Self-presentation in LinkedIn portraits: Common features, gender, and occupational differences

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Abstract

LinkedIn is the largest professional social network site in the world, designed for professional networking, job seeking, and recruitment. The current study explores visual self-presentation in LinkedIn user portraits. LinkedIn portraits serve alongside explicit data posted in users’ profiles as a tool for professional self-presentation, yet they have hardly been studied. In the absence of scientific recommendations, non-academic websites offer recommendations for the optimal portrait. In this study, we aimed, first, to identify the common features of LinkedIn portraits and to determine whether they adhere to the popular recommendations found on the Internet. Second, we offered grounded hypotheses suggesting that LinkedIn portraits, and other features of LinkedIn accounts, would show gender and occupational differences. Using a representative city in the United States, 480 LinkedIn portraits and accounts were selected and analyzed. Results indicate that LinkedIn portraits display common features and tend to adhere to popular recommendations. Women were more likely than men to signal emotions, whereas men were more likely to signal status. No occupational differences were detected. The findings suggest that two opposing forces shape self-presentation in LinkedIn portraits. Specifically, social norms, corporate culture, and popular advice drive users to display standard business-like portraits, while gender-related self-expression inspires users to display their uniqueness and attractiveness. These pioneering findings can inform scholars and practitioners on impression management processes in professional online settings.

1. Introduction

One of people’s strongest motivations for using Social Network Sites (SNSs) is self-presentation (Krämer & Winter 2008). To present themselves, SNS users post explicit data about themselves, such as their life events and interests (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009, pp. 947–955). However, scholars suggest that implicit data conveyed through users’ profiles can be as important as this explicit information (Gunaydin, Selcuk, & Zayas, 2017, pp. 947–955; Van Der Heide, D’Angelo, & Martin, 2008, pp. 947–955). Implicit data can include aspects of users’ e-visibility, such as the size of their networks (number of friends) and online activity (e.g., numbers of posts, photos, and articles uploaded). Implicit data can also include visual cues such as background colors (Moss, Gunn, & Heller, 2006, pp. 947–955) or photos (Vilnai-Yavetz & Tifferet, 2009, pp. 947–955). In general, implicit cues have been found to affect perceived competence (Wang, Mao, Yexin, & Liu, 2017, pp. 947–955), professionalism (Cardon & Okoro, 2009, pp. 947–955), and service quality (Vilnai-Yavetz & Tifferet, 2009, pp. 947–955).

One of the most salient sources of implicit data is the profile photo the user has chosen to represent himself/herself (Ivcevic & Ambady, 2012, pp. 947–955; Zhao et al., 2008, pp. 947–955). These photos contain elements that convey implicit non-verbal impression management cues. For instance, emotional expressivity can be communicated by facial expressions (Coviello et al., 2014, pp. 947–955), professionalism by the formality of one’s attire (Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993, pp. 947–955; Yan, Yurchisin, & Watchravesringkan, 2011, pp. 947–955), or status by the prestige of accompanying objects (Bellk, 2004, pp. 947–955; Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010, pp. 947–955). These cues help shape the viewer’s impressions of the user just as they do in actual face-to-face encounters (Gunaydin et al., 2017, pp. 947–955; Ivcevic & Ambady, 2012, pp. 947–955; Zhao et al., 2008, pp. 947–955).
This matters, because profile attributes in professional SNSs have been found to have a bearing on professional outcomes such as hiring recommendations (e.g., Chiang & Suen, 2015, pp. 947–955).

LinkedIn is the leading professional SNS (Adams, 2013, pp. 947–955; Kluempner, Mitra, & Wang, 2016, pp. 947–955; Ollington, 2013, pp. 947–955; van Dijck, 2013, pp. 947–955), with over 450 million users in 24 languages (LinkedIn, n.d.). Nonetheless, very little research has been done on LinkedIn profile photos (known as portraits in LinkedIn parlance). In the absence of scientific recommendations, users may base their portraits on unverified advice offered on popular websites (e.g., Kane, 2013, pp. 947–955; Lachance; Pachter, 2014, pp. 947–955; Lachance Shandrow, 2013). In this study, we analyze the portraits of LinkedIn users, along with other aspects of LinkedIn accounts, in order to answer the following questions: (1) What are the common features of LinkedIn portraits? (2) Do they adhere to the popular recommendations found on the Internet? (3) Do LinkedIn portraits and accounts show gender differences? (4) Do they show occupational differences?

1. LinkedIn

As noted above, LinkedIn is the largest professional network in the world (DMR., 2016, pp. 947–955), with over 450 million users worldwide, including 130 million in the United States (LinkedIn, n.d.). In comparison to Facebook—the most popular SNS overall—LinkedIn is specifically intended for professional networking, job seeking and recruitment (Girard & Fallery, 2010, pp. 947–955; van Dijck, 2013). In a survey of 260,000 recruiters using the online recruiting platform Bullhorn Reach, approximately 19% reported using Facebook and 21% Twitter, but almost all (97%) reported using LinkedIn (Bullhorn Reach, 2014, pp. 947–955). Similarly, in a survey of business-to-business marketers in North America, 94% of respondents reported that their organization used LinkedIn to distribute content (Content Marketing Institute, 2016, pp. 947–955). The main reasons reported for using LinkedIn include researching people and companies (77%), reconnecting with past colleagues (71%), uncovering potential job opportunities (41%), networking (39%), and increasing marketing presence (39%) (Breitbarth, 2016, pp. 947–955).

Recent years have seen a rise in studies on LinkedIn as a recruiting tool (e.g., Chiang & Suen, 2015, pp. 947–955; Davison, Maraist, & Bing, 2011, pp. 947–955; Girard & Fallery, 2010, pp. 947–955; Leftheriotis & Giannakos, 2014, pp. 947–955; Ollington, 2013, pp. 947–955; Vicknair, Elkersh, Yancey, & Budden, 2010, pp. 947–955; Zide, Elman, & Shahani-Denning, 2014, pp. 947–955), as well as a tool for marketing, professional networking, and public relations (e.g., Bolotaxe & Cata, 2011, pp. 947–955; McCorkle & McCorkle, 2012, pp. 947–955; van Dijck, 2013, pp. 947–955). However, there is still much to explore (Kluempner et al., 2016, pp. 947–955). In particular, research on self-presentation in LinkedIn remains sparse.

1.2 Professional self-presentation and LinkedIn

Self-presentation is “the use of behavior to communicate some information about oneself to others” (Baumeister, 1982, p. 3). People tailor their self-presentation based, in part, on the reaction they would like to elicit from others (Goffman, 1974, pp. 947–955). Job candidates, for example, attempt to sell themselves by presenting a professional appearance (e.g., personal grooming, appropriate dress) and through non-verbal behavior (e.g., smiling, making eye contact). Such self-presentation tactics elicit positive interviewer ratings (Barrick, Shaffer, & DeGrassi, 2009, pp. 947–955), evoke desired customer reactions (Kim, Ju, & Johnson, 2009, pp. 947–955; Wang et al., 2017, pp. 947–955), and facilitate social interactions (Nelissen & Meijers, 2011, pp. 947–955).

Professional self-presentation exists not only in face-to-face job interviews, customer relationships, and peer interactions, but also in the online realm. This is not surprising, as SNS profiles are increasingly being used as a source of information in work-related contexts. For instance, a growing number of hiring managers report that they reject job candidates who (for example) post provocative or inappropriate photographs and posts about drinking and using drugs—or, alternatively, hire candidates whose profiles suggest they would be right for the job or a good fit for the firm (CareerBuilder, 2009, pp. 947–955). According to Baumeister (1982, pp. 947–955), the two main reasons for engaging in self-presentation are obtaining rewards and self-fulfillment. van Dijck (2013), similarly, draws a distinction between professional self-promotion and personal self-expression. These two motives—self-promotion and self-expression—can collide, because the traits one conveys for self-expression may be unsuitable for self-promotion. For instance, advertising an avid online gaming hobby may satisfy the user’s need for personal self-expression, but may poorly serve his professional self-promotion (Davison, Maraist, Hamilton, & Bing, 2012, pp. 947–955). Given that LinkedIn is a business-oriented SNS,where users’ interests in job opportunities, professional networking, or potential customers (Breitbarth, 2016, pp. 947–955; DeKay, 2008, pp. 947–955), it is unsurprising that LinkedIn profiles—like those of sites such as Facebook—tend towards self-promotion (van Dijck, 2013, pp. 947–955). See fig. 1 for an example of a LinkedIn profile.

This tendency toward self-promotion on LinkedIn, rather than self-expression, is also apparent in the photos users post with their profiles. It is to these that we turn next.

1.3 LinkedIn portraits and their implications

Chiang and Suen (2015) found that when recruiters using SNS attempt to assess the fit between work candidates and the job, they do so mainly based on explicit data such as certifications, the individual’s profile summary listing their experience, skills, and education, and the candidate’s posts. However, in addition to such explicit data, SNS profiles in general—and LinkedIn profiles in particular—offer another type of information: implicit data, such as that implied in posted information such as connections and photos. This distinction is similar to that made by Goffman (1974, pp. 947–955), who distinguished between “the expression that [a person] gives”—that is, explicit information—and “the expression that he gives off,” or implicit information conveyed in non-verbal cues (p. 136). For instance, just as a smile can convey warmth and friendliness in face-to-face encounters, the same may be true for smiles in photographs.

In keeping with LinkedIn’s role as a forum for professional self-promotion, LinkedIn photos are relatively uniform. Most are fairly standard headshots—that is, medium close-up photographs showing some part of the shoulders and the head, with the person looking toward the camera. In this, LinkedIn portraits differ from Facebook profile photos, which take a range of forms and subjects (Vilnai-Yavetz & Tifferet, 2015, pp. 947–955; Wu, Chang, & Yuan, 2015, pp. 947–955; Zheng, Yuan, Chang, & Wu, 2016, pp. 947–955). Headshots, with their focus on the face, can make an immediate, long-lasting impression on the viewer (Willis & Todorov, 2006, pp. 947–955). In studies conducted in general settings—i.e., outside of LinkedIn—portraits have been found to influence viewers’ ratings on traits such as approachability and dominance (Vernon, Sutherland, Young, & Hartley, 2014, pp. 947–955), and professional outcomes such as teaching evaluations and assessments of suitability for employment (e.g., Freng & Webber, 2009, pp. 947–955).
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