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Examining the receiver's perceptions of impression management

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The Paradox of Virtuous Online Presentation: Examining the Receiver's Perceptions of Impression Management

Liyu Gao*, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK, liyu.gao@ed.ac.uk
Ben Marder, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK, ben.marder@ed.ac.uk
Ewelina Lacka, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK, ewelina.lacka@ed.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Virtue signaling, defined as the act of engaging in public moral discourse to enhance or preserve one's moral reputation (Westra, 2021), happens frequently in daily interactions. It is particularly common online since social media has substantially lowered the costs of online self-presentation. Typical examples of virtue signaling include an individual making a virtuous post on social networking sites that advocate a social cause, such as racial equality and feeding the homeless. With virtuous posts, actors deliver a positive image to receivers and expect receivers to form a virtuous or morally respectable impression of them. However, it can also be perceived negatively. Actors may be perceived as manipulative when receivers consider them to be extrinsically motivated to self-promote their virtues online and/or impress others with their virtues (i.e., being perceived as virtue signaling by receivers). Perceptions of manipulateness subsequently have a negative impact on the receiver's online intention to like the post, and offline intention to support the social cause mentioned in the post. Additionally, receivers are more likely to unfollow the actor and avoid the actor's future posts. Perceived manipulative intention mediates the relationship between perceived motivations of virtuous posts and receivers' behavioral reactions. It has a direct positive effect on the relationship between perceived extrinsic motivation and avoiding/unfollowing. Besides, perceived manipulateness has a direct negative effect on the relationship between perceived extrinsic motivation and receivers' online intention to like the post and offline intentions to support the social cause mentioned in the post. This paper conducted semi-structured interviews and experiments to examine the perceptions of virtuous posts and the impact of virtue signaling perceptions.

Keywords: Perceived impression management; Virtue signaling; Perceived manipulateness; Online Self-presentation

INTRODUCTION

Individuals like to construct their images of being kind, decent, or virtuous with virtue-related social media posts. As a result, the society is consistently exposed to numerous virtuous posts since social media has provided an ideal platform for impression management. Typical examples include individuals advocating a social cause online, such as recycling or antiracism. Individuals intend to make themselves look good in others' eyes by sharing a virtuous post. On the one hand, receivers may perceive the actor (i.e., the individual who shares virtuous posts) as warm and sincere when they consider the actor is genuinely motivated to support the cause. However, online virtuous posts can also be perceived negatively by receivers. For example, receivers may consider the actor as extrinsically motivated to self-promote their virtues online and/or impress others with their virtues, which is defined as perceived virtue signaling (VS). VS refers to a symbolic demonstration that leads the receiver to make favorable inferences about the actor's moral value (Ok et al, 2020). Westra (2021) also defines VS as the behavior of participating in public moral discourse to maintain or enhance one's moral reputation. Despite its prevalence in daily interactions, there is a lack of research on the perceptions of impression management associated with virtuous posts on social networking sites (SNSs). This study aims to examine the perceptions of virtuous posts and the impact of VS perceptions.

The perception of virtuous identity construction matters because it affects how the actor is viewed, evaluated, and treated by others. Actors hope to receive a positive appraisal from receivers. Yet, receivers may unfollow the actor and/or avoid seeing the actor's posts. Individuals may criticize the behavior of VS when they perceive hypocrisy between the statement and the actual action of the signaler (Quiggin, 2019). This research examines impression construction by the means of virtuous social media posts from the receiver's side and investigates how receivers feel and behave when they see others presenting themselves as virtuous online. At the phenomenon level, the research intends to contribute to the understanding of this social phenomenon. It is essential to examine the receiver's authentic emotional and behavioral reactions when seeing virtuous posts. At the theory level, the study contributes to the understanding of impression management theory from the receiver's perspective. Impression management is a social interaction activity that requires the receiver's involvement. Existing research however focusing on the actor's perspective, tends to ignore the receiver's perspective. It is imperative to investigate from the receiver's side.

Gurevitch (1984) suggests that receivers form two types of perceptions when investigating the receiver's impression of an actor: the perceived ability and the perceived interactivity of the actor. Nevertheless, there is no research applying this perceived impression management theory to explain VS phenomenon. This study aims to fill this gap by examining receivers' perceptions of virtuous posts on social networking sites (SNSs). SNSs offer an ideal platform for impression management, as users can easily edit and present information (Siibak, 2009). Users can build specific images to construct a positive online identity (Roulin and Levashina, 2016), such as sharing a picture of themselves driving an environmentally friendly hybrid car to demonstrate environmental concerns. Social media, therefore, presents an optimal environment for online impression management, making it a suitable context for this study.

The literature on impression management and its negative implications is scant. A few studies examined perceptions of impression management in the context of luxury consumption. For example, Cannon and Rucker (2019) show that receivers perceive lower warmth towards the actor who constructs an identity with luxury goods. Lower warmth indicates an individual's negative intent towards others. Individuals with negative intentions are perceived as untrustworthy (Ybarra et al, 2008). The use of luxury goods in impression management signals the actor's social status and wealth, while virtuous posts signal virtue. However, no research has yet examined the perception of online impression management in the context of VS.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are two key players in impression management: an actor who engages in impression management behaviors and a receiver who interacts with the actor (Paliszkievicz and Madra-Sawicka, 2016). Previous studies from the actor's perspective demonstrate that impression management involves two discrete processes. The first process deals with impression motivations, which measures what motivates the actors to control how others perceive them. Actors actively try to influence how others think of them by creating particular impressions in the minds of others or attempt to ensure that their public image is close to their ideal image (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). This behavior is motivated by the desire to acquire social and material rewards, maintain and enhance self-esteem, or develop self-identity (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). Delivering the right impression increases one's chance of getting the desired outcome (Schlenker, 1980), such as approval from audiences.

The second is related to impression constructions which refer to the type of images actors aim to present (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). Actors change their behaviors to impact the way others see them once they are motivated to construct a specific impression (Leary and Kowalski, 1990). For example, during a job interview, candidates use assertive impression management tactics (self-promotion) to present skills or previous achievements that are relevant to the position (Stevens and Kristof, 1995), or individuals use photographic filters to edit their selfies to present better-looking selfie on SNSs. A virtuous post on SNSs is also one type of impression construction that the actor uses to deliver a certain impression. By conveying the desired impression to others with virtue-related activities, actors aim to influence others' perceptions of their characteristics.

In fact, social media provides a perfect environment for impression construction. Impression management on SNS is underpinned by the awareness of online audiences (Lavertu et al, 2020) because individuals construct identities when online surveillance becomes salient. At the same time, individuals may not engage in impression management activities if there is no audience (Grant and Mayer, 2009). Therefore, from the receiver's perspective, it is reasonable to doubt that the motive of the actor is to impress the audience. However, a preponderance of research examined the actor's perspective, which limits the holistic understanding of the theoretical frameworks. In an attempt to redress this imbalance, the present study will examine receivers' perceptions of self-presentational claims on SMSs in the context of VS. Therefore, this research aims to answer the question:

What are the receiver's perceptions of virtuous posts, and what are the receiver's behavioral reactions when seeing impression construction with virtuous posts?

Impression Management from The Receiver's Side

Previous studies conducted by Gurevitch in 1984 and 1985 examined receivers' perceived impressions of self-presentation claims by asking 195 participants to recall a situation in which an actor presented their 'self' to them. The author concluded that in forming impressions of an actor, receivers respond both to the projected image (ability dimension) and to the attempt to convey that information to the receiver (interactivity dimension). The perceived ability dimension is related to the receiver's judgment of the actor's ability according to the delivered information. The interactivity dimension is mainly influenced by the perceived manipulative intention of the actor. Manipulativeness traits refer to taking advantage of others in a way that tries to get appraisal, approval, or attention from others without asking directly. For example, receivers may describe a high-manipulativeness individual as: "*All this person wanted was that everyone would pay attention to him and see how wonderful he was.*"(Gurevitch, 1985).

This is parallel with Leary and Kowalski's (1990) research where the perceived ability dimension corresponds to impression construction. The receiver evaluates the ability of the actor based on the constructed image. Secondly, impressions of personality traits (perceived interactivity) describe the perception of impression motivation. When detecting the actor's certain motive, the receiver interprets impression management motivation about the actor's personability, such as manipulateness. Van Prooijen, Ranzini and Bartels (2018) demonstrate that receivers are more interested in information about interactivity traits than competency traits when forming an impression of the individual. The perceived ability of the actor cannot fully represent the overall responses because the receiver is more influenced by and concerned with the actor's underlying motivation to project the image (the attempt to convey the information). Therefore, this study mainly focuses on the impact of perceived motivations of virtuous posts.

Perceived Motivations of Online Virtuous Posts

Perceived motivations of virtuous posts are measured by perceived intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of the post. This finding is consistent with the study conducted by Wallace et al. in 2020 on conspicuous virtue signaling (CVS), defined as mentioning charity donation on Facebook, which is one type of VS. Wallace et al. (2020) divided CVS into self-oriented CVS (to gain intrinsic benefits) and other-oriented CVS (to impress others) from the actor's side. Self-oriented CVS is driven by the desire to pursue intrinsic benefits, it allows the person to show others the authentic self. Other-oriented CVS is motivated by the desire to make an impression on others. The authors demonstrated that individuals were unlikely to donate money to the charity when they were stimulated by other-oriented CVS. The actor concerns more about presenting themselves rather than taking practical actions to donate. Similar conclusions are reached by Schau and Gilly (2003), who argued that actors construct digital selves to project the desired impression perceived by the audience on the internet. When individuals engage in impression management by presenting virtuous behaviors and highlighting positive traits or moral values to construct their socially visible identities online, their ultimate objective is to

obtain approval from the audiences and thus impress others. Correspondingly, perceived intrinsic motivation (PIM) in VS is related to perceptions of actors' genuinely motivated concerns about the cause. Perceived extrinsic motivation (PEM) is about impressing others with the post. This is also confirmed by the concept of perceived altruistic and egoistic motivations when making attributions to others' behavior (Batson, 2014). Therefore,

Hypothesis 1: Virtuous posts can be perceived as intrinsically or extrinsically motivated by receivers.

The Receiver's Behavioral Intentions

The extant literature identified the perceptions of impression management motivations and constructions. Yet, the successive research either lost the focus on perceived impression management or turn back to the actor's side again. For example, Highhouse, Brooks, and Wang (2016) propose the concept of manipulative self-presentation. They argue that, from the actor's perspective, the pursuit of status is a significant motivation for understanding manipulative impression management in the workplace. There are no subsequent investigations to scrutinize the perceived impression concluded in Gurevitch's studies in 1985 or further studies to explore the impact derived from such perceived impression on the receiver.

This study will address the question of *when the receiver formed a certain impression of the actor; will this influence the receiver's subsequent reaction?* This paper mainly focuses on the impact of perceived motivations of virtuous posts on receivers' behavioral outcomes. We intend to investigate four behavioral reactions including online intentions to like the post, unfollow the actor or avoid the actor's future posts, and offline intentions to take further actions to support the cause mentioned in the post. Liking, unfollowing, and avoiding are the basic functions embedded in SNSs. These are the immediate reactions receivers may have when responding to an online post without constructing an output (e.g., writing a comment). Moreover, this study conducted semi-structured interviews to explore receivers' overall impression of virtuous posts and receivers' behavioral intentions when they see virtuous posts. Interviewees primarily concentrate on evaluating the actor's intentions about why they share the post. They also frequently mention that they will quickly flick past to avoid seeing the post and they will not like the post. Besides, this paper is also interested in the receiver's offline intention to support the social cause mentioned in the post. It is unpredictable whether receivers will support the social event when they see actors mentioned the cause in a virtuous post. Thus, we test the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Perceived motivations of the virtuous post will have a significant impact on receivers' online intention to like the actor's post, unfollow the actor, or avoids the actor's future posts.

Hypothesis 3: Perceived motivations of the virtuous post will have a significant impact on the receivers' offline intention to support the social cause mentioned in the post.

Mediator: Perceived Manipulativeness

When the actor is perceived as attempting to impress the target person (i.e., being perceived as

virtue signaling or extrinsically motivated), it often signifies manipulative intentions (Gurevitch, 1985). Manipulativeness is a personability construction relating to influencing others (Christie and Geis, 1970). Receivers perceive someone as egoistic and manipulative when they believe the actor controls how they appear (Chen et al., 2021; Lam et al., 2007). Gurevitch (1984) explains why perceived manipulativeness arises during evaluation. They insist that receivers evaluate the actor as a highly manipulative person when there is a high derogative change from the receivers' expected relative position inferred from the actor's presentation. That is, when receivers expect themselves to be in a higher position (higher status) than the actor, a superiority presentation will imply greater status loss than if the receiver's initial expectation is low. On the contrary, there will be little derogative change in the relative position if receivers originally consider themselves lower in status compared to the actor.

Generally, a positive self-presentation may be seen as an aggressive act by the receiver due to its perceived manipulativeness possibly along with a perceived competitive threat to the receiver's self-esteem/image. This aggressive act may induce anger, rejection, and negative impressions (Gurevitch, 1985). The underlying explanation can be receivers simultaneously evaluate themselves when evaluating other individuals. The self is a natural reference point when evaluating others' behaviors (Holyoak and Gordon, 1983; Srull and Gaelick, 1983; Markus, Smith and Moreland, 1985). A positive self-presentation can generate a competitive threat to the receiver's relative status/self-esteem even if the delivered impression is convincing (Schneider, 1981; Gurevitch, 1984). In other words, an actor who is evaluated as intelligent may simultaneously be perceived as conceited and aggressive.

When receivers consider that the actor is extrinsically motivated to share the virtuous post, they may perceive the actor with a higher manipulative intention. For example, some interviewees infer the actor is motivated to show off their virtuous behavior and seek others' positive judgments. In summary, this study will examine the mediating effect of the receiver's perceived manipulativeness. This is supported by previous literature indicating the mediating effect of perceived manipulativeness on the relationship between perceived impression management motives and person perceptions (Eastman, 1994; Chen et al., 2021). Therefore,

H4: Being perceived as extrinsically motivated will positively impact on receivers' perceived manipulativeness of the actor.

H5: Being perceived as intrinsically motivated will negatively impact on receivers' perceived manipulativeness of the actor.

METHODOLOGY

This paper uses partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) to test the model (see figure 1). PLS is an appropriate SEM method for this study since it is a causal-predictive approach which focuses on estimating statistical models whose structures are designed to provide causal explanations between variables (Sarstedt et al., 2017). This study explores the theory development of the impact of perceived impression management motivations on receivers' behavioral intentions in the context of VS based on the existing perceived impression

management theory. Moreover, the PLS-SEM method is appealing to the study because it can help to estimate models with indicators variables, reflectively measured constructs, and structural paths without restrictions on distributional assumptions of the data (Hair et al., 2019).

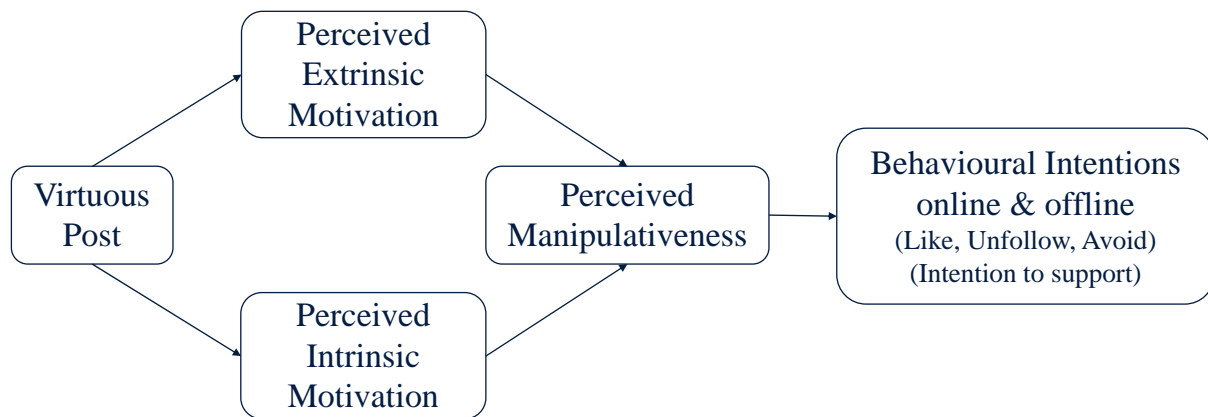


Figure 1: the model

Participants and Procedure

Before collecting data to examine the model, we pre-tested the construct validity of the scales used to measure variables. That is the items measuring PIM, PEM, and perceived manipulativenness which are adapted from previous literature (see Appendix 1). All the surveys incorporated bot detection mechanisms in Qualtrics to identify and exclude respondents based on the probability of their being automated bots. A total of 499 responses (female: 52.5%) were collected in May 2022 to examine the impact of perceived motivations of virtuous posts. Among these responses, 149 samples were randomly assigned to examine the perception of VS with the topic of environmentalism, 170 for racial equality, and 180 for animal welfare. In the first study, we examined receivers' perceptions of the three different virtuous posts.

Multi Group Analysis

The variations in perceptions among the three posts with distinct social causes were examined using SMART PLS 3.0 multi group analysis. The results indicated that there were no significant differences in path coefficients between the three groups regarding the relationships between PEM and behavioral outcomes. Consequently, the model demonstrated validity within the context of virtue signaling, irrespective of the specific topics mentioned in the posts. Environmental protection, racial equality, and animal welfare were chosen because they are the top there mentioned topics when people engage in virtue signaling. To gather information on the topics of virtue signaling posts, a sample of 100 participants was recruited through MTurk. As a result, the stimuli used in study one consisted of three posts addressing the aforementioned causes.

Data analysis

The proposed model satisfies the threshold criteria for construct validity and discriminate validity. The model has a moderate explanatory power (> 0.50). There are no notable indications of collinearity affecting the model's results (the variance inflation factor (VIF)

values are lower than 3). In our analysis, we controlled for receivers' individual levels of passion towards the social cause mentioned in the post, recognizing that this may influence their perceptions. For instance, individuals who are passionate about animal welfare may show support for posts related to this cause.

The result showed that PIM and PEM have significant impacts ($p\text{-value} < 0.05$) on receivers' online and offline behavioral intentions. As expected, PEM has a positive impact on perceived manipulative intentions. Higher levels of PEM are associated with increased online intentions to avoid the actor's future posts and to unfollow the actor. The more receivers perceive the actor is extrinsically motivated, the more likely they will unfollow the actor and avoid seeing their future posts.

The tests of the mediating effects of perceived manipulateness confirm our hypotheses. We find a significant mediating effect of perceived manipulateness on the relationship between PEM and the dependent variables. Perceived manipulateness has a direct negative effect on the relationship between PEM and receivers' intention to like the post and support the social cause. Conversely, perceived manipulateness has a direct positive impact on the relationship between PEM and the receivers' intentions to unfollow the actor and avoid the actor's future posts.

In Study two, we conducted an experimental test of the model. A total of 296 participants were randomly assigned to read a virtuous post or a neutral post. The stimuli can be found in Appendix 2. The results from one-way ANOVA analysis suggest that virtuous posts are perceived to have higher levels of extrinsic motivation and manipulateness compared to the control group.

High in PEM And Low in PIM

Overall, the results support our hypotheses. Virtuous posts can be perceived as extrinsically or intrinsically motivated. For the same virtuous post, different receivers may interpret it differently, with some perceiving it as highly extrinsically motivated while others perceive it as intrinsically motivated. Given the focus on PEM, we conducted a cluster analysis based on the disparity between PEM and PIM. In Study two, approximately 38% of participants fell into the cluster of perceiving the virtuous post as high in PEM and low in PIM. In Study one, this cluster comprised 20% of participants. These receivers share common traits, including higher levels of individual cynicism and low levels of agreeableness. Cynicism refers to the suspicion of other people's motives, faithfulness, and goodwill (Kanter and Wortzel, 1985). Lower level of agreeableness indicates that the people tend to find fault with others (Rammstedt and John, 2007). Additionally, the receivers who perceive the actor who share virtuous posts as highly extrinsically motivated also perceive them as highly manipulative.

CONCLUSION

The current research makes several contributions to the literature. Firstly, it provides an initial empirical investigation into receivers' perceptions of virtue-related impression constructions

on SNSs and the impact of being perceived as virtue signaling. It is observed that when the virtuous post is perceived as being extrinsically motivated to share, receivers are less likely to support the mentioned social cause. Additionally, actors who share virtuous posts online are more likely to be unfollowed by receivers, who also show reluctance in liking the virtuous post. These findings have implications for marketers, particularly for charities that encourage individuals to post their donations on SNSs. The practice of posting may not significantly increase others' intention to donate and can even have a negative effect on receivers' perceptions of the donor when they post it online.

Secondly, the findings from the receiver's perspective contribute to the theoretical understanding of impression management theory, which has not been explored from the viewpoint of receivers in the context of virtue signaling. The perception of impression management is crucial as individuals attend to others' evaluations, making the receiver an important component in interpersonal interactions involving impression management. Lastly, this paper highlights that perceived manipulative intention acts as a mediator between perceived motivations of virtuous posts and receivers' behavioral reactions.

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Appendix 1: Variable Measures

Perceived manipulateness measures (adapted from Paunonen et al., 2006)

PM_1 The poster's focus is their own needs rather than the cause itself.

PM_2 The poster is trying to manipulate online audiences to 'Like' their post.

PM_3 The poster is trying to manipulate online audiences to perceive them positively.

PM_4 The poster is pretending to be overly interested in the cause to positively influence others' appraisal of them.

PM_5 The poster is exaggerating their interest in the cause to get others' positive evaluations of them.

PM_6 The poster is posing as someone highly driven by the cause to influence others' impression of them.

Appendix 2: Stimuli

Study 2 - Virtuous post (left) vs. Neutral post Virtuous post (right)

Dogs cruelty is a real problem. I make sure I do everything I can to support animal shelters and animal rights initiatives. Making the effort is so important. I urge all my friends to join me in taking action to fight against the mistreatment of dogs.

[#dogwelfare](#) [#rescuedogs](#) [#compassion](#)



Saw this on Facebook today, cute pictures of dogs make me really smile. What an adorable little one they are, such cute eyes, ears and a lovely coat. Simply, the more dogs in life the more happiness. I wish I had a dog like this.

[#cutedogs](#) [#puppylove](#) [#dogsoffacebook](#)

