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Inconsistency of Online Self-presentation across SNS Platforms and Its Impact on Impression Formation

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to explore the use of multiple SNS platforms and determine whether the number of used platforms affects one's online self-presentations across the said platforms and if there is any difference in one's online and offline self-presentations based on how many SNS platforms are used. This work studied online self-presentations, compared the on/offline ones and tried to find out if the inconsistencies of one's own (observer's) self-presentations both online (across platforms) and on/offline affected the observer's impression formation (likability, trustworthiness and hypocrisy) of others. The study also aimed to find out if the impression of the others' inconsistency both online and offline would differ based on the level of intimacy between the observer and the discussant. Three levels of intimacy were studied in order to do this: friends, acquaintances and strangers (online-only friends). The results showed that the more platforms people used the more inconsistent their online self-presentations got. Even though the results of the study showed barely significant relationship between the number of SNS accounts and one's online and offline self-presentation, and partial connection between observer's inconsistent self-presentations and impression formation of others, interestingly enough, the results managed to find significant differences between the impressions based on the level of intimacy between the observer and the discussants.

Keywords: self-presentation, social media, impression formation, inconsistency, social network services, intimacy

1. Introduction

In present day and age lots of relationships, personal or professional originate and are supported more often online than offline. Even our closest friends prefer sending us personal messages through Internet rather than seeing each other in person or calling on the phone. The variety of social networks allows us to maintain our own image, control the development of our interpersonal relationships and partner's impression formation by carefully monitoring and selecting the amount and the contents of the information we share or disclose online.

Internet-based communication tools also provide new opportunities for self-presentation, especially via social networking sites which allow users to strategically create custom profile pages. Online SNS users can post information about themselves by means of different communication tools, starting with simple text that will report their personal information, update status, and write comments on friend's profile pages, to sharing a significant amount of photographs (Rui, Stefanone, 2012)[1].

Researchers in the field of computer-mediated communication have long been trying to find out how interpersonal impressions form among computer users.

There have been many works on online self-presentation, self-disclosure, impression formation and impression management etc., and most of them one way or another come to the subject of consistency and inconsistency of one's internet profile and real life self-presentation. For example Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimmons (2002) looked closely at the expression of 'true' self in one's online and offline self-presentations because as the authors suggest, the Internet unlike face-to-face communication possesses the ability to facilitate self-expression and encourage the expression of 'true' self, due to the lack of situational context, lack of non-verbal cues that present in face-to-face interaction, and most importantly its anonymity [2]. The study found that the 'true' self was more accessible on the internet than during face-to-face interactions. The authors concluded that people felt that it was easier for them to express their 'true' qualities through the Internet which as Bargh et al. suggested was mostly due to the ability of the Internet to facilitate self-presentation [2].

At the same time Walther et al. (2011) studied the phenomenon of 'identity shift' through the perspective of Hyperpersonal model of computer mediated communication [3]. This model helps to understand various transformations in relational interactions in online environment. It describes the specifics of computer based communication and its attributions such as anonymity, asynchronism, lack of non-verbal etc. and how they enable users to present themselves selectively, and how these controlled self-presentations become the matter by which online partners come to know one another. The research looks closely at the effects of feedback as one of the components of the Hyperpersonal model, which 'reinforces and extends idealized perceptions of partners in CMC' (p.5). Walther et.al found that online feedback is associated with changes in one's self-perception and self-identity which leads to inconsistent online Self-presentation. They found that feedback from other people heightens the effect of selective self-presentation in bringing users' self-perception into line with their identity performance.

These findings suggest that the abilities of the internet to facilitate the way we express ourselves can both result in greater and easier exposure of one's true personality or might at the same time create inconsistencies between one's online and offline personality, cause false self-presentation and exposure of intentionally misleading information (DeAndrea, Walther 2011) [4].

The current study aims to look closely at self-presentation across different media platforms. According to the E-business ranking (www.ebizma.com) there are at least fifteen popular global social networking sites where people can connect with each other by creating their own profile page and managing their presentation as well as personal relationships online thus creating more space and opportunities for self-presentation [5]. What this particular study is concerned with is whether there are significant differences in one's online self-presentation from one platform to another. As mentioned before there are various communication tools for presenting oneself in cyberspace such as text, comments, images, videos etc. and there are also various platforms accenting just one or several of these tools. So the current research will concentrate on the following objectives: 1) see if the use of multiple SNS platforms will create significant inconsistencies between one's online self-presentations; 2) see if online self-presentation across various platforms will be significantly

different from one's offline presentations and behaviors; 3) find out if the inconsistent self-presentation both across platforms and on/offline will affect the impression formed about the presenter.

2. Research questions and hypotheses

Previous studies concentrated on the inconsistencies of one's online and offline self-presentations and on their effect on impression formation and the observers' perception of the actor or presenter of the information. There have also been a number of studies comparing self-presentation between two different platforms, for example Facebook and LinkedIn, or Facebook and Twitter, proving that depending on the features of the platform there might be differences in online self-portrayals. Van Dijck(2013) who analyzed the use of Facebook and LinkedIn based on the site features, for example, presented the idea of multiple online identities [6]. He found that Facebook is particularly focused on facilitating personal self-presentation, which means to manage the impression between friends and acquaintances whereas LinkedIn's interface caters towards the need for professional self-promotion. Thus the results of his study propose that there might be significant inconsistencies between one's online self-presentations depending on the platform. There is Facebook which requires one's real name and personal information and then there are other sites, like Twitter or Tumblr with a totally different level of anonymity which creates the ground for enhancing one's self in order to communicate information to different audiences. Qiu et al. also agreed that perceptions made on Twitter and Face, for instance, are different due to the differences of platforms and thus different tactics and strategies for self-presentation (2011) [7]. Based on these findings this study wants to look closer at the users of multiple SNS platforms and see if their online self-presentations will be different according to the number of social platforms that they use.

RQ1: How does the use of multiple SNS platforms affect the consistency of self-presentation across these platforms?

As the results of previous studies show, unlike face-to-face presentations online ones can be enhanced and altered in order to present more favorable characteristics of self. They are broadcast in more of a one-to-many than one-to-one fashion. When different viewers of someone's Facebook self-presentation have varying impressions and knowledge of the person depicted, a strong likelihood emerges for self-presentations to be viewed differently [4]. At the same time, studies suggest that the information about the same person can be presented differently depending on the social media platform and its features, thus creating room for inconsistencies between the same person's online identities [6], [7]. In this case we would like to look closely at the users of multiple SNS platforms and answer the following question:

RQ2: How does the use of multiple SNS platforms affect the consistency of self-presentation online and offline?

As a result of different perception of one's online presentations by different people, what may be simple acts of impression management for the benefit of some viewers may be construed as embellishments, distortions, or dishonesties when viewed by others [4]. As the results of this study suggest, inconsistencies of online and offline self-presentations may be viewed as misleading, untrustworthy and hypocrite based on how well the observer and presenter know each other. For example, they found that acquaintances are more likely to make negative judgments based on inconsistency that close friends [4]. Since this paper is concentrated on the use of multiple SNS platforms and self-presentation, we would like to address the topic of impression

formation in a slightly different way.

RQ3: How does the inconsistency of the observer's Self-presentation influence impression formation of others' inconsistent self-presentations (likability, trustworthiness and perceived hypocrisy)?

RQ4: How does the inconsistency of the observer's online/offline Self-presentation influence impression formation of others' inconsistent self-presentations (likability, trustworthiness and perceived hypocrisy?

The current study concentrates on the role of inconsistencies between one's online self-presentations as well as online/offline self-presentations on impression formation in terms of likability, trustworthiness and perceived hypocrisy. However as previous studies suggest [4], [7], it is necessary to take into consideration the moderating role of the relationship between the presenter and the observer as it eventually affects the impression formation. Friends tend to search for explanations of their friends' presentation inconsistencies, whereas acquaintances feel more reluctant about justifying someone else's behavior and form less favorable impressions and judgments [4]. Based on these findings the current study suggests exploring the moderating effect of presenter-observer relationships further and proposes the level of intimacy as the moderating variable. In case with online presentations there are not just acquaintances and friends that form one's online social network, there are also strangers at the so-called zero-acquaintance level [7]. The three can differently judge the inconsistent online presentations across multiple platforms, however only two of them can judge the inconsistencies between online and offline presentations. Unlike the past research, this study will divide the level of intimacy into 1) strangers 2) acquaintances and 3) close friends to try and achieve more accurate results on impression formation.

RQ5: How does the effect of the observer's own inconsistent self-presentations on impression formation (on likability, trustworthiness and perceived hypocrisy) differ depending on the level of intimacy between presenter and observer?

3. Research method

According to the conditions and the aim of the current study a paper survey was conducted among 312 Russian social media users residing both in Korea and in Russia (final 303 responses were selected for the analysis). Undergraduate and graduate students from National Research University Higher School of Economics and Moscow State Pedagogical University filled in the questionnaires under the professor's supervision. The age range of the participants was from 17 to 26 years old, average age being 21.6 years old, gender wise 62% of the participants were female (N = 190) and 37%   were male (N=113). Only 21 people among the participants were university students from Russia residing in Korea, the remaining 282 (the majority) were all Russian nationals residing in Moscow.

In order to measure others' impression formation, the respondents were asked to act as observers and recall their impression of the inconsistency of self-presentations of the people they knew. The impression formation was measured in terms of online inconsistency and inconsistency between online and offline self-presentations on three scales: hypocrisy, trustworthiness and likability. Measures were taken based on the level of intimacy between the observer (respondent) and the discussant. For this study three levels of intimacy were set: friends, acquaintances and strangers (online friends that they never met offline).

4. Results

To test RQ1 and RQ2 accordingly, independent sample t-tests were conducted (<Table 1>). The results reveal that significant relationship between the number of SNS accounts and the inconsistency of online self-presentation across platforms (p=.026). Also, the test showed significant relationship between variables (p=.025) but opposite the stated prediction, which means that respondents with bigger number of SNS platforms on the contrary showed self-presentation online that was more consistent with their offline personality.

Table 1. Inconsistency of online only and on/offline self-presentations (t-test)

Dependent variable	Independent variable	Group	N	Mean	Std. Error	t
Inconsistency of online self-presentations	N of SNS platforms	"Less"	160	3.3344	. 15679	-2.240
		"More"	143	3.7727	.10981	
Inconsistency of online and offline self-presentations		"Less"	160	3.4375	.17436	2,219
		"More"	143	2.9371	.13724	

To test RQ3 and RQ4, ordinary linear regression analyses were performed(<Table 2>). The results however, showed no significant relationship between observer's own inconsistency of online self-presentations and perceived hypocrisy, trustworthiness, and likability. However, as for hypocrisy, number of friends, number of social platforms and observer's inconsistency of online and offline self-presentations were significantly connected with the impression formation of friends. For trustworthiness, key predictors were number of SNS friends, time of use, and frequency of SNS updates. In terms of likability, number of SNS friends, frequency of updates and one's own inconsistency of on/offline showed significant relationships with the dependent variable.

For acquaintances, the regression analysis also showed significant relationship between observer's own inconsistency and likability (p=.015), however none significances with perceived hypocrisy and trustworthiness. This result means the more inconsistent the observer's online self-presentations are, the more likely they are to perceive the inconsistent online self-presentations of their acquaintances as less likable. Also, the results showed significant predictors of impressions such as number of SNS platforms for hypocrisy; number of SNS, frequency of updates, number of SNS friends, time of use and one's own inconsistency between online and offline self-presentations for likability(<Table 2>).

Lastly, for strangers, one's own inconsistent on/offline self-presentations were related to impression of formation of strangers, as well as the frequency of SNS updates. For trustworthiness, the significant predictor turned out to be the number of friends, and for likability, it was the frequency of updates and time of use(<Table 2>).

Table 2. Multiple Regressions predicting hypocrisy, trustworthiness, likability (N=303)

	hypocrisy			trustworthiness			likability		
	friends	acquaints	strangers	friends	acquaints	strangers	friends	acquaints	strangers
Age	.075 (.077)	-.059 (.042)	-.017 (.045)	.087* (.036)	.122*** (.037)	-.003 (.043)	-.022 (.050)	.048 (.049)	-.015 (.039)
Gender	.087 (.089)	.047 (.193)	.073 (.211)	.022 (.024)	.074 (.172)	.394+ (.200)	.051 (.231)	.102+ (.226)	-.568+ (.183)

N of SNS friends	-.762** (.264)	.003 (.097)	-.114+ (.106)	-.697** (.235)	-.070 (.254)	-.686* (.288)	-1.038*** (.322)	-.990** (.320)	-.015 (.270)
N of SNS	.260** (.085)	.378*** (.097)	.005 (.311)	.009 (.056)	.172* (.086)	-.092 (.100)	-.078 (.116)	-1.214*** (.330)	.074 (.092)
Time of use	-.114+ (.256)	.044 (.228)	.009 (.248)	.499* (.199)	.103 (.203)	.386 (.235)	-.038 (.271)	.743** (.270)	.581** (.215)
Frequency of update	.006 (.049)	.084 (.190)	.585** (.206)	.711*** (.165)	.584*** (.168)	.292 (.196)	.665** (.235)	-.043 (.222)	-.497** (.178)
Inconsistency of on & off self presentations	.095* (.046)	.059 (.050)	.145** (.052)	.010 (.059)	-.049 (.044)	-.118* (.051)	.330*** (.059)	.223*** (.057)	.056 (.047)
Inconsistency of online self presentations	-.001 (.046)	-.018 (.055)	.033 (.060)	-.049 (.048)	.057 (.049)	-.040 (.057)	.105+ (.040)	.153* (.062)	.010 (.052)
R-squared	.160	.190	.154	.249	.248	.163	.258	.217	.143

Note. Coefficients in the table are non-standardized betas with standard error in parentheses.
*** p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05, +p<.10

For RQ5, the current study compared the impressions of others' inconsistent self-presentations to see if the level of intimacy between the observer and the observant (discussant) affected the perception and influenced impressions formation. To compare the results for online impressions across three groups: friends, acquaintances and strangers, we conducted two-way ANOVA analysis. The result showed significant relationships between the variables in terms of hypocrisy (p=.000), trustworthiness (p=.000) and likability (p=.000), meaning that the inconsistencies of online self-presentations are perceived more hypocritical, less trustworthy and less likable as the level of intimacy decreases(<Table 3>).

Table 3. Impression formation online (ANOVA test)

Dependent variable	Independent variable	M(SD)	SS	df	MS	F	p
Hypocrisy	Friends	2.017 (1.542)	137.807	2	2.725	25.288	.000
	Acquaintances	2.646 (1.645)					
	Strangers	2.952 (1.756)					
Trustworthiness	Friends	1.852 (1.485)	105.094	2	2.422	21.693	.000
	Acquaintances	2.201 (1.523)					
	Strangers	2.682 (1.655)					
Likability	Friends	3.723 (2.038)	37.088	2	3.430	5.406	.005
	Acquaintances	3.593 (1.945)					
	Strangers	3.245 (1.533)					

In order to see if the effect of inconsistent online and offline self-presentation on the impression formation of others' inconsistent on/offline self-presentations will be stronger for acquaintances than friends, independent sample t-tests were conducted(<Table 4>). The results showed marginal significance between the variables in terms of likability (p=.060), and significant relationships between variables in terms of hypocrisy (p=.047) and trustworthiness (p=.000). This implicates that the effect on the impression formation was stronger for friends rather than acquaintances (inconsistent online and offline self-presentations of friends were

perceived as more hypocritical and less trustworthy).

Table 4. Impression formation online and offline (t-test)

Dependent variable	Independent variable	N	Mean	Std. Error	t
Hypocrisy	Friends	303	3.1273	.06668	1.995
	Acquaintances	303	2.8919	.09734	
Trustworthiness	Friends	303	2.0396	.09284	-3.650
	Acquaintances	303	2.5160	.09175	
Likability	Friends	303	3.3727	.11657	-1.884
	Acquaintances	303	3.6778	.11240	

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to find out if the number of SNS platforms people use will be associated with the inconsistency of their online self-presentations across these platforms and inconsistencies in presentations online and offline. Based on the theory of the observer-actor basis, the research also aimed to find out whether one's own inconsistent online self-presentations will affect the impression formation of others' inconsistent self-presentations. Lastly, the research was trying find out if the impression of the others' inconsistency both online and offline would differ based on the level of intimacy between the observer and the discussant.

First of all, it was indeed correct that the more platforms people used the more inconsistent their online self-presentations got across the said platforms. However, the results of the study didn't show significant relationship between the number of SNS accounts and one's online and offline self-presentations. The current study also revealed partial connection between observer's inconsistent self-presentations and impression formation of others. The results showed that one's own inconsistent self-presentations had a negative effect on likability of acquaintances and strangers, and trustworthiness of their online friends.

In addition, as shown in <Table 2>, even though the independent variables reported only partially significant results, some of the additional variables were associated with dependent variables. The number of online friends of the observer was negatively associated with impression formation of close friends on all three scales, assuming the smaller the number of online friends was, the more the observer perceived inconsistent online self-presentations as hypocritical (B= -.762), less trustworthy (B= -.697) and less likeable (B= -1.038). Same results were reported for strangers in terms of trustworthiness (B= -.686) while for acquaintances the number of friends showed no significant connections. In case of online and offline inconsistencies, the number of friends was negatively associated with all three scales in perception of friends (B= -.536, -.656, -.769), and likability scale for acquaintances (B = -1.143). The number of SNS platforms was positively associated with perceived hypocrisy of friends' (B= .260), meaning the more platforms the observer used the more they considered their friends' self-presentations across platform hypocritical. For acquaintances, the number of SNS platforms was also positively associated with hypocrisy and trustworthiness (B= .378, .172) and negatively associated with likability assuming that the smaller number of platforms was, the more the inconsistencies of acquaintances were perceived as less likable (B=-1.214). For online and offline inconsistencies, the number of SNS platforms also showed positive correlation with hypocrisy and trustworthiness scales when assessing the

inconsistencies of acquaintances. (B= .309, .446). Interestingly, time of use and frequency of update of one's own SNS platforms also showed significant relationships with impressions of others' inconsistent self-presentations across platforms, online and offline.

Lastly, one of the interesting findings of the current study is that both of the independent variables in some cases showed influence on the dependent variable in a different directions from the stated prediction. The inconsistency of own online and offline presentations, for instance, had significant effect on online impressions of friends in terms of hypocrisy and likability (B= .095; .330) meaning that the more inconsistent one's own online and offline self-presentations were, the less trustworthy and more hypocritical were the perceptions of their friend's online inconsistencies. The same way inconsistency of one's online self-presentations had significant effect on the perception of online and offline inconsistencies, as for example in case of friends likability (B= .126) where more inconsistent online self-presentations of the observer made them perceive inconsistent online and offline presentations of friends as less likeable.

The current research also managed to find significant differences between the impressions based on the level of intimacy between the observer and the discussants, showing that the inconsistencies of online self-presentations are perceived more hypocritical, less trustworthy and less likable as the level of intimacy decreases.

Nonetheless, due to the complexity of the current study, there are some unsatisfactory points that require more detailed research in the future as well as some limitations. First, since we employed network-based dyadic discussant relationship measures (which could gather specific and precise information on individuals' dyadic discussants depending on three different level of intimacy separately), the length of the survey inevitably might have had a negative impact on the quality of the responses, seeing as it required a lot of time and concentration. Different research design would be advisable for the future studies of the same complexity.

The results also only partially supported the assumptions regarding the influence of one's own inconsistent self-presentations on the impression formation of others. This might be explained by various circumstances, such as the complexity of the questionnaire, individual traits of the research group (students, Russians) or the specific traits of SNS use in Russia (taking in consideration the restrictions on the use of specific internet platforms, censorship etc.). This point might also require deeper and more detailed research in the future as within the past few years internet usage in Russia underwent drastic changes with some of the worldwide platforms being censored, and some of the domestic SNS platforms being exposed to data leakage thus decreasing the number of users or causing loss of interest in the network overall (Moscow Times, 2018) [8].

Lastly, even though the relationships between observer's inconsistency of self-presentations and the impression formation were mostly insignificant, the study still managed to determine some key factors that might affect the impression formation and created the base for future research in this area; as well as was able to show significant connections regarding the differences in impression formation based on the level of intimacy between the observer and the observant through the example of 'friends', 'acquaintances' and 'strangers', which can also create the basis for further research on that matter in media psychology.

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