

**PRACTICES AND RESPONSES OF Facebook USERS ON
ANONYMITY AND PSEUDONYMITY IN Facebook**

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ABSTRACT

With the widespread use of Social Networking Sites (SNSs), specifically Facebook, this study was endeavored to explain how and why netizens create inauthentic identities online. Primarily, this study determined the practices and responses of Facebook users on anonymity and pseudonymity in Facebook. Specifically, it identified the practices of Facebook users in creating anonymous and pseudonymous profiles, their motivations to be anonymous or pseudonymous online, and their responses to anonymity and pseudonymity. In pursuit of such, descriptive research design was utilized with survey questionnaire as the primary gathering tool. An interview was also conducted to come up with the data needed. It involved 382 students from the five colleges in MMSU Batac Campus. Data gathered were treated through frequency count, percentage, mean, and rank. Results yielded that majority of the participants pattern their online identity with that of their offline identity, hence, revealing genuine information in supplying their personal information in Facebook. On the other hand, it was found that privacy is the reason why the participants conceal their personal information in Facebook. As regards their responses, even anonymous and pseudonymous Facebook users lack identification or are unidentified online; other users would still initiate connection with them. Thus, anonymity and pseudonymity in Facebook is isolated and minimal and other Facebook users do not respond negatively to the activities initiated by anonymous and pseudonymous Facebook users.

Keywords: *computer-mediated-communication, SNSs, anonymity, pseudonymity, Facebook users*

INTRODUCTION

It is unusual if someone receives a message online containing an unpleasant content or if someone is being stalked by an unidentified or improperly identified online user. This scenario is widespread especially in SNSs which allow one to communicate with other users using their virtual identity online – which may be patterned to the offline identity of a user or may also be altered or changed as to the preferences and intentions of the said users.

Anonymity is not a new thing. It has been known for millennia as means to give threats, deliver unwholesome messages and to attack other people. But anonymity and pseudonymity became different in the arrival of the internet. This is due to the combination of the growing significance of the internet and the ease with which one can be untraceably anonymous while online (Pavliček, 2005).

Thus, an internet user can create his desired identity online. This possibility gives anyone an opportunity to use anonymity and pseudonymity to avoid being recognized and feel freer in expressing oneself, specifically, in SNSs.

One of the fastest growing SNSs is Facebook (FB), which features several online activities like posting one's status, personal messaging, creating a group, online web cam, and advertising, among others, which make it attractive to most SNSs users. These engaging features of Facebook, however, have been taken for granted by individuals who abuse this freedom in the cyberspace to ridicule and cause injury or to perform cyber bullying to other users. Most of these individuals create anonymous or pseudonymous accounts to avoid any liability that could affect their online or offline identity. These draw anonymity and pseudonymity on one's online identity closer to negativity than of the positive side, making it unethical and unwanted to other users.

With the desirable features of Facebook and the inevitability of anonymity and pseudonymity, the researcher became interested to study how and why inauthentic identity is created online.

Objectives of the Study

Generally, this study sought to determine the practices and responses of Facebook users on anonymity and pseudonymity in Facebook. Specifically, it aimed to determine the practices of Facebook users in creating anonymous and pseudonymous profiles, distinguish the motivations of Facebook users to be anonymous or pseudonymous online, and be acquainted with how Facebook users respond to anonymity and pseudonymity.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used the descriptive research design to determine the practices and responses of Facebook users on anonymity and pseudonymity. A survey questionnaire and structured interview were used to come up with the data needed in order to answer the problems of this research.

Participants of the Study

This study was conducted in January to February 2014 at the Mariano Marcos State University, Batac campus. It involved five colleges in the said university, namely: College of Engineering (COE), College of Arts and Sciences (CAS), College of Agriculture, Food, and Sustainable Development (CAFSD), College of Business, Economics, and Accountancy (CBEA), and College of Health Sciences (CHS). The above colleges hold the greatest number of college students in the university; thus, the researcher believed that these would provide the most approximate representation of college students who are using Facebook.

The Slovin's formula was used to get the representative sample of MMSU Batac's total population (7,867 students). The obtained sample, that is, 382 student participants were distributed proportionally to the five colleges of MMSU Batac: 103 students from COE, 40 students from CAS, 55 students from CAFSD, 125 students from CBEA, and 59

students from CHS.

Furthermore, the researcher employed the purposive-random sampling in choosing participants who answered the survey checklist and were interviewed in the condition that they are active Facebook users.

Instrumentation

The researcher used a survey questionnaire and a structured interview in order to obtain data to be analyzed.

The survey questionnaire comprised of two parts: the personal information of the participants and the survey checklist. The personal information of the participants includes the Name (optional), Age, Gender and College/Unit. On the other hand, the survey checklist comprises six major questions which involve the genuine personal information revealed, unrevealed and altered, the identification through profile picture and the behavior of online users in communicating with anonymous and pseudonymous Facebook users in terms of adding friend, posting comments/status, posting links and sending messages.

An in-depth interview was also made with participants who own an anonymous or pseudonymous account online and other users who have experienced communicating or caused to reject anonymous or pseudonymous identities online to validate the results of the survey. Interview questions for anonymous and pseudonymous online users involved their motivation being such and the effects of this in their Facebook activities. On the other hand, interview questions for other online users involved their perception, experience and action toward anonymous and pseudonymous online users.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Revealed personal information of the participants

Results showed that more items in the revealed information are above 50%. The most revealed information included the full name

(87.70%), gender (87.43%) and birth date/year (85.86%).

Participants tend to disclose these pieces of information because these are considered as the most public information about one's identity that can be shared even in the first encounters. These are followed by work/education (75.65%), places lived (72.51%), age (70.42%), relationship status (60.73%) and contact email (40.31%). The least three revealed personal information is family (34.56%), contact number (26.44%) and personal description (23.30%). Users sometimes don't disclose this personal information because they are considered to be private and are only shared to acquaintances and intimate friends. This implies that there are still more users who practice patterning their virtual identity with that of their offline identity.

Unrevealed personal information of the participants

Majority of the items in the unrevealed information are below fifty percent (50%). It resulted that contact number (64.66%), personal description (52.88%) and family (37.17%) are the most unrevealed personal information of the participants. These are followed by contact email (34.03%), relationship status (18.85%), places lived (16.75%), age (15.18%) and full name (12.30%). Birthdate/year (7.07%), work/education (6.02%) and gender (1.31%) are the least unrevealed personal information of the participants. This only means that the percentage of participants who concealed personal information is minimal compared to those who opted to reveal their identities online.

Altered personal information of the participants

Participants who altered their personal information in Facebook are also minimal. This can be justified by the percentage of the participants who said that they altered information in their Facebook accounts.

All the items in the altered personal information are all below 25%. Full name (24.16%), relationship status (17.80%) and work/education (15.71%) are the most altered personal information. Users do this for them to create a good image about themselves online. This

is as what the Social Information Processing Theory and Hyperpersonal Computer-mediated communication (CMC) assert that the image created by each user online is the basis for the development of communication between these parties. These most altered personal information in Facebook is followed by contact number (9.16%), age (8.38%), contact email (6.02%) personal description (5.24%) and birthdate/year (4.97%), places lived (4.45%), gender (1.57%), and family (1.57%).

Summing it up, it can be corroborated that majority of Facebook users are still using genuine personal information account compared to those who did not reveal and alter this information.

According to the Social Penetration Theory and Hyperpersonal CMC, one great payoff of self-disclosing is the reduction of uncertainty and the stress that it creates. And later in a relationship, when a deeper level of self-disclosure occurs, online users experience the rewards of having greater intimacy with people other users like (Doyle, 2004). Thus, most Facebook users disclosed more in order to create an upright image online that encourages other users to confirm them as friends.

Similarly, this suggests that online certainty needs to be reduced for the creation of opportunities for interpersonal communication, shared understanding of messages, and interpersonal trust (Mesch & Beker, 2011). The need for communication in online environments to reduce uncertainty and create trust leads individuals to be more willing to disclose personal information to support the continuation of online communication.

Practices of the participants in Creating their Profile picture in Facebook

Profile picture is the main photo of the users on the Timeline section in Facebook. It appears as a thumbnail next to the comments and other activities on Facebook.

The statuses of the participants are displayed based on their

profile pictures they use in their Facebook account.

Overall, there are 352 (92.15%) participants who are genuine; there are 5 who are anonymous and 25 are pseudonymous.

Types of pictures used by the participants in their profile pictures are shown in the data. Some of the most used pictures by the participants are own picture, group picture, other's picture, anime, celebrity's picture, picture of place and picture of a thing.

Participants said that own picture is the most often used type of picture supplied either in the profile picture or cover photo found in the timeline section in Facebook, this is followed by group picture, celebrity's picture, anime, other's picture, picture of a place and the least used is picture of a thing, respectively.

It can be surmised from the data above that most Facebook users still use their own picture to display in their profiles. This could be attributed to the fact that by using "selfie", a type of self-portrait photograph, typically taken with a hand-held digital camera or camera phone pictures, is the current trend. "Selfies" can also be in group, thus, jibes to the second most used kind of profile picture/cover photo.

The appeal of selfies comes from how easy they are to create and share, and the control they give self-photographers over how they present themselves. Many selfies are intended to present a flattering image of the person, especially to friends whom the photographer expects to be supportive (Adewunmi, 2013). However, a 2013 study of Facebook users found that posting photos of oneself correlates with lower levels of social support from and intimacy with Facebook friends (except for those marked as Close Friends).

Motivations of Anonymous and Pseudonymous participants

Privacy is the main reason of 206 (60.59%) participants why they did not reveal their personal information. Next reason of the participants is security as said by 63 (18.53%) participants. This is followed by avoid stalking answered by 36 (10.59%); 22 (6.47%)

believed that some personal information is not necessary; 9 (2.65%) believed it is for fun; and 4 (1.18%) claimed that they do not know how to use a certain function of Facebook, that is why they are able to reveal some information.

It can be said then that the participants are privacy sensitive that they give space for themselves, even in the virtual world, by not disclosing all information about their identity patterned to the offline world.

Conversely, in the case of altering personal information, on trend is the top reason of the participants in doing so with a number of 72 (29.63%). Next to this is for fun with 59 (24.28%) participants. These numbers are followed by to update information, 50 (20.58%); security, 42 (17.28%); avoid stalking, 14 (5.76%); and the least reason of the participants why they alter information in their Facebook account is privacy with 6 participants (2.47%).

It is noticeable in social networking sites, including Facebook, that the use of nicknames or constant pseudonyms is observed. The celebrity-like nature of Facebook pushes some users to do so for them to sound better or look better online. It jibes to the top answer of the participants that pseudonyms in SNS are on trend.

In an article “Make room for pseudonyms” by Fred Wilson, he believes that most people want to have some privacy and chance to create a new persona on the internet. And when people have these two considerations met, they feel more comfortable and engage with other people more freely.

For the case of anonymous and pseudonymous Facebook users in terms of profile/cover photo, they explained that they don’t supply picture in their profile, or they use a picture which is not theirs because they lack confidence, or they don’t know how to operate such function of Facebook.

Responses of Facebook Users to Anonymous and Pseudonymous Facebook Users

Add as a friend. If an anonymous or pseudonymous Facebook user adds other users as a friend, their initial action, according to the participants, would be to search for a background of the person or group adding them as corresponded by 266 (69.63%) participants. This is followed by ignore answered by 102 (26.70%) participants. Next to this is to confirm such request immediately as answered by 52 participants (13.61%). This is followed by saying not now by 51 (13.35%) participants. The 2 least answers are to block the account and report the user with 6 (1.57%) and 5 (1.31%), respectively.

This main action of the participants to such situation may adhere to what is being practiced in the offline world that if ever a stranger is making friends with someone else, he/she may be asked of some details pertaining to his/her personality. The information then that is obtained in this process will tell whether communication between the two individuals will continue or not.

This can be explained by the Social Information processing theory that personal information available through CMC is the basis in establishing a relationship online and use that information to form interpersonal impressions of who they are. Thus, interacting parties draw closer if they both like the image of the other part they've formed, if not otherwise.

Post comment/status on wall/account. If there is someone who is unidentified or improperly identified who posts comment/status on one's wall/account, the initial response of the participants would be to like the post. This is followed by responses such as commenting back with 139 (36.39%) participants, ignoring answered by 116 (30.37%), deleting the post confirmed by 32 (8.38%) and reporting the post as a spam, as the least choice by 12 (3.14%) participants.

Liking one's post in Facebook even other users do not know the one who posted certain things personally.

According to the Psychology of Facebook, “commenting” and ‘liking’ another user’s posts make up the majority of what users engage in while on Facebook on any given day. One possible reason could be that since we appreciate the gratifications arising from being acknowledged or approved by others through means of ‘liking’ or commenting on our posts, we do the same to others as a sign of goodwill.’

Similarly, the concept of reciprocity is very much at play with the saying “Do unto others as you would like others do unto you.” Thus, it becomes a mutually dependent relationship in which both sides will keep getting the same fulfillment from ‘liking’ and commenting on each other’s posts.

Post/share links. To ignore, as answered by 193 (50.52%) participants, is the main action of the participants if someone who is anonymous or pseudonymous posts/shares/links. Likewise, 142 (37.17%) answered that they go to the link page, 2nd rank, if such happens. 3rd in the rank to delete such posts, answered by 40 (10.47%) while the least choice is to repost the link with 31 (8.12%) participants.

Send message. If an anonymous or pseudonymous Facebook user sends a message to someone, other online users would replay was told by 268 (70.16%) participants. This is followed by ignoring such as said by 137 (35.86%). These answers are followed by deleting the message, 36 (9.42%); hiding the message 22 (5.76%); and reporting such as spam, as the least answer, with 10 (2.62%) participants.

From the above data, it can be deduced that other Facebook users do not respond negatively to the activities initiated by anonymous and pseudonymous Facebook users.

This conforms to the statements of interviewed anonymous and pseudonymous Facebook users who said that as to their experience, they have not encountered other users yet who cause to ignore or

responded negatively to their initiated activities in Facebook.

Some of their statements are as follows:

“Parang wala rin kasi so far, wala pa namang nagdedeny or nag-aunfriend sa amin sa Facebook” (So far, we have not experienced that kind of scenario, no one has ever denied or “unfriended” us in Facebook yet) – Pseudonymous Facebook Users from CAS

“So far wala pa namang umiignore sa akin sa Facebook” (So far none has ever ignored me in Facebook yet) - Pseudonymous Facebook User from CBEA

“Wala pa naman akong naexperience na gano’n” (I have not experienced that kind of scenario) – Anonymous Facebook User from CBEA

“Wala pa namang gano’n kasi puro close friends ko lang ang friends ko sa Facebook” (I have not experienced that kind of instance yet because all my friends in Facebook are all of intimate relationship with me) – Anonymous Facebook User from CAFSD

“Wala pa naman akong naencounter na gano’n” (I have not encountered like that one) – Pseudonymous Facebook Users from CHS

Even users lack identification or are unidentified online, other users would still initiate connection with them. In the process of this stage of communication, the possibilities that the connection will end or continue will be based on the preferences of both parties as explained by the Social Information Processing theory.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, the researcher concluded that some Facebook users practice not to reveal and alter some personal information in their profile which is also true in their profile picture. On the contrary, most Facebook users practice identifying themselves

properly in Facebook through creating genuine personal information and profile picture. Thus, it can be said that anonymity and pseudonymity in Facebook is isolated and minimal.

On the other hand, privacy and going with on trend are the main motivations of the participants why they are anonymous or pseudonymous in their personal information while anonymous and pseudonymous participants through picture point lack confidence or skills to operate such function.

Finally, the Facebook users do not respond negatively to the activities initiated by anonymous and pseudonymous Facebook users.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher recommends that if a similar study is to be conducted, a larger sample from varied groups should be involved. Also, the instrument used in the study should be enhanced. And lastly, studies on other social networking sites are recommended.

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