Self-Presentation of Personality During Online Profile Creation

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Abstract

When users present themselves in a social networking community, they are called on to create profiles that are representative and portray a desired image. In this paper, we examine the profile creation process. We explore what self-presentations are desired and how these presentations are created by having people rate their profile along personality dimensions after completing each attribute field in a mock social network-like profile. Findings indicate that people hope to convey personality traits through their online profiles and that they are able to create profiles they feel match their desired self-presentation. Free-form profile attributes best enable desired self presentations of traits, and only a few of these attributes are needed for sufficient self presentation online.

Introduction

Self-presentation can be thought of as the image or idea of the self, or the process of creating this image for a variety of social purposes. In Western culture this image is tied to personality traits (Cousins, 1989) and the self-presentation of these traits has garnered scholarly study for over a century in psychology and sociology (e.g., Goffman, 1959; James, 1890). Arguably, online social networks represent a unique opportunity for self-presentation (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

The personal profile is a key piece of a person's social network experience, around which her self-presentation is built. Although users typically complete over half of all profile fields available to them (Lampe, Ellison & Steinfeld, 2007), all fields may not be necessary to create a meaningful self-presentation. In fact, Fiore et al. (2008) find that within dating profiles, only photos and free-text responses are predictive of the profiles' overall attractiveness ratings. Fixed-text responses are not predictive of perceivers' overall attractiveness ratings and may not be useful content to perceivers when they make these ratings. Stecher & Counts (2008b) also find that users only need five profile attributes to make meaningful inferences about others within their social network. Potentially then, more information is not always better in an online profile, but the most meaningful attributes are worth displaying. In this paper we explore the profile creation process in an attempt to identify how many and what profile attributes most contribute to a desired self-presentation.

Self-Presentation Online Briefly

Self-presentation online is a complex subject, with many factors coming together to form an overall presentation of an individual. Elements as diverse as friends in the network, testimonials, interests, photos, and the about me statement all say something about the person. For each of these, the locus of control over presentation of the information is closer or farther from the user and more or less easily "faked." For example, the friends a person has in a network are relevant to a number of social processes, such as for confirming identity information (Donath & boyd, 2004) and providing social context (boyd, 2006), and while friends are often chosen explicitly, attributes of friends such as their display photo usually are not under the control of the user.

Here we consider only aspects of self-presentation that are easily under the control of the user, specifically the profile attributes that they choose to complete. With respect to the accuracy of the profile, these are more easily faked than say, the networks to which a person belongs, or the number of friends a person has, and thus largely can be considered conventional signals, rather than the harder to fake and therefore more reliable assessment signals (Donath, 2007). However, there is evidence that in cases where appropriate, and often because of the social context that keeps them honest, users tend to self-declare profile attributes that paint a reasonably close approximation of their true self (Gosling, Rentfrow & Swann, 2003). Whether being faked or not, precisely because these attributes are under control of the user, the user stands to gain significantly from a more nuanced understanding of how profile attributes contribute to their desired self-presentation.

Personality Characteristics

There are a variety of ways online self-presentation can be characterized. While others have focused on the signaling of status (Donath, 2007) or personal tastes (Liu, 2007) through the profile, we focus on the conveyance of the self in personality terms, including a taxonomy first developed by William James (1890) who categorized the self-concept into the material (i.e., physical), social (i.e., social and occupational roles) and spiritual self (i.e., perceived abilities). In Western societies, people are generally

individualistic and typically define themselves in terms of their spiritual self placing particular emphasis on their personality traits (Cousins, 1989). We discuss how desired self-presentations online can be categorized using this taxonomy.

Research Study

This study looks first at how people describe their ideal profile and then traces the online profile creation process in order to examine how personality is conveyed as profile attributes are added to the profile. By classifying ideal profile descriptions, we suggest what type of identity users hope to create. The hope for studying the process of creating a profile is that this will allow us to determine how many, which, and what type of profile elements contribute differentially to the presentation of personality. As users build up their profiles we determine which profile attributes contribute most to the desired self-presentation.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do people characterize ideal profile representations?

RQ2: As people build up their profile, does their online self-presentation converge on their ideal?

RQ3: What types and which specific attributes contribute most to creating a profile that presents personality traits?

Methods

Participants

Participants who indicated that they had experience with social networks were recruited and participated in exchange for a software gratuity. None of the participants were known to the experimenters. Fifty-two participants who were on average 33 years old took part in the study, including 36 males and 16 females. All participants lived in the United States and 42 identified as Caucasian, seven as Asian-American and two as African-American.

Procedure

Participants completed all measures on their home computers and responses were collected through the web.

Ideal Self, Free-form. Participants were instructed to, "[p]rovide a short description of how you want others to perceive you based on your online profile." These free-form responses were intended to provide qualitative descriptions of ideal self-presentations that were later classified with respect to the three identity categories discussed earlier: the social, spiritual and material self. Two of the experimenters coded whether or not responses belonged to any of these three categories and responses could belong to more than one category. Interrater reliability was high, 0.78 and disagreements were broken by a third tie breaker.

Figure 1: Screenshot of profile creation and ratings for TIPI items. In the interest of space 8 of 22 attributes are shown.

Attribute Ratings. Next, participants were asked to create an online profile. The experience was kept as realistic as possible, but also maintained a clean look to minimize study presentation effects (Figure 1). Participants were presented with 22 attribute fields derived from Facebook and already established as meaningful in prior research (Lampe, Ellison and Steinfeld, 2006; Stecher et al., 2008b). Their task was to populate these fields with their personal information. Attribute fields were presented in random order to control for possible order effects. Participants were instructed to complete as many attribute fields as they felt necessary, although everyone was required to enter a minimum of ten attributes.

Personality Characteristics (TIPI). After adding each attribute, participants rated their profile on its personality characteristics with the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI, Gosling, Rentfrow & Swan, 2003), a well established measure that briefly assesses personality. The TIPI uses a 1-7 Likert scale and creates a score for each of the Big Five personality traits: openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and

neuroticism. Participants could not input another attribute until they completed the TIPI ratings.

Ideal Self Ratings (TIPI). Participants completed the study by providing ideal self ratings, measured quantitatively using the TIPI. Participants were instructed to rate themselves along the personality characteristics for "how you would like others to see you via your profile." These "ideal" ratings were intended to capture participants' desired self-presentation in personality terms and allowed comparison of this desired self-presentation to both their self-assessments of their profile as they were constructing it and to the same ratings others made of their profile.

Results

RQ1: How do people characterize ideal profile representations?

When free-form describing their ideal self-presentation, 96% of participants cited aspects of their spiritual self. P9 used many different personality traits to describe how he would like to be seen saying he wanted to be perceived "[a]s a calm, considerate and interesting individual, expansive and dynamic, intelligent and unique." Only 25% of participants suggested that they wanted to portray aspects of their social self and these participants also mentioned their spiritual self: "I am someone who is intelligent and creative I am also servily Dislexic. I am a photographer. (P36)" Only one participant brought up the material self mentioning that he wanted to be perceived as "attractive". Although some participants shared other cultural identities (seven participants were Asian-American), all participants lived in the United States and we did not see effects of culture.

RQ2: As people build up their profile, does their online self-presentation converge on their ideal?

As participants completed more attribute fields, their appraisals of their own profile (TIPI ratings after adding each attribute) became more closely correlated with their ideal self-presentation (TIPI ratings for their ideal self-presentation). A scatterplot of these relationships after each attribute was completed is depicted in Figure 2 This correlation is collapsed across all attributes since participants chose to reveal different attributes at different time points. After only four profile attributes were added, the correlation between profile self-appraisals and ideal self-presentation was greater than r=0.60. This correlation reaches r=0.70 after 10 attributes, the most common number of attributes completed. In other words, participants perceived they were able to effectively convey their personality traits, an important part of their identity, through their profile and were able to do so fairly quickly.

RQ3: What types and which specific attributes contribute most to creating a profile that presents personality traits?

Participants rated their profile on the TIPI after they entered each attribute field. When each attribute was added to the profile, it generated change in the participants' TIPI

ratings of their profile. This change measure captures the contribution of that particular attribute to the overall self-presentation of personality. Average change scores for each attribute field are displayed in Table 1. In order to classify completion of free-form and other attributes we divided these attributes into three categories: Free-form, short answer and categorical (Table 1, 'Type' column). A one-way ANOVA showed significant differences across the three attribute types, $F(2, 18)=6.18$, $p<0.01$. A Bonferonni post-hoc comparison indicated that free-form attributes ($M=5.4$, $SE=0.47$) generated more change in trait ratings than categorical items ($M=3.69$, $SE=0.32$), $p<0.05$. Responses to the short answer items ($M=5.12$, $SE=0.24$) were not significantly different from the other items and as expected, generated less change than the free-form responses but more than the categorical attributes.

Thus, attributes that allow a person to express herself, such as quotes and the about me statement lead to more change in the person's self-assessment of their profile. Less expressive items like gender, political affiliation and name generate the least amount of change in the personality assessment. There were exceptions. For example, a relatively non-expressive attribute like college ranks high, while a relatively expressive attribute like music ranks comparatively low in terms of allowing users to self-present their personality.

Discussion

When creating online profiles, most people wanted to represent their personality traits or aspects of their "spiritual self". A minority also wanted to use their profile to convey social roles and even fewer wanted to convey their material self. This is in keeping with research that suggests that, at least in individualistic cultures, people identify themselves using trait terms (Cousins, 1989) and in online settings they make preferential inferences about traits (Stecher et al., 2008a).

Users were able to create desired profiles as characterized in personality trait terms, and their assessments of the personality presented by their profile converged on their ideal self-presentation as they added
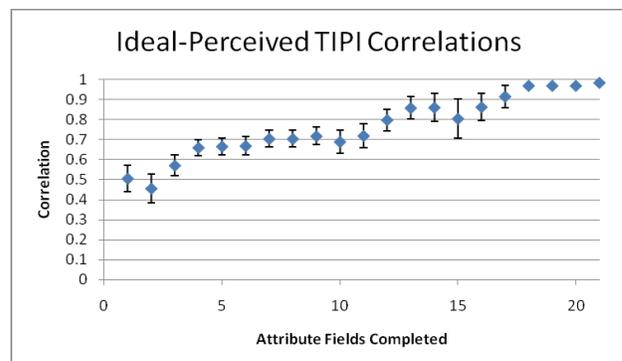

Figure 2. Correlation between ideal and perceived TIPI rating. Error bars= S.E.

Attribute	TIPI Δ	Type
Quotes (29%)	7.5	Free Form
About (23%)	6.3	Free Form
College (58%)	5.6	Short Answer
Movies (48%)	5.4	Short Answer
TV (56%)	5.4	Short Answer
Hometown (63%)	5	Categorical
Books (38%)	4.9	Short Answer
Photo (29%)	4.9	N/A
Interests (44%)	4.8	Free Form
Relationship Status (77%)	4.8	Categorical
Religious (58%)	4.5	Categorical
Activities (37%)	4.4	Free Form
Looking For (40%)	4.3	Categorical
Music (58%)	4.3	Short Answer
Status (60%)	4.2	Free Form
Birthday (67%)	4	Categorical
Gender (87%)	4	Categorical
Political (46%)	3.9	Categorical
Name (52%)	3.3	Categorical
Employer (38%)	2.5	Categorical
Interested In (35%)	2.2	Categorical
Current Town (65%)	2.1	Categorical

Table 1. Per-attribute change scores for profile self-assessment of personality (TIPI Δ), (%) is percent of participants completing the attribute field

attributes. In terms of quantity of attributes, profiles converged with the ideal personality loosely in a step function with noticeable increases at about 4 and 13 attributes, suggesting targets for system designers to encourage users to hit. The increasing strength of the correlations between participants' assessments of the personality presented by their profile and their ideal self-presentation as attributes were added suggests a subtle relationship between these ratings that cannot simply be explained by priming effects or recall for earlier responses.

In terms of which attributes users should complete, descriptive items like the photo and about me statement along with other more free-form items like quotes, movies and books had the most impact on personality trait ratings. From RQ1, we know that people use online profiles to convey their personality traits (or spiritual self, in James' terms). Therefore, we can infer that these items are particularly important for conveying online identity. Furthermore, results from RQ2 showed that ratings of portrayed and ideal self-presentations converged over time suggesting that these free-form items were most helpful in allowing users to converge on ideal scores and thus to portray themselves in the desired manner. This extends

findings that already support the use of free-form profile attributes suggesting that they are more predictive of overall profile attractiveness (Fiore et al., 2008). Items that applied to social roles and identities like employer and current town had little value precisely because participants said they were overall less interested in using their profile to portray their social roles. From a practical standpoint, the rank ordered list of profile attributes shown in Table 1 we hope provides guidance for which profile attributes a system designer would prioritize to help users most efficiently convey their ideal self.

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