What's on Your Mind?
Rhetorics of Identity Construction in Facebook

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Abstract

Among young Filipinos, Facebook enjoys wide acceptance, with almost 81 percent of the youth population using the social networking site. With this knowledge, this exploratory study, What's on your mind: Rhetorics of identity construction in Facebook, aimed to determine how Facebook features, specifically, status updates and profile pictures, aid in the construction and representation of identities. Using textual analysis, backed by concepts on Speech-act theory, identity performance and power discourse, it also sought to present the rhetorical capacity of these engagements. As a rhetorical site, Facebook engagements are, thus, considered powerful loci of identity activation and representation. This, likewise, explored the various reasons and motivations for young people's engagements with the identified Facebook features and how they think this contributes to the way they are seen and understood by others in the social networking site. Finally, this research also posits that young Filipinos' online identity play are primarily performative in nature, which can be observed both in the way status updates and profile pictures are constructed and understood.

Keywords: youth, Facebook, Filipino youth, rhetorics, profile pictures, status messages, performance identity, social networking sites

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Introduction

Everything communicates. And every communication has a purpose. And this is what rhetoric is, too. And it is present, in real space or in cyberspace.

In this age of advanced communication technologies, interaction has become both simple and complicated. In the same vein, identity construction and representation have become multi-faceted and multi-textured. But formation of one's identity does not take place in a vacuum. There will always be causative factors that will be at interplay with one another to allow a person cognition and affirmation of one's sense of being. One doesn't simply arrive at an identity. Formation and construction of one's identity and how it is represented takes time and is a product of various converging causes and effects.

And in today's society bombarded with various media and their "life gurus," constructing one's identity can be a daunting endeavor. "In society today the construction of a personal identity can be seen to be somewhat problematic and difficult" (Hamley, 2001). This might also be the realities of young people who have access to endless choices for the modeling of an identity as offered by the equally endless media. From broadcast to print, to non-traditional media like billboards and posters, the youth's environments are saturated with words that suggest images and images that create statements on how the young should look, think, feel, speak and consequently, conduct their lives. "The youth consume copious amounts of media across development" (Kirsh, 2010). These days, these consumptions take place 24/7 as various agencies of influence have also leveled up in their delivery of messages, mainly through the utilization of the new media – a platform that can be accessed anytime, anywhere.

One of these popular platforms are the social networking sites (SNS) which see a lot of traffic coming from the youth. Of these sites, Facebook (FB), whose rhetoric centers on sharing and connection as its supposed mission is "to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected" (Facebook.com, 2013), can be deemed the major player as it caters to people's basic need for connection. How important this connection is can be reflected by the population that FB now enjoys: 1.23 billion monthly active users, 757 million of which are daily active users, with 945 million monthly users who are also active users through their mobile gadgets (Facebook.com, 2013). From a simple university social networking application in 2004, which only opened to the global audience in 2006, Facebook has reached iconic status in today's society. Its immense popularity among people, organizations and institutions cannot be denied nor ignored. Clearly, the Facebook phenomenon has taken hold of people around the globe.

Objectives

Given these scenarios, various studies have been made in relation to Facebook and identity construction. However, despite the abundance of such studies in the different parts of the globe, there is a dearth of such literatures in the Philippines, especially on researches that focus on particular influential interfaces of the social networking site, such as profile pictures and status updates.

The study, therefore, aimed to look into possible ways that status updates and profile pictures are points of rhetorical power that activate online identity construction and representation in Facebook among young Filipinos.

It also sought to determine how Facebook subscribers ascribe significance and value to these two features of the social media in terms of how they are seen and understood in the social networking site.

Assumptions

The study argues that Facebook aids in identity construction and representation through the rhetorics of subscribers' status updates and profile pictures. It contends that these features are not only innocent posts but are filled with meanings, both for the holder of the account and that person's FB public and, therefore, affect how online identity is communicated, represented and understood. It also postulates that online identity processes are, by nature, performative, which can be observed both in the way status messages and profile pictures are constructed and communicated. Lastly, although accessing Facebook is an individual chore, this study presupposes that, as points of rhetorical power, it is not an independent engagement as the experience of Facebook is an experience shared with the multitudes of its users.

Significance of the study

Majority of young Filipinos are actively engaged in and with Facebook.

According to the website GetHooked 360 (2013), the Philippines now has around 30 million Facebook users. Majority of this number who are hooked to the Internet belongs to the younger generation and the Philippines' youth, from ages 13-34, now comprise around 80 percent of the total Facebook users in the country, with majority of this coming from the 18-24 age group. This is also reflective of a Social Baker study that says that the average age of Internet users in the Philippines is 23.

In a Rappler article in 2012, again citing data from SocialBakers, it was mentioned that almost one out of every four Filipinos has a Facebook account and that the country was ranked 8th in the world among Facebook countries. The Philippines also ranked first in the nations where Facebook rules the Internet based on a Wall Street report (Rappler 2013), saying that "the Philippines has one of the highest penetrations in social media."

It is important, therefore, to make a study on the youth's appropriation of social media in identity construction and representation because their number, alone, is formidable. These digital natives or millennials as they are called these days, are said to be the most diverse and most numerous generation, making up around one-fourth of the world's population, or roughly 2.5 billion (Kurz, 2012).

With these numbers and with more and more channels for mediation opening for these young people, it is crucial to question how they see who they are and how they conduct their identity formation since they have the capacity to be a powerful and influential group in today's society. Moreover, it can be assumed that the way they

construct and represent who they are will, eventually, influence how various dimensions of society's life will also be constructed.

Related literatures

Cyberspace is a significant locus in the identity construction and representation of the youth. And the omnipresent social media, one of the platforms of cyberspace, has influenced the everyday life of the youth, playing more roles than just giving them entertainment. In many ways, these sites greatly influence how young people create their identity and how these identities are presented. This social media phenomenon has also provided young people to express, not just a singular identity but, layers of interconnected identities. This has created an impact on the way these young people organize who they are, both in the real and the virtual worlds.

Creating Identities
Identity is a complex state and idea that everybody has to grapple with time and again. For many, it can be as simple as asking the question, "who am I?". The answers, however, are not that simple.

Far from being a one-human-show, identity now is taken as a social construct, subject to the interplay of various elements. "Today, identity is conceived as being the combination of multiple factors, age, gender, sexuality, status and personhood" (Harris, 2003). Given these factors, one cannot limit the sources of influences that affect the way identities are constructed or box a person within one particular set of unchanging characteristics, as Gauntlett (2008) mentioned, citing from Butler's (1990) work, Gender Trouble, that "nothing within your identity is fixed" (p. 104).

Identity is also no longer seen as something people are just born with but something that can freely be created, invented or chosen as there "is the emancipation of the individual from his or her ascribed, inherited and inborn determination of social character" (Bauman, 2001). People are now charged with responsibility with regard to how their characters and identities are put together as identity construction becomes no longer a 'given' but a 'task' (Bauman, 2001) that should be made and remade time and again. And this remaking happens in the context of people's relationships as identity is no longer just considered a 'private matter' and a 'private worry' (Bauman, 2001) but something that co-exists with others in the different spheres of people's lives which makes identity fluid and in flux all the time. Hamley (2001), likewise, believes that "identity is something that is constructed over a period of time and can constantly be updated or changed completely."

This identity construction engagement can also be considered most crucial in the impressionable ages of the youth. And that from ages 11 to early 20s, these young people can be seen to change their identities or have different identities and that throughout this period, different influences will be in contact with these people, among them, the media which Hamley considers significant. Citing Brown, et al. (1994), she shows the value of media in the construction of identity: "individuals actively and creatively sample available cultural symbols, myths, and rituals as they produce their identities. For teens, the mass media are central to this process because they are a convenient source of cultural options."

Constructing Identity in Cyberspace

Online engagements which are present in Facebook and other social media contribute in the way young people's identities are formed and negotiated. "The potential of online media generates a multitude of responses and reactions. Most are centered around the ability of digital and online media to simultaneously restrict and empower individuals as they interact with each other in public life" (Papacharissi, n.d.).

"One of the primary tasks of adolescence is identity exploration" (Kirsh, 2010). But how do young people construct their identities, especially in an environment where they are exposed 24/7 with various forms of content and media? And given the different constructs on identity formation, how do these young people, who are now often called digital natives, process their own identities?

Because of the ubiquity of the Internet now, it is undeniable that cyberspace, with its various platforms and the artifacts tied with these media, aid in the way the youth process identity construction and presentation. Ito (2008) relates that social network and video-sharing sites, online games, and gadgets such as iPods and mobile phones are now fixtures of youth culture. With these available resources, young people have access to a variety of mediated discourses that inform their identity. "Identities reside not only in the mind but also in the context and in the artefacts we interact with" (Talamo & Ligorio, 2001).

That is why youth identity construction is not just an individual activity. In fact, because of the highly interactive feature of cyberspace and especially social networking sites, young people's interactions with others become loci of construction and co-construction of identities. Talamo and Ligorio (2001) stress this point, "identity construction in cyberspace is directly related to the nature of the interactions and opportunities offered within the environment." Moreover, social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, whose platform is the Internet, allow for the interplay of its consumers and therefore, circulate and mediate stories (Gray, 2009). This mediation and circulation of stories strengthens Michel Foucault's (1976) take on how discourses color the way identities are constructed. Activities on social networking sites such as Facebook also allow the youth avenues which they can control so that they get to choose how they are seen by others.

Taking those points of identity construction and representation and how they are now being made online, along with the interplay of various elements and power, will give a clue on how rhetorical engagements also happen in cyberspace.

Methodology

This exploratory qualitative study was made by analyzing the interfaces of Facebook, specifically, the features that allow posting of status updates and profile pictures, and how they function as rhetorical sites for the construction and representation of identity. These two features of Facebook were critiqued vis-à-vis related concepts of identity as performance, and online engagements as speech-act communication activities. Additionally, observation and surveillance of various Facebook profiles from the researcher's friends' list were made by securing permissions to check on these profiles. Eight FB friends of the researcher were also interviewed regarding their appropriations of Facebook interfaces.

Analysis

Rhetorics, Performance and Power: identity construction and representation in Facebook

Engagements with Facebook do not exist in a vacuum and its interfaces, such as the updating of status or the posting of profile pictures are not innocent activities. Facebook consumption is, therefore, replete with meanings and ideologies.

The rhetorics of Facebook
How do status updates and profile pictures acquire rhetorical power?

Foss (n.d.), citing Ehninger (1972), says that "rhetorics are the ways in which humans may influence each other's thinking and behavior through the strategic use of symbols." Additionally, Foss (n.d.) defines rhetoric as "an ancient term for what is now typically called communication."

With these definitions, it can be surmised that status updates and profile pictures, as FB subscribers' channels of communicating identities can also be loci of rhetorics in the most basic sense. Since these engagements in Facebook are circulated within and among the users of the site, its power to influence thinking and understanding, which are important concepts of rhetorics, cannot be discounted. Symbols and codes used in Facebook, such as language and pictures, are significant elements in understanding how subscribers process their online identities.

"At a basic level, the choice of photos and the personalized answers to generic questions allow individuals to signal meaningful cues about themselves" (Boyd, 2007). From the standpoint of Facebook, the interface for status updating provides users to post anything that they want, be it thoughts, ideas, feelings, or even liked pages and photos. The interface for this has provisions for choosing to whom you would like to share the post, where you are, and what you are doing or feeling. With these, the user creates in other members of his/her network, a particular environment that conditions how he/she is seen, thus, understood. This conditioning is similar to how a speaker will use various rhetorical devices in order to be understood or how to arouse in people particular responses. Similarly, a Facebook user will use either a status update or a profile picture to help others 'picture' who they are.

These can be gleaned with the responses that these two engagements in Facebook are the most ideal in constructing and communicating identities when asked which among the features of Facebook are most beneficial in contributing to this process of identity formation and representation.

> *"My status messages express the kind of person I wish others to see me. The photos I approve in my timeline, my about page, and the pages that I like and share all point to the personality I build in my online accounts."* - ***NG***

> *"Most of these activities reflect the person's attitude, behavior or even emotion. By just updating status, I would be able to share what I am thinking, and on the least way, liking interest pages show who am I as a user likes or inclines to."*- ***RC***

These answers also support the idea that the creation and representation of an identity is done with the thought of how it will be seen and understood by others. Given this premise, a person is bound to appropriate symbols and codes that will create the most impact among friends or viewers, in this sense, similar to a speaker's audience.

When asked what they usually post, it can be seen in their responses that, like in the employment of general forms of rhetorical devices to effect logos, pathos and ethos, FB users make use of emotions, experiences or knowledge which, in turn, they say, contribute to how they are projected. Again, this conscious choice of what to put out for the public is a manifestation of a rhetorical engagement.

This choice is extended even to the choice of a profile picture which is also considered significant as this engagement projects the user's identity.

"When a Facebook account is created, the user can upload a main profile picture of themselves, their family, or a logo, among other things, to represent their identity. Those who see the profile picture, whether it is a family member, classmate, significant other, or some random friend will make generalizations about the user's personality" (Estoisia, et al., 2009). Thus, similarly, photos are considered agents of identity construction and representation, and with the agency to choose which one to use, the subscriber also influences how others see him/her.

This backs the impression that images can be subjected to rhetorical analysis, which is what visual rhetorics is about. In Facebook, this is true, not because of the possible aesthetic value of the photographs, but rather, on what they symbolize and how others are affected by it. "Key to a rhetorical perspective on images and what makes the perspective a rhetorical one is its focus on a rhetorical response to an image, rather than an aesthetic one. In a rhetorical response, meaning is attributed to an image" (Foss, n.d.). Again, in the social networking site, this meaning is attributed to the person's projected identity. This may be the reason why majority said that they chose their particular picture for their profile because they look good in them, thus, also hoping that others will like how they are particularly posed in the pictures.

> *"I want to project a good image of myself. My profile pix are good shots (I think) of myself, this shows that I want other people to see the best in me or my best features rather."* - *CP*

If engagements such as status message posting or profile picture posting, then, can be construed as rhetorical activities, it can also be assumed that they are performative by nature.

Identity as Performance

Signing up for a Facebook account can already be construed as an exercise in autonomy. The same can be said for the various engagements with the features of FB such as posting status updates and uploading pictures since these are supposed to take place with the discretion of the users as they are afforded control over what to post or what to upload. This exercise in autonomy is, by itself, already a performance. At the same time, this sense of independence is also just another layer of valuing, again a conscious act, and contributes to what one thinks as part of her characters, thus, identity. Emboldened by such idea of the self, the user can take it to another level and have the courage to post updates or upload pictures that expose more of what the

person values, motivating identity representations that, congruently, translates to projection, thus, performance.

Social networking sites that are commonly utilized by young people have significant interfaces that allow for the mediation of identities, which Boyd (2007) identified as the following: profiles (of the user), consumer-generated text, images and videos, comments from the site's other members and the list of network of friends. The fact that the identity is projected or mediated adds to the basic impression that identity is performed in cyberspace.

"Furthermore, the integration of text-based (i.e., chat) and visual communication (i.e., Avatars) seem to shape individual identities in ways that may not occur if either media was present by itself" (Talamo & Ligorio, 2001). For sites that allow users to create an avatar, the choosing of avatars, by themselves, is already an illustration how young people construct who they are in cyberspace. Again, Talamo and Ligorio (2001) believe that "the avatars should provide a further communication channel to express the self, both in terms of body and identity." They also point out that even if the site remains text-based, it "will still offer an important means to express and negotiate identities" (Talamo & Ligorio, 2001). This choosing and shaping of identities made in cyberspace, again, are performative in nature.

In a similar fashion, identity is expressed and negotiated, chosen and shaped in Facebook through status updates and profile pictures, therefore, performed. This performance is reflected in the Speech-act theory that "explains how messages express speakers' intentions" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). In this sense, messages in Facebook take the forms of status updates and pictures that construct meanings, both for the creator and the audience. Additionally, something that is mediated, negotiated and expressed contributes to the idea that there is an intention, a purpose towards the achievement of something, and to achieve is to perform.

Estoisia, et al. (2009) similarly argue that "in cyberspace people are (likewise) identified by language in what they write, and how they choose to visually display themselves." This presents that Facebook's status updates and profile pictures interfaces allow its users to perform their identity by "displaying themselves" which can be construed as a conscious act, and therefore, intentional.

These performative acts are mirrored in the type of status messages that majority of young people post. Checking the status messages of those who have granted their consent for analysis, most have posted statements or things related to experience or what they are doing or thinking about. And, although a thought is supposedly personal and individual, the act of sharing the ideas to one's network in Facebook give this a performative nature. Austin, cited by Cline (n.d.), surmised that in his theory of speech acts and the concept of performative language that to say something is to do something. "He [eventually] comes to the conclusion that most utterances, *at their base*, are performative in nature. That is, the speaker is nearly always doing something by saying something" (Cline, n.d). So, a status message that says, *"Gusto ko ng fries!"* is not a just another benign statement but, in the concept of speech act, is already performative as this statement cannot "be judged true or false" (Cline, n.d.). Plus, it gives us an idea of the kind of person the one who made that statement is supposed to be like (i.e. one who loves eating fries).

The same person who posted that *fries* statement, as well, sees status updates as virtual ways to shout, thus, performative, as reflected in this answer:

"Posting status on Facebook let others see and think what you really are. It is everyone's feelings in their everyday lives and most of the time those feelings and emotions are shouted out through this social app." **- EC**

This is also true for pictures in the site. A profile picture or a set of pictures uploaded in Facebook help construct an online self or identity that users believe will clearly communicate who they are and give others, their friends, for example, a chance to create their impression of the user's identity. And as pictures are composed of various poses and stance, for example, showing the user looking straight at a camera or duck-faced or smiling, already creates an impression of performing not only for one's self, but the act of uploading and sharing shows a performance made for other, as well.

"A photograph conveys a great deal of information" (Borchers, 2006). One of these information is the identity of the person who is shown in the picture. These can be clearly exhibited in the rise of *selfies*, or those pictures that users have taken of themselves. Selfies project the person in different angles or light, with photos ranging from serious to funny. Whatever the selfies show will give viewers a glimpse on the mood that person is in, and in a way exhibiting or performing too, that person's identity and personality in cyberspace. Looking at profile pictures which are mostly self-portraits of the subscribers where they consider themselves cute, adorable, pretty, handsome, happy will also give a viewer an impression on how the person sees himself/herself, with the judgments made based on the context the viewer evaluates them.

"My profile pictures are mostly wacky pose, so it is me, a jolly and stubborn person, or sometimes a serious face." **- GS**

"My profile pictures are the ones which I look good in. I like other people to see and remember me that way. I see to it that my profile pictures show the happy side of me, that's why most of my profile pictures are the ones where I am smiling." **- NG**

In her paper, Why youth (heart) MySpace, Boyd (2007) argues that "a MySpace profile can be seen as a form of digital body where individuals must write themselves into being; through profiles, teens can express salient aspects of their identity for others to see and interpret." This statement speaks similarly to what takes place in Facebook where users have to continuously assert themselves through sharing representative language and visual of who they are and, therefore, performing their identities.

When asked where he is more comfortable in expressing himself, one respondent gave this answer:

"Cyberspace. Perhaps because of its bigger space, and I think less scary and distant. Here no one can easily step on my personal/intimate space. I got all my spaces controlled." **- RC**

This, asserts the concept that the expression of an identity is something that can be controlled and manipulated, which are basically actions and contributes to the

assumption that the representation of the self in Facebook or in other social networking sites are performative,

Ideologies and power
As a site of identity construction, posting of profile pictures and status updates can be considered as loci of power, and thus, replete with discourses that circulate meanings among members of the social networking site, among them, the understanding of identity. Rhetorical engagements in Facebook either get likes or comments as feedback to what was posted.

Even through the posting of status updates or the uploading of photos, power discourses abound as Foucault mentions that "power is everywhere." After all, why would one engage in these activities? Surely, one hopes to achieve something, to be seen or to be 'heard' or to be understood or paid attention to. Any which way, there is a purpose for such engagements as each user knows that whatever is posted or uploaded will be seen, might be liked or commented on. In this case, it can be said that it is always a calculated action, and therefore, "operates as a form of intelligibility" (Foucault, 1976, 1978) and thus, can also be considered productive as it meets whatever goal it has set itself for.
  "I usually 'sugar-coat' everything and sometimes when the writer in me is awake, I tend to exaggerate the expression of my ideas/emotions to make it more interesting/appealing to my fb friends." - **CP**

In the same vein, power relations also take place when one gets ignored as when a status update remains un-liked or uncommented. When this happens, identity construction can also commence like when one feels that she is not worth anything. "Your existence will be maintained only at the cost of your nullification" (Foucault, 1976, 1978). It can be said, therefore, that even in resistance, power emanates.
  All that I have posted are my responsibility of making sure that I reflect myself into it, the comments of other people are somewhat crucial and critical that might show a 'different' identity of mine. - **AB**

Therefore, every construction people do in Facebook is an activity, a performance, of power relations between the user and that person's set of friends. These power relations, however, is not limited to these two elements.

Facebook, as a technology of power, establishes its own power relations with its subscribers. For that reason, FB's interface, features and platforms cannot be considered neutral engagements. In fact, Facebook, as a site that is powered by interconnecting people, is able to construct a sphere where discourses of power crisscross and where construction and representation of identity take place all the time.

Westra (2012) discussed this power role by Facebook in the article *Identity on Facebook: even who you are is defined and controlled by Facebook:*
  Interestingly, the creation of identity on Facebook is not solely done by users themselves; Facebook has significant influence in construction of information and identity too. Not only by content moderation, [but] also through software, algorithms, interface and a predefined set of options. What users view on the site and even who they can be is consciously controlled by the social network site.

Given these realities, the posting of status updates and profile pictures, as loci of power, supports the contention that interactions that take place in cyberspace, or more specifically in Facebook, are also rhetorical engagements. As "rhetoric is thus ultimately implicated in all a society attempts. It is at the center of a culture's activities" (Berlin, 1984 in Cline, n.d.).

Conclusion

Even in seemingly mundane tasks in cyberspace such as status updating or choosing a profile picture, rhetorical power abound. And this power is essential for young people's construction and representation of identity, especially during these times where media are available 24/7. For the youth, Facebook is one of those significant channels where they are allowed to form and exhibit their identities as it generates interfaces that allow the young venue for such. Two of these Facebook features are the interfaces that allow the posting of status updates and the posting of profile pictures that give young people not only venues for identity formation, but also identity performance, allowing for the interplay of power relations among and with its subscribers which are considered each subscriber's public.

Moreover, it is important to understand that young people's performed identity should be understood in the context in which they operate. Social media allow them to experiment, discover and share with each other. Even Filipino youth are not far behind in their utilization of social networking sites, maximizing the potentials that these sites have to offer.

Lastly, social media, like Facebook, should not be disregarded as a site for rhetorical engagement as these incorporates the elements that make for such discourses.

As Cline (n.d.) says, "language grounds all human experience and is implicated in all human behavior. All truths arise out of dialectic, out of the interaction of individuals within discourse communities."

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