

NEGOTIATING AND CONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES THROUGH FACEBOOK COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

This study was premised on the observation that in the contemporary moment, the online construction and presentation of the self has become a general cultural practice. Using the idea of persona, a concept that explains the presentation of the self and masks that people “wear” to construct themselves in real and virtual settings, this paper argues that the existence of multiple personas is clearly demonstrated in the context of Facebook communication. Using a “desktop” analysis of a selected Facebook pages, and a semi-structured interviewing of the owners of the selected Facebook pages, this study explored the construction of self by Facebook activists in order to identify how they negotiated and constructed personas that they deployed and employed in their everyday Facebook communication. This study also established the versions of identities that emanated from such constructions and how those versions came to prominence.

Keywords: Facebook, Identity, Persona, Social Networking sites.

1. Introduction

There is a widespread consensus that online social media has brought major changes to human societies around the world, and that those changes are still continuing and significantly intensifying. Although human societies have undergone many communication transitional periods in history, none of those changes were as intense and as faster as the use of online social media for conveying and sharing information. The use of online social media undoubtedly emanates from a trend broadly referred to as globalization, whose resultant influence has penetrated every facet of life in Botswana, including the field of communication. While there is no universally agreed upon definition of globalization, and also that the definition of globalization remains varied across different scholarships, the definition of globalisation by Kawachi and Wamala (2007, p. 5) as an increased cross border movement of information consequent to advances made in information technologies directly explains the emergence of online communication culture in Botswana. Consequently, just like is the case with the rest of the world, Botswana (citizens of Botswana) now live in an increasingly networked and knowledge-based environment called “new media ecology”.

According to Hoskins and O’Loughlin (2010,) we are now living in new media ecology (media in relation to the environment) which has effects on the recipients of the information. Media ecology has significantly and profoundly occasioned cultural and social changes in Botswana. These changes are manifested in Botswana’s everyday lifestyles, means and media of communication, social relationships and identities. As confirmed by Norris (2001), the invention of the World Wide Web, and its concomitant dispersed computers operating through “packet-switching networks” has marked an unprecedented change in human life and interactions. Botswana, as part of the global village have not allowed the marauding effect of this technological change to bypass them as evidenced by an increased number of them using Social Networking Services (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter, Myspace and LinkedIn.

It must be noted however that Botswana have always been connected to each other through numerous types of ties. However, social networking sites appear to offer one of the most popular and interactive methods that link them together. They also link them with people all over the world. For instance, through social networks, Botswana are able to communicate with friends,

network with professionals, and find others who share common interests in different parts of the world. Moreover, social network users in Botswana are able to manipulate profile information to create online identities that are a stark opposite of their actual identities. They do this through exaggerating or completely fabricating characteristics and pictures to project different identities for outside observers.

This, however, should not be misconstrued to suggest that before the advent of online social networks Botswana had no means of communicatively constructing identities. There has been a wealthy tradition of constructing identities through traditional mass media and interpersonal forms communication in Botswana. However, due to the marauding nature of computer mediated social networks and their ability to enable multidimensional patterns of interaction between users, the construction of identities through traditional mass media and interpersonal forms of communication seems to have petered out. Underpinned by the idea of persona and the concept of Facebook, this study aimed to investigate the presentation of the self and the masks that Facebook activists used as they constructed themselves or their identities in virtual settings. It also aimed to establish what versions of identity were constructed and how they came to prominence in Facebook pages. To achieve this, the following are the questions that guided this investigation:

1. Do activists' Facebook presentations or messages portray true personal identities or faked ones?
2. How and what online identities do Facebook users create through language?
3. How and what online identities do Facebook activists create through the content of their posts?
4. How and what online identities do Facebook activists create through pictures/photos that they upload into their pages?

Prior to discussing results and methods through which data for this study was generated, we first provide and discuss theoretical perspectives that guided this study. As already alluded to in this section, the idea of persona and Facebook social networks underpinned this study.

2. Social Networking Sites (SNSs)

As indicated above, Botswana has in recent years witnessed an increased number of people who use social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Myspace and LinkedIn. Social networking sites are online communication platforms where users can construct profiles, connect with friends and communicatively interact through varied forms of communication technologies (Chia-Ming Chang 2014). The Internet is a conduit through which social networking sites have been conceived and are able to expand and have their impact felt. According to Ozad and Gumus (2014), Social Networking Sites were conceived in the 1990's and their popularity grew with the new millennium. These social networking sites are web-based services that allow people to communicatively interact and construct public or semi-public profiles within bounded systems. Of all the different Networking Services, Facebook seems to be the most popular among Botswana, just as is in the rest of world. According to Chia-Ming Chang (2014), the three largest SNS sites in the world are Facebook with 720 000 000 members, Twitter with 250 000 000 members and LinkedIn with 110 000 000 members.

It is not surprising that a huge number of Botswana have taken to Facebook activism. After all, with over 750 million Facebook users, Facebook is the most successful and popular and largest social networking site in the world (Chia-Ming Chang 2014). But the question that needs to be addressed here is: What does Facebook do that has made it the most successful and popular networking site? Facebook allows users to set up personal profiles that include basic information such as name, birthday, marital status, and personal interests which directly reveal their identities. Each profile includes a message board called the "wall". The "wall" provides the main computer messaging mechanism for users. Facebook networks also allow users to upload photos on which they can mark or "tag" other users. Users establish bi-directional social links by "friending" other users. Comments can also be left on photos. All wall posts and photo comments are labelled with the name of the user who performed the action and the date/time of submission. Another useful feature of Facebook is the Mini-Feed. This is a detailed log of user's friends to see at a glance what they have been doing on Facebook, including activities in applications and interactions with common friends. Other events include new wall posts, photo uploads and comments profile updates, and status changes. The Mini-Feed is ordered by date, and only displays the 100 most recent actions.

The other feature of Facebook is that it is designed around the concept of “networks” that organizes users into membership-based groups. Such groups can include among others: educational institution (university or high school), company or organization (called work networks), or geographic (regional network) location. Facebook is able to authenticate group membership by verifying that users have valid e-mail addresses from associated domains or through confirmation by existing members. A user’s network membership determines what information they can access and how their information is accessed by others.

Facebook offers several options for users to interact and communicate. Users can interact by sending and receiving private messages similar to emails. Facebook users may post public messages on each other's walls. As alluded to above, communication may also occur in groups which Facebook users can create and join. Facebook can also be used to organise offline social interactions. This can be done by creating invitations to events and posting online notifications for meetings, parties, and other gatherings. Users may also post “notes” or blog-like entries that are linked to their profile pages.

3. Persona

The word persona has been derived from the Latin word for theatrical mask (D’Cruz 2014) and for its everyday usage it refers to assumed character, social role or the person’s character that is perceived by others (D’Cruz 2014). D’Cruz (2014) further argues that persona is a kind of mask that people “wear” to make a definite impression upon others and to conceal their own true nature. It is a character we adopt, display or assume (Marshall 2014). As these explanations show, persona is predicated on “deception”, or in the words of Marshall (2014) and D’Cruz (2014) “inauthenticity” and “fiction”. Goffman (1969) argues that when an individual plays these “deceptive roles”, they covertly request their observers to take seriously the impressions they display. They clandestinely request their audiences to believe that the characters they see actually possess the attributes they are displaying (Goffman 1969). As Marshall (2014) also suggests, although the characters or parsonage are not real, they have a clear relationship with the real public culture. While through performance it may seem what is being seen or heard is an expressive extension of the characteristics of the performer, it often happens that the

performance mainly serves to portray the characteristics of the task being performed and not of the performer (Goffman 1969).

Persona could also be viewed as a conscious repression of one's identities in order to display social roles and characters that are in synch with the prevailing social order. This kind of repression is made possible by the fact that some identities are socially constructed. As Elliott (2014) confirms, some identities are established through personal actions and choices, and the patterning of thoughts, dispositions, feelings and desires and modelling subjective experiences in line with social settings of daily life. Elliott (2014:53) illustrates the point about the patterning of actions and dispositions in response to different social settings when he opines that:

The way in which an individual acts in the presence of family members or loved ones is likely to be rather different from encounters with, say, work colleagues or sporting partners. From family, school and work to shopping, community associations or surfing the Internet: all these social fields summon forth, and through them we construct, different sorts of self.

The influence of social setting or front as Goffman (1969) calls it, in the fashioning of individual disposition and actions demonstrates that at the core of the adoption of a persona is the navigation of personal and public life or relation between self and society. Elliott (2014) confirms this assertion when he argues that identity is constructed through predetermined actions and choices, the patterning of thoughts, dispositions, and feelings and desires to align them to the prevailing social order. Elliott (2014) further argues that as human beings we act out or perform particular roles in our relationships with other, and that we have an awareness of the varying identities we want to adopt as we move from one social setting to another.

Based on the above, it can be said that some Facebook users may be having their own individual or real identities which vary diametrically from the identities they espouse in real life situations; hence this study which sought to investigate the form and array of identities which were constructed by Facebook activists and the impressions those identities had upon the public world-the recipients of the information.

Marshall (2014) argues that persona addresses the fabrication of a role to achieve a particular purpose. Goffman (1969) also raises the same point when he suggests that the performance that an individual offers, and the show that they put on are done for the benefit of other people. This entails that the personas that Facebook activists' adopted should not be viewed negatively as mere objects of deluding the recipients for purposes of self-interest or private gain. In fact, they should be viewed as having been influenced and adopted with good intentions and desirable purposes of enacting change of recipients' attitudes. In short, although they might not be real, they clearly portrayed some desirable public culture. They were an extension into the public world. As Goffman (1969) further asserts, individuals may deceive other people for what they consider to be their own good and the good of those people.

The discussion above shows that in a broader sense, persona denotes articulation of repertoires of actions, identification, association and cultural practices through which new inauthentic identity positions are adopted. Hetherington (1998) argues that all these issues-actions, associations, identification and cultural practices are linked to theatricality. They are linked to theatricality because they are embodied and enacted through performance. Hetherington (1998) uses theatricality here as a metaphor to mean the social construction of self through performances and creation of personae. In the same vein as Goffman (1969) depicts presentation of the self as "stage managed", Hetherington (1998) also argues that the presentation of the self is closely associated with impression management, coordination of behaviour and role assumption. In this way, theatricality is enacted. Hetherington (1998) contends that while this theatricality is played out, the real self remains outside such practices and inaccessible to audiences who will then believe that the characters they see actually possess the attributes they are displaying.

4. Methods of Data Analysis

In order to unearth whether or not Facebook activists portrayed or masked their personal identities when they interacted on virtual environments, two methods were used: "desk top" analysis of selected Facebook pages and semi-structured interviewing of Facebook users whose Facebook pages were selected for analysis.

4.1 “Desktop” Analysis of Facebook Pages

The “desktop” analysis method was conducted before the semi-structured interviews to enable researchers to go into the interviews with preliminary findings which interviewees could confirm or refute. Through this method, eight Facebook pages were selected using purposive and representative sampling procedures using gender, occupation and age criteria for diversity of the sample and to enable the researchers to uncover how these three demographic epithets influenced the creation and construction of identities in Facebook communication. Facebook pages were analysed in terms of the nature of content, linguistic behaviours of selected Facebook users, and pictures/photos on the walls.

The analysis of content focused on wall posts and comments with a view to determining how and what social identities they constructed. In the light of Bailey’s (2001) argument that the style of language explicitly reveals the user’s social identities, the analysis of language looked into how the language of Facebook activists showed their allegiances and ascriptions. Choice of words and writing styles were the two basic criteria of the analysis of language. While wall posts, language, pictures and photocould not by any means be complete records of Facebook activists’ interactions, they were the most publicly accessible applications and they profoundly and abundantly provided a ‘window’ into what online identities individual Facebook users were portraying.

4.2 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used mainly to counterbalance the subjectivity of “desktop” analysis of data and also to corroborate the findings from the analysis of Facebook pages. People whose Facebook pages were analysed constituted interview participants. Interviews sought to find out whether or not selected Facebook users revealed or “masked” their personal identities on Facebook and how they presented themselves in terms of language, content and pictures. The interview guide had four items. However, the researchers composed and asked interviewees some follow-up questions as the interviews progressed. For ethical reasons, participants’ consent were sought before their Facebook pages could be analysed.

5. Methods of data analysis and Rationale

Given the qualitative nature of this study, data was produced in the form of narratives of interviewees and researchers' opinions. As a result, data analysis was largely interpretative, analytical and descriptive and was based on researchers' impressions and interviewees' reportages. To put it differently, data was examined and interpreted by forming impressions and reporting those impressions using the coding guidelines proposed in Corbin and Strauss' (2008) grounded theory. Grounded theory is an approach which is characterised by systematic processes of collecting, coding, analysing and sub-dividing data into categories using the information that emerges from the data itself (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Corbin and Strauss 2008). It is one of the most rigorous, popular and widely recognised approaches to qualitative research (Jeff and Taylor 2014). Using the grounded theory approach, the coding enabled the division and sub-division of data into common themes and sub-themes embedded in the data.

The analytic notes for all the two methods were accomplished through the questioning of data and making comparisons to determine the different identities emerging from the data as suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2008). The questioning of data involved exploring opinions expressed by interviewees, and observations made by the researchers when analysing selected Facebook pages in order to determine the extent to which they answered research questions and confirmed or disconfirmed hypotheses developed at the initial stages of the study and the reading of literature on persona.

Given the aim of examining the presentation of the self and the masks that Facebook users "wore" in order to construct virtual identities, the grounded theory approach was deemed appropriate for the analysis of data for this study. As shown above, this study produced qualitative data. It was therefore fitting to analyse the produced data using the grounded theory, a methodology that was widely recognized as an approach for qualitative data (Lauridsen 2014, p. 8). Second, as stated elsewhere in this study, research on construction and adoption of personae through Facebook communication had not yet been adequately explored. Consequently, this study was preliminary and relatively unexplored. It therefore would significantly benefit from grounded theory, an approach which is widely recognized as being suitable where there is little to no knowledge about a phenomenon being studied (Rintala et al. 2014).

6. Impression Management and Construction of Identities in Facebook

The examination and analysis of selected Facebook pages and the subsequent interviewing of affected Facebook activists showed that indeed Facebook was used as “conduit” for impression management and construction of identities. In accordance with Goffman’s (1969) and Marshall’s (2014) pronouncements, some of the identities were real and some were fake. The other thing that emerged from the findings was that some Facebook users intentionally constructed identities and others did so unconsciously. To the latter, it just happened spontaneously and was purely influenced by their statuses and personal traits.

Some Facebook activists used pseudonyms (false names) in Facebook and others used real names. The use of pseudonym as recounted by participants was driven by a desire to conceal real identities. As one of the participants indicated: *“in Facebook I fake information about me. First I don’t use my real name. Second I lie that I went to the University”*. Asked to explain the reason for faking identities, the respondent indicated that he wanted to elevate his status so that the public could hold him in high regard thinking that he had received university education. However, most of the participants who used pseudonyms indicated that despite being funny and “cool” (and they gave themselves funny names) to use pseudonyms, it also helped them to circumvent being identified with their posts. Most of the participants who used pseudonyms were young and still studying at the university. It was therefore understandable, as was confirmed by two of the participants that they did not want their parents and guardians to link them with their Facebook posts. Thus, the use of pseudonyms was greatly influenced by age factor and the main purpose for using them was to construct the self and identities in online settings.

Issues that participants raised also exposed their identities. For example, in one Facebook page, a pictures of a house, house designs and a construction company logo alternated as profile pictures. It was therefore hypothesised during the analysis of the Facebook page that the owner could be a builder, architect or someone who just owned or liked beautiful houses. It emerged later during the interview that the owner the Facebook account holder was actually builder and he owned a construction company. In another Facebook page, the account holder profoundly discussed and commented mostly on family matters. Her profile picture showed her in a company of a man and two children; ostensibly her husband and children. The profile picture and comments and posts

projected her as a loving mother and wife and this character was confirmed during the interview. As can be discerned from these two cases, there was association between the profile pictures, posts, comments and the identities of the Facebook account holders. This showed that indeed Facebook was used to construct identities.

The analysis of Facebook pages in terms of language showed that activists used a variety of language forms and styles. Some used formal and grammatically correct sentences. Here is an example of a post by one of the Facebook activists who used formal and grammatically correct sentences: *“I wish I understood the language”*. Some used Setswana (people of Botswana’s native language) and English alternately (code mixing). Here is an example of such posts: *“Reminds me of my farewell party at 35 Cherrington Road Birmingham. Oh time flies **waitse**”* (*waitse means you know in English*). Some used short forms of words which mostly rendered the sentences incomprehensible to people who did not know the context in which they were used such as; *“No Sir, I will be smwr in gabs”* (*smwrin this post is a short form of somewhere and Gabs is a short form of Gaborone. Gaborone is the capital city of Botswana*). Some used informal language such as; *“Hi chief”* (meaning hi mate”).

The semi-structured interviews unearthed that the language forms and styles that were used by Facebook activists were commensurate with their individual academic standing and character. They thus, projected both personal professional identities of the users. For instance, two of those who used formal academic writing style in their posts were university academics. During the interviews those participants indicated that as academics they needed to use formal language all the time for two main reasons. Firstly, it had become part of them to use academic writing style as they used it all the time in their work and as writers. Second, they use formal academic writing styles because they wanted people to learn the correct language style from them. Given that some of their Facebook friends were students, they wanted to model good writing skills and correct language style for those students to learn from them. The declaration by the participants that they espoused particular attributes just to indirectly assist students and other people who would benefit from their formal academic writing styles confirms Goffman’s (1969) assertion that some people may act out a “performance” just for the benefit of others. Thus, the decision by

those academics to adopt personae of academic writers must not be viewed negatively as it was not done for purposes of self-interest but to help others.

Other than the exposition of personal and professional identities, the language projected nationality and religious orientations of the Facebook users. Here is an extract of a post which revealed the nationality and religious orientations of the user: *“Ee bontle jotlhe jwa lefatshe lotlhe ga se jo bo ka tswantshiwang le mmopi wame mothusi wame ke raya Jeso yo nthatang (nothing on earth is comparable to my lord Jesus Christ”*. The use of Setswanain this post portrayed the identity of the Facebook user as a Motswana. The content and words used in the post explicitly projected the Facebook user as a Christian.

The analysis of Facebook pages also revealed that there was indeed a presentation of the self and creation of false identities through pictures and photo comments. All the participants continually changed profile pictures. In most cases they chose what in their opinions, were their best pictures, just to make public statements about their looks and social statuses. Some used pictures that would project socio-economic status of them in terms of posture, dress code and environs. While the portrayed socio-economic statuses might be genuine for some, it was not so for others. For instance, one of the participants whose profile picture showed her in a modern room, smiley and expensively dressed indicated during the interview that it was a friend's room he took a picture in just to “deceive” the public into believing that she was affluent. This was a typical case of using Facebook to construct faked identities.

Profile pictures and other photos in the Facebook album also reveal people's characters and personal attributes. In one of the pages that were analysed, the Facebook user uploaded a picture of her seemingly dancing with friends and close acquaintances. In another page, the photo showed the participant in the company of people from different racial and cultural backgrounds. In the former case, the impression that was created was that the Facebook user was a sociable and fun loving person. In the latter, the picture portrayed the Facebook user as a racially tolerant person who embraces different racial and cultural backgrounds. As these two cases show, and many others that this study unearthed, Facebook users were able to construct different versions of identities through pictures/photos that they upload into their walls.

7. Conclusion

The findings in this study confirmed that through Facebook interactions and communication, Facebook users intentionally and unintentionally construct different versions of identities. This study has also confirmed that indeed there was an increased euphoria on the use of social networks in Botswana as all participants announced that they went on Facebook almost daily. It made unquestionable sense that there was an increased euphoria for use of Facebook in Botswana to construct identities as this was commensurate with the pronouncements of new media theorists such as: Stewart and Kowaltzeke (1990), Livingstone (2009), Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010) and Stewart and Kowaltzeke (1990). These theorists content in cohort that online social media have become integral part of human existence. In talking about computer networks as integral part of human activities in the modern world, Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010) and Livingstone (2009) specify that they are talking about the new media technologies, not just media in general. In fact, Livingstone (2009) when discussing this issue makes it very clear that he is not only talking about the traditional mass and interpersonal forms of communication, but he is bringing in new and more interactive networked forms of communication.

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