Gender, Sexuality and Impression Management on Facebook

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Abstract

The world of social networking sites (SNS) has advanced at a rapid pace, allowing for new opportunities to examine personality and gender differences in online behavior. Motives for managing online networking sites vary between individuals, and include self-validation, facilitating new social relationships, and maintaining existing ones. This study examines gender and relationship differences, as well as sexual orientation and relationship status, in association with impression management. Data from approximately 350 randomly selected Facebook users was gathered and coded for both subjective and objective content, including demographics, profile construction and online activity. Analysis of the data suggests individuals in a relationship maintain greater rates of changing their profile picture, post pictures of themselves and other people to a greater degree ($r = .15$, $p < .05$), and spend more time observing the activities of other Facebook users ($r = .14$, $p < .05$). Further results indicated that males tended to more often report themselves as being single, and possessed a higher frequency of engaging in specific online activities that provided references to entertainment ($r = .13$, $p < .05$).Users who reported themselves as being homosexual or bisexual were found to more regularly change their profile picture ($r = 0.152$, $p < 0.01$) and personal profile information ($r = 0.118$, $p < 0.05$), as well as less often post comments on others' profiles ($r = -0.206$, $p < 0.01$). Implications for these and further findings, as well as proposals for future research, are discussed.

1. Introduction

The past decade has seen the world of social networking sites develop at a dramatic rate, with usage in the United States reaching an approximate growth of 38.6% in 2010 alone, a statistic which has been surpassed in other nations (4). Estimates place the worldwide number of Facebook users as of 2012 at 845 million users, with approximately 200 million of those being derived from the United States (3). This information revolution has developed at a global level and has witnessed an immense growth in social facilitation through online sources, becoming a natural extension of everyday life in today's youth. Due to its increasingly widespread prevalence and integration into the general population, it seems logical that social networking tools such as Facebook would become a source for individuals to develop and maintain social relationships through the increasing ease in which communication can ensue. Research suggests that the relative ease in which Facebook allows various people to keep in touch with each other increases their capability in maintaining relationships, especially in instances where they are otherwise unable to invest more time into the relationship (12). The heightened accessibility and convenience in which this online tool can be utilized via wireless devices allows people to constantly remain updated on the status and activities of their Facebook friends, and has made the exchange of a great amount of information a simple process. The extent of this is such that several Facebook users engage in 'Facestalking' (6), a function in which individuals frequently follow what happens in the lives of others via their pictures, posts, and personal activities. While these online behaviors have expanded as the popularity of these social media tools have surged, research has suggested that rather than detracting from offline relationships, online engines such as Facebook may actually promote face-to-face socializations (12). This increased ability to develop and maintain relationships to such a degree accordingly means that the impression management that Facebook users employ will affect the type and the intensity of the social relationships that they are able to establish. In particular, their self-presentation has strong implications in their mate-seeking behaviors, or else serve to exemplify their contentment with their current relationship status.

Individual management of social relationships is largely determined by the perceived perceptions that others form about them. In order to achieve valued goals and engage in meaningful interpersonal interactions, the majority of the population strives to monitor and control how they present themselves in order to maximize the positivity of others' perceptions (11). Social networking sites allow users to create identities for themselves that emphasize those qualities which are either desirable or noteworthy, in some cases allowing people to develop entirely new personas that depict them favorably (6). To this end, Facebook users who are seeking optimal levels of self-portrayal may rationally engage in online practices that create the epitome of idealized self-presentation. Research suggests that individuals who possess this motivation to impress others, particularly for mate-seeking behaviors, frequently shape their online photographs (via shooting or editing practices) and account information into the idealized image that they wish to portray (10). Managing the image one develops for themselves has been found to be a critical factor in romantic attraction, with both genders emphasizing qualities that they perceive are more appealing to members of the opposite sex (11). The intensity to which self-portrayal is controlled and accentuated varies accordingly with whom it is the person is attempting to impress, with men and women putting more effort into impression management when socializing with the opposite gender (9).

Despite the overall growth in its usage by all demographics of the population, the facilitation of Facebook may be approached differently depending on the status of the user. These deviations can occur between different genders, differences in the relationship status of the user, or else by the individual's sexual orientation. Evolutionary theory suggests that men and women each possess sex-specifically evolved mechanisms, causing a variation in the psychology between genders (2). These physiological and behavioral traits evolved in

response to problems consistently encountered by ancestral humans in order to promote survival and reproduction, and continue to be utilized in adaptation of environmental stimuli (1, 2). In conjecture with these adaptive strategies, men and women seek and sustain an attraction to characteristics in the opposite gender that promote successful child-rearing. While males are drawn by attributes that emphasize female youth and attractiveness, women tend to maintain a preference for men who portray power and an availability of resources (7). These inclinations and behaviors, which evolutionists describe as genetically derivative, prompt individuals to engage in particular Facebook behaviors that promote an ideal self-image that will best draw attention to these specific features.

The goal of this study is to examine variations in online social networking behaviors in association with differences between individuals based on gender and relationship status, particularly in regards to mate-seeking strategies. It is hypothesized that single individuals engage in more online practices that promote socialization and positive self-image, such as exchanging comments, posting and changing pictures, as well as exhibiting behaviors that are categorically considered social, than do users who described themselves as being in a relationship. Furthermore, it is predicted that women will maintain a positive correlation with the amount of Facebook activity that emphasizes socially-based behaviors and interactions, especially in regards to posting comments and checking in with friends.

2. Methods
2.1 Participants

Three hundred and fifty Facebook profiles (154 female, 196 male) were included in the analyses for this study. The selection process itself was conducted by randomly selecting individuals from the 'friends' list of the Facebook profiles of the eight individuals serving as research assistants. All analysis of the data gathered contained a minimum of 262 participants, with most incorporating 313 individuals. Of the 350 participants, 161 were listed as single, 79 were in a relationship (married and otherwise), and 52 provided no data concerning their relationship status.

2.2 Coding/Procedure

In order to gather the required information to conduct this study, a coding sheet was created with which to assess the profiles of the participants. This coding sheet was developed to encompass the greatest amount of information possible from the participants. The sheet is comprised of a checklist wherein coders could fill in information that pertained to the Facebook page of the participant, including data such as personal information and demographics, recent activities, and coding descriptors. The coding descriptors portion of the checklist was developed to categorize participants into one of six previously developed typological constructs. These constructs included categories for *observers, scrapbookers, activists, entrepreneurs, social butterflies,* and *other*, in which participants were classified based on the activities that they most frequently engage in while utilizing their Facebook account. These categories were developed by assigning various Facebook behaviors into one of the six classifications based on their account activities for the 10 most recent posts on their Facebook 'wall.' The *observer* category was defined by behaviors that suggested the user spent a significant amount of time examining the profiles of other users, and consisted of commenting on others' statuses and profile pictures. *Scrapbooking* included behaviors that involved posting photography and corresponding descriptors on their own profile, while *activists* provided information on political and social issues (including environmental and ecological), as well as showing support for any type of cultural media icons. Individuals labeled as *entrepreneur* were mainly concerned with business related activities, while *social butterflies* were comprised of individuals who spent the majority of their time communicating with others. Activities placed in the *other* category consisted of Facebook behaviors that

could not be placed into the first five categories, such as posts emphasizing personal emotions.

In order ensure reliability in the coding procedure for participants, six of the research coders were given 60 random Facebook profiles to code separately, which were then compared and checked for reliability. This kappa reliability coefficient was found to be significant at $\alpha = 0.97$, indicating a high level of inter-rater consistency. Therefore, the profiles were coded in a fashion that was consistent from individual to individual.

3. Results and Discussion

Based on the literature review, it was postulated that single individual Facebook users would engage in a higher degree of mate-seeking practices than those who were in a relationship, specifically via their level of exchanging comments, posting and changing pictures, as well being classified as a *social butterfly*. Results based on Pearson's correlations showed that there was no significant difference in the frequency of posting comments between single and partnered individuals ($r=-0.027$, *ns*). While this does not support the notion that single people are more likely to post comments in order to promote relational interactions, it may be that both single and partnered users engage in relatively high degrees of commenting due to the social benefits that Facebook promotes in general, rather than specifically to mate-seeking practices as used by dating websites. However, further analysis of the results suggested that individuals who were currently in a relationship would be less likely to be *social butterflies* than any other coding category ($r=-0.149$, $p<0.05$), as well as simultaneously maintaining high rates as *observers* ($r=0.138$, $p<0.05$). This suggests that while both single and partnered users frequently engage in social interactions with others, single individuals tend to initiate communication with other Facebook users more often, while individuals who were described as being in a relationship would instead reply to comments others posted, rather than actively facilitate an exchange. This implies that even if the rates of communication itself does not differ, when compared to individuals currently in a relationship, single men and women appear to be more active in attempting to promote conversation with members of the opposite gender, thus actively attempting to achieve the potential of a future relationship.

As with single individuals, women were hypothesized to engage in increased levels of social interaction with others when compared to men, particularly in terms of commenting rates, their frequency of 'checking in with friends,' and classification as a *social butterfly* or a *scrapbooker*. However, Pearson's correlations revealed that women were no more likely than men to be either a *social butterfly* ($r=-0.035$, *ns*) or a *scrapbooker* ($r=-0.047$, *ns*). While this behavior is not supported by past literature or by behaviors suggested in evolutionary theory, these results may be explained by the social structural origin theory. According to this perspective, gender differences in behavior are primarily viewed as accommodations to situational and environmental variations, with genetically mediated sex differences only being accounted for when they are pertinent to the current adaptation of an individual's circumstances (2). As Facebook is an environment that is specifically geared toward promoting social interactions between individuals, the social structural origin theory would postulate that these features would be the ones most significantly relevant to both genders, and that variations that would typically apply are significantly minimized. This may explain why counter to the evolutionary disposition for women to engage in social interactions more frequently than men (1), the results from the data suggest that both males and females would be classified as *social butterflies* to a relatively equal degree.

An analysis of the data revealed an interesting set of results in regards to the sexual orientation of Facebook users. A Pearson's correlation revealed that individuals who described themselves as being either bisexual or homosexual maintained higher rates of changing their profile picture ($r=0.152$, $p<0.01$), as well as a greater frequency of altering their personal profile information ($r=0.118$, $p<0.05$). Alternatively, these same individuals also spent a significantly less amount of time commenting on others' profiles and pictures ($r=-0.206$, $p<0.01$).

While this quantitative research has provided a good foundation for future study, the results were limited by a number of variables. As the participants themselves were selected only from the 'friends' list of the researchers' Facebook accounts, the sample was limited in the diversity that it offered, and results were subject to biases associated with participants being pooled from a limited population. Furthermore, because the study was conducted via a coding process that did not include a direct interaction with the participants, the information itself was limited, as pertinent questions, surveys, and interviews pertaining to the data could not be gathered. This became problematic in instances in which participants did not include certain personal information about themselves, or at times in which an elaboration of a certain behavior would have been beneficial to the results. However, certain research may suggest that in some cases, third party coding is actually more beneficial to the validity of the study than self-reported measures. During instances in which topics affect self-impression and are ego-sensitive (such as Facebook), self-respondents may be more likely to distort information and offer responses that are more culturally favorable (5). As a consequence, this social desirability bias possesses the distinct potential to increase measurement error and distort the results of a study. Third party coding and indirect data gathering thus offers an approach by which to avoid these potential confounding variable, and may be especially prudent in a social networking site as subject to impression management as Facebook. Future research may benefit from expanding the methodology to accommodate for these factors, especially by including a larger sample size, utilizing surveys and direct interactions with the participants in correspondence with third party coding, as well as pulling from a much wider pool of the population to diversify the sample.

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