Professional Personae - How Organizational Identification Shapes Online Identity in the Workplace

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As organizations become increasingly mediatized, the roles of professionals are reshaped and negotiated, and the boundaries between professional and private relationships are blurred. In this context, the extent to which one identifies with his or her organization might play an important role. This paper investigates how professionals construct their digital identities on social media sites, focusing in particular on their willingness to overlap private and work profiles to create a univocal online persona. Based on a sample of 679 communication and marketing managers, the paper analyzes the self-representational choices of professionals and demonstrates how organizational identification influences professionals’ tendency to combine their domains under one online persona, and their confidence to use social media in a professional context.

Keywords: Social Media, Boundary Management, Organizational Identification, Identity.

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Introduction: Online identities and boundary management

The pervasiveness of social media within our lives and daily practices has contributed to a progressively thinner and blurrier distinction between personal and professional spaces. Social network sites have become, for most of us, part of our daily routines: They infiltrate our conversations, the way we socialize, and much more. Consequently, individuals find themselves in a network of friends that bypasses offline contexts, mixing contacts from different realms of life (Stutzman & Hartzog, 2012). Accordingly,
the creation of an online identity stems from a process involving the self-definition, delineation, and manipulation of available cues (Lange, 2007; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2007; Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin, 2008). Individuals can thus have one or several distinct online identities, which are representative of their different roles in life. Online identities serve as a “promise” of authenticity to a chosen audience (Ellison, Hancock & Toma, 2011). Simultaneously, however, given the nonexclusivity of profiles and the considerable capacity for anonymity online, social media allow individuals to relax the need for authenticity and to instead present “possible” (Brewer, 2003; Ibarra, 1999) and “desired selves” (Ellison, Heino & Gibbs, 2006; Zhao et al., 2008).

Identities on social network sites are created within a specific context and may be more difficult to define than identities within daily offline interactions. In fact, although social network sites such as Facebook allow users to manage their target audience through specific settings, the information that they share nevertheless remains largely standardized and untailored (Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard & Berg, 2013). To examine how individuals manage this complexity, we introduce the concept of “online personae,” characterizing each single social media representation of a user and mirroring Jung’s idea of identity in a specific context (cf. Progoff, 1953).

In a professional environment in particular, the blurring of boundaries between online personae is, to some extent, induced by the use of social media both at home and in the office, simultaneously connecting users to family members, coworkers, business partners, and friends. Furthermore, the practice of telework often alters the previously defined physical spaces of work and private life. This blurring of boundaries between work and private life, in turn, changes what individuals perceive to be public and private. Further, on social media, constructing an identity that is representative of all their relevant relationships becomes difficult for professionals (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012). Accordingly, negotiating the boundaries between professional and private roles, online and offline alike, might be an important issue related to how professionals view work today (cf. Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000).

Thus far, little research has examined how employees manage the boundaries between their professional and personal roles in online social networks and how managing these boundaries affects their careers and well-being (Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard, & Berg, 2013, p. 646). Further, the process of managing boundaries online might mirror recent changes in offline work practices. In fact, the rise in telework and the practice of “virtual nomadism,” in which personal and professional spaces often overlap (Fonner & Stache, 2012; Troup & Rose, 2012), may necessitate a reconsideration of the way in which we think of work identities, as well as the time and place in which they belong.

In this study, we hypothesize that the strength of employees’ organizational identification influences whether individuals separate or unify their personae. We hold that employees’ sense of assimilation to their organization is a factor in the extent to which they separate or unify their personae, particularly given that a limit on the extent of overlap between online personae might not be motivated by privacy in a traditional sense but rather might be imposed by the organization or imposed by individuals as a best practice. In this sense, Stutzman and Hartzog (2012) noted that many individuals do not wish to bore family members (or other acquaintances) with posts about work. From a different perspective, for the average professional, the degree of persona overlap may also be primarily influenced by perceived abilities, such as his or her confidence in using the medium. Thus, personae might help individuals identify a representation that fits their different roles, taking into account the extent to which contexts that are typical of social media-based communication collapse (boyd, 2008).

In the following sections, we propose that organizational identification might affect individuals’ tendency to unify their online personae and that this relationship might be at least partially mediated by individuals’ confidence in using social network sites in a professional capacity. To cover all the nuances that may be important for understanding how professionals manage their online personae, we then
examine whether individual differences, in terms of age, privacy concerns, organizational hierarchical level, and other context factors, influence the extent to which professionals’ organizational identification and confidence in using social network sites affect their online self-presentation.

We analyze these relationships by using data collected from 679 European communication and marketing managers, a sample for which digital and social media have emerged as, apart from a way to stay in touch with family and friends, a strategic professional tool. In fact, for corporate communication and public relations in particular, social media often provide a gateway to both stakeholders and customers. Professionals operate online as both themselves and representatives of their organization: Self-representation is therefore crucial for the delivery of both personal and organizational messages. Accordingly, the managers in our sample are familiar with using social media in both a professional and a private context but simultaneously face challenges in negotiating boundaries between their identities and crafting messages directed to different audiences. Because of the increasing mediatization of many professions, however, our focus on communication professionals might represent a first step in the investigation of role boundaries and social media in which the role of technology in perceptions of work life today is elucidated.

As this research into professional online social networking practices is exploratory at this time, we decided to focus our research on one professional group and one type of social media use to better understand the nuances of how individuals manage their online personas. In this sense, by postulating that organizational identification affects the establishment of boundaries between professional and private online spaces and by assuming that confidence in the medium plays a role, we expand current research on the use of social network sites in the workplace by including the role of online personas. This research thus aims to extend the existing debate on how technology—and social media in particular—might influence our everyday activities and the ways in which we present ourselves to others.

Past research and avenues for new research

Managing the boundaries between private and professional spaces

Negotiating multiple roles, as well as managing the boundaries between them, is arguably one of the characteristic challenges of our time. In fact, as the elements defining “work” and “home” domains gradually blur (Ashforth et al., 2000; Fonner & Stache, 2012; Nippert-Eng, 2010), for example, through the increasing diffusion of telework and home offices, professionals have to constantly redefine the times and spaces that they assign to work and private life. With this redefinition necessarily comes the renegotiation of roles, professional or otherwise.

Prior research has shown that boundary management is an active, ongoing process and that employees either reinforce or lessen boundaries during social interactions. Boundaries are typically set between professional and personal domains to define different realms, and they help professionals avoid incoherence between different facets of their overall identity (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013). Norms and expectations geared toward behavior that is deemed appropriate in a professional context reinforce boundaries between professional and personal contexts; however, in the private domain, these norms and expectations are less defined (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). In this sense, if we define boundaries as the “physical, temporal, emotional, cognitive, and/or relational limits that define entities as separate from one another” (Ashforth et al., 2000), then blurrier boundaries necessarily lead to challenges in defining and performing work and home-based roles (Fonner & Stache, 2012).

Social media-based interaction creates such a challenge for many workers. In their review of the literature, Ollier-Malaterre, Rothbard, and Berg (2013) illustrated a number of elements that qualitatively
differentiate the management of boundaries between professional and personal in cyberspace from that in physical space. For many individuals, managing these boundaries is more difficult online than offline. For instance, professionals increasingly employ social network sites as formal organizational tools, as spaces for self-promotion (Mangold & Faulds, 2009), and, simultaneously, as vehicles for maintaining friendships and family bonds (Gilbert & Karalahios, 2009). Thus, the degree of overlap between different audiences necessarily increases, and networks become wider and more variegated. In their analysis of social network sites in the workplace, Skeels and Grudin (2009) found that the blurring of multiple social group boundaries leads to tension and discomfort.

Irwin Altman (1977) defined boundary regulation as one of the functions of privacy that is essential for establishing plans and strategies for interacting with others and developing and maintaining one’s self-identity. In his 1975 book, Altman stated that “when the permeability of these (i.e., identity) boundaries is under the control of a person, a sense of individuality develops” (p. 30). In this sense, boundary regulation becomes “a selective control of access to the self” (1975, p. 24), through which individuals manage their social interactions. As noted by Palen and Dourish (2003), this approach can be particularly helpful if it is applied to the online context, as boundary regulation develops as a dynamic process that is influenced by “our expectations and experiences, and by those of others with whom we interact” (p. 129). The regulation of boundaries is therefore a dynamic response to circumstances rather than a static enforcement of rules (Palen & Dourish, 2003, p. 135). In connection to privacy concerns in particular, boundary regulation is a relevant mechanism for social media use. For example, boundary regulation could be interpreted to reflect users’ increasing awareness of the implications of their actions on social network sites and their increasing management of personal information disclosure on social network sites (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2008; Ozenc & Farnham, 2011). Lampinen, Tamminen, and Oulasvirta (2009) have defined two main strategies involved in the management of personal information related to boundary regulation between different context: “behavioral” and “mental” strategies. Behavioral strategies are preventative and include actions such as self-censorship and access control (Skeels & Grudin, 2009). Conversely, mental strategies are less proactive and tend to allow individuals to cope with the situation. Such strategies include activities such as creating inclusive identities, trusting social networks, and being more responsible with content creation (Lampinen et al., 2009). In extreme cases, individuals may create multiple, fully segregated profiles. For such a strategy, Boyd (2007) proposed the “mirror network” concept, in which the individual maintains two or more discrete identities on a single social media site—one of a more proper, professional form than the other but each interlinked owing to personal preferences. Stutzman and Hartzog (2012) noted that the use of multiple profiles is motivated by factors related to utility, propriety, privacy, and identity.

We posit that the construct of online personae, as introduced in the previous section, can be useful for measuring how professional users manage their identity boundaries online. Accordingly, by measuring the degree of overlap between personal and professional personae, we can assess an individual’s intention to appear as a univocal person online, merging messages and audiences that belong to his or her professional and private lives. While offline, individuals are given contextual limits to the information that they can provide about themselves; by contrast, social network sites provide them with the flexibility to allow for a parallel representation of multiple sides of their identities (Zhao et al., 2008). In this sense, the overlap of personae suggests the establishment of a continuum between professional and personal realms that rightfully represents the complex and multifaceted set of relationships existing within professionals’ lives today. Hence, persona overlap represents a measure of the blurring of boundaries between private and professional identities on social network sites. In the sections that follow, we formulate hypotheses about the variables that may influence the level to which professionals allow their different roles to overlap online.
Identification with one's organization

The identification, or lack of identification, with a single role is one of the driving forces behind the willingness to integrate that role with other constituencies within a person's life (Ashforth et al., 2000). In fact, the more that a person identifies with a role, the more that she will define herself through that role, “essentially becoming the role.”

Organizational identification does not per se entail identification with a role but rather refers to a perceived similarity with the organization as a social category. Individuals identify with the attributes recognized as “prototypical” for the members of the organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). This connection generates a sense of belongingness through which the characteristics and the goals of the organization become increasingly integrated or congruent with those of the individual. Identification with one's place of work is, in itself, quite far from a strategic process; professionals demonstrate an "attraction and desire to maintain an emotionally satisfying self-defining relationship with the identification object" (Riketta, 2005). As the relationship between individuals and their organizations becomes more salient within the hierarchy of existing connections in a person's life (Stryker & Serpe, 1994), that person's belongingness to the organization will increase in importance within her overall identity. In other words, the stronger the identification bond is, the larger its defining power will be. The professional role will be predominant over other roles for the individual, as the individual will attribute behaviors and ethics that he or she shares and values to the organization (Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999).

Online, identification with an organization can have similar consequences for how individuals decide to present themselves. In fact, within most social network sites, individuals are encouraged to share their work position; in some cases, explicit endorsements of colleagues and teams are facilitated, triggering mutual recognition. Because of this emphasis on the representation of belongingness, we can assume that organizational identification plays a role in the establishment of boundaries online. In fact, because of both hyper-connecting technology (such as smartphones) and requirements for a social media presence among professionals, individuals need to determine where to set the boundaries between work and private life, as well as between private and public information.

We can assume that organizational identification influences the degree of persona overlap because of the role identification entailed in organizational identification: The more that a person defines herself through a role, the more likely she will be to attempt to integrate that role with other parts of her identity (Ashforth et al., 2000). If this assumption also applies online, we would expect individuals with strong organizational identification to exhibit a preference for flexible boundaries, i.e., borders that can be relaxed to meet needs from other domains (Ashforth et al, 2000). On social media sites, this preference would translate to a higher degree of persona overlap, leading to more coherent and univocal self-presentational choices. In contrast, organizational identification could lead to a separation of personae by promoting the idea that the professional domain, because of its relative centrality (Kossek et al., 2012), should be somehow shielded from outside invasion. In this sense, setting stronger boundaries between professional and private personae can be considered a means to better manage separate domains.

Given both the importance of an individual's degree of belongingness to an organization for his or her overall identity (Stryker & Serpe, 1994) and individuals' tendency to collapse contexts emerging from social media interactions, we hypothesize that organizational identification positively affects the overlap of online personae:

H1: Professional social media users who more strongly identify with their organizations will tend to overlap their online personae.
To better understand the impact of organizational identification on how professionals represent themselves on social network sites, we also examine the relationship between organizational identification and individuals’ perceived confidence in the professional use of social network sites. In fact, while research has shown that organizational identification is positively related to self-esteem and, by extension, a person’s constructed external image (Fuller, Marler, Hester, Frey, & Relyea, 2006), no study has extended organizational identification to interactions on social network sites. Given the increased use of social network sites in organizational contexts and the positive relationship between organizational identification and both job involvement and occupational attachment (Riketta, 2005), we hypothesize that organizational identification positively affects individuals’ perceived confidence in using social network sites in a professional capacity.

H2. Professional social media users who more strongly identify with their organization will have higher perceived confidence in their social network site use in a professional context.

Confidence in the use of social media
Questions related to the effects of social media use on how professionals represent themselves online are becoming more important because of the increasing use of social network sites in work. In fact, social media have become instruments to promote organizational activities, manage team activities, or maintain contact with important stakeholders (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). As a result, individuals must reflect on their messages and audiences: Because the same platform, such as Facebook, can be used for both private and professional communications, users must think strategically about what information they share and with whom they share it.

Thus, appearing online simultaneously as me-the-person and me-the-professional seems to generate trade-off decisions between the advantages of mixing audiences and the risks relating to disclosing information that is inappropriate for each specific audience. These trade-off decisions, however, seem to be in line with those identified in the literature as a general approach to privacy. Acquisti and Grossklags (2005) highlighted how decisions in the digital world, particularly those of a commercial nature, are mostly made by mediating between the willingness to participate and concerns for safeguarding private data.

Individuals’ confidence in their skills related to social media has widely been investigated as a driver of online behavior, particularly with respect to the diffusion of personal information. Research has shown that individuals’ perceived level of comfort with using social media influences their awareness of the risks of using social media (Brandtweiner et al., 2010) and their actions directed at mitigating or preventing damage from social media use (Fogel & Nehmad, 2009). Furthermore, individuals’ perceived confidence in use is often operationalized as self-efficacy, defined as individuals’ “capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). By developing their self-efficacy, social media users gain an understanding of “what [they] believe they can do with the skills they possess” (Eastin & LaRose, 2000). While self-efficacy remains a poor proxy for users’ Internet proficiency (e.g., Hargittai & Shafer, 2006), it nevertheless influences the ways in which users approach the dangers and threats related to Internet use, thereby affecting their online behavior (Barbeite & Weiss, 2004). Therefore, to some extent, through their confidence in their social media skills, users express attitudes that are emotional rather than strategic by nature, leading to a less conscious and rationalized representation of themselves (Durndell & Haag, 2002).

For professional users, confidence in one’s social media skills may differ between private and professional contexts, as self-efficacy is domain specific. In this regard, Bandura (1997) argued that an individual cannot be all things but that individuals differ in the areas in which they cultivate their efficacy.
and in the levels to which they develop it. For example, a professional might use social network sites for relational purposes in her private life but might be unsure of how to use the same media for promotional purposes in a professional capacity. Given the presumably different professional and private purposes of social media use, individuals might perceive their social media skills to be differently suited for fulfilling these purposes—not because of their lack of skills in using social media but because of their lack of confidence regarding how to behave in a new role and how to interact with constituencies who are no longer embedded in semirelational interactions.

Thus, individuals’ perceived confidence in the use of social media in different contexts can influence the ways in which individuals decide to represent themselves online: Different levels of private and professional confidence in social media use, for example, can trigger the need to set stronger boundaries and separate online personae. In contrast, a very confident user might disregard privacy concerns and instead aim to blur the boundaries between online personae and to create a univocal representation.

To better understand how perceived confidence in different contexts influences the way professionals represent themselves on social media, we use two measures of self-reported confidence related to individuals’ private and professional use of social network sites. These measures allow us to explore how the two elements might differently influence professionals’ self-representational choices online. Accordingly, we propose the following hypotheses:

H3. Professional social media users who have a higher perceived confidence in social network site use in a professional context will tend to overlap their online personae.
H4. Professional social media users who have a higher perceived confidence in social network site use in a private context will tend to overlap their online personae.

In this study, we use a sample of communication professionals to test the relationships hypothesized above. The nature of the sample allows us to explore the use of social network sites in a context in which digital communication is part of professionals’ daily activities. Furthermore, the communication field is also characterized by a fluidity that makes the boundaries between public and private particularly interesting to analyze. However, this characteristic of the sample also limits the generalizability of the results to professions with dissimilar use of technology or a more rigid division of work from private life. To make our exploration as meaningful as possible, in one of the subsequent sections, we examine whether demographic and organizational characteristics are important predictors of the overlap of online personae.

Methods

Sample and data collection

The survey sample was recruited from the database of the European Association of Communication Directors, a network comprising communication and marketing managers from over 30 countries. The invitation to take part in the survey was sent electronically to over 17,000 individuals, who were asked to take part in an Internet-based survey in November 2011. Within 4 weeks, a total of 1862 questionnaires were collected, of which 679 were complete and therefore deemed suitable for further analysis.

The choice of the sample was motivated by communication and marketing professionals’ familiarity with the use of digital and social media in a work context. Eyrich, Padman, and Sweester (2008) found that communication professionals employ a wider variety of social media than any other category of corporate and government employees. Moreover, a more recent study identified practice-oriented public
relations journals as the journals with the largest increase in articles about social media (Khang, Ki, & Ye, 2012), which may further indicate a particular interest in the field toward the use of digital and social media-based communication.

One possible explanation for the increased use of social media in the communication field is in the significant advantages that social media offers communication and marketing professionals. For instance, the nature of social network site-mediated communication allows communication and marketing professionals to both reach a broad set of stakeholders and expose themselves as spokespersons or official reference points to the public. Furthermore, the direct access to both the public and peers provided by social media allows communication and marketing professionals to establish dialogic relationships that can help them target messages to particular audiences and more directly access relevant audiences (Rybalko & Selzer, 2010). Communication and marketing professionals’ involvement in social media leads to practical questions regarding their self-representational choices, such as how to differentiate between one’s own views and those of the organization and how to manage relationships with the many stakeholders in one’s professional role while simultaneously maintaining connections with family and friends.

The demographics of the sample revealed a number of peculiar characteristics: a modest gender imbalance, with women slightly overrepresented (369 female respondents relative to 310 male participants), and a certain age homogeneity, with most members being in their forties and early fifties (Mean = 41.64, Mode = 50, SD = 9.021) (see appendix A). As such, the sample characteristics are similar to those of other vocational studies surveying European marketing and communication directors, such as the long-running study by European Communication Monitor (2013), which reported similar distributions in terms of gender, age, and seniority among the surveyed populations. Considering the involvement in digital communication for the selected sample, the sample was found to be suitable for the objective of this study, as engagement in social networks was high among the respondents (roughly half of the respondents were “active” or “very active” in the use of social network sites). The sample may suffer from self-selection bias to some extent, as the participants are already interested or active in social media and therefore might not be representative of individuals within the communication profession in general. Further, as outlined above, many professionals in marketing and public relations are required to use social media in their jobs, a requirement that might not be as mandatory in other professions. We nevertheless posit that our results are interesting from an exploratory standpoint, providing insight into self-presentational choices among professionals who are among the earliest adopters of social media in the workplace and, by proxy, other professionals further down the adoption curve.

**Item development**

The tendency to establish flexible boundaries between one’s private and professional lives online was measured with a single item on a 5-point Likert scale, for which respondents were asked to state the degree to which (from “not at all” to “completely”) their private and professional social media profiles and contacts overlapped. The employed measure of organizational identification was derived from Smidts, Pruyn, and Van Riel (2001): the scale is composed of 5 elements, ranked on the basis of a 5-point Likert scale (“I feel strong ties with my company,” “I experience a strong sense of belonging to my company,” “I feel proud to work with my company,” “I am sufficiently acknowledged in my company,” and “I am proud to work for my company”). Given the nature of the sample, exploring the impact of perceived confidence in social media use on the decision to set or remove boundaries between a person’s online persona required a measure that encompassed self-perceptions in both private and professional realms. For this purpose, we established two separate single-item measures for confidence in social network site
use in a professional and a private capacity. A 5-point Likert scale was also used for these measures (‘I feel confident when using social network sites as a professional person’; ‘I feel confident when using social network sites as a private person’). We also asked the respondents several questions concerning their sociodemographic characteristics (gender, age), social media use (frequency of use, privacy concerns), and organizational hierarchical level. The measure for privacy concerns was again a compound measure, based on Dinev and Hart (2003) (‘I am concerned that the work-related information I circulate through social network sites could be misused,’ ‘When using social network sites, I worry about the possible theft of my personal data,’ ‘I am concerned about submitting work-related information on the Internet because of what others might do with it,’ and ‘I am concerned about submitting personal information on the Internet because it could be used in a way I did not foresee’).

**Data analysis**

The collected data were analyzed by using a two-step approach to ensure the feasibility of the study: first, factor analysis was employed to establish the monodimensionality and internal consistency of the constructs. Subsequently, a structural model was constructed for all respondents with complete data sets, using Mplus (Version 6.1) (Muthén & Muthén, 2008). Through the combination of the two steps, the formulated hypotheses could be tested for applicability and direction. The full model incorporating the hypotheses is presented below.

Before the measurement model was tested, it was evaluated with confirmatory factor analysis to test for monodimensionality and scale reliability at both the indicator and the construct levels. On the construct level, Cronbach’s alpha (\(\alpha\)), composite reliability (C.R.), and average variance extracted (AVE) were employed to assess the internal consistency of the scale. Table 1 presents the results. Cronbach’s alpha (\(\alpha\)), C.R., and AVE scored above the acceptable thresholds for criterion values (Hair et al., 2009). Therefore, scale reliability can be assumed. As shown in Table 2, the fit indices for the model, which are discussed in further detail in the results section, showed good fitness, allowing us to consider the structural equation model valid to answer our research questions (Table 2).
Table 1  Measurement Model and Fit Indices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct Item</th>
<th>Standardized loading</th>
<th>t-values</th>
<th>R²</th>
<th>Cronbach’s alpha</th>
<th>C.R.</th>
<th>AVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OI1</td>
<td>.787</td>
<td>29.704***</td>
<td>.620</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OI2</td>
<td>.829</td>
<td>34.021***</td>
<td>.687</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>OI3</td>
<td>.912</td>
<td>50.634***</td>
<td>.831</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OI4</td>
<td>.692</td>
<td>24.322***</td>
<td>.479</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OI5</td>
<td>.888</td>
<td>41.841***</td>
<td>.788</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 2  Fit Indices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
<th>Measurement model</th>
<th>Criterion</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CFI</td>
<td>.998</td>
<td>≥ .90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLI</td>
<td>.997</td>
<td>≥ .90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRMR</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>&lt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMSEA</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>≤ .05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to the presented hypotheses, we also explored the efficacy of demographic characteristics and web experience as predictors of communication managers’ level of persona overlap. For this purpose, we conducted multiple group analyses of the structural equation model developed above. We tested the model for configural, metric, and scalar invariance, and all these invariances can be assumed for all the models and their groups (see Appendix B). We constructed these groups according to gender, organizational hierarchy (where we distinguished between managers and nonmanagers), and privacy characteristics. To differentiate between privacy concerns during the use of social network sites, we created an index of the included items. Respondents with lower scores (from 4 to 12) were considered to have low privacy concerns, whereas respondents with higher scores (from 13 to 20) were considered to have high privacy concerns. We likewise constructed groups according to respondents’ frequency of social network site use. Finally, for age, we distinguished between participants born before and participants born after 1980 to determine whether differences in usage existed between younger and older users, potentially based on differences in familiarity and degrees of comfort with social media between younger and older users (see Helsper & Eynon, 2009; Prensky, 2001).

Results

Organizational identification and professionals’ online identities

The first research question in our study, corresponding to Hypotheses 1 and 2, concerns the role of organizational identification in individuals’ willingness to overlap their online personae and individuals’ confidence in both private and professional social media use. The two variables are analyzed for their influence on professionals’ tendency to mix messages and audiences belonging to professional or private realms. Table 3 provides a summary of the results for each relationship.

To test Hypothesis 1, we analyzed the impact of organizational identification on persona overlap. The results of testing this relationship in the model were univocally positive, but they were significant at only the .05 level ($\beta = .102$, Sig. = .05). These results indicate that a greater identification with one's
organization—and a stronger sense of belonging—can influence the tendency to appear online with a single identity. This tendency may be triggered by the greater saliency of the professional role: If organizational identification has a strong definitional value for an individual, it can induce a blurring of lines between private and professional realms in that the professional realm is not as easily distinguished from the private realm.

To test Hypothesis 2, we analyzed the effect of organizational identification on the perceived confidence in professional social media site use. This analysis aimed to determine whether, and how, a professional’s attachment to her organization can influence her feelings of ease when she interacts online professionally. Furthermore, an established connection between identification and confidence could signal indirect effects on persona overlap and therefore provide opportunities for further exploration.

A positive and strongly significant effect was found between organizational identification and confidence in professional social media site use ($\beta = .188$, Sig. = .000; see Table 3). This result indicates that individuals who perceive a stronger bond with their organization also feel more confident in using social media professionally. However, organizational identification does not have an indirect effect on the persona overlap construct through confidence in professional use of social media. These results also provide a clear, if slightly less explanatory, picture regarding some of the antecedents of the decision to appear online under a single digital identity. A possible interpretation of these results is provided in the discussion section.

### The role of confidence in professional self-presentation online

The next set of hypotheses focus on the influence of perceived confidence in using social media on the willingness to overlap one’s online personae. To examine both facets of a professional’s daily life, we employed two separate measures of perceived confidence that asked the respondents to rate themselves in terms of both their professional and their private social media use. The effects of the two types of confidence were very different. Whereas perceived confidence in personal social media use positively and significantly affected persona overlap ($\beta = .263$, Sig. = .000), perceived confidence in work-related social media use did not significantly affect persona overlap. In other words, individuals who were confident in their social media use outside work were more likely to decide to appear online under a univocal profile or to set flexible boundaries between their private and work lives. The same effect was not found for individuals who were confident in their use of social media in a professional capacity.

A more detailed interpretation of the antecedents of persona overlap follows in the discussion section.

### Multiple group analysis

As a third step, we examined the extent to which the variables and relationships in the persona overlap model differ when only certain subgroups are considered. This analysis was primarily exploratory,
Table 4  Parameter Estimates and Hypothesis Testing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Std. Estimate (t-value)</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Identification → Persona Overlap</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td></td>
<td>.157  (2.772)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Identification → Confidence in Professional Use</td>
<td>.234 (4.058)***</td>
<td>.138  (2.398)*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in Professional Use → Persona Overlap</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in Personal Use → Persona Overlap</td>
<td>.249 (3.437)***</td>
<td>.265  (4.527)***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Identification → Persona Overlap</td>
<td>.301 (3.227)***</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Identification → Confidence in Professional Use</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>.2  (4.24)***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in Professional Use → Persona Overlap</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in Personal Use → Persona Overlap</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>.251  (4.723)***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Identification → Persona Overlap</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td></td>
<td>.232  (3.003)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Identification → Confidence in Professional Use</td>
<td>.210 (4.243)***</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in Professional Use → Persona Overlap</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in Personal Use → Persona Overlap</td>
<td>.251 (4.506)***</td>
<td>.272  (3.339)***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privacy Concerns</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Identification → Persona Overlap</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td></td>
<td>.178  (3.365)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Identification → Confidence in Professional Use</td>
<td>.207 (3.140)**</td>
<td>.180  (3.415)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in Professional Use → Persona Overlap</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>-.126 (-2.061)*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in Personal Use → Persona Overlap</td>
<td>.195 (2.883)**</td>
<td>.324  (5.535)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of Use (SNS)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Identification → Persona Overlap</td>
<td>.153 (2.444)*</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Identification → Confidence in Professional Use</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>.235  (4.263)***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in Professional Use → Persona Overlap</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence in Personal Use → Persona Overlap</td>
<td>.201 (2.834)***</td>
<td>.283  (4.783)***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p ≤ 0.05 **p ≤ 0.01 ***p ≤ 0.001

aiming to identify potential sociodemographic (gender, age), social media use (frequency of use, privacy concerns), and organizational hierarchical variables that might provide a foundation for future, more granulated research on professionals’ social network site use. Table 4 presents the models for the groups that were analyzed. Next, the results are briefly outlined in the order of the proposed hypotheses and are interpreted in more detail in the discussion section.

With regard to our first hypothesis, organizational identification affected persona overlap in the female sample ($\beta = 0.157$) but not in the male sample. Women with high organizational identification were more likely to adopt a unified online persona, whereas men were not. Age was also a predictor, showing a strong relationship between high organizational identification and persona overlap for younger users ($\beta = 0.301$) but not for older users. Similarly, organizational identification was found to play a role in unifying the online personas of individuals in staff functions ($\beta = 0.232$), individuals with few privacy concerns ($\beta = 0.178$), and individuals who frequently use social media ($\beta = 0.153$).

Regarding the second hypothesis, the link between organizational identification and confidence in using social network sites in a professional capacity was stronger for men ($\beta = 0.234$) than for...
women ($\beta = 0.138$). For older but not younger individuals, organizational identification was associated with increased confidence in using social network sites in a professional capacity ($\beta = 0.227$). A similar relationship was observed for executives ($\beta = 0.210$) but not for staff. Further, organizational identification had a greater effect on confidence in using social network sites in a professional capacity among individuals with high privacy concerns ($\beta = 0.207$, compared to $\beta = 0.180$ among users with low privacy concerns) and high social media use ($\beta = 0.232$, compared to $\beta = 0.135$ for sporadic users).

For the final two hypotheses regarding the link between confidence in social media use and persona overlap, gender had a highly significant effect, with a stronger effect for women ($\beta = 0.265$) than for men ($\beta = 0.249$), as did age (with $\beta = 0.218$ for younger professionals and $\beta = 0.270$ for older professionals). With regard to privacy concerns and frequency of usage, the relationship between confidence in professional social network site use and persona overlap was stronger for individuals with low privacy concerns ($\beta = 0.324$ compared to $\beta = 0.195$ for users with high privacy concerns) and infrequent users ($\beta = 0.281$ compared to $\beta = 0.201$ for frequent users).

Overall, the group comparisons add several interesting findings to the results, particularly with respect to the importance of the role of organizational identification in persona overlap for females, which has possible gender implications concerning the display of professionalism via social media. Further, the group differences regarding both age and organizational hierarchy suggest that job experience might play a role in the relationship between organizational identification and confidence in professional social media use. Regarding privacy concerns, organizational identification again seems to be a significant factor leading professionals to forgo certain reservations when qualifications are met, as discussed below.

**Discussion and conclusions**

This paper explores the self-presentation of marketing and communication managers on social media sites with a focus on boundary regulation. Using the concept of “online personae,” a parallel was established between the ways in which professionals separate their work and personal spaces in real life and the ways in which they address their private and work-related audiences while online. As in Jungian psychology, personae are used as the personality reflections that are voluntarily projected to others (cf. Progoff, 1953); online personae represent a translation of the roles that individuals face within their daily lives. Particularly considering work-home boundaries, online personae can be useful for understanding how self-representational choices take place and how negotiation practices follow. The choice to separate or integrate one’s professional and private personae is a decision concerning boundaries: Similar to the distance that individuals impose between their offline identities, they can decide the extent and flexibility of their limits between work and nonwork spaces (Lampinen et al., 2011). Considering the choice of whether to establish flexible or fixed online persona boundaries as a self-presentational action, we explored two potential influential elements: individuals’ organizational identification and individuals’ confidence in both professional and private social media use.

Regarding the impact of organizational identification, the analysis suggests that organizational identification has a positive effect on persona overlap. Within boundary theory, this result could be explained by the tendency of stronger organizational identification to coincide with an increased importance of one’s professional identity within one’s overall sense of self. Offline, higher organizational identification has been conceptualized to lead to decreased compartmentalization and higher integration of existing boundaries (Ashforth et al., 2000). Online, higher organizational identification may increase an individual’s propensity to present a univocal identity, which includes both professional and private elements,
messages, and audiences. However, the effect of organizational identification is viewed in the wider context of elements influencing one’s willingness to overlap one’s online personae, such as one’s personality traits, personal view regarding one’s organization, and affordances derived from a univocal presence online.

Moreover, in the analysis, organizational identification was found to have a largely significant and positive effect on individuals’ confidence in their professional use of social media. This result could be explained by considering how the use of social media in a professional setting might have different purposes, such as a more explicitly promotional scope, or may involve the use of different tools, such as social network sites targeting in-office use. Thus, social media use could be perceived as a professional activity. In this sense, a stronger organizational identification could reinforce individuals’ identification with their professional roles and consequently their confidence in their professional skills, including their work-related use of social network sites. No such effect was found regarding confidence in private use of social media.

Differing perceptions regarding confidence in social media use depending on the context (private or professional) also lead to very different effects on persona overlap. Whereas confidence in professional use of social media has no significant effect on the introduction of more flexible boundaries, confidence in private use of social media seems to drive individuals to merge their online personae and to aim for a largely univocal self-presentation on social media. This result may have several different explanations. On the one hand, greater confidence in social media use might work to reduce privacy concerns, which might otherwise lead individuals to separate their audiences and messages as much as possible. On the other hand, very high confidence in social media use might lead individuals to underestimate the risks of social media use and to seek the simplicity of only having one profile.

Based on the results of the multiple group analysis, a few insights emerge regarding how sociodemographic variables might influence the way in which professionals represent themselves online. Among the considered elements, gender seems to play an important role: In fact, regarding the positive relationship of organizational identification on the overlap of online personae, the effect is strongly positive for women but nonsignificant for men. Women’s tendency to unify their individual identities when their bond with their organization is stronger could highlight the greater importance of representing qualities associated with professionalism among women than among men. In the literature, such an attitude has been found to prevent criticism and to maximize credibility (Thretheway, 1999).

The significance of the relation between organizational identification and persona overlap for younger professionals and staff can be interpreted similarly: Displaying one’s belongingness to an organization can become a way to highlight one’s credibility in the face of elements, such as a young age, that might suggest a lack of experience or expertise.

Regarding the privacy concerns of professionals, identification with one’s organization plays no role in the overlap of online personae for individuals with strong fears about their privacy. In other words, for users who prioritize protecting their personal data, unifying their personae represents a source of such potential risks that completely overcome the effect of organizational identification, whereas for users with low privacy concerns, organizational identification increases their tendency to unify their online personae. Interestingly, users with high privacy concerns report a positive and moderately significant effect of confidence in personal social media use on the overlap of personae, indicating that their perceived skills may partially revert the effects of their concerns regarding their behavior.

Given its nature as an exploratory study, this paper opens several streams for possible future research. The introduction, for example, of organizational identification within the framework of online self-representation seems to be increasingly important as social media are widely employed as tools for team organization, job searches, and promotion. Considering organizational identification might
also help to extend the existing literature on the digital identities of adults focusing on one of the most defining and often most controversial identity boundaries: the boundary between private and work lives and identities.

Confidence in social media use, as well as the difference between private and professional social media use, should also be investigated in future research. Such research could focus on the differentiation of perceived self-efficacy in private and professional contexts, which could help elucidate how professionals live, interact, and express themselves through social media.

Because of its exploratory nature, our research naturally suffers from several limitations. First, concerning the sample, communication and marketing managers may use social media in a manner and to an extent that might differentiate them from individuals in other business contexts. Further research could help clarify this issue by using other samples, strengthening the link between organizational variables such as organizational identification and professional social media use and possibly introducing additional objective variables. Second, we used perceptive measures, particularly for confidence in social media use. Furthermore, because of our exploratory aim, we decided to use only single-item measures for both professional and private social media use. Future research could better contextualize or extend our results by using multiple variables. Third, we employed an oversimplified conceptualization of online persona management, which is much more complex in practice. We focused on very few variables that may elucidate some of the analyzed relationships. Such a focus may limit the explanatory power of this study and its extendibility. A natural extension would therefore involve an elaboration on the persona measure to encompass practices and possibly different social media platforms in order to better incorporate the different nuances of how professionals manage their online personas.

In addition to the limitations of the study, significant potential exists for the application of the results of this study to practice. In fact, while organizations embrace increasing “mediatization” and involvement of technology in their daily business (Pallas & Friedriksson, 2011), they should consider the consequences of this mediatization on their employees’ self-presentation. If, as this study suggests, increased organizational identification leads individuals to create a univocal online representation, organizational identification could be the explicit object of reflection for professionals who might want to critically consider the consequences of their profile choices, in terms of both self-expression and potentially undesired exposure. The influence of organizational identification on confidence in professional social media use might also be worthy of exploration for organizations and teams of professionals.

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References


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