

Research Proposal

Provisional title- Social media and the hidden spaces of online identity management

Topic: Social Networking and Interaction

This project is concerned with computer mediated communication (CMC) between individuals via the social networking platform, Facebook. Created by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004, Facebook is a social networking forum wherein individuals can share photographs, personal information, conversations and friends (Buckman, 2005). Although other online sites such as MySpace, Friendster and Bebo are also designed to carry out such functions, Facebook is generally considered to be the leading site of its kind, currently consisting of over a billion users worldwide (Facebook, 2013). Facebook has increasingly become deeply integrated into user's daily routines (Debatin, 2009). Indeed, a recent study found that students spend an average of 38 minutes a day 'Face-booking' (Muise et al, 2009). This equates to almost 9 days every year being dedicated to communication activities via the medium. With the internet increasingly being accessed via mobile devices, anytime, anyplace, it is likely that this figure will increase over time.

With these ideas in mind, it is interesting to consider sites such as Facebook as capable of revealing important information about how young adults interact with one another in the information age. Platform functions such as wall posts, comments, statuses, private messages and so on provide a vast space for a number of different text based interactions to take place. To be sure, some believe computer mediums such as social networking to be impoverished and unsuitable arenas for social interaction (Baron, 1984). And yet, due to the time people dedicate to these sites, their inherent social nature and the variety of interaction functions available, Facebook is perhaps better understood as a breeding ground for rich social interaction. It is therefore imperative that such mediums are considered when it comes to computer mediated communication and interaction research.

A frequent topic of research on social networking sites and interaction is that of the creation and maintenance of online identities. Here, attention is often given to an individual's active role when it comes to impression management and self presentation (Kramer & Winter 2008; Grasmuck, Martin & Zhao, 2009; Hancock et al 2007; Gonzales & Hancock, 2008 & Bargh, Mckenna & Fitzsimmons 2002). One interesting notion is that social networking users strategically use language, tone and editing behaviours to form and create a certain identity and impression (Walther, 2007). It is this area of study that this project wishes to extend and develop in new ways.

The project aims to consider what interaction on Facebook looks like in terms of talk, language and discursive make-up- what language do people use? How are conversations constructed? Does this vary depending on audience, or specific function? These questions go beyond the mere forms of identity presentation on Facebook and aim to dissect the language of social networking using discursive analytical tools in order to give a unique insight into the world of Facebook and the language of computer mediated communication (CMC).

The central question that this project asks, then, is: *How is interaction negotiated, managed and rhetorically and discursively created on Facebook?* (i.e. how is interaction initiated, maintained, corrected and repaired?). Questions that then are consequently asked are:

- i) Does this vary depending on who the interaction is between? (i.e. a friend, a stranger, a colleague or a love interest?)
- ii) Does this vary depending on participant demographics? (i.e. Age? Gender?)
- iii) Does the nature of interaction vary depending on the Facebook function? (i.e. a status, a comment, a private message)
- iv) How does an individual's discursive management aid identity and impression management?

Methodology

Data collection

This project is methodologically innovative in the ways it seeks to understand how individuals discursively manage their facebook identities. It aims to capture interaction on social networking sites live, as it happens, in real-time. This will enable the analysis to focus not only upon the finished 'product' of communication, but also to see the actual process of constructing that finished 'product'. What we will see, in other words, is something like textual 'construction' and 'repair': e.g. how sentences are put together, corrected, tweaked, revised and so on. But in doing so, what we will also see are the ways in which people tend to manage and negotiate their online identity in more specific, and hitherto unseen ways: e.g. the moments at which, for instance, someone might initially write three kisses to a friend with an 'xxx' but then, for instance, delete an x, add an x, and so on. In order to examine discourse in this way and answer the research questions above, data collection for this project will use a computer screen recording software called *Litecam*. *Litecam* will record participant's exact actions on Facebook allowing us to see interaction in the making, capturing all online actions on a variety of Facebook functions. This innovative form of data collection will reveal to us the 'hidden moments' of social networking, moments of identity construction, management and repair that have previously remained unseen. Although this data

collection method is unique to the landscape in which it is being applied, it has been used in previous interaction studies such as Attenborough & Stokoe (2012) and Stokoe, Benwell & Attenborough (2013).

As the project is primarily concerned with interaction and language use, rather than particular social groups per se, the study will recruit participants from varying demographics. The project will aim to capture interactions from both male and female participants that are from both younger and older generations.

As we can see from Muise's study referenced earlier, younger generations such as students spend a considerable amount of time on social networking mediums such as Facebook. But, interestingly, more recent studies have shown that older generations have also been taking to the medium. The Pew Internet and American Life Project (2010), for instance, found that 'between April 2009 and May 2010, social networking use among internet users ages 50-64 grew by 88%', increasing from 25% to 47%. Due to this rather significant increase in older social networkers, it is relevant that we include this demographic within the data collection. Collecting data from both younger and older participants will add an interesting angle to the research. It will allow for us to look at if/how interaction and language use on such mediums may vary depending on age, addressing point (ii) of the research questions.

Research has also found that there are gender differences when it comes to social networking use. Findings suggest that women are more likely to engage in stronger tie activities rather than weaker tie compared to men (Hargittai & Hsieh, 2010). By including both men and women participants within the sample we can see if these different patterns of usage are reflected in peoples language use.

Data Analysis

Compared to face to face interaction, Facebook has a limited supply of social cues. Therefore, text based communication becomes the main (if only) way of interacting with fellow users, arguably making language the heart and soul of social networking. In order to study this language effectively, the chosen form of analysis for this study is that of discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is concerned with how talk is used to perform social actions. It is interested in how certain phenomena are described, portrayed, complained about, exaggerated, ignored or in any other form of vernacular category that may apply. With discourse analysis, the object of the study becomes centred on the ways in which accounts are organised through certain sets of interpretative practices to construct a

version of reality or a version of self (Wooffitt, 1992). This method is interested not so much in the 'whys' of the data (i.e. why was it written like this, and by whom?), but more the 'hows' (i.e. how it was written in an for a particular context) and the assembly process of the content in participants accounts. This form of analysis transforms a respondent from a 'passive vessel of answers' to someone who 'not only holds facts and details of experience, but, in the very process of offering them up for response, constructively adds to, takes away from and transforms' the data. (Talmy, 2011:28 cited in Holstein and Gubriums, 2003).

In the context of this project, discourse analysis allows us not only to see 'what' identity management strategies an individual puts forward, but 'how' they do this through their rhetorical organisation. By looking at the recorded on screen data collected via *Litecam*, this rhetorical organisation will become clear. At this stage of the project, classic discourse analysis theories and concepts can be used and compared to the new, unique data collected (see scholars such as Edwards, 1996, 2000, 2005, 2006, 2007; Goffman, 1979, 1981; Potter, 1996; Sacks, Jefferson & Schegloff 1992; Van Dijk, 1985, 1993, 1997; Wodak, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Wooffitt, 1991, 1992). This form of analysis takes this project from a study of computer mediated communication (CMC), to a study of computer mediated discourse (CMD) (Herring, 2001).

Potential challenges and ethics

When proposing any project, it is essential to pre-empt any issues that may arise during the data collection and analysis phases in order to act on such issues and put solutions in place. The data collection method for this project does provides a unique insight into online interaction, and is also simple, low cost and low maintenance. However, the main ethical concern that needs addressing with this method is that of privacy. By using online recording software, researchers have access to all participants interactions with and through the computer. The potentially invasive nature of such a method means it may be difficult to find participants who agree to the recording as people may feel uncomfortable with their personal conversations and interactions being recorded and consequently analysed (Tang, Liu, Muller, Lin & Drews, 2006).

Although this is a concern, by following the university's ethical guidelines, any feelings of discomfort can be avoided. Firstly, 'informed consent' will be adhered to. Participants will be made fully aware of what the research involves and how said research will be used. Secondly, anonymity of participants will be protected and any data collected would be used only for the purposes of the study and destroyed after completion. Thirdly, all participants would have the right to withdraw

from the study at any time and inform researchers if there is any data they are uncomfortable with being used as part of the study.

In order to iron out any potential problems with the proposed project, a smaller scale, pilot study would also be carried out beforehand in the form of a MA dissertation project. This pilot study would expose any potential, unforeseen issues prior to the start of the PhD research, meaning appropriate solutions can be firmly put in place.

Situating within existing literature

Over recent years, an increase in academic interest has been seen in relation to CMC practices and social networking, especially Facebook. This rise in academic interest has run parallel to the increased popularization of such sites as it has become more apparent to scholars that they play an integral part in the lives of individuals. Key ideas, which the internet, and, more specifically, social media are beginning to suggest may need re-thinking are identity, self-presentation and impression management. Many recent studies have taken concepts initially wrote about in the classic text *'Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life'* (Goffman, 1959). Goffman's work set the academic stage for self presentation and impression management literature. It explored how people negotiated and validated their identities in face to face interactions. Goffman suggested that people tend to construct a self that is acceptable and present self in a more positive and morally adequate light (i.e. as intellectual, funny and thoughtful rather than uneducated, boring and selfish). He also explained that people have 'backstage' processes in which these constructions are carefully and strategically formed to create an effective performance front of stage.

Goffman's classic thoughts and ideas have been taken and adapted to the landscape of CMC. Many scholars have applied such concepts to mediums such as social networking with works taking numerous different angles, for example studies on Facebook's 'anonymous' environment and the effects on 'true self' (Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin 2008); the representation of a 'branded' self (Hearn, 2008); the creation of idealised selves (Walther, Slovacek & Tidwell, 2001; Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis & Sprecher, 2002) and impression management through Facebook functions (Barash, Duchenaud, Isaacs & Bellotti, 2010).

This project combines such literature with that of computer mediated *discourse*. CMD distinguishes its self through its focus on language and language use on computer mediated platforms (Herring, 2001). Previous CMD studies have focused on issues such as how different properties of computer messaging systems play a role in shaping language and discourse, for

example asynchronous and synchronous natures and the effects on language repair, correction and editing (See Walther 2007, Kiesler, Siegel & McGuire, 1984 & Cherny, 1999); linguistic structures of online communications such as fragmentations, gaps and overlaps in talk (Baron, 1984, Baym, 1996), as well as discursive ways to replace physical social cues (Raymond, 1993; Reid, 1994).

How does this project further existing knowledge?

This project furthers knowledge in the areas discussed above in three ways. Firstly, it cannot be ignored that a wide range of interesting academic literature has been published in relation to social networking, identity and impression management. However, what this project does is build upon such works by investigating the topic through an alternative analytical lens. Rather than looking at how an individual may manage their self online per se (Zhao et al, 2008; Hearn, 2008; Walther et al, 2001 and Finkel et al, 2002, Barash et al, 2010), it looks at how language is used in a performative and strategic manner in order to present and construct a self in a particular context, therefore taking a CMD approach.

Secondly, the project takes ideas and concepts developed within the CMD field and investigates if, and how, they are applicable to the more contemporary media landscape of social networking, allowing for insight to be given into computer mediated discourse on this popular interaction platform.

The third, and arguably the most exciting contribution to knowledge this project will make, is through its innovative data collection methodology. The *Litecam* software collects data in such a way that not only will show the end result of conversation, but unlike any other data collection method, it will allow us to see how conversation is constructed sentence by sentence and word by word. This proposed data collection method will allow us to be witness to the 'backstage' presentation process that Goffman (1959) has referred to. By using screen recording technologies such as *Litecam*, a 'behind the scenes' view point of computer mediated communication will be brought to life, revealing those previously inaccessible 'hidden moments' and processes of self presentation and identity management. By recording interaction in the making, issues such as repair and correction (discussed by scholars such as Walther et al, 2001) can be seen in real-time. This will provide a unique insight into how people discursively manage their social media relations and identities.

Not only will the study fill a gap in academic knowledge, but it will also addresses issues outside of academia, for instance marketing and advertising. Whilst working as a Marketing Executive, it has become quite clear that social media sites like Facebook play a huge role in the

commercial sector, both in terms of targeted advertising and company marketing. Thus, research into people's interactions whilst on these sites will be beneficial to this industry and enable them to communicate with and target audiences more effectively. An example of how discursive research can be used within a variety of institutions and businesses can be seen within Elizabeth Stokoe's CARM project, which offers communication skills training that can be adapted to any workplace (See Stokoe, 2011). Stokoe's project has proved that discursive research, such as this project, can help businesses improve interactions, services and therefore financial return.

Details of any previous work in the proposed field

Previous experience that may assist with the completion of the project includes training in *Litecam* software during modules on an MA. I also completed a discourse analysis undergraduate dissertation, achieving a grade of 85%. This project took the topic of Facebook and language, but explored how people spoke about their Facebook behaviours in an offline setting by using focus group interview data. The dissertation focused on how individuals use language to present themselves as 'normal' Facebook users, rather than, for instance, snoopers. Although this project picks up on similar themes, the aim is to extend this knowledge and examine how people use language on the Facebook platform, rather than how they discuss it in an offline setting. I have also completed courses in relevant areas such as Digital Cultures and Digital Futures (both covering issues of new media, social networking and identity) as well as courses in varying research methods such as Discourse Analysis, all of which provide the foundations to complete the project discussed above.

Sum-up

This project aims to provide a unique insight into the interactive world of social networking. Through capturing live, real-time interaction on social media sites such as Facebook, the hidden moments of the back stage processes of self presentation and impression management can be seen live for the first time. With social networking becoming an integral part of our communicative lives, it seems imperative that we understand the interaction that occurs on such mediums. This project aims to build on existing knowledge by 1) applying an alternative analytical lens (that of discourse analysis) 2) applying previous computer mediated discourse studies to landscape of Facebook and 3) by capturing online communication live through the use on screen recording technologies.

A provisional timetable for the project:

Time Period	Anticipated Activities
Year One October 2013- December 2013	In-depth reading around the topic in areas such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internet, Identity, Self Presentation and Impression management. • Social networking
January 2014-March 2014	In-depth reading around the topic in areas such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Computer Mediated Discourse Research • Discourse Analysis
April 2014- June 2014	Continue reading
July 2014- September 2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation and drafting of Literature Review • Preparation and Pilot of methodological software- Litecam. • Begin recruitment of participants
Year Two October 2014- December 2014	Data collection begins
January 2015- March 2015	Data Collection Continues
April 2015- June 2015	Data collection completed
July 2015- September 2015	Initial attempts of Data Analysis begin
Year Three October 2015- December 2015	Data Analysis continues
January 2016- March 2016	Data Analysis continues
April 2016- June 2016	Data Analysis completed
July 2016- September 2016	Begin planning write up
Year Four	Final Write up begins

October 2016- December 2016	
January 2017- March 2017	Final Write up continues
April 2017- June 2017	Final Write up continues
July 2017- September 2017	Completion of Final Write up

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