

An Evaluation of Student Conformity When Using Professor Rating Websites

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Are all students equally likely to utilize websites like RateMyProfessor to determine the appropriate courses to take in college? Positive and negative professor reviews were examined to discover whether previous student feedback might influence future students' perceptions of instructor attractiveness and anticipated academic effort. Two hypothetical professors, Professor X and A were created for this study. Each professor had either positive or negative commentary. Two hypotheses were formulated: (1) there would be a main effect between the low self-esteem individuals and the likelihood of choosing Professor X, with positive student commentary; and (2) students that are attracted to a professor review will anticipate more positive academic effort for the course. The Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale was used to evaluate whether self-esteem level would be predictive of choosing a professor with positive student commentary. Additionally, perception questions were formulated to assess "attraction to professor" and "positive academic effort." Results indicated that students that received a positive feedback review were more attracted to the professor. Attraction ratings to the professor review failed to predict a students' academic effort. Overall, the findings support the reliability for the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Attraction to Professor measure, and the Positive Academic Effort measure. Further studies should measure perceptions of the RateMyProfessor reviews as students are actually examining potential professors as well as, whether a student's grade point average is a variable in the likelihood of students to use the website to locate professors with more favorable student commentary.

INTRODUCTION

Who Needs RateMyProfessor.com? Evaluating Student Conformity

Instructor evaluations and conformity have been popular and contemporary research topics. Research has evaluated the reasons in which students are led to assess their instructors in a positive or negative way. In addition, research has evaluated student confidence in their judgments and conformity to others beliefs. RateMyProfessor.com is the largest online professor review website. Over 1.5 million professors are listed on the website from colleges and universities in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. The website allows students to numerically rate and write commentary about professors so that other students may obtain insight to which professors are recommended and which might not be a good choice for them. Although plenty of research has been conducted to assess how students evaluate their instructors, little research assesses the relationship between the potential students' self-esteem, perceived attraction to a professor and the anticipated academic performance after reviewing the professor's review. The purpose of this study is to determine the importance of professor reviews for prospective students that use websites like RateMyProfessor (RMP)

To demonstrate how professor reviews are conceived, researchers have assessed whether course difficulty has a part in the evaluations. Addison, Best, and Warrington (2006) evaluate whether instructor ratings are a result of preconceived notions of difficulty for a course, or whether ratings are reflective of the final grade earned by a student. The researchers hypothesized that student evaluations and ratings of the instructor would be lower if the class was more difficult than originally perceived. Similarly, the researchers hypothesized that if the course was easier than the student had initially expected, the instructor evaluation would be higher. Results confirmed the researcher's initial hypothesis; students' evaluations did correlate to the predicted difficulty of the class.

Similar to research that studied the relationship between student's preconceived perceptions of course difficulty and satisfaction with an instructor, research has also assessed the relationship between student self-esteem and their perception of the instructor's behavior. Ismail and Majeed (2011) studied student's perceptions of instructors being either supportive or controlling. Academic achievement within the classroom was measured to distinguish between high achiever students and low achiever students. The researchers formulated three hypotheses: (1) high achiever students would have higher self-esteem than low achiever students; (2) high achiever students would perceive instructors as more supportive than low achiever students; and (3) students that were measured as low achievers would perceive their instructor to be more controlling and less supportive.

Participants completed a self-esteem scale, a questionnaire to measure their perceptions of the instructor's controlling behavior, and a questionnaire to measure their perceptions of the instructor's supportive behavior. Lastly, students were divided into either the high achiever category

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(HAC) or the low achiever category (LAC) based on school reports and instructor assistance.

The researcher's hypotheses were confirmed. Ismail and Majeed (2011) found that students that were HAC perceived instructors as supportive and less controlling. The students' perceptions of instructors being either controlling or supportive were inversely related for both the HAC and the LAC. The HAC felt that instructors were more supportive and less controlling. However, the LAC believed the instructor behavior was more controlling and less supportive. A significant difference in self-esteem scores existed between the HAC and the LAC (Ismail & Majeed, 2011).

Shifting from variables that are based on student perceptions, researchers have also focused on issues regarding student conformity when expectations to explain judgments were present. Torelli (2006) examined the influence of consumers' perception of self with regard to their use of others opinions as a basis for judgment. This study identifies interdependent self-concept as the perception of self that is connected to others and independent self-concept, the perception of self that is separate from others. Torelli examined whether individuals primed with interdependence and independence would conform to others beliefs based on whether they expected to explain their judgments. The experiment utilized a hypothetical allergy drug that was explained by researchers to have many positive features but could also have undesirable side effects for individuals who exercise regularly. The participants read either an interdependent or independent story, performed an "unrelated" task evaluating the allergy drug, and were informed that they would be either explaining their judgment to a small group or their judgment would remain anonymous. The researchers goal was to determine which group of individuals whether primed with interdependence or with independence would conform to others beliefs regardless of expectations to explain their judgments. The questionnaire given utilized a likert scale that assessed whether the participants believed the allergy drug involved cause between safe to substantial risk.

Torelli (2006) found that participants were more likely to rely on the judgments of others when they were primed with interdependence and when expected to explain their judgments to others. Participants that were primed with independent self-concepts would not conform to others opinions, regardless of whether they had to explain their judgment to others. Torrelli's research is beneficial in understanding whether students that are primed with interdependence might be more likely to rely on the commentary found on professor reviews to choose an instructor.

Whereas past research has considered the issue of social pressure and conformity, it is also important to evaluate how judgments are construed. Landry, Kurkul, and Poirier (2010) assess how students using the RMP) website will interpret commentary and trust that it is valid. The researchers hypothesized that instructors that were rated as easy would have overall more positive commentary and that students would evaluate "the easiness of instructors", one of the RMP variables, to be the most beneficial. Participants included 550 undergraduate students that first completed a demographic

questionnaire including their high school and college GPA's and then specified whether they had any experience in participating in studies related to the RateMyProfessor website. Participants indicated if they had ever used the website before and ranked how important each factor on the website was when choosing a professor and their level of trust for the reviews on the website.

The researcher's hypothesis was not confirmed. The numerical ratings for Overall Quality, Helpfulness, and Clarity were rated to be more important to students. Landry et al. (2010) found that 90% of participants had used the RateMyProfessor website to assess or choose their professors. Analysis of the data revealed that reviewed the ratings online of instructors generally trusted the commentary from previous students. Additionally, *t*-test were run to compare the trust scores of men ($M= 3.41$, $SD= 0.79$) and women ($M= 3.49$, $SD = 0.71$), revealing no significant difference in trust among the genders.

In addition to research that has assessed the variables listed on the RateMyProfessor website, research has also evaluated what variables are most influential in student satisfaction of an instructor. Maceli, Fogliasso, and Baack (2001) assess the relationship between gender and student satisfaction of an instructor. The researchers hypothesized that student gender, instructor gender, and degree of classroom respect will influence the satisfaction students will experience with their instructor (Maceli et al., 2001).

Participants included undergraduate students as well as two male and two female instructors (Maceli et al., 2001). For both pairs, one male and one female instructor were about the same age and there was a 10-year age difference between the two age sets.

Researchers conducted a *t*-test that revealed a significant difference in the students rating for instructor satisfaction and a higher mean of satisfaction for female instructors. Maceli (2001) found that the student satisfaction with course presentation and student satisfaction with instructors had the strongest correlation. Results of this study also show that male student satisfaction was not influenced by their major, instructor age, and if they wanted to be in college or not. However, these variables were significant for female student satisfaction. The classroom respect issues explained variance in both male and female satisfaction with the course (Maceli et al., 2001).

Similar to past research that evaluates the numerical rating and commentary on the RateMyProfessor website, research has weighed the validity of the website to determine whether it is a valuable source in reflecting an instructor's effectiveness. Davison and Price (2009) tested the internal and external validity of the ratings on the RateMyProfessor website. The purpose of this study was to determine whether websites such as RateMyProfessor.com are collecting data that truly reflects an instructor's ability to teach.

A questionnaire was given to students that first assessed whether the student had heard of, visited, or posted on the rate my professor website. If the student was aware of the website, they were additionally asked how useful and important they believed the data to be. Davison and Price (2009) also did

correlation tests between data provided on the website: easiness, helpfulness, clarity, hotness, interest, overall score, instructor gender, and course discipline. In addition, the researcher's evaluated student written comment and 13 common themes were identified: entertainment, ease, politics, informative, personality-general, student centeredness, professor intellect, student chiding, sexual, preparedness, discrimination, language and physical traits.

Davison and Price (2009) found that a majority of participants had heard of the RateMyProfessor website (88%) and believed it to be helpful (84%) and credible (95%). Correlations existed between easiness and overall score, indicating that professors with easier courses would have higher overall scores. Similarly, a significant inverse correlation was observed between the number of ratings and overall score, $r = -.13$, which therefore implies that "students are more likely to post ratings on the website to whine or complain about instructors" (Davison and Price, 2009, p. 56).

Davison and Price (2009) claim that the problem with the RateMyProfessor website and similar student evaluating websites is the lack of external validity. There is no guarantee that posts evaluating a professor truly come from a student who actually took an entire course with the professor. Also, there is no control to when a rating can be posted in relation to the time after or during which the student was enrolled in the course.

Although it is important to test the internal and external validity of the RateMyProfessor website, research has also assessed the usefulness of the website, for both students and professors. Otto, Sanford, and Ross (2008) were interested in testing the internal reliability of the reviews on ratemyprofessor.com to determine whether or not faculty should ignore ratings, discourage students from observing them, or admit commentary can potentially be useful. The researchers hypothesized that helpfulness and clarity would be positively correlated, and the variability uneasiness to clarity, as well as easiness to helpfulness would be inversely related.

Researchers evaluated 399 instructor ratings from 373 universities. The variables assessed were those included on the RateMyProfessor website: easiness, helpfulness, clarity, and instructor gender. The results of the statistical analysis support each of the researcher's hypotheses. Additionally, the website was suggested to be useful, and suggested that the website may be a true reflection of student learning. However, the researchers did assume that abuse on the website could occur, creating a lack in internal validity at times. The variability of reviews regarding instructor's degree of easiness was inversely correlated to clarity and helpfulness.

Although there is abundant research that measures the validity and the correlations of variables and written commentary on the RateMyProfessor website, there is little research done to understand the perceptions of students that simply read the reviews before deciding to enroll in a professor's course. Hossain (2010) assessed the motivational reasons that students reviewed or posted on professor review websites. The researcher aimed to understand the shopping behavior of students who both gathered and posted information on third-party professor review websites.

Participants completed a survey that inquired the qualities of a professor they would be interested in taking. The study utilized frequency tests that assessed the percentage of students who read reviews but would not post them.

Hossain (2010) found that 65% of participants admitted they had previously posted at least one comment, and 29% of students had browsed the reviews but had never posted commentary about an instructor. The results found that work-ethic related statements were predictive of lower odds of shopping behavior. One way to measure shopping behavior is through the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale which characterizes which students are more likely to rely on others feedback.

Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale has become among the most widely used scales in research measuring global self-esteem. Global self-esteem refers to how an individual evaluates oneself. The Rosenberg Scale contains 10-items, with an equal distribution of positively phrased and negatively phrased statements. Characteristics of low self-esteem are timidity, lack of initiative, and insecurity (Mruk, 2006, pg.152.) Additionally, individuals with low self-esteem experience less self-certainty (Wright, 2001). When choosing which professor to take, an individual with lower self-esteem might proceeding with caution and feel it is helpful to acquire feedback from previous students. Contrastingly, people with higher self-esteem would be more open to new experiences, therefore, most likely utilizing the RateMyProfessor website less. Research indicates that students that have higher self-esteem do better in school (Covington, 1989.) Additionally, Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, and Rosenberg (1995) found that changes in self-esteem can result in improvement to academic performance. Research has evaluated the interactions between gender differences and self-esteem (Rosenberg 1965; Epstein, 1979). Epstein (1979) reported that when females recalled experiences relating to their self-esteem, the experiences were involving acceptance and rejection, however, "males reported slightly more experiences involving success and failure than females." Based on literature, females in our society are influenced by the worthiness component of self-esteem, whereas, males self-esteem are more influenced by the competence aspect (Mruk, 2006, p.72.) Rosenberg's (2001) last and unpublished manuscript characterizes low self-esteem individuals as being defensive of as well as protective of possible damage to their feelings of self-worth. Rosenberg (2001) concludes that when faced with new experiences, the low self-esteem individual is likely to ask: "How does this person or situation threaten me and my sense of self-worth? And how can I deal with or foretell the threat." This inference supports the studies hypothesis that the low self-esteem individual will be likely to choose the professor that has all positive feedback because the professor will cause no threat to the students' hope of academic success.

The popularity of the RateMyProfessor website has been noted by several researchers. (Hossain, 2010; Landry, Kurkul & Poirier, 2010; Davison & Price, 2009; Otto, Sanford, & Ross, 2008). Students refer to the website to write commentary about their professors as well as to provide input to other students regarding their experience (Hossain, 2010) and the

difficulty of the class (Addison, Best, & Warrington 2006). One reason that the RMP website is helpful for students to find the right professor (Davison & Price 2009) is that they desire to feel connected with their fellow students and possibly anticipate using the website to explain their judgment or assessment of the professor following the course (Torelli, 2006). The objective of this study is to determine whether student feedback and attraction to a professor will influence anticipated positive academic effort. Additionally, we will determine whether students with high self-esteem or low self-esteem will use the RMP reviews more often to choose professors with positive feedback.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

Participants for this study were 104 male ($n = 32$) and female students ($n = 72$), aged 18-40 years old (in 2012), who were enrolled in an Introductory to Psychology course at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi (TAMUCC). Forty percent of the participants were Hispanic, 34% Caucasian, 9% African-American, 10% Asian-Pacific Islander, and 7% were classified as other ethnicities. An extra credit survey session was offered as an incentive by a professor to recruit participants. At the time of participation, 49% of participants were classified as freshman, 37% sophomore, 10% junior, and 4% were seniors. Participants represented four out of five of the colleges at TAMUCC. Thirty-eight percent of the students came from the College of Nursing and Health Science, 19% from the College of Liberal Arts, 17 % from the College of Business, 12% from the College of Education, and 14% were general or undecided. When describing the research, potential participants were told that the study would assess their opinions of the characteristics of a professor at their school. All participation was voluntary and the researchers gave no compensation.

Materials and Procedures

Participants were given a demographic sheet, the Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale (RSE), a scenario, a professor’s review, and finally a questionnaire pertaining to their opinions of the professor’s feedback. The purpose of the scenario was to provide real-life context to the participants, (e.g., “you will be taking a full course load of 12 hours minimum”), and enhance the perceived reality of the study, (e.g., “depending on your school schedule you will consider a full-time job, part-time, or not having a job”). Also, the scenario was to distinguish a single perspective that each participant would have in common, (e.g., “you are required to take a basic course that is required for your degree plan”). The two professor reviews had five commentaries each. Also, the numerical values for “Enthusiasm, “A” Potential, and Overall” were the same for both Professor A and Professor X.

Rosenberg’s Self-Esteem Scale.

Participants completed the 10-item questionnaire; using a four point likert scale to measure their self-esteem prior to viewing

the instructor reviews, (e.g., “All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure”). Previous studies have reported Cronbach’s alpha reliabilities for the RSE scale ranging from .72 to .88 (Gray-Little, Williams, & Hancock, 1997).

The dependent variables of the study were “attraction to professor” and “positive academic effort.” After observing either Professor A or Professor X’s evaluation, participants completed the questionnaire assessing these measures. On a likert scale ranging from *definitely* to *not at all likely*, the students ranked the likelihood of performing the questions based on their perceptions of the chosen professor. Four items from the questionnaire were used to assess attraction to professor, “How likely are you to choose a class taught by Professor (A/X), how likely are you to recommend this professor to another student, how likely are you to be satisfied with the numerical rating of Professor (A/X), and how likely are you to put this class as your first priority?” The measure of “positive academic effort” was assessed based on six items from the questionnaire, “How likely are you to read the required textbook for the course, how likely are you to consult with Professor (A/X) regarding your grade if you are unhappy, how likely are you to take notes during this class, how likely are you to dedicate 3 hours outside of this class studying for every 1 hour of lecture, how likely are you to ask questions in class, how likely is it that you might visit Professor (A/X) during office hours to seek answers to material taught in class?”

The independent variables of the study are the professor review’s that vary between negative commentary for Professor A and positive commentary for Professor X. The professor reviews were comparable to commentary on the Rate My Professor website for Texas A&M University - Corpus Christi. The positive and negative feedback should reveal whether attraction is based off of it, as well as, whether the anticipated academic behaviors differ depending on which professor they received. To ensure a random sample, researchers distributed the surveys to students as they walked into the classroom.

Gender	Feedback	Self-Esteem (SE) Level	Mean	Standard Error
Male	Negative	Low SE	2,250	.453
		High SE	2000	.261
	Positive	Low SE	3,393	.342
		High SE	4,417	.302
Female	Negative	Low SE	2,365	.251
		High SE	1,625	.202
	Positive	Low SE	3,818	.193
		High SE	3,412	.220

Table 1 Attraction score as a function of self-esteem levels, gender, and feedback

RESULTS

Dependent Measures

Both the four-item “attraction to professor” measure and six-item “positive academic effort” measure were found to be reliable (alphas = .90 and .80, respectively). The scores on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale were also found to be reliable (alpha = .807). A median split was performed on the scores for the Rosenberg Self- Esteem Scale to create a low and high self-esteem group

To explore whether the type of feedback provided to students influenced their perceptions of the professor, a 2 (Positive vs. Negative Feedback) X 2 (Low vs. High Self Esteem) X 2 (Male vs. Female student) between subjects ANOVA was performed on the attraction to professor ratings. The means for this analysis can be found in Table 1. This analysis yielded a large main effect of feedback, $F(1, 96) = 68.9, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .418$. Students receiving positive feedback ($M = 3.76$) indicated more attraction to the professor than those receiving negative feedback ($M = .06$). Additionally, for the low self-esteem group, attraction to the professor with positive feedback was less ($M=3.605$) than for the high self-esteem group ($M=3.914$). A small interaction between participant sex and self-esteem level was also found, $F(1, 96) = 5.5, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .054$. For males, attraction scores were greater for the high self-esteem group. For females, however, attraction scores were higher for the low self-esteem group. Finally, the interaction between feedback and self-esteem level approached significance, $F(1, 96) = 3.86, p = .052, \eta_p^2 = .039$. Contrary to predictions, high self-esteem participants were more influenced by feedback than low self-esteem students (see table 2).

An identical ANOVA was computed for the academic effort ratings. This analysis failed to yield any significant effects. As a follow up to this analysis, correlations between self-esteem scores, attraction scores, and effort scores were examined. Contrary to expectations, attraction ratings failed to predict academic effort, $r(104) = -.144, p = .146$. Attraction ratings were found to be negatively correlated with self-esteem scores, $r(104) = -.233, p = .017$. Finally, self-esteem ratings were found to be correlated with effort ratings, $r(104) = .273, p = .005$.

Feedback	Self-Esteem (SE) Level	Mean	Standard Error
Negative	Low SE	2,308	.259
	High SE	1812	.165
Positive	Low SE	3,606	.196
	High SE	2,914	.187

Table 2: Attraction as a function of feedback and self-esteem levels.

DISCUSSION

Online professor review websites like RateMyProfessor.com is a popular destination for students to communicate their opinions of professors. Students also use professor review websites to discover the characteristics of professors before deciding to ever meet or take a course with them. The objective of this study was to determine whether all students are equally likely to utilize the RMP website to choose professors in college. Altogether, students indicated professors with positive feedback are perceived as more attractive.

Neither of the hypotheses was confirmed. It was expected that students within the low self-esteem group would report more attraction to Professor X, with positive feedback from previous students. However, we found that the students with high self-esteem reported more attraction to Professor X. A gender difference was observed between attraction to professors and the level of self-esteem. Males with higher self-esteem reported greater attraction to the professors. Males’ high attraction can possibly be attributed to them using the feedback to further their success in college. However, females that used the professor reviews were more attracted to the professor when they were within the low self-esteem group. Females within the low self-esteem group may be more attracted to professors’ in-part because of a lack of self-certainty (Wright, 2001), therefore, having a greater desire to discover characteristics of a professor prior to any encounter.

The second hypothesis was also not confirmed; attraction to professor reviews did not prove to indicate anticipated academic effort. However, correlations did exist to indicate that the higher an individual’s self-esteem the higher their academic effort rating, which supports the literature that was reviewed. Lastly, the correlation between attraction and self-esteem reflects that students with higher self-esteem were less attracted to either professors. Overall, an individual with high self-esteem would be less likely to utilize the feedback for either professor to determine attraction.

Limitations of the Study

Our study suffered from several limitations. First, we used convenience sampling and recruited student volunteers from a single lecture class at Texas A&M University- Corpus Christi. Further research should consider using random sampling to include more undergraduate institutions. Second, because of the lack of participation that we received by only seeking volunteers from one lecture class. More survey participants would be beneficial for this study and might have produced more statistical significance. Our target participation was 250 students, however due to voluntary participation and no incentive by the researchers we did not achieve our goal. In addition, of the surveys that were completed by participants, seven were not added into the data set due to errors in the organization of the survey packet. Third, because the study did not include a control condition comprised of mixed reviews. A review with positive and negative commentary might have forced students to make a more effortful decision in whether or not to rely on previous student’s

experiences with a professor. Fourth, because we did not ask grade point average (GPA) we could not measure any interactions between low self-esteem students, GPA, and attraction to the positive feedback professor. Research has indicated that students with low self-esteem do not perform as well as higher self-esteem individuals (Covington, 1989), therefore, further studies might benefit by evaluating whether a relationship occurs between GPA and attraction to positive feedback professors. Finally, we used the survey method to assess the students' perceptions of professor feedback. Although our study included a professor review that appeared as a screen shot of an actual review, the natural circumstances, such as, using the computer to encounter reviews on the website ratemyprofessor.com, were lacking.

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