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To tweet or ‘subtweet’?: Impacts of social networking post directness and valence on interpersonal impressions

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 December 2015

Received in revised form

6 May 2016

Accepted 17 May 2016

Keywords:

Subtweet

Face theory

Facebook

Twitter

Interpersonal impressions

SNS politeness

SNS positivity

ABSTRACT

Subtweeting denotes using an SNS post to talk about another user behind his or her back in a public forum. This study investigates how others in the online environment view subtweeters and their messages. The experiment involved manipulating SNS posts in terms of directness of reference to another user (tweets versus subtweets) and valence of information (face-threatening versus face-giving messages). Results demonstrated that, overall, subtweets were perceived as lower in message competence, which led to less favorable interpersonal impressions of their sources. However, directness and valence interacted. Subtweeting led to less favorable impressions of face-giving posts, but more favorable impressions of face-threatening posts. Sources of direct, face-giving posts were rated most favorably. We present implications for Face Theory and politeness, and practical guidance for SNS users.

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1. Introduction

Increasingly, people use social networking sites (SNSs) to create, maintain, and transform their relationships and identities (e.g., Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). A number of interesting discourse practices, some of which are unique to computer-mediated communication (CMC) and some of which are heavily anchored in face-to-face interaction (FtF), have emerged in the past several years. Among those appearing relatively unique to the CMC context is *subtweeting*, or using an SNS post to indirectly, but obviously, refer to another user by talking behind his or her back in a public forum (Love, 2012; Parkinson, 2014).

Previous research employing Social Information Processing Theory (SIP; Walther, 1992; 1993) has identified a number of online cues upon which individuals rely in order to form interpersonal impressions of other people. Most of this research has held steady a user's SNS posts (statuses, micro-updates) in order to study the influence of cues generated by other people (e.g., the attractiveness of one's Facebook friends; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim,

Westerman, & Tong, 2008) or the system (e.g., the size of one's Klout score; Edwards, Spence, Gentile, Edwards, & Edwards, 2013) on perceptions of the user. Fewer studies have focused on how user-generated cues, such as message features of one's SNS posts, may influence interpersonal impressions. A long-running research agenda on politeness in FtF interaction suggests a general preference for the public images of individuals who are sensitive to the face concerns of their conversational partners (Brown & Levinson, 1987/1978; Lim & Bowers, 1991; O'Keefe & Shepherd, 1987, 1989; Witt & Kerssen-Griep, 2011). Yet, the CMC environment and unique affordances of social media present challenges to the traditional politeness framework in at least two ways. First, social media affords two-way interaction with an audience, or many-to-many communication (Hogan & Quan-Haase, 2010). Specifically, SNSs involve multiple concurrent “speakers” and “hearers,” each with positive and negative face needs that may be simultaneously, but differentially threatened and/or promoted through a single speech act. Subtweeting is illustrative because the practice has dual addressees: both the individual *about whom* one is talking, and the audience of social network members *to whom* one is talking. Second, the technological affordances associated with online communication create an environment that favors efficiency (Walther & Parks, 2002). Yet, in FtF interaction, politeness may be

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regarded simply as a deviation from maximally efficient communication (Brown & Levinson, 1987/1978). Because the SNS context may demonstrate preference for directness or clarity of expression over sensitivity to face concerns, it is important to link online practices like subtweeting to the specific interpersonal impressions they foster.

Therefore, the purpose of this project is to determine how subtweeters are seen online by others. Specifically, this study uses Face Theory (Goffman, 1967) to experimentally examine the effects of SNS post directness and valence of reference about another person on evaluations of the message and interpersonal impressions of the communicator.

1.1. Communication and social networking sites

Much current communication research focuses on internet-based social networking as a productive context for understanding the role of online communication in social interaction. An SNS is a “networked communication platform in which participants 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-level data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site” (Ellison & Boyd, 2013, p. 158, italics in original). Research conducted across multiple social science disciplines has demonstrated SNS communication is consequential to users, with the ability to impact outcomes including loneliness, social support, and overall happiness (see review by Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012). Communication researchers are particularly interested in SNSs as contexts in which users form and manage impressions, and develop and maintain relationships (Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008). An important goal of research is to link SNS messages (understood as impression-management activities) to the specific interpersonal impressions they foster.

1.2. Subtweeting

Subtweeting refers to “subliminal tweeting,” or posting about someone on an SNS without actually mentioning his or her name (urbandictionary.com, 2015; wiki.answers.com, 2015). Whether appearing as Facebook status updates or 140-character Tweets, subtweets are predominantly used to express negative affect or information about others. More rarely, they may be used to offer gratitude or praise for an unnamed user (Friedman, 2014). Although subtweeting technically specifies messages sent on Twitter, Facebook *vague-bookings* is an analogous, but somewhat broader, practice, which may involve stealth insults or more general bids for attention through post obscurity (Parkinson, 2014).

In colloquial terms, “talking behind someone’s back” is nothing new. Allport (1954) coined the term “antilocution” to refer to negative verbal remarks against a person, group or community, which are not addressed directly to the target. The negative impact, especially for prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping was Allport’s early focus. Yet, there is something new in broadcasting information about another unnamed user to a large digital network that also includes that user. Not surprisingly, some parent groups have identified subtweeting as a form of teen and tween cyberbullying that is “particularly difficult to pin down and combat” (Woda, 2014). Moreover, subtweeting may damage not only the target of antilocution, but also its source. By publicly insulting or complaining about another user without revealing his or her identity, those who subtweet may garner poor impressions for their lack of directness (passive aggressive, vague, attention-seeking), negativity (bitter, anti-social), or both.

1.3. Online impressions

Previous research has demonstrated that individuals use SNSs to engage in self-presentation behavior and to form and manage interpersonal impressions on a broad array of dimensions (e.g., Gosling, Gaddis, & Vazire, 2007; Tong et al., 2008; Walther et al., 2008). Users engage in both explicit and implicit impression management activity. SNS profiles, for instance, are composed of self-generated information about how users perceive themselves and wish to be perceived by others. Status updates (or, in platform agnostic terms, “micro-posts”) are another pervasive impression management activity (Barash, Ducheneaut, Isaacs, & Bellotti, 2010). The impressions formed online may be positive or negative (Walther et al., 2008) and people often are unaware of how they are perceived on the basis of their SNS impression-management efforts (Barash et al., 2010; Gosling et al., 2007).

Previous research has demonstrated impressions are based on a number of SNS cues including a user’s choice of music (Liu, 2007), comments made by friends (Walther et al., 2008), number of friends (Tong et al., 2008), physical attractiveness of user’s friends (Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009), the nature and amount of personal data revealed (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2007), and profile information (Donath, 2007). In addition to these cues, the degree to which users demonstrate attentiveness to the face needs of others may also influence how they are seen.

2. Theory

2.1. Face theory

Following Goffman (1959), SNS micro-posts may be understood as performances meant to be evaluated by an audience of friends or followers. Through their messages and other SNS activities, users seek to create and maintain *face*, which refers to one’s public identity. Face is “an image of self, delineated in terms of approved social attributes” (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). Brown and Levinson (1987/1978) extended Goffman’s account to describe two universal face concerns. *Positive face* is the projected personality and “the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of” (p. 61), whereas *negative face* is “freedom of action and freedom from imposition” (p. 58).

In interaction, an individual’s face is always at stake. Face can only be granted or withheld by others, so it is in everyone’s best interest to protect one another’s faces. Acts that jeopardize another’s desire to be approved of or to act unimpeded are considered *face-threatening acts* (FTAs; Brown & Levinson, 1987/1978, p. 60). Acts that promote, uphold, or sanction another’s honor, or presented identity, are known as *face-giving acts* (FGAs; Ting-Toomey & Cole, 1990). Speakers develop strategies to attend to the face-wants of others as they guard their own faces from threat (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Cupach & Metts, 1994). This *facework* is comprised of the communicative strategies one uses to enact self-face and to uphold, support, or challenge another person’s face (Ting-Toomey, 1988).

Both online and offline, people are motivated to be seen in a positive light. Research has demonstrated that impressions are “given” and “given-off” in the context of social media (e.g., Barash et al., 2010) and that Facebook identities tend to be highly socially desirable and difficult to attain offline (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). SNSs are interactional spaces in which impressions may be mismanaged as well as managed, and faces may be threatened as well as upheld. Face Theory is relevant to the current investigation in two primary ways. First, SNS users seek to manage their own impressions, or “make face,” through their online message behaviors. Second, the messages posted may have

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