



The self on the Net: The joint effect of self-construal and public self-consciousness on positive self-presentation in online social networking among South Korean college students



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ABSTRACT

In the present research, two studies examined how self-construal and public self-consciousness jointly influence positive self-presentation in online social networking. Participants' independent and interdependent self-construals were either measured (Study 1, $N = 137$) or manipulated with priming (Study 2, $N = 120$). Public self-consciousness was measured with self-report ratings in both studies. Participants self-reported their tendency (Study 1) and behavioral intention (Study 2) to engage in positive self-presentation on Facebook. Both studies were conducted with college student Facebook users in South Korea. Results from both studies demonstrated no main effect of self-construal but a significant interaction between self-construal and public self-consciousness. Specifically, the negative association between interdependent self-construal and positive self-presentation on Facebook was significant among those low in public self-consciousness; the association became less prominent for those higher in public self-consciousness (Study 1). When self-construal was experimentally manipulated, interdependent self-construal priming, as compared with independent self-construal priming, resulted in lower intention to engage in positive self-presentation, particularly among those low in public self-consciousness (Study 2). The implications of the findings were discussed.

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1. Introduction

With their growing popularity, social network sites (SNSs) have attracted considerable attention for the central role they play in self-expression and relationship management (Fox, Osborn, & Warber, 2014; Utz, 2015). Notably, research on Facebook has demonstrated that its users often engage in *positive self-presentation*, selectively presenting positive aspects of the self over negative aspects (Chou & Edge, 2012; Kim & Lee, 2011; Lee-Won, Shim, Joo, & Park, 2014) and disclosing positive emotions (Bazarova, Taft, Choi, & Cosley, 2013; Qiu, Lin, Leung, & Tov, 2012; Reinecke & Trepte, 2014).

The positivity bias in self-presentation on SNSs has been recognized as an emerging phenomenon that may potentially

create a psychological conflict between the need for expressing authentic feelings (which can be often negative) and the perceived norms for positivity, particularly among people with relatively low levels of well-being (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014). Given the possible adverse social consequences of the positivity bias in self-presentation on SNSs, identifying the role of key variables in generating differences in positive self-presentation can make an important contribution to the literature. However, relatively little research has been conducted on social and psychological predictors of positive self-presentation in online social networking. Lack of this knowledge may prohibit our understanding of the implications and underlying mechanisms of this self-presentational tendency.

As an attempt to fill the gap in the literature, the present research examined two primary factors pertaining to individuals' perspective of the self that have been shown to play a vital role in self-presentation both in person and online: (1) *self-construal*, which refers to the extent to which people perceive themselves to be independent from (versus interdependent with) others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994), and (2) *public self-consciousness*,

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which refers to the attention to the public aspects of the self (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975; Scheier & Carver, 1985). Both of these variables concern the extent to which individuals relate themselves to others, and, therefore, may offer a key to understanding of why and how some people in certain contexts would strive for positive self-presentation on SNSs while others would not. Noting the prevalence of positive self-presentation on Facebook observed in past research (Bazarova et al., 2013; Kim & Lee, 2011; Lee-Won et al., 2014; Qiu et al., 2012), we examined the role of self-construal and public self-consciousness in the context of Facebook use. Equipped with the essential affordances of SNSs for users' self-presentation (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Toma & Hancock, 2013) and often perceived as a socially rewarding means for self-disclosure (Forest & Wood, 2012), Facebook offers ample features and opportunities – such as status updates, wall posts, and photo-sharing – for positive self-presentation (Bazarova et al., 2013; Chou & Edge, 2012).

This research consisted of two studies with different methodologies. In Study 1, we conducted a cross-sectional survey that measured independent and interdependent self-construals as individual differences, and examined their role in positive self-presentation in conjunction with public self-consciousness. In Study 2, to replicate the findings from Study 1 and establish causality, we conducted an experiment in which self-construal was manipulated with a priming technique. Both studies were conducted with college-age Facebook users in South Korea, where Facebook is showing a rapid growth with more than 14 million monthly active users (An, 2015).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Positive self-presentation in online social networking

Positive self-presentation is one form of behavioral self-enhancement (Hepper, Sedikides, & Cai, 2013). Individuals have general tendencies of engaging in strategic behaviors to construct and maintain a positive self-image and impressions (Goffman, 1959). Especially in the context of computer-mediated communication (CMC), interactants can engage in selective and positive self-presentation with relative ease by taking advantage of technological affordances, such as editability and asynchronicity (Walther, 2007), which enable them to carefully and selectively craft messages in presenting themselves to others (Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008).

The strategic and positive self-presentation behaviors on SNSs characterized as *anonymous* (opposite to “anonymous”) – such as Facebook – (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008) should be distinguished from inaccurate or deceptive self-presentation (Toma & Hancock, 2013). Unlike self-presentation that occurs among complete strangers in anonymous CMC settings (Toma et al., 2008), self-presentation on nonymous SNSs is often performed with audience primarily composed of a profile holder's offline connections or people who are “already a part of” a profile holder's “extended social network” (boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211). Therefore, positive self-presentation on SNSs should be understood as self-presentational behavior that more or less lies within the boundary of “positively skewed forms of authenticity” (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014, p. 97). Users engage in mostly authentic self-presentation, but they tend to favor positivity in self-presentation over negativity, adhering to social norms and friendship rules that govern interactions on SNSs (Bazarova, 2012; Forest & Wood, 2012; Qiu et al., 2012).

Whereas past studies have contributed to conceptualizing the positivity bias in self-presentation on Facebook and illustrating the pervasiveness of the phenomenon, relatively less research has been

conducted about which social and psychological factors influence positive self-presentation in online social networking (e.g., Bazarova et al., 2013; Lee-Won et al., 2014). To further research on psychological factors associated with the sense of self and positive self-presentation in online social networking, we attended to self-construal and public self-consciousness. Independent and interdependent self-construals have been identified as factors that can change the nature of self-presentational efforts (Lalwani & Shavitt, 2009), and public self-consciousness has been found to play an important role in behavioral regulation of self-presentation (Doherty & Schlenker, 1991). Being pertinent to personal understanding or perception of the self, these variables are likely to influence the ways in which people construct their public self-image on SNSs (Kim, Kim, & Nam, 2010).

2.2. The role of self-construal in positive self-presentation

Scholars have maintained that the self can be construed and conceptually represented in multiple ways. Self-construal is grounded, most importantly, in one's understanding of oneself in relation to other people, and two primary types of self-construal stem from the self-understanding: independent and interdependent (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). The independent self-construal involves a view of oneself as being autonomous and distinct from other people, whereas the interdependent self-construal refers to viewing oneself as a part of larger social relationships (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). While the self-construal construct originated from cross-cultural research on individualism and collectivism (e.g., Levine et al., 2003; Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002), it is now widely accepted that individuals have both independent and interdependent views of the self and people within the same culture may differ in terms of the relative salience of each type of self-construal (Singelis, 1994). Thus, individual-level (as opposed to culture-level) self-construal reveals the basic, albeit conflicting, human motives for both individuation and connectedness (Pilarska, 2014).

Individual-level self-construals are related to different motivations (Komissarouk & Nadler, 2014) and activate distinct sets of self-presentation goals and behaviors in social relationships. Individuals characterized by independent self-construal are driven by the motivation to self-enhance (Taylor & Sherman, 2008), whereas those characterized by interdependent self-construal are guided by the motivation to seek harmony with others (Komissarouk & Nadler, 2014; Oetzel, 1998). Accordingly, independent self-construal is associated with presenting oneself in a positive and favorable light, increasing the likelihood for one to be subject to self-enhancing biases (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999; Lalwani, Shrum, & Chiu, 2009). By contrast, interdependent self-construal tends to promote self-presentation behaviors in normatively appropriate ways, decreasing the likelihood for people to engage in explicitly positive or boastful self-presentation that could be detrimental to social harmony (Kurman & Sriram, 1997; Lee & Park, 2011).

Particularly in the context of online social networking, where users constantly have to make choices about whether or not to engage in self-presentation behavior (e.g., status updates and photograph-sharing) and how to construct one's public self-image for their actual and imagined audiences (Marwick & boyd, 2011), the sense of self in regards to the relationship between the self and a given social environment cannot but play a crucial role. A few studies have examined the role of independent and interdependent self-construals in self-presentation on SNSs at the individual level (e.g., Chen & Marcus, 2012; Kim et al., 2010; Long & Zhang, 2014). These studies have not generated a coherent set of findings. One study conducted with college students in the United States did not

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