Research Report

Who puts the best "face" forward on Facebook?: Positive self-presentation in online social networking and the role of self-consciousness, actual-to-total Friends ratio, and culture

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ABSTRACT

The present research investigated how individual, interpersonal, and cultural variables influence positive self-presentation in online social networking. In particular, we examined the role of self-consciousness, actual-to-total Friends ratio, and culture in positive self-presentation on Facebook. A cross-sectional survey was conducted with college-age participants in the United States (n = 183) and South Korea (n = 137). Results showed that self-consciousness (public vs. private) and actual-to-total Friends ratio were not significantly associated with positive self-presentation on Facebook; however, culture showed a statistically significant association with positive self-presentation on Facebook, with the U.S. participants engaging in positive self-presentation on Facebook to a greater extent than the South Korean participants. More interestingly, culture significantly moderated the relationship between public self-consciousness and positive self-presentation as well as the relationship between actual-to-total Friends ratio and positive self-presentation. Specifically, positive self-presentation showed a significant positive association with public self-consciousness and a significant negative association with actual-to-total Friends ratio only among the South Korean participants and not among the U.S. participants. Theoretical and practical implications for understanding cross-cultural differences in self-presentation behaviors on social network sites were discussed.

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1. Introduction

From *Six Degrees.com* in the 1990's to *MySpace* and *Facebook*, social network sites (SNSs) have played a vital role in facilitating online social interaction. Although specific services available on each SNS may vary widely, several features are in common across different platforms. SNSs allow their users to create and manage a personal profile, to build and maintain a list of "Friends,"[1] and to stay connected with these Friends through various modes of communication (boyd & Ellison, 2007). All of these representative

characteristics of SNSs are crucial to self-presentation behaviors, as these features deliver important social cues from which people form perceptions of themselves and others.

Among the numerous players on the field of SNSs, Facebook is recognized as one of the most popular and influential SNSs, with more than 1.28 billion monthly active users and 802 million daily active users as of March 2014 (Facebook, 2014). Besides its popularity, another noteworthy aspect of Facebook concerns self-presentation behaviors performed by its users. In particular, Facebook has received a great amount of scholarly attention with respect to how it fosters strategic and selective self-presentation behaviors that "showcase" the self in an exclusively positive manner. Research has also indicated that these strategic and self-enhancing ways of self-presentation are often characterized by emotional disclosures that are positively valenced (Qiu, Lin, Leung, & Tov, 2012). Noted as positive self-presentation (Chou & Edge, 2012; J. Kim & Lee, 2011) or "positivity bias" (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014, p. 98), this trend has become so pervasive on

[1] In their usage of the word "Friends," boyd and Ellison (2007) proposed to capitalize the word so that the term could be differentiated from the colloquial use of the word "friends" (p. 225). We followed boyd and Ellison's (2007) approach and capitalized the word whenever it referred to individuals with whom a user is connected via an SNS system.

Facebook that heavy Facebook users have been found to perceive other people on Facebook "are happier and having better lives" than themselves (Chou & Edge, 2012, p. 117).

While Facebook offers its users unique opportunities to perform strategic and positive self-presentation through selective construction of user profiles (S. Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008; Van Der Heide, D'Angelo, & Schumaker, 2012), or through instant dissemination of status updates (Bazarova, Taft, Choi, & Cosley, 2013; Hogan, 2010), the extent to which users actually engage in positive self-presentation may be determined by dispositional and contextual variables. In the present research, we investigated possible predictors of positive self-presentation on Facebook at individual, interpersonal, and cultural levels, drawing on the conceptual frameworks of strategic self-presentation and self-enhancement. At the individual level, we examined whether public self-consciousness would have a positive association and private self-consciousness would have a negative association with positive self-presentation. At the interpersonal level, we tested whether relative presence of actual friends in one's Facebook connections would have a negative association with positive self-presentation. At the cultural level, we investigated whether North American individuals would engage in positive self-presentation to a greater extent than East Asians. Furthermore, we explored a possible moderating role of culture in the effects of public vs. private self-consciousness and audience composition on positive self-presentation. In the following section, we present theoretical and conceptual frameworks that guided our investigation.

2. Theoretical and conceptual considerations

2.1. The strategic and self-enhancing nature of positive self-presentation

The literature on self-presentation has distinguished two styles of strategic self-presentation: protective and acquisitive (Arkin, 1981; Leary & Allen, 2011; Wolfe, Lennox, & Cutler, 1986). In general, protective self-presentation refers to avoidance of social disapproval and unfavorable impression formation, whereas acquisitive self-presentation refers to pursuit of social approval and positive impression formation (Arkin, 1981; Hermann & Arkin, 2013; Leary & Allen, 2011). In the context of SNS use, these two strategic self-presentation styles could be translated into two forms of communication behaviors: (1) controlling negative other-provided information about the self and (2) disclosing or sharing positive self-provided information (Rui & Stefanone, 2013a, 2013b). On the one hand, users can deny or even remove unwanted other-provided information concerning the self, such as tagged photos and wall posts. This, which Rui and Stefanone (2013a, 2013b) termed as *protective self-presentation* on SNSs, includes untagging from unwanted photos and removing wall posts created by others. On the other hand, thanks to the technological affordances that allow interactants to take time and exercise selective choices in creating and editing messages (Walther, 2007), users can selectively portray positive and desirable aspects of the self to actively construct and maintain positive public self-images (Human, Biesanz, Parisotto, & Dunn, 2012; Schlenker, 1975). These acquisitive strategic self-presentation behaviors, which involve deliberate and selective sharing of positive self-provided information, constitute *positive self-presentation*.

Positive self-presentation could also be viewed as behavioral manifestation of *self-enhancement*: the motivation to enhance the positivity of self-views and public self-images (Hepper, Sedikides, & Cai, 2013) to maintain a sense of self-worth and "maximize social approval and minimize social disapproval" (Schlenker, 1975, p. 1031). Although self-enhancement is quite a complex,

multi-faceted phenomenon (Sedikides & Gregg, 2008), many scholars have considered positive self-presentation as one of the primary ways in which self-enhancement is exhibited, and have often used the term "self-enhancing presentation" interchangeably with positive self-presentation (e.g., Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995; Ungar, 1980).

The strategic self-presentation and self-enhancement frameworks point to three possible key predictors of positive self-presentation on Facebook: (1) self-consciousness (public vs. private) at the individual level, (2) composition of SNS Friends at the interpersonal level, and (3) cultural variability in individualism vs. collectivism at the national level (Hofstede, 1980). First, public vs. private self-consciousness has been viewed as an individual-difference variable that plays a key role in regulation of strategic self-presentation behaviors (Doherty & Schlenker, 1991). Second, research on strategic self-presentation has highlighted that the extent to which people engage in self-enhancing presentation tends to be influenced by the nature of their relationship with audience (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Tice et al., 1995); therefore, the composition of SNS Friends with respect to what portion of them are actual friends may be an important predictor of positive self-presentation. Last but not least, research addressing cultural variability in individualism vs. collectivism suggests that cultural norms may play an important role in strategic self-presentation and self-enhancement (Baumeister, Hutton, & Tice, 1989; Kurman & Sriram, 1997; Lee & Park, 2011).

Particularly with respect to the role of culture, it is noteworthy that the user population of Facebook has grown globally. According to Facebook (2014), approximately 81.2% of its daily active users reside outside the United States and Canada. Although general usage and self-presentation behaviors on SNSs have been compared cross-culturally (Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011; Vasalou, Joinson, & Courvoisier, 2010; Zhao & Jiang, 2011), relatively little research has been conducted on positive self-presentation on SNSs and its possible predictors across different cultures. Noting this gap in the literature, we not only examined the role of culture as a possible predictor of positive self-presentation on Facebook, but also explored whether and how culture interacts with self-consciousness (public vs. private) and composition of SNS Friends in influencing positive self-presentation on Facebook.

2.2. Self-consciousness and positive self-presentation on Facebook

Self-consciousness, which refers to the personal tendency to direct attention to self-related aspects either inward or outward, plays an important role in regulation of strategic self-presentational behavior (Doherty & Schlenker, 1991). Broadly, there are two types of self-consciousness: public vs. private. Public self-consciousness refers to the self-awareness with respect to how the self is publicly displayed (Greenwald, Bellezza, & Banaji, 1988; Scheier & Carver, 1985); people who are high in public self-consciousness are more likely to be attentive to how they are viewed by others and behave accordingly. Private self-consciousness, on the other hand, refers to introspection-oriented awareness centered on "covert aspects of the self that are not directly observable by others" (Doherty & Schlenker, 1991, p. 3); people who are high in private self-consciousness are typically more aware of their inner world and behave based on privately held beliefs, values, and feelings about the self (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975; Scheier, Buss, & Buss, 1978).

Public self-consciousness has been noted as a key individual-difference predictor of self-presentation. Specifically, research has indicated that individuals high in public self-consciousness tend to have greater concerns about being rejected by others and making good impression; hence, they are more likely to engage in creation of positive and favorable public self-images (Burnkrant &