

**NANYANG
TECHNOLOGICAL
UNIVERSITY**

SINGAPORE

(HG2052)

LANGUAGE, TECHNOLOGY AND THE INTERNET

ACADEMIC YEAR 2020/21

ASSIGNMENT 1:

ANALYSIS OF A MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION

Brenda Poh Xin Hui

U1931871J

Analysis of LinkedIn as a communication medium:
How do users employ language to portray themselves on their profile pages?

1. Introduction

With the advent of social media, the way we communicate on a day-to-day basis has undoubtedly shifted from how we used to do so in the past. In today's technologically-advanced world, new social media platforms are popping up every other day. As noted by Papacharissi (2009), these social media platforms (or sometimes also referred to as social networking sites) each have different purposes. Papacharissi (2009) also uncovered that the information users choose to share on these platforms is largely dependent on each platform's orientation and structure.

In this paper, we will be looking at LinkedIn — a social networking platform with a focus on building professional connections. We will be exploring the ways people use language to communicate on the platform, on top of how the platform differs as a medium of communication when compared to text and speech. Finally, we will look into whether LinkedIn, as a communication medium, has had further effects on language and society. It should also be noted that there has not been much research done on LinkedIn in existing literature (as observed by Utz, 2016). Thus, the author of this paper hopes to contribute to existing research on social media by helping to fill the current gap in LinkedIn research.

2. Brief introduction to LinkedIn

Founded in 2003, LinkedIn is owned by Microsoft. As of 2021, there are more than 738 million registered users on LinkedIn in 200 countries and regions ("About Us | LinkedIn Pressroom", 2021), making it the largest professional network in the world. Of these users, more than 70% are from outside of the United States (Aslam, 2021). The social networking site is currently available in 24 languages, including Czech, Tagalog and Norwegian ("About Us | LinkedIn Pressroom", 2021).

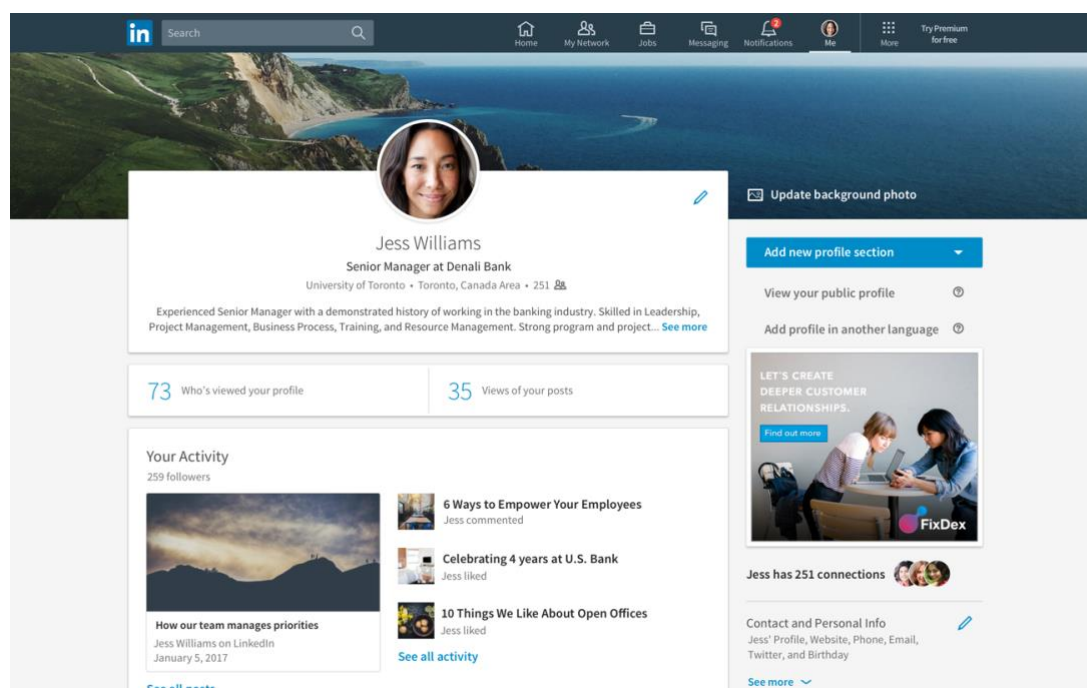


Figure 1: User profile page, taken from LinkedIn Pressroom (LinkedIn, n.d.)

While it is meant to be a professional networking platform, LinkedIn's interface and functions are fairly similar to that of social networking platforms like Facebook. With a free account, users can access basic functions — connect with other users, like and share content, post updates, and engage in instant messaging. A user's profile is modelled like a resume, where one can include their educational background, work experience, achievements, skills and endorsements from connections, among other things.

LinkedIn helps to connect “the world's professionals to make them more productive and successful” (“LinkedIn: About | LinkedIn”, n.d.). With more than 55 million companies listed on LinkedIn, along with more than 14 million open jobs listed on LinkedIn Jobs (“About Us | LinkedIn Pressroom”, 2021), LinkedIn has become a treasure trove for individuals looking to enrich their professional lives. Whether one is searching for new and better job opportunities, seeking to build their network of professional contacts or learn new skills, LinkedIn is a one-stop shop.

3. Communication on LinkedIn

As a social networking platform, LinkedIn can be categorised as a form of computer-mediated communication (CMC), which Herring (2007) defines as “predominantly text-based human-human interaction mediated by networked computers or mobile telephony” (p. 1). LinkedIn's various functions allow users to communicate with each other in different ways, both synchronously and asynchronously. In this paper, we will be concentrating on a type of asynchronous CMC that LinkedIn facilitates — the communication of one's professional identity through user profiles, with a focus on the ‘About’ section of these profiles, where users can write their own text to describe themselves.

Asynchronous CMC have systems that do not need users to be “logged on at the same time” for messages to be sent and received (Herring, 2007, p. 13). This means that sent messages will be stored on the server, until the recipient logs on to read them. In the case of LinkedIn profiles, messages that are sent out (information that a user chooses to put on their profile) stay online until the user chooses to take them down. The interface of LinkedIn dictates that all profiles are public and can be viewed by anyone with an Internet connection. Even individuals who do not have a registered account are able to view all LinkedIn profiles; although, access is limited and one will be prompted to sign in or create an account to get access to the full profile. As such, there is no one intended or specific recipient for what a registered user chooses to put on their profile — the user is addressing a larger general audience (anyone who has an Internet connection and a LinkedIn account) and this may include: potential business partners, potential employers/colleagues, former colleagues, former classmates and so on.

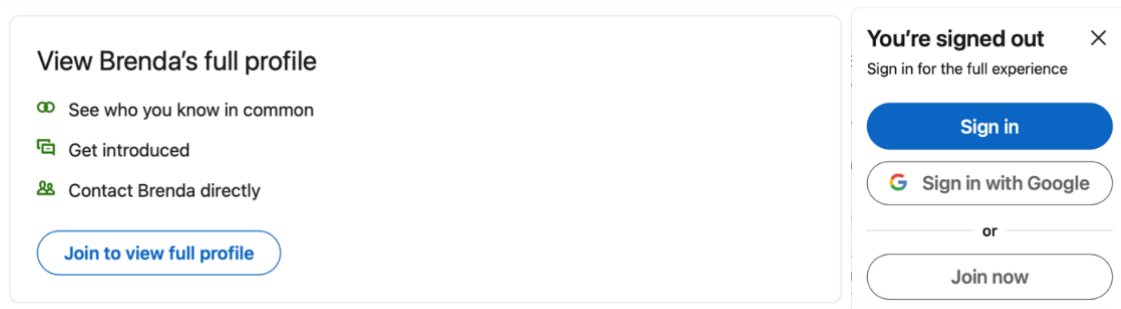


Figure 2: Individuals who are not logged in while browsing LinkedIn will get prompts to sign in or create an account

Because LinkedIn's interface allows for wider visibility of user profiles, users might find themselves putting more thought into what they display on their profiles — more so than with other social networking sites like Twitter or Facebook, which both allow users to restrict access to their profiles by changing their privacy settings. Tobback (2019), in her analysis of a corpus of US and French LinkedIn summaries (the 'About' section), found that LinkedIn users often advertise their skilfulness in their summaries. Such behaviour is of no surprise due to LinkedIn's reputation as a social networking site for professionals. In fact, Dave Johnson from Business Insider encouraged users to have their profile pages as "polished" as their actual resume, because recruiters and professional connections would be looking at them (Johnson, 2019).

Profile pages on LinkedIn look clean and professional as a result of LinkedIn's interface, where profiles comprise text mostly formatted in lists and a single (usually formal) profile photo (van Dijck, 2013). It is also noted by van Dijck (2013) that LinkedIn has a preference for a "clean-slated presentation" of users' professional selves (p. 208), discouraging any kind of emotional attachment or self-expression because these might be damaging to one's professional image. This is supported by Utz (2016), who remarked that the profile fields of LinkedIn were akin to the categories of a CV, and excluded things like one's favourite music or hobbies. On the other hand, users are prompted to feature specific skills to help them highlight their strengths (van Dijck, 2013).

The type of discourse found on LinkedIn profile summaries are similar to that of job interviews (Tobback, 2019). According to van Dijck (2013), LinkedIn is often given the nickname "Facebook in a suit", referring to the attire people typically wear during job interviews (p. 208). This comparison to job interviews is understandable; as noted by Tobback (2019), users on LinkedIn are typically not well-known by their audience (potential readers of their profiles) and are competing against each other in the same way jobseekers compete against one another during a job interview. Her observations from the corpus supports this — self-praise appeared to be one central speech act in the LinkedIn summaries she analysed (Tobback, 2019).

With regards to the exact way LinkedIn users engage in self-praise in their summaries, Tobback (2019) discovered that users employ more indirect than direct strategies to show their skilfulness. While she did not find any instances of explicit utterances of direct self-praise (e.g. "I am a skilful communication professional"), she noticed that there were two techniques that came close: (1) the use of evaluative nouns or descriptive adjectives to make one's skilfulness explicit, and (2) explicit mentions of one's domain of expertise, competencies, qualities, strengths and skills (Tobback, 2019, p. 653).

Tobback (2019) defines indirect self-praise as utterances where users do not make overt claims of skilfulness by "overtly describing and self-assessing their skills and qualities" or "making a positive identity statement" (p. 653). Though this differs from direct self-praise, she noted that the underlying intention is the same — to be perceived as a skilful professional (Tobback, 2019). She elaborates on her point by illustrating the two main ways LinkedIn users practise indirect self-praise. The first way involves shifting the focus away from oneself by reporting third-party praise or mentioning a third-party as the beneficiary of the user's skilfulness; the second way sees users implicitly expressing their skilfulness through the stating of one's achievements, expressing of one's passion towards their professional activities, or detailing one's general goals or vision towards their jobs (Tobback, 2019, p. 653-657). These indirect self-praise strategies "make use of inferences or particularised

conversational implicatures”, which require readers to infer that the user is making an implied claim of skilfulness without actually flouting the Gricean maxims of conversation (Tobback, 2019, p. 653).

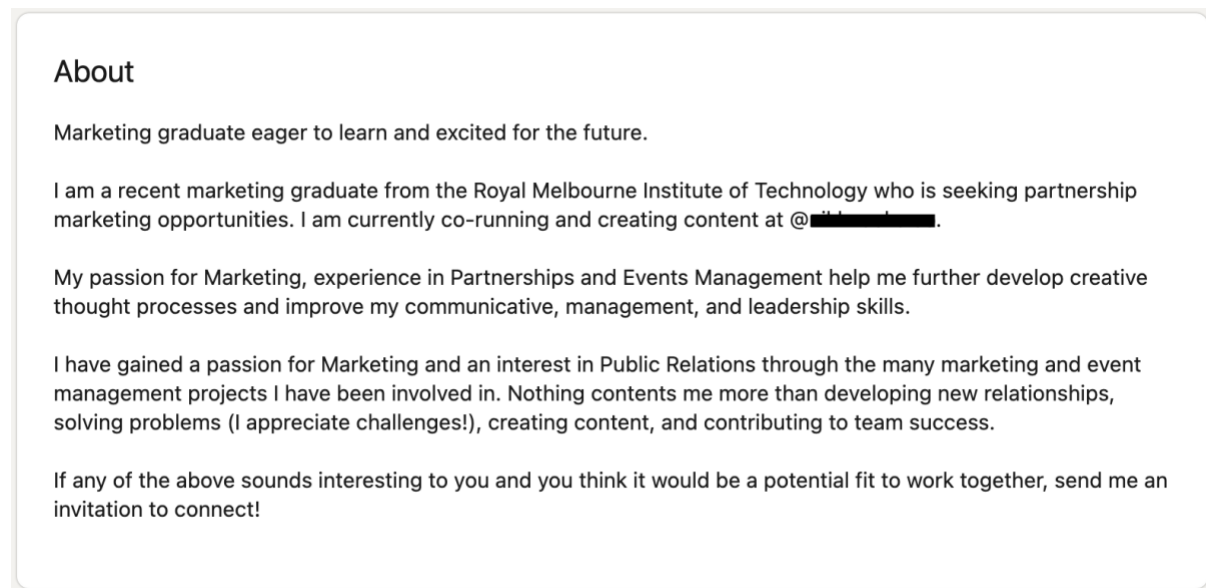


Figure 3: An example of a LinkedIn user’s profile summary, taken with permission (user requested to stay anonymous)

In her paper, Tobback (2019) stated that LinkedIn profile summaries fall under Dayter’s (2014) definition of self-praise, as the intent behind these summaries is to paint the user as a skilful professional in the readers’ eyes. At the same time, Tobback (2019) also acknowledged that self-praise has traditionally been considered to be a potentially face-threatening act, and infringes on the Modesty Maxim put forth by Geoffrey Leech (1983), which states that one should minimise expressions of self-praise and maximise expressions of self-dispraise. However, Tobback (2019) argued that it is debatable to merely postulate that LinkedIn profile summaries infringe on Leech’s (1983) Modesty Maxim or Speer’s (2012) ‘norm against self-praise’ (p. 651). Given the nature of LinkedIn — a professional social networking site where it is not uncommon for (a) users to seek employment opportunities, and (b) companies to use it as a platform for recruitment — it is not unexpected to come across discourse on self-praise. Moreover, the function of the LinkedIn profile summary is for users to present themselves in a positive light (Tobback, 2019). Making reference to recent research on Politeness, she goes on to point out that self-praise strategies employed in the context of LinkedIn summaries might be deemed appropriate or politic (see also: Locher, 2006) by readers (Tobback, 2019) precisely because such behaviour is acceptable on LinkedIn, or may even be considered the norm. Additionally, Tobback (2019) also suggested that self-praise discourse on LinkedIn will be more accepted and expected by users compared to face-to-face interactions, since LinkedIn *is* a social media platform.

4. Comparison of LinkedIn communication to text and speech

Having illustrated how LinkedIn’s interface affects how users use language on their profile pages, we will now look at David Crystal’s (2006) seven features of speech and writing (text) to see whether this form of communication on LinkedIn is more akin to speech or text.

The form of communication (discussed in this paper) that LinkedIn users partake in is time bound (text like), as the information users put up on their profiles stays visible until the user chooses to remove it. It could also be considered to be space bound (speech like), if there is a limit on the number of characters that a user can write on their summaries (to the author's knowledge, there is none). This communication is also contrived (text like) — users carefully choose what they want to display on their profiles, deliberately choosing to spotlight their strengths for the purpose of portraying themselves as skilful and experienced professionals. Special attention is also paid to one's choice of words (i.e. strategies of indirect self-praise), showing that the text found on one's profile is not at all spontaneous. As a result, LinkedIn user profiles are factually communicative (text like).

The information on LinkedIn user profiles are visually decontextualised (text like), as the communication between user and reader does not happen face-to-face; the user need not even be online at the time readers are interacting with the user's profile. The content comprises mainly text accompanied with a single profile photo, and cannot be considered graphically rich in most cases. Such discourse is elaborately structured (text like), with text usually formatted in lists or proper paragraphs. It is also not prosodically rich, as users communicate with their audience utilising only text which does not include excessive use of capitals (usually used to mimic emphasis in speech) because of the nature of LinkedIn — one should always present themselves in a professional way, even in the discourse they produce.

LinkedIn profiles are both immediately revisable (speech like) and repeatedly revisable (text like). Edits on a user's profile can be repeatedly made, whenever a user wishes, without the reader ever knowing.

Speech like	Text like
Time bound*	Space bound
Spontaneous	Contrived*
Face-to-face	Visually decontextualised*
Loosely structured	Elaborately structured*
Socially interactive	Factually communicative*
Immediately revisable*	Repeatedly revisable*
Prosodically rich	Graphically rich

Table 1: Summary of LinkedIn communication in comparison to Crystal's (2006) seven features (* denotes that feature is characteristic of LinkedIn communication)

As can be seen above, the type of communication users engage in through their profile pages on LinkedIn is more similar to that of text. It should be noted, however, that the analysis and comparison done in this paper is solely focused on how LinkedIn users make use of their profiles to communicate. Other ways of communication that LinkedIn facilitates is not taken into account here.

5. Effects on language and society

This paper has shown how a communication medium's properties, which includes its interface, features, as well as the purpose it serves, can affect the way individuals use the medium to communicate. In the case of the social networking site LinkedIn, its purpose is to provide a platform for individuals to connect professionally. LinkedIn profiles serve a similar function to CVs; they provide a space for users to advertise their expertise and skilfulness. As such, it is acceptable for — or even expected of — users to use language to describe themselves positively to promote themselves in such a space. This has resulted in many LinkedIn users employing indirect strategies of self-praise in their profile summaries (as observed by Tobback, 2019).

Such language use definitely has a larger effect on our society. In a society where self-praise has traditionally been frowned upon as a potentially face-threatening act (Tobback, 2019), the self-praising discourse one can find on LinkedIn is now seen as appropriate and acceptable when it usually would not be. Of course, context plays a part — such discourse may still be deemed as inappropriate and immodest outside the contexts of LinkedIn and social media. Nonetheless, such a shift in attitudes is notable as this increasing use (and acceptance) of self-praise in discourse is now shared by a wider audience (i.e. the “general public”, since LinkedIn profiles are public), when it was previously only confined to the domains of job interviews and one's CV.

With the rise of social media and professional social networking platforms like LinkedIn, such use of language and the sentiments surrounding them will only become more widespread as an increasing number of people get access to Internet connection, which in turn will result in an increasing number of accounts being created on the aforementioned platforms. LinkedIn, as a communication medium, has opened doors which used to only be accessible by the traditional route of word-of-mouth in the realms of career progression and professional network building. With LinkedIn, individuals can form connections and start conversations more seamlessly with people they might not have had the chance to do so with in person — encouraging people to widen their professional (and social) circles, which might contain unexpected contacts whom one might find to be “useful” in the future. On a similar note, Utz (2016) also found that LinkedIn users reported having higher professional informational benefits than non-users.

6. Conclusion

This paper looked at LinkedIn as a medium of communication, analysed how the properties of LinkedIn affected the way people communicate on the platform, compared LinkedIn to the mediums of text and speech, and finally, explored the effects that a platform such as LinkedIn have on language and society in general. In sum, the nature of LinkedIn as a professional networking platform allowed for discourses of self-praise which would usually be regarded as immodest, unacceptable or inappropriate. LinkedIn as a medium has more text-like properties, and is demonstrated to have several effects on language use and society.

As mentioned before, this paper only explored LinkedIn profiles, with a focus on how language is utilised by users to describe oneself professionally. Further research can be done on the other functions of LinkedIn — instant messaging, for example — to find out more about how these other functions affect how users communicate on the platform, as well as whether they have an effect on language use and society.

References

- About Us | LinkedIn Pressroom. (2021). Retrieved 18 February 2021, from <https://news.linkedin.com/about-us#Statistics>
- Aslam, S. (2021). LinkedIn by the Numbers (2021): Stats, Demographics & Fun Facts. Retrieved 17 February 2021, from <https://www.omnicoreagency.com/linkedin-statistics/>
- Crystal, D. (2006). *Language and the Internet [electronic resource] / David Crystal*. (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Dayter, D. (2014). Self-praise in microblogging. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 61, 91–102. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2013.11.021>
- Herring, S. C. (2007). A faceted classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse. *Language@Internet*, 4(1).
- Johnson, D. (2019). 'What is LinkedIn?': A beginner's guide to the popular professional networking and career development site. Retrieved 18 February 2021, from <https://www.businessinsider.com/what-is-linkedin>
- Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics / Geoffrey N. Leech*. Longman.
- LinkedIn: About | LinkedIn. Retrieved 17 February 2021, from <https://www.linkedin.com/company/linkedin/about/>
- LinkedIn. *[LinkedIn user profile page]* [Image]. Retrieved from <https://content.linkedin.com/content/dam/me/news/en-us/media-resources/profile-self.png>
- Locher, M. (2006). Polite behavior within relational work: The discursive approach to politeness. *Multilingua*, 25(3), 249–267. <https://doi.org/10.1515/MULTI.2006.015>
- Papacharissi, Z. (2009). The virtual geographies of social networks: a comparative analysis of Facebook, LinkedIn and ASmallWorld. *New Media & Society*, 11(1-2), 199–220. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444808099577>
- Susan A. Speer. (2012). The Interactional Organization of Self-praise: Epistemics, Preference Organization, and Implications for Identity Research. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 75(1), 52–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0190272511432939>
- Tobback, E. (2019). Telling the world how skilful you are: Self-praise strategies on LinkedIn. *Discourse & Communication*, 13(6), 647–668. <https://doi.org/remotexs.ntu.edu.sg/10.1177/1750481319868854>
- Utz, S. (2016). Is LinkedIn making you more successful? The informational benefits derived from public social media. *New Media & Society*, 18(11), 2685–2702. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444815604143>

van Dijck, J. (2013). “You have one identity”: performing the self on Facebook and LinkedIn. *Media, Culture & Society*, 35(2), 199–215.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443712468605>