# Searching for the perfect fit: The interaction of community type and profile design in online communities

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## ABSTRACT

In times of social networking and knowledge exchange on the Internet, we ask how different types of member profiles are perceived depending on the type of community, and how the interplay between community and profile affects the audience orientation of community members. We explored these questions in two laboratory experiments. Experiment 1 examined the suitability of profiles. It demonstrated that in common-bond communities people showed satisfaction with off-topic as well as on-topic profiles, whereas in common-identity communities they were less satisfied with off-topic than on-topic profiles. In common-bond communities, in addition, people perceived profiles, independent of the type of profile, as an important feature of the community, whereas in common-identity communities people devaluated the importance of the off-topic profiles. Experiment 2 dealt with the influence of profiles on audience orientation in the different community types. This study showed that in common-identity communities off-topic compared to on-topic profiles reduced group members' reflection about what is important to know for the group as a whole as well as their self-presentation goal of being accepted by the group. In sum, off-topic profiles are not only perceived as inappropriate in common-identity communities, they also diminish the orientation toward the group.

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Self-presentation is an inherent part of people's lives (Baumeister, 1982; Goffman, 1959; Leary & Kowalski, 1990) occurring also in people's online activities (Kimmerle & Cress, 2008; McKenna & Bargh, 1999; Turkle, 1995). People become visible through personal websites, write blogs, and join online communities for private as well as professional purposes. Facebook and Wikipedia are within the top 10 most visited sites worldwide (Alexa, 2014; Oeberst, Halatchliyski, Kimmerle, & Cress, 2014). Usually, during the registration process of a social networking site (SNS) people fill out a member profile. Hence, self-presentation is the first step to start interaction. People present personal information to influence the impression their audience gets of them. Generally, self-presentation on SNS is quite extensive (Gross & Acquisti, 2005). People disclose a lot of information to get in contact with other community members. However, comparing self-presentation in different types of communities, survey (Schrammel, Köffel, & Tscheligi, 2009) as well as experimental data (Schwämmlein & Wodzicki, 2012) revealed that on SNS, people disclose more information in their profiles than in communities for content sharing.

Prompting extensive self-presentation through predefined profile fields asking for specific aspects of the self such as personality, interests, or location perfectly matches the purpose of social networking sites, that is, to establish and maintain personal relations. However, there might be cases in which extensive profiles highlighting the individuality of members do not match the goals of a community and the interest of the user. What happens, for example, when communities for information exchange (Cress, Kimmerle, & Hesse, 2009; Kimmerle & Cress, 2009) ask for vast amount of personal information that is not related to the shared interest of the group? The implicit affordance of individualizing profiles could indeed counteract the code of conduct explicitly stated in the community description and thereby evoke activities that are not in accordance with the goal of the community, because self-presentation may reduce the exchange of information (Cress, 2005). Even more fundamental, a lack of fit between self-presentation prompted by predefined profile fields and activities promoted in the community description could evoke irritation and diminish the willingness to register as a user right from the beginning. To date, there is no systematic analysis of whether different types of profiles are beneficial for different types of communities. In addition, it is unclear whether the profile itself affects the orientation of community members beyond explicit community description.

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In the following, we first distinguish between common-bond and common-identity groups, and discuss the different types of self-presentation. Then we reflect the aspect of the suitability of self-presentation in terms of people's preferences and the functions of profiles. After that we present considerations on people's audience orientation. Subsequently, we report two experimental studies. In the first experiment, we examined which kinds of profiles, that is, which self-presentation style, are perceived as suitable in different types of communities. In the second experiment, we analyzed how profile design affects community members' audience orientation in different types of communities. Concluding, we provide a general discussion about our findings and their implications for future research.

## 1. Common-bond and common-identity communities

Prentice, Miller, and Lightdale (1994) distinguished between common-bond and common-identity groups. "In common-bond groups, member attachment is primary and group attachment follows from it" (p. 485), whereas common-identity groups "are based primarily on direct attachment to the group identity" (p. 485). This means that interpersonal relations among members are the defining characteristic of common-bond groups, while these interpersonal relations are not necessary to generate attachment to common-identity groups (of course, this conceptual distinction does not preclude hybrid forms or intermediate stages of these types of groups; some common identity communities, for example, may have a component of common bonding as a goal). To become member of a common-bond group, interpersonal attraction to other members is essential. Considering the question how to establish interpersonal attraction, it has been shown that the more people interact with others, getting to know and like each other, the more they feel connected (Lott & Lott, 1965; Newcomb, 1956).

In common-identity groups, social identification with the group, that is, the perception to be a group member is independent of interpersonal relations between members (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). To become a member of a common-identity group, it is not necessary to get to know each other personally. Instead, the perception of being part of a unit sharing a common fate or outcome, or the perception of being connected by sharing at least one characteristic such as interest, attitude, or values, is sufficient to feel like a group member (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Kimmerle, Gerbing, Cress, & Thiel, 2012; Kimmerle et al., 2013; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Sassenberg (2002) showed that in common-identity groups, group attraction predicted social identification, while personal attraction was even negatively correlated with social identification.

The typology of Prentice et al. (1994) has often been used to characterize groups in the Internet such as chats, MUDs, and communities (Ren, Kraut, & Kiesler, 2007; Sassenberg, 2002; Utz, 2003). We use the term *common-bond community* to define communities in which interpersonal relations among members are central (i.e., social networking sites such as Facebook). Common-bond communities usually support private one-to-one communication; in the case of Facebook, for example, chatting with friends about diverse life events. In contrast, we use the term *common-identity community* to describe communities in which collective exchange about a common topic or interest is central, while interpersonal relations are not promoted (i.e., communities for knowledge exchange such as Wikipedia). Common-identity communities usually support public one-to-many communication from one member to the group, focusing on the shared interest, in the case of Wikipedia, for example, writing and discussing articles to improve their quality. According to the typology of Prentice et al. (1994), the critical aspect for differentiation is whether the community promotes interpersonal relations or

not. Other examples of these different types of communities are business communities that either aim at professional networking (common-bond community) or rather at sharing of expertise (common-identity community), or sport communities that either focus on becoming connected with other people to play basketball or to find jogging partners (common-bond community) or instead on sharing training and dietary tips with the group of sportsmen (common-identity community).

## 2. Different types of self-presentation

Predefined profile fields asking for specific self-relevant information imply a certain self-presentation style. Profile templates in common-bond communities typically include profile fields for a broad range of personal characteristics such as age, gender, location, interests, occupation, favorite music, books and movies, and personal statements (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Nosko, Wood, & Molema, 2010), whereas profile templates in common-identity communities usually are more focused and provide often only profile fields for picture, username, and registration data. The extensive self-presentation in common-bond communities is not surprising. In these communities, profiles are the main content and providing personal information helps to get in contact with other members. Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield (2007) showed that members of common-bond communities disclose a lot of information demonstrating potential links with others. References to stations in life (e.g., field of study) or physical locations (e.g., hometown) predicted the number of friends in Facebook, and the disclosure of contact information, interests, or general self-descriptions correlated with the number of friends. Through self-presentation in profiles people deliver starting points or potential links for interaction. Additionally, it is a well established premise that self-disclosure leads to liking (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Collins & Miller, 1994). That suggests that members of common-bond communities disclose diverse personal information to be perceived as likeable and open-minded.

But self-disclosure can also go along with negative effects. Considering the consequences of self-presentation for social identification in groups, research subsumed under the *Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects* (SIDE; e.g., Lea, Spears, & de Groot, 2001; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995) has demonstrated that anonymity of group members, meaning the absence of any form of self-presentation, is advantageous for increasing social identity because anonymity hides interpersonal differences between group members. Furthermore, Cress (2005) showed that members of groups in which people are anonymous exchange more information than members of groups in which they are represented through personal photographs. However, we should not conclude that self-presentation per se diminishes social identification and collective exchange. While revealing personal attributes such as age, hobbies, and favorite music fosters differentiation between group members and reduces the salience of social identity (Lee, 2007a), accessibility of shared characteristics of group members such as visibility of sharing the gender category (Lea, Spears, & Watt, 2007; Lee, 2007b) as well as uniform pictures of group members demonstrating homogeneity of members (Wodzicki, Schwämmlein, Cress, & Kimmerle, 2011) even promotes social identification and information exchange. Consequently, it is necessary to differentiate between *individualizing self-presentation* that makes diverse, personal characteristics salient and *self-presentation regarding the shared characteristic* that connects the member to the group.

## 3. Suitability of self-presentation: self-presentation preferences and functions of profiles

In the following, we discuss the suitability of profiles, that is, the self-presentation opportunities profiles provide. These