

# Effects of Perceiver/Target Gender and Social Networking Presence on Web-Based Impression Formation

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## ABSTRACT

*As the Web has expanded in its use and utility it has fundamentally changed the way in which individuals gather and use information. This paper suggests that those changes give rise to tangible and significant effects in the impressions people form of others using Web-based information. This study explores the impacts of perceiver gender, target gender, and social networking presence on subjects' perceptions of potential teammates otherwise unknown to them as revealed by ratings they assign based only on search engine results. Experiments reveal differences in how male and female perceivers view others' social networking activity in general and suggest that how the perceiver gender matches, or differs, from the gender of the target affects how social networking presence plays into impression formation. Findings hold implications for professionals, academics and individuals concerned with the role that Web-based information plays in impression formation and how inherent gender-based biases may affect power and politics in the workplace and beyond.*

*Keywords: ePerception, ePersona, Gender Differences, Impression Formation, Social Networking*

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## INTRODUCTION

With growth in the use of computers and the Internet, we now live in a world where there are two spheres of existence—a physical sphere and a digital sphere. Many now rely on the Web as a reflection of reality for finding facts. For example, many turn to the Web to get the ad-

dress of a store rather than consult traditional yellow pages in book form. This existential dichotomy between our physical and digital spheres of existence gives rise to a number of issues. One interesting issue is that people are able to perceive others and form opinions about them based solely on the information available about those people on the Web.

While it may be tempting to characterize the Web as essentially equivalent to traditional

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print media as a basis for forming impressions, a critical look reveals fundamental differences. For example, relative to traditional media, Web-based sources are easier to access, far more searchable, much more amenable to aggregation, and have a longer lifespan because of the refresh-ability afforded by their digital format. Further, these sources are growing exponentially with Web 2.0 technologies that allow anyone to create and post their own content. Kalyanaraman and Sundar (2008) suggest that today's Web-based sources and tools provide options for self-expression and self-presentation that are unprecedented. As the information paradigm changes, it follows that the processes, and thus outcomes, are being affected and it thus behooves us to explore them toward a better understanding and use.

One important aspect of the paradigm shift is that, ironically, though the self-publishing phenomenon enabled by the Web lacks the well-established integrity controls of traditional print media, it has become an important source of information for decision making in both personal and professional contexts. For example, a recent study sponsored by Microsoft surveyed 275 US hiring managers and human resource professionals about their hiring practices and found that 85% of these recruiters work for firms that have hiring policies requiring them to investigate potential candidates online and 70% admitted to turning down potential employees based on the information they found on the Web (Cross-tab Marketing Services, 2010). Given the importance of decisions being made based on impressions created solely from Web searches, it is imperative that we understand the characteristics of both the searcher and the searched that may impact formation of these impressions.

We examine this issue in greater detail using the concepts of ePersona and ePerception (Venkatsubramanian & Hill, 2007). ePersona refers to searchable digital information about a particular person from a variety of sources – personal home pages, social and professional networking sites, organizational Web pages, news articles, blogs and others. ePerception is

a term coined by Vazire and Gosling (2004) but was defined and further developed to refer to the perception formed by people about others depending primarily, if not exclusively, on the ePersona (Venkatsubramanian & Hill, 2007, 2009a, 2009b). Building upon their model of impression formation, we explore how the gender of the perceiver, and the presence or absence of social networking activity for an ePersona, affect the formation of an ePerception. Additionally we examine how these effects differ by the gender of the searched individual, the “target”, as compared with that of the perceiver. The results are both interesting and valuable, particularly given the integral role gender issues play in the social power and political dynamic of the workplace as well as broader social contexts, because better understanding the inherent biases enables awareness that can empower the affected individuals.

The paper is organized as follows. First we describe the theoretical background, present Venkatsubramanian and Hill's (2009b) model of Web-based impression formation, develop our research question and put forward the propositions used to guide our research. Next we describe the experimental methodology for an empirical study designed to address the research question, followed by a discussion of results and their interpretation. We conclude with a summary and a discussion of the study's limitations, implications and directions for future research.

## THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

In existing models of impression formation, the perceiver is the person forming an impression, while the target is the person about whom the impression is formed. People form impressions about others based on primary (or direct) and secondary (or indirect) sources of information. Primary sources of information include personal interactions (face-to-face or otherwise) including both verbal and behavioral cues. Secondary sources of information include sources such as hearsay (opinions expressed by others), photo-

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