Playing with masks
Fragmentation and continuity in the presentation of self in an occupational online forum

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Abstract

Purpose – To investigate the presentation of self of participants in occupational online forums.

Design/methodology/approach – Interpretation of more than 300 profiles of participants to a banking-related occupational online forum based on Goffman’s seminal analysis of presentation of self and on the literature on mystification and fragmentation in virtual environments.

Findings – Contributors to the occupational online forum adopted one of several main categories of profiles. These categories differed in the degree of detail with which profiles were filled and showed that forum users chose a certain degree of mystification or de-mystification for their profile. The presentation of self in the online occupational forum was related to the presentation in offline environments, such as in the workplace as well as to other online contexts, such as in electronic chats. The categories of profiles were also associated with strikingly different registration dates and number of posts per year and per contributor.

Research limitations/implications – The research analyzed only the profiles of contributors to the online forum, but not their motivations or posts.

Practical implications – Employees and employers should hone their ability to present online information about themselves and to interpret the virtual image(s) others present.

Originality/value – This paper covers: grounded categorization of adopted fronts in occupational online forums; conceptualization of the presentation of self in online environments as related to the participation of multiple online and offline social contexts; identification of simultaneous processes of fragmentation and continuity at play in online forums through their participants’ presentation of self.

Keywords Electronic media, Online operations, Internet, Individual psychology

Paper type Research paper

The [online] persona thing intrigues me. It’s a chance for all of us who aren’t actors to play [with] masks. And think about the masks we wear every day (Multi User Domain (MUD) participant in Turkle, 1995, p. 257).

Introduction
A total of 26 percent of hiring managers admitted that they had already used the internet in order to research job applicants; among those, more than half acknowledged they did not hire the candidate on the basis of what they found online, according to a
study by CareerBuilder (2006). This trend suggests that Management has taken note of
the ubiquity of internet use and of employees’ postings in various web sites. More and
more people participate in various virtual (i.e. electronically-mediated) environments,
either to play video games, discuss hobbies or news-related topics, find support for
difficult offline situations, or ask, find, and exchange information related to their job
(Cummings et al., 2002; Finholt et al., 2002; Galagher et al., 1998; Kling and Courtright,
2003).

People leave traces from their participation in these online environments, traces that
may be searched by potential employers. Yet, the image projected through
participation in online environments may be quite different from the one that would
be projected offline such as in the workplace. The mediation of information technology
(1T) provides greater freedom from the constraints of direct interactions, physical
appearance, and disabilities (Castells, 1998; Hiltz and Turoff, 1978; Hinds and Kiesler,
1995; Sproull and Kiesler, 1991; Turkle, 1995). The internet is full of anecdotes of people
who created an online persona that fooled others (Walther, 1996). The stories of “Jack”
who, in 1982, presented himself as “Joan”, a disabled woman on Compuserve (Stone,
1995; Van Gelder, 1996; Whitley, 1997) or, almost 25 years later, of “Lonelygirl15” on
YouTube[1] are well-known examples of people who manipulated their self in a virtual
environment.

Given the increasing managerial interest on employees’ online selves and the
inherent ability of people who participate in virtual environments to play with their
online image, some startups promise to protect and polish the professionalism of their
clients’ online profiles[2]. In such a “bluffing game” context, it becomes of paramount
importance to investigate how people present themselves in virtual, but work-related
environments. In particular, in occupational online forums, in order to be able to ask
and answer job-related questions, participants usually have to fill a form that provides
their online profile. This online profile is accessible to the other participants and, very
often, to the audience of the forum as well. This research examines the presentation of
self in online occupational forums through the investigation of the online profiles of
more than 300 participants in a specific forum.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. It first presents Goffman’s (1959)
notion of presentation of self and explores how the presentation of self is affected by
the specificities of virtual environments. Then, the methods section introduces the
grounded interpretation of online profiles of participants to the “BankerNet” forum[3],
an online forum dedicated to banking issues. The discussion section interprets how the
profiles expressed various ways of building a virtual self. It also analyzes how these
virtual selves may be related to offline situations. In particular, it shows how the
evolution over time of new profiles hinted at socially accepted characteristics in the
workplace and at how different categories of profiles took advantage of the electronic
medium. The conclusion section summarizes the research and puts forward its main
conceptual and practical implications.

Presenting oneself in a virtual environment
Goffman and the encounters of everyday life

Goffman was fascinated by the micro-sociological encounters that constitute social life.
In particular, he developed a dramaturgical perspective in which people involved in
interactions give performances that aim at producing a certain impression on the
audience (Goffman, 1959). Performances and impressions are partly shaped by the social environment and by the audience’s interpretation. An important dimension of the performance is its “front”, that is, “that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (Goffman, 1959, p. 22). Fronts are constituted by the “setting” of the performance and by the “personal front” of the performer. The setting corresponds to the scenic layout of the interactions (e.g. the classroom in an educational context). The setting shapes actual interactions and performers’ presentation of self. This research focuses solely on the items of sign-equipment that performers have a certain degree of control over, i.e. on the “personal front” of the presentation of self. In this regard, Goffman explored the relations between individual performances and social identity, and he contended that some fronts became prevalent and socially accepted by the audience and the performers.

The presentation of self in virtual environments
Goffman’s seminal analysis solely concerned situations in which people are “in one another’s immediate physical presence” (Goffman, 1959, p. 15), which does not fare well with a virtual environment. Interestingly, however, Goffman (1983, p. 2) noted:

Social interaction can be identified narrowly as that which uniquely transpires in social situations, that is, environments in which two or more individuals are physically in one another’s presence. (Presumably, the telephone and the mails provide reduced versions of the primordial real thing).

Virtual environments, in which interactions take place electronically, may also be viewed as other “reduced versions” of the “primordial real thing” with specific characteristics that affect the front that people can adopt. In this regard, electronic media arguably provide more limited opportunities than face-to-face contexts to present a sophisticated front, since people cannot rely on the rich palette of cues conveyed by co-presence (Donath, 1998; Walther, 1996). The (personal) front that participants in virtual environments adopt is therefore much more limited that the front adopted in non-mediated situations. In non-mediated environments, the items of sign-equipment that people can rely on to present their front include clothing, gesture, body language, etc. through which they convey subtle messages onto their audience.

Mystification and fragmentation in virtual environments
Yet, the electronic mediation also allows for a greater “mystification” in Goffman’s terms, that is, for a greater distance between how people who present themselves and the audience, keeping the audience “at awe”. The audience’s lack of access to the offline backstage of the performance creates such potential for greater mystification. Participants in virtual environments can therefore easily hide aspects of their offline persona they do not want known by others, while emphasizing other aspects they deem presentable. Such presentation of new selves online is apparently freed from the constraints of the offline world. It can disinhibit from offline constraints (Meyrowitz, 1985; Donath, 1998; Suler, 2004). Turkle (1995), in particular, showed how MUD users present multiple fronts simultaneously in various virtual environments. This idea of decoupling between the online self (or selves) from offline situations led some authors to argue that new technologies allow for the emergence of fragmented and “postmodern” selves through which, in online environments, people present diverse
fronts that are potentially disconnected from each other and from the offline world (Poster, 1995; Stone, 1995; Turkle, 1995; Waskul and Douglass, 1997).

Other authors have amended this view of fragmented selves and fronts emerging from the use of new technologies. They argue that identities have always been multiple and co-constructed in social situations through interactions (Berger and Luckmann, 1996; Wynn and Katz, 1997). They consider that the presentation of self in virtual environments is not necessarily freed from social constraints and that social norms affect how people present themselves through electronic media (Lamb and Poster, 2003; Wynn and Katz, 1997). Moreover, the “Panopticon” effect of new technologies can limit people’s privacy, making it difficult if not impossible to hide “backstage” (Spears and Lea, 1994).

This question of multiple, fragmented fronts freed (or not) from social constraints should be especially significant in electronically mediated but work-related environments. The presentation of self in the workplace is constrained by norms that are more or less stringent depending on the industry and the organization, but that, usually, employees must follow for the sake of their career (Baron, 1986; Goffman, 1959; Wayne and Liden, 1995). Engaging in virtual venues may offer occasions to break free from the rigidity of norms in the workplace, hence potentially leading to disinhibited presentations of selves. At the same time, as mentioned in introduction, Management has started to check candidates’ online profiles when hiring new employees.

It is therefore important to examine how people who participate in virtual but work-related environments present themselves. Yet, so far, the literature on the presentation of self in electronically mediated contexts has not explored such semi-professional environments. It has considered virtual gaming (Turkle, 1995), online dating (Ellison et al., 2006), personal or organizational web pages (Miller, 1995; Winter et al., 2003), but not the way people who belong to the same occupation present themselves in electronically-mediated contexts. This research aims at contributing to fill this gap in the literature by studying the presentation of self of participants in an occupational online forum.

Methods
Research setting: BankerNet forum
An online forum dedicated to issues of interest to bankers constitutes the setting of this research. The forum’s discussions were publicly available from the BankerNet web site, a web site dedicated to professional banking issues that includes news, legal information, training opportunities, blogs, and a forum.

This research analyzes profiles filled by registered users of the BankerNet forum. Overall, there are more than 12,000 registered users (Fall, 2006). Registration is free and open to anyone. Non-registered users can browse threads but not participate in discussions. Registered users (henceforward called users or participants interchangeably) can browse, ask, and answer any question on any thread of the BankerNet forum (about 20 threads in Fall 2006, dedicated to issues ranging from compliance to state specific issues and from chat to security or human resources). Figure 1 gives a sense of the growth of the forum in terms of number of registered users.
Users’ profiles consist of various items: user id (only mandatory field), e-mail, member number (automatically attributed depending on when the user registered), homepage, occupation, hobbies, location, birthday, bio, date of registration. The BankerNet web site also automatically gives users’ a title (according to the number of posts), and publishes their total posts. Figure 2 provides an example of such a profile.

Data collection and analysis
Data collection took place in two stages, in January-February 2006 and in August-September 2006. During the first stage, I collected a sample of profiles from
three threads: the “Ask a banker” thread, in which non-bankers ask questions about any issue they may have with banking (e.g.: “What is a good credit score?”); the “Compliance” thread in which discussions deal with compliance, a central issue for bankers (e.g. “How to document a lending application when the applicant is doing a joint application with another institution?”); and the “Chat” thread, in which participants freely discuss non-banking related issues (e.g. dating troubles). The profiles of 50 participants from each of these threads were randomly selected. Due to cross-listings, the first sample contained 129 users.

These 129 profiles were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The descriptive quantitative analysis (e.g. number of items in the profile filled by participants) gave a sense of how different participants in the forum filled out their profile, and helped initiate comparisons among profiles. In particular, the distribution of number and types of categories of filled fields as well as the registration date were analyzed. The qualitative analysis helped interpret the individual profiles and identify patterns in presentation of self in the profiles. It relied on well-established qualitative approaches for data reduction and analysis (Feldman, 1995; Miles and Huberman, 1984) including the Straussian version of grounded theorizing (Boudreau and Robey, 2005; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) that allows for a continuous dialog between previously established conceptualizations and inductive observations. In particular, I developed a thematic coding of different items of the profile (e.g. user id, hobbies) that followed the guidelines of grounded theorizing (open, axial, selective coding of profiles).

The results of this quantitative and qualitative data analysis were put together to establish a categorization of profiles. Four categories emerged and were labeled as four types of characters in a play, in a way that followed Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical analogy:

1. “protagonists” (main characters in a play);
2. “deuteragonists” (secondary characters);
3. “tritagonists” (minor characters); and
4. “fools” (Beaty et al., 1998; Flickinger, 1911).

The categorization aimed at making sense of the variety of profiles while possibly identifying similar ways of presenting oneself in the BankerNet forum. Forum contributors were assigned to different categories by following a principle of internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity (Kluge, 2000). The attributes concerned the main categories of the profile (i.e. user id, picture, e-mail, occupation, hobbies, bio) and emerged from the thematic coding.

In order to test the reliability of the grounded categorization beyond the three aforementioned threads, a second sample of 180 profiles of contributors was randomly selected from all threads (ten profiles per thread). These additional profiles were analyzed and categorized. Results were highly comparable, especially in terms of proportion of users in each of the four categories. To test the reliability of the typology, a second, independent, coder double coded all profiles of the two samples (total: 309 users). The inter-coder agreement rate for the two combined samples was of 88.6 percent and deemed acceptable.

Consistent with Goffman’s symbolic interactionist perspective (Chaput Waksler, 1989), the epistemological stance of this research is interpretive and assumes that:
our knowledge of reality is gained only through social constructions such as a language, consciousness, shared meanings, documents, tools, and other artifacts (Klein and Myers, 1999, p. 69).

Because the interactions between the researcher and contributors to the forum were non-existent, the guidelines proposed by Klein and Myers (1999) for the conduct of field studies did not apply readily. However, I strove to respect Klein and Myers’ (1999) principles of hermeneutic interpretive research. In particular, the principle of contextualization was respected thanks to the inspiration of Lee’s (1994) joint investigation of individual e-mails and overall context. In the present research, individual profiles were constantly related to the overall sample and the forum to make sense of the differences and similarities among them, and to interpret the overall meanings of the profiles. In order to respect the principles of suspicion and multiple interpretations, I relied on double coding of the profiles. The principle of abstraction and generalization was respected by constantly confronting the empirical observations with existing conceptualizations as well as with questions within the literature, such as whether people present multiple, fragmented online selves freed from offline social constraints (Lamb and Poster, 2003; Turkle, 1995; Wynn and Katz, 1997). Finally, this research also strove to respect Allen et al.’s (2006) ethical rules regarding the collection of electronic secondary data; this research relied on manual (as opposed to automatic) data collection and the anonymity of the forum and its participants was respected through the pseudonym “BankerNet”.

Profiles of contributors to the BankerNet forum

The big picture

The user id was the only required field of the registration form. More than 70 percent of users from the samples (222/309) chose a user id that seemed to contrast with their offline name. The samples showed diversity in these ids, but a few patterns appeared. Among the main sources of inspiration of fantasy user ids were the banking world: (sometimes with a twist of humor:, e.g. “Blue Banker”, “Compliance 101”), hobbies (e.g. “Redsoxfan”, “Georgia Golfer”), pop culture (e.g. “Princess Leia”), and values or ideas (e.g. “Bliss”). Some user ids seemed to reflect the disinhibiting effect of virtuality noted by the literature (e.g. “Wacokid” or “Wild turkey”). Others seemed to reveal a desire to remain anonymous (e.g. “Random name”, or “barely there”). In contrast, 28 percent of users (87/309) chose user ids that seemed related to their regular name (e.g. “Don Narup”).

In addition to this required field, users could fill out any of nine fields: image, e-mail, name, birthday, homepage, occupation, hobbies, location, and bio. Users in the sample filled out some of the nine non-required fields (min = 0, max = 9, average = 3.10, standard deviation = 2.05). Table I presents the distribution of number of filled fields.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of filled fields</th>
<th>No. of profiles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 to 2</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 to 5</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 8</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Number of non-required categories filled in online profile
Among the profiles with few filled fields (0 to 2), the fields that were most often filled were the birthday, location, or the occupation. Among profiles with an average number of filled fields (3 to 5), the fields usually filled were: the birthday, picture, occupation, hobbies, location, and/or bio. The fields that were not usually filled were the e-mail, name, and homepage. Among the profiles with many filled fields (6 to 8), the categories that were least filled were the birthday and the picture. The categories that were the most filled were the ones related to the banking world (occupation, bio).

Regarding how the categories were filled, again, several patterns appeared. Among the users who filled out very few categories of the profiles, the categories that were filled were so with few words and with a high degree of generality (e.g. occupation: “banker” or “marketing dude”). Among the profiles with an average number of filled fields, there seemed to be two main groups of profiles in the samples. Most of these users filled out the categories with information that credibly seemed to come from their offline situation (e.g. occupation: “V.P. compliance”, or bio: “17 years of risk management experience in compliance and internal audit. CRCM and CFSA”). Occasionally, fields were filled with distance and humor (e.g. bio: “Being a good worker is 3 percent talent, 97 percent not being distracted by the internet”). In profiles where a large number of fields were filled, certain fields (in particular, the occupation and the bio) were filled in a very specific and detailed way (e.g. occupation: “CRA Officer & Community Relations Coordinator” or bio: “OCC Regulated $370 million in assets, Jack Henry Silverlake bank, ABA Compliance School Graduate, OBA Banking School Graduate”).

Specific fields
With regard to the fields of occupation and bio, 191 profiles of the samples provided the user’s occupation, 69 of them presented a bio, and 58 presented both their occupation and a bio.

Among the profiles that provided an occupation and/or a bio, despite varying degrees of detail, there was a relative homogeneity in what was presented in the profile. Occupation and bio often mentioned the job title currently and previously occupied, but not, save exceptions, the name of the company, even though no explicit rule forbade it in the BankerNet forum. In the same vein, profiles usually included technical and professional certifications but usually did not mention the degree or institution. The occupation field was also sometimes filled by contrast with other occupations (e.g. “NotALawyer”). Other profiles also expressed a certain distance vis-à-vis the banking world, very often through humor (e.g. occupation: “Slave, oh, I mean, loan assistant”, hobby: “anything non-banking”, or bio: “I did not want to grow up to be in compliance, I wanted to be a rock star”).

A total of 94 profiles mentioned hobbies. The hobbies fell into only a few categories: indoor activities (e.g. reading, scrap booking, cooking), outdoor ones (e.g. fishing, sailing, hiking), sports (e.g. golf, volleyball). The proper character of these hobbies was noteworthy. There was no mention of “TV”, “gambling”, “smoking”, “bar hoping”, or any non-socially sanctioned hobby. Golfing, on the other hand, appeared very often in the hobbies. In the same way, the family and, especially, the children or grandchildren, were often mentioned in the hobbies category (e.g. “reading/playing with my son” or “Playing with my step daughter. Isn’t being a parent the coolest thing?”). In the
BankerNet profiles, the frequent mention of kids among the hobbies reminded of the picture of the kids that one finds on people's desk.

Regarding pictures, few were the profiles that presented pictures that credibly looked like pictures of the "real" users (less than 20 in the samples). Most pictures were related to the user id, to a landscape (e.g. horses running), or pop culture (e.g. Tinkerbell, the matrix, superman logo). Many pictures were animated jpegs that presented little clips of action that usually bore no direct relationships with the banking occupation.

**A dramaturgical categorization**

Putting together the similarities and differences in users' profiles, four categories of profiles emerged. As noted supra, consistent with Goffman’s dramaturgical analogy, these four categories were named after typical characters in a play (Beaty et al., 1998; Flickinger, 1911):

1. the Protagonist (the leading character);
2. the Deuteragonist (a secondary character);
3. the Tritagonist (a minor character whose specific background the audience is not made aware of); and
4. the Fool (a character who uses humor to convey messages).

Figure 3 illustrates each of these profiles with examples from the samples, and Table II presents the number and percentage of profiles from the two samples in each category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example user profile:</th>
<th>Protagonist</th>
<th>Deuteragonist</th>
<th>Tritagonist</th>
<th>Fool</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Image</td>
<td>LenS</td>
<td>kvb</td>
<td>Marykaylady1</td>
<td>Murphysgirl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name / E-mail</td>
<td>Len Sunzio homepage provided</td>
<td>Not provided</td>
<td>Not provided</td>
<td>Not provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Bank consulting</td>
<td>Loan Auditor</td>
<td>Not provided</td>
<td>Everything</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birthday</td>
<td>Not provided</td>
<td>Oct. 21st</td>
<td>Not provided</td>
<td>Not provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Not provided</td>
<td>Kentucky</td>
<td>Not provided</td>
<td>Not provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hobbies</td>
<td>Golf and sailing</td>
<td>Not provided</td>
<td>Not provided</td>
<td>Professional clown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bio</td>
<td>CRA and HMDA consultant providing banks</td>
<td>Not provided</td>
<td>Not provided</td>
<td>I did not want to grow up to be in compliance, I wanted to be a rock star</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Figure 3. Examples of profiles from each category
The “Protagonist” category represents the category of profiles where most fields were filled and, most of all, where users seemed willing to provide information that could identify them in their “offline” world. In these profiles, users often adopted a user id that included their first and last name, and/or they provided their e-mail address or a link toward their web site. Also, this category contrasted with the other ones in the sample by providing a relatively high degree of detail for fields related to the banking occupation (e.g. occupation, bio).

In contrast, within the “Deuteragonist” category, fewer fields were filled. Also, the profiles did not include information that could identify users offline. Banking-related fields were not filled in such details, but some information about the occupation and/or the bio, location, and hobbies was usually provided.

The “Tritagonist” category grouped together the profiles in which very few fields were filled beyond the mandatory choice of user id. Profiles from this category provided very little information about the offline or even the online persona of users.

Finally, the few profiles from the “Fool” category had more filled fields than the “Tritagonist” one. The playfulness and multiplicity of jokes or humor spikes inside the fields characterized this category of profiles.

Substantial differences appeared with regard to the year of registration of users of different categories of profiles. Figure 4 presents the proportion of new profiles from each category by registration year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of profiles</th>
<th>Number in the samples</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Protagonists</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>17.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deuteragonists</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>45.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tritagonists</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>33.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fools</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II. Number and percentage of profiles in each category of the samples

Figure 4. Proportion of new profiles in the BankerNet forum per category and per year
The “Fool” category was unusual but relatively stable over time. After 2001, the “Deuteragonist” category became the most frequent category. In contrast, the “Protagonist” category was much more frequent among the users who registered during the first years of the BankerNet forum. It became steadily less adopted as users registered in later years. The “Tritagonist” category followed a reverse evolution. It was adopted on average by between a sixth and about a quarter of the users who registered until 2003. After 2003, though, the proportion of new users who adopted a Tritagonist profile increased dramatically and, since 2005, it has become the dominant category of adopted profiles among new users.

Table III reveals statistically significant differences in the median number of posts per user and per year among the four categories of profiles. In particular, the median number of messages posted by contributors who adopted “Deuteragonist” and “Tritagonist” profiles was less than half of the messages than contributors who adopted a “Protagonist” profile. Moreover, a qualitative exploration of the threads that sampled contributors participated in revealed that “Fool” users tended to participate mostly in the informal “chat” conversations, whereas participants from the “Protagonist”, “Deuteragonist”, and “Tritagonist” categories participated predominantly in banking-related threads.

Building fragmentation and continuity in an occupational online forum
The analysis suggests that BankerNet forum users “played” with the way they presented themselves. Their profiles can be interpreted as the “personal fronts” (in Goffman’s terminology) that they present in the virtual environment of the BankerNet forum. Users picked and chose various items for their profile, and those items were or were not directly related to their offline situations. They also took advantage of the disinhibiting effects of electronic media already noted by the literature (Donath, 1998; Suler, 2004; Walther, 1996). For instance, very few pictures of the profiles looked like actual pictures of participants in the forum, and most pictures had a theme (e.g. nature, pets, comic books heroes) that seemed foreign to the main purpose of the BankerNet forum, i.e. to discuss banking-related issues. BankerNet users thus took advantage of the greater freedom of the electronically mediated environment to choose a virtual front that was at least partly freed from the constraints of wearing a suit and a tie in the day-to-day job. Such apparent freedom could lead to assume that profiles were highly diverse in the BankerNet forum. Yet, the analysis of the profiles suggested that there was a limited diversity in these profiles. This limited diversity was summarized in the four categories of profiles. This section discusses the observations from the forum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Median number of posts/contributor/year *</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Protagonists</td>
<td>272.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deuteragonists</td>
<td>99.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tritagonists</td>
<td>41.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fools</td>
<td>179.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: *: p < 0.0001. Kruskall-Wallis test, $\chi^2=34.05$
profiles that reveal original insights onto the presentation of self in online and offline work-related environments.

**Continuity in online and offline environments**
Profiles usually referred to users’ participation to the banking world. In particular, the banking occupation was a frequent reference in user ids. The adoption of banking-related user ids expressed the common bond among participants in the forum. It also established users’ legitimacy in discussing job-related issues. Similarly, the frequent references to banking in participants’ profiles also established the forum as dedicated to banking-related issues. By making references to their occupation, participants also build the overall identity of the online environment.

Moreover, online profiles revealed some participants’ attitudes toward their occupation. This was especially visible in the frequent use of humor (in many profiles beyond the ones from the “fools” category), such as when the occupation field indicated: “Slave, oh, I mean, loan assistant”. Participants who introduced occasional job-related humor distanced their virtual front from their self-image as bankers (Dutton *et al.*, 1994; Van Maanen and Barley, 1984) while at the same time re-affirming their membership to the occupation.

Such play on their identity as bankers also revealed the absence of hermetic separation between the forum and offline work-related situations. Typical markers of the presentation of self in the workplace appeared frequently in profiles. In particular, among the most recurrent hobbies were the ones that convey higher social status in the workplace (e.g. golfing, sailing). The frequent occurrence of these hobbies shows that some social norms of presentation of self in the workplace find an expression in the presentation of self of another, virtual, environment. This observation echoes Wynn and Katz’s (1997, p. 298) point of “continuity” between online and embodied/offline behaviors. Profiles from the sample revealed a situation in which offline fronts help establish online ones. While the electronic mediation allows for greater freedom from the constraints of face-to-face workplace interactions, participants bridge their online and their offline work-related environments through references to socially accepted norms in the workplace. By doing so, they also establish the foundation for mutual understanding among participants, essential for interactions to take place.

Similarly, some profiles revealed a presentation of self in the BankerNet forum that was very similar to that of other online environments. In particular, profiles from the “Tritagonist” category reminded of the profiles of electronic chats, where users are characterized by their user id only. This observation suggests that the dominant front from an online environment may also inspire front adoption in other online environments. This finding is original because most of the research on the presentation of self in electronically mediated environments has so far considered one online context at a time (e.g. web pages, blogs, etc. see Papacharissi, 2002, 2006; Winter *et al.*, 2003). In contrast, this research reveals that the online fronts of various virtual environments may be related to each other. The adoption of fronts that share similar aspects helps people build continuity in their identities among potentially disconnected virtual environments. This may help them build continuity for themselves in these otherwise disconnected worlds.
Negotiating mystification and anonymity

The varying degree of mystification and, in a related way, of anonymity, adopted in the profiles also revealed different ways in which people establish their self in a virtual environment. So far, the literature has suggested that, because of electronic mediation, mystification is more firmly established in online environments than in offline ones (Donath, 1998). Profiles from the sample reveal contrasted insights with regard to the question of mystification in a virtual environment, especially when this environment is related to one's occupation.

On the one hand, the sample shows that a high degree of mystification can be achieved through two very different means. Adopting a blank profile, i.e. presenting no information about oneself, is one effective way to preserve anonymity and to create mystification regarding one's virtual front. Another way consists in presenting information whose character can be directly and easily interpreted by the audience as having little to do with the offline situation of the participant. Humor, as seen in profiles from the “Fool” category, for instance, appears as an effective way to generate such mystification. Moreover, humor also cultivates the common bond among members of the virtual community, as its understanding relies on a shared set of values, knowledge, and assumptions. This is especially evidenced in ironic references to the banking occupation in “Fool”’s profiles.

On the other hand, profiles from the “Protagonist” category provided extensive information about the user’s offline situation (e.g. full first and last name, e-mail, and web site). In a virtual environment in which mystification is easy to achieve, some participants “de-mystify” their profile, i.e. limit the distance between the front they present online and their offline situation, allowing the audience to reach them offline. Such “de-mystification” can build the credibility of the online persona and can make others trust them, which echoes Wynn and Katz’s (1997, p. 315) “tokens of authenticity”. In a virtual environment where anyone can pretend to be anything and anyone else, providing credible information about one's offline situation helps build a feeling of truthfulness with regard to the virtual persona.

Overall, these insights show that mystification is not a given of online environments, that it is not determined by the electronic mediation. Participants in online environments adopt varying degrees of mystification in their presentation of self. This finding is especially relevant for occupational online forums. Choosing a degree of mystification may be part of a trust- and reputation-building strategy, as contributors to knowledge management systems and occupational online forums often seek to improve their reputation as knowledgeable experts (Kankanhalli et al., 2005; McLure Wasko and Faraj, 2005; Vaast, 2004).

This point also leads to explore the relationship between the degree of mystification/anonymity adopted in the profile and the actual participation in the occupational online forum. As seen in Table III, the participants who had not made their profiles anonymous were also the ones who contributed the most heavily in the BankerNet forum. While the collected data did not provide any detail regarding the actual content of posted messages, this observation nevertheless corroborates the argument that de-mystification expresses involvement in an online environment as well as willingness to establish trust with the audience. Contributors who adopted a “Fool” profile also contributed heavily in terms of volume of messages, but a qualitative observation of the threads they participated in shows that they participated...
mostly to the informal “chats” and “water cooler” discussions, i.e. the threads that did not discuss directly banking-related issues.

These differences reveal a differentiated pattern of participation in the BankerNet forum. Studies have already shown that the majority of participants in online forums and communities are low contributors while a minority of participants makes up most of the contributions (Nielsen, 2006). This research adds to these existing insights by pointing at a consistency in the way participants present themselves and the way they participate. In the BankerNet forum, the heaviest contributors were also the ones who provided the most details in their profile. This finding makes sense given the semi-professional status of the occupational online forum. Contributors who take part in work-related discussions do not participate as freely as they would in other electronically mediated environments such as in virtual gaming. The most committed participants are most likely to both establish an image as a competent expert for themselves and to contribute heavily to discussions.

Dynamics of fragmentation and continuity
The evolution over time of new profiles in each category was also notable. So far, the literature on the presentation of self in electronically-mediated environments has relied on cross-sectional observations (e.g. Miller, 1995; Papacharissi, 2002; Winter et al., 2003). In this research, participants’ registration date gave a sense of the transformation over time of the adopted profiles. Such evidence is useful to deepen the understanding of the dynamics of participation in electronically mediated environments (Lamb and Poster, 2003; Sproull et al., 2007; Vaast, 2007). Figure 4 revealed a transformation over time of the dominant front among the new contributors.

The “Protagonist” category was adopted by the majority of early participants in the BankerNet forum. These early participants adopted profiles filled with many details and some identifying information. This pattern can be viewed as a sign of commitment to the forum and to its purpose of exchange of occupational experiences and information. Moreover, early participants are also likely to be committed to the forum and therefore willing to fill their online profile extensively.

Over time, in the BankerNet forum, new contributors adopted profiles that became increasingly anonymous. These contributors also participated relatively less in discussions than early contributors. At first, the new contributors still explicitly mentioned the banking occupation in their profile and, by doing so, articulated the bond that linked them to others in the forum. However, later contributors abandoned this mention to the occupation in favor of completely blank and anonymous profiles. As they did so, they signified a lesser commitment to the dynamics of the forum, but they also revealed an inspiration for their profile that came from the participation in other virtual environments (online chats).

Overall, these observations reveal that both dynamics of continuity and fragmentation are at play in the adoption of virtual profiles. Participants to virtual environments build their profiles in a way that establishes continuity for them between their online profile and other online and offline fronts. At the same time, the cumulative effects of new front adoption can also build increasing anonymity in the forum. The virtual environment can become more fragmented and characterized by differentiated patterns of presentation of self and contributions.
Conclusion

This research, which investigated how people present themselves in an occupational online forum, is not without limitations. In particular, it relied on data collected directly from an online forum and did not explore contributors’ motivations to adopt certain profiles. Moreover, this research only reported the profiles of actual contributors, i.e. of registered users who participated in discussions. Future research should contrast the profiles of contributors with that of lurkers who do not actively participate in threads. Finally, this research only investigated profiles from one occupational online forum dedicated to banking-related issues. No cross-industry statistical generalization of the results is therefore made. However, a conceptual generalization of the findings can be put forward (Lee and Baskerville, 2003).

In this regard, this research showed how social norms of presentation of self that are accepted in different offline (such as in the workplace) or online (such as in electronic chats) environments find an expression in another online environment. It also adds to the understanding of the connections among multiple selves in fragmented electronically mediated environments. Some of the items of sign-equipment that express professionalism and achievements in the workplace find an expression in electronic profiles. More generally, users build a continuity in their participation to various online and offline environments through their presentation of self as they adopt certain items of sign-equipment that carry over various environments. This research also holds implications for the understanding of the mystification that comes from the participation in electronically mediated environments. In particular, this research showed that, while electronic mediation generates mystification de facto, participants in online environments decide of the degree of (de-)mystification of their presentation of self. De-mystifying one’s profile is especially useful to build an impression of expertise and to encourage audience’s trust in one’s postings.

Overall, as social networking technologies become more popular and as generations who grew up using applications such as Facebook and MySpace enter the workplace, these related questions of mystification, anonymity, and trustworthiness will generate more delicate dilemmas for workers and their employers. People have become savvy at both controlling their online images and at identifying excessive mystification. Yet, the multiplicity of online sources feeds simultaneous and only apparently contradictory trends of increasing transparence (with its corollary of lack of privacy) and of information manipulation. Such situation will undoubtedly continue to disrupt the dynamics of trust- and expertise-building in the workplace and on the job market.

Notes
1. www.youtube.com/profile?user = lonelygirl15
2. Example of such startups is ReputationDefender.com, see www.wired.com/news/technology/0,72063-0.html
3. A pseudonym.

References


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