The influence of the number of 'likes' and priming information on observers' evaluations of social media status updates

Karol Maybury, Lacey Tatosky, Ansel Mallonee (University of Maine, Farmington) and Amanda DeCarlo (University of North Carolina, Asheville)

Research Problem and Hypothesis:

This study tested the hypothesis that individuals evaluate social media (i.e., Facebook) status updates more or less negatively depending upon the degree to which others have endorsed ('liked') the status update previously. For instance, we hypothesized that people would rate a status update (and the individual who has posted it) as more humorous if it has already been 'liked' by a large number of individuals. In addition, it was hypothesized that negative priming information about the person posting the status update (the 'poster') would negatively impact raters' evaluation of the status update *and* the poster.

Methodology

Using paper and pencil questionnaires, undergraduate participants (n=84) at two public state universities were asked to read six Facebook-style status updates ostensibly produced by an undergraduate female college student "Ashley". After reading each status update, participants evaluated it on a number of characteristics (e.g., humor, attention-seeking, 'creepiness', appropriateness). The status updates were the same across all conditions. Using a between-subjects (2 X 2) design, two independent variables were manipulated: popularity of the target's status updates (number of likes) and emotional stability (neuroticism) priming information about the target (poster). The first independent variable was manipulated so that half of the subjects read that the status update had received a large number of likes (M=18) and the other half of the subjects read that the status update had received no or very few (M=1) 'likes'. The second independent variable involved priming one-half of the subjects to read preliminary status updates that suggested high neuroticism in the poster (3 'priming' status updates that were negative or 'angsty' in nature: e.g., "Some people call it being mean. I call it honesty."). The other half of the subjects read 3 priming status updates that were neutral/positive (e.g., "The new pumpkin lattes at Sebastian's are great!"). Next, all subjects read 6 identical status updates that included three humorous status updates (e.g., 'Sometimes when I'm cleaning my cat's litterbox, I just pretend I'm a very unlucky gold-panner from the 1880s') followed by three negative/complaining status updates (e.g., 'Thank you to all my friends who do not suck 90% of the time'). These were time-stamped as occurring across a one-week span. Participants read

each one, and evaluated them on 6 qualities (e.g., humor, appropriateness) on a Likert-style scale. Finally, the participants rated the poster on global characteristics (popularity, likeability, intelligence) and reported on their own social media usage.

Results

A 2 X 2 ANOVA (number of likes X priming information) was conducted on a number of dependent variables. Several notable results emerged. For example, a main effect for number of likes emerged for the dependent variable of 'how funny is Ashley (the poster)?' $F_{(1,79)}= 5.44$, p.<.02). For the high-likes condition (when the poster had an average of 18 likes for each of her status updates) undergraduates rated her as M=2.68, SD=1.8 on 'funniness' whereas in the low-likes condition (when the poster had an average of 1 like for her status updates) she was rated significantly lower M=2.15, SD=.13 on funniness. In addition, a main effect for number of likes emerged for the dependent variable of popularity $F_{(1,79)}=4.41$, p<.03). When asked "How popular do you think Ashley is?" participants in the high-likes condition rated her an average of M=2.83, SD=.14 on popularity. Whereas when she received a low number of likes she was rated lower on popularity: M=2.34, SD=.19.

In addition, a main effect for priming information (neurotic vs. neutral) emerged for the dependent variable of likeability of the poster: $F_{(1,79)}=4.84$, p. <.04. The neurotic poster was rated as significantly less likeable (M=2.47, SD=.16) than the neutral poster (M=2.92, SD=.12). In addition, the poster was rated as significantly more innocent when given neutral priming information (M=3.19, SD=1.65) than when given neurotic priming information (M=2.46, SD=.22): $F_{(1, 79)}=6.79$, p.<01.

While uniform main or interaction effects were not found across the status update evaluations, some status updates (particularly negative or complaining status updates) were evaluated significantly more *positively* in the condition in which the status received no likes and the poster was neurotic. This result was contrary to our hypothesis. For instance, the "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer" status update produced an interaction effect for the dependent variable 'creepy' $F_{(1, 79)}=4.81$, p.<.03. Post-hoc Tukey tests revealed that the low-likes, neurotic priming condition rated this status update as significantly less creepy (M=2.44) than the high-likes, neutral (M=2.93) or low-likes, neutral (M=2.91) conditions.

Implications of the results

This research is the first to examine the impact of priming information, and others' evaluations, on the impact of individual status updates. We found evidence that people are significantly influenced by others' opinions (e.g., number of previously-awarded 'likes') when evaluating status updates. We discovered that number of likes influenced observers' global evaluations of the poster, and also influenced how they evaluated individual status updates. While some of the findings are intuitive (it makes sense that observers would evaluate someone receiving a lot of 'likes' as more popular) others run counter to what conventional wisdom would suggest

(participants rating a complaint as 'creepier' when the poster is described as non-neurotic and popular.) While previous research has examined other notable aspects of Facebook use (e.g., Sheldon, Abad and Hinsch's 2012 research that examines the social rewards and social disconnection after using Facebook; Manago, Taylor and Greenfield's 2012 research that illustrated that status updates are used for emotional disclosure and individuals with large networks assume a larger audience for their postings), this is the first study to examine how others' evaluations, and priming information may impact how individual status updates are evaluated. Implications for future research will be discussed.