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A Review of Identity on Facebook

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Abstract

The area of online identity formation has been studied thoroughly. However, most research to date has focused on anonymous online environments. With the success of Facebook, a popular social networking site, researchers are beginning to study the psychology of identity and areas related to it. This review attempts to synthesize some of the research conducted concerning identity formation, friendship and social attractiveness as it relates to Facebook. It will also serve to identify areas for further study.

Identity, as explained by Svend Brinkmann (2008), is derived from the interpretations of society. In other words, we are who others imagine us to be. Under this model, an individual's identity is as much controlled by the individual as it is by his or her audience:

Identity is constructed under a unique set of constraints. The presence of the corporal body in social encounters prevents people from claiming identities that are inconsistent with the visible part of their physical characteristics (e.g., sex, race, and looks), and the shared knowledge of each other's social background and personality attributes renders it difficult for an individual to pretend to be what he or she is not. (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008, p. 1817)

With the rise of the Internet and online communities, however, identity formation found a new set of tools – and greater control. Through chat rooms and newsgroups, users were able to leverage the anonymity afforded to them to create new identities without the accountability typically present in offline interactions. These identities did not necessarily match their true identities and researchers began to study the psychology behind what David Giles (2003) refers to as the “identity laboratory” (p. 271). Individuals could use the Internet to role-play. An introverted person offline could act extroverted online. A man could act as a woman and vice versa. In some cases, role-play could temporarily overcome physical disabilities. Anecdotally, paralyzed individuals could take on personas with fully functioning limbs on the virtual world known as Second Life. The ability to take on these alter-identities, however, relies heavily upon the anonymity of the online environment. When anonymity is reduced, online identities will more closely match the

offline identities of the individual user. Research conducted on Internet dating sites found that when the constraints of offline interactions presented themselves, the identities presented by users of those sites were more often accurate portrayals of the self (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2006).

The social networking site Facebook.com has five features that affect a user's identity beyond anything currently and popularly available online. First is self-presentation. The Facebook user has complete control of his or her personal profile, picture and postings authored by the user. This allows a user of the site to establish biographical information about him- or herself to help guide the formation of his or her identity. Second, friends have the ability to post writings to a Facebook user's wall that is often available for others to see. Users have little control over the content of their friends' postings. These postings, when viewed by others, add to the formation of the user's identity. Third, there is very little anonymity to Facebook accounts. Facebook administrators attempt to reduce anonymity by verifying accounts and deleting accounts they find to be fictional. The structure of Facebook also requires identifying information in order to find and *friend* others. This lack of anonymity creates an environment similar to online dating sites in that there are social constraints to the identity an individual is able to put forward. Fourth, environmental behavior, such as interactions with friends, groups or events through Facebook, is automatically published to the user's public profile. These cues provide a dimension of identity currently unavailable on other social networking sites. Finally, the number of friends a user has is published through Facebook. This information creates a sort of badge communicating social success or failure to others on the site.

This review attempts to synthesize some of the research conducted concerning identity formation, friendship and social attractiveness as it relates to Facebook. It will also serve to identify areas for further study.

About Facebook

Facebook is a social networking site that enables users to connect with others through an online forum. As of January 2008, Facebook had 18.4 million self-identified American adults with an account (Smith, 2008). Users create profiles that represent their personality including personal interests, photos, affiliations and a listing of the user's friends. Once two users have become friends on the site, Facebook begins automatically posting updates of their respective online behaviors. Because of these automatic posts, known on Facebook as the Mini-feed, users do not need to directly communicate with each other in order to learn about recent events in each other's lives. Furthermore, users can communicate with each other privately through a Facebook Inbox or publicly through the user's wall, posting of photos and videos or commenting on the user's behavioral updates in the Mini-feed.

When it originally began, Facebook was a network catering to students at Harvard University. This orientation meant that the online relationships established through Facebook were all anchored through an offline network. Indeed, the original goal of the site was to connect individuals to people who study and work near them. As the site grew in popularity, it began expanding its offering. Initially, it offered its service to other universities. As its success continued to grow, it expanded further to organizational groups and ultimately to geographies. Today, Facebook is available to anyone with an e-mail address. Its stated goal, according to its website, is "to connect and share with the

people in your life.” This shift makes Facebook more a medium for fostering existing relationships than for fostering geographical ones.

Communicating the Self

Facebook provides its users, as do most social networking sites, the ability to create a personal profile of autobiographical information. This profile becomes the foundation of an online identity on Facebook. According to a study conducted by Shanyang Zhao and colleagues (2008), Facebook users could establish their identity through explicit (such as wall posts or pictures) or implicit (such as the “About me” section) means. In most cases, identity was created through the use of photos. However, users also projected an identity through interests, hobbies and first person narratives. The process of forming this online biography parallels the process Brinkmann (2008) describes as self-interpretation. Brinkmann (2008) says identity relies “on self interpretations that must be articulated in words and images within one or more interpretative traditions” (p. 405). Facebook provides a medium for the interpretation of identity through its profiles.

The difference between the formation of an identity online from that of an offline identity is the control users have over what is communicated to others. Zhao and colleagues (2008) describe two categories of identity – the “now selves” and the “possible selves.” “Now selves are established identities known to others, whereas possible selves are images of the self that are currently unknown to others” (p. 1819). In offline interactions, portraying the possible self is difficult because of obvious constraints or contradictions evident within the interaction. A person may attempt to portray themselves as upper class and wealthy, but clothing, linguistic patterns and cultural cues

will often betray him or her. In the online environment, however, users have the ability to control which aspects of him or herself are communicated. Portraying the self as highly educated may be easier online as communication is often asynchronous and the user has time to think out responses and postings before publishing them. In the case of Facebook profiles, users have the ability to choose flattering photos, educated quotes and hobbies and interests that are not completely accurate of their offline lives. As Zhao and colleagues (2008) mentions, “what better way to personally convey ‘kool [sic], hot and smooth’ than to signal it through ‘kool, hot and smooth’ music” (p. 1826). However, the portrayal of the possible self is still tempered by the fact that most Facebook users have friends who also know them in offline contexts. This means that users must still portray a version of his or herself that falls within the acceptable range of truth among his or her friends.

Friends as Contributors to Identity

In conjunction with the identity developed by the individual user on Facebook, friends of the user may also affect his or her identity. The friends of a user on Facebook have the ability to post messages about the user on their public profile and add photos of the individual for others to view. While the user had control over the disclosure of information in their autobiography, they have little control over the types of comments or pictures posted by their friends. This aggregation of information relating to the user presents others with additional data by which to judge the user’s identity. As Walther, J.B., Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong (2008) point out, this data may be weighed more heavily than data authored by the user himself or herself:

[I]n a Facebook profile, things that others say about a target may be more compelling than things an individual says about his- or herself. It has more warrant because it is not as controllable by the target, that is, it is more costly to fake. (p. 33)

Friendships on Facebook may also play a role in identity formation beyond the comments of those friends. In a study conducted by researchers at Michigan State University and West Virginia University, the physical attractiveness of friends translates to the physical attractiveness of the user himself or herself (Walther et. al., 2008). The study found that “participants who saw attractive friends’ photos rated the profile owner significantly more physically attractive” (p. 41) compared to participants shown unattractive photos. This is possible through the design of Facebook. In most cases, a name and a self-selected, thumbnail photo identify individuals on Facebook. When other users visit a profile page, they immediately see a collection of photos representing the user’s friends. As in offline interactions, the identity of Facebook users are not just informed by the user, but also by the company he or she keeps.

The Role of a Lack of Anonymity

Furthermore, the lack of anonymity means Facebook users must be more honest with the identity they portray. Because a user often has friends on Facebook that are also friends in offline environments, this forces the identity portrayed by its users to be validated by those who know them. In its earlier stages, the Internet afforded its users a great amount of anonymity. This anonymity fostered the development of identities very separate from the identities of users in their offline environments. The development of these multiple identities is what Giles (2003) describes as “the fragmented self” (p. 272).

Users were able to portray different versions of themselves dependent upon the online community or their own personal desires. As the Internet and technology that utilized it evolved, however, users began migrating to less anonymous environments. Facebook was originally designed as an extremely anchored environment in that everyone on the site had to have some sort of offline affiliation. The first affiliation required was at Harvard University. However, as the site's popularity grew, it began expanding to other universities and organization. Now, Facebook is available to anyone with an e-mail address. However, the core function of Facebook – to become friends with others online – forces a minimum level of disclosure about the identity of each user. In contrast to chat rooms and even Second Life, this disclosure reintroduces the social constraints of offline interactions by forcing users to present their offline identities somewhat accurately online. One study found that Facebook users presented both an identity that was socially desirable and one that was considered to be a possible self. In most cases, the identities were accurate though perhaps not complete – users tended to emphasize positive aspects of their identity over negative ones. (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008).

The Role of Quantity of Facebook Friends

The function of counting friends on Facebook leads to an ultimate declaration of social attractiveness. Facebook provides its users with the ability to friend other users online. While traditional social networks typically have about 10-20 close friends and 150 social relationships (Tong, Van Der Heide, & Langwell, 2007), Facebook users often have hundreds of friends listed on their profiles. Though there are clear differences in how these relationships are managed offline versus online, theories of social attractiveness may still apply on differing scales. One study conducted by researchers at

Michigan State University found that social attractiveness peaks when users have 302 friends. Fewer friends led users to assume introverted characteristics of the individual. More friends led to doubts of credibility – too many friends may mean an individual is actually less attractive because they are spending great amounts of time carelessly friending other users (Tong et al., 2007). The research findings suggest that the number of friends an individual has also contribute to the identity of that individual. They also suggest that the number of friends that signify social attractiveness may be related to the number of friends the observer has himself or herself. A user with 500 friends may consider someone else with 515 friends to be as socially attractive.

The Role of the Mini-feed

Facebook establishes a behavioral history of each user through the Mini-feed, an area of Facebook that has been the least studied to date. The Mini-feed is a feature of Facebook that publishes online behaviors of each user. Whenever a user interacts with other users, groups, or the Facebook platform itself, a brief description of that interaction is published to the Mini-feed for all of the user's friends to see. What is important about this feed is that relationships and identities can be fostered without direct communication between users. Though two users may never directly communicate, they will know through their Mini-feeds intimate details about that person and begin to form an identity of that individual. Someone who is constantly posting about a sports team, for example, will put forth the identity of a fan of that sport, though the two individuals may never discuss sports together. This passive form of communication provides an implicit identity claim for others to consume. In this case, the user is seen as a social actor exhibiting his or her identity through his or her behaviors (Zhao et al., 2008).

Uses and Gratifications of Facebook

Very little research has been conducted to date regarding why social networking sites are used in the first place. Two researchers, John Raacke, Ph.D. and Jennifer Bonds-Raacke, Ph.D., attempted to answer this question using the Uses and Gratifications theory of media research. As explained in Giles' (2003) text, *Media Psychology*, "[Uses and Gratification] researchers look at the *motives* [sic] for using media and the *needs* [sic] that media use gratifies" (p. 23). Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2007) found that users of Facebook and MySpace (a similar social networking site) use the site to keep in touch with friends old and new, to post and view pictures and to make new friends. Nonusers of the sites predicted users were receiving the same benefit, though they also added that its use also satisfied a desire to fit-in with the crowd. (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2007). Even more revealing is that the research found that students were spending almost 3 hours per day on a single social networking site managing more than 200 friends (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2007).

Conclusions

Considering the five characteristics discussed above and the uses and gratifications research conducted, it would appear Facebook has the distinct possibility of replacing a portion of offline relationships. I say only a portion because despite the amount of time spent online managing relationships, the majority of relationships established on Facebook are still with friends previously known offline. Nonetheless, Facebook provides its users with the ability to not only establish one dimension of identity, but multiple dimensions of identity including self-perceptions, social position and implicit knowledge of the user. This formation of identity, and the interaction

Facebook allows between different users, seems to replicate the types of disclosure shared in offline experiences. For example, in a study on disclosure, closeness and satisfaction with friendship, it was found that disclosure leads to closeness and ultimately satisfaction with the relationship (Morry, 2005). Facebook allows for each of these in that the profile and other modes of publishing information about the user provides disclosure to others, while the site immediately reciprocates that disclosure on behalf of the user's friends. However, to say that Facebook replaces offline relationships may be a hasty conclusion. Giles (2003) notes that some researchers postulate that "cyber-relationships are just different, and their unique nature has the potential to change the way humans interact in general" (p. 270). Giles (2003) also references a study which finds that "most Internet users feel a need to meet their cyber-friends in person at some point" (p. 272). Studies are only recently beginning to emerge regarding the combination of both online and offline relationships and how they are managed together. In his book, Johnson (2005) discusses the development of new socially-oriented Internet technology:

Nearly all of the most hyped developments on the Web in the past few years have been tools for augmenting social connection....Some of these tools create new modes of communication that are entirely digital in nature....Others use the networked computer to facilitate a face-to-face-encounter (as in Meetup). Others involve a hybrid dance of real and virtual encounters, as in the personals world, where flesh-and-blood dates usually follow weeks of online flirting. (p. 123-124)

Facebook presents a new facet in the evolution of interpersonal relationships.

Areas for Further Study

While studies concerning Facebook are still sparse at best, a few areas of interest are particularly lacking of any research. Aside from further research into all of the areas mentioned above, the following areas should also be considered for academic research.

The management of existing relationships and the formation of new ones inspire questions regarding the role Facebook plays in the lives of its users and how a site like Facebook fulfills the needs of its users for interpersonal experiences. As Facebook users invest so much time and manage so many relationships, one might readily hypothesize that the users are exchanging an activity in their offline lives to maintain these online relationships. But what? Further ethnographic research should be conducted to understand not just how individuals use Facebook, but how Facebook use fits into the lives of the individuals.

Facebook transforms the social network from a maximum of 150 persons to totals reaching above 1,000. The management of this many social connections begs a number of further studies. Managing 1,000 social connections would traditionally require large amounts of time. Further studies should be conducted to understand how these relationships are being managed and where each friend stands within the social network. Is it possible to have 1,000 friends or are they simply loose acquaintances? Further research in this area would expand upon theories of relationship and provide further understanding into the use of technology to further build the social capital of a network.

The Mini-feed provides a unique aspect of social communication that is currently unavailable on many other sites. There have been no studies conducted to date that focus on the role of the Mini-feed in the management of Facebook relationships. Studies should be conducted to understand this specific feature of Facebook.

Finally, further studies should be conducted to understand the uses and gratifications Facebook meets. While studies have been done to understand why people use Facebook, there are no studies currently exploring the nature of the relationships individuals establish on Facebook and how these relationships compare to traditional offline relationships.

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