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Unmasking Penn Face: Measuring the Phenomenon and Its Relationship to Other Personality Constructs

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Description

This study aimed to develop a valid and reliable scale to measure the phenomenon known in the media as “Penn Face”. The scale was simultaneously administered with established measures to gauge its association with personality constructs that were expected to be associated with it (or not). Given that this phenomenon has yet to be empirically investigated, research for scale development relied heavily on the media, internet blogs, and individual student accounts. The finalized measure elicited promising reliability and was correlated with a number of expected personality traits, especially: anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and perfectionism. Our findings suggest that Penn Face is a measurable and potentially dangerous phenomenon that may exist within an undergraduate population.

Location

CUB Ballroom

Disciplines

Cognitive Psychology | Personality and Social Contexts | Psychology

Comments

This poster was presented at the Annual Research Symposium, 2016.

Unmasking Penn Face: Measuring the Phenomenon and Its Relationship to Other Personality Constructs

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Abstract

This study aimed to develop a valid and reliable scale to measure the phenomenon known in the media as “Penn Face”. The scale was simultaneously administered with established measures to gauge its association with personality constructs that were expected to be associated with it (or not). Given that this phenomenon has yet to be empirically investigated, research for scale development relied heavily on the media, internet blogs, and individual student accounts. The finalized measure elicited promising reliability and was correlated with a number of expected personality traits especially: anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and perfectionism. Findings suggest that Penn Face is a measurable and potentially dangerous phenomenon that may exist within an undergraduate population.

Introduction

- Penn Face has been defined in the media as: “...the practice of acting happy and self-assured even when sad or stressed...” (Singal, 2015). The phenomenon was made infamous through the suicide of University of Pennsylvania track star, Madison Holleran in 2014.

- The top three concerns that plague students most are: academic performance, pressure to succeed, and post-graduation plans respectively. These are significantly associated with heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Beiter et al., 2015).

- Certain facets of perfectionism (doubts about actions and parental criticism) are significant predictors of both depression and suicidal ideation (Muyan & Chang, 2015).

- The age of social media: When assigned to browse Facebook versus a control website, female participants reported being in a significantly more negative mood (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015).

- Women, compared to men, possess a heightened awareness and reliance on interpersonal feedback and social approval (Lopez et al., 2014).

Method

Participants:

- 138 Gettysburg College females, 18-22 years of age

Procedure:

- Preliminary scale development and pilot testing
- Administering the finalized measure as well as numerous other personality measures

Penn Face Scale

Read each statement and rate how often it has been true of your own feelings and experiences in the last 3 months (during the Fall 2015 semester):

1	2	3	4	5	6
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Usually	Almost always

- I believe that people who are visibly stressed and struggling are unlikely to be successful in life.
- I believe that having a confident appearance is important for personal and professional success.
- I avoid discussing my stresses and failures with my peers.
- I feel pressured to display a seemingly perfect life through social media.
- I believe that my success should appear effortless.
- When I become stressed or overwhelmed, I feel the need to put on a positive front.
- I feel the need to appear successful even when I am not.
- I feel pressured to appear calm and collected on the outside when I am really stressed on the inside.

Measures

Penn Face Scale (8 items, $\alpha = .80$)

Frequency of impairment by depression/anxiety (1 item)

Brief Symptom Inventory

- Anxiety (6 items, $\alpha = .88$)
 - Depression (6 items, $\alpha = .90$)
 - Suicidal ideation (1 item)

Narcissistic Personality Inventory-16 (16 items, $\alpha = .63$)

Dweck's Mindset Inventory (4 items, $\alpha = .93$)

Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Inventory (29 items, $\alpha = .92$)

- Concern over mistakes/doubts about actions
- Parental expectation/criticism
- Personal Standards

Ten Item Personality Inventory (2 items per scale)

- Extraversion
- Agreeableness
- Openness to experience
- Conscientiousness
- Emotional Stability

Results

Associations with Penn Face: Zero-order correlations and partial correlations controlling for emotional stability

Variable	Penn Face measure	Penn Face measure while controlling for emotional stability
Impairment	.46***	.39***
Anxiety	.46***	.39***
Depression	.38***	.29***
Suicidal Ideation	.27**	.21*
Narcissism	-.02	.01
Mindset	.01	.01
Perfectionism	.60***	.56***
Extraversion	-.04	-.01
Agreeableness	-.07	.05
Openness to experience	-.10	-.06
Conscientiousness	.02	.07
Emotional Stability	-.26**	-----

Note. *p < .05; **p < .01, ***p < .001

Discussion

- The Penn Face measure remained significantly associated with impairment, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and perfectionism after controlling for emotional stability – suggesting promising convergent and discriminant validity.

- The fact that Penn Face showed no significant relationship with narcissism, entity mindset, and conscientiousness helps clarify the nature of the phenomenon.

- Considering that perfectionism is associated with conscientiousness, it was notable that perfectionism was correlated with the Penn Face measure and conscientiousness was not.

- Penn face may be more strongly associated with a perfectionistic self-presentation than with diligent behavior.
- Although students high in Penn Face may strive for perfection, the depression and anxiety associated with this phenomenon may impair their ability to be conscientious.

- Future research should also examine the phenomenon's manifestation in men.

- Since completing this study, two similar scales have been published on the pursuit of “effortless perfection” (Flett et al., 2016; Travers et al., 2015).

- Our findings suggest that Penn Face is a measurable and potentially dangerous phenomenon within an undergraduate population. Perhaps the most disconcerting facet of this practice is that sufferers will appear completely fine - making the identification of this phenomenon all the more difficult.