

DOCTORAL THESIS

How prosocial and alarm words predict online reads, responses, and relays

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Abstract

This thesis empirically investigates alarm and prosocial words in online news headlines and the associated reads (the number of clicks), responses (including the number of likes, dislikes, and comments), and relays (the number of shares). I analyze over 170,000 online news headlines and mainly the associated number of reads and likes for each news story on an online news platform. Theoretically, based on the meta-level evolutionary theory—evolution by natural selection—I propose a middle-level evolutionary model of prosocial media effects from a nature-nurture interactive perspective. Then, I propose a specific evolutionary model that was derived from the proposed middle-level model, the human alarm system for sensational news, a psychological mechanism designed to detect and concern threatening news. I generate research questions from the specific model to test whether news headlines with alarm words attract more likes as a survival concern indirectly through an increased number of reads as a selection device, and whether prosocial words in headlines serve as a moderator. The results of a conditional indirect effect model showed that given that online readers click on (i.e, read) news headlines with alarm words, the fact that it has a prosocial word in the headlines leads readers more likely to “like” it. The empirical findings’ theoretical and methodological contributions, research agenda, and examples of implications for future studies are discussed.

Table of Contents

Declaration.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgement.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Tables.....	viii
List of Figures.....	x
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Brief Introduction.....	1
1.2 What is Prosociality?.....	3
1.2.1 Theories of Prosociality.....	3
1.2.2 Psychological Antecedents and Consequences of Prosociality Propagation.....	5
1.2.2.1 Prosocial motivation: Empathy.....	6
1.2.2.2 Prosocial emotions.....	6
1.2.2.3 Prosocial personality: Agreeableness.....	8
1.2.2.4 Prosocial value: Self-Transcendence.....	8
CHAPTER 2 PROSOCIAL MEDIA EFFECTS.....	10
2.1 Current Theories of Prosocial Media Effects.....	12
2.1.1 General Learning Model (GLM).....	12
2.1.2 Other Theories.....	15
2.1.2.1 Social cognitive theory.....	16
2.1.2.2 Cognitive-neoassociation theory.....	17
2.1.2.3 Selective exposure theory.....	17
2.1.2.4 Uses and gratifications theory.....	18
2.1.2.5 Cultivation theory.....	18
2.1.2.6 Reinforcing spirals model.....	19
2.2 Critical Review of Current Theories of Prosocial Media Effects.....	19

2.3 Synthesis of Prosocial Media Effects	24
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CHAPTER 3 EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVES ON PROSOCIAL MEDIA EFFECTS29

3.1 Origins and Ultimate Functions of Prosociality Propagation	30
3.1.1 Prosociality towards Kin and Non-kin.....	30
3.1.2 Evolutionary Cyber-psychology	31
3.1.3 Meme	32
3.2 Selective Prosocial Media Effects	35
3.2.1 Agreeableness	36
3.2.2 Self-transcendent Values	37
3.3 Indirect Prosocial Media Effects.....	39
3.3.1 Compassion.....	42
3.3.2 Other Prosocial Emotions	45
3.4 Conditional Prosocial Media Effects	46
3.5 Transactional Prosocial Media Effects.....	49
3.5.1 Dramatic Prosocial Learning Process	50
3.5.2 Prosocial Media Reception, Expression, and Interaction	52
3.6 Prosocial Effects in Social Media: New Methods	54
3.7 From Meta-Level to Middle-Level to Specific Evolutionary Model	57

CHAPTER 4 ONLINE NEWS HEADLINES WITH PROSOCIAL AND ALARM WORDS AND ASSOCIATED GENERIC DIGITAL FOOTPRINTS60

4.1 Literature Reviews	60
4.1.1 Prior Prosocial Media Effects Research	61
4.1.2 Sensational News and Selective Exposure	63
4.1.3 Sensational News and the Human Alarm System.....	64
4.1.4 Sensational News and Prosocial Acts	65
4.1.5 Online News Headlines and Generic Digital Footprints	67
4.2 Method.....	69
4.2.1 Data Source.....	69

4.2.2 Data crawling	70
4.2.2.1 Dates of data gathering.	70
4.2.2.2 Selection policy.	70
4.2.2.3 Revisit policy.	71
4.2.2.4 Politeness policy and crawling duration.	72
4.3 Pilot Study.....	72
4.3.1 Analysis.....	72
4.4 Results.....	75
4.4.1 Intercorrelations Among All the Variables.....	75
4.4.2 Mean Difference Between Online News Headlines with an Exclamation Mark and Headlines without an Exclamation Mark	77
4.4.3 Mean Difference Between Online News Headlines with Prosocial Words and Headlines without Prosocial Words	79
4.4.4 Proposed Moderated Mediation Models.....	81
4.4.5 Reads.....	84
4.4.6 Likes.....	87
4.4.7 Dislikes	91
4.4.8 Relays.....	95
4.4.9 Comments	97
4.4.10 Cross-validation of Results	98
4.5 Main Analysis	101
4.5.1 Data Source.....	102
4.5.2 Coding.....	102
4.5.2.1 Prosocial words dictionary.	102
4.5.2.2 Human alarm words in headlines.	109
4.5.2.3 Punctuation and news type in the headlines.	110
4.5.3 Analysis.....	111
4.6 Results.....	112
4.6.1 Primary Analyses	112
4.6.2 Main Analyses.....	118
4.6.2.1 Reads.....	118
4.6.2.2 Likes.	120

4.6.2.3 <i>Dislikes</i>	122
4.6.2.4 <i>Moderated quadratic relationship</i>	125
4.6.3 Cross-validation of Results.....	128
4.6.4 Normalization of Results.....	131
4.6.5 Log-transformation of Generic Digital Footprints.....	134
4.6.6 Split/Analyze/Meta-analyze Approach.....	136
4.6.6.1 <i>Regression analysis</i>	140
4.6.6.2 <i>Meta-analysis</i>	149
4.6.6.3 <i>Other criterion variables</i>	151
4.7 Discussion.....	152
4.8 Limitations.....	155
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION.....	157
5.1 Research Agenda.....	157
5.2 Examples of Implications.....	159
5.2.1 Charity Advertising.....	159
5.2.2 Cooperative Violent Video Games.....	162
5.3 Conclusion.....	164
References.....	165
Appendix.....	217
Curriculum Vitae.....	Error! Bookmark not defined.