'It all kind of symbolises something doesn't it?' How students present their career image online

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It has become common to share images of yourself online. There is evidence that employers are using these images as part of selection decisions. This article presents a research project which explored these issues with current undergraduates. It found that students had a clear understanding of what a professional online career image would look like, but that this was not reflected in the images that they shared. However, students were careful and considered in the images that they did share; they just did not want employers looking at them. For careers professionals this situation presents an ethical challenge as to how far we want to curb students' online identities to ensure their employability.

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Introduction

We can share all sorts of information about ourselves online. Many people have enthusiastically embraced this opportunity leaving a substantial digital footprint which includes images. The images of us that are available online are not simple representations of our physical appearance. Each image that we share contains clues about who we are, what we do and what we might be like. Goffman (1959) developed the concept of 'impression management' to describe the way in which people seek to utilise their appearance to influence others to view them favourably. Hooley & Yates (2015) have explored this with specific attention to career development and argued that a strong 'career image' can offer individuals advantages in their career. However, the failure to recognise that career is a context within which our online images might be

consumed can create problems for individuals. Careers professionals might respond to this by warning clients and students of the potential dangers and seeking to improve their digital footprint. But, careers professionals should also be careful about turning themselves into 'image police' and seeking to channel individuals' online sharing of images into a limited (and dull) set of work-related 'personal branding' (Buchannan, 2017).

Digital footprints

Undergraduate students use social technologies extensively (Piela *et al.*, 2014). The research that has been conducted on what they disclose online has typically looked at risky behaviour, for example using social media to reveal your current location (Chang and Chen, 2014), alcohol use (Shah, Alfonso and Jolani, 2015) and smoking (van Hoof, Bekkers and van Vuuren, 2014). Chang and Chen (2014) argue that students' decisions about self-disclosure are not usually based on a rational consideration of costs and benefits but are rather influenced by the habitus of their peer community. In other words 'if everyone else is doing it, it must be OK'.

This kind of self-disclosure has some implications for students' careers. Woodley and Silvestri (2014) and El Ouirdi *et al.* (2015) have both explored this, noting that there are issues that result from students' ability to effectively broadcast information about themselves through social media and employers' willingness to use this information to inform recruitment and employment decisions. Conversely others have highlighted how the careful and purposeful creation of an online personal brand can bring career benefits (Labrecque, Markos and Milne, 2011). Hooley (2012)

has argued that individuals can develop, and be encouraged to develop, the skills which enable them to use the Internet effectively for their careers, including thinking about how they represent themselves online and how they manage this representation over time.

For employers this kind of self-disclosure on social media also poses questions about how information about candidates' wider lives should be used to inform employment decisions (Madia, 2011). There is evidence that the use of social media in recruitment is becoming increasingly popular (Roth *et al.*, 2016), but it is less clear how employers are using information that they gather from online surveillance. Research suggests that online evidence of alcohol consumption, nudity and provocative pictures impact negatively on an individual's overall employability (Betances *et al.*, 2012). However, there is also debate as to whether the use of online information of this type is useful, reliable, relevant and ethical for recruiters (Davison *et al.*, 2012) with some research suggesting that it accentuates gender and racial biases (Van Iddekinge *et al.*, 2016). More critical voices have also urged caution in encouraging individuals to regulate their online self-presentation for fear of what a future employer might think (Buchannan, 2017). There is a danger that such self-regulation limits individuals' freedom of speech, creativity, sexuality, identity and wellbeing in the service of conforming with social norms.

The Graduate Selfie project

To explore issues of social media use, image sharing and the intersection with career we developed a research project with undergraduate students from a single midlands university to explore this. We recruited nine participants for the study (described here as Students A-I) and talked to them in a semi-structured interview about what photographs were available about them online.

We used the methodology of photo elicitation in the interviews (Harper, 2002). Photo elicitation involves using photographs in an interview situation to stimulate discussion. The combination of language and image culminates in a clearer understanding of the participant's ideas. This is ideal for a project about image sharing as it allows participants to demonstrate visually what they mean when they use descriptive language and generic terms such as 'smart' or 'well-dressed'. During the interview, we asked the participant to enter their name into an Internet search engine. This generally produced several photographs of the participant. After discussing these photographs, we then asked the participant to show us a number of their social media profile pictures. The interviewer asked questions about these photographs and asked participants to identify which of the photographs discussed was the most professional, and why.

We transcribed the interviews verbatim, including copies of the photographs that the participants discussed. We then produced codes from the transcripts manually; we read through the transcripts and highlighted key words or themes that occurred frequently. The process of coding the data helped us to organise the information and assisted us to develop an analysis of the data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). We used the respondent's own phraseology as the basis for the codes assigned (MacQueen, McLellan, Kay and Milstein, 1998).

Being 'professional'

When participants were asked to talk about how they wanted to present themselves for employers they talked about the importance of portraying a 'professional' persona. Participants had specific ideas about what professionalism meant, how a professional person would look and how to convey a professional image in a photograph. Participant H saw appearing professional as a simple process: 'You want to look professional and you want to look neat and tidy, make sure your hair's washed. Just basic things like that, you don't want to look scruffy'. Looking professional involved being clean and presentable and was also generally connected to sombre colours and Western business dress.

Participants' discussions of professional appearance and how this should be performed through the medium of a photograph were consistent. However, as we will go on to argue, this clear understanding about professionalism did not necessarily influence their online behaviour. They generally describe a professional photograph as one which contained the following elements.

Articles

'It all kind of symbolises something, doesn't it?' How students present...

- headshot. 'I don't think they need to see your whole body, I just think they need to see your head.' (Participant H);

- smile. 'It's important to smile.' (Participant A);

- looking directly at the camera. 'Looking straight on, to be direct and give that (professional) impression.' (Participant C); and

- smart dress and grooming. This included the importance of 'neat hair' (you should have 'hair out of your face' – Participant B). Male participants highlighted that it is important to wear a business suit.

Participants had some concerns about what this kind of professional career image meant for them. Participant H talks about this professional image as a 'barrier' which you can erect to keep employers from finding out who you are. Participant A sums this up, 'It's probably best to be as simple or kind of non-descript as possible.' The idea of being 'non-descript' implies that one does not posit anything that can be described; one is a blank canvas. Participant B explains why this kind of 'non-descript' approach to presenting yourself online is the best strategy. 'I think you should be as plain and simple as possible. You don't know what the other person is looking at. You don't know what they think about things so there's no point in you putting any signifiers in there that you think are good but they will think are bad.' Participant G was also aware that photographs could be viewed in different ways: 'It all kind of symbolises something doesn't it? In a world where one thing can stand in for plenty of other things, you've got to be careful.' Participants assumed that an employer would interpret their picture either positively or negatively and therefore sought to present as little information as possible.

A 'non-descript' image was seen as necessary because the participants did not know what an employer would *want* to see and also because there was a perceived tension between being professional, or employable, and being yourself. Therefore, the recommendation was to remove all evidence of identity that the participant would usually present online. Participant C demonstrates this when asked to talk about a photo that he had identified as professional. 'There's nothing here that could be misinterpreted, that could

conceivably give a wrong impression.' Participant D similarly described an image by saying 'I don't think it's damaging or an incriminating image, it's just my face.' Whilst participants were concerned with averting failure, they mainly did not talk about how to present themselves positively to employers in their online profiles.

Some participants felt uncomfortable about suppressing their identities to appeal to employers. Participant H argued that 'you need to show that there's a person behind that'. While Participant F was keen to find an employment context that allowed her to be herself: 'I'd rather be with a company that was open about self-expression'. This concern by students about the need to compromise their identity as they move into work has been noted in other research (Cutts, Hooley & Yates, 2015) and the discussion of online images crystallised this issue for the participants. Uncertainty about what was wanted made them feel that they should scrub their online identity of signifiers. Ideally, though, they would like an employment context that did not require them to do this.

What images are being shared?

Participants revealed that they were currently using social media as a means of constructing and performing various facets of their identity. Butler (1988) argues that our identities are not fixed but are rather dynamic and performed. Goffman (1959) also discusses the various roles adopted by individuals in different areas of life in terms of performances and notes that a set of unspoken rules, of the kind that our participants were able to articulate about 'professionalism', governs the various 'parts' played in different situations.

Social media websites are a stage on which individuals perform their identities (Van Dijck, 2013). People use social media to highlight and develop different elements of their persona according to the image they wish to present. Previous research demonstrates that students consciously present a certain image of themselves on social media (Peluchette & Karl, 2009) and that this image is aimed at their peers rather than at employers (Dash & Schmidt, 2015).

The online personas of our participants included the fun-loving party-goer, the committed partner, the musician, the good friend, and the socialite, with these images often being combined. The predominant types of photographs that our participants shared with us were the:

- night out;
- selfie;
- participant with friends; and
- participant with their partner.

Many of the participants' photographs were taken on a night out. Their concern was to create an impression of themselves as 'fun'. Participants B, D and I had chosen photographs taken on a night out whilst wearing fancy dress as their profile pictures. Participant B said that this shows that she is a 'partygoer', Participant D said that she 'looks fun' in the photograph and Participant I said he looks 'happy'. In Participant B's photograph, she is dressed up for Halloween as a vampire; her make-up is very heavy and she is pouting at the camera. She is with two more girls in the photograph, who are kissing her on each cheek; the girls are also dressed up for Halloween. This photograph is developing the 'partygoer' image in various ways; the participant is in fancy dress, demonstrating her willingness to get involved and do something different; she is also with friends, showing that she is sociable and popular. Student D also discusses various photographs taken either before or during a night in town. In one photograph, she is wearing a sombrero. The photograph is clearly taken late at night, and the participant is smiling whilst pulling at each side of the hat. The pose deliberately draws attention to the sombrero, showing that this was a different and exciting night.

The students also shared selfies with the interviewer. A selfie was seen as an ideal vehicle for Goffman's (1959) 'impression management'. Through a selfie participants could manipulate how they appeared. One of Participant C's selfies was used with the aim of promoting himself as a musician. In the photograph, he is alone, and has headphones around his neck, and a guitar in the background. His expression is serious, or, as he put it 'I look deep in thought.' The participant consciously used the photograph to convey specific personality traits as part of his identity as a musician.

Participant F shared a lot of selfies with the interviewer. These were generally taken with her friends and provided her with a way of cataloguing her friendships. She felt that the selfies she took with her friends showed that she was 'laid back but social' and it 'just looks like I'm with friends having a good time.' Several of the photographs were taken with the same person, and the participant saw this as a demonstration of her loyalty in friendship: 'It shows I've got constant friends; because both pictures have been with the same person it shows that I can hold down a relationship or friendship.'

Student H also saw her photographs on social media as a way of indicating her sociable side, and demonstrating friendships. Her photographs with friends were both selfies and photographs taken by someone outside of the shot. One of these photographs is of her alongside two friends just after doing a charity run to raise money for cancer research. They are stood in front of the 'Race for Life' advertisement board, which bears the slogan 'Cancer, we're coming to get you.' The participant said that this 'shows that I'm happy. I might be totally knackered but I'm happy especially in front of that banner as well.' She highlighted that this photograph had multiple connotations: she is with friends, and therefore it demonstrates that she is sociable and likeable. It has further signification: she is showing via a number of visual signifiers that she is a caring individual as well as a willing volunteer.

Several participants used their social media sites as a way of demonstrating their commitment to their partner. Other than her image as a 'partygoer', Participant B's photographs were largely of her and her husband. She talked about a photograph of them on their wedding day that she had used as her profile picture. She chose this photograph 'because I love my husband and I like to have him in my photo.' Three of the four photographs that Participant I talked about were of him with his girlfriend; he has his arm around her in all of these photographs. He describes the meaning that is conveyed in these images as follows 'It says that this is me, this is me on my nights out, and this is the person that I'm with, here we are. I feel like it just says I'm a nice guy who has a significant other.' He also said 'I feel it might be important to (his girlfriend) that I'm not alone in the picture'.

Articles

'It all kind of symbolises something, doesn't it?' How students present…

Participants were using photos both to demonstrate and build their identity and also as a part of the building and maintenance of relationships and social ties. The way that participants described these images suggested that, in many cases, they were carefully and thoughtfully managing the presentation of their online identity. However, the sharing of images was part of a conversation that they were engaging in with their peers and one to which employers were not invited.

Tensions between different identities

Participants were using social media to express their identity to their peer group, but were generally not concerned with performing a professional identity for future employers. They found it difficult to choose a photograph that they viewed as professional and when asked to think about which image they would show to an employer they generally chose one which was the least representative of their identity. Participant A demonstrated this as she chose a photograph as professional because 'It doesn't give any clues' as to her personality.

One way that participants managed the tension between how they would like employers to perceive them and how they were presenting themselves online was to view employer surveillance as something that might happen in the future. Participants felt that they would have to compromise their identity and be professional when they moved towards work rather than feeling a need to compromise it while they were students. Clearly employers may not respect these boundaries in the way that students anticipate.

Participant I felt that it was 'silly' for employers to use social media images to select employees, but had been struggling to get a job and was wondering whether it was to do with his social media profile. Similarly, Participant F also felt that it should be possible to maintain multiple identities for different areas of life, saying 'when you're in a work place you've got a very different face on to wherever else you are'.

Participants felt that their social media profiles, and their non-professional identities, were not the business of employers. Participant B asked, rhetorically, 'really who's your Facebook for, is it for them (employers) or is it for you?' Participants were very concerned with

keeping their Facebook profiles separate from their working lives. Several participants felt that what they put on Facebook was 'private', as Participant G said 'Profiles such as Facebook are private so you can't see them anyway'. However, the belief that something should be 'private' was not always linked to an active strategy to ensure that it is kept private e.g. careful use of Facebook privacy settings.

Participants often articulated contradictory and/or naïve positions. They assumed that they understood what employers wanted, but made little effort to deliver this. This is largely because they perceive themselves to be operating in what Shirky (2008) calls 'small worlds' and have internalised the rules and the frame of reference of these small worlds into their habitus. The participants understand themselves to be operating in the small world of the university and operate without actively thinking about these rules or considering that other people might be accessing the content that they are producing. They have either no, or very limited, experience of employers entering their university online world and surveying them. Consequently, there is an assumption that concerns about 'professional' online presentation can wait until the point at which they enter the world of work.

Conclusions: The gap between theory and practice

The students who participated in this study were careful and considered users of social media. They understood the tools and used them consciously to perform their identity within the small world of the university. Participants had internalised the rules of the environment that they were in and this led them all to present remarkably similar images on social media. Through the genres of the night out; the selfie; the photo with friends; and the photo with a partner, the participants were able to create and communicate an identity to those around them. This online identity creation was designed to emphasise a range of different attributes and attitudes: fun, sexy, friendly, loyal, caring, family orientated and so on. It was not created with the idea of looking 'professional' and indeed the idea of professional identity was frequently viewed as antithetical to their sense of self and the identities that they had created as students.

Although students were not performing a professional identity this was not because they were unaware of what such an identity might look like nor was it because they believed that they were unable to perform such an identity. Rather the professional identity was seen as neither relevant to the context that they were in nor desirable. It is a coat that they are willing to don when the time comes despite some concerns about how well it might fit.

For careers professionals this raises some concerns. If employers are surveying students' online identity as part of recruitment, selection and management processes, the attitudes of our participants should be viewed as potentially risky. In this case careers professionals may wish to develop interventions to encourage students to develop their understanding of employer surveillance and adapt their behaviour in response to it. Social media extends the boundaries of employment and potentially requires individuals to behave as if they are at work at all times. The most straightforward response to this changing situation is for careers professionals to encourage individuals to develop their digital career literacy (Hooley, 2012) or digital career management skills and to closely regulate and self-censure their online self-presentation. However, there are also ethical concerns about the careers profession acting as the herald of a new world of employer surveillance. The participants in this study were uncomfortable in the thought of the employer gaze being directed at them and concerned that it would limit and constrain their identity. Young (1990) has described these kinds of constraints on identity as 'cultural imperialism' where ruling class culture becomes the 'referent' and the 'norm' against which all other cultures are (negatively) judged. Given this, careers professionals run the risk of damaging or limiting individuals' identity in the attempt to transform them into employable workers. Hooley & Sultana (2016) argue that if career guidance is going to take a social justice stance it needs to challenge this kind of cultural imperialism by supporting individuals to build a critique of such oppressions and develop both individual and collective strategies to challenge them. For example this may include campaigning collectively against employer surveillance of social media as well as individually responding to it by curating your online self-presentation.

Careers work helps individuals to navigate an unequal and imperfect world. The growth of online image sharing and the employer surveillance of it is yet another dimension of this imperfect world through which we need to plot a careful path. The opportunity to do good by raising issues about online career image needs to be balanced with the potential dangers of limiting individuals' online identities in ways that diminish their lives. Given this there is a strong case for careers professionals to view their role as one of educating students about the way in which power is exercised through social media and recruitment processes and empowering them to consider a range of responses rather than simply warning against posting certain images and advocating for the self-censorship of identity.

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Articles