Nasty online comments anger you more than me, but nice ones make me as happy as you

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A B S T R A C T

Using online comments posted on news stories as the context, this research used two experiments to assess the influence of online comments on people's emotions as well as on their perceptions of others' emotions. Study 1 ($N = 301$) showed that people perceived uncivil disagreement comments posted on news stories as having a greater effect on negative emotions than civil disagreement comments. In addition, it found that people perceived uncivil comments as having a greater effect on the negative emotions of others, compared to the self, suggesting support for an emotional third-person perception (TPP). Study 2 ($N = 565$) showed that people perceived agreement comments as having a greater effect on positive emotions than uncivil disagreement comments. Findings also showed that people perceived agreement comments as having an equal effect on the positive emotions of the self, compared to others. This supports an emotional first-person perception (FPP).

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1. Introduction

Since online commenting began on news sites more than a decade ago, scholars and the public at large have questioned what influence these online discussions have on the larger public debate. Scholars have examined what types of stories people are most likely to comment on (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2012; Tenenboim & Cohen, 2015; Weber, 2014) and how anonymity in comments and news site commenting rules shape the types of comments people post (Ksiazek, 2015; Santana, 2014). Others have probed the potential of online comments to offer an avenue of deliberation and debate (Hoffman, Jones, & Young, 2013; Peacock & Leavitt, 2016; Rowe, 2015; Stroud, Scacco, Muddiman, & Curry, 2015) or what emotional responses online comments generate (Chen & Lu, 2017; Gervais, 2015; Rösner, Winter, & Krämer, 2016). What has received less exploration is how people perceive their own emotional responses to online comments, compared with how they perceive others' emotional responses. Using two online experimental studies ($N = 301$; $N = 565$), we aimed to fill this gap by examining the influence of online comments on two

dimensional emotional experiences (Bolls, 2010) — feeling angry and upset or happy and pleased — on American participants' perceptions of themselves and on their perceptions of others. The tone of the comments was manipulated to produce these emotional responses. Across the two experiments, comments either offered uncivil disagreement, which was biting and nasty; civil disagreement, which offered a counter view respectfully; or agreement, which supported a viewpoint (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014; Papacharissi, 2004; Santana, 2014; Stroud et al., 2015). Across the two studies, we used two issues in the news in the United States — debates over abortion and same-sex marriage — because these morally loaded topics that tap into people's core values are more likely to evoke emotional experiences (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996; Nekmat & Gozenbach, 2013). Overall, the two experiments answered three main questions: How do people categorize their own emotional responses to online commenting compared to how they categorize others' experiences? Does the way people categorize their own and others' emotional experiences vary based on whether the emotional experiences are positive or negative? Does the way people categorize their own and others' emotional experiences vary based on the tone of the online comments. Specifically, Study 1 focused on negative emotional responses to uncivil disagreement and civil disagreement comments. Study 2 examined positive emotional responses to agreement comments and uncivil

disagreement. These are important areas for inquiry because online commenting is an increasingly common form of computer-mediated communication (CMC) on news websites (Brost, 2013; Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Santana, 2014), yet relatively little research has examined incivility in this particular CMC context (Locher, 2010).

2. Study 1

2.1. Disagreement in online comments

One of the touted benefits of online commenting is to provide a means for public debate on important issues in the news. People take to comment streams to debate the news story, the topic of the story, and others' viewpoints in a form of disagreement, defined as expressing a counter opinion (Klofstad, Sokhey, & McClurg, 2013; Marcus, Neumann, & MacKuen, 2000). Disagreement can foster a positive value for society, as people deliberate, drawing attention to particular issues and becoming involved in the democratic process (Jacobs, Cook, & Delli Carpini, 2009; Landemore, 2012). However, when people are confronted with any type of disagreement it can create cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), as people reconcile their opinions with alternative viewpoints. According to affective intelligence theory, people may experience negative emotions when they face disagreement (Marcus et al., 2000). In addition, prior research has found that even civil disagreement sparks aggressive intentions or negative emotions (Chen & Lu, 2017). When disagreement is uncivil, effects are stronger (Brett et al., 2007; Brooks & Geer, 2007; Chen & Lu, 2017; Gervais, 2015; Rösner et al., 2016).

2.2. Face and politeness theories

Face and politeness theories (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1959) are useful to explain why uncivil disagreement would be expected to boost negative emotional responses more than mere civil disagreement. Politeness is a positive value in Western society; therefore, incivility challenges accepted conversational norms both online and offline because people expect conversation to follow social rules and maintain people's sense of *face*. *Face* is the socially constructed identity that people act out during conversation (Goffman & Best, 2005; Metts & Cupach, 2008), so incivility would threaten one's sense of *face* that indicates a person has value as a relational partner (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003) in a similar way as insults and criticism (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In contrast, civil disagreement comments might annoy but would not threaten one's sense of *face* in the same way as uncivil disagreement would. When *face* is threatened, people often feel a heightened sense of negative emotion (Chen & Abedin, 2014; Chen & Lu, 2017; Brett et al., 2007; Brooks & Geer, 2007), specifically anger (Gervais, 2015) or hostility (Rösner et al., 2016). Based on this theoretical foundation and prior research, we hypothesized:

H1. Participants will rate uncivil disagreement comments as having a greater effect on angering or upsetting others than civil disagreement comments.

2.3. Emotions and self-other comparisons

Social comparison theory has a long history of being used to explain how media messages and images influence people's perception of themselves. Research has found people are driven to compare themselves to others and make cognitive judgments about themselves based on those comparisons (Festinger, 1954). In the computer-mediated context these comparisons may be particularly salient because people have few cues about others people online and little context of whom the person is (Bazarova, Taft, Choi, & Cosley, 2012; Marwick & Boyd, 2010).

Little research has specifically addressed what might dictate how people form assumptions about others' emotional responses to online comments. However, literature on the third-person effect (TPE) can be helpful to explain how these self-other comparisons may occur. The TPE posits that people believe media has greater effects on others than it does on the self (Davison, 1983). It is divided into two realms, a behavioral effect or a perception. Perception is our focus. The third-person perception (TPP) demonstrates a gap between the media's presumed smaller influence on the self, with the presumed larger effect on others. Perceptual gaps such as this have been identified in media contexts as varied as pornography (B. Lee & Tamborini, 2005); video games (Scharrer & Leone, 2008; Zhong, 2009); and across personal blogs, media blogs, online news, and print newspapers (Schweisberger, Billinson, & Chock, 2014). While the TPP has not been fully explored in online commenting, research has found that comments about the dangers of Internet pornography produce a TPP (Sommer & Hofer, 2011), uncivil comments about abortion produce a TPP (Chen & Ng, 2016), and the TPP was greater for news stories with partisan comments, compared to those without (Houston, Hansen, & Nisbett, 2011).

The underlying explanation for the TPP is that people are motivated by self-enhancement (Tal-Or, Tsfati, & Gunther, 2009). Basically, people in general have a better view of themselves than of others (J. Cohen & Davis, 1991), so they assume others will be more susceptible to media messages than they will be. This is where social comparison theory comes in. When people make assessments about whether a media message will influence themselves or others, they compare themselves to "hypothetical others" (Shen, Palmer, Kollar, & Comer, 2015). These social comparisons are particularly informative when objective comparisons (e.g. based on test scores or income) are unavailable (Knobloch-Westerwick, Appiah, & Alter, 2008). People make downward social comparisons to others (Wood, Michela, & Giordano, 2000) because they tend to self-enhance. As a result, they see others as more vulnerable to media message that they think do not affect the self. The TPP perceptual gap would be expected to be larger between the self and others when downward comparisons are greater.

2.4. An emotional TPP

The main theoretical contribution of Study 1 was to propose and test extending TPP to the emotional realm. In general, the TPP relates to perceptions regarding the extent to which media messages can persuade others compared with the self. The TPP is part of a body of research that seeks to explain how media messages change attitudes through persuasion. In this sense, social desirability of the message plays a role. People tend to overestimate the effect of media on others when it comes to negative content, such as gambling, tobacco, and alcohol advertisements; pornography; and television violence (Banning, 2001; Gunther, 1995; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996). However, this study examined whether a TPP would occur in emotional responses to media message, not in persuasion. Thus, it offered a theoretical contribution by seeking to extend the TPP to the emotion realm by examining whether uncivil comments posted on a news story would produce a TPP such that people would expect others to be more angered or upset by the message than they would be. While prior research has not tested an emotional TPP, we suggest that it is a logical extension of the quite ample literature that shows the TPP operates in a wide variety of media contexts, across a range of subjects. If the underlying theoretical mechanism of the TPP — that people make downward social comparisons — is correct, as a plethora of research would support, it