



Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Computers in Human Behavior

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/comphumbeh

Strategic self-presentation online: A cross-cultural study

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 17 August 2012

Keywords:

Self-presentation
Social network site
Culture
Audience

ABSTRACT

Contemporary social networking sites (SNSs) make idealized self-presentation and image maintenance difficult because users' audiences are becoming more diverse and individual users must negotiate often unanticipated *other-provided information* in the form of text posts and digital images on their profile pages. This cross-cultural study examines how audience-related variables affect a range of strategic self-presentation and image management behaviors online. Results from samples of Singaporean and American SNS users ($N = 411$) show that while Americans update their profiles with text-based wall posts more frequently, Singaporeans share significantly more photos. Audience diversity is positively associated with active management of other-provided information, and females share more photos and actively manage unwanted photo tagging. Cultural identity and the tendency to 'friend' unknown others interact on managing other-provided wall posts; individualistic cultural identity exhibited positive relationships with these reactions for those less likely to friend unknown others but negative ones for those more likely to friend unknown others. Implications for the theoretical understanding of and practical suggestions about self-presentation online are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Self-presentation is "the process of controlling how one is perceived by other people" (Leary, 1995, p. 2) and is key to relationship inception and development. In order to construct positive images, individuals selectively provide information about themselves and carefully cater this information in response to others' feedback (Goffman, 1959).

Internet-based communication tools provide new opportunities for self-presentation, especially via social networking sites (SNSs) which allow users to strategically create custom profile pages. Here, users provide information about themselves via a variety of different modes of communication, ranging from using plain text to report personal information, update status, and write comments on friend's profile pages, to sharing a prolific amount of images. However, individual users are not the only source of information about themselves. Members of their online networks also contribute information to their profile page. These social network 'friends' can publicly comment on an individual's status updates, add text-based posts to their friend's profile pages, and connect individual profile owners with shared digital content like photos, a behavior known as photo tagging. Once an individual user is tagged in a photo, that photo becomes visible to visitors of his or her profile

page. More importantly, these content additions can be made at any time without permission of the profile page owner.

These interactions reduce the profile page owner's control over the information about themselves (Ramirez & Walther, 2009). This is problematic for the pursuit of idealized self-presentation because information provided by others (*other-provided information*,¹ or OPI) may be inconsistent with the strategic image-based goals of profile owners. Compared with information provided by profile owners themselves (*self-provided information*,² or SPI), OPI is less likely to be manipulated, more credible, and thus can have a greater impact on how profile owners are perceived (Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008).

The multiple audience problem poses additional challenges (Leary, 1995). Today, users' online networks encompass family members, friends from school and work, as well as total strangers (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011). This may be problematic because different audience segments have different expectations about one's public image (Binder, Howes, & Sutcliffe, 2009), and SNS users must adjust their public image to expectations of all these segments (Goffman, 1959). As traditional geographic and temporal boundaries in face-to-face communication diminish during online communication, it becomes difficult to manage diverse audience segments simultaneously in closed systems like SNS (Binder et al., 2009; boyd, 2008). This increases the chances

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that OPI becomes problematic and thus poses challenges to effective self-presentation.

Audience characteristics and individual cultural identity effect self-presentation online. Culture is a broad concept associated with national identity and gender (Hofstede, 1980; Maltz & Borker, 1982). Scholarship has found cultural- and gender-based differences in self-presentation behaviors on- and offline (Rosen, Stefanone, & Lackaff, 2010). Research also demonstrates that online social network (i.e., audience) characteristics could affect self-presentation behaviors (Binder et al., 2009). However, the relationships between culture, idiosyncratic audience characteristics, and how individuals manage OPI to present themselves in a positive light online, remain unclear.

The purpose of this research is to address these gaps by examining factors that affect how individuals share *self-provided* text- and image-based information in the form of wall posts and photos, and how they manage *other-provided* visual and text-based information on their profiles. Drawing on research about protective self-presentation (Arkin, 1981), the individualism-collectivism dichotomy (Hofstede, 1980), the gender-as-culture argument (Maltz & Borker, 1982), and the analysis of social network structure (Binder et al., 2009), we propose to examine how cultural identity, gender, and specific audience characteristics affect a range of self-presentation behaviors online.

2. Theoretical framework and hypotheses

2.1. Self-presentation

The goal of self-presentation is to make others accept the images individuals claim for themselves (Goffman, 1959). To achieve this goal, individuals must present themselves in accordance with their social roles, and make sure others positively evaluate their images. Thus, individuals need to adjust their public images to audience expectations.

Goffman suggests that seeking approval and avoiding disapproval motivate effective self-presentation, which can be achieved through two types of self-presentation: acquisitive and protective (Arkin, 1981). The purpose of acquisitive self-presentation is seeking approval, so presenters emphasize attractive aspects of themselves and construct desirable images. However, protective self-presentation is aimed at avoiding disapproval. Thus, presenters make neutral expressions, conformity, and modest self-disclosure to avoid rejections from the audience. Arkin (1981) argued that humans tended to make acquisitive self-presentation, but three factors could motivate them to switch to protective self-presentation. First, if the target is considered capricious, their expectation of appropriate self-presentation is unclear. This motivates presenters to employ protective strategies to avoid negative outcomes. Second, if information disclosed during an interaction undermines positive images, presenters are motivated to engage in protective self-presentation. Finally, certain internal characteristics render some presenters more motivated to engage in protective self-presentation. Examples of these characteristics include low self-esteem, greater concern over how one's self is perceived, and the tendency toward social comparison.

Based on Arkin (1981), we argue that individuals engage in acquisitive self-presentation by disclosing positive SPI and protective self-presentation through protective tactics discussed later. Further, as Arkin (1981) suggests, these two self-presentation behaviors are affected by both internal (e.g. personality) and external factors (e.g. audience characteristics). However, when self-presentation manifests during computer-mediated communication (CMC), technological features should also be considered.

2.2. Online self-presentation

Traditional CMC scholarship argues that Internet-based communication tools allow individuals to optimize their self-presentation. The hyperpersonal communication model suggests that limited cues and the asynchronous nature of CMC enable selective self-presentation wherein individuals emphasize attractive characteristics and conceal unattractive ones (Walther, 1996). Thus, the technological features of CMC promote acquisitive self-presentation and optimized personal images (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006).

However, today's CMC platforms make acquisitive self-presentation challenging. One antecedent of selective self-presentation is that all the information about the presenter is self provided. However, recent technology allows for OPI from SNS users' contacts. This type of information involves identifying people in shared photographs and comments from other network members. As OPI reduces profile owners' control over the information about themselves, it can be inconsistent with the desired image they construct (Ramirez & Walther, 2009). Further, OPI is less likely to be subject to manipulation and therefore judged as more credible (Walther & Parks, 2002). Thus, OPI may have a greater impact on self-presentation than SPI.

Another challenge is the multiple audience problem (Leary, 1995). Increased audience diversity characterizes contemporary online social networks (Hampton et al., 2011). Traditionally, temporal, spatial, and social boundaries between different interactions can segregate the audience so that self-presentation can be target at specific audience members. However, these boundaries are obscured in the contemporary CMC environment (boyd, 2008). As effective self-presentation needs to be adaptive to expectations of different audiences (Goffman, 1959), this may cause undesirable public impressions or relational intensions (Binder et al., 2009; Tokunaga, 2011).

These two challenges increase the chance of protective self-presentation for two reasons, consistent with Arkin (1981). First, the multiple audience problem obscures expectations of the entire audience. Second, OPI undermines optimized public images. Therefore, individuals may be prompted to make protective self-presentation.

Multiple protective tactics in CMC have been discussed. Smock (2010) categorized these tactics into repudiative and subtractive strategies. Repudiative strategies are those tactics used for denial of certain characteristics such as making an innocent defense or compensatory self-presentations. Subtractive strategies are those tactics used to remove undesired information. As self-presentation is influenced by external and internal factors, we focus on audience and individual cultural identities below, examples of external and internal factors respectively.

2.3. Self-presentation and audience

In face-to-face (FtF) communication, audience is those that individuals interact with and can directly observe their behaviors. On SNS, audience refers to users' online network members because they can view both SPI and OPI about those network members. Thus, in the current study we operationalize audience as individual user's network members.

The first audience characteristic that influences self-presentation is size. One main motive for using SNS is relationship maintenance (Smock, Ellison, Lampe, & Wohn, 2011). As online networks increase in size, so does the need to maintain those relationships. One technique of relationship maintenance is self-disclosure. Theories contend that increased self-disclosure can facilitate relationship development (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Burger & Calabrese, 1975). Therefore, users with large networks require

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