Untagging on social media: Who untags, what do they untag, and why?

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1. Introduction

Self-presentation and impression formation have been persistent and important themes in research on mediated communication. One feature that differentiates today’s social network sites from earlier online media (e.g., blogs and early photo sharing sites) is the “tag” or “mention,” which associates a named person with a piece of content. Rather than simply naming a friend in a photo caption, (e.g., “Fred Jones at the beach”), the photo poster can click on Fred's face in the photo and select Fred’s name from a menu to tag him, making Fred what we call the tag’s “target.” The tag then formally links the photo to Fred’s profile, Fred may receive a notification, and Fred’s other contacts on that platform may be able to see or search for the photo.

Tagging is fundamental to social network sites generally and to self-presentation online. People learn how to tag from their friends (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2009), they tag and are tagged regularly (Hampton, Sessions Goulet, Marlow, & Rainie, 2012), and the notifications tags generate can draw friends into conversations. Burke and colleagues refer to tagging as “directed communication” noting that — in tagging — one friend singles another out, signaling that their relationship is important. As a result, being tagged by friends is generally associated with increases in social capital (Burke & Kraut, 2014) and relationship closeness (Burke, Kraut, & Marlow, 2011).

From a self-presentation perspective, tagging is important in that, by allowing others to contribute content to a user’s profile, it significantly expands the role of other individuals in one’s own online self-presentation. On the one hand, these contributions can be positive as when desirable content is posted. Moreover, “information warranting” theory suggests that content tagged by friends, when compared with content posted by a user about herself, may be a more trustworthy indicator of what that person is really like because the tagger has less incentive to make the target look good (Litt et al., 2014; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008). On the other hand, this same logic means that content tagged by others is not always consistent with the impression that targets seek to project (e.g., Litt et al., 2014; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012), especially to different parts of their social networks such as new friends (Carr & Walther, 2014) or potential employers (Bohnert & Ross, 2010). Taggers may
also have different ideas about what content is appropriate to share or may not be aware of the actual audience for the content (Litt, 2012; Sleeper et al., 2013).

Information or situations that are inconsistent with one’s desired identity are, of course, not unique to social media (e.g., Cupach & Carson, 2002). Indeed, an important part of everyday impression management is mitigating the negative effects of these situations (Goffman, 1959). Wohrn and Spottswood (2016) developed a taxonomy of possible responses to undesirable online content posted by others, such as using humor to diffuse the situation or asking the tagger to remove the content (Young & Quan-Haase, 2013). These responses are needed due to key differences between online content and face-to-face interaction. Where in the past simply ignoring an embarrassing episode may have been an effective strategy, for example, the persistence and searchability of content on a site like Facebook can make the embarrassing moment more likely to resurface (boyd, 2010; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012). Moreover, social media content can be easily shared. A photo with 20 people tagged in it is typically visible to the union of all 20 people’s friends, multiplying the potential audience quickly.

A common response is for the target to “untag” herself via a site feature that severs the tie between her and the content (Madden, 2012). Importantly, the target cannot delete the content itself; only the tag that links them to the content. Untagging can be important for mitigating potential embarrassment in that removing the technical link between the target and the content makes it harder for others to locate and see the content (Besmer & Lipford, 2010; Madden, 2012).

From the view of traditional self-presentation theories, untagging presents a paradox. Where self-presentation has traditionally been conceptualized as the projection of one’s own identity and others’ responses to that identity, untagging foregrounds the online situations where it is the target who must respond to others’ projections of the target’s own identity. Response to these situations can create tension for people between the need to avoid association with undesirable content and the need to preserve or manage one’s relationship with the tagger (Litt et al., 2014). In this regard untagging is further unique from a self-presentation standpoint in that it requires no interaction or confrontation with the tagger. Thus, we can say that untagging is a novel and relatively low-effort way for a target to respond to a tagger’s projection of the target’s own identity.

From a theoretical standpoint, there are several key open overarching questions we must address in order to account for and explain novel behaviors like untagging. The first of these is whether people engage in response strategies as we would expect them to engage in other self-presentation and impression management behaviors, or if there are key differences. The second relates to people’s attitudes toward and motivations for untagging, and whether these are distinct from the more traditional elements of self-presentation behavior including behavior, appearance and manner.

Untagging is a useful window through which we might better understand online self-presentation for two reasons. First, untagging foregrounds response by an individual to others’ projections of the individual’s identity, which is a unique aspect of online self-presentation so can help expand our understanding. Second, it is a discrete online action that can be systematically examined in context via log data. In the paper that follows, we draw on analyses of aggregated, de-identified Facebook log data and surveys to explore untagging by addressing two overarching questions: 1) how do users treat untagging as we would expect them to treat other impression management strategies, and 2) how do users feel about untagging as a strategy and what are their motivations in untagging?

2. Background

To address our overarching research questions in this exploratory study, we considered a range of individual and contextual factors that influence or seem likely to influence self-presentation. Rather than pose a large number of hypotheses, we discuss each variable with regard to three key themes in our study.

2.1. Who untags?

Our first broad question asks whether people respond to others’ content in the same ways we would expect them to engage in other impression management behaviors. To address this question, we first looked at individual attributes of tag targets that make untagging more or less likely, including age, gender and self-monitoring. Existing theories of self-presentation largely do not account for demographic differences between individuals, but these may have an increasingly salient effect as social media require different social and technical skills (Litt & Hargittai, 2014) and it becomes easier for content to be viewed quickly by many different audiences. Moreover, there is evidence that individual differences do affect people’s online behavior. Our goal here is to understand how these differences affect people’s self-presentation tactics and whether untagging differs in key ways from what we would expect for other impression management behavior.

Age is an important factor to consider here because it can help us understand generational differences in attitudes toward the presence of content itself versus the presence of a technical link between a user’s profile and content. Younger users are known to update their profiles more often and share more content online (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010), strategically manage impressions and content online (boyd, 2014) and potentially have more at stake to lose if content is discovered by parents, teachers or future employers (Litt, 2012). In Lang and Barton’s (2015) focus group study, younger users were more likely to untag content, but this has not been systematically observed in a larger data set. If younger users are more likely to untag, it would suggest that they may be particularly sensitive to the visibility and discoverability of undesirable content, or more savvy to the ways in which their connection to content can be manipulated.

Gender has also been shown to affect impression management and concern for reputation. Women tend to derive self-esteem from relationships and connection to others (Josephs, Markus, & Tafarodi, 1992), so may be more concerned about evaluation and others’ impressions, particularly in potentially compromising situations. On social media, women are more likely to modify privacy settings (Hoy & Milne, 2010; Litt, 2013) and tend to share more modest content when given the option (Aguiton et al., 2009). We wondered whether this would make untagging a likely strategy for women, given that untagging does not remove the content itself.

Third, there is substantial evidence that people’s level of concern about their appearance and other impressions of them, or their level of “self-monitoring” (Snyder, 1974) can affect impression management online. Litt (2012) describes this as a key element in people’s ability to imagine their audience for online content, and a survey study suggests that self-monitoring affects people’s embarrassment from undesirable social media content (Litt et al., 2014). On social media, privacy settings provide control over who can see content. Those who are higher self-monitors are likely to use these settings more and also be more careful in sharing content. We therefore used privacy and content visibility control settings as a proxy for self-monitoring in our analyses, believing that those who share content more publicly are lower self-monitors. We wondered if higher self-monitors would be more likely to untag themselves, and vice versa.
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