Chapter 13
Curating the Public Self: Helping Students Present an Authentic, Professional Persona via LinkedIn

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ABSTRACT

Many 21st century student writers have long since mastered the art of crafting a public image through their social media profiles. However, when it is time to make the transition from personal to professional in their public persona, many students have trouble differentiating between the shades of their lives, and subsequently, create less-than-professional public profiles. In this chapter, I explore ways writing teachers can help students transition from a social media experience limited to friends and family to a public persona for job searches, graduate school applications, and the like. More specifically, I discuss how I used LinkedIn to help student writers create authentic, yet professional, public selves.

INTRODUCTION

I met Reggie1 two years ago; he was a senior and a student in my course, Technical Writing for Health Science Majors at the University of South Florida. Reggie had a strong personality and voice, a remarkable face-to-face presence, a long list of jobs and internships related to his area of study, and great references. Yet, when we began our employment unit in the course, Reggie told me he was having trouble getting any calls for job interviews. After coming to the conclusion that he looked quite marketable on paper, I asked him to perform a Google search on himself. He reported back to me the next class period with astonishment. His public persona was anything but professional, and he had racked up quite the collection of personal photographs. Some of these photos were not so appropriate for a job search. In addition, he had found a long list of personal rants, links to games and apps, and the like. In other words, he had made no moves to craft his online public persona.

Like Reggie, a majority of Millennials have grown up with all the trappings of a digital society. Reggie and his peers have grown up in an age of self-promotion of accomplishments on Facebook and rants on Twitter. Reggie and his peers often post daily Instagram “selfies,” and find entire relationships formed.
Curating the Public Self via text messaging. Many Millennials have grown up in a world where much of their lives have been cast to the public, and, as such, many of these 21st century student writers have long since mastered the art of crafting a public image through their social media profiles. However, when students approaching graduation set out to make the transition from personal to professional in their public persona, many students have trouble differentiating between the shades of their lives. Subsequently, they create less-than-professional public profiles, their profile pictures are “selfies,” (see Figure 1) and their profile content is written in “text talk.”

This, of course, can lead to problems for Millennials when they begin to search and put themselves on the job market. Cassandra Branham and Danielle Farrar (2014) write in “Negotiating Virtual Spaces: Public Writing,” “Despite the fact that public writing in the virtual world has become increasingly popular, some people think less and less about what they write online. One particular consequence of this trend is the rise, in the past few years, of employers ‘vetting’ the online personas of potential employees and scholarship applicants” (p. 1).

Whether we like it or not, employers have long since begun using the capabilities of Internet searching to lay the groundwork for hiring decisions. A survey conducted via Career Builder claims that about one in four U.S. employers research prospective employees via Internet searching. And, further, of those using the Internet to research candidates, 51 percent found information which led to a decision not to hire a given candidate (p. 1). For those employers doing research specifically on social media sites, 63 percent of employers opted to not hire a given candidate based on information revealed in such searches (p. 1). The search information discovered varies from embellished qualifications to lying about an absence; further, 25 percent of the aforementioned employers found “poor communication skills” online, 19 percent found information about candidates drinking alcohol or using drugs, 11 percent found provocative or “inappropriate” photographs, and 8 percent found candidates with unprofessional screen names (p. 1).

In terms of creating positive information about themselves online, one of the best strategies for students is the creation of a LinkedIn profile. Recent Career Builder estimates note that 98 percent of recruiters

Figure 1. A selfie style photograph