



Research Report

Can you tell who I am? Neuroticism, extraversion, and online self-presentation among young adults

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 14 February 2014

Keywords:

Self-presentation
Personality
Neuroticism
Extraversion
Facebook
Social networking sites

ABSTRACT

The present study examined the link between neuroticism, extraversion, as well as presentation of the real, the ideal, and the false self on Facebook. Self-reports were collected from 261 young adults (ages 18–30) about personality, online self-presentation, and Facebook use. Level of extraversion was positively associated with Facebook activity level. A series of regression analyses revealed that young adults high in neuroticism reported presenting their ideal and false self on Facebook to a greater extent whereas those low in extraversion reported engaging in greater online self-exploratory behaviors. Findings suggest that young adults who are experiencing emotional instability may be strategic in their online self-presentation perhaps to seek reassurance, and those who have self-doubt further explore their self online.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, social networking site (SNS) use has soared among 18–29 year olds [2005: 9% vs. 2012: 83%] (Brenner, 2013). Facebook, the world's most popular SNS, has over 1.11 billion users worldwide (Smith, 2013), accounting for almost 16% of the world's population (United States Census Bureau, 2013). Of these Facebook users, 38% are between the ages of 18–29 (Facebook, 2013). Facebook has evolved over the years (Rahman, 2012), offering members more ways to connect with their family and friends (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008), and present information about themselves (Strano, 2008) and their whereabouts online (Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012). Self-presentation features prominently in young people's use of SNSs (DeAndrea & Walther, 2011; Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008), such as via profile pictures, status updates, and uploading of images and videos. Recent research suggests that youth present different aspects of their self online such as their real self, ideal self, and their false self (Michikyan, Dennis, & Subrahmanyam, submitted for publication), and it is important to examine how individual factors relate to different kinds of online self-presentation.

Research on youth social media use suggests that factors such as psychosocial well-being, self-efficacy, and personality are associated with online self-presentation (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Michikyan & Subrahmanyam, 2012; Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011; Wilson, Fornasier, & White, 2010; Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012). With regard to the role of personality in online self-presentation, however, research to date has only examined the relation between young people's personality characteristics and the frequency of their SNS use (e.g., Ong et al., 2011; Ross et al., 2009), and suggests that neuroticism and extraversion may be central to social media use (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Ross et al., 2009; Zywicki & Danowski, 2008). Little is known however about the extent to which these personality characteristics may be related to different kinds of online self-presentation. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to examine the relation between neuroticism, extraversion, and presentation of the real self, the ideal self, and the false self on Facebook.

1.1. Differences in online self-presentation

Mead (1934) proposed that a self emerges through social interaction, and understanding the self is essential in having a purpose in life (Schlegel, Hicks, King, & Arndt, 2011). In general, the self, or who one is, involves one's personal, social, cultural as well as emotional experiences (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Russell, 1991). In offline or face-to-face social interactions, individuals carefully

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present, monitor, and manage the self to ensure the smooth flow of the interaction (Schlenker & Wowra, 2003). Brown has defined such self-presentation as the attempt to create, modify, or maintain a certain self-image in the presence of an audience (Brown, 2007). Research suggests that individuals generally observe their own behaviors and others' reactions to them, and compare their own reactions and attributes to others when interacting socially (Festinger, 1950). In so doing, they engage in various self-presentations (Elliott, 1982; Schlenker & Wowra, 2003). Self-presentation is multifaceted (Harter, 1990, 1998; Harter, Bresnick, Bouchey, & Whitesell, 1997; Harter & Monsour, 1992) (e.g., one may present a false sense of the self to gain the approval of others), and it may foster identity construction (Harter, 1998; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008).

As noted earlier, youth interact with each other online including presenting their self in a variety of ways (Michikyan & Subrahmanyam, 2012). Recent studies have concluded that they use SNSs to present their real personalities (Back et al., 2010; Gosling, Gaddis, & Vazire, 2007). However, drawing on the theory of the self (Harter, 1990, 1998; Harter et al., 1997; Harter & Monsour, 1992), Michikyan and colleagues found that on Facebook, college students not only presented their real self (aspects that are authentic) and ideal self (who one wishes/desires to be), but they also presented their false self (aspects that are not fully truthful). Importantly, identity state and well-being were associated with such online self-presentation: Young adults who were experiencing emotional fluctuations and self-doubt presented their false self on Facebook to a greater extent (Michikyan et al., submitted for publication).

1.2. Personality differences in online behavior

Online self-presentation may also be influenced by the presenter's personality (Krämer & Winter, 2008; Ong et al., 2011; Ross et al., 2009). In general, personality includes one's motives, thoughts, feelings and behavioral tendencies (McCrae & John, 1992), and can be categorized into broad characteristics (Costa & McCrae, 1992a,b). Each personality characteristic can be summarized by its personality markers – for example, anxious/moody (markers of neuroticism), and outgoing/social (markers of extraversion), and be considered as bipolar (extraversion vs. introversion) (Goldberg, 1992; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003). In general, neurotic individuals are overly emotional and tend to experience difficulties in their offline social interactions (Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel, & Fox, 2002; McCroskey, Heisel, & Richmond, 2001). In their online interactions, they prefer to use chat rooms (McCroskey et al., 2001), instant messaging (Ehrenberg, Juckes, White, & Walsh, 2008), and SNS features like status updates (Wang, Jackson, Zhang, & Su, 2012) and wall posts (Ross et al., 2009) perhaps to mitigate some of their interaction concerns. Tosun and Lajunen (2010) suggested that neurotic individuals expressed their real self on the Internet, especially in anonymous online contexts (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2002). However, other evidence linking neuroticism and SNS use tells a more complex story. For instance, Back et al. (2010) found inconsistencies in accuracy ratings of SNS profiles belonging to neurotic young adults, suggesting that self-presentation is malleable, and that neurotic individuals may be strategic in their SNS self-presentation. However, it yet remains to be seen what aspects of the self are presented by neurotic young adults on SNSs, a less anonymous online venue. Thus, it was expected that young adults high in neuroticism would present their ideal self and their false self (for the purpose of deceiving and impressing others) on Facebook to a greater extent, as such online self-presentation may be intrinsically strategic (Michikyan et al., submitted for publication).

Extraverted individuals, on the other hand, find offline social interactions rewarding (Goby, 2006) and have been found to

express their real self offline (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2002). Unlike neurotic individuals, extraverts use social media to strengthen and extend their social networks thereby engaging in greater levels of online activities (Tosun & Lajunen, 2010; Wang et al., 2012). In examining young adults' SNS profiles, Back et al. found that extraverted young adults presented their real self on the sites, suggesting that extraverts' online lives are an extension of their offline lives (Back et al., 2010; Tosun & Lajunen, 2010). Stated differently, online self-presentation may be similar to offline self-presentation for extraverted individuals. Therefore, it was expected that there would be a significant relationship between extraversion and online self-presentation of the real self.

1.3. Focus of the present study

Although the empirical evidence suggests that differences exist in how neurotic and extraverted individuals use Facebook (Back et al., 2010), the extent to which young adults high in neuroticism and extraversion present the real self, ideal self, and the false self on Facebook remains unclear. Given the popularity of Facebook (Brenner, 2013), and research that young adults present their multifaceted self on Facebook (Michikyan et al., submitted for publication), it is important to examine the likelihood of personality differences in such online self-presentation.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Young adults [$N = 261$, (66 males, 195 females); $M = 21.92$, $SD = 2.76$], were recruited from a large urban university. The ethnic make-up of the sample [18.7% Asian, 4.6% Black, 57.4% Latino/a, 10.3% White, and 9.3% other racial/ethnic groups] reflects the diverse population in Southern California. This data set is part of a larger project (Michikyan, 2011). On average, participants reported spending over two hours and forty minutes per day on Facebook ($M = 145.06$, $SD = 123.89$), logging into their Facebook profiles at least six times a day ($M = 6.14$, $SD = 6.58$), updating their status more than once per day ($M = 1.37$, $SD = 1.91$), and posting at least four wall posts per day on Facebook ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 5.13$). Participants completed all self-report measures in the laboratory, on www.surveymonkey.com (a survey hosting site), and received course credit for their participation.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Demographic questionnaire

Participants' age, gender, and racial/ethnic identity were collected using a demographic questionnaire.

2.2.2. Facebook use questionnaire

This questionnaire comprised of questions about participants' average daily use of Facebook: (1) Facebook time – the number of minutes spent on Facebook, and (2) Facebook activity level – the number of Facebook logins, status updates, wall posts, and participants' perceived level of activity on Facebook were transformed to z-scores and summed (Cronbach's $\alpha = .69$).

2.2.3. Self-Presentation on Facebook Questionnaire (SPFBQ)

The SPFBQ (Michikyan et al., submitted for publication) contains 17 items that assess different aspects of online self-presentation on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Sample items include: "The way I present myself on Facebook is how I am in real life" (real self, $\alpha = .81$), "I post things on my Facebook to show aspects of who I want to be" (ideal self, $\alpha = .70$), "I sometimes try to be someone other than my true

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