The Effects of Self-Awareness and Self-Reflective Writing on Online Task Performance

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ABSTRACT

This study examined self-awareness and self-reflective writing effects on performance in an online task environment. Participants (N = 98) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: self-awareness (private vs. public) and self-reflection (reflection vs. no-reflection). They were instructed to complete two successive online survival tasks that required analytical thinking and problem-solving skills. Findings demonstrated that participants in the private self-awareness condition performed better after writing a self-reflection than the no self-reflection condition. However, participants in the public self-awareness condition performed worse in the second task upon completion of their self-reflection compared with those that did not write a self-reflection. Additionally, a post-hoc linguistic analysis of the self-reflections illustrated that high-performers discussed their task completion using more cognitively complex language compared to low-performers.

KEYWORDS
Dual-Process Model, Objective Self-Awareness Theory, Online Performance, Self-Awareness, Self-Reflective Writing

INTRODUCTION

Online task completion is an inseparable aspect of today’s educational and professional environment. An increasing number of educational institutions are offering distance-learning programs that require self-regulated activities (Gooley & Lockwood, 2012). Similarly, several organizations employ crowdsourcing practices for efficient and affordable online task assignments (Poetz & Schreier, 2012). Despite the extensive research on cognitive and behavioral processes in collaborative environments (Buder, 2011; Kwon, Hong, & Laffey, 2013; Phielix, Prins, & Kirschner, 2010), scholars still know little about how these processes influence online task completion at the individual level.

Online task completion takes place primarily in solitude, and requires self-regulated behaviors, thereby when one’s self-awareness becomes salient; it is likely to affect the cognitive processes and subsequent performance. The self-awareness perspective, in the field of psychology, implies that individuals’ attention can be directed either internally or externally (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). When individuals direct their attention inwardly toward themselves, their focus is private. In contrast, when individuals direct their attention outwardly, their focus is public. Therefore, self-awareness can place attention on internal (private) and/or external (public) levels depending on where the self-awareness is focused.
Extensive research has been devoted to understanding the effects of self-awareness on perceptual and behavioral processes in computer-mediated communication (CMC). For instance, several studies looked at self-awareness in the context of online intimacy, politeness, attraction (Yao & Flanagin, 2006), self-disclosure (Joinson, 2001), self-esteem (Gonzales & Hancock, 2010), and language use (Blackburn, LeFebvre, & Brody, 2014). However, few empirical studies have examined the influence of self-awareness on cognitive processes in the context of online task completion. Many studies in conventional task and learning environments have documented that metacognitive processes, such as writing a self-reflection enhances performance (Barron & Erev, 2003; Hoffman & Spatariu, 2008). For instance, one study reported that information processing via reflection leads to better comprehension and integration of information in the memory (Smith & DeCoster, 2000). Another study found that individuals performed significantly better on subsequent tasks when they reflected on what they learned from the task they completed (Di Stefano, Gino, Pisano, & Staats, 2014).

Building on previous theoretical and empirical studies’ findings at the intersection of self-awareness and self-reflective writing, this study aims to reveal cognitive and behavioral processes underlying individual performance in an online task environment. Using the theoretical assumptions of objective self-awareness theory (Duval & Wicklund, 1972) and dual-process models of information processing (Chaiken & Trope, 1999), this study examined the effects of self-awareness and self-reflective writing on performance improvement. Also, using a post-hoc analysis, this study explored the linguistic differences in self-reflective writing between high and low performers.

THEORETICAL FRAMING AND HYPOTHESES GENERATION

Self-Awareness and Online Task Performance

Self-awareness affects perceptual (e.g., perceptions of attraction or politeness) and behavioral (e.g., self-disclosure) processes in CMC (Joinson, 2001; Yao & Flanagin, 2006). Private self-awareness refers to increased salience of one’s physical and affective states, whereas public self-awareness refers to how others perceive one’s physical and affective states (Joinson, 2001). Objective self-awareness theory (OSA Theory; Duval & Wicklund, 1972) argues that when individuals’ private self-awareness is enhanced, they see themselves more objectively, and are able to compare their behaviors to the standard norms (e.g., how an average person would behave, feel, or perform). This theory proposes that if a discrepancy exists between individuals’ actions and perceived standard norms, they evaluate themselves negatively. Yet, Gonzales and Hancock (2011) articulated that in contrast with the predictions of OSA theory in CMC contexts, enhanced private self-awareness influenced self-esteem positively. These results showed that becoming self-aware by viewing one’s own online profile enhanced self-esteem rather than diminished it. Similarly, Duvala and Lalwani (1999) reported that when individuals had high private self-awareness, they attempted to make more effort in their performance to change the self in the direction of the expected performance standard.

On the other hand, Yao and Flanagin (2006) documented the effects of private and public self-awareness on perceptual processes in online dyadic interactions. Their results showed that different levels of public and private self-awareness in CMC interactions did not have a strong impact on intimacy or group identification. However, their findings demonstrated that when public self-awareness was heightened, people were perceived as more likable and attractive. Also, public self-awareness affected perceptions of politeness, and social versus task orientation. Though their study postulated certain differences in public and private self-awareness on perceptual processes in CMC environments, there has been limited research about how these factors may influence cognitive processes (e.g., task completion) that lead to improved performance.

In line with the findings of previous research, we speculated that heightened public self-awareness would generate more consciousness in terms of public impressions compared to private self-awareness. For instance, if participants knew that they were monitored and evaluated, they might invest more time
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