

## Expectancy violation theory on social media and relationships: A selective review

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In recent years, social media, especially social networking sites (SNS), continue to gain great popularity. The rapid advancements in technology and increasing demand among users have facilitated the building and maintenance of interpersonal relationships and networks, sharing and exchanging information, as well as conducting and organizing social and political events (e. g., Beer, 2008, Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007, Xu, Takai, & Liu, 2018). To date, a critical question has been raised by scholars in computer-mediated communication (CMC) and related fields, whether interpersonal communication theories developed based on face-to-face (FTF) research could be applied to the SNS scholarship. To answer this question, scholars should first examine one premise: Who are the SNS friends with which people communicate most frequently? While SNS gives the impression of anonymity, most of its networks consist of individuals who at least know each other offline (Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008). Boyd and Ellison (2008) also pointed out that although people can use SNS to make connections with people they have not met face to face, “that is often not the goal...instead, they are already primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network” (p.211). Dunbar (2016) echoed their ideas in a theoretical

framework of social brain, that people also have cognitive constraint on maintaining online social networks. To maintain stable online relationships, people also need to meet each other face-to-face. These results provided evidence that some interpersonal theories would seem appropriate for use with this CMC medium (Fife, Nelson, & Zhang, 2012). In terms of Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT) on SNS, the communicators to a large extent are FTF acquaintances. Hence basic key valences and impact patterns of interpersonal interaction can be assumed to be similar. In reference to the above arguments, the current review will provide a general understanding of the use of EVT in SNS domain.

In this review, we aim to clarify a primary research question, whether the patterns of online interpersonal communication behavior, the processes of relationship formulations and maintenance via SNS can be described and interpreted through a theoretical framework of EVT. This question leads to several specific topics. First, to what extent are the tenets and predictions of the EVT relevant to interpersonal communication on SNS? Second, in term of SNS mediated communication, compared to FTF communication, what are the characteristics of communication valences (i.e., expectancy valence, expectancy violation, communicator valence, behavior and violation valence and the effect of violation), and the resulting impact on interpersonal evaluation and interaction.

In the following sections, we will go through a wide range of relevant empirical research to cover each of these topics. First, we will briefly introduce the key concepts, predictions and major research findings of EVT (basically in the FTF domain). Next, we synthesize what is known about EVT on SNS regarding: “social norms and expectancy violations on social media,” and “effects

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of expectancy violations.” Moreover, we will discuss the characteristics of EVT in an online domain, such as “evolution of social norms in the digital age,” “reactions to expectancy violations,” and “SNS-specific expectancy violation.” Finally, we will provide suggestions for future investigations in this research area.

### Theoretical framework:

EVT is an interpersonal communication theory which interprets how individuals respond to unanticipated violations of social norms and expectations (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). According to Burgoon (1978), there are two types of violations: norm violations and expectancy violations. The former refers to violations of social rules within a specific community where the conversation occurs, whereas the latter refers to behaviors of a particular communicator against existing cognitions or previous knowledge about him or her. Expectancy violations can be both positively and negatively valenced, one positive example being a friend sending you a gift from overseas where s/he is studying, and a negative example being that of a husband forgot his wife’s birthday. It should be added that most violations of expected norms in a relationship are viewed as being negative.

Moreover, according to EVT, other communicator valences, behavior valences, and contextual factors are also involved in the processes of interpersonal evaluation and subsequent actions. In other words, when expectancies are violated, the violation will be judged as either positive or negative, acceptable or unacceptable, important or unimportant (Reward value) depending upon how close the relationship is and how favorably and relevant the violation is perceived (Afifi & Metts, 1998). “This determination of reward value can influence both the interpretation of the violation, for ambiguous behaviors, and an interactant’s reaction to that violation” (Fife et al., 2012, p.16). Subsequently, the interpretation leads to a substantial response, which could be either communicative or an internal reaction.

Although, EVT was initially developed to analyze individuals’ allowances and expectations of personal distance and how responses to this distance violations were influenced by the level of preference and closeness to the behavior (Burgoon et al., 1976), it has been employed to interpret violations in many nonverbal and verbal com-

munication contexts (cf. Fife et al, 2012). For instance, Burgoon and her colleagues (1988, 1992) applied this theory to nonverbal communication in the form of immediacy and touch behaviors. Other scholars also expanded EVT to interpret the behaviors in close relationships (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000, Bachman & Cuerrero, 2006, Bevan, 2003), teaching and learning context (Mottet, Parker-Raley, Beebe, Cunningham, 2007), employment context (Johnson & Lewis, 2010) and public health campaigns issues (Campo, Cameron, Brossard, & Frazer, 2004).

EVT has also been studied in computer-mediated communication contexts in recent years. However, to our knowledge, the issue has not been thoroughly reviewed, and a synthesis of the findings in this context is due. Accordingly, this review attempts to fill this void.

## EVT and SNS

### Online social norm and expectancy violation

According to the broad definition by Sherif (1936), social norms are rules that guide behavior, the ‘customs, traditions, standards, rules, values, fashions and all other criteria of conduct which are standardized as a consequence of the contact of individuals’ (p.3). In other words, social norms are the standard by which people judge what behaviors are appropriate or not. Although in an online context, social norms often evolve with IT technology, much research has demonstrated that offline norms also hold in many online situations, even when users remain anonymous (cf. Malaughlin & Vitak, 2011). Martey and Stromer-Galley (2007), for instance, found that in online interaction, offline expectations of politeness were also relevant. In conjunction to this, Malaughlin & Vitak (2011) elaborated on the inference that if offline norms work well in anonymous online environments, they should have even stronger influences on behavior on SNS, in which the user identities are visible.

However, other scholars (e.g., Boyd, 2006, 2008) also argue that the norm regulating interaction on SNS such as Facebook should differ from norms regulating offline interaction. He claimed that friends on SNS might be extremely different from those in offline situations. We will give more detail on specific social norms and norm evolutions on SNS in the next section. In this section, we will introduce a basic typology of SNS social norms and give particular examples of SNS expectancy violations.

Generally, in this review, we follow the framework of Cohen (2010) that distinguishing online norms as moral norms, trust norms, and social norms. Accordingly, previous research demonstrated that moral violations (e.g., abusive behavior, aggression, deviant sexual desires), trust violations (e.g., confidence betrayals, deceptions) and social violations (e.g., impolite, unfriendly, belittling) could have aversive consequences for both offline and online close relationships.

Regarding Facebook norms, McLaughlin & Vitak (2011) facilitated discussions about SNS norms among several groups of college students. They mainly focused on the implicit rules, because according to Salam (2007), although various etiquette guides exist, users tend to establish and obey unspoken or implicit rules within each online community. MacLaughlin & Vitak (2011) found that too many unnecessary and annoying updates, and overly emotional status updates or public posts are viewed as expectancy violations. Moreover, denying or ignoring a friend request from someone they had met in person, or unfriending an SNS friend are perceived as highly negative expectancy violations (Bevan, Ang, Fearn, 2014). Furthermore, failing to distinguish between public and private, such as heated interactions, fights, name calling through SNS, along with excessive monitoring are also perceived negatively (Fife, Nelson, & Bayles, 2009). Fife et al. (2009) also note that tagging pictures of friends, or any type of Wall posting that potentially damage an SNS friends' self-presentation, creating an unfavorable impression is also viewed as negative expectancy violations.

Although most of the responses are about negative expectancy violations, we believe there might also be positive ones via SNS interactions. According to MacLaughlin & Vitak (2011), Fife et al. (2009) and Fife et al. (2012), a potential positive expectancy violation might be that of fortifying weak ties, exemplified by receiving a message or getting tagging in a picture by a childhood friend might result in a reunion. Expectancy violations can also enhance an existing close relationship, such as receiving encouragement from a dad who hardly ever talks to his children face-to-face.

## Characteristics of EVT in SNS contexts

### Evolutions of social norms

Technological advances in mediated communication have resulted in an incessant evolution of social norms and rules. For instance, MacLaughlin and Vitak (2011) conducted a series of exploratory research on the research question of how individuals' behavioral norms change over time, and found that people kept changing their profiles over time, including updating their privacy settings when their post or tweet arises in negative consequences, or deleting some crucial details of their personal information. They referred to this phenomenon as *context collapse*, following Wesch's (2009) extension of the stage theory of self-presentation. Unlike the FTF situation, each context of interactions remains relatively separated. Hence, people can easily decide how they would act, and how to present themselves. However, in the SNS context, the social circle is continuously growing, and this may urge individuals to adjust their self-presentation on SNS accordingly. Self-presentation, therefore, requires constant maintenance, warranting users to adjust their SNS social practices with time (e.g., socializing and information sharing). Scholars have also claimed that SNS social norms keep evolving with age, such as DiMicco and Millen (2007), who found that older age groups (longer employment experience) tend to disclose less personal information, but more job-oriented information on their profile. Similarly, McLaughlin and Vitak (2011) suggested that Facebook users of different age groups use this platform for different purposes, and have different norms in regulating their behaviors.

### Reactions to expectancy violation

According to the original theory by Burgoon (1978), when an unrewarding or negatively valenced communicator challenges an expectation inappropriately, this behavior should be reciprocated, whereas a negative violation from a rewarding or positively valenced communicator would result in compensation. However, recent SNS research contest such classic EVT predictions, e.g., McLaughlin and Vitak (2011) found that on Facebook, while reactions to positive violations are consistent with EVT predictions, negative norm violations elicit responses that deviate from EVT. In particular, when a negative violation occurs, people may show a different response depending on the nature (e.g., high vs. low cost,

serious vs. less serious) of the violation. The participants reported that in a wall-post case, when *A* (a mere acquaintance of *B*) makes a public post that threatens *B*'s self-presentation norm (serious issue), *B* will be likely to delete *A* directly from his or her friend list. Since the tie between *A* and *B* is relatively weak, compared to the risk *A* brought, the cost is relatively low for *B* to do so. On the contrary, if the violation is less serious, such as *A* updated his or her status too frequently or using too many applications. These actions probably might not result in deletion, but may coerce *A* to reroute information about updates from *B* too, perhaps, a spam folder. This action would reduce the likelihood of future positive expectation violation, but would also keep the relationship with the norm violator from trouble in a relatively low-cost way.

In McLaughlin and Vitak's (2011) research, another example from a workplace situation shows a similar tendency. In this example, a negative violation is committed by *A*, who betrays members of his group by not attending to his group work session, because he attends a party instead. *A*'s colleagues learn the reason for his absence through a spontaneous Facebook post of him having a good time at the party. Participants were asked about their potential reaction to this violation, and they found that for acquaintances, responses were extremely passive, as exemplified by a respondent reporting that avoiding a direct conflict, and even covering for his work would be the best solution. However, if the violator is a close friend, their response was completely different, such as strongly pestering him to do his share of the work, which is more in consistency with Burgoon's idea of reciprocation (1978, 1993).

In sum, the results of these expectancy violation cases indicated that individuals are more likely to choose a confrontative response to a close friend, and a compensative response to mere acquaintances. These findings are inconsistent with EVT predictions.

### SNS-specific expectancy violations

Previous studies also investigated a number of medium-specific (SNS-specific) expectancy violations. In this section, we will introduce three typical empirical research on nuanced, specific medium expectancy violations.

First, infringement of privacy, especially by strangers or mere acquaintances would be viewed as a typical expectancy violation. Fife's research team (2009)

conducted a thematic analysis of group discussion transcripts. They pointed out that "stalking on one's personal information and social activities via SNS" and "gossiping on it" are rated extremely high as a negative expectation violation. Stutzman and Kramer-Duffield (2010) indicated that expectancy violations of infringement of privacy by weak ties along with the increasing concerns of interpersonal privacy would potentially lead to SNS privacy-enhancement behavior, such as creating a profile which could be only accessed by close friends.

Second, challenging one's self-presentation goal is also a critical expectancy violation. As Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong (2008) suggested, one's SNS profile and other public posts affect audiences' impressions on them. In a context collapse environment (e.g., Facebook), one's SNS friends, such as close friends, family, colleagues or even potentially non-Friends would have possibility to view that information simultaneously. Therefore, unexpected interaction behaviors such as heated interactions, fights, and name calling through SNS (See McLaughlin & Vitak, 2011, Fife et al., 2009) would challenge one's desired images. For instance, Walther et al. (2008) reported that inappropriate messages about certain moral behaviors (e.g., being terribly drunk, having casual sex, or saying dirty words) increased male profile owners' perceived physical attractiveness, whereas decreased females perceived attractiveness". To avoid or reduce potential damages on one's self-presentation goals, SNS users would delete the violators (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2011) or create a friend-only account (Stutzman & Kramer-Duffield, 2010).

Third, Ramirez and Wang (2008) also explored the occurrence of modality switching (MS) from the perspective of EVT, in which they regarded the social information provided through MS (a shift of a CMC virtual communication to an FTF interaction) to be an expectancy violation. Previous research indicated that MS would have both positive and negative effects on communicator perception, social evaluation, and further relationship growth. In particular, they emphasized that participants in an MS-violation condition perceived social information more positively, and considered it more important than in the non-MS condition. Moreover, they also tested the moderation effect of timing of MS. The results indicated that switching into an FTF interaction after a short-term online communication would not only make communi-

cators evaluate their partners more positively, but also reduce the feeling of uncertainty in their relationships.

### Future directions

This paper mainly reviewed studies on the application of EVT in SNS contexts. The results showed that EVT is viable in describing and interpreting the processes and outcomes of online interpersonal communication. Consistent with Burgoon et al. (1978)'s initial claim (FTF communication domain), expectancies do guide communication actions and have persistent effects on interaction in the SNS context. Moreover, communicator reward valence affects communication patterns and outcomes independently or in combination with violation characteristics. Although studies on EVT in the SNS context have rapidly increased, the research scope and depth are still relatively limited. We believe that there are many critical questions left untouched in the area. Based on the above, we offer three directions for future investigations.

#### Generalizability

First, although past research provided in-depth data and sophisticated analyses, the generalizability is relatively low. One of the reason is that scholars focused on a small subset of the population (e.g., McLaughlin & Vitak, 2011, involved juniors and seniors at an US university), and focused on overly specific topics (e.g., being unfriended on Facebook, or message response latency). Nonetheless, these empirical studies have made significant contributions to the field. However, at this time, a broader research question probing into whether such studies allow scholars to gain a grasp of the underlying processes behind mediated communication, and gearing to predict and explain behaviors of people from SNS via an EVT scope (e.g., Fife et al. 2012, p.20). To achieve this goal, scholars suggested that future quantitative research should be conducted to determine if these results can be generalized to other social groups, such as people who are in employment or who are more at risk of negative consequences related to SNS self-presentation (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2011).

Another reason is a limited understanding of SNS norms and *rewardingness* of the communicator. In other words, due to the rapid development of the Internet and mobile technology, the norms and desired communicator

characteristics have kept on evolving. These advancements result in a limited understanding of the communication valences which subsequently constrains predictive accuracy. Fife et al. (2012) suggested more thorough investigations in understanding those communication valences of that unique medium. Also, the effects of positive expectancy violations (e.g., surprise) are yet to be seriously investigated.

#### Online-offline modality switching

Second, most of the current studies in this area construed online and offline as separate stage sets, as mentioned above, and some scholars point out that SNS often involve individuals who are known in an FTF situation (e.g., KuJarth, 2011, Tong et al., 2008) or who are already a part of their extended social network (Boyd and Ellison, 2008, p. 211). There are also possibilities for online friends to meet each other physically. Therefore, Beer (2008) suggest that future researchers should pay more attention to the continuing connections between the SNS mediated environment and FTF relationships. Interpersonal adaptation theory (IAT, Burgoon, Stern, & Dillman, 1995) provides a comprehensive account of dynamic multiple concurrent adaptation patterns. For example, in the unfriending case, suppose *A* and *B* are FTF acquaintances. *A* posted something he/she thought funny with no offense on *B*'s Facebook wall. However, this post against *B*'s self-presentational goal (violation 1). As an expressive action, *B* deletes *A* on Facebook. To *B*, being unfriended by an acquaintance on Facebook is unexpected and inappropriate behavior (violation 2). Since in the FTF context, being deleted by an Internet friend is not a serious violation, whereas, in an online situation, this behavior means termination of friendship. When switching back to the FTF situation, *A* tends to choose an avoidance strategy to withdraw from the conflict results from violation 2. On the contrary, *B* believes confrontation is beneficial for the current relationship (violation 3). How would the conversation go on? Previous research has rarely provided insight in interpreting and predicting such a chain of expectancy violations, and those impacts on subsequent online-offline modality switching communication. Future studies should not consider "online" and "offline" friendships independently, but as continued relationships. IAT (an extension of EVT) would be a suitable theoretical framework to enrich our understanding of adaptation processes when violations occur.

## Cross-cultural and intercultural applications of EVT

Burgoon and Ebesu-Hubbard (2005) pointed out that most of the research on EVT have been conducted by Western samples. While these studies have helped scholars confirm the effects of expectancy violations, they fail to go beyond the scope of Western culture, and this applies to EVT in SNS context as well. Western bases of motivation, attitude towards norms, and interpersonal conflict styles have understood to be universal. However, much remains to be seen in EVT's application toward Eastern cultures. In a more complex situation, when people who hold different cultural backgrounds are engaging in a conversation, how would they learn and adapt to each other's norm? Relatively few EVT research have addressed the effect of culture on the pattern and degree of the effects of expectancy violation on interpersonal communication behavior (cf. Burgoon and Ebesu Hubbard, 2005). Further investigations should be conducted in the Computer-mediated communication domain.

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## ABSTRACT

## Expectancy violation theory on social media and relationships: A selective review

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In this article, we reviewed the applications of expectancy violation theory (EVT) in the scholarship of Computer-mediated communication. In particular, we sought to answer two questions: 1) To what extent are the tenets and predictions of the EVT relevant to interpersonal communication on SNS?; 2) What are the originalities of communication valences and those impacts on social evaluation and communication behaviors in the SNS context? We first introduced the basic theoretical framework of EVT. Then we synthesized the major findings of EVT in the domain of SNS, including: 1) social norms and expectancy violations on social media; 2) effects of expectancy violation on mediated communication. Moreover, we demonstrated three major originalities of expectancy violation in the SNS context: 1) norm evolutions; 2) more complex reactions; 3) SNS-specific expectations and violations. Finally, beyond the scope of existing research, we provided three suggestions for further studies in this area: 1) increasing research generalizability, 2) focusing on the dynamic processes of online-offline interactions; 3) probing for cross-cultural and intercultural applications of EVT.

Key words: Expectancy violation theory, SNS-specific norms, Evolution of SNS norms, Online-offline interaction, Culture