

Affirming the Self through Online Profiles: Beneficial Effects of Social Networking Sites

Catalina L. Toma

Department of Communication

Cornell University

Ithaca, NY 14850, USA

catalina.toma@cornell.edu

ABSTRACT

Self-affirmation is the process of bringing to awareness important aspects of the self, such as values, goals, and treasured characteristics. When affirmed, individuals are more open-minded and less defensive. This study examines whether social networking tools, such as Facebook, have self-affirming value. Participants were asked to either spend time on their own Facebook profiles, or on a stranger's profile. Afterwards, they were given negative feedback on a task. Participants who spent time on their own profiles were more accepting of the feedback, and less likely to engage in ego-protective mechanisms, such as derogating the task or the evaluator. In fact, they behaved identically to participants who completed a classic self-affirmation manipulation. The theoretical contributions of this paper include (1) identifying intrapersonal effects of online self-presentation and (2) extending self-affirmation theory to include social media use.

Author Keywords

Social networking sites, self-presentation, self-affirmation, media effects

ACM Classification Keywords

J4 Social and behavioral systems: Psychology

General Terms

Experimentation, Theory

INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites (SNSs) enable users to connect with important people in their lives by creating virtual representations of the self (i.e., online profiles). As such, these profiles can have significant repercussions on users' ability to initiate, develop and maintain personal relationships [e.g., 6].

A less obvious, yet equally important function of online profiles is to influence how users relate to *themselves*. SNS

profiles tend to contain a repository of positive information about the self (e.g., flattering photographs, friendly wall posts, a log of social activities) and they highlight users' friendships and other social connections. What might be the psychological effect of visiting and revisiting the favorable version of the self encapsulated in the online profile?

This paper applies self-affirmation theory [4] to explicate how SNS profiles may benefit users' self-concept. Self-affirmation theory posits that accessing positive information about the self makes people more confident, secure and open-minded, and less biased. Does reviewing one's own flattering online profile have self-affirming benefits? To address this question, I first review the main tenets of self-affirmation theory and then discuss their applicability to profile-based self-presentation.

Self-affirmation theory

One of the best documented findings in psychology is that people need to think of themselves as "good" and "appropriate," although they are much more critical of others. To maintain this positive view of the self in spite of life's unavoidable setbacks and failures, people engage in a variety of defensive mechanisms [3, 4]. For instance, a student who fails an exam may make herself feel better by concluding that the exam was "unfair" or the teacher "too harsh."

While these strategies protect the self from threatening information, they can be harmful when they prevent people from learning from their mistakes or holding accurate views of reality. Fortunately, there exists a strategy that allows people to maintain positive self-regard *and* accept threatening information at the same time: self-affirmation.

Self-affirmation involves bringing to awareness important and positive aspects of the self, such as personal values, goals, or treasured characteristics. When affirmed, individuals realize that, in the grand scheme of things, they are valuable and worthy. As a result, any single setback seems less important, and accepting it does not harm the self. For example, the student who failed an exam, but is reminded that she has a large and supportive network of friends, may not need to make herself feel better by derogating the importance or the fairness of the exam.

Positive self-regard can be derived from any of the domains that comprise the self: social roles (e.g., parent, student,

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spouse), values (e.g., humor, religion), group identities (e.g., culture, nation), central beliefs (i.e., ideology, political beliefs), goals (e.g., health, economic success), and relationships (e.g., family, friends) [3, 4]. Self-affirmation by definition occurs in a domain unrelated to the one that was threatened. Research shows that the most widely used and persuasive domain of self-affirmation is personal relationships [see 3].

Also noteworthy is that self-affirmation occurs unconsciously: People are generally unaware of their own efforts to repair a wounded ego.

The buffering role of self-affirmation has been demonstrated repeatedly in laboratory studies. In these studies, participants are typically affirmed by identifying and writing short essays about their most important values (a procedure henceforth referred to as the *classic self-affirmation manipulation*). This reduces people's defensiveness in a variety of settings: they are more likely to accept threatening health information, to ruminate less, to stereotype others less, and to exhibit fewer processing biases [see 3 for a review]. But what are the real-world equivalents of these self-affirmation exercises? How do people self-affirm outside of the lab, in their natural environments?

Self-affirmation through SNS profiles

As mentioned earlier, this paper investigates whether SNS profiles, and in particular Facebook – the most popular of these, have self-affirming potential. Consistent with self-affirmation theory, Facebook profiles emphasize important domains of the self: social roles (e.g., university student, friend), personal relationships, treasured activities (e.g., traveling, spending time with friends – which are often documented in photo albums), values and beliefs (e.g., political views, religious views). In fact, the most prominent feature of Facebook is that it allows users to “collect” friends and memorabilia from these friends, in the form of wall postings, gifts, and photo comments. Recall that friendships and personal relationships are the most widely used sources of self-affirmation.

Additionally, research shows that users do construct profiles that are self-enhancing, but also relatively accurate [6]. Because of the affordances of asynchronicity and editability [7], users have enough time to create profiles that emphasize the best aspects of themselves while not deviating significantly from the truth. Such deviations are undesirable because users' social networks serve as a “warrant” that can verify the accuracy of claims. Needless to say, most users do not wish to be perceived as dishonest by their friends.

This line of reasoning suggests that Facebook profiles may have self-affirmation potential through the combined forces of selective self-presentation [7] and an emphasis on social connections.

Present study

To test this claim, an experiment was set up where participants' ego was threatened by negative feedback on a public speaking task. A threat to academic abilities tends to be very salient to students at Cornell University. Prior to the threat, participants had an opportunity to review their own Facebook profile (in the experimental condition) or a stranger's profile (in the control condition). Participants then rated the quality of the feedback they received. This allowed them an opportunity to derogate the feedback by 1) rating it as inaccurate; 2) rating the task as meaningless; 3) rating the evaluator as incompetent or dislikable; or 4) shifting blame from themselves to the technology involved in the task. If Facebook does have self-affirming effects, then participants reviewing their own profile should be less likely to derogate the feedback than participants reviewing a stranger's profile.

Additionally, two more conditions were added in which the classic self-affirmation manipulation [see 2] was replicated: participants were asked to write an essay about their most important value (in the experimental condition) or about their least important value (in the control condition). If Facebook is a real-world equivalent of this classic self-affirmation manipulation, then participants reviewing their own Facebook profile should be as accepting of the feedback as participants performing the classic self-affirmation task.

METHOD

Participants and recruitment

Participants were undergraduate students at Cornell University ($N = 98$; 68% women; mean age = 19.81) who received extra-credit in their courses. Five participants were excluded from the analyses because they were suspicious of the purpose of the study. An additional five participants assigned to one of the Facebook conditions were eliminated because they were not Facebook users. The effective sample size was thus reduced to $N = 88$.

Self-affirmation manipulation

The experiment was a one-way completely randomized design with four conditions: 1) Facebook self-affirmation; 2) Facebook control, 3) classic self-affirmation; and 4) classic control. In the Facebook self-affirmation condition, participants were asked to spend five minutes examining their own Facebook profile. Instructions specified that they could view any element of their profile (e.g., photographs, wall comments, list of friends), but they could not navigate to somebody else's profile. In the Facebook control condition, participants were given the same instructions but were asked to spend 5 minutes examining *a stranger's* Facebook profile. This stranger was in fact a participant in the Facebook self-affirmation condition, who had provided access to his/her profile by temporarily befriending the experimenter. The two conditions were yoked such that the first person in the Facebook control condition viewed the

profile of the first person in the Facebook self-affirmation condition, the second person in the Facebook control condition viewed the profile of the second person in the Facebook self-affirmation condition, and so on. This procedure ensured that, as a group, participants in the Facebook self-affirmation condition viewed exactly the same information as participants in the Facebook control condition.

In the classic self-affirmation condition, participants were asked to rank six values in the order of personal importance (business, art – music – theater, social life – relationships, science – pursuit of knowledge; religion – morality; government – politics) and then write a short essay about why the highest ranked value was important to them. In the classic control condition, participants also ranked these values in the order of personal importance, but wrote an essay about why their *lowest* ranked value was important to the average college student [see 2].

Procedure

Participants were given a cover story adapted from Swann and colleagues [5]. They were told that the university's Center for Distance Education is considering creating a distance-learning version of the Public Speaking class, and it has hired the research team to pilot this course and determine whether it is a good idea. To achieve this goal, participants were asked to (1) prepare a short (3-5 minutes) speech on the legality of abortion and deliver it via webcam to another participant (i.e., the evaluator), who will provide feedback on the speech; 2) participate in a short and unrelated study while waiting for their feedback (this was in fact the self-affirmation manipulation); 3) read their feedback and rate its usefulness: was it accurate? Was the evaluator able to form a good impression of the participants' public speaking abilities in spite of not being physically present to watch the speech? Is distance-learning appropriate for a public speaking course? All participants were provided with the same negative feedback, which was written in a generic fashion such that it may be applicable to any speech.

Participants were debriefed using a funnel procedure, which assessed whether they were suspicious of the true purpose of the study. Suspicious participants were eliminated.

Measures

The dependent measure was participants' acceptance of the feedback (adapted from [5]). This was assessed across five dimensions: 1) the perceived accuracy of the feedback (5 items; $\alpha = .88$); 2) the perceived competence of the evaluator (3 items; $\alpha = .96$); 3) the appropriateness of the task (2 items; $\alpha = .86$); 4) attribution of the feedback to themselves or someone else (3 items; $\alpha = .88$); and 5) attraction to the evaluator (2 items; $\alpha = .88$). All items were measured using a scale from 1 (not at all) to 9 (a lot).

Participants also recorded how they felt after the self-affirmation manipulation: They rated how much they were experiencing several feelings (e.g., loving, joyful, connected, loved, supported) on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely).

Participants in the Facebook self-affirmation condition also completed measures of their Facebook use, such as their satisfaction with their Facebook self-presentation, the accuracy of their self-presentation and the amount of time they typically spend on Facebook.

RESULTS

A one-way ANOVA conducted on each of the dependent measures revealed a significant effect [$F(3,81) = 3.50, p = .02$ for perceived accuracy; $F(3, 81) = 5.29, p = .002$ for evaluator competence; $F(3, 81) = 4.13, p = .009$ for task diagnosticity; $F(3, 81) = 8.99, p < .001$ for attribution; $F(3, 81) = 3.47, p = .02$ for attraction to evaluator]. Independent sample t-tests revealed that, as predicted, participants who examined their own Facebook profiles were more accepting of the feedback than participants who examined a stranger's profile: they regarded the feedback as more accurate [$t(43) = 2.39, p = .02$], the evaluator as more competent [$t(43) = 3.40, p = .001$], and the task as more appropriate [$t(43) = 2.66, p = .01$]. They also took more responsibility for their performance [$t(43) = 4.31, p < .001$] and liked the evaluator more [$t(43) = 2.89, p = 0.006$].

Also as predicted, participants who examined their own profiles were equally accepting of the feedback as participants who completed the classic self-affirmation manipulation [$t(41) = -.03, ns$ for perceived accuracy; $t(41) = .48, ns$ for evaluator competence; $t(41) = .55, ns$ for task diagnosticity; $t(41) = .07, ns$ for attribution; $t(41) = 1.08, ns$ for attraction to evaluator]. Similarly, participants in the Facebook control condition behaved identically with participants in the classic control condition [$t(40) = -.58, ns$ for perceived accuracy; $t(40) = -.71, ns$ for evaluator competence; $t(40) = .86, ns$ for task diagnosticity; $t(40) = -.23, ns$ for attribution; $t(40) = -.64, ns$ for attraction to evaluator]. The effect of the classical self-affirmation manipulation was also replicated. Means and standard deviations for all these variables are presented in Table 1.

Participants who examined their own Facebook profiles felt more positive emotions than participants who examined a stranger's profile. They felt more loving [$t(43) = 2.56, p = .01$], joyful [$t(43) = 2.01, p = .006$], connected [$t(43) = 3.75, p < .01$], loved [$t(43) = 4.64, p < .001$], supported [$t(43) = 4.53, p < 0.001$] and grateful [$t(43) = 2.73, p = .009$]. However, these positive emotions did not mediate the relationship between self-affirmation and decreased defensiveness, suggesting that another mechanism is responsible for the self-affirming benefits of Facebook.

Finally, a manipulation check ensured that participants who viewed their own Facebook profiles had indeed constructed self-affirming profiles. On a scale from 1 to 5, participants

| | Facebook SA | Facebook control | Classic SA | Classic control |
|-------------------------|----------------|------------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Perceived accuracy | 5.91 (1.56) | 4.57 (2.13) | 5.93 (1.67) | 4.89 (1.49) |
| Evaluator competence | 6.76 (1.23) | 4.89 (2.24) | 6.53 (1.86) | 5.35 (1.85) |
| Task diagnosticity | 5.69 (1.92) | 4.17 (1.90) | 5.30 (2.68) | 3.69 (1.55) |
| Attribution | 5.86 (1.27) | 4.11 (1.43) | 5.12 (1.27) | 4.20 (1.02) |
| Attraction to evaluator | 5.31 (1.76) | 3.81 (1.71) | 4.80 (1.33) | 4.17 (1.87) |

Table 1. Means and (standard deviations) for the dependent measures in each condition.

rated their profiles as very positive ($M = 4.42$, $SD = .61$) and relatively accurate ($M = 3.89$; $SD = .88$). They also reported spending an average of 62 minutes on Facebook every day ($SD = 47.79$) and logging on 3.5 times a day ($SD = 2.97$).

DISCUSSION

Self-affirmation theory [4] postulates that people's natural desire to protect their egos can be switched off by a self-affirmation exercise, such as a reminder of the important and positive aspects of their lives. This decreased defensiveness can be beneficial, as it allows people to feel good about themselves while at the same facing life's setbacks and hurdles [3, 4]. The effect of self-affirmation is widely documented, yet most studies to date involve an "artificial" type of self-affirmation: while in the lab, participants are required to write short essays about their most important values. Rarely if ever do people do this in real life. The present study contributes to the vast literature on self-affirmation by identifying a real-world counterpart of the classic self-affirmation manipulation: social networking profiles.

Indeed, SNS profiles appear to restore users' sense of self-worth by reminding them of the important aspects of their lives: their connections with friends, their identities and group membership. As such, a surreptitious effect of the selective self-presentation and social connectedness afforded by SNS profiles can be a boost in morale and feelings of self-worth. In the present study, participants who spent 5 minutes on their Facebook profiles were more likely to take responsibility for their performance and less likely to blame others when receiving negative feedback. Additionally, these participants experienced more positive feelings, both self-directed (feeling loved, supported, connected) and other-directed (feeling loving and grateful), suggesting that the beneficial effects of online profiles may extend even beyond self-affirmation.

Another important theoretical implication concerns the effects of online self-presentation. Walther [7] advanced the idea that online self-presentation is carefully crafted and can be flattering above and beyond face-to-face self-presentation, thanks to online affordances such as asynchronicity and editability. Current findings support these claims, and also advance them by examining the *intrapersonal* effects of these enhanced self-presentations (i.e., reduced defensiveness and increased positive affect). Future work is necessary to determine whether these psychological benefits extend to behavioral changes (i.e., does participants' reduced defensiveness to negative feedback increase their ability to learn from their mistakes and improve their future performances?).

Finally, the present research contributes to the literature on motives for SNS use by suggesting that, in addition to building and maintaining social connections and engaging in social investigation [1], a desire for self-enhancement may draw users (albeit unconsciously) towards SNSs. Future research is necessary to fully examine this claim.

To conclude, this paper explores the hidden benefits of the selective self-presentation and social connectedness enacted in SNS profiles. Not only do these profiles affect users' personal relationships, but they may even affect their self-construal and emotional well-being.

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