

Faceplant: Impression (Mis)management in Facebook Status Updates

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Abstract

While recent research examined the impressions projected by users of Social Network Sites through their relatively static online profiles, the addition of status updates to Facebook offers the opportunity to study a more fluid type of impression management. In this paper, we take a first look at data collected with a custom application designed to capture the impressions both “given” and “given off” by a user’s status updates. We show that while users generally succeed at presenting a positive image of themselves, they are only partially aware of how they are coming across and tend to underestimate the strength of the impressions they foster. This is particularly prevalent in the case of self-importance, giving credence to the notion that projecting an inflated sense of self can be a risk in a world where impressions are formed based on “micro updates.”

Introduction

Social Network Sites (SNSs) have become a popular form of social media. On Facebook and MySpace, millions of users have created a profile including such data as basic demographics, personal tastes and, most importantly, a list of “friends” that the subscriber has chosen to associate with publicly. These profile pages are interesting in that they allow users to “type themselves into being” and to make their social networks visible (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Much research on SNSs has focused on impression management, exploring the kind of signals generated by a user’s profile (Donath, 2007). Observers quickly form strong impressions (Gosling et al., 2007; Stecher & Counts, 2008) based on information provided by the owner (e.g. music tastes, Liu, 2007) or more indirect cues (e.g. comments left by friends, Walther et al., 2008). How much and what kind of personal data is revealed can also encourage relationships with others (Lampe et al., 2007).

Profiles tell us how people choose to portray themselves when asked explicitly to do so. However, the more recent phenomenon in which Facebook users post frequent status

updates offers the opportunity to understand how people manage impressions as a secondary activity when communicating with others. Through the Facebook News Feed, people provide small snapshots of their activities and thoughts via text, sometimes accompanied by photos, web links, or videos. Examples include content such as, “Just saw Angels and Demons and liked most of it,” or “Super-determined to be ultra-focused this week.” The updates are similar to those seen on micro-blogging services such as Twitter and, in fact, many users re-direct one to the other. Facebook’s News Feed offers a kind of perpetual contact (Joinson, 2008) with one’s social network.

This increased awareness of others’ minute actions may have interesting implications for the way we relate to others and understand ourselves. Using a framework inspired by Goffman (1959) we can interpret each of these updates as a “performance,” giving the audience (i.e. friends) a chance to form an impression of the updater, whether this impression was intentional or not. The Facebook and Twitter communities are surely aware of the “impression management game” taking place on social networking services and how projected impressions can sometime backfire. Web sites such as *TweetingTooHard* or *Twochebags*, for instance, have been created as public repositories of the most transparently self-serving status updates. YouTube videos such as “Facebook Status-Off” illustrate the same phenomenon, spoofing the way some users try too hard to project a flattering and “cool” image of themselves through their updates. Goffman (1959) was particularly interested in these breakdowns – instances when people’s performances are exposed and give off a different impression from what was intended.

Indeed, there is some evidence that there may be such breakdowns in Facebook profiles, as Gosling et al. (2007) found that people were unaware of how they were perceived on four of five Big Five personality traits. In this paper, we attempt to explore this impression formation and (mis)management through micro-updates.

Measuring Micro Impression Management

While the work of Goffman provides a well-established metaphor (stage and audience) for understanding impression management, it remains surprisingly vague about the dimensions that constitute an impression in practice. In his essay, “On Face Work” (Goffman, 1963), face is defined as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. [...] It is an image of self, delineated in terms of approved social attributes.” Yet Goffman did not provide a list of tactics people use during face-work, or a taxonomy of impression formation.

Nevertheless, others have attempted to characterize the dimensions of impression management. Examples include the work of Jones and Pittman (1982), which defines five tactics used during face-work: ingratiation, intimidation, self-promotion, exemplification (appearing virtuous), and supplication (looking weak to engender help). McClelland (1988) offered three basic social motivations: power, affiliation, and achievement, and Leary (1995) posited that people are motivated to be seen as physically attractive, likeable, competent, capable, and virtuous.

Our initial inclination was to adopt one of these taxonomies to characterize face-work on Facebook. Upon initial examination of the authors’ own News Feeds, however, most of the dimensions did not seem to apply to most updates. For example, how does one rate “Mango pancakes are super yummy! Next culinary venture: mango salsa” in terms of its attempt to demonstrate power or achievement, let alone ingratiation or supplication? Further, all posts scored high on affiliation because posting an update is in itself an attempt to connect with others. This disparity between posts and existing frameworks for face-work underscored Goffman’s insistence on the contextuality of impression management. To proceed we needed to find a set of dimensions that would apply to the type of micro-updates presented on Facebook.

Consequently, we ran an initial pilot study with over 20 Facebook users asking them to characterize the impressions they formed of their friends’ News Feed updates, using any adjective they liked. The data were collected through a simple Facebook application providing a text box for the adjective next to each status update, allowing subjects to rate the posts in context. Following principles from Grounded Theory (Glaser, 1998), the authors constructed a list of high-level categories that characterized the principal dimensions collected. Based on Goffman’s earlier definition of face-work, these dimensions were binary to capture the notion of “positive social value” claimed by the post author vs. the corresponding negative value (which can be seen as a “failed” impression). The dimensions were:

- Cool – Uncool
- Entertaining – Boring

- Uplifting – Depressing
- Self-deprecating – Self-important
- Appreciative – Critical

We do not claim that these dimensions capture the full diversity of face-work on Facebook, but they did capture the impressions our subjects believed to be “given” and “given off” in most status updates, as we describe in our next section. It is worth noting that this bottom-up approach yielded only one category – self-importance – that mapped well to the theory-based taxonomies.

We then used these dimensions to evaluate the alignment between the impressions people intend to give off with the impressions others form of them. We did so by asking people to indicate their impressions of their own and others’ status updates using a custom-built Facebook application, and by tracking the naturally occurring responses to those posts. Facebook provides two ways to respond to a post: by adding a text comment and by clicking a “thumbs up” symbol to indicate one “likes” a post. Beyond the data generated by our application, we also looked at which types of posts received more comments and more “likes.”

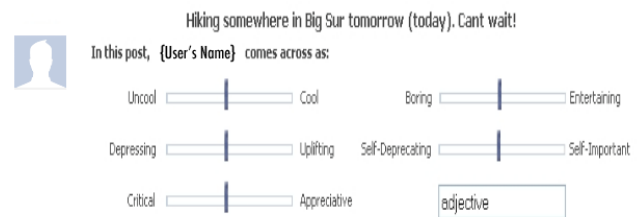


Figure 1. Screenshot of "Rate Your News Feed"

Methods

Our “Rate Your News Feed” application presented users with a list of posts from their News Feed, including their own and their friends’ posts. Each post was accompanied by a picture of the poster, that person’s name, and the text of the post. No likes or comments were displayed with the post, so as not to bias people’s perceptions of the post. Beneath each post was a set of five sliders, one for each of our five dimensions of impression management, plus a text box asking for an adjective to describe how the person “came across” in that post (see Figure 1). The latter was included in case our categories did not fully capture the performance projected in a given post. The sliders were set in the middle between the two adjectives and no numbers were associated with the end points. After rating five posts, users could ask to rate another page of posts or they could submit their ratings. Doing the latter took them to a page showing the dimensions on which their friends’ posts deviated most from the norm, along with humorous cartoons comparing their friends to characters such as House on the popular TV show (for especially self-important posts) or Mary Poppins (uplifting).

Results

We collected data from 100 participants over 21 days, resulting in 674 rated updates. Out of these updates 575 were for other people's status updates and 99 were for the participants' own posts. There were relatively few posts (30) for which we collected both the participant's ratings and at least one friend's rating of that same post. Therefore, in most of these analyses we aggregate ratings of users' own posts and ratings of friends' posts, understanding that they are generally not ratings of the same posts. We performed preliminary analysis with the posts for which we had both the user's rating and the rating of at least one friend, and found qualitatively the same results as with aggregate ratings, but without statistical significance due to the small sample size.

Relevance of Dimensions

Since the sliders all started in the middle (indicating the dimension did not apply to the post), we looked at the number of updates for which raters moved at least one slider to get a sense of the applicability of our dimensions. Participants rated 71% of their friends' posts along at least one dimension, and among the remaining posts they added their own adjective only 3.5% of the time. This result indicates that these dimensions generally captured people's impressions of most types of Facebook status updates. Interestingly, users rated only 45% of their own posts on at least one dimension, and added their own adjectives to only 5.7% of the remaining 55%. This gives us an initial indication that there may be a gap between the impressions people believe themselves to be giving off and the impressions they form of others.

The dimension that was seen as most relevant to friends' posts was Entertaining–Boring (rated in 47% of the posts), followed by Cool–Uncool (38%), Appreciative–Critical (35%), Uplifting–Depressing (34%) and Self-Important–Self-Deprecating (28%). When rating oneself, Cool–Uncool was most often seen as relevant (35%), with all the other dimensions being rated between 28% and 24% of the time. Since the dimensions seen as most relevant were Entertaining–Boring and Cool–Uncool, the positive ends of those spectra may capture some of “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself” (Goffman, 1963) in the context of Facebook. Put differently, seeing a lot of “cool” and “entertaining” updates could shape a user's perception of what constitutes “successful” face-work on Facebook.

Alignment of Impressions Given vs. Given Off

The crux of our interest is the degree to which the impressions people think they are giving are aligned with the impressions others form of them. We started to explore this question by comparing how people rated themselves vs. others on the five dimensions. In all analyses, we used

binomial tests to determine statistical significance. As shown in Figure 2, on average people viewed others' posts positively on all the dimensions except one. They thought others came across as significantly more cool than uncool, more entertaining than boring, more uplifting than depressing, and more appreciative than critical, but they also saw them as more self-important than self-deprecating [$p < .05$]. When judging their own posts, however, they saw themselves only as significantly more appreciative than critical [$p < .01$]. Self-ratings on the other four dimensions showed the same pattern as the other-ratings, but none of the differences were statistically significant. The data for self-ratings was fairly sparse, so more data would tell us whether this pattern would hold up.

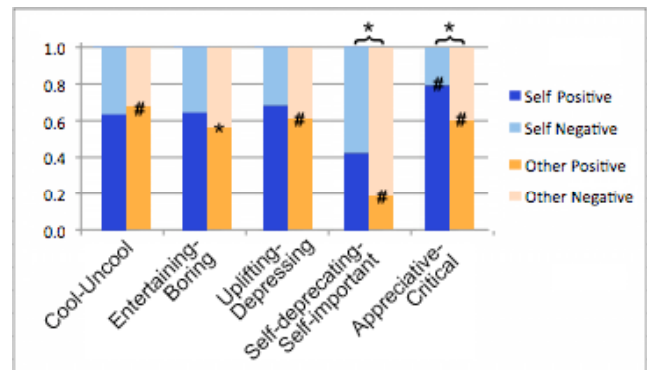


Figure 2. Proportion of positive and negative ratings for one's own and for others' posts (* = $p < .05$; # = $p < .01$).

Overall it appears that people were generally successful at projecting a positive image of themselves except for a tendency to come across as self-important. Examples of adjectives people added to characterize others' posts include “showing off,” “snobby,” “proud” and “overachiever.” The self-rating data suggest that, while people believed they were portraying themselves as appreciative, they were not as aware of the impressions they were creating along the other dimensions.

Next, we wanted to see if people had a sense of the degree to which they were giving off these impressions. We looked at the proportion of positive to negative ratings along each dimension when rating self and others. Although people were aware they were coming across as more self-important than self-deprecating, they underestimated the degree to which this was so (see Figure 2) [$p < .05$]. Similarly, although they accurately believed themselves to be coming off as appreciative, they overestimated the degree to which this was so [$p < .05$]. There were no significant differences between self and other ratings on the remaining dimensions.

Face-work that Provokes a Response

We were also interested to see which types of posts were more likely to provoke a response via text comments and “likes” ratings. As shown in Figure 3, posts that were seen

as entertaining were significantly more likely than boring ones to provoke comments [$p < .01$], and posts seen as depressing generated comments more often than uplifting ones [$p < .01$]. The other dimensions did not have a significant effect on commenting. We found no pattern in the types of posts that garnered “likes” votes.

Subjective experience with Facebook suggests these results could reflect two common commenting patterns: the phatic (Schneider, 1998) “ha ha” or “hilarious!” often seen after an amusing message, or offers of sympathy like “poor you” or “that’s terrible” offered after a participant announces bad news. The “laughs” generated by entertaining updates also illustrate how being funny is one of the “approved social attributes” (Goffman, 1963) that participants want to reinforce through explicit positive feedback in the context of Facebook.

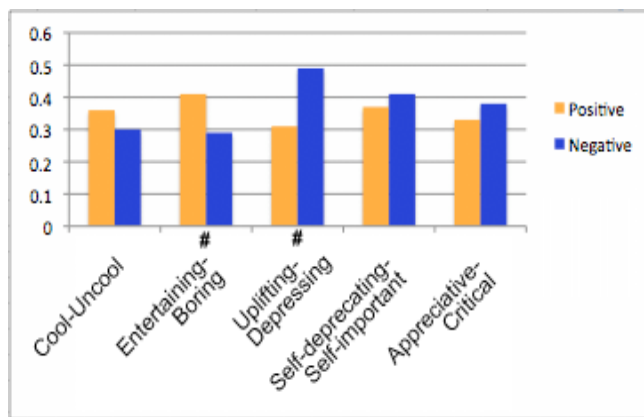


Figure 3. Probability of receiving at least one comment, based on the impression given (# indicates $p < .01$).

Conclusion

While limited in scope, these initial analyses shed some light on the kind of “impression management game” played through Facebook status updates. The prevalence of cool and entertaining updates suggests these dimensions as highly relevant to successful face-work on SNSs, which is reinforced by their tendency to attract more comments than other types of posts. While users strive (and often succeed) to project a positive image along these dimensions, they underestimate how much certain updates make them look self-important. This finding is well-aligned with a common perception that updates can go “too far” and project a self-aggrandizing image that clashes with the light-hearted tone of most SNSs. People also believe their posts express appreciation more than their friends perceive. In a world of perpetual contact (Joinson, 2008) where people form quick and long-lasting impressions of others (Gosling et al., 2007; Stecher & Counts, 2008) our data show that users, now more than ever, need to walk a fine line between the impressions they “give” and inadvertently “give off” (Goffman, 1959).

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