



The Effect of Appearance Information on Favorableness Perception
- The Role of Contingencies of Self-Worth and Self-Relevance

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Significance: As online social networks evolve, people have more chances to encounter others' profiles. According to Mussweiler et al. (2006), people tend to associate themselves with others' profile information when encountering it. A situation in that an individual comes across others' profiles becomes a social comparison (Festinger, 1954), and the information becomes a reference point for the comparison. As a receiver of the information, this study focuses on comparison process happened and investigates the mechanism of how people evaluate others' appearance information in online social networks.

Theoretical Background: According to the Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model (SEMM) of Tesser (1988), self-evaluations are more subject to self-relevant domains than in irrelevant domains. William James (1890) stated that people have a tendency to stake their self-worth in certain domains, but not in others, which differs by individuals (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Threats from a specific aspect of the self may trigger coping behaviors to the extent that one's self-worth is put on the threatened domain (Crocker & Park, 2004; Crocker & Wolf, 2001). Likewise, contingencies of self-worth (CSW) emphasize benefits of evaluation regarding certain aspects, not the overall self-esteem (Campbell, 1990). This study defined a self-relevant situation where one is likely to compare oneself with others because of the similarity (e.g., the same sex; Berscheid, Snyder & Omoto, 1989). In a comparison situation, it is expected that people will be more affected by others' information (e.g., appearance) when it is contingent to their self-worth.

Research question: For those who have high CSW in appearance (compared to low CSW in appearance), the favorableness on others will be affected by others' appearance information when it is self-relevant.

Experiment: Seventy eight undergraduate students from universities in Seoul voluntarily participated in the experiment, and responses from 32 male (41.5%) and 45 female (58.4%) students, excluding one incomplete sample, were analyzed. The experiment was carried out in a lab for about 15 minutes, and a monetary compensation was given to each participant. After exposing to a picture of a girl, participants were received either positive or negative additional information (e.g., height) and asked to evaluate favorableness of her. It is assumed that for female participants, the model in the picture would be perceived as relevant other, whereas male would perceive it as irrelevant.

Results: A 3-way ANOVA of 2 (height as appearance information: tall vs. short) x 2 (self-relevance: relevant vs. irrelevant) x 2 (CSW: high vs. low) mixed design on the evaluation of favorableness was conducted and 3-way interaction was marginally significant [$F(1,69)=3.093$, $p=.083$]. For those who have high value in appearance CSW, 2-way ANOVA of height information and self-relevance was conducted and the interaction was significant as expected [$F(1,30)=5.537$, $p=0.025$], whereas the result was not significant for those who have low value in appearance CSW. Contrast analysis was conducted on result of high CSWs. Those who were in self-relevant situation showed significantly stronger favorableness on others when the appearance information (i.e., height) was negative than positive ($M_{\text{tall}}=80.00$, $SD=8.29$ vs. $M_{\text{short}}=68.57$, $SC=15.49$; $t=-2.144$, $p=.047$).

Discussion: Such a result was demonstrated only by those with high appearance CSWs when they were in self-relevant situation that elicited social comparison. The results that people showed less favorableness on the other whose appearance information is positive than negative can be explained by social comparison theory: if the comparison is upward, the one may get threatened and try to find coping responses (Festinger, 1954). Follow-up studies is scheduled to discover the underlying mechanism of social comparison and coping behavior that trigger different attitude in favorableness: whether 'self-threat' actually comes into play when one encounters others' profile information on which the one puts high value in self-relevant situation.

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