Online authenticity, popularity, and the "Real Me" in a microblogging environment

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current study is to explicate the theoretical structure of online authenticity and to reveal the relationship between the need for popularity and online authenticity. A survey-based research was conducted with 573 randomly selected active users of "Me2day" a popular microblogging service in South Korea. Drawing on a representative sample, we tested the discriminant validity of online authenticity. As predicted, the need for popularity was a significant predictor of online authenticity. Exploratory factor analysis followed by confirmatory factor analysis validated two factors that underlie microblogging users' online authenticity: (1) sense of real me (SRME); and (2) expression of real me (ERME). Microbloggers with a higher need for popularity had lower SRME and ERME than those with a lower need for popularity. Age and gender were negatively correlated with both need for popularity and online authenticity. Younger microbloggers had a higher need for popularity and lower SRME and ERME than older microbloggers. Male microbloggers had higher need for popularity and lower SRME and ERME than female microbloggers. Theoretical and practical implications for future studies are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The thinking on the subject of what it is to be real or authentic as a person has occupied philosophers for millennia, and every person struggles with authenticity when producing messages that reflect what they are really thinking, and who they really are. The computer mediated, or online environments of social media platforms offer new contexts for presenting a self that is less than authentic. The desire or need to be popular and to say things that are well received by one's (perceived) audience(s) may encourage people to produce messages and enact identities/personas that may not reflect that person's authentic self. Marwick and Boyd addressed the tensions Twitter users may experience when they simultaneously want to manage impressions of themselves while following a "social norm of personal authenticity" (Marwick & Boyd, 2011b, p. 11). A potential disparity and tensions between one's authentic self in the real world and one's online presence has been increasingly noted in various feature articles in the media. This is an important issue because one's authentic online

presence, like their offline enactment of authenticity, can have significant effects on their psychological well-being (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014), and their reputation (Dumitrica, 2014), and on factors including online narcissism (McKinney, Kelly, & Duran, 2012). The enactment of authenticity becomes particularly salient in a microblogging environment where users involved in real-time conversation with their imagined audience can possibly fail to balance "the desire to maintain positive impressions with the need to seem true or authentic to others" (Marwick & Boyd, 2011b, p. 11).

The theoretical and practical implications of online authenticity are significant, even profound, yet research on online authenticity is still in a rudimentary stage. Research on online authenticity is hampered, in part, by the lack of a valid and parsimonious tool used to measure a validated construct. Thus the first research goal reported here is to articulate and validate the construct of "online authenticity." Building on contemporary research in online authenticity (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Lenton, Bruder, Slabu, & Sedikides, 2013; Reinecke & Trepte, 2014), we have proposed a concept of online authenticity in two related but distinct dimensions—sense of real me (SRME) and expression of real me (ERME).

The second goal is to describe our efforts to develop, test and validate an online authenticity measurement tool. The proposed

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two-factor model of online authenticity is assessed with the measuring items of the authenticity scale (Gillath, Sesko, Shaver, & Chun, 2010; Lopez & Rice, 2006; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008).

The third goal is to use the online authenticity instrument to explore and to test the relationship between the demands of and for online authenticity and the desire to be popular or famous. Specifically, we examine how microblogging users' motivation to be famous online affects their authentic online presence. To accomplish this, a survey of a representative sample of a large Korean social media portal was conducted to test a structural equation model that shows the relationship between the need for popularity and online authenticity, while controlling for microblogging use behaviors and the composition of followers.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The importance of online authenticity in microblogging environment

Microblogging platforms continue to grow, functioning as an outlet for personal publishing, and as a site where social networking occurs, and with them, the need for authenticity enters a new moment. Authenticity, trustworthiness, reliability and credibility – ethos – as Aristotle called it, is a social tool, and the manner in which one's ethos is used and assessed in any context matters. Individuals, institutions and organizational brands may actively seek to manage and maintain a particular representation of themselves, while experts of social media emphasize that establishing authenticity is a key to being a successful communicator in microblogging environments. In his interview with NBC's "Today Show," Twitter CEO Dick Costolo asserts that the success of Twitter management depends on what kind of person the microblogger is and how they speak (Kim, 2013); highlighting the importance of the true self and authentic communication behavior. Chris Cancialosi, a leadership communication consultant, aptly explained that the key component of authenticity on microblogging sites are self-awareness, authentic behavior, and self-regulation (Cancialosi, 2015). To be authentic, therefore, microbloggers need to be aware of who they are and align their behavior with their values that constitute their true self (Cancialosi, 2015).

Although the importance of authenticity in the microblogging environment is increasingly addressed by communication professionals, little published research has offered solid conceptualization or validation on which a new measure can be developed. To fill that gap, this study attempted to explain how traditional conceptualization efforts of "authenticity" can shed light on the current discussion on online authenticity by next presenting potential conceptual models for online authenticity.

2.2. Authenticity in human communication

Previous research has identified two aspects of authenticity— that is, (1) trait authenticity, and (2) state authenticity (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010; Gillath et al., 2010; Kernis & Goldman, 2005; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Lenton et al., 2013). Like the two sides of the same coin, both are the necessary elements that constitute authenticity. Kernis and Goldman (2006) explain that trait authenticity "reflects self-understanding," whereas state authenticity "involves behaviors that are rooted in self-knowledge" (p. 292).

The trait perspective of authenticity conceives authenticity as "a disposition toward self-congruent behavior" (Lenton et al., 2013, p. 277). The trait-based approach to authenticity stresses the importance of one's awareness of their personal values, beliefs and preferences on which their actions can be based (Lenton et al., 2013).

In contrast, the state perspective of authenticity is conceived to explain one's trait- or value-behavior consistency while rejecting others' influence (Lenton et al., 2013). This state authenticity concerns the momentary sense of one's self-concordant behavior in the expression of values, beliefs or opinions (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010). In terms of Lenton et al. (2013), this perspective of authenticity focuses on the "momentary access to one's self system" (p. 277). State authenticity aims to know within-person variation of one's genuine self at a given moment when the actions were observed (Fleeson & Wilt, 2010).

This behavioral aspect of authenticity has been noted by several researchers. Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, and Ilardi (1997) defined authenticity as "behavior that is phenomenally experienced as being authored by the self" (p. 1381), and argued that individuals feel most authentic "when they act with a full sense of choice and self-expression" (p. 1381). This aspect of authenticity requires the users to behave "in accord with one's values, preferences, and needs as opposed to acting "falsely" merely to please others or to attain rewards or avoid punishments" (Kernis & Goldman, 2006, p. 298). Cranton (2004) defined authenticity as "the expression of genuine self in the community" (p. 7), and Tisdell (2003) explained authenticity as having a sense of acting or expressing one's genuine self as opposed to oneself that is being defined by others' expectations. Sheldon et al. (1997) note that being authentic in expression is a behavioral component or behavioral manifestation of authenticity. In this sense of authenticity, people experience inauthenticity when they are constrained by the circumstances of a given situation (Gillath et al., 2010; Sheldon et al., 1997) when they are not free to express themselves as they wish.

Authenticity is also understood by emphasizing behavioral consistency in a relationship context or in the expectations of others on oneself. Sheldon et al. (1997) argue that within-person variation in behavior could occur when individuals manifest different styles in different roles. Thus, being authentic does not demand that one be rigid or inflexible. Rather, one's enactment of authenticity is a reflection and manifestation of who we are, of who we are with, and across the contexts in which we find ourselves.

Taken as a whole, authenticity can be understood in two dimensions—a trait dimension and a state dimension. Gardner et al. (2005) differentiated the two dimensions of authenticity in this way: "... authenticity involves both *owning* one's personal experiences (values, thoughts, emotions, and beliefs) and *acting* in accordance with one's true self (expressing what you really think and believe and behaving accordingly)" (pp.344–345, italics in original).

Current literature includes multiple, uncoordinated attempts at both the definition and measurement of authenticity, with the two-dimensional definition of authenticity having been validated. Lopez and Rice (2006) developed and validated measures for the construct of authenticity, derived from 37 items on the conception of relationship-based authenticity. Lopez and Rice (2006) identified a set of 24 items that loaded on two factors: (a) unacceptability of deception and (b) intimate risk taking. The first factor, unacceptability of deception, can be interpreted as one's cognizance of, and willingness to accept, a deceptive self. This factor of authenticity is applied to "felt authenticity" that reflects one's true, genuine self. By contrast, the second factor, intimate risk taking, concerns one's willingness to express oneself to relational partners, even at the risk of hurting the relationship. This is characteristic of the expression of one's true self, and is related to one's standing in a relationship, or need for popularity or acceptance.

Another attempt to develop an instrument to assess authenticity was made by Gillath et al. (2010). They used the "authenticity inventory" composed of 45 items, which was designed to assess