

AN ANALYSIS OF EFFECTIVE ONLINE REPUTATION MANAGEMENT: A CRITICAL THINKING SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVITY

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Abstract

Purpose: This study analyzed students' perceptions of an instructional activity that was the focus of a two-year qualitative research project on effective online reputation management. The activity required students to evaluate each other's online presence and think critically about the content that they posted on their social networking sites to build a professional online reputation that would positively promote their employment search while on the job market. **Research Method:** A qualitative research design was used to gather data indicating the effect of assessing peers' online reputations on the students' own online reputation management practices. Students in business communication courses and computer-mediated communication courses participated in the activity, which was utilized and refined over five semesters. **Results:** Qualitative feedback from students following the activity indicated that they know to conceal or remove online content that they predict will be perceived negatively by employers. However, by limiting their online presence, students neglect to leverage opportunities to self-promote their professional presence and enhance their networking options.

Social media has reshaped the way that information is disseminated and continues to exponentially increase both the audience and the authors' use of shared content (Doerr, Fouz, & Friedrich, 2012; Dyrud, 2011). Content that was once limited to print media is now published online through social sites such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Pinterest. Employers are increasingly using these tools to screen job applicants, sometimes even requesting passwords to social media accounts (Quast, 2012). Therefore, the care with which college students manage their online reputation is becoming increasingly more important. College students are early, and typically enthusiastic, adopters of social media (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011; Madden & Jones, 2008; Sacks & Graves, 2012; Wankel, 2009). However, these students often do not consider what their social media content communicates to potential employers. When beginning a job search, students need to do more than simply Google themselves to discover what information a prospective employer could discover about their personal and professional lives.

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To effectively market themselves, students need to create a professional online brand that will motivate employers to interview them (Dyrud, 2011; Netzley & Rath, 2012; Sparrow, Liu, & Wegner, 2011).

Background of Study

Although many college students are aware of the need to create a professional online presence, as many as 71% of social network users between the ages of 18 and 29 have set high privacy settings on their personal accounts (Madden & Smith, 2010). Unfortunately, this increased level of privacy leads to a second reputation problem: a limited online presence. To be competitive in today's job market, students must ensure that their online information is not only socially acceptable, but that there is enough positive information for potential employers to be able to glean information beyond the students' résumés and cover letters (Berlin, 2009; Hartman & McCambridge, 2011; Roberts & Roach, 2009; Sacks & Graves, 2012; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). Creating a pervasive social network is becoming as powerful as the interpersonal network in making needed *foot-in-the-door* connections (Jones, 2010). As such, a strong professional online presence is necessary for today's college student to be competitive on the job market so that they can, as many of their competitors will, benefit from the online space available for promoting their credentials, and setting themselves apart from the applicant norm, on the Internet.

Purpose of the Study

The objective of this study was to encourage students in business communication and computer-mediated communication courses to critically think about how the lack of face-to-face communication cues influence the interpretation of computer-mediated messages and, thereby, their online reputation. By evaluating one another's online presence, students were taught to analyze and evaluate the content that they post on their social networking sites to build a professional personal brand and positive reputation for the job market. This paper describes an activity that requires students to use social media tools to examine their online reputation and critically think about effective ways to improve (or create) their professional brand. The activity was tested on students in business communication courses and computer-mediated communication courses at two moderately-sized southeastern universities in the same state for five consecutive semesters in both the face-to-face and online learning environments.

Review of Literature

The conceptual framework for this study is based on communication privacy management theory (Heo, 2011; Hosek & Thompson, 2009; Nodulman, 2011; Petronio, 2002). This theory suggests that, in regards to self-disclosure, individuals have a unique internal dialectic ranging from private to open (Petronio, 2002).

This push and pull of personality characteristics and interpersonal goals identify where on the continuum of private to open a person's natural range of disclosure falls (Petronio, 2004). As such, there is no innate cognitive rule that regulates what is enough or too little information for any individual to share. Because of this, internal governors must be learned and built, which teach individuals what and how information should be shared both face-to-face and online. This study investigates a method of building such awareness so that students can share the information necessary to create an effective online reputation.

Although the concept of reputation management is not new, few academic publications exist about the importance of reputation management in social media contexts as it relates to employment success. Economic shifts negatively impacting employment opportunities have led to some questions about strategic personal branding (Grant, 2008). Furthermore, the proliferation of Web 2.0 applications and social media have resulted in several related studies (Boyd, 2010; Cheung, 2010; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010), including a few that focus specifically on the identification of self in social media (Hogan, 2010). Others address the use of social media within the curriculum as a learning tool (Hung & Yuen, 2010; Manlow, Friedman, & Friedman, 2010; McLean, 2010; Minocha, 2009; Pata, 2009).

The concepts of *reputation management* and *brand* traditionally related to organizational reputations and product brands (Hutton, Goodman, Alexander, & Genest, 2001), but have been applied to educational institutions as well (Chapleo, 2004; Helgesen & Nettet, 2007). In these studies, the focus of reputation related directly to the image of the company, product, or university. A positive image results in increased customers, purchases, or enrollments, respectively. In these contexts, the foundation of reputation management is *public relations*—the public's perception of someone's (or something's) value or worth (Hutton et al., 2001). As applied to this study, the definition focuses on the individual—; what is the student's value or worth to a potential employee? Creating a positive image through social media builds the student's reputation and professional personal brand.

Creating and maintaining a positive image requires a proactive approach that begins with awareness (Jackson, 1997)—awareness of what defines a brand, awareness of the specific brand an individual wants to project, awareness of the social media outlets in which that brand will be successful, and awareness of how to maintain an on-going professional brand (e.g., what to post and when to post it). Popular literature provides a wealth of personal branding resources that students will easily find online. For example, a web search for “personal branding” provides at least one result from personal-branding expert Dan Schawbel, who provides weekly advice through his *Personal Branding Blog* (Schwabel, 2009).

Research Method

This study is based on a qualitative research design from a post-positivistic framework (Bailey, 2008; Kerlinger & Lee, 2004). Qualitative research methods

are best used when the participants' exact wording is important (Guba, 1990). Because this study sought to understand how individual experiences of analyzing peers' online reputations influences students' awareness of their own online reputation management, qualitative design was most appropriate for the present study. Yet, in keeping with the post-positivistic tradition, the scientific approach to qualitative research recognizes that information does not emerge from the data; rather, the data exist separate from the researchers who are tasked with the job of first independently recognizing the existence of the themes and validating these findings through comparison (Bailey, 2008).

To address the concept of reputation management, specifically as it relates to a job applicant's personal brand, the researchers designed an instructional activity that was refined over a two-year (five-semester) period. This section describes the participants, procedures, and instructional activity. The instructional activity is explained in detail in the "Instructional Activity" section.

Participants

Students at two universities participated in this study ($N = 200$). Students ranged from 18 to 24 years of age. Combined, the classes were composed of 62% females and 38% males. Both in-class and online sections were included in the study.

Procedure

At the institutions from which data was collected, the business communication course covered a unit on computer-mediated communication, and the computer-mediated course covered a unit on business communication. It was in these units of overlap that the activity was implemented. When administering the activity during the study in the face-to-face classroom, instructors documented student feedback by taking detailed notes of student comments to assess what students learned and how they benefited from the assignment. In the online platform, students provided feedback to the activity via a discussion board. . IRB approval was received from both institutions.

Thematic analyses were performed on the data, which involved the researchers first independently assessing the data for reoccurring themes. Boyatzis (1998) foundational research on qualitative design indicates that themes are best determined by reading through the data until the information presented becomes redundant. Once researchers had independently identified themes and quotes to support the themes, their findings were compared. The themes that emerged were identical for both researchers

Instructional Activity

Based on continuous student feedback over subsequent semesters, the activity was adapted to better meet instructional goals and student learning objectives. The original version of the activity is the version presented here as the *short version*. In its four-phase form, the activity allows for more practice of critical thinking skills.

“Critical thinking is a learned skill that requires instruction and practice” (Snyder & Snyder, 2009, p. 90). Therefore, when possible, instructors are encouraged to use the extended version of the activity because it allows students to first think critically about the online reputation of others, and then their own.

Phase 1: Research a classmate’s online presence. The instructor randomly assigns the name of a classmate, called a *target*, to each student. In the face-to-face classroom, this can be accomplished easily by writing each student’s name on a slip of paper and asking each student to draw one name from a container. In the online classroom, instructors can use the same technique by drawing on behalf of their students and email each student a name to research. The instructor should emphasize to students that name assignments should not be shared with anyone during the research phase. The students are then given a class period to use social media tools, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Pinterest, to research their assigned targets for information about that individual. Students were encouraged to make impressions about their target’s personality, character, and abilities. This phase of the assignment provides an excellent opportunity for a sidebar on effective searching techniques.

Phase 2: Summarize the findings. After completing the research phase, students were provided with a list of questions about their target. The goal was for students to conduct adequate research to be able to report a perceived profile of their target’s online reputation. The researchers recommend that students be instructed to find specific *evidence* of content that describes their target’s online persona. Questions may include, but are not limited to:

- Is this person intelligent?
- Is this person hardworking?
- Is this person trustworthy?
- Does this person have good manners?
- Is this a likeable person?
- Is this person dependable?
- Is this person well cultured?
- What else can you infer about this individual’s personality?
- Has this person ever been in legal trouble?

The students should document their responses to each of these questions by identifying specific evidence for each answer. For example, the target may appear hardworking if he or she holds leadership positions in student organizations while also working parttime and carrying a full class load. Conversely, the target may appear lazy if a social network status indicates that he or she has recently skipped class. If the course meets in a computer lab, this phase of the activity can be an in-class writing activity. Otherwise, the report can be assigned as homework.

Notably, the definitions of each of the constructs identified in the Phase 2 questions will likely vary from student to student. Yet, this is consistent with the likelihood that the definitions of constructs will also vary from potential employer

to potential employer. Therefore, it was important that the instructor did not define any of the constructs for the students. Later phases of the activity typically highlight different understandings of conceptual definitions.

Phase 3: Share the Findings with the Target. Students should be instructed to submit their reports prior to the next class period. After grading the assignments, instructors remove the name of the student who wrote the report from the document. (Grades were administered through completion: was each question answered, and was support from research used to substantiate the answers?) The instructor then shares the report to the target student. In the face-to-face classroom, this should be done in the next class period. In the online classroom, this should be done within the same learning module.

Phase 4: Discussion. In the final phase of the activity, the instructor leads a discussion about how online reputations impact the job search. The goal is to explain that although job applicants can have too much personal information readily accessible in their social media accounts, there can also be too little. Either in class or online through a forum, an engaging class discussion can be prompted through a series of questions, such as:

- What was your initial reaction to the report that was written about you?
- What most surprised you?
- What were you most surprised about in the research you conducted about your target?
- How can the information posted online be taken out of context without prior face-to-face interaction to reference?
- How can the lack of nonverbal cues be attenuated in computer-mediated communication?
- What steps can you take to improve your online reputation and build a professional online presence?

Many students do not yet have enough awareness of the business world to understand what content is appropriate. Therefore, the discussion should also include examples of “appropriate content” that contributes to a positive professional brand. If students are comfortable sharing their social media sites, examples of both questionable and appropriate content could be displayed in class, or screen shots of content could be posted to the online discussion forum. However, instructors are encouraged to preview this content before making it accessible to the entire class.

Additionally, the instructor should discuss content that students may not currently, but should, make available online to brand themselves as a professional. Because 51% of hiring managers use online applications to assess whether the potential employee will fit in with the organization’s culture, students should be reminded that their online presence defines who they are to a potential employer (Chulik, 2012). Hobbies and interests that pertain to noncontroversial material should be readily displayed. Furthermore, as potential employees, students

need to add information that presents them as a professional. Updated interests, education, work experience, and accomplishments should be highlighted that are consistent with the content in their résumé (Smith, 2011). Including links to schools and organizations in addition to pictures illustrates more in-depth information for potential employers to review than a résumé alone can provide. Lastly, the importance of posting professional profile photographs should be emphasized to help seekers discern them from other individuals of the same name (Brown, 2012). The same profile image should be used consistently among all of the individual's social media accounts (Shwom & Snyder, 2012).

Alternative Short Version of the Activity

If time is limited, the activity can be modified to be used within one class period. This alternative version has also been well received by students. In the abbreviated assignment, students are randomly assigned the name of a classmate either at the beginning of a class period or as a homework assignment. The students are instructed to use a search tool, such as Google, to analyze their assigned classmate's online reputation. The students are asked not to talk to each other about their research until after they have written a short description of their classmate based on their findings. Each student then reveals the identity of the student that they were assigned and shares their description either by posting it to the class website or presenting it in class. After the students share their findings, the researching students are asked to describe how a perspective employer might perceive their classmates' online presence. This information could be shared as short oral presentations in class or as written assignments that are submitted prior to the next class session. During an online or in-class discussion, the instructor prompts students to reflect on the experience. The class should discuss whether the findings led to any surprises, either by the researchers or by the targets, and how unpleasant surprises can be corrected to promote a more positive professional brand.

Results

When researchers reviewed their observations of student discussions, two consistent themes emerged from the findings of both researchers. The first theme was cautiousness. Students repeatedly stated that they were careful about what they posted. The following student statements were recorded during the study:

I am selective about what I put on the Internet, even when it comes to silly things like movie and music preference.

I really don't want anything floating around out there about me that I can't control.

I am always fearful of submitting information online because of the possibility of someone using my private information to do me harm.

While I am very careful about what I choose to post onto the Internet, that cautiousness in no way affects the way I want people to perceive me (it is much more about safety).

The concept of cautiousness indicated both positive and negative online reputation management behaviors. By being cautious in what they posted, students controlled their online presence. However, by being too cautious, they limited their creativity and missed the opportunity to present their professional brand.

The second theme that emerged related to issues of privacy, as indicated in the following student statements:

I'm not worried one bit because my first thing to do when I sign up for sites, especially social networking sites, I make sure to make my profile private. No matter what the most you could see is my profile picture

Personally, I have no concerns whatsoever about my online identity affecting my life. Why? I have a couple of reasons actually. (A) I've been smart enough to lock everything down so no one but approved individuals can see anything. (B) While I have been known to use curse words online, that is the extent of my "extreme" behavior. (C) I'm a boring person, I don't go to parties. Therefore, no one on this planet has any photo of me that [would make me feel] ashamed.

I know I have all of my settings on private and a lot of my friends do too. I think it's crazy if you allow people to see your information and pictures if you don't know them. There are some weird people in the world and we need to protect ourselves the best we can.

I do not care that much for online social domains, that is why I keep my Facebook private and do not have Twitter, or other such online medias.

Although the students' preference for privacy is understandable, by limiting access to their information, potential employers may assume they have something to hide. While students clearly understand the need to keep certain content from being viewed, they do not seem to realize the importance of being visible online. By hiding all of their information, they have removed the content from which they could build a professional brand.

Limitations

The activity is limited in that it works best in courses that meet in a computer lab or entirely online. However, given the prevalence of smart phones, it is rare that a student is not able to complete the assignment in a face-to-face class setting, even if a computer lab is not available. Instructors who wish to use this activity in a traditional face-to-face classroom may wish to make extra preparations, such as encouraging students to bring a laptop to class, if they have concerns about each student having Internet access.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This activity has been well received in both business communication courses and computer-mediated communication courses in both online and face-to-face platforms. Student feedback was used to identify what students learned from the activity, specifically how they could improve their online reputation by enhancing their professional use of social media tools. Responses were positive in that students indicated enjoying the activity, but also positive from an instructional perspective in that they indicated that the outcomes were consistent with activity goals. Student responses indicated that, in general, most students already understood the need to hide content that employers would perceive negatively. However, students accomplished this by limiting their online presence to the point that opportunities to self-promote were lost. Their reputation management strategies did utilize social media as an asset to the job market.

To adapt to the changing landscape of the job market, instructors must concentrate on presenting a balanced view of social networking, focusing equally on what information students *should* provide as well as that which they should not. The digital age has affected how and what information is shared, and it is important that students understand the effects that their online presence can have on potential employment. In the main, this assignment helps students to critically evaluate the effects of social media on their future employment opportunities. Having an online presence review written by their peers helps students realize how others view their online presence. This lesson also provides students with the skills to not only manage their online professional brand but also to enhance it so that potential employers can view the whole person and not just a résumé. As such, it is recommended that this activity, or one with similar goals, be presented in courses that discuss an intersection of business and computer-mediated communication to help students better prepare themselves for the job market in the world of Web 2.0.

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