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Superlatives and Scope of Improvement in Online Recommendations: Breath of Life or a Kiss of Death?

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Abstract

Online professional networks are important tools used by recruiters to find qualified candidates for job openings. Within these networks, professional recommendations are used to supplement profiles and add credibility. These recommendations tend to be overly positive, full of superlatives, and lacking in critical statements (referred to as scope of improvement). We draw on the theory of online trust to argue why having scope of improvement and superlatives may affect various dimensions of trust, and how online trust, in turn, can affect the usefulness of a recommendation and the likelihood of receiving an interview. We contribute to the body of work on online trust both theoretically and empirically. From a theory perspective, we explain why including scope of improvement and superlatives in recommendations on online professional networks may help certain candidates in getting an interview but hurt others. From an empirical perspective, we provide a unique empirical setting that allows us to observe not only the effect of scope of improvement and superlatives, but also validate the theoretically argued underlying process. Furthermore, through discussion with recruiters, we identify then test contextual factors that differentiate recommendations on online professional networks from traditional recommendations. In this study, we use a scenario-based, quasi-experimental survey to test the effects of superlatives and scope of improvement on the usefulness and effectiveness of recommendations. Further, we test the mediating role of trust and how the experience levels of the recommendee affect the sign and strength of these relationships. Our findings indicate that including scope of improvement increases the effectiveness and usefulness of recommendations for candidates at low- and middle-levels of experience. For the most experienced candidates, including scope of improvement has a negative effect on effectiveness. Superlatives negatively affect the perceived competence of the recommender and thus should be avoided. This negative effect is reduced when combined with scope of improvement.

Keywords: Online trust, social networks, recommendations, superlatives, negative messaging