Kwantlen Psychology Student Journal
Issue 8, October 2026
Kwantlen Polytechnic University

First Impressions of Various Detailed Instagram Profiles

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Abstract

In an online world of sociality where first impressions influence connections and interactions based on the judgments and opinions of individuals, this study was conducted to assess the effect of various detailed Instagram profiles on first impressions of trust, friendliness, safety, and likelihood to follow and accept requests. We hypothesized that a sparsely detailed Instagram profile would have a negative effect on first impressions. We conducted a within-subjects experimental design by an online survey, with 59 undergraduate students (64% men, 46% women). The participants were presented with 3 differently detailed profiles—popular, typical, and sparse— and assessed on first impressions with a 5-point Likert scale. A repeated measure ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference between the three profiles on all five first impression variables. The follow-up analyses showed that a sparsely detailed profile negatively affected first impressions compared to the popular and typical detailed profiles.

[1] sana.aktary@student.kpu.ca; Written for Research Methods in Psychology I (PSYC 2400). I am grateful to Dr. Shayna Minosky for her continuous feedback and support with our research. I acknowledge Melissa Arbocco-Feyre and Puneet Kaur for their contributions to experiment design and conduction. I also acknowledge Nureen Sheik for her contribution to experiment design.

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Social media interactions and first impressions have become integral to online and offline social experiences in the digital age. Our virtual presence increasingly influences personal and professional relationships, as individuals instinctively form impressions upon initial encounters. Humans are inherently social beings, and the ability to assess trustworthiness, safety, and other personal traits from minimal exposure is a fundamental aspect of social cognition (Willis, 2006). Research suggests that a mere tenth of a second of facial exposure is sufficient for individuals to infer specific personality traits, anchoring subsequent judgments on these initial perceptions (Willis, 2006). This rapid assessment was found to be automatic, with the amygdala playing a crucial role in detecting trustworthiness in human faces—an evolutionary mechanism for survival (Willis, 2006). First impressions, traditionally shaped through face-to-face interactions, now extend to digital spaces, particularly on visual-centric platforms like Instagram.

Instagram is a social media platform for self-expression and personal branding for all individuals. It provides the space to curate an online persona, whether true or false, and leave first impressions upon interactions and viewing of a profile. As noted by Qin et al. (2024), both online and offline first impressions are important in determining interpersonal perceptions and the quality of relationships going forward, which reaffirms that our online interactions matter. Social media profiles have reconfigured social interactions by presenting individuals the opportunity to form first impressions of stranger's profiles by a judgment of their disclosed profile information—profile picture and description, posts, story highlights, post interactions such as likes and comments, followers, and following—without direct interactions with the user profile. The abundance of information, or lack thereof, disclosed on an Instagram profile allows for the opportunity to form first impressions of the user profile.

Instagram facilitates online social engagement by allowing users to share their lives through images, videos, and other visual cues, to reach their following audiences. However, there remains a critical gap in research regarding the impact of Instagram profile details on perceived trustworthiness, safety, friendliness, and likelihood of following and accepting follow requests. Specifically, little is known about how the level of personal information shared— by profile picture and description, posts, stories and story highlights— and online engagement, through followers and followings, shapes instinctual

first impressions. Understanding the effect of these various detail levels is crucial for comprehending how privacy choices impact online social evaluations and interpersonal trust in digital interactions. Since the impression of trust contributes to a positive judgment due to reduced perceived risk and uncertainty of profiles (Xu, 2014).

Researchers attempting to figure out how profile cues and pictures influence trust and perceived credibility cited that first impressions are formed due to the human aversion to uncertainty in knowing someone (Xu, 2014). People actively seek personal information about others using all available resources to reduce their discomfort in social interactions and interpersonal relationships, enabling them to form judgments and predict behaviour (Berger, 1975). This learning process of others which fosters a sense of security, trust, and familiarity, guiding individuals in establishing connections was found by Berger et al. in 1975. They named this phenomenon the Uncertainty Reduction Theory—how a lack of information about a person can heighten uncertainty in sociality, ultimately influencing perceptions of safety, trustworthiness, and approachability. A higher level of uncertainty due to a lack of information about the individual causes' negative perceptions of safety, trust, and approachability which influence negative judgments and reduces social interactions. In contrast, an abundance of information better influences perceptions of safety, trust, and approachability which positively aids in socialization and building relationships.

Research conducted by Osterholz et al. in 2023 on first impressions of Instagram profiles found that self-expression on Instagram—assessed by posts, profile pictures, profile descriptions, followers, followings, and story highlights—aids in accurate personality judgments due to visual-based aspects. Individual's friendliness and openness were accurately judged by their Instagram profiles, and a positive correlation was found with the number of posts shared. The results of the study suggest that an abundance of personal information online decreases social uncertainty by accurate personality assessment per first impression of profiles. However, research has not examined the effect of Instagram profiles which lack personal information on first impressions.

Assessing trust in Instagram profiles can be difficult because of uncertainty in the information provided being accurate and honest. Researchers assessing textual and visual cues on profiles found that in vague situations where personal information and pictures were lacking, individuals adhered to what they presumed was solid information, such as

the textual description of profiles and posts, in contrast to pictures, to assess first impressions (Pelled, 2017). Visual cues received priority in face-to-face interactions, but their results showed that in online interactions, individuals felt compelled to rely on textual cues when visual cues were contrary, lacking, or complex. Users relied on various strategies to reduce information uncertainty and formed an impression of a profile in a single glimpse (Pelled, 2017). Importantly, they discovered that when participants were presented with visual cues, such as pictures, and textual cues, like descriptions, they accurately remembered and prioritized textual cues in forming judgments of the profile. The number of likes a profile's posts received was positively associated with perceptions of extraversion and, thus, friendliness. In contrast, a lack of likes led to a weaker effect of profile evaluation. Individuals relied on the number of likes posts received to evaluate a profile when visual and textual cues were unreliable and inconsistent (Pelled, 2017). Research conducted by Yahya et al. (2017) on Palestinian women found that individuals do not tend to make positive or negative judgments of profiles based on the number of likes and followers. However, participants reported that they cared about how others interacted with their posts, indicating that Instagram interactions affected their feelings about themselves due to the importance of social and interpersonal connections. Participants also found that other user's posts were inspiring and motivating, which affected their emotions positively. Overall, they found that it was understood by Instagram users that individuals presented themselves differently in their online profiles than in real life.

A discrepancy in online presentation versus real life is understood (Yahya, 2017); therefore, it may affect discernment of trust in users. Trust is an impression upon the first view of a profile. Thus, accepting a follow request would mean allowing a stranger online to learn personal details and information based on user profiles, especially if the account is private. This would mean individuals must assess profile trustworthiness to accept follow requests and socialize online, per online impressions of the profile (Xu, 2014). Researchers in China investigated the trustworthiness of profiles upon first impressions and found that online trust was defined by the extent of confidence in an individual's profile information, which was assessed by provided cues in association with trustworthiness (Xu, 2014). The results of the study indicate that trust is the foundation of online relationships because online credibility relies on information provided by assessment of the user's profile. A user with a profile picture is more likely to be identified as trustworthy than one without, even if

they lack followers (Xu, 2014). This association of profile pictures with participant's trust was found to be due to a significant influence on perceived social presence. Participants trusting an online profile was contributed to their positive impression of personal safety due to perceived low risk and uncertainty. Xu et al. (2014) also found that a user with a high follower count was seen as more trustworthy in contrast to a user with a low follower count. This finding demonstrated that when no profile picture is present, follower count is used to determine trustworthiness based on perceived social connectivity of the user. Overall, their study found that the presence of a photo can enhance trust among unfamiliar individuals, showing the power of visual cues in shaping trust.

The abundance of visual cues on Instagram profiles helps soothe the discomfort of interaction with unfamiliar individuals (Xu, 2014). However, no study has investigated first impressions of sparsely detailed profiles. People vary in their preference of sharing personal details of their lives online, some share a lot and have very active profiles, others fall in the middle, and some don't share much at all. Therefore, the lack of or abundance of information about profiles can create space for uncertainty even if they are trustworthy in person. If a sparsely detailed profile sends a request to follow a detailed profile, the automatic judgment would be of caution and investigation to gain information about the sparsely detailed profile to judge how trustworthy, friendly, and safe they are.

This gap of first impressions in sparsely detailed profiles has not been investigated, and our research aims to explore how the absence of information in such profiles impacts the social perceptions of trust, friendliness, and safety. This is important as a lack of visibility or content may lead to unconscious judgments of distrust, insecurity, and unsafety, whether intentionally or not. Per the Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger, 1975), we hypothesize that a sparsely detailed Instagram profile, in comparison to a typical or popular profile, will arouse suspicion and create a negative first impression due to a lack of trust, friendliness, and safety. Our research aims to bring clarity and understanding of how profile activity influences the aforementioned social perceptions and individual's receptiveness to following and accepting follow requests. Thereby, insight can be provided into managing personal and professional profiles to foster positive impressions while aiding in the identification of potential red flags for improved online security and long-term digital footprint.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited in person at Kwantlen Polytechnic University's Surrey Campus location. They were asked to scan a QR code to complete an online survey. We acquired 98 participant responses in total. However, 34 responses were excluded on the basis that the survey was incomplete, and they did not provide consent to participate. Our final sample size of participants was 59, wherein 64% identified as men (n = 38) and 46% identified as women (n = 21). A majority of 43 participants (72.9%) were 20-24 years old, while the remaining 10 (16.9%) participants were 16-19 years of age. Additionally, five participants (8.5%) were 25-34 years old, and 1 participant (1.7%) was 45 years of age or older. All participants were Instagram users, as required for eligibility to participate in this study.

Profiles

We created three fake Instagram profiles using Canva (www.canva.com): a popular profile, a typical profile, and a sparsely detailed profile. All profiles were Caucasian women in their twenties to prevent confounding bias between profiles. The popular profile, username Alice, had a profile picture, a profile description, 1.6 million followers, 689 followings, 500 posts, 5 story highlights, and active post interactions such as 30+ comments and 75+ likes. The typical profile, username HayLay, had a profile picture, a profile description, 250 followers, 415 followings, 30 posts, 2 story highlights, and active post interactions such as 4+ comments and 20+ likes. The sparsely detailed profile, username Bella, had no profile picture, no profile description, 40 followers, 73 followings, 1 post, no story highlights, and active but minimal post interactions, such as 8 likes and 3 comments.

First Impressions

Participants were asked about their Instagram usage and had their responses measured by a 5-point Likert ratio scale, ranging from 1 (Less than 1 hour per week) to 5 (more than 3 hours per day). We measured what elements of a profile participants first noticed and gave them the option to select unlimited responses as applicable to their judgment. The response options were profile picture, number of posts, bio/description, recent posts, and other. Finally, we asked participants how important they deemed an active Instagram profile to form a first impression. Their responses were measured by a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (Not at all important) to 5 (Extremely important). After seeing

each profile, participants were then asked the following five key questions, each measured on a 5-point Likert scale: a) “How trustworthy does this profile appear to you?”, responses ranged from 1 (Not trustworthy at all) to 5 (Completely trustworthy); b) “How friendly does this profile appear to you?”, responses ranged from 1 (Not friendly at all) to 5 (Completely friendly); c) “How safe would you feel interacting with the person behind the profile?”, responses ranged from 1 (Not safe at all) to 5 (Completely safe); d) “How likely would you be to follow this user?”; and, e) “How likely would you be to accept a follow request from this user?”, responses for both ranged from 1 (Not at all likely) to 5 (Extremely likely).

Procedures

All data was collected online on Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com). Participants were approached on Kwantlen Polytechnic University Surrey Campus and asked to scan a QR code to complete an online survey. They could only participate in the survey if they had an Instagram account. Afterwards, they were asked to sign an online consent form and begin the survey. They were asked demographic, perception, and five key questions after being presented with the three profiles in random order—randomized by Qualtrics. The profiles were presented randomly to allow no room for the carryover effect—an effect from testing in one condition affecting participants in subsequent conditions. After all three profiles were presented, the participants were debriefed, and the survey was completed. The survey took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete.

Results

To analyze participants' Instagram perception data, we ran a frequency test using the statistical software program IBM SPSS statistics (version 30.0.0.0) to compare the varying responses about their usage of Instagram and first noticed details of a profile. The majority of 22 participants (37.3%) used Instagram for 1 to 3 hours per day, followed by 15 participants (25%) who reported using Instagram for more than 3 hours per day. Then, 10 participants (17%) reported use of Instagram for 1 to 3 hours per week, and 8 participants (14%) for less than an hour per week. Finally, 4 (7%) participants reported spending less than an hour on Instagram per day. A majority of 63% (n = 37) reported noticing the profile picture as the first element of an Instagram profile, followed by both (n = 16) the profile description (27%) and the most recent post (27%). Then, participants (n = 15) reported noticing the number of posts (25%) of a profile, and lastly (n = 10) reported

other (17%). When looking at perceptions of an Instagram profile's importance on first impressions, participants were fairly neutral ($M = 2.78$; $SD = 1.25$, on a 5-point scale). Although we collected participant age information for four different age groups, discriminant analysis between age categories were not conducted because of the small number of respondents per age category. Analyses were conducted collapsed across all age groups.

A repeated measures ANOVA was then conducted to compare the three profile types—popular, typical, and sparse—on the five variable outcomes of the trust, friendliness, safety, follow, and accept follow request. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and ANOVA results. As seen in this Table, there were statistically significant differences, with large effect sizes, for all five outcome variables.

We conducted follow-up tests using a Bonferroni correction which showed that participants who viewed the sparse profile rated it less trustworthy, safe, and friendly than both the popular and typical profiles. Participants were also less likely to follow and accept requests from the sparse profile in comparison to the popular and typical profiles. There were no differences between the popular and typical profiles.

Discussion

Our study examined the effect of three Instagram profiles— popular, typical, and sparse profiles— on first impressions of trust, friendliness, safety, and likelihood to follow and accept follow requests. Our hypothesis that a sparsely detailed Instagram profile would arouse suspicion and create a negative first impression due to a lack of detail was supported. Our findings suggested that profile detail affects first impressions, as the popular and typical profiles each created an uncertain first impression, while the sparsely detailed profile created a negative first impression. A lack of trust due to unfamiliarity with profile users may have aided in uncertain first impressions. Our findings of the popular and the typical profiles receiving higher means than the sparse profile on all five first impressions variables suggest that a profile with a lot of detail—such as profile picture and description, posts, story highlights, followers, followings, and post interactions of likes and comments—is perceived uncertainly on first impression. This could suggest that higher profile activity such as followers, followings, posts, likes, and comments creates no positive difference of first impression on viewers since the profiles only vary in such

regards. Implying that detail level and interaction with other profiles does not demonstrate trustworthiness, safety, and friendliness of the user profile.

The difference between typical profile, which has a basic amount of information about the user and activity level that a typical person would have on their profile, and the popular profile, which has a large amount of user information and high activity, is the difference in platform following and activity. This difference did not present the popular profile as any more positive than it did the typical, showing that large following, follower, and activity numbers on Instagram does not affect first impressions nor does it make a profile seem any more trustworthy than the average profile. This is inconsistent with earlier findings by Xu (2024) where the higher a user's follower count, the more trustworthy it was seen in contrast to a lower follower count. The participants did not know either user, and their first impression was not any different on the five variables for the popular and typical profiles. Ultimately, rejecting earlier findings of a study where individuals do not tend to make positive or negative judgments of profiles based on the number of likes and followers (Yahya, 2017), as both popular and typical profiles were viewed with similar uncertainty, but the sparse was viewed negatively in comparison.

The lack of personal detail of the sparse profile aroused suspicion per lack of information of profile user. Thus, having been viewed negatively in comparison to the popular and typical profiles per the Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger, 1975)—how a lack of information about a person can heighten uncertainty in sociality, ultimately influencing perceptions of safety, trustworthiness, and approachability. Our findings did not support earlier research findings where the number of likes on posts of a profile being received positively in association with perceptions of extraversion and, thus, friendliness (Pelled, 2017), as neither popular nor typical was favoured positively. The number of likes on posts did not create an association of friendliness, thus demonstrating that user engagement is not seen as a reflection of profile users character traits. Therefore, displaying that post interaction does not affect first impressions of friendliness negatively nor positively. Which further explains the lack of difference in uncertain first impressions of the popular and typical profiles.

In contrast to the popular and typical profiles, the sparse profile was perceived as the worst in all five variable categories, supporting our hypothesis that a lack of detail and activity arouses suspicion, thus, leaving a negative first impression of trust, friendliness,

safety, likelihood to follow, and accept follow requests. These results show that participants did not perceive a lack of detail positively, but rather negatively, which supports the Uncertainty Reduction Theory (Berger, 1975). The low level of detail in the sparse profile heightened uncertainty, as suggested by the theory, and caused a negative influence on participants' perception of safety, trustworthiness, and approachability—defined by following and accepting requests as online approachability. In contrast to the sparse, the popular and typical profiles decreased uncertainty by providing an abundance of personal information which influenced a less negative perception of safety, trust, and approachability. Our results also support earlier findings where perceived risk and uncertainty in profiles led to a lack of trust and vice versa which impacts the impression of trust on the judgment of profiles (Xu, 2014); the perceived risk and uncertainty of the sparse profile increased judgment of distrust, in contrast to uncertain judgment of trust in the popular and typical profiles. Overall, the level of profile detail affects first impressions. The takeaway of our study is that a detailed profile creates an uncertain first impression, while a profile with low detail curates a negative first impression. Therefore, profiles should be curated with detail if seeking to leave a better first impression online.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study was the convenience sample of Kwantlen Polytechnic University students; this leads to low generalizability to the rest of the population. More research assessing other adults' perceptions of the various profiles on first impressions would broaden generalizability and understanding of the general population. A second limitation is our sample size of 59 participants, which creates low generalizability to the rest of the population. A larger sample size may aid in further significant findings and higher understanding of populations. Our lack of discriminant analysis may have understated the difference of impression per age groups in our sample. A broader age range in sample size may display further findings. Moreover, our choice of Instagram as the visual-based social media to assess the impact of profile detail on first impressions also lowers generalizability to other visual-based social media platforms since the platform layout may differ. Thus, our findings may not apply to social media platforms outside of Instagram.

Implications & Applications

Further implications or applications of our study could be usage by individuals or companies seeking to create better Instagram first impressions by curating detailed profiles—as supported by our findings of detailed profiles curating less uncertain first impressions than sparse profiles—that may aid in growth strategies for higher profile interactions, follower engagement, enhanced credibility, and improving audience connection and interaction; making our research valuable for personal branding and marketing strategies on Instagram. Further inquiries on the effect of various detailed profiles upon first impressions with larger sample sizes and varying age groups would be beneficial to understand the full implications of our research on a broad scale to the rest of the population and identify any differences in first impression based on age cohorts. Additional research in understanding of how user engagement activity—per posts, likes, and comments—influences viewers first impression of the profile user will aid in broader implications and applications of profile perception by user engagement. Our efficient and simple study design allowed for causal inference of profile types upon first impressions. Moreover, our findings of the negative perception of sparsely detailed Instagram profiles can help users identify red flags in profiles, aiding in protection from impersonators, scammers, and deceptive accounts. Additionally, Instagram and other visual-based social media platforms may use this research as a starting point to further investigate and find justification for flagging sparsely detailed profiles as a measure to protect users and reduce risks of online deception, as well as help users improve online engagement by suggesting curation of a detailed profile.

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Tables

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and ANOVA Result for the Effect of Various Instagram Profiles First Impressions on Five Variables

	Popular		Typical		Sparse				
Variable	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*F(2, 106)*	*p*	n^2
Trust	**2.80**	1.31	**2.52**	1.19	1.74	0.98	14.65	< .001	.22
Friendly	**2.83**	1.05	**2.62**	1.16	1.75	0.98	19.19	< .001	.27
Safe	**2.63**	1.16	**2.54**	1.20	1.71	0.92	14.65	< .001	.22
Follow	**2.70**	1.17	**2.51**	1.17	1.87	1.04	10.52	< .001	.17
Accept	**2.87**	1.20	**2.75**	1.18	1.96	1.07	11.58	< .001	.19

Note. No difference in conditions between Popular and Typical profiles. Bolded means are significantly higher than the Sparse profile condition ($p < .05$, Bonferroni post hoc comparisons).