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FlashReport

On being liked on the web and in the “real world”: Consistency in first impressions across personal webpages and spontaneous behavior

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ABSTRACT

With recent growth in the use of personal webpages and online social networking, people are changing the way that they meet and form impressions of each other. The current research examines the correspondence in impressions formed from face-to-face interaction and personal webpages. As expected, people liked by interaction partners were also liked on the basis of their Facebook® pages. Across the two social mediums, social perceivers utilized analogous criteria in forming impressions: interaction partners and webpage viewers liked people who were socially expressive in face-to-face interaction and personal webpages, respectively. Finally, webpage expressivity and webpage self-disclosure were independent constructs, predictive of face-to-face counterparts: nonverbal expressivity and verbal self-disclosure. Implications for the changing landscape of social perception are discussed.

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Over the last decade, industrialized countries have observed a major shift in how people meet and interact. People now use personal websites to assess who they should befriend, date, and even employ. The premise is that examination of personal webpages allows potential friends, dates, and employers to predict how a person will actually behave. Yet despite the exponential growth in the creation and perusal of personal websites, little is known about the correspondence between personal websites and “real world” behavior. To address this issue and provide some insight into the behavioral validity of website judgments, we examined whether and why people judged to be likable on the basis of their Facebook® page might also be likable in real life.

On the transformation of social life

The popularity of social networking websites has grown so much in the last decade that it is rare to find an adolescent or young adult who does not actively maintain a personal webpage on websites such as Facebook®, MySpace®, or Friendster® (e.g., Lenhart & Madden, 2007). Adult single people are increasingly likely to maintain personal webpages on “dating” websites (Madden & Lenhart, 2006) and employers are increasingly likely to search personal webpages when evaluating potential employees (Finder, 2006). Indeed, 10% of Americans have jobs whose employ-

ers require them to market themselves online (Madden, Fox, Smith, & Vitak, 2007). With web-based technology advancing at an ever-increasing rate, it is likely that social networking will only become more popular in the coming years. Although it is unlikely that people will ever completely abandon face-to-face social interaction, many important social activities that were previously relegated to the “real world” are now occurring on the Internet. What was previously “known” with regard to impression formation, person perception (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000), self-presentation (Schlenker & Pontari, 2000) and other topics may need to be revisited in this new social reality.

With the Internet-driven transformation of social life, social scientists have begun to explore the dynamics of web-based communication, including social networking patterns (e.g., Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007). Some recent research has even demonstrated that self-reported personality traits are reflected in personal webpages (Buffardi & Campbell, 2008; Marcus, Machilek, & Schutz, 2006; Vazire & Gosling, 2004). While such studies are informative with regard to the social and psychological processes occurring online, there is little evidence regarding the extent to which spontaneous (and directly observed) behavior occurring in the “real world” is faithfully represented online. Gaining such an understanding is crucial, for example, to understanding the validity of web-based social perception as well as for understanding the social psychological correspondence between the web and more traditional social milieus.

We here examined the correspondence of web-based social perception and “real world” social perception with the understanding that these mediums may yield somewhat different impressions.

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Actual social interaction occurs in real-time and is likely to include much spontaneous behavior. In contrast, people can spend hours deliberately constructing the webpages on which social perceivers base their impressions. Hence, whereas impressions formed from social interaction may be based on a mix of deliberative and spontaneous behavior, impressions formed from personal webpages may be based on targets' wholly deliberative or self-presentational behavior (Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008). There may therefore be limited correspondence between web-based and interaction-based impressions.

Conversely, very different types of information provided by the two mediums may still yield quite similar impressions. Funder and Colvin (1991) have argued that "people might change their behavior markedly across situations and yet maintain a substantial degree of interindividual consistency..." (p. 775). Indeed, when considered in terms of impressions formed by observers, there appears to be consistency across mediums or situations. Funder and Colvin, for example, demonstrated that target persons elicited similar impressions regardless of whether those targets were observed in an informal conversation with one person or were observed in a debate with a different person on a different day. Likewise, a recent study demonstrated considerable similarity in impressions of target persons' across 15 situations ranging from introducing oneself to singing to solving a logic problem (Borkenau, Mauer, Riemann, Spinath, & Angleitner, 2004). Finally, although there are differences between initial face-to-face interaction and webpage construction, both situations presumably include an element of impression management. For these reasons, we expected some consistency between impressions formed from face-to-face interaction and those formed from personal webpages.

Impressions of likability were examined here, in part, because of the clear implications for important decisions such as dating, friendship, and employment. A person who is disliked on the basis of their webpage is unlikely to attract dates, friends, or employers online. Moreover, likability (warmth) is often regarded as one of two core factors that drive social judgments (see Rosenthal, Hall, DiMatteo, Rogers, & Archer, 1979). Hence, people are likely to make likability inferences in perusing personal websites. To the extent that people do make inferences about likability they are likely to do so on the basis of observable cues. Although there are substantial differences in the cues available to perceivers across the two social media, the conceptual factors underlying cues on personal webpages may bear some similarity to the factors underlying cues available in face-to-face interaction. In both media, we examined observable cues theoretically undergirded by social expressivity and self-disclosure, both of which are thought to play some role in producing intimacy and liking (though too much or uneven disclosure can also produce disliking; e.g., Collins & Miller, 1994; Reis & Shaver, 1988; Riggio, 2006).

In general, because people appear to exhibit consistency in behavior across channels of communication (e.g., Funder & Colvin, 1991), we expected students who were rated positively in the social interaction to also be rated positively on the basis of their Facebook® pages, even if conscious impression management is more likely on personal websites. We expected observable cues to underlie such correspondence in social perception.

Method

Participants

Thirty-seven undergraduate students (18 female) at a private university in the northeastern United States received monetary reimbursement for participation.

Procedure

Participants completed the experiment individually in a large office-sized room containing a video-camera. After informed consent, participants were introduced to "another participant" who was actually a female confederate. There were six such confederates in total, each of whom was trained to respond naturally but to maintain consistency between participants, whether those participants were male or female. The confederate sat opposite the participant with only a small coffee table separating the two. After the initial introduction, the experimenter explained that the participant and confederate should try to get to know one another by asking questions. The experimenter then left the room and returned after 4 min had elapsed. The participant was later debriefed, verbally probed for suspicion, and given a permission form for downloading his/her Facebook page. Immediately after the participant left the room, his/her Facebook page was downloaded.

Measures

Confederate ratings. The confederate rated the participant on several dimensions, three of which were relevant to likability: likability, warmth, and agreeableness. *Behavioral liking* denotes the average of these three ratings ($\alpha = 0.84$).

Behavioral cues. From videos of the social interaction, three undergraduate research assistants at a separate university coded (on 7-point scales) seven specific cues related to social expressivity and personal disclosure. As expected, a principal components analysis with varimax rotation revealed a two factor structure accounting for 76% of the variance. *Nonverbal expressivity* consisted of four items with rotated factor loadings greater than 0.6: lively vocal expression (inter-rater $\alpha = 0.69$), smiling ($\alpha = 0.78$), open versus closed smile ($\alpha = 0.71$), and facial expressivity ($\alpha = 0.76$). *Nonverbal expressivity scores* denote the average of these four items (internal consistency $\alpha = 0.84$). *Verbal self-disclosure* consisted of three items with rotated factor loadings greater than 0.6: revealing emotional information about oneself (inter-rater $\alpha = 0.63$), talking about oneself ($\alpha = 0.70$), and disclosing more than the confederate ($\alpha = 0.68$). *Verbal disclosure scores* denote the average of these three items (internal consistency $\alpha = 0.87$).

Global Facebook ratings. Ten undergraduates from a nearby private university rated the target person on the basis of his/her Facebook page with regard to the likeability of the target person (inter-rater $\alpha = 0.79$), the extent to which the judge would want to be friends with the target person ($\alpha = 0.73$), the extent to which the target person seemed attractive ($\alpha = 0.85$), and the extent to which the target person seemed trustworthy ($\alpha = 0.75$). *Facebook liking* denotes the average of these four items (internal consistency $\alpha = 0.85$).¹

Facebook cues. As with face-to-face interaction, we expected to distinguish between self-disclosure and social expressivity, where the former refers to talking about oneself and the latter refers to a sociable interactive style. On personal webpages we describe self-disclosure with respect to how much one talks about himself or herself, as indicated by lists of personal interests, personal activities, personal attitudes, and the like. We describe social expressivity with respect to displays of sociable interactivity, as through posting of photo albums and contacting others ("friends"). Our analysis focused on 12 easily quantifiable cues. As expected, a principal components analysis with varimax rotation revealed a two

¹ A principal components analysis on these four items revealed a single factor. The only factor with an eigenvalue greater than 1 accounted for over 70% of the variance—all items had factor loadings above .70. Moreover, when broken down into the two most face-valid items for likability ("how likable is this person?" "how much would you want to be friends with this person?"), results for this index remain unchanged.

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