ABSTRACT

The ease and convenience of Web-based search engines has fundamentally changed information gathering and use and given rise to tangible and significant effects in the way we form impressions of others. This study explores how the quantity of relevant search engine results affects individuals’ selection of potential partners in a team project scenario. Experimental data reveals a distinct bias favoring potential partners associated with many results as compared to those with few results, even when the results are devoid of meaningful individuating value, assuming the proportion of social media occurrences is held constant. By contrast, there was no evidence of effect from gender stereotyping as would be expected due to social categorization tendencies in contexts that provide minimal discriminating information such as the experimental scenario. Indeed there was only minimal evidence of gender effect in interaction with the result quantity factor, further highlighting the relative predominance of the latter. Findings help underscore the value of managing one’s online identity and hold implications for professionals, academics and individuals concerned with how the Web affects the way we form impressions of others.

Keywords: ePerception, ePersona, Gender, Impression Formation, Online Identity, Search Engines, Web Presence

INTRODUCTION

The simplicity, speed and accessibility of Web-based searches have radically changed the way individuals search for information. While individuals once sought restaurant menus, movie times and train schedules in newspapers, phone books or other print media, most now prefer to search for this type of information online. Moreover, many also depend on Web-based searches to evaluate companies, products, services, service providers and even potential employees prior to making a selection decision. The returned list of search results enables
searchers to form first impressions of objects or individuals based solely on the information gathered on the Web.

While it may be tempting to characterize the Web as essentially equivalent to traditional print media as a basis for forming impressions, a critical look reveals fundamental differences. Relative to traditional media, Web-based sources are easier to access and search, much more amenable to aggregation and have a longer lifespan. Further, these sources are growing exponentially with Web 2.0 technologies which provide unprecedented opportunities for anyone to create and post their own content (Kalyanaraman & Sundar, 2008). Although Web-based information lacks the well-established integrity controls of traditional print media, it has become an important source of information for decision making in both personal and professional contexts. A recent study sponsored by Microsoft surveyed 275 US hiring managers and human resource professionals about their hiring practices and found that 85% of these recruiters work for firms that have hiring policies requiring them to investigate potential candidates online and 70% admitted to turning down potential employees based on the information they found on the Web (Cross-tab, 2010). Given the importance of decisions being made based on impressions created solely from Web searches, it is imperative that we understand the characteristics of both the searcher and the searched that may impact formation of these impressions. Indeed, McKenna and Bargh (2000) argue that,

"like the telephone and television before it, the Internet by itself is not a main effect cause of anything, and that psychology must move beyond this notion to an informed analysis of how social identity, social interaction, and relationship formation may be different on the Internet than in real life." (p. 57)

It is in this spirit that we seek to better understand Web-based impression formation in this study.

For a business, the portion of its identity that is Web-searchable is often referred to as its Web presence. Individuals also have a presence on the Web that reflects the digitally hosted and searchable portion of their identity. Venkatsubramanyan and Hill (2009a) refer to this online portion of an individual’s identity as ePersona. One’s ePersona is derived from a variety of sources—personal home pages, social and professional networking sites, organizational Web pages, news articles, blogs and others. Passive viewers of this information (i.e. “perceivers”) then develop impressions depending primarily, if not exclusively, on the ePersona (Vazire & Gosling, 2004; Venkatsubramanyan and Hill, 2009a; 2009b). In the research presented here, we build upon Venkatsubramanyan and Hill’s (2009a) model of impression formation, using Web search results as surrogates for ePersonas, to explore how the quantity of these search results influences ePerception. Additionally we examine how these effects differ by the gender of the searched individual, the “target,” as compared with that of the perceiver. The results are both interesting and valuable in light of the common practice of “Googling” potential employees by organizations and given the integral role gender issues play in the social power and political dynamic of the workplace.

Our research is presented here in the following four sections. First we describe the theoretical development, starting with a review of traditional models of impression formation followed by a presentation of Venkatsubramanyan and Hill’s (2009a) model of Web-based impression formation. Within this section we develop our research question and put forward the hypotheses used to guide our research. Next, we describe the experimental methodology for an empirical study designed to address the research question and we provide the experimental results and their implications with respect to the original hypotheses. In the discussion and analysis section that follows, we assess and interpret the results. Finally, in the Conclusion, we reflect on the study’s contributions and implications for future research.