

Chapter 5.4

“Pathfinding” Discourses of Self in Social Network Sites

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ABSTRACT

It has been argued that social network sites (SNSs) constitute a cultural arena which gives rise to the processes of self-presentation, impression management and friendship performance (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Based on the tenets of discourse-centered online ethnography, this study investigates how identity can be discursively generated, reproduced and co-constructed within the genre of SNSs, taking as a case in point Pathfinder, a Greek portal which incorporates social networking features. The tendencies suggested by interviewing a Pathfinder web developer as well as by a pilot survey on social networking are traced in a popular Pathfinder networker's profile. Adopting Zhao et al.'s (2008)

sociological model of implicit and explicit identity claims on SNSs and leaning on critical discourse analytical tools (Fairclough, 2003; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001), the chapter explores how the online self can be cemented and disseminated in narrative, enumerative and visual terms via an armory of linguistic and multimodal strategies. In this fashion, SNSs should not be approached as a sheer technological artefact, but as a “space for growth” (Turkle, 1997) that encourages users to have agency shaping collaboratively their own linguistic, social and psychological development.

INTRODUCTION

During summer 2007, when I started crafting my profile in *MySpace*, it had not even occurred to me

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that social network sites¹ (SNSs) could ever receive such sustained interdisciplinary attention. Several months later, an unusual experience entered my subconscious only to bring to my notice the omnipotence of Web 2.0² practices in everyday life and their high potential to monopolize the academia henceforth. I dreamt of one of *MySpace* “friends” with whom we just share similar music interests and occasionally exchange comments. Still, I am totally unaware of her bodily presence; on no account have I met her face-to-face before and, in all probability, I am never going to. According to the dream scenario, we were supposed to attend an algebra course and she was overwhelmed by anxiety and hesitance because she had not prepared her homework. At the end of the lecture, she fetched an enormous king cake as a special treat to everyone present. When I informed my “friend” via *MySpace* personal message facility about the content of the dream, I received the following startling answer: “You saw aspects of myself; I am generally a shy, reluctant while generous person”.

Yet, identities in SNSs do not exist in a vacuum, let alone in abstract dreams. Conversely, they are fleshed out because one “type[s] oneself into being” (Sundén, 2003, p. 3), that is by virtue of language. Being trained as a linguist, with a background in discourse analysis and stylistics, I decided to explore the online discursive performance of self in SNSs. The choice to work on this topic was fueled—apart from the dream—by two overarching reasons. First and foremost, as Crystal (2001, p. 237) and Thorne (2008, p. 307) have pointed out, the Internet does not simply constitute a technological artefact; it is primarily a social fact which has textual language use at its very heart. Secondly, public discourse, and therefore Internet discourse, is reckoned to be inherently constitutive of identity (Scollon, 1997, p. 39). Web 2.0 modes of interaction in general and SNSs in particular were conceded an ideal context to look at as they mirror, support and change usual practices, especially with reference

to how people reveal aspects of themselves and connect with others (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 224).

The launch of SNSs entailed a new organizational framework for online communities, and with it an appreciable, vibrant fresh research agenda (boyd & Ellison, 2007). In concurrence with Beer (2008), “we are at a crucial moment in the development of this field of study” (p. 516), in view of the fact that its parameters and scope are still nascent and more work needs to be conducted so as to comprehend this online phenomenon in its entirety. Turning now to previous scholarship on social networking platforms, the lion’s share almost exclusively belongs to the disciplines of media and cultural studies, information science, sociology and psychology. With respect to eminent documented language-focused studies on SNSs, Herring et al. (2007) and Das (2007, 2008; see also this volume) are more sociolinguistically-oriented in their research exploring the robustness of non-English languages in the topologies of *LiveJournal* and *Orkut* respectively. Larsen (2007), on the other hand, examines identity construction in *Arto*, a Danish SNS, adopting Scollon’s (2001) mediated discourse analytical framework, which pays attention to social actions in lieu of sticking to written text or language per se. Informed by corpus linguistics approaches, Thelwall (2008a, 2008b) has published two ground-breaking studies: the first analyzes swearing among British and American users of *MySpace* while the other compares word frequency statistics of English Live Spaces to the British National Corpus and UK university websites. What is more, he has tackled with the language of *MySpace* comments addressing spelling variants and “typographic slang” (see Thelwall, 2009).

With these in mind, the purpose of this article is to reflect upon how identity can be discursively generated, reproduced and co-constructed within the genre of SNSs, taking as a case in point *Pathfinder*, one of the most thriving Greek portals, which incorporates a SNS service. My analysis is situated in the realm of work of Critical Discourse

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