‘You’re given just a page to show the real you’: To what extent does gender influence perceptions of self-expression on Facebook? A discourse analysis

Lauren Rye

Supervised by: Erica Burman     March 2012
‘You’re given just a page to show the real you’: To what extent does gender influence perceptions of self-expression on Facebook? A discourse analysis

ABSTRACT

The current study aims to test the extent to which gender is made relevant within the discussion of self-expression online. By using Subrahmanyam’s (2008) co-construction model, perceptions of individuals were also analysed for recognition of offline/online fusion. 3 male and 3 female participants took part in semi-structured interviews, where they were expected to discuss online self-expression (in relation to themselves personally, those around them, and society at large). Data was then transcribed and then explored using discourse analysis with reference to Fairclough (2001).

Participants expressed the motivation to manipulate self-expression, in order to produce an online identity which enhances the offline self. Gender was not found to substantially affect this process, as Facebook provides all members with an equal opportunity to express online. When describing characteristics normatively associated with a particular gender stereotype, individuals often asserted that this behaviour could be related to male or female self-expression; thus creating a lack of gender reinforcement within conversation.

KEY WORDS: GENDER SELF-EXPRESSION FACEBOOK DISCOURSE ONLINE
Introduction

Tracy (1998:15) stated that ‘gender only becomes an issue when participants themselves make it one’. The present study aimed to test the extent to which participants detail differences in gender whilst discussing self-expression online. By using Subrahmanyam’s (2008) co-construction model of online/offline environment connectedness, the perceptions of participants are also analysed for recognition of offline/online fusion.

Facebook and Identity

Aboujaoude (2011:16) stated that:

The internet and all it brings have become so ingrained in our experiences that the state of being totally logged off or out of reach now strikes us as a bit unusual, perhaps even unnatural.

This refers to the ‘virtual revolution’ where networking sites, such as Facebook, have made an explosive impact on the allowance of virtual sociability. With 800 million users, of which half log on within any given day, Facebook is becoming further embedded into the daily behaviour of most individuals. As personality is diffused into modern technology, it has become important to explore developmental concerns such as identity formation. According to Miller (2011:51) an analysis of Facebook representation is important in understanding how identity is formed:

Who a person ultimately is does not just depend on what they think they are, or who they would like to be or wish themselves to be. It lies essentially in what others perceive you to be.

Accordingly, Facebook was introduced as an ideal research tool for allowing individuals to judge others, via which information they choose to disclose. Self-expression is characterised by activities including status updates, instant messaging and uploading photos and viewed by a users collection of ‘friends’. Chou and Edge (2012) reported that those who use Facebook more extensively, feel that ‘friends’ have a better/happier life than themselves. Thus users actively compare the happiness of their own life with others, by viewing information which has been selectively chosen for judgement.

Although identity is usually assessed as rigid and constant throughout life, social theorist Zygmunt Bauman focuses on its changeable and fluid nature. Within this framework, identity becomes an issue when exposed or threatened in some way, and therefore needs to be asserted. In the context of Facebook, users are able to
achieve appraisal by negotiation of their own identity. Buckingham (2008: 1) suggests that identity illustrates both similarity and difference:

I am the product of my unique personal biography. Yet who I am (or who I say I am) varies according to who I am with, the social situations which I find myself in, and the motivations I may have at the time.

Therefore identity is described as both the distinguishable inner programming of a person and something which brings unity between individuals (identification). Facebook allows commonality to be sought by providing a standard template, where individuals are invited to use popular culture to compose aspects of their identity (Williams 2008). Assumingly the motive behind this is to mirror the offline experience of meeting someone new and asking their personal interests, in order to find common ground for discussion.

**Online/Offline Motivations to Self-Express**

Subrahmanyam et al’s (2008) co-construction model suggests that online and offline worlds are psychologically connected, as users bring issues to their online world through a different ‘online self’. Pempek et al (2009) supports this as self-presentation was found to be one of the most attractive reasons for maintaining a Facebook profile. Collins and Miller (1994) believed that disclosure is more likely in a reciprocal relationship, which is easily maintainable on Facebook as content is public and therefore users feel obliged to reply to disclosed information with their own. Reciprocity was explored by Ellison et al (2007) who found that internet use alone does not predict social capital accumulation, however intensive use of Facebook does. Furthermore LaRose et al (2001) concluded that students use Facebook as a modern device for social support. However, it has been suggested that Facebook activity may provoke negative consequences in the offline environment, thought to influence social capital, such as lack of face-to-face contact (Nie, 2001).

Valkenburg and Peter (2007) found that 80% of students used Facebook to maintain existing friendships, which according to Planalp et al (2006) are preserved by users engaging in constructive actions and avoiding negative ones. Although reciprocity is a major factor in the process of disclosing information, Zhao et al (2008) suggests that users choose to only disclose information that merely shows glimpses of their personality rather than direct, explicit cues. This can be seen as a method for others to pass judgment about a person and respond to cues through their own interpretations.
Selectivity, Accuracy and Facebook

The notion of ‘self-expression’ threatens to install the belief that the very self is transferred exactly to a virtual format, without recognising this as a performance. Goffman (1959) references a ‘dramaturgical’ process where individuals become actors in their own theatrical performance. This theory presents the ‘front stage’ as a place where the individual conforms to societies regulations and the ‘back stage’ as an area of reflective honesty. By developing this theory into the virtual Facebook environment, the ‘front stage’ includes public channels of self-expression where individuals selectively choose which information to disclose, in order to strengthen ties in the ‘back stage’ (offline) part of life (Sas et al, 2009).

Contemporary media frequently emphasises the dangerous nature of misrepresentation online through screen work such as ‘Catfish’ (2010). This bombardment of false online identity has somewhat fixed the idea that if an online profile does not exactly match the personality of an individual offline, then the online attempt is inaccurate and dishonest. However if we are to embrace expression online as a performance, Facebook can be seen as a platform which enables individuals to expand and distribute ideas of selfhood. Therefore, concerns should not lie within the issue of dishonesty but why/how individuals shape this type of media for their own advantage. Papacharissi (2011:304) describes Facebook as a routine process where the ‘social couch potato’ creates an identity driven performance in order to meet goals of gratification, based on their socio-psychological disposition. Thus how an individual chooses to select their information determines how ‘honest’/‘dishonest’ their online representation is.

By identifying Facebook as a habitual process for goal orientated expression, it can be suggested that information disclosed online is merely syntax, however semantic meaning is needed for interpretation. This relates to Searle (1980), who argues that the human mind cannot be copied by manmade materials due to a computers inability to possess a semantic framework. Although some cyberneticists would argue otherwise, computers are unable to replicate these kinds of cognitive processes (Yaszek, 2002). Therefore, expressions of identity online can only be analysed as representations of a person, as the viewer will make their own interpretation of the information at hand depending on their semantic frameworks.

Park et al (2011) found that ‘honest’ formations of self-disclosure may not lead to an increasing intimacy on Facebook; however a large amount of disclosure with positive content may enhance feelings of connectedness. This led Park et al to conclude that
individuals may not seek strong bonds on Facebook, but wish to experience a number of weak ties, where they are able to selectively construct an identity which may be wishful and not exactly true to life; ‘the online self’ (Subrahmanyam et al, 2008). Responding to this debate Miller (2011: 50) found that Facebook is ‘actually a technology for allowing someone to be more true than ever was possible’. However, Hancock and Toma (2009) highlighted that ‘selective self-perception’ is the motivation behind disclosing certain information in efforts to ‘ego-cast’ oneself (Bugeja, 2006).

Facebook allows individuals to enhance their identity by creating opportunity to disclose only desired information. Hum et al (2011) suggests that profile pictures are the main source of enhancement, especially within females as it is socially normative to use beauty regimes that change appearance. Zhao et al (2008) confirmed this, stating that individuals strive toward ‘hoped for, possible identities’. However, according to Stern and Taylor (2007) 74% of the students in their sample agreed that their profiles were true representations of themselves. Therefore, personal information on Facebook is seen as accurate for the majority of individuals, however selective in nature. Nosko et al (2010) stated that in general people tend to disclose around 25% of information, meaning that there is an active decision to limit disclosure, which may be due to the increasing wariness surrounding online disclosure or the wish to provide non-explicit cues which viewers can interpret identity from.

**Gender and Self-Expression**

Emerging adulthood, described by Arnett (1994), is an ‘age of possibilities’ in terms of the exploration one must go through to find their own identity. Hum et al (2011) found that young adults tend to store 20 profile pictures at once, varying in content, which implicates a stage in life where identity is an experimental process. Being the most noticeable feature of a profile page, profile pictures aim to sum up ones identity and therefore each individual will hold a different criterion for which aspects of their personality/appearance they want to expose. Bond (2009) found that girls have a more urgent desire to store memories through profile pictures as they include more content of family, friends and holidays. In contrast to this, boys prefer to expose pictures of sporting activities, which ultimately asks if gender role stereotypes are valid online in the same way as offline.

As aforementioned, if a sense of social capital is to be reached one must identify feelings of intimacy, gained by positive representation, which Eagly (1987) considers to be made through consideration of socially constructed gender roles. The relevance of gender stereotypes is further noted by Cooley and Reichart Smith (2010, cited in Hum et al, 2011), who found that even when an individual is able to
format their own identity, gender stereotypes are demonstrated, shown through females dominantly exhibiting pictures including more of their body than males. In another example of self-expression, Devoss (2002, cited in Attwood, 2007) describes women’s self-published pornography sites as ‘identity projects’, where images of female nudity are thought to liberate the female identity, however essentially reinforce females objectively as stereotypes.

Weatherall (2002:85), using a social constructionist approach, suggested that gender:

‘…is created and renegotiated in interpersonal relationships and encouraged and maintained through social structures. Gender is something that is done in social interaction.’

In this respect, data is not to be seen as a reflection of an individual’s gender identity but speech behavior, which reinforces conventional norms of masculinity/femininity. Tracy (1998:15) argues that ‘gender only becomes an issue when the participants themselves make it one’. This comments on ethnomethodological ideas of ‘doing gender’ (West and Zimmerman,1987) which imply that gender is something one ‘does’ instead of what one ‘has’ (Stokoe and Smithson, 2001). Therefore gender is an ‘omnipresent feature of all interactions’ (Weatherall, 2000:287-288), as individuals reinforce gender roles through self-expression. In this respect, it becomes necessary to explore if males/females construct interaction differently when communicating their perceptions of self-expression online. Thus, the subsequent research does not seek to find evidence of gender identity per se, but identification of gendered acts online through interview analysis.
Method

Design

Kvale (1996) offered a seven-stage method, which aims to ‘provide some structure to an open and flexible interview study’. By following these stages, the present study progressed from ‘thematizing’ to ‘reporting’. ‘Analysing’ took place through discourse analysis, where interview material was explored for inter-person variability, for instances:

1. Where the participant referenced the fusion of offline/online environments.
2. Where gender was made relevant within the discussion.

The social constructionist outlook to discourse analysis detailed by Fairclough (2001), suggests 3 stages of interpretation:

1. Detailed textual analysis – Regarding the immediate discourse environment.
2. Macro-sociological analysis – Regarding how social practice is shaped by social structure/power relations.

Thus, data is analysed in terms of social identity, social relations and systems of knowledge/meaning. A systematic analysis was not employed as automatic, common sense assumptions were used to ‘chain together’ both explicit and implicit inferences made by the participants about gender/fusion of environments. Due to the overall focus on power relations, aspects of Foucauldian discourse analysis were used to explore how ideologies reinforce social structure. For example, by taking ‘subject positions’ into account the researcher was able to explore why certain discourses may arise, with regards to how the participant feels they should construct speech within the interview environment.

Participants

3 male and 3 female participants were recruited through the researchers own social networks, proved by to be an effective technique (Noy, 2009), as in this instance those with active Facebook accounts could be addressed. 6 participants provided enough information for discourse analysis to take place, with each interview lasting approximately 20 minutes.

Students aged 20-21 were chosen on the assumption that their age group would actively be exploring identity online. Originally, Facebook success was achieved by directing the site at university students as a means to keep in contact with one another. This proved relevant as participants identified the desire to maintain existing relationships and create new connections. Overall, participants were thought to be central in the ‘virtual revolution’.
Procedure/Data Collection

6 individual semi-structured interviews took place, with meeting times agreed by participants and then confirmed via email. To keep the interviewing process informal in nature, a quiet university environment was chosen in order to provoke familiarity within participants. A full brief of the study’s aims was provided upon participant arrival.

Once consent had been obtained (appendix 1), Kvale’s (1996) ‘exploratory interview’ took place with the researcher asking open ended questions, using an interview schedule (appendix 2), designed to cover 3 general Facebook topics thought to provoke discussion of self-expression (general Facebook background, relational intimacy, accuracy). Prompts were included within this schedule, enabling the researcher to use cues from which participants could respond to unreservedly. Questions were created in accordance to Foddy (1993), who took points from his own work and the work of others to suggest how questions should be formulated. However, these questions were subject to change throughout the interviews, as participants on occasion voiced something of particular interest which the researcher did not plan to cover. The theme of gender was not imposed upon discussion, as a partial aim of the study was to explore if participants themselves made gender relevant.

In order to avoid the participant experiencing feelings of emptiness, due to the one sided nature of an interview, the researcher aimed to sum up main findings by evaluating content and any points of interest within discussion. The participant was then given a debrief form (appendix 3) and the opportunity to voice any overwhelming concerns. After each interview, a summary was produced noting aspects such as general mood and initial points of interest. Each interview was recorded using equipment supplied by Manchester Metropolitan University and then transcribed for ease of analysis. In accordance with Kvale’s (1996) idea of sociolinguistic analysis, transcription took a ‘detailed verbatim form’, in effort to understand why precise words were chosen to formulate a particular sentence. Transcripts were sent to participants via email, to confirm that they were happy with the complete version of their data.

Justification for Chosen Methodology

Through interviewing participants could talk at length and freely voice any concerns which helped to avoid Subrahmanyam’s (2008) mistake of limiting response through surveys. On discussion of gender analysis, Weatherall (2002:98) stated that ‘analysis is limited to what participants themselves demonstrate is relevant to them in an interaction’. Therefore by the use of open ended questions, participants were able
to freely discuss their opinions of Facebook in an offline setting of disclosure, allowing the researcher to explore if gender became relevant in conversation.

Walton (2007) suggested that it is important to employ appropriate analytic concepts and present findings in accordance with theoretical, epistemological positions rather than trying to create ‘truth claims’. Madill et al (2000) demonstrated a classification system of epistemological positions, where Foucauldian discourse analysis fell into the category of radical relativist, meaning that data is evaluated on its own terms on the basis of its ‘internal coherence, theoretical sophistication and persuasiveness’ (Willig 2008). Therefore, data can be analysed as a mere interpretation of identity, despite Facebook being publicly judged as a platform for inaccurate representation.

Fairclough (2001:20) proposed that discourse material could be regarded as both ‘traces of the productive process’ and ‘cues in the process of interpretation’. By viewing interview material as a product rather than a process, the researcher was able to build an interpretation of the text using ‘members resources’; current knowledge of the subject at hand, values, beliefs assumptions etc.

**Ethical Considerations** (See appendix 15 for general ethical considerations)
From a Feminist perspective, it was impossible for the analyst to remain completely impartial to the research as analysis placing males/females in different categories automatically reinforces gender roles (Stokoe and Smithson, 2001). Ochs (1992, cited in Stokoe and Smithson, 2001) proposes that there are few direct gender references such as ‘she’ and ‘him’, therefore previous knowledge of what constitutes as a gender reference is essential in analysing occurrences. Consequently, reflexive research was employed to reflect the researchers’ personal experience. Thus, individuals reading the final report are able to make their own personal judgments on the conclusions made, constituting as a further interpretation.
Analysis

**Ideal Identity** (Appendix 10)

Identity construction online became apparent by participants referencing seemingly commonplace desires, where there is a wish to be seen in a way which the Facebook user deems personally ideal. Inferences demonstrate how participants use the ideal identity discourse to shape conversation, concerning management of their own Facebook account.

‘I just think people tend to make themselves look a lot more cool or happy than they actually are...or busier than they are in person’ (*I1A: 44-45*)

By using ‘cool’ ‘happy’ and ‘busier’ this participant identifies characteristics which have been socially constructed to insist positive qualities, therefore making them attractive traits to hold. This is considered achievable online, as individuals are not viewed ‘in person’ and are able to create an identity revolving around features accepted as favourable.

‘I think a lot of people do self-promote...you can create an image for yourself without having to actually be yourself’ (ID: 75-76)

The concept of ‘self-promotion’ stresses firstly that the power to express lies essentially within the individual and therefore individuals consciously put themselves through the process of applied personal gain. Secondly, use of the word ‘promotion’ implies the semantic association of consumerism, which falls directly into Fairclough’s framework of our modern society as promotional rather than informational. This suggests the practice of online expression as something to be sold to another individual and therefore there is a need to shape an image that is perceived as socially desirable in the offline environment.

**Selective Self Expression** (Appendix 11)

In order to form ideal identity, participants referred to the process of actively adjusting the information which they choose to include online. On evaluation of interviews, it seems that Facebook has the potential to influence first impressions and build upon existing relationships via the information which is chosen to be disclosed. Due to this and the legal rules surrounding Facebook membership, individuals are compelled to monitor the information that they expose.

---

1 * ‘I’ refers to ‘Interview’ and is then followed by the interviews letter (A-F).
‘It’s a lot easier to type something where you can think about how you’re gonna phrase it...in person you don’t have as much opportunity to think’ (IC: 55-57)

This quote exemplifies the notion of shaping online identity through typing. When typing, one must first think of the current sentence at hand before words appear on the screen. These words can then be altered until the individual is satisfied with the content and structure of their text. However, in person this is harder to achieve as the process of conversation is unalterable and almost automatic. These advantages of typing explain why the participant feels it is easier to shape identity online, as offline methods of communication do not hold ‘as much opportunity to think’.

‘You can’t accurately judge people because you don’t know what’s going on behind the scenes’ (IB: 68-69)

Through use of ‘behind the scenes’ an underlying theme of theatre is encouraged via semantic association. This introduces self-expression as a performance, where an individual is able to explore a new online character. Realistically, ‘Behind the scenes’ is referring to the true thoughts of the individual who is creating the information for others to actively ‘judge’. Generally, the activity of judging someone has negative connotations however due to the inclusion of judging as a normal behaviour, within this quote, it appears that individuals have accepted that their information is subject to evaluation. This participant further goes on to say ‘the representation I suppose...is just there for you to believe’ (61). This expresses that individuals are willing to take online identity for what it is shown to be, however there is appreciation that this identity is merely a representation of the user that chooses to create it.

‘Displays of affection online. There’s no need. I just can’t understand why someone would do it’ (IF: 34-35)

Alongside identifying the need to limit personal expression, participants also expressed a negative outlook toward the exposure of issues believed to be too personal in nature. This participant uses the term ‘display of affection’, which is generally considered as an offline behaviour. Consequently a direct reference is made to an online representation of a formerly exclusive offline behaviour, where those in relationships can publicly announce ‘how much they love their boyfriend or girlfriend’ (32-33).

Inclusion/Exclusion (Appendix 12)

As Facebook is recognised as an ever-growing community, those who are included in the process have the opportunity to utilise a service which is fast becoming ‘part of
every everyday life’ (IB: 14). The power to become a member of Facebook lies within the individual, as membership is free and therefore exclusion is personally chosen, however ‘people are quite shocked if you don’t have it’ (IC: 27-28). The use of ‘people’ assumes that this is a common belief shared by the majority of society.

‘There’s that thing where you can tag a friend’s name in your status...it sounds a bit weird but if you get tagged in something like that it’s gonna make you excited for the night out. Like you’re part of something’ (IA: 59-62)

This participant directly focuses upon a Facebook mechanism which aids a sense of inclusion – the tagging of friends in a status. This grouping of friends together online asserts the need to sustain current relationships in the offline environment. It can be assumed that these relationships exist offline as the participant uses the experience of a ‘night out’ which presumably will be shared with those considered as close friends. In this quote ‘part of something’ seems to relate to a basic desire of belonging in human development.

‘If you meet someone you’ll always ask them what their full name is so you can add them on Facebook’ (IF: 25-26)

Firstly the participant uses the everyday experience of meeting someone and then goes on to suggest that this meeting allows an individual to gain a basic element of another person’s identity – their full name. ‘You’ll always ask them’ suggests that this process has now become normalised to a point where it is something which will frequently happen. Therefore, at the initial start of a relationship an individual can be expected to give their full name, in order to be included in further Facebook communication. By inferring that ‘you can add them on Facebook’, the participant places the power with the reader suggesting that you have the ability to include others in the Facebook experience. It is therefore your responsibility to bring offline connections into the online world.

‘It’s one of the most annoying things as a student because just everybody uses it. It’s the biggest distraction in the world’ (IA: 20-21)

The overall tone of this quote is very negative through use of the words ‘annoying’ and ‘distraction’, which when connected are generally depicted as unhelpful in the context of a student lifestyle. For students, feeling distracted disturbs a core feature of the student role - completing university work. As this role is threatened by the basic presence of Facebook, a positive evaluation is inhibited. By stating that ‘everybody uses it’ the inclusive nature of students on Facebook is recognised, however this seems to rationalise the idea of distraction.
Documentation/Memories (Appendix 13)

Individuals are becoming increasingly aware of Facebook as a reliable storage space as there is no capacity limit for instances of self-disclosure. If we suggest identity as something which is not fixed but has the capability to be flexible in nature, we accept that individuals are constantly structuring and restructuring their interactions. From this perspective, individuals are in control of their own documentation and can continuously shape the identity which they wish to expose.

‘It’s just really easy to use. Like...it kind of tells you when everyone’s birthday is (laughs)’ (IE: 13-14)

There were constant referrals of Facebook being ‘easy to use’, making it seem appealing to use as a limited amount of effort is supposedly exerted for advantageous results. In the offline environment, the act of remembering someone’s birthday is considered important as it is thought to demonstrate that you know a certain individual well enough to memorise their birthday. Facebook facilitates this process by memorising birthdays for you, meaning that even weakly connected individuals are able to communicate messages of theoretical loyalty. Through the impression of Facebook itself ‘telling you’ this information, this participant gives Facebook a human-like form.

‘It’s becoming like a database for everyone’s information. Now because of timeline...it’s gone back from having it like from the date that everyone was born...all the way through their life. So...I think it’s just going to build and build’ (ID: 20-23)

This participant recognises the ability to use ‘timeline’ as a resource to view the information disclosed by others. Timelines are generally constructed to record events of significance and therefore this creates the possibility for individuals to document important events ‘all the way through their life’. By labelling Facebook as a ‘database’ this participant almost creates an image of a solid 3D structure, which can be acquired to gain access to readily available information. Facebook is further seen as something which is ‘going to build and build’, suggesting that the amount of information stored can only become more substantial as timelines grow.

Absent Presence of Gender (Appendix 14)

Throughout interviews it did not appear that there were many explicit instances where participants differed greatly in their perceptions of the Facebook identity experience. Upon initial evaluation it seems that there are generally more differences
of opinion between all participants rather than just between males and females. However, when any difference did occur it seemed to be implicit and unintended by participants:

**MALE:** ‘I don’t see it like...if I have a new haircut that I need to post a picture of it. I don’t feel the need’ (ID: 99-100)

**FEMALE:** ‘Like when I dyed my hair and people were complementing me on it...it’s nice. Everybody wants to get compliments from people’ (IB: 94-95)

Both participants bring the changing of hairstyle into content and therefore it seems that they both recognise what kind of identity changes may be recorded online. The male participant does not explicitly say that only females partake in this form of expression, however justifies his personal opinion with ‘I don’t feel the need’. By using ‘need’, there is an implication that it is not essential or desired to post this type of information. Conversely, the female participant seems to justify her willingness to express this type of disclosure by stating that ‘everybody wants to get compliments from people’. This creates Facebook as a space to receive positive comments about appearance giving a sense of identity relief to the individual. As ‘everybody’ wants to partake in this positive experience, the participant is reassured of her actions and does not hesitate to admit self-gain.

**MALE D:** ‘I know some people where it is a sleazy way to know what everybody else is doing...’ (ID: 34-35)

**MALE F:** ‘See what other people are doing, have a little stalk on people (laughs).’ (IF: 16-17)

Both ‘sleazy’ and ‘stalk’ are words commonly constructed to provoke negative reaction, however by using ‘stalk’ male F installs a light-hearted feeling in conversation. ‘Stalking’ in the offline environment is of extensive concern, however individuals online can only ‘stalk’ through looking at information that has been publicly exposed to them. Therefore this individual is merely referring to the accessing of information which has been shaped for his viewing. To ‘stalk’ somebody on Facebook has therefore become a common phenomenon which explains why the participant has no apprehension when using the term. ‘Sleazy’, has not been subject to this transformative word meaning process and therefore Male D produces negative association. Overall this demonstrates different perceptions between males, rather than between genders.
Discussion

Participants expressed the motivation to manipulate self-expression, in order to produce an online identity which enhances the offline self. By filtering this disclosure individuals are able to present the desired self, which is insisted by the surrounding society.

Gender is not thought to substantially effect this process as Facebook provides all members with an equal opportunity to express online. When describing characteristics normatively associated with a particular gender stereotype, individuals often asserted that this behaviour could be related to male or female self-expression; thus creating a lack of gender reinforcement within conversation.

Ideal Identity and Selective Self-Expression

Participants noted the lack of morality in feeling able to talk about personal issues online, as opposed to offline. This recognition hints towards a perceived negative consequence of Facebook use within the offline environment, which could be related to Nie’s (2001) approach of losing social capital through extensive online involvement.

In relation to Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of fluid identity, Facebook acts as an ideal platform for filtering expression towards an identity which is recognised by society as desired or normative. Thus, conditions surrounding the individual are likely to determine how they choose to represent themselves online, as positive traits are constantly reinforced. This overwhelming power of society’s reinforcement techniques means that all individuals are left striving for the same gratification, resulting in a commonplace desire to express online for offline satisfaction (Subrahmaniam 2008).

Many inferences implied that Facebook users generally aspire to ‘make the most’ out of their identity rather than creating a new identity, especially with regards to profile picture selection, relating to Hum et al (2011). Thus Facebook provides a window of opportunity for individuals to enhance selected aspects of their identity, supporting the notion of maintaining a Facebook profile for self-presentation purposes (Pempek et al 2009). By participants talking so freely about enhancement it may be that this behaviour is now accepted as normative and no longer of secretive nature. Upon much reference to Facebook as a ‘first impression’, individuals feel constantly obliged to ‘self-promote’ their identity (similar to ‘ego-casting’ by Bugeja, 2006) as they are aware that they are being judged persistently. This relates to Miller’s (2011) notion that identity is formed upon what others perceive an individual to be. This also recognises Facebook behaviour as a performance, as expression is recorded for others to scrutinise.
Inclusion/Exclusion and Documentation/Memories

Participants noted primary and secondary gains of Facebook membership; the latter requires individuals to become fully involved in the Facebook experience in order to fulfill the need to belong. By using Facebook as a storage device, individuals are able to use computers to present their offline experiences to the public. However this simple pleasure may lead into compulsion which seems to be the general risk factor of creating a Facebook account amongst the sampled student population. Facebook is regarded as something which is ‘always there’ despite the fact that users log on at their own discretion. However an individual’s information can still be seen by others even in a state of offline mode, suggesting why an online presence is constantly felt.

Participants frequently referred to the offline environment as ‘the real world’, suggesting Facebook activity as almost fictional. The power of being included in this fantasy escapism may therefore lead individuals to feel they can be more honest in their interactions which relates to Miller who suggested the Facebook identity as ‘more true than was ever possible’. This however, in a sense, rejects the notion of online/offline fusion as participants are effectively separating the 2 environments by recognising how their behaviour changes from one to another. Turkle (2011:151) proposes that this ‘cyborg’ nature is initially welcomed, rather than feared, as modern technology is seen as a tool for ‘being better prepared and organised in an increasingly complex information environment’. Therefore individuals use computers as a means of relieving cognitive processes in the complex offline world. According to Searle (1980) these processes are represented online via symbols, which the viewer must then interpret.

The Presence of Gender

On evaluation, it seems that perceptions of self-expression between genders do not differ at large. Rather than explicit statements detailing the differences in online expression between genders, participants made general statements about their online participation which was then implicitly connected by the researcher to a member of the opposite sex. In relation to Tracy (1998:15) who argues that ‘gender only becomes an issue when the participants themselves make it one’, the current study shows that gender differences regarding online expression were made through unintended statements of gender difference, which were only categorised as gender differences due to the researchers cross comparison to other texts.

The lack of explicit reference to gender difference may be due to the outlook of Facebook as a unique platform for identity, where personal goal orientation of the
individual is held in higher regard than reinforcement of gendered identity. This can be furthered by Postmes and Spears’s (2002) ‘equalisation hypothesis’, which suggests that traditional intergroup differences, found in face to face interaction, can be equalised when using computer mediated communication. Accordingly this hypothesis shows why more commonalities between genders were found as gendered identities may not seem as apparent online.

In some inferences gender differences in self-expression were made explicitly relevant (more commonly by males), by using socially constructed stereotypes. For example males, on occasion, associated female expression online with ‘bitchiness’ and romance, however straight after this association went on to state that this type of behaviour was not exclusive to the female gender category. Although perhaps implicit in nature, each female challenged these stereotypes by, for example, stating that they would not go online to ‘bitch’ about somebody, or that they swear too often in status updates. These instances demonstrate that the individual does in fact recognise what these stereotypes entail, however has opportunity to change them in the online environment. However it is normal that one who is labelled as a stereotype, will want to avoid being categorised and aims to become their ‘own person’ which actually reinforces the escapist nature of a stereotype. It may be that society’s view of normative gender behaviour is changing as participants recognise that any individual, regardless of gender, can partake in previously gender specific behaviour. Thus, gender may be ‘an omnipresent feature of all interaction’ (Weatherall, 2000), as participants construct language based on common sense beliefs, however the ‘virtual revolution’ may be challenging these beliefs by offering each individual an equal chance to express.

Reflexive Analysis

Fairclough (2001:22) stresses that even from the stage of transcription, a researcher is interpreting material: ‘the way which one interprets the text is bound to influence how one transcribes it’. Furthermore, the instances that a researcher focuses upon are subject to their own personal interpretation of worthy discourse and different aspects may be emphasised if the material was analysed by another person. Therefore, it is important to identify the relevant issues concerning the researcher as an insider of the Facebook revolution.

As a member of Facebook for 3 years, the researcher is now central to the virtual revolution. Due to an overwhelming presence of Facebook, through phone applications etc an intense emotional attachment has been formed; partially due to the ability to look back at personal expression over the years (which is now exacerbated by the introduction of the Facebook timeline). This investment in Facebook may explain why certain aspects of analysis are illogical to some, as
Facebook language such as ‘stalking’ is perceived as normative. However, those who are not as heavily involved in Facebook may think otherwise. These questionable parts of analysis are merely products of the generation which the researcher belongs to.

The current research created ease within discussion, as membership was exposed as a commonality between researcher and interviewee. The researcher also being a student seemed to compliment this, as both individuals viewed each other at the same intellectual level and an equal relationship was established. These factors seemed to counteract feelings of wariness when discussing expression, which may have occurred due to the publicity of Facebook as a dishonest means of asserting identity.

The absent presence of gender within analysis has demonstrated a new, unexpected generational shift towards gender equality, by use of a virtual environment.

On reflection of the current study, it may be useful to conduct further research which allows participants to respond to questions related to the online/offline fusion of Facebook through a computer medium. Again by using Fairclough’s constructionist approach to analysis, researchers could aim to compare how participants use language when typing to a respondent, rather than talking. Perhaps there would be further implication and evidence that participants manipulate their expression due to the online circumstance.

References


LaRose, R., Eastin, M. S. & Gregg, J. (2001) Reformulating the internet paradox:


