

I Know Something You Don't: The Use of Asymmetric Personal Information for Interpersonal Advantage

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ABSTRACT

With the widespread use of social networking sites, it is easy to acquire a great deal of personal information about someone before meeting them. How do people use this information when initiating relationships? In the present study, participants either had access to an unknown partner's Facebook profile or did not, and were instructed to get their partners to like them in a short instant messaging conversation. Participants used social network and profile information in two ways: *probes*, asking questions whose answer they already knew, and *implicit mentions*, referencing information that made them seem more similar to their partner. These strategies successfully increased interpersonal attraction. Participants, however, frequently rated these strategies as deceptive, raising important concerns about the use of asymmetrical personal information for interpersonal gain.

Author Keywords

interpersonal attraction, social networking sites, computer-mediated communication, deception

ACM Classification Keywords

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INTRODUCTION

Gone are the days when getting to know people required actually meeting them in person. Today, online social networking sites (SNS), such as Facebook, MySpace, Orkut, LinkedIn, etc., provide detailed personal and network information about users. Importantly, current versions of these sites do not reveal to users who may have viewed their profile. It is not always the case, therefore,

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that two people have the same amount of prior knowledge about each other, or that they hold the same assumptions about their partner's knowledge when entering a conversation.

Imagine a hypothetical situation: two women, Aimee and Chantal, who do not know each other but have mutual friends, are invited to a dinner party. Aimee finds out that Chantal will be attending, and takes the initiative to learn more about her by visiting Chantal's Facebook profile. She learns they share a taste in music and fashion. When Aimee and Chantal are introduced for the first time, (1) Aimee already has a bank of knowledge about Chantal, and (2) Chantal is unaware that Aimee has this information. We refer to this situation as one of *asymmetric personal information*. This paper examines three questions that arise with asymmetric personal information:

1. How might Aimee use this information in her conversation, if at all?
2. If Aimee does use this information, will Chantal like her more than if she didn't?
3. Is it deceptive to use this kind of information without disclosure?

Managing Asymmetric Personal Information

Having information about others without their knowledge is certainly not new to the era of social networking sites. People have long used asymmetric information to their advantage in their personal and professional relationships [2, 3]. For example, teenagers manage the information they tell their parents with various strategies, such as revealing only partial information, or revealing everything when it is perceived as necessary for safety or the avoidance of punishment [6].

What is new with social networking sites, and Internet technology more generally, is the broader range of information available about individuals, along with the ease and speed of accessing this information. People frequently seek out online information about others' interests,

activities, tastes and relationships by locating their social networking profiles and homepages, and by extracting archival information from Usenet, blog postings, or message boards [5, 8].

One reason why people actively seek personal information from others' online profiles is to accomplish social goals, such as obtaining others' approval and liking [4]. Indeed, as research on homophily suggests, one way of achieving likability is to demonstrate similarity with interaction partners, because people tend to associate and like those who are similar to them [9]. Thus, one strategy for using asymmetric personal information from SNS would be to introduce similar interests or beliefs during conversation. For instance, if Aimee knew that Chantal liked a music group called Ladyhawk, Aimee could mention that she had been listening to a band called Ladyhawk and really liked them. A second strategy Aimee might use would be to ask Chantal if she had ever heard of the band Ladyhawk, even though Aimee already knew the answer to this question.

The challenge that arises with information that has been obtained from the Internet is how to introduce it in conversation. There appears to be a social norm of not telling others that you have "looked them up." This social taboo may derive from general principles of social equity [1,10], whereby interlocutors in a conversation try to maintain balance in the relationship - in this case, similar levels of knowledge about each other. Situations where an inequity is revealed, such as asymmetries in the information that we hold about each other, can cause emotional distress, and people engage in strategies to redress the inequity, such as reciprocating information about the self [10]. In our example, if Aimee revealed that she had information about Chantal, then Aimee would feel obligated to reciprocate information about herself to return the social situation to one of equity. Equally important, by revealing that Aimee had seen Chantal's profile, the power of the asymmetric information to create homophily may be diminished.

Given that people frequently access SNS information about others but may not want to reveal it explicitly, how exactly do they go about using this kind of information? One possibility is that they simply won't bring it up in conversation, although it seems unlikely that they would fail to take advantage of this resource to advance interpersonal goals, such as being positively regarded [5].

The present study explores if and how asymmetric personal information is used in short instant messaging conversations between unknown partners, one of whom was given the goal of ingratiating themselves to the other. Consistent with equity theory, we expected that the asymmetric information would be introduced with subtle strategies, like implicitly mentioning information or asking questions whose answer is already known, rather than

explicit references. We also expected that using such information would engender greater social attraction.

METHODS

Participants

Participants were 110 undergraduates (48 men and 62 women) who received course extra-credit in exchange for their participation. The experiment was advertised as a study of "achieving common ground online," and Facebook was not mentioned at any point during recruitment.

Participants were randomly assigned to same-gender unacquainted dyads. In each dyad, one of the participants was randomly assigned to the role of *ingratiator*, and the other to the role of *partner*. Only partners who had open-access Facebook profiles were included in the study.

Procedure

The 55 dyads were randomly assigned to two conditions: asymmetric information (30 dyads) and control (25 dyads). Ingratiators in both conditions were given an affiliative goal: to get their partners to like them [see 2,4]. Partners were instructed to simply get to know their partner.

In the asymmetric information condition, ingratiators had access to their partner's Facebook profile and were instructed to familiarize themselves with it. To ensure that these informed ingratiators studied the profiles carefully, they were told they would be quizzed on the content of the profile. In the control condition, the ingratiators had access to an unrelated website (www.kiva.org) instead of their partner's Facebook profile. These uninformed ingratiators were also told they would be quizzed on the content of the site.

Participants in the partner role in both conditions had access to the unrelated website (www.kiva.org) instead of the other participant's Facebook profile and received similar instructions to familiarize themselves with the content of the site.

Ingratiators and partners then engaged in a 15-minute conversation over instant messenger with the task of getting to know one another better. At the end of the interaction, participants filled out a questionnaire assessing interpersonal liking.

In the asymmetric information condition, informed ingratiators were then asked to go through a transcript of the conversation and identify any instances where they used Facebook information, as well as any instances where they felt they had been deceptive. In the control condition, uninformed ingratiators were asked to identify only where they had been deceptive.

After completing the interpersonal liking questionnaire, partners were informed that the other participant was instructed to be likable. Subsequently, partners were asked

to identify any instances in the conversation where they thought the ingratiation was trying to be likable. Partners in the asymmetric information condition were also told that their partner had viewed their Facebook profile, and were asked to identify any instances where they thought their partner had used their facebook information.

Measures. Interpersonal liking was assessed using the 6 items from the Social Attraction dimension of McCroskey and McCain’s [6] Interpersonal Attraction Scale. Sample items included “I think he (she) could be a friend of mine” The scale was reliable (Cronbach’s alpha = .77).

Coding. The unit of analysis for the transcripts was each IM message. The transcript data was tabulated as follows. For ingratiation, we recorded (1) the number of instances where Facebook information was used; (2) the number of lies ingratiation told their partners; and (3) the number of instances where informed ingratiation thought they used Facebook information deceptively. For partners, we recorded (1) the number of times the partner thought the ingratiation used an ingratiation strategy; (2) the number of ingratiation strategies that the partner thought involved Facebook information; and (3) the number of times the partner correctly identified the use of Facebook information as an ingratiation strategy.

Two trained raters then assessed *how* informed ingratiation introduced Facebook information during the conversation. Specifically, Facebook references were coded into three categories (see Table 1): (1) *probes*: asking a question whose answer was already known from the partner’s Facebook profile; (2) *implicit mentions*: surreptitiously introducing information from the partner’s profile (e.g., bringing up a common interest without referencing the Facebook profile); and (3) *explicit mentions*: admitting to their partners that they had seen their Facebook profiles prior to the interaction. Inter-rater reliability was high ($kappa = 0.85$).

Strategy	Conversation Example
Probe	I: have you taken Comm 101? P: I’m taking it now actually.
Implicit Mention	I: i like rap and pop stuff like radio top 20 i guess.....but im also into the laid back stuff like u2...cold play zeppelin P: yea im a big fan of coldplay and zeppelin too
Explicit Mention	P: what'd you get to read about? I: she sent me to facebook

Table 1. Examples of strategies for using information from Facebook profiles (I = Ingratiation, P = Partner).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Use of Facebook Information

Asymmetric personal information was used a total of 133 times by the 30 ingratiation in the asymmetric condition. Only 3 ingratiation explicitly revealed that they had seen the partners’ Facebook profile (for a sum of 8 instances). The remaining participants used an average of 4.4 pieces of asymmetric information in their conversations, with all ingratiation using at least one piece and one ingratiation using 10 pieces.

Of the 133 instances of asymmetric information, participants used probes 72.2% of the time, implicit mentions 21.8% of the time and explicit mentions 6% of the time. These data indicate that participants used probe strategies significantly more often than implicit mentions, $F(2,58) = 27.62, p < .001$.

Consistent with social equity theory [10], participants appeared to guard their informational advantage carefully. Although the informed ingratiation made abundant use of asymmetrical information, they were careful about introducing it in conversation in subtle ways that would not violate social equity norms. Specifically, they preferred probes (questions whose answer was already known) to making statements about common interests and values. This strategy is conducive to conversation flow between strangers where question-asking is the norm, and preserves the illusion that homophily is genuine, rather than carefully orchestrated. Ingratiation overwhelmingly preferred not to reveal to their partners that they had seen their facebook profiles – a situation that could be awkward and would also cancel out the ingratiation’s informational edge in achieving homophily.

One concern here may be that the experimental procedure encouraged ingratiation to avoid explicitly mentioning their access to Facebook. We do not believe this to be the case, because participants were specifically told that it was up to them to either reference Facebook or not. Nonetheless, future studies should examine this phenomenon outside the laboratory.

Liking

Did asymmetric personal information improve liking? The data suggest that it did. As predicted, a comparison across the two conditions revealed that partners in the asymmetric condition liked the ingratiation ($M = 4.04, SD = .43$) more than partners in the control condition ($M = 3.83, SD = .45$), $t(54) = 1.75, p < .05$ (1-tailed). This finding supports the idea that asymmetric information can be used to increase homophily. Interestingly, prior access to Facebook profiles also affected the ingratiation’s liking of their partners: informed ingratiation ($M = 4.08, SD = .58$) liked their partners more than uninformed ingratiation ($M = 3.62, SD = .74$), $t(54) = 2.57, p < .05$.

Given that having asymmetric personal information increased social attraction, the next question was whether the implicit mention and probe strategies were specifically correlated to the increased attraction. Spearman correlations between both probes ($r = 0.16$) and implicit mentions ($r = 0.26$) showed a positive association with social attraction, suggesting that the more asymmetric information used, the more participants were liked. However, neither correlation achieved significance, a result that could be due to the small sample size used in this test (only the partners in the asymmetric condition were included) and the consequent drop in power.

Detection of Asymmetric Information

The results so far suggest that the ingratiation in the experiment used asymmetric information frequently, and that they were more successful in getting the partners to like them than control participants. Were the strategies for using asymmetric information detected by their partners? That is, did the partners pick up on the fact that their partners seemed to know a lot about them?

Of the 133 instances in which ingratiation used asymmetric information, only three (or 2.3%) were identified by partners as originating from their facebook profiles. These data suggest that the partners were largely unaware of the asymmetric information the ingratiation had about them, or of the ingratiation's strategic use of this information.

This lack of awareness that publicly available online information can be used to advance others' social goals may be due to self-deception stemming from people's all-too-human desire to believe that they are truly liked [4]. Another possibility is that SNS users lack experience concerning the possible uses of private information available online.

Are Probes and Implicit Mentions Deceptive?

Did ingratiation perceive their use of asymmetric information, such as probes and mentions, as deceptive? Of the 122 non-explicit uses of asymmetric information, participants considered 77% of the instances deceptive, regardless of whether they were probes or implicit mentions. The finding that asymmetric information is regarded as deceptive is consistent with the idea that acts of omission also count as lies. This observation raises important questions about the acceptability of asymmetric personal information gleaned from SNS. For instance, is disclosure of "looking someone up" necessary to avoid being perceived as deceptive? Additional research, outside of the laboratory environment, is required to address these important questions.

CONCLUSION

The current generation has been dubbed the most documented generation in history, because of their proclivity to track their actions and post their thoughts

online. Indeed, new developments in communication technology make it easy to engage in copious amounts of self-disclosure on personal websites, blogs, or social networking profiles. However, online self-disclosure serves not only as a document for the self, but also as a rich source of information about the self that others can easily access and use. Perhaps one unintended consequence of posting personal information online is that others can use it strategically for their own relational goals. This study provides evidence that people can use information culled from the Internet as a resource for advancing their interpersonal agenda, and that they do so in a careful, strategic, and ultimately successful way.

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