

Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus? Examining Gender Differences in Self-Presentation on Social Networking Sites

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Abstract

Psychological research on gender differences in self-presentation has already revealed that women place higher priority on creating a positive self-presentation, while men are less concerned about the image they present in face-to-face (ftf) communication. Nowadays, with the extensive use of new media, self-presentation is no longer so closely tied to ftf situations, but can also take place in the online world. Specifically, social networking sites (SNS), such as Facebook or MySpace, offer various features such as profile pictures, groups, and virtual bulletin boards with which users can create elaborated online representations of themselves. What remains open is whether this virtual self-presentation on SNS is subject to gender differences. Based on studies emphasizing gender-related differences in Internet communication and behavior in general, it can be assumed that men and women have different motives regarding their SNS usage as well. A multimethodological study, combining results of an online survey and a content analysis of 106 user profiles, assessed users' diverse motives for participating in SNS in general, and their use of specific profile elements or self-presentation in particular. In this sample of StudiVZ users, women tend to be more likely to use SNS for comparing themselves with others and for searching for information. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to look at other people's profiles to find friends. Moreover, women tend to use group names for their self-presentation and prefer adding portrait photos to their profiles, while men choose full-body shots.

Introduction

SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES (SNS), such as Facebook or MySpace, today offer a new arena for examining individual differences, especially those related to gender and Internet communication.¹ The worldwide popularity of these Web sites across all age groups is unambiguously documented by the large usage numbers that exceed the populations of many countries.^{2,3} Users can easily create an individual online identity by uploading profile pictures and adding personal information. Except for information generated by others (e.g., bulletin board postings⁴), most of the displayed profile information can be controlled and selected by the profile owner. This opportunity of presenting a multifaceted image on SNS, which inevitably creates specific impressions, makes these sites all the more appealing to both men and women.⁵

Well-established findings⁶ suggest that women's online behavior is more interpersonally oriented, while men are

more task- and information-oriented. Women, for instance, spend more time writing e-mails, while men use the Web more frequently for information seeking in general. These observations conform to stereotypically assumed offline behavior and illustrate that gender is an important aspect in online research as well. Fittingly, Bimber⁷ concluded that "around one-half of the 'digital divide' [...] on the Internet is fundamentally gender related" (p. 813). The digital divide is often explained by the idea that the Internet is an inherently male technology, which reproduces societal structures and behavioral dispositions.⁸⁻¹⁰ This results in gender-specific differences in SNS use, examples of which have been outlined previously. However, the question yet to be resolved is to what extent and in what dimensions self-presentation on SNS differs between genders. Applying a multimethodological approach, this study examines whether strategies of self-presentation on online profiles, as well as users' motives for fashioning online identities, are gender specific.

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Self-Presentation on SNS and Gender

A considerable body of research about networking pages, in the tradition of the popular uses-and-gratifications paradigm,¹¹ focuses on the motives of creating user-generated content.^{12–18} Typical motivations for hosting an online profile are interpersonal communication, entertainment, as well as self-presentation.^{12,19} Because the formatting on online profiles is user friendly, even less-experienced users can create an elaborated profile of themselves.^{19–21} Unlike in face-to-face (ftf) communication, the reduced cues setting and potentially asynchronous communication enable users to select information they want to present in order to create a positive impression. Thus, users spend considerable time choosing information and reflecting about its potential effects.²¹ While this selectiveness might be appealing to the user, because personal information can be embellished,²² research has revealed the users' desire to present an authentic image of themselves.²¹ Since in most cases users list people they know from ftf as their friends in SNS, fake information may be identified.

Assuming that, as in ftf communication, gender determines behavioral (interaction) standards online, it is likely that gender has a part to play in the form and content of messages and self-presentation conveyed online. Also, since on the gendered net²³ a profile owner's gender is requested profile information on SNS, people tend to be aware of the rules and behavioral expectations resulting from their own gender.²⁴ Especially for ftf self-presentation, it has been reported that people indeed want to conform to stereotypical gender-specific expectations, since²⁴ "[p]eople who do not conform to stereotypic behavior may be punished through social rejection."²⁵ Given that research on gender differences in self-presentation within ftf communication²⁶ has already identified differences in self-presentation strategies, it is plausible to assume that some aspects of gender norms are replicated on SNS.

In ftf settings, women generally tend to disclose more personal information²⁶ and they more intensively strive for the development of personal ties.^{27,28} Men, by contrast, have a clearly more task-oriented usage behavior. Additionally, it is postulated that—independent from media usage—men's self-presentational behavior is notably marked by competition and one-upmanship.²⁹

With regard to gender-related online behavior, comScore data (February 2011) revealed that women spend 10 percent more time on SNS than men, and are also more active in composing profiles. The first studies on the meaning of various profile elements on SNS illustrate that the characteristics described previously are also true for gender differences regarding self-presentation online. Manago et al.¹ showed that, for MySpace users, men's online portrayals conform to stereotypical norms of masculinity, emphasizing strength and power, while women tend to style themselves as attractive and affiliative. In a qualitative content analysis, Sveningsson Elm³⁰ showed that women's self-presentation on SNS was more related to categories such as "relationships" and "feelings," while men focused on the exposure of "status" and "technology." Also, qualitative interviews showed that men put higher priority on describing their occupational status and prestige, while women focus on communication skills, especially within SNS groups.²¹ Tufekci³¹ confirmed that women primarily aim to increase their social capital by using SNS. They are also generally more oriented toward their ex-

isting network of friends, whereas men are more interested in meeting new people with similar interests.

All the findings just outlined suggest that male and female users might have different motivations to host a profile on SNS,³² leading to the following hypotheses:

H1: Female users put a higher priority on communicative exchange via SNS than male users.

H2: Male users put a higher priority on task- and information-oriented behavior on SNS than female users.

Moreover, our research focuses on specific differences between men's and women's self-presentations; that is, which profile elements are used in particular for creating an online identity on SNS. This in turn leads us to ask the following question:

RQ1: Do men and women have different self-presentation strategies when using profile features on SNS?

Research on computer-mediated self-presentation has emphasized the double meaning of groups on SNS³³; the SNS users join groups not just for communicative exchange, but as a strategy of self-presentation. Given that we know that women place a high priority on communication, one can assume that they are more interested in communicative exchange via groups than men. Since research has not covered this question yet, we therefore ask:

RQ2: What are the motives of men and women in joining groups on SNS?

Besides the active process of content creation for one's own self-display, users are also confronted with self-presentations of other users when browsing through SNS. From a social-psychological perspective, it can be argued that online profiles are actively frequented by men and women to gratify specific needs. For instance, Haferkamp and Krämer²¹ showed that social comparison appears to be a universal motive for looking at strangers' profiles online. However, according to their results, men and women seem to focus on different aspects of other people's profiles for comparison. More specifically, it was shown that for men, successful careers displayed on others' SNS profiles led to a more negative perception of the man's own occupational status, while women were less negatively influenced by ideal career descriptions. This leads to the following research question:

RQ3: Are there different motivations for male and female SNS users to look at other people's online profiles?

Methods

The study consisted of an online survey and a content analysis of user profiles. By using the messaging function, 500 randomly selected members of the SNS StudiVZ, a German equivalent of Facebook, received an invitation with a description of the study and a personal access code. 359 of the messaged members completed the questionnaire (response rate 71.8 percent). Out of these, 106 publicly accessible profiles were selected for content analysis (54 men, 52 women; age: $M=23.12$, $SD=3.12$) (*Note:* The study was conducted in 2010 at a time where StudiVZ profiles were predominantly used without privacy settings.).

Power analysis³⁴ resulted in a power of 72.42 percent. Although the recommended effect size of 80 percent is not

reached, the exploratory style of this study justifies the selected sample size. Before profiles were coded according to specific categories, each participant was assigned a unique identification number to relate the questionnaire data to the content analysis (a sample profile from StudiVZ is shown in Figure 1).

Data analysis

Content analysis was conducted by four coders who counted the number of friends, groups, photos, completed fields, and number of words. Users' revelation of (reportedly) real names, political orientation, and relationship status as part of the style of the profile text, as well as the type of photo, were also categorized. Fifteen percent of the data were coded by an additional person, allowing for the calculation of inter-rater reliability by means of Cohen's κ . The agreement of coders (0.73 to 1.0) was good to excellent. The coded profile information also served as dependent variables.

In addition to gender serving as independent variable, further sociodemographic variables, such as age and occupational activity, were assessed in the online survey to control for their potential impact. To determine the participants' motivations for hosting an online profile, their membership in discussion groups, as well as their perception of other people's profiles, exploratory principal component analyses (PCA) were conducted with self-constructed items (rated on 5-point Likert scales; 0=strongly disagree, +5=strongly agree). We chose PCA to find umbrella terms for variables that highly correlate with a factor.³⁵ The resulting factors, described in the "Principal component analyses" section, served as dependent variables.

Principal component analyses

Motivations of hosting an online profile. The 23 items selected are based on the uses-and-gratifications scale,³² with

FIG. 1. Public online profile of the German social networking site StudiVZ (www.studivz.net).

a specific focus on SNS usage. PCA of these motive items resulted in seven factors explaining 69.71 percent of variance (Table 1). The factors were called "self-presentation" ($\sigma^2=17.14$ percent, $M=1.79$, Chronbach's $\alpha=0.88$), "entertainment" ($\sigma^2=14.38$ percent, $M=3.14$, $\alpha=0.82$), "support" ($\sigma^2=8.84$ percent, $M=1.51$, $\alpha=0.81$), "promotion of career" ($\sigma^2=5.94$ percent, $M=1.63$, $\alpha=0.60$), "coordination" ($\sigma^2=4.99$ percent, $M=2.89$, $\alpha=0.63$), "relationship seeking" ($\sigma^2=4.63$ percent, $M=1.52$, $\alpha=0.63$), and "cultivation of contacts" ($\sigma^2=5.92$ percent, 1 item). Although Chronbach's alpha does not prove satisfactory for the last four factors, we kept them due to the exploratory character of our research. Because of the small number of single items (2) and the low alpha value, we additionally conducted a Pearson correlation for the items of the factor "relationship seeking": it was shown that "to find a partner" was positively correlated with "to meet new people," $p>0.001$, $r=.525$.

Motivations for joining groups. Against the background of the underlined importance of group names for self-presentation, we particularly wanted to know why users join groups on SNS. Again, PCA was conducted with 18 self-constructed items measured on a 5-point Likert scale, resulting in three factors explaining 60.38 percent of total variance (Table 2). The factors were called "attention" ($\sigma^2=24.41$ percent, $M=1.60$, $\alpha=0.87$), "organization" ($\sigma^2=21.12$ percent, $M=2.13$, $\alpha=0.86$), and "self-presentation" ($\sigma^2=14.85$ percent, $M=3.23$, $\alpha=0.76$).

Perception of other people's online profiles. Finally, we asked the participants about their perception of other

people's online profiles, using 17 items with 5-point Likert scales. PCA resulted in five factors explaining a total of 68.08 percent of variance (for details, see Table 3). The factors were called "entertainment" ($\sigma^2=17.11$ percent, $M=2.95$, $\alpha=0.83$), "information" ($\sigma^2=15.14$ percent, $M=3.44$, $\alpha=0.70$), "social comparison" ($\sigma^2=13.55$ percent, $M=1.93$, $\alpha=0.77$), "searching for friends" ($\sigma^2=11.79$ percent, $M=2.48$, $\alpha=0.67$), and "inspiration" ($\sigma^2=10.49$ percent, $M=2.16$, $\alpha=0.69$). With regard to data analysis, one-way ANOVAs were conducted, with gender serving as the independent variable and the above-mentioned dependent variables. With regard to descriptive data, χ^2 tests were used.

Results

Sample

About 68.3 percent of the 106 participants use StudiVZ every day. On average, these users have 215.23 ($SD=103.24$) friends listed, joined 35.19 ($SD=21.15$) groups, present 5.11 ($SD=7.01$) photo albums, linked to 60.11 ($SD=21.10$) photos, and describe themselves with 59.89 ($SD=66.18$) words on the profile page.

Gender differences in motives

H1 predicted that women would put a higher priority on communication than men. However, our results show that the opposite is true, $F(1, 104)=8.08$, $p=0.01$, $\eta_p^2=0.07$. Descriptive results suggest that men put a higher priority on relationship seeking ($M=0.26$; $SD=1.14$) than female users ($M=-0.27$, $SD=0.75$). Moreover, H2 postulated that men

TABLE 1. PRINCIPAL COMPONENT ANALYSIS (VARIMAX ROTATION, EIGEN VALUES=1) OF MOTIVES TO USE STUDI VZ ($N=106$)

<i>I use social networking sites ...</i>	<i>Motive factor</i>						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
because I like presenting myself to others	0.832						
to show myself, my interests, and my background	0.815						
to express my personality	0.773						
to show others who I am	0.770						
because I want to communicate information	0.601			0.575			
out of boredom		0.873					
to kill time		0.864					
to have fun		0.635					
because I seek entertainment		0.592					
to get information about others		0.501			0.410		
because many of my friends use it too		0.418					
to help others			0.832				
to support others			0.777				
to develop my career				0.685			
to be part of the society				0.585			
because it's exciting		0.430		0.492			
to coordinate appointments					0.839		
to organize my studies and get in touch with my costudents			0.459		0.669		
to exchange information with others					0.503		
to meet new people						0.821	
to find a partner						0.692	
to stay in touch with my friends							0.883
Explained variances (in percent)	17.24	14.38	8.82	8.40	8.06	6.90	5.92

TABLE 2. PRINCIPAL COMPONENT ANALYSIS (VARIMAX ROTATION, EIGEN VALUES=1) OF MOTIVES OF JOINING GROUPS ($N=106$)

<i>I join SNS groups...</i>	<i>Motive factor</i>		
	1	2	3
to appear attractive	0.844		
so that others ask about them	0.805		
to look intelligent	0.775		
to get to know other people	0.733		
because I want to be integrated	0.722		
to fill my profile with information	0.671		
to be provocative	0.580		
to look interesting	0.577		0.439
to organize things		0.851	
to get informed		0.838	
because I use them		0.820	
for communication			
to deliver information		0.813	
to plan my free time		0.793	
because others invited me		0.419	
because they represent my humor			0.761
to show who or what I like			0.726
because they describe my personality			0.717
to show my interests			0.714
Explained variances (in percent)	24.41	21.12	24.41

SNS, social networking site.

would be more likely to show task- and information-oriented behavior on SNS than women. However, with regard to "coordination," no significant results were found. Thus, H_2 was rejected. Instead, our results show a significant main effect for the factor "entertainment," $F(1,104)=7.59$, $p=0.01$, $\eta_p^2=0.07$. Female users achieve higher values for the entertainment motive ($M=0.26$, $SD=0.94$) than men ($M=-0.25$, $SD=1.01$).

We also asked (RQ2) whether men and women use SNS groups for different motives. Although our findings did not show any quantitative differences with regard to the number of groups displayed on male and female profile pages, we found a significant effect for the motives for using groups, $F(1,101)=6.55$, $p=0.006$, $\eta_p^2=0.07$. This suggests that women are more likely to use group names for self-presentation ($M=0.27$, $SD=1.0$) than men ($M=-0.27$, $SD=0.93$).

Descriptive results of gender-related SNS usage

RQ1 asked whether men and women use profile elements differently for their online self-presentation. Indeed, with regard to the profile photograph, we found a significant difference ($\chi^2=6.16$; $p=0.05$; see Table 4), suggesting that women prefer using a portrait photography, while men more frequently use full-body shots, also showing the environment and other people.

Furthermore, χ^2 tests reveal that men tend to edit their profile picture more than women ($\chi^2=9.83$, $p=0.02$; see Table 5).

Perception of other people's online profiles

RQ3 asked whether there are gender-specific motives for looking at other people's profiles. Indeed, we found a significant main effect for the motive "information," $F(1, 104)=4.01$, $p=0.05$, $\eta_p^2=0.04$. This suggests that female users look at other people's online profiles to get information about other people ($M=0.20$, $SD=0.95$) more than men ($M=-0.19$, $SD=1.02$). Moreover, an ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for the motive "social comparison," $F(1, 104)=14.69$, $p<0.001$, $\eta_p^2=0.12$. This suggests that women ($M=0.36$, $SD=1.03$) compare themselves with others more often than men ($M=-0.34$, $SD=0.84$).

Finally, an ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for the motive of "searching for friends," $F(1, 104)=11.98$, $p<0.001$, $\eta_p^2=0.10$. This implies that men are more inclined to

TABLE 3. PRINCIPAL COMPONENT ANALYSIS (VARIMAX ROTATION, EIGEN VALUES=1) OF MOTIVES TO LOOK AT OTHER PROFILES ($N=106$)

<i>I look at other profiles</i>	<i>Motive factor</i>				
	1	2	3	4	5
because it's fun	0.836				
to make fun of others	0.810				
out of boredom	0.715				
out of curiosity	0.528	0.505			
to be up to date		0.848			
to get information about the particular person		0.720			
to be informed about my friends		0.677		0.408	
because the person visited my profile before		0.411			
to look at the ex of my partner			0.862		
to compare myself with this person			0.708		
out of jealousy			0.678		
to observe others	0.421	0.424	0.510		
to find old friends				0.776	
to search for new friends				0.691	
to get to know other people better				0.672	
to find ideas for my own profile					0.830
to find new StudiVZ groups	0.428				0.754
Explained variances (in percent)	17.12	15.14	13.55	11.79	10.49

TABLE 4. PROFILE PHOTOGRAPH AND GENDER ($N=106$)

Categories	Gender		Total
	Women	Men	
Portrait photo			
Observed	34	23	57
Expected	28.0	29.0	57.0
Residuals	1.1	-1.1	
Full-body shot (including environment)			
Observed	17	27	44
Expected	21.6	22.4	44.0
Residuals	-1.0	1.0	
Total			
Observed	52	54	106
Expected	52.0	54.0	106.0

search for people when they look at other people's online profiles ($M=0.31$, $SD=0.97$) than are women ($M=-0.33$, $SD=0.93$).

Discussion

Various features provided by SNS for fashioning online profiles allow a much more detailed self-description than a casual ftf interaction. Assuming that ftf stereotypes and behavioral expectations influence the way men and women fashion their profiles on SNS,³⁶⁻³⁸ the reported study examined gender differences in underlying motives for using profiles, as well as with regard to specific self-presentation strategies. Prior studies on Internet communication highlighted that female users put a high priority on interpersonal aspects of SNS usage, while men rather engage in information- and task-oriented behavior. However, our results regarding the general motives of hosting a profile suggest the opposite, revealing male StudiVZ users are more likely to search for new people (or even partners) than women, who favor entertainment. While surprising at first glance, these findings can be explained by the observation that men primarily perceive SNS as a pragmatic communication medium. For instance, Haferkamp and Krämer²¹ showed that men do not consider online profiles as platforms for self-portrayal, but rather appreciate the pragmatic aspect

of easily getting in contact with other people. In line with this, they may perceive browsing through online profiles as a pragmatic and comfortable way of getting an overview about existing friendships, new contacts, and potential spouses. From this, we may conclude on a more general level that men indeed use SNS for information seeking but not with regard to factual data or knowledge but rather for collecting information on their existing contacts and potential future network. On the contrary, women's motives are driven by a more hedonistic perspective of personal enjoyment and of self-presentation. This is also underlined by the result that women tend to use group names for individual, personality-related self-presentation (i.e., hedonic aspects), whereas men use group names to search for friends (i.e., relationship seeking). As suggested by social-psychological findings,^{29,36,37} women are more concerned about how they are perceived by others. Consequently, online profiles perfectly accommodate females' need for self-display, by offering the opportunity to consciously create, adapt, and edit one's self-presentation. In line with this, our findings regarding the motives for the perception of profiles demonstrate that women tend to compare themselves with other users and search for information when they look at other people's online profiles, whereas men follow the initial idea behind social networking, which was to search for friends.

Surprisingly, while the analysis of the questionnaire data provided a variety of insights for future research, the content analysis of the chosen profile elements does not reveal many gender-related differences: women tend to use portrait photographs, whereas men more often choose full-body shots. Against the background of the results discussed above, one might postulate that the choice of portrait photographs is related to women's need for self-presentation. Moreover, since physical attractiveness is an integral aspect of self-display, and it is more important for women to evoke positive evaluations than it is for men,^{39,40} women might feel the need to disclose their appearance in detail. However, a major limitation of the content analysis is that the quality of the pictures—that is, whether the photo shows the user in an extraordinarily positive manner—was not coded. It is thus difficult to evaluate whether women tend to use idealized and extraordinarily beautiful portraits for self-display or whether they tend to present a realistic impression. Considering that men are more likely to use edited profile photographs than are women in this study, one can guess that the latter is true. Combining these two results, it may be assumed that women selected portrait photographs which show them in a realistic manner. This assumption is in line with previous research by Hancock et al.,⁴¹ showing that the magnitude of deception on online profiles is rather small. On the other hand, men's use of edited profile pictures may be attributed to a desire to express their affinity toward and expertise with technology (e.g., using Photoshop).

All in all, we identified specific gender-related usage patterns of SNS. We argue that women reveal a more hedonistic use—that is, they concentrate on entertainment and self-presentation—while men focus on the pragmatic functions of SNS. They perceive the aspect of searching for friends as much more important than women do, whose primary goal is a creative and elaborated fashioning of online self-presentation. Naturally, our findings have certain restrictions, such as a rather small sample size and the focus on StudiVZ as a national

TABLE 5. ORIGINAL/EDITED PROFILE PHOTOGRAPH AND GENDER ($N=106$)

Categories	Gender		Total
	Women	Men	
Original profile photograph			
Observed	43	34	77
Expected	37.8	39.2	77.0
Residuals	0.9	-0.8	
Edited profile photograph			
Observed	9	20	29
Expected	14.2	14.8	29.0
Residuals	-1.4	1.4	
Total			
Observed	52	54	106
Expected	52.0	54.0	106.0

SNS with a strong focus on university students. Given that most of the users are enrolled at universities, their usage patterns might differ from users of other SNS such as MySpace or Facebook with much broader audiences. Also, the relatively low reliability values are certainly a limitation. On the other hand, while the extraction of a relatively high number of factors is a good approach for the explorative style of our study, small numbers of items in each factor may have caused these low alpha values. However, it provides a number of interesting insights for further research, regarding the analysis of the gender gap 2.0 and its implications for communication and self-presentation on the social web.

Disclosure Statement

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