"This is NOT a #humblebrag, this is just a #brag": The pragmatics of self-praise, hashtags and politeness in Instagram posts

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ABSTRACT

Social media can be seen as "sites of self-presentation and identity negotiation" whose affordances facilitate the production and promotion of both individual and collective identities (Papacharissi, 2011, pp. 304–305). From a pragmatic perspective, self-promotion and self-praise are interactionally risky acts. While some studies have shed light on self-praise in online communities, little attention has been paid to the pragmatic function of the affordances of digital media such as hashtagging and multimodality in self-praising discourse. This article contributes to filling this research gap by examining the ways in which posters of "bragging" Instagram photos do face work by using the hashtags #brag and #humblebrag in interaction with positive (im-)politeness strategies. It presents the results of both a small-scale quantitative study of face work in Instagram posts labelled #fitness, #brag and #humblebrag, as well as a qualitative analysis of the mitigation and aggravation strategies used in explicitly self-praising posts. The article argues that the hashtags #brag and #humblebrag have a clear metalinguistic function as a reference to the illocution of the speech act. It also shows that they are used in a balancing act of face mitigation and aggravation strategies. Overall, the study suggests that the hashtags #brag and #humblebrag function as part of a strategy that negotiates an appropriate level of self-praise and positive self-presentation. The study adds to an understanding of the pragmatics of self-presentation on social media, and raises questions regarding the new literacies that digital media require.

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1. Introduction

Social media can be seen as "sites of self-presentation and identity negotiation" whose affordances facilitate the production and promotion of both individual and collective identities (Papacharissi, 2011, pp. 304–305). However, to be conducted successfully, positive self-presentation requires a strategic combination of "self-enhancement, accuracy, and humility" (Schlenker and Leary, 1982, p. 89), a precarious balancing act whose outcome has an impact on factors such as likeability (Lee-Won et al., 2014; Sezer et al., 2015).

Self-praise or outright "bragging" is one such "interactionally risky" activity (Dayter, 2014, p. 91). Studies of face-to-face (FTF) communication have shown evidence of a conversational norm against self-praise similar to that regarding compliment responses (Pomerantz, 1978; Speer, 2012). However, as yet very few studies have focused on the pragmatics of self-praise in computer-mediated communication (CMC) (cf. Dayter, 2014). Furthermore,

while Dayter's (2014) study provides some insights into the pragmatics of self-praise in online communities, little attention has been paid to key affordances of digital technologies such as hashtagging and text-image interaction.

This article contributes to this research gap by examining the ways in which authors of "bragging" posts on the photo-sharing app Instagram do face work by using the hashtags #brag and #humblebrag. It presents the results of both a small-scale comparative study of face work in Instagram posts labelled #fitness, #brag and #humblebrag, as well as a qualitative analysis of face mitigation and aggravation strategies in self-praising Instagram posts.

In this article I suggest that the hashtags #brag and #humblebrag have a clear meta-pragmatic function as a reference to the speech act of self-praise. Overall, I argue that Instagram posters use these hashtags as part of a strategy that negotiates an appropriate level of self-praise and positive self-presentation through the reflexive transgression of interactional norms. The results add to an understanding of the pragmatic functions of hashtags, and shed light on their role in positive presentation of the self on social networking sites (SNSs).

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2. Positive presentation of the self and self-praise

In terms of self-presentation strategies, a distinction can be made between positive self-disclosure and bragging (Miller et al., 1992, pp. 370–371). Positive self-disclosure is presented as mere information-sharing, but which is positively connoted in a particular community. It involves statements of achievement rather than disposition ("I won the match"), and avoids comparatives and superlatives ("We had a good season"). Bragging, on the other hand, features a greater element of competitiveness, such as dispositional statements focusing on the nature of the person ("I'm a wonderful person"), and comparatives and superlatives ("I was the best player"). Miller et al.'s (1992) research showed that positive self-disclosers were seen to be more likeable than braggers, suggesting that a form of modesty may be conducive to better self-presentation. Subsequent studies of FTF communication have provided further evidence that – in terms of likeability – boastful self-enhancement is perceived negatively (Chen and Jing, 2012; Sezer et al., 2015; Van Damme et al., 2016), while modest self-presentation styles are perceived positively (Sedikides et al., 2007).

Positive self-presentation is also a highly strategic and selective activity in CMC environments (Geurin-Eagleman and Burch, 2016; Lee-Won et al., 2014). On SNSs, users engage in both acquisitive and protective self-presentation (Arkin, 1981). The former is aimed at "the avoidance of social disapproval and unfavorable impression formation" (Rui and Stefanone, 2013, p. 111) such as the removal of unwanted wall posts on Facebook, whereas the latter is intended to gain social approval and form a positive impression, such as presentation of achievements (Leary and Allen, 2011, p. 1206; Lee-Won et al., 2014, p. 414). Research suggests that self-presentation online exhibits a "positivity bias" (Reinecke and Trepte, 2014, pp. 97–98) that makes positive forms of self-presentation more likely than negative ones (Chou and Edge, 2012), due to both social norms in online communities and the technical affordances thereof (Qiu et al., 2012).

One pragmatic framework that has been used to understand positive self-presentation online is Brown and Levinson's concept of face (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Particularly positive face – the desire "to be valued, liked and admired, and to maintain a positive self-image" (Holmes, 2009, p. 711) – has been used in analysing a range of linguistic behaviour online that can be seen as 'impolite', such as insults, flaming and bragging (e.g. Angouri and Tseliga, 2010; Dayter, 2014; Helfrich, 2014). Whereas some understandings of impoliteness include an element of intentionality (Culpeper, 2005, p. 38), others focus on contextualised definitions of impoliteness as "behaviour that is face-aggravating in a particular context" (Locher and Bousfield, 2008, p. 3). Particularly in online settings, approaches that combine an appreciation of the illocution of the speech act (speaker intention) with contextualised views of impoliteness norms may offer stronger models for explaining inappropriate behaviour online (Dynel, 2015, pp. 332–333).

Within this approach, self-praise – "uttering a positive statement about oneself" (Dayter, 2014, p. 92) – is a potentially face-threatening act (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 39). Thus far, self-praise has been analysed in terms of compliments to the self (Dayter, 2014; Speer, 2012): whereas a compliment is intended to enhance the positive face of the addressee, self-praise is oriented towards the speaker, making the speaker both the subject and the object of the positive assessment (Speer, 2012, p. 56). It has primarily been seen as a face threat to the addressee, in that it indicates that the speaker does not care about the hearer's feelings (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 67). However, it can also be understood as a threat to the positive face of the speaker, as they may be seen as ego-centric and "invested in their self-descriptions" (Speer, 2012, p. 56; Rhodewalt et al., 1998).

Self-praise remains a relatively unexplored phenomenon from a linguistic perspective. Speer (2012) examined self-praise in a range of data from FTF interaction within a Conversation Analysis (CA) approach. Speer's study suggested that self-praise is an interactionally delicate matter for both epistemic and normative reasons. Epistemically, utterers of self-praise (e.g. "I'm a fantastic cook") are both the source and the object (author and principal respectively, Goffman, 1981, p. 144) of positive assessment, and run the risk of being judged by others as overly subjective and biased (Speer, 2012, p. 56). Following Pomerantz's (1978) work on compliment responses, Speer also posited a conversational norm against self-praise, illustrated by a range of strategies documented among self-praising speakers that pre-empt accusations of bragging, including disclaimers, qualifications and meta-comments on self-enhancing talk (2012, p. 57). Speer's work also suggested a high level of knowingness among speakers that the identity of people "who routinely think highly of themselves" is problematic and that self-image is at stake (2012, p. 57).

In one of the few analyses of self-praise in CMC, Dayter (2014) studied a small online community of ballet students and pre-professional dancers on Twitter. Her study revealed that the members of the Twitter community performed a range of self-praising activities in a strategic manner. Dayter documented unmitigated positive self statements in microposts, as well as self-praise coupled with a range of mitigation strategies such as self-denigration, a shift of focus away from the self and reinterpretation of the speech act (e.g. couching self-praise within a complaint). Overall, Dayter's results suggested that while members of the online community engaged more in positive self-disclosure rather than outright bragging in Miller et al.'s (1992) terms, positive self statements served to establish solidarity within the group, thus counterbalancing some of the face-threatening aspects of self-praise.

Thus, despite the face threat that self-praise theoretically involves, there are some indications that it may perform different functions in online communication. Thus, in examining the affordances of hashtags below, I combine both contextualised views of norms of appropriateness (Locher and Bousfield, 2008) and illocution-oriented approaches to the notion of face threat (Brown and Levinson, 1987), reflecting an understanding of (im-)politeness online as a dynamic concept (Dynel, 2015).

3. Focus of the study and methodology

This study focuses on the pragmatic use of the hashtags #brag and #humblebrag on the photo-sharing app Instagram. Instagram was launched in 2010 and numbered 700 million users as of April 2017 (Statista, 2017), with millennials (aged 18–36) forming a key demographic (e-Marketer, 2016). The app's functionality allows users to take photos and post them online, where they can be tagged, liked and commented on. Members can also follow other Instagram accounts and view their photos.

Using the websta Instagram viewer (http://websta.me), I searched for photos tagged #fitness, #brag and #humblebrag between June and September 2015.[1] In a previous pilot study I had found that images labelled #fitness frequently presented positively valued visual information (such as photos of people working out) but without overt marking of "bragging" via hashtags, suggesting that such posts would form a useful comparison for posts that

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[1] As of 17 January 2017, websta.me listed a total of 168,372,671 Instagram posts tagged #fitness, 38,750 tagged #brag and 77,722 tagged #humblebrag. In May 2014, there were fewer #humblebrag posts than #brag posts (24,364 vs. 17,918 respectively), which may be indicative of the growing phenomenon of humblebragging online (see Ferdman, 2015; Wittels, 2011).