

LinkedIn as pressure builder.

The development of social comparison behavior and performance pressure among students through
LinkedIn's media environment and affordances.

Student Name: Sophie Merckx

Student Number: 699771

Supervisor: Tim de Winkel

Media & Creative Industries

Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

Erasmus University Rotterdam

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ABSTRACT

This thesis will focus on LinkedIn's influence, the professional social media platform, has on young users. As the position of social media is becoming significant in society, the process of self-presentation of identities is changing in the online environment of platforms. The focus will lie on the combination on LinkedIn's affordances and media environment. During this research the following question was centered: How do the affordances and media environment of LinkedIn contribute to performance pressure and social comparison behavior in its users ages 20 till 25, and how this can be explained through Ervin Goffman's concept of self-presentation? Relevant theories for the purpose of this research were the social comparison theory, affordance theory and Goffman's theory on self-presentation for analysis, to see how LinkedIn can influence the behavior and actions of users. The combination of these theories forms an understanding of the connection between the medium and the position of the recipient, in this case students. The theoretical framework produced a critical perspective into the influence social media has on the values of society and user's behavior. To analyze the phenomenon of LinkedIn, an affordance analysis and interviews with students was conducted. Results show that multiple affordances are responsible for creating a feeling of being watched by others, which constrains the ability to express true identities freely and changes the student's self-presentation. The affordances carry relevance for the development of the attitudes towards certain self-presentations and the act of social comparison behavior. Besides, the media environment of the platform enables an ideal performative presentation to become the norm, which influences the pressure to achieve similarly. The comparison to mainly other students leads to performance pressure. Feelings of stress, jealousy and insecurity regarding their own achievements are the consequence. Simultaneously, students are partly responsible for the over-positive presentation of a successful professional identity, which leads to others posting similar content and similar interaction with affordances. LinkedIn presents itself as a goal-orientated path for professional growth but is experienced as a place for individualist boasting. The analysis show that self-presentation of identity, that is performative for professional goals presented to the audience of LinkedIn, is significantly important when it comes to influencing the mental state of students. This paper contributes to further research about the influence of social media on mental health of young people.

KEYWORDS: *LinkedIn, affordances, performance pressure, social comparison theory, self-presentation.*

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1. Introduction

Receiving popups like “Congratulate Linda with her 2-year anniversary at ING Banking” is a daily reminder of the social media platform LinkedIn. While most social media platforms create an informal environment for entertainment, LinkedIn is in many ways the opposite. LinkedIn is designed to use for professional purposes such as applying for vacancies, sharing promotions, and recruiting (LinkedIn, 2023). A LinkedIn profile is a resume and an idealized presentation of identities, instead of reflecting reality (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 208). Profile pictures show suits, formal dresses, and a professional smile, while on Instagram people can show a glass of alcohol, something more daring and with friends. When creating a LinkedIn profile, users are questioned about their highest education level or their current working title. As LinkedIn has a professional purpose, career misfortunes are difficult to find in user-generated content or action-possibilities given by LinkedIn (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 208). LinkedIn has over 850 million users all over the world. The platform creates revenue by the payment of premium memberships and advertisements. 21.7% of LinkedIn users are 18–24-years-olds (Martin, 2024, para.1). LinkedIn claims the platform has become fundamentally important for the advancement of careers of professional users. “Building your professional brand” and “demonstrating your skills and knowledge” are described as the positive capabilities LinkedIn offers. Research shows that the most significant motivation for students to use LinkedIn compared to other social media, is career development (Florenthal, 2015, p. 30). However, the positive purpose of a platform can differ from the reality experienced by users.

The professional communication and purpose of LinkedIn can create different experiences for students or influence their well-being, compared to more informal social media platforms. Each social media has a different goal and has created new insights for research the economy, and society. Besides, changing how is reflected on the media of the last 20 years, some negative consequences have originated from the rise of social media. Think of discussions surrounding privacy, the controversial concept of the filter bubble, or how it also created more ground for toxic and discriminative communication (BNNVara, 2023). Another well-known worry of the ever-growing pervasiveness of social media is the experience of pressure, especially in youth. Social media has the possibility to alter the presentation of identities and how individuals perceive themselves through the application of social media. The self-image of young people is influenced by social media, leading to decreased self-esteem, belief in capabilities, and internal view of their identity (Cleland Woods & Scott, 2016, p. 43).

In academic literature about the negative consequences of social media on youth, there is a perspective on how social media conditions in society changes communication between people, self-reflection, and the balance between reality and ideality (Schlosser, 2020, p.1). Studying how social media influences the perception of individuals on themselves in social communication has been researched before. However, this literature overwhelmingly focuses on secondary school students, and their online behavior on more social platforms like Instagram and TikTok (Nasidi et al., 2024, p.

124). This is a gap in the literature that needs addressing.

Research by the Dutch Ministry of Education showed that 70% of higher education students feel pressure to perform in grades and careers (Nieuwsuur, 2019). This pressure is divided into pressure experienced by themselves or by the performances of others (ECIO, 2023). Confidence in career abilities is crucial for students entering the workforce and their professional identities (Wang & Fu, 2015, p. 656). The identity presentation on social media is the ideal version, presented as a performance for audiences (Vogel et al., 2014, p. 207). This influences upward social comparison, where an individual sees himself as less compared to others. This can lead to inspiration, but also low self-esteem and feeling inadequate (Vogel et al., 2014, p. 206). Self-presentation of identity is believed to be successful if accepted by the audience, which in this case means user's connections on LinkedIn. The personal demand to show the right performance related to professional norms in society on LinkedIn might be influencing performance pressure.

Social media has created the projection of an individual's different identities for independent social groups to join (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 201). As the perception of individuals through social media accounts is visible to everybody, self-presentations of identities are combined. Goffman (1959, p. 6) speaks of self-presentation being dependent on credibility. As social media becomes a regular presentation of people, different personalities cannot live separately. Research shows that companies check multiple social media accounts, besides LinkedIn, during the recruitment of new employers (Harvard Business Review, 2021). The concept of being watched by others has taken a new form when it comes to social media platforms. The visual panopticon discusses how platforms watch their users with all the data provided to them while using their services, but more importantly how users watch each other through their profiles and content (Fuchs, 2011, p. 137). What is perceived as private and personal, becomes visible to others. A strategy to construct self-presentation on social media is done with affordances. Affordances are an action that creates a relationship between users and the material of environments, for instance, LinkedIn (Ronzhyn et al., 2022, p. 3175). Affordances create action possibilities for actors. The user's individual context affects the interpretation of affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p. 4). Social media affordances are directions in which users act, that benefit the platform and the individual possibility to construct their identity online.

In this study the gap in knowledge for the influence of social media on students will be filled, by analyzing the professional platform LinkedIn from the inside and the views of the user in relation to the discussed theories above. As themes on LinkedIn are related to professional success, the influence of comparing oneself might add to performance pressure of students. To research if LinkedIn influences social comparison, the environment and affordances of LinkedIn need to be analyzed in connection to the creation of unrealistic self-presentation. To achieve this analysis, while contributing to the academic field, Goffman's theory (1959) on self-presentation will be used. Besides, the social comparison theory and affordance theory will be applied. Following the theoretical framework for this paper, the research question is formulated as: How do the affordances

and media environment of LinkedIn contribute to performance pressure and social comparison behavior in its users ages 20 till 25, and how this can be explained through Ervin Goffman's concept of self-presentation?

To answer the research question, interviews combined with an affordance analysis will be performed. Through interviews, the personal perspective of students on LinkedIn and its influence will be analyzed. With an affordance analysis the domain of the platform will be analyzed. How LinkedIn presents affordances and how students interpret them, may influence their performance pressure or social comparison behavior. Besides, affordances might contribute to uniting separate identities, changing self-presentation to performative. The connection between the production of surveillance in the viewer's society and LinkedIn's affordances needs to be explored (Fuchs, 2011, p. 139). Finally, it should be remembered that these platforms have been designed by people. This means that platforms are built on their values. The affordances and features have been constructed with a certain meaning and goals for its user. But this can be interpreted differently than intended. With these theoretical frameworks, this paper will be able to translate the analysis of LinkedIn's technical features and media environment, including the experience of students, into a critical reflection on the contributions of LinkedIn.

As students are struggling mentally, it is important to research how LinkedIn's environment and affordances might contribute to social comparison and performance pressure of young people (Nieuwsuur, 2019). This research addresses a gap of knowledge by applying the social comparison theory to LinkedIn which theory has been applied to Facebook and Instagram, though these represent social identities rather than professionals (Yang, 2016, p.704). There the focus lies more on the comparison between looks and popularity. Besides, earlier research was to understand the effect on users without analyzing at the medium. This paper aims to contribute to the field of critical social media studies, by researching the design and environment of LinkedIn through the affordance theory, while also developing a connection between LinkedIn and the well-being of students. In addition, this paper is interested in how the design of LinkedIn may create a viewer's society and performative self-presentation (Fuchs, 2011, p 142; Goffman, 1959, p. 398).

This thesis's societal relevance could be that the results can contribute to students and organizations understanding how social media influences their behavior and mindset, and perhaps change their online behavior to reduce the performance pressure or social comparison behavior LinkedIn creates. If the results show that LinkedIn's affordances and media environment impact the well-being of students, the platform itself might change. As society and its values are presented and formulated on social media, the influence it might have on young users who have grown up during the foundation of social media, must be analyzed to understand how the presentation of professional identity is understood through LinkedIn.

2. Theoretical framework

In this thesis, the goal is to understand the implications of media- and social theories on LinkedIn and how this relates to student's experiences. To place the research question in the field of relevant studies a theoretical framework will be produced. In section 2.1 a description of LinkedIn, a critical perspective on social media, and the affordance theory are discussed. This will then be connected to section 2.2, where the theories of Goffman, the social comparison theory, and performance pressure will be discussed in relation to LinkedIn. Finally, in section 2.3 the critical perspective on online surveillance on social media will be critically discussed.

2.1 Understanding LinkedIn and the role of affordances

LinkedIn is responsible for imagining a new form of professional opportunities and presentation, developing from an offline spheres like work, to online for a broader audience. In this section the relation between LinkedIn and the affordance theory will be discussed.

LinkedIn was launched in 2003, long before others like Facebook, Snapchat, or Instagram. The platform is not only used by individuals, but also companies who can post vacancies on their account. LinkedIn currently has over 850 million users in more than 200 countries (LinkedIn, 2024). The company was bought by Microsoft in 2016 (Hern & Kasperkevic, 2016). The reason behind this acquirement was Microsoft's business plan to add LinkedIn to an inclusive package for companies. The professional network would be part of their daily work systems. LinkedIn has changed the way society looks at professional information, requirements, and career starting points. As LinkedIn has a minimum age of thirteen, any teenager can start translating their CV to an online platform when they are still far away from a full-time job (BBC News, 2013). As presenting yourself on LinkedIn has become important for career development, universities and student organizations have started organizing LinkedIn classes for students to learn how to create a notable account for the future job market. LinkedIn explains its purpose as one of creating strong meaningful connections and that creating an account early is necessary, as it produces a less competitive environment when entering the labor market. Multiple websites mention that a LinkedIn account is a must, for online visibility is described as necessary (HERC, 2023). The pressure to create an account might be capable of producing a different level of motivation for the usage, as it is seen as an obligation for future career opportunities.

When discussing social media platforms such as LinkedIn or Instagram, the platforms will present the possibilities they create for their users, companies, and entrepreneurs. From finding likeminded users, following the latest news in different countries, communicating with your friends, to posting content related to your life and interests. Since the foundation has been laid for social media, new affordances have been added as live-streams, shopping, or payment strategies.

Unfortunately, even though social media is responsible for many positivity, the consequences their technical design and usage has created can also be negative. For example, user's data is used further than known to them, fake news and algorithms have altered the political public discussion, and the lack of serious surveillance has created an open space for racist, sexist, and discriminatory content to be produced (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 221). Besides, more personal effects influenced by social media activities are low self-esteem, online bullying, body image problems, and social comparison behavior (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016, p. 2). While social media creates room for each group, judging others has increased with the place these platforms have taken in our society. While many researchers focus on more social platforms, this research is interested in the professional environment of LinkedIn and the effects it might have on their young users.

If researching how social media platforms can influence their users, researching action possibilities of the platform through the affordance theory is possible. The affordance theory will be applied to understand which effect the meaning and influence the technological action-possibilities of LinkedIn can have on social comparison behavior or performance pressure. The affordance theory aims to determine how audiences interact with affordances. Gibson first described affordances as a relationship between animals and their environment, where the environment provides something (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p. 4). This means environments are understood through affordances, the given possibilities for users. An affordance does not change, but the perceived meaning changes within the user's context. This individual perspective is important, as affordances may create different meanings in the student's perception of LinkedIn. Affordances control user's actions and behavior, instead of causing it. This will be analyzed in that paper regarding LinkedIn influencing students' behavior. Affordances are dependent on the interaction and exploration of users (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p.6). Wellman describes how social media affordances can influence social structure and everyday life, for instance, the pressure to achieve professionally (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p. 9).

Affordances are perceived through the behavior and actions of others. With each affordance that is produced by the platform, for example the like button, a meaning is linked to the action. For example, liking a post shows the user's appreciation for the post. Social media environments provide something to the animal, the users, to contribute to their needs and actions. The behavior of other users through affordances might contribute to performance pressure, and social comparison to other users on LinkedIn. This paper aims to find if the conceived affordances create a connection between the action possibilities of users and the social meaning it creates regarding social comparison and performance pressure.

Social media platforms have been built on the implication of user's engagement with affordances which enables users to contribute to positive influences of social media like chatting with new friends, and the possibility of comparing yourself to others on platforms such as LinkedIn.

2.2 Social and psychological theories on identity formation

When social media platforms are researched concerning the personal influence they have on users, the field uses an interdisciplinary approach and applies social and psychological theories. For this research, those theories will focus on the construction of identity and how presentation can alter audiences. As we live in a social online environment, identity formation may cause pressure or comparison.

Self-presentation was described as a performance by Goffman (1959, p. 397), which is attributed to the fact that different identities individuals have for work, family, and friends, are now on open display for everybody through LinkedIn (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 202). Since the creation of the internet, individuals have been able to have complete anonymity if they desired, which gives them the possibility to create a new persona that differs from the true identity of that person (Orsatti & Riemer, 2015, p.2). With a LinkedIn account, this might not be as easy, as a real name and attributes of your professional identity are needed for the platform. Goffman's theory of performing identity can be categorized into two distinctions: expressions individuals give to audiences and ones that they give off (Goffman, 1959, p.397). Expressions given off, are presentations or performances that were not deliberate but experienced by the audience. A given expression is the intended communicated performance for the audience.

Identity was described as having a front- and backstage, where backstage the person is the “true” version of himself and on the front stage a performance is played towards a particular audience (Orsatti & Riemer, 2015, p.3). Goffman (1959, p. 400) questions if the performance of an individual's identity is only for the benefit of audiences but also for the belief in that individual's reality. Simultaneously, they might not believe the presentation they portray. When an individual fails to mirror the values and social connections of the audience, they could lose face (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p.102). The perception of wearing a mask or role-playing for an audience is the idealized identity people want to achieve (Goffman, 1959, p. 399). This metaphor of a mask is described as the individual still remaining itself, which means that some aspects are brought forward for a certain self-presentation for an audience while others are marginalized (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p.101).

Social media platforms and its affordances are the fixed setting of performances. Self-expression reflects the shown identity. Goffman (1959, p.403) combines self-presentation with portraying the values of society, where people illustrate an idealized version of themselves complying with these values. With the case of LinkedIn, one might argue that the user's presentation is idealized as only positive news is shared, to obey the importance of career success in society. As the purpose of LinkedIn is to become the ideal presentation toward recruiters or connections, it is important to understand if its affordances lead to users portraying something more “perfect” or ideal than what is the actual person and their professional capabilities.

The concept of Goffman's self-presentation is of importance for this paper, as LinkedIn's affordances and media environment can contribute to users performing their professional identity.

Careers used to be more private, and professional identity was only shown during working hours, which has changed since the creation of LinkedIn. LinkedIn reaches multiple audiences, as friends and colleagues, to witness the presentation of someone's identity through the actions afforded. As self-presentation is built through the performance of identities and a reflection of society's values, researching how LinkedIn's domain of performative professional identities can cause performance pressure, the pressure to achieve certain goals set by society or self, will explain LinkedIn's influence on students' well-being (Mitchell et al., 2019, p.532). The disbelief an audience can have in a performance can lead to social comparison to others, to become more like the wanted performances of audiences (Goffman, 1959, p.399). Social comparison is the action where a person follows the movements and presentation of an individual to become more similar.

The presented identity on social media is collectively judged and compared by members of different social groups. In the social comparison theory four questions are central, summarized as: who people compare themselves with, why they compare, the effects of those comparisons, and who is likely to compare (Gerber, 2018, p.1). Social comparison is done upward or downward, where upward is formulated as comparing to somebody better, and downward to somebody less (Vogel et al., 2014, p. 206). People tend to compare themselves to people close to them instead of distant relations or strangers and with someone who is doing better but also reflects their own identity (Gerber, 2018, p.2). Individuals also like to examine the person and what they are comparing, to see if the comparison is reliable. Gerber (2018, p.2) calls these relatable attributes, where similar ages and backgrounds look at each other, like students. Research shows that the process of social comparison leads to focusing on negative aspects of oneself, instead of strengths (Wang & Fu, 2015, p. 652). This is connected to the concept of performance pressure, a comparison can lead to stress to improve those negative aspects (Mitchell et al., 2019, p.532). The comparison can cause people to focus on their failures and question their future achievements. Research has shown that people who act in social comparison behavior on Facebook tend to have low self-esteem, poor self-reflection, perception, and decreased well-being (Vogel et al., 2015, p. 254). As the presentation of identity becomes unequal, but the backstage presentation is not visible to watchers, the comparison to become the same is the consequential process. Social comparison behavior online can be consistent or temporary, the latter creating a more intense effect on the individual (Vogel et al., 2015, p. 250). People who tend to show high amounts of social comparison behavior are also the most active users of social media, as the comparison might lead to them changing their online content.

The motivations for practicing social comparison in psychology has been difficult to research and lead to different findings (Gerber, 2018, p.2). In this research the psychological motivation is not of interest, but the media attributes that causes the comparison. Social comparison has become more prominent because of social media, as more content is available to compare oneself with. As social media has increased media content availability and the number of people to compare oneself with, researching how social comparison is experienced through a professional social media platform is important for understanding the power of social media. Social comparison behavior is not

something independently alone but is in relation to the environment of the individual and the person they compare to (Vogel et al., 2015, p. 254).

The social comparison theory mentioned above, has been researched concerning young people and their social media usage. As the theory is important for understanding how the well-being and self-confidence of individuals are constructed, which is important currently time as students are struggling mentally, studying how LinkedIn might be responsible is changing user's self-reflection can create a more media studies perspective on the social comparison theory. As Goffman's theory on self-presentation introduces, the identity users show online is designed for a certain anticipated audience. The self-presentation of identity limits success, when the audience does not believe the performance. This means that on LinkedIn the professional presentation is also designed for this system. As accounts are becoming more ideal self-presentation this may influence the act of social comparison. Social comparison, observing others and contrasting this to your attributes and identity, leads individuals to change their self-presentation.

Feelings of pressure in students to reach similar professional achievements might be influenced by the act of comparing themselves to other students or doubting their performance of a certain self-presentation. Performance pressure is a process where a person's attention is focused on their own skills and performances which disrupts personal growth and work execution (Baumeister, 1984, p.610). The effect of performance pressure has created a debate in science, as it affects the mental well-being of individuals. Mitchell et al. (2019, p.535) shows that performance pressure causes the perception of a threat, but also a challenge. Performance pressure can result in people working harder, longer, and faster. This raises the question if this process can be caused by LinkedIn's affordances or environment. By researching if personal comparison produced by affordances or LinkedIn's environment can lead to performance pressure, this paper contributes to a new media studies perspective on how a platform influences psychological stress in students. If performance pressure is influenced by LinkedIn, this affects the career confidence of students (Mitchell et al., 2019, p.531).

2.3 Internalized surveillance

Within social comparison individuals compare and assess their attributes with those of others after observation (Wang & Fu, 2015, p. 652). The panopticon, first designed by Bentham as a prison, illustrates a state where a person is always watched (Waycott et al., 2017, p.13). This leads to a motivation to perform in a certain matter, because of constant surveillance. In the time of social media, a viewer's society has been constructed, where users watch each other through a medium (Fuchs, 2011, p. 138). Academics illustrate with social media, users stand in the middle of the prison while others look down (Romele et al., 2017, p.3). By conceptualizing social media as a visual panopticon, the user's privacy is questioned, as no data, content, or account can be fully private. This position changes the perspective on performing self-presentation as individuals need to behave in a certain way, because of surveillance. An individual becomes part of this user's surveillance with or

without a free choice. In the case of LinkedIn, this means companies, recruiters, friends, and colleagues observe an individual. LinkedIn's CEO said in 2011 the following words: "The key distinction is that as a professional you want people to want to know who you are, people are searching for you or people like you whether you like it or not" (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 207). This quote reminds the users of LinkedIn that the purpose of LinkedIn is to be watched by others for the creation of a professional career. Feeling watched is part of the deal for having a LinkedIn account.

By understanding if students feel watched on LinkedIn, this research wants to know if this leads to social comparison or performance pressure. The concept of the visual panopticon is relevant for this research, as LinkedIn's affordance and environment might influence this surveillance and students' LinkedIn experience. The perception of being watched could change behavior into being performative (Romele et al., 2017, p.5). The self-presentation of identities Goffman (1959, p.397) describes, may be produced by the surveillance by an audience. As students might know they are observed, this could change their curation of professional identity on LinkedIn.

Weissman (2019, p.32) illustrates a new concept called peer-to-peer (P2P) surveillance, where technology such as social media gives individuals the opportunity to watch others. The public social media users have become virtual entities, living in different places and times but still moving as one. P2P surveillance has created a new kind of mass judgment of ordinary people on ordinary people. The threat of being judged leads to people copying acts of behavior and speech approved and valued by the public and society (Weissman, 2019, p.31). This surveillance has created a new kind of control over each other, as we watch each other and feel watched. Weissman (2019, p.32) describes how P2P surveillance can lead to public shaming and reputation damage, while in this research, the focus will lie on the feeling of being watched on LinkedIn like in the visual panopticon. As companies and even universities are known to scan the social media activities of future employees and students, reviewing each other has become a new form of surveillance. To protect themselves from the negative consequences of surveillance, users transform their online presentation to an ideal version and a reflection of the crowd (Weissman, 2019, p.33). The global village of platforms keep users in check in a certain matter that represents what is formulated as wanted and correct. P2P surveillance enlarges the panopticon as the number of guards increases and no permanent space exists where one is watched. Contextual integrity, the belief in privacy in a certain context of place and people where one can be himself without judgment or fear of losing face, is transformed and damaged by the acts of P2P surveillance on social media (Nissenbaum, 2004, p.119; Weissman, 2019, p.32). As information and identities are visible to everybody, contextual integrity disappears, and multiple identities become one for the "ideal" self-presentation. For example, posting a picture of a crazy boozy night out can be caught by a potential recruiter, without you knowing. Understanding what influence a social media platform like LinkedIn might have on their young users about the perception of being watched, might explain the growing performance pressure of students.

3. Method

This section describes the methods used to answer the research question. The steps to gather and analyze the data are explained. The research question will be answered by using a walkthrough method to analyze the affordances of LinkedIn and interviewing students about their related personal experiences. Sections 3.1 to 3.3 discuss the affordance analysis, followed by sections 3.2 till 3.2.4 for the interviews. This method chapter will finish by discussing the ethical framework and the validity of the thesis.

3.1 Methods

For this research two qualitative research methods were used conducted to research the design and environment of LinkedIn related to social comparison theory and performance pressure. The first method is an affordance analysis, and the second method is the conducting of interviews. The combination of these two methods has been chosen on purpose, as only using one method would be inefficient for the contribution to the social media studies field. The used methods were both qualitative, as this will lead to more profound in-depth answers related to the personal experiences of students about their interactions with the affordances of LinkedIn. By only doing an affordance analysis, the influence the researched affordances have on students is not identified, which is important to provide an answer to the research question. Following this, the affordance analysis was conducted first, so examples of affordances or features could be presented to the students during the interviews. This way the interviews were more specific towards the technical implications of the platform, besides connecting the discussed concepts in the theoretical framework to their experiences. By doing interviews this thesis can illustrate how the affordances shape the actions and behaviors of users. These two qualitative methods were chosen as a quantitative method would have given a statistical output, which would not have led to analysis illustrating students' personal experiences, as the data would have been too broad for that interpretation.

3.1.1 Affordance analysis

An affordance analysis means critically understanding the design, function, and action of affordances in its environment, where the access and influence on its users are analyzed. Van Geenen (2020, p. 19) described the process of an affordance analysis as “tool criticism” of the product's design. Through it, the part of the research question focusing on how affordances influence performance pressure and social comparison behavior of students can be examined. This qualitative method will give this paper a media studies relevance because the sample will exist of LinkedIn features and affordances. An affordance analysis's purpose is to determine how affordances influence certain actions and behaviors and what motives are behind its design (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p.3). By studying how LinkedIn formulates or illustrates certain affordances and features, while connecting it to the discussed theories, a more in-depth analysis determines if LinkedIn adds to social comparison behavior or performance pressure of students. The walkthrough method was used

to find suitable affordances and features of LinkedIn (Light et al., 2018, p.882). The walkthrough method entails observing and documenting a platform, by immersing oneself as a researcher into the app and website of LinkedIn (Light et al., 2018, p.884). By conducting a walkthrough method, the affordances were examined on multiple levels of scale (Light et al., 2018, p.886). This causes the researcher to put themselves in a user's perspective, and more importantly that of students. It will be a systematic inquiry to answer the research question.

3.1.2 Sampling affordance analysis

The sample for the affordance analysis data existed out of multiple design features of LinkedIn, which were discovered after analyzing the app and website with the walkthrough method. Both mediums are considered for the sample. An unpaid non-premium subscription of LinkedIn was used, as most students have this (Gilbert, 2023, para.2). The sample consists of various dimensions of features of affordances of LinkedIn, such as systematic exploring profile dashboards, connection tabs, communication sections, etc. Diversity in affordances and environment was of importance, to illustrate multiple categories that may lead to social comparison behavior or performance pressure. The sample was found by immersing into the platform and finding multiple design features or choices, related to the subject of this study. Eventually, after conducting the walkthrough method, three affordances were chosen for this thesis and analyzed.

3.1.3 Data analysis affordances

The affordance analysis of LinkedIn was categorized through a connotation and denotation scheme in Excel. Items such as language, placement, and meaning, possibly linked to theory, were discussed. An affordance analysis enables the study of artifacts of communication and is unstructured, which brings opportunities for different interpretations (Herring, 2010, p.496). The researcher has less effect on the data, as the data is set. The following steps were taken to analyze the sample:

1. The walkthrough method used to investigate the website and app version of LinkedIn affordances and media environment. Each menu or option will be considered for the analysis.
2. Code found affordances and create an Excel sheet with the following categories: feature/affordance description, affordance type, placement, possibility of action, menu or page name, denotation, connotation, website/app, connection to membership, and comments of researcher (O'Riordan et al., 2012, p. 6).
3. Find patterns between features and affordances.
4. Identify high-level and low-level affordances and create a hierarchy.
5. Connect the affordance to a category or sub-sections.

6. Identify the most important themes in affordances and create related interview questions.
7. Write a result section describing the most important affordances and themes related to the research question.

3.2.1 Interviews

To determine how students relate these affordances to their LinkedIn usage, interviews were conducted. Interviews allow participants to share their experiences, views, and feelings (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, p.68). For this research that means the students can express their feelings towards social comparison and possible performance pressure correlated to LinkedIn's environment and features. An active method was employed, where participants are a source of information and contribute to the study (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, p.67). Additionally, the interview design was semi-structured, where some open-ended questions were prepared (Baxter & Babbie, 2003, p.325). The interview design is based on four main themes: social comparison to others, self-presentation, performance pressure, and surveillance experience on LinkedIn. Each theme consists of around ten open questions. At the same time, there was considerable space for follow-up questions to discover additional observations. Before each interview, the participant was given some neutral background information.

3.2.2 Sample Interviews

The sampling strategy for the interview is discussed in this section. Each participant needed to be at least a weekly user of LinkedIn. Participants were enlisted by communicating through large community groups on WhatsApp, LinkedIn, and through personal relations. A snowballing method was used to find additional participants. The sample consisted of ten participants. Each was in the last year of their academic career. Participants were asked to be interviewed face-to-face or on Zoom/Teams. Out of the ten, only two were conducted via Zoom. Each interview was between 30-60 minutes. All ten participants had permitted recording. Besides the fact they should be students and use LinkedIn, personal information such as gender or background were minor. The subject of their studies was not of value. Participants needed to be between the ages of 20 and 25. Only one participant had just turned 26 during the communication of planning an interview but was added as this person was still a student and used LinkedIn. An information letter was sent to all ten participants to inform participants about the study's subject.

3.2.3 Procedure interviews

Each participant could decide to do the interview online with a platform such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. It was important to see the expression of the participants, for example, if they showed a clear emotion or were thinking before talking. Seeing each other also makes the conversation more natural, and as some of the questions or themes of the interview could be quite personal, feeling comfortable in the conversation is important. Zoom and Teams also have a

recording feature, which makes transcribing easier. If the interview was face-to-face, this was done in a quiet and private environment where the participant felt comfortable. These interviews were recorded with a phone. Examples of locations were somebody's house, a quiet cafe, or during a walk. During the start of each interview, a short introduction was given about the interview, how long it would be, and that it was recorded. Following this, the participant was asked some personal information questions related to LinkedIn. After the interviews finished, the recording was transcribed.

3.2.4 Data analysis interviews

To analyze the interview data, a thematic analysis was employed, which involves the identification and reporting of patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After each interview, the recording was transcribed. A theme can be discovered in the data by a pattern related to the research question. Each transcript will be compared to analyze themes. Open coding was the first step, in which a color system would locate codes. Then a coding frame was created, where data was redacted, and interpretation was easier. This coding frame was data-driven, but also concept-driven. Following this, selective coding was used to identify categories of themes. Through this approach, relevant themes were identified, analyzed, and elaborated in detail with the help of the theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All ten interviews were held in Dutch, as this was the most fluent language of the participants. The quotes in the analysis are in English.

3.3 Operationalization

In table 1 below the operationalization of the concepts used in the analysis is formulated. The social comparison theory was used during the affordance analysis, as these action possibilities may contribute to exaggerated self-presentation of professional success that causes social comparison. Students were asked if the affordances contribute to their social comparison behavior. The social comparison theory was linked to the concept of performance pressure, as the act of upward comparison might lead to stress to work towards similar achievements. To analyze and measure the social comparison theory, the INCOM scale questions were used for inspiration, including six items (Schneider & Schupp, 2011, p.2). As these questions are produced for surveys, and answered with a 5-Likert scale, inspiration was used to formulate the interview questions. For the affordance theory, the operationalization is described in the table. During the walkthrough method, the following categories of affordances were considered: social affordances, communicative affordances, vernacular affordances, and high- and low-level affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p.12). Social affordances are described as the opportunities technical features produce social relations or social structure (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p.9). An affordance can create changes in communication or social behavior in everyday life. A communicative affordance can be described as mobile media and specifically the control affordances can have on communication between users. Vernacular affordances describe the relationship and perspective users have with an affordance in relation to their personal experiences, other affordances, or social media platforms. The action possibility of an

affordance is not firm but is determined by the perception of its users. At last, the difference between a high-level or a low-level affordance is categorized in multiple ways. A high-level affordance is more abstract to its user while a low-level affordance is a clear action on a platform. A low-level affordance is more focused on buttons, or the design of the actual platform. For the affordance theory, different operationalizations will be considered to critically research which is best suited for LinkedIn.

Table 1

Operationalization Affordances and Social Comparison

Concept	Definition	Sub-sections	Example
Affordances	Affordances are material features in an environment which enables the user to complete an action (Ronzhyn et al., 2022, p. 3177; Treem & Leonardi, 2012, p.2).	Visibility	User-generated content becomes visible to other users.
		Edibility	The ability of change in the affordance and created content.
		Persistence	The display of content and communication stay the same as the original.
		Association	The connection between individuals and products or actions.
Social Comparison	The act of comparing yourself to others on different levels (Vogel et al., 2014, p. 206).	Downward	Comparing achievements with someone who has done less work.
		Upward	Comparing achievements with someone who has done more work.

3.4 Ethical Framework

As one of the methods is interviews and students are the researched object, describing and following ethical rules are important. Participants have rights that should be told, implemented, and accepted. This means the participants needed to be aware of their position in this research and what their participation meant related to their rights and privacy. The participants were given an information letter and a consent statement. This information letter explained the meaning of the research, without making them biased. The structure of the interview and the kind of expected questions were mentioned in the letter. The letter informs participants about the followed rules, set by the Erasmus University of Rotterdam about the integrity needed during research (Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2024). The researcher is responsible for guarding the participants and their data. After reading the information letter all the needed details were explained to sign the statement. In this statement, the participant was asked for permission to record and asked for personal information. The consent statement needed to be signed for participation. To respect the participant's privacy, no personal information was used in the analysis. As this is media research, there will be no follow-up questions too focused on the psychological well-being of the students.

3.5 Validity and reliability

As both methods used in this research are qualitative, it is crucial to discuss the validity and credibility of these methods and analysis of the data. By conducting interviews besides the affordance analysis, the validity of the research increases. Only conducting an affordance analysis illustrates the researcher's perspective, while the interviews expand this to other students. It is important to understand the position the researcher has related to the subject of the research. As being objective is the goal, but never completely possible, the perspective of the researcher can influence the found themes in the affordance analysis and interviews. As a master's student and a LinkedIn user, the subject of this study is of interest to me. This can cause not replicable results in identical ways if the research is repeated. As the participants share their perspectives and opinions related to LinkedIn, this can differ from future participants. To increase the validity of this research the analysis in both methods needs to be consistent and trustworthy and transferable as possible. To illustrate the credibility of this research, other interpretations need to be explored.

4. Affordance Analysis of LinkedIn

In the following chapter, the results of the affordance analysis will be discussed. As the affordance analysis was researched first, and then the interviews were conducted, this order will be followed in the thesis. In these sections, the theories and concepts of the theoretical framework will be used to connect the found themes to the academic field of critical social media studies. During the walkthrough method, certain features and affordances became prominent. Each subchapter discusses a different feature or affordance of LinkedIn. In section 4.1, the focus will lie on the affordance of account visitation and create an understanding of this affordance in relation to the theoretical framework. In 4.2 the affordance “grades of connections” will be analyzed and how it relates to the processes of social comparison and P2P surveillance in the context of student’s experiences on LinkedIn. The following section discusses the feature of title job placement on the platform and how this relates to self-presentation. 4.4 concentrates on the media environment of LinkedIn. This is important as affordances create meaning in the context of the environment.

4.1. The visitation of strangers

This section will focus on the theme surrounding the expansion of the perceived audience. As Goffman (1959, p. 398) explains, the self-presentation of an individual depends on the expected audience. During this theme, it will be argued that on LinkedIn audiences increases to unknown people. While social media platforms contribute to people watching each other secretly, LinkedIn contributes to breaking this illusion by through this affordance.

The affordance of profile visitors will be analyzed here. While opening the home page on the website of LinkedIn, users can see in the left menu how many people have visited their account in the last 90 days. This feature is always visible when opening the home page. Besides, users get notifications from the app and through email about this affordance. When clicking on this, a list of accounts becomes visible. The specific name or profile picture of the user is invisible, as a non-premium account is used during the walkthrough method. Only words such as “works at” and their title job, followed by the company tell you something about who has visited your account. In the middle of this page, LinkedIn offers the user a premium account, which makes seeing these accounts possible.

Now the context of this affordance has been described, one can understand the relevance of this affordance in correlation to the research problem as it presents a positive and negative action side. The positive is being able to see who shows interest in your profile, but this possibility is only offered to the premium users of LinkedIn. The possibilities of complete visibility of these accounts can bring, might contribute to future career opportunities or the growth of a noticeable account. However, the negative side of this affordance of LinkedIn is experienced by people who have a non-premium account.

I will argue that the lack of transparency is an example of the visual panopticon and P2P

surveillance. Weissman (2019, p.31) explains how social media has given users the freedom to watch others. A peer, which in this case could be a friend from a friend but also a recruiter, could watch your account and online movements without the predicament of feeling like a lurker because of account privacy. The affordance of LinkedIn allows other users the liberty to watch others. P2P surveillance changes the perspective on who is allowed to judge the professional skills and knowledge of an account. As research shows the act of P2P surveillance leads to following the behavior, speech, and values seen as correct in society, the relevance of this affordance is important for understanding the position of students towards the platform (Weissman, 2019, p.31). As users are not able to see completely who has searched and checked their account, their behavior will be influenced.

Knowing you have been watched any time you open the homepage and by how many, is the kind of circumstance that might contribute to the performance pressure of students. As a user cannot know if the visitation of their account and their professional self-presentation was positively experienced or judged by another user, one can argue this can influence the pressure students might feel to achieve certain things. As there is no clear identification of the person watching or the reason for that behavior, the stress might create a disbalance between a reflection of individual qualities and personal growth. A person starts to look at what is wrong and how it should be improved, instead of the qualities and skills that are already there and possible what that other user was looking for. Research shows that performance pressure has consequences on the strength of the well-being of students (Mitchell et al., 2019, p.532).

By not knowing who is interested in your account or is judging your content, the self-presentation of identity can alter. The audience of your front stage, as Goffman (1959, p.398) described, is unclear. When a performance is not seen as credible, the audience loses belief, and the performer loses face. How to behave or perform a certain self-presentation, needs to become a display of different self-presentations combined where everyone in the audience can believe what is visible on the front stage, or in this case a LinkedIn account.

To conclude this section, the affordance of account visitation creates room for certain feelings to flourish. As the identity of the audience is not completely clear, as their reason, the user is able to construct stress about their self-presentation and how they perform compared to others. The presentation and the visible placement of the statistics create a system of feeling watched, which changes the behavior to more ideal.

4.2 Grades of Connections

The following theme will focus on the kind of connections that can contribute to the social comparison behavior of young users and their performance pressure. The theme is labeled as the grades of connections. As LinkedIn is a professional platform, this theme illustrates how the platform projects users as a part of the system for everybody to contribute to their self-presentation. The users

are a product for the technical design to work, while students are presented with new content to compare with.

This theme refers to the affordance of the grading of connections that is built into the system of LinkedIn. Connections are what on other social media are called followers or friends. The concept of connections also contributes to a more professional environment, as if they are not your friends but something work-related that benefits the user. While presented with content on the home page of both the website and the app, LinkedIn shows you a small number that illustrates the grade of connection next to the user who posted. There are three levels of grades. The first grade are your connections, people you have made a connection with (LinkedIn, 2022). The second grade is the connections of your connections, so the users your connections follow. The third grade is a level further, these are the users that are connected to the second-grade users (LinkedIn, 2022). LinkedIn offers this information to its users, to create a new network and interest for users.

The circle of connections indicates the importance of networking for the system of LinkedIn to work, as with any social media platform, LinkedIn cannot work or gather data without the user's activities. This shows how affordances and systems, rely on the interaction of its users, in this case, the liking and commenting of LinkedIn users (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p.2). An activity to show a user as a second or third connection can go from posting, liking, and commenting. As the purpose of LinkedIn is professional networking, seeing the people your connections are following, allows users to contribute to growing their network. The second grade of connection could be interesting for users, as there might be similarities between you and the connections of your connection. While this feature may positively contribute to the growth of a user's network, a critical view is also needed to understand how users can otherwise interpret this feature.

The circle of connections is a presentation of the circulation of the visual panopticon. As the connection of your connections is presented to you, P2P surveillance has an opportunity to flourish. Judging becomes a free space if the consequences of your judgment are not correlated to a personal relationship (Weissman, 2019, p.34). By showing the users connections that are not personally connected, the vision of the user standing in the middle of the panopticon makes it possible for the user to watch everybody, as well to be watched by others. As a user might be watching the content of a third-grade connection, their content and account is also a third-grade connection on somebody else's home page. Knowing to whom you are presented as a second or third-grade connection is impossible, a limitation of the affordance that controls the user's behavior (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p.5). When critically analyzing the circle of connections, it becomes a circle of surveillance. As you are presented with who you know directly or not, they are also. The relevance of these grades of connections and the surveillance can contribute to analyzing if this surveillance may create performance pressure and social comparison behavior. Weissman (2019, p.32) describes how P2P surveillance can lead to people feeling pressure to perform in the form of what is accepted by the people watching. As a result, people tend to alter their self-presentation towards the ideal to avoid public judgment. The posts users are presented with can alter the user's perception of their qualities

and self-presentation. The content that is presented to them, is content that their followers have connections with, in the form of a like or comment. This circle makes social comparison behavior able to move from people personally known, to further connections. As the feed of the home page of LinkedIn is built upon the structure of relying on the interaction of users with affordances to create new content, social comparison is now easier made with people you do not know (O’Riordan et al., 2012, p.3). For example, the posts your connections are commenting “congratulations” under, are open for interpretation of comparison as the achievements of that person are now presented to you. As your connection presents the qualifications that are celebrated as successful on LinkedIn, the user is free to compare that second-grade connection with their contributions to the platform. Research shows that individuals tend to compare themselves to people they know, but this affordance contributes to the expansion of comparison.

By presenting users with more content that might be related to their interests and studies, combined with the amount of achievement-positioned content that is posted on LinkedIn by students, the connection circle increases the opportunity for performance pressure to grow. The norm also becomes to be active on the platform in the form of liking and commenting on your connection’s posts. The connection circle is a clear example of how an environment is understood through the usage of affordances, and how this affordance can control certain like and comment behaviors of users (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p.6).

The discussed theme shows how LinkedIn’s affordance is responsible for producing an audience that judge and compares by developing an algorithm for content reliable on the activities of users. By showing users the activities of others the platform changes in a place of surveillance of one user to the other. The presentation of content by connections in addition to your own, contributes to social comparison behavior and performance pressure. By knowing your contributions are seen by others outside your expected audience of connections, the self-presentation may be altered.

4.3 Profiling and Title

LinkedIn makes the importance of professional self-presentation in multiple ways clear. The presentation seen as successful is possible by the behavior of users or created by the platform through features and affordances. This can be a serious profile picture, listing all your employers, or a job title. Self-presentation has a different meaning on LinkedIn as the platform describes itself as being responsible for creating new career opportunities. The platform provides the users certain features and affordances that change the setting of their performance. In the following section the job title, connected to the position of students, will be analyzed.

As the presentation of identity on LinkedIn’s accounts is the online version of a CV, the job title is prominent in the profiling of an individual. While scrolling on the homepage of both the website and app, under the person who has posted something, their job title or current study position is placed. As mentioned earlier, the homepage’s feed does not only exist out of content placed by your connections but also of their second and third-grade connections. The profiles that are projected

onto your home page are therefore for only a small group of people you will recognize. This means that the titles underneath their name are also visible to you, which might negatively influence the user. This theme of title placement shows how the professional identity of users is created through a feature like job titles. The title is written by the user after creating an account. Even though the title is gray and smaller than the account name, it is still clear to every user. The title is the person.

As the title job of a user becomes the main personality trait of a professional identity, the other attributes such as finished education, extra curriculum, or past jobs, that are all important for the formation of professional self-presentation become concealed to other users. This is of relevance to this paper, as the position of students differs from full-time working people.

As the identity of a person is directly linked to their job title, the perception of importance on the hierarchy in the labor market is projected. Because the title is so visibly placed, the act of social comparison can easily follow. The job title is as prominent as the name of the person, without further explanation of what the title means or what this person has done, etc, upward social comparison is given open space (Vogel et al., 2014, p. 207).

The professional information of a title is a product users can compare themselves with. As a title does not speak for how much they work, or their salary, the title is a presentation of the success of that user. The kind of comparison depends on the title of both users. If a student sees a title that is higher than their own, upward comparison might be the effect. If the reverse happens in title comparison, a downward comparison might happen (Vogel et al., 2014, p. 206). Upward comparison is more feasible in this case, as students have the title “student” followed by their studies. Even though their connections might be other students, as explained earlier, LinkedIn shows you what your connections have liked or commented on. LinkedIn also remembers what you have liked or looked up; the algorithm changes the feed on the home page. This means that similar content and people will be placed in a space for comparison. While doing the walkthrough method, the home page feeds messages from other students, but also CEO’s, founders, executives, etc. Some were very young people.

As job titles become a major part of the professional identity of users on LinkedIn, self-presentation as Goffman (1959, p.398) explains, becomes dependent on the title given by yourself or work. Professional identity is based on the title, instead of other factors such as your background in other jobs, education, skills, or values. The title of somebody’s job could be described as the setting, the costume, and the decor of the performance (Goffman, 1959, p.403). What the audience believes of a performance is staged by the title of the job visible under somebody’s name on the home page or also immediately under their name when on their personal account. As the audience is made up out of connections of your account and other unknown users, the title placement feels placed purposefully as the main presentation of that person. When comparison with other titles can make users feel insecure about their position or current title, the well-being of students is impacted. By the design and positioning of the title, LinkedIn creates an environment where the presentation of online professional identity is created by a few words. By placing the title under the name of a person,

identity becomes a thing based on the title, while on other social media platforms, such a thing does not exist. For personal information on for example Instagram, one should click on the profile visible on their feed to find what is in their bio. The title of the user on LinkedIn becomes their mask, which is formulated in such a way that contributes to their self-presentation, while other things are pushed backstage (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p.104). A good and clear title that can show professional success quickly to other users, even a second or third connection, presents a value in society in the form of an affordance (Goffman, 1959, p.403).

Social comparison behavior becomes a practice that can flourish when titles are placed as one of the most important values on LinkedIn. The placement of the feature to always be visible shows the importance of a certain self-presentation is, and how this can influence young users who have a low title compared to working people. By making the success of your self-presentation dependent on a title, your attributions can be questioned and lead to social comparison for inspiration.

4.4 The ideal positioning in the created media environment

The themes discussed above have focused on the affordances and features of LinkedIn. Each does contribute to the formation of a certain media environment on the platform. LinkedIn offers its users constructions in which they are allowed to move to a goal. This goal is constructed as a building block for a professional identity that provides users with professional opportunities. In this current theme, the media environment will be analyzed regarding the theoretical framework. The media environment is responsible for the users to use certain affordances in a way as is seen as the norm of the platform.

Certain behaviors of users became clear in relation to the design and purpose of LinkedIn that should be analyzed. Affordances create meaning in the projected environment of the platform, that is perceived through the behavior of their users (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p.9). When looking at the kind of content posted by users, the focus lies on the positioning of positive news. Some of the most common themes in the posts on the home feed page are graduations, grade announcements, admission to an internship, thank you messages directed to supervisors, open vacancies, and acceptations of positions. With each theme, a certain language is used to present the importance of this achievement. For example, when posting about student's graduation. Some people add their grades to the text, but only if it's above an eight. Posting something as clear as an indication of success on a scale, allows other users to compare that grade to their own. The comparison behavior LinkedIn influences is not only created directly through the affordances and features of the platform but also the behavior and environment these features produce. As the platform is based on the active behavior of posting users, the media environment becomes filled with similar content as that is what is posted by the majority of users. When a platform is based on the fact it contributes to professional growth, the performance of backstage self-presentation like failing your thesis, is not likely posted (Goffman, 1959, p.399).

When the context of the posts is focused on the positive perspective of professional successes and achievements, the reality of professional life changes. People get laid off, fail classes and studies, or struggle to find employment. From the perspective of students on the brink of finding full-time employment, the positive environment might feel toxic. The ideal presentation of professional identity is the one that becomes the presentation of what society finds valuable (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p. 102). The positive news may influence others and moves them in the direction to do so as well. Social comparison behavior increases when only the “ideal” version of self-presentation of professional identity is presented to first-, second-, and third-grade connections. The spiral of pressure continues to grow when only the ideal positivity is visible on the platform. When connecting this to Goffman’s theory on self-presentation the media environment of LinkedIn is a reflection on what is called the front stage. The audience believes the ideal presentation in content and accounts, which means the user has not lost face (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p.101). The audience, here other users, is in such a belief that they start to copy the behavior of users. The media environment of LinkedIn has been based on a mix of meanings by affordances, user behavior, and LinkedIn’s presentation of values and purpose.

The purpose of LinkedIn, as the company describes itself, is an online presentation of a resume that contributes to the opportunities given by the networking of users. By limiting options for users, the environment of the platform is established. For LinkedIn, this means positive professional news or content is the wanted perspective for the platform. Even though LinkedIn is an open field for publishing content, where a user can post anything if it does not break policy, the platform has created space for limited openness.

To conclude this theme, the media environment of LinkedIn has become a circle, in which contributions by users have become self-centered focusing on personal gain. This gain is designed to establish a reputable professional self-presentation. One, users can compare with and feel the need to achieve similar contributions, which starts the circle again. The meaning the discussed affordances and features get by interaction of users depends on the environment they are placed.

5. Interview analysis

In the following chapter, the analysis of the interviews will be presented. During the interviews, only Dutch was spoken, as it was the native language of all participants. The quotes are translated into English. Each subchapter will discuss a specific theme that became significant during the process of analyzing the interviews. In these sections, the data of the transcripts will be connected to the theoretical framework. The purpose of the sections in Chapter 5 are to understand the experiences of students and their perspectives towards the affordances and media environment of LinkedIn. The aim is to recognize the relation between the mindsets of the students and the affordances discussed in the chapter above.

To start, in section 5.1 the theme of LinkedIn usage by the students is discussed, and how this sets a base for certain online behavior that influences social comparison behavior and performance pressure. In 5.2 the experienced media environment is analyzed and how the activities of the students on the platform are influenced by this. Followed by section 5.3 where the consequences of using LinkedIn in the form of performance pressure and social comparison behavior are analyzed. Besides, how the social comparison theory is linked to performance pressure. The aim of section 5.4 is to understand how the participants experience their privacy on LinkedIn and how this relates to the concept of visual panopticon and P2P surveillance, and the consequence it has on the student's self-presentation. Finally, in section 5.5 the concept of Goffman's self-presentation will be analyzed in connection to how LinkedIn contributes to the performative projection of professional identity.

5.1 LinkedIn usage

Each interview started with some questions about the accounts of the participants. Some things became clear through the student's answers. Most participants will be finishing their master's degree in the following month or year, which means that finding a job is the next step in their career. Through this position, it became clear that LinkedIn is important to them. To understand the influence LinkedIn's features or media environment has on the participants, understanding their usage of the platform is important for the construction of the found themes.

Firstly, most students have had their account since the beginning of their study or the second/third year. All created an account because they were advised by others of the benefits of LinkedIn and the importance of creating an account for the duration of their study and future careers. Different groups or people were advising these students, which was experienced as pressure. The participants were told by family, friends of the same age, fellow students, colleagues, or teachers at universities that having an account is necessary. These opinions show how professional visibility online is a norm in society (HERC,2023). This action can create a feeling of pressure from the beginning, as the creation of an account is seen as needed still quite early on in their studies. The motivation to create an account therefore came from the advice of others for these participants

instead of an intrinsic motivation. Since having an account, the platform is used for specific goals such as applying for future vacancies, finding new connections, reading articles, and looking at what similar people are doing. The kind of connections people have on the platform are different from what is normal on more personal social media. Most participants express having connections with people who are professionally linked to them, such as colleagues and other students. The majority of the connections these participants have are of the same age or students, which is interesting to know for further discussion surrounding performance pressure.

The kind of connections the students have are for a specific purpose or goal. The connection needs to be beneficial to the user and needs to be able to contribute to certain goals. This means that the contact is not very social but is used to grow professionally. This shows that LinkedIn is an individual platform focused on the personal and individual experience. This is also visible in the fact that most of the participants used the platform via the website on a laptop. That way, the participants could use LinkedIn while working as a professional activity. Just scrolling on your phone as with Instagram is not the case here. By using the platform while studying or working, the contributions that are presented to the user can easily be compared to their own. Five participants did use the app, but this was a quick look out of boredom. Participant Eight had a specific and important reason not to use the app, which was formulated as “Yes. I don't want to have it on my phone, because then I get too much performance pressure. While on my phone, it's also constantly available to look at. Yes. That is a conscious choice”.

When the interviews went a bit deeper into the theoretical framework and their LinkedIn usage, the question “How important is the number of connections you have for you?” was asked. Multiple perspectives were presented. Four participants stated it was not important to them, but when asked how many, all expressed high numbers above 200-300 connections. The feeling of having many connections is enjoyed. The answers show a mix of not caring or finding the number important, as a higher number shows a more professional presentation and allows more exposure to recruiters. The number of connections can reflect the front stage setting, which shows the audience an environment in which a performance is shown (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p.102). Two participants for example expressed that they felt pressure to achieve the 500+ connections on LinkedIn because their surroundings said this was important. One opinion towards the kind of connections is a contradiction to the belief when she knew she achieved the 500+ than before this target was completed:

I: Did you really try to reach the 500+ at the beginning, or did you think...

P: Yes, I did in the past.

So when I just started, I did, because I thought it was cool. But now that I have the 500, it is not cool anymore. I find it important, but the number itself is no longer important to me. Because I've had 500 for quite a while now.

P: No, they (connections) are not all people I know well. I find that sometimes... So in the beginning, when I wanted to reach 500, I accepted everyone. But now I find it annoying.

Four participants indicate how the quality of connections is more important than quantity. But this is the perspective now when they did feel the need to have many connections in the beginning. Participants question the kind of connections people have if they are determined to gather a high number of connections.

P: Ooh, um well I see I have one hundred and thirteen myself.

And yes, when you look at some people who have, I don't know, four hundred or five hundred or even more, then on the one hand, you think wow, you have a lot of connections.

And on the other hand, you also think, are those people you might not have much in common with. So I think it is much more important for you as a person to look at the quality of your connections and who you really interact with.

...

P: I also can't stand that LinkedIn is all about making connections just for the sake of making connections. And you do that with people you don't really know, but then you have a bigger network.

This quote is an example of the student's feelings towards the set norms for successful usage of LinkedIn that have become more focused on the presentation of professional identity than profound contact. This can be connected to the fact that little enjoyment is experienced through the usage of LinkedIn. The experience of LinkedIn is explained as neutral, practical, informative, or even tedious. When compared to other social media platforms like Instagram or TikTok, all ten participants said they would not use LinkedIn for entertainment or personal interests. By engaging with the platform with a personal hesitation without enjoyment, it shows that the experience of the participants can influence performance pressure and social comparison behavior. The circumstances surrounding the usage of LinkedIn by students explain that the platform is not a typical social networking platform. As described earlier, the environment of affordances and their usage can change the behavior of the user. LinkedIn has been presented as a necessary platform by others. The pressure to achieve certain milestones is produced in the environment that is presented to a person. As creating an account is required for students, still years from starting their working life, the pressure to perform is increased by pressure to become active on the platform like their peers. Even the feeling of needing a certain number of connections, is based on the comparison to other users and the pressure that is a self-presentation of a successful professional presentation of an account. The platform is not social, but an individual goal-orientation which makes young users able to compare themselves.

The position students are in is also visible in the fact none of the participants have a premium account. Some find it too expensive but would like to have the benefits of it. By having a premium account some influences of affordances might not be experienced the same.

5.2 The media environment of LinkedIn, experienced by students

During the interviews, not only affordances were discussed but also the kind of atmosphere the students experienced on LinkedIn. This is of importance for answering the research question, as the behavior in an environment can alter the amount of performance pressure or social comparison behavior they experience. Also, the affordances and features create meaning in the environment they are used. The students were clear when speaking about the environment of LinkedIn, indicating negative thinking about the importance of ideal self-presentation on the platform.

What became clear in every interview was the projection of performance on LinkedIn by users. A “me me me show” as it was put, where the participants questioned the sincerity of the contributions on their timeline. The main purpose of LinkedIn was explained as purposefully profiling yourself to others. While talking about the “the show” words such as smug, arrogant, and fake are mentioned. While the participants know that these contributions are true to the experience of that user but are also a bit bragging, these are the kind of contributions that the participants compare themselves with and experience performance pressure from. The kind of contributions posted by their connections, which are mainly other students, look so much alike that it becomes stiff and a followed format. These contributions are made to showcase their skills, achievements, and relationship to a company. An example that was mentioned many times is the kind of contributions students post after graduating with their thesis, where the grade only gets mentioned if it is high enough. These kinds of messages are not only projected by their own connections but also from second or third grade connections because of the connection circle. The environment of LinkedIn has become one of boasting. For example, participant nine felt that by not posting an achievement on LinkedIn, it had not happened. Their achievements need to be shared on the front stage and positioned precisely so that the audience, their connections, and future recruiters, believe it (Goffman, 1959, p.398). That way they contribute to further changing the environment of LinkedIn towards something that could be called toxic, as the individual presenting before an audience becomes positioned to personal growth and over-positive to almost fake. Examples describing the LinkedIn’s media environment are:

P: It is acceptable bragging. Yes.

I think it's very much the "me me me" show. How to make it about me. In everything.

...

P: On the other hand, it is also a kind of platform where people brag quite a bit.

And only say how honored and humble they are. And I don't really like that myself. So I sometimes find that a bit of a downside.

...

P: I would like it very much if people stop using the words humble or honored. But I also think the platform is made for this. It is an over-positive environment, which makes me think sometimes ‘oke calm down’ but I also think it is a logical development.

...

P: I do not know a different way than to say so directly, but everybody is really putting it up their own ass, just continuously. And I find that annoying. It is really a platform to unashamedly say” I am doing amazing”. Really, it is a me-me-me show.

Certain languages are used to present the achievements of their connections. Most participants know that the contributions are made prettier than they might be in real-time. The realization that the messages of fellow students are made to contribute to their professional presentation does not stop them from posting similar- contributions. Here the consequence of social comparison is also visible. As the amount of these kinds of contributions are posted, students feel the need to also post such content after comparing their position to others. The contradiction of knowing LinkedIn is not a true presentation of reality but still becoming part of this loop of profiling is important to understand the influence a certain media environment has on its users. When the audience does not believe the presentation that is given that person loses face, but as the performance on LinkedIn all have an individual purpose the audience accepts it as they too perform in that manner (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p.102). The feelings towards LinkedIn when talking about this subject of performative contributions can be described as annoyed, understanding, disappointed, and mocking.

The media environment of LinkedIn is experienced by students as presenting an online version of your CV. The online behavior or posted content by users is done consciously to achieve certain goals and to contribute a presentation of that CV. Participants expressed the desire for LinkedIn to be less performative and more realistic, for example, messages about mental health, trouble finding a job etc, a presentation of backstage of a truer identity than a performative self-presentation for the professional audience of LinkedIn (Orsatti & Riemer, 2015, p.4). Other participants explained that the ideal presentation of achievements is just part of LinkedIn, even if it is annoying. When asked how the participants would feel if LinkedIn was less of a show of personal achievements, participants differed in answering as a combination of accepting LinkedIn as it is and liking the idea. Participant ten made a comment that stood out:

P: It's actually funny. Because if you only show positive posts on such a platform, the effect is actually quite negative. But if negative things were also shared, like "I've had a hard time with this," then the overall experience might be more positive. Yes. That is just funny.

The environment of positivity, in a sense that becomes fake and toxic, contributed to some participants changing their online behavior. Participant one, started following more organizations and companies, instead of similar people to themselves, to see less of the “look at me” content and more contributing and educational content. Participant eight set up a maximum limit of time on the platform to maintain a positive mindset and to use LinkedIn only as a tool.

Understanding how students would describe and experience the media environment is significant for answering the research question. Affordances create meaning for the user in the environment they are presented (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p.2). The media environment of LinkedIn for students is something of a boasting platform where the positive aspects of a user's

career is shared with specific language and contributions. By using similar language like others, shows how P2P surveillance influences online speech (Weissman, 2019, p.34). While students are aware of LinkedIn creating this environment of perhaps deceiving content, they participate in the media environment by creating similar content and withholding certain more realistic aspects of their professional identity. This environment created by the platform itself and the behavior of its users, is one of the reasons that performance pressure and social comparison behavior can increase for students. By focusing on the positive and politely said, smug content created for the improvement of belief in the self-presentation of professional identity, the students can produce feelings of insecurities and jealousy.

5.3 Performance pressure as a result from social comparison

In the theoretical framework performance pressure and the social comparison theory are both formulated. Both are processes that can alter the mental state of the involved person. Social comparison is the act of comparing yourself to others who are presented to you (Gerber, 2018, p.1). This can change the way an individual thinks about their looks, skills, capabilities, and personality. As both these concepts are discussed in the research question, multiple questions were asked during the interviews to see how these concepts were experienced by students and through LinkedIn.

To start, each participant compared themselves to others on LinkedIn. The comparison was mainly done with people with the same study background, or around the same age. This contributes to the believe that social comparison happens with people that are close to you (Gerber, 2018, p.2). People further along in their career or even 10 years older did not have an effect, as their experiences and contributions felt like something very far away from their own professional lives. These people do not share relatable attributes with the students (Gerber, 2018, p.2). All participants showed upward comparison behavior, where they compared themselves to somebody who is doing “better” than themselves (Vogel et al., 2014, p. 207). Even though the participants compared to people with a similar background, it is still an upward comparison as the students felt less compared to that person. Downward comparison was experienced, but not in extreme form. An example is:

P: But I did, I think a bit earlier when I just started my master's, that I really often, that I, let's say, around me, had people who were doing very well, that I was constantly looking up on LinkedIn and then at some point I thought, I'm not happy with this, so I'll also look at people who are worse off than me, so to speak.

(Discusses a call with a friend, where she insults somebody's job)

And then I was really, kind of, an eye-opener, why am I looking down on someone else, while that person has nothing to do with me and I never talked to her? And that I still took pleasure from it, that I thought, oh, you have a smarter degree, but you have a dumber job. While then it was like, what's the point of that? One degree isn't smarter than another. One job isn't smarter than another.

...

P: Well, I think it does make me feel insecure, but also sometimes a bad person. I can also look at a friend's CV, and if she has fewer things than I do, I think, oh, I'm doing well. You don't have to be so insecure. And I think you put things on your CV for yourself and not to feel better than someone else. And that's just a really negative, jealous way to look at the world. So I don't think LinkedIn really helps with that. It makes it extra easy to have just a bit of a toxic view towards others, I think.

The act of looking at the contributions and accounts of people doing less good is described firstly as a satisfactory feeling that changes in embarrassment. The participants compared themselves with multiple features on the platform. The comparisons are made with the content that is shown on the home page, the features on somebody's account like the summary of description users write themselves, or the skillset or work experience section. The comparison that is made with people who are better/higher, influences the mental state of the participants. Overall, social comparison leads to stress, anxiety, and insecurities. This is in line with earlier research about social comparison behavior by young people on social media (Wang & Fu, 2015, p. 656). The students feel that their achievements compared to theirs start the feeling of performance pressure. At the same time, participants one and nine see it as motivation or a challenge to achieve similar things (Mitchell et al., 2019, p.535). This motivation can create action from the students to look for opportunities to grow professionally, which also gives them the chance to post something on the platform.

During the interviews the relation between social comparison and performance pressure became significant. Performance pressure was influenced by the act of comparing yourself to somebody on LinkedIn. While asking participants what performance pressure meant to them, the concept was explained as the pressure from others, but primarily yourself to achieve a certain goal. People influencing this process were described as family, friends, and colleagues. While five participants felt the pressure directly from these groups, three students described how this pressure was formulated by themselves thinking it came from others. When asked the question "do you experience performance pressure through LinkedIn?", all participants said they experienced performance pressure outside the platform, which was further influenced by LinkedIn, increasing the feeling of performance pressure.

The performance pressure that is produced by their usage of LinkedIn comes from the fact that the platform presents them with a high amount of content that they can compare themselves with, which can lead to the feeling of disappointment in one's contributions and achievements professionally. The focus lies on their contributions negatively and disrupts personal growth after comparison to others (Baumeister, 1984, p.618). Participant seven even mentioned how she only experiences performance pressure on LinkedIn and not offline. The presentation of professional identity and the technical design and media environment of LinkedIn makes it possible for users to compare their own online CV to others. The performance pressure disrupts personal growth and creates stress, feelings of insecurity, and even demotivation. The confidence in one's career

decreases on LinkedIn (Mitchell et al., 2019, p.532). Here are examples of what three participants said about the subject:

P: I think that if people are aware that it's presented more idealistically on the internet than it actually is, then it doesn't matter that much. But I think especially for younger people who may not realize that, the pressure to perform can really increase because of that.

...

P: Well, I think that when I spent less time on LinkedIn, the pressure to perform did decrease a bit. And I think it has also decreased somewhat because I myself have recently made quite a few posts. So I feel like I've actively contributed. I've also had a lot of people who didn't know me very well give feedback like oh, you're also really doing a lot. And oh, I feel a bit pressured by you. And then when I became aware of, made aware of the fact that I'm adding to someone else's pressure. Yes. My own pressure decreased a bit.

...

P: I can feel pressure from that, that many people, for example, get a 9 for a thesis and so on. And then I really think, oh, if I don't achieve that, will I make it in? That's the thought then. So maybe that pressure then. But that's also purely because I really want to do well myself. But so I used to often look at all kinds of different people for inspiration, but lately I've been feeling more insecure when I look and then you see so many things that people do and have and then you think wow, I can never have that or wow, they are much further. So you start comparing a lot. Which isn't good, I think.

I: Okay. Have you ever felt that a comparison with another person has led you to take action outside of LinkedIn to reach that same level?

P: Yes. Yes, definitely.

This participant of the last quote felt the need to look for opportunities in study, work or extracurricular to achieve similar things of other students they share a connection with. After posting something on LinkedIn their mental-well-being became better, after creating a stronger position on the platform. LinkedIn creates a space where students obsess about their own performance and of other users, as the platform affords users to compare their own CV to others. The thoughts of not performing in a similar manner compared to others can be formulated as a threat to their professional self-presentation and career opportunities (Mitchell et al., 2019, p. 533). LinkedIn creates a space for competition to become important instead of values or open conversations. Students actively look for opportunities to be equal to their connections, but one can question if this pressure to do extracurricular would be felt if LinkedIn' media environment or affordances influenced them differently. A distinction should be made from extrinsic and intrinsic motivation for achievements if LinkedIn affects stress for achievements.

5.4 It is a matter of privacy

As discussed in the theoretical framework, knowing your audience is of importance for a successful self-presentation to be believed (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p.103). While conducting the affordance analysis the account visitation and grade of connections affordance showed how the perceived audience on LinkedIn was much larger than expected. During the interviews matters as privacy in combination with its influence on its user and the above-mentioned affordances were discussed. In the following section, the participants perspective towards these subjects is analyzed.

When asking the participants about how they felt about their privacy on LinkedIn, many were stunned by the question and expressed never thinking about it. The participants felt fine about their privacy and expressed that some things are just part of the experience of LinkedIn. However, when asking if they ever felt watched, nine participants expressed to feel so. While diving further into this feeling in combination with the affordances like account visitation and grades of connection, a contradiction became clear in the perspective the participants had towards their privacy and self-presentation. On one side, the participants described their privacy on LinkedIn as normal, while on the other side, an uncomfortable feeling of being watched was expressed. Besides, these experiences about surveillance also present a new path for social comparison and performance pressure to grow.

As account visitation and how this works is explained in the affordance analysis, this section will discuss the student's perspective on this. After participants expressed sometimes feeling watched on the platform, half of the participants started talking about the visitation affordance on LinkedIn themselves. Here opinions started to differ. Participant two found it normal and accepted this experience as "just a part of LinkedIn", others as participant seven found it handy as they wanted to know for further opportunities, and others like participants eight and ten found it weird and annoying.

P: Yes, because then you get a notification saying so many people have looked you up. Or so many people. But sometimes that also gives a kind of kick.

P: It's maybe a bit weird, but right after I share a post, a lot of people suddenly start looking at it. And then you think, ooh... (indicating uncomfortable feeling)

...

P: Yes, I find that a bit strange, I must say. I have my account set to private. So people can't see that I viewed them and I can't see who viewed me. But then I still get a weekly overview. And I find it strange that with companies you can already see that you can't see who viewed you.

I: Yes, but why did you set it to private?

P: Because I often looked at LinkedIn profiles of people and that was visible.

...

I: Okay. And why do you have it set so that others can't see that you viewed them?

P: Yes, because I just find that a bit awkward. For example, when I looked up all those people who don't really know me. And then I look at what they have on their profile. And I would feel a bit uncomfortable if they saw that I did that. That I did that. And then I think, what are you doing?

I: Why do you find that uncomfortable?

P: Yes, because I specifically looked up that person. Not as if they just came up on my feed or something. But that I actually searched for that person in the search bar, with whom I sometimes don't have a connection or anything.

...

P: How do I feel about my privacy? You share a lot on LinkedIn. You actually share your place of residence. You share where you study. So you share a lot of information. You can eventually trace everything back. One person. You have a photo. You have a network. So you can actually trace everything back. You can see which groups you are in. So, privacy-wise, you are not being very careful. You also give permission for everything. People can contact you. You have given your email address. Your phone number is on there. So your privacy is really exposed.

When asked about how the participants would feel about the affordance of account visitation being implemented on other social media like Instagram or Facebook, a third of the participants felt uncomfortable with that idea. Being watched by others on LinkedIn is much more accepted, as it is part of the online platform for professional identity. This shows how the comment "The key distinction is that as a professional you want people to want to know who you are, people are searching for you or people like you whether you like it or not" made by the founder of LinkedIn, in reality, is accepted by its users as part of the active usage, even when the consequences in reality are not accepted (Van Dijck, 2013, p. 207).

While the idea of people looking at your account was met with different opinions, the idea of the participants looking at others came with mostly the same feeling. It was seen as stalking behavior and something that had to be done carefully as others might it. Participant four did not feel this, as she was a recruiter who makes more than ten connections in a week, otherwise not done. P2P surveillance is possible on LinkedIn and engaged with by the students, even when another might be made aware of being watched. The idea of being watched through account visitation changes the

behavior of users (Romele et al., 2017, p.9). The nine participants who did feel watched wondered why some users looked at their accounts, and why little further communication happened, which introduced an element of stress. By creating the feeling of being watched, the visual panopticon is produced. The kind of reaction given by the participants showed a tension, mixed with acceptance of the circumstances. But by opening the floor to open surveillance between users and not showing completely who they are, an opportunity is created to compare themselves to others. Also, by not showing the full identity of those visiting your account, a certain anxiety builds up and changes the mindset of the user towards their contributions and account, the content that produces their self-presentation. This shows that the feeling of being watched or even judged by others constructs individuals to participate in similar behavior (Weissman, 2019, p.34). The contextual integrity, not worrying about your privacy in a specific context, is not representative on LinkedIn as users can be watched by anybody through the account visitation affordance, which alters the self-presentation of students as the concept of knowing your audience is broadened (Nissenbaum, 2004, p.120).

During the conversation about privacy, the participants were asked if they knew what the connection circle was and how they felt about it. Few knew what this meant and were surprised to know this is how the algorithm of the platform worked. Again, opinions differed. Three participants clearly stated liking this because it showed them new content that was interesting, while three other participants found strange. The interesting part during the interviews came forward when asked how the participants felt about being a second or third connection on somebody else's home page. For example, if they liked something that was then presented on another user's home page. This way of looking at the system was met with surprise and concern. Participant six was tagged with a picture and name in a post that was then reposted by multiple people. She felt a loss of control over the content and who saw her name and picture. The quotes underneath show how participants felt about the affordance of the connection circle when explained from their position as a second or third connection:

P: Wow, I didn't know that. Bizarre, but also, I think that's maybe your privacy that you aren't aware of. Yes, because for example, if I like something now... Yes, that's nice. A post from someone you don't personally know.

...

P: Yes, that's weird, right? Yes. And now I think that people might change their behavior if they know that's how it works.

I: Now that you know that things you react to or like can be seen by others outside your own circle?

P: Yes, maybe then... I understand that friends, whom I might have talked about at the beginning, that I also check their reactions. And that it's sometimes so serious or different than what you're used to how they normally talk. But I understand that now it's a bit... Showy. Yes.

...

I: What do you think, if you think about your own likes or congratulations?

P: Yes, I don't like that. Well, because that's just personal. The things I see from other people, I think it's more... I like it when, for example, I see news articles or when someone posts something controversial on LinkedIn and there are a lot of comments under it. I do read that. But, for example, if I comment like congratulations or something from a friend, then I don't really like that everyone can see it.

...

P: Yes, that sometimes indeed feels a bit weird, that then a friend of mine says oh I did this and then I like that and then you see that your own connection still works. My employer, for example, sees that too. Yes, then you think, why do you need to see that?

These comments show the workings of the affordance of the connection circle creates a possible violation of their privacy, as their behavior is open for further judgment by unknown users. Knowing your online movements are presented to others, could lead to alterations in online behavior as the perceived audience of self-presentation expands. The connection circle is also responsible for the students to be confronted with new content, contributions and accounts that create an open space for further social comparison behavior and performance pressure. As most students have connections with other students, seeing what they have liked, commented on, or reposted, introduces these students to others they do not know but might have a similar background or interest. The pressure to achieve certain things can increase by seeing a second and third grade connections. As mostly only positive news is shared on the platform, the platform relies on the system to show users content of other connections than your own, otherwise the home page would be empty. This system creates a loop of content that users can compare themselves with.

The affordances of the connection circle and account visitation presentation are able to alter the perception of privacy of these users. Besides creating an environment where users feel watched by other users but cannot even see their full identity without a premium account, the affordances open the possibilities for further content and accounts to be presented to the students for influencing performance pressure and social comparison behavior.

5.5 The performance of identity

Self-presentation was described by Goffman (1959, p.397) as a performance that is changed to the needs, beliefs and norms of the audience. This means a person alters their presentation of identity towards the expected audience. On LinkedIn the same happens as during the metaphor of Goffman. The front stage is in this case a professional presentation of identity for an audience filled with future employees, friends, family, and other students.

The self-presentation issue is of importance for this research, as the analysis of the transcripts showed that the media environment is influenced by the presentation of the identity of users. The self-presentation of identity on LinkedIn influences the performance pressure and social comparison behavior of students. As the professional presentation focuses on having achievements and mostly positive news, the audience believes it and contributes to further maintaining the values of society focused on professional success (Goffman, 1959, p.404). When the norm of self-presentation is formed, others compare themselves to it and change it. This can be visible in the fact that the participants all tried to have a more professional account by having a serious photo that should be up to date, a title clear of their status, the number of connections, and a certain language used in their contributions.

All participants explained that the identity shown on LinkedIn is a part of their real identity, formed to be more ideal for LinkedIn's purpose. The participants expressed they knew the presentation of the professional identity of other users was more ideal presented than it might be realistically. This can be linked to wearing a mask as Goffman (1959, p.399) expressed, where the individual is the main structure of the performance, but some aspects are brought forwards for an audience while others are marginalized (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p.102). Backstage presentations as informal activities or social personality traits are deliberately not posted on LinkedIn.

The participants discussed how they rarely saw any negative news on the platform. Only positive achievements were posted. Content about people losing their jobs or struggling with their mental health was rarely seen. This suggests that these backstage activities or situations that happen in somebody's life would not be posted on LinkedIn, and only the front stage of positive news about grades, graduations, or promotions would be posted. Some participants expressed they would not post "negative" news on the platform as it would damage their presentation. Goffman (1959, p.401) discussed how the performance is for the benefit of the audience, in this case for example recruiters who have purposeful roles for the user. By maintaining certain set standards of only presenting positive ideal versions of professional activities, the success rate of the performance on the front stage is believed to be more successful, even though the participants know that the contributions of others are made more ideal.

When talking about what the participants would think about the platform being less flawless or a presentation of ideal professional identity, only two participants said it would disturb the function of the platform while the rest were open to this idea.

P: Yes, also really nice, I think, if someone shares something, that I can also do a bit better. If someone, for example, found something very difficult, then I find it very powerful if that is shared. I just think it's not going to happen quickly. People don't show that side of themselves very often because they want to come across as well as possible.

...

I: Do you think you would enjoy being able to show more of yourself on LinkedIn?

P: Yes, actually, if there were space for that. Yes. Now, there's not really room to show, hey, who am I outside of the work I do, but that is very interesting about a person.

...

I: Okay. Do you think you would find LinkedIn a nicer platform if fewer people shared less positive information? Or if people showed a less ideal presentation of themselves?

P: Yes, absolutely. Yes, as I said, if people dared to share their insecurities too, because I do believe that every person has their own obstacles, so to speak, on the way. So I think that on LinkedIn, only the peaks are shown and not how someone got there or the times someone kind of, yes, actually had to fail first to get there.

These quotes show that the presentations of self on LinkedIn are performative and that brining forward more “backstage” presentation would be appreciated. If the media environment does change towards a more neutral based place where positive/negative news can be shared, the comparing to others and following similar behavior towards a certain self-presentation might decrease.

When talking about how people formulate a certain professional performance on the platform the title feature came forward. The title under a user's name is something an individual can easily be identified with. For four participants it was a handy tool to see if that user was interesting to them or had a purpose to them. The user is judged on their title, and then either used to compare with, used for personal gain, or skipped. Examples of an opinion towards the title under a username are:

P: then I immediately think that is the most important thing about that person.

...

I: Do you then feel that when you look at the title, you are quicker to say, you are interesting to me and you are not?

P: Yes, maybe indeed automatically. I am also thinking about how my title sounds, like master student, okay, but yes, that's the reality or something, so I don't find that really fair.

The title feature becomes an indicator of the professional performance of that user. It creates a label or a setting for the front stage of the performance of the professional self-presentation (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p.103). As it is visible every time under a user's name, the title is clear indication for comparing success or performance to yourself. The title becomes the person, by judging their self-presentation performance on this short contribution to their account on LinkedIn. By presenting a job title always under somebody's name, one can easily compare themselves to a title without knowing anything else about that person's professional path.

The news that companies and recruiters also looked at other social media accounts like on Instagram was discussed. More than half of the participants expressed not liking this. The participants felt that LinkedIn had the purpose of presenting them professionally to future employees, and other social media platforms were more private for their personal social lives. Backstage self-presentation and frontstage should not be mixed in their opinion (Orsatti & Riemer, 2015, p.3).

P: Yes, I would find that strange. But also because, for me, that is not relevant for a job. Why would you want to know what I post on my Instagram or what I do in my daily life? That shouldn't be relevant to me. And if you look at my LinkedIn, then you are still a bit interested in my work experience and so on. But if you were to look at my Instagram, I would find that really weird and a bit intrusive, so to speak.

As the students have their social groups as friends and families as connections on LinkedIn, their private social lives, a different self-presentation is not presented on LinkedIn. While social media has the ability to combine social groups, the students want their professional groups as employees, colleagues, or future recruiters to be distant and separated. However, as discussed above the interviews did indicate participants liking the idea of the platform becoming less focused on performative self-presentation to showing ups and downs and more personal interests. But still social life as shared on Instagram is not to be shown on LinkedIn. The purpose of LinkedIn is to stay the same, metaphorically the stage, but the media environment of the platform in combination with the influence of affordances needs to change to less performative to the ideal vision of professional identity.

6. Conclusion

In this paper the connection between the social networking platform LinkedIn and the influence of social media on mental well-being has been researched. As social media has become a part of daily life in society, the influence it has on different social aspects, our values, mental well-being, and presentation of identity is important to research. This thesis aimed to bridge the influence of an online medium, responsible for an important matter as a career, to social theories resulting in personal consequences. By applying certain theories such as the social comparison theory, performance pressure, and Goffman's theory on self-presentation on LinkedIn, the personal effect on young users has been researched. The research question was formulated as: How do the affordances and media environment of LinkedIn contribute to performance pressure and social comparison behavior in its users ages 20 till 25, and how this can be explained through Ervin Goffman's concept of self-presentation?

To find a specific answer two qualitative methods were used. A mixed method approach was used consisting of an affordance analysis and interviews to achieve a significant indication of the influence LinkedIn has on students. The two methods approach has given the opportunity for specific phenomena of LinkedIn as affordances to be used for questions in the interviews. By using these methods a new distinctive answer was formulated, instead of a broader quantitative analysis with a survey.

While performing the affordance analysis certain features stood out like the connection circle, title placement, and account visitation. The affordances contributed to the creation of an idealist self-presentation, based on feeling watched by others. The themes discussed in chapter four were then used for questioning the students during the interviews. The themes that have been brought forward in the analysis section, show that the participants in general do not enjoy LinkedIn, find it an unrealistic platform where most people only boost their accomplishments, and while even knowing the presentation of professional identity is too ideal, the students feel performance pressure because of social comparison behavior through content posted on LinkedIn. While students are aware of the ideal performative postings, they continue to create similar content. The combination of the discussed affordances and media environment contribute to their influencing the social comparison behavior and performance pressure of students, resulting from the performative self-presentation of professional identity. As users boast their accomplishments and work/study activities, students are open to interpret the content or account features in relation to their achievements. The students feel pressure from each other, as most of their connections are other students. Because of the connection circle, similar content is presented to them from their connections. The combination of affordances and media environment results in a negative influence on the mental well-being of students. The results of the interviews show that LinkedIn creates a kind of circle, where students post their accomplishments as it is designed for, then others compare themselves to that content and feel

pressure to achieve similarly, which leads them to posting similar content where other users can compare themselves to because of the grades of connections. Affordances such as the connection circle and job title also contribute to an open space for further content where students can compare their own position to others, which leads to increased stress about their own career and disrupts growth. The results show that affordances such as the account visitation and connection circle create a feeling of being watched, which translates to changing your self-presentation to a more ideal version for fear of judgment. This can lead to social comparison and performance pressure.

When taking a critical view towards LinkedIn, certain points can be made. The found affordances in combination with the answers of the participants show that young people are not only influenced by more social platforms like Instagram and Facebook on their self-esteem and body image but also specific goal-orientated platforms like LinkedIn. While the platform presents itself as the place for future career development, the results show that an over-positive presentation of professional identity leads to negative feelings in students. LinkedIn creates a media environment that is based on the positive achievements of people, where some are presentations of reality and others exaggerated. When looking at some affordances of LinkedIn one can question the purpose of them. For example, account visitation can lead to more performance pressure and uncertainty about their account, even when little contact follows from the visitations. The participants did not feel comfortable with that affordance being used on Instagram, so one can wonder what the professional meaning it has for LinkedIn. Besides, the grades of connections is presented in a way that does not happen on other platforms. While most social media platforms are based on the workings of similar algorithms, LinkedIn contributes to performance pressure and P2P surveillance by showing user engagement with content in an obvious and evidential way. Liking and commenting on posts, becomes strategic knowing your professional self-presentation can be judged by its presentation to others through the grades of connections. While all participants believed LinkedIn might help them in the future, the feelings it creates towards themselves, their achievements, and to others is not something described as positive. Because the platform is not entertaining and is described more as a chore for professional self-presentation, LinkedIn offers eventually little satisfaction to its young users.

By creating an environment where LinkedIn becomes necessary for professional presentation, the pressure to be active and deal with the negative influences will become the norm. While society is embracing the possibilities of social media, this thesis shows that critically analyzing how social media platforms negatively influence their users is important. This thesis shows that human-produced platforms like LinkedIn have faults, which can cause personal consequences not expected by their creators. LinkedIn's purpose of involving the user in the online presentation of their professional achievements is overshadowed in the over-positive media environment.

The conducted research contributes to scientific knowledge about LinkedIn and implications of social theories as social comparison and performance pressure in an online setting. The self-presentation acted out on LinkedIn is not only created by the action possibilities the platform affords

but also by the behavior formulated by other users visible in LinkedIn's media environment. By setting the stage for the focus on individual goals for professional gain, the media environment of LinkedIn becomes a determination to promote an ideal self-presentation.

Both analyses contribute to earlier research in media studies about the influence of social media. By analyzing the medium and the perspective of students about the medium, this paper illustrates that social media can impact mental health. As described in the theoretical framework, earlier research focusing on the influence of social media on young people has looked at subjects such as body image and damaging effects on self-esteem (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016, p.2). The current results expand on this by showing the influence of social comparison behavior by LinkedIn usage can have on students' stress levels and insecurities surrounding professional achievements. This paper can be used for a new embedding in research about social media and the environment of user's activities in combination with affordances create mental consequences for young people. While the affordance theory described the relation between the environment and the user's actions, this current research has shown the influence of affordances the user's behavior in its environment (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p.3). Affordances such as the account visitation and title requirement, have changed the social structure towards professional requirements in young people.

By analyzing indications of social comparison theory on LinkedIn, this research has shown that comparison is done with similar people with close connections in online settings such as LinkedIn (Gerber, 2018, p.2). In LinkedIn's context, this expands through the connection circle, to people with possible same backgrounds but no personal relations. Besides this, the difference between upward and downward social comparison is not feasible in this research as more upward comparison takes place on LinkedIn from students. As only positive news is posted on the platform the social comparison that happens, creates a situation where the users feel less than other users through the behavior and content formed by the media environment and affordances. During the interview analysis, it became clear that performance pressure was caused by comparing yourself to others. Future research surrounding the social comparison theory should include theory on performance pressure.

The self-presentation that Goffman (1959, p.398) constructs is based on the believe of an audience in a performance created through the showing of specific personality traits. While social media contributes to people finding new places for the presentation of certain backstage attributes, LinkedIn offers only one setting for one stage of self-presentation (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, p.103). The professional focus of the platform constructs pressure on the students to construct a believable ideal presentation of their professional achievements. While Goffman describes how the performance is also successful in the believe it's part of that individual's reality, the fear of losing face by the audience, in this case the believe in professional identity, becomes more important than personal belief. The loss of face can be felt as having serious implications as future jobs can be found and recruiters are present on the platform. The description of the students of a "me show", shows that the audience can disbelieve a performance but still accept it, as it is the norm to present an ideal

presentation on LinkedIn. The current research has shown that self-presentation relies on the behavior of others, as the participants knew the self-presentation of others was exorbitant but continued to show similar online behavior.

Besides, the P2P surveillance and visual panopticon have been researched in relation to the experience of students on LinkedIn. The results show that feeling watched by others is significant, but how students reflect on this differs. The students feel watched, which leads to them changing their behavior and following the set norm to shield themselves from judgment (Weissman, 2019, p.32). The panopticon on LinkedIn, created by account visitation and the connection circle, can influence the mindset of these users as the feeling of being watched creates performance pressure. The act of watching others and feeling watched as part of P2P surveillance, carries responsibility for influencing social comparison behavior.

A limitation in this research was the number of participants, only ten people were interviewed for this thesis. While the sample follows the settings of Erasmus University, the number is still quite low to make a significant statement about the influence LinkedIn has on students. The methodological triangulation implemented in this thesis alters the amount of data from both methods (Roulston & Choi, 2018, p. 243). The number of interviews depends on the fact if sufficient data is found to answer the research question (Roulston & Choi, 2018, p. 244). While enough data was found to properly analyze the transcripts, more interviews would have increased the width of the research. Recommendations for the sample size for interviews ranges from numbers like ten to fifteen, to high numbers as sixty, but by the time limit of this thesis this could not be met (Schreier, 2018, p. 91).

Besides, another limitation was how active the participants were on LinkedIn. Each participant used the platform at least once a week, some much more than others. The platform was used for professional purposes, which is still quite limited when studying. The purpose of LinkedIn makes the usage of the platform less active compared to social media like Instagram, which focusses on personal interests and entertainment. For further research how active participants are on LinkedIn needs to be considered in relation to the aim of the research.

Another limitation was the sampling of participants. As described in the methods chapter, participants were found through large group chats for students. As students from the study of the researcher were not allowed, the spread of communication happened mainly in Dutch-speaking groups. This led to the participants all being Dutch and being university students. The current participants in this thesis are a homogenous sample based on age, nationality, and background (Roulston & Choi, 2018, p. 88). During further research related the topic of LinkedIn influencing students, more heterogenous sampling like international students or students from applied sciences needs to be considered.

As described in the research of Fardouly & Vartanian (2016), providing an overview of research in social media and the influence of online social comparison behavior on body image, longitudinal research in this field of studies is limited. A suggestion for further research might be to

interview young people about their perception on LinkedIn and the discussed theories in two periods of when they are still students and working full time. The context of their professional situation might change the influence of LinkedIn's media environment and affordances on their performance pressure.

To conclude, this thesis has given new insights in how the online activities of students on LinkedIn and their self-presentation can change by the media environment and affordances of the platform. By altering the connection between professional achievements and self-belief in the abilities of the students compared to connections, the mental well-being related to stress and professional confidence is influenced by LinkedIn. These results are not only a concern to academic fields of education, social media, and social studies, but also important for students and universities as it can contribute to understanding the influence technical settings such as LinkedIn has on user's.

7. Literature list

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