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Individuals' perception of others' self-esteem, psychological well-being and attractiveness: Role of body size and peers' comments among Japanese and Americans

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ABSTRACT

From a cross-cultural perspective, this study investigates how individuals form impressions of others' self-esteem, psychological well-being, and physical attractiveness as a function of others' body size as well as messages these others receive from their peers. Mock-up Facebook profile pages in which the body size of the profile owner (thin vs. overweight) and peer-generated messages (accepting vs. thin-encouraging) were manipulated in the study. After viewing a Facebook profile page online, American and Japanese females completed a questionnaire. Japanese, but not Americans, (a) believed a profile owner who received thin-promoting messages to have higher psychological well-being than a profile owner who received accepting messages, (b) assumed an overweight profile owner to have lower self-esteem than a thin profile owner, and (c) perceived a thin profile owner as more physically attractive than an overweight profile owner.

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Researchers are interested in the impression formation process in the context of social networking sites (Stopfer, Egloff, Nestler, & Back, 2013; Utz, 2010). Evidence suggests that various cues in the social networking environment, such self-generated cues as profile pictures and other-generated cues, influences individuals' impressions about a target's personality on dimensions, such as friendliness, credibility, and extraversion (Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008; Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009). The present study examines impression formation on social networking sites concerning another characteristic: psychological health, represented by self-esteem and psychological well-being.

Why does perception of others' psychological health matter? Evidence shows that, when making inferences

about someone, people use their perceptions of that person's self-esteem as information. For instance, individuals rate a person who is believed to have low self-esteem as less attractive, intelligent, and competent than a person who is believed to have high self-esteem, when all else is equal (Cameron, MacGregor, Hole, & Holmes, 2012). Another study shows that peers' and supervisors' perceptions of an individual's self-esteem impact their rating of that person's job performance (Strauss, 2005). Furthermore, negative perceptions might lead to differential treatment of people who are perceived to have low self-esteem. Individuals are less willing to vote for a political candidate presumed to have low self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill & Myers, 2009) and to engage in relational activities with targets who are believed to have low self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill & Myers, 2011), and may even discriminate against these people in employment settings (MacGregor, Cameron, & Holmes, 2010). Considering the adverse impacts of being perceived as possessing low self-esteem, research examining the process in which

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individuals form impressions about others' psychological health is necessary.

The first purpose of this study is to examine how messages left by others, as well as body size of a profile owner in the profile picture influence others' perceptions of an individual's self-esteem and psychological well-being. The study also examines how the profile owner's body size impacts peer perceptions of physical attractiveness. The second purpose of this study is to examine cultural differences in the aforementioned aspects between Japanese and Americans. It is not uncommon to have international friends on Facebook among Japanese (Thomson & Ito, 2012) or Americans (Schaefer, 2011). Being aware of cultural differences in impression formation helps people engage in successful impression management in intercultural contexts. For these goals, peer comments that may impact perceptions about psychological health will be discussed first.

1. Perception of others' self-esteem and psychological well-being based on peer comments

People have a tendency to form perceptions about the characteristics of others based on peer comments. In Walther et al.'s (2008, 2009) experiments, college students are exposed to mock-up Facebook profiles that include wall postings left by the profile owner's friends. Walther et al. (2008) demonstrate that friends-generated messages, which connote either desirable or undesirable behaviors of the profile owner, and influence individuals' judgment about social and task attractiveness, and credibility of the profile owner. Further, Walther et al. (2009) provide evidence that wall postings left by the profile owner's friends suggesting that the profile owner is (a) extroverted or introverted, and (b) physically attractive or unattractive have influence on impressions that individuals make about the profile owner's level of extroversion and attractiveness, respectively.

The present study investigates how individuals form perceptions of a person based on peer comments in a "fat talk" (Nitcher & Vuckovic, 1994) context. Fat talk, which is particularly pervasive among young women (Ousley, Cordero, & White, 2008), refers to "conversation with family and friends about positive and negative comments about appearance, dieting techniques, and the need to lose weight" (p. 74). Fat talk impacts body image of not only those who engage in fat talk (Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003) but also those who witness others' fat talk online (Taniguchi & Lee, 2012). More specifically, in Taniguchi and Lee's (2012) experiment, when Facebook posts suggest encouragement of weight loss, Japanese express lower body satisfaction compared to when the posts connote discouragement of weight loss. Moreover, Japanese and Americans report higher psychological well-being when they witness fat talk implying discouragement of weight loss than fat talk promoting weight loss. Based on the aforementioned studies, it is possible that peers' comments exchanged in fat talk online affect individuals' perception about the self-esteem and psychological well-being of the profile owner receiving the comments.

Typically, a female starts fat talk by expressing her desire to lose weight and her peers or family members reply. In replying to the female, others can potentially (a) encourage altering her body size as she wishes (i.e., weight loss) or (b) accept her body as it is (i.e., discouragement of weight loss). It is important to note that encouragement of weight loss implies her current state is inadequate and she needs to lose weight to be accepted. Conversely, messages accepting her body as it is communicate that she is acceptable and worthy without having to change anything about her body.

Research consistently shows that feeling accepted by others has positive consequences in aspects such as psychological adjustment among adolescents (de Minzi, 2006; Ohannessian, Lerner, Eye, & Lerner, 1996) and self-regulation abilities among college students (Blackhart, Nelson, Winter, & Rockney, 2011). More specific to the present study, perceived acceptance of weight by others is associated with positive outcomes, such as women's appreciation of their own bodies (Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2011; Avalo & Tylka, 2006).

It is likely that individuals know from anecdotal experience the positive impacts of accepting messages on the receivers' well-being. Therefore, on witnessing a female receiving accepting comments from her peers, individuals would perceive that she has high self-esteem and psychological well-being. Conversely, when witnessing a female receiving peers' thin-promoting comments, individuals would assume that she has lower self-esteem and psychological well-being. Thus, the following hypothesis is generated:

H1. An individual receiving thin-promoting comments will be perceived as having lower levels of self-esteem (H1a) and psychological well-being (H1b) than an individual receiving accepting comments.

Though individuals across cultures would react in this manner, there might be cultural variations in such assumptions in the form of two opposing possibilities. The first is that such a discrepancy is more pronounced among Japanese than North Americans. Japanese tend to have highly developed interdependent self-construals and, thus, are more concerned with others' thoughts (Markus & Kitayama, 1991b). This suggests that Japanese would assume that other Japanese would be also concerned with and more highly influenced by others' comments.

Americans, on the other hand, are often considered to have high independent self-construals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991b) as bounded entities that are relatively separate from social context (Markus & Kitayama, 1991a). Individuals with an independent self see being unique and having private thoughts and feelings as important features (Markus & Kitayama, 1991b). This could suggest that North Americans are more likely than Japanese to assume that other Americans are not be as concerned with or influenced by others' comments. Based on these cultural differences, it is expected that Japanese assume that accepting messages impact the receiver more positively than Americans do. Similarly, it is hypothesized that Japanese believe that thin-encouraging messages influence the receiver more negatively than Americans believe.

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