

Dissonance In the Public Eye: Understanding the Role of Initial Affection and Deviation Size on Negative Evaluations

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Abstract. This study examined the impact of a public figure's deviation from societal expectations on public perceptions and economic support intentions. We hypothesized that smaller deviations would induce higher negative evaluations, and that initial personal liking for the figure would interact with deviation size to affect these evaluations. Although we did not find substantial support for our primary hypothesis, we observed an interaction effect consistent with our secondary hypothesis. Specifically, among those who initially liked the figure, minor deviations incited marginally higher negative evaluations than significant deviations. The findings suggest that initial affection introduces an additional layer of complexity in public reactions to a figure's deviations, which aligns with the Cognitive Dissonance Theory. Interestingly, participants were more likely to endorse harm for smaller deviations, implying that society tends to reprimand public figures more severely for minor deviations. There were no significant effects observed for economic support intentions. The study's implications are discussed in the context of understanding public figures' influence and societal reactions. These findings highlight the intricate dynamics of public sentiment and emphasize the need for future research to continue exploring these multifaceted relationships.

Keywords: Cognitive dissonance, psychological reactance, evaluation, moral outrage, public figures.

1. Introduction

Public figures – a broad category that encompasses celebrities, politicians, and athletes – are perpetually under the public gaze, attracting considerable attention and recognition. It's a widely corroborated fact in existing literature that these individuals are held to a higher moral standard than the average person, reflecting an overarching societal expectation. This expectation invariably amplifies the perception of perfection, resulting in a paradox when these figures, more prone to scrutiny due to their elevated status, fail to uphold these expectations or partake in less than desirable behaviors. Importantly, a deviation from these high standards doesn't necessarily translate into a moral or professional failing of the public figures in question. The high standards they're held to are such that even minor deviations might be interpreted as failures, despite these individuals potentially still operating at a standard above that of an average person. Yet, the correlation between the severity of public judgment and the level of deviation demonstrated by these figures remains somewhat ambiguous. This study ventures to unravel this uncertainty, focusing on the central research question:

"How do people's reactions differ when public figures demonstrate minor deviations from high expectations—namely, not quite living up to those expectations—compared to when they exhibit major deviations, as in engaging outright in undesirable behavior?"

Examining this question is crucial as it delves into the complex dynamics of societal responses to deviations from expected behavior exhibited by public figures. On the one hand, common intuition might suggest that moral outrage directed at public figures remains constant, regardless of the severity of their deviation from societal expectations. This possibility is grounded in the belief that, given their elevated income, prestige, visibility, and influence, public figures are required to uphold high moral standards, and could evoke the same level of moral outrage for minor infractions as they would for major transgressions. This perspective aligns with the prevalent expectation that public figures maintain higher moral standards due to their societal standing and influence. Another prevailing notion is that the halo effect may color the public's reactions, allowing individuals to rationalize minor deviations due to their pre-existing admiration for the public figures, focusing their critique only on

major deviations that are challenging to overlook or justify. In this case, negative perception of a public figure is positively correlated with the severity of infractions observed.

However, despite these considerations, existing research in social cognition points towards an even more intriguing, yet counter-intuitive perspective—which is the focus of this paper. This viewpoint suggests that public figures might, in fact, face harsher negative evaluations for minor deviations than for significant violations. This theory is anchored in principles of cognitive dissonance and psychological reactance. To preview part of our hypothesis development, the idea is that public figures, typically admired and well-regarded within a society, can have their identities and images intertwined with the self-esteem of individuals within that society. People may take pride in themselves, in part, due to a shared identity with these esteemed public figures. As such, it's conceivable that individuals may hold an implicit motivation to safeguard the reputations of the public figures within their society. In doing so, individuals may unconsciously downplay or overlook major violations lacking substantial evidence committed by public figures, such as rumors about their bad behaviors. These individuals could choose to focus solely on minor deviations from high expectations, which do not significantly challenge their favored image of the public figure. Consequently, they may react more strongly to these minor deviations, potentially intensifying their negative evaluations.

This nuanced interplay of public perception and individual psychology highlights the importance of this study, promising to shed new light on the complex dynamics of social influence and perception. By challenging common assumptions and delving into these counterintuitive possibilities, this study offers valuable insights into the nuanced psychological dynamics underpinning societal reactions to public figures, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of public perception and social influence.

This paper will begin by explaining our hypothesis and the specific theory behind our predictions. Next, the methodology for the study, including the experimental design and measures used to assess participants' reactions, will be described. The results section will present the findings of the study, followed by a discussion of the implications, limitations, and potential future research directions.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Hypothesis Development

The primary hypothesis of this study proposes a paradoxical reaction to the behavior of public figures. This hypothesis postulates that public figures who engage in minor transgressions—namely, instances recognized as slight deviations from their elevated expectations, such as merely failing to meet these expectations—may incite more negative perceptions among observers than those who commit major deviations, such as engaging in overtly undesirable behavior. This intriguing hypothesis marries two influential theories from the realm of social psychology: Cognitive Dissonance Theory and Psychological Reactance Theory.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory, postulated by Festinger (1957), is anchored in the notion that individuals encounter psychological discomfort when they encounter information contradicting their self-conception, well-being, or pre-existing beliefs, values, or expectations. This unease, termed cognitive dissonance, can be mitigated through a variety of strategies. For instance, one might adjust their existing beliefs to incorporate the discordant information (Cooper, 2007), or resort to a justification process, whereby the conflicting data is (intentionally or subconsciously) dismissed or overlooked. Though these approaches may differ in their execution, they share a common objective: facilitating a harmonious alignment between beliefs and information, thus reducing cognitive dissonance.

Within the context of public figures, scenarios where they fall short of lofty expectations but refrain from overtly negative behavior represent relatively minor deviations from societal expectations. Although these minor infractions can induce a mild level of cognitive dissonance, given the limited severity of the contradiction, individuals are more inclined and willing to recalibrate their beliefs about the public figure (as a way to reducing dissonance), rather than outrightly reject the

conflicting information. This may render them more susceptible to acknowledging the public figure's failure to meet expectations, subsequently leading to heightened negative perceptions of the figure.

However, when confronted with situations where public figures are rumored to be engaging in explicitly undesirable behavior, individuals may choose to sidestep confronting the information altogether. In this case, they might resort to a different mechanism to alleviate cognitive dissonance: downplaying or disregarding the newly introduced, contradictory information (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959). This strategy comes into play when the chasm between pre-existing beliefs and the unsettling new information is too profound. Faced with such a vast discrepancy, individuals might find it overwhelmingly challenging to adjust their beliefs. Instead, they might choose to diminish the importance of or overlook the conflicting information, especially when the incriminating details lack substantial corroborative evidence. This approach enables individuals to maintain their initial beliefs—an efficient, psychologically expedient method to cope with significantly negative news about public figures within their societal circle.

Though not central to our theory, research in social identity (Tajfel, 2010) also suggests that part of this justification process—this intentional overlooking—could be fueled by the fact that public figures, to a certain extent, represent an extension of the individuals' own identity. There exists a shared sense of collective identity, which makes the public figure's significant transgressions and subsequent reputation damage more personal, therefore making them harder to dismiss or overlook. As such, the major deviation of a public figure may be less likely to elicit negative evaluations due to these unconscious cognitive maneuvers.

Collectively, the principles of cognitive dissonance theory shed light on the paradoxical reactions to public figures' deviations from societal expectations. When a highly esteemed public figure partakes in explicitly undesirable behavior—a stark contrast to the societal expectations—it can trigger intense cognitive dissonance. However, due to the shared identities between the public figures and their observers or the notion that observers' well-being is inextricably linked to these figures, there may be an enhanced motivation—either conscious or unconscious—to protect the figures' reputations. As a result, to alleviate this psychological discomfort, individuals might feel compelled to discredit or overlook the disconcerting information about the public figure's inappropriate actions, thereby maintaining their initial favorable perceptions. This mechanism can lead to surprisingly lenient evaluations of the public figure when they have committed significant transgressions.

Yet, in a somewhat counter-intuitive twist, when public figures only engage in minor deviations, such as failing to meet high expectations or making small mistakes, people might be more willing to accept these figures' shortfalls. They may adjust their belief systems accordingly, acknowledging their mounting negative evaluations of the public figure. These cognitive underpinnings fuel our hypothesis that people might be paradoxically more forgiving towards major transgressions and harsher towards minor deviations when assessing the actions of public figures they admire.

The Psychological Reactance Theory, as proposed by Brehm & Brehm (1981), serves as a complementary perspective to Cognitive Dissonance Theory in explaining people's responses to public figures' deviations. This theory posits that individuals exhibit defensive reactions when their perceived freedoms—such as the freedom to maintain certain attitudes or beliefs—are threatened. This could manifest in the form of resistance towards unsettling information, or a downplay of its significance (Dillard & Shen, 2005).

In the context of our discussion, the undesirable actions of public figures—especially when they starkly diverge from an individual's lofty expectations—could pose a threat to the individual's beliefs about the figure. It is conceivable that the significant deviations can be construed as an attack on the individuals' freedom to continue to view the public figure in a favorable light. The resultant discomfort can catalyze a psychological reactance, which might present as individuals resisting the negative information, or even dismissing the misconduct (Steindl et al., 2015). This protective stance potentially leads to the paradoxical outcome of attenuated negative perceptions of the public figure, even in the face of glaringly undesirable conduct.

This notion of psychological reactance complements our previous discussion on cognitive dissonance, where individuals might overlook or discredit information to alleviate the discomfort induced by conflicting beliefs. When paired together, both theories suggest a compelling mechanism that might underlie the paradoxical public reactions to the transgressions of esteemed public figures. By extension, these theories underscore the intriguing and counterintuitive focus of our paper: the possibility that public figures might be subjected to harsher judgments for minor deviations but receive more lenient responses for major transgressions.

3. The Moderating Role of Individual Liking of the Public Figure

Building upon these theories, it's crucial to address the potential moderating role of an individual's affection for the public figure in this dynamic. The counterintuitive reactions we propose are expected to occur principally when the observer has a high initial liking or admiration for the public figure. Supporting this notion, research indicates that cognitive dissonance intensifies when individuals must negatively evaluate someone they hold in high regard (Cooper, Zanna, & Taves, 1978). This implies that cognitive dissonance and subsequent psychological reactance are more likely to emerge when a well-liked public figure disappoints or behaves inappropriately, challenging the observer's positive attitudes. On the contrary, when individuals possess neutral or even negative sentiments towards a public figure, this process might unfold differently. They could be less predisposed to experience cognitive dissonance or reactance in response to the public figure's actions, as their pre-existing beliefs and attitudes aren't significantly threatened.

This notion also coheres with the "halo effect" principle (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Nufer, 2019), which posits that positive emotions towards an individual can bias perceptions and judgments about their actions. This bias might manifest as more lenient evaluations when a favored public figure engages in less desirable behaviors, hence feeding into the proposed paradoxical reaction. In the absence of such positive emotions, the halo effect might not be as potent, leading to more linear and less paradoxical responses to the public figure's actions.

In sum, our additional hypothesis concerning the moderating role of personal affection offers a more nuanced account of the potential paradox in public reactions to public figures who merely fall short of high expectations versus those who engage in explicitly undesirable behavior. By intertwining Cognitive Dissonance Theory and Psychological Reactance Theory, we present a robust theoretical scaffold for interpreting this paradoxical phenomenon. Moreover, we recognize the influential role of an individual's affection for the public figure, thereby adding a layer of depth and intricacy to our understanding of this complex social dynamic. Our main hypotheses are summarized below:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Public figures who engage in minor deviations from high expectations (such as failing to meet these expectations but not displaying explicit negative behavior) will generate stronger negative perceptions amongst observers compared to those who engage in major deviations (such as explicit undesirable behavior).

Hypothesis 2: The effect described in H1 is moderated by the degree of an individual's liking or positive regard for the public figure. Specifically, we proposed that the effect in H1 is more positive for individuals who show an initial liking for the public figure, as compared to individuals who feel neutral or negative towards a public figure.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

A total of 172 participants (64% male, $M_{age} = 39.06$, $SD_{age} = 10.14$) completed the study voluntarily. All participants were recruited from a local community known to the authors. The selection of this sample size was done a priori and was based on our aim to detect a medium interaction effect size. To ensure the validity and reliability of our study, we set several inclusion

criteria for participant selection. Firstly, all participants were required to provide informed consent before participating in the study. Secondly, we ensured that they were proficient in Chinese to eliminate any potential language barriers. Lastly, they had to be capable of completing the study electronically, as the study was administered via an anonymous link.

4.2. Materials and Procedures

Our study was designed and executed using WenJuanXing (www.wjx.cn), a platform widely adopted for social science research in China. Participants first provided their informed consent before proceeding to a series of demographic questionnaires capturing details such as their age, gender, and hometown. To subtly incorporate the key variable of personal affection without revealing the study's primary objective, we asked participants to rate their initial liking for five different local public figures (1 = *not at all like*, 5 = *like very much*). This list of public figures included the key figure that would later appear in the vignette. By doing so, we ensured the study's purpose remained concealed, avoiding any potential bias that might emerge if participants knew that the study was primarily interested in the moderating role of their initial liking or personal affection for the public figure.

Then, participants were randomly assigned to one of the two conditions: small vs. large deviation from lofty public expectations. Both conditions featured vignettes revolving around a real-world public figure from the local community. Each vignette started identically, introducing the public figure, and emphasizing their reputation and role in society. The narratives diverged when revealing a series of rumors regarding the recent behavior of the public figure.

In the small deviation from expectation condition, the public figure was depicted as having engaged in minor deviations from their lofty public expectations, which included behaviors such as 1) singing slightly off-pitch during a private event, 2) appearing unprepared for some recent events they attended, 3) dressing unfashionably, and 4) looking much older than depicted in their posters. These are relatively small digressions that mildly contrast their public persona. On the other hand, for the significant deviation (large deviation) condition, the public figure was implicated in actions that greatly contrasted with their public image. These included behaviors such as 1) reckless driving overseas, 2) being seen spending long hours in a casino suggesting habitual gambling, 3) rudely rejecting fans' requests for pictures, and 4) failing to show up for philanthropic events they had committed to attend, with their promised donations not being realized.

Despite the stark differences in these conditions, both were presented with a degree of uncertainty and labeled as "rumors," given the lack of substantial evidence to confirm the validity of the described behaviors. The vignettes were presented as silent, video-like slides. This approach intended to provide a vivid and engaging experience for the participants, immersing them in the context and fostering a more authentic response.

After reading the vignette, participants complete three dependent measures. To assess participants' **negative evaluations** towards the public figure, we employed three items adapted from previous research (Veksler & Eden, 2017). These items, when translated to English, read as follows: (1) I have a negative impression of [the public figure], (2) I would not be surprised to hear that [the public figure] is disliked by others, (3) I do not appreciate [the public figure]. These items follow a 5-point likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). The responses to these items were combined to create a composite measure of negative evaluations towards the public figure. The internal consistency of this measure was high ($\alpha = .89$).

In addition to the main evaluation measure, we also gauged participants' **endorsement of harm** towards the public figure. To do this, we developed three items specifically for this study. Participants were presented with a scenario where social media has recently begun to post negative comments about the public figure, with some particularly harmful posts circulating. They were shown an example of such a post which translated to:

"[The public figure] is nothing but a hypocrite who enjoys throwing his weight around without having any real talent. He has questionable morals, truly disgusting."

After being presented with this post, participants were asked three questions to gauge their support of the harm aimed at the public figure. Translated to English, these questions were (1) Do you support the above criticism of [the public figure]?, (2) If asked to share the above post, would you be willing to do so?, and (3) Do you believe that the above criticism of [the public figure] is appropriate? All these questions were answered on a 5-point scale, with higher scores indicating greater support of the harmful action towards the public figure. These items were designed to provide supplemental insight into the extent of negative attitudes and behaviors participants would be willing to direct towards the public figure based on the scenario they had been presented with. The internal consistency of this measure was high ($\alpha = .91$).

Finally, to gauge the participants' **economic support intentions** for the Public Figure, we employed a single item measure. The item asked, "If [the public figure] were to hold a concert in your city in the future, would you buy a ticket?" This question aimed to capture whether the rumors would influence participants' willingness to financially back the public figure, thus providing a real-world reflection of their attitudes and support towards the figure amidst the allegations.

Upon completion of all dependent variable measures, participants were debriefed about the hypothetical nature of our scenarios. We clarified that the vignettes were entirely fictitious and that the public figure involved had not actually engaged in the rumored behaviors. This was necessary to avoid potential misinformation or undesired consequences for the public figure based on the study's narratives. Furthermore, participants were reassured that the purpose of the study was purely for academic research, with no intentions to malign or misrepresent the public figure. Participants were also provided with the researcher's contact information, should they have further questions or concerns regarding the study or its findings.

5. Results

Means, standard deviations, and zero-order inter-correlations of all variables are presented in Table 1. Before running analysis, we dichotomize the initial liking of the public figure, so that any scores that were 4 or above were coded as 1 (high initial liking), and all remaining scores of 3 and below were coded as 0 (low initial liking).

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics and Inter-correlations of All Study Variables

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Condition (1= Small deviation)	-						
2	Negative Evaluation	.13	-					
3	Endorsement of Harm	.17*	.72**	-				
4	Economic Support Intention	-.04	-.31**	-.35**	-			
5	Age	-.24**	-.26**	-.25**	.15	-		
6	Gender (1 = Female)	-.07	.03	.05	-.15*	.01	-	
7	Initial Liking of the Public Figure	-.07	-.42**	-.46**	.39**	.24**	.03	-
	Mean	-	2.05	1.85	3.46	39.06	-	4.00
	Std. Deviation	-	.86	.81	1.06	10.14	-	.98

Notes. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$;

Next, we employed an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) framework to test our primary hypothesis. Our model incorporated the main effect of the condition (1 = small deviation from lofty expectations, 0 = large deviation from lofty expectations), binary initial liking (1 = high initial liking, 0 = low initial liking), and the interaction between these two variables. This framework was applied for each dependent variable under consideration.

Interestingly, we did not find a significant main effect of condition on the negative evaluation, $F(1, 168) = 2.29, p = .1318$. However, we did identify a marginally significant interaction, $F(1, 168) = 3.38, p = .0679$. Simple effect analyses revealed that when it came to individuals who held a neutral attitude towards the public figure, we observed no significant differences in negative evaluations

between participants exposed to the small deviation condition ($M = 2.54, SD = 0.89$) and the large deviation condition ($M = 2.82, SD = 0.65$), $p = 0.269$. On the contrary, a different pattern emerged for those expressing high personal liking for the public figure. For this group, a marginally significant difference appeared between conditions. Participants who experienced the small deviation condition ($M = 1.96, SD = 0.85$) had a slightly higher negative evaluation towards the public figure than those who encountered the large deviation condition ($M = 1.72, SD = 0.70$), $p = 0.0907$.

In summary, while our main hypothesis was not conclusively supported, the interaction pattern partially aligned with our prediction. It indicated that cognitive dissonance and psychological reactance effects were present to some extent, specifically among participants with high personal affection towards the public figure. These individuals demonstrated marginally higher negative evaluations when the public figure committed minor infractions, rather than when they engaged in outright undesirable behavior. Figure 1 offers a visual representation of these findings.

For our supplemental measure, we observed as significant main effect of condition on the endorsement of harm, $F(1, 168) = 6.19, p = .0138$, such that participants exposed to the small deviation condition ($M = 1.98, SD = 0.87$) showed a higher willingness to endorse harm imposed on the public figure than participants in the large deviation condition ($M = 1.70, SD = 0.72$). No interaction effects were observed for this variable, $F(1, 168) = 0.830, p = .3636$. For economic support intention, neither the main effect of condition, nor its interaction with binary linking, was significant (all $ps > .40$).

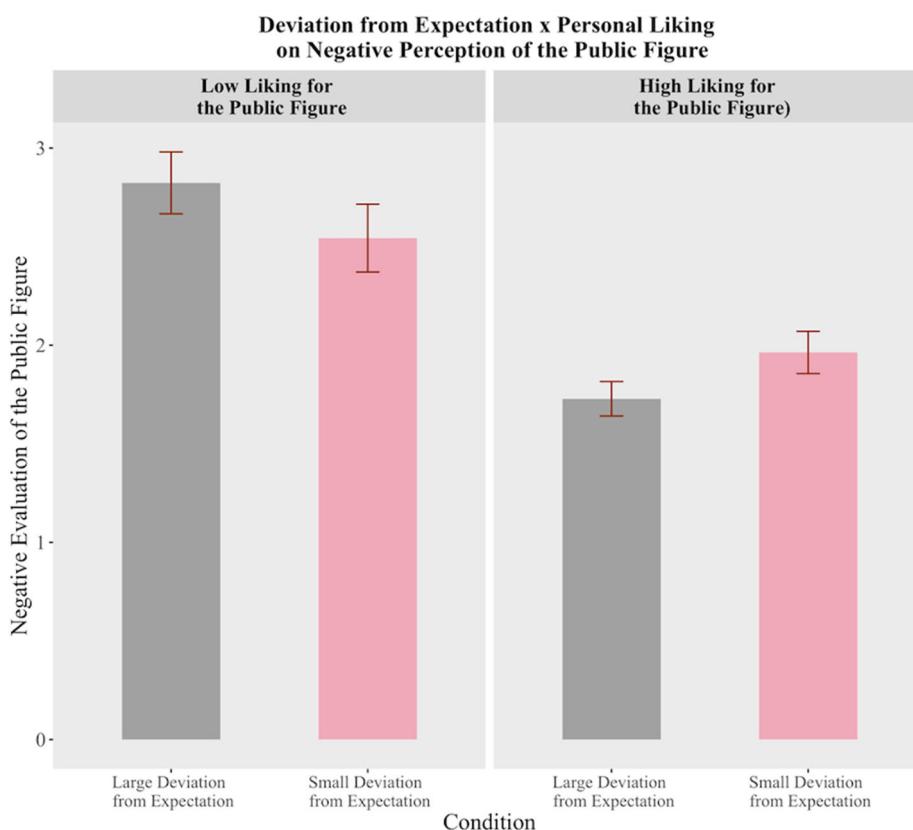


Figure 1 Simple Effect Analysis Results for the Deviation from Expectation x Personal Liking Interaction

6. General Discussion

This research was aimed at probing the ramifications of deviation from expectations by a public figure, specifically on the magnitude of negative evaluations, endorsement of harm, and economic support intentions directed towards that figure. A secondary goal was to scrutinize the moderating role of initial personal affection for the public figure within this framework.

Despite the intriguing questions we set out to answer, our results did not yield substantial support for our first hypothesis, though some nuanced trends were observed in supporting our second hypothesis. While we expected participants to exhibit a higher level of negative perceptions when the public figure was in the small deviation (vs. high) condition, the deviation condition didn't exert a significant main effect of on the degree of negative evaluations of the public figure as hypothesized. One possible explanation is that the public might not differentially respond to public figures based solely on the magnitude of deviation as we had presumed. This also suggests that other factors might be at play in shaping these negative evaluations, such as the nature of the deviation (regular pattern or incidental, for example), the figure's previous actions, or the public's expectation of the figure's moral conduct (Higgins & Brendl, 1995; Ito, Larsen, Smith, & Cacioppo, 1998).

While our primary hypothesis did not find substantial empirical support, a more complex narrative emerged when we examined the interaction effects. These partially supported our secondary hypothesis. Intriguingly, our data suggest that an individual's initial fondness for the public figure inserted a layer of intricacy into their assessments. Specifically, among those with a strong personal liking for the public figure, minor deviations from expectations incited marginally higher negative evaluations than more substantial deviations. This observation aligns with our theoretical understanding drawn from the Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957).

The data also revealed a significant main effect of the condition on endorsement of harm — an exploratory measure— in the direction consistent with our hypothesis, though this variable was not part of our key hypotheses. Participants who were exposed to the small deviation condition expressed a stronger willingness to endorse harm towards the public figure than those who encountered the large deviation condition. This result suggests that society tends to reprimand public figures more severely for minor deviations, possibly because these deviations might be perceived as 'teachable moments' or growth opportunities for the public figure (Carlsmith, Darley, & Robinson, 2002).

Finally, our economic support intentions did not demonstrate any significant influence from the deviation condition or the interaction with initial liking. This suggests that actual consumer behavior might be fairly resistant to the changes in negative perception driven by deviations from public expectations, at least in the short term (East, Hammond, & Lomax, 2008).

As with any research endeavor, our study was not without limitations. Our focus on a singular public figure from a localized community, while useful for consistency, might introduce potential issues of generalizability. Future research should look to expand this investigation to include a more diverse array of figures across different domains to broaden the applicability of our findings. Additionally, our conceptualization of deviation size was limited to specific behaviors and did not encompass the full range of possible deviations a public figure might engage in (Bollen & Jackman, 1985).

In summary, while our hypotheses weren't decisively supported, our research provides a meaningful foray into the intricate dynamics of public perception in response to a public figure's behavioral deviation from expectations. This study underscores the complexities of public sentiment and the challenges public figures confront in navigating their actions in an ever-watchful society. Future research would benefit from the continued disentanglement of these multifaceted relationships, deepening our understanding of public figures' influence and the societal reactions they incite.

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