The Effects of Physical Attractiveness and Political Affiliation on Facebook Friend Acceptance

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effects that physical attractiveness and political affiliation have on the likelihood of “accepting” a Facebook friend request. Participants included 120 undergraduate students randomly assigned to view 1 of 6 conditions of a White male Facebook profile. Physical attractiveness of the Facebook profile picture was manipulated in 2 conditions: physically attractive and unattractive. In addition, political affiliation, as identified in the “describe who you are” box on the profile, was manipulated in 3 conditions: Republican, Democrat, and Independent. Following each condition, participants were asked to answer how likely they would be to accept the Facebook friend request of the profile viewed. It was primarily hypothesized that participants would report a significantly higher likelihood of accepting the Facebook friend request for profiles that appeared to be physically attractive and similar to their own political affiliation compared to other profiles. Statistical analyses revealed that, although physical attractiveness significantly increased the likelihood of accepting a Facebook friend request ($p < .001$), neither similarity of the profile’s political affiliation to participants nor the interaction of the two variables were significantly related to acceptance. However, exploratory analyses ($p = .03$) highlighted that participants who identified as Independent were equally likely to accept the attractive and unattractive profiles. Democrat and Republican participants were more likely to accept attractive rather than unattractive profiles, with slight nuances depending on the profile’s political affiliation. Findings are discussed with an emphasis on characteristics associated with the different political parties.
French name. Participants were randomly assigned to view different Facebook request messages sent by the pseudo-profile that varied in content according to three levels of similarity between the two users: no similarity, similarity of birthday, and similarity of birthday as well as hobby/singer/writer. Results indicated that 48% of the participants accepted the friend request when multiple similarities were present, 41% accepted the request when one similarity was present, and 20% accepted the friend request when no similarities were present (Martin et al., 2013). As indicated, similarity can be a determining factor when choosing to pursue a relationship with another person.

Similarities can be manifested through many different attributes including political affiliation. Poteat, Mereisch, Liu, and Nam (2011) found that people generally favored friendships that shared a similar political ideology. Furthermore, Macafee (2013) speculated that people engaged in online political activity because of how simple it was to affiliate with a political party just by “liking” the party’s Facebook page. Facebook served as a means for users to express their political beliefs during the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections (Fernandes, Guurcanu, Bowers, & Neely, 2010; Pennington, Winfrey, Warner, & Kearney, 2015). In fact, people turned to Facebook to endorse and advocate for their preferred candidate (Carlisle & Patton, 2013). This suggests that political affiliation on Facebook is an item by which users can identify with others who express similar political views. To attain acceptance via intergroup bias, peers may gravitate toward those who share similar political views. Intergroup bias is the inclination to view one’s membership in an in-group more favorably than others’ memberships to an out-group (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002). In the context of Facebook, users who can identify with other users who share a similar political affiliation may establish an intergroup bias toward their specific political party. The user’s self-esteem may elevate due to feeling accepted by Facebook members who support similar political ideologies, which may provide a positive social identity for the user to embody (Hewstone et al., 2002). However, the bias toward a political party that is held by members of the in-group may lead to the rejection of members that affiliate with out-group political parties.

Expression of political affiliation on Facebook may be suppressed to prevent rejection from occurring. Further, someone may refrain from openly accepting a friend request that outwardly expresses a specific political affiliation. This is supported by the findings that people often refrain from liking political parties on Facebook because they fear what peers who have opposing political affiliations will think (Marder, Slade, Houghton, & Archer-Brown, 2016). Moreover, as political opinions appear more hostile in manner, an individual is less likely to express political views. This is evidenced by findings that hostile opinions generated on Facebook due to its opinion-based networking system were found to be negatively associated with political expression (Mihee, 2016). In other words, those who perceived the political opinions of Facebook friends as hostile were less likely to express their political opinions via Facebook, and in turn, were less likely to participate in political activities outside of Facebook than those who perceived political opinions of Facebook friends as friendly. Such research indicates that individuals may be motivated to appear politically neutral on Facebook in efforts to gain broader social acceptance. It is likely that this creates a rift between the desire to establish Facebook connections sharing similar political affiliations and the desire to be socially accepted on Facebook. In efforts to better understand when similar political affiliation may facilitate (versus impede) social acceptance, additional attributes need to be examined. Physical attractiveness may be an attribute that increases the likelihood of social acceptance.

A large body of literature has supported the role of physical attractiveness as a characteristic that often sways whether a Facebook user accepts a friend request. In Greitemeyer and Kunz’s experiment (2013), undergraduate Facebook users attending the University of Innsbruck were randomly assigned to view a friend request from an unfamiliar profile. Researchers manipulated the name valence and physical attractiveness of the profile. Results indicated that users were most likely to accept requests that were both physically attractive and had a positively valenced name. Users were also more likely to accept requests if the profile was moderately attractive with a positively valenced name, or if the profile was attractive with a negatively valenced name. These results emphasize physical attractiveness as an important factor when judging whether to initially interact with someone. Peña and Brody (2014) further depicted physical attraction as a normative influence for keeping someone as a friend on Facebook. If a Facebook profile was engaging in hurtful or threatening communication, the receiver was more likely to keep...
the person as a friend if the person was considered physically attractive. Their study suggests that Facebook users choose to maintain relationships with physically attractive profiles to elevate their own self-confidence and physical attractiveness because a person who has physically attractive friends is presumed to be physically attractive (Peña & Brody, 2014).

In summary, research regarding the effect that similarity of political affiliation has on the likelihood of accepting a Facebook friend request is unclear. Similar political affiliation can facilitate Facebook relationships, but people may choose not to politically affiliate in efforts to avoid rejection. Physical attractiveness is a variable that may help strengthen the relationship between political affiliation and likelihood of acceptance. Physical attractiveness is known to sway people’s acceptance of others. However, to the authors’ knowledge, no study has examined the interaction between political affiliation and physical attractiveness when evaluating a Facebook profile. The present study addressed the initial onset of a Facebook relationship, the friend request, to investigate whether these attributes would impact a person’s likelihood to accept. In the current study, researchers hypothesized that Facebook users would report a significantly higher likelihood of accepting a Facebook friend request for profiles that appeared to be physically attractive and similar to their own political affiliation compared to other profiles. Gender was not included in the current analyses because research has indicated that both men and women attend to attractive and unattractive faces of the other sex (Hooff, Crawford, & Vugt, 2011).

Method

Participants

One hundred and twenty undergraduate students participated in the study. Participants self-selected into the study using the Psychology Department’s online research participation system. Out of all the participants, 68.33% were women and 31.67% were men, with an average age of 18.93 (SD = 2.38). Most identified as White or European American (70%), with 14.2% Asian or Pacific Islander, 9.2% Hispanic or Latino, 4.2% Black or African American, and 2.4% as “Other” or “Rather not answer.” Additionally, 36.67% of participants affiliated as Republican, 30% of participants affiliated as Democrat, and 33.33% affiliated as Independent. In exchange for participation, participants received class credit. The current study was initially completed as a course project. Creighton University institutional review board (IRB) approval was gained following the course to allow for additional data analyses and project dissemination.

Materials

Facebook profiles were created to measure the likelihood that a participant would accept the Facebook friend request with varying physical attractiveness and political affiliation. Six different profiles were manipulated to display one of two pictures, physically attractive (see Figure 1) or unattractive, as well as one of three political affiliation labels (Democrat, Republican, or Independent). The six different profiles were displayed randomly and at equal intervals. The attractive and unattractive photo conditions eliminated potential confounds by using White male headshots with the same hair color, eye color, background color, and shirt color. Male headshots were selected to best ensure the likelihood that the profile’s characteristics, namely political affiliation, would be attended to in addition to the photo. This decision was based on Seidman and Miller’s (2013) finding that participants spent significantly more time viewing the Likes and Interests disclosed on male Facebook profiles than...
the actual profile photos, whereas participants spent more time viewing the profile pictures of women rather than their Likes and Interests (Seidman & Miller, 2013). Further, the profile’s political affiliation label was strategically placed directly under the profile photo, to aid participants’ view of political affiliation in the instance that the profile photo was more attended to. The six Facebook profiles all utilized the same photo of Creighton University's campus as their background cover picture. Further, all profiles were formatted to appear as friend requests through the inclusion of a “respond to friend request” button on the profile page that typically displays during a Facebook request.

Following the profile, participants were asked to indicate the likelihood that they would accept the Facebook profile friend request on a 10-point Likert-type scale ranging from 10 (definitely accept) to 1 (definitely would not accept). In addition, a second 10-point Likert-type scale was presented to indicate the degree of attractiveness the participants found the profile, ranging from 10 (extremely attractive) to 1 (extremely unattractive). The experiment was conducted through Qualtrics, an online survey program, through which Facebook use and demographic information was acquired. Demographic information included gender, age, race, sexual orientation, political affiliation, academic year, and relationship status. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate their gender (i.e., man, woman, other, or “rather not answer”) and their political affiliation (i.e., Republican, Democrat, or Independent).

**Procedure**

Participants began by opening Qualtrics online in a setting of their choosing. They were first presented with the informed consent. After reading, participants indicated their consent by clicking the “next” arrow. Participants were randomly assigned to view one of the six Facebook profile conditions for 30 seconds. After viewing the profile, participants reported the likelihood that they would accept the profile friend request and how attractive they found the profile. Then, each participant answered the same Facebook use and demographic questions. The Likert scale addressing physical attractiveness served as a manipulation check to ensure the effectiveness of the attractiveness manipulation. A debriefing was presented at the end of the study to inform participants about the experiment and to clear up any misconceptions about the study.

**Results**

**Preliminary Results**

To test the manipulation for the independent variable of attractiveness, a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted. Results indicated that there was a significant difference in the perceived physical attractiveness between the two conditions, $F(1, 118) = 159.74$, $p < .001$, $\eta^{2}_{partial} = .58$. Results revealed that participants found the picture used in the attractive condition to be more physically attractive than the picture used in the unattractive condition. See Figure 2.

**Primary Results**

To test the hypothesis that Facebook users would report a significantly higher likelihood of accepting the Facebook friend request for profiles that appeared to be physically attractive and similar to their own political affiliation, a 2 x 3 x 3 factorial ANOVA was conducted among profile attractiveness, profile political affiliation (Democrat, Republican, or Independent), and participant political affiliation (Democrat, Republican, or Independent). Results indicated that there was a significant main effect for attractiveness, $F(1, 100) = 17.97$, $p < .001$, $\eta^{2}_{partial} = .15$. Consistent with the research hypothesis, those who viewed the physically attractive condition reported a significantly higher likelihood of accepting the Facebook friend request than those who viewed the physically unattractive condition. The main effects for profile, $F(2, 100) = 0.81$, $p = .45$, $\eta^{2}_{partial} = .02$, and participant political affiliation, $F(2, 100) = 1.95$, $p = .15$, $\eta^{2}_{partial} = .04$, were not significant. Contrary to the research hypothesis, the two-way interaction between profile political affiliation and participant affiliation was
not significant, $F(4, 100) = 1.08, p = .37, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .04$. Those who viewed a profile that had a similar political affiliation to their own did not report a significantly higher likelihood of accepting the friend request than those who viewed a profile with a different political affiliation. In addition, the two-way interaction between attractiveness and the profile’s political affiliation was not significant, $F(2, 100) = 0.60, p = .55, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .01$. However, the two-way interaction between attractiveness and participant political affiliation was significant, $F(2, 100) = 4.11, p = .02, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .08$. Further analyses based on LSD follow-up of the cell means (minimum mean difference = 1.33) were conducted to determine the pattern of interaction. Findings relevant to the simple effect of attractiveness for each political affiliation indicated that Democrat and Republican participants were more likely to accept the attractive rather than the unattractive profile. However, there was no significant difference on attractiveness for Independents; they were equally likely to accept the attractive and unattractive profiles.

The three-way ANOVA allowed for exploratory testing that was not only consistent with the primary hypothesis, but also provided the opportunity to examine how attractiveness and the profile’s political affiliation interacted with participants’ political affiliation irrespective of similarity. Results indicated that the three-way interaction was significant, $F(4, 100) = 2.82, p = .03, \eta^2_{\text{partial}} = .10$. Based on LSD follow-up analyses (minimum mean difference = 2.30), results indicated that, consistent with the above two-way, research participants identifying as Independent were equally likely to accept attractive and unattractive profiles, regardless of the profile’s political affiliation. In contrast, participants who identified as Democrat were more likely to accept the attractive rather than the unattractive profile, particularly when the profile was labeled as Democrat or Republican. They were equally likely to accept the Independent profile. Republican participants were more likely to accept the attractive rather than unattractive profile, particularly when the profile was labeled as Republican or Independent. They were equally likely to accept the Democrat profile. See Figure 3.

**Discussion**

The current study investigated the effects of physical attractiveness and political affiliation on the likelihood of accepting a Facebook friend request. Statistical analyses revealed that participants viewing the physically attractive condition had a significantly higher likelihood of accepting the Facebook friend request compared to those viewing the unattractive condition. Although similar political affiliation was not found to significantly increase the likelihood of accepting a friend request, unexpected findings of participants’ political affiliation on attractiveness indicated that Independents were just as likely to accept attractive and unattractive profiles, regardless of political affiliation. On the contrary, Republican and Democrat participants were significantly more likely to accept profiles that were attractive rather than unattractive, although the profile’s political affiliation had an influence. Specifically, Democrat participants were more likely to accept attractive Facebook profiles that politically affiliated as Democrat or Republican and were less swayed by attractiveness in accepting Independent profiles; whereas Republican participants were more likely to accept attractive profiles that politically affiliated as Republican or Independent, and were less swayed by attractiveness in accepting Democratic profiles.

Previous research studies on attractiveness are consistent with the current study’s findings. For example, Greitemeyer and Kunz’s (2013) study on name valence and physical attractiveness found that more Facebook friend requests were accepted when the profile appeared to be physically attractive. These findings suggest that physical attractiveness is an overt determinant when evaluating a Facebook

**FIGURE 3**

Results of the three-way interaction ($p = .03$) indicated that Independent participants were equally likely to accept attractive and unattractive profiles, regardless of the profile’s political affiliation. In contrast, participants who identified as Democrat were more likely to accept the attractive rather than the unattractive profile, particularly when the profile was labeled as Democrat or Republican. They were equally likely to accept the Independent profile. Republican participants were more likely to accept the attractive rather than unattractive profile, particularly when the profile was labeled as Republican or Independent. Error bars reflect 95% confidence intervals.
friend request perhaps through an association of beauty to positive characteristics. People who appear to be attractive may be perceived as more confident, mentally healthy, and competent than those who appear to be unattractive (Langlois et al., 2000; Mobius & Rosenblat, 2006). Therefore, participants might have attributed these positive characteristics to the physically attractive Facebook profile condition, resulting in significantly higher likelihoods of acceptance compared to the physically unattractive condition.

No prior research has examined the interaction between physical attractiveness and similarity of political affiliation on the likelihood of accepting a friend request on Facebook. Although a large literature has referenced the importance of similarity in liking or acceptance (e.g., Martin et al., 2013), current findings indicated that similarity of political affiliation was less important when rating acceptance. Political affiliation alone may not provide enough information for participants to sufficiently gauge similarity. For example, Chen and Kenrick (2002) found that similarity between research participants and a target profile, as measured by consistent attitudes on a range of issues (e.g., immigration, interracial dating, and environmental protection), was a significant determinant of desired contact with the profile. However, the profile’s political affiliation alone did not predict desired contact. Additionally, the relations between similarity in attitudes and desired contact were not altered by similarity of political affiliation between the participant and the profile. Results may suggest that, in the case where only a political affiliation is listed (as opposed to various attitudes on political issues), individuals may rate acceptance in part by utilizing characteristics that are associated with certain political memberships.

Our exploratory finding that Independents were less swayed by attractiveness across the Facebook profile’s three political affiliations was unexpected, although it may suggest that characteristics associated with an Independent political membership to some degree may override the importance of similar political affiliation, especially when similarity is evidenced only by a label. For example, Hawkins and Nosek (2012) indicated that self-proclaimed Independents chose their political membership for reasons such as wanting to express views that do not align with one party. Further, they want to remain objective and to be free of labels. With an emphasis on objectivity and being free of labels, Independents may be less conforming. They may not easily follow social norms associated with attractiveness or similarity when evidenced by a label. As such, ratings of acceptance may be less biased by attractiveness or similar political affiliation compared to individuals identifying with alternative political affiliations.

Reasons were examined to explain why participants identifying as Republicans and Democrats were significantly more likely to accept attractive profiles, with nuances depending on the profile’s political affiliation. No evidence of an in-group or out-group bias was given, meaning that Democratic participants did not rate profiles with similar or different political affiliations within the same attractiveness condition as either more or less attractive. Accordingly, the current findings may again be interpreted using research identifying characteristics associated with political party membership, such as the characteristic of liberalism. Liberalism is positively associated with openness to novel experiences, self-esteem, and curiosity (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Democrats’ elevated self-esteem may increase their likelihood of accepting attractive profiles as a potential reciprocal method of sustaining their own self-esteem (Peña & Brody, 2014). Their openness to novel experiences may make them more inclined to accept attractive profiles that affiliate with the opposing partisan party. In contrast, behavioral analyses have revealed that conservatism is positively associated with acceptance of social norms and fear of threat (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2011; Jost et al., 2003). Republican participants may be more inclined to accept attractive profiles politically affiliating as Republican or Independent to the degree that they adhere to attractiveness norms, particularly with individuals from similar or nonthreatening political parties. Independents may be perceived as nonthreatening to Republicans, given that 39% of Independents lean toward Conservative ideals (Pew Research Center, 2015). That said, significant caution should be used when generalizing research examining characteristics of a group to any one individual. Further research is needed to better examine the degree to which college students align with behavioral analyses identifying characteristics associated with political party membership, and the degree to which such characteristics contribute to judgments regarding acceptance.

There were several limitations to the current study. First, because the study collected data from a sample of undergraduate students enrolled in psychology courses, results may be less generalizable...
to alternative samples such as noncollege young adults. Second, there are possible limitations using an online survey delivery. As seen in an online study by Yu (2016), survey data may be subject to social desirability and response biases. Additional limitations may be that the online experiment was subject to potential confounds such as multitasking, time of day, and variability of location. Third, it was discovered that the attractive male headshot used in the present study was making direct eye contact with the viewer; however, the headshot used in the unattractive condition seemed to be looking slightly past the viewer, making indirect eye contact. In prior research, faces that made direct eye contact received higher attractiveness ratings compared to faces that made indirect eye contact (Ewing, Rhodes, & Pellicano, 2010), suggesting that the slight alterations in eye contact may have acted as a confound in the current ratings of attractiveness and potentially acceptance. Future research may work to replicate the present study’s findings keeping eye gaze consistent across headshots, or may work to manipulate attractiveness and eye contact to understand how cognitive processing of eye gaze influences findings. Although researchers used young, white men with brown hair for the Facebook profile photos to reduce confounds, potential race and gender biases might have further limited the study. Lastly, although efforts were made to ensure that participants attended to the profile’s political affiliation, it cannot be guaranteed.

In summary, findings supported the first part of the hypothesis that Facebook users would report a significantly higher likelihood of accepting a Facebook friend request for profiles that appeared to be physically attractive compared to physically unattractive. Although similarity of political party affiliation did not interact with attractiveness, a three-way interaction indicated that research participants identifying as Independent were just as likely to accept attractive and unattractive profiles, regardless of the profile’s political affiliation. In contrast, Republican and Democrat participants were more inclined to accept the attractive compared to the unattractive profile. Again, further research is needed to better examine the extent to which college students align with behavioral analyses identifying characteristics associated with political party membership, and the extent to which characteristics aid in formulating first impressions online and in person. As Facebook continues to be a generational means to establish relationships, express oneself, and advocate for one’s interests, research should also examine how variables such as political affiliation and attractiveness display online interactions with the larger social context, for example, national political events such as presidential elections.

References


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