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Perceiving Attractiveness on the Social Networking Site Facebook

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Abstract

This study will explore how one's Facebook profile can effect someone else's perception of the profile maker. College students will be used to test the hypothesis that profiles with "good-looking" pictures, positive wall posts, and a high number of friends and comments will be perceived overall as an appealing, attractive person. The results should indicate that a person will be perceived as a significantly more attractive person when he or she has an attractive profile, compared to those who do not.

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Perceiving others and forming impressions is a underlying process that has been complicated by new communication technologies. The development of the Internet has expanded the way we can communicate with others (Leon, Rotunda, Sutton, & Schlossman, 2002). Because of the Internet, a variety of questions have arisen about new ways we can form and manage impressions. We now wonder at what rate impressions are formed online, how online impressions may be like offline impressions, and how people judge the authenticity of our online self-presentation (Walther, Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008) Because online impressions are controllable, they are often suspect. Online users can organize the information and enhance their self-image by selecting how and what to convey to the receiver. Manipulating others' perceptions of oneself has come to be expected. Being able to self-present in a positive manner has been tied to social survival (Hogan, Jones, & Cheek, 1985).

Online social networking technologies complicate the impression formation perspective. Sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Friendster allow individuals to present themselves by making a profile, articulate their social networks, and establish or maintain connections with others (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). In particular, Facebook is a social networking Web site initially built for college communities. It is organized around social networks corresponding to schools and now other institutions and locales. Like other online social networking sites, Facebook provides a formatted Web page profile into which each user can enter a considerable amount of personal information. The profile maker can include information such as birth date, sexual orientation, e-mail address, relationship status, hometown, hobbies, and pictures .In addition to his or her own profile, all users have a “wall” on their Facebook profiles. Here their

friends can leave messages to the owner in public. This can complicate the impression formation because people other than the person about whom the site is focused, also can contribute information to the site. The messages left may express sentiments or reflect common or individual activities between the target and the friend. They may even reflect a desire to embarrass the profile owner. It is also possible that observers' reactions of the comments may affect perceptions of the target profile maker as well (Walther et al., 2008). In a Facebook profile, things that others say about a target may be more compelling than things an individual says about his- or herself. Other's comments are more likely to show the conduct of the true character of the profile maker because it is not a controlled aspect. The public display of friend connections contributes to one's social identity (Donath & Boyd, 2004). People also use Facebook as a means of making new friends or learning more about new acquaintances. Even when previously unacquainted individuals meet offline at college, they check the other's Facebook profile to learn more about that person and whether there are any common friends or experiences. People try to find out about one another via common nodes in overlapping social networks.

I intend to investigate how young people perceive attractiveness of their peers on the social networking site, Facebook. Social attractiveness represents the degree to which a target is seen as a likely friend (McCroskey & McCain, 1974). Physical attractiveness and socioeconomic status (SES) are important factors to consider in the study of Internet interaction behavior because they are two of the most likely attributes about which one would lie or exaggerate in a potential computer mediated situation. Physically, men prefer relatively youthful, female facial characteristics in women (Buss, 1987). The appearance of robust health, clear skin, and strong muscles in a male is likely to be more attractive to females (Alley & Cunningham,

1991). Attractiveness has also been associated with a number of other positive traits. In fact, some research has suggested that physically attractive persons are expected to lead lives that are happier and more successful than people of lesser attractiveness (Berscheid & Walster, 1974). Wealth and social status are factors which humans consistently consider when evaluating potential partners. Because attractiveness and socioeconomic status are considered potential factors that might influence perceptions, female participants have been found to rate males with high SES more favorably than low SES males, and that males favor the more attractive women. People are attracted to those who are pleasant, reward them, and are associated with pleasant experiences (Johnson, 1989).

My research will examine how others perceive the profile maker by what information he or she chooses to include on their profile. My study will also look at the question of how other individuals' contributions to one's own online profile affect observers' impressions and evaluations of the profile maker. Since social networking sites are a relatively new concept, my research is important to learn how these sites can effect impression formation. Based on previous attractiveness research, I predict that profiles with "good-looking" pictures, positive wall posts, and a high number of friends and comments will be perceived overall as an appealing, attractive person.

Method

Participants

Undergraduate students from a medium sized university in the mid-Atlantic region will participate in the study. Both males and females will participate. The students will be recruited through the SONA experiment scheduling system. They will receive extra credit in a psychology course at their professor's discretion.