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УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У БЕОГРАДУ
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The Role of the LinkedIn Social Media in Building the Personal Image

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Virtual social networks are used today by individuals and companies as a channel of communication. They have become a matter of interest to both academic and professional public. This study examines the role of LinkedIn business social network in building personal images for individuals working in different business areas in Serbia. The research results describe the reasons for and levels of individuals' activation on LinkedIn, as well as the importance of recommendations in the context of building and improving a personal image.

Keywords: Social media, LinkedIn, Personal image, Serbia

1. Introduction

Social media and virtual social networks have become very interesting research topics for academic and expert community in different areas. According to Lipsman report from ComScore Company released in May 2011 the number of social networking website users is rapidly growing. The most exploited social network is Facebook with 157.2 million monthly visitors, followed by MySpace (34.49 million monthly visitors), LinkedIn (33.4 million monthly visitors) and Twitter (27.0 million monthly visitors). [18] It is particularly interesting that social networks are viewed differently by the experts in marketing, public relations, information technologies, human resources, etc., according to their respective fields of interest. Regardless of the aspect of looking upon the use and benefits of using social media and networks, it is a fact that "Professional social networks represent not only a powerful tool in interaction with other professionals from a particular business area, but also a platform for offering services, finding jobs and promoting individuals as experts in a particular business area". [31]

Some earlier studies pointed out the importance of using social media in business presentation of both companies and individuals [7], as well as the need for adapting online communication strategy towards target groups. [22]

Social media and social networks are used for business purposes to gather information [4] and present companies and individuals in virtual surroundings [11]. According to Hershberger, more than two million companies have a LinkedIn page today, since this social network enables presentation of a business in the online arena and the employees in their respective business areas. All the presented data show that the influence of online communication on social networks for both companies and individuals is being increasingly used for exchanging information, pictures and videos and for business social network connections as well. [10]

The main objective of this study is to analyse the presentation of an individual in online surroundings, especially on the LinkedIn professional network in Serbia, in the context of creating a personal image. The presented results give insight into the current position of LinkedIn usage in Serbia and give a chance to expert and academic communities interested in this topic to better understand the way LinkedIn users perceive the importance of online communication and this particular social network in creating a personal image.

2. Literature review

There are many authors that have noticed the importance of social networks in a better positioning of a business in online surroundings. In his study Noela [26] mentions LinkedIn as a tool used by top managers, one that contributes to attaining business objectives of their organisations. Apart from LinkedIn, there are other so-

cial networks specialised for certain business industries. Thus in the area of financial management there is CFO-Zone network (), specialized for finance managers. A study in strategic communication [1] suggests that one of the five crucial steps in business rebranding and increase in the sales of certain products is the presentation of managers and the company through digital media in order to offer possibilities for business cooperation.

Some other research studies point out the importance of positioning an individual and presenting business profiles on social networks. That helps companies to select and recruit the best job candidates. [33] The author McGinley [21] explains that LinkedIn social network should be viewed as a kind of business Facebook where people leave their business résumés and that the number of contacts can also be observed today by the connections with business partners on social networks. A research conducted in the USA in 2009 showed that 73 % of students used social networks, especially Facebook, in order to search for a practice or a job [6]. On the other hand, the study by Millard [23] explains that employers often watch profiles of the potential job candidates and they mainly focus on the previous work experience and the degree of correspondence between the profile of an individual and the company objectives. The *First Tennessee Bank* Company [29] has developed a special strategy of employee recruitment via Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn social networks and YouTube channel, thereby providing a greater number of quality job candidates.

The third group of authors explain the role of social networks in building the image of an individual. In a study dealing with the reasons for using Facebook [24], the authors have analysed motives and come to the conclusion that the reasons can be found in two basic human needs: the need to belong and the need to present oneself as an individual. The importance of a good image has been explained by Hood [12] who points out that a successfully presented personal brand is the key to success of the product and organisation brand represented by that individual, both in real and virtual surroundings. Nowadays, online platforms enable even small organisations to become well-known through their top management. For example, Tom Dickson, the manager of a small company for blending appliances from the USA has built a strong personal and product brand via YouTube channel, using this channel for a specific promotion of product functionality [5].

2.1. LinkedIn social network

LinkedIn is a social network used by experts all over the world, covering 170 industries (professions) and 200 countries. LinkedIn was officially founded in 2003. The website was launched on 5 May (often referred to as “Cinco de LinkedIn – The LinkedIn five” by the employees) when the five website founders invited their 300 most important contacts to join the network. One month later, LinkedIn had 4500 online members. [14] The first “real” LinkedIn office was on *Shoreline Road, Mountain View*.

LinkedIn already has nine million users in Europe, 500.000 of which belong to German-speaking countries. For the sake of comparison, Xing has 6.5 million users, most of which belong to German-speaking countries (Xing does not publish data for each country respectively). Although Xing holds the leading position as far as German-speaking countries are concerned, LinkedIn has an enormous advantage as far as other European countries are concerned, including the United Kingdom, Italy and France. [13]

LinkedIn profile enables individuals to find and meet their potential clients, service providers, experts in the areas of interest and partners with recommendations; to discover new business options, search for a job, find connections that can help in conducting business; make job offers; find highly qualified candidates and meet other experts through the people they already know. [3]

2.2. Building personal image in the social media

The changes that continually happen in our surroundings, both in social and economic senses, and tumultuous technological development change the ways we work and do business. Thereby, the role and importance of an individual is being changed, both in private and business surroundings. More and more importance is given to the values such as: permanent education, developing skills and knowledge, building and nourishing personal image, etc. Building personal image is a continuous process of influencing behaviour [8] in such a way that individuals can adapt and fit into the surroundings and expand personal influence by stressing their positive characteristics, skills, qualities and achievements. [3]

Owing to the increasing number of social network users and the time they spend on networking, social networks have become both an important source of information about individuals and a platform for personal image building (Okanović). The above mentioned study points to the fact that individuals use the Internet in order to upgrade and strengthen their image. Since the image represents the result of physical and behavioural attributes of an individual [25], the previous activities and experiences of the individuals on social networks influence their overall image. Therefore it is of great importance to take care of the presentation on social networks, profile creation, the way of communication, contents presented (comments, photos, videos), etc.

According to Leder (Leder), personal image can be built through LinkedIn and Facebook social networks. Although by using social networks users can partially control the contents of the launched messages, managing a personal online image is the most important and the most effective way of personal presentation to target groups. The employees in *Domino's Pizza*, *Burger King*, and *Delta Air Lines* companies have realised that they can lose their jobs because their personal statuses on social networks or the messages dealing with the employee entertainment are not in accordance with the social media policies of the mentioned companies.

It is very important to understand the obstacles that individuals encounter while creating profiles on social networks. In the study by Dalton it is pointed out that the greatest problem represents the data security on social networks. [2] Other obstacles refer to the lack of time and knowledge needed to create or update a profile and the lack of trust in social networks as the tool that can help them for business purposes. Regardless of all the negative connotations, it is still recommended that the individuals should be familiar with everything that a certain social network offers and, depending on their personal needs, create such profiles that can strengthen their social and professional images.

Earlier studies on the role of social media and networks in Serbia pointed to the importance of creating a personal image on Facebook for students and making efforts to develop certain personal image components in this surrounding. [27] A study by Kostić, Stanković and Damjanović [16] explains the reasons for using LinkedIn and Facebook social networks in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina showing both similarities and dissimilarities from the viewpoint of students. This study is focused on asking individuals with different professions in Serbia about the reasons for and levels of activity on LinkedIn professional social network, in the context of building a personal image.

3. Research methodology

In the research study, a quantitative survey was conducted by means of *Kwik Surveys* () electronic questionnaire tool from September to December 2010. The questionnaire had previously been tested on a pilot sample of 32 participants. The research was anonymous. SPSS 17.0 software was used for data analysis.

A total of 374 respondents participated from Serbia, 360 of which valid: 34.4 % of the participants in the area of information and communication technologies and the Internet, 3.1 % in the area of human resources, 12.2% in the area of marketing, 19.2% in the area of management and organisation, 5% in public relations and the media, while 26.1% of the sample belongs to the participants in other business areas.

The sample was gender balanced with 51.9% of male and 49.1% of female participants. Most participants were 25-34 year olds (47.8%), then 18-24 year olds (43.6%) and 35-44 year olds (4.7%). The questionnaire was based on the previous research study. [28]

This paper examines the following hypotheses:

H1: The reasons for using LinkedIn social network vary between male and female participants.

H2: The reasons for using LinkedIn social network vary between different age groups.

H3: The reasons for using LinkedIn social network vary between the participants with different professions.

4. Research results

Research results show the types of information that individuals search for on the Internet, including the reasons for and levels of activation on LinkedIn professional social network, in the context of building a personal image. Furthermore, a comparative analysis is provided with a similar research, conducted in the USA in 2009 on the initiative of the *Pew* research centre in Washington.

The analysis of the browsing purpose shows that the majority of participants (90.3%) search for the information about themselves on the Internet. In comparison with the research conducted in the USA in 2009, where 57% of the participants stated that they searched for their own names and the information about themselves via browsers, a conclusion may be drawn that the Internet users in Serbia are more interested in personal information availability. From the demographic standpoint, males and females almost equally use browsers in order to check their “digital signatures”.

The analysis of the information availability on the Internet shows that e-mail, photos and birth dates represent the most available information regardless of the participants’ occupation. As for the information on the employers or the organization/group where an individual belongs, the results show that the participants from human resources and public relations are the most liberal ones when posting information that belongs to the mentioned two categories.

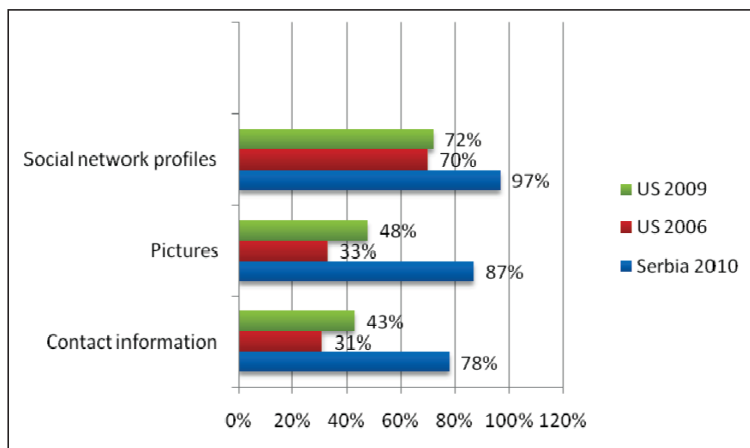


Fig.1. Most searched information by the Internet users in Serbia and the USA (19)

Fig. 1 presents the difference between Serbian and the USA participants in most searched information on other persons and it shows that the participants in Serbia browse contact information, pictures, and profiles on social networks to a greater extent than the participants in the USA.

Although the majority of participants search for information about other people on the Internet, almost one out of two participants considers it wrong “to judge people by the Information on the Internet”, while 34.7% of the participants totally agree with this statement.

As for building a personal image on the Internet, the opinions are divided. Almost 48.8% of the participants think that it is hard to build and maintain a personal image on the Internet, while 32.5% of the participants disagree.

The participants have also identified the reasons for their activation on LinkedIn business social network. Fig.1 shows the reasons for activation on LinkedIn, according to age groups.

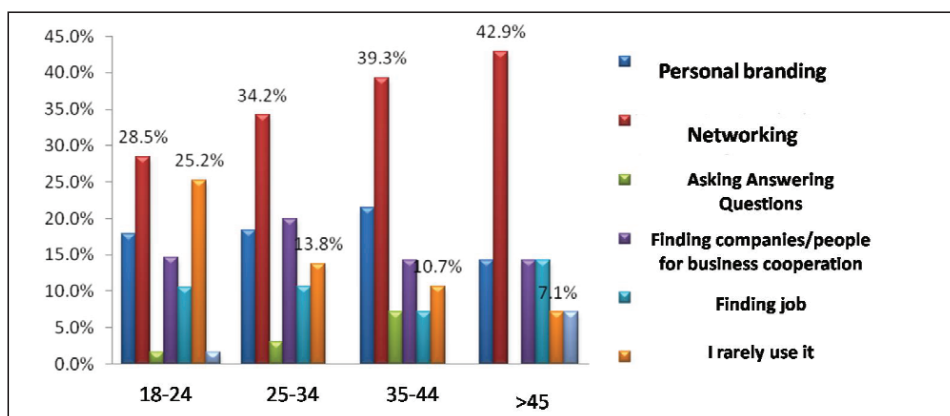


Fig 2. The reasons for activation on LinkedIn according to age groups

In Serbia, LinkedIn is mostly used for networking – 33.1%, then for personal branding as experts in a certain area – 18.3% and finding companies and people for business cooperation, while 10.6% use LinkedIn for finding a job. Both men and women use LinkedIn in almost the same way, except that percentually the second position for women is using LinkedIn to find people for business cooperation (16.9%), while the second position for men is using LinkedIn to find a job (16.2%). However, statistically relevant gender difference has been identified in using LinkedIn to find a job ($X^2=8.004, p=.005$), so it can be concluded that the hypothesis on the reasons for using LinkedIn social network (H1) has been partially proved. If the difference between age groups is analysed (fig. 1), it can be observed that for the majority of the mentioned reasons for using this social network there is a statistically relevant difference between age groups. The participants over 35 years of age use LinkedIn for personal branding and networking, while those between 25 and 35 years old use it mostly for new business endeavours. As a result, the hypothesis on different reasons for using LinkedIn business social network depending on different age groups (H2) has been proved almost completely.

Table 1. Differences in the purpose for using LinkedIn between age groups

The purpose of use	% of the participants using LinkedIn for the given purposes			X ²	Sig.
	younger than 25	between 25 and 35	older than 35		
Personal branding	13,6%	20,9%	30,8%	5,950	,052
Connections	21,6%	39,0%	65,4%	24,583	,000
Questions and answers	1,2%	3,5%	7,7%		
Finding companies/partners	11,1%	22,7%	23,1%	8,330	,016
Finding a job	8,0%	12,2%	15,4%		
New business endeavours	6,8%	17,4%	15,4%	8,867	,012
n=360					

As for the use of LinkedIn for networking regarding the profession of the participants (Fig. 2), it has been found that 81.82% of the employees in human resources use this social network for that purpose, 72.22% of the employees in public relations; 59.1% of those in marketing; 28.89% of those in management and organisation, and 27.4% of those in ICT and the Internet.

Chi square test has shown that in the majority of cases there are statistically relevant differences among the participants, so the hypothesis on the reasons for using LinkedIn among the participants with different professions (H3) is considered to be proven.

Table 2. Differences in the purpose for using LinkedIn between the participants with different professions

The purpose of use	% of the participants using LinkedIn for the given purposes					X ²	Sg.
	IT	HR	MAR K	MEN ORG	PR/Med Kom		
Personal branding	16,9	45,5	29,5	20,3	38,9	24,48 3	,00 0
Connections	27,4	81,8	59,1	29,0	72,2	49,59 2	,00 0
Finding companies/partners	16,1	63,6	27,3	17,4	33,3	30,46 2	,00 0
Finding a job	10,5	18,2	11,4	15,9	11,1	5,556	,35 1
New business endeavours	12,1	45,5	20,5	13,0	22,2	22,50 7	,00 0
n=360							

Although LinkedIn represents a professional network whose main purpose is somewhat different in comparison with a typical social network, more than half the number of the participants say that they network with the same or similar contacts as those on Facebook or other social networks. This indicates that Serbian participants do not pay much attention to and do not differentiate their contacts on different social networks regarding the purpose (business or private), unlike the USA participants.

An average Serbian LinkedIn user is quite passive in the sense of asking questions and responding to certain subjects in the area of interest or the area they belong to. The most active of all the participants are the representatives of human resources – 40% of them use at least one of the above mentioned activities and 45.5% of the representatives aged between 35 and 44 also use them.

Although personal branding takes the second position on the list of purposes for using LinkedIn, more than half the number of the participants have no recommendations – 58% of them, while 27% have one to three recommendations, 10% have four to seven, while 5% have more than seven recommendations (Fig.3).

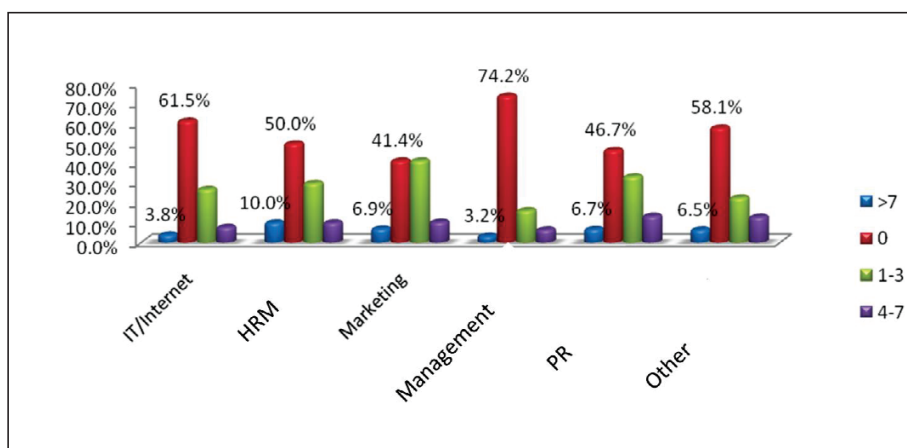


Fig 3. Recommendations on LinkedIn sorted by professions in Serbia

Human resource employees have at the most “more than seven“ recommendations – 10% of them, while those belonging to management and organisation and IT have at the most “no recommendation“ representatives – 74.2% and 61.5% respectively.

Since many participants have no recommendations on LinkedIn, it is not a surprise that 53% of them do not give recommendations at all, while 44% say that they give their recommendations to those who deserve them, in their opinion. The human resource participants are once again at the top of the list – 77.8% of them give their recommendations to those who deserve them, while 60% of the participants from management and organisation, IT and other occupations, respectively, give hardly any recommendations. Furthermore, men

are more willing to give recommendations – 47.8% of them, while 40.3% of women feel ready to write a recommendation for those who, in their opinion, deserve it.

So far as the employment is concerned, only 18% of the participants have been contacted by the employers to fill the vacancies in companies. One of three participants that have been contacted for possible employment belong to the area of IT and the Internet, while human resource and marketing participants take the second position on the list with 19.4%. A little more than a third of the participants are optimistic about using LinkedIn for the purpose of employment, while more than a half of them are not sure, but deem it possible. Men are more optimistic – 38.9% of them think that LinkedIn can help them in searching for a job, while 30.1% of women share their opinion.

Conclusion

Joining online community through virtual social networks by activating a profile is the first step in the processes of building a personal image in the Internet surroundings. An important aspect of managing a personal image on social networks is the controlled management and posting of various contents within personal profiles. Social network profiles have become an important source of information that can be used for different purposes.

According to the research conducted in Serbia, it can be concluded that most participants use browsers in order to gather and check the information about themselves and the others. The interest for the browsed information varies depending on the age of the participants. Users younger than 25 mostly search for information about their peers, while the older participants focus mainly on business contacts. Other people profile descriptions, photos and contact information are most frequently searched on social networks by the users in Serbia. It is now much easier to establish new contacts via the Internet, but it must be pointed out that the general impression about an individual should not be formed exclusively on the information found on social networks. [15]

LinkedIn business social network is used mostly for networking, but also for personal branding, which shows that certain individuals recognise this channel of communication as an opportunity for building their own professional image. Definitely the least used LinkedIn potential is an active participation in discussions concerning the areas of interest to an individual for the purpose of being recognised in the desired business area. This is supported by the result which shows that three of four LinkedIn users in Serbia do not actively use the groups that concern their profession.

Furthermore, most users do not have any recommendations on LinkedIn, and those who have them do not exceed three. On the other hand, the participants give their recommendations to those who, in their opinion, deserve them, and not reciprocally. The actual effects of using LinkedIn professional social network, like possible employment, have affected only 18% of the participants, which were contacted by a company, mostly in the area of information and communication technologies. Such results indicate that LinkedIn is not recognized as a relevant potential human resource database in Serbia.

The reasons for activating a profile on LinkedIn business social network mostly depend on the participants' occupation, so the employees in the area of management and organisation use LinkedIn for finding a job, while the employees in the area of public relations and marketing use this network for personal branding. The employees in the area of human resources use LinkedIn mainly for business networking.

Considering the fact that the trend of crossing the boundaries between real and virtual world is still in progress, it is very important for the individuals to manage their personal image, both in real and virtual surroundings by controlling the published information. It is particularly important to draw the young users' attention to all the consequences that can affect both personal and professional life after publishing certain information. Therefore, the first step in personal image management is to educate users in this area. [20]

On the other hand, apart from raising the levels of awareness and education with the young, companies in Serbia should pay attention not only to using social media for marketing purposes, but also to recognising many other possibilities that social networks offer, such as the recruitment of potential employees. However, companies should also have rules for using social media and social networking websites so that the employees could be warned about the negative effects of certain activities that can harm the company image.

In order to successfully build a professional image on virtual social networks, certain rules for presentation are recommended – find yourself online using Google and compare the search results with those of your business partners and colleagues in your business area. Then create a LinkedIn profile and join the groups relevant to your profession. It is also very important

to upgrade your Facebook and LinkedIn social network profiles on a regular basis, participate in business discussions and post materials on the Youtube channel, since the integrated communication proved to be the best way to build the online identity and image of an individual, which should by all means correspond to the image in the real business world.

This study points out the significance of LinkedIn business social network in building a personal image. It is very important for users to be informed about the possibilities that business social networks offer, but also to make a clear distinction between creating personal and business profiles and to use social business networks accordingly.

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