

Social Network Identity: Facebook, Twitter and Identity Negotiation Theory

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Abstract

The use of social networking sites (SNS) has had implications in traditional areas of communication such as identity and relationship construction. This study explores how identity is expressed on Facebook and Twitter, the top two most trafficked SNS (Brenner, 2013). Specifically, this study reports the finding of a survey of young adults who use these sites. Respondents were asked questions about what prompts them to choose how they express their identity on Facebook and how/if it differs from identity expression using Twitter. In addition this study examines how Facebook and Twitter can be understood through the sociological theory of identity negotiation. Implications for the connection between social digital identity and “catfishing” are provided and discussed.

Keywords: identity, social networks, communication, representation, trust

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1 Introduction

Social network sites (SNS) function as socio-technical systems that allow users to broaden their communities and create and maintain new connections and relationships. As web-based services, SNS allow individuals to construct a profile, articulate a list of other users whom they share a connection and view the connections of the others in the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). In Facebook’s 2012 earnings report, the company noted that of its 1 billion profiles, about 83 million were fake accounts (Facebook, INC., 2012). Many other SNS host a large number of fake or duplicate account profiles, some purposely used in the new online trend of “catfishing”. Catfishing occurs when an individual creates a profile for a pseudo-identity on a SNS and uses it to create and maintain a romantic relationship. The term originated in a 2010 independent film that documented a deceptive online relationship.

SNS enable users to negotiate an identity online. Identity negotiation theory is a sociological process in which people assign roles during the formation of a relationship. It is broken into two components. In the first phase people look for other who see them as they see themselves and approach interactions that are likely to uphold their self-view and self-esteem. This is known as self-verification. In the second phase people make predictions about how the other person will behave, and then act in ways that are likely to make the prediction true. This is called behavioral confirmation (Swann & Ely, 1984).

2 Conclusion

This study provides insights into the identity negotiation process that occurs on Facebook and Twitter. The self-verification phase take places when a user creates a profile and adds content. Self-view, or how a person thinks about his/her personality, can be perceived from the user’s profile. Users project their 'self-views' on to their profiles through post, photos and comments. Users then allow friends or followers to view that content, who will likely uphold that self-view. Facebook users have more control over who can view their profile than Twitter users. This may explain why many Facebook users are more mindful of their audience and why users are less likely to add an

unfamiliar person to their network. In order to protect their identity and preserve their self-view, users are less likely to add someone who might threaten their identity.

Survey participant's responses about Facebook usage reveal users did not believe their profile was a mirror representation of their identity. Many participants responded that they "didn't want to offend any of their family members or co-workers" and wanted to ensure that information posted could not harm their appearance to others. In contrast a large majority of the survey participants felt as if Twitter was a better mirror reflection of their identity. Some explained that they "feel free to express themselves" and never thought about who could read their tweets so they were able to express more aspects of their personality.

Identity negotiation becomes difficult if a person has encountered a catfish profile. Catfish profiles create problems in the identity negotiation process by using misleading information to gain the trust of another person. Based on the survey responses, we conclude that catfishing is more likely to take place or begin on Twitter, where people are more likely to make new connections and less likely to be cautious of an unfamiliar profile. Twitter allows users to use any name on their profile and in their handle, it even allows users to have multiple handles. While there are benefits to levels of anonymity and pseudo-identities, catfishing and its negative consequences create distrust and suspicion among users. Identity verification remains a critical component of trust building between users, particularly when engaging in romantic relationships.

Though Facebook and Twitter are used in different ways, both sites allow users to create and portray an identity and interact with other users. Despite the differences in how users interact with SNS, both Twitter and Facebook are commonly used for building and maintaining social relationships. The primary difference between identity on Facebook and Twitter for my survey participants is a belief that Twitter allows them to portray a broader portion of their personality whereas Facebook is more of a representation of what you want other users to see. Survey respondents view Twitter as the raw, unrefined version of a user's identity while a Facebook profiles is seen as a polished, edited version of a user's online identity. Twitter users feel less pressure from the audience viewing their profiles. The identity negotiation process that takes place on SNS relies more on honesty and communication than traditional interactions because there aren't other social cues such as first impressions or body language to help add to the information users are gathering on a person's identity and behavior.

3 References

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