



Facebook Profile Pictures: Gender Differences in Frequency and Type of Profile Pictures Posted within One-Year Period Among Older Adults

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ABSTRACT

This study examines gender differences in frequency and type of profile pictures posted on Facebook within a twelve-month period among adults aged fifty and over. This study continues research on a sample of subjects whose mean age was 22.57, conducted by the Facebook Research Group (FBRG) at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB) (Fiebert, Castaneda, Pham, McGivern, Caudillo, & Warren, 2017). The method of data collection and analysis closely replicates that of the previous study. Profile pictures were categorized into four groups: 1) self in close-up; 2) self in long shot; 3) self with group; 4) other. In congruence with the previous study the current work found that women changed their profile pictures significantly more frequently than men. In contrast to results of the previous study, the current one found that the most commonly profile picture for both genders is self with group while the least common profile picture for both genders is self in long shot.

Keywords: Profile Pictures, Facebook Research, Gender, Late Adulthood

INTRODUCTION

Facebook continues to be the most popular social media website with an average of 1.23 billion people across the globe (Facebook, 2016) actively using it daily. Seventy-two per cent of adults aged 50 to 64 and 62% of adults 65 and over use Facebook, (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). People use Facebook for many reasons: to connect with family, friends, and others; for entertainment, business, and news. Facebook photos are one way for individuals to communicate with other users. Photos have been shown to be a component of impression management and self-presentation (Siibak, 2009).

A study of photo-related behavior on FB found that users post photos differently based on their personality (Eftekhar, Fullwood, & Morris, 2014). Extroverted users tend generally to post more photos, including profile pictures. Their Facebook profiles are also more likely than introverted users to represent their offline self (Seidman, 2013). Choosing a profile picture that differs from a person's actual physical appearance implies that there is a discrepancy between their real self and their virtual self (Suh, 2013). Neuroticism was also correlated with posting significantly more photos in general and specifically more photos of themselves (Eftekhar et al., 2014). This behavior may be motivated by a desire to belong, to combat loneliness, or to gain popularity. Individuals who rate high on openness have a tendency to replace their profile pictures frequently, possibly because they are more likely to engage in a variety of activities that they document through Facebook photos (Gosling, Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman, & Gaddis, 2011).

Facebook users are aware that posted profile pictures play an important role in creating a positive online identity, and users test out different identities by frequently changing their profile pictures (Hum, Chamberlin, Hambright, Portwood, Schat, & Bevan, 2011). However, no gender differences were found for the number of profile pictures posted or the objects depicted in those pictures (Hum et al., 2011). Furthermore, there is evidence that frequently sharing pictures of oneself online is related to self-worth based on appearance (Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen, 2011).

The Facebook Research Group at CSULB has analyzed various behaviors and trends on the website, including gender and relationship status differences in birthday message (Fiebert, Tilmont, & Warren, 2013), as well as the relationship between photo-sharing and online impression management (Dorethy, Fiebert, & Warren, 2014). In a recent study the FBRG examined gender differences in the frequency and type of profile picture posted within a twelve-month period. Results showed a significant gender difference in frequency of profile-picture changes, with females changing theirs significantly more often than males. In order to further develop those findings, which were based on participants whose mean age was 22.57 years, the present study compares the behavior of adults over the age of fifty.

METHOD

Participants

Three researchers randomly selected a convenience sample of 100 subjects over the age of fifty from a network of active Facebook friends (50 men, 50 women). The mean age of the subjects was 57.9 years. Every fourth profile was selected from the researchers' lists of friends and examined for inclusion requirements. If the profile did not meet the inclusion requirements, the next eligible subject was chosen. All demographic data was gathered from the subjects' public information posted on Facebook, including age and gender. Ethnicity was excluded from demographic data in order to avoid labeling subjects in any other way than self-report. Only subjects who had changed their profile picture at least twice within a twelve-month period were included in the study.

Procedure

Each profile picture was coded to fit into one of four categories. The first category is "Self in a Close-Up," defined as a photo of the individual's face to mid-torso. The second category is "Self in a Long Shot," defined as a photo of the individual that includes most of the body. The third category is "Self with Group," defined as a photo of the individual with one or more others. The fourth category is "Other," defined as any realistic or abstract image. Researchers recorded the number of times each subject changed his/her profile picture within the previous twelve-month period.

RESULTS

Females changed their profile pictures a total of 452 times in one year, of which 113 were Self in Close-Up (25%), 35 were Self in Long Shot (7.74%), 154 were Self with Group (34.07%), and 150 were Other (33.19%). Males changed their pictures a total of 290 times in that period, of which 72 were Self in Close-Up (24.83%), 36 were Self in Long Shot (12.41%), 110 were Self with Group (37.93%), and 72 were Other (24.83%). The most commonly posted type of profile picture for both males and females was Self with Group. The least commonly posted profile picture for both males and females was Self in Long Shot.

A 2 x 4 One-Between-One-Within ANOVA on number of profile pictures posted was conducted with gender (male, female) as the between-subjects factor and type of profile picture posted (face, full body, with others, other) as the within-subjects factor. The results showed a significant main effect for gender, $F(1,98) = 4.886$, $p = .029$, $\eta^2_p = .047$, and a significant main effect for type of profile picture posted, Greenhouse-Geisser adjusted $F(2.17, 212.20) = 6.895$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2_p = .066$. There was no significant interaction between gender and type of profile picture posted, Greenhouse-Geisser adjusted $F(2.17, 212.20) = 1.051$, $p = .356$.

Females ($M = 9.04$, $SD = 7.66$) posted significantly more profile pictures in a one-year period than did males ($M = 5.80$, $SD = 6.98$). Dependent samples t-tests were conducted to assess differences among types of profile pictures, with each test conducted at an alpha level of .0125. The results indicated that participants posted significantly more pictures Self in Close-Up ($M = 1.85$, $SD = 2.60$) than they did Self in Long Shot ($M = 0.71$, $SD = 1.84$), $t(99) = 3.649$, $d = 0.37$. There was no significant difference between the number of Self in Close-Up and Self with Group pictures posted ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 4.07$), $t(99) = -1.621$, $p = .106$. There was also no significant difference between the number of Self in Close-Up and Other pictures ($M = 2.22$, $SD = 4.14$) posted, $t(99) = -.770$, $p = .443$. Participants posted significantly more Self with Group than Self in Long Shot pictures, $t(99) = -5.902$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.59$. Participants posted significantly more Other than Self in Long Shot pictures, $t(99) = -3.536$, $p = .001$, $d = 0.35$. Finally, there was no significant difference in the number of Self with Group and Other pictures, $t(99) = .720$, $p = .473$.

DISCUSSION

Significant gender differences emerged in the frequency of profile pictures posted, with females posting significantly more than males. This was consistent with the previous study's findings among the young adult group. These findings contradict the results of a study by Hum, et al. (2010), which found no gender differences in number of profile pictures posted in a sample of college students between the ages of 18 and 23. Due to Facebook's privacy policies all three studies involved convenience samples, which are not representative of the Facebook-user population as a whole. Further research should, therefore, examine gender and age differences in Facebook activity using a more representative sample.

Previous results in the study conducted by the Facebook Research Group showed that the most commonly posted profile picture for both genders of the younger age group was Self in Close-Up while the least common was Other (Fiebert et al., 2017). The current study shows that the older group preferred Self with Group and Other, and posted Self in Long Shot the least. This may reflect body image concerns associated with aging, which, along with subjective perceptions of them, significantly affect the self-esteem of older males and females (Baker & Gringart, 2009). An older subjective age is associated with lower self-esteem while a younger subjective age is associated with higher self-esteem (Mirucka, Bielecka, & Kisielewska, 2016). Body image satisfaction and self-esteem may explain why older adults do not pose full-body pictures. Another possible explanation may be the internalization of societal judgments often disseminated in the mass media, that aging bodies are unattractive, and therefore should not be presented.

Another interesting difference between the young and older adult populations was that older adults of both genders most frequently posted Self with Group pictures. This may be due to differences in psychosocial developmental stages between early and later adulthood. Although Erikson's stages of psychosocial development are only a description of challenges during each

stage of life rather than an empirically validated theory, it is still a useful framework for categorizing common cohort experiences. Since young adults would be in the intimacy versus isolation stage of Erikson's stages of psychosocial development (Erikson & Erikson, 1998), it seems likely that profile pictures would depict face and/or full body, as these focus the viewer's attention on physical attractiveness. On the other hand, older adults would be in the generativity versus stagnation stage (Erikson & Erikson, 1998), in which adults seek to find meaning in their lives through relationships, work, family, and social responsibility (Erikson & Erikson, 1998). That, in turn, may explain why the most frequently posted photo for older adults was Self with Group, particularly since many adults in this stage have already found their life partner, and are not seeking to attract others.

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