We Know More About You Than You Do: The effects of confirmation bias from social media on first impressions

RoseMarie DiStefano and Adrianna Gregory
Mount Saint Mary College, Newburgh, New York

First impressions, or snap judgments, are formed very quickly and often from just a brief exposure to another's facial appearance (Bar, Neta & Linz, 2006). Confirmation bias can occur when the individual making the judgment has prior information on the person he or she is judging, such as a Facebook profile. With this type of bias, the prior information can lead a person to focus particularly on the actions of the individual that confirm what the he or she already knows. In an interview setting, this type of bias can be detrimental to the application process. The purpose of our study is to determine the effects that prior knowledge can have on an interviewer's impression of an applicant, and whether this potential confirmation bias will skew the accuracy of an interviewer's snap judgment.

People always say to never judge a book by its cover; judging someone before you know about them can lead to false assumptions. First impressions can be formed very quickly. These trait inferences and general judgments based on a short influx of sensory information are also known as snap judgments (Willis & Todorov, 2006). Appearance, facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice are a few of the many details that are evaluated by another within seconds in order for an impression to be formed.

“Snap judgments” can be accurately made in many different environments. A study done by Apperson, Bregman, Buchert, and Laws (2010) focused on the topic of first impressions in a classroom setting. They compared the impression a random participant would form of a professor to the impression formed by the current students of the professor. Not only were participants unfamiliar with the professor, but they were also asked to evaluate the instructor in the context of a silent six-second video (Apperson et al., 2010). It was concluded that a student could determine an instructor’s teaching style as well as specific personality traits based off of this information. This was supported by the results, showing that the participants’ judgments based on the short clip strongly correlated with the end of the year evaluations that the actual students made of the same instructor (Apperson et al., 2010). Benjamin and Shapiro (2006) did a similar study pertaining to political elections. Undergraduates from Harvard University participated in the researchers' political prediction study. The researchers presented three 10-second clips of two major candidates during a debate to the participants. The students then had to complete a questionnaire predicting who they believed would win the election. The questionnaire also included questions about the participants’ opinion on whether the political candidate was either a Democrat or Republican and whom they personally would vote for. Results showed that the predictions made by the participants foretold results of the actual election (Benjamin & Shapiro, 2006). Because past research has shown snap judgments to be accurate, it is possible that these judgments can serve as convenient tools for evaluators to use in different fields across the workplace, especially when predicting the potential of their employees.

The snap judgments that one makes are not limited to face-to-face meetings. With the increasing popularity of social media sites, such as Facebook, it comes as no surprise that job applicants may be screened by means of their Facebook profiles. Depending on the type of

RoseMarie DiStefano (rdis5107@my.msmc.edu) graduated in May 2015 with a B.A. in Psychology, Minors in General Science and Art and a concentration in Physical Therapy. She is planning to pursue a M.A. in Counseling with a concentration in Higher Education/Student Affairs.

Adrianna Gregory (agre0149@my.msmc.edu) graduated in May 2015 with a B.A. in Psychology and a Minor in General Science. She is planning to pursue a M.S. in Speech Language Pathology.
privacy setting an applicant has, one’s Facebook profile could offer more information about an applicant than just an interview or other personality approaches (Goodmon, Smith, Ivancevich & Lundberg, 2014). Kluepem and Rosen (2009) found that in viewing another’s Facebook profile, personality traits depicting future job performance could be identified by the evaluator, such as extraversion, agreeableness and emotional stability.

Many young adult Facebook users are aware of the judgments that can be made based off their profiles. As a result, these users portray their online selves in the way they wish to appear to their peers and future employers (Peluchette & Karl, 2009). Individuals often try to mold these views by managing their photos and posts in an attempt to mask their undesirable characteristics (Strano & Queen, 2012). For example, college students tend to delete photos of themselves drinking because they fear that it will tamper with their career opportunities (Strano & Queen, 2012). Research shows that out of 615 users, 75% of college students have taken down a post or photo from their social media page (Strano & Queen, 2012). Developing misinterpretations based on prior information can cause an interviewer to go into a meeting with the intent of seeking characteristics and traits that support their preconceived judgments, an act called confirmation bias (Ask & Granhag, 2005). This act of only focusing on details that support these pre-existing judgments make it difficult for a legitimate first impression to be made.

Because of preconceptions, confirmation bias can skew an accurate judgment and affect the life of an individual severely. When a person is provided with prior information towards another, such as a social media page, it can often cause a preconception to be made. Such preconceptions set the groundwork for confirmation bias to occur during the initial interaction, therefore decreasing the likelihood of a legitimate first impression. The person provided with prior information about the other will often approach the interaction with the mindset of confirming his or her pre-existing judgments (Mast, Bangerter, Bulliard & Aerni, 2011). Additionally, the person is likely to focus in on aspects of the individual that match up with these prior judgments. If an employer views a potential applicants social media page and sees inappropriate photos and vulgar comments, they might not perceive the applicant as a respectable fit for their company. Since first impressions are seen as highly important, such assumptions could be very unfair for the individual being judged, almost not giving them a fair chance at a job or educational opportunity.

Confirmation bias is not limited to affecting the side of the evaluator, but also the individual being evaluated (Callendar, Dougherty & Turban, 1994). Researchers found that if the person being interviewed can sense that the interviewer has a negative regard toward them, they will perform poorly and not to their highest potential (Dipboye & Macan, 1990). Becoming more knowledgeable about this issue of intimidation can be beneficial in finding ways to avoid inaccuracies.

Confirmation bias can skew an accurate judgment and affect an individual in many different life settings. For example, because of preconceptions and stereotypes, a jury can claim a defendant guilty when he really is innocent (Hill, Memon & McGeorge, 2008). Ask and Granhag (2005) conducted a study in which a fake criminal investigation about a homicide was proposed. One half of the participants who acted as the jury were provided with information about the motive of the prime suspect to kill the victim, while the other half of the participants were provided with information geared toward a potential alternative culprit. Because both groups were provided with different materials, they were manipulated to go into the case with different mindsets (Ask & Granhag, 2005). At the end of the experiment, the researchers found that the participants tended to conform to the hypothesis originally proposed to them. This demonstrated that a confirmation bias was present, which allowed false accusations to occur (Ask & Granhag, 2005). These accusations could be detrimental to an individual’s future.

Confirmation bias can also be seen in the medical field. Bornstein and Emler (2001) studied the way prior information from a patient’s medical history could sway a doctor’s decision on the patient presenting a certain syndrome. Doctors that were given medical histories of a patient before a visit showed an increase in leaning toward the probability of the patient having syndromes that matched their medical history, rather than looking into the symptoms further (Bornstein & Emler , 2001). Many times if a patient is constantly coming into an office complaining about a certain symptom or is asking for pain medication, a doctor will come to an assumption about the individual’s general health. Because of past encounters with the patient, the doctor is likely to overlook certain signs rather than look into them (Bornstein & Emler , 2001). Providing information on ways to prevent this bias can be valuable for one’s future in a range of settings.

This study will examine if pre-interview judgments from social media profiles really do skew one’s ability to make an accurate first impression decision during an interview. Past research has studied the accuracy of interpreting personality based on social media accounts, such as Facebook, as well as the accuracy of first impressions made in a short time period (Kluemper & Rosen, 2009; Hassan & Trope, 2010). We will utilize this past research in the current study to determine whether negative or positive background information can skew the impression one has of an individual. We will also utilize our observations to predict ways in which interviewees can better present themselves in order to minimize confirmation bias. Becoming knowledgeable about what should not be posted publically online can help interviewees acquire a better chance at landing a desired position.
PROPOSED METHOD

Participants

105 participants between the ages of 18 and 55 will be selected through the use of random sampling. Researchers will go to a local mall and randomly ask shoppers walking by if they would like to participate in a study. Participants will then be randomly distributed evenly into three groups. An actor will also be hired to play the role of the applicant.

Materials

All participants will be given an informed consent form explaining the nature and procedure of the experiment. The three groups of participants will be given an abbreviated Big Five Personality test before partaking in a fake job interview with an actor. This test is based on the version created by John and Rammstedt (2007) (See Appendix A). The test will consist of questions pertaining to the applicant such as, “do you see this person as someone who is trusting?” (John & Rammstedt, 2007). The participants will answer the questions relying solely on the items they are given, pertaining to the applicant being judged. Group one will only get the actor’s fake name, group two will receive a fabricated Facebook profile page of the actor with positive posts (See Appendix B) and group three will receive a fabricated Facebook profile page of the actor with negative posts (See Appendix C). The negative Facebook profile will contain pictures, posts from friends, and statuses that would be deemed as unprofessional. The characteristics displayed through these posts, such as heavy drinking habits and use of foul language show traits of the “applicant” that a potential employer would see as disadvantageous in a work setting. For the positive Facebook profile of the applicant, the pictures, posts from friends, and statuses will be very professional in nature. These posts and statuses will highlight traits that a potential employer would see as advantageous in a work setting such as intelligence and leadership skills. After being given one of the three variables: the applicant’s name, the positive profile, or the negative profile, all of participants will engage in a fake interview with an actor for a job, and then again take the abbreviated Big Five Personality test post interview.

Procedure

Prior to the experiment an actor will be selected to play the role of the “applicant”. This actor will be used for all three groups and each of their processes. As previously stated, participants in the study will be randomly assigned to one of three groups. The first group will consist of 35 participants. This group will act as the control and will only receive the name of the applicant before the interview, no visuals. This first group will take the abbreviated Big Five Test prior to the interview, referring only to the applicant’s name. This interview will be scripted by the researchers. One participant will act as the interviewee and the rest will act as observers. All participants will then take the same Big Five Test post interview (Appendix A).

The second group will also consist of 35 participants. This group will receive a fake Facebook profile page (Appendix B) of the actor that consists of positive posts and take the abbreviated Big Five Test pre interview. This interview will be scripted by the researchers. One participant will act as the interviewee and the rest will act as observers. All participants will then take the same Big Five Test post interview (Appendix A).

The third group will also consist of 35 participants. This group will receive a fake Facebook profile page of the actor with negative posts (Appendix C) and will take the abbreviated Big Five Test pre interview. This interview will be scripted by the researchers. One participant will act as the interviewee and the rest will act as observers. All participants will then take the same Big Five Test post interview (Appendix A). The researchers will then take the pre-interview tests and post-interview tests of all three groups and compare the results to see if their opinions changed, were magnified or stayed the same. The data will be analyzed using ANOVA.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Limitations

Limitations in this study include the how representative the sample of participants from the mall are of the population. Though the mall is a setting that tends to attract many types of people, it is impossible for mall-goers exclusively to truly represent an entire population. Individuals who either utilize other settings for shopping, or who don’t do so at all are excluded from the selection of participants. Another limitation is that this is a simulation interview setting. Since it is not real, the participants will not be as invested as an individual who is actually trying to hire someone.

Significance

When a person tends to focus on information that supports their beliefs, it is referred to as a confirmation bias. Someone with this type of bias has a tendency to ignore the rest of the information provided that does not support their initial ideas (Powell, Hughes-Scholes & Sharman, 2012). Interviews can be very intimidating for people of all ages and it would be very useful to learn techniques that would make this experience less overwhelming, more beneficial and more productive. Powell et al. (2012) found that using open questions as opposed to leading questions during an interview can reduce the effect confirmation bias has on judgment. This
study will utilize past research similar to Powell’s study about the accuracy of first impressions in determining different ways interviewees can present themselves in order to minimize the confirmation bias. It will also enhance the understanding of how having additional information about an individual prior to meeting them can affect one’s first impression.

REFERENCES
Willis, J., & Todorov, A. (2006). First impressions, making up your mind after a 100-ms exposure to a face. Psychology Science, 17, 592-598

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
We would like to thank Professor Yasmine Kalkstein for putting her time and effort into helping us with the development of this research proposal.
APPENDIX A

Abbreviated Big Five Test

English version.

**Instruction:** How well do the following statements describe this individual’s personality?

1= Disagree strongly
2= Disagree a little
3= Neither agree nor disagree
4= Agree a little
5= Agree strongly

Do you see this person as someone who....

is reserved (1) (2) (3) (4) (5)

is generally trusting (1) (2) (3) (4) (5)

tends to be lazy (1) (2) (3) (4) (5)

is relaxed, handles stress well (1) (2) (3) (4) (5)

has few artistic interests (1) (2) (3) (4) (5)

is outgoing, sociable (1) (2) (3) (4) (5)

tends to find fault with others (1) (2) (3) (4) (5)

does a thorough job (1) (2) (3) (4) (5)

gets nervous easily (1) (2) (3) (4) (5)

has an active imagination (1) (2) (3) (4) (5)

(John & Rammstedt 2007)
Appendix B

[Image of a Facebook profile for Janet Atkins, showing various sections such as Timeline, About, Friends, Photos, and More. The profile includes options to add profile info, update info, and view activity logs. There are posts and comments from friends, including one from Adrianna Elizabeth thanking Janet for babysitting and another from Janet Atkins expressing appreciation for help with homework.]

[Link to Brainwaves website: http://brainwaves.msmc.edu]
Appendix C