



Relational transgressions on social networking sites: Individual, interpersonal, and contextual explanations for dyadic strain and communication rules change



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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites have demonstrated considerable utility to Internet users who wish to form or maintain interpersonal relationships online, but the qualities of these Internet platforms can also give rise to negative interactions between contacts. Perceptible relational problems, such as strain and changes to relational rules, originate from three commonly experienced transgressions on social networking sites: having a friend request declined or ignored, having a public message or identification tag deleted, and issues related to Top Friends applications. This investigation examines factors that contribute to the experience of relational problems following the three most common relational transgressions over social networking sites. The findings reveal that self-esteem, relational satisfaction, and publicness of the event, moderated by network esteem, affect the magnitude of the relational problems.

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1. Introduction

New media have challenged the constraints of time and space associated with in-person communication. Despite the numerous benefits of these communication technologies, their use is accompanied by some measure of risk. Since its inception, the Internet has been branded inescapably by the small proportion of negative experiences encountered by its users. These interpretably antisocial events include cyberbullying (Tokunaga, 2010), cyberstalking (Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002), and the sexual solicitation of minors over the Internet (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2010). Beyond the more global cybercrimes that have been reported, negative online encounters can be experienced at more local levels within interpersonal and group dynamics. Zadro, Williams, and Richardson (2004), for instance, found that ostracism in an Internet game had profound negative effects on one's self-concept. Unpleasant encounters can also arise out of other communication technologies where the rules of engagement are not explicitly articulated, such as social networking sites (Tokunaga, 2011).

Social networking sites, defined as Internet platforms that allow people to create and maintain profiles, construct social links with others, and navigate the links formed through the Web (boyd & Ellison, 2007), have become an important tool used by individuals

of all ages to keep in touch with others (Ellison, Lampe, & Steinfield, 2009). The ability to develop new connections and maintain existing relationships have led to the growing popularity of these platforms among youths and adults. In 2009, 73% of teens and 47% of adults who had access to the Internet reportedly used social networking sites (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2010). These Web-based services reduce the obstacles of social interactions and support relationships that would not otherwise exist. New members are attracted to these sites each day because they offer a unique opportunity for bridging and bonding social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007).

The potential of social media to support connections in real time has been somewhat eclipsed by recent evidence of personal and social problems borne out of their use. For instance, interpersonal conflict can originate on social networking sites from the receipt of unwanted or inappropriate messages, having personal information disseminated to nonfriends, and misinterpreting publicly posted messages (Stern & Taylor, 2007). These behaviors commonly surface on social networking sites because their interactional norms are not explicitly stated and vary widely across users (Tokunaga, 2011). Hurt, strain, and other interpersonal challenges are byproducts of these negative events, which are interpreted as acts of negligence or impoliteness (Kim & Yun, 2007). It is important to examine these events further to ascertain what individual, relational, and contextual conditions might signal larger relational problems following the impolite or negligent acts.

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1.1. Common relational transgressions over social networking sites

The characteristics of social media can serve to both help and hurt users' interactions. The novelty of social networking sites, the implicitness of the norms governing social interactions, and the number of new members who join each day collectively contribute to some negative experiences. Tokunaga (2011) analyzed responses to open-ended questions asking university students to recount an episode on social networking sites that strained their relationship with another user. The thematic analysis of the responses produced the three most common relational transgressions, which he termed "negative events", encountered on these platforms. The three transgressions derived from the content analysis are having a friend request denied or ignored, the deletion of publicly posted messages or identification tags from pictures, and issues with Top Friends applications. In the following sections, these transgressions are explained in more detail.

1.2. Friend request denied or ignored

Friends are an important and inextricable component of the social networking aspect of social media. The term "friends" on these sites is used in a nontraditional sense in that it can refer to relationships that range from intimate to very distal connections (boyd, 2008). To locate friends, individuals can search through a database of other registered users or review recommendations for possible friends offered by some social networking sites (Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008). After locating potential connections, users must initiate a request to be a part of the other's online social network. At times, people elect to decline or ignore friend requests. Although no formal notices of rejected requests are sent to the requestor, boyd (2006) explains that "the sender can infer a negative response if the request does not result in their pages being linked" (para 26). Tokunaga (2011) found that strain can be experienced by those who had their friend request ignored or declined. Because of this, many users summarily accept others as friends despite weak connections; rejecting or ignoring requests is an awkward process with significant social repercussions (boyd, 2004).

1.3. Public posts deleted or identification tags on photographs removed

Another important component of social networking sites is the message boards on which friends can post public comments. These message boards, which have been called "the wall", "comments", and "testimonials", are considered public domain in which interested third parties can view the message exchanges. Walther et al. (2008) suggested that although unfavorable messages posted by others appear on owners' profiles, they "tend not to remove friends' posting from their profiles. Doing so is possible but defeats the spirit of Facebook's very utility and implicitly challenges the rules of friendship" (p. 30).

Identification tags placed on photographs or notes can also be removed by the other party who is tagged. Individuals may at times choose to disassociate themselves from pictures they find unflattering; the removal of these identification tags acts as a form of impression management. Other reasons exist for removing an identification tag. For instance, the picture or note may have captured irresponsible or unfavorable behaviors (e.g., consuming alcohol) that could result in offline punishment. Tokunaga (2011) discovered that the individuals who authored the message or created the identification tag interpreted the deletion as a transgression that strained the relationship.

1.4. Top friends application

Top Friend applications, which still appear on popular social networking sites (e.g., MySpace, Facebook), ask users to publicly articulate their closest friends and, in some cases, rank the order in which they are considered best friends (boyd, 2008; Savage, Cerelejia, & Dudley, 2008). Top Friend applications contribute to relational transgressions when a discrepancy exists between where individuals expect to be ranked and where they are actually positioned. Likewise, being absent from a Top Friends list altogether also fuel problems in certain relationships (Savage et al., 2008; Tokunaga, 2011). boyd (2004) suggested "the reason that the Top Friends feature wreaks social havoc on teens' lives is because there are social consequences in publicly announcing one's friends, best friends, and bestest friends (p. 214)".

1.5. Social costs of the relational transgressions on social networking sites

Relational transgressions that surface from participation on social networking sites can be the source of interpersonal problems. Although the consequences of these transgressions are broadly termed "relational problems" (see Kim & Yun, 2007), strain and changes to relational rules have been discussed as two concrete outcomes (Tokunaga, 2011; Walther et al., 2008). Despite theoretical justification, no previous investigation has examined factors at different levels of interaction that affect the magnitude of these relational difficulties following the most common social networking site transgressions.

1.6. Relational strain

Relational strain is defined as "the negative dimension of the functional aspect of social relations" (Due, Holstein, Lund, Modvig, & Avlund, 1999, p. 663). Dyadic strain emerges in any close intimate relationship, but mere acquaintances can undergo strain as well (Cupach & Metts, 1986; Raghavan & Mennerich, 2007; Walen & Lachman, 2000). Strain is experienced on emotional or instrumental levels in interpersonal relationships. Poor relational dynamics, such as persistent engagement in destructive cycles of conflict or infidelity, can be the source of strain.

The geographical dispersion of online communication partners does not mean that relational strain is of minimal concern to them. The concept of "face" appears online in similar function and form as offline social interactions (Walsh, Gregory, Lake, & Gunawardena, 2003). Face is described as the preferred identity or image people wish to project to the public (Metts, 1997). This identity represents internal desires about how individuals expect to be treated by others (Sheer & Weigold, 1995). Metts (1994) referred to behaviors that violate the explicit or implicit rules of engagement, thereby interfering with individuals' face concerns, as relational transgressions. Serious transgressions can spell the termination of a relationship, but even mild transgressions can introduce strain between partners. The arousal of emotions, such as hurt and anger, accompany these transgressions, signaling to the recipient that a strain-provoking event has taken place (Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998).

1.7. Change in communication rules

Communication rules are defined as "statements which express consensus, shared at varying levels of generality, concerning the structure, procedures, and content of communicative relationships" (Miller, 1978, p. 175). The renegotiation of relational rules is an overt behavior distinct from relational strain, which exists

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