants composed more prosocial lies in the deception condition. Although Levine et al. (2010) did not assess what motivated these lies, it is likely that their participants composed prosocial lies in order to preserve the friend's positive face. This leads us to predict that:

The tendency to use prosocial lies to preserve a friend's positive face should persist on Facebook when users perceive that they are identifiable and their interaction is publicly accessible. For example, imagine Brandy publicly posts a picture of her new haircut on Facebook and asks Amanda what she thinks of her haircut on the site instead of FtF. Now imagine that Amanda does not like Brandy's new haircut, but given the fact that they are both identifiable and Brandy made their conversation publicly visible on the site, Amanda is prompted to be mindful of Brandy's positive face and will likely post a prosocial lie (e.g., "You look great!") in order to preserve Brandy's positive face both on and off the site. Therefore, we expect that:

2.2. Surveillance primes

In addition to publicness, more subtle variations in Facebook's design may unconsciously activate positive face goals and prompt prosocial lying on these sites. Primes are implicit cues that are embedded in a person's environment that can unconsciously affect their social behavior (Aarts & Dijksterhuis, 2003; Kay, Wheeler, Bargh, & Ross, 2004; Peña & Blackburn, 2013). Although there is some debate concerning whether the effect of primes is wholly unconscious (Newell & Shanks, 2014), there are others who contend that some priming effects are robust and warrant further examination (Pashler, Coburn, & Harris, 2012; Stafford, 2013). We attempted to uncover how primes that are embedded in Facebook's visual layout might affect users' posting behavior on the site.

One of Facebook's main sources of revenue comes from sponsors who pay to have their advertisements visually displayed on the site (Curran, Graham, & Temple, 2011). These ads include images that may unconsciously influence posting behavior on the site. For example, Buchanan (2015) examined whether violent images embedded in Facebook ads would prime aggressiveness. He found that the participants that were given the violent prime recalled seeing violent words on the Facebook page more than participants who did not get the violent prime. It is important to note that only the images varied between the prime and control conditions, meaning the violent prime may have activated thoughts and words associated with aggression and made these words more cognitively accessible during the recall task. Although Buchanan (2015) did not examine communication behavior, the ability of ads to affect the cognitive accessibility of behavioral constructs might in turn