Why Are People So Naïve?
Long-term Motivation in Online Reputation Management: A Grounded Theory Study

Full Paper

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Abstract

In our digital society, individuals’ online reputation has progressively gained more importance because people used to search for information about others in order to get a first impression before they meet in real life. For example, studies revealed that 70% of human resource professionals have rejected job applicants based on information they found online and only 35% attempted to verify the information they retrieved (Cross-Tab 2010). Although individuals consider their online reputation as important, they do not conduct online reputation management on regular basis. This paper aims to identify the factors that influence individuals’ long-term motivation for online reputation management. Thereby, we contribute new insights to the general understanding of online reputation management behaviour and provide recommendations for online reputation management service providers and policy-makers. We have drawn the results from a conducted grounded theory study based on 22 qualitative interviews with young adults in Germany.

Keywords

Online Reputation Management, Long-term Motivation, Grounded Theory, Self-Search, Social Networking Sites

Introduction

In the digital age, particularly with the introduction of Web 2.0 platforms, online reputation has significantly gained importance because individuals become both consumers and authors. Although Web 2.0 services are tremendously successful and demonstrated their multifaceted advantages they entail risks for individuals. Everybody can publish content or re-share existing content in the Web without prior verification. Consequently, individuals need to manage information about them online in order to maintain their online reputation. Therefore, online reputation management (ORM) becomes significantly important.

Reputation is a versatile term and has been researched in various domains in the academia (Eisenegger and Imhof 2008). In this paper, reputation is defined as any “information used to make a value judgment about [a] [...] person” (Farmer and Glass 2010), which means that individuals’ online reputation is a multi-source outcome consist of textual information, videos, and photos. Based on this, ORM can be defined as any activity in the Web for reputation building, maintenance, and enhancing (Burkhardt 2008). ORM is familiar to the majority of people that frequently interact with the Internet and they already realized that ORM becomes influential and relevant. Most people consider their personal offline and online reputation as important (Komisarjevsky 2012, pp. 2–3). Studies indicate this believe about the importance of online reputation is right because it can influence many facets of their life. For instances, a survey from Cross-Tab (2010) uncovered that 70% of human resource professionals have rejected job applicants based on the information they found online. Moreover, this study also revealed that only 39% of the recruiters attempted to verify the retrieved reputational information. As a consequence, job applicants might get rejected anyway albeit the information about them is inaccurate or even lies. This study exposed the downside of Web 2.0 because other people can affect one’s life by sharing false information. Therefore, personal ORM can be crucial since the Internet does not forget published content (Rosen 2012). People
need to go through three steps in order to conduct ORM: identification and notification, analysis and evaluation, and action (Yang and Albers 2013). Firstly, relevant information about an individual needs to be identified and the individual needs to be notified. In next step, the individual has to analyse the retrieved information and evaluate the reputational impact. Lastly, actions have to be taken in order to recover or modify the affected online reputation. Considering that new information about a person can be shared anytime, this process has to be repeated on regular basis (Yang and Albers 2013).

However, surveys prove that people do not conduct ORM on regular basis and some results even indicate that people do not conduct ORM at all. For instance, Madden and Smith (2010) questioned over 2,200 individuals about their ORM behaviour and they found out that only 2% of the adult Internet users perform self-searches regularly whereas the rest do it once in a while (19%) or have only done it once (78%). Brackenbury and Wong (2012) carried out a survey that questioned 5,000 people in five countries and disclosed that only 35% of them consider long-term effects online activities have on their online reputation. The findings of the surveys lead to the conclusion that people do not conduct ORM on regular basis notwithstanding they acknowledge the importance and impact of their online reputation. Therefore, the factors that hinder individuals to conduct ORM on regular basis need to be identified in order to enhance current ORM solutions and motivate people to conduct ORM on regular basis. Consequently, the research question for this paper is: *how can people be motivated for long-term ORM?*

This paper is organized as follows. The next section outlines the related work of the study. The following section introduces the grounded theory methodology, which is used for data collection and analysis. Then, we highlight the findings of the study and discuss the results. Finally, we conclude the paper and provide an outlook on further research.

**Related Work**

As outlined in the introduction, several industrial surveys (Brackenbury and Wong 2012; e.g. Cross-Tab 2010; Microsoft Corporation 2012) have been conducted to examine individual’s motivation and behaviour in ORM. They conclude that individuals’ motivation regarding long-term ORM is on a low level and their behaviour is irregular. Unfortunately, those studies focus on basic statistics and the goal of the studies were not to identify factors that inhibit ORM on regular basis. Moreover, the main focus is on social networking sites. Our study also investigates individuals’ ORM motivation outside such platforms with unstructured data that required other forms of motivation and ORM behaviour (Yang and Albers 2013).

The research field online reputation is related to impression management (Eisenegger and Imhof 2008), which is traditionally located in the offline world and there people used to manage their impression automatically as soon as they are visible to others (Goffman 1959; Leary and Kowalski 1990). This does not apply to the online world because everybody can view published information and the viewer is anonymous for the reputation manager. Some researchers transferred the offline world concept of impression management to the online world (Chester and Bretherton 2008; Krämer and Winter 2008; e.g. Turkle 1995) including the construct “impression motivation”. They focus on factors that influence people to modify their online reputation or to construct a different online reputation but not on the long-term motivation that involves continuous monitoring of information shared about an individual.

Notwithstanding offline reputation has a long history, the research landscape of online reputation contains many gaps that are worth researching (Yang and Albers 2013). We aim to contribute knowledge to the understanding of long-term motivation in ORM since long-term motivation in the ORM research has not been addressed and theories from related research fields do not explain the paradoxical behaviour.

**Methodology**

This paper aims to examine and develop a set of factors influencing the long-term motivation of ORM for German digital natives by using an explanatory research approach. Therefore, the experiences and inner thoughts of individuals need to be revealed. Related research domains provide evidence (e.g. Acquisti and Gross 2006; Anderson and Shirako 2008; Krämer and Haferkamp 2011) that identifying the motives of people is manifold and complex. Therefore, an explanatory research approach was chosen, specifically the modified grounded theory method of Charmaz (2014) because it allows the investigation of research topics without predefined hypothesis and to include aspects and perspectives that have not yet been consid-
ered in previous literature. Furthermore, Charmaz proposes a more flexible way to conduct research with grounded theory, which acknowledges existing knowledge from literature. This approach does not presume researchers as a tabula rasa (p. 306) but that every researcher already has knowledge about the research topic. Moreover, it allows the usage of previous knowledge from literature during the study: “Draft your literature review and theoretical framework in relation to your grounded theory. It can be used to direct how you critique earlier studies and theories and to make comparisons with these materials” (p. 305). Therefore, the modified grounded theory approach is most suitable for researching online reputation because of its relation to many other research domains.

Data Collection

Semi-structured and open-ended face-to-face interviews were conducted with young adults in Germany and used as primary data source. This interview method was chosen because of its flexibility and possibility to frame the interview at the same time. It does not interrupt respondent’s mid-flow and concurrently structures the interview based on the predefined questions. Additionally, face-to-face interviews provide better communication and more precise data since the reaction of the interviewees are visible (Bhattacherjee 2012). The focus on young adults is grounded in their long experience with using Internet services and their resulting connection to online reputation. The aim of the interviews is to cover the topic as broadly and deeply as possible in order to generate a set of factors from the data. 22 interviews were conducted between December 2013 and April 2014. The interviewees ranged in age from 18 to 30 years, with 12 males and 10 females. The interviewees were randomly acquired according to the predefined conditions at the university. Additionally, those interviewees referred us to new potential interviewees. Interviewees’ privacy and anonymity were guaranteed at the beginning of each interview in order to reduce their fear and let them speak as free as possible. All interviewees were German or people with a migration background but had been living in Germany for a long time.

The interviews were structured into two stages. In the first stage, students applying for jobs were interviewed. It provided an in-depth insight into people who were conducting or should conduct ORM. This slice of data comprised 12 interviews that resulted in approximately 110 single-spaced pages of transcribed text. The interview length was between 35 and 90 minutes. 10 interviews were conducted with people with job experience in the second stage. This slice of data is concerned with people’s behaviour after they had conducted ORM. It produced about 100 single-spaced pages of transcribed text and the interview length was at least 40 minutes. After the second round of interviews and an analysis of the data, a trend towards saturation became visible and suggested that we had collected sufficient relevant data in order to describe the long-term motivation for digital natives in Germany (Guest 2006).

Data Analysis

Following the grounded theory approach, data collection and analysis were conducted in parallel. After each interview the intermediary results were analysed and discussed. The collected insights were compared to existing insights and based on identified contradictions and emerging new questions, the interview guide was extended accordingly. This cycle of constant comparison proposed by grounded theory literature (Charmaz 2014) enabled the identification and an in-depth understanding of factors contributing to long-term motivation of the interviewees. Additionally, constant comparison enables examination of questions from different perspectives. The process of data analysis was divided into two parts. The aim of the initial stage (open coding) was to identify concepts and high-level categories that influence long-term motivation for ORM. Although the main focus was on the influencing factors, we tried to remain as open as possible in order to identify concepts and relationships that were salient in the data (Charmaz 2014). At this stage all interviews were coded line-by-line and produced over 200 codes. Those codes were further integrated and abstracted into the most important core categories and the properties of the core categories. In the second step (axial coding) the main categories were further developed and elaborated. The findings and results of the study are presented in the following section.
Findings

Ease of Use

Ease of use, defined as “the degree to which a person believes that using a particular system would be free of effort” (Davis 1989), is perceived as an issue in the current ORM solutions. The interviewees consider current solutions as not self-explaining and that most of them require long training period in order to understand them. Therefore, interviewees’ investment to reach their ORM goals is limited because the benefits they draw out of it are unclear and often not measurable. Additionally, they perceive taking action in order to repair their online reputation such as removing photos from the Web as complicated and hard to achieve. Consequently, the interviewees do not think about ORM on regular basis due to its high workload and complicated nature. One-time ORM are already considered as complex, which makes ORM on regular basis even more unattractive. The interviewees rather consider quitting and deleting their profiles on social networking sites as the best option to overcome online reputation problems.

- Training Period: “It is hard to follow the changes of the privacy policies of Facebook. It was difficult to understand the first version and to configure my profile in a way that I was satisfied. But the changes make it harder to keep my desired settings.” (Interviewee James).
- Limited resource usage for ORM: “I don’t invest much time for one-time ORM. So I am not investing much time for regular ORM either because I do not know if the results of my endeavour are worth for the costs I have to invest.” (Interviewee Lucy).
- Perceive ORM actions as complicated: “One guy took some application photos of me and he uploaded those photos to advertise his company. I didn’t like that and asked him to take down these photos. But it was really hard because he didn’t want to do it in the first place. I needed to be very persistent.” (Interviewee Max).
- Consider regular ORM as too complex: “To check and manage my online reputation all the time would be to complicated for me. I would rather delete my Facebook account.” (Interviewee Lucy).

Convenience

In the information-seeking research spheres, convenience is often defined as a service that increases comfort or a situation or context in which the information-seeker feels comfortable (Connaway et al. 2011). The interviewees perceive ORM as stressful. They consider managing their information online such as social network profiles as necessary and therefore, they keep them up-to-date. But they see ORM as daily expenditure and they have to pay attention all the time if they are posting information about themselves.

For some other interviewees ORM is also stressful but they decide to be passive. They explain their passiveness with laziness. They know that they should take care of their online reputation, but they remain passive. This kind of behaviour is comparable to people who know that they should exercise in order to live healthier, but remain passive and lazy due to lack of motivation (e.g. Ebben and Brudzynski 2008).

- Stress: “I am managing my profiles on LinkedIn and Facebook and I keep them up-to-date because I think my company wouldn’t like to see any kind of inappropriate information on those profiles.” (Interviewee Mika)
- Laziness: “I know that I should take care of the online available information. But it is like exercise motivation problem. I know that I should do it, but I cannot motivate myself.” (Interviewee Scarlett).

Naivety

Meriam Webster and Oxford Online Dictionary define naivety as an expression or a form of lack of understanding, knowledge, experience, wisdom, or judgment (Meriam Webster 2015; Oxford Online Dictionary 2015). It becomes apparent during data analysis that interviewees behave naïve in the matter of ORM. Their assumptions and beliefs regarding ORM are simple and credulous, particularly given that they are at least partially aware of current issues in ORM: “Generally, if something is published on the Internet, it is hard to remove it. That is why people should present themselves as well as possible because you have to live with it if information about you is on the Web. It is hard to repair your online reputation, when it
is damaged.” (Interviewee Rene). Some interviewees consider negative postings from others about them as improbable or impossible although they knew other people could share false information.

Despite their gullibility, the interviewees are also waiting for trigger events (e.g. date, job interview) to conduct ORM. For them a good online reputation before specific circumstances is sufficient and they hope trigger-event-based ORM is enough in order to avert harm caused by bad online reputation notwithstanding they know taking down or modifying published can take long time. We noticed during the analysis of the interviews that there are more naïve individuals than the aforementioned. They do not know that regular ORM is indispensable for maintaining their desired online reputation and that it may take some time to enhance online reputation. The interviewees have heard about ORM-related issues but they do not think that it will affect them. Their level of motivation for ORM decrease fast as long as the topic is not publicly discussed because a bad online reputation is not a threat to their basis of life. Some interviewees reported that they have not experienced negative impact of a bad online reputation or ever heard of consequences because of not conducting ORM in their social circle. Resulting from the lack of experience they do not recognize the necessity of regular ORM.

• Wrong assumption: “I searched myself some months ago. But honestly, I don’t think that anybody posted something negative about me in the last months. I know that this trust might be wrong and maybe this is a naïve trust in other people.” (Interviewee Max).

• Need trigger-event: “Currently I am not applying for a job or looking for a new girlfriend. So from my point of view there is no reason to look after my online reputation. My online presentation should be as it is and this is fine for me.” (Interviewee James).

• Ignorance with regard to necessity of regular ORM: “Last time I search for myself, everything was fine. So I don’t see the point to do it again.” (Interviewee Mika).

• Self-experience: “Neither have I experienced that anyone shared false or negative information about me on the Web nor that information I shared was perceived negative or affected me on an unfavourable way. I also haven’t heard from any of my friends about such negative experiences. So I am not considering conducting regular ORM.” (Interviewee Henry).

Perceived importance of online reputation

Perceived importance refers to an information set (which forms the online reputation) that acquires the attention of the individual (Larcker and Lessig 1980). The chosen sample does not include famous people or celebrities. It seems that the degree of fame influences the motivation because the interviewees perceive themselves as not important enough and consequently, other people do not have incentives to attack their online reputation in order to harm them. Since current mass media reports mostly broadcasting cases involving public figures, non-famous people do not consider similar attacks on them. This feeling is supported by the fact that interviewees did not often find new information about themselves. They lose motivation, consider themselves as not important enough or find ORM is not important for them if no new information has been disclosure for awhile. The same feeling arises if self-searchers do not find extraordinary or surprising results about themselves.

All interviewees were more active on professional than private social networking sites. The reason for this behaviour lies in the clear goal people have on social networking sites like LinkedIn or Xing. On these platforms people want to be visible for headhunters or looking for new jobs. For most interviewees, the clarity of goals on private social networking sites such as Facebook is much more blurred. Consequently, the perceived importance is higher for professional than private social networking sites.

• Degree of fame: “If I am a celebrity or sport star, I would conduct ORM more often. But now I don’t think that it would be worthy.” (Interviewee Joshua).

• Rate of finding new information: “I haven’t found new information about me last time when I conducted self-search. So it got boring and I stopped it.” (Interviewee Jones).

• Finding surprising information: “Sometimes I find new information about them. But most of them are press releases that I already know and they aren’t really surprising.” (Interviewee Owen).
• Clarity of goals: “I manage my Xing account on regular basis because I know my professional goals and therefore, I try to present myself in order to reach those goals. But I don’t manage my Facebook account on regular basis because I don’t have a clear goal here.” (Interviewee Scarlett).

**Discussion**

This study reveals current issues of long-term ORM motivation and the main factors influencing individuals to conduct ORM on regular basis. Figure 1 illustrates the emerged conceptual model.

![Conceptual Model of Long-term Motivation](image)

*Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Long-term Motivation.*

Interviewees perceive and consider ORM on regular basis as too complicated and they see the imbalance between the advantages and the resources they have to invest. Moreover, the interviewees already consider one-time ORM as difficult and suspicious regarding its effectively. Consequently, ease of use is one of the major issues of current ORM solution and one of the most influencing factors that hinder individuals from conducting ORM on regular basis. The Interviewees find the results of search engines too imprecise and current solutions do not support the self-searchers in the analysis and evaluation of results. Additionally, interviewees perceive modification of online reputation as time-consuming and it is unclear which rights they have. The interviews had been conducted before the European Court of Justice decided that search engines have to remove results from their index when requested (European Court of Justice 2014). The perception about ease of use may have changed after this court ruling.

The perceived ease of use of ORM solutions also affects the convenience of interviewees. Conducting ORM is considered as stressful and consequently, interviewees try to avoid ORM endeavours as often as possible. The impact of ease of use on interviewees’ perceived level of stress is clear: the more complicated and incomprehensible current ORM solutions are, the more ORM activities are perceived as burden and the more interviewees are likely to stop their ORM endeavours. Additionally, laziness negatively contributes to convenience. People are inherently lazy and try to avoid work if possible (McGregor 1957). Considering this, people try to stay convenient and if conducting ORM involves too much work, they stop their endeavours. This finding holds true for both one-time and long-term ORM. Moreover, interviewees remain passive and do not invest resources (e.g. time, money) because ORM on regular basis is not perceived as essential to life and the majority have not experienced negative consequences or have even heard within their social circles about bad aftermath resulting from a bad online reputation. Therefore, their motivation for long-term ORM stays on a low level and they take the comfortable way and remain passive.

The factors “perceived importance of online reputation” and “ease of use” strongly contribute to individuals’ passivity with regards to ORM endeavours, too. According to Komisarjevsky (2012) people consider their online reputation as important. The findings of this study support this statement because the majority also stated that they find their online reputation as important. But yet, they remain passive and do not conduct ORM on regular basis and this behaviour conflicts with the idea that people take care of things they consider as important (comparable to the privacy paradox, e.g. Barnes 2006; Spiekermann et al.)
2001). Nonetheless, interviewees clearly see their online reputation as not essential to their life for reasons like not being a celebrities or athletes. Consequently, they weigh the benefit up against the cost and conclude that the benefits they derive from a better online reputation cannot compensate the resources, i.e. money and time, they have to invest in order to build, maintain, or enhance their online reputation. This trade-off can be attributed to the perceived ease of use of current ORM solutions because most interviewees consider them as too complicated for regular usage, which increases the cost for regular ORM. Moreover, the interviewees reported that they often do not often find new information about them and if they find information, it is boring or at least not surprising. They take this as an indicator for the importance of their online reputation and conclude that they are not important enough to be attacked and therefore, there is no need to manage their online reputation on regular basis.

The aforementioned two factors “perceived importance of online reputation” and “ease of use” also influences the factor “naïveté”. Interviewees said that they are not conducting ORM on regular basis because they never experienced negative consequences resulting from a bad online reputation and the same holds true for their social circle. From this point of view it is reasonable to consider the benefits of ORM as low. But in spite of this, nearly all interviewees would conduct (one-time) ORM if they were personally and directly affected by information shared about them online, which may cause negative consequences. However, most interviewees will not be active until such a case happens and some interviewees also realized that it is naïve to stay passive but they are unwilling to change their behaviour. Hence, missing self-experience has a high impact on “perceived importance of online reputation”, “ease of use”, and “naïveté”. Additionally, the collected and analysed data suggest that it is reasonable to assume that individual’s naïveté might be the strongest influencing factor for their low degree of long-term motivation.

Apart from missing self-experience, interviewees have wrong assumptions and are ignorant with regard to necessity of regular ORM. Several interviewees admitted that they do not conduct regular ORM because they naïvely trust other (unknown) people in hopes of those people not sharing negative information about them. From their point of view, no one in their circle of friends and acquaintances has a reason to do so. Notwithstanding this belief might not be wrong and their trust is legitimate, they do not take into account that other people may share information without malicious intent but information taken out of context can be interpreted in different ways, which leads to unexpected consequences. Other interviewees acknowledged their ignorance with regard to the importance of ORM on regular basis to maintain a good online reputation. Most of these interviewees conduct ORM once and expected that the search results will not change. They have not considered the possibility of other people sharing information about them without them noticing. Interestingly, most of them are of the younger interviewees. The data indicates the reason for this way of thinking is grounded in their strong link between online reputation and social networking sites such as Facebook. They consider social networking sites as the main source that contributes to their online reputation and such platforms send out notifications if a person has been tagged. For them, reacting on these notifications is conducting ORM on regular basis: “Actually, I have never considered searching myself on a regular basis. I haven’t seen the advantage in doing so because Facebook normally send me a notification mail if I am tagged somewhere. But now, due to this interview, I ponder on this issue and I am considering to change my behaviour.” (Interviewee James). It has not occurred to them that other people might share information about them outside social network platforms.

In summary it can be stated that individual’s motivation to conduct ORM on regular basis is on a low level and currently, there are no signs that it will rise in the near future. The main reasons for missing long-term motivation are grounded in individuals’ naïveté and the ease of use of current ORM solutions. Consequently, ORM providers need to improve their services in terms of usability and effectiveness. For example, search engine providers should work towards solutions that can distinguish namesakes and only show results that are relevant for the self-searcher. Such solutions would reduce the workload of people with namesakes and make their ORM endeavours more effective. Nevertheless, ORM providers by themselves cannot achieve effectiveness in ORM but it also involves the policy-makers. The European Court of Justice makes the first step by legislating the right to be forgotten, which obliges the search engines providers to delete unwanted results from their search index (European Court of Justice 2014). But this law might be a two-sided sword for the Internet. Rosen (2012) elaborated on this in his paper using the example of Argentina that the right to be forgotten can be one of the most powerful tools for reputation manag- ers or the biggest threat to the Internet because there is a thin line between freedom of speech and privacy and currently, the boundaries are still blurred. Moreover, the current version of right to be forgotten does not let the Internet forget published information. People only have the right to remove unwanted results
related to them from the indices of the search engines but the information is still available on the original website and it can still be found. For example, human resource professionals can use a search engine, which is not amenable to the right to be forgotten. In most instances it is enough to use another top-level domain of famous search engines. Time will show if the right to be forgotten is beneficial to individuals.

We focus in this study on German digital natives and although we believe that the results of the study could hold true for a broader population, we acknowledge the limitation of the study and its generalizability. Conducting the same study in other countries, culture, ages, or educational background may result in other findings, results and implications. Furthermore, the right to be forgotten (European Court of Justice 2014) may change people’s motivation. However, short and informal re-interviews with some interviewees revealed that the changes in the legal frameworks have not reached the broader population.

Conclusion

Understanding individuals’ long-term motivation and the factors hinder them from conducting long-term ORM is an important step towards extending the body of knowledge of personal online reputation research. This study based on the modified grounded theory methodology unrevealed the low degree of motivation for regular ORM and at present there are no evidences that people will change their behaviour in the near future. The data indicates the main reasons for this behaviour in individuals’ naivety and the ease of use of current ORM solutions. Therefore, ORM providers should enhance their services in order to facilitate individuals’ long-term ORM motivation. Furthermore, in order to overcome individuals’ naivety, they have to be aware of the fact that other people can share information about them any time and even if those people do not have malicious intention, one post might have a strong impact on other’s life. In order to reach this goal, media companies should broadcast more about potential consequences of not conducting ORM on regular basis but not by taking example of celebrities but rather using example of normal people. This would increase the probability that individuals take ORM on regular basis more seriously.

Notwithstanding the findings of this study, the research field of online reputation and the results of this study need more specification and elaboration in order to create testable constructs, a hypothesis, or proposition. Therefore, we encourage other researchers to challenge our results and extend our research.

References


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