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How Do Facebook Users Believe They Come Across in Their Profiles?: A Meta-Perception Approach to Investigating Facebook Self-Presentation

Catalina L. Toma & Cassandra L. Carlson

The present study examines Facebook self-presentation from the perspective of the self-presenters themselves: How do Facebook users believe they come across in their profiles? A sample of undergraduate students (N = 212) rated their Facebook self-presentations as highly positive, although not so positive as to communicate an idealized version of self. Additionally, self-presenters believed that their profiles portrayed them as better than reality on certain dimensions of self (e.g., “funny,” “adventurous,” “outgoing”), accurately on other dimensions (e.g., “physically attractive,” “creative”), and worse than reality on yet other dimensions (“intelligent,” “polite,” “reliable”). Participants believed that their own profile postings made them come across more positively than reality, but Friends’ postings made them come across more negatively than reality. The results are generally consistent with the Hyperpersonal model’s notion of selective self-presentation.

Keywords: Accuracy; Facebook; Meta-Perception; Self-Presentation

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The Hyperpersonal model of communication (Walther, 1996) predicts that online communicators present themselves in positive and flattering ways because technological affordances, such as unlimited composition time and editability, permit them to be highly strategic about their self-presentational claims. This proposition has received empirical support in online dating profiles (e.g., Toma, Hancock, & Ellison, 2008), online discussion boards (Walther, 2007), and the creation of online avatars (Vasalou & Joinson, 2009). However, on Facebook, it has received mixed support. On the one hand, studies found that exposure to one's own Facebook self-presentation enhanced users' self-esteem and concluded that this must happen because profiles are highly positive (e.g., Toma, 2013). On the other hand, studies found that unacquainted observers formed accurate, rather than overly positive, impressions of profile owners' personality (Back et al., 2010; Gosling, Gaddis, & Vazire, 2007). How can these findings be reconciled? Does the Hyperpersonal model retain its explanatory power in a Facebook self-presentation context?

In this study we argue that the *vantage point* from which Facebook self-presentation is assessed may explain the discrepancies in the existing literature. Specifically, Facebook self-presenters *themselves* may think they come across in highly flattering and positive ways (explaining why they derive emotional benefits from accessing their own profiles), although observers disagree. We investigate this possibility by directly examining users' own evaluations of their Facebook self-presentations.

People's beliefs about how they come across to others are known as meta-perception (Kenny & DePaulo, 1993). While frequently studied in face-to-face contexts, meta-perception has not yet, to the best of our knowledge, been examined in a Facebook self-presentation context. We use this lens to capture the *overall images* that Facebook users believe they communicate through their profiles, focusing on images of personal characteristics such as personality traits, sense of humor, and physical attractiveness. These characteristics are frequently presented and assessed in social interactions (e.g., Malloy & Janowski, 1992), particularly on Facebook (e.g., Utz, 2010; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008).

Facebook Meta-Perception: A Hyperpersonal Perspective

As mentioned, the Hyperpersonal model proposes that online communicators are empowered by technological affordances to construct highly strategic and flattering self-presentations. Specifically, asynchronicity, or the time lag between message composition and send-off, allows self-presenters to carefully ponder the information they wish to convey; editability allows them to revise and refine their messages; and the reallocation of cognitive resources allows them to invest the totality of their attention into message composition, without distraction (Walther, 2007).

Together, these affordances are theorized to enable *selective self-presentation*—an optimized, more positive version of face-to-face self-presentation. Selective self-presentation is not necessarily deceptive, but rather involves such strategies as emphasizing positive qualities and omitting negative ones, contextualizing or explaining away negative information, and strategically framing information such that it flatters (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006).

For Facebook users, perhaps the most salient self-presentational goal is to impress their audience, comprised of hundreds or even thousands of Friends (Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012). Indeed, research shows that publicness substantially enhances the motivation to self-present in a positive manner (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). As a result, users should want to emphasize the flattering aspects of self and downplay their flaws, leading to self-presentations that they believe to be more positive than their actual selves. Importantly, self-presenters should believe themselves capable of creating such images, because they have controllable affordances at their disposal. Hence:

H1: Facebook meta-perceptions are positive across personal characteristics.

H2: Facebook meta-perceptions are more positive than self-presenters' actual selves across personal characteristics.

However, selective self-presentation is a *strategic* act, and one important strategy when trying to impress an audience is to be believable (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Thus, the desire to come across positively should be tempered by a desire to not be caught lying. This is a prominent concern on Facebook, where many audience members are offline friends (Ellison & boyd, 2013), who can detect misrepresentations. Therefore, the Hyperpersonal model predicts that Facebook self-presenters should create profiles that they believe to be positive and enhanced but not so much so that they convey a completely idealized (and hence unrealistic) version of self:

H3: Facebook meta-perceptions are less positive than self-presenters' ideal selves across personal characteristics.

Finally, because Facebook profiles are co-constructed by profile owners and their Friends, it is important to establish whether users believe they come across in an enhanced way because of their own self-presentational efforts, their Friends' postings, or both. According to the Hyperpersonal model, Facebook self-presenters should make a concerted effort to present themselves positively by posting flattering status updates and photographs. Additionally, research shows that social norms mandate that Friends also contribute validating and supportive messages (i.e., wall posts, comments, and "likes"), rather than critical or confrontational ones (Sas, Dix, Hart, & Su, 2009). Hence, Facebook users should believe they come across more positively than their actual selves both because of their own and their Friends' postings:

H4: Perceived enhancement in Facebook profiles is associated with more status updates and photographs posted by the self-presenters, and more wall posts, comments, and "likes" posted by self-presenters' Friends.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants ($N=212$; 78.8% women; ages 18–40, $M=20.36$, $SD=1.92$) were undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, who were compensated with course extra credit. Only Facebook users were recruited for this study. Data collection took place in two phases. First, participants completed an online questionnaire

measuring their perceptions of their actual and ideal selves, basic demographics, and Facebook use. Second, they came to the lab, where they completed meta-perception measures.¹ A time lag of one week was imposed between the two phases, such that meta-perception ratings are not biased by actual and ideal self ratings.

Measures

Participants were asked to rate their *actual self*, or how they currently are, along 15 dimensions. The first 10 of these dimensions were personality dispositions (e.g., “shy vs. outgoing,” “reserved vs. friendly,”) that were adapted from the 10-Item Personality Inventory (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swan, 2003). Five additional dimensions were added (e.g., sense of humor, intelligence; see Table 1 for a full list) in order to capture participants’ self-images in more detail and beyond personality traits. Following Gosling et al.’s (2007) procedure, participants then reported how they would “ideally like to be” (*ideal selves*) along the same 15 dimensions. Finally, participants reported their beliefs about their Facebook *meta-perceptions* (“Generally speaking, how do you think you come across in your Facebook profile?”) along the same dimensions.²

Participants were prompted to imagine how they come across to a general audience who is unacquainted with them (i.e., strangers), rather than to specific individuals (see Back et al., 2010; Gosling et al., 2007 for a similar procedure). In everyday practice, Facebook users have an opportunity to think of how they come across to strangers because strangers comprise a substantial portion of their Friends (Manago et al., 2012).

All the dimensions were measured through semantic differentials on a scale from 1 to 7. Semantic differentials assessing personal characteristics have high face-validity and have been shown to be useful replacements of longer personality scales (Gosling et al., 2003). We operationalize self-presentation accuracy as the extent to which meta-perceptions match actual selves.

Participants’ self-reported gender, age, experience with Facebook, and use of privacy settings were used as covariates.

At the end of the study, participants temporarily “friended” the researchers, granting us access to their profiles. We then extracted from the main profile page the number of status updates and number of photographs added by the profile owner, and the number of wall posts, comments, and “likes” contributed by Friends.

Results

The meta-perception measures were set up to have a negative, undesirable anchor (e.g., “unlikeable”) and a positive, desirable one (e.g., “likeable”). Higher scores on each dimension indicate more positive and hence more flattering meta-perceptions. A series of one-sample *t*-tests compared meta-perception ratings with the midpoint of the 1–7 scale used (i.e., 4), which represents conceptually and statistically a neutral assessment.³ The significance level was Bonferroni-corrected to $p = .003$. All meta-perceptions were higher than the midpoint of the scale

(all t 's > 4.38 , all p 's $< .001$), except for *polite*, which was lower than the midpoint ($t = -9.63$, $p < .001$). Effect sizes for all tests were substantial (for 12 of the 15 dimensions, Cohen's d was between 1.69 and 4.89). This indicates that participants believed they came across positively on most dimensions and supports H1.

How did meta-perceptions compare with participants' actual and ideal selves? For each dimension, general linear models were set up with the three levels of the dimension (i.e., actual self, ideal self, and meta-perception) as the repeated-measure factor, and all the covariates described earlier. All models revealed a significant effect of the repeated-measures factor (all F 's > 2.37 ; all p 's $< .05$, *one-tailed*), indicating at least one significant difference among the three levels considered. Simple effects tests (Bonferroni-corrected) showed that, in comparison with actual selves, meta-perception ratings were (a) higher (and hence more positive) for "outgoing," "calm," "relaxed," "adventurous," and "funny"; (b) lower (and hence more negative) for "polite," "reliable," "ambitious," "intelligent," and "deep"; and (c) not significantly different (and hence accurate) for "talkative," "friendly," "creative," "physically attractive," and "likeable." That is, participants believed that their Facebook profiles were more positive than reality in several areas but accurate and even self-diminishing in others. Therefore, H2 was only partially supported. Paired-sample t -tests also showed that participants rated all meta-perceptions as less positive than their ideal selves, providing support to H3 (see Table 1). Of the covariates considered, gender and privacy settings did not reach significance in any of the models. Experience and age reached significance for some of the dimensions, but

Table 1 Means (and Standard Deviations) for Facebook Users' Ratings of Meta-Perception (MP), Actual Selves (AS), and Ideal Selves (IS)

Self-Descriptive Dimensions	MP	AS	IS
Outgoing vs. Shy	5.64 (1.12) ^a	5.04 (1.24) ^b	6.35 (0.74) ^c
Talkative vs. Reserved	4.76 (1.63) ^a	4.68 (1.58) ^a	5.48 (1.27) ^c
Friendly vs. Unfriendly	5.94 (1.08) ^a	5.82 (1.28) ^a	6.60 (0.70) ^c
Polite vs. Impolite	3.11 (1.24) ^a	5.80 (1.39) ^b	6.64 (0.55) ^c
Relaxed vs. Tense	5.09 (1.12) ^a	4.43 (1.35) ^b	5.82 (1.05) ^c
Calm vs. Anxious	4.77 (1.12) ^a	4.15 (1.25) ^b	5.95 (0.93) ^c
Reliable vs. Unreliable	5.12 (1.16) ^a	5.91 (1.34) ^b	6.80 (0.67) ^c
Ambitious vs. Unambitious	5.27 (1.25) ^a	5.64 (1.24) ^b	6.64 (0.70) ^c
Adventurous vs. Unadventurous	5.13 (1.38) ^a	4.28 (1.21) ^b	6.17 (0.98) ^c
Creative vs. Uncreative	5.02 (1.31) ^a	5.02 (1.31) ^a	6.61 (0.72) ^c
Funny vs. Not Funny	5.40 (1.03) ^a	4.86 (1.07) ^b	5.66 (1.20) ^c
Intelligent vs. Unintelligent	5.25 (0.85) ^a	5.49 (0.88) ^b	6.82 (0.40) ^c
Deep vs. Shallow	4.41 (1.12) ^a	5.31 (1.04) ^b	5.97 (1.07) ^c
Physically Attractive vs. Unattractive	5.24 (1.05) ^a	5.11 (1.11) ^a	6.59 (0.89) ^c
Likeable vs. Unlikeable	5.96 (0.89) ^a	5.86 (1.03) ^a	6.88 (0.38) ^c

Note. Different superscripts within each row indicate significant differences ($p < .003$).

since they were not central to the hypotheses, we do not discuss them here. Although discrepancies occurred, meta-perceptions were correlated with actual self-views on all dimensions (all r 's > 0.20, all p 's < .002).

To test H4, a perceived enhancement variable was created by averaging the discrepancies between meta-perception and actual selves on the dimensions on which the former were *higher* than the latter. Then, a regression model was built with number of status updates, photographs, comments, "likes," and wall posts contributed by Friends as continuous predictors, and all the covariates described earlier. Perceived self-enhancement was significantly related to status updates ($\beta = 0.17$, $p = .05$), comments posted by Friends ($\beta = 0.20$, $p = .03$, *one-tailed*) and "likes" ($\beta = 0.22$, $p = .02$), but the other predictors did not reach significance, and the overall model did not fit, $F(9, 161) = 1.33$, $p = .18$. This provided partial support for H4. To obtain a more accurate estimation of model fit, we revised the model by removing the non-significant predictors. The revised model fit the data well, $F(3, 171) = 3.00$, $p = .03$, with all the aforementioned predictors reaching statistical significance and accounting for 7% of the variance in the data ($R^2 = 0.09$, $R_{\text{adj}}^2 = 0.07$).

An unexpected finding was that participants thought they came across less positively than their actual selves on certain personal characteristics. We computed a *perceived diminishing* variable by averaging the discrepancies between meta-perception and actual selves on the dimensions on which the former were *lower* than the latter. We then conducted an analysis of which profile elements contributed to perceived diminishing using the regression procedure outlined earlier. Since it was theoretically implausible that content contributed by the self-presenters themselves or "likes" received by Friends (which are explicit signals of support) would cast them in a negative light, we only probed whether wall posts and comments contributed by Friends would be significant predictors of self-diminishing. The model fit the data well, $F(2, 188) = 3.34$, $p = .04$, $R^2 = 0.02$, $R^2 = 0.02$, but only the total number of wall posts was a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.18$, $p = .02$).

Discussion

This project set out to test the applicability of the Hyperpersonal model to Facebook users' beliefs about how they come across in their profile self-presentation. Several results support the model's notion of *selective self-presentations*. First, self-presenters believed they came across positively on all but one of the aspects of self investigated. Second, they thought they came across more positively than they really were on several key aspects of self, such as sociability ("outgoing"), adventurousness, and being laid-back ("relaxed," "calm"). Among the young adults in our sample, these dimensions are likely to be critical for popularity, and hence they may have been strategically targeted for self-enhancement (i.e., by only posting about exciting and fun aspects of life). Third, self-presenters did not believe they communicated an idealized version of self, consistent with the model's claims that self-presenters do not enhance themselves so much as to arouse the audience's suspicions. Finally, users' own self-presentational efforts (i.e., posting more

photographs and status updates) were related to enhanced self-presentations, suggesting that self-presenters thought their own contributions to the profile made them appear better than their actual selves.

However, several unexpected findings emerged. First, participants thought their Facebook profiles were *less* positive than their actual selves in several areas (i.e., being “reliable,” “polite,” “intelligent,” “deep”). These pejorative images were exclusively attributed to Friends’ postings. This is in fact consistent with the Hyperpersonal model: Friends’ postings are less controllable than one’s own and hence cannot be assumed to contribute to selective self-presentation in the same way. Second, participants thought they came across accurately on about a third of the dimensions considered (i.e., “talkative,” “creative,” “likeable,” “friendly,” “physically attractive”). One explanation is that enhancement on these dimensions could be easily detected by the audience, and hence it is strategically kept in check. For instance, presenting photographs that are more attractive than reality could be obvious to Friends. Another possibility is that a “show, don’t tell” approach (see Ellison et al., 2006) is more appropriate for these dimensions, making it harder to misrepresent them. For instance, coming across as “talkative” involves sustained gregariousness in one’s posts over time. Similarly, coming across as “creative” involves posting content that *demonstrates* artistic or imaginative proclivities.

In sum, the first theoretical contribution of this study is that it is the first to provide support for the claim that Facebook profiles represent a case of *selective self-presentation*, at least from the perspective of the self-presenters themselves. However, this claim is qualified by the fact that Facebook profiles were selectively self-presented only when it comes to a subset of self-images, suggesting that selective self-presentation may not be a monolithic entity. Rather, certain self-images may be more likely to be selectively self-presented than others. A related theoretical contribution is the finding that Facebook profile owners evaluated their own self-presentation differently than observers, who find the profiles to be accurate (Back et al., 2010). Our results indicate that self-presenters take a more nuanced approach to their own self-presentational acts than observers, viewing them as a complex amalgamation of self-enhancement, accuracy, and self-diminishing. Therefore, we can preliminarily conclude that the *vantage point* of the evaluator matters when determining whether a certain self-presentation is “selective.” Follow-up research is necessary to establish *why* differences between meta-perception and observer perception occur. A third theoretical contribution is to provide direct empirical support for assumptions made by prior research (e.g., Toma & Hancock, 2013), which claimed that users derive emotional well-being benefits from their profile self-presentations because they consider these self-presentations to be highly desirable. Here, we show precisely how Facebook self-presenters believe they come across in their profiles.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study only examined undergraduate students, the majority of whom were women (although no gender differences emerged). It is important that future research replicate this study with broader demographics, whose self-presentational

norms may differ. When assessing whether perceived enhancement and diminishing were related to self-presenters' or Friends' postings, we only considered a few quantitative aspects of the profile. Future research should examine additional profile components.

Conclusion

This exploration of Facebook meta-perception, or how Facebook users believe they come across in their profiles, is an innovative approach to Facebook self-presentation. Results reveal a complex pattern of enhancement, accuracy, and diminishing, that informs theoretical propositions about the nature of Facebook self-presentation.

Notes

- [1] Half of the participants were randomly assigned to examine their Facebook profiles for 5 minutes prior to rating their meta-perceptions, while the other half did not have profile access. No differences between the two groups emerged, and therefore we do not report this variable.
- [2] We attempted data reduction on the personality dimensions included in this study. Although several factors emerged for the items measuring actual self-views, they did not emerge for ideal self-views and meta-perception, making it impossible to run comparisons between these three aspects of self. We then report data for the original dimensions separately.
Participants were given the option to select "I can't tell" if they were unable to rate their meta-perception on any of the dimensions. Over 95% of the participants reported being aware of how they come across on all the dimensions, with the exception of "relaxed" (91.6% of the participants), "ambitious" (85%), and "reliable" (62.6%). In particular, meta-perceptions of outgoingness, friendliness, and likeability were evident to over 99% of the participants.
- [3] Conceptualizing the midpoint of a scale as a neutral assessment is a widely used procedure in the communication and social psychology literature (e.g., Klar & Giladi, 1997; Kruger, 1999).

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