

Professional Personal Branding:

Using a “Think-Aloud” Protocol to Investigate How Recruiters Judge LinkedIn Profile Pictures

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Abstract. This study builds on previous work on personal branding [1, 2] and is one of the first to qualitatively explore how and why *actual recruiters* make certain decisions in selecting a candidate on LinkedIn. In this study, recruiters reviewed seven different LinkedIn pictures of a job candidate applying for a fictitious entry-level Marketing Consultant Job, while using a think-aloud method. Each picture displayed the candidate in a different way, making certain cues more salient (e.g. smiling, casual holiday shot, avoiding eye gaze). The results of this study indicated that especially the cues of smiling and eye-contact (looking in the camera) appear to have a positive influence on the perception of perceived credibility. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: Personal branding · Strategic social media · Impression management · Recruitment · Think-aloud method · Credibility · Job interview success · LinkedIn

1 Introduction

Recruiters are increasingly screening potential applicants via Social Network Sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and LinkedIn, before deciding to invite them to a job interview [3]. In an “ideal” world, recruiters should base their selection decisions on objective assessment of information provided by the candidate (e.g. cv, cover letter). However, in practice, identically skilled candidates may not be invited to an interview due to stereotyped interpretation of information available on their physical appearance [4]. Although recruiters ought to look beyond these cues and base their hiring decisions on all work-related information available, in reality, these practices do take place. When screening SNSs, particularly profile pictures receive the most attention [5]. Moreover, the few visual cues displayed in these pictures (e.g. attire) are often magnified and stereotyped [6].

So how can job applicants combat these perceptions and make the most of their online self-presentation? Compared to face-to-face communication, an online setting offers individuals more control over their self-presentation allowing them to strategically

“plan” impressions [7]. This act of “personal branding” is increasingly emerging among individuals and is defined as “the process by which individuals attempt to control the impressions others form of them” [8, p. 34]. In our previous work, we manipulated LinkedIn pictures with glasses and beards and investigated how this influenced the generation of “positive” stereotypes related to Ohanian’s perceived credibility [1, 2].

This study is one of the first to qualitatively explore how actual *recruiters* make decisions in selecting candidates. Hereby this study goes beyond previous, more quantitative approaches (e.g. experiments) that predominately relied on student and the general public samples to investigate perceived credibility of job candidates [1, 2, 9]. The aim of this study is to gain more insight into how certain visual cues in pictures of potential candidates influence the decision-making process of recruiters. Therefore, the following research question is formulated: *“How does a LinkedIn profile picture contribute to the perceived credibility of a job applicant on the likelihood to obtain a job interview?”*

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 LinkedIn as a Tool for Screening and Selection

Since its introduction in 2003, LinkedIn has grown into the world’s largest professional network with more than 345 million users as of 2015 [10]. LinkedIn strives to connect professionals worldwide to increase the success of both job seekers and recruiters [10]. This is facilitated by the setup of the platform. As a social networking site, LinkedIn allows job seekers to create a public profile, present themselves as professionals, share personal information, work experiences, and relevant skills, and link up with other professionals, recruiters or organizations. Similarly, LinkedIn allows organizations, or recruiters working on behalf of these organizations, to create a public profile, to present themselves to job seekers, share employment opportunities, and link up with potential candidates [10, 11]. Thus, LinkedIn simultaneously functions as an online resume, professional network, and as a tool for screening and selection. Indeed, as much as 81 % of Inc. 500 companies use LinkedIn for talent acquisition [12].

When judging the credibility of an individual through a LinkedIn profile there is an inherent level of bias and subjectivity involved because it is completely user-generated [13]. Job applicants are increasingly becoming aware of the opportunities of LinkedIn as a screening and selection tool by future employers [3]. As personal profiles shape first impressions, applicants may spend time and energy in creating a profile that is likely to leave a positive impression. In doing so, individuals engage in impression management [14] also known as self-presentation: “the process by which individuals attempt to control the impressions others form of them” [8]. Candidates have control over their self-presentation given the allowance of user-generated content in SNSs such as LinkedIn. Thus, impressions can be strategically manipulated to present oneself as more competent, likeable, and trustworthy [7].

Research shows that a profile picture is one of the most important tools that people use for visual impression management in CMC contexts [15, 16]. The value of a profile picture lies not only in its ability to display physical appearance, but also in its ability

to (rightly or wrongly) display a person's personality. Appearance, facial expression, and attire may signal qualities that are supportive of an individual's proclaimed set of skills and on his/her profile [5, 15]. Considering that a job applicant intends to 'sell' his or her qualities to a future employer in order to successfully obtain a job interview, a profile picture may be manipulated in various ways. For example, wearing spectacles in order to look more intelligent [2].

Despite their potential for manipulation, recruiters are relying on LinkedIn for screening and selection, as user profiles are believed to be a valid and truthful source of information [17], even more so than a résumé, application form or cover letter. Unlike the latter forms of communication, a LinkedIn profile is accessible to anyone with whom the profile owner is connected. These connections (e.g., current or former colleagues and employers) can verify or contradict provided information [18]. Recruiters infer that, due to the risk of being contradicted by others, job applications are more likely to share truthful information.

2.2 Visual Cues as Input for Credibility Assessments

The primary concern of recruitment professionals is to assess whether a candidate is qualified for the job. Thus when evaluating person's profile for job fit, recruiters should base their selection decisions on a careful and rational analysis of all job-related information available. However, research on the selection process of recruiters in face-to-face settings, shows that impressions are not only based on job-related information but also on the simple cues, such as those captured by non-verbal communication (e.g., facial expressions, voice intonation), that are unrelated to qualifications of the candidate [19]. Constraints in time and cognitive capacity may induce recruiters to rely no more cues than necessary to form an impression. These cues provide mental shortcuts that ease the cognitive load of making a decision, as described by the Elaboration Likelihood Model [20] and the Heuristic-Systematic Model [21].

Thus, recruiters may base first impressions on very minimal cues of information [22–24]. This is not different in CMC settings. According to Social Information Process theory (SIP) [25] individuals form impressions of each other, regardless of the medium being used. As CMC contexts are devoid of non-verbal cues that accompany face-to-face communication, people tend to look for other cues to shape impressions [6]. Given the absence of non-verbal communication, people rely more heavily on whatever cues remain available, such as those captured by a person's profile photo.

LinkedIn allows candidates to upload a photo, which is typically not present in traditional means of initial employee evaluations, such as the résumé. Research shows that people rely on the visual appearance of a person's face to form impressions. For example, one's facial expressions and attire reveal information about a person's qualities, such as attractiveness, trustworthiness and competence that can be less quickly obtained from textual information. Perceptions based on facial information are shaped as quickly as 39 ms [26]. This is facilitated by a specific area of the brain that is involved in the processing of visual information, in particular faces [27].

Thus, facial signals play a crucial role in how people infer meaning to personality traits [28], especially in a context that is devoid of other visual cues such a non-verbal

communication. This is confirmed by the study of Chiang and Suen [19], who showed that recruitment professionals use visual cues (heuristics) from the online profiles of job applicants and that these cues are likely to evoke positive responses amongst the recruitment professionals if the source is believed to be credible. Additionally they add that these cues may be more important than job related information such as prior work experience or education.

According to a recent study by Edwards et al., [29] the presence of picture/no picture) affect credibility perceptions, i.e., a set of perceptions that a receiver holds of a source, including its perceived competence, trustworthiness and attractiveness. Results indicated that users who post a profile picture along with their LinkedIn profile are perceived as more attractive and more competent than users who do not post a picture. Although these studies confirm that visual cues of LinkedIn profiles shape impressions, there is a dearth of research on the question whether visual cues directly affect perceptions of credibility, and if so in what way [30]. This is surprising, as credible subjects are more persuasive than non-credible subjects [31]. In the context of recruitment selection it is therefore likely that perceived credibility results in a higher likelihood of obtaining a job interview. Therefore, this study aims to examine whether visual cues have any influence on the decision-making *process* of recruitment professionals. A more detailed discussion will follow in the methodology section.

3 Method

3.1 Sample

In total, 11 recruitment professionals were interviewed with an average age of 29.2 (ranging from 22 to 41 years old), of which 73 % were female. Only recruitment professional were selected that spend at least 20 h a week in recruiting potential job candidates, over a period of at least 1 year, working at an organisation that has a 1000 employees or more. All recruitment professionals were familiar with using LinkedIn as a recruitment tool. Recruitment professionals were chosen as the sample of this study, to increase the external validity of this study since a major part of recruitment professionals' daily job consists of "selecting online job candidate selection" within a limited time frame. Although the sample size of this study was relatively small [32], it was sufficient as information saturation was achieved in these interviews.

3.2 Research Design

This study took on a qualitative approach and used a think-aloud protocol in combination with photo-elicitation. The think-aloud method is a technique where the respondent is asked to vocalize thoughts and reactions while evaluating information (e.g. photos) in real-time [33]. Think-aloud was previously predominately used in usability testing of products and websites [e.g. 34], as it is a relatively cheap and fast way to gather feedback from users [35]. Advantages of this approach are that it enables the researcher to ask follow-up questions to specify and clarify certain motivations [36]. This way, a more rich and in-depth contextual understanding of recruiters' decision-making process is

obtained, which is particularly important as the exploration of decision-processes is rather complex. To a certain extent, the think-aloud method minimizes the possibility of socially desirable answers, since the respondent is requested to express all thoughts verbally in real-time [33].

Photo-Elicitation Material. Seven different pictures of a potential job candidate applying for a fictitious entry-level Marketing Consultant Job were shown to recruiters. Each picture displayed the potential candidate in a different way, making certain cues more salient, namely: (1) smiling, (2) formal attire (3) black and white picture (4) casual holiday shot (5) avoiding eye gaze (6) neutral face and (7) avoiding eye contact, but smiling. The rationale for these selection of these specific cues, is as follows:

First, the smiling picture was chosen because previous research has demonstrated that a smile is a positive emotion that may enhance a person's attractiveness and approachability [37]. Second, formal attire was chosen because several studies demonstrated that a more masculine outfit such as business suit leads to job interview success [38]. However, blogs state that to dress for success, you should match the industry's culture, as in a more creative industry such as advertising, more casual attire may be more effective than formal attire [39]. Third, the black and white pictures were chosen because they are associated with aesthetic photography, and set an intellectual, scientific tone [40]. However, other studies have demonstrated that black-and-white photography creates a distance between the depicted individual and the perceiver, and displays the individual less realistic due to the lack of colour [41]. Four, the casual holiday shot was chosen because this is considered as a faux pas for the professional SNS LinkedIn according to popular press [e.g. 42], but has not yet been empirically tested. Five, avoiding eye gaze was chosen as a picture because many LinkedIn profiles use this composition assuming it may be a "dreamy", aesthetical appealing picture. However, eye gaze is an important indicator of trust [43]. Therefore, it's important to further investigate the impact of this cue. Six, a neutral face was chosen because some people believe that on LinkedIn this signifies "seriousness". However, research has demonstrated that people perceive a non-smiling person (neutral expression) as someone who is in the possession of less positive traits in comparison to a smiling person [44]. Finally, avoiding eye contact but smiling was chosen because the results on this combination have been mixed [cf. 45]. Together, all of these visual cues can be used to explore perceived credibility by looking at the elements of attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise.

In order to create a realistic setting, the manipulated photos were presented to the recruitment professionals as a profile picture placed in a real screenshot of a LinkedIn profile page. Any additional information that may contain cues (e.g. number of contacts) was blurred. The model in this study was 27-year old male. This age indicates that the job candidate is a recent graduate or starter with little to no working experience [46]. The same model was used in every profile picture, to avoid unwanted interaction effects (Fig. 1).

Moreover, it requires a certain level of grooming, yet it is not fully dependant on the physical appearance of the model. The job vacancy was based on several existing descriptions of starter positions for marketing consultant, and resonated the three



Fig. 1. Pictures for photo-elicitation (NB: All pictures were of identical size. The numbers displayed on the pictures here are for clarity purposes; they were not present on the actual photos).

different sub dimensions of Ohanian’s perceived credibility [47]. First, the attractiveness aspect is conveyed by mentioning that the ideal candidate is a team player that possesses excellent communication skills and dynamic, strong presentation skills. Second, expertise aspect corresponds to the requirement for a Master’s degree, excellent project management, presentation and analytical skills. Third, although trust is not explicitly stated in the job description, it is implicitly required in order to form mutually beneficial relationships, such as those encountered in a typical working environment. In terms of format, the job-description showed similarities with our previous work [see 1, 2].

3.3 Procedure

All interviews were recorded and transcribed in order to assure replication of the data-analysis process. The interview started by stressing confidentiality and that information was only to be used for research purposes. As the researcher was the “measurement-instrument”, she took care to remain an open, non-judgemental, objective approach, and to stimulate the respondent to talk freely and comfortably.

First, the recruiter was offered the fictitious job vacancy. After allowing sufficient time (2–3 min) the researcher determined if the job vacancy was clearly understood to

ensure full understanding and to prevent any language barriers. Hereafter, an introduction was given stating that the recruitment professional was looking to hire a new marketing consultant and had the access to online profiles of job applicants. The recruiters were asked to ‘think-aloud’ on their cognitive processes when judging the pictures of the shown candidates. To prevent any bias, the visualisations were shown in a set order as demonstrated in this article. After the last visualisation had been shown the respondent was asked to turn around all the visualisations and to rank them from high (1) to low (7) in respectively attractiveness, trust, expertise and likelihood to invite the job applicant. The reason for this ranking was to explore whether the recruiters had a specific preference for one visualisation over the other. In order to guarantee a systematic analysis of the data, the six steps of thematic data analysis from Braun and Clarke [48] were used. After the interviews were transcribed and familiarized, interesting passages or quotes were highlighted to identify data segments. However it is important to note here that during this process there was no selection yet of importance or relevance, as this does not correspond with an open approach [49]. In phase 3 and 4 [48], the data segments were organized in thematic maps and sorted per visual cue. Each visual cue was analysed thoroughly on how the recruiters perceived the job applicant, conforming to the three components of Ohanian’s [47] perceived credibility: attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise. Additionally, the results of the rankings of the visualisations altogether, on the three components of Ohanian [47], were taken into account and analysed. Eventually in phase 5 and phase 6, a final analysis of the visual cues was conducted and repeated patterns of meaning were uncovered.

3.4 Operationalization

To enhance validity and reliability during the interview process [49], a set script of interview questions was followed.

Questions for the interview on perceived credibility were adapted to a qualitative open approach based on the theory of Ohanian [48]. If, how and why the subject was perceived as credible was examined by questioning the respondent on three areas: attractiveness, trustworthiness and expertise. Example questions were:

- What is your first impression of this person?
- What are the qualities of this person?
- Does this person fit the job description?

4 Results

For the first picture (the smile), the data demonstrates that there is a clear tendency to be perceived as a socially skilled, ambitious, trustworthy and professional candidate. This is for instance displayed in the following remark by a recruiter: *“He looks open, very positive and has a smile. I also think his communication skills are very good and those are the most important requirements for this function.”* Another recruiter mentioned: *“He looks confident due to his posture and open appearance.”* For the second picture, for formal attire, the results were somewhat mixed. Some recruiters were

positive and indicated the candidate looked more experienced. However, three recruiters expressed that the formal attire could also be used by the applicant as a tool for a more fortunate presentation in order to hide his insecurity or lack of work experience. This was indicated by a 26 year old recruiter: *“He looks very serious and arrogant and that gives me the feeling that he is maybe trying too hard, so he is pretending he is someone he’s not and is actually very insecure.”* For the third picture (black and white) the data demonstrates that a black and white picture does not hinder, nor help a person’s appearance on LinkedIn. This is illustrated by the following comment: *“Well my preference would go to a photo with colour because that looks more natural and attracts more attention than a black & white photo. However overall, I think this is a good profile shot and it looks professional”*. For the fourth picture (the holiday picture), the data obtained from the interviews demonstrates that a slight majority of the recruiters was still likely to invite the candidate. However, they would have preferred a more representative photo. For the fifth picture (avoiding eye gaze), the results demonstrate that the visual cue of eye-contact has a noticeable influence on the perception of recruiters. A majority of recruiters said that they couldn’t gauge this person’s personality because they don’t feel a connection. Moreover, they perceive this person is less trustworthy due to the avoidance of eye contact, which is illustrated by the following remark of a recruiter: *“I always want to look someone in the eye. For me that’s an important indicator if someone is trustworthy or not.”* For the sixth picture (neutral face) recruiters are not very positive, but also certainly not negative. Some recruiters noted that it was so difficult to “read” this job applicant, and others found him a bit boring. Finally, for the seventh picture (avoiding eye contact, but smiling) the smile had a positive influence on the overall perception, however, the avoidance of eye-contact remained a disturbing factor for trust perceptions. Recruiters perceived this job applicant as more distant and to himself. However, as for expertise, all the recruiters perceived this applicant as an expert as they perceived the “staring in infinity”-expression as someone who is an intellectual thinker that clearly sets his goals.

5 Discussion

The results indicated that especially the cues of smiling and eye-contact (looking in the camera) appear to have a positive influence on the perception of perceived credibility. For the other cues the results were rather mixed. For example, the recruiters that indicated that formal attire was preferred also worked in more “formal” organisations, while other recruiters worked in more informal settings.

The contribution of this study is that it demonstrates that even recruitment professionals process information in a similar vein as other “human beings”, and they may also be led by heuristics. This finding adds to the discussion on the validity of studies on perceived credibility of which the sample were not recruitment professionals. However, further research on the investigated cues is necessary in a more controlled, experimental setting and with larger samples in order to draw more definite conclusion.

This study also has practical implications. Based on the insights obtained in this study, job applicants (particularly in the field of marketing) are advised to smile and

make eye-contact on their profile picture, as these seem to be universal cues that positively influence perception of credibility. Regarding wearing formal or informal attire, the job applicant is advised to adapt their dress code to the specific type of organisational culture. As in today's world one is the CEO of ones own brand, the likelihood to successfully obtain a job interview is just a few visual cues away.

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