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Tempus Fugit: Unraveling Temporal Occurrence and Display Order Effects of Online Information on Employer Impressions

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ABSTRACT

As social media readily enables users to traverse a targets' posted content across time, the present research explores the effects of two types of temporality – occurrence and display order – on offline perceptions. Using the context of employers' impression formation of job applicants, $N = 200$ human resource personnel were exposed to a job posting and an applicant's resume and supplemental social media posts in a fully crossed 2 (occurrence order: posts becoming either more or less positive over a 4-year period) and display order (most-recent posts presented either first or last), and a one-condition offset in which all posts were made 2 years ago and displayed in a random order. Findings support the main effect of temporal occurrence so that more recently posted information more strongly influenced resultant perceptions of the applicant's employability, person-organization fit, and starting salary; but neither primacy or recency effects of display order were detected. Findings are discussed with respect to warranting theory, primacy/recency effects, and the hiring process.

What's past is prologue. (Shakespeare, 1611, *The Tempest*, II.1, 253-254)

Time typically flows in one direction: forward (Carnot & Thurston, 1824/1880). Consequently, when we meet someone new, we first learn about their most immediate self through their initial disclosures. However, online tools – especially social media – provide opportunities to alter the flow of time, both examining far back into a zero-history partner's disclosures and the order in which information is displayed. As such, mediated communication affords a naturalistic opportunity to explore disparate temporal flows and effects on impression formation, considering

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the order in which information chronologically occurred as well as the order in which that information is displayed.

The present research advances our understanding of temporality in impression formation in three important ways. First, we advance the role of time collapse in impression formation, exploring how information gleaned about a target at multiple time points (relative to a single time point) impacts impression formation. Second, within the context of employers' impression formation of a job applicant, this work provides initial evidence for the effects of observing a target's online persona across multiple social media posts across time on impression formation of the target's offline self, within the context of employee selection. Third, this work helps understand the independent and interactional effects of temporal display order on impression formation by considering the degree to which online information affects offline perceptions based on the order in which information actually *occurred* or was merely *displayed*. Findings of an original experiment ($N = 200$) reveal a main effect for posting temporality so that information from more time points (rather than a single time point) fosters stronger impressions, and more recently posted online information more strongly affects employers' perceptions of a job applicant. However, the primacy or recency of display order of online claims did not affect employers' perceptions of the applicant nor was there an interaction effect between posting and display temporality.

Literature Review

Warranting Applicant Information

Online information is an integral part of modern life, particularly an individual's engagement in online activities through social media. Individuals, therefore, have greater opportunities for selective self-presentation that may reflect their offline selves and characteristics to various degrees of accuracy (Ellison et al., 2006). Walther and Parks (2002) refer to the process of connecting an online presence to an offline identity as *warranting*. The warranting value of an online claim depends on the perceived believability of its tether to the offline attributes of a target. Information shared in a public or social channel is said to have greater warranting value because it allows others to either validate or challenge an individual's claim (Parks, 2011). A claims' warranting value is also tied to a user's ability to modify claims and manage the accessibility of information about them online (DeAndrea, 2014). Employers use *warrants* to, "authenticate an online self-presentation" (p. 187), ensuring the information found online about "Mark Smith" correctly guides their offline impressions of the "Mark Smith" applying to the job (Carr, 2016).

Much of the information employers initially request from applicants (e.g., applications, resumes, interviews) contain highly curated self-

presentations (Feintzeig & Fuhrmans, 2018). Consequently, employers continue to seek supplemental applicant information via online tools (Express Employment Professionals, 2020). Especially, as social media gradually collapse personal and professional presentations (Marwick & boyd, 2011), individuals may engage in less-selective behaviors and disclosures online than in a hiring context (Roulin & Bangerter, 2013). Employers are therefore paying attention to online cues as extensions of an applicant's character, ethics, and suitability to assess applicant qualities (Carr et al., 2017, 2024). Employers especially seek applicant information to assess multiple dimensions of employability and personnel fit (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2015; Roulin et al., 2015).

Attributional Effects of Multiple Online Disclosures via Temporal Collapse

Online information affects offline applicant perceptions commensurate with the valence of information, consistent with predicted outcome value theory (POV; Sunnafrank, 1986). Briefly, POV proffers individuals to use initial interactions to reduce uncertainty, to achieve more accurate impressions of a target, and to achieve goals of positive relational outcomes. Specifically, Sunnafrank (1986) predicted individuals are more attracted to partners when expecting more favorable outcomes: Learning positive information about a target results in stronger (i.e., more intense) positive attitudes toward that target and increases expectations of more favorable future interaction and contacts, whereas learning undesirable information about a target results in stronger negative attitudes toward that target and decreases expectations of favorable future interactions and contacts. Extant research has supported this effect within the context of hiring so that more favorable online information results in more positive applicant perceptions and unfavorable information results in more negative perceptions of a job applicant (Bohnert & Ross, 2010; Carr et al., 2014, 2016, 2024; Hartwell & Campion, 2020).

Yet a shortcoming of this extant experimental scholarship has been its use of a single social media stimulus to carefully control for the online information of interest in that study (e.g., valence or topic of claim, date the individual post was made). The use of a single online post has allowed for careful control over study variables, helping demonstrate causal effects of social media content on subsequent offline perceptions of a job applicant. However, this approach presumes the stimulus post is totemic of the individual's entire social media presence and history, limiting understanding of the effects of social media content on employers' perceptions of applicants. This shortcoming led Carr et al. (2024) to call for work that explores "how an amalgam of positive and negative posts may influence employers' perceptions" (p. 21).

Effect of multiple temporalities in disclosures

Exploring multiple artifacts of an applicant is particularly *apropos* for social media, which make it possible to retrieve and observe a bevy of a user's behaviors, including self-presentations (Ellison & boyd, 2013), which tend to faithfully warrant posters' offline personalities (rather than merely being self-promotive or idealized; Back et al., 2010). Scholars have long-understood that multiple bits of information and later disclosures about a target can more strongly-guide impressions than a single bit of datum (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Sunnafrank, 1986). However, the role of information temporality in this impression formation process remains understudied (Carr et al., 2024; Hollenbaugh, 2021). One of the most fundamental questions therefore is whether the same number of data points affects perceptions of a target if those data are reflective of an applicant across multiple temporal points rather than a single time point.

Though undertheorized, it is likely that multiple temporal points provide more information value to perceivers (relative to similar observations at a single time point), as behaviors over time can represent less-strategic self-presentations. As individuals' self-concepts and personalities can change over time (Jones & Meredith, 1996; Shapka & Keating, 2005), temporally disparate self-presentations may illustrate how an individual has changed over a period of time, providing predictive power regarding the trajectory of present and future attributes. Carr et al. (2024) provide some foundational support for this, finding that the same online datum results in stronger perceptual outcomes as it was made more recently. Looking back at a target across multiple life stages may be even more informative than a target's self-presentational artifacts at a single time point. Consequently, we hypothesize that online observations guide stronger perceptions of the target's offline self when those online artifacts represent a longer temporal period than a single temporal period. Formally:

H1: *Online information about a target from multiple time points results in stronger impressions of their offline self than online information about a target from a single time point.*

Time collapse

A second question about the role of temporality depends on information of varying valence across time. If you see multiple negative online behaviors about a target over multiple years, POV (Sunnafrank, 1986) would predict your perceptions of the target are negative and more certain: Since that person was and continues to be a jerk, you are confident they really are a jerk. But what happens when the valence of online self-presentations change over time? How does that affect perceptions of the target offline? This becomes the critical question for the present research and is particularly germane for social media.

Whereas perceivers cannot (yet) go back in time to observe a target at an earlier time, social media naturally enable (and sometimes highlight) *time collapse*, "a blurring of time and a muddling of past and present experiences" (Brandtzaeg & Lüders, 2018, p. 2). Social media desynchronizes impression formation, providing individuals look at both contemporary and past self-presentations by the target through both focused temporal searches (e.g., seeking posts within a date range) or general browsing back in time. Users seem to be showing greater awareness of time collapse, sometimes engaging in self-presentational strategies to reduce traces of their past selves that may not exemplify their current desired self-presentation, including deleting or untagging undesirable past content (DeAndrea, Tong, et al., 2018; Dhir et al., 2016). As individuals curate past and present self-presentations to reflect their contemporary desired self (Birnholtz & Macapagal, 2021; Huang et al., 2020), perceivers form impressions of an offline target based on available online artifacts.

We proffer a simple premise to initially explore the temporal effects of information: Over time, people can get "better" or "worse." These are subjective terms, but they reflect the broad changes individuals' personalities and selves can undergo, given sufficient time. Though some individual traits stabilize in later life stages (Costa et al., 2019), individuals' self-concepts and personal attributes are particularly mutable and changeable in adolescence and emerging adulthood (Jones & Meredith, 1996; Shapka & Keating, 2005) as individuals develop autonomy and agency. Recent research has identified that, generally, perceivers incorporate more recent online behaviors into their concept of a target's current offline self (Carr et al., 2024), suggesting some recency effects with respect to the chronology of actual posts. We therefore predict that for a target whose online presence "gets better" over time (i.e., presents increasingly positively valenced online artifacts), perceivers' impressions of the target's current self should be more positive than impressions of a target whose online presence "gets worse" over time (i.e., presents increasingly negative online artifacts). Formally:

H2: *When presented with multiple temporal claims, more-recently-occurring online information more strongly informs perceptions of a target's current offline self. Conversely, more-temporally-distal information exerts weaker effects on perceptions of a target's current offline self.*

Effect of Information Display Order

In addition to the actual chronology of events (i.e., Do an applicant's posts become more positively- or negatively valenced over a multi-year period?) is the potential for social media to display information in various orders,

including *chronologically* (i.e., first-posted to most-recent) and *reverse-chronologically* (i.e., newest to oldest) (Huang et al., 2020). In addition to the temporal order in which a user's online behavior occurred, it is also of both theoretical and practical interest to understand how the order of encounter or display of online information affects perceptions of the target's offline self. Two disparate processes – primacy and recency – guide competing hypotheses regarding the effect of presentation order on perceptions.

Primacy and recency effects

The *primacy effect* posits that our impression of a target is determined by the first information, word, or descriptor we see about the target, regardless of subsequent information (Asch, 1946; Sullivan, 2019). In other words, "information presented early in a sequence has more influence on final judgments than information presented late in the sequence" (Tetlock, 1983, p. 286). For example, if the first social media post by a target to which the perceiver is exposed is negatively valenced, the perceiver's impressions of the target is dominated by that negative impression (Sabet et al., 2019); just as judgments of a person tend to be more positive if the first word used to describe them is positive rather than negative (Asch, 1946). Primacy effects are driven by biases in memory and attention (Anderson & Hubert, 1963), including initial information anchoring latter information (Hogarth & Einhorn, 1992; Steiner & Rain, 1989) and the perception that the most important information is always presented first and thus disregard latter details or information (e.g., Hendrick & Costantini, 1970; Stewart, 1965).

Contrarily, the *recency effect* expects information presented last or later in a series of information has the most influence on a person's subsequent judgments (Richter & Kruglanski, 1998), overriding previous impressions. Although individuals find it hard to completely ignore earlier information about a person, from this perspective the most recent information has the strongest effect on that overall impression. For example, Wiedenroth et al. (2021) found interpersonal impressions based on later information about an individual strongly influenced the overall impression of that individual. According to Forgas (2011), the recency effect affects impression formation as it is easier to remember the information encountered recently than previously, and thus individuals form impressions from recent information rather than struggling to remember and assimilate initial information. This tendency to rely on later judgment may also be attributed to continued or increased acquaintance (Wiedenroth et al., 2021), as later judgments of a person's behavior are more predictive of an individual's overall impression.

Both primacy and recency effects have been documented in the hiring process a. Springbett (1958) revealed information presented early during in-person interviews had greater influence on hiring decisions than information disclosed later in the interview (see also Sydiaha, 1961). More recently, Arnulf

et al. (2010) demonstrated a primacy effect of resume layout so that individuals whose resumes listed key job information first were more likely to be short-listed/selected for an interview. But similar research has also demonstrated a recency effect, including the last bit of information about an applicant most strongly guiding personnel staffs' perceptions of the applicant's ability to learn the job (i.e. P-J fit), get along with coworkers (i.e., P-O fit), and overall suitability (i.e., employability) (Farr, 1973). More recently, Thomas and Reimann (2023) found human resource personnel are susceptible to recency bias when deciding who to hire. Given these mixed findings regarding primacy and recency effects of information display order on resultant impressions, we proffer two competing hypotheses:

H3: *Exposure to information about a target from multiple time points exerts a primacy effect, whereby the first-displayed information (regardless of temporal occurrence) asserts the strongest impression formation value.*

H4: *Exposure to information about a target from multiple time points exerts a recency effect, whereby the last-displayed information (regardless of temporal occurrence) asserts the strongest impression formation value.*

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 200$) were recruited via the Prolific online recruitment tool, which has been found to provide high-quality responses from engaged and targeted participants (Eyal et al., 2022). To be eligible to participate, individuals had to be at least 18 years old, currently work at least 30 h/week in a human resource or personnel job in the United States, and have at least 6 months of human resources or personnel experience. Participants self-reported their gender ($n_{female} = 96$, $n_{male} = 100$, $n_{self\text{-}identified} = 4$) and age ($M = 42.90$, $SD = 11.24$). Participants' organizations reflected 24 different industries, with Health Care and Social Assistance (11%), Information Industry: Scientific or Technical Services (10%), and Retail (9.5%) the most-represented. Participants were paid US$2.50 for their participation in the ~10-min study.

Procedure

Participants were recruited to take part in an online study in which they were asked to review a job applicant for an entry-level management position. All participants were initially exposed to an identical job posting, followed by the applicant's resume (Appendix B & C). Then, participants were told that

additional social media posts from the applicant (selected as exemplar posts from across several years) were found that may be informative and asked to review them as well. Finally, after carefully reviewing all materials, participants completed several standardized scales of their perception of the job applicant.

Stimuli

This research hypothesized temporal effects of online information on impressions of the target's offline self, necessitating five experimental conditions. Consequently, stimuli were developed to reflect a 2 (temporality of self-presentation: increasingly positive over time v. increasingly negative over time) × 2 (temporality of information flow: chronological v. reverse-chronological order) crossed design with an offset condition (all five posts displayed in a random order with no temporal collapse, all dated 2 years ago). Instagram posts were created (using Zeeob.com's Instagram post generator), identifying "Frankie Greene" from Missoula, MT as the poster, thereby tethering the online claims to the offline applicant via name, username, and geographic location. The study design used five Instagram posts of differing valence to depict the applicant.

A pretest ($N = 78$, $n_{\text{female}} = 42$, $n_{\text{male}} = 35$, $n_{\text{transgender or self-identified}} = 1$) identified "Frankie Greene," as an androgynous name using a 7-point semantic differential with "masculine|feminine"' endpoints ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.46$), that was nondifferent from the scale midpoint, $t(77) = -1.93$, $p = .06$). Additional potential spurious effects of gender or other physical attributes were minimized by using the default profile image in the Instagram profile and ensuring images did not depict the actual poster. Use of this gender-neutral target helped mitigate potential gender effects from either the participant or target.

Valenced social media content

The content of the applicant's purported social media posts were manipulated to depict either increasingly- or decreasingly problematic social media content over a 5-year period. As participants viewed a total of five posts, we based the social media content on Hartwell and Campion's (2020), identification of social media content employers consider to be of varying problematicness. As Reeves et al. (2016) cautioned that single-message designs can raise concerns about message effects, two stimuli for each cluster (i.e., level of valence) were developed and used. The pretest also confirmed participants perceived each of the two posts within each cluster as nondifferent with respect to the positivity of impression formed about the poster while significantly differing from posts in all other clusters (see Appendix A).

Extremely negative posts depicted the applicant's use of hard drugs and a xenophobic caption. *Moderately negative* posts had a suggestive photo and a profane caption that contradicted their resume (e.g., suggesting they did not

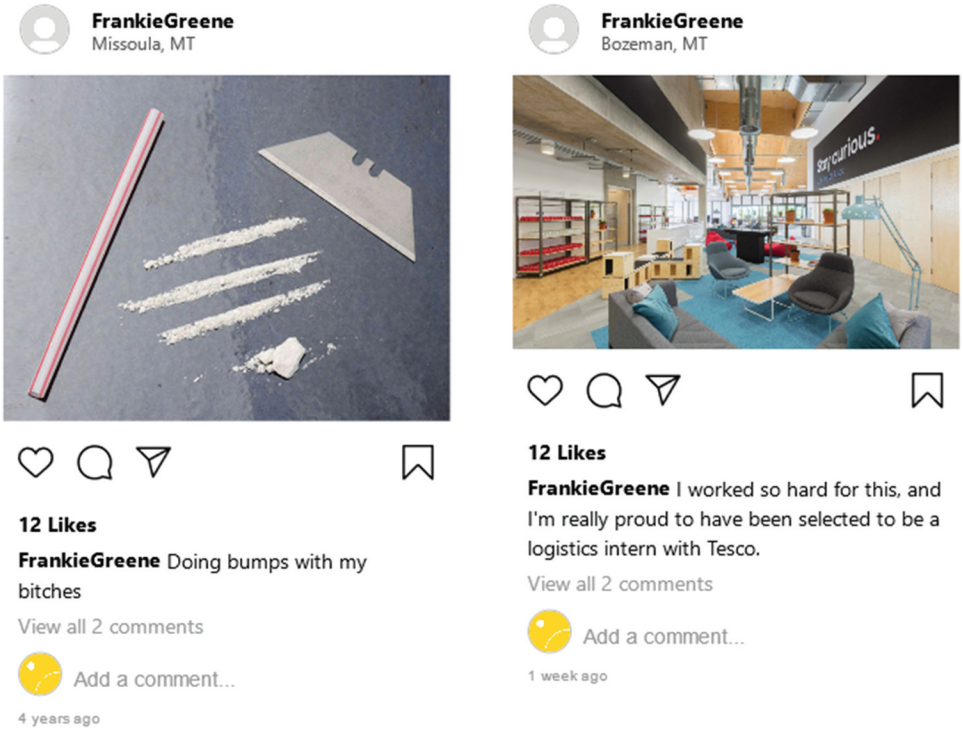

Figure 1. Sample Stimuli, Depicting Extremely Negative-Valenced Post from Four Years Prior (left) and Positively–Valenced Post from One Week Prior (right). The Valence and Timing of Stimuli Posts Varied Based on Experimental Conditions So That Participants in Experimental Conditions Saw Either Applicants' Improvement or Decline in Applicants' Content Over Time in Either Chronological or Reverse-Chronological Order.

actually do the summer internship claimed). *Mildly negative* posts depicted the applicant's copious alcohol consumption and captioned using text speak and improper grammar. *Neutral* posts depicted a vacation picture and a caption alluding to the family trip. *Positive* posts depicted the applicant's desk during either an earlier internship or recent work (as noted in their resume) and a caption about work successes. Figure 1 provides example stimuli, and all stimuli are available in the study's OSF repository.[1]

Experimental Conditions

Posting temporality

One independent variable of this research was *posting temporality*, conceptualized herein as whether the valence of a target's post became more positively or negatively valenced over time. To manipulate posting temporality, social media stimuli were dated as being posted 4 years ago, 3 years ago, 2 years ago, 1 year ago, and 1 week ago. Thus, stimuli posts reflected the target across a particularly critical period in the development of young adults (Jones &

Meredith, 1996; Shapka & Keating, 2005). In addition to the date within the post, participants received supplemental instructions in the survey engine about when the social media post had been made (i.e., "We found this post from **four years ago**."). The five posts were then organized so that they either became increasingly positive over the time period (i.e., depicting the applicant as getting "better" over time, moving from extremely-negative posts about drug use to positive posts about professional accomplishments) or increasingly negative over the same period (i.e., depicting the applicant as getting "worse" over time, moving from positive posts about professional goals to extremely negative posts about drug use).

Display temporality

The other independent variable of this research was *display temporality*, conceptualized as whether social media posts were displayed chronologically or reverse-chronologically. In the *chronological* condition, posts were displayed with the oldest post (i.e., "posted 4 years ago") first, regardless of valence. In the *reverse-chronological* condition, posts were displayed with the most recent post (i.e., "posted 1 week ago") first, regardless of valence.

Control condition

The control condition used the same posts as the experimental conditions, with one of each of the five levels of valenced content. However, the display order of posts was randomized so as to minimize the impact (e.g., primacy or immediacy) of display order. Additionally, all posts in the control condition were dated "posted 2 years ago" (with corresponding supplemental note in the survey engine). Thus, participants in the control condition saw posts similar to the experimental conditions but not depicting any sequential change in the target (i.e., not getting "better" or "worse") and with all posts made at the same time period (i.e., the midpoint of the chronology displayed, "posted 2 years ago"). This allowed for testing of H1, and ensuring it was the chronological and display order of information that caused effects rather than the contents of social media posts themselves.

Measures

Following exposure to study stimuli, participants completed several standardized and validated scales, which operationalized study variables. All except the starting pay items were assessed using 7-point Likert-type scales, with greater values indicating higher perceptions of that construct. After capturing study variables, participants also self-reported their age, gender, and industry (by selecting among a list of the 30 sectors identified by the North American Industry Classification System).

Dependent variables

Hypotheses make generalized predictions about the relationship between the temporality of online information and offline perceptions, as these hypotheses should generalize across targets and contexts. Within the context of hiring, several concepts are critical to hiring managers and have been well researched as important outcomes. Specifically, general *employability*, the sense the applicant would be able to procure any job (even if not the one to which they are currently applying) (Adkins et al., 1994; see Carr et al., 2017, 2024); *person-job* (P-J) *fit*, the congruence between the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) required to do the job and the applicant's KSAs (Edwards, 1991; see Carr et al., 2024); *person-organization* (P-O) *fit*, "the match between an applicant and broader organizational attributes" (Kristof, 1996, p. 643; see Roulin & Bangerter, 2013); and the *starting salary* an employer would offer the applicant were they to be hired (Bohnert & Ross, 2010) have all been used as outcome variables in related research. Consequently, all four are operationalized as dependent variables in the present work. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations are presented in Table 1.

Employability. The applicant's overall *employability*–the perception they were capable of generally obtaining employment, even if not with the specific job to which they were applying – was assessed using Adkins et al. (1994) 4-item scale. Items included, "Given my overall impression of this candidate, they are 'employable' (i.e., this candidate will receive other job offers)," and "People in my organization will feel this candidate is very employable (will receive many job offers)." The scale demonstrated excellent reliability, McDonald's $\omega = .92$.

Person-job fit. *Person-job fit* was operationalized using Cable and Judge's (1996) three-item scale. Sample items included, "The applicant's abilities and education provide a good match with the demands this job would place on them," and "To what degree do you believe the applicant's skills and abilities 'match' those required by the job." The scale demonstrated good reliability, $\omega = .89$.

Person-organization fit. *Person-organization fit* was measured using Cable and Judge's (1996) three-item scale. Sample items included, "The applicant's values

Table 1. Study descriptives and bivariate correlations.

Variable	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3
1. Employability	3.69	1.47	-		
2. Person-Job Fit	4.08	1.68	.71*	-	
3. Person-Organization Fit	2.75	1.61	.78*	.61*	-
4. Starting Pay (USD)	33,622.34	2,894.89	.53*	.48*	.52*

Notes: * $p < .001$.

'match' or fit the organization and the current employees in the organization," and "The values and 'personality' of this organization reflect the applicant's own values and personality" The scale demonstrated excellent reliability, $\omega = .96$.

Starting salary. Finally, participants were told new hires to similar positions were offered a mean starting salary of US$36,000 ($SD$ = $4,000), and shown a normal distribution chart with the same information. Participants were then asked to indicate the starting salary they would offer the applicant, presuming they were selected for a job, using a slider bar to indicate a starting salary between $30,000 and $42,000, inclusive.

Results

Hypotheses were initially tested using contrast analyses. Whereas analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests can identify nondirectional differences among multiple conditions, contrast analysis uses contrast weights to test specific patterns of differences among various conditions, specified *a priori* (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1985). Contrast analyses thus represented a more rigorous and direct test of hypotheses than an ANOVA which would require additional *post hoc* testing. Contrast weights for each hypothesis were assigned given the expected patterns of differences for each hypothesis so that higher contrast weights reflected an expectation of more favorable impressions of the target's offline self and are presented in Table 2.

H1 predicts online information about a target from multiple time points results in stronger impressions of their offline self than online information about a target from a single time point. All conditions presented the same online content, differing only in the time the posts were made and the order in which they were displayed. Consequently, to test H1, we contrasted the two chronological display order experimental conditions and the control

Table 2. Contrast weights for posting temporality and display order.

	Increasing Valence		Decreasing Valence		
Condition	Chronological	Reverse	Chronological	Reverse	Control
H1: Temporality Matters	+4	0	−3	0	−1
H2: Posting Temporality	+2	+2	−2	−2	0
H3 & H4: Display Primacy/ Recency	−1	+1	+1	−1	0
n	40	40	41	39	40
Employability *m*(*sd*)	4.36 (1.21)	3.94 (1.64)	3.10 (1.26)	3.39 (1.19)	3.67 (1.71)
Person-Job Fit *m*(*sd*)	4.29 (1.61)	4.46 (1.80)	3.80 (1.47)	4.12 (1.44)	4.08 (1.68)
Person-Organization Fit *m* (*sd*)	3.38 (1.54)	3.14 (1.67)	2.07 (1.31)	2.32 (1.34)	2.81 (1.83)
Starting Pay *m*(*sd*)	34,227.73 (2,912.23)	34,168.90 (2,673.09)	32,973.41 (2,432.15)	33,586.74 (3,483.10)	33,170.23 (2,894.89)

condition, expecting (consistent with H2 below) that resultant offline perceptions would be more positive in the condition in which participants were displayed as improving (contrast weight + 4), more negative in condition in which participants were displayed as worsening (contrast weight −3), and the control condition (in which the same online claims were displayed, but in random orders and all dated 2 years ago) would serve as a midpoint between the two experimental conditions (−1). The two reverse-chronological display conditions were weighted as 0. Contrast analysis supported the pattern of effects for three of the four outcomes: *employability* ($t[195] = 4.03.891$ $p < .001$ [one-tailed]), *person-organization fit* ($t[195] = 3.62$, $p < .001$ [one-tailed]), and *starting salary* ($t[195] = 2.09$, $p = .02$ [one-tailed]). The pattern of differences in *person-job fit* was not significant, $t(195) = 1.50$, $p = .07$ [one-tailed]). Thus, H1 received qualified support.

H2 predicts that perceivers presented with multiple online claims from a target made over multiple time points are more influenced by more recent posts. Functionally, this hypothesis would be supported if conditions in which participants' perceptions of Frankie Greene's offline self became increasingly positive over the 4-year time period in which the applicant posted. Contrast weights of +1 were assigned to conditions in which the target's post became increasingly positive over time; weights of −1 were assigned to conditions in which the target's post depicted them getting "worse" over time; and a contrast weight of 0 was given to the control condition as there was no temporal variance in posts made. Contrast analysis supported the pattern of effects for three of the four outcomes: *employability* ($t[195] = 4.01$ $p < .001$ [one-tailed]), *person-organization fit* ($t[195] = 4.56$, $p < .001$ [one-tailed]), and *starting salary*[2] ($t[195] = 2.02$, $p = .02$ [one-tailed]). The pattern of differences in *person-job fit* did not reach conventional levels of significance to be considered a good fit to the data ($t(195) = 1.56$, $p = .06$ [one-tailed]). Thus, H2 received qualified support, as the data were consistent with the pattern of differences for three of the four outcomes.

H3 and H4 present competing hypotheses about the order in which information is displayed. H3 predicts a primacy effect (i.e., earlier-viewed online posts exert the most influence on offline impressions, regardless of when the post was chronologically made) and would functionally expect that individuals initially exposed to more positive posts (regardless of time posted) should experience more favorable impressions of the poster offline than participants initially exposed to more negative posts. H4 predicts a recency effect: That the last-viewed online posts exert the most influence on offline impressions (regardless of when the post was chronologically made) and would functionally expect that individuals exposed to more positive posts at the end of their review (regardless of time posted) should experience more favorable impressions of the poster offline than participants exposed to more negative

Table 3. Multivariate regression predicting applicant perceptions including only the four Experimental Conditions ($n = 160$).

	Employability		P-J Fit		P-O Fit		Starting Salary	
Predictor	F	$\eta^2_{partial}$	b	$\eta^2_{partial}$	b	$\eta^2_{partial}$	b	$\eta^2_{partial}$
Posting Temporality (PT)	18.15*	.10	2.71	.02	20.84*	.12	4.02†	.03
Display Temporality (DT)	.09	.001	.92	.01	.00	.00	.37	.002
PT X DT	2.73	.02	.09	.001	1.12	.007	.54	.003
Constant	1219.03	.89	1104.68	.88	549.61	.78	21731.11	.99
$F(3, 156)$	7.04*	.12	1.26	.02	7.36*	.12	1.67	.03
R^2 (R^2_{adj})	.12 (.10)		.02 (.01)		.12 (.11)		.03 (.01)	

†$p < .05$; * $p < .001$.

posts at the end of their information review. Because these competing hypotheses predict similar patterns of effects, but simply in different directions, they were tested in a single contrast analysis, weighting conditions consistent with H3. Contrast weights of +1 were assigned to conditions in which participants were exposed to posts that were initially positively valenced and then got increasingly negative; −1 to conditions in which participants were exposed to posts that were initially negatively valenced and then got increasingly negative; and 0 to the control condition. Contrast analysis did not support either the primacy or recency effect of information display for any of the four outcomes: *employability* ($t[195] = -1.56$, $p = .06$ [one-tailed]), *person-job fit* ($t[195] = -.28$, $p = .39$ [one-tailed]), *person-organization fit* ($t[195] = -1.01$, $p = .26$ [one-tailed]), or *starting salary* ($t[195] = -.74$, $p = .23$ [one-tailed]). The lack of support for competing hypotheses H3 and H4 suggests display order of online information did not affect participants' perceptions of the target's offline self.

Finally, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) of just the four experimental conditions was used to further probe main and interaction effects, and presentation order was entered as fixed effects; and employability, P-J fit, and P-O fit, and starting salary were all entered as dependent variables. The model enabled both another means of hypothesis testing as well as helping account for the covariance between the study's dependent variables (see Table 1). Consistent with prior analysis, the MANOVA revealed a statistically significant main effect of *posting temporality*, Wilks' $\lambda = .86$, $F(4, 153) = 6.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_{partial} = .14$, but not of *display order*, Wilks' $\lambda = .02$, $F(4, 153) = .70$, $p = .59$, $\eta^2_{partial} = .02$ (H3 & H4). Additionally, there was not a significant interaction effect of temporal occurrence and display order, Wilks' $\lambda = .98$, $F(4, 153) = .98$, $p = .42$, $\eta^2_{partial} = .03$. Taken together, these MANOVA results (Table 3) further support the prior contrast analyses, revealing a main effect of posting temporality, but neither a main or interaction effect of display order.

Discussion

This research responds to prior calls (i.e., Carr et al., 2024; Hollenbaugh, 2021) to further study the role of temporality in impression formation. The study helps disentangle *what* claims were made and *when* claims were made by uniquely testing multiple claims made over a multi-year period. Findings provide initial support for the perceptual effects of information temporality, illustrating that the same information has differing effects on impressions formed when the same claims are made over a multi-year period rather than a single time frame. Findings also challenge two often-discussed psychological order effects: Neither primacy and recency effects of display order were identified nor was there an interaction between posting temporality and display order. Taken together, these data reveal that – within the hiring context – job applicants are perceived as more employable, demonstrating better person-organization fit and would be offered a higher starting salary when their social media presence displays increasingly positive content during a critical life stage than when the same posts display increasingly negative content, regardless of the order in which information is actually presented. These findings are discussed below with respect to warranting and primacy/recency effects.

Warranting Implications

The present study reemphasizes warranting's online – offline tether (Walther & Parks, 2002), demonstrating that online information, when tethered to an offline identity, affects perceptions of that offline self. Support for our first two hypotheses evidences that perceivers account for the temporality of online information when forming impressions of the offline target's current attributes (H1), with more recent self-presentations more strongly informing perceptions of the target's contemporary self (H2). Even though the actual online claims made were held constant across all conditions, differences emerged based on the temporality of claims made. As such, our findings help further evidence the role of temporality in impression formation, specifically with respect to warranting. Beyond reinforcing that online claims appear to have greater warranting value when claims are temporally closer to the present (see Carr et al., 2024), the present work further evidences that the warranting value of more recent online claims is strong enough to overcome the lower-value warrants of temporally distant online claims. The online you now matters most to impressions of the contemporary offline you. As our histories continue to expand in social media records, perhaps this is good news: We do not appear to be judged by the things we did long ago as much as we are by the things we have done recently.

Another implication is that individuals' impressions of an offline target from online information are stronger when online information is obtained from several different timepoints than a single time. Just as POV (Sunnafrank, 1986) predicts that repeated encounters can help perceivers form and be more certain of their impressions, it appears that multiple temporal episodes (rather than a singular one) can help vulcanize perceptions of a target. As supported in H1, the same claims caused disparate impressions of the target when temporally ordered differently (i.e., improving or worsening across 4 years) and different still when temporally cooccurring (i.e., the same claim all being posted 2 years ago). In particular, as information about a target is more readily extracted online than it is to obtained via other uncertainty reduction strategies (Ramirez et al., 2002), the temporality of online information may serve as another warrant, helping to discern who is the current online self and who is simply an online shadow of a past self. Multiple online selves across different timelines offer more cues as compared to a single timeline, and the more cues employers have on a target applicant, the stronger their perceptions of the applicant's current self.

These findings also offer implications for hiring perceptions where employers utilize online cues to assess an individual's character and professional suitability, specifically by evidencing how multiple claims can guide employers' perceptions (see Carr, 2016). One implication is that potential employers may view an applicant more favorably when they identify a progressive trajectory in the applicant's online self-presentation, illustrating growth, adaptability, and a solid ethical foundation. Beyond simply becoming more positive, posts in this research became less problematic (from an employer's perspective), presenting a broad swath of time over which the applicant's post indicated increasingly professional behavior. This resulted in participants perceiving the applicant as more employable, a better fit with the organization, and willing to offer them a higher starting salary. Just as recent grades are a more valid indicator of a student's current proficiency than grades from prior years (Wilson, 1983), employers appear to integrate more recently-occurring behaviors (at least those presented online) into their current schema of an applicant's present self.

Display Recency/Primacy Implications

Prior work is divided about the effects of display order, and this study muddies those waters even more: Information display order just did not matter. Temporal flows and display orders seem to function differently. This study found no evidence for the existence of display order effects on the judgments made about an applicant. That is, whether the information is seen first or last, it has no effect on the impression of a job candidate. This lack of support for the hypothesis further contributes to the ongoing debate regarding primary

and recency effects (Bellucci, 2023; Hogarth & Einhorn, 1992). Counter to either of these display order effects, the present data reveal that display order has very little to no effect on the judgments made about an individual, at least with respect to judgments hiring professionals make about a job candidate from online information.

A potential explanation for this may be that hiring professionals focus on the overall online persona of a candidate when making judgments, and therefore the information that was seen first or last does not influence overall judgments. As Wiedenroth et al. (2021) notes, it may be valuable to evaluate the overall information about an individual instead of giving greater importance to the order in which information was obtained. Overall information may provide a better prediction of a candidate's future behavior, which is the essence of making these judgments in the first place (Wessels et al., 2021). As such, the present research reveals a critical distinction between the function of temporal flows for information and presentation order, which appear to function differently.

Fit Implications

It is notable that we consider H1 and H2 as supported as significant differences in the expected patterns are identified for three of the four dependent variables (i.e. general employability, P-O fit, and starting salary). Employers viewed applicants who "improved" over time as more generally hirable, better fits with the organizational zeitgeist, and were willing to pay them more but did not necessarily think the applicant differed with respect to the knowledge, skills, and abilities they could bring to bear (i.e., P-J fit). This discrepancy is similar to Carr et al.'s (2024) discrepant findings between employability and P-J fit as outcomes. One reason for the present discrepancy in P-J fit could be that the time frame depicted – the applicant's college years – can reflect wide variations in individuals' personalities (Jones & Meredith, 1996). However, gains in KSAs may be much more stable, as any individual remaining in college or a trade program over a four-year period would (hopefully) continue to gain KSAs oriented to post-college work (Cegielski & Jones-Farmer, 2016). Consequently, P-J fit may not have the same temporal presumptions as more "soft skills" such as personality or overall employability.

The disparate effects on fit dimensions (i.e., P-J and P-O fit) may also have been a result of the difference in cues presented in stimuli. As Skowronski and Carlston (1987) note, different trait dimensions can have differing effects, particularly based on their valence, specifically finding that negative morality behaviors tend to guide stronger perceptions, whereas positive ability behaviors guide stronger perceptions. In the stimuli for the present study, negative posts could be classified as morality behaviors (e.g., drinking, partying), leading to stronger negative effects on personality perceptions (i.e., P-O fit) without the

same magnitude of effects on ability perceptions (i.e., P-J fit). This may explain why P-J perceptions ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.68$) were typically more positive than P-O perceptions ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.61$), $t(199) = 13.00$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.38$: negative social media claims were more moral in nature, and thus exerted disproportionate effects in participants' overall assessments. Future research should consider all of these potential explanations for the differing effects, particularly by considering different types of category memberships, providing cues that may assign the actor to different trait categories to determine how they independently affect perceptions of various dimensions of fit.

Future Directions

Although the present work fills a gap in the hiring literature about the use of temporal online information to guide perceptions of the applicant offline, several gaps remain. One important area is the process by which employers extract and identify online claims. That process was held stable for the experiment herein, simply presenting five "noteworthy" online posts. But employers may not scroll back 4 years into an applicant's history, nor would they find every post informative. Future work may apply an information-foraging approach (see Nontasil & Payne, 2019) to understand how employers browse and recall various online posts. Another gap is to extend these findings beyond entry-level positions into the hiring process for upper-level jobs, particularly in which there may be preexisting knowledge of the applicant. For example, is the effect of long-past negative online behaviors mitigated when those indiscretions are already known by the recruiter? Finally, future work may continue to explore potential moderating effects that may cause disparate effects based on recency and valence of information. Prior work has noted that an employer's perception of people as being able to change can ameliorate more temporally distant negative posts (Carr et al., 2024), and additional work should extend and expand this line of research to consider under what conditions primacy and recency may be activated differently or result in disparate effects. Ultimately, much research is yet needed in the domain of the integration of social media into contemporary hiring processes.

Finally, future work should extend these findings beyond the hiring context. The processes identified herein were theorized at a fundamental level, only applied to hiring at the operational level, and should generalize more broadly. However, any other relational instances would involve seeking online information about a target's past, and future work should replicate the processes identified here in other contexts. For example, within established romantic relationships, would discovering an unknown long-past romantic entanglement via your partner's social media lead to an increase in uncertainty or decrease in attraction (see Planalp et al., 1988)?

Conclusion

Antonio's aphorism, "The past is prologue," suggests that what has happened sets the stage for what is and what will be. Though who a person *was* may inform their future self, their history is not necessarily who they *are*. The present research explored whether someone's past self – made accessible via social media – strongly warranted that person's contemporary self. Findings reveal that more recent online behavior and communication more strongly guide impressions of the present offline self. For applicants, their recent online history is a better predictor of their likelihood of getting a job offer, their perceived personality, and even their starting salary than long-past behavior. Particularly as social media continues to expand how much of our past selves are readily accessible, perhaps that the prologue is not as impactful as the most-recent act is good news.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Instagram Posts, Groupings, and Differences from Pretest

There was a significant difference within-pair for the neutral condition as four of the posts in the neutral category did not differ from posts in the positive condition. Consequently, we paired and used the two neutral-valenced items that significantly differed from the mildly negative and positive posts, even though the posts themselves differed.

[1] Superscript numbers indicate *p*-values.

Post Valence	*Post Text*	n_{post}	m_{post}	sd_{post}	n_{pair}	m_{pair}	sd_{pair}	w/i pair *t*-value[1]	b/w pair *t*-value[1]
Extremely Negative	Wanna play a game with us	28	1.39	.74	60	1.42	.77	$.25^{.80}$	
	Doin bumps with my bitches	32	1.44	.80					$3.32^{.001}$
Negative	Another wild night out!  #PartyAnimal	32	1.97	1.09	61	2.03	1.20	$.42^{.68}$	
	That feeling when you're getting screwed by more than your boss	29	2.10	1.32					$3.63^{<.001}$
Mildly Negative	1 tequila, 2 tequila, 3 tequila, FLOOR 	27	3.04	1.63	56	3.16	1.42	$.62^{.53}$	
	Pub Tuesday, so we b getting wrekt!	29	3.28	1.22					$5.34^{<.001}$
Neutral	I though spending a week with my family in Yellowstone	29	4.21	1.42	57	4.65	1.54	$2.20^{.03}$	
	Enjoying Spring Break with some good travels. See you when I get back!	28	5.11	1.66					$3.85^{<.001}$
Positive	I worked so hard for this, and I'm so proud to be selected to be a logistics intern with Tesco.	28	5.68	1.49	57	5.69	1.34	$.03^{.98}$	
	This is going to be my view this summer. May not look like much, but I'm interning at CVS.	29	5.69	1.20					

Notes.
Total pretest $N = 78$; $M_{age} = 32.04$ ($SD_{age} = 11.98$); $n_{female} = 42$, $n_{male} = 35$, $n_{transgender\ or\ self\text{-}identified} = 1$.

Appendix B

Job Posting Viewed by All Participants

ENTRY-LEVEL MANAGEMENT

Our organization is currently expanding, and is looking to fill an opening as an entry-level manager position. This position offers full training for candidates with or without industry experience.

If you are driven, competitive in nature, and looking for a stable career then this would be a good opportunity for you.

Candidate Preferred Qualifications:

- A Bachelor's degree in BA or BM preferred but not needed
- Passion for helping people and developing relationships
- Excellent time management and organizational skills
- Sales & customer service experience
- Excellent communication skills
- Self-motivated and goal-oriented mindset
- The desire to be active in the community
- Knowledge of CRMs (Salesforce preferred)
- Competent with Microsoft Word/Excel/PowerPoint

*Must be able to commute to the main office in Great Falls for interview and one week training.
*Must have a clean background and reliable transportation.
*Must be able to complete Classroom & Field training program.
*90 day evaluation period before advancement.
*Great retirement plan and other benefits

Job Types: Full-time, Contract
Pay: $30,000.00 - $42,000.00 per year
Schedule: 8 hour shift, Monday to Friday
Work Location: One location
Work Remotely: No

Appendix C

Applicant Resume Viewed by All Participants

FRANKIE GREENE

3[redacted]aly Ave., Missoula, MT 59801 · 406.43[redacted]
Frankie.Greene@umontana.edu · @FrankieGreene

I am an upcoming college graduate with education and experience in management and administration. I am seeking an entry-level management job.

EDUCATION

MAY 2024 (EXPECTED)
B.S., BUSINESS MANAGEMENT, UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Relevant coursework:

- Business Finance
- Principles of Marketing
- Strategic Management
- Leadership and Motivation
- Business Ethics and Social Responsibility
- People, Processes, and Technology (I & II)

EXPERIENCE

MAY, 2023 – AUGUST, 2023
OPERATIONS MANAGEMENT INTERN, CVS, BOZEMAN, MT

- Worked directly with management, Sales, and Marketing departments to brainstorm, discuss strategy, and mitigate finance issues.
- Informed Operation Manager of expense and inventory incidents for assistance and remediation.
- Studied recent sales records and trends to recommend adding new merchandise to product lineup.

SEPTEMBER, 2019 – APRIL, 2023
SALES ASSOCIATE, MURDOCH'S RANCH & HOME SUPPLY, BOZEMAN, MT

- Sold men's wear, women's shoes, and house wares.
- Assisted department manager with local advertising campaigns.
- Developed "Ask the Manager" customer feedback system, helping reduce customer complaints by 15% over a 3-month period.

JANUARY, 2021 – MARCH, 2021
LOGISTICS INTERN, TESCO, CORK, IRELAND

As part of my International Experience course (BMGT 493), I worked with the regional hub of Tesco supermarkets, embedding in their regional branch where I assisted in logistics and scheduling.

- Aided in the scheduling of regional acquisition and distribution of perishable produce for over 100 Tesco locations.
- Worked to ensure GDPR compliance with employees and external vendors.
- Produced cost-benefit analyses for multiple distribution channels.