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Is Facebook an Accurate Representation of Personality?

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

“Is Facebook an Accurate Representation of Personality?”

written by

Hannah Murdock

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for completion of the
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meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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Is Facebook an Accurate Representation of Personality?

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to examine whether there are correlations between online presentation of oneself on Facebook (through profile pictures, number of Facebook friends, relationship status, and how often friends are mentioned) and four personality traits (extroversion, social anxiety, self-esteem, and attachment style). Participants completed an online survey to report Facebook information and measure personality traits. Findings show that (a) the more friends one has, the more likely one is to mention them on his or her profile; (b) people with an avoidant attachment style are less likely to have a boyfriend/girlfriend; (c) neither extroversion nor social anxiety is related to number of friends; and (d) number of pictures taken alone versus with others is not related to self-esteem.

Is Facebook an Accurate Representation of a Person's Personality?

Does the way that people present themselves in online social networks predict certain personality traits? The social networking website Facebook offers a relatively uncensored look into people's lives as a result of users placing often very personal information about themselves on their individual webpages. In the present study, participants completed an online survey in which they recorded their number of Facebook "friends," compared their number of profile pictures in which they appear alone versus with others, said whether or not they were in a relationship, and stated if they mentioned their friends on their profiles. In addition, they completed questions to assess attachment style and measure their levels of extroversion, self-esteem, and social anxiety. Because they examined their Facebook profiles themselves to answer questions, this design allowed individuals to offer personal information without compromising their anonymity as a result of there being no need for a researcher to view their profiles.

Previous Research

There has not been a great deal of previous research on online social networking behavior in relation to personality traits. The majority of related research has been done on personal living space as opposed to personal webpages. Gosling, Craik, Martin, and Pryor (2005) developed the Personal Living Space Cue Inventory (PLSCI) in which they examined individuals' personal living spaces (PLSs) in an attempt to determine whether one can predict certain personality traits simply by what types of things people have in their PLSs. The correlations show that residents were judged to be high in openness if their PLSs had many CDs and books, had varied collections of books and magazines, were multipurpose spaces, and were distinctive, decorated with pictures, cluttered, and full. Another study by Gosling, Ko, Morris,

and Mannarelli (2002) looks at the correlations between PLSs and openness, conscientiousness, and extraversion. Individuals with high openness scores had distinctive rooms and a variety of books and magazines; conscientious individuals were well-organized, neat, and uncluttered; and extroverted individuals decorated with more pictures and had noisy homes.

Gosling also led a study with John, Craik, and Robins (1998) in which they examined how accurate retrospective self-reports of behavior were in an attempt to see whether or not people know how they are presenting themselves to others. For some acts there is a consensus about how often an act occurred, but for other acts individuals just do not agree. They tend to agree about acts that are observable, desirable, frequently occurring, and are from extraversion and conscientiousness domains (rather than agreeableness). Also for this study, the researchers had participants who were observing the behaviors record their observations online.

The most relevant research to the present study looked at the accuracy of personality impressions based on personal websites (Vazire & Gosling, 2004). In this study, the researchers had observers view participants' personal webpages and rate their apparent personality traits, the results of which were compared to participants' self-assessment of their own personalities. The most accurately judged trait was openness, and the second most accurately judged trait was conscientiousness. The participants' self-based criterion suggests emotional stability is the least accurately judged trait, and the observer-based criterion suggests agreeableness is the least accurately judged. However, all five traits were for the most part accurately judged regardless of which criterion is used.

Present Research

The topic of online self-presentation is an increasingly important one as more and more people participate in online social networks like Facebook and present themselves to others

through self-designed personal webpages. If individuals do not present themselves accurately, then much of what online social network participants think they know about someone could be false.

This study sought to determine whether certain personality traits could predict certain aspects of Facebook profiles—namely, whether the number of reported friends online is related to levels of extraversion and social anxiety, whether the ratio of profile pictures alone to profile pictures with others is related to self-esteem, whether secure attachment style is related to a person being in a relationship, and whether mentioning one's friends or a boyfriend/girlfriend is related to extroversion. I hypothesized that the more extroverted and the less socially anxious a person is, the more Facebook friends he or she would have; higher self-esteem would predict more profile pictures alone as opposed to with others; a more secure attachment style would predict a person being in a relationship; and if a person mentioned friends or a boyfriend/girlfriend, he or she would be more extroverted.

Method

Participants

Thirty-eight university students were recruited through lower-level psychology classes and through the Ouachita Baptist University Facebook network. Participants recruited through classes agreed to participate in order to receive extra-credit, while participants recruited through Facebook participated completely voluntarily. Six participants were excluded from analyses due to attrition or to unclear answers on the survey.

Survey

Participants completed an online survey developed for this study that included sections from the following surveys: Self-report Measures of Adult Romantic Attachment (Brennan,

Clark, & Shaver, 1998); Introversion/Extraversion: Sociability (Shepherd, 1972); Emotional Stability: Self-esteem (Shepherd, 1972); and Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (Liebowitz, 1987). Participants responded to the questions on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree." In addition, I developed questions to measure number of Facebook friends, number of profile pictures alone and with others, relationship status, and whether or not participants mention friends or a boyfriend/girlfriend on their profiles.

Personality Variables

Attachment Style. Attachment is an affectional tie that one person forms with another specific person, and attachment styles can be divided into four categories: secure, anxious-ambivalent (preoccupied), avoidant (dismissive), and fearful-avoidant. Secure attachment is the most supportive of relationships

Extroversion. High levels of extroversion signify a disposition in which a person is concerned primarily with things outside the self and with the external environment rather than with one's own thoughts and feelings. An extroverted person is more outgoing and enjoys being around others more than an introverted person.

Social Anxiety. Social anxiety is the experience of fear, apprehension, or worry regarding social situations and being evaluated by others. People vary in how often they experience anxiety in this way or in which kinds of situations. Social anxiety can negatively affect relationships or limit the number of positive relationships one has.

Self-esteem. Self-esteem reflects a person's overall self-appraisal of his or her own worth and encompasses beliefs and emotions. Behavior may reflect high self-esteem in assertiveness and confidence, and low self-esteem in timorousness and caution. It is usually regarded as an

enduring personality characteristic (trait self-esteem), though normal, short-term variations (state self-esteem) occur.

Facebook Variables

Number of Facebook Friends. This is the total number of friends one has on Facebook within one's primary network—in this case, the Ouachita Baptist University network.

Profile Pictures. Participants recorded the number of Facebook profile pictures in which they are by themselves as well as the number of profile pictures in which others are also in the picture.

Relationship Status. This section of the Facebook profile displays whether or not a person is in a relationship.

Friends or Boyfriend/Girlfriend Mentioned. Some people mention their friends or a boyfriend/girlfriend on their Facebook profiles, usually in the "Interests" or "About Me" sections.

Results

My first two hypotheses—that the more extroverted and the less socially anxious a person is, the more Facebook friends he or she would have, and that higher self-esteem would predict more profile pictures alone as opposed to pictures with other people—was not supported by the data. There was no correlation between these variables, $r(31) = .17, p = .36$.

The hypothesis that attachment style would predict a person being in a relationship was partially supported by the findings in that attachment avoidance scores were negatively correlated with reporting having a boyfriend or girlfriend, $r(29) = -2.98, p < .05$. However, anxious attachment scores were unrelated to reporting having a boyfriend or girlfriend, $r(29) = .37, p = .72$.

My final hypothesis—if a person mentioned friends or a boyfriend/girlfriend, he or she would be more extroverted—was not supported by the data, but a related result was found. If a person mentioned his or her friends or a boyfriend/girlfriend, that person had more friends ($M=661.06$) than those individuals who did not mention anyone on their profiles, $M = 350.69$, $t(31) = .40$, $p < .05$.

Not surprisingly, there were several correlations among the personality variables, as shown by statistically significant Pearson correlations ($p < .05$): Negative correlations included extroversion and anxious attachment, $r(31) = -.51$; self-esteem and anxious attachment, $r(31) = -.64$; and social anxiety and extroversion, $r(31) = -.54$. The positively correlated variables included social anxiety and anxious attachment style, $r(31) = .49$; and self-esteem and extroversion, $r(31) = .49$.

Discussion

This research attempted to address the question of how accurately people present themselves on their Facebook profiles, and if it is possible to predict certain aspects of their profiles by examining their personality traits. With respect to the variables I chose—extroversion, social anxiety, self-esteem, and attachment style—this does not appear to be the case.

Regarding why there were not more correlations between variables, this could be due to the nature of Facebook friends. Number of friends reported went as high as 1250, and even the smallest number reported (120) was still a large number of people one considers to be friends. These large numbers are typical among Facebook users, so one can infer that Facebook friends are not necessarily “real” friends. Therefore, it would make sense to say that one’s reported number of friends may not have anything to do with how easy one makes friends, for example.

This study could have most likely had better results with a larger sample size than thirty-two and if there had not been a few time constraints. Also, perhaps different variables would have provided significant findings. For example, in previous research on personal living spaces as opposed to personal websites, openness and conscientiousness have appeared to be effective variables to include (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002).

Although this study did not produce the desired results, future research on the subject of social networking websites will be important because of the growing significance of the Internet in our daily lives. Facebook is just one of many online social networks, and participation will likely increase with each new generation of Internet-users. More research on social network participants' presentation of themselves and how it relates to their personalities could allow us to better understand the nature of our increasingly technological culture and why people present themselves the way they do online.

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