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Self-presentation in professional networks: More than just window dressing

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ABSTRACT

Online professional networks become more and more important for professional self-presentation, for recruitment processes, and job hunting. While previous studies determine that individuals present themselves authentically on rather privately used social networks, self-presentation on online professional networks is still unexplored. This study examines how validly individuals present themselves on professional networks. It investigates whether an individual's online self-presentation is idealized or rather authentic. 63 owners of a profile on the German professional network XING had to describe themselves twice – first authentically and then idealistically. Both self-descriptions were compared with the ratings of five independent observers who received the participants' XING profiles. Results reveal that observer ratings correlated significantly with some of the profile owners' authentic personality and job-relevant characteristics, but none of them correlated significantly with the idealized self-descriptions of the profile owners. This shows that individuals present themselves rather authentically on XING.

1. Introduction

The impression management theory (Goffman, 1961) states that in social situations individuals are concerned with the impression they make on others. This motivates them to manage their behavior strategically, and to present to others a favorable version of themselves. That means that they try to make their public presentation of self correspond with their idealized self (Baumeister, 1982).

This study investigates how validly individuals present themselves in professional online networks, and whether their self-presentation mirrors more their idealized selves or their authentic selves. In accordance with previous research (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1980), we define self-presentation as the process by which individuals are concerned with the impression they make on others in social situations. In our study, the social situation is established through an online professional setting. There the audience consists of any individuals who are able to access one's profile. These are possible employers, head-hunters, colleagues or friends. One may expect that for such a work-related audience, people present themselves in an even more idealized way than in other contexts. In the following, we will first describe professional online networks more in detail before we review

previous research literature about self-presentation in online social networks. This review leads us to the hypothesis that people present themselves rather validly in professional online networks.

1.1. Online professional networks

Online professional networks offer the opportunity to facilitate social relations in business contexts. Especially for young people like students, graduates, and young professionals online networking is part of their daily life – whether for private or for business reasons. Compared to social networks, professional networks are more standardized and do not display as much personal information: E.g., user profiles are formatted like a CV; they contain the most important details about one's education, past and current employment as well as professional skills. They usually have only one formal picture (Van Dijck, 2013). Analog to adding friends on Facebook, users can add business connections to their contact list. First degree, second degree and even third degree connections can be used for introductions to someone, a user wishes to know, or wants to add as new contact. In sum, professional networks offer a modern way of collecting business cards. They support users in finding jobs, people, and other opportunities. Furthermore, users can become part of groups and demonstrate their professional knowledge in online discussions. Employers can list jobs, and screen potential candidates.

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As companies compete in a "war for talents" (Chambers, Foulon, Handfield-Jones, Hankin, & Michaels, 1998), recruiting in online networks is already common practice for employers (Davison, Maraist, & Bing, 2011). They see it as a promising way to address young professionals. But also for employees professional networks offer a good opportunity to get in touch with potential employers. For this reason, one might expect, that users would probably want to present themselves as positively as possible. The pressure to present a great profile might be even higher than in privately used social networks, where people do not connect for business reasons (Cress, Schwämmlein, Wodzicki, & Kimmerle, 2014).

Given the increasing popularity of social and professional networks, and given that more and more companies use professional networks to find new employees, it seems highly important to know how validly users present themselves in those networks. Do people present themselves as they really are? So, do they present themselves in an authentic manner? Or do people idealize themselves in their professional online profiles?

The most popular online professional network worldwide is probably the American LinkedIn. However, in Germany it is XING, having 12 million members.[1] Because the following study involves German participants, it bases on XING. Fig. 1 shows a typical profile on Xing.

1.2. Self-presentation in social networks

To the best of our knowledge, there is to date no experimental study about self-presentation in professional networks. Van Dijck (2013) states that LinkedIn profiles portray idealized professional identities by showing off skills, but he did not test this hypothesis empirically. However, some research about self-presentation in social networks in general does exist. It reveals mixed results: One group of studies has demonstrated that self-presentation in social networks is idealized (Brivio & Ibarra, 2009; Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011; Walther, 2007). These studies confirm the hyperpersonal model of communication in online settings, which states that users utilize technological aspects to manipulate the impression they want to give in socially desirable ways (Walther, 2007). Manago et al. (2008) discussed goals for using MySpace with a group of MySpace users. These claimed that they wanted to try out possible and idealized aspects of their personalities on MySpace, because one day they wanted to be like their idealized self. In another study, Brivio and Ibarra (2009) interviewed active MySpace users, and concluded that these play with multiple personalities on MySpace. Participants intentionally chose a personality depending either on their personal goals, or on the audience of their profiles. Rosenberg and Egbert (2011) asked Facebook users about their personal goals using Facebook. According to their results, being liked by friends is an important personal goal of many users. To achieve this Facebook users idealize their self-presentation.

In contrast to the results that show an idealized way of self-presentation in social networks, another group of studies shows that user profiles present users' real selves: Strangers judged the personality of profile authors correctly based on profiles on personal websites (Marcus, Machilek, & Schütz, 2006; Vazire & Gosling, 2004), on MySpace (Gosling, Gaddis, & Vazire, 2007), and on Facebook (Back et al., 2010; Gosling et al., 2007). In the studies of Vazire and Gosling (2004) and Marcus et al. (2006), website authors had to answer a personality questionnaire twice, first in an authentic manner, and the second time in an idealized manner. Unacquainted observers rated the personality of the website

Fig. 1. A typical profile on Xing.

authors based on their website. The results showed that the observers were able to rate the personality of a profile owner correctly. This shows that individuals present themselves authentically on their websites. Back et al. (2010) presented similar results for Facebook: The personality ratings of the profile owners completed by unacquainted observers were more similar to the authentic self-descriptions of the profile owners than to their idealized self-descriptions.

Further research focuses on the capabilities of the observers. Gosling et al. (2007) demonstrated that on MySpace, unacquainted observers were not only good at rating the authentic personality of a profile owner correctly, but that these ratings were also very similar across different observers (Gosling et al., 2007). Kluemper and Rosen (2009) examined self-presentation on MySpace and Facebook. Observer consistency across profiles was high, and observers were able to assess profile owners' personalities reliably. They could even distinguish low from high performers. Also the study of Kluemper, Rosen, and Mossholder (2012) revealed that ratings of online profiles demonstrated sufficient interrater reliability and internal consistency.

In sum, current research results can be summarized as follows: All studies that find an idealized self-presentation directly asked users about their presentation and their goals of presentation, whereas all studies that find an authentic online self-presentation used independent observers. These studies show that those observers can form valid impressions of a person just from reading the respective user profile. So, although individuals think that they

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[1] *Xing AG.* (n.d.). Retrieved October 23, 2012, from XING website, http://corporate.xing.com/no_cache/deutsch/unternehmen/xing-ag/.