Chapter XXI
The Psychology of Personal Web Sites

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews psychological research on personal Web sites, on their owners and on the effects personal Web sites may have on visitors. Personal Web sites were conceptualized as media for self-presentation and identity construction. Converging evidence is reported with regard to the elements found on Web sites and to the demographics, personality characteristics, intentions and self-presentational goals of their owners. The popular and somewhat intuitive notion that Web sites are narcissistic media or platforms for vanity and exhibitionism does not apply to the average Web site owner. Empirical findings on personality expressions of Web site owners and personality impressions people form after a brief visit of the sites are presented. Initial results show that objective features of personal Web sites are associated with self and visitor-rated personality traits of the owners. It is concluded that more longitudinal research is needed to fully understand the dynamics of identity management on personal Web sites.

PERSONAL WEB SITES

In the first section of this chapter, we focus on issues of definition and on theoretical as well as methodological approaches to personal Web sites. We also report empirical findings on the contents of Web sites. Several different definitions and slightly varying understandings of what a personal Web site is can be found in the literature. From a theoretical point of view, Web sites are interpreted as media for self-presentation and identity construction.

Issues of Definition: What is a Personal Web Site?

What is a personal Web site? It is difficult to answer this question as different researchers provide different definitions and even use different terminology. In our literature review we have found the following expressions: personal Web sites (e.g., Vazire & Gosling, 2004), personal home pages (e.g., Döring, 2002) and personal Web pages (Flanagin & Metzger, 2003). It is important to consider these different terms if one wants to

keep track of the relevant research. Still, a single commonly-shared term would be desirable in order to facilitate communication between different researchers. We suggest the expression "personal Web site," as home pages or Web pages usually refer to the welcome page or a single page only. In contrast, Web sites encompass all contents that are (a) interrelated with the welcome page via subdirectories, (b) distributed on several Web pages, (c) except for contents that can be retrieved via external links.

Definitions of personal Web sites are either based on assumed functions or on authorship and personalized content. The former are sometimes stated in a metaphorical manner, for example, Stern (2003) has described personal Web sites as "business cards of the 21st century" or as "refrigerator doors." Definitions of the latter category signify that personal Web sites are written (partly or wholly) by and about an individual (Groth, 1999) and contain personalized, self-selected information (Dillon & Gushrowski, 2000; Döring, 2002). In our view, it is important to further differentiate between personal Web sites with respect to what kind of personalized information is provided. Chandler (1998) described a type of personal Web site that reflects institutional rituals or satisfies the objectives of employers or teachers, that is, presenting a job-related identity to colleagues or customers. These personal job-related Web sites are usually located on university or company servers. Another type of Web site, typically hosted by commercial Internet providers and owned by an individual, aims at presenting one's private identity independent of one's job or profession. These personal identity-related Web sites provide information on hobbies, activities and sometimes intimate thoughts or feelings. Clearly, some personal Web sites lie in between: some owners link pictures of their pets, parties, or honeymoon to their professional site. However, job-related Web sites are subjected, more so than others, to institutional demands and limitations. There are often predetermined categories that

have to be used to describe one's job-related identity. For example, as a university scientist it is common to include curriculum vitae, research interests, publications, and courses. In contrast, the owners of identity-related Web sites are fairly free to present whatever information they wish to convey about themselves in any way they are able to do so.

We therefore suggest a distinction between personal Web sites that convey job-related information and personal Web sites that predominantly contain identity-related (i.e., not job-related, not commercial etc.) information. The former case may be interpreted as a "strong situation" (Mischel, 1977), that is, a situation in which pressures or restrictions that lead a person to behave in relatively similar ways that are independent of their unique personality characteristics. For example, university scientists will present their lists of publications on their job-related Web sites regardless of their level of extraversion or neuroticism. In contrast, voluntarily maintained identity-related Web sites may be conceived of as "weak situations" (Mischel, 1977), in which subjects behaviors are largely influenced by aspects of the owner's personality. Of course, one's job has a considerable impact on one's identity: we all have job-related identities. From a psychological point of view, however, it matters whether a person is more or less obliged to present him or herself as a professional in a standardized way or if he or she freely decides to present him or herself without such restrictions on the Web. However, owning a personal identity-related Web site is not tantamount to a license for virtual self-presentation without any restrictions. For example, the distribution of certain pornographic and racist contents via personal Web sites is prosecuted by law. Furthermore, security and confidentiality issues could also be of relevance for owners of personal Web sites. For example, it makes a difference if postings to a guestbook on a personal Web site are visible to the public or not. Since the owner is responsible for the contents on his or

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