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It's not what you say it's how you say it: Language use on Facebook impacts employability but not attractiveness

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Running head: Language use on Facebook

Abstract

The expansion and increasing diversity of the Internet has seen a growth in user-generated online content, and an escalation in incorrect and non-standardized language use (e.g., text speak). This evolution has been exemplified by social networking sites such as Facebook. In our experiment, participants viewed six Facebook profiles whose walls contained status updates that were either spelled correctly, incorrectly, or using text speak, and then rated the profile owners on measures of attractiveness and employability. It was shown that language use had no impact on attractiveness, but users who used correct language were seen as more intelligent, competent, and employable. These results highlight the need to control language in this area of research by demonstrating the variables' seemingly elevated importance to employers compared to peers. The findings also pave the way for further exploration of the Warranting Theory of impression formation online and the role of language in social media-based identity statements and behavioral residue.

Introduction

The expansion of the Internet has seen a rapid rise in the amount of user-generated content and thus the diversity of language used online.[1] Given the increasing weight attributed by employers to personal information disclosed by individuals in online environments,[2] the time is right to investigate the impact of common online language types in employers' impression formation. This experiment manipulated the language used by targets to convey messages on social networking sites (SNSs) and measured the impact this had on impression formation using social- and employment related variables.

One medium that characterizes the destandardization of online language use is social media (e.g., SNSs such as Facebook and Twitter) where usage of slang, colloquialisms, and text speak is common.[3] Such language is thought to have developed to facilitate communication with peers. Specifically, text speak is a technology-based hybrid language that initially evolved from standard English in instant and text messaging on mobile communication devices, and more recently transferred to online domains.[4] Text speak comprises many features including orthographic abbreviations (e.g., omitting vowels), phonetic respelling (e.g., ''u'' for ''you''), acronyms (e.g., ''LOL'' for ''laugh out loud'') and emotiograms (e.g., '':-)'' for ''happy'').[5] Although text speak often speeds communication because it is faster to write on mobile devices, and information is conveyed using fewer

characters, eye-tracking research has demonstrated a cost when experts read text speak relative to standard English.[5] Neuroimaging has shown that similar patterns of brain activity are produced when experts read text speak as when a non-native speaker reads text in their second language.[4]

The absence of editing or proof-reading in many online domains means that, compared to traditional printed text, the Internet not only contains relatively unrestricted vocabulary but a large proportion of incorrect language such as spelling or grammatical mistakes. Comments on SNSs such as Facebook are typically designed for general friendship maintenance and are usually short, with 95% containing fewer than 57 words. These combine standard spelling, accidental mistakes, interjections, and slang, with 97% of posts containing non-standardized features or text speak.[6] The frequency with which such language is used suggests it is highly recognizable and desirable to the majority of users.

The language individuals choose to convey information online could have unforeseen consequences. The main motivations for using Facebook are social: maintaining and establishing relationships and friendships, and organizing social activities.[7] Employers are, however, increasingly evaluating—and vetting—potential job candidates based on their SNS profile content.[2] Of 300 hiring professionals surveyed, 90% used information contained on candidates' SNS profiles to help decide which position to offer them,[8] and many recent studies have reported that both job and internship candidates were refused positions as a direct result of the content of their SNS profiles.[9–11]

Facebook profile content can influence employers' impressions of individuals,[12] but the role played by the language used to convey information has not been investigated. Given that language use can be indicative of characteristics such as personality, social identity, and emotional states,[13,14] this in itself could be a valuable source of information for employers. A negative correlation has been shown between use of text speak in certain contexts, including on SNSs such as MySpace and Facebook, and literary skills.[3] Education level is a significant predictor of making spelling mistakes online.[15] Spelling and grammatical mistakes have also been shown to make online reviews less clear and valuable but more entertaining, as they are often associated with expressive slang and humour.[16] Consequently, whether caused by lack of knowledge, negligence, or an attempt to communicate more effectively with friends and peers, both of these types of language could have implications for user employability. This is especially relevant if certain types of

language have negative associations, as negative information is weighted more heavily than positive information when evaluating job candidates.[17] The wrong choice of language could potentially override any positive information an individual may try to convey.

Online impression formation is often framed around the Warranting Theory,[18] which distinguishes between two types of residual information from which impressions of individuals can be formed: identity claims (symbolic statements made by individuals) and behavioral residue (traces of behavior left unintentionally). These, when taken together, lead to accurate impressions being formed of individuals' personalities and abilities based on personal physical space (dorm rooms[19]) and personal online space (personal web pages[20]). It has been suggested that such information may be weighted differently when forming judgments and that, because of the combination of target-generated and friend-generated information that comprise profiles, SNSs may be an ideal platform on which to investigate this further. It has also been shown that viewers rely on the content of other more than target-generated statements on Facebook profiles when making judgments of extroversion and physical attractiveness.[17]

In the current experiment, all language manipulations occurred in profile owners' status updates on their own walls, traditionally considered as identity claims, to examine the impact that language use on Facebook has on impression formation. The content of targets' Facebook status updates were kept constant, but the language used to present this information was manipulated. Participants viewed three male and three female Facebook profiles, each of which contained profile owner status updates either spelled correctly, spelled incorrectly, or presented partially in text speak. Profile owner gender was also manipulated because previous studies have reported manipulated variables having different effects on the perceptions of males and females. [18,21,22] Walther et al.,[18] for example, found that when wall posts referred to undesirable sociable behavior, perceptions perceptions of females' physical attractiveness decreased, but that of males increased. No specific predictions were made regarding gender, but it was hypothesized that use of non-standardized language would result in higher ratings of social attractiveness but reduced ratings of employability.

Method

Participants

A total of 112 volunteers (60 females; age 18–53 years, M= 21.30, SD = 5.83) participated in this study for either course credit or no compensation. Nationalities of participants were 70.5% British, 19.7% European, 6.3% African, and 3.5% Asian. Participants were recruited via electronic advertisements, and indicated on an open-ended question that they used Facebook at least once per day. All scored more than 90% on a language test that required them to identify the incorrect spelling of a sentence from a choice a three, and included all mistakes in the ''incorrect'' condition.

<u>Design</u>

A 3x2 (language: correct, incorrect, text speak · target gender: male, female) within-participants design was used. Dependent variables were physical, social, and task attractiveness measured on 5-item scales[23] (Cronbach's a = 0.750, 0.702, and 0.722 respectively), and single-item measures of intelligence, competence, and employability. All items were 7-point Likert scales, with seven being the maximum, one the minimum, and four the mid-point.

<u>Materials and Procedure</u>

Participants saw six Facebook profiles in total. Each contained three status updates by the profile owner and three posts by a ''friend.'' All three status updates were either spelled correctly, contained two spelling mistakes, or were written in text speak (e.g., correct: ''Anyone want two tickets for Kasabian on Wednesday night?''; incorrect: ''Anyone want two tickets for kasabien on wedensday night?''; text speak: ''NE1 want 2 tickets 4 Kasabian on Wed nite?'').

All other profile details (e.g., profile picture attractiveness, personal information, number of friends and photos, friends' names and photos, content of friends' wall posts) were controlled and counterbalanced across conditions. Participants viewed the profiles on a laptop in a quiet room on campus. They were instructed to view them as they would the profile of a friend or peer for as long as they wanted to form an impression before completing the questionnaire. Profiles were presented to participants in a pseudo-random order. Upon completion, participants were debriefed as to the purpose of the experiment.

Results

We conducted a total of six 3 · 2 (language: correct, incorrect, text speak · target gender: male, female) analyses of variance (ANOVAs) on the three measures of attractiveness and the three measures of employability. All means and SDs are presented in Table 1, and all main effects and interactions are presented in Table 2. The results are summarized below.

There were no main effects or interactions for social, physical, or task attractiveness, but there were significant main effects of language for measures of intelligence, competence, and employability. Bonferroni follow-up contrasts revealed that targets using correct language (intelligence: 4.79; competence: 4.59; employability: 4.81) were rated higher on all three measures ($ps < 0.05$) than those using incorrect language (intelligence: 4.28; competence: 4.24; employability: 4.44). Targets using text speak (intelligence: 4.56; competence: 4.38; employability: 4.48) were rated as being significantly less intelligent and employable ($ps < 0.05$) than those using correct language, but there were no other significant differences. Additionally, females were rated as being more competent (M= 4.52 vs. 4.29) and more employable (M= 4.71 vs. 4.44) than males. There were no significant interactions.

Discussion

While the type of language used to convey information on SNS profiles did not affect perceived social, physical, or task attractiveness, targets who used correct language were judged as being more intelligent, competent, and employable than those who used incorrect language, and more intelligent and employable than those using text speak. Female targets were rated more competent and employable than male targets. Our study demonstrates that the language used on SNSs can impact impression formation online. The results highlight the dichotomy between the primary social function of SNSs and the potentially damaging consequences of presenting information online. Spelling mistakes, of which social network users may be unaware (or not take the time to correct), or text speak, which may be consciously employed as a communication strategy, have no effect on the perceived attractiveness of profile owners. They do, however, detrimentally affect perceived intelligence, competence, and employability, indicating their potential to impact opinions formed by employers.

This demonstrates for the first time that not only the information contained on SNSs but also how this information is conveyed can impact target employability. Use of incorrect

language, but not text speak, might result in lower ratings of competence because the former is seen as a mistake or oversight, whereas the latter could be viewed as a conscious communication strategy indicating online capability. Perhaps the most surprising finding is that the use of text speak did not result in any increase in any social measure; it was developed to facilitate communication, but it apparently provides no social benefit over standard language. Having evolved to facilitate speed of use on mobile devices, text speak is not necessarily faster to produce on conventional keyboards, and there is a cost to processing it relative to conventional text.[4,5] One explanation for its continued use is that it has become convention in some domains, and that SNS users view it positively and seek to incorporate it into their online identities. Given that current results denote a cost to using text speak, social networkers should be made aware of the potential detrimental impact of employing such language.

It should be noted that this study focused on impression formation. Targets were unknown to participants, and further research is required to determine the significance of nonstandard language use by known friends and acquaintances. Also, participants were asked how generally employable they judged targets to be: what constitutes ''employability'' in distinct occupational sectors, and how this manifests online, requires future investigation. Additionally, all language manipulations in the current study occurred within targets' status updates. Previous research has shown that not only the behavior of the target, but also that of their friends, can impact impression formation.[18] It would be interesting to see if friends' language use could affect impressions formed of a target.

The results also have implications for the Warranting Theory of impression formation,[18] which distinguishes between identity claims and behavioral residue. Language used strategically (e.g., text speak) may contribute to individuals' identity claims, whereas unintentional mistakes may be classed as behavioral residue. It has been suggested that such information may be weighted differently when forming judgments of individuals online. Although in cases such as this behavioral residue seems to carry more weight than identity statements, use of language may impact more heavily on statements produced by the targets themselves, as in such incidents they would be more indicative of the target's underlying personality and abilities.

Our results have further implications for research in the area. Previous studies have demonstrated that the content of SNS profiles can influence impressions users form of

profile owners.[17,11,24,25] The language used as stimuli in such studies have not always been controlled, however; for example, wall posts manipulated by Walther et al.[18] used text speak in some but not all conditions. This was presumably done to improve the ecological validity of the stimuli given the prevalence of such language in real life.[6] While it no doubt succeeded, future studies should control this variable across conditions, especially if measures relate to target employability. The significant results in this study generally had small size effects, so attempts should be made to replicate the findings, and future research could also look at differences in different types of incorrect language used and differences in types of text speak employed.

Women have previously been rated higher than men on some social dimensions[21] but to our knowledge have never been rated as more employable. Females consistently outperform males on exams in higher education.[26] Additionally, the education system has reportedly become more ''feminized,'' rendering males at a disadvantage.[27] Given that participants were undergraduate students, these factors might combine to make females appear more employable to their peers. Women also score higher than men on emotional intelligence, a dimension that predicts employability.[28]

In conclusion, this study manipulated the type of language used on Facebook profiles and found that while no effect was shown on measures of social, physical, or task attractiveness, owners of profiles containing correct language were rated as more employable than owners of those containing incorrect language or text speak. Results highlight the dichotomy between the primary social function of social networks and the consequences of presenting information online. They also underline the implications to users' careers of employing certain language types in this domain.

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Table 1

Mean (Standard Deviation) Ratings for Social-, Physical, and Task-Attractiveness, and Intelligence, Competence and Employability

		Social Att	Physical Att	Task Att	Intelligence	Competence	Employability
Correct	**Male**	3.97 (0.74)	3.81 (0.64)	3.85 (0.71)	4.71 (0.97)	4.49 (1.05)	4.71 (1.27)
	Female	3.95 (0.79)	3.85 (0.69)	4.00 (0.77)	4.89 (1.17)	1.69 (1.11)	4.92 (1.16)
	Total	3.96 (0.76)	3.83 (0.67)	3.92 (0.74)	4.79 (1.07)	4.59 (1.08)	4.81 (1.22)
Incorrect	**Male**	3.85 (0.78)	3.82 (0.67)	3.90 (0.76)	4.19 (1.28)	4.13 (1.19)	4.26 (1.39)
	Female	4.01 (0.76)	3.87 (0.69)	3.97 (0.81)	4.37 (1.35)	4.36 (1.18)	4.62 (1.31)
	Total	3.92 (0.77)	3.85 (0.68)	3.94 (0.79)	4.28 (1.31)	4.24 (1.19)	4.44 (1.35)
Text Speak	**Male**	3.89 (0.81)	3.93 (0.56)	3.92 (0.66)	4.52 (1.11)	4.24 (1.12)	4.37 (1.25)
	Female	3.94 (0.83)	3.85 (0.61)	3.87 (0.70)	4.59 (1.19)	4.52 (1.15)	4.59 (1.33)
	Total	0.91 (0.82)	3.89 (0.59)	3.89 (0.68)	4.56 (1.15)	4.38 (1.13)	4.48 (1.29)

Note: Likelihood to gossip was measured on a scale of 1 to 4 (low to high). Standard deviations are in parentheses. Also shown are results of follow-up contrasts to the Familiarity × Interest interaction, including *t*-values and significance thresholds ($p<.05=$*, $p<.01=$**, and $p<.001=$***).

Table 2

Main Effects and Interactions for the 3 · 2 (Language: Correct, Incorrect, Text Speak · Target Gender: Male, Female) ANOVAs on Measures of Social, Physical, and Task Attractiveness, and Intelligence, Competence, and Employability

	Language			Target Gender			Language x Target Gender		
	F	p	μ^2	F	p	μ^2	F	p	μ^2
Social attractiveness	0.221	0.802	0.002	1.136	0.289	0.010	0.515	0.195	0.015
Physical attractiveness	0.765	0.467	0.007	0.028	0.868	0.000	1.08	0.340	0.010
Task attractiveness	0.223	0.792	0.002	0.977	0.325	0.009	1.658	0.193	0.015
Intelligence	10.787	**<0.001**	0.089	2.677	0.105	0.024	0.255	0.775	0.002
Competence	5.173	**<0.05**	0.045	6.601	**<0.05**	0.056	0.093	0.911	0.001
Employability	5.781	**<0.005**	0.049	6.037	**<0.05**	0.052	0.358	0.699	0.003

Significant results are indicated in bold. ANOVA, analysis of variance.