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Exposing one's identity: Social judgments of colleagues' traits can influence employees' Facebook boundary management



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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that the willingness to interact with colleagues in offline contexts mostly depends on morality traits. However, little is known about how social judgments of traits can influence online intentions to interact with colleagues. Specifically, we investigated the effects of colleagues' morality, sociability, and competence traits on employees' boundary management on Facebook. An experiment ($N = 289$) was conducted using a (morality: high vs low) by 2 (sociability: high vs low) by 2 (competence: high vs low) design. Results revealed that employees' preference to separate (vs. integrate) professional and private contacts on Facebook was determined by both morality and sociability traits, whereas no effects of competence traits were found.

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1. Introduction

The emergence of Social Network Sites (SNS), and of Facebook in particular, has brought about important opportunities for users to make, and maintain, connections with people from different parts of their lives. This has come with great potential for users to participate in the social capital of their personal and professional networks (Ellison, Gibbs, & Weber, 2015; Steinfield, DiMicco, Ellison, & Lampe, 2009), but also with the difficulty of presenting themselves in ways that could be both appropriate and recognizable within the different domains of their lives (Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard, & Berg, 2013; Van Dijck, 2013). According to Marwick and Boyd (2010), users of SNS experience a “context collapse”, i.e. they respond to the need to appeal to networks from different parts of one's life by unifying their audiences and representing themselves as a “common denominator” of different identities.

Especially as the appeal of SNS has extended to adult and professional users, managing the online boundary between work and private life has become increasingly difficult. In fact, whilst specific norms apply in work contexts concerning what is considered to be

professional behavior (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006), no guidelines exist online. On the one hand, disclosing private information on SNS means extending the ownership of such information to a variegated audience that includes professional contacts (Frampton & Child, 2013), which can lead to feelings of boundary turbulence, if not full boundary violation (De Groot & Vik, 2017). Some organizations encourage employees to be restrictive in the private information that they share with colleagues, thereby influencing employees' decisions regarding their SNS network (Frampton & Child, 2013). Occasionally, organizations will determine through regulations the limits of employees' audiences (Skeels & Grudin, 2009). On the other hand, the disclosure of personal information can also promote stronger feelings of likability and connectedness among one's colleagues (Collins & Miller, 1994; Utz, 2015). Recent research has even linked the inclusion of professional contacts within employees' SNS to increased job satisfaction (Hanna, Kee, & Robertson, 2017; Robertson & Kee, 2017) and job performance (Huang & Liu, 2017). The type of effort employees make whilst using SNS is therefore one of boundary management, where they determine the degree of permeability of the boundaries they set between private and professional identities (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000), deciding thereby on how separate (versus integrate) they should be (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013).

The willingness of employees to integrate professional and

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private identities is likely to depend, among other factors, on their perception of the personality traits of their colleagues. Forming an impression of the traits of others is a basic and essential process that underlies interpersonal interactions, as these impressions can help people to comprise expectations of the benefits and costs that an interaction with other individuals can bring them (Asch, 1946; Ybarra, Chan, & Park, 2001). Due to the focus of SNS on interpersonal interactions, people's social judgments of others' traits might also be relevant in SNS contexts, given that these traits could inform people about the risks or benefits that are associated with the disclosure of personal information (Gibbs, Ellison, & Lai, 2011; Gross & Acquisti, 2005; Taddei & Contena, 2013; Wang et al., 2011).

Similarly, when the online boundary between one's professional and private life is crossed due to the inclusion of colleagues in SNS networks, the impression of these colleagues' traits might provide people an indication of the severity of the consequences when one accidentally fails to comply to professional norms online. Indeed, research has indicated that employees experience tensions when mixing professional and private identities due to concerns about, for example, embarrassing reactions from family and friends or inadvertently disclosing company-confidential knowledge (Skeels & Grudin, 2009). In the current research we aim to address the possible influence of colleagues' personality traits on employees' decision to separate (or integrate) professional and private identity on Facebook. Supporting our hypotheses with theories of boundary management and social judgment, and basing our analyses on an experiment ran on a sample of 289 participants, we wish to contribute to the existing body of research on online boundary management.

1.1. Contributions of the current research

The emergence of SNS like Facebook, and the growth in popularity of their app-based version, have had a substantial effect in what Ashforth et al. (2000; p.474) defined as the "permeability" of the boundary between private and professional lives, i.e., "the degree to which a role allows one to be physically located in the role's domain but psychologically and/or behaviorally involved in another role". This happens largely through SNS-based interaction: Professional users are facilitated in exchanging information with the multiple constituencies to which they belong, negotiating through their different expectations (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013). However, especially with Facebook, previous research has also identified its notifications and requests of action as an incentive to task-switch between work and leisure, increasing the permeability of the boundary in-between (Rosen, Carrier, & Cheever, 2013). The number of studies that focus on employees' use of social technologies is growing (El Ouiridi, El Ouiridi, Segers, & Henderickx, 2015). For example, research has focused on the link between employees' online self-disclosure strategies and their perceived likeability (Batenburg & Bartels, 2017), and on the prevalence and function of work-related topics in tweets (Van Zoonen, Verhoeven, & Vliegthart, 2016). Nevertheless, several research gaps can be observed in the literature on online boundary management. For example, whereas research has separately addressed the impact of occupational pressure on offline private lives (Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005), and the management of online boundaries in samples consisting of various groups (e.g., students; Karl & Peluchette, 2011; teenager hospital patients; Rosen et al., 2013; Van Der Velden & El Emam, 2013), few studies have actually investigated online boundary management by employees (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013). Moreover, empirical questions regarding which factors can contribute to employees' decisions to separate their professional and private identities online thus far remain unanswered. The current research aims to extend the understanding of online

boundary management by specifically focusing on the tension between identities that employees might experience when using Facebook, and whether perceptions of colleagues' traits might impact this process.

Furthermore, the current research also contributes to social judgment research by examining the effects of perceived personality traits of others in a Facebook context, in which people are often faced with diluted boundaries between different groups with which they identify (Lampinen, Tamminen, & Oulasvirta, 2009; Marwick & boyd, 2010; Tufekci, 2008). Most users of Facebook are likely to have contacts in their network that are members of different groups and that thereby represent different aspects of users' life domains. Consequently, it can be challenging for Facebook users to present themselves in a way that is consistent with the norms and expectations of all the groups that are represented in their network. Whereas previous research has primarily focused on the effects of social judgments in offline contexts (Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014; Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007; Van Prooijen & Ellemers, 2015)—where users' life domains are less likely to constantly collide and traits of a single individual or group tend to be considered—it can be argued that the role of social judgments might be more complex in a Facebook context due to the often mixed audience, as users might consider how Facebook interactions with members of one group could be evaluated by members of other groups.

Finally, social judgment research has thus far tended to center on which impressions we form of groups with varying traits, how inclusion in these groups can affect our identity, and whether we are willing to interact with group members (Brambilla, Sacchi, Pagliaro, & Ellemers, 2013; Leach et al., 2007). The current study, however, expands this line of research by focusing on employees' willingness to *engage in online self-disclosure* to a work team of which they have formed an impression. Specifically, we examine whether people are willing to expose themselves on Facebook to work team members with whom they are also expected to interact in a professional context. There is some evidence to suggest that the social judgments of traits might promote different effects when people anticipate on interactions with a group—which reflects a basic goal of Facebook use—than when people have to evaluate a group. For example, a recent study revealed that the evaluation of a work team and the physiological responses during the anticipation of a team decision-making task were predicted by different perceived traits (Van Prooijen, Ellemers, Van Der Lee, & Scheepers, 2016). This could imply that different traits might promote the tendency to separate or integrate professional and private identities than the traits that thus far have been shown to dominate offline group evaluations.

1.2. Social judgment dimensions

People routinely engage in processes to form an impression of the traits of other individuals and groups (Abele, Cuddy, Judd, & Yzerbyt, 2008; Rosenberg, Nelson, & Vivekananthan, 1968; Wojciszke, 2005). The fundamental dimensions underlying these social judgments have extensively been examined in previous studies (Abele et al., 2008; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). Two core dimensions tend to be identified in most of these studies: Warmth, which reflects how a person functions in social relationships (e.g., trustworthiness, friendliness, tolerance); and competence, which reflects the achievements and abilities of a person (e.g., capability, skillfulness, intelligence; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008). Warmth provides an indication of whether others have beneficial or harmful intentions toward us, while competence indicates whether others have the ability to pursue and fulfill their intentions (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002).

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