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## Constructing Identity through Facebook Profiles: Online Identity and Visual Impression Management of University Students in Malaysia

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### Abstract

Social connection is the social currency in social network sites. The popularity of social networking sites among university adolescents causes invisible lines between the students' online identities and offline identities. University students often are lead into false security believing that they could post personal and intimate information without ramification in real world as online conversations become offline conversation. Insecurity, self-promotion and peer-perception often influence university students' online identities. The study investigates university students' textual online identity and visual impression management by investigating the students' choice of usernames, languages and profile pictures in their Facebook profiles. The study suggests students' online identity and visual impression are re-constructed based on values associated with peer perception, social connection and popularity. The students include pictures and information that represent their real identities and ideal-self as their online identities. Male users are more comfortable than female users using their real names as their Facebook usernames and use their own pictures as their profile pictures.

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## 1. Introduction

Since social network sites are immensely popular among university students in Malaysia. Online conversations often lead to offline conversation. Similar to face-to-face communication, online communication requires appropriate impression management because people requires information about people they communicate to facilitate online communication. In online communities in social network sites, online identities are constructed from profiles, profile images, languages and nickname. Online communities provide university students platforms to constantly constructing their identities as they navigate multiple communities in the social network sites. It becomes difficult to distinguish one's real-world identity from his or her online identity. Insecurity, self-promotion and peer-perception often influence university students' online identities.

University students are deceived by the impersonal screen nature and safety of the computer, that they share intimate information with the rest of the world with repercussions to their offline identities. University students often are lead into false security believing that they could post personal and intimate information without ramification in real world as online conversations become offline conversation. The study was conducted to observe online identities being constructed and visual management being managed by university students through nicknames chosen by the participants, languages used in their profiles and profile pictures being selected. The ability to navigate their identities through multiple communities ensures success in real life especially at workplace environments, which require them to navigate through multiple communities.

## 2. Literature Review

Identity is influenced by membership to a particular social group. An identity requires a person to fulfil the role and expectation of such identity (Thoits and Virshup, 1997). Members of a community share similar values, characteristics and common social identification as self-categorization and social comparison affect social identity formation (Hogg & Abram, 1988). Proper role performance can be achieved through negotiations (Riley & Burke, 1995). Social connectedness is another important key feature in identity formation in social network sites. University students in Malaysia value their social connectedness that they are willing to trade their privacy in order to be well-connected in social network sites (Latisha et al, 2011). Thus the students choose peer-approved identity as their online identities. Social network sites profiles act as identity substitutions where university students replace their real interests with peer influenced interests in their profiles and supported by egocentrism structure of social network sites such as Facebook and twitter.

Online identity is anonymous and flexible and not tied with offline identity. Online identity encompasses of online social identity and online personal identity. Online identity consists of symbolic communication and textual communication. Self-concept consists of personal and social aspects leads to self-presentation (Canary et al. 2003). Identity sharing behaviours such as hobbies, interests, favourites, testimonials, groups and affiliations show open communication and trust among Social network sites (SNS) users (Shahrinaz, 2010). Identity performance and self-representations in online communities are constructed through online nicknames. A nickname introduces an identity a participant wants to present and gain access to other social networkers. Tingstad (2003) studies chatroom nicknames chosen by children in two chat rooms which were categorized into 16 categories such as animals, well-known people and places. Popular nicknames are HOT girl, KISS\_ME, popboy, Osloboy, and cat. Buffardi and Campbell (2008) analyse the content and impression value of 130 Facebook accounts and the findings suggest that the number of Facebook friends and wallposts that individuals have on their profile pages correlates with narcissism which is practiced in real life by having numerous shallow relationships.

Narcissists choose glamorous self-promoting pictures for their main profile photos which reinforce negative real traits.

Back et. al(2008) argue that online identities reflect offline identities as their study on 236 SNS users of 17-22 years prove there is no self-idealization as they are using SNSs to maintain their relationships. This is supported by Bessière, Kiesler, Kraut, & Boneva (2008) as the adolescents in their study too use SNS to maintain existing relationship. Siibak (2009) in his study of a survey of 713 between 11-18 years old at Estonian schools shows social connectedness influence social network sites profiles. The findings suggest that gender differences occur in profile images selection as the females choose images based on their aesthetic, emotional, self-reflecting and aesthetic-symbolical values than their males. Furthermore, visual impression management in SNS is influenced by their peers and is associated with 'the ideal self' or 'the ought self'. Salimkhan, Manago & Greenfield (2010) study online communication and online self-representation in social network sites with 10 active MySpace users. The findings suggest that visual metaphors are used for connection, photos act as narrative links between past and present selves and visual images and multimedia are used to represent their identity.

Images selected in the profiles are to present the desired images (Tufekci, 2008). Koole(2010) believes that the strategies of Web of Identity(WoI); Technical-Dramaturgical (TD) Strategy, Political-Dramaturgical (PD) Strategy, Structural-Dramaturgical (SD) Strategy, Cultural-Dramaturgical (CD) Strategy, Personal-Agency-Dramaturgical Strategy (PaD), Cognitive Resonance (CR) can be used to understand the influence of the formation of online identity and community. Individual's actions resonate with acceptable practice of the community. Wang et al. (2010) investigate hyper personal model in online friendship initiation impression formation influences willingness to initiate friendship. The findings suggest physical attractiveness is crucial in online friendship initiation as both genders especially males prefer attractive images. Male respondents respond strongly to visual images. People use similar processes to initiate online relationships and offline relationships.

Culture influences offline and online identity. Chen and Gonglue (2011) indicate Chinese users employ more polished self-photos whereas American users prefer group photos. The findings suggest that collectivism culture practised by Chinese users influence them to reveal less personal information by employing external objects such as cars and mobile phones as their profile pictures. On the other hand, American users focus more on social activities by employing group photos as their profile pictures. This revelation provokes another emerging issue such as the possibility of new Chinese generation is more individualistic than new American generation.

Identity, privacy and control are debatable issues of online social network sites (OSNs) as the complex socio-technical eco-system of OSN demands a stabilized solution from the users, designers, policy makers and engineers. The issue of using real names in any social online environments is about power and control (boyd, 2012). Facebook and Google+ are identity services. In the beginning, Google+ required users to use their real names instead of pseudonyms and nicknames. However Google was pressured by the digerati and had to allow users to use anonymity and pseudonymity. The usage of real names as usernames is a social norm in Facebook. Facebook was initially launched as extended social life in Harvard and early users were comfortable using their real names. Later on the practice of using real names was adopted by early adopters outside of Harvard and it becomes the culture of Facebook. In Facebook, normally online friends are befriended after offline friendships are initiated. However as Facebook becomes immensely popular, some new users do not use their real names. In OSNs, users are reluctant to use their real names as they are afraid if their personal information is compromised as observers are able to use search engines to find information about them by using their real names. This action may compel users to have less power to control online social situations (boyd, 2012).

### 3. Methodology

This exploratory study employs a quantitative research method. The study investigated 185 Malaysian university students' choice of languages, profile pictures and nicknames in their Facebook profiles. There were 65 males and 120 females. All of these participants are students at a university in Malaysia. Participants were former students of the researchers and their participation in this study was voluntary. Facebook was chosen, as it is the most popular social network site among university students in Malaysia. All the participants are Malays. Two researchers independently coded the profile pictures and usernames.

### 4. Findings and Discussions

This section discusses three themes such as usernames, choice of languages and profile pictures employed in students' Facebook profiles. The findings indicate that 64 female users and 19 male users prefer creative variations of their real names as their Facebook usernames. 39 male users and 55 female users prefer to use their real names. Meanwhile 7 male and 2 females use other usernames, which are not derived from their real names. Males are more comfortable in using their real name in online settings as they are more comfortable revealing their true self online. Female users prefer to use catchy creative variations of their names such as MeERaaFilaa, Ms Fie Fie, Rose Cda and AnneCakura. Creative variations of their real names are perceived to be more playful as they shift between online and offline identities.

Table 1 Facebook usernames

|  | Male | Female |
|--|------|--------|
| Creative variations of their real names    | 19   | 64     |
| Real names                                 | 39   | 55     |
| Usernames do not resemble their real names | 7    | 2      |

All the users use English in their profiles. This is because all the users choose English as the preferred language despite they are given language choices in the general account settings. This could be because English is deemed as the language of Facebook and all their friends are using English. Moreover, it is easy for them to edit their profiles without requiring them to have high proficiency in English, as they just need to fill in information in the box given. Another reason is the university uses English as the medium of the instruction; therefore the participants are familiar with the language. Furthermore, English is treated as a second language in Malaysia.

The profile pictures are constantly updated due to the whims of the users. The profile pictures discussed were captured during the collection of the data. The users use attractive and meaningful images as their profile pictures. When female users use creative variations of their names, the majority of them (40 users) use their own pictures. This is different when they use their real names, the majority of them (20 users) use group photos and meaningful objects as their profile pictures. This shows they are less self-conscious when they do not use their offline identities. Many female users use images of their beloved ones in their picture profiles to show they value their relationships with their significant others. Some of them opt for meaningful pictures and interesting cartoon characters. 4 users use body parts to depict their image especially foot and fingers. Female users choose cute and adorable visuals such as babies, cartoon characters, teddy bear and flowers to project attractive images. Female users are likely to use the images of their imagined self than male users. It can be suggested that female users are more self-conscious compared to male users when they use their real names or variations of their names as Facebook

usernames. Male users are more comfortable with their offline and online identities. It can be concluded that their online identity is just a continuation of their offline identities.

Only seven male users and two female users employ usernames which are not derived from their real names. Only 4 male users use their own pictures. The remaining 3 male users use the images of scenery, symbolic picture and car as their profile images. Male users prefer non-living image such as a car, symbolic picture and scenery to portray their online self. In female users' case, two of them use their own pictures. However only one of them prefers to use her picture meanwhile the other one employs a group photo.

Table 2 Usernames

|   | Creative usernames of real names |        | Real names |        | Usernames different from real names |        |
|---|----------------------------------|--------|------------|--------|-------------------------------------|--------|
|   | Male                             | Female | Male       | Female | Male                                | Female |
| Their real photos(alone)                | 14                               | 40     | 28         | 20     | 4                                   | 1      |
| Their real picture with loved ones      | 1                                | 7      | 1          | 17     | 0                                   | 1      |
| Their idols                             | 1                                | 0      | 1          | 2      | 0                                   | 0      |
| Their loved ones                        | 0                                | 2      | 0          | 3      | 0                                   | 0      |
| Their imagined self                     | 0                                | 2      | 3          | 4      | 0                                   | 0      |
| Cartoon characters/babies               | 1                                | 6      | 0          | 4      | 0                                   | 0      |
| Scenery                                 | 1                                | 0      | 0          | 1      | 1                                   | 0      |
| Symbolic picture/picture with a message | 0                                | 2      | 4          | 1      | 1                                   | 0      |
| Bodyparts                               | 0                                | 4      | 0          | 1      | 0                                   | 0      |
| Flowers                                 | 1                                | 0      | 0          | 2      | 0                                   | 0      |
| Motorcycles                             | 0                                | 1      | 0          | 0      | 0                                   | 0      |
| Car                                     | 0                                | 0      | 0          | 0      | 1                                   | 0      |
| Jersey                                  | 0                                | 0      | 2          | 0      | 0                                   | 0      |

## 5. Conclusion

The study is interested in how university students construct their identity through Facebook profiles in Malaysia context. The findings of the study help to understand the usage of visual self-presentation, language and usernames in Facebook profiles constructed by university students to construct desired online self-presentation. The study suggests textual online identity and the visual impression are re-constructed based on values associated with peer perception, social connection, popularity and the self-domains through carefully chosen usernames, language and profile pictures in their Facebook profiles. Online images employed in Facebook profiles are carefully designed to promote their online identities. Culture and gender might influence the findings of the study. The research indicates female Malay users are more self-conscious and more comfortable navigating their online presence by partially hiding their offline identities. They are more comfortable displaying their solitary pictures when they are not using their real names. Malay males are less inhibitive as demonstrated by using their real names as their usernames and use their own pictures as their profile pictures. Future research could be conducted with larger number of university students from diverse backgrounds and from different universities in Malaysia.

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