

WOMEN FACEBOOK AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION- AN ANALYSIS OF PERSONAL IMAGES

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Abstract: Facebook being the largest used social networking site has transformed the way we communicate. It has given a great opportunity to people to present themselves to the world. By allowing individuals to upload images of them, Facebook has allowed individuals to present themselves in a meaningful and constructive way. Facebook's main feature of profile creation has enabled it to be one of the most used social networking sites. Individuals are allowed to create their own profiles by uploading images whenever and from wherever they want. Profile creation, an important feature of social networking site allows its users to display facets of their identity. (Boyd, Ellison 2007, p.1). SNS like Facebook has made people more conscience about the way they present themselves to their group. It has emphasized on the fact that a deliberate conscious identity construction may take place when an individual uploads his/ her photographs. The research is based on the identity construction theory. In identity theory (McCall and Simmons 1978) the classification and categorising of the self is identification. Through the process of identification an identity is formed. Constructing identity literally involves relationships and how symbolically one communicates his/her thoughts and emotions creating a conceptual representation of oneself. Using qualitative method, through snowball sampling, ten working women Facebook users have been selected as respondents. Their Facebook profiles have been studied for three months. (This includes studying their personal photographs on timeline, cover page and profile.) The study revealed that women were aware of how to use Facebook, and through their photographs did create their online identity. They tried to maintain their offline identity and online identity the same. Though others comments and likes did have some emotional effects on them but that did not affect their online identity. They deliberately choose certain photographs as to help them maintain their online identity. Being professionals maintaining both social an professional identity was a challenge that they faced.

Key words: identity, self- presentation, profile images, selection.

I. Introduction

Facebook has become an integral part in many peoples life. With the highest users, Facebook as a social networking site, has enabled people to know what their friends are doing, share their important occasions and be more active online. It has given a platform for people to create an intricate profile which is their principal means for presenting themselves to an online audience (Bobkowski, 2008, p.6). The user has the right to decide what to say and what not to say (Rybas & Gajjala, 2009, p.24). In this process of profile creation there is an attempt by the user to create his identity. There is an opportunity to construct and re constructs their identity.

Though Facebook has many social tools, photography has been an important aspect. Uploading photographs on their profile page, has made many individuals use Facebook as a medium to communicate about themselves to others. Profile creation, an important feature of social networking site allows its users to display facets of their identity (Boyd, Ellison, 2007, p.1). Facebook allows an individual to create their own profile page and upload how many ever pictures they want. Through this, an individual can create an identity that he /she may want to communicate to their friends.

It is important to understand if Facebook allows the users to self-represent themselves. According to Smock (2010, p.8) ,self-representation is often seen as a set of process employed by people for the purpose of convincing others that they are a particular type of person or have specific characteristics. If there is self – representation then it can pave way to identity construction.

II. Relevance of the Research

A lot of study has been done on computer generated communication, very less has been studied on how personal photographs have been used in social networking sites to construct an identity .Not much has been studied on women Facebook users and their perspective on identity creation. Women users make up majority of social media users (Faye, Carter, 2010), Having a professional life makes many women use social networking sites and establish an online identity. It is important to study why women users choose to include or exclude certain photographs, how they use personal pictures to communicate about themselves, and what is the thought process that actually goes behind in being selective about certain photographs. Thus it becomes significant to study the use of social networking space like Facebook by women users to construct their online identity. There have been authors who have emphasised the importance of studying photographs as they contribute to the understanding of profile creation by an individual. (Siibak, 2007a; Young, 2008; Mikkola, Oinas & Kumpulainen, 2008).

This research tries to study the aspect that goes into choosing certain photographs over others by women Facebook users. It also tries to understand how these selected photographs create a self- representation and an online identity for working women. The researcher has applied the identity theory to understand these aspects. It is a theory of role related choice behaviour deriving from a structural symbolic interaction, which assumes that human are actors , recognising the possibility of choice in human life (Stryker, 2000, p.26). The research tries to understand the behavioural pattern of women users and how they tend to create their online identity. Goffman (1959, p.52, 53, 55) says that any person's activity for a period of time continuously in front of an audience can have an influence over the audience. Goffman further discuss that there can be two different types of performers. One who act and believe that what they communicate is the actual reality and the other who do not fully believe their own act but are satisfied with the fact that they can deceive their audience. He also discusses that a "mask" can be the self the individual might like to be. Keeping Groffman's concept, the performer can be the Facebook user and the

audience are his /her Facebook friends. The mask can be the identity the user is trying to be and create through his/her photographs. The creation of Facebook profile is the very beginning in creating a personal online identity, and this personal identity provides the platform for social identity building (*Gearhart & King, 2010,p.19*). Each one has their own way of choosing a specific identity. For working women it altogether becomes very important to maintain a profile that is acceptable both at home and at a professional level. Any false identity can be easily identified by the user's friends. So it is necessary for the user to carefully create his/her online identity. *Smock (2010)* links identity to the concept of self-presentation. A user creates an identity that he/she wants his/her friends to see. According to *Smock (2010,p.6)* self – presentation is a process where an individual attempts to control how others perceive them. Compared to face to face communication an individual has the freedom to manipulate and be selective when choosing his/her photographs and there by presenting a multiple self.

III. Research Methodology

Women between 18-34 are a major users of social networking sites (*Solis, 2011*), (*State of the media, 2011*), because of which it is interesting to study this age group of people. The researcher has concentrated only on working women in this research who fall under the above age group category. 10 Working women aged between 23-35 were used as respondents. This study has tried to find how they construct a specific identity and how they self – represent themselves. Being a qualitative research, the number of respondents was limited to 10. All participants in the study had to be women, working professionals from different backgrounds aged between 23-35, who had a Facebook profile and actively updated their photographs on Facebook. The respondents were chosen based on snowball method, where participants were asked to recognise and suggest active Facebook women users whom they knew. According to *Smock (2010, p5,7)*, individuals are often concerned about how others view them and that at least to some extent their self- presentation can aid in making specific impression to their audience. Thus it allows them to present a controlled image of themselves.

Being a qualitative analysis the researcher followed a semi structured interview method and kept it open to bring in unexpected results. Depending upon the response the researcher added questions wherever necessary as to get more information. As this area is not much studied it was necessary to have open and close ended questions that will help in getting a good result. All discussions were made through e-mail correspondence. Wherever needed phone conversation was done depending upon the availability of the respondents. The respondents were briefed upon the aim of the research and researcher reminded them that their data will be confidential and wherever they needed could refrain from answering but giving factual answers was important. The main aim of the research was to make the respondents open up and share about the thought process that goes into selecting their photographs and uploading them and whether through this process they were attempting to create an identity and self-present themselves through those photographs. The study was divided into two segments. One segment included the study of the personal photographs that were uploaded by the participants between a period of three months, November 2015- January 2016. The second segment included filling up of the questionnaire, after which a telephonic conversation was used to elaborate and discuss the answers that were given. The average age group of the participants was 25, who were from different parts of South India. The respondents who gave similar answers were categorised together and the researcher tried to find the factors that might have led to similarity in their responses.

IV. Result of the study

The result of the study revealed that all the 10 working women respondents used Facebook more than 4 hours every day. Having smartphones and laptops helped them to access internet whenever needed. They all spent 2-3 hours every day on Facebook. The main reason for joining Facebook was to get in touch with old friends. Some also felt that having an online identity was important for their professional life. They felt that many companies do check their employee's Facebook accounts to know more about them thus it was necessary to maintain an online profile. This also helped them to keep in contact with their peer group. Most of the respondents uploaded their pictures every fortnight. They thought it was necessary to keep them active online. Photographs with friends and family were the main pictures that were considered important to upload. 'Important occasions' was also another criterion for selection of photographs. Though the respondents agreed that through their pictures they were trying to establish their online identity, but they never manipulate or edit their photographs to achieve it. Majority of the respondents felt unhappy if their photographs did not reach 100 likes. The respondents said that they were very particular about their pictures on Facebook and carefully selected the pictures to be uploaded.

All the respondents felt that looks were the most important criteria for choosing a photographs followed by style. Respondents did not try to portray a different identity online and maintained their real identity. They were satisfied with their identity online. Being a woman did make them conscious about the photographs they uploaded. They did agree that they did not have freedom like men to post anything. As most of the respondents were yet to be married, having a good profile pictures on Facebook was important as they felt that their profile are checked whenever there is a marriage proposal

In this research, the researcher was able to understand and analyse the online behaviour of the women Facebook users. The respondents were very clear to maintain their real self when it comes to their online identity. They never felt the need for a false identity and were mainly satisfied with their online identity. They were conscious about the fact that many people do watch their photographs and looks did matter when it comes to choosing a photograph. Being appreciated by friends was an important aspect. They even agreed that they have learnt the art of self-presentation. They consciously knew which photographs will fetch them more likes, but were also disappointed when it didn't happen. Though the respondents put a lot of thought on what to upload, they felt that their identity on Facebook was a real representation of themselves. When users select a profile picture, they are "communicating something significant" and this picture is one of the first steps in identity creation (*Ellis, 2010*). Though their picture selection varied as some liked to post pictures with others in the frame and some liked independent pictures. Selfies also went well with some respondents. Being working women, they made it a point to show their "cool" self to others. They thought it was important to share through the pictures that they also have a fun filled life. The respondents also shared that they sometime untag themselves with pictures where they do not look very presentable. They also agreed upon that their Facebook profile has changed over the period of time. Earlier when they had just started using Facebook anything and everything seemed appropriate to upload, but after having a professional life, they have become more conscious in creating their social online identity. Before posting a picture the respondents do spend time thinking what kind of response they might receive, whether they might get a like or a comment. Checking their picture update, once in four hours, emphasises the fact that there is a kind of unrest within them. Reaching the mark of 100 likes- is a sense of satisfaction. When that is reached it automatically gives them a sense of happiness and the frequency of checking their updates reduces. They wanted their pictures to be interesting and different from their previous post. They thought it was necessary not to have a boring profile picture.

V. Discussions

The data collected during this study helps us to understand that, women are very learned and conscious about how to use Facebook. They have in a way learnt the technology and have mastered the art of creating their profile. Having android phone keeps them accessible to internet everywhere. They have been very particular to maintain their professional identity along with which they have tried to communicate the fun loving person they are. Previous studies have stated that Facebook users often tailor their profile pictures for a certain audience (Gearhart & Kang, 2010), but this research has not proved the above said statement that women transform their identity depending upon who their audience are. Throughout the research it has been found that the respondents maintained the same identity online and offline. The research has shown that as women sift their roles its impact can be seen on the choice of photographs that they upload. When they are a daughter it's different, when they are married their selection of pictures tends to change and when they are mothers, pictures with their kids become important criteria in selection of photographs. At every level they have also been able to maintain their professional identity. Viewing others photographs and the comments they receive, have made them very conscious and selective about uploading their own photographs.

VI. Limitations

Being a qualitative study the researcher has carried out the research with 10 respondents. Many were not comfortable with the idea of having their pictures studied for a research. The number of respondents may not be a representation of the majority of population, but the research has been able to give very factual and true reasons as to why and how women create their identity on Facebook. All the respondents are from an upper middle class, who are graduates and are well placed. This could be a factor for their high Facebook usage.

VII. Further study

This research has been one of the few studies that are carried on women and identity construction through photographs on Facebook. There is much scope to study further on how women in different professions construct their identity. Even women who are from different geographical areas could be studied and how they respond to selection of photographs, whether there has been any cultural aspects related to it. One more area of study could be on how selection of photographs has changed at different stages in a women's life.

VIII. Conclusion

The study has emphasised the fact that women do create their online identity and self-represent. Photographs have been an important and significant element in shaping an online identity. Women have been conscious about their selection of photographs and are well aware of how these photographs make others understand about them and judge them. They have felt a conflict between their social self and professional self while creating their identity. The women respondents have a sense of satisfaction with their online identity. Friends do have a role in shaping up their identity as the feedback from their friends does emotionally affect them. Thus Facebook has been effectively used as a tool by professional women to establish their online identity. "Everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role"(Robert Ezra Prk, 1950, p 249 cited in Goffman 1990, p.19).

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