

DRAMATURGY AND THE SOCIAL MEDIA: DECODING THE VIRTUAL SELF

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Abstract

Social Media has entered our lives to an extent where it seems impossible to live without our smart phones. The virtual lives of the users though are just a fractional part of their real lives. People sometimes even fake it to construct a different virtual identity for themselves. In contemporary times the social media behaviour can be studied in terms of Goffman's theory of dramaturgy. This paper looks at the sharing of real socio economic status patterns of 500 respondents on social media along with their dependence on social media for real life decision making.. The study follows a mixed method approach where a survey along with expert interviews is conducted. Results indicate that people subconsciously use dramaturgy while sharing the real life socio economic status online and seek approval of social media peer to an extent to make real life decisions.

Key words: Social media, Dramaturgy, Virtual identity Socio economic status.

Introduction

Human beings have been communicating since their existence. This travel has been a long journey. They communicate for various reasons and they communicate with an agenda. The current times have seen the emergence of the phenomenon of Social media. Social media has entered our lives in a very impactful way. “Contemporary times have seen social media becoming “ubiquitous” and essential for maintaining social network and sharing content” Asur, S., & Huberman, B. A. (2010)¹. Since the advent of social media and social networking problems people tend to spend a lot of time in their virtual worlds. Social media or social networking sites can be prominently located in the debates happening today. Today, social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have been intertwined in the digital makeup of common households groups and organizations all over the world. Boyd, D. (2015)²

The emergence of social media has given the users an opportunity to lead a parallel life. This parallel life is their virtual self. The virtual setup is a “vehicle” to observe, imitate and model “avatars” as in virtual selves lead to fuelling these processes. Yoon, G., & Vargas, P. T. (2014).³ In the context of “dramaturgy” Goffman, E. (1978)⁴ mentioned that these avatars plan and execute a certain role play that they have designed. The Social media is the stage set for the virtual identities of the users. The back stages are their lives and their walls (like on Facebook) are their front stages. Social networking sites are transform how the youth engage

with others users in their social worlds. Salimkhan, G., Manago, A. M., & Greenfield, P. M. (2010)⁵

Today's age is that of Social media. Everywhere we come across people who constantly engage on these social media platforms. The inventions of computers and later smart phones have changed the way we communicate forever. Social media today is much more than just a trend. It's turned into an indispensable part of the fabric of contemporary society. It's difficult to estimate how social media has impacted our world. It is true on multiple levels, including how we socialize, how we gain access to information how we entertain ourselves and also how we conduct business.

The Social Media Advent

Contrary to prior predictions that moving social interactions from face-to-face to text based media would lead to an "impoverished communication environment", this new media has now adapted the use of social web services as a vital means of interacting, communicating and sharing, thus enhancing human connectivity and sociability Hart et al (2008)⁶ It's a matter of interest to look into the history of social media. It firstly began with Bulletin Board Systems, which was later followed by services like America Online and Compuserv. These provided people who were not mandatorily techies with a way to connect with each other. America Online better known as AOL became the first major social networking site. AOL can be termed as a precursor to MySpace and, later, Facebook in many a ways. After being launched in 2004, Facebook and Twitter reached users all around world by 2006. These have been among the most popular social media sites on the Internet. After this various other sites including Spotify, Tumblr and Pintrest also popped up filling up social networking niches sites Whatsapp messenger a messaging and Voiceover platform also came up in 2009 which allowed users to make voice and video calls, setup display pictures, put status and share all kinds of locations, documents and pictures. Instagram a social networking site which allows users to share photos and videos was also launched in 2010. Both Whatsapp and Instagram are now owned by Facebook. The common feature of all these platforms was to make internet accessible to users every day. They also provided the users with friendly interfaces features like instant messaging creating profiles and creating groups etc. The internet minus these social media sites was just a huge digital wilderness where there was no locating your known and no resource sharing. The launch of these websites was just the tip of the iceberg in relation to the impact they caused. People were highly impacted when they engaged with these platforms. They created a parallel selves for themselves- their virtual selves.

Virtual Self

The construction for an identity for the virtual word is termed as virtual self. The users of social media require constructing these identities which may or may not match with their real

selves. The virtual world has become so engrossing that people spend a lot of time on these platforms. This is changing the way people used to communicate. The identity construct of these avatars as they are called is a matter to probe as they are rapidly changing the social equations of the globe. The craving to show your best character on social media channels stems from a variety of psychological factors. Virtual mediums allow people to experiment with themselves. They enjoy the freedom to alter their identities to their wishes. This engagement with one's own self through the virtual environment and the constant negotiation between the real and virtual world forms the core of this study.

Changed Socialization

Social Media has changed the way how people connect and socialize. "Online access provides drastically superior opportunities than previous communication technologies, leading to the fact that modern-day communication environments are defined as new media." Gunduz .U. (2017)⁷ Contents that are produced by people and sharing of these contents, quick spreading and acceptance of social media have been able to provide a social dimension to contemporary communication channels. These platforms of social communication are online channels of communication. Owing to the fact that social communication sites enable users to share their own content as well as content created by professional for specific purposes users tend to create a digital profile of their selves. Social networking sites like Facebook, LinkedIn, Myspace, Google Plus and Periscope, have become extremely popular . The common aspects of these social networks are that posts are produced by users and are shared with people who are in the same platform." Gunduz .U. (2017)⁸

The first major change is you can connect to people from your past. Facebook made it easy for you to reconnect with lost contacts from the past. These were friend, co workers old classmates and so on. People were excited about this new phenomenon. They could feel nostalgic and an emotional cord was touched by this social networking site. Thus it gained immense popularity. Also it ensured that you could control your privacy.

The second change that these sites brought was making the world a global village. The physical distances seem to have vanished. People can make video call to their loved ones using Whatsapp. They can share thoughts message photos and videos thus diminishing the physical distances amongst them. One thus doesn't have to physically travel to share the events happening in their daily lives that their loved ones would like to know about them to the extent that now a days even invitations have started to be extended on social media platforms rather than the traditional ways.

Thirdly one can see that the access to smart phones has made it easy for people to be on social media. With the growing facility of internet and cheap data availability people can easily connect to social media network in the convenience of there preferred time and

location. Mobile phones are generally carried everywhere hence providing an opportunity to socialize everywhere. These constant interactions for sure impact the overall identity of a person. The self that they portray on social media is the virtual self.

Social media and Dramaturgy

The study revolves around the theory of dramaturgy proposed by Erving Goffman in his 1959 book titled *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Though the idea has come a long way and has faced criticism it holds true even today. It is applicable equally well to the current day interaction between individuals in social media. Sannicolas, N. (1997)⁹ states that the emergence of technology and communication that is computer mediated one can very well observe that that dramaturgy is displayed every single day within the online networks of chatting. He further states that a lot of work has been done on this stage called internet chat and the same has attracted a lot of audience and performers in this case the users of social media. Goffman proposed that our life is like a play which is never ending and people around are actors. He assumed that when a person is born he is thrust in to his everyday life which is like a stage. Since our birth we become a part of the process of socialization. We start learning to play our roles in life from other people. We began enacting our roles with others whereas they start enacting their roles with us. Goffman proposed that whatever we do we are playing some kind of a role on the stage called life. He further distinguished front and back stages in the concept. Examples of the front stages can be a wedding, a lecture, a dinner table, or in this study, social media interaction. Hence any place where we present ourselves is a front stage. Looking at the importance of our social media in our lives we can also derive the importance of the performance we make on this platform as a front stage. Further sometimes we retreat to back stages of life. These are private areas where we don't need to act. We also use this opportunity to practice and prepare for returning to front stages. While using the stage of social media as a front stage we portray our virtual selves in a specific manner. "We portray ourselves in a manner we want people to perceive us. Miller, H. (1995)¹⁰ observed that one of the things people are supposed to do while communicating with other individuals is to present themselves in such a way that they are acceptable to other people such that they look entitled to certain considerations look to be having certain expertise, look to be morally upright and so on. We choose our pictures, places we visit, our opinions in the back stage and then share them in the front stages. Goffman, E. (1964)¹¹ says that 'Backstage' preparation is helpful to people for presenting a 'front' that is effective. 'expressive resources' can be channelised, and collaboration can be looked for from others who are a part of the interaction." Similarly we prepare ourselves in backstage of real lives to present our perceived virtual realities in the front stage of our social media profiles. Miller, H. (1995)¹² stated that Electronic communication (EC) has started a new array of frames to facilitate communication with an emergent decorum. We select pictures that we want to share and formulate our opinions in a manner we want people to perceive us. We want others to

have a specific impression about us Goffman looks at this aspect as Impression management. In context of Social Media the same holds true .Virtual Identities are all about image management The way social media is affecting our lives and behaviour, it becomes important to look at the kind of transformation it is making the psychology as well as behaviour of a person. The unpredictable behaviour in terms of hiding the real socio economic status and being dependent on social media on social media for real life decision making is not very much researched upon in India. The research gap of this study lies in the fact that a quantitative as well as qualitative approach needs to be studied in coherence to bring out a reliable result. The study looks at the question of if users on social media hide their socio economic status to gain a certain virtual identity that they want for themselves in the minds of their peer along with if the overuse of social media has made the users dependent on social media for taking real life decisions, small or big.

Research Questions

RQ1 Do social media users hide their real socio economic status?

RQ 2 Are social media users dependent on social media for taking real life decisions?

Methodology

The study adopted a mixed method .The universe of the study social media platform and the population is social media users. The sample size has been derived from the formula. The quantitative part of the study was to conducted an online survey. A google form was floated on various social media platforms. Convenient purposive sampling method was adopted to get the forms filled.

$$Ss = \frac{Z^2 * (p) * (1-p)}{c^2}$$

c^2

Where: Z = Z value (e.g. 1.96 for 95% confidence level)

p = percentage picking a choice, expressed as decimal
(.5 used for sample size needed)

c = confidence interval, expressed as decimal
(e.g., .04 = ±4)

The sample size hence is 385. To reduce the error factor 500 responses will be collected.

The qualitative part of the study conducted expert interviews with four experts from the fields of communication, psychology and sociology.

Data collected by both the methods was studied and analysed in the light of the theory of dramaturgy

Data Analysis

The questions that was inquired looked at whether respondents have ever hid their real name age and financial status on social media along with wheather respondents considered opinions of followers on social media before taking real life decisions (like having a haircut, buying a car etc)

Frequency/ Opinion	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	No Response
Opinion on whether respondents have ever hid their real name age and financial status on social media	174	108	138	36	30	14
Opinion on whether considered opinions of followers on social media before taking real life decisions (like having a haircut, buying a car etc)	150	124	138	46	25	7

Table 1

Table 1 shows wheather respondents ever hid their real name,age and financial status online. 174 respondents said they never did so whereas 108 said they rarely did so . 138 respondents said they sometimes hid some information online whereas 36 respondnts said they often did so. 30 respondents said they always did so whereas 14 chose not to respond to the question. The table further shows wheather respondents considered opinions of followers on social media before taking real life decisions (like having a haircut, buying a car etc) 150 respondents said they never did so whereas 124 said they rarely did so . 138 respondents said they sometimes considered opinions of followers on social media before taking real life decisions (like having a haircut, buying a car etc) whereas 46 respondnts said they often did so. 25 respondents said they always did so whereas 7 chose not to respond to the question.

Opinion on whether respondents have ever hid their real name age and financial status on social media



Figure 01

Figure 01 shows wheather respondents ever hid their real name,age and financial status online. 34.8% respondents said they never did so whereas 21.6% said they rarely did so . 27.6% respondents said they sometimes hid some information online whereas 7.2% respondnts said they often did so. 6% respondents said they always did so whereas 2.8% chose not to respond to the question.

Opinion on whether considered opinions of followers on social media before taking real life decisions (like having a...



Figure 02

Figure 02 shows wheather respondents considered opinions of followers on social media before taking real life decisions (like having a haircut, buying a car etc) 30 % respondents said they never did so whereas 24.8% said they rarely did so . 27.6% respondents said they sometimes considered opinions of followers on social media before taking real life decisions (like having a haircut, buying a car etc) whereas 9.2% respondnts

said they often did so. 5% respondents said they always did so whereas 1.4% chose not to respond to the question.

Interpretation

The results brought to light the dramturgy between real and virtual lives clearly Respondents were asked wheather respondents ever hid their real name,age and financial status online. 174 respondents said they never did so whereas 108 said they rarely did so . 138 respondents said they sometimes hid some information online whereas 36 respondnts said they often did so 30 respondents said they always did so .. 138 respondents said they sometimes considered opinions of followers on social media before taking real life decisions (like having a haircut, buying a car etc) whereas 46 respondnts said they often did so.

The users plan in their real lives to what projection they want to make online about themselves. So in real lives they selected those aspects and share selective or some times fake informations about themselves. They may hide the real personal informations and project themselves in a different way . The aims of doing so may be diverse inculding gaining accepatance from peer, trying to gain prasie and popularity and so on. What makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks Boyd, D. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007) They are also dependent on social media to take real life decisions. They share opinion polls and seek approval of their peer when they want to take certain decisions in real life.

As put by Dr Monika

In real and virtual lives conflicting identities do exist. One can count so many examples that people beleive in certain things but dont want to acknowledge it in the virtual lives and on the social networkingg platforms. They are very careful about their virtual images and dont want the images they have made for the,mselves to braek. They are very careful about being associated with a roup or person. They do so to maintain a neutral social stance and dont want to get themselves branded. Thus they maintain double standards in real and virtual lives. They have diffrent opinions online and offline. The social status that they maintain online may not necessarily match their real selves. They may follow certain things in real lives and may not at all do that in their real lives. They constantly look for approval from their social media peer.

Dr S. Mishra opined that

It is a matter of interest how young people find it fascinating to pose in front of an SUV or luxury car that may belong to someone else. They do fake checkins. Like they are travelling to a foreign destination or check in to high end hotels . They tend to exhibit themselves on theri

virtual platforms They show off which is normal for their age and try to gain acceptance for their behaviour.

Further Dr. Monika commented that

We in normal are not known to our social media friends in person. We don't know them face to face. We don't interact with them on a daily basis so it is easier to fake about one self online. It is easy to plan the drama in the backstage and enact it on front stages .In contemporary times people use social media to showcase how nice they are in real life and how good are their social relations. Thus we engage in double standards very often when it comes to their virtual avatars. They but also want peoples acknowledgement for their online behaviour and apply them in real life decision making.

Dr. R K. Khayalia pointed out that

Social media has given rise to insecurity among the users. Those who have feel insecure of having things and thus fake on social media and those who don't fake it to show that they have it. Users try to nullify their insecurities in their virtual spaces. Whatever positive or negative assets one has are actually threat on social media. So people want to be accepted by others on social media. They are very influenced by what others thought of them.

Dr S. Rai mentioned that

The basic reason for hiding a real socio economic status by a person online is that they have different aspirations as per their social environment. There are people who live with meagre means in their lives. Their obvious dream and aspiration is to be well off. That he has enough money not only for himself but also to buy luxury for himself. Social media provides him with this opportunity. He can create his own role play and enact his part for others on social media. He can also sometimes base his real life decision on these social media experiences

Dr Monika further opined that

People belonging to lower income groups tend do hide their real financial or social status more. If you have something in real lives you will probably not showcase it. The charm of owing it is gone for you. Yet one may showcase what he believes is lacking in his life. The may provide him with momentary satisfaction. Those belonging to higher income groups probably show off to gain popularity like celebrities..They have a higher status socially and economically and they need publicity for every small or big act of theirs. They also want to maintain their fan following and if they don't give information about their acts fan following can reduce.

Dr S. Mishra also pointed out that

There is a less of gate keeping on social media. The socio economic status of a class may differ. So at times is very disapproving. To cope up with this inequality they may show off. The Rich express and poor off exhibit. There is a difference. Young people do it more often.

Dr R K Khayalia opined that

Users don't share their real social and economic status. There is an insecurity that they want to cope with. Both rich and poor have their own set of insecurities that they deal with in real lives. There is an insecurity of have and have not.

Finally Dr.S.Rai summed up as

A person who is well to do have an identity crisis to prove to others how they are better than the others. And that they are living up to the expectation of the society they are a part of. So they would like to portray that look how much charity and good we are doing to the society. The idea is that the society has set certain parameters and points of references to be followed for us. We define satisfaction but society defines success for us . So this lower income group person wants to be called successful. Rich people may be shunned because of being rich so they use charity to meet the targets of reference of the society. So this clearly is associated with real life decision making too.

Conclusion

The results indicate that people lead different lives online and offline. The similarity between the lives is very less. People hide their social status including their relationships and their economic status including their financial health. They actually on the back stages of their lives plan their virtual identities for themselves. They tend to create a euphoric world for themselves where the live their dream lives. The study found that virtual lives of people fall under the umbrella of Goffman's theory of dramaturgy. They use their real lives as back stages and virtual lives as front stages and enact a different self for themselves that they want others to believe about themselves. They gain satisfaction in creating these virtual avatars for themselves along with seeking approval from others for taking real life decisions. Thus social media has been crucial in creating an identity of users that they actually look for in real lives.

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