

A Candid Advantage? The Social Benefits of Candid Photos

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Abstract

Photos are a ubiquitous mode of social communication. Analysis of thousands of online profiles finds that people overwhelmingly post posed photos of themselves. But might candid photos actually lead observers to react more favorably? Five studies test this possibility. Compared to posed photos, candid photos made observers feel more connected to the poster, feel more interested in getting to know or date them, and like them more. This was driven by candid photos making people seem more genuine, which made others react more favorably. Furthermore, consistent with the hypothesized role of genuineness, the benefits of candid photos were diminished when observers learned that the poster realized their photo was being taken. These findings highlight the role of authenticity in person perception and a potential disconnect between photo posters and viewers. Although posters seem to post mostly posed photos, observers may prefer candid photos because they provide a more authentic sense of who the poster really is.

Keywords

interpersonal perception, authenticity, self-presentation, social media, photography

Imagine you are updating your Facebook profile and picking a photo to use. Which would you pick? A posed photo of yourself or a candid one?

Appearances matter. Across a range of contexts, people make inferences about others based on how they look (Harker & Keltner, 2001; Todorov, Said, & Verosky, 2011; Vazire & Gosling, 2004; Zebrowitz, 2011), and inferences made from appearances predict everything from who people date (Hitsch, Hortacsu, & Ariely, 2010) to which political candidates get elected (Olivola & Todorov, 2010).

Not surprisingly, then, when picking photos to display, impression management concerns (Leary & Kowalski, 1990) often drive choice. People pick images that they think will lead to desired outcomes (e.g., finding dates or making friends). For example, online daters and Facebook users pick profile photos that make them look more fit (Hancock & Toma, 2009) and attractive and fun-loving (Strano, 2008).

Consistent with this, most online contexts are dominated by posed photos. Posed photos involve someone looking directly at the camera and picking a particular position, to present themselves in a certain way. Field data (see Online Supplemental Materials) examining a range of online outlets illustrates that people overwhelmingly post posed photos of themselves. Whether looking at dating profiles (OkCupid: 93.2%), binomial test $p < .001$, Facebook profiles (87.6%), $p < .001$, Facebook News Feed photos (81.5%), $p < .001$, or profiles on Meetup.com (92.8%), $p < .001$, most photos are posed.

The benefits of posed photos are clear. By carefully constructing the image and posing in a certain way, posters can

shape how they come across to others. They can work to communicate desired identities and feel more control over the impression they are making (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980).

But might there be benefits to candid photos as well? Candid photos don't involve posing and capture people acting naturally or spontaneously. While posters may like posed photos because they provide control over the self being conveyed, observers may feel differently.

We suggest that, particularly in the context of friendship and dating, observers may react more favorably to candid photos because they seem more genuine. Genuineness, or sincerity, involves expressing one's true, authentic nature, or the absence of trying to convey or signal things to others. Because posed photos often involve self-presentational effort, they don't provide as much information about who someone actually is (i.e., their authentic self). Candid photos should be more likely to be perceived as genuine because it is not clear if the person knows the photo is being taken. As such, candid photos seem to provide a glimpse into what someone is truly like, an unvarnished perspective on how they look and behave when others aren't looking.

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Genuineness is a valued feature of people's personalities (Anderson, 1968), emotional displays (Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen, & Sideman, 2005), communications (Barasch, Berman, & Small, 2016), and relationships (Swann, De La Ronde, & Hixon, 1994). Seeming genuine can increase liking and persuasion because it makes it seem like someone isn't acting a certain way to achieve a hidden or concealed objective (Campbell & Kirmani, 2000; Tuk, Verlegh, Smidts, & Wigboldus, 2008). Gaining insight into even a small aspect of someone's true nature makes people like them more (Aronson, Willerman, & Floyd, 1966), while misrepresentation of the self can decrease liking and trust (Schweitzer, Hershey, & Bradlow, 2006; Tyler, Feldman, & Reichert, 2006). Thus, particularly in contexts like dating or being friends, candid photos may generate more positive responses.

Taken together, we expect that candid photos can elicit more favorable responses because observers should see them as more genuine or authentic. While recent work has examined inferences from online presence (e.g., personal websites and social media accounts; Gosling et al., 2011; Vazire & Gosling, 2004) and how different photos of the same person can lead to different judgments (Jenkins et al., 2011; Todorov & Porter, 2014), there has been less attention to specific features of photos that produce different impressions. We study a key photo characteristic and examine how it affects person perception.

Five studies test these hypotheses. Study 1 examines whether candid photos increase interest in friendship (Study 1a) and dating (Study 1b). Studies 2a and 2b extend these effects using candid and posed photos of the same person and investigate the underlying process of genuineness. Finally, in Study 3, we manipulate the genuineness process directly and test for moderation by awareness that the photo is being taken.

Study 1: Posed Versus Candid

Study 1 provides a preliminary test of whether observers respond more favorably to candid photos. We test whether people are more interested in being friends with someone (1a) or dating them (1b) if that person posted candid (rather than posed) photos.

Study 1a Method: Facebook

Participants ($N = 59$, mean age = 27.1, 64% male) imagined they were on Facebook, browsing peoples' profiles. Sample size was determined using a target rule of 60 participants per condition. In this and all subsequent studies, attention checks were used before condition was assigned, and data were only analyzed for people who passed the attention check, leading to slightly smaller sample sizes. Participants were told that they would see a series of profile photos and were asked how interested they were in being friends with the person in the photo. All participants were shown the same 30 photos, one at a time. Approximately, half the photos were of men and the other half of women.

We selected photos, so that half were candid and half were posed. The photos were taken from the Facebook and OkCupid field data samples discussed in the Introduction, balancing gender, candid/posed, and origin (i.e., Facebook or OkCupid). To decrease the possibility that any effects could be driven by the different people in the two types of photos, rather than photo type itself, we picked photos that were rated as equally attractive in a pretest. Participants ($N = 40$) were shown each of the 30 photos, one by one, and asked to rate how attractive the person was. There was no difference between the candid ($M = 5.05$) and posed photos ($M = 4.98$; $F < .5$, $p > .5$, $\eta_p^2 = .011$, 95% confidence interval [CI] = $[-.147, .286]$).

For each photo, participants in the main study rated how interested they were in being friends with the person (1 = *not at all interested*, 7 = *extremely interested*). Then, they completed some demographic measures and were debriefed. We averaged these ratings across each type of photo to create two indices: one for candid photos and one for posed photos.

Study 1b Method: Online Dating

Study 1b was similar to Study 1a except it focused on online dating. Participants ($N = 66$, mean age = 27.4, 64% male) were asked to imagine that they were single and were on OkCupid looking at potential dating partners.

All participants were shown the same 30 photos as Study 1a but were asked to only rate photos of the gender of people they would be interested in dating (i.e., heterosexual men rated photos of women, homosexual men rated photos of men, bisexual participants rated both, and participants could decide not to rate a photo by not giving it a score).

For each photo, participants rated how interested they would be in dating the person (1 = *not at all interested*, 7 = *extremely interested*). Then, they completed some demographic measures and were debriefed. We averaged these ratings across each type of photo to create two indices: one for candid photos and one for posed photos.

Results

Study 1a

As predicted, a repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) shows that the type of photo used influenced whether observers wanted to be friends with the person, $F(1, 58) = 7.83$, $p = .007$, $\eta_p^2 = .119$, 95% CI $[.090, .543]$. Observers were more interested in being friends with people who used candid photos ($M = 5.02$, standard deviation [SD] = 1.08) than posed ones ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.21$).

Study 1b

Similarly, a repeated measures ANOVA shows that the type of photo used influenced how interested observers were in dating the person, $F(1, 65) = 34.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .343$, 95% CI $[.421, .859]$. Observers were more interested in dating people

who used candid photos ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 1.46$) than posed ones ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 1.53$).

Discussion

Study 1 provides preliminary support for our theorizing. Observers were more interested in being friends with someone (Study 1a), or dating them (Study 1b), if that person used a candid (rather than a posed) photo.

One might wonder, however, whether the effect was driven by the different people in the different photos rather than photo type. While the candid and posed photos did not differ in attractiveness, there might be other differences between the types of people who post posed photos versus candid photos that could influence interest in friendship or dating. To more directly rule out this possibility, Study 2 uses candid and posed photos of the exact same person.

Study 2: The Underlying Role of Genuineness

Study 2 has two main goals. First, we conduct a more stringent test of favorable responses to candid photos. We examine whether even among multiple photos of the exact same person, candid photos generate more favorable responses among observers compared to posed photos.

Second, we begin to test the hypothesized process. We measure how genuine observers think the person in the photo seems and examine whether that drives increased favorability.

Stimulus Generation

Before conducting the main study, we collected a set of matched photo pairs of the same people (one candid and one posed). Participants ($N = 54$, 50% male) were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk. Eight participants did not follow directions (e.g., uploading group photos or two of the same photo) and were excluded, leaving 46 participants.

On separate pages, they were asked to upload two photos of themselves, one posed and one candid. For the posed (candid) photo they were asked to "Find a photo that you like of yourself that is posed [candid] . . . i.e., where you are [NOT] posing for the camera" that they had never used for an online profile picture previously. Which photo they were asked to upload first was randomized across participants.

Main Study Method

Participants ($N = 92$, mean age = 26.5, 63% male) were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk. They were told that they would see someone's Facebook profile photo and respond to the questions that follow.

Each participant was yoked to one photo from the stimulus set, so half the participants saw a candid photo, while the other half saw a posed one. Then, participants rated our key

dependent variable: how interested they would be in getting to know the person better (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*).

Finally, to test the hypothesized process, participants rated how genuine the person seemed based on their photo (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*).

Results

Observer Reaction

As predicted, a one-way ANOVA shows that observers were more interested in getting to know someone whether that person used a candid ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 1.77$) rather than posed ($M = 2.78$, $SD = 1.72$) photo, $F(1, 90) = 5.42$, $p = .022$, $\eta_p^2 = .057$, 95% CI [0.124, 1.571].

Perceived Genuineness

Further, observers thought the person seemed more genuine if they use a candid photo ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.43$ vs. 4.04, $SD = 1.65$), $F(1, 90) = 4.12$, $p = .045$, $\eta_p^2 = .044$, 95% CI [0.139, 1.290].

Mediation

Finally, the bootstrap mediation method (using the bootstrap procedure with 10,000 samples; Hayes, Preacher, & Myers, 2011; SPSS Macro PROCESS Model 4) illustrates that perceived genuineness drove the impact of photo type on desire to get to know the person better (indirect effect = .379, standard error [SE] = .207, 95% CI does not include 0 [.018, .838]). Relative to posed photos, candid photos made people seem more genuine ($a = .65$, $p < .001$), which increased observers desire to get to know them better ($b = .58$, $p < .001$). Once we included genuineness in our model, the effect of photo type on interest in getting to know the person decreased from $c = .85$, $p = .02$ to $c' = 0.47$, $p = .15$.

Study 2b

We find similar results even when observers are considering photos of people they already know. Participants ($N = 180$) went on Facebook and identified the first candid and first posed profile picture in their News Feed. Then, they rated how connected they felt to that individual after viewing the photo and how genuine the photo seemed.

Consistent with the main study, observers felt more connected to the person if he or she posted a candid photo ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 2.26$) as opposed to a posed one ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 2.36$), $F(1, 179) = 6.74$, $p = .010$, $\eta_p^2 = .036$, 95% CI [0.145, 1.066], and rated the person as more genuine ($M_{\text{candid}} = 6.54$, $SD = 1.74$ vs. $M_{\text{posed}} = 5.91$, $SD = 2.01$), $F(1, 179) = 13.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .070$, 95% CI [0.292, 0.975]. Further, perceived genuineness mediated the effect of photo type on connectedness (indirect effect = .339, $SE = .114$, 95% CI [.137, .581]; MEMORE macro for within-subject mediation; Judd, Kenny, & McClelland, 2001; Montoya & Hayes,

2015). Thus, even when people are looking at pictures of someone they know, candid photos generate more positive responses. Note, however, that this study’s within-subjects design makes it more susceptible to demand concerns.

Discussion

Study 2 provides further evidence of the benefit of candid photos and suggests why observers might prefer them. Even when considering photos of the same person, a candid photo made observers more interested in getting to know the person (Study 2a) and feel more connected to them (Study 2b). Further, these effects were mediated by perceived genuineness. Compared to posed photos, candid photos made the person in the photo seem more genuine, which elicited more favorable responses from observers.

Using matched photos of the same person casts doubt on the possibility that differences in the photo target drove the effect, but one could still wonder whether some other aspect of the photo, beyond its candid or posed nature, is driving things. Maybe the posed photos were just worse photos, for example, or showed people doing boring things.

While it is difficult to rule this alternative account out entirely, ancillary data suggest that is not the case. In addition to providing candid and posed photos of themselves, stimulus generation participants were asked which photo they would use as their Facebook profile picture. An overwhelming number said they would prefer to use the posed photo (84.8%) rather than the candid one (15.2%), $p < .001$, arguing against the notion that the posed photos were worse or more boring in general. We find the same result (i.e., preference for posed photos) when different sets of people selected which photo of theirs they would post on an online dating site ($N = 49$; 65.3% posed vs. 34.7% candid), $p = .03$, or when they were directly asked “which photo would lead people to want to date you” ($N = 44$; 72.7% posed vs. 27.3% candid), $p < .001$, or “which photo would lead people to want to be friends with you” ($N = 43$; 67.4% posed vs. 32.6% candid), $p = .02$. In addition to casting doubt on this alternative explanation, these data, combined with the field data in the introduction, suggest a potential disconnect between photo posters and observers, a point we return to in the General Discussion section.

Study 3: Testing Genuineness via Moderation

Study 3 further tests the role of genuineness by manipulating it directly and examining whether it moderates the effect of photo type on observer reactions.

Authenticity perceptions are shaped not only by a photo’s image but also what went into taking the photo (i.e., whether the person realized the photo was being taken or not). For example, consider a photo where someone is looking off into the distance. The photo may look candid, but learning that the person knew the photo was being taken would make it seem less genuine. In other words, having information that the

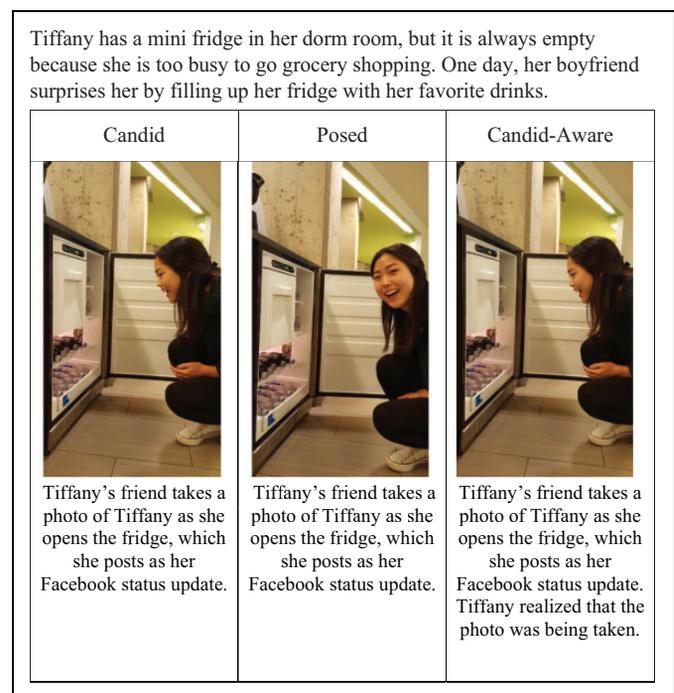


Figure 1. Example photos and scenario from Study 3.

subject of a candid photo was aware that the moment was being photographed might make the image seem less like an authentic depiction of who they truly are. As a result, awareness should moderate the positive effect of candidness, and lead otherwise candid-looking photos to have the same effect on observers as posed ones. Study 3 tests this possibility.

Method

Eight hundred one participants (mean age = 34.7, 42% male) were randomly assigned to one of 18 different conditions in a 3 (Photo Type: *candid* vs. *posed* vs. *candid-aware*) × 6 (stimulus sample) between-subject design. Sample size was determined using a target rule of at least 40 participants per condition (per stimulus).

All participants read a short scenario about one of the target individuals. This scenario described an event in the person’s life (e.g., going on vacation or receiving a gift) where a photo was taken of them, which they subsequently posted as a Facebook status update.

Participants then viewed a photo of the person (see, e.g., Figure 1), and we manipulated photo type. In the posed condition, the target was engaging in the event and looking directly at the camera. The candid condition was almost identical (i.e., same positions, background, facial expression, etc.), except that instead of posing, the target person was engaging in the event and looking away from the camera. No additional information about the target or their awareness of the photography was provided in either condition. Finally, an additional candid condition tested the role of genuineness. In the candid-aware condition, participants viewed the same photo as the candid

condition but were told that the target realized the photo was being taken. This allowed us to hold the photo constant, while manipulating genuineness through photo taking awareness. See scenario and photo in Figure 1 for an example.

After looking at the photo, participants completed the dependent variable: observer reactions to the target individual. In particular, participants responded to 5 items: “How much do you like this individual?” “How much would you like to hang out with this individual?” “How much would you like to get to know this individual?” “How excited are you to get to know this individual?” and “How connected do you feel to this individual?” (first 3 items: 1 = *not at all* to 9 = *a lot*; last 2 items: 1 = *not at all* to 9 = *extremely*; $\alpha = .96$, averaged to form an *observer reaction index*).

Next, to test the hypothesized process, we measured perceived genuineness using the measure from Study 2.

To ensure that attractiveness was not driving the results, participants also rated how attractive the target individual seemed. As expected, there was no difference across conditions, $F(2,784) = 2.71, p = .114$. Moreover, consistent with our suggestion that posed photos appear more self-presentational, when asked “How much do you think this individual was trying to impress people by using this as their photo?” and “How much do you think this individual cares about how they look to you in their photo?” (1 = *not at all* to 9 = *extremely*), participants thought targets who posted posed photos were more self-presentational ($ps < .01$).

Finally, as a manipulation check, participants were asked how aware the target individual was that the photo was being taken (1 = *not at all* to 9 = *extremely*). As expected, observers thought target individual was less aware that the photo was being taken in the candid ($M = 4.42, SD = 2.56$) than posed condition ($M = 5.68, SD = 2.59$), $t(515) = -5.43, p < .001$, 95% CI [-1.710, -0.802]. Further, the candid-aware condition raised perceived awareness above the candid condition ($M = 4.92, SD = 2.72$), $t(544) = -2.21, p = .027$, 95% CI [-0.941, -0.056].

Results

For all dependent measures, we conducted a mixed-model ANOVA with photo type (candid vs. posed vs. candid-aware) as a fixed factor and stimulus sample as a random factor. As expected, there were no Photo Type \times Stimulus Sample interactions on any dependent measures ($ps > .89$).

Observer Reaction

Even though it was the same person in the same situation across all conditions, as expected, a one-way ANOVA indicated that photo type influenced observer reactions, $F(2,784) = 19.93, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .795$. Looking at the two original conditions, consistent with Studies 1 and 2, observers felt more favorably toward the target individual when her photo was candid ($M = 4.96, SD = 2.17$) rather than posed ($M = 4.33, SD = 2.18$), $t(515) = 3.46, p = .001$, 95% CI [0.275, 0.994].

However, telling participants that the target individual was aware the candid photo was being taken (candid-aware condition), decreased favorability ($M = 4.20, SD = 2.05$) relative to the candid condition, $t(544) = 4.18, p < .001$, 95% CI [0.396, 1.098], to the level of the posed condition, $t(542) = -0.63, p = .768$, 95% CI [-0.463, 0.239].

Genuineness

Perceived genuineness followed a similar pattern, $F(2,784) = 36.09, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .875$. Looking at the two original conditions, observers thought the target individual was more genuine when her photo was candid ($M = 6.99, SD = 2.17$) than when it was posed ($M = 6.19, SD = 2.48$), $t(515) = 3.97, p < .001$, 95% CI [0.410, 1.214]. Telling participants that the target individual was aware the candid photo was being taken (candid-aware condition), however, decreased perceived genuineness ($M = 5.83, SD = 2.48$) relative to the candid condition, $t(544) = 5.52, p < .001$, 95% CI [0.709, 1.492], to the level of the posed condition, $t(542) = -1.45, p = .148$, 95% CI [-0.681, 0.103].

Mediation

Finally, a mediation analysis (using the bootstrap procedure with 10,000 samples; Hayes, Preacher, & Myers, 2011; SPSS Macro PROCESS Model 4) illustrates that perceived genuineness drove the impact of photo type on response favorability. The independent variable was photo type (*candid* = 1, *posed* = 0), the mediator was genuineness, and the dependent variable was our measure of observer responses. Consistent with Study 2, we find a significant indirect effect of genuineness (indirect effect = .367, $SE = .100$, 95% CI [.184, .573]). Posting a candid photo increased perceptions of genuineness ($a = .80, p < .001$), and as genuineness increased, so did observer favorability ($b = 0.46, p < .001$). Once we included perceived genuineness in our model, the effect of photo type on favorability decreased from $c = .63, p = .001$ to $c' = 0.27, p = .118$. Results are the same when including the candid-aware (*code* = 0) condition (indirect effect = .420, $SE = .078$, 95% CI [.273, .577]).

General Discussion

Photos are a ubiquitous channel of social communication. They are used to make inferences about personalities and characteristics of others and facilitate decision-making in a variety of domains. Changes in technology have only increased their use. People upload and share 1.8 billion photos a day (Meeker & Wu, 2013), and images play an increasingly important role in the formation and maintenance of social relationships, as well as how people enjoy and remember their experiences (Diehl, Zauberman, & Barasch, 2016; Barasch et al., 2017).

The present research suggests a potential benefit to candid photos. Compared to posed photos, candid photos made observers react more favorably to posters. They were more interested in being friends with or going on a date with them, felt more connected to them, and liked them more overall.

Further, this was driven, at least in part, by perceived genuineness. Candid photos made photo targets seem more genuine, which made observers respond more favorably to them.

These findings have a variety of implications for self-presentation. People often assume that a curated, polished version of the self will generate the most favorable responses—that by smoothing rough edges and presenting one's best side, others will like and want to interact with them more. But this assumption is not always correct. In some cases, observers may actually prefer an unvarnished perspective because it seems more genuine. Observers may also value authenticity because it gives them a more accurate sense of another person's true self. This does not mean that attractiveness does not matter, but rather that it is only one dimension that drives interaction preferences.

Of course, there are some situations where more polish may be useful. Additional data we collected, for example, show that people are more interested in hiring someone who used a posed rather than candid photo on LinkedIn. Thus, which photo type is more beneficial may depend on how the specific context shapes the inferences people draw from a candid photo and the relative value placed on genuineness. There may be some situations where photo posters would prefer to show the less polished but more accurate view of themselves, for example, with established relationships (Swann et al., 1994) or in an effort to feel more connected with others (Swann, Milton, & Polzer, 2000). Future work might also examine how a mixture of candid and posed photos are perceived. It may be optimal to include some of each in one's profile to achieve the benefits of both photo types.

What makes a photo seem candid or genuine? As shown in Study 3, perceived awareness is key. Observers don't always know for sure whether someone knew a photo was being taken, so they likely use other cues for help. It's hard to seem candid when shot up close, so distance may be one such cue. Also, because candid photos involve the person not looking at the camera, whether the target person is engaged in another activity may be another cue. Indeed, ancillary analysis of images from Study 2 finds that candid photos involve people who are further away and doing other things. Future work may want to investigate these and other features of photos that impact how individuals are evaluated (e.g., lighting, head tilt, attractiveness, etc.) as well as the relative strength of their effects on observer reactions.

Future research may also want to consider how other aspects of candid versus posed photos affect judgments. For example, while it cannot explain the effect of perceived genuineness, the fact that candid photos are potentially rarer (i.e., posted less frequently than posed ones) may also contribute to observers' favorable reactions. This would be diminished if candid photos became more common.

Moreover, it would be interesting to explore how accurate people are regarding how their photos are perceived. While some work has demonstrated that metaperceptions about how others will judge one's traits and personality can be quite accurate (e.g., Carlson, Furr, & Vazire, 2010), it is possible that in the context of photo perceptions that people would not have as

much insight. Indeed, some of our data suggest that people may not always be correct. The field data show that people overwhelmingly post posed photos, and ancillary data from Study 2 show that when asked to select photos, posters not only choose posed photos but think that posed photos will generate more favorable responses (i.e., get them more dates or make them more friends). This suggests a potential disconnect between photo posters and observers, and one that deserves further attention. Photo posters may like posed photos because it gives them the feeling of controlling the impression they are making, but that same control may make observers view them less favorably.

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Supplemental Material

The supplemental material is available in the online version of the article.

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