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The Means to Justify the End: How the Way in Which Decisions to Intervene Are Communicated to Users Can Combat Cyber Harassment in Social Media

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Cyber harassment can have harmful effects, such as emotional distress for victims and consequently a withdrawal from social network sites or even life itself. This paper analyzes in two studies how decisions to intervene can be communicated to users in such a way that they are deemed adequate and acceptable.

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Competitive Papers—Extended Abstracts

The Means to Justify the End: How the Way in Which Decisions to Intervene Are Communicated to Users Can Combat Cyber Harassment in Social Media

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Cyber harassment does not only have harmful effects for social network sites, because victims tend to exit the service (Avery 2010; Martin and Smith 2008), but the emotional distress brought on by the online aggression has also caused victims to take their own lives (Parker 2012). At the same time, social media users are often upset when network providers intervene with the network and deem such an intrusion an unjust occurrence (Brunk 2012; Davis 2007; Pruitt 2003). The general aim of this paper is to answer the call for “making a difference” research that the *Association for Consumer Research North American Conference 2013* has put out. Our intention has been to explore how the aforementioned catch-22 can be resolved through framing the ways in which decisions to intervene are communicated to users. This work expands on existing persuasion and victim identification effects.

First, we contend that a decision to intervene based on a story has a more positive effect on user perception than the decision is just than an analytical, factual format. We further distinguish two main components of identity: personal and social (Dollinger et al. 1996; Reid and Deaux 1996). We explore whether the effect of the story over the analytical format holds across both components.

Second, we further understanding of the mechanism underlying the presentation format effect. We examine whether the narrative transportation that people experience may lead to a justice perception that the story events imply.

Third, we move beyond the prediction that presentation format will be associated with justice perception by exploring an intraindividual moderator that influences this relationship. The current research investigates why self-referencing may lead to either less or more positive justice perceptions under the framework of the story and analytical presentation format.

Study 1

Method

The purpose of Study 1 was to examine whether identity violation and presentation format of a decision to intervene interact in their effect on justice perception. Both identity violation and presentation format were manipulated. The study had a randomized 2 (identity violation: personal or social) \times 2 (presentation format: story or analytical) full-factorial design.

Participants. Participants were 124 graduate business students.

Materials, Procedure, and Measures. Upon entering the laboratory, participants were informed that they would be asked to take part in a study aimed at understanding a decision the network provider of the business school’s social network site was in the process of making. Specifically, they were told a major issue at the school was how the network provider planned to limit cyber harassment on the site. Participants were told they would be asked to read a fictitious wall post from the network provider about how he planned to handle the cyber harassment situation. After the introduction into the study, the participants saw on a computer screen a fictitious wall post on the school’s social network site signed by “Patrick Franken, network provider” with an e-mail address of the school’s ICT service desk.

There were four conditions: Story presentation format & personal identity violation, story presentation format & social identity violation, analytical presentation format & personal identity violation, and analytical presentation format & social identity violation. After reading the wall post, participants responded to narrative transportation (Green and Brock 2000) ($\alpha=.89$) and informational justice perception (Colquitt 2001) ($\alpha=.89$) measures.

Results

Tests of simple effects on the adjusted means indicated that, in the personal identity violation condition, the difference in informational justice perception was significant for presentation format (see Table 1). In the social identity violation condition, there was no effect for presentation format (mean difference = .04, SE = .31, $p = .901$).

Table 1: Informational Justice Perception for Different Experimental Groups

	Story format <i>M</i> (SD)	Analytical format <i>M</i> (SD)
Study 1		
Personal identity violation	4.82 (1.21)	3.38 (1.29)
Social identity violation	4.86 (1.14)	4.82 (1.05)
Study 2		
Encouraged self-referencing	5.55 (.95)	2.64 (1.01)
Not encouraged self-referencing	4.86 (1.04)	3.53 (1.13)

We bootstrapped the indirect effects of presentation format on informational justice perception. Narrative transportation mediated the relationship between presentation format and informational justice perception (point estimate = .42, bias corrected and accelerated 95% CI = .15 \pm .76).

Study 2

Method

We examined the interaction between the format in which the decision is presented to users and whether the decision encourages self-referencing. Both presentation format and self-referencing strategy were manipulated. Study 2 was a randomized 2 (presentation format: story or analytical) \times 2 (self-referencing: encouraged or not encouraged) full-factorial design.

Participants. Participants were 233 graduate business students.

Materials, Procedure, and Measures. This experiment was based on the same introduction as Study 1. A fictitious wall post on a computer screen followed the study introduction. The wall post began with the opening statement as in Study 1. The next part of the wall post introduced the presentation format manipulations. Self-referencing was encouraged through the use of “imagine” and “you” instead of “victim.” Following the manipulations, information was provided about the decision that the network provider made. After reading the wall post, participants were instructed to respond to a series of scales regarding the wall post they had read. The scales included narrative transportation ($\alpha=.89$) and informational justice perception ($\alpha=.79$) measures.

Results

There was a main effect of presentation format ($F_{(1, 222)} = 235.97$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .515$), qualified by an interaction between presentation format and self-referencing ($F_{(1, 222)} = 33.55$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .131$). Tests of simple effects on the adjusted means indicated that, in both the story and the analytical presentation format condition, the difference in informational justice perception was significant for self-referencing (see Table 1).

Discussion

Results from two experiments provide support for the proposed effect of presentation format. Further, the findings lend support for narrative transportation as an underlying mechanism for the effect. In addition, the findings from Study 2 suggest that decisions to intervene are more likely to be perceived as just when they are based on a story and encourage a self-referencing strategy. In summary, we extend research on the dilemma between one user's right to freely construct an online identity and another user's right to protection from cyber harassment by assessing decisions to intervene across identity violations, examining the role of presentation format, and examining self-referencing strategy as an explanatory factor. We suggest extending this research by studying prior real-life situations where social network sites have intervened.

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