You Saw THAT?: Social Networking Sites, Self-Presentation, and Impression Formation in the Hiring Process

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Recommended Citation  
http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2012/proceedings/EndUserIS/8
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ABSTRACT
Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn – individuals have more opportunities than ever before to present themselves in public using social networking sites (SNSs). However, individuals tend to live segmented lives and often develop different self-presentations depending on the audience. The combination of opportunities to present publicly and presenting different self-presentations can have unforeseen impacts for job candidates. From employers’ perspectives, access to this public information represents a new source of information about job candidates. This paper studies how self-presentations of candidates in SNSs affect impressions formed of candidates by individuals faced with a hiring decision. Utilizing the self-presentation and impression management literature, a model is developed and tested utilizing data from an online survey-based experiment. Findings of the study suggest information from self-presentations is seen as valuable, yet can create ambiguity for decision makers. Implications for theory and hiring organizations assessing the influence of SNSs on hiring are discussed.

Keywords
Social networking sites, hiring, job search, impression formation, self-presentation, social media

INTRODUCTION
New technologies have helped users evolve from simply consumers of information to creators of content (e.g., Tapscott and Williams, 2008). Today more than 1 billion users worldwide have profiles, or collections of information about themselves, on social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook and LinkedIn. Coupled with nearly ubiquitous access to the Internet, these sites allow users to easily create content by posting updates on what they (or others) are doing or thinking, updating profile information, commenting on articles, and sharing images and videos.

When using publicly accessible SNSs individuals shed their veil of anonymity, intentionally or not. Contributions to SNSs are a form of self-presentation, or the conscious or unconscious attempt to control what impression others form about oneself by transferring information (Leary, 1996; Schlenker, 2003), also referred to as impression management. Whether sharing information about themselves or creating connections with others, individuals reveal clues about themselves, which can be linked to their offline identity (Douglas, McGarty, Sassenberg, McKenna and Green, 2002). In fact, a large majority of SNS users recognize the public nature of these spaces and admit that others would be able to find out who they are from the information they disclose online (Lenhart, 2009). This highlights an inherent issue in the use of SNSs – users are naturally interested in social interaction through self-presentations, yet in doing so users’ self-presentation are publicly accessible to multiple audiences and across contexts. As a result of this issue, SNSs tend to break existing boundaries, particularly those between one’s public work life and private personal life.

As a result, self-presentations in the public spaces created by SNSs can create opportunities and challenges for the selection of organizational talent – both for job candidates and human resource (HR) professionals focused on recruiting (Kluemper and Rosen, 2009). For job candidates, SNSs afford them the opportunity to create self-presentations with high visibility. For
HR professionals provided with limited information while attempting to assess the fit between the candidate and the organizational needs (Cable and Judge, 1996), SNSs represent a source of new, publicly available information accessible across multiple sites and located easily (Brandenburg, 2007; Doherty, 2010).

While the popular press has anecdotally discussed negative experiences of job candidates and employees (e.g., not being hired for a desired position) associated with their self-presentations on SNSs, researchers are focused on understanding the role and impact of SNSs when they are utilized by HR professionals during the hiring process (Doherty, 2010; Klumper and Rosen, 2009; Martensen, Börgmann and Bick, 2011). Towards this end, this study utilizes a survey-based experiment to examine the impact of self-presentations from SNSs on impressions of candidates’ suitability, or the degree to which the candidate is well-matched with the target position, by HR professionals. The goal is to examine the impact of SNSs from the recruiter’s perspective and how SNSs influence impressions formed.

SELF-PRESENTATION AND IMPRESSION FORMATION

Rooted in the work of Jones (1964) and Goffman (1959), known for describing self-presentation as akin to “performance on a stage,” the concept of self-presentation has generated a significant amount of research in social psychology (Leary, 1996). Core tenets of this body of work are that self-presentation is a “fundamental feature of social life” (Schlenker, 2003 p. 513) and that much can be learned about individuals by observing the appearances they create for others, or their self-presentations. A self-presentation is shaped by the situation and the audience being presented to (Schlenker, 2003). As such, another relevant aspect of the self-presentation literature examines how self-presentations are perceived by others and used to form impressions. Studies in this body of literature view impression formation as an attitude change (Triandis and Fishbein, 1963), examining how multiple sources of information are combined together to form an impression.

The role of self-presentations has been researched in a hiring context (Baron, 1986; Broussard and Brannen, 1986; Knouse, 1994), and it has been found to be a complex process that brings with it potential benefits and detriments for job candidates. For example, research has found that carefully crafted self-presentation (e.g., strong statements of accomplishments and noteworthy qualities) in a cover letter leads to more favorable evaluations of the applicant because it leads the reader to perceive the applicant as more self-confident (Knouse, Giacalone and Pollard, 1988). In contrast, research has shown that self-impression can also lead to less favorable outcomes for the job applicant if not managed properly (Giacalone, 1985). For example, self-presentation via a resume that creates ambiguity about the applicant can lead to less favorable outcomes (Knouse et al., 1988), as ambiguity is perceived negatively and can be treated as a “red flag” (Broussard and Brannen, 1986). Whether positive or negative, research has found that perceptions prior to meeting an individual, such as those in a cover letter or resume, can be especially influential in the evaluation of the individual post-interaction.

Hiring decisions are complex, filled with unknowns related to job candidates and HR professionals working to form impressions efficiently based on the available information. HR professionals gather information to form impressions of job candidates which will, in part, reduce their uncertainty about them (Berger and Douglas, 1981). To reduce the most uncertainty about a job candidate, HR professionals and hiring managers can utilize various methods (e.g., active, interactive, and passive) of observation (Berger and Douglas, 1981). HR professionals recruiting candidates commonly conduct active and interactive observations to reduce uncertainty (Forsythe, 1990; Rosenfeld, 1997). In both active and interactive observations, the job candidate is aware that he or she is being observed and has the opportunity to strategically craft his or her self-presentation for the audience. With passive observation, the job candidate does not have the opportunity to craft his or her self-presentation for the particular audience because the candidate is neither aware of the observation or its focus (Berger and Douglas, 1981). Thus, passive observation is considered one of the most informative types of observation as the individual forming the impression is less likely to think that the target is acting or performing to the audience (Berger and Douglas, 1981).

Users are attracted to using SNSs because of the opportunities for social interaction and connectivity with others, with an emphasis on enhancing and enriching existing offline relationships (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2006). To support these objectives, SNSs provide users with tools that facilitate users’ self-presentations, including the ability to: create a personal profile, identify a list of associates, create and join groups, and send private and public messages to other members (boyd and Ellison, 2007). As a tool for impression management, the profile allows users to self-present aspects of themselves, including their: first and last name, gender, date of birth, preferred language, interests, relationship status, sexual preferences, location, affiliations, and history (Ellison, Lampe and Steinfield, 2009; Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2007).

At the backbone of SNSs, and arguably, the feature most associated with them (boyd and Ellison, 2007; Parameswaran and Whinston, 2007) is the ability to specify other users with whom one has a relationship, or their social network. What is unique about this feature is not only the ability to create a social network, but that the network is publicly visible to others. A public network serves as a form of self-presentation because it is a source of information which can be used to identify
commonalities between new acquaintances, as well as reveals cues about other’s social position due to the presence, or absence, of mutual acquaintances (boyd and Ellison, 2007).

Contributions to SNSs are a form of self-presentations, which consists of the conscious or unconscious attempts to control what impression others form about oneself by transferring information (Leary, 1996; Schlenker, 2003), in this public sphere. Collectively, the profile and social network are tools of impression management that either directly or indirectly facilitate the self-presentation of information.

**THEORETICAL MODEL**

Human resource professionals are provided with limited information and must make a judgment regarding a candidate’s suitability (Impression of Candidate Suitability), or the degree to which the candidate is well-matched with the target position (e.g., Cable and Judge, 1996). While passive observation can be informative, it is difficult to conduct because the target individual is unaware of the observation. Observing a job candidate without the candidate knowing he is being observed is not part of the typical hiring process, largely because it would be too difficult, expensive, and often simply impossible to set up (Dipboye and Jackson, 1999). However, SNSs have changed this. For HR professionals, SNSs represent a new potential source of additional information on candidates. Given the public nature of SNSs, many self-presentations created by an individual can be fully accessed. As a result, passive observation via SNSs is relatively inexpensive compared to other methods of passive observation, which is largely considered to be more accurate than active or inactive forms of observation (Berger and Douglas, 1981). One potential explanation for this is that individuals may express themselves more freely due to the perception that self-presentations are less public than they are (Bateman, Pike and Butler, 2011) or a belief that others cannot or would not want to access their self-presentations. Furthermore, individuals sometimes perform self-presentations for short-term audiences and do not understand the larger consequences of their actions. For these reasons assessing candidate suitability can be difficult.

Self-presentations via SNSs provide valuable additional information for the HR professionals and hiring managers. The value of the self-presentation via a SNS (SNS Self-Presentation Value) is the degree to which the self-presentation in the SNS provides information that indicates the candidate’s qualification match the job description. The value of the information in the self-presentation can be discussed by looking at the extremes – a positive self-presentation and a negative self-presentation. In the case of a positive self-presentation via a SNS, it provides information that indicates a candidate’s qualification match those of the job. In this situation, an HR professional’s perception of the candidate suitability’s should increase when this information is incorporated. On the contrary, a negative self-presentation via a SNS provides information that is inconsistent with the self-presentation viewed in other sources (e.g., resume) and/or provides information that indicates the candidate’s qualifications do not match those of the job. In this situation, an HR professional’s perception of the candidate suitability’s would not increase, but would likely be damaged when this information is incorporated.

**Hypothesis 1:** The value of the self-presentation via a social networking site by a job candidate is positively associated with the human resource professional’s impression of candidate suitability.

HR professionals form impressions based on observations via a variety of sources (e.g., resume, interview). However, information gathered from a variety of sources can lead to impression ambiguity, or a lack of clarity in the impression formed due to the multitude of information and the perception that the information can be interpreted in multiple ways (Daft and Macintosh, 1981). During impression formation, ambiguity leads decision makers to question information available to them. Impression ambiguity is treated as a “red flag” and can negatively impact perceptions of a candidate (Knouse et al., 1988). In other words, increased impression ambiguity hurts the impression formed of the candidate, while reduced impression ambiguity benefits the impression formed of the candidate.

**Hypothesis 2:** Impression ambiguity perceived by the human resource professional in regard to the job candidate is negatively associated with the human resource professional’s impression of candidate suitability.

SNSs have created a new forum for public communication (Slevin, 2000), with individuals “using communication media to make information and their points of view visible and available to others” (p. 182). However, this environment can be challenging for job candidates to navigate. Individuals tend to desire to live segmented lives and often develop different self-presentations depending on the context or audience (Goffman, 1959; Walther, 2007), such as a professional, structured presentation for one’s boss and colleagues and a casual, care-free presentation for one’s college friends. However, maintaining multiple presentations is possible as long as the audiences are separate and little opportunity for interaction among the audiences exists (Goffman, 1959). This highlights an inherent issue in the use of SNSs – users are naturally interested in social interaction through self-presentations, yet in doing so users make their information publicly accessible to
multiple audiences and contexts. This aspect of SNSs blurs existing traditional boundaries, particularly those between one’s public work life and private personal life (Hewitt and Forte, 2006). Thus, SNSs are boundary-blurring (SNS Boundary-Blurring), or the convergence of communication aimed for different audiences (e.g., professional and personal that previously would not have been communicated to the same audience). Further, some SNSs may project certain boundaries and an association with a particular type of self-presentation. For example, LinkedIn may be perceived as a place for professional self-presentation, while Facebook is for personal self-presentation. However, these boundaries do not formally exist, only perceptions, as self-presentations contained in these publicly accessible sites can be reached by any audience due to their boundary-blurring nature.

A strong theme in the self-presentation literature is that individuals will present different versions of themselves to different audiences (Goffman, 1959; Walther, 2007). As a result of these blurred boundaries, between personal and professional, HR professionals may have access to a multitude of information communicated in different self-presentations created for different audiences by one individual. When the number of self-presentations viewed increases, the potential for acquiring new information not previously viewed also increases. For example, a HR professional may view certain information in a self-presentation via a resume (e.g., employment history) and completely different information in a self-presentation via a SNS (e.g., hobbies, movies the candidate likes). However, these different self-presentations may not be intended for the same audience (i.e., the HR Professional). As these self-presentations were prepared for different audiences, there is likely to be conflicting information. While SNSs have the opportunity to offer different, and potentially more accurate, information about a candidate through passive observation, this additional information can create ambiguity in the impression of the job candidate because of inconsistent information. This implies that the more a SNS blurs boundaries, the more audiences view the self-presentations contained within it, which may or may not be the target audiences for the self-presentations. Viewing mistargeted self-presentations, or self-presentations that were not created with the true audience in mind, can create ambiguity in the formed impression.

Hypothesis 3: The degree to which a social networking site containing a self-presentation is boundary-blurring is positively associated with the human resource professional’s impression ambiguity.

RESEARCH METHODS

To test the research model an online survey-based experiment was conducted. Consistent with the research questions, the experiment’s context was the impression of a job candidate. Participants targeted were those with professional experience earning an advanced degree on a part-time basis, as has been used in prior studies (e.g., Knouse et al., 1988). After receiving an invitation that offered a small incentive, participants went to the web address provided that allowed them to participate in the study. After reading brief instructions, the online experiment presented the participant with a job description and a self-presentation in the form of a profile in a SNS belonging to a candidate for the position. A 2 (low/mediocre qualifications vs.
high/strong qualifications- value of the SNS self-presentation) x 2 (low/LinkedIn vs. high/Facebook - SNS boundary-blurring) between subjects randomized experimental design was used. After the participants reviewed the job description and the SNS self-presentation, they answered questions regarding the impression of the candidate’s suitability for the job and the ambiguity in their impression of the candidate.

Measures
The items used to measure the constructs were adapted from previous studies and modified to meet the context. All items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale anchored with “Strongly Disagree” and “Strongly Agree.” Items assessing the impression of candidate suitability were adapted from a study which focused on making hiring judgments (Christiansen, Rozek and Burns, 2010). Items measuring impression ambiguity were adapted from prior studies on ambiguity and equivocality (Daft and Macintosh, 1981; Dennis and Kinney, 1998). SNS self-presentation value and SNS boundary-blurring were manipulated variables, and the manipulation check items were used as the items for SNS boundary-blurring as they assessed the degree to which the participants believed they were blurring the boundary from a professional environment (i.e., the context of their candidate evaluation task) into another context. All items used were first vetted and refined by the researcher and were tested for good psychometric properties following a pilot test. Control variables included gender, age, highest level of education, SNS use, resumes reviewed in the last year, and involvement in hiring in the last year.

Respondents
Initially, 646 individuals were invited to participate in the study. Of the 646 individuals invited, 212 clicked on the web address to begin the experiment. Of the 212 who began the experiment, 141 completed it for a response rate of 21.8%. Excluding twelve participants that declined to answer, the average number of years of business experience among the participants was 6.0 years, and the range was from 1 year to 28 years. All of the respondents were college graduates, and had an average age of 29.2 years. Of the participants, 60.3% were male, 43.3% of the participants indicated that they had reviewed resumes in the last year in their current position, and 34.0% of the participants indicated that they had been involved with filling an open position within the last year.

Data Analysis and Results
Data were employed in a simultaneous test of structural and measurement models using Partial Least Squares, SmartPLS 2.0 (Ringle, Wende and Will, 2005), which is well suited for detecting differences with small sample sizes (Chin, 1998). The adequacy of the measurement model was assessed using three common tests of convergent validity (Chin, 1998). Items loaded on their intended constructs greater than 0.7, indicating that there was more shared variance between a construct and measure than error variance (Carmines and Zeller, 1979). Second, the internal consistency of each construct was assessed using composite reliability (Werts, Linn and Jöreskog, 1974). Third, the average variance extracted (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) was calculated for each scale. All scales exceeded Chin’s (1998) guideline of 0.5, meaning that at least 50% of variance in indicators was accounted for by its respective construct. The square root of AVE for each construct exceeded all respective inter-construct correlations, providing further evidence of discriminant validity. To assess discriminant validity, the correlations of items with their intended constructs was examined, and it was found that all items correlated most strongly with their intended construct.

The research model was tested by examining the size and significance of structural paths in the PLS analysis, with all significant paths shown in Figure 2. No controls were found to be significant.

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1 PLS produces standardized regression coefficients for structural paths. Bootstrapping techniques, a nonparametric approach for estimating the precision of paths, were used to test for significance using 500 re-samples.
Hypothesis 1 predicted that the value of the self-presentation in a SNS would be positively associated with the impression of candidate suitability. The results of the PLS analysis showed support for H1 (supported, β=0.474, p<0.01). In other words, the more positive the self-presentation in a SNS, the more suitable the candidate will be perceived by the individual doing the evaluation. Hypothesis 2 proposed that impression ambiguity is negatively associated with the impression of candidate suitability. The model showed support for H2 (supported, β=-0.109, p<0.10). Hypothesis 3 suggested that the degree to which the SNS blurs boundaries is positively associated with impression ambiguity perceived by the evaluating individual. The results supported H3 (supported, β=0.18, p<0.05). In all, the model explained 26.7% of the variance in the impression of candidate suitability. None of the control variables (gender, age, highest level of education, SNS use, resumes reviewed in the last year, and involvement in hiring in the last year) were significant.

**DISCUSSION**

Self-presentation has been found to be critical for job candidates seeking to demonstrate that they are well-qualified and well-suited to work in recruiting organizations (Baron, 1986; Knouse, 1994; Leary, Tchividjian and Kraxberger, 1994). However, self-presentations in the boundary-blurring, public spaces of SNSs have created opportunities and challenges for selecting organizational talent – both for candidates and HR professionals.

For job candidates, SNSs afford them the opportunity to create self-presentations with high visibility, especially as HR professionals are increasingly turning to the internet to find candidates and gather additional information (Brandenburg, 2007; Doherty, 2010; George, 2006). While popular press stories have largely focused on the detriment of SNSs to job seekers, this study suggests that the value of the self-presentation in SNSs can be positive. When favorably aligned with the job requirements, the additional information obtained from SNSs is incorporated by the HR professional during impression formation, raising the perceived suitability of the candidate. This result holds whether the SNSs is boundary-blurring or boundary-maintaining (i.e., personal or professional). This suggests that having a self-presentation publicly available in a SNS while on the job market can benefit the candidate.

For HR professionals provided with limited information attempting to assess candidate suitability, SNSs represent a source of new, publicly available information. However, prior research suggests that impression management is a complex process (e.g., Baron, 1986). This study suggests that the boundary-blurring nature of SNSs can further complicate the process with HR professionals having access to multiple, and potentially conflicting self-presentations from a job candidate, which can create ambiguity in the impression of the candidate. This increased ambiguity has the potential to be a detriment to the job candidate as increased ambiguity reduces the perceived suitability of the candidate. Thus, while having a self-presentation in
a boundary-blurring SNS is likely not to affect the weight placed on the information obtained from the self-presentation, having a self-presentation in a boundary-blurring SNS indirectly affects the impression of candidate suitability through impression ambiguity. While there are both positive and negative aspects of having a self-presentation in a SNS, empirically, in this study, the detriment does not compare to the benefit, which is much larger.

Finally, the study highlights an inherent tension between individuals creating self-presentations and SNS providers. Individuals using SNSs for self-presentation typically like to preserve boundaries between audiences, for both privacy and to reduce audience ambiguity. Yet, SNS providers have traditionally had the (unspoken) goal of blurring boundaries as that is key to attracting a large, broad, merged audience to the site, as it is what drives traffic, and ultimately generates revenue via advertisement sales. As such, users need to consider this goal and perhaps adapt their self-presentations to this environment – or deal with potential consequences.

CONCLUSION

Thanks to SNSs such as Facebook and LinkedIn, individuals now have more opportunities than ever to present themselves in public. From the organization’s perspective, access to this public information represents a new source of information about job candidates. However, as individuals tend to live segmented lives and often develop different self-presentations depending on the audience, this may create opportunities and challenges for both parties. Our study finds that self-presentations from SNSs can positively influence perceptions of candidate suitability. However, they can also create ambiguity, which adversely impacts perceptions of their suitability. As such, job seekers and hiring organizations should pay attention to this, and take these nuanced implications into consideration when engaging SNSs during candidate searches.

REFERENCES