

Are We Known by the Articles We Comment On?

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Walther, van der Heide, Kim, Westerman, and Tong (2008) provide a rich, complex, and intriguing study. Some of the results are also somewhat depressing, though not necessarily a surprise. Well, it *is* a surprise, or at least uncommon, to not only identify but also explain how much social processes are bubbling within the two-dimensional space of a Facebook page on a computer or mobile phone screen. But detailed theory, rigorous analyses, and surprise are a hallmark of much of Walther's work.

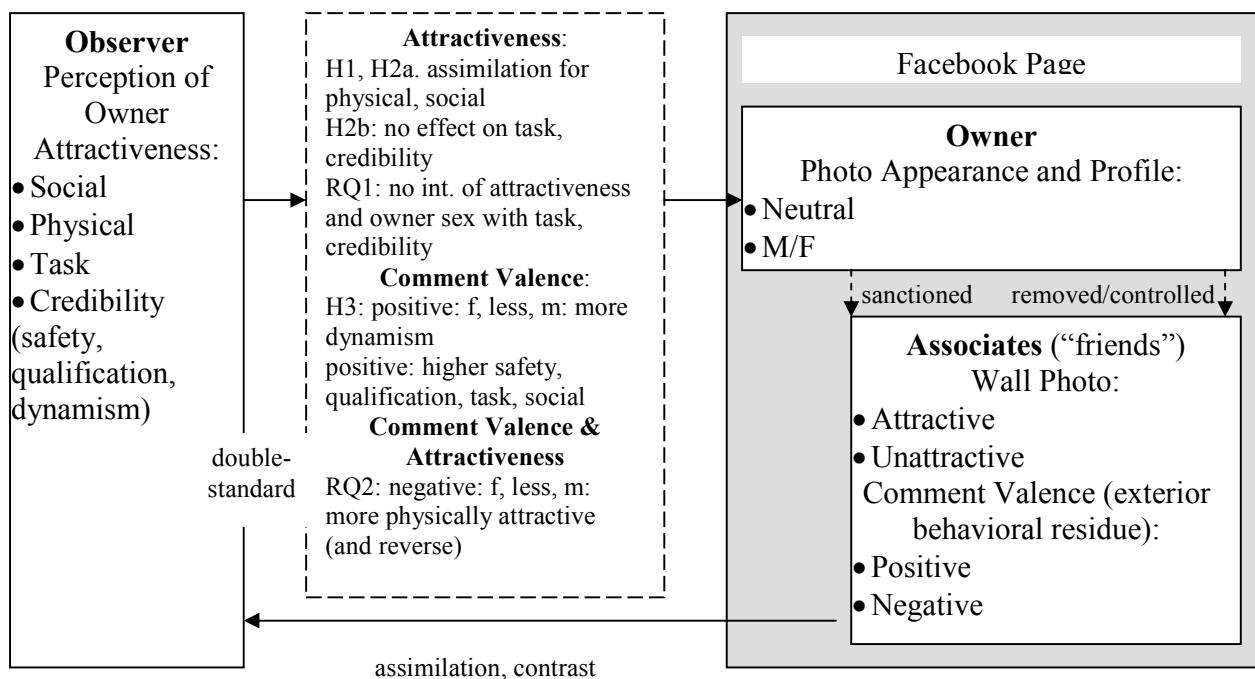


Figure 1.  
*Summary of Variables and Results in Walther et al., 2008*

Figure 1 represents their basic argument and results. Conceptually, this study is an example of general social psychological and social influence processes, including group leadership emergence, social (group) identity, attribution, citation and co-citation, organizational and public social networks, cliquishness (think of the movie *Mean Girls*), and marriage photographs in The New York Times. These general principles are finding replication in a variety of mediated contexts, including virtual reality (Biocca et al., 2003; Blascovitch, et al., 2002), IM buddy lists

and mobile phone address books (Rice & Hagen, 2010), fragmented and uncontrolled online digital identity (Andrejevic, 2002; Marx, 2006) and even human-computer interactions (Reeves & Nass, 1996). In general, being perceived of as having more friends, and more attractive or influential friends, especially within a salient group, increases one's social value and power. Having more online associates may contribute to the increased social capital associated with a broader online friendship network (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe 2007; Rice & Hagen, 2010).

The argument that because an owner has to have invited associates requesting "friendship", who can then can post photos and comments on an owner's Wall, observers implicitly accept those as "sanctioned" is a reasonable assumption. If the assumption of sanctioning is crucial to explaining assimilation and the influence of positively as well as negatively valenced comments, then an extension of this study would conduct a manipulation check, or even variation, of the level of perceived sanctioning. This may be too obscure an issue, given the reasonableness of the assumption. But while there may be general Facebook norms of not removing friends' comments even if negative, a variation to test would be having the Owner post some comment about explicitly being aware of or not, and approving of or not, all comments. That is, more explicit awareness of owner sanctioning should increase the effect of the hypothesized positive influences, and less awareness decrease, due to improved cue validity (one of the Brunswick's environmental cues about one's image). However, attribution theory would argue for perhaps more extreme results (Kelley et al., 1983; Ross, 1977): explicit sanctioning of positive comments would be devalued as non-independent self-attribution, while explicit sanctioning of negative comments would improve the perceived credibility of the comments and thus validity cues.

An additional influence feedback loop exists where an Owner aware of the associations explained in this study might well apply more control over invitation requests (more than they already do in accepting friends in general, and for Facebook), making their own sanctioning more intentional. But, to the extent that Owners increased control over the display of photos and comments that might positively influence Observers' impressions, and indicated explicit sanctioning, they might gain some credibility because of Observers falling prey to the fundamental attribution bias, they may actually lose some credibility because observers might conclude excessive self-attribution. It is not, however, as though this would all of a sudden create a new problem of pervasive ego-centrism and self-aggrandizement some have attributed to much social networking, or solve the problem of "associates" replacing actual "friends" (Rosen, 2007).

It was rather surprising that there was no effect of sex of Observer on perceptions across sex of Owner, as gender research reminds of so much cross-sex effects. Because there was no effect of Observer sex on perceptions, the double standard – for both physical attractiveness and dynamism credibility, is imposed by both men and women; it's not just a guy thing, but a pervasive social belief imposed on women by women and men alike. So the double standard is doubly standard.

Looking at the intentionally sparse profile page (their Figure 1), it would have been useful to have run a manipulation check on the extent to which observers really do assess the owner as "neutral". While the owner's photo was chosen based on a rigorous method, there was no discussion about how the profile entries were chosen or assessed. Dogs, Ben Harper, House, and U2 may or may not constitute a "neutral" profile. Because of the relative assessments involved

in assimilation, there may very well be an interaction effect between strongly positive or negative owner profiles, and observers' assessment of associates' comment valence, and thus observers' perceptions of owner traits. Any such unexplained variance would mean that some of the current results are actually conservative.

An interesting paradox somewhat noted by the authors is that awareness of this subtle social process can provide more control of external behavioral residue and impression management. By removing associates ("de-friending") who are less than average attractiveness, and who post comments that do not have desired assimilation influence (negative for women, positive for males), owners can gain even more control over their impression on observers. At the cost, perhaps, of the loss of those observers who are also removed former "friends". Thus, a related paradox is that while in some ways, as Walther and colleagues began their article, new communication technologies have complicated "forming and managing impressions" (p. 28), the same tools may be used to simplify the process by providing a Facebook page Owner more control over not only their own profile and photo (control leading to hyperpersonal identity and communication; Walther, 2007) but also over their representation by sanctioned but presumably "independent" assessments appearing on the owner's Wall. The Wall can become, then, not just a display (such as hanging photos or testaments on a wall), but also a barrier (putting up a wall to keep out negative assimilations). So we may be known both by the company we keep, and not by the company we remove. This elaboration of the "control" issue also requires a slight rewording of "Because online impressions are controllable" (p. 32), to "Because the online displays that influence others' impressions are controllable". An online user may well control much of their own representation (leading to the possibility of hyperpersonal communication), and thus indirectly influence others' impressions, but fundamentally an online person does not control others' impressions. This is, of course, a central principle in communication – the message is not the meaning, though it certainly influences the meaning.

There may be an additional feedback loop: observers may request being invited as a friend of an owner based on what they see, assimilate, and thus perceive on an owner's page. To the extent that they respond positively to what they see, and that is a primary motive for requesting an invitation, and are accepted, they are more likely to post similarly valenced comments, and be drawn to similarly attractive other associates, thus reinforcing the social reinforcement loop. This also raises two others question, not intended as part of this particular study, of observers' general motivations for requesting an invitation, and the influence of the owner's own photo and profile on observers' invitation motives.

Overall, this is an extremely thought-provoking, rigorous, and timely study.

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