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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Professors' Facebook Content Affects Students' Perceptions and Expectations

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Abstract

Facebook users must make choices about level of self-disclosure, and this self-disclosure can influence perceptions of the profile's author. We examined whether the specific type of self-disclosure on a professor's profile would affect students' perceptions of the professor and expectations of his classroom. We created six Facebook profiles for a fictitious male professor, each with a specific emphasis: politically conservative, politically liberal, religious, family oriented, socially oriented, or professional. Undergraduate students randomly viewed one profile and responded to questions that assessed their perceptions and expectations. The social professor was perceived as less skilled but more popular, while his profile was perceived as inappropriate and entertaining. Students reacted more strongly and negatively to the politically focused profiles in comparison to the religious, family, and professional profiles. Students reported being most interested in professional information on a professor's Facebook profile, yet they reported being least influenced by the professional profile. In general, students expressed neutrality about their interest in finding and friending professors on Facebook. These findings suggest that students have the potential to form perceptions about the classroom environment and about their professors based on the specific details disclosed in professors' Facebook profiles.

Introduction

One of the most highly trafficked social networking sites is Facebook, with more than 800 million current users around the world.[1] Facebook has become an increasingly vital mode of communication, especially among college students.[2] As early as 2008, 93% of college students had an active Facebook account[3] and were using it as their primary form of communication over other options such as e-mail.[4] The most common goal of college students' use of Facebook is to maintain and strengthen existing friendships.[1,3,5,6] However, students also use Facebook to gain social benefits,[7] gather information,[8] publicize their romantic relationship status,[9] monitor their romantic partner,[10,11] avoid boredom,[3] play games,[12] and organize events.[13,14]

In contrast, students' use of Facebook for purely academic purposes is relatively low.[6] Selwyn[15] reported that only 4% of college students' wall postings were related to academic pursuits. The majority of students in other studies reported never using Facebook to communicate with an educator.[16,17] At most, students use Facebook to talk with their friends about their experiences as a student, such as poor performance on an exam.[15] Karl and Peluchette[18] found that students would rather be Facebook friends with their mother or boss than with their professors.

Despite this fact, faculty view Facebook as a communication tool, using it to increase their availability to students,[3,4] remind students of upcoming class assignments,[19] send information,[13] and build technological proficiency in low income students.[4] As faculty use this tool, they have to make decisions about personal disclosure and privacy levels.[20] Students perceive their own profiles as accurate self-portrayals,[21] suggesting that students will assume that faculty portrayals are also accurate representations.

Concerns about professor use of Facebook were examined by Barber and Pearce[22] in a study on Facebook's effect on teacher credibility. College students evaluated an instructor by viewing either a Facebook profile or a paper biography with the same information. Students who evaluated the instructor through Facebook gave lower competence ratings; they also were less interested in having a social relationship or working with the instructor. This finding suggests that benefits that faculty might gain from using Facebook for academic purposes would have to be weighed against potential loss of credibility.

One factor that may affect student perceptions is the amount of professor self-disclosure. In the classroom environment, professors use disclosure as a strategy to explain course material and emphasize significant material.[23] However, average teachers tend to self-disclose more than award winning

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Table 1. Sample Size for and Content of Fictitious Professor Profiles

Profile information and sample size	*Basic information*	*Personal information*	*Groups and photo album*	*Wall posts*
Professional $n = 17$	Sex: Male Undergraduate education: The University of Alabama at Birmingham Graduate education: University of Pennsylvania	About me: I am a psychology professor. I advise the Psychology Club.	Member of: American Psychological Association, Association for Psychological Science Photo album: Psi Chi Induction	"It was good seeing you at the conference." "Don't forget Thursday's meeting."
Politically liberal $n = 19$	Sex: Male Political views: Liberal Undergraduate education: The University of Alabama at Birmingham Graduate education: University of Pennsylvania	Activities: College Democrats advisor, Rock the Vote Interests: The Green Movement, The Onion, political rallies Favorite TV shows: MSNBC, House, The Office Favorite books: Dreams of my Father, Handbook for Progressives Favorite quotations: "Those who are too smart to engage in politics are punished by being governed by those who are dumber." Plato About me: I am a psychology professor. I am very involved in the Democratic party.	Member of: American Civil Liberties Union, Liberal Democrats Photo Album: ACLU Party!	"can't believe all this opposition to Obama's health care plan either!" "are you going to make it to the rally tomorrow? We need all the support we can get."
Politically conservative $n = 18$	Sex: Male Political views: Conservative Undergraduate education: The University of Alabama at Birmingham Graduate education: University of Pennsylvania	Activities: College Republicans advisor, listening to Rush Interests: political rallies, U.S. History, state's rights Favorite TV shows: FOX news, House, The Office Favorite books: Arguing with Idiots, The Age of Reagan Favorite quotations: "Someone must stand up to those who say, 'Here's the key, there's the Treasury, just take as many of those hard-earned tax dollars are you want.'" Ronald Reagan About me: I am a psychology professor. I am very involved in the Republican party.	Member of: National Rifle Association of America (NRA), GOP Photo album: Conservative Party!	"I know! It's like I'm just watching my money disappear into taxes." "Check out Ann Coulter on Bill O'Reilly tonight."

(*continued*)

Table 1. (Continued)

Profile information and sample size	*Basic information*	*Personal information*	*Groups and photo album*	*Wall posts*
Religious *n* = 19	Sex: Male Political views: Christian Undergraduate education: The University of Alabama at Birmingham Graduate education: University of Pennsylvania	Activities: Fellowship of Christian Athletes advisor, church choir Interests: Israeli history, New Testament studies, music Favorite TV shows: American's Got Talent, House, The Office Favorite books: Bible, Mere Christianity Favorite quotations: "I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble, but take heart! For I have overcome the world." John 16:33 About me: I am a psychology professor. My faith is very important to me.	Member of: Admirers of C.S. Lewis, FCA Photo album: FCA Retreat	"What's up with choir practice this week? Are we on or not?" "FCA meeting tonight at 9pm!"
Socially focused *n* = 18	Sex: Male Relationship status: Single Looking for: Dating Undergraduate education: The University of Alabama at Birmingham Graduate education: University of Pennsylvania	Activities: SKP faculty advisor, hanging out with good friends at Finnigans Interests: good beer, good times, meeting new people Favorite TV shows: The Simpsons, House, The Office Favorite books: The Zombie Survival Guide, Naked Lunch Favorite quotations: "Hear no evil, speak no evil—and you'll never be invited to a party." Oscar Wilde About me: I am a psychology professor and a Sigma Kappa Pi.	Member of: Sigma Kappa Pi, Beer for Breakfast Photo Album: Weekend at Finnigans	"What happens at Finnigans stays at Finnigans—lucky for you!" "Hey—had fun last night. Don't be a stranger. ;)"
Family oriented *n* = 19	Sex: Male Relationship status: Married Undergraduate education: The University of Alabama at Birmingham Graduate education: University of Pennsylvania	Activities: Psychology Club advisor, little league soccer and baseball coach Interests: family, PTA, camping Favorite TV shows: American Idol, House, The Office Favorite books: Raising Successful Kids, The Cat in the Hat Favorite quotations: "No matter what you've done for yourself or for humanity, if you can't look back on having given love and attention to your own family, what have you really accomplished?" Elbert Hubbard About me: I am a psychology professor. I have a wonderful wife and two great kids.	Member of: Reading books to your children, The International Parenting Network Photo album: Good Time with Family.	"I was wondering, where do you usually camp? My family and I are considering giving it a try …" "Hey check out the new photos I just put up of the kids."

teachers, suggesting that while some disclosure is good, too much may be perceived as inappropriate by students.[23] Sheldon[3] found that a moderate amount of self-disclosure on Facebook is central to relationship development with online friends, while Whitty and Gavin[24] found that online communication elicits higher levels of self-disclosure than face to face conversation. Thus, striking a balance may be important.

Mazer et al.[25] examined the role of professor self-disclosure on Facebook. Three groups of students were randomly assigned to view a fictitious female professor's profile depicting high, medium, or low self-disclosure. The level of self-disclosure was manipulated with the amount and type of pictures, comments, and personal information. The greater the self-disclosure, the more students expected a positive classroom environment and anticipated higher motivation in the classroom. Student perceptions of professor appropriateness were consistent across conditions. However, the students who did provide negative feedback focused on the professor's lack of professionalism on her Facebook page. In a follow-up study, high self-disclosure also related to perceptions of greater teacher credibility, trustworthiness, and caring by students.[26] These findings suggest that the level of self-disclosure impacts students' perceptions of professors' use of Facebook.

Our study built on this work by examining specific types of self-disclosure. We experimentally manipulated the content of a fictitious professor's Facebook profile to examine the effects of students' perceptions of the professor and his classroom. We made two hypotheses:

H1: Students would perceive the socially focused profile as containing inappropriate information and would rate the professor negatively.

H2: The professor that provided only professional information would be rated positively by students because of the appropriateness of the self-disclosure.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 77 female and 33 male undergraduate students from a midsized southeastern university of which 63% were Caucasian, 28% African-American, and 9% other ethnicities. The sample was 36% freshmen, 14% sophomores, 12% juniors, and 38% seniors. The mean age was 20.70 ($SD = 5.27$). Participants were randomly divided into six groups. Each group contained between 17 and 19 participants, and between five and seven men (see Table 1 for exact n sizes). Participation was voluntary.

Materials

We created six profiles of a fictitious male professor on Facebook (using the pre 2012 format). Each profile had a unique focus: politically conservative, politically liberal, religious, family oriented, socially focused, or professional (see Table 1). These six factors were selected based on ad hoc observations of existing faculty profiles from different disciplines. The number of self-disclosures was matched for all profiles except the professional profile, which was limited to information related to the professor's academic position.

Each Facebook profile was printed in black and white on a single sheet of paper and then deleted to abide by Facebook's policies for appropriate use of the site.[20] On each printed profile, we blacked out the profile owner's name, city, number of friends, friend photos, e-mail address, and employer, as well as the names/photos of people who "posted" on the wall to convey the impression that we were protecting the privacy of an actual professor. Each profile contained a $4\,\text{cm} \times 4\,\text{cm}$ profile picture consisting of a headshot of a 39 year old white man smiling. There were two variations. The social profile had the man holding a glass of beer, and the family oriented profile had the man next to a male child.

Participants were told that the profile was taken from Facebook. Using a 5-point Likert scale, participants rated the professor's skill level as a teacher, friendliness toward students, and difficulty level when teaching. To assess how these perceptions might translate to behavior, students indicated to what extent they would personally respect the teacher and how likely they would be to take a class with this professor. To examine students' beliefs about how others might perceive the professor, students rated the professor on overall popularity with college students and level of respect from university colleagues. Modeled after Mazur et al.,[25] two questions asked participants to assess the appropriateness and age appropriateness of the profile for a college professor. A third asked participants whether the professor should have revealed more or less information. We also asked participants how influential the profile was in shaping their perceptions of the professor.

We provided students with a list of adjectives suggesting engagement (entertaining, informative, interesting), negative adjectives (annoying, boring, offensive, pathetic), and filler adjectives (conservative, liberal, typical), and asked them to mark all of the ones that applied to the profile they viewed. We also asked students to rank six types of information (see Table 3) according to how "interesting" they would find it to be on a professor's profile. Additional questions assessed participants' typical use of Facebook, attitudes toward professors' use of Facebook, and demographics.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through undergraduate classrooms and offered extra credit. Testing took place in a group setting. The printed Facebook profiles were randomly distributed such that each participant received only one version of the Facebook profile and could only see his version. The survey was distributed immediately afterward.

Results

The six profile conditions were compared using multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) and least significant difference (LSD) tests. Means and standard deviations can be found in Table 2.

Classroom environment variables

The professional professor was considered to be more skilled at teaching than the social and conservative professors, $F(5, 101) = 2.11$, $p = 0.015$. Students differed in how difficult they expected the professor's class to be, $F(5, 100) = 3.22$, $p = 0.000$. Post hoc tests revealed that students

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations (on a 5-point Likert Scale) for Student Assessments of the Six Fictitious Facebook Profiles

	Professional	*Family*	*Social*	*Conservative*	*Liberal*	*Religious*
This profile describes a skilled teacher who knows how to teach.	3.19 (0.83)	2.88 (0.86)	2.17 (0.71)	2.44 (0.86)	2.68 (0.89)	2.63 (0.90)
What difficulty level do you think this professor's class would be?	3.13 (0.50)	3.28 (0.58)	2.39 (0.70)	3.71 (0.85)	3.0 (0.49)	3.05 (0.41)
This professor is probably very friendly.	3.81 (0.54)	3.83 (0.51)	4.11 (0.68)	3.11 (0.96)	3.42 (0.69)	3.95 (0.41)
This professor is probably very popular with students.	3.69 (0.70)	3.67 (0.49)	4.06 (0.64)	2.39 (0.92)	3.32 (0.75)	3.11 (0.88)
This professor is probably respected by other faculty members.	3.38 (0.62)	3.61 (0.61)	2.39 (0.78)	3.28 (1.13)	2.79 (0.79)	3.58 (0.51)
I would probably respect this professor.	3.56 (0.81)	3.78 (0.65)	3.06 (1.0)	3.18 (0.88)	3.21 (0.92)	3.63 (0.60)
How likely would you be to take this professor's class?	3.19 (0.83)	3.44 (0.51)	3.56 (0.98)	2.83 (1.04)	2.84 (0.90)	3.16 (0.90)
How much would seeing this Facebook profile influence your perceptions of the professor?	2.56 (0.89)	3.56 (1.04)	3.94 (1.21)	4.0 (0.91)	3.68 (0.95)	3.58 (0.96)
How appropriate would you say this professor's use of Facebook is?	3.63 (0.89)	4.18 (0.73)	2.56 (0.98)	3.22 (1.06)	3.63 (0.83)	3.89 (0.81)
This profile is age appropriate for this professor.	3.38 (1.03)	3.94 (0.73)	2.50 (0.92)	3.67 (0.59)	3.79 (0.63)	3.53 (0.77)
Do you think this professor should have revealed less or more information about himself?	3.38 (0.50)	2.89 (0.32)	2.17 (0.99)	2.83 (0.99)	2.74 (0.73)	2.89 (0.32)
Professors should be careful about what they post.	4.19 (0.91)	4.06 (0.64)	3.89 (0.96)	4.28 (0.67)	3.95 (0.62)	4.0 (0.75)
Negative descriptor Total	0.75 (0.68)	0.11 (0.32)	0.83 (0.99)	1.17 (1.34)	0.89 (0.88)	0.68 (0.58)
engagement descriptor Total	0.19 (0.54)	0.67 (0.69)	1.22 (0.91)	0.56 (0.86)	0.58 (0.77)	0.74 (0.87)

expected the social professor to be less difficult and the politically conservative professor to be more difficult than all other professors.

The politically conservative professor was perceived as less friendly toward students than all other professors with the exception of the liberal professor; there was no difference in perceptions of friendliness between the two political professors, $F(5, 102) = 2.49$, $p = 0.000$.

Student behaviors

Students did not differ in their reported willingness to take a class with the professor they viewed, $F(5, 102) = 1.62$, $p = 0.071$. However, students differed in how much they reported personally respecting the professor, $F(5, 101) = 1.54$, $p = 0.05$. The family oriented professor received higher respect ratings than the social and two political professors. The social professor received lower respect ratings than all other professors with the exception of the two political professors.

Others' perceptions

The popularity variable revealed significant differences, $F(5, 102) = 6.07$, $p = 0.000$. The politically conservative professor was perceived as less popular with students than all other professors. The social professor was perceived as more popular with students than the conservative, liberal, and religious professors. When students were asked how they thought colleagues perceived the professor, students responded that the social professor was less respected than the professional, conservative, religious, and family professors, $F(5, 102) = 4.26$, $p = 0.000$. The same post hoc test revealed that the liberal professor was perceived as less respected by colleagues than all professors except the social and conservative professors.

Appropriateness

The social professor's profile was perceived as less appropriate, $F(5, 101) = 5.75$, $p = 0.000$, and less age appropriate, $F(5, 102) = 4.77$, $p = 0.000$, than all other profiles. Students who viewed the social professor were more likely than all other student groups to respond that the professor should have revealed less information; students who saw the professional profile were more likely than all other groups to respond that the professor should have revealed more information, $F(5, 102) = 2.58$, $p = 0.000$.

Level of influence and overall reactions

The professional profile was rated by students to have the least amount of influence over their perceptions compared to all other profiles, $F(5, 102) = 4.47$, $p = 0.001$. Across groups, all students agreed that professors should be careful about what they post on Facebook, $F(5, 102) = .39$, $p = 0.65$. The numbers of engagement and negative adjectives were summed to create two numbers for each profile. Compared to all other professors' profiles, the family professor received the least amount of negative descriptors, $F(5, 102) = 2.98$, $p = 0.015$, and the social professor received the most engagement descriptors, $F(5, 102) = 3.91$, $p = 0.003$. Participants ranked professional information as the most interesting information a professor could provide and ranked religious information as least interesting (see Table 3).

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations for Participants' Ranking of Interest Level (Highest to Lowest) in Different Types of Information on Facebook

Type of information	*Mean (SD) rank*
Professional information	2.75 (1.89)
Hobbies and interests	3.17 (1.62)
Family details	3.58 (1.52)
Political views	3.75 (1.71)
Social life	3.90 (1.80)
Religious views	3.92 (1.60)

Student interest

Seventy percent of participants reported having no professors as friends on Facebook; the overall mean for number of professor friends was 0.95 ($SD = 2.42$). Participants were neutral ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 0.82$) about whether they prefer professors to have Facebook accounts, and tended toward disagreement when asked if they look for professors on Facebook ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 0.96$).

Discussion

Our results demonstrated that professors' Facebook profiles affected students' perceptions. In particular, the profile of the social professor elicited strong but mixed reactions from students. This finding partially supports our hypotheses, as we expected consistently negative reactions. The social professor was perceived as less skilled and as the least difficult teacher. Students rated the social professor as having less colleague respect than all other professors except the liberal professor. Compared to all other professors, the social professor was perceived as having a less appropriate, and age appropriate, Facebook page and needing to disclose less personal information on Facebook. Despite these negative impressions, the social professor simultaneously was viewed as popular with students, and his profile received the highest mean of engagement descriptors. Students use Facebook for entertainment purposes,[3] and this profile may have met that goal. At the same time, students in our study formed negative impressions about the social professor's professional character and ability. This finding is similar to the Mazer et al. study,[25] where participants who responded negatively to the fictitious teachers' profile focused on the use of Facebook as unprofessional. This risk also has been documented in the nonacademic workplace, where the likelihood of hire can depend on the professionalism of the applicant's Facebook profile.[27]

Students' perceptions of the five remaining profiles were more varied. The politically conservative professor was rated as the least friendly of all professors, with the exception of the liberal professor. The two political professors also were rated equally on level of colleague respect, appropriateness of profile material, engagement adjectives, and negative adjectives. At the same time, compared to the politically liberal professor, the politically conservative professor was perceived as a more difficult teacher and less popular with students. Politically liberal professors hold negative attitudes toward politically conservative professors,[28,29] and this attitude may have been shared in some subtle way with students. Alternatively, students may have based these perceptions on past experience with politically conservative teachers or parents, or as a reaction based on their own political affiliations. Students ranked political information as one of the least interesting types of information to find on a professor's Facebook profile, which may explain our participants' overall tendency to react to political information more negatively than positively.

The family and religious profiles did not emerge as powerful determinants of student perceptions. These two professors were rated as equally skilled at teaching as other professors and as friendly and difficult as most other professors. In other words, these two professors tended to elicit moderate reactions from students. One explanation is that being part of a family and having some type of religious affiliation is fairly common, especially in the southeast where this study was conducted. Another possibility is that religion may not come into play in a college classroom the way that other variables do, making it less salient to students. In fact, our participants ranked religious information as the topic that least interested them on a professor's Facebook profile.

Our hypothesis that the professional professor would be perceived positively because of the appropriateness of the shared material was not supported. The professional professor was perceived to be the most skilled teacher, although only significantly more skilled than the social and conservative professors. Students ranked professional information as the most interesting information available on a professor's profile, yet students who viewed the professional professor's profile were the least likely to report being influenced by the profile. One reason for this contradiction may be the limited amount of information provided on the professional profile. This finding is similar to the Mazer et al. study[26] where 61% of participants in the low self-disclosure condition felt unable to form an impression of the teacher due to a lack of information.

Overall, our data suggest that given only limited information on a Facebook profile, students formed judgments about professors. However, our participants did not differ in their reported willingness to take a course with these teachers. One possible explanation is that participants do not typically use Facebook as an academic resource[15]; thus, in this somewhat abstract situation, students did not translate the information to the context of course planning. Students are much more likely to use Facebook for entertainment.[3] The majority of our participants did not have professors as Facebook friends and disagreed that they look for professor profiles on Facebook. This finding matches previous research[16] and provides support for the argument that course planning is not a motive for students' use of Facebook.

Our finding that students across conditions did not differ in their willingness to take a class with the professor may also reflect the fact that many factors drive students' course selections.[30,31] For example, Pass et al.[32] recently found that factors such as desirable test formats, opportunities for extra credit, and accessibility to lecture notes increased students' preference for courses. Last but not least, it is possible that students may have reported that their perceptions would not influence their willingness to take the class in this abstract context, but were they actually registering for classes (i.e.,

higher stakes), their behavior would more closely match their perceptions. In support of this possibility, Brown et al.[33] reported that 71% of a college sample avoided a teacher because of online information on Ratemyprofessors.com.

Students reported being willing to take a class with any of the depicted professors. However, given the fact that their perceptions of and levels of respect for the professors differed, students may have entered the classroom with unique expectations. This situation is potentially problematic, as previous research establishes that student expectations influence the learning environment of the classroom.[34] For example, students' performance, motivation, and attendance decrease the more their actual classroom experiences diverge from their expectations.[35] In a study on Ratemyprofessors.com, students who formed positive impressions of professors based on this online information also had an increased sense of control and a more positive attitude toward the professors' classes.[36] This finding held true regardless of whether students actually took or imagined taking the class with the professor after reading online information.[36]

Students' quickly formed impressions also raise the question of how useful they might be. Previous research suggests that Facebook can be an accurate source of information about people. Back et al.[37] compared strangers' perceptions of individual profiles with objective information about those individuals, and concluded that the individual's image presented on Facebook is a realistic representation of the individual. Karl et al.[38] found that people high on conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability, all pleasant characteristics, were less likely to post inappropriate content on Facebook. Thus, even limited self-disclosure on Facebook can provide accurate information to viewers about the discloser, and this fact gives credibility to our participants' willingness to make quick judgments.

This area of research is ripe for continued investigation. For example, previous research suggests that female job applicants are particularly vulnerable to employers forming impressions based on social networking sites, such as Facebook.[27] The use of humorous high self-disclosure is considered more appropriate from a male professor than from a female professor.[39] Researchers may want to examine whether these gender related patterns hold true for different types of self-disclosure in men and women.

In addition, future research may want to document how prevalent Facebook use is among professors, including an assessment of what professors are choosing to disclose and who they picture as their audience. Adults who are high in conscientiousness, emotional stability, and self-esteem are more careful in what they choose to self-disclose on Facebook.[38,40] Researchers may want to investigate if the same characteristics influence professor postings.

As King et al.[7] argue, the importance of addressing teacher use of Facebook cannot be understated. Students currently do not appear to rely on Facebook for academic purposes. However, Facebook is a rapidly evolving medium. As professors utilize Facebook as a means to stay technologically relevant to their students, they need to monitor what they self-disclose. Our data demonstrate that students form perceptions about the classroom environment and about their professors based on the specific details disclosed in professors' Facebook profiles.

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