Does AI Kill "Real" Networking? Opportunities and Risks of AI-Assisted Self-Presentation on Professional Online Networks

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Abstract

LinkedIn is the largest social networking platform in the world for job seeking, recruitment, and presenting a professional identity online. As AI-assisted writing tools become increasingly embedded in how professionals write and post on LinkedIn, they raise important questions about the presentation and authenticity of online identity in the context of professional networking. This study examines how LinkedIn users perceive the opportunities and risks of leveraging AI-assisted writing tools for text-based professional self-presentation (e.g., writing posts, comments, and outreach messages to present themselves on LinkedIn). Based on a thematic analysis of 534 Reddit posts and comments and 6 practitioner articles, our findings reveal three ways AI-assisted writing reshapes text-based professional self-presentation on LinkedIn: redistributing the labor of writing, expanding access through more polished text, and standardizing written communication in ways that erode genuine human voice and expertise. These insights may inform future research on AI's impacts on professional online self-presentation, helping design future AI writing tools that support efficient yet authentic professional online networking.

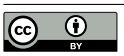
ACM Reference Format:
Han Nguyen, Guo Freeman, and Christopher Flathmann. 2026. Does AI Kill "Real" Networking? Opportunities and Risks of AI-Assisted Self-Presentation on Professional Online Networks. In *Companion of the Computer-Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing (CSCW Companion '26), October 10–14, 2026, Salt Lake City, UT, USA.* ACM, New York, NY, USA, 5 pages. https://doi.org/10.1145/3785651.3831517

1 Introduction

Understanding how people manage self-presentation and identity practices on social networking platforms, such as social media sites and online forums, has long been a central agenda in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) [4–6, 14]. Prior work has shown that users present their identities and selves across platforms in ways that matter for how people narrate themselves and manage visibility online [1, 5, 12]. This includes both mainstream social networking sites for everyday casual social interactions, such as Facebook and Instagram, and more professional work-oriented platforms where identity presentation is directly linked to employability and career advancement. However, unlike Facebook and Instagram where self-presentation is more social and informal and driven largely by social and emotional goals (e.g., likability) [1, 5], professional networking platforms operate differently. While self-presentation online can take many forms, such as visual content, avatars, and voice, **self-presentation on these platforms often focuses on text-based forms through writing and posting**. Such text-based self-presentation functions as a persistent professional record actively screened by recruiters to assess competence and job fit [3], requiring users to strategically manage a single professional identity across diverse audiences simultaneously. Among them, LinkedIn is particularly influential, given its explicit career orientation and its ties to professional visibility, networking, and work-related outcomes [15, 22].

In this sense, understanding self-presentation and how people manage their self-presentation on professional networking platforms is important to HCI and CSCW because these practices shape how people build relationships, establish credibility, and navigate professional communities through writing and posting online. Yet, the growing adoption of AI-assisted writing tools on these platforms introduces new questions and concerns for CSCW researchers: as AI-generated text becomes more common in professional networking, it may destabilize what counts as social signals of **effort** and **authentic expertise** conveyed through writing and posting, the primary mode of text-based self-presentation on platforms like LinkedIn. While prior work has shown that AI involvement can shape perceptions of sincerity and credibility [8, 9, 25], much less is known about how professionals themselves perceive and navigate these tensions in their everyday text-based self-presentation, specifically through how they write posts, comments, and outreach messages.

To address this gap, we explore the following research question in this work: **RQ: How do LinkedIn users perceive both opportunities and risks of leveraging AI-assisted writing tools to express and present their professional identity online?** We conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of 534 public Reddit discussion posts and comments, along with 6 online articles about how professionals perceive and approach the use of AI writing tools for LinkedIn posts, network outreach, profile optimization, and communication. As generative AI (GenAI) rapidly reshapes professional writing and presentation online, our preliminary study contributes to ongoing HCI and CSCW research on AI-mediated communication, online identity work, and the future of professional networking. We provide early empirical evidence on how



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CSCW Companion '26, Salt Lake City, UT, USA
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ACM ISBN 979-8-4007-2378-0/26/10
https://doi.org/10.1145/3785651.3831517

AI-assisted writing tools are reshaping text-based professional self-presentation on platforms like LinkedIn, highlighting both opportunities and challenges. These insights may inform future research and the design of AI writing tools that support rather than harm meaningful professional connections.

2 Related Work

On LinkedIn, professional self-presentation is primarily expressed through text-based methods, writing posts, comments, and outreach messages, making the platform a distinctly language-driven space for identity work. Compared to self-presentation and identity management on everyday social networking platforms such as Facebook and Instagram [1, 5, 20], prior research shows that LinkedIn is an important space for professional self-presentation [3, 21, 23] where users carefully curate their profiles, photos, posts, and messages to present themselves as competent, credible, and employable. This makes text-based communication, how professionals write and post, the primary channel through which impression management and identity work unfold on LinkedIn [3, 21, 23], and the central site where AI-assisted writing tools intervene. The growing use of GenAI in writing introduces a new layer to this textual identity work. HCI and CSCW research on AI co-writing highlights that writers' desired level of AI intervention varies across writing stages and is shaped by goals, notions of originality and authorship [7, 13, 18]. Writers explicitly talk about "percentages" of contribution (e.g., "80% me, 20% AI") and strive to preserve an authentic voice while benefiting from AI's fluency and structural support [10]. Networking depends on relational cues such as tone, style, and sincerity, which shape impressions of credibility and competence [10, 17]. When AI mediates or generates these written cues, it challenges the traditional markers of human authenticity [8, 17]. Previous studies show that when individuals believe a message is AI-assisted, they may perceive the sender as less affiliative and sincere, even when the written content remains professional [8, 9]. Moreover, while undisclosed AI use generally does not harm perceptions, disclosure can reduce perceived sincerity, referred to as "blissful (A)Ignorance" [25].

At the same time, previous work finds that AI-assisted writing can also be perceived as more professional or effective than human-written messages [9], highlighting a tension between written professionalism and authenticity [16]. AI writing tools not only change the mechanics of text production but also reshape what kinds of professional selves can be easily expressed and which forms of genuine voice become harder to signal through writing [1, 7, 10]. The integration of AI writing tools into LinkedIn raises new questions about how much textual impression management labor can or should be delegated to AI [3, 21, 23], and how others interpret such delegation. AI-assisted writing can enhance clarity and professionalism while simultaneously triggering concerns about reduced effort and algorithmic rather than relational motivation [24, 25]. These dynamics are especially relevant in professional networking, where impressions formed through writing significantly influence relationship formation and career opportunities [19]. Yet, existing research offers limited insight into how professionals themselves perceive and navigate AI-assisted writing tools in professional text-based self-presentation and networking practices on LinkedIn, leaving an important gap for HCI and CSCW research to address.

3 Methods

3.1 Data Collection

As norms around professional networking are increasingly discussed in public online spaces, this study draws on online conversations about AI-assisted writing for LinkedIn. In doing so, we collected data from Reddit threads and online articles. Reddit was selected for its large member base and active discussions, which surface experiences that may not appear on more formal platforms. We targeted subreddits where professional networking and LinkedIn are frequent topics of discussion: r/LinkedIn (235 thousand members), r/LinkedInLunatics (936 thousand members), and r/recruitinghell (1.2 million members). We conducted keyword-based searches within these subreddits using terms such as "AI LinkedIn," "AI networking," "AI outreach," and "AI posts," and manual browsing of recent and top posts. We included posts that discussed the use of AI writing tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Claude, LinkedIn's built-in AI, third-party LinkedIn bots) in relation to text-based professional self-presentation, containing first-person accounts or explicit evaluations of AI-generated posts, messages, or comments from individuals describing their own LinkedIn activity. We excluded posts focused on purely technical or platform-configuration topics. For online articles, we used Google Search with queries such as "AI LinkedIn networking" and "AI-generated LinkedIn posts authenticity," filtered out sources that did not discuss how AI writing practices shape networking, authenticity, or professional culture. We treated Reddit discussions as our primary data source, with online articles serving as complementary context. We continued collecting articles until additional searches returned recurring rather than novel perspectives. In total, our dataset included 534 Reddit posts and comments, along with 6 online articles published between 2023 and 2025, which we consider an appropriate time frame because AI writing tools had become widely adopted for professional use. We removed any potentially identifiable information (e.g., usernames and locations) to protect user privacy.

3.2 Data Analysis

We then adopted thematic analysis [2] to analyze the collected material. Our data analysis followed the following steps: (1) the first author closely read through the collected data line by line to identify pieces of information relevant to how users perceive AI-assisted writing tools in their text-based professional self-presentation on LinkedIn, noting preliminary observations. (2) The first author assigned preliminary codes to identified pieces of information, combined codes, eliminated redundant codes, and categorized codes into thematic topics related to the research question. For example, the quote, *"You can spot an AI-generated connection request from a mile away, it's so perfectly generic it feels insincere,"* was coded as "detection of AI-generated writing," "generic written content," and "perceived insincerity," which were grouped into themes such as "AI-assisted writing causes potential authenticity trade-off". (3) All authors continued to review, refine, and name these themes to ensure they accurately represented the dataset and addressed the

research question [2]. Finally, (4) findings were structured into a coherent narrative using example quotes [2].

4 Findings

Overall, our analysis across Reddit discussions and articles shows that LinkedIn users navigate a fundamental tension in their text-based professional self-presentation: while AI-assisted writing tools lower the barrier to producing polished written content, they destabilize the social signals of authenticity, effort and expertise that give writing and posting their value on professional platforms. Our findings present three ways users make sense of these opportunities and risks in their writing and posting practices on LinkedIn.

4.1 AI-Assisted Drafting Eases the Often Invisible Labor for Jumpstarting Text-based Professional Self-Expression on LinkedIn but Leads to Extra Burden to Make Posts Appear Human-Written

Many Reddit users described AI-assisted drafting as an important way to **ease the often invisible labor required to jumpstart text-based professional self-presentation on LinkedIn**. In particular, they framed AI as helping them overcome the difficulty of starting from a blank page by generating ideas, structuring their thoughts, and translating them into "readable LinkedIn posts that sounded more polished and professional much faster". One post framed LinkedIn's AI features and third-party tools as *"jumpstarts for people who struggle to translate their experience into concise, compelling copy."* For users who feel less confident in their writing or have time constraints, AI helps reduce the labor of turning their ideas into a usable first draft, making the ongoing textual demands of professional self-presentation feel more manageable. Another user described the shift *"staring at a blank screen for an hour with pasting a prompt into ChatGPT to at least get a draft I can tweak."* They *"hate writing LinkedIn posts, never know what to say in connection requests,"* but AI writing tools now give them a starting point.

At the same time, this ease of generation introduced a new layer of textual labor: **creating an extra burden, as the ease of generating a draft also increased pressure to ensure that the final post still reads as human-written**. One commenter described having to alter long-standing writing habits because AI had changed how readers interpret certain writing cues, *"I've been using em dashes forever... I hate so much that AI has ruined them… Sometimes I put a hyphen instead so people will know it's really me."* Here, the issue is the need to alter even familiar stylistic habits so that one's writing is not mistaken for automation, and what was once an ordinary personal preference now requires deliberate management. Another user explained their revision process: *"I let GPT-4 write the baseline, but then I go in and add a personal story about why I'm reaching out to this person. I change the formal words to how I actually talk. It's 30 seconds to generate, 10 minutes to make it mine."* Rather than eliminating effort, AI-assisted writing redistributes it, shifting labor from generating text to humanizing it. Text-based self-presentation on LinkedIn thus remains effortful, but the nature of that effort has changed: users now invest substantially in reshaping AI-generated drafts so that their writing reflects a personal professional voice.

4.2 AI-Assisted Polishing Helps Users Present a More Professional Self but Leads to Anxiety About Identity Judgment

As users moved from drafting to refinement, some described AI-assisted polishing as **helping them present a more professional self through how they write on LinkedIn**. As one commenter framed AI as *"a coach that helps you sound like the professional you already are."* For them, AI is not replacing their professional identity, but helping them express that identity in a more polished writing that better matches LinkedIn's communicative expectations. This was especially meaningful for users who felt excluded from LinkedIn's communicative norms. Non-native English speakers or those without formal training in business communication described AI writing tools as transforming their ability to participate: *"English isn't my first language. Before AI, I would spend hours on a single post and still worry it was wrong. Now I can communicate my ideas clearly and be part of the conversation."* For these users, AI did not simply improve their writing; it expanded their ability to present themselves as legitimate professionals through text, lowering a barrier that had previously been tied to language proficiency rather than professional competence.

Yet this same polishing capacity generated **growing anxiety about how AI-assisted writing would be read and judged by others**. Users expressed concern that if their AI use were detected in their posts or messages, they might be seen as *"fake," "lazy,"* or lacking *"genuine expertise."* One comment said, *"As soon as you detect an AI post, all authenticity, respect and credibility is gone. People can tell."* The problem is not merely detection itself, but that once they do, the post may no longer be seen as reflecting the user's own effort, expertise, or professional voice. Another user described the resulting guilt, *"I do get that guilt but also the shame that goes with using the tools [AI] to assist,"* wanting their posts to look great but feeling that AI-assisted writing undermines the legitimacy of that appearance. Some felt pressured to adopt AI simply to keep up and remain competitive *"It's an arms race. If everyone's connection requests are polished by GPT, yours looks sloppy if it's just you."* These accounts show that AI-assisted writing does not simply help users craft a more polished professional self but raises the stakes of how that writing is socially interpreted, making text-based self-presentation on LinkedIn simultaneously more accessible and more fraught.

4.3 AI-Assisted Templates Help Standardize Professional Communication but Undermine the Value of Nuanced Human Expertise and Experience

Beyond influencing how individuals present themselves, users also described AI as reshaping not just individual writing practices but also the broader environment on LinkedIn by **helping structure and standardize professional written communication**, especially in outreach messages. One user noted that AI *"done a good job*

of structuring my stories and experiences into consistent frames" and *"recommended sending a short personalized note message along with connection requests"* to improve acceptance rates. Others described AI as helping them write more substantive comments, moving beyond hollow responses like "Great post" toward more contextually engaged written interaction.

However, this same standardization was perceived as degrading the quality of what gets written and shared on LinkedIn. A user expressed their frustration as a breach of what LinkedIn was supposed to be, *"I use LinkedIn to learn more about the sectors I am interested in. Not from AI."* Users described a feed increasingly dominated by interchangeable AI-generated content that no longer reflected human expertise: *"Every post I come across has been written by AI... what is the point if we are just reading AI-generated content."* Another poster agrees, *"My feed is just a wall of the same five AI-generated 'thought leadership' posts rearranged. There's no personality, no real experience behind it."* This frustration points to something deeper than aesthetic preference. When writing on LinkedIn is assumed to be AI-generated, it loses its function as a signal of genuine professional expertise and experience. LinkedIn was no longer perceived as a space to learn from how professionals write and think, but as a stream of optimized, generic text. These perceived changes extend beyond annoyance to a redefinition of what counts as "real networking". Several posts argued that AI-assisted outreach had *"killed real networking,"* making cold outreach feel *"more robotic and less personal"* and leading messages to be read as "low-effort spam" rather than sincere professional engagement. As AI made generic professional writing easier to produce, people set a higher bar for what counted as meaningful textual engagement. Posts and messages now need clearer personalization and contextual detail to be seen as authentic or worth responding to.

5 Discussion and Future Works

Our findings show that LinkedIn users face this tension across three dimensions of their text-based self-presentation practices. **First**, AI-assisted writing lowers the labor of initiating written professional self-presentation but shifts effort toward humanizing the output. **Second**, AI-assisted polishing expands who can participate professionally through writing but raises anxiety about how that writing is socially judged. **Third**, AI-assisted templates help standardize written professional communication but erode the perceived value of a genuine human voice and expertise on the platform. Together, these findings suggest that AI does not simply make writing on LinkedIn easier but fundamentally reshapes what written self-presentation means and what it signals to others.

These findings extend existing HCI and CSCW work on AI-mediated communication [8, 9] by showing that the consequences of AI-assisted writing are particularly acute in professional networking contexts, where text-based self-presentation carries direct career consequences. Additionally, prior work has shown that AI involvement shapes perceptions of sincerity and credibility [11]. Our study adds that on LinkedIn, this dynamic is amplified because users understand their writing not merely as communication but as professional identity work, a signal of competence, effort, and authentic expertise that others actively evaluate. The concern is not just that AI-generated text is detected, but that once detected, it strips the writing of its function as evidence of genuine professional presence. Despite these risks, our findings also show that AI-assisted writing tools could meaningfully expand access to text-based professional self-presentation for users who face language, confidence, or time barriers. There is a need to establish a careful balance: AI should support users in writing and presenting themselves professionally without normalizing generic, template-like written communication that erodes LinkedIn's value as a space for nuanced human expertise. In this sense, our preliminary study surfaces new research questions about the social, design, and ethical challenges of using AI-assisted writing in professional networking contexts.

A limitation of this study is that our data draws primarily from Reddit, which may skew toward more vocal or critical users, limiting how well our findings generalize to the broader LinkedIn user base. Future work could examine how different AI writing tool designs, such as those that preserve the user's voice or make AI involvement transparent, might better support text-based professional self-presentation while mitigating risks to authenticity and credibility. We plan to extend this study through interviews and surveys with LinkedIn users to examine how people strategically use AI writing tools across different writing and posting practices, and how platform and AI tools design might better support genuine human expertise alongside AI assistance. In doing so, we hope to contribute to a broader understanding of how genAI is reshaping how professional identity is expressed, crafted, and evaluated through text in online professional communities.

Generative AI Disclosure

Generative AI tools were used solely to assist with grammar correction, sentence structuring, and stylistic refinement of the manuscript. All research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and framing were conducted exclusively by the human authors.

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A Online Articles

(1) Yes, That Viral LinkedIn Post You Read Was Probably AI-Generated. (https://www.wired.com/story/linkedin-ai-generated-influencers/)
(2) Artificial Authenticity And The Humblebrag Industrial Complex. (https://www.forbes.com/sites/nathanpettijohn/2025/07/27/artificial-authenticity-and-the-humblebrag-industrial-complex/)
(3) How AI Can Strengthen Your Personal Brand, But Only After You Do the Human Work First. (https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-ai-can-strengthen-your-personal-brand-only-after-you-mcclure-eo45c/)
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