Professional Online Profiles:  
The Impact of Personalization and Visual Gender Cues on Online Impression Formation

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ABSTRACT

Online profiles are becoming increasingly important in work contexts from recruiting to termination decisions. The authors conducted two experiments to investigate the effect of profile layout on professional impression formation. Presence or absence of photos had no impact on overall rating or likability, but interacted with profile gender. Male profiles were rated best with photo, female profiles without photo (Study 1, n=264). Placeholders providing only gender cues led to similarly low ratings for male and female profiles (Study 2, n=202). The authors’ findings indicate that visual gender cues have a considerable biasing effect for online impression formation, particularly for women. This study extends our understanding of the gendered nature of professional online settings with implications for HR professionals and organizations as well as users managing their attractiveness on the job markets.

Keywords: Gender, Hyperpersonal Cues, Impression Formation, Online Profiles, Visualization

INTRODUCTION

In 2011, 56% of companies used the internet for recruitment; an additional 20% were planning to do so in the future (SHRM, 2011). This is a considerable increase compared to 2008 (34%; SHRM, 2008) and illustrates the growing importance of online information for HR decisions. The internet, and here especially social media services, have become an important source of information from recruitment to termination (Davidson, Maraist, & Bing, 2011).

New online environments provide users with a wide range of possibilities from text-only elements to the posting of photos, videos or even interactive content (e.g. gifts, hugs, virtual kisses or gaming and event invitations). This raises the question what type of information

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users should post on their profiles and in what way to guarantee the best possible impressions in potential viewers.

In this paper we investigated the impact of visual gender cues in online profiles on impression formation in a professional context. Gender remains one of the most pervasive influences in work-related contexts. Studies in written (i.e., offline) CVs repeatedly demonstrate that gender information impacts the chances of being hired as well as the proposed salary and perceptions of competence (e.g., Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, & Handelsman, 2012). In this context visual cues play a particularly biasing role (Cann, Siegfried, & Pearce, 1981; Watkins & Johnston, 2000). Research on gender cues for impression formation in online settings has so far focused predominantly on personal relationships such as the development of friendships or romantic relationships, while professional contexts have been largely ignored. Yet, the processes for choosing a friend or dating partner are likely to differ considerably from choosing a potential employee. Our investigation aimed to increase our understanding of the gendered nature of professional online settings. In two experiments we varied the strength and degree of personalization of gender cues in professional online profiles. In both experiments we found a strong interaction of profile layout with the gender of the rated person in that men were rated more positively with photo (i.e., strong individualizing gender cues) and women without photo (i.e., weak gender cues). These results confirm the gendered nature of impression formation also in online professional contexts.

**Online Profiles for Impression Management and Formation**

Personal information online is often provided in profiles, a format similar to a traditional CV, usually containing a picture, current employment, education, professional history and at times hobbies and personal endorsements by colleagues or friends. Services such as LinkedIn, with its mission to help its members to “stay informed about your contacts and industry [and] find the people and knowledge you need to achieve your goals” are specifically geared towards professionals. Other sites such as Facebook, MySpace or Twitter have a more personal mission, but are still routinely used by HR professionals (SHRM, 2011). Online profiles can thus have a considerable impact on our careers and professional life.

Users are well aware that they need to manage their self-representations to create the best impression possible and that online profiles are a potent way to influence impression formation. As such self-presentation is a strategic activity “to convey an impression to others, which it is in [a person’s] interests to convey” (Goffman, 1959, p. 4). In this sense, impression management can be understood as “the goal-directed activity of influencing the impressions that audiences form of some person, group, object, or event” (Schlenker & Britt, 1999, p. 560).

Due to the asynchronous and often (semi-)anonymous nature of online communication, users experience greater control over their self-presentation. They may choose especially favorable images and descriptions, decide to include or consciously omit personal information such as age or relationship status or post comments and links indicating an interesting, ‘well-rounded’ personality (e.g., Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). By placing personal information in their profiles, users make explicit identity claims, which are used by viewers to construct a picture of their personality (Vazire & Gosling, 2004). Some even use the relative anonymity of the internet to create a whole new personality on the Web leading to questions of deception and identity construction in online communication and relationships (e.g. Stone, 1996; Turkle, 1995; Donath, 1999; Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). Yet, while users conduct impression management, it is questionable whether they are always aware of the impact of their design choices (Labrecque, Markos, & Milne, 2011).

A first impression of a person often decides whether further contact is looked for and thus whether a relationship develops at all. Impres-
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