

Face Validity? A Commentary on Walther et al.'s "The Role of Friends' Appearance and Behavior on Evaluations of Individuals on Facebook: Are We Known by the Company We Keep?"

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In reading Walther et al.'s (2008) piece on Facebook and attractiveness, I was struck by the conclusions – that surrounding yourself with beautiful people does not make one appear less attractive by comparison, but more so. If only we knew: I do not need to keep up with Mr. Jones at all! Simply having a driveway next to his new Porsche assimilates me into a 'reality distortion field' of increased attractiveness. Of course, this sort of conclusion has already been noted in psychology. Twenty-five years ago, Geiselman, Haight and Kimata (1984) came to similar conclusions using a comparison of photos of high and low attractiveness, and referred to the 'halo' effect of attractive or unattractive people. But where Geiselman et al.'s experiment might have been criticized for external validity (since people would typically interact face-to-face in the 1980s), the authors might have no such issue since we are interacting with each other's photos all the time in the present day (Mendelson and Papacharissi 2010).

To summarize, the authors carefully selected a series of photos and paired them with positive and negative comments from two other individuals. These photos+comment stimuli are then positioned with a neutral profile picture to simulate a Facebook profile. The authors take almost surgical care with each step: pictures were carefully selected using "hotornot.com", the words were chosen through a focus group session, and the tone was designed to be appropriate for the target population (college students). Male and female students were asked to review the page and then ask about task attractiveness, social attractiveness, personal attractiveness, and credibility. The results indicate that there is indeed an assimilation effect whereby more or less attractive photos of the commenters influenced the subjects' evaluation of the main profile picture. Moreover, the wording also had an effect that interacted with gender. Positive comments were seen to make females appear more physically attractive, however negative comments (in this case suggesting drunkenness and promiscuity) made males appear more physically attractive.

I feel like there's a catch to this assimilation theory. If I live in a rich neighborhood, surely it would make my modest home look (and be valued) better due to this effect. But what if I have a mansion on one side of my house but a lowly shack on the other? Here is where I begin to wonder how far we can take the claims of Walther et al. By seeking to isolate and accentuate the stimuli that may influence perceptions of attractiveness, it is difficult to tell how these stimuli work on a real profile page, where there are copious mixed signals from many mixed participants.

Questioning the external validity of experiments is not a new game (Berkowitz and Donnerstein 1982; Bracht and Glass 1968). The standard trope is that the lab is somehow different from the field, and thus we should be hesitant to transport findings from one to the other. In fairness, the authors did their very best to replicate Facebook's aesthetics, page positioning and fonts. They took care in the wording and the pictures. So, what's left to vary? The stimuli themselves represent artificially clear signals compared to the field. It is not that I feel their findings are somehow wrong or misleading. But I believe that the cumulative effect of mixed signals is not merely an additive process where people add up all the positive and negative comments, weighted by the attractiveness of the speakers and come out with an average value. The gestalt internal calculus of evaluating someone from Facebook (or any other site

with a list of ego-oriented comments) no doubt plays the same notes as the authors, but the melody may be completely different.

How can we extend Walther et al.'s approach to get further towards a clear assessment of the relationship between friend comments and impressions of an individual? Below I make three assertions that I believe can be coupled with this article in order to get to a fuller answer of the question about how self-presentation is mediated by the social information provided by others:

**Claim #1: Signal to noise is artificially high.**

Isolating stimuli are meant to get directly at a specific idea and its relationship to the subject – show really violent programs and see how children behave post-stimuli, show really attractive people and see how subjects evaluate the profile, etc...But how are we to take that effect back to everyday life? The question is not is an assimilation effect possible, but how does it really work? The authors anticipate this by mentioning a study by Geiselman, Haight and Kimata (1984) that tests both two and four photos and discovered that the effects persisted. However, this article also noted that, “Presenting the persons of a set as friends enhanced the perceived attractiveness of the target face *but only when the context did not contain a face of low attractiveness*” (p. 409, emphasis added). In a sense, the authors thus replicated this study and found that the context effects worked well as presented, but did not extend this work to assess the naturalistic conditions where there are faces of differing attractiveness (which would have addressed the outstanding unanswered question). This might even require open-ended exploratory and qualitative research where participants are first asked what factors appear salient and then test these, rather than assume the photo is going to take priority, or that it takes only two photos to make a judgment.

**Claim #2: Social network sites have social information**

This is not just about the evaluation of two strangers on a sidewalk, but of one's friends, or potential friends. Most interaction on Facebook is going to take place between individuals where at least one of the faces is known to the subject. Studies suggest that anywhere between 5 and 15 percent of online friends are not known offline (Stefanone, Lackoff and Rosen 2008; Dutton, Helsper and Gerber 2009). So what can we say about the other 85 to 95 percent? This is a different situation than when the participants are not known to ego. An experiment that draws upon an individual's own network would be challenging both technically and ethically, but in lieu of testing under these conditions the claims made in the article are really only generalizable to the initial contact period. Granted, this initial contact is important for new potential friends (Wang et al., 2010; Tong et al., 2008). But again, it is a rather restricted context relative to the larger context of common usage. Consider past work by Walther with Slovacek and Tidwell (2001) that noted the use of viewing images in collaborative work wears off over time. Moreover, other cues may have a significant or even stronger impact, such as the number of friends *in common* or shared tastes.

**Claim #3: Social networking software extends beyond college...even for those in college**

It is common to use undergraduates for psychology experiments. For many experiments that test rather stable constructs such as personality, the use of students is considered fair game. However, in an area of attractiveness, there are reasons to think that college students' values may depart from the rest of the population. The authors were wise, therefore, to consider a comment that is particularly appropriate to these students (one that implied either a positive future event or a negative past one). However, as the authors note, the effects of these comments varied by gender,

wherein males were not considered less attractive by other males when the experimenters used a message about promiscuity and alcohol (p. 44). It suggests that the students have their own culturally understood values of attractiveness. What about assessments where college students are evaluating older adults or vice versa? Granted, it would require a much larger sample or more complicated design, but it may help disentangle the important issue the authors raise in the conclusion that males benefit from a 'double standard' (p. 45). Does this double standard extend beyond college?

Ultimately, I find little to disagree with in the article within its scope, but I think that scope is severely limited: how do (presumably straight) college kids evaluate the attractiveness of people they do not know when these people's profiles are framed by other individuals unknown to the subject. It is a precise way into an assessment of how our identities are mediated the looks and notions of others, but it only scratches the surface. Thus, I'm weary to take the conclusions at, ahem, face value.

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