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MAKING THE MOST OF PEOPLE WE DO NOT LIKE: CAPITALIZING ON
NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

By

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Making the Most of People We Do Not Like: Capitalizing on Negative Feedback

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Capitalization was first articulated by Langston (1994) to describe how individuals increase their own positivity by sharing good news with others. This study tests the idea that sometimes people share positive news with others they do not like in an attempt to savor their dissatisfaction with shared accomplishments. A fully crossed randomized 2 X 2 experiment was used to set an initial impression (positive or negative) followed by an interview procedure where the participants would disclose some recent positive event and the confederate interviewer would provide feedback (positive or negative). This procedure was used to test capitalization processes in a lab setting. Limited support for negative capitalization was found. Expectancy Violations Theory is used to describe the relationship between the initial and feedback interactions for standard and negative capitalization processes.

Introduction

The idea of getting back at someone through success is often lauded in popular culture with slogans like “silence them with your success.” But this idea contrasts against with the common tendency to broadly share good news for the purpose of winning accolades and support. The drive to celebrate life’s events, even small happenings, is referred to as capitalization. More specifically, capitalization is the process of sharing positive life events with others to increase the experienced positivity by savoring other’s positive reactions (Langston, 1994). These events are not required to be the accomplishment of the individual, just positive events that happen in life. The ubiquity of social media makes sharing these positive events easy. When shared in this way, events sometimes spread across entire networks, far beyond what the individual intended.

Yet, while the concept of capitalization is typically used to describe prosocial activity (Reis et al., 2010; Pagani, Donato, & Iafrate, 2013; Demir, Doğan, & Procsal, 2013), the concept could also be expanded to describe a darker strategic act of attempting to increase positivity by disclosing positive events to individuals who might respond with envy or other negative responses, and then savoring their negative reaction. Although positive experiences are often shared with individuals to help savor and celebrate the occurrence of something a single individual might find difficult to do alone, sharing news broadly means messages will sometimes be received by individuals who may not be excited about one’s success. Occasionally individuals seek to send these messages to these individuals in an attempt to savor those negative responses.

The most visible acts of this behavior can be found in social media, although sometimes the outcome is assumed, rather than displayed in explicit reactions. A person posting positive news to a broad audience might be targeting a single individual knowing they are creating

displeasure and relishing in it. On Twitter, one form of this behavior is called sub-tweeting, wherein a person makes an unflattering comparison to a person known by those who are reading, but without naming them, leaving some strategic ambiguity (Graves, McDonald, & Goggins, 2016). Negative capitalization can sometimes be a form of revenge or manipulative behavior in this way.

While somewhat dreary, individuals may derive positive emotional outcomes from creating envy or other negative emotions in other people. They may savor these moments and reactions in the same way people engage in the capitalization of positive events. Expanding the concept of capitalization to include negative reactions and negative feedback allows for growth in understanding of these negative behaviors. Some of the same positivity created by sharing with loved ones may also be created when sharing with those less liked. While outside the scope of this paper, it begins a conversation about the long-term outcomes from both the sender and receiver of these strategic disclosures as well as their prevalence. These actions could provide positive outcomes depending on the disclosure and the nature of the relationship but might also be destructive to one or both individuals. The purpose of the study is to explore negative capitalization in an experimental context and to better understand how communication theory might help explain capitalization.

Capitalization

The concept of capitalization, introduced by Langston (1994), continues the research focus on positive interactions and prosocial communication behavior. Langston originally conceptualized capitalization as the inverse of coping. Instead of sharing negative news to help manage challenging situations, as in coping, individuals strategically choose whom to share good news with to savor and capitalize on positive events (Langston, 1994). According to the initial

conception of capitalization, when individuals experienced positive events, they mark the experiences by sharing them with others to extend positivity beyond the experience of the event alone. This early conception of capitalization was akin to celebrating, that by telling others about an event people are creating markers about the event that might be forgotten without sharing the story. More recent research has reconceptualized capitalization as a process where a strategic disclosure is made, and the quality of response from a receiver plays an important role in the success of a capitalization attempt (Gable & Reis, 2010). The interactive nature of this process allows for greater understanding of the role of disclosure and response.

Langston connects coping and strategic positive disclosures through Lazarus's (1991) Theory of Emotion, in which individuals who experience events make assessments of the valence of an event, as well as their ability to manage the consequences of an event. Lazarus argued that in the case of negative events, these assessments lead to coping behaviors and seeking social support and that a similar process happens in the case of positive events. This theory of emotion is a systems approach linking the environmental context, behavior, and outcomes in a recursive fashion influencing the current situation as well as future interactions. The theory has focused mostly on stress and coping, but has been generalized to negative emotions fear, anger, guilt, and shame. While the theory has focused primarily on a negative emotion, Lazarus and Folkman (1987) have argued it captures all emotions.

Although we have usually referred to stress and coping theory and research, we think that we should now speak less of stress and more of emotion. Stress, which primarily concerns negative person-environment relationships, cognitive appraisals, and emotional response states... falls under the larger rubric of emotion, which also includes positive

relationships, appraisals, and emotions such as joy, happiness, pride, love, and relief. (p. 142)

Within their work there has been little confirmation of this assumption, but other scholars such as those investigating capitalization have explored its relationship. Langston's research into capitalization offers more information in an understudied area using existing work in coping and negative events to reveal a similar process for positive events.

Research reveals a complicated relationship between people with increased general positivity (typically described as a mood) and higher levels of social support. Positive mood is believed to be an evolutionary adaptation to encourage behavioral interaction with the environment or others for the success of the individual or the species (Cacioppo, Priester, & Berntson, 1993). Through this evolutionary lens, positive mood would be a predictor of providing social support. An alternative view argues that positivity offers a more diverse range of response behaviors leading to behaviors like social support, which in turn increase positivity and continuing in an upward spiral of positivity (Fredrickson, 2002). The latter approach seems to be a better explanation for capitalization behavior, in that individuals make strategic choices to capitalize on positive events, thus trying to spiral that positivity upwards.

Additional complexity exists in the process because of differences between perceived and received social support. Whereas perceived social support involves information leading an individual to believe that they are a member of a network, cared for, and within good standing, received social support is actual instrumental support that has tangible outcomes for the individual (Nurullah, 2012). One meta-analysis suggests that, at least for their sample of papers, social support has either mixed or positive effects on health, mood, and perceived well-being with many of the mixed findings coming from papers examining perceived social

support (Haber, Cohen, Lucas, & Baltes, 2007). Received support has a clear connection to increases in positive mood, but perceived support is mixed. These types of support are individual and nuanced, complicating capitalization attempts. While the differences between support are important for capitalization attempts, an elaboration of those differences is beyond the scope of the paper.

Yet, knowing the existence of the distinction between the two types of support is important because capitalization behavior is, in some ways, a form of both received and perceived social support. Some researchers believe they have isolated the differences between received and perceived support through as a result of perceived traits of those enacting help. When enacted support is initiated by someone perceived as without social support as a trait (i.e., perceived social support) the support was interpreted negatively (Lahey, Orehek, Hain, & VanVleet, 2010). Even when someone does not engage in received support behaviors, the perceived support behaviors still create some positive mood outcomes. Changes in mood as a result of social support behaviors are linked, to some degree, to the social relationship of the individuals in some cases. The complicated nature of the type of support that the receiver of a capitalization attempt provides further highlights that the initial conception of capitalization is inadequate to capture the full process. Applied studies have highlighted this nuance as well, leading to more scholarship that examines capitalization as a process.

The relationship between behavior and mood often functions in both directions. That is, enacting social support increases mood, just as positive mood can spur social support behavior. For example, Peterson (2009) examined an online HIV support group wherein users could only post positive messages and found that this positivity created stronger group norms and greater

social support. The spiral of positivity was generated because group content moderators only allowed positive messages, and those positive messages spurred further social support behavior.

Some of this confusion about behavior and mood's positive or negative directional impacts was captured in Langston's initial research (1994) on capitalization. He began to study this phenomenon by studying two groups of students in a diary study. The first was a group of sorority members who kept daily diaries for a semester. This group recorded positive and negative events and their response to them. Initially, two categories of action signified capitalization, marking the event (which included behaviors like celebrating, rewarding oneself, or maximizing the significance of the event) or engaging in social contact (with behaviors like helping others with the task or seeking social contact). The positivity surrounding the events was connected to how individuals managed those events. When individuals experienced positive events, they often engaged in social behaviors that marked the event (celebrations, calling and telling family members, etc.). When they did this, they experienced more positivity than the event alone. There were also many cases in which individuals engaged in social behaviors that did not mark the event (helping others with the same task, spending time with others, etc.). When this happened, there were not gains in positivity surrounding the event. Thus, creating social support is a part of capitalization and the particular behaviors that mark the event expressively allow capitalization to take place.

Early work continued to lay out the foundations of capitalization using different methods and data collection tools. The second group Langston evaluated was a group of self-selected individuals who also filled out diaries. Participants in this group were asked to record positive and negative events, along with their importance and their response to the event. Analysis of the 49 participant's diaries revealed that expressive responses to positive events increased positivity.

Participants also experienced a decrease in positivity when highly positive events were not responded to, perhaps representing disappointment. These results indicate that if an individual marks or shares an event, they experience positivity beyond the positive event itself.

Langston's initial research framed capitalization by how a person responds to an event. In other words, a person's behavior identified when a capitalization event took place. The more attention and focus individual made of the event by sharing it with others, the more positivity was gained. Sharing with other individuals requires a look at the receiver's qualities and perspective in capitalization attempts. How receivers respond and their relationship with the capitalizer are important questions to understand how they impact capitalization as a process. As other researchers have captured, capitalization is not a single behavior but a more complex process (Gable & Reis, 2010). That process allows for a better understanding of capitalization and other ways in which people might attempt to increase their positivity.

Feedback

Capitalization is partially contingent on feedback and the different qualities of the feedback. Research shows that when individuals respond more expressively to a capitalization attempt, more positivity is gained than experiencing the positive event alone (Ilies, Keeney, & Scott, 2011). However, sharing positive events with strangers or new acquaintances often leads to a greater increase in positivity than sharing with existing and developed relationships (Demir, Doğan, & Procsal, 2013). Individuals who have an established relationship have expectations for the type of response expected surrounding good news. But strangers often have unknown or more muted expectations of a response. It would be likely to expect a close friend to remember a birthday, but when a stranger examining a driver's license notices a birthday the unexpected well-wishing can produce more happiness than that of a close friend.

Langston's study is a landmark for establishing capitalization as a concept, but it did not take into account how individuals interpret the receiver's response to good news. Feedback after capitalization attempts can prevent or promote capitalization, depending on the receiver's reaction to others' good news. Recent research has revived interest in capitalization by examining how, depending on the reaction of the person who is being disclosed to, feedback to an event can prevent or cause capitalization to take place. For example, Reis, Smith, Carmichael, Caprariello, Fen-Fang, Rodrigues, and Maniaci (2010) examined capitalization processes across five studies designed to experimentally test capitalization and understand the role of feedback in a capitalization attempt and found that the quality of feedback plays an important role, especially in establishing new relationships.

The first study in the multi-study piece by Reis et al. (2010) is mostly a replication of the initial capitalization research with a slightly different method that is used for the other four studies. Specifically, participants would fill out the Brief Mood Introspection Scale and then recall a positive experience within the last two years. In conditions where participants shared the event with positive feedback from a confederate, they experienced more positivity than other recall or control conditions. Study two used expressive or passive feedback conditions and determined that expressive feedback produced more positivity. Studies three, four, and five examined the relationship-building nature of capitalization in laboratory and applied contexts. These last three studies establish that capitalization is a clear path of developing trust and intimacy as well as increasing positivity in online and in-person contexts.

In sum, these studies show the importance that feedback and relationship have in capitalization by revealing that expressiveness, relationship, interaction are important variables for successful capitalization. Also, the studies examined both stranger and existing relationships,

which adds strength to the concept beyond lab settings. The research did not look at any negative relationships, which is likely because positive expressive feedback is conceptualized as the only way to get capitalization, and negative relationships are unlikely to provide positive expressive feedback. How many of us expect that those who we dislike will respond warmly to our successes? However, it does seem possible that negative relationships could play a role in capitalization. Negative feedback, even expressive negative feedback, could lead to capitalization if there was an existing negative relationship to moderate the impacts of the message. A person could increase their happiness by savoring the negative expressive feedback of other individuals.

Capitalization only takes place when friends respond more expressively than expected (Demir, Doğan, & Procsal, 2013). Capitalization does not occur when individuals share news with friends and the friends respond as expected because there is no increase in positivity over the event alone. In contrast, individuals interacting with strangers or new acquaintances may have little to no expectation for expressive feedback, which allows capitalization to be more common and effective in these situations. In short, the relationship to an individual and expressiveness of a feedback message help dictate which capitalization attempts ultimately are successful.

The use of negative feedback has not been examined concerning capitalization before and has typically been avoided by researchers because of the possibility of preventing capitalization. Existing relationships are avoided because of the potential for negative feedback to positive events. For example, Ilies, Keeney, and Scott (2011) explain that if one partner were to have a positive work event, such as a new promotion, a romantic partner might respond negatively because of the implications the promotion might have on the relationship such as moving, more

time apart, or different hours. These events are a case where capitalization would not take place because the individual would want a positive and supportive response from their partner. The expectation would be that the receiver would provide a supportive environment, and by doing so there would be no increase in positivity and quite possibly a decrease in positivity. Having a long-standing negative relationship with another person who provides negative feedback might provide an increase in positivity, as long as the negative feedback is linked to their envy of a capitalizer's success.

The existing work on capitalization focuses on two key principles: the more expressive the feedback, the more positivity gained, and the better we know a person, the more expectations we have on how they will react. Just as plausibly, however, individuals might sometimes brag or gloat about these events to people they have a negative relationship with, possibly in an attempt to create envy by prompting negative social comparisons. In doing so, a person may also be gaining increased positivity when they perceive that they have created envy and "bested" another person, perhaps a form of capitalization.

Expectancy Violations Theory

Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT) originally focused on non-verbal communication behavior based in anthropological work in proxemics. Proxemics broadly focused on how space is used interpersonally in various cultures to indicate closeness of a relationship (Burgoon & Jones, 1976). Expectancy Violation Theory expanded upon this work by incorporating how specific interactions altered the closeness of a relationship when a person violated cultural, contextual, or individual normative behavior (Burgoon, 2015). As the theory was expanded, other overt behaviors such as language use were incorporated. The theory states that individuals have expectations of verbal and non-verbal communication that when violated lead the receiver

to evaluate the sender, relationship, or context differently. A violation must break from the expected response and varies based upon the valence of the behavior (positive or negative) as well as the magnitude of the violation (Burgoon, Stern, & Dillman, 2007). Capitalization is highly dependent on feedback and the magnitude of that feedback which maps on well to core propositions of EVT.

The success of a positive capitalization attempt often is dependent on positively violating the expectations of the person attempting to capitalize. Capitalization is more difficult for existing relationships because the set expectation for a positive response is already present. A person has a wider bandwidth of expected behavior and will only confirm expectations rather than violate them. The expectation that an existing positive relationship will respond enthusiastically to good news requires that they respond in a way beyond the existing relationship to achieve increased positivity from capitalization. However, a stranger or new acquaintance might have a smaller and lower bandwidth of expectations for a response. One might expect a hug from a friend as a greeting, for example, but from a stranger, a hug could be too personal. The lower expectation for intimacy is more likely to cause their response to result in a positive violation. EVT states that positive violation of expectations produces greater outcomes (learning, positivity, credibility, etc.) than positive confirmations (Burgoon, 2015). The positive violating of expectations, whether from a stranger or a close friend, is necessary for capitalization to take place. Confirming expectations is not enough, because such confirmations would be unlikely to provoke the kinds of positive responses necessary for capitalization to occur.

Expectancy violation theory offers insight into positive capitalization, but is less clear about outcomes in negative capitalization. Negative violations are not as well understood because of their cultural, contextual, and individual variations that are near impossible to

standardize (Brown, Venkatesh, Kuruzovich, & Massey, 2008). The lack of research is partly due to the complicated discrepancy between the predictive and prescriptive expectations that are considered in negative interactions. Predictive expectations are those that are provided by the individual, while prescriptive expectations are the normative cultural and contextual expectations (Burgoon, 2015). Research using EVT as a framework for examining cultural shock indicates that positive and negative violations function as expected because of alignment between what the social situation prescribes and what the individual predicts will happen (Bucy, & Newhagen, 1999). Less studied reverse culture shock, where an individual reacclimates back to home culture, is often rife with discrepancies between individual expectations and normative cultural expectations (Mooradian, 2004). A person might expect to be treated negatively as an outsider to their home culture and instead be unexpectedly treated as a member of the culture. The discrepancy and its inverse are difficult to understand because of the multiple individual interpretations of the interaction based on differences between the normative and expected response.

Building on the work of Reis and colleagues (2004), expressive feedback in capitalization is analogous to an expectancy violation. For capitalization to take place, feedback must be expressive, violating the contextual and individual norms of the interaction. Social support literature indicates most individuals share positive events with approximately 80 percent of the individuals they have an existing positive close relationship with (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). Negative capitalization is more complex because it occurs in the context of a relationship with someone who is close, but also disliked. The role of strategic disclosures in negative capitalization limits the predictive expectations to only negative reactions, allowing for more direct exploration of prescriptive expectations within the theory. The individual expectations for

the capitalizer are negative reactions from the sender during negative capitalization, potentially allowing for greater examination of variation in contextual expectations for negative violations in EVT. This study only examines the opportunity to negatively capitalize in lab contexts, the opportunity for further work exploring EVT is possible.

Negative capitalization could provide a framework for understanding outcomes when there are consistent contextual and individualistic response expectations. Inherent in negative capitalization is the general contextual expectation of celebrating someone else's positive news, but the initiator of the interaction has an individual expectation of a negative response from the receiver. The necessary conditions for negative capitalization are the same conditions that have created confusion for EVT researchers. The difficulty stems from being unable to determine whether a violation or confirmation of a norm is positive or negative. This study is an attempt to help answer part of that question by examining the change in positivity after experiencing an attempted negative capitalization. If a negative reaction results in increased positivity then, to the initiator, the interaction is a positive expectancy confirmation. Violation intensity could also be examined within this context, but first understanding if the process can be measured in laboratory settings is necessary.

Hypotheses

This study examines the possibility that capitalization could take place in certain circumstances beyond the scope of positive relationships. Specifically, if the initiator perceives a negative relationship with the receiver, meeting or exceeding the expected negative reaction could result in capitalization because the news-sharer would be experiencing increased positivity beyond the event itself. These ideas are evaluated with the following research questions and hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: When individuals make a capitalization attempt within the context of a positive stranger relationship, negative feedback will lower the positivity from the experience of the event relative to positive feedback.

As mentioned above, stranger dyads were used to mimic the previous experimental work of Reis et al. (2010). The second hypothesis in this study explores negative capitalization. Expectancy violation theory suggests that negative reactions from a receiver result in negative consequences for the sender or sender/receiver relationship. But negative capitalization suggests that capitalizers might increase their positive outcomes which is counter to the current research in negative violations in EVT.

Hypothesis 2: When individuals make a capitalization attempt within the context of a negative stranger relationship, negative feedback will relate to an increase in positivity gained from a capitalization attempt.

Method

Participants

This study examined negative feedback in stranger dyads to explore the ways that it could generate potentially positive outcomes for the sender. Participants were recruited from undergraduate courses at a northwestern university and through social media used by the researcher. Overall, 81 participants came to the lab, but four participants were removed from the analysis because of incomplete data. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 75 years old (mean = 31.3) with a roughly even gender distribution (54.3 percent female and 45.7 percent male). Students who participated were awarded course credit in exchange for their participation.

Instruments

Interpersonal Attraction Scale (IAS). The IAS was used to measure attraction to the confederate. The IAS measures social, physical, and task attraction. McCroskey and McCain (1974) found an initial Cronbach's alpha of .84, .81, and .86 for the three factors respectively. The manipulation check utilizes all of these factors. However, the study only used the social factor in the manipulation check. The measure has 15 seven-point Likert-type items, five for each of the three factors. In this study only five items from this scale were utilized.

Brief Mood Introspection Scale (BMIS). The BMIS is the other mood measure used in this study. The BMIS has 16 adjective items rated by the participants on a seven-point semantic differential scale across four axes: Pleasant-Unpleasant, Arousal-Calm, Positive-Tired, and Negative-Relaxed. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the dimensions range from .76 to .83 (Mayer & Gaschke, 1988). The original measure used five-point Likert-type scales but was expanded to a seven-point scale to increase reliability (Kokkonen, & Pulkkinen, 2001).

Personal Report of Communication Apprehension. The PRCA was used to distract the attention of participants. The PRCA is the most widely used tool to measure communication apprehension. The PRCA is a 24 item five-point Likert-type scale with a Cronbach's alpha of .93 to .95. The PRCA is negatively correlated with the Assertiveness Scale.

Assertiveness Scale. Finally, the Assertiveness scale was used in the same way as the PRCA, an attempt to misdirect the attention of the participant to prevent any instrumentation threats to validity. The Assertiveness scale consists of 17 items that are coded positive or negative for assertive behavior. The reported reliability on this scale is .75 (Bakker, Bakker-Rabdau, & Breit, 1978).

Procedure

This study used a 2 (positive or negative impression) X 2 (positive or negative feedback) between-subjects factorial design. Participants were recruited for participation in an interview study, in which they were exposed to either positive or negative interaction behaviors, and either positive or negative feedback by the confederate in response to answering interview questions, designed to prompt attempts at capitalization. Participants first came to a private room in the lab and filled out a packet of pre-test measures on moods and attitudes. While the participant was filling out the first packet, the confederate would arrive but wait to enter the same room until the participant was done with the first packet. This delayed entry was done to aid in the perception that the confederate was not a researcher, as well as control the initial impression of the participant (Reis et al., 2010).

Once finished with the packet, the participant would then meet with a confederate under the guise of participating in an interview as part of the study. The four conditions in the study meant that participants had either a positive or negative initial interaction with the confederate and either positive or negative feedback to the participant's capitalization attempt. The confederate left the room after the brief 15-minute interaction, and the participant then filled out some attraction measures and additional more mood and attitude measures to compare change from before and after the interaction.

The negative initial interaction behaviors included ignoring the participant for a short time before the interview, eye-rolling, bored expression and demeanor, and opening comments of, "let's get this over with." All of these behaviors are deviant and designed to break the norms of initial interactions. The use of these behaviors is based on the assumption that socially inappropriate behaviors are aversive. Social norms exert social control over individuals when individuals act beyond the norms they are labeled deviant (Bryant, & Forsyth, 2012). The

positive initial interaction started with a hello or welcome, a short compliment about an article of clothing the participant was wearing, eye contact, an overall pleasant demeanor, and starting the interview with, “Thank you so much, let’s gets started.”

Once the first question was read, the behavior of the confederate would change for different valence conditions. Follow-up questions to the capitalization attempt included: 1) Why did you pick this event, 2) Who else have you told about this, 3) Why did you tell those people, 4) Who would you avoid telling, 5) Why would you avoid telling them. Other follow-up questions were improvised by the confederate based on the details of the event provided by the participants. For example, if a participant had talked about the purchase of a new boat the confederate might ask where they had taken the boat.

The positive feedback condition included non-verbal behaviors of attentiveness, short lines of encouragement, and happy facial expressions (Norton, & Pettegrew, 1979). The negative feedback condition tried to create the exact opposite with the confederate appearing annoyed, not paying attention to the participant, and using short lines of disinterest in response to the participant. After the interview, participants filled out the second set of measures on attraction, mood, and attitude without the confederate present. Participants were then debriefed about the experiment and its intentions and were then free to leave.

The first ten participants were asked to also sit down for an exit interview with the researcher after the debriefing to identify behaviors with the confederate that increased or decreased liking. The first ten participant’s mood change scores were also reviewed to ensure that shift in perception happened in the direction anticipated. This information was used to alter confederate protocol for future participants to increase the liking or disliking of the confederate according to the appropriate condition. The same analysis was conducted excluding these

participants and similar results were found. The final analysis included all participants who completed the survey.

Results

To test the initial manipulation of positive and negative interaction, an independent samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the IAS scores between the positive and negative feedback groups. No significant differences existed in the scores for positive interaction ($M = 4.61, SD = .40$) and negative interaction ($M = 4.46, SD = .62$) conditions; $t(74) = 1.30, p = .20$. Although the test was not significant, the means were in the expected direction.

A 2 x 2 factorial between-subjects ANOVA was conducted on BMIS change scores, with initial interaction (positive, negative) and capitalization feedback (positive, negative) as the independent variables. The main effect of initial interaction on BMIS change score was not significant, $F(1,73) = .01, p = .92$. BMIS change scores did not significantly differ between positive initial interaction ($M = .51$) and negative initial interaction ($M = .062$), but the main effect of feedback on BMIS change scores was significant, $F(1,73) = 7.15, p = .01$. BMIS change was lower for positive feedback ($M = -.83$) than for negative feedback ($M = .195$). The initial interaction x feedback interaction was significant, $F(1,73) = 9.27, p < .01$. The main effect of feedback on BMIS change was significant, but this is qualified by the interaction.

Table 1. Fixed-effects ANOVA using BMIS change score

	Sum of Squares	<i>df</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Intercept	0.23	1	0.23	1.16	.29	.02
Initial (negative/passive)	0.00	1	0.00	.01	.92	.00
Feedback (negative/passive)	1.41	1	1.41	7.15	.01	.09
Initial * Feedback	1.83	1	1.83	9.27	.00	.12
Error	13.61	69	0.20			

$R^2=.16$

A post-hoc Tukey’s honest significance difference test was then conducted to understand the interaction. The post-hoc test indicated that the negative initial/negative feedback ($M = .36$, $SD = .46$) participants significantly differed from the negative initial/positive feedback ($M = -.02$, $SD = .52$) participants at $p < .05$. However, the positive initial/positive feedback ($M = .07$, $SD = .39$) and positive initial/negative feedback ($M = .03$, $SD = .38$) participants were not significantly different from the other two groups. This overall indicates that the initial positive interactions had little impact on the BMIS change scores. Instead, negative feedback conditions increased positivity, and positive feedback conditions decreased positivity. The study shows little support for H_1 , because the traditional capitalization condition (positive interaction, positive feedback) did not indicate increased positivity. However, the study shows partial support for H_2 , because of the increase in positivity for the negative initial interaction/negative feedback condition. Yet, the post-hoc analysis indicates that the difference is primarily composed of differences between negative initial/positive feedback and negative initial/negative feedback.

Discussion

The results of this study provide partial support for the idea that individuals may capitalize on negative interactions with individuals they have negative relationships with. The results do make some contributions to understand capitalization and perhaps how individuals make strategic decisions about disclosing positive events. However, an alternate theory might

better explain the results of this study. The study also has several limitations for capturing this phenomenon which encourages the consideration of alternative design choices and that better capture capitalization processes.

The results indicate that individuals did not capitalize on sharing positive events in this context. Positive initial interactions/positive feedback participants did not experience an increase in positivity statistically distinct from any other condition. A different pattern was found for negative initial interaction/negative feedback, in which it did create an increase in positivity as hypothesized. This effect was only true when compared to negative initial/positive feedback participants and not when compared to other condition participants. The only significant difference is in negative initial conditions between positive and negative feedback. This finding offers partial support for the possibility of capitalizing by creating perceptions of envy. The study failed to capture traditional conceptions of capitalization as the initial positive interaction conditions were not significantly different regardless of the feedback provided. These results indicate the important role of feedback after an initial negative interaction, and perhaps the importance of initial interactions.

Capitalization has long focused on overall positive interactions and their impact on positivity experienced by those sharing. Individuals are described as strategically choosing who to disclose positive events to (Langston, 1994). While not experimentally tested within the capitalization literature, how a person responds can have an enormous impact on the increases or decreases in positivity (Reis et al., 2010). This study attempted to experimentally manipulate feedback conditions and found that when those being disclosed to are negative initially their feedback does increase positivity in the discloser. Traditional capitalization was not found in

this study but expectations about response intensity could have prevented capitalization. While troubling, it is important to examine each finding and try to understand its meaning.

Research conducted by Demir, Doğan, and Procsal (2013) indicated that capitalization did not take place when individuals responded as expected. Rather, capitalization only takes place when those being disclosed to respond above the expected response. People often choose to disclose positive information strategically to people they believe will be happy for them increasing the likelihood of a successful capitalization attempt. That same expectation of positive response can then require a successful capitalization response to be beyond the expected response. If I tell my friend my birthday is approaching, I might expect my friend to wish me a happy birthday and a simple happy birthday might not elicit capitalization because expectations were met rather than exceeded. However, if I tell my friend my birthday is approaching with the same simple “happy birthday” expectation, and they then organize a party, I would be more likely to have a successful capitalization attempt because of the positively exceeded expectation. Alternatively, if I tell a stranger (who I do not expect response from) it is my birthday and they respond excitedly, I would likely to have a successful capitalization attempt because capitalization is largely dependent on a balance between expected feedback and actual feedback.

While this effect is interesting the caveat may more clearly help understand what happened during the experiment. Interviews were organized with stranger dyads within the context of an experiment. It is entirely plausible that even though the attempt was to minimize expectations of response, the experiment context might have altered expectations and prevented traditional capitalization (positive initial/positive feedback) from taking place. Context has always been important in these types of experiments to induce a level of realism (Kerlinger, &

Lee, 2000). If that balance between expected response and actual response is not very different then little change is likely to occur in experienced positivity.

This potentially explains why traditional capitalization did not occur, but negative capitalization did. The context of the experiment could have created average expectations for positivity. People often expect strangers to say *gesundheit* after a sneeze or to hold an elevator for them and this basic expectation of kind response could easily have been present in the experiment. As a result, the confederate in the experiment did not provide an increased enough response than what was expected creating no capitalization. However, in a controlled lab environment there is likely to be less expectation of someone being rude. When the confederate was negative to the participant that was a large enough difference from expected behavior and actual behavior to create change.

This mechanism between expected behavior and actual behavior has long been examined in the expectancy violation literature. Born out of proxemics research, expectancy violation theory is an examination of how individuals respond when social norms and expectations are unexpectedly violated (Buller, 1987). The bandwidth of acceptable behavior defined by context and perceived credibility of the speaker. Positive violations are higher than the expected response and negative violations are those that are below the expected bandwidth. Initial interactions help set the bandwidth by creating initial expectations of a person's responses. When individuals have negative impressions of another individual, positive or negative secondary actions, like feedback, could be interpreted as malicious regardless of their intent (Burgoon, & Dunbar, 2006). Positive communication events could re-establish as hiding an ulterior motive, and negative communication events beyond the bandwidth are interpreted as continued negative behavior. Often the only course of action in short term interaction is for someone in a negative relationship

is to stay in the bandwidth and meet expectations. This can result in an increase in positivity (Burgoon, & Dunbar, 2006). Expectancy violation theory explains the results of this experiment adequately but in some ways counter to the research of capitalization.

Limitations

Since the experiment was exploratory, it is important to recognize the limitations on the process. Capitalization research has long linked positivity and social support. The connection between the two is intuitive, and most research in this area has examined long-standing relationships. Even most of Langston's work involved individuals who would interact multiple times over months. Thus, condensing the process of capitalization into a 15-minute interaction is likely not be enough time for individuals to establish a relationship that would create social support, particularly social support predicated on strategic disclosure.

Another potential limitation is that this study used mood change as a proxy for capitalization, rather than attempting to directly apprehend capitalization itself. However, previous work has also treated increased mood as a proxy capitalization (e.g., Reis et al., 2010). This study uses the same proxy as previous research, but without the same investigative mission as previous work.

, In addition, trying to test the existence of positivity in negative situations may require even more time and interaction over standard capitalization relationships. Research into how individuals use social media has indicated that individuals are less self-enhancing with friend groups than with stranger groups when interacting online and face to face (Wilcox & Stephen, 2012; Tice, Butler, Muraven & Stillwell, 1995). Interactions with strangers are managed differently than interactions with friends. Initially, it was thought that this difference might make capitalization processes more condensed, offering immediate spikes in positivity with much

smaller long-term impacts. Under certain circumstances stranger interactions have been condensed versions of longer relationships (Dindia, Fitzpatrick, & Kenny, 1997). For example, some self-disclosure research has indicated that strangers are sometimes disclosed to very quickly but not always very deeply (Rosenfeld, & Kendrick, 1984). This experiment did not find similar results, possibly because of the lack of strategic disclosure for the participant. Rather than choosing to share a disclosure with a stranger with limited opportunity for continued interaction, participants were asked to disclose to a certain individual. The lack of strategic choice in the disclosure could have limited the impacts of the capitalization process.

Finally, feedback conditions may have varied due to natural variation with the confederate. Every individual who interacted in a given condition received slightly different interactions as a result of their individual positive disclosure. While a regular review of interactions with the confederate took place the complexity and attempt to create a natural conversation made perfect consistency difficult. This may have led to problems with maintaining manipulations which ultimately may have created spurious data (Levine, 2011). Focus on consistent manipulation through another system might have produced a better manipulation. For example, perhaps using a video with feedback conditions might have been far more consistent at creating stable manipulations.

Conclusion

While the hypotheses were not roundly supported, the fact that the negative initial impression/positive feedback was different is interesting and perhaps might be explained by EVT. Understanding negative interactions from EVT has often been difficult because of the discrepancy between normative and individual expectations. Negative capitalization with further refinement could offer a structure to examine negative interactions. Alternative methods could be

employed to understand the role of strategic disclosures as the method applied in this study fell short. Numerous stories indicate that individuals often share good news with people they do not like as a way of marking an event. Finding ways to record that process in action are difficult. This experiment offers at least some preliminary understanding of how that process might function. A better understanding of capitalization research from a communication perspective might at the very least help researchers understand how strategic disclosures help create social support. Overall, the results of the study indicate promise in understanding how individuals may make disclosures to increase short term positivity.

In the end, this study worked to establish negative capitalization as a concept within the existing literature. Both anecdotal and now exploratory research suggests that individuals can increase positivity by sharing positive news with others who provide expressive negative feedback if there is an initial negative interaction. Even within the limitation of a stranger dyad, where capitalization might be most difficult, this exploratory analysis suggests that this “dark side” phenomenon is present. Replicating the approach in ways similar to the early diary studies of Langston (1994) might help reveal more about the selective disclosure process as well as the nature of the relationships in which people engage in this behavior outside of the lab. This work is promising for a greater understanding of negative interactions in the context of EVT and capitalization. Further work should replicate these findings and explore the short and long-term implications of negative capitalization on the sender and receiver.

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Appendix

Interpersonal Attraction Scale

Instructions: Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements as they apply to the other participant.

Use the following scale and write one number before each statement to indicate your feelings.

7 = Strongly agree; 6 = Moderately agree; 5 = Slightly agree; 4 = Undecided; 3 = Slightly disagree; 2 = Moderately disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree

- _____ 1. He (she) seems to be a typical goof-off when assigned a job to do.
- _____ 2. It seems it would be difficult to meet and talk with him (her).
- _____ 3. We could never establish a personal friendship with each other.
- _____ 4. He (she) is somewhat ugly.
- _____ 5. I think he (she) could be a friend of mine.
- _____ 6. I would like to have a friendly chat with him (her).
- _____ 7. I think he (she) is quite handsome (pretty).
- _____ 8. It seems he (she) would be a poor problem solver.
- _____ 9. I find him (her) very attractive physically.
- _____ 10. I don't like the way he (she) looks.
- _____ 11. He (she) just wouldn't fit into my circle of friends.
- _____ 12. He (she) is very sexy looking.
- _____ 13. I have confidence in his (her) ability to get the job done.
- _____ 14. If _____ wanted to get things done, I could probably depend on him (her).
- _____ 15. I couldn't get anything accomplished with him (her).

Russell Attitude Scale

Instructions: Please circle the number indicating the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements as they apply to your current mood.

		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Unsure	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
General	1. Lively	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Activation:	2. Active	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	3. Full of pep	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	4. Energetic	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	5. Peppy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	6. Vigorous	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	7. Activated	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
High	8. Clutched up	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Activation:	9. Jittery	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	10. Stirred up	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	11. Fearful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	12. Intense	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
General	13. At rest	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Deactivation:	14. Still,	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	15. Leisurely	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	16. Quiescent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	17. Quiet	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	18. Calm	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	19. Placid	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Deactivation	20. Sleepy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Sleep:	21. Tired	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	22. Drowsy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Pleasure:	23. Contented	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	24. Happy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	25. Satisfied	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	26. Pleased	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	27. Joyful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Displeasure:	28. Discontented	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	29. Unhappy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	30. Dissatisfied	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	31. Displeased	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	32. Joyless	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Arousal:	33. Wide awake	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

	34. Aroused	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	35. Aflame	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	36. Impassioned	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	37. Alert	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	38. Roused	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Sleepiness:	39. Inactive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	40. Half asleep	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	41. Slow	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	42. Unaroused	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Dominance:	43. Dominant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	44. Controlling	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	45. Influential	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	46. Important	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	47. Autonomous	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Submissive:	48. Submissive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	49. Controlled	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	50. Influenced	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	51. Awed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	52. Guided	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Depression:	53. Depressed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	54. Discouraged	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	55. Gloom	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	56. Sad	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	57. Blue	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	58. Sluggish	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Brief Mood Introspection Scale

INSTRUCTIONS: Circle the response on the scale below that indicates how well each adjective or phrase describes your present mood.

	Definitely Do Not Feel	Do Not Feel	Slightly Do Not Feel	Unsure	Slightly Feel	Feel	Definitely Feel		Definitely Do Not Feel	Do Not Feel	Slightly Do Not Feel	Unsure	Slightly Feel	Feel	Definitely Feel
Lively	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Drowsy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Happy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Grouchy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Sad	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Peppy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Tired	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Nervous	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Caring	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Calm	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Content	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Loving	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Gloomy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Fed up	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Jittery	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Active	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Positivity Scale

Instructions: Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with the following statements as they apply to the other participant.

Use the following scale and write one number before each statement to indicate your feelings.

5= Strongly agree; 4 = Slightly agree; 3 = Undecided; 2 = Slightly disagree; 1 = Strongly disagree

- _____ 1. I have great faith in the future
- _____ 2. I am satisfied with my life
- _____ 3. Others are generally here for me when I need them
- _____ 4. I look forward to the future with hope and enthusiasm
- _____ 5. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself
- _____ 6. At times, the future seems unclear to me (reverse scored)
- _____ 7. I feel I have many things to be proud of
- _____ 8. I generally feel confident in myself

Personal Report of Communication Apprehension

This instrument is composed of twenty-four statements concerning feelings about communicating with others. Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by marking whether you: **Strongly Disagree = 1; Disagree = 2; Neutral = 3; Agree = 4; Strongly Agree = 5**

- _____ 1. I dislike participating in group discussions.
- _____ 2. Generally, I am comfortable while participating in group discussions.
- _____ 3. I am tense and nervous while participating in group discussions.
- _____ 4. I like to get involved in group discussions.
- _____ 5. Engaging in a group discussion with new people makes me tense and nervous.
- _____ 6. I am calm and relaxed while participating in group discussions.
- _____ 7. Generally, I am nervous when I have to participate in a meeting.
- _____ 8. Usually, I am comfortable when I have to participate in a meeting.
- _____ 9. I am very calm and relaxed when I am called upon to express an opinion at a meeting.
- _____ 10. I am afraid to express myself at meetings.
- _____ 11. Communicating at meetings usually makes me uncomfortable.
- _____ 12. I am very relaxed when answering questions at a meeting.
- _____ 13. While participating in a conversation with a new acquaintance, I feel very nervous.
- _____ 14. I have no fear of speaking up in conversations.
- _____ 15. Ordinarily I am very tense and nervous in conversations.
- _____ 16. Ordinarily I am very calm and relaxed in conversations.
- _____ 17. While conversing with a new acquaintance, I feel very relaxed.
- _____ 18. I'm afraid to speak up in conversations.
- _____ 19. I have no fear of giving a speech.
- _____ 20. Certain parts of my body feel very tense and rigid while giving a speech.
- _____ 21. I feel relaxed while giving a speech.
- _____ 22. My thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech.
- _____ 23. I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence.
- _____ 24. While giving a speech, I get so nervous I forget facts I really know.

Assertiveness Scale

Please write a short description of what you would do if the following scenarios happened to you.

1. You have set aside the evening to get some necessary work done. Just as you get started some friends drop over for a social visit.
2. You are standing in a line when someone cuts in front of you.
3. A friend or relative asks to borrow your car or other valuable property but you would prefer not to lend it to them.
4. A person who has kept you waiting before is late again to an appointment.
5. Someone has, in your opinion, treated you unfairly or incorrectly.
6. Friends or neighbors fail to return some items they have borrowed from you.
7. Others put pressure on you to drink, take drugs, or eat too much.
8. Another person interrupts you while speaking.
9. You are asked to carry out a task that you do not like to do.
10. Your relationship partner has done something you do not like.
11. A salesperson has spent a great deal of time showing you merchandise but not of it is exactly what you want.
12. You are invited to a party or other social event, which you would rather not attend.
13. In a movie theater a couple next to you distracts you with their conversation.
14. In a restaurant you receive food that is poorly prepared.
15. You receive the wrong merchandise from a store.
16. Someone gives you an unrequested negative appraisal of your behavior.
17. Friends or relatives try to get information from you that you consider personal.