Chapter 21

Technoself-Presentation on Social Networks:
A Gender-Based Approach

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines social networking sites from a sociological and discursive perspective in order to highlight how users engage with them in the construction of their identities. In order to do so it focuses on the different strategies users of Facebook take advantage of in order both to construct their gender identity and control the way they self-represent. The results shed light on the range of identity claims both men and women tend to make in a non-anonymous online setting. In addition, this study aims to increase understanding of identity construction in the online environment in general and gender identity construction in particular.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 2000s, linguists, psychologists and sociologists have devoted considerable time and effort to investigating the impact of the internet on identity production. Most of their studies, however, have focused their attention on online identity constructions in anonymous environments such as chat rooms (Surratt, 1998; Turkle, 1995; among many others). In general terms, authors such as Gibbs, Ellison, and Heino (2006) suggest that people tend to adopt a fake identity and pretend to be someone else in order to give free rein to their negative impulses. Although this may suggest that the online world is monolithic as far as online identity construction is concerned, leading edge identity research has turned its attention to other online environments such as Bebo (Ringrose, 2011), internet dating sites (Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & McCabe, 2005), and blogs (García-Gómez, 2010a, 2010b), and all these studies suggest that online self-presentation strategies are sensitive to each particular setting.

The present study extends this line of research to online self-disclosure and gender identity constructions on Facebook, the most popular social networking site (SNS) at present. In this context, I intend to explore the range of identity

claims both men and women tend to make in a non-anonymous online setting. This will be done in the belief that the findings of such a study will increase our understanding of identity construction in the online environment in general and gender identity construction in particular.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Coon (1994, p.471) defines self-concept as the 'total subjective perception of oneself, including an image of one's body and impressions of one's personality, capabilities, and so on'. Michener, DeLamater, and Myers (2004, p. 79) add that:

Self-concept (or self-schema) is the organized structure of cognitions or thoughts that we have about ourselves. It includes the perceptions we have of our social identities and personal qualities, as well as our generalizations about the self based on experience.

These definitions accord with Mead's (1934) idea that the self is reflexive, meaning a person can perceive him/herself as both the individual doing the acting and the object on which action occurs. Therefore, self-concept and identity refer to ideas about the self. Let us discuss both self-concept and identity separately.

Self-concept is made up of cognitive components. Early views of self-concept were concerned only with self-evaluation. Self-concept was often connected with self-esteem (i.e. one's evaluation of oneself in either positive or negative terms) (cf. Rosenberg, 1979). This narrow view of the concept was later elaborated and broadened to suggest that self-concept is made of meaning, and can be said to be a symbolic, social, linguistic phenomenon. As acknowledged in the literature, there are no self-concepts without symbols and language. A review of current literature shows, however, that self-concept is constructed from a complex process which involves not only how

we see ourselves and how we behave but also includes the inferences we draw from how people behave towards us. In other words, self-concept is the result of the reflected appraisal process (Gecas & Burke, 1995). There is no consensus, however, on whether self-views are a product of direct experience with the environment or whether most of the knowledge we think we have about ourselves comes from others. Authors such as Baron and Byrne (1997), on the one hand, argue that our self-views are built up in terms of the positive or negative appraisals we obtain from people around us. Conversely, there is a line of thought which claims that our self-concepts do not resemble how others actually see us, but are filtered through our perceptions and, therefore, resemble how we think others see us (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979).

As far as identity is concerned, it can be defined as the 'meanings attached to the self by one's self and others' (Michener et al., 2004, p.85). Needless to say, identity and self-concept are interrelated terms in so far as self-concept comprises one's thoughts and feelings with reference to oneself as an object (Rosenberg, 1986), and identity is viewed as that part of the self which makes us visible to others. Owing to the fact that the self emerges in social interaction within the context of a complex society, this makes it possible to argue that the self must also be complex. This idea is rooted in the belief that there are as many different selves as there are positions in society in terms of the social groups with which one identifies. Such a belief fits the notion of identity into the overall self. In other words, the overall self can be said to consist of multiple identities, each of which is anchored in different aspects of the social structure. According to the differentiated roles we hold in society, we tend to activate a particular identity which meets current needs (e.g. self as son, father, friend, etc.). Put like that, all the different identities which can be activated are the meaning every individual has as a member of a particular social group.

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