

# More Glitter than Gold?

## *An Analysis of Virtual Impression Management Behavior in Online Career-networks*

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**Keywords:** Impression Management, Self-representation, Social Online Networks, Xing.

**Abstract:** The aim of the present study was to analyze virtual impression management behavior of students on a German online career network site. In addition, it was analyzed if gender specific differences would exist in the subjects' impression management behavior. In general, the study indicated that students indeed present themselves in career networks like Xing in an idealized way. However, it appears that the students' Xing profile pages are more realistic than expected. Reasons for these findings are discussed and suggestions for future research are given.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

An old Greek adage says, „show me your friends and I will tell you who you are". Based on this saying nowadays one would probably be more likely to say, "show me your social network profile and I will tell you who you are". In recent years the computer-supported social interaction has become an essential feature of the communication between individuals. Because of this, the Internet has gained a great influence on nearly all facets of social life (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Social networks offer the opportunity to socialize with informal and professional contacts and to become an active participant on the market. Through Web 2.0 applications, users can communicate with each other and present themselves virtually (Okdie and Guadagno, 2008; Okdie et al., 2011). The possibilities of presenting oneself online are quite diverse. Web-based platforms are one of them (McKenna et al., 2002). The German online network "Xing" is a career platform with more than 14 million members managing professional and social contacts and establishing new ones. In Germany, seven million businesses and individual users such as students utilize Xing. Inside this career network users can contact other users and present themselves simultaneously through their profile. As such, users are available for potential employers and can be found by HR managers or headhunters, respectively.

Accordingly, the user's presentation of the professional profile and the creation of one's own virtual image might follow strategic issues in order to present oneself in the best possible light towards potentially interested parties. However, the term 'best' is likely to differ between users: While it seems reasonable to assume that some individuals will idealize the virtual self to bring themselves into a better position, others may rather aim at virtually reproducing their identity as realistically as possible. Online social networks have become for many a part of daily life. Social networks can have an impact on trends in social recruitment and professional networking (Benson et al., 2013).

The present study deals with an analysis of German students' self-representation at the online career network Xing. First, the concept of impression management behavior will be defined. Impression management theory serves as the theoretical background here and will be illustrated in detail. Furthermore social networks are defined and, building on that, virtual impression management in social networks will be further discussed. In the following part of this paper, information on the study's design and method are given, and the results of the empirical analysis are presented. The paper concludes with a discussion and suggestions for further research.

## 2 BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Impression Management Behavior

For an individual it is very important which kind of impression he or she is creating and what other persons think about him or her. These impressions built by an individual towards others can extend to all facets and areas of life, e.g. public appearances as well as private encounters.

Because of the great importance of the mutual impressions of interaction partners, people actively try to influence impressions (Van Dijck, 2013).

According to this, impression management can be defined as the behavior of an individual or a group trying to influence the impressions of other people or groups (Jones and Pittman, 1982). The subject of *impression management theory* is the impression management of individuals, thereby focusing on the use of several forms of self-presentation towards a given social environment. This self-presentation can be used for tactical and strategic reasons. The underlying assumption of this theory is that an individual is potentially able to control impressions of other people in social interactions (Stopfer, Egloff, Nestler & Back, 2014). This type of influencing the public image and, as a result, the thoughts, emotions and behavioral actions of the targets of influence simultaneously reflects to the individual's self-image and affects it in a certain way (Manago et al., 2008; Okdie et al., 2011).

It can be supposed that active control of self-presentation occurs in all public situations. In addition, a number of several other contextual factors are likely to have an effect on presenting oneself in the desired way, e.g. the anticipation of a further interaction with the same social environment (Boyd and Ellison, 2007).

As was stated above, there is a huge variety of impression management strategies. Overall, these techniques can be divided into 'positive' and 'negative' categories. Both categories contain a wide range of different techniques. All techniques that are used to affect directly the impressions of other people are referred to as *positive techniques*. In contrast, the category of *negative techniques* contains all practices that shall create a negative presentation of the own person with the aim to reach an indirect, positive reaction, e.g. understatement. Examples for positive techniques are self-promotion, overstatement or basking in reflected glory (Leary and Kowalski, 1990).

There are different reasons for the use of impression management. Jones and Pittman (1982)

identified five strategic motives. They distinguished between *self-promotion* (attempt to convince others of one's own competencies), *ingratiation* (attempt to be liked by others), *intimidation* (attempt to convince others of one's own dangerousness), *exemplification* (attempt to be acknowledged as moral person) and *supplication* (attempt to convince other individuals of one's own helplessness and neediness with the goal to generate compassion). Among those five motives only self-promotion will be considered for the following study because competencies and skills can be regarded as crucial criteria for the presentation in career networks.

### 2.2 Social Networks

In the field of sociology a network generally is understood as a set of nodes/actors that communicate with each other (Castells, 2005). It's very difficult to explain the concept of virtual social network in social science universal because there are many definitions. There is no universal definition of the concept of virtual social network in social science. However, most authors agree that the use of information and communication technologies as the mediator of social interactions is the central characteristic. One possible form of virtual networks may occur on communication platforms, which are often also referred to as *online communities* (Birchmeier et al., 2011).

In this study, virtual social networks can be understood as web-based services that allow users to create a public or partly public profile (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Within this network, there are various possibilities to socially compare to other users and to interact with them. Such systems can be described as social software and/or online communities (Alby, 2006). The main tasks of an online community are development of relationships, self-representation of the users, and search for information (Kneidinger, 2010). There are different types of online communities. While Facebook is used primarily for private purposes, Xing named itself as "the social network for business professionals" and therefore it can be regarded as being career-oriented in nature.

### 2.3 Impression Management in Social Media

The fact that impression management is a relevant social psychological subject for the research of practices in web 2.0 contexts implies that the online profile is both a central feature of social networks

and the virtual profile of the user. Impression management is a necessary requirement to be identifiable by other users in social network platforms like Xing. However, technology-mediated impression formation is different from face-to-face-communication since other clues become important (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002). In contrast to the latter, the user of social media may willingly choose which personal information he or she wants to disclose in online environments. Therefore, the user has the chance to live out, try, change and develop part-identities (Okdie and Guadagno, 2008).

These high levels of control of impression formation in online profiles provide the opportunity to more specifically and strategically managing one's self on networking sites in comparison to face-to-face-communication (McKenna et al., 2002). The open question is to what extent individual users of social networks are aware of this opportunity (Okdie et al., 2011). It can be assumed that individuals with a more private self-awareness align their virtual self-presentation more to their opinion and own attitude. In comparison, individuals with a more objective self-awareness are seemingly more interested to create an appropriate public image, because for them, impression management in public situations and their evaluation by others play an important role. Individuals with high levels of self-monitoring also tend to create an appropriate public image of themselves because it is important for them to know how they appeal to others (Stopfer et al., 2014).

### 3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Taken together, the guiding question of the present study is the following: In what ways is impression management in social online networks exerted by their users? Can the management of impressions be regarded as rather realistic or idealized?

The study tries to shed some light on this crucial question with a focus on the German career network Xing. The aim of the study is to analyze the impression management of students at Xing. We chose this target group because networks like Xing are likely to be a first step into the workforce. As such, a virtual self-presentation maybe more crucial when compared to established practitioners. In addition, it was analyzed if gender specific differences exist in impression management behavior of students. The starting point for the study is, among others, the common opinion that people present themselves in an idealized way, so that they can present themselves in an optimal light. On the

one hand, users want to know the person behind the profile, on the other hand, personnel managers and organizations use the career network Xing to find, among others, potential employees.

Four hypotheses were derived on the basis of the research questions.

Considering the fact that Xing is a career network and is used for professional purposes, it can be suggested that users present themselves in an idealized way in order to leave a positive impression on others, especially recruiters and HR managers. In accordance with this the first hypothesis was formulated as follows:

*H1: There is an Idealized Impression Management of Students in the Career Network Xing.*

Furthermore, impression management can extend across the profile's several categories. However, the contents could be verifiable by other users to a different degree. Accordingly, possibly users are more likely to present oneself in an idealized way in those categories that are more difficult to verify. In other words: Some contents may be more susceptible to impression formation than others. On the basis of these considerations the following hypothesis needs to be examined:

*H2: There is a Difference in the Degree of the Idealization between the Several Categories of the Impression Management (Language Level, etc.).*

There are gender specific differences in many areas of virtual interactions. For example both genders differ in the amount of the performed actions on network sites (Alpizar et al., 2012) and furthermore how they behave in organizations (Guadagno and Cialdini, 2007). Therefore, gender needs to be taken into account in this study as well. Previous studies showed that men not only spend more time on the Internet, but that men and women try to present different social identities in social networks (cf. Jones and Pittman, 1982). Therefore, hypothesis three assumes:

*H3: There is a Difference between Female and Male Students in the Impression Management on Xing.*

Finally, it seems possible that especially Economics and Social Science students deal with Xing before entering the career network, because their studies are related to business issues to a larger extent and therefore they have certain background knowledge about online career networks: Impression management is actually part of current Economics and Social Science curricula. These considerations lead to the formulation of the following hypothesis:

*H4: There is a Difference in the Degree of Impression Management between Students of Economics and Social Sciences and Other Fields of Studies.*

## 4 METHOD

### 4.1 Procedure and Subjects

Participants were acquired via various Internet platforms such as social media sites, for example Xing and Facebook, and online communities, such as student forums.

The participants were asked to complete an online survey and were informed that the study examined how students represent themselves in career networks such as Xing. At the end respondents could enter their e-mail address to get the result report of the study and to participate in a raffle.

Overall, 121 students (including 52 men and 69 women) participated in an online survey. The sample consists of 71 students from Economics and Social Sciences and 50 students from a variety of other fields of study (including law, medicine, psychology, education, humanities, mathematics, computer science, natural sciences). The average age was 24.5 years. In the following, we compare men and women as well as students from different study

fields with respect to their self-presentation.

### 4.2 Study Design and Instruments

Based on the hypotheses presented in section 3 a questionnaire with 50 items was developed. The structure of the questionnaire is shown in *Table 1*.

The items on subject idealization and lies relied on validated scales by Graf (2004) and Brueckner et al., (2008) as well as the BIDR (Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding). In addition, some further items were developed in order to capture Xing-specific characteristics on idealization.

To verify the self-representation across different dimensions of time, various aspects of self-idealization were assessed on the basis of various specification options from which an average was calculated as a part of the evaluation.

## 5 RESULTS

With a focus on the hypotheses illustrated above, the following results emerge. The overall findings reveal a very weak degree of idealization of the students' self-presentation (see *Table 2*). With an average of  $M = 1.37$  ( $N = 121$ ,  $SD = .44$ ) on a 5-Point-Likert-scale over all dimensions the results indicate a clear tendency to a realistic virtual presentation.

Table 1: The structure of the online questionnaire.

Category	Items	Scale	Examples
Demographic questions	5	Diverse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Age</li> <li>• Gender</li> <li>• Field of study</li> </ul>
Xing	13	Diverse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Usage behaviour</li> <li>• Number of contacts</li> </ul>
Impression Management & Lying	18	Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I'm not always the person I pretend to be"</li> <li>• "I got too much change back and said nothing"</li> <li>• "The career network Xing is an ideal platform to get the attention of potential employers"</li> </ul>
Idealization	13	Likert scale (1=absolutely realistic, 5=strongly idealized)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "The number of my specified languages is..."</li> <li>• "My given language levels at Xing are ..."</li> </ul>
Reason for Idealization	1	Open, possible predetermined answers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Please state the reasons for the idealization of your profile on Xing"</li> </ul>

Table 2: Manifestation of the different dimensions of self-presentation.

Dimensions	N	Min	Max	M	SD
Language level	116	1	5	1.59	.791
Professional competence	111	1	4	1.50	.725
Profile picture	109	1	5	1.50	.824
"I offer"	96	1	4	1.48	.696
Content "organizations"	74	1	4	1.38	.676
Interests	107	1	4	1.36	.650
Number of qualifications	99	1	4	1.33	.623
Number of "organizations"	71	1	4	1.32	.671
Content of qualifications	99	1	3	1.29	.539
Content of work experience	116	1	4	1.25	.603
Number of languages	118	1	4	1.25	.640
Number of work experiences	115	1	4	1.19	.560

Note. 1=absolutely realistic, 2=rather realistic, 3=partly, 4=rather idealized, 5=strongly idealized.

Accordingly, students practice impression management on Xing only to a very limited extent. The participants stated the following reasons for not idealizing their profile: lack of time and—as a result—outdated data, highlighting strengths or to be easily found by recruiters, and utilization of certain standard phrases.

Overall, self-presentation is only shown in a very low degree, so H1 can only be partly accepted.

However, besides an overall low level of idealization, it varies between the different dimensions.

The dimensions investigated can be found in Table 2 together with the related sample sizes, the mean values and the standard deviations. With 118 persons the field 'number of languages spoken' shows the highest number of participants. Simultaneously, this dimension shows only very weak idealization ( $M = 1.25$ ) and medium variation ( $SD = .64$ ) regarding the statements of spoken languages. The strongest degree of idealization was found in the dimension of the language levels ( $M = 1.59$ ). Besides the language skills, professional competencies and the profile picture are slightly idealized as well ( $M = 1.50$ ). Regarding the given number of work experiences ( $M = 1.19$ ), idealization cannot be identified. Consequently, H2 is accepted.

In the context of H3, different aspects of Xing usage by female and male subjects are analyzed. The focus was on the willingness to idealize, existing idealization, group membership, number of contacts, stated information, and possession of a paid premium account. Differences between genders identified in other surveys could not be confirmed in this study. Merely an—albeit weak—significant correlation between gender and the number of contacts was identified ( $r = .328$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Accordingly, H3 is rejected.

For the comparison of different fields of studies, the different aspects of Xing usage were analyzed. Once again, no differences were found except for the number of contacts. The discipline of Psychology showed an interrelation of  $r = .112$  ( $p < .05$ ), again the correlation is low. Furthermore, the number of persons with a premium account is noticeably higher for persons who study Economics (16%) than for other fields of studies (8%).

Taken together, however, H4 is rejected, because there are no significant differences regarding the degrees of idealization.

The study shows additional relevant results. The assumption that career promotion is the main reason for using Xing was confirmed within the framework of this study. Nearly 93 per cent of the participants

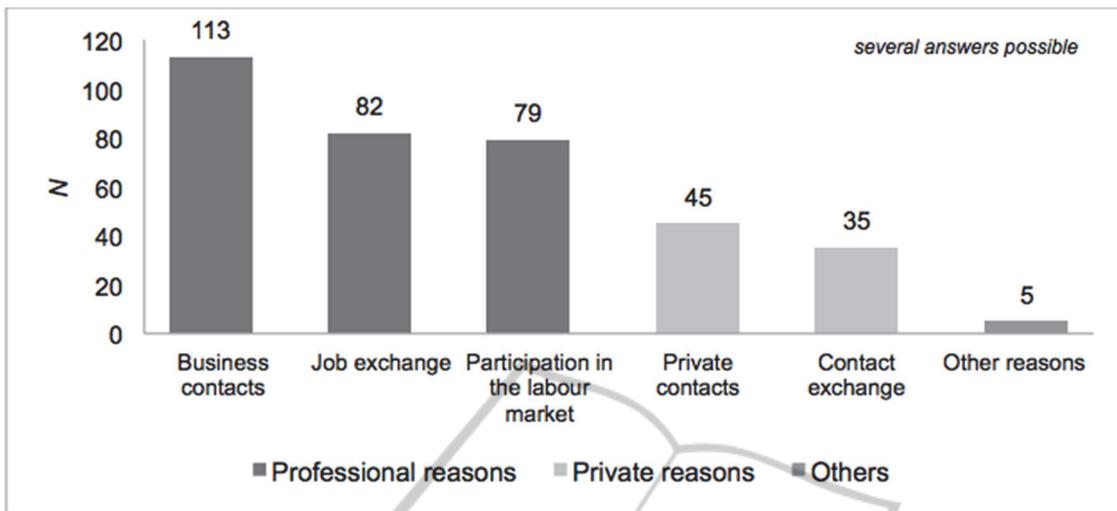


Figure 1: Reasons for using Xing.

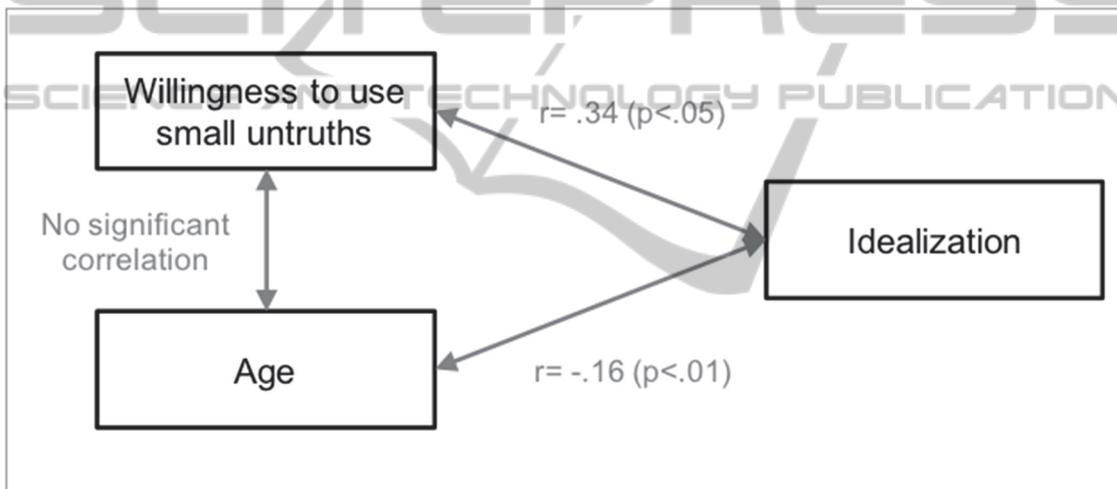


Figure 2: Influences on idealization.

stated to use Xing for work reasons. 113 persons stated to use Xing for business contacts, whereas only 45 subjects declared to use it for private contacts. A precise breakdown is given in *Figure 1*.

More than half of all respondents (approx. 56%) stated that they joined Xing during their first year of study. No significant interrelation between idealization and the students' current semester was found.

In addition to the analysis of the information provided on Xing by the respondents, omissions show an interesting picture. The analysis shows that nearly 91% of the participants provide no portfolio (e.g., personal data sheets, quotation of references). In addition, most respondents do not state a motto (73%) or any kind of distinction (69%).

Furthermore, the results show a low to moderate

correlation between idealization and the acceptance of small lies ( $r = .343, p < .01, N = 121$ ). Thus, people who are more willing to use small lies in normal life are also more likely to idealize their presentation on Xing.

Regarding age, no significant correlation could be determined with the assessed degree of idealization. However, we found an-albeit low-significant correlation ( $r = -.16, p < .10$ ), between age and idealization (see *Figure 2*). Simultaneously, no significant interrelation between the subjects' age and the willingness to use small lies was detected.

Taken together, across all analyses only two variables showed a significant correlation with individual idealization, the subjects' age and the willingness to lie.

## 6 DISCUSSION

The study results indicate that students present themselves in career networks like Xing in a slightly idealized way. However, it appears that the Xing profile page is used for impression management only to a small extent: The information posted on the profile pages is more realistic than expected, even though there are slight differences with respect to various types of information. Thus, with regard to this paper's title, there seems to be only few 'glittering'.

This could be explained by the fact that Xing is a career network where students search for potential employers and want to show presence on the labour market: Data provided here, like for example work experience and language levels, will be verified in future job application processes and false statements might have negative consequences. Therefore, idealization would be useful to be selected as a potential employee, considering that social networking sites have become an important tool to find additional information about applicants (Caers and Castelyns, 2011; Davidson et al., 2011), but in the next step may result in a negative effect.

The differences regarding various types of information could be due to Xing's very objective evaluation scheme. The strongest idealizations can be found in areas that provide some space for interpretation (e.g. language level, competences). On the other hand, information that is very much standardized and can be easily verified (e.g. number of job positions) are not subject to idealization.

Unlike prior studies showing that men and women try to embody different desired identities in social networks, we found no relations between gender and degree of idealization. This might be due to the fact that former research focused on private social networks, whereas Xing is a dedicated business network. More research is needed to investigate impression management in this field. In addition the connection between gender and the amount of other, in this study not considered actions on XING like posting or messaging should be considered in further research.

The low but significant correlation between age and the degree of idealization could be interpreted in several ways. For instance, the curriculum vitae of older people will be more detailed, and as a result there is no need for idealization. In contrast, younger people use idealization to 'boost' their CVs. Other explanations include a greater proximity to one's job entry or maybe a growing confidence in one's own professional skills and thus less need for

idealization.

The present study has some limitations. First, only users from one social network—namely Xing—were investigated. Furthermore, the study focused on students, thus limiting the generalizability of the results to populations with other socio-demographic characteristics...Second, the results of the study have to be considered critically in the light of social desirability. Idealization refers to an issue where a truthful answer, despite anonymity, could lead to a negative image. Even though there were no negative consequences for the participants, admitting idealization might nevertheless impact their self-image in a negative way.

The expectation to find strongly pronounced impression management among Xing users could not be confirmed. While this is in line with previous studies of other social networks like Facebook (Back et al., 2010) where a low degree of idealization was found as well, it is unclear whether this is due to characteristics of the sample or the nature of business networks such as Xing. Therefore, it would be interesting to investigate whether people who use business as well as private networks show different levels of idealization or use different impression management strategies in the two contexts. From our findings practical implications for personnel managers, who use Xing for the recruitment of young academics, can be drawn. Recruiters can assume that the information given in the profiles is basically realistic. Nevertheless, they should be more cautious with respect to information that provides more leeway for interpretation, such as language levels, where more idealization was found.

Finally, we observed a notable imbalance regarding the presence of different professions—or fields of study, respectively—within the Xing network: Students from Economics and related fields were clearly overrepresented and also used paid premium accounts more often. Possibly, students from business-related fields tend to use these kind of networks more often. Recruiters as well as researchers should keep this in mind.

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