**Facebook Consensus**

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Behavioral conformity, as a result of various social and contextual factors, has been researched and analyzed by a growing body of sociologists and anthropologists. Changes in behavior or social responses is a normative practice as social agents tend to shape and reshape their beliefs and opinions according to the widely prevailing narrative. This practice is self-explanatory as people have an innate desire to appear 'normal' and express an inclination to fit in. A plethora of research and existing literature define conformity as the perceived and 'felt' change in the behavior or opinion of an individual when there is an influence of external factors. The extant literature has not adequately researched the impact of social consensus on moral decision making and the individual actions under circumstances that impose a certain degree of pressure on the individual.

Recent studies and literature indicate that moral judgment and inner moral compass can undulate by the influence of social and contextual factors (Gibbs, 2019). One such study in this regard has been conducted whereby a philosophical question acted as a pivotal factor behind the motivation (Kundu, 2013). The researchers probed into the dynamics of conformity and experimented to determine whether morality is influenced by social consensus or not. A basic premise duly considered while answering this question was that morality is an integral part of an individual's identity. The results of this study determined that a strong conformity effect prevails in societies and social context is a crucial reason for the changes perceived and felt in social decision making. These results led the researchers to think around the lines of rationality and social acceptability. If an individual exhibited conformed behavior, would it be considered rational and socially acceptable? Literature specifies that the answer to this question depends on the weight which will be awarded to social consensus. If social consensus and prevailing opinions held by a significant majority of people will be deemed irrelevant, then the perceived and exhibited conformity will be irrational. Social conformity is also viewed as acceptable because consensus on the majority opinion is an indication that there has been a departure from one's own inherent beliefs. The logical claim behind this frame of reference was that subjective and individual beliefs can invite uncertainty and suspicion which are, in most cases, unwanted. A counter-argument in this regard was provided that rationality is violated by people when they conform to socially acceptable behavior (Campbell, 1990).

Concerted efforts have also tried to answer the question of whether a departure from the social consensus is morally acceptable or not. Several studies have carried out unique experiments on various online platforms to determine if peer pressure or a general influence will impact the behavior of observers and bystanders. (Anderson et al., 2014) conducted a research and found that in situations where individuals faced weight-based cyberbullying, modeling dissenting behavior can significantly avoid the bystander effect. As a direct outcome of the experiment carried out and analyzed in this study, bystanders provided verbal support to the victims of weight-based cyberbullying. Amongst all the social media networking sites, Facebook was pinpointed as a specific medium for this study, given its popularity and a rapidly growing body of users (Baker, 2013). The motivation behind this study was the reflection upon dissenter and conformity effects. The researchers had a pre-supposed hypothesis structured from a theoretical framework that if a Facebook user experiences some pressure in the cyberspace, there is a maximum likelihood that conformity will occur. The reason attributed to this presumption was that challenging a bully or resisting against bullying behavior in the cyberspace is a quintessential dissent from the norm and socially acceptable behaviors (Suler, 2005). However, the results of this study do not fully support the hypotheses which primarily entailed that bystanders, in a situation where an individual is being bullied, may conform to this behavior and/or provide tacit support through mere observation or silence to the bully.

Facebook is also appraised as an effective tool for the dissemination of news since print media has considerably reduced and its circulation has faced a conspicuous decline. Although as per set journalistic criteria, this platform cannot be solely relied upon for authentic news but increased dependency has been observed on it for day-to-day information and news sharing. The impact of social consensus on controversial topics on peers has been studied and analyzed by a lot of researchers. Effects of peer reactions on Facebook news channels were examined in a study by Winter & Krämer (2015), and an online questionnaire was filled by a total of 227 respondents and in the analysis of the experiment, dependent and moderating variables were also used. The driving force behind this study was to analyze whether the voices of online audiences and peers in response to an online post are representative of the public opinion or not (Lee, 2010). Another objective of the study was to comprehend whether positive comments reinforce the widely prevailing opinion or not. In contrast to the positive comments, argumentative and dissenting comments (opinions) were also taken into consideration. Four types of hypotheses were designed and tested. The first two hypotheses were designed to test if the comments of a diverse group of people on Facebook will affect the attitude of readers in that direction which is reflective of the prevalent opinion or if the perception of a reader about the public opinion will steer towards the main premise of the comments. The third hypothesis was highly significant as it proposes that subjective comments tend to be less convincing than argumentative comments. This also led the researchers to scrutinize the engagement level of readers on Facebook and their need for cognition. The participants of the experiment in the study were not influenced by the comments of their peers against the expectations.

Extensive research on social influence also inquired into the different phenomena associated with individual personalities. One such study has been conducted by (Perfumi et al., 2019). An online experiment was carried out to determine whether the loss of self-awareness invalidates the effects of social consensus or normative influence. Results explained that normative influence has an almost negligible or non-existent effect in those situations where social identity is not fortified by the consciousness of self-awareness and the presence of an inner moral compass and inherent beliefs. The motivation for this highly significant study was derived from the functioning of influence exuded from social factors whereby the physical or online presence of a group of people led to the change in the judgment of the other group. This resulted in the conformity of behavior but it was also theorized that events can take place differently in cyberspace (Lee E. J., 2004). Paving the way for elaboration and meticulous comprehension of deindividuation, researchers identified the diminishing of personality traits as a major driving force behind the normative influence.

Researchers are also well-aware of the fact that there is a difference between reviews and opinions which are posted online and those which are disseminated in a personal capacity. In the context of online reviews of various products and services, the comments and opinions held by the majority group can markedly impact the conception of an individual. Although that review is considered as primarily helpful which is closer to the average score of the product or which synchronizes with the prevailing belief about the brand, some online users also steer in a completely different direction and express a behavior which is anti-conforming in nature (Moe, 2012). Advancement in neuroimaging and particularly, brain imaging, have shed light on a direct connection between behavioral patterns and specific parts of the brain (Stallen, 2015). The results of the experiment specified that positive reviews are more helpful for online users as opposed to negative reviews. Although this study requires clarification and elaborate comprehension on several fronts, the results signify that in the social and online context of reviews, a negativity bias lies in the process of cognition when users read such reviews. In case of positive reviews, there is no need for a lot of cognitive effort and this supports the hypothesis of the study that positive reviews continue to receive a considerably higher rate of votes which indicates their helpfulness.

The above analyses and studies have paved the way for a well-crafted hypothesis which reinstates the effect of social factors on the behavioral conformity of individuals. In general, we predict that participants who read unanimously supportive feedback will rate the Facebook user’s conduct as more acceptable than participants who read unanimously oppositional feedback, with those who read mixed feedback falling between these extremes. More specifically, participants in the unanimously supportive condition will more strongly agree with supportive survey statements (“Abigail’s behavior was understandable, “Abigail’s behavior was reasonable”, “Abigail’s behavior was appropriate”, “I would advise Abigail to keep silent”, and “I would try to comfort Abigail”) and more strongly disagree with oppositional survey statements (“Abigail’s behavior was wrong”, “Abigail’s behavior was unethical”, “Abigail’s behavior was immoral”, and “Abigail’s behavior was unacceptable”) compared to participants in the unanimously oppositional condition, with participants in the mixed condition falling between these extremes. However, participants in both the unanimously supportive and unanimously oppositional conditions will strongly agree that they would give Abigail the same advice that her friends gave her.

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