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Facework, Gender, and Online Discussion

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ABSTRACT

The study of facework (communicative strategies people use in order to enact self-face and to uphold, support, or challenge another person's face [Oetzel et al. 2000]) during discussion is in its infancy. Previous studies focused on participants' recollections of face-to-face discussions. This paper reports the results of an empirical study of facework behavior and online discussion outcomes. In the study, 103 participants used an online discussion board to discuss a controversial topic. The results show that different outcomes of online discussions are related to different facework behaviors, and gender plays a moderating role.

Keywords

Face, Facework, Gender, Online Discussion

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is important for collaborative learning. During learning-related conflicts, arguments and negotiations allow students to produce shared solutions to their disagreements (Doise and Mugny 1984; Petraglia 1997; Piaget 1977).

Face is a vulnerable resource during conflict interactions (Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Yokochi, Masumoto, and Takai 2000). It consists of an individual's claimed sense of image in the context of a social interaction. *Facework* consists of those face-related behaviors in which people engage, according to Face-Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey 1988; Ting-Toomey and Kurogi 1998). Face can be lost, saved, or protected, and every person wants to present and protect his/her own sense of image (Brown and Levinson 1987; Goffman 1967; Ting-Toomey1988). Ting-Toomey (2005) argues that everyone has face concerns, and managing face is especially critical during conflicts. Facework is critical for this end.

The research reported in this paper was guided by two questions: 1) What is the relationship between facework behaviors and online discussion outcomes? and 2) How could gender affect online discussion outcomes? To date, there is a paucity of research about the relationship between facework and online discussion outcomes.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Face

For Deutsch (1961), "face is one of an individual's most sacred possessions" (p. 897). Goffman (1955, 1967) defined it as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (p. 213). For Deutsch (1961) and Goffman (1955), face is carried with the individual into his/her social encounters. Lim (1994) stated that face has three characteristics: 1) Face is not private, it is public, because face is not about what one thinks about oneself, but about what one believes others should think about oneself; 2) Face is related to the ones projected image which may or may not be concurrent with other's assessment of ones real self; and 3) Face is defined just in terms of positive social values.

Face-Negotiation Theory

There are some theories and models explaining face and facework such as: Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987); Cupach and Metts (1994); and Lim and Bowers (1997). Those models have limitations for the study of facework in conflict. Face-Negotiation Theory (Ting-Toomey 1988; Ting-Toomey and Kurogi 1998) argues that face is a central component of an explanatory mechanism for facework across cultures during conflicts. One basic assumption of face-negotiation theory is that face plays an important role in uncertainty situations such as conflict. Another is that situational variables influence the use of facework behaviors in interpersonal and intergroup encounters (Oetzel et al. 2000).

In studies related to face and facework (Oetzel et al. 2000; Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Masumoto, Yokochi, Pan, Takai, and Wilcox 2001; Oetzel and Ting-Toomey 2003; and Oetzel, García, and Ting-Toomey 2007), researchers gathered information asking what participants recall from a past conflict with a parent, siblings, best friends, etc. Even though it is not explicit, we assume that they refer to conflicts on face-to-face interactions. In 2010, Baranova studied facework in organizational conflicts by asking participants about hypothetical face-to-face situations. Walsh, Gregory, Lake, and Gunawardena (2003) asked questions to students based on a conflictive scenario in an online learning environment,.

Facework

According to Oetzel et al. (2000), facework is defined as the communicative strategies people use in order to enact self-face and to uphold, support, or challenge another person's face. Oetzel et al. (2007) argue that facework is employed to resolve, exacerbate, and avoid a conflict, in addition to threaten or challenge another person's position, protect a person's image, or to even manage the shared social identity.

Oetzel et al. (2000, 2001) identified eleven facework behaviors during conflicts:

- *aggression*: degree to which a person tries to insult, hurt, or ridicule another person, telling the other he/she is wrong, stupid

- *problem solve*: focuses on behaviors that attempt to resolve a conflict through compromising or integrating viewpoints

- *third party*: involving an outside person to help to resolve the conflict

- *apologize*: admitting that you make a mistake during the conflict and telling the other about it

- *defend*: defending one's position without giving in

- *respect*: showing sensitivity, attentiveness, and listening toward the other person

- *pretend*: pretending the there is no conflict or that you are not upset or hurt by what has happened

- *remain calm*: it is about trying to keep the composure, stay calm, and unemotional during a conflict

- *give in*: accommodate the other person and let them win during the conflict

- *express emotions*: express how one is feeling without defending or attacking the other

- *private discussion*: refuse to talk about the problem in public

METHOD

Participants

Out of 143 undergraduate students registered in a "Management Information Systems" course at a Western US University, 103 (72%) wrote six or more posts to an online discussion application used in the course, and completed the survey associated with this research. The sample comprised 50 males and 52 females (1 missing). 90.1% of the participants were between 20 and 25 years.

Data collection

For an assignment, participants interacted through a discussion board, in which they had to choose and discuss a specific topic. (Topics were determined a priori by the researchers, with the purpose to generate as much conflict as possible.). Following this interaction, participants completed a survey. To get full credit for participation, every team member had to write at least six posts on the discussion board.

Measures

The outcomes of the online discussion teams were: Outcome Satisfaction, Process Satisfaction, Face Loss, and Team Cohesion.

Outcome Satisfaction refers to the participants' degree of satisfaction with the results of the teams' work. Four items (α = .82) were extracted from an instrument by Liu, Magjuka, and Lee (2008).

Process Satisfaction refers to the perceived satisfaction with general group functioning. Six items (α = .75) were taken from the Strijbos, Martens, Jochems, and Broers (2007) instrument.

Face Loss is defined as the deterioration in one's social image (Chester and Bond, 2008). According to Chester and Bond (2008), people experiencing loss of face may react in order to restore or protect such status. Three items (α = .89) were modified from scales from Chester and Bond (2008) and Hui and Bond (2009).

Team Cohesion refers to the perceived level of group cohesion. Ten items (α = .95) were extracted from an instrument by Strijbos et al. (2007).

The independent variables were the eleven facework behaviors reflected in an instrument by Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001). The scales included in the instrument (and their reliability estimates) were: *remain calm* (α =.62), *apologize* (α =.63), *private discussion* (α =.52), *third party* (α =.67), *defend* (α =.49), *aggression* (α =.82), *give in* (α =.67), *pretend* (α =.70), *express emotions* (α =.71), *respect* (α =.57), and *problem solve* (α =.61).

RESULTS

Stepwise regressions were carried out for each outcome variable.

Outcome Satisfaction

Express emotions was the only facework behavior that explained *outcome satisfaction*, accounting for 9% of its variance in males. The facework behavior *Private Discussion* accounted for 8% of its variance in females.

Process Satisfaction

Third party was the only facework behavior that explained *process satisfaction*. For males, it accounted for 10% of the variance in *process satisfaction*; for females, it did not explain a significant amount of the variance.

Face Loss

Aggression was the only facework behavior related to *face loss*. For females, it accounted for 26% of the variance in *face loss*; for males, it did not explain a significant amount of the variance.

Team Cohesion

For males, *pretend* was the only facework behavior related to *team cohesion*, explaining 8% of its variance. For females, *private discussion* was the only facework behavior related to *team cohesion*, explaining 8% of its variance.

	Males			Females		
Outcome Satisfaction	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	B
Constant	3.06	0.55		3.03	0.45	
Express Emotions	0.32	0.15	.30*			
Private Discussion				0.30	0.14	.28*
R^2		.09			.08	
Process Satisfaction						
Constant	6.69	0.67				
Third Party	-0.48	0.20	-.31*			
R^2		.10				
Face Loss						

	Males			Females		
Constant				0.56	0.42	
Aggression				0.84	0.20	.51**
R^2					.26	
Team Cohesion						
Constant	9.99	0.62		6.00	1.03	
Pretend	-0.45	0.22	-.29*			
Private Discussion				0.69	0.33	.28*
R^2		.08			.08	

Notes: * $p < 0.05$ and ** $p < 0.001$

Table 1. Regression Analysis for the Online Discussion Teams Outcomes

CONCLUSIONS

Results suggest a difference between males and females in the facework behaviors that account for a significant variance in online discussion outcomes. (Unlike *gender*, which contributed to several regression results, *age* did not contribute to any, and was excluded.)

For males, the facework behaviors related to the different outcomes are more direct and confrontational, while for females the facework behaviors are less confrontational. *Express emotions* is the facework behavior related to *outcome satisfaction* in males (R^2 = .09), while it is *private discussion* for females (R^2 = .08). This result suggest that males are more satisfied if they are able to express their emotions in the middle of the conflict "in front" of all team members, while females prefer to deal with the conflict in private.

In the case of *process satisfaction*, the difference between genders is more evident, since this outcome was only related to *third party* for males (R^2 = 0.10); no facework behavior was related to *process satisfaction* for females. For males the higher the level of *third party* involvement, the lower *process satisfaction* is. We can suggest that males prefer a more direct, faster approach overlooking for the intervention of a third person.

Face loss represents an interesting outcome for females, where *aggression* (R^2 = 0.26) predicts a high percentage of the variance in comparison with the other outcomes. From the IT perspective, it would be interesting to develop an artifact capable of detecting aggression in interactions involving female participants in an online discussion team to reduce face loss.

Pretend is related to *team cohesion* for males (R^2 = .08), and *private discussion* for females (R^2 = .08). In this case, the more the males *pretend* the lower the team cohesion. This is aligned with the case of outcome satisfaction, where males prefer a more confrontational process. For females, as in the case of outcome satisfaction, a higher level of private discussion results in higher team cohesion.

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