Understanding the Pain: Examining Individuals’ Online Reputation Management Behaviour and its Obstacles – A Grounded Theory

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Abstract

The Internet with its numerous services and innovative platforms initiated a transformation process of our society towards a digital and hyperconnected one [35, 45]. As a result, more and more personal data are available in the Web that enable creating of comprehensive online profiles and ease the derivation of implicit information for various purposes. Such information forms an online reputation and it is “used to make a value judgment about [a] … person” [17]. Consequently, personal online reputation management (ORM) gains significantly more importance for individuals because it influences their private and professional lives. Current body of knowledge lacks of understanding in this matter [50]. In order to provide a holistic view and gain a comprehensive understanding of individuals’ ORM behaviour we conducted a grounded theory based on 22 qualitative interviews with digital natives. Thereby, we contribute new facets to the general understanding of personal ORM.

1. Introduction

The Internet initiated a transformation process of our society towards a digital and hyperconnected one [35, 45]. It revolutionized the way people consume information, communicate, collaborate, or shop [13, 31, 41]. Those activities happen progressively more in the Internet because it allows people to create multiple (desired) partial identities with low effort, lets them act as authors and publish without prior verification, and supports individuals get together at little cost [41, 50].

Whereas the benefits of the Internet have been proven by its tremendous success, the nature of the Internet (e.g. anonymity, broad audience) generated uncertainty because individuals often interact with others without knowing anything about them [42, 50]. Online reputation, defined as “information used to make a value judgment about [a] […] person” [17], has been established as a trust anchor to counteract uncertainty in the Internet [14, 42]. It supports individuals’ decision by being an indicator for reciprocity, credibility, or competency [11, 21]. The increasing amount of available personal information in the Internet allows people to easily check others’ online reputation for various purposes [24]. Consequently, personal online reputation management (ORM) gains significantly more importance and influence because it affects individuals’ private and professional lives and hence, the society as a whole [24]. For example, 70% of human resource professionals have rejected job applicants based on the information they found online albeit most of them have not verified the retrieved information [9]. Just being “Facebook friend” with non-creditworthy people can lead to a low credit scoring and result in loan or mortgage refusal [43]. Furthermore, published information persists long in the Web and is hard to remove [26, 36]. The approval of the right to be forgotten (RTBF) in Europe underlines the importance of ORM [34].

Notwithstanding the influence of online reputation in our society [14] and individuals consider it as important, several studies revealed individuals’ ORM effort on a low level [e.g. 5, 9, 29]. Current research mainly focus on individuals’ privacy and protection strategies on social networking sites (SNS) [13, 39, 50]. However, ORM covers a wider range of actions such as actively reveal information to enhance reputation [14, 26, 30], which requires an extended view on the topic. Additionally, researchers demonstrated that existing and valid theories in the offline world does not explain individuals’ behaviour in the Internet [15, 40].

Therefore, to our best knowledge, since no existing theories or models deals with this important issue, we aim to provide a holistic view on individuals’ ORM behaviour on and outside SNS. More specifically, we intend to investigate and reveal individuals’ behaviour, their personal needs, and the obstacles they face during the ORM process [50]. Hence, we contribute to the general understanding of personal ORM and extend the body of knowledge by uncovering individuals’ inner thoughts and experiences. Distinct knowledge about individuals’ ORM behaviour and obstacles would help ORM service providers, policy- and decision-makers to understand and address current issues, enhance the legal framework and services. Consequently, our research question is: How do individuals manage their online reputation on and outside SNS?
In order to address the research question, we analysed individuals’ ORM behaviour by uncovering their behavioural patterns in the ORM process, which comprises of three phases [50]: Identification & Notification, Analysis & Evaluation, and Action. Additionally, we identified the most critical obstacles individuals face in each phase.

We decided for an explanatory research design because evidences from existing literature of related research streams [e.g., 2, 40] and authors’ personal experience indicate understanding individuals’ behaviour and obstacles is manifold and complex. Therefore, data collection, analysis, and model development are oriented upon the grounded theory methodology (GTM). It allows us not only to investigate the topic without predefined hypotheses and include aspects that have not been considered in previous literature but also allows us to integrate existing knowledge [7].

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 highlights the related work of our study. The next section introduces the methodology we used for data collection and analysis. Section 4 outlines the findings of the study, which are discusses in Section 5. The paper concludes with an outlook and further research.

2. Related work

Reputation has been subject to research endeavours in various domains [14], even though it lacks of knowledge in information system research [50]. Researchers of different disciplines have conducted comprehensive literature reviews on reputation and ORM [e.g., 30, 46, 50] and therefore, we provide a shorter overview of existing literature in this section.

Whereas traditional personal reputation management research in the offline world focuses on individual’s self-presentation in face-to-face interactions [18] and impression on others [28], research enquiries in the online world concentrate on both transferring offline theories into the online world [e.g., 15, 31] and leveraging the possibilities of the Internet in order to spread information to a broader audience [12], create management strategies for online reputation [38, 42], analyse people’s privacy behaviour on SNS [2, 33] and self-searching behaviour on search engines [32].

Researchers addressed several aspects of personal ORM and related topics. For instance, a multitude of researchers revealed motives for self-presentation and creation of desired identities on SNS [23, 47] as well as for personal ORM [48, 49]. Various papers investigated individuals’ privacy protection strategies on SNS [13, 52]. Further, existing concepts and theories have been transferred to the online world and used to analyse individuals’ self-monitoring behaviour on SNS [e.g., 15, 20, 40] and its correlation to personal traits [37, 41]. Computer scientists created tools to support self-monitoring [1] on SNS. Nevertheless, the above mentioned publications, like other studies in the last years [30], focus on SNS and rarely include other websites such as blogs or forums that can be sources for online reputation and require more effort due to unstructured data lack of control instance [50].

Others dealt with information retrieval outside SNS. For example, Nicolai et al. analysed the self-searching phenomenon and the performance of personalized information resources [32]. Industrial studies surveyed self-searching behaviour of individuals [e.g., 5, 6, 29]. Researchers also investigated how information influences individuals’ lives: 70% of human resource professionals have rejected applicants based on information they found online albeit they have not verified the retrieved information [9]. A case study revealed the influence of online history on the decision-making of recruiters [8]. But the current body of knowledge of ORM outside SNS lacks of in-depth understanding from individuals’ perspective [50].

This study focuses on holistic view on ORM, which means we analyse individual’s ORM behaviour on and outside SNS and the obstacles during ORM. We argue that Websites outside SNS are as important as SNS because they are sources for individuals’ online reputation and search engines can retrieve the published information. Further, information on Websites without a central gatekeeper or control instance is even harder to delete [36]. Moreover, individual’s ORM activities are on a low level [5, 29] although they consider online reputation as important [25].

To our best knowledge, current body of knowledge lacks of understanding in the matter of personal ORM behaviour.

3. Methodology

As outlined in the introduction, we decided for an explanatory research design. While we acknowledge existing research, we aim for a comprehensive understanding in that matter by revealing individuals’ behavioural patterns, obstacles during ORM, and individuals’ experiences. This allows us to develop an integrative model of ORM. In order to provide this novel and unique perspective on personal ORM, we chose a qualitative approach and therefore, our data collection, analysis, and model development are oriented upon the GTM by Charmaz [7]. Her interpretation of GTM is most suitable for our purpose because it allows us both creating a new model with a unique and holistic perspective, which includes facets that have not been considered by previous literature, and using and integrating existing knowledge because aspects of ORM have already been addressed (cf. Section 2).
3.1. Data collection

We chose young adults as sample because they grew up with information technology and have integrated the Internet into their daily lives and consequently, the amount of personal information available is higher for this group than other groups [44]. More, they are more related to online reputation issues (e.g. privacy protection, self-presentation) and are more likely to take care [5]. Therefore, they are suitable as sample for analysing ORM behaviour, personal needs and obstacles. Hence, we conducted semi-structured and open-ended face-to-face interviews that serve as primary data source. This interview method was chosen due to both its flexibility and possibility to frame the interview at the same time [4]. Respondents are not being interrupted in their mid-flow and the interviews can be concurrently structured based on the predefined questions. Further, face-to-face interviews provide more precise data since it creates a personal environment in which the interviewees speak more freely and their reactions as well as body language are visible.

In total we conducted 22 interviews between December 2013 and April 2014. The interviewees ranged in age from 18 to 30 years, with 12 males and 10 females, and their job experiences ranged from no experience up to three years. The educational background of the sample covers economy (7 interviewees), psychology (4), sociology (3), marketing (3), IT (3), art (1), and engineering (1). The interviewees were randomly acquired at the university according to the predefined conditions. Additionally, those interviewees referred us to new interviewees. Interviewees’ privacy and anonymity were guaranteed at the beginning of each interview in order to reduce their fear. Moreover, to avoid biased answers the interviewees were not informed about the acquisition conditions. All interviewees were German or people with a migration background but had been living in Germany for a long time.

The interviews were structured into two stages. In the first stage young adults have been interviewed that were acquired on the campus according to the previous mentioned conditions. We use this slice of data as analytical benchmark for the subsequent interviews. It comprised 12 interviews that resulted in approximately 110 single-spaced pages of transcribed text. The interview length was between 35 and 90 minutes. 10 interviews were conducted with young adults that were acquired outside the campus (referrals) in the second stage. It produced about 100 single-spaced pages of transcribed text and the interview length was at least 40 minutes. After the second round of interviews and the analysis, a trend towards saturation became visible and suggested that we had collected sufficient data [19].

3.2. Data analysis

Following the GTM, data collection and analysis were conducted in parallel. After each interview the intermediary results were analysed and discussed. The collected insights were compared to existing insights. Based on identified contradictions and emerging new questions, the interview guide was extended accordingly. This cycle of constant comparison guided by grounded theory literature [e.g. 7] enabled an in-depth analysis of people’s behaviour in the ORM process and the exposure of obstacles. Additionally, constant comparison enabled examination of questions from different perspectives. Data analysis was divided into two parts. In the initial coding process we conducted content analysis and examine the data with regard to recurring patterns, concepts, and high-level categories that explain people’s ORM behaviour and identify obstacles. We tried to remain as open as possible in order to identify concepts and relationships that were salient in the data [7] albeit the focus was on people’s behaviour and the obstacles during ORM. In this stage all interviews were coded line-by-line and produced over 200 codes. Those codes were further integrated and abstracted into the most important core categories and the properties of the core categories. In the second step (focused coding) the main categories were further developed and elaborated [7]. It resulted in a conceptual model, which is presented in Section 5.

4. Findings

This section presents the findings of the study and two facets of the study are elaborated: individuals’ behaviour in and the obstacles they face during ORM. The findings are structured along the ORM process, which comprises of three phases [50]: Identification & Notification, Analysis & Evaluation, and Action. We do so because the results of our study match with the ORM process and its phases. In the Identification & Notification Phase, relevant information about the individual has to be identified by the individual or a service (e.g. Google Alert). Then, the retrieved information needs to be analysed and evaluated with regard to its impact on the individual’s online reputation. Last, necessary and appropriate action has to be undertaken in order to remove or modify identified information that may harm the individual’s online reputation.

4.1. Identification and notification phase

We noticed during data analysis one statement that covers the common and average perception and behaviour in the Identification & Notification Phase:
“I used only Google for self-search and found out that results related to me are relatively rare. I typed my name in and some of the results referred to Facebook but there are many people with the same name. I also used the image search and found one photo of me when I was in a table tennis club. [...] I used Google to identify information about me because I was interested to see what information is available about me. But I have only done this once until now. I used only my name to find information about me.” (Interviewee Scarlett).

This exemplary quote shows many typical facets of the Identification and Notification Phase. Interviewees tend to perform superficial searches and do not invest much time to proof check the results. They do not dig deeper if the results do not look peculiar:

“I checked only the first three result pages and it was done in two minutes.” (Dexter).

The interviewees admitted to prefer Google as primary search engine because of its prominence and results. Some interviewees have tried other search engines but stuck to Google in the end:

“I prefer to use Google because it is the most famous search engine with the best algorithm. I have tried other ones but their results were not as good as Google’s results.” (Rene).

Further, we identified that interviewees tend to conduct name-focused search. The majority never considered using additional information like e-mail address, hobbies, or location in order to refine the results:

“I used my name for self-search. I didn’t add other information about myself for self-search. The results I got were about a celebrity and a ventilation system manufacturer.” (Dexter).

Although some interviewees know free alert tools due to their work, they have never considered using them for personal ORM. They conduct manual search to identify information about them:

“I have never considered using a tool like Google Alerts although I know it.” (Lucy).

Notwithstanding most interviewees do not conduct regular ORM [e.g. 5, 29] or set up alert services they want to be informed about new information about them. They rely on swarm intelligence and hope that friends and close peers in SNS find new information earlier than other stakeholders. Hence, their investment in identifying new information stagnate on a low level:

“In my job, I am not working with a computer every day. So I don’t get notified when somebody is posting about me. But I think my friends will notice if false information is published about me and they will notify me. And I think that other relevant people will notice such information later than my close friends.” (Max).

We identified obstacles that cause low commitment for self-search. Interviewees concede to have the bad feeling of arrogance. This hinders interviewees to conduct self-search more often because they do not like to feel self-regarding. The finding is in line with research about self-googling as part of narcissism [32]:

“To google yourself on the Web implies a little bit of arrogance and I don’t like this kind of feelings because I don’t want to be an egocentric guy” (Oliver).

Interviewees stop ORM after the Identification & Notification Phase if the costs exceed the benefits. For instance, filtering out namesakes is time-consuming and the costs exceed the (perceived) benefits:

“I found too many people with my name and I have to dig real deep in order to find a link which was about me and I was not able to modify the search in a way that only show results about me. After that I quit searching for myself because it costs too much time.” (Max).

Another facet of interviewees’ cost vs. benefit calculation is the degree of fame. The perceived likelihood of being searched by others is rather low if the interviewee does not feel famous:

“The degree of fame influences my frequency of self-searches. I am not so famous and therefore, I don’t think many people will search for me. The reason I am not doing it is because I think the resources I have to invest in are higher than the benefit. That would be different if I were a famous athlete. But before a specific event I check information about myself on the Web by conducting self-searches.” (Joshua).

Uninteresting results also leads to discontinuance of ORM endeavours:

“I have searched once for myself but the only result about me was the company website I am employed at. There was nothing more interesting so I didn’t do it again.” (Sophie).

Existing studies show the influence of usability on higher acceptance, adoption, and usage [e.g. 10]. We noticed usability as an issue in ORM:

- Require help from expert: “I have to say that it could be easier. I was told how to identify information on Facebook and how to restrict it. But it is too complicated so I guess many people lose motivation to do it.” (Joshua).
- Too complicated to use: “I think that tools for ORM that can be used to identify or remove information, such as privacy settings or vanity
search engines, but are too complicated. That’s why I stopped using them.” (Lucy).

• Individuals perceive current ORM solutions as uselessness: “I find self-search not usable because I have the feeling that they do not provide the easiest way for the user to restrict the results. I cannot influence anything if someone writes a comment about me on a website.” (Alex).

4.2. Analysis and evaluation phase

The distinction between the Identification & Notification and the Analysis & Evaluation Phase is often blurred. Interviewees analyse immediately after search engines present the results with little information as preview of each entry: “When I searched for myself, I looked at the first result page and didn’t see any interesting results. So at the end of the [first] result page, I stopped self-searching.” (Mika). We aim to investigate the analysis and evaluation process in which the interviewees consciously assess the impact of information on their online reputation. Hence, we define the opening of a link as the start of the Analysis & Evaluation Phase because this action shows the intent to appraise the retrieved information on a more detailed level.

In order to get initial impression how individuals perceive their own online reputation, we ask for an assessment of it. All interviewees see their current online reputation as at least neutral but mostly positive:

“I think my reputation is OK. I don’t expect anything conspicuous. I think it is rather positive than negative and most likely neutral because I don’t share so much information.” (Lucy).

Subsequently, we ask how this perception is formed and on what information the assessment base. Interestingly, interviewees do not exactly remember the details of the information of their last self-search:

“I’m unsure about the results of my last self-search. There were some results. But I kept in mind that nothing was negative.” (Jonas).

In order to learn how individuals’ decide whether information positively or negatively influence their online reputation, we asked questions about evaluation criteria in order to identify decisive factors. We noticed the non-existence of evaluation criteria. Instead, interviewees try to put themselves into audience’s position and evaluate information based on their gut feelings:

“I analyse retrieved information based on my gut feelings. Normally, I try to put myself in potential audience’s shoes and try to imagine what they will think about me when they find this information.” (Oliver).

In addition to gut feelings, the context in which the retrieved information is embedded has a significant influence on the outcome of the evaluation:

“I don’t have criteria to decide which information or photo about me is positive or negative. I rely on my gut feelings because it heavily depends on the context of the information and I need to decide individually.” (Max).

But the interviews struggle with unknown audience in the Internet [30, 51]. It creates uncertainty in their analysis process. Different audiences can interpret information in several ways: “[…] but the major problem for me is that I do not know who will see information about me. Some pictures are not appropriate for my employer or colleagues but they are OK for my friends. So last time I saw on Instagram photos showing me on a party, I don’t know what to do because on one hand I want my friends to see this photo because I want to share my life with them, but on the other hand I’m afraid that my employer see this photo and interpret it in an unfavourable way for me.” (Owen).

Subsequently, we take advantage of using semi-structured interviews and asked further questions about reasons why the interviewees do not try to find out how information is perceived by their employers or establish an online reputation, which is positively interpreted by both friends and employers. We realised again that the cost exceeds the perceived benefit:

“Deeper analysis of my online reputation costs too much time and I can’t be sure how my employer see the information except I explicitly ask them. I don’t think this is worth.” (Scarlett).

Further, we noticed that the most valuable resource is time and not money or any other resources:

“I know that there is some false information about me on the Web. But I don’t consider false information about me as bad enough that I would invest time to correct it. I wouldn’t invest time to write someone an e-mail and request deletion of false information about me.” (Henry).

4.3. Action phase

The Action Phase deals with closing the gap between actual and desire online reputation [50]. We
asked individuals’ about their strategies and experiences to identify their behaviour, patterns, and thoughts.

Some interviewees have requested content removal from third party Websites outside SNS and experienced that content removal is hard to achieve:

“One guy took some application photos of me and he uploaded those photos to advertise his company. I didn’t like that and asked him to take down these photos. But it was really hard because he didn’t want to do it in the first place. I need to be very persistent.” (Max).

Moreover, interviewees find current legal framework as unclear. They are unsure if they have the right to ask for removal and avoid the legal way because it is too expensive and time-consuming (The interviews had been conducted before the RTBF was released [16]):

“I don’t see a clear legal framework for ORM, I don’t know if I have the right to request a deletion of a photo or video, and consulting a lawyer is too expensive and complicated.” (Henry).

A common pattern for taking action in ORM is to stay authentic in their self-presentation and do not fake character traits. Further, the corresponding goal is to be perceived in the online world as in the offline world:

“I don’t try to fake anything. I try to stay authentic because I think this is more valuable. When I meet people in real life, then they will know that I didn’t lie.” (Joshua).

Pushing positive information in order to enhance online reputation creates a feeling of pitifulness:

“I find pushing positive information about myself pitiful. A potential employer should only see what he needs to know and nothing more. It is not his business to see my complete profile with all vacation photos or my hobbies.” (Joshua).

Professional SNS profiles are kept up-to-date because they are considered as applications. By revealing more information interviewees hope to benefit from it:

- Keep professional SNS profiles up-to-date: “What I do is update my LinkedIn or Xing profile in order to manage my online reputation because this is under my control. Also on Facebook I try to be careful and I do not post so much.” (Oliver).
- Perceive professional SNS as an application: “For me business profiles and my ORM behaviour towards it is a kind of an application or curriculum vitae. It starts with the photo; it is a very professional photo and not a party photo. The profile is much more focused but actually I am more willing to share information about myself for business purposes because I directly benefit from it. And I think that you can do more wrong in business life if nobody can find you on the Web.” (Lucy).

In contrast to professional SNS, strategies on private SNS are more focused on restricting access to content as well as protecting privacy rather than self-presentation. Depending on the desired online reputation, untagging names from comments or inappropriate photos are popular strategies [27]. If the photos are under control of the individual, the preferred strategy is deletion. The reason for taking care of tags and photos arises from the fear of misinterpretation: “I deleted a photo on which I drank alcohol because such photos can be easily misinterpreted. That’s also the reason why I restricted my privacy settings on Facebook in order to prevent new people seeing too many things they should not see.” (James). Other strategies on private SNS are remain passive or leaving group in order to protect privacy and reveal as less as possible:

- Taking care of tags and photos: “I delete photos or unlike pages on Facebook, when I am conducting ORM on Facebook. I also deleted all tags on Facebook. And the last time I changed my job, I deleted all likes related to my old job.” (Lucy).
- Leaving groups: “I think groups I am in can influence my reputation. I am very careful when I am joining a new group on social networks because some groups have funny names but can be easily misinterpreted. So I left some groups because I did not benefit from it.” (Mika).
- Remain passive: “I don’t post so many trashy things like what I am eating or that I have this interview right now or that I need to go to the toilet. I rather share stuff I like or tag my friends in funny videos. But I am quite reserved with regard to disclosure of my privacy.” (Joshua).

Deleting their social media profile is also an option if the investment to control information on these platforms becomes too high:

“I think I would delete my profile, if it was getting too much.” (Lucy).

Interviewees struggle with the usability of ORM tools and privacy options. In their opinion, it should be more self-explanatory and easier to find. Moreover, they perceive taking action as too time-consuming.

- Dissatisfaction with regard to ORM tools: “I don’t even know how to delete photos that others uploaded. This should be much easier and more visible. And from my point of view, even if you reported a photo you want to delete, it would take a long time before they take the content down. I have no experience but this is the feeling I have.” (Lucy).
- Lack of usability: “If I am searching for information about myself and I find false information, I don’t know what to do. There should be a button just next to the search results, which enables me to delete or report the information. […] I know that
there is a false address of me on the Web and I never took care of it because it would take too much effort. But with such a button I would have definitely reported this issue.” (Henry).

Interviewees find it hard to understand privacy options and consequently, they were unable to find settings that protect their privacy and let them use SNS without restrictions. Other interviewees complained about the rapid changes of privacy settings and terms of use:

- Do not understand the privacy settings: “I once tried to change my privacy settings on Facebook and it was pretty hard to understand them. I did it once and never did it again.” (Scarlett)
- Privacy settings changes too fast: “The major obstacle of the privacy settings is understanding the changes. Last time Facebook changed something in their terms of use I didn’t understand the dimension of the changes and didn’t know if I needed to change my settings.” (Alex)

Interviewees indicated frustration because information in the Internet is hard to delete. They do not know how to overcome this obstacle, which results in discontinuance of ORM endeavours:

“It is very hard when other people lie about you on the Web because your options are limited. You can only hope that your friends don’t believe it because when information is on the Web, it is nearly impossible to delete.” (Jonas).

5. Discussion

Figure 1 summarizes the findings and results of the study. It depicts individuals’ ORM behaviour patterns and the main obstacles they face during ORM.

Interviewees tend to conduct basic and superficial searches in the Identification and Notification Phase and they show limited interest in identifying all relevant information about themselves notwithstanding they consider their online reputation as important and influential. This finding confirms and supports existing research [25]. Moreover, they used to conduct self-search only based on their full name. Furthermore, interviewees do not use monitoring tools (e.g. Google Alert), which can ease their ORM endeavours, even though they have experience due to their work with such tools. Based on the findings of this study individuals’ behaviour is grounded in the current perception of ORM tools. The lack of interest arises from the lack of usability. Interviewees see current ORM solutions as too complicated and/or the search results as too poor. People seem to need a more effective search engine that only shows them the relevant results. An efficient and ORM-centric search engine can help to overcome the factors “too complicated to use” and “perceived uselessness”. Another way to support ORM endeavours would be to promote already available alert services for personal ORM purposes because interviewees relate such services to corporate ORM.

The main findings in the Analysis and Evaluation Phase are interviewees’ reliance on gut feelings during the analysis and evaluation of retrieved information and the non-existence of predefined evaluation criteria. Moreover, they perceive the distinction of good and bad information as strongly contextual-dependent. The reason for this behaviour is due to the high reach and anonymity of the audience in the Internet, which results in uncertainty [26]. People are hardly able to create different online reputations for specific audiences because the viewers are anonymous. As a result, the most used strategy is to remain passive and strict access on SNS. From their point of view, such strategies lead to a neutral or positive online reputation. But this is a misconception because human resource professionals often do not perceive online invisibility as neutral or positive [3] because they expect an applicant to be visible. Therefore, a better understanding of audience’s evaluation criteria is required in order to build a
more audience-appealing online reputation. Moreover, the effectiveness of a good online reputation is not directly visible or perceptible, which means the interviewees are unsure if their ORM endeavours were worth the effort. Taking these uncertainties into account, it is clear why interviewees consider perceived effort higher than perceived benefit, which leads to cancelation of ORM endeavours in this phase.

Interviewees see privacy settings as a preventive measure but the majority do not use individual sharing options in order to restrict content access to a specific audience [13]. This behaviour is grounded in the rapid changing and incomprehensible privacy options of SNS. Therefore, individual sharing options and privacy measure on SNS lack of usability, which confirms previous research [13]. Consequently, usability should be the first priority of ORM and SNS providers. In particular, privacy settings and terms of use of SNS should be more stable and more self-explaining.

We noted different strategies on private and professional SNS. On professional SNS interviewees are more active and try to keep profiles up-to-date whereas they tend to be passive and stay invisible (e.g. untag photos [27]) on private SNS. This bidirectional behaviour can be explained by the expected outcome. Interviewees see chances to get better opportunities for their career if they present themselves on professional SNS, which they do not see on private SNS:

“For me business profiles are like an application or CV. It starts with the photo; it is a very professional photo and not a party photo. The profile is much more focused but actually I am more willing to share information for business purposes because I directly benefit from it. And I think that you can do more wrong in business life if nobody can find you on the Web.” (Lucy)

Interviewees desired online reputation is congruent with their offline reputation. In order to reach this, they try to stay authentic. Further, they feel uncomfortable to push positive information, which is in line with their feeling of being arrogant while self-searching [31].

The most mentioned obstacles in the Action Phase are related to the characteristics of the Internet and legal framework. In the former case interviewees are aware that deleting information on the Web is hard and it may take a long time. They also know it is possible to retrieve information albeit it is deleted (e.g. from archive.org). In the latter case, they know their options are limited. When interviewees see the obstacles they stop considering ORM because the success of their ORM endeavours is uncertain. To ease people’s life in this matter ORM service provider should aim for tools that empower users with effective and fast deletion. Moreover, lawmakers should clarify the legal boundaries between the defence of personal rights and freedom of speech. The RTBF can be the first step towards effective ORM, but currently it lacks of clarity of distinction of personal rights and freedom of speech [36].

Overall, the issues and potential obstacles in each phase are greater than the benefit interviewees see. Consequently, it is no surprise that interviewees rarely conduct ORM [5, 29] and indicated frustration. Moreover, the degree of frustration is high enough to let people act paradoxically (cf. Section 1 and 2). Therefore, ORM service providers should enhance their solutions in order to empower individuals as well as support their endeavours. Lawmakers should lay the foundation for effective ORM by defining the boundaries of personal rights and freedom to speech for the RTBF. Beyond this, available (free) ORM solutions should be more promoted in order to create awareness.

The findings of this study are focused on German digital natives due to the chosen sample. Although, we believe that the results of the study could hold true for a broader population, we acknowledge the limitation of the study and its generalizability. Conducting the interviews with the same set up in other countries, ages, culture, or educational background may result in other findings and implications. For example, in most Asian countries the definition of reputation (also referred to as “face”) is different than in Western countries and causes more personal shame and decreases much more the social status of the individual [22]. With the introduction of the RTBF in Europe, people may change their perception and behaviour in the future. However, short and informal re-interviews with some interviewees revealed the changes in the legal frameworks have not reached the broader population.

6. Conclusion and outlook

Understanding individuals’ ORM behaviour and the obstacles they face is the next step towards enriching knowledge to the research of personal online reputation. We identified multiple facets of behaviour by elaborating on the three phases of the ORM process. This study uncovered how people identify information about them, how they analyse their online reputation, and what they do in order to manage it. Moreover, we discovered common patterns in the ORM behaviour of German digital natives. Further, we identified general and common obstacles in each phase. They hinder individuals to take care of their online reputation. In summary, the whole ORM process need better support by the industry or lawmakers. The complete study provides substantial insights into people’s perception and behaviour with regard to ORM and it builds the baseline for many stakeholders. For instance, ORM service providers can improve their services by taking individuals’ behaviour into account and easing their pain by
helping them to overcome the obstacles. Lawmakers can help individuals based on the results of the study by empowering the users and clarify and specify the boundaries of personal rights and freedom of speech. Moreover, researchers could invest in research on machine learning, artificial intelligence, or semantic web (Web 3.0) in order to provide simple and effective tools to individuals.

Nevertheless, due to the limitations, the results of this study need further specification and elaboration in order to create testable constructs, a hypothesis or proposition. Therefore, we encourage other researchers to challenge our results and extend our research.

7. References


[6] BrandYourself and Harris Interactive, National Study: Just Google Me - How our personal search results affect our everyday relationships, from who we do business with, who we vote for and even who we date, 2012.


