



## MySpace is your space? Examining self-presentation of MySpace users

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### ABSTRACT

The study examined the role of self-presentation on MySpace pages through the information users post on their sites. MySpace users were more comfortable with posting the broad pieces of information, like gender, race, zodiac sign, and hometown. They were not as willing to present personal information like income, whether they smoke or drank or groups they belonged to. Age and motivations for creating a page were major predictors of how much information people revealed about themselves.

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### 1. Introduction

Social network Web sites are quickly becoming one of the more popular destinations on the Internet, particularly among teenagers and young adults (Global Faces, 2009; Lenhart, 2009; Lenhart & Madden, 2007). Researchers have offered several reasons why these sites have become popular. In short, individuals use social network sites to present themselves, to articulate their social networks, and to develop and maintain relationships (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007; Hargittai, 2007; Stern & Taylor, 2007).

The increased popularity of social network sites has led to increased attention from researchers, who have studied them from a wide range of perspectives, from the role of the sites in society to the nature and characteristics of their users. Of particular interest for researchers has been the way individuals use social network sites to share information about themselves with others. There have been studies looking at the role of self-presentation with Facebook (Ellison et al., 2007; Stern & Taylor, 2007) but few have looked at its role within the context of MySpace (Nyland, Marvez, & Beck, 2007). Researchers also have not focused much attention on the relationship between users' motivation for using a social network site and their self-presentation. Recent studies have shown that nearly all (approximately 90%) of social network site participants created a profile to stay in touch with friends, while half of them use their profiles to meet new friends (Lenhart, 2009). Additionally, some have suggested that the connection users establish with friends via social network sites may serve to validate the identity a user has presented on his or her page. In other words, certain motivations, such as the desire to connect

with friends online, may influence the user's efforts in self-presentation (Banczyk, Krämer, & Senokozlieva, 2008; boyd & Ellison, 2007). There have been some studies examining this relationship on different social network sites, such as Friendster and Livejournal (boyd & Ellison, 2007). However, not much has been done in regards to MySpace. While a lot of attention has recently shifted toward studying Facebook, MySpace is still worth examining because it still has a strong following of users. For instance, MySpace is the most popular social network site among adult users (Lenhart, 2009). Additionally, MySpace offers users a wide range of self-presentation tools, which is another reason why the authors chose to study its users.

This study will examine self-presentation on MySpace, including the amount and type of information users are providing on their MySpace profiles. This study also examines how interactive and vivid users' MySpace pages are and what are their motives for having a MySpace page. Finally, this study will examine the extent to which age and gender of the MySpace user as well as motives for using MySpace influence how much information individuals disclose about themselves as well as the level of interactivity and vividness of their pages.

Self-disclosure has long been an important tool in relationship development in offline settings (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). Individuals have also used self-disclosure practices in developing online friendships, mainly because users can exercise more control in the amount of information they provide about themselves (Ellison et al., 2006, 2007; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008). Because many users participate in social network sites as a means to create and connect with friends, it would seem that they would be more willing to reveal information about themselves. This study will aim to determine if this is indeed the case.

Additionally, understanding self-presentation practices on MySpace can be helpful for researchers who have been concerned

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with privacy issues related to social network sites (Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Stern & Taylor, 2007; Tufekci, 2008). Nearly two-thirds of users have taken some steps to privatize their online profiles as some level – making them visible only to friends for instance – but many users, especially younger users, admit they do not fully understand how privacy settings on these sites work or how to use them (boyd, 2009; Lenhart, 2009). One possible explanation for the confusion could be that the level of privacy available to users varies between the different sites (boyd, 2009; Papacharissi, 2009). MySpace users will likely deal with more privacy issues than Facebook users because MySpace is more open than Facebook. In other words, Facebook offers more privacy options than MySpace.

## 2. Literature review

There are several reasons individuals construct personal Web pages. Specifically, studies have found that individuals who hosted Web pages did so because it offered an alternative to other communication channels (Papacharissi, 2002b). They used their Web pages to keep in touch with friends and family, particularly when other forms of communication were not available or were not fulfilling their needs. The Web pages also served as a mode of self-expression for individuals who were comfortable with, and enjoyed, interpersonal communication. At the same time, individuals who were apprehensive with face-to-face communication were less likely to reveal much information about themselves on their Web pages (Papacharissi, 2002b).

Among social network sites, MySpace allows for greater self-expression than its popular cousin, Facebook. MySpace allows its users to customize their virtual “space” with an open format in which design elements, text, video, music, graphics and photographs can be employed to reflect the user’s online personality. Users can therefore construct a self-image that can be communicated to a mass audience (Kane, 2008). MySpace also affords users more anonymity by giving them the option of using a nickname or pseudonym.

### 2.1. Self-presentation

According to Goffman (1959), self-presentation is a process of information management. He differentiated between the expressions one gives and the expressions one gives off, which are often more theatrical, contextual, and often non-verbal. For instance, MySpace users give certain expressions by posting descriptions of themselves, including likes and dislikes. However, their choice in clothing, hairstyle, or overall appearance as seen in photos or videos they post on their pages posted could give off certain expressions about the users that they did not mean to share.

According to Goffman (1959), it is easier for an individual to manipulate the expressions he/she gives than the expressions he/she gives off. It becomes an “information game,” where impressions of individuals are formed as a result of the information given or given off.

Papacharissi (2002a) said Web pages are an ideal setting for this “information game” because individuals have maximum control over the information disclosed on the site. Web pages allow individuals to present a multi-mediated self-image, using audio and visual components, along with text, to potentially communicate to mass audiences. They can also manage the expressions given and given off, simulating an offline experience, but can make it a more convincing and satisfying experience. For example, an individual who wants to appear outgoing can include links to pages of friends and photos of gatherings as evidence (Papacharissi, 2002a).

For instance, blogging offers individuals an outlet for self-expression. A survey of active bloggers revealed that more than

half (60%) use their blogs for self-expression (Papacharissi, 2006). The average blog features personalized information, often disorganized, fragmented, and largely self-referential, similar to a traditional diary. However, unlike written diaries, where privacy is closely guarded, blogs are often open for all to browse (Papacharissi, 2006). Overall, personal blogs are about the display of intimate thoughts, information, and insight (Papacharissi, 2006).

A variety of tools have been used by individuals to present themselves, including both direct textual expressions and indirect expressions, like hyperlinks, images, animations, color and font type (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Papacharissi, 2002a). Additionally, users fulfilled the need for interpersonal communication by including e-mail, guest books, and counters on their pages (Papacharissi, 2002a).

Many researchers have measured self-presentation through an individual’s use of many of these online tools. For instance, Papacharissi measured self-presentation through identifying users’ motives for hosting a personal Web page and examining the characteristics of their sites. The latter was measured through dividing the Web pages into different categories, based on the focus of the content (i.e. self-expression, personal interests, family, professional, support, and personal views of host), and counting the number of feedback mechanisms (e-mails, surveys, guest-books). Interactivity and vividness of a Web page were also used in measuring self-presentation (Papacharissi 2002a, 2002b). Interactivity was measured by identifying the elements a user had on his or her page that would invite participation from visitors. This could include providing links to additional photos or information, posting quizzes or polls, or providing a message board for visitors to leave messages. Vividness was measured by identifying several elements, including the amount of text on the page, the number of graphics, the number of photos, etc. (Papacharissi, 2002a, 2002b). These two elements are worth considering because they are tools that individuals use in their self-presentation. For instance, users who want to appear outgoing might provide links to other friends and family on their page. Other users who want to appear creative may include a lot of color, animation, or other interactive elements on their page (Papacharissi, 2002a). The measurements of self-presentation for this study were adopted from the measurements introduced by Papacharissi.

### 2.2. Accuracy and autonomy

One challenge an online environment creates is the inability to ensure other individuals are accurately representing themselves (Ellison et al., 2006; Stern & Taylor, 2007). A commonly accepted understanding of identity suggests that there are multiple versions of self that are expressed in different contexts (Ellison et al., 2006). Specifically, Higgins (1987) suggested there are three domains to the self: the actual self (the attributes an individual actually possesses), the ideal self (attributes the individual would like to possess), and the ought self (attributes an individual should possess). The anonymity of the online environment allows individuals to select which self they would like to present to others. Additionally, it has allowed individuals to better present aspects of their true selves that they may not be willing to share in other situations, like face-to-face communication (Ellison et al., 2006).

Anonymity can take two forms: visual and discursive (Qian & Scott, 2007). Visual anonymity occurs when the physical presence of a messenger cannot be detected. Within the realm of computer-mediated communication, this would refer to the lack of visual representation of a person, like a picture or video clips. Discursive anonymity, on the other hand, occurs when verbal communication cannot be attributed to a particular source. In the online environment, this would include withholding name, e-mail, address, and other identifying information (Qian & Scott, 2007).

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